



The Will of Time

By

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Chapter 1

Having been witness to history unfolding for over a hundred years, the brick house sat encircled by pines as old as its own walls. Trimmied in forest green, the house appeared to blend right into the trees, a guise that had helped it survive the scarring of the Civil War.

Leia had never encountered a more fascinating house, and she had seen many houses in her career as an appraiser. It was almost as if the walls held a secret, and like a good friend, she needed to be near. She couldn't believe she might lose this place over a ridiculous, old-fashioned will.

Anger pulsing through her, Leia's hand slammed the Camaro's gearshift into PARK. Immediately, she regretted the abuse. Martin stood a few feet away, and his onyx eyes bored into her, reminding her she was not one to take out her emotions on her car or anything else. Leaning back, she rested her head on the car's plush headrest for support. The drive over two-lane country roads, most of which were barely paved, had done nothing to ease the grief or resentment she'd felt since Grandfather's death.

Her eyes popped open as the car door did the same. Martin, a tall black man, elegantly dressed in a three-piece suit, was waiting for Leia to alight.

"Did it help?" he asked, always polite.

"No. You were right, as usual. Grandfather's still gone and I still have to be married to inherit the house," she admitted, swinging her bare legs out of the car. She accepted Martin's hand as her sandaled feet hit the gravel driveway. "But I guess I feel a little better."

"That's good, Leia, because you have a visitor."

"Who now?" The house had been littered with callers for the three days since the funeral. Leia's kitchen table was blanketed with casseroles and cakes donated by well-wishers. They must have thought Grandfather had done all the cooking for the household, and now Leia would be in danger of starving.

"Jason Maxwell." Martin's deep voice was flat, not indicating the poor opinion Leia knew he held concerning Jason.

"Is Sara with him?" Leia asked, brightening at the thought of her best friend's red-headed, bubbly presence.

"He came alone."

"How odd. Even for Jason." She grabbed her purse and pushed the car door shut.

"Mmm hmm," Martin said, walking alongside Leia. His back remained ruler-straight. The large man was a formidable escort.

Leia smiled, knowing that without her grandfather around, Martin would become even

more protective. Having been partners in accounting for so many years, both men had come to believe Martin was family. She pushed a wisp of stray hair from her dry, puffy eyes, and turned away from Martin. He wouldn't be amused to see her doting expression.

"He's waiting by the fountain," Martin told her, nodding toward the right of the house.

"You wouldn't let him in the house, huh?" Leia teased. "Thanks, Martin."

He finally cracked a smile, then left her in the front yard.

She watched his rigid back as he retreated into the house, through the screening of pines. Then, drawing a deep breath laced with honeysuckle, Leia walked toward the opening in the trees. Equal to a tennis-court in size, the garden area's central figure was a rustic cherub perched on a pedestal topping a fountain. During her childhood, water had splashed continuously from the happy angel's mouth. To a six-year-old, the fountain's figure was an angelic guardian sent by her parents after their death. As she'd grown older, the cherub had decayed past the point of such fantasy.

Jason waited for her, on a dull wrought-iron bench in the cherub's sight. He'd sat there before, but always with his girlfriend, Sara, nestled next to him. Something about him was different today, something more than the absence of his better half.

"Jason, what a surprise," she began, nearing her visitor. "Where's Sara?" Leia stood in front of the strawberry-blond man, noting that he had softened physically during the past few weeks. She decided it must be too much sedentary office work.

"She's at school. You're keeping her really busy with this charity show business. But she loves it, puts one hundred and ten percent into every costume." He stood to greet her, then resumed his relaxed pose on the bench.

"We've both invested a lot of time in this show, and Sara needs the credit to graduate. Grandfather wanted to sponsor it, and I'm sure he'd have wanted it to go on, even without him." Leia sat on the far end of the bench, wedging her back into the armrest to face Jason without touching him.

"He was a generous man," Jason said, looking around the garden.

Leia remained silent. Everyone knew about the will by now, even Jason. She didn't feel he'd been generous with his granddaughter. A twinge in her stomach silently told her she felt betrayed.

"I know you did so much for him, Leia. You were just like a daughter, taking care of him and this place for all those years. How many dates did you turn down to keep him company?" Then he softened his voice to ask, "Didn't you know what was in his will?" He propped an arm on the back of the bench and rested his head on the back of his hand.

"Only that I had to be twenty-five to inherit, just as he had." Leia sighed. "I didn't know that I had to be married, too. That part was a surprise. Is that what you came to ask me?"

Her abrupt question drew Jason's gaze away from the cherub.

"Actually, no. There's something else."

"Go on," she said, eager to finish their impromptu meeting. Her black cotton skirt, though loose fitting, had finally started to cling.

"Well, I have an idea that may help your predicament. I've given it a great deal of thought." He spoke slowly and stared into Leia's eyes.

"Oh?" He'd only had a day or so. How much time was that for thought?

"You only have a month to find a husband, Leia. You don't want to lose this house, this land. I don't want to see that happen. So what I'm proposing is marriage."

She laughed. "And you're going to zap this bridegroom out of thin air? Really, Jason, what are you thinking about?"

"Me. I'm thinking about me. And us. I'll marry you immediately. You'll inherit your home, no law suits, no legal problems."

Leia stared at him now, her mouth gaping. She made a physical effort to close it. "Are you nuts? What about Sara?"

"Sara is your best friend. She'll understand. We both know how you adore this old house. It's your whole life. Sara's loving, caring, a wonderful person. She'd want me to do this for you."

"Oh no she wouldn't. Friendship only goes so far." Leia shook her head vigorously, shaking strands of hair across her forehead and into her eyes. As she pushed aside the wisps, Jason's full intent hit her even like a blow to the gut. Her stomach muscles cinched tighter.

"And you get half of it all someday?" Her voice shook more than it had at the reading of the will. "Is that your plan?" Wondering which investor had showed interest in the property, and how much Jason hoped to sell it for, she noted that he at least had the grace to look uncomfortable at her accusation.

He shifted his weight and looked down at his well-manicured hands. "I hadn't thought everything out, Leia."

She stood and crossed her arms over her chest. "Well, it doesn't take me as long to think. No thank you, Mr. Maxwell," she said, trying to drip her voice with sarcasm. What nerve!

He rose. "Half of the property is better than none. If you change your mind as the deadline approaches..." The statement was left unfinished and he headed for the front yard. His pace was slow, as if he were thinking hard and couldn't walk simultaneously. As he reached the line of trees, he turned back.

"Leia," he called, his voice almost apologetic.

"I can take care of myself, Jason. I really have for a long time now. And I'll take care of my house, too."

The sound of footsteps nearing made Leia twirl. Martin appeared, having entered the garden from the path that curved around from the back door.

"Speaking of taking care of the house," he began, coming to a halt next to Leia, "I'm afraid I've broken one of your favorite flasks. I'm terribly sorry. Would you please come inside, so I can show you the one? Perhaps we can search for a replacement." His normally stern face was pinched and sincere.

Leia nodded, acknowledging acceptance of yet another loss. Turning toward the front yard, she saw Jason flash a patronizing smile before disappearing into the pines.

The reading of Grandfather's will had cast an air of anxiety over her entire day. First there had been the anticipation, which had made her stomach uneasy, and then the fateful moment when Mr. Sanders read the conditions Grandfather had stipulated for her to keep the house. Grandfather, an old-fashioned Irish man, had never fully accepted that Leia had grown up.

On her sixteenth birthday, Grandfather had presented her with a white velvet box containing her mother's wedding ring. Considering it a miracle that it was recovered from the accident, he suggested she wear it to keep her mother alive in her heart. He told her she'd always be somebody's little girl, his now, and someday, her husband's. She had let the statement go unchallenged, and now it was too late. He'd died believing that, or so his last will and testament indicated.

Leia went back to the house to consider the damages and slipped her sandals off. The gray slate floor cooled her soles, but not her growing anger as her thoughts returned to Jason. She should have slapped him, would have enjoyed the marks of her rings impressed on his smug face. It would be especially satisfying to mark him with the sapphire friendship ring Sara had given her on her twenty-first birthday.

"Hi Leia! Martin told me I could wait for you here." Sara appeared from the kitchen.

Her bright smile told Leia that Sara was unaware her boyfriend had just been lurking nearby. An invisible hand grasped Leia's heart. She knew the right thing to do was very different than following through, and when it came to hurting a sweet friend, it was near impossible.

"Okay if I take the blue guest room?"

"Absolutely. I'm going to go change clothes." Leia led her friend up the wide staircase, caressing the polished banister, relieved for the moment to not meet her friend's trusting gaze.

"You wanna talk?" Sara asked, sticking her head into Leia's bedroom.

Leia looked up and tried to smile, but could only manage a nod. Sara always came into

Leia's room to talk when she stayed there.

"Thanks for coming over, Sara. Just you being here makes me feel better."

"Did you have any idea what your grandfather's will said?" Sara plunged directly into the matter at hand, plopping characteristically on the bed beside her supine friend. She smoothed the folds of the silk comforter with her hand, making aqua blue ripples like those on a small pond.

"Of course not," Leia replied. "I'm the only family he had left. I just assumed, and I know that's a stupid thing to do, that when he died I'd get to keep our home." She rose from the bed and walked over to the bay window, its tiny panes of glass distorting the view. "Look out there. I mean, I just can't imagine him wanting this place to be auctioned off. What was he thinking?"

"He was thinking that by now you should be married, that's all. And you know, he probably made his will a long time ago, way before you were old enough to be married. And he probably wrote it just how his father had written his own will. That's what my parents did, you know. They simply took their parents' will and changed a few words. He probably had that all set up way before he realized how good you'd turn out. Maybe after your parents died he figured you'd be a basket-case."

"Then why didn't he change his will?"

The perfectly logical question obviously put Sara at a loss for words. She rolled onto her stomach, the bed's silky covers moving like liquid with her. Finally she said, "Your parents married really young, didn't they? And didn't you tell me you'd been conceived on their wedding night?"

"Yeah, Mom was young, in love, and very fertile. But that was back in the sixties. It's just not fair," Leia continued, louder. "These are the nineties! I mean, I might have expected this in the nineteenth century, when everyone was so predictable and boring. But I have a career. I practically raised myself. And another thing... Oh, sorry. I shouldn't be taking my frustration out on you."

"It's okay. I've been thinking." Sara's voice softened. "Jason has a brother. He's great looking, and if you two got together, we would be sisters someday."

"Okay, okay," Leia smiled finally, "You can stop that. Sara, I'm happy for you, if you are. But I do need to talk to you about something Jason said." If Sara knew that Jason had proposed to her best friend, even if it was strictly for financial reasons, there would be no more relationship. Could she be the one responsible for breaking Sara's heart? Leia looked at her friend. If they weren't such good friends, she would be envious of Sara's beauty and height. Leia avoided her own reflection in the room's Federal style mirror. She had no desire to see the tension lurking under her thick brown eyebrows and fly-away blonde bangs.

"We'll talk more later, Sara. C'mon, let's go see what kind of damage Martin did to my

collection." They started down the oak paneled hallway, Sara running her hand along the chair rail molding.

Leia led her down the carpeted staircase, through the two-story foyer and into a small parlor. The room was used only as a showplace, as was obvious from the immaculate white carpet, white sofa and love seat. Each time she entered the room, Leia took a moment to focus on each object. The focal point of the room was the Chippendale satinwood commode, about the size of a small dresser, decorated with marquetry and ormolu rings. Above it hung a mahogany china cabinet, its glazed doors covered in Chinese fretwork. The two pieces, valuable antiques from the eighteenth century, made the perfect display area for Leia's bottle and glass collection. She opened the cabinet door slowly, and immediately knew what was missing.

"Oh, no," she whispered, staring into the cabinet as if the item would reappear. "Oh, no."

"What? What's missing?"

"My flask."

"Flask? Like for whiskey?" Sara sounded genuinely confused.

"Yes. It was amber glass, and it's gone. I can't believe he broke that one."

"Why? What was so special about a whiskey flask?" Sara examined the other bottles and dishes.

"It was my father's. He got it from his father, I think. It had a baseball and bat embossed on it...a really rare piece. My father loved baseball, but that's all I really remember about him." Leia sat on the white love seat, feeling numb and unable to focus her eyes or thoughts.

Sara closed the cabinet door, slowly, careful not to rattle the contents. She remained silent for a few moments, then sat beside Leia. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she said, then sat up straight. The tears that had blurred her vision trickled down her cheeks, and she swiped them away with the back of her hand.

"I don't know why I let you talk me into this, Sara," Leia said, swishing through racks of designer dresses. "Wouldn't Grandfather have just loved me wearing this one to dinner?" She held up a bright orange dress splashed with white polka-dots. "This one looks like a creamsicle." A picture flashed in her mind of Grandfather handing her one of the frozen confections as she played on the back porch. Her throat tightened and she shoved the dress between several others.

"Ooh, lovely." Sara laughed and held up her own discovery...a red organza cocktail dress with a white net tutu. "Or this one, you could go appraise a house in this little number." The dress in question was a halter-top, sequined thing.

"Didn't you design one like this for a term project last year?" Leia asked.

"Not quite. Mine was better. Wait 'till you see the nineteenth century collection I'm working on. It's more trendy than these duds. Say, do you have a costume yet for the charity show?" An approaching saleslady put a damper on their playful banter.

Leia shook her head, avoiding Sara's eyes.

"I really didn't talk you into this, you know. You want the show to go on."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Say, what about this skirt?" Leia held up a floor-length black, silk skirt. The zipper was on the right side of the waist, and was nearly invisible in the narrow silhouette.

"Donna Karan, right?"

"Yeah, and black, too. Perfect for my mood," Leia said, and pulled a size four from the rack.

"Oh, I'm sorry dear. Is it for a funeral?" the saleslady asked, accepting Leia's credit card. "You know, dear, once the wake is over things will really begin to seem better." The woman punched numbers on her cash register, chatting on. "This time next month you'll feel a bit better. I'm certain." Sara rolled her eyes at her friend, a sympathetic smile on her face.

Leia fought the urge to cry; her heart pounding as she considered exactly where she'd be this time next month if she hadn't figured a way around Grandfather's will. She scribbled her name on the sales slip.

"She'll be back for her honeymoon clothes soon," Sara said, nodding toward Leia.

"Well, whenever you wear it," the saleslady said, "this outfit is versatile. And the fabric will last you a century."

Leia dressed carefully for her dinner with Sara and Martin, though her heart was not in it. She put on the new black skirt with a silk blouse. It didn't feel like she was preparing for a family dinner, because of the unappealing matters she needed to discuss with her friends. Leia sighed as she pulled on the black stockings Sara had found in a lingerie shop.

She decided to wear no jewelry, except for her mother's wedding ring. After only a few trips to inspect strange houses, owned by even stranger people, she'd learned the value of a wedding band on her left hand. She wanted to look nice, but still be comfortable tonight, so she added her black leather granny boots instead of the previously planned heels. She descended the back stairs, having decided to wait for her guests in the kitchen. She'd given Mary Beth, the part-time housekeeper, the night off.

The menu was lasagna and green salad, simple, homey food that she had prepared that morning. Her sense of fairness had told her to give this discussion a chance, to listen to whatever suggestions were made, and not be hampered with intricate food preparations. She set the dining room table with the white family china, and added her three antique

flint glasses for wine. Having only been able to obtain a trio of goblets in this Huber pattern, Leia only used them for tiny dinner parties.

"Hello, Leia," Martin said, entering the kitchen and causing Leia to jump. He carried a long, flat white box in his arms. "I met Sara in the driveway loaded with boxes and bags. She said this one's for you." He delivered the box into Leia's oven-mitted arms. "A new dress?" he asked, examining the oven dials.

"Yes, but it looks like an old one. It's my costume for the charity show. Sara went home and brought it. She wants a Polaroid snapshot, too, for the lobby poster."

"And I've got my camera, whenever you want to model it," Sara announced, breezing into the kitchen.

"Are you kidding? I don't want to model it at all. I heard they got some famous model to pose for the flyers they sent out." Leia said. The late June historical revue was timed perfectly. After Grandfather had agreed to sponsor the show, Sara's design class had sent out flyers using the mailing list of the Civil War re-enactors who would participate in the July 1 Gettysburg battle. More than half of the participants had purchased tickets for the charity show, which was being held only a few hour's drive from Gettysburg.

"You'd better get an 'A' for this," she said, and found a clean spot on the counter to open the box. From under a layer of modern white tissue paper she pulled an old-fashioned black gown with white lace trim, some torture device that must be a corset, a white nylon crinoline hoop that popped out of the box almost by itself, a pair of baggy, split bloomers, a full-length petticoat and an ivory lace camisole.

"My goodness, they certainly wore a lot of clothes back then," she said. "And I thought the girls got to wear really low-cut dresses. Maybe this is more modest because of the war."

Martin asked, "What year are you representing?"

"1863," Sara said, answering for Leia and fussing over a loose thread. "Leia's our female Civil War model, and we have a half-dozen males to portray soldiers."

"Something smells real good," Martin said, pulling the oven door open to peek. "What is it?"

"Lasagna, of course. I know you love the stuff." She handed him two pot-holders.

He lifted the casserole dish from the oven. "You're right."

"Why don't you go try the dress on, Leia, and I'll snap your picture before we eat? This needs to cool a bit. Besides, I know you always refuse to have your picture taken once you've stuffed yourself. Should I put this on the counter?" Sara laughed softly as she chattered.

"Ha ha. Okay. But let's go into the dining room. It's all set up," Leia said, pulling the crystal salad bowl from the refrigerator and leading them from the kitchen.

Martin whistled softly as he entered the dining room. The chandelier was dimmed, casting a warm glow on the china and crystal. Two white taper candles flickered in the center of the oval table, their light reflecting off of dark green pressed glass holders.

"This is beautiful. Looks too good to eat off of," he said, setting his casserole on a large table pad.

"Thanks. Be right back." She gathered the garments from the kitchen and went back to her room to change. It took her longer than she had expected to dress. The bloomers she started with were ruffled and had a mind of their own. She had the hoop-skirt on before she realized that the petticoat probably went underneath, so she tossed it aside and put her silk skirt back on as an underskirt. The black dress would go on last, and she would keep her granny boots. They seemed appropriate to her, kind of old-fashioned.

"Need any help?" Sara asked, bringing a load of bags into the room.

"Only if you really expect me to wear this," Leia replied, holding up the corset.

"No problem. Turn around." Sara had her friend in the corset and tied up quickly.

"I couldn't have gotten into this after I ate," Leia gasped, struggling for air.

"Nonsense. It affects your lungs more than your stomach. Now, let's get this dress on you."

Leia noticed that Sara's usually perky smile was drooping, and thought she saw a cloud settling in her blue eyes. "You don't seem yourself tonight, Sara."

"You're perceptive, as usual. It's just Jason. He acted really strange this afternoon." Having finished dressing Leia, she turned to rummage in one of her shopping bags.

"Any idea why?"

Sara sighed again, pulling what must have been a hair pin from her bag. "Nope. But you know, when I think back over the past week or so, he's been acting kind of distant." She twirled the metal object between her fingers.

"I think I know why," Leia told her, taking the sharp object and setting it on a high dresser.

"Really?" Sara asked, sounding unconvinced.

"Here, sit," Leia said, patting a space beside her on the bed. Sara sat, but before Leia could spill her guts, Sara blurted out her opinion.

"I can tell you one thing. I do know that Jason's father was in town this week."

"Really? He hasn't seen him since what...fifth grade?"

"It's been more recent than that, but Mr. Maxwell doesn't see his son unless there's a reason. Financial reason, usually."

Leia plumped a satin covered pillow, turning it over easily in her lap. "That's such a

shame. The only thing wrong with Jason is his ambition to get rich, I think. And that's his father's fault," she said, telling herself that was the case.

"Well, most of Jason's ambition, if we have to call it that, came from trying to get that man's attention most of his life. I wouldn't even go so far as to call him a father." Sara picked up the other pillow sham and punched its slippery surface. "Now what did I do with that pin I brought for your hair?"

She got up and dug through her bags again. "Remember high school graduation? Mr. Maxwell didn't show up as promised, he just sent Jason a new car."

"That's some expensive attention."

"Expensive love," Sara said, producing another pointed hair torture item. "But he doesn't have the bucks anymore. He keeps calling Jason for help. Turn around."

Leia held her tongue while her friend pinned her hair to her scalp.

"Then again, look how good you turned out, and your parents have been gone a long time. Why couldn't Jason be happy with what he's accomplishing?"

"My parents loved me a whole lot, Sara, for as long as they were alive. I don't think Jason's ever had that kind of security."

"Done." Sara handed her a small vanity top mirror.

Leia used it to gaze at the back of her head in the larger mirror over her short dresser. "Very old fashioned. And painful."

"Jason would hate it. I think if we ever get married he'd want everything new and modern and shiny. No antique lace, no ancient traditions, you know?"

The mention of a wedding reminded Leia of her dilemma. She had to tell Sara what had happened. She walked to her desk and ran her hands over a framed photograph of her and Sara, taken when they were six or seven years old. Dressed in their mothers' clothing and heels, they each sported a large, floppy sunhat tilted lazily to their sides. Their arms were around each other's shoulders.

"Okay, here's the thing. Today, Jason stopped by to see me."

"He did?"

"Yes. He wanted to make a business proposition."

Sara looked relieved. "That figures. What was it?"

"Well, he said he wanted to help me out. Sara, I'm only telling you this because you're my best friend and I care. Today, Jason asked me to marry him so I can inherit."

"Get out of here," Sara said, smiling at the presumed joke.

"I'm serious, Sara. And so was he. You can ask him, but I said no, so he'll probably deny it. But you can't trust him like you thought."

Sara's smile faded. She stood, tilted her head and glared at Leia. "I don't believe you. Either you're lying or you misunderstood."

Shivers ran up Leia's spine from the ice in her tone. "Sara," she said, her voice a whisper, "why would I lie?"

"I don't know," Sara admitted, tossing her thick red locks.

"We've been friends forever. I wouldn't hurt you." Leia said, hoping her friend would understand. She couldn't see the future without Sara, who had been there through every bad perm, fashion crisis and broken heart.

"You just did." Sara was gone before Leia could reply.

Back in the dining room, Martin whistled again, this time at Leia's appearance. "You look fantastic. Very historical. Sara just ran out of here...said she'd be back later. Oh, here, I found your driver's license in the bag with the film."

Leia was glad she had dimmed the overhead lighting. She wasn't used to blushing and wasn't sure if she was doing it now or not. She slipped the license into the sleeve of her dress.

"But I'll warn you, I'm no photographer." He arranged her in front of the closed rose mini-blinds to take her picture, in front of the parlor's fireplace, and then on the front porch.

"Okay, that should do it," Leia said, after half a roll of film and a dozen flashes. "If you want to take more pictures, you'll have to come to the show and plunk down your eight dollar admission. I guess I should go change. Why don't you sit down and start? The food's getting cold... I'll be right back." She hoped Sara would return later, after calming down, and she could rehear the food and their friendship.

"I'll pour awhile. Where's the wine?"

"Forgot it! Be right back."

She'd never liked the basement door being in the dining room. Not only did it make the room less formal, it was an oddity she'd never seen in a house she'd appraised. Leia took a deep breath, always needing one before tackling the lowest level of her home. She hated cellars. The cellar was where Grandfather kept the wine racks, however, so she had no choice but to yank open the door now and head down the steep stairs. As she descended, Leia's shadow grew from the naked light bulb's glow. The door to the dining room clicked shut behind her, causing goose bumps to pop out on her arms. Why did that sound so ominous today? She drew a deep breath, telling herself to relax and complete her task. The rack was to her left at the foot of the stairs.

She was amazed, as always, at the sheer number of bottles Grandfather had collected for his horizontal storage rack. Many were old, wearing blankets of dust over their labels. Leia lifted one, examining it only long enough to determine that the wine it contained

was red.

"This will do," she said, and turned right, toward the stairs. They weren't there.

A fresh row of goose bumps broke out, and Leia turned, spotting the stairs to her left. Of course, she thought, it must have been longer than I remembered since I was down here. Scurrying toward the stairs, Leia chided herself for over-reacting, suddenly aware that the air around her was too thick. She had to grab for each breath. Before grasping the handrail, she wiped the perspiration from her palm on her dress, remembering too late that it was someone else's costume. The practical promise to have it dry-cleaned edged out the anxiety, giving her the push she needed to continue. She was being ridiculous!

Climbing, Leia thought there were more stairs going up than there had been going down, but dismissed the notion as silly. She just couldn't see very well. After all, the light bulb seemed to have dimmed, for she could barely make out the outline of the door at the top of the stairs. Nerves did that to a person.

Halfway up, Leia froze. Every ounce of light from around and under the door had gone, faded to black, to an inky well of nothingness, and she could see nothing above or below her. If she took a step, she knew she'd plunge to the depths of the cellar and die. The wood rail she clutched was the only evidence she had she was not already floating in space. Her stomach swimming, Leia pushed back the nausea and lifted one foot, feeling for a step she could only hope was there.

Her foot landed firmly on wood. She felt a ray of hope, and tried the next step, still using the handrail as her lifeline, pulling herself up, higher into the dark. With her free hand held straight in front of her, Leia took two more steps, refusing to look down at where she'd been. It was as if all time had stopped, and she alone existed in the stairwell.

A thin beam of light sparked above her.

She could make it! Leia's heart raced as she took another step, and the door, her wonderful door to the dining room, became outlined only a few feet in front of her. What a beautiful door!

With a surge of energy usually reserved for her exercise class, Leia dashed up two more steps and was through the door, bursting into the brightly lit room. Her exhaled breath of relief immediately reverted to an intake, a gasp, as her gaze fell on people she didn't know...a roomful of costumed strangers. She blinked...hard...but the vision didn't evaporate. The mysterious diners grew silent, the clank of silverware ceasing as they stared at Leia with undisguised curiosity. It was as if she'd interrupted a costume dinner party, for the ladies and men were dressed in nineteenth century garb.

Having always prided herself on being too tough to faint, Leia allowed her stomach to contract in alarm instead. Grandfather had always said to take the offensive. Show no fear. "What's going on here? Where's Martin?" she demanded, her gaze fixed on one of the women, who appeared to be the oldest. She wore a low-cut gown of cameo-blue

satin that puffed at the sleeves and nipped in at her waist, though the younger women's dresses were nipped and cut to a greater degree.

When no answer came, Leia turned to the men at the table. The older of the two, who looked a great deal like Grandfather, was leaning back in his chair, either bored or sleepy. Next to him sat a young man in a Civil War uniform, his brown hair neat on his neck, glaring at her with the most appealing grimace she'd ever seen. His dark eyes spoke, but like the other man, he was silent. Despite their strangeness the men didn't seem threatening.

Whoever these people are, Leia thought, they seemed to have brought their own interior decorator. She recognized the walls themselves, the layout of her dining room, but nothing else. The wall coverings, the furniture, even the shape of the dining table were foreign to her. The mini-blinds were gone, replaced by heavy folds of velvet fabric. The painted walls had been covered with gold, flocked wallpaper. An antique chandelier swayed above the table, tiny prisms dripping from its branches. She thought it looked beautiful, but it wasn't hers. She blinked again, harder, scrunching her face.

"Impossible," she whispered then, recalling the brief moments she had spent in the cellar, certainly not long enough for anyone to make the changes she was witnessing. Feeling a slight spinning behind her eyes, Leia looked down at the bottle still clutched in her damp hand. The thick cellar dust had cleared by itself, exposing a nearly new label on the cool glass. Had the dust disappeared or had she wiped it on her dress? She drew a deep breath, inhaling a heavy, greasy odor of good food cooked...differently?

"Well?" She waited for someone to speak.

"Who is Martin, and who on earth are you?" The older woman had found her voice first. "And why were you in our cellar?"

"I'm Leia, and this is my family's home." She didn't want it to sound like she lived alone. "Who are you?" Leia's mind tried to process everything she saw, and she still couldn't believe her eyes. At least her voice sounded calm.

"Ah, Leah! I'm your Aunt Martha. How nice to see you have arrived ahead of schedule. This house is so far from the town, and so hidden in the pines, we were afraid you might be delayed. Especially with the Confederates advancing this way," said the lady in the cameo-blue gown, finally breaking the silence that had been as heavy as the humid air. Who had turned off the air conditioning, anyway?

The woman rose and extended a hand, but not for shaking, as Leia expected. Instead the woman took the wine bottle and set it on the table in front of the soldier and said something to him Leia couldn't hear. Who was Leah, anyway, and why did Martha assume she was Leah? Maybe the woman was just messing with her mind.

The others resumed their conversation, keeping their eyes on the newcomer, and Leia stiffened her spine and strode toward the closest doorway. She needed to see if her own

kitchen was there, and if Martin was in it.

Leia's ankle turned slightly as she stumbled into the kitchen. The floor was planks of wood not the smooth linoleum she was used to walking on. Her entrance had stopped the conversation of two black women arranging food containers over steaming platters. Leia wondered what they were supposed to be doing and how they were going to do it since her shiny, modern appliances had all been removed. She looked around the room, and sure enough, the gingham curtains were gone as well as the oak cabinets. The kitchen looked downright historic.

At Leia's continued silence, the two women nodded and returned to their task. Dressed like servants, their caps had wilted in the heat and their aprons were soiled. Huge shadows ringed their underarms. Leia felt her own perspiration trickling down the sleeves of her costume.

At last one of them spoke. "May I git you something, Miss?"

Leia thanked her, saying no, that there was nothing she could put into words at the moment.

"Are you feeling well, my dear?" The cameo woman had followed Leia into the kitchen. She pushed Leia onto a hard, wooden-backed chair. "We were worried so when we heard that William's daughter was coming north almost unescorted."

"Yes. I'm fine. I think," Leia said, trying to take in her surroundings and get her bearings.

"Where is your traveling companion?"

"He, um, turned back already." Okay, it sounded good to her. Maybe the woman should believe Martin had left, in case she meant them harm. "But I'm not alone."

"Of course he would, what am I thinking, the war is on. At least he delivered you here safely! We did not expect you until next week, Leah, if at all. Traveling now! I suppose Baltimore is not the most suitable atmosphere for a new widow, especially since the riot year before last."

So Leah was someone they had been expecting. A relative? Martha's niece? At least, that's what they wanted her to think.

Martha went on. "The death of a mate is overwhelming, though, and I suppose we just can not judge the behavior of someone so newly bereaved. And of course you're not alone. All of your relatives are right here in this house." She patted Leia's hand in a motherly fashion, then leaned closer.

"You must not take to the spirits, my dear. Try to limit your drink to that which you take with meals for now." Martha wrung her hands. A gesture of concern? Her conspiratorial tone confused Leia momentarily, until she recalled her entrance into this madness with the wine bottle in hand.

"Oh, I..." Her voice trailed off from the automatic explanation. Why did she need to explain herself to this woman? She and others should be explaining their presence to Leia. Had Grandfather's lawyers or Jason arranged for this little charade? And why? Maybe these were some of Sara's charity show actors. That would make sense. Or maybe she was being set up for some scam, like she'd been warned about on television. Perhaps these people had drugged her, and done something to Martin. Where was Martin, anyway? And what were they after? Grandfather's money? Maybe they wanted the property to build a mall or hotel. Hadn't there been a TV movie-of-the-week just like this? Leia decided to play along for the moment, not to antagonize possible criminals. She had always thought television victims were stupid by refusing to play along with their abductors, at least long enough for an escape opportunity to present itself.

Ignoring her companion, Leia returned to the dining room. She smoothed the sides of her rumpled costume skirt, and wondered briefly if Donna Karan had ever encountered materials like the ones now in her house. Leia hadn't seen this much velvet since she visited the Velvet Elvis Gallery in Nashville.

The two ladies remaining at the table continued their chatter, oblivious to Leia's gaze. The older man, who not only resembled, but also acted a lot like, Grandfather, was nodding off in his chair...a Heppelwhite chair, Leia realized, the kind with dainty legs that could snap under too much pressure. She took a few steps closer to the table.

"Forgive my manners, ma'am," the soldier said, rising at her approach. "Are you hungry?" Despite his attempt to be polite, Leia felt his gaze slide down her entire body, as if he could actually see her figure under what she wore. Not shy, she returned the look. The only thing soft on his body was the sash around his waist. Their eyes met, but he looked away as if startled.

"Just wine, please," she replied, ignoring the older woman's advice and taking the chair he offered. He said nothing at her request and poured Leia a small glass of the burgundy-colored liquid. Since he was drinking from the same bottle, she assumed it was safe. She sipped and shivered.

"The air is damp. We need more wood for the fire," he said, and she smiled in appreciation. Only Leia knew that she wasn't cold...the heat was oppressive...that her body shivered only from the tingling his smoldering appraisal of her had caused. She had to remind herself that she was probably in danger, either physically or mentally. This was no time to enjoy the masquerade.

Brant tapped his fingers on the off-white linen table cover. He found it hard to believe the woman seated across from him was a McGarland, no matter how much Baltimore had changed after the riots. Her dress was similar to Belle's and Mary Katherine's, yet it was different. He couldn't put a name to the difference. It was subtle, but different it was nonetheless. Although her face was lovely, she wore a light layer of paint. Was that acceptable now in Baltimore? It certainly was not in Pennsylvania, even among the more

liberal society...and not only her paint was brazen. She'd returned his assessment of her body, matching his with an unwavering gaze.

"How did your dear brother handle the news of your parents?"

Brant looked around, unsure of which lady had asked the question. So he merely said, "Torin?"

"Of course. I wouldn't ask about the others," Martha said, wringing her hands over her ample lap.

"It's been difficult for us both," Brant said, "but I've done what they would have wanted."

"Keeping that boy away from the real lines of fightin', you mean?" Patrick suddenly perked up, shaking his head. "Damn foolish of you, boy, to take so much on yourself."

"And even while you made things easier for Cameron at the farm." Mary Katherine spoke up, after crossing her knife and fork daintily. She was the little sister he'd never had.

Brant swallowed. He hadn't willingly given up his heart for his older brother, but he'd been raised to support his family and accept what he couldn't change.

Leah toyed with her glass, running tiny white hands around its delicate stem.

Little cannonballs went off inside of Brant as he watched. There was most certainly something about this woman...something unusual.

And attractive.

The kitchen maids cleared the dishes away, working around the people still at the table. Leia thought that in such a charade the "ladies and gentlemen" would have moved from the dining room before the cleanup, but that was the least of her curiosities. By the time the table was spotless and the older man was smoking a cigar, Leia had ascertained the first names of all the diners. The stogie-smoking, half-asleep grandfather-type was Patrick, at least that was his name for this role. Cameo-blue was called Martha, who presumably was the hostess. One of the chattering ladies was Belle, and the other Mary Katherine or something like that. The character with the most promise, the tall soldier with the sandy-brown hair, was called Brant.

Brant sipped on an amber-colored liquid, perhaps brandy or sherry, from a tiny glass. In real life that wouldn't seem so masculine, but on this guy, it worked. The woman called Belle continuously asked Brant questions about the war. War? There was no doubt they were supposed to be from the Civil War era, because Brant's uniform appeared to be that of a Union soldier. Dark blue, it had definitely faded from time or washing, and was entirely too heavy a material for a summer day in Maryland. A line of gold buttons marched up the front of the jacket, and gold epaulets decorated each shoulder. A sash of material Leia didn't recognize was wrapped around his waist, presumably covering a

belt. She had seen the same sort of getup in scores of history books.

Keeping her silence, and watching Martha from the corner of her eye, Leia accepted another glass of wine from Brant. He smiled at her as he poured, carefully transferring the liquid without a single drop of waste. His grace surprised Leia, because his arms were quite large due to either muscle or bulky fat. ...scratch the fat. Actually, he looked muscular and hard compared to Jason. Since Jason hadn't appeared in this scenario, Leia began to wonder if he had somehow arranged everything. She knew he wanted to marry her and take control of the house, but she thought he had feelings for Sara. Would they overcome his ambition? There couldn't be any other explanation, could there? Could any of this be real? Had she perhaps fallen down the cellar stairs and now lay in a coma at the bottom, with Martin hovering over her or calling 911? Then this would all be a dream? She swished the wine around, drinking very little now. Determined to keep her wits about her, she smiled a lot and paid very close attention to the ongoing conversations.

"Mary Katherine, would you like to ride with me tomorrow?"

"Where did that divine lace come from, Martha?"

"So, Brant dear, how many troops do you think you'll be meeting in Pennsylvania?" This question came from Belle, who smiled and looked around the room. Leia thought she sounded phony.

"All of this war talk lately has become dreary," Martha told her in response, then reached over to shake the older man's arm.

"Wake up, Patrick, you're nodding off again. We must be boring our cousin to tears. She hasn't said a word all evening."

"I am awake, Martha. You see? Please pass the wine, Brant."

Brant lifted the black bottle and shook it lightly.

"Empty, sir. Shall I fetch another?" The mention of wine made Leia pay attention, and she was grateful that she'd had the last glass. Someone would surely have to go to the basement for more, unless they were trying to keep her in the midst of the act. She rose to grab the opportunity, heart pounding.

The old man nodded at Brant's offer, and before the cellar door shut behind him Leah was slipping through it as well.

"It can be dangerous down here, ma'am. It's very dark, and a person might become confused," he began, lighting an oil lamp.

"You don't know the half of it," she replied, not quite loud enough for him to hear. As he descended the stairs, Leia turned and felt the back of the door. She touched each hinge, and prodded the wood panels. She could find nothing unusual about it.

"Are you coming down?"

"Yes," Leia said, grasping the wall. She was happy to be wearing her boots instead of heels, but the crinoline certainly got in the way. She clutched at the railing. If she hadn't been scared, she would have been angry that someone had put her in the position of needing to be in a cellar. Brant watched her from the wine rack. With damp palms Leia approached him, noting even in the dim light the outline of his body, masculine and sturdy...proud.

"May I borrow the lamp?" She shuddered as the moist air settled on her face and neck.

"Here. Be careful with it, it's the only light source here." He handed her the small lamp, gently grazing her fingers before she raised it over her head and moved forward. She walked the perimeter of the cellar, checking carefully for hidden doorways. Every surface felt rough, slimy or gritty. The only door she found led to a tiny, closet-like room with hooks on the wall. A dank smell escaped, an invisible cloud that hovered in the humidity. She did not want to know what the room was used for, but peered inside just to make sure Martin wasn't in there, bound and gagged. The room was empty.

"Shall we return?" Brant's voice was patient, but did not completely hide his confusion over her actions. She didn't explain, but led the way back to the staircase. Why did she feel so disappointed when she really had no idea of what she had hoped to find? She only knew she hadn't found it.

Chapter 2

"Thanks for suggesting the walk," Leia said, still shaking. "I really needed to get out of that house." What she really needed was to figure out what was going on.

"I understand. The McGarland family can be smothering, with good intentions, that is. Martha wants to run the family, but every so often she remembers her place and worries about Patrick's reaction. He appears to be sleepy much of the time, but he sees all that goes on, and is very much in command. On a more pleasant subject, I must say that you are a fresh sight in this country house. I have not seen many ladies since the war started, but I can honestly say you are the prettiest, Leah."

The couple had passed through a dense area of trees, which Leia recognized as her front yard. The fact that there were many more trees than she remembered was not lost on her.

"And are you also a McGarland?" She felt she had to ask, hoping the question didn't make her appear stupid, or even worse, like she was falling prey to some scheme. He just seemed so darned sincere. Could it all be an act?

"I'm a Douglas. I am on my way to rejoin my regiment in Pennsylvania."

Leia struggled to think of an appropriate response. "Were you wounded?"

"No, my parents were just killed in West Virginia, in a carriage accident, where they had been visiting relatives. There were only a few of us able to get to the burial." His face twisted with the memory, and she understood his pain instantly.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Brant," Leia said, feeling her emotions tug at her heart. That explained the conversation earlier about his brother, at least part of it. She looked over at his profile, saw the lines deepening around his mouth, and turned away. Whatever his part in her situation, this man seemed to have felt real pain. Or maybe his pain was a part of her own wounded psyche and her mind had conjured up his image while she lay unconscious in her basement?

Surrounded by fragrant pine trees, Leia took a deep breath and turned again to Brant's sculpted face. She stepped toward him and placed a hand on his arm. He stiffened for just a second, then covered her fingers with his own.

"I'm an orphan, too," she whispered, "Since I was six."

"I'm sorry. The McGarlands never mentioned that," he said, touching a strand of her hair. "Leah.. I will be leaving soon. For Gettysburg. We are in great need of goods, especially footwear. I have to be with my unit." He leaned in to bury his nose in her hair.

Leia knew she should pull away. This man was a stranger, dressed as a Union soldier. He was either crazy or a criminal...or supernatural...or a mere figment of her imagination. Yet he was warm and sexy and uncomfortably close. Her body tingled in places that would shock old Aunt Martha. She stepped away from him.

"You know, Brant," she said, pulling on a tree branch over her head. "I think I know

Hettie from somewhere." Changing the subject made Leia breathe easier. "It's not that she looks so familiar, but it's her mannerisms, the way she talks. Sometimes I get this feeling of *deja vu*."

"What is that?"

Leia sighed, wondering how to explain the concept, telling herself that it didn't necessarily mean anything that he didn't recognize the phrase. "It's a feeling that you've been in the same place or experienced the exact same thing before. It can give you an eerie, confused feeling if you let it."

"Did you visit here as a child, perhaps? That would explain the feeling."

"Not that I can recall." Good answer, she told herself. Brant was almost too logical, it seemed.

"But I guess it's possible. And that would explain it, but I certainly hope I'd remember someone who is so, nice. So comfortable to be around."

"You like Hettie, then?" He sounded pleased.

"Oh yes. Except, she seems to have a wall of reserve around her, something deeper than a servant staying in her role. I talked to her in the kitchen just now, and she responded like we're old friends, but then she clammed up on me."

Brant looked at her. "Clam up? What an appropriate description. Leah, Hettie's growing older, and it worries her."

"It worries all of us, believe me. I have a birthday coming up I absolutely dread." She plucked a leaf from its branch and crumpled it.

"You are still young, and you don't have as much to lose as Hettie in your later years."

Leia nodded, assuming Brant spoke of an insecure retirement situation. What did free servants, farmers, storekeepers and other workers do in this era when their usefulness gave out? At least slaves had each other nearby, sometimes their own relatives lived on the same property. At least she hoped that was the case.

More likely, this group was contemplating what to do with the money Jason was paying them once the scam was over. Or maybe they were all afraid of getting caught and going to jail!

Brant had continued walking, pausing in front of a maple tree. He took his coat off and spread it on the grass like a picnic cloth, motioning for Leia to join him on the wool.

"We're lucky there's no fighting here," she said, settling on the coat's sleeve and lapel. "It's a beautiful area." Had she really said that?

"May it stay this way far into the future," he said with a reverent tone. He clasped his hands together in front of him, steeping the index fingers toward the sky.

"Oh, it will," she said, drawing a curious look from him.

"You say strange things, Leah. I may have to spend some time in Baltimore to understand you better."

Leia said nothing, looking around the garden for a reason to change the subject yet again.

"But you understand, I may never see you again." His words rang truer than any she had heard that day, and added a note of melodrama to the situation. She turned her face up toward his, which towered at least a foot over hers. His gaze locked onto hers, as they paused, embracing like two teenage lovers that were about to be torn apart. Leia knew raw desire when she saw it, and Brant's eyes glistened with it. Any other man, any modern man, would have been all over her by now. She reached toward his face, and stroked his cheek with the back of her fingers.

Brant took her hand and gently kissed it, his thumb pressed into her palm "We should return to the house. There's no chaperone with us. It would be nice to learn more about you, to know you better, but I'm leaving very soon. I've no doubt there will be fighting." His voice was suddenly harsh as he pulled her to her feet.

Leia stepped back. Why did he keep saying that? Clips of movies portraying bloody, ragged soldiers played in Leia's mind. How could a man speak so calmly of combat if it was real for him? Perhaps he was just a good actor, though he was almost too-handsome for Hollywood. He didn't seem to know just how hot he was, which only made him more appealing.

They walked to the fountain and he passed his hand through the water spouting from the gurgling cherub's mouth. When he moved his hands up and down his thighs to dry the beads of water, Leia was struck by his sensual movement. The man certainly had captured her attention, she thought. They sat on a shiny, wrought-iron bench decorated with lacy scrollwork.

"It's so pretty here. Let's sit a minute."

"I like to think here. It's very calm," he began and smoothed his thick hair back from his forehead. "The sound of the fountain is relaxing, so when I visit, I always spend time out here."

Leia was still silent, contemplating that when she had seen this fountain this same morning, it had been rusted, broken in a few places, and not in use. If this was a scam, she thought, it was an expensive one. But what if it wasn't? Could she have traveled back to the nineteenth century?

"You are very quiet, Leah. Did I offend you? I should not have been so forward."

"Oh, heavens no. I was just wondering... I have seemed to lose track of time these past few days. What is the date?"

Brant looked at her with narrowed eyes. "June fifteenth, of course."

"June fifteenth, nineteen..." She looked at her hands in her lap. Asking was risky and her heart began to pound.

"Eighteen, Leah, 1863. You know that. Are you feeling well?"

No! Suddenly Leia was not feeling well at all. She could not believe she was somehow back in 1863. Civil War time? Real fighting, real bloodshed! No, it was impossible. She was a twentieth-century woman, dammit!

"I'm fine, Brant. I think I just need to get some sleep. Too much wine, probably."

He smiled as if he finally understood her, and rose to escort her back to the house. She knew then how to get to the bottom of this mess. She needed to get off this property. Even Jason Maxwell, real estate wizard, couldn't have the resources to extend his scam outside of the McGarland gates. Although she knew her property boundaries up one side and down the other, literally, she wasn't about to test the limits of Jason's charade in the dark.

For tonight, she would play along. Tomorrow, she would ask one of the maids to take her to town, and she'd get back to reality. She didn't feel like she was in any immediate danger, quite the opposite. Leia sighed and smiled, thanked Brant for the walk, and went inside.

"Hettie, I would like to go into town today. Martha doesn't approve of my attire, and I'd like to do some shopping," Leia said, tying a coarse apron over the black dress she'd borrowed. She felt surprisingly good, having slept well on the feathery mattress of the green guest room. Martha had seen her to bed personally, providing a nightgown straight from the eighteen-hundreds. It had not looked old enough to be an actual antique, and Leia had again been impressed by the thoroughness of the scam-designers. She had lain awake a short time expecting Jason to make an appearance, but he did not. The night was quiet except for the crickets, silence overwhelming everything else. She'd awakened several times and wondered about time, about her life, about Martin.

Just after dawn Martha had appeared with a dark brown, nearly black gown and the coordinating undergarments. Leia had hidden her own skirt, bra and panties in a tall armoire. Hettie had come to help her dress, insisting she wear thick stockings and a balmoral petticoat under the gown, which had a corset-like bodice built in. Leia began to sweat just thinking about all of these heavy clothes. She wouldn't even have known what they were if Sara hadn't taught her. After squeezing her waist into a stiff, tiny garment, the maid arranged Leia's blonde hair into a chignon so tightly that her eyes pulled squinty. Martha had sighed and told Leah she'd have to wear her own shoes, but heaven only knew where she had obtained such unsightly items of torture.

"Miz Leah, you knows you can't be going to any town, and you are still in mourning, so you have to wear black, " Hettie told her in a serious tone, and continued stirring whatever she was stirring. Aha, Leah thought, I've got them now. They can't continue this charade if I leave the grounds.

"And why would that be, Hettie?"

"Soldiers, Miz Leah, the war! Mista Brant said we shouldn't leave the house at all, that Confederates are headin' this way even as we speak." Leah was surprised that the woman had come up with such a good answer to her challenge. It fit right in with the date Brant had given her last night, June 1863. She remembered from busloads of high school field trips that Gettysburg had been a huge battle sight in July of that year. One of the few perks of growing up in Walnut Grove, Maryland was the close proximity to the Pennsylvania battlefields.

"Hettie, I need to get out of here for a while, war or no war. How far is it to town?"

"Too far to walk, if that's what you are wantin' to do," the maid replied, pouring a creamy orange batter into a dish. The tone she used sounded familiar to Leia, but she couldn't place where she'd heard it before.

"What are you making?"

"Pumpkin pie. It is Mista Patrick's favorite. We put up enough pumpkin every year so he can have pie year 'round."

"Um, sounds good. Hettie, is there a car...carriage I could use?" Leia decided to play along for the moment to get what she wanted.

"Yes'm, there is. But it's hidden away. You'd need to speak with Mista Patrick. He don't want no soldiers confiscatin' it."

"Confiscating what?"

The women had not heard Brant enter the room. They turned to look at him, and Leia saw worry, or suspicion, crinkling the handsome face.

"Good morning, Brant," Leia began, "I was just asking Hettie if I could take the carriage into town." She smiled at him, even batting her eyelashes. She wished that she had mascara to enhance them.

"No, I'm afraid that would be too dangerous. May I ask why you wish to go?"

"Well, I need to purchase clothing," she said, "and shoes. Aunt Martha did not seem to approve of my dress last night, and the rest of my clothing was stolen." Not exactly a lie, she thought, I just don't happen to have the rest of my 1990's wardrobe handy. Where had Jason moved her clothes to, anyway? Had all her personal items been stashed away, along with her friends?

"I can understand her concern. I, however, enjoyed your unique style. And with the war on, there's not a great deal available in store clothing. Cotton is very precious now." Brant spoke softly, a teasing tone in his voice. "Tell me, are all the ladies in Baltimore as lovely as you? If they are, the Confederates may never get any farther north than that."

"Oh, they won't go through Baltimore," Leia said, leaning against the wood counter.

"And how do you know that?" Brant's eyes narrowed.

She wasn't sure how to answer him. She just remembered that the troops had come up more west than Baltimore. She really couldn't even be sure of that fact, however, not being an expert on the Civil War. Brant had crossed his arms in front of his body, and obviously wasn't moving until he got a satisfactory response. Luckily, Martha entered the kitchen chattering happily.

"Leah, oh good! Here you are. We have received an invitation to the Bauer home, our neighbors. They've asked us to come for lunch...you, me and Mary Katherine. Won't that be pleasant? We will have to walk, though, because Patrick insists the carriage stay hidden. Come with me, dear, we have to see if Mary Katherine has more sturdy shoes you can borrow. You will never make it on those scanty things you wear." She rubbed her hands together, then wrung them as if worried. "Good morning Brant, Patrick would like to see you, he has some papers for you to sign. Witness, I think he said. Come, dear," Martha said, pulling Leia from the room before Brant could say a word.

Leia smiled at Martha's wonderful timing, but was reminded of Martin and grew anxious wondering what had happened to him. She hoped he hadn't been hurt by the perpetrators of this sham.

The realization that she was leaving the property cheered her. Although it wasn't freedom to seek out the civilization of a town, she should be able to spot inconsistencies or staged settings, and once she could determine that this was a hoax with certainty, she could demand that it be brought to an end. Or, at the very least, she could make an escape. Martha handed her a cloak and a pair of spool-heeled ankle boots, and Leia wondered why her own shoes wouldn't work for a walk next door. She'd always thought of the granny boots as sturdy.

She did not have long to wonder. After the first quarter-mile her feet hurt. Neighbors weren't close in modern Walnut Grove, but this was ridiculous. The air was warm from sun and humidity. The weather seemed just like a normal June day. The grass was as tall as their knees in some places, and Leia noticed that a good mowing was in order. She also noted with some trepidation that the Smith house, the neighboring white stone house, was missing.

Brant watched the little party set out, then returned to the kitchen.

"May I have more water?" he asked, watching Hettie perform her daily work. The pies she created for the family were only a tiny part of the duties Brant knew she did.

At her nod, Brant poured his own water from a glazed brown pitcher.

"Mista Brant," Hettie began, still keeping her eyes on her current project. "Why do you suppose Miz Leah wanted that carriage?"

Brant's cup thudded to the counter beside him. "I'm sure she was sincere about needing dresses. What she was wearing last evening was strange in some way."

Hettie turned to him, wiping her flour coated hands on a rough towel. "May I speak?" Brant passed a hand through his hair, loosening it from his damp forehead. "Of course." "Why did Miz Leah follow you back to the cellar last night?"

"Another question, Hettie, that I can't find a ready answer for."

Hettie nodded, slowly, her dark eyes solemn. Brant noticed she had sprouted a few graying strands lately. "She is lovely. Far more than that Belle woman. Could cause a body to lose his head, if you know what I mean."

"Don't worry. Mine is on very tightly." At her pointed glance, he added, "And it has been ever since Margaret. Still, there's always reason for caution when so much is at stake." He reached for his cup again.

"We go on like usual?"

He stared at Hettie, weighing possibilities in his head. "We must. There's too much to do to let fear stop us. Agreed?"

"Yes sir." She straightened, holding her lower back with one hand. "Too much to do, and too little time."

As the small group rounded a bend in the dirt carriage-walk, Leia drew in her breath. Where the Foster's cedar-shingled ranch should be was a three-story brick mansion. She felt a pit form and begin to burn at the bottom of her stomach. Her palms were sweating profusely.

A circular dirt driveway led them to the porch that ran the entire front of the house. The white brick only made the house look larger, as did the doorway that was wide enough to hang four standard-size doors.

"Thank you for the shoes, Mary Katherine. I had no idea how far we would walk," Leia whispered to the young woman as they climbed the white brick steps to the porch. If she concentrated on her feet, she couldn't start to freak out about the impossible scenery. The door was opened by a large black man, who was dressed very nicely in a gray suit of some sort. The McGarland group was ushered inside, and Leia stared in awe at the curving staircase they faced. As a white-haired woman in a blue gown was introduced to her, Leia began to feel dizzy.

"My dear, you look quite ill! Please, come in and rest," the woman offered, startled by Leia's pale and damp appearance. "Is it the heat?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Bauer," Leia whispered, allowing herself to be seated on a long bench. She saw Aunt Martha and their hostess tilt heads together, obviously discussing her odd behavior. Mary Katherine sat beside her and patted her hand sympathetically, as if she knew just how Leia felt. Fat chance, Leia thought. The prim and proper Mary Katherine McGarland would not, in a million years, understand what Leia faced...that this was really 1863, that this could not possibly be a hoax or scam. She was very much awake,

and unless she was insane, she had traveled back in time.

The realization that one had traveled through time was no less frightening than finding one was being victimized by scam artists. The only major difference Leia could think of was that there was no great danger imminent from the "players" themselves. Martha, Mary Katherine, and old Patrick were her ancestors, not criminals...and Brant, he was just a good-looking soldier from the Union army. These thoughts swirled through Leia's mind as she dressed for dinner. Her illness, although it was actually just strange behavior, Aunt Martha had said, was why they had left the Bauers' home almost as soon as they had arrived. Leia knew Aunt Martha had been embarrassed, and the old woman had even taken Leia aside when they got home to discuss her physical status.

"This is very personal, Leah," Martha had said, picking up her sewing. "Could it be that you are carrying a child? Feeling light headed and sick to the stomach are definite signs, you know."

Leia was surprised by the question, but recovered, remembering Martha thought her recently widowed. "Why, no. That's not possible. It has been a very long time since..." Leia had let her voice trail off, not finishing the indelicate sentence. She didn't want to even imply such a thing could be possible and subject herself to some kind of barbaric medical examination. If anyone knew she was really a virgin, they'd know she wasn't cousin Leah from Baltimore, and Leia knew enough about history to know she couldn't afford to be cast out homeless in the midst of the Civil War. That could have worse consequences than risking her virginity to just anyone in the twentieth century. Aunt Martha had seemed to believe her, and told her to go upstairs and rest before dinner...and wasn't it ironic that a twentieth-century virgin, an oddity from her sixteenth birthday forward, had traveled one hundred and thirty years into the past to become an oddity again, in the most conservative of times, for that very same reason.

Leia then began to worry about the real Leah showing up. What would happen then? There had to be a way back to the future, and Leia had to start looking. After dinner, she'd go down to the cellar again. She shivered. She remembered sitting cross-legged just outside the cellar door many times when she was young, waiting for something to happen, but now she'd have to ignore the prickly fear and search for a door back. After all, this whole mess had started when she had left the basement through the wrong door, hadn't it?

Chapter 3

"Leah, are you well enough to come down for dinner?" Mary Katherine's sweet voice followed her knock on the door.

"Yes, thank you. I'll be right down." Leia swiped away the few stray tears she had shed in a moment of self-pity. At least I don't have to worry about my mascara smudging, she thought wryly. She checked her reflection in a yellowing mirror on her bureau, and smiled at the cloudy, distorted image. When she joined Mary Katherine in the hall, she was no more sure of her appearance than when she had started fussing.

"Do I look, um, presentable?"

"You look beautiful, Leah. Just like your mother," the girl replied, taking Leia's arm as they went down the curving staircase.

How could I look like Leah's mother? And does that mean I look like the real Leah?

"When did you last see my mother, Mary Katherine?"

"Oh, several years ago. Aunt Caroline came to a birthday party here, without you, I believe. Do you remember the time you broke your leg riding? It must have been then. It is wonderful that you don't have a lame leg now," she said, as they entered the dining room.

So she's my cousin. Thank God Leah had broken her leg that year and never arrived, Leia thought, taking her seat. Or it might not have been so easy for them to assume I was her.

Leia stayed lost in her own thoughts through most of the meal. She only barely noticed the baked chicken, the potatoes and corn dishes. She did enjoy the apple dumplings, savoring the sweet, puffy pastry and realized that the war had not effected the food supply in the McGarland house...at least not as far as she could tell, from a 1990's viewpoint. She joined the conversation when she heard Mary Katherine mention Belle's name.

"Will Belle be staying with us again?" Leia was uneasy including herself in 'us.'

"Oh, I don't believe so," Aunt Martha answered.

Leia saw Brant squirm in his chair, adorably, eyes fixed on his dumpling.

"We thought Belle was becoming sweet on Brant," Mary Katherine explained. "But after spending a few days, she just disappeared."

"Which is just as well, young lady. We don't know anything about that girl's family. It was totally unsuitable for her to show interest in Brant," said Martha, clucking her tongue.

"Where did you meet her?" Leia asked. She was pleased that some other female was raising more eyebrows than she was. Maybe this Belle was a time-traveler?

"I met her at school last year. She's from Martinsburg, and was traveling to visit relatives when she stopped here. You know, Leah, more than a few soldiers and the like have stopped here on their way to Pennsylvania. Always be careful, but don't be startled if you see strangers here, coming or going."

Leia knew all about their abundance of strangers since she was one herself.

"It was not proper for a young lady of any quality to be traveling alone," Martha said.

"But I traveled here alone," Leia said, her voice soft...Really alone.

"You are a widow," Martha replied, as if that should have been obvious.

"But it was no less dangerous for Leah to come here alone. Soldiers and stragglers are everywhere. Her bags were stolen, remember. She could have been hurt, or worse," Brant said, and looked across the wide table at Leia. His gaze seemed to capture hers for a moment, and she couldn't look away. He folded his hands under his strong chin and let his gaze meet hers. The depth of the brown eyes made Leia keep looking, seeking the bottom of a never-ending well. His cheekbones were so strongly sculpted that when he wasn't smiling, his face appeared to be almost grimacing. With her eyes she caressed his nose, feeling its straight and long plane, his lips ...Leia felt a blush rise to her cheeks as she recalled their intimate moment in the garden.

When his stern expression melted into a knowing smile, she blushed more. The conversation had stumbled around the table, and the three diners not remembering the garden were watching Leia and Brant.

"May I join you?" Brant entered the library without waiting for an answer.

"Of course," Leia said, not turning to face him. Instead her attention was riveted to the long wall of books opposite the fireplace. She ran her fingers lightly over several of the leather volumes, almost reverently. "These are beautiful books."

"Yes, they are," he agreed, "but not as beautiful as you." He was standing behind her when she turned to face him, a forest green covered book in her hands. She smiled at his choice of words, rather corny to the ears of a twentieth century woman. From Brant, they sounded sweet.

"Thank you, Brant. Have you read this?" She held up the book's spine that displayed the title: 'Tale of Two Cities,' by Charles Dickens.

"Yes, actually, my teacher required it a few years ago. Would you like me to tell you about it?"

"I've read it, too. Thanks," Leia said, and enjoyed his surprised expression. She set the book on the nearby desk and walked to the fireplace. Despite the June heat, many parts of the large house were chilly and damp. She touched the cherry mantle, which reminded her of the last house she had appraised. Its smooth surface was polished to reflect the images of the objects it held. A vase, a blown-glass bowl, a silver candlestick

and a hammered metal snuffer decorated the special shelf. Leia took the bowl down to inspect it closely.

"Now this," she told Brant, "is beautiful." He nodded and sat down on the gold brocade sofa that faced the fireplace.

"If you like that sort of thing, there are many more pieces just lying about in the cellar. There are also a few in the Chippendale cabinet."

"Really?" Leia couldn't keep the excitement from her voice. If she was going to be stuck in 1863, access to 'new' antique glassware could provide a small distraction. Looking at him to ask about the glass, Leia caught her breath and forgot her question.

Brant was seated, twisted to face her with one arm propped on the sofa's back. His head was outlined by the glow from the fire, almost aura-like. The strength of his shoulders was emphasized by the way they were set, his arms open and welcoming. Flame light softened his features from their normal stern look. He seemed to be watching her with fascination.

"It sounds nice to hear happiness in your voice," he told her. "You are far too young to be a widow."

She racked her brain for an appropriate response. "I'm afraid the war has made many widows out of young women."

"Did you love him?" Brant asked her the question in his softest voice. He looked at her, still seemingly entranced, but she didn't respond. "Your husband, did you love him?"

"Hmnn, I..." she mumbled, and turned back to the fire. She grasped the mantle with one hand and leaned her head against it. She hoped he would assume her to be very distraught, but the truth was, she didn't even know the name of the man who had been Leah's husband. She could call up the image of her late grandfather, though, and felt the familiar pangs of grief begin in her stomach. The face she turned back to Brant felt truly sad, her eyes welled up with fresh tears.

"I'm sorry," he said, rising to place his arms around her. She buried her face in the warm material covering his chest, the wool of his uniform tickling her nose. The strength she felt coming from this man far exceeded anything she had ever felt from Jason, who had tried halfheartedly to comfort her after Grandfather's funeral. From Brant it was almost a tangible thing, a force emanating from somewhere deep inside him. She was grateful to Brant for not speaking, but holding her in a tight embrace while her tears poured out in a gurgling stream. She couldn't stop them once they had started. Her grandfather, her parents, her unfathomable time-travel...all these things racked sobs from Leia that she couldn't control. Brant held her, a silent comforter, for a quarter of an hour. When finally the flow ebbed, Leia grew embarrassed.

"Now I'm sorry," she said, pulling back from his grasp. "I can't believe I burdened you like this. Please forgive me." He handed her a handkerchief of stiff white cotton, and she

wiped her eyes. Looking down at the wet material, she was amazed. It had been years since she had cried and not found mascara all over everything. She blew her nose as quietly as possible.

"No, I am. I spoke about your being happy, and then I drew you back into a state of grief."

"It felt good, though. I think I needed to do that. But look at your wet uniform! And I bet that wool's dry-clean only."

"What does that mean? How can something be cleaned dry?"

"Oh, it's just an expression. In Baltimore. Because wool shrinks if it gets wet." She quickly changed the subject. "Will you tell me about the other glassware now?" She managed a smile, because despite the tightness of her face and pounding behind her eyes, she felt much better.

They remained huddled together for some time on the brocade sofa, Leia's head resting on Brant's shoulder. When the fire's crackling slowed to a smolder, he lifted her chin with one hand.

"It's getting late. Perhaps you want to retire now?" He looked into her eyes, holding them level with his own.

She sighed. "I suppose." She made no attempt to move. Although she was certain her face was swollen from her earlier tears, she didn't break away from his gaze. The way he looked at her made her feel pretty.

"Are you feeling better?"

"Much. I really appreciate you letting me cry on your shoulder, Brant. I don't know what got into me to be such a baby."

"You have every right to cry. You just lost your husband. You're staying in a house with family you don't know, with strangers, and a man in uniform stares at you constantly," he said, trying to make the last phrase sound light.

It was true, though, and she smiled, not fully sure if she was amused by his statement or pleased with its truth. Impulsively, Leia leaned toward him and kissed his cheek.

"Goodnight, Brant," she said, shifting her weight to rise.

"Goodnight, Leah," he replied and pulled her shoulders closer to him. His lips were on hers before she could move, crashing down on hers with the same intensity of her earlier racking sobs. He turned his cheek to hers, moving it over her face, as if to wipe away the salty tears. She felt his hands reach for the back of her head, supporting her and stroking her hair. Leia felt his support in her heart, where it warmed her and relieved some of her anxiety. She slid her arms around his waist, reaching for his strength, leaning forward into the embrace. She knew if he looked down, he'd see right down into the lacy black bodice of her dress. It was a high neckline, compared to the other women's, but it gaped

a bit from her body. She didn't care.

His head bent so he could kiss the tops of her breasts, through the lace, and a swirl of sensation pulsed through her. Her nipples seemed to reach for him.

Brant suddenly sat up straight, as a soldier comes to attention, took her hands in his, and apologized.

"Forgive me, I should not have been so forward."

"It's okay," she said, not knowing how naive she should be in this century. Being a widow would make her experienced, but also put her in a prolonged state of mourning. She stood. "How soon do you have to leave?"

"Any day now. A messenger will call for me on his way to Pennsylvania." He pulled back from her, almost imperceptibly. "Tomorrow, time prevailing, we can search the cellar for glassware."

Thanks to Hettie, Leia soon found herself immersed in a bathtub filled with moderately hot water. Being short, Leia could stretch out a bit, though her knees were still raised. The bar of soap Hettie supplied smelled unfamiliar, but not unpleasant. It didn't lather well, but Leia tried to relax and make the best of it. She'd had no bath her first night. She hadn't even tried to wash her face. Cold water this morning had erased the last traces of twentieth-century makeup.

"Miz Leah, do you need anything?" Hettie had returned, always moving silently.

"No, thank you. I'm just going to sit here till I look like a prune."

"Yes, ma'am." Hettie started for the door, her shoulders rounded and leading the way.

Now was her chance to ask questions, though she felt a twinge at the woman's obvious discomfort. "Wait...Hettie?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Can I ask you something? It may sound a bit strange." Probably everything she said sounded strange in this time.

"Yes, ma'am."

Leia wanted to tell her to stop calling her ma'am, but she didn't want to be called Leah, either.

"How long have you been here?"

"Ya mean workin' here?"

Leia nodded.

"Since I was fifteen, ma'am. Masta Patrick hired me and my brother to work in the house 'cause he didn't keep any slaves. Been a good place," she added, her eyes wary.

"Relax, Hettie. You can tell me anything." Leia tried to rinse her body parts as the water

cooled. "Who else lived here while you've been here?"

"Well, Miz Eve before she died, and the boys."

"Boys?"

"You hadn't forgotten your own daddy? Mistas William, and Michael and James grew up here." The maid helped Leia dry herself and get into a rough cotton gown. "But you had to run off and marry that Jonathan, and your daddy never got over it." She clicked her tongue. "So now all its left is Miz Martha, with me here to take care of her, but I'm gettin' on in years. And o' course Masta treats her just like his own daughter."

Leia felt confused, like she had some puzzle pieces but needed many more. Was Martha Leah's mother or her aunt? Had to be her aunt, judging from what Leia had observed so far.

"Anyone else?"

"Well, just my brother, like I said. I ain' seen him for years and years, since he disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Leia was instantly alert. Disappeared, how?

"Just uppin' disappeared from his plantation in Virginia one day. Never been seen again." Hettie had Leia buttoned up and under a thin quilt before the door knock that startled them both.

"Your timing is excellent, Hettie," she said, smiling and motioning for her to open the door. Brant stood in the door way, his shoulders filling the entire width of the frame.

"Just came to say goodnight again," he said, crossing his arms and smiling.

Hettie slipped out the door to an adjoining room, looking pointedly at Leia before leaving them alone. It was like having a disapproving nanny.

"Goodnight, Brant." Leia let the quilt fall from her chest and watched his expression change. Although she knew he couldn't see anything, she felt wanton.

"I see widows don't sleep in black gowns," he said, smiling.

"You noticed." She wondered about his intentions, smiling at her own old-fashioned thought.

"Good night, Leah Gram," he told her, and abruptly closed the door as he left. Silently, she wished Brant knew who she really was. It bothered her deceiving him now. Leia didn't have long to ponder Brant's feelings, because those tears earlier were such an effective depressant, she was asleep before her conscience could squawk.

Almost immediately Hettie was waking her for breakfast. Dressed in yet another near-black gown, Leia joined the others in the dining room. The others were again dressed in bright colors, and Leia wondered why they did not wear mourning for her husband. She remembered from the movie, *Gone With The Wind*, that when Scarlett's first husband

died, the whole family had worn black. It seemed that every McGarland female had donated her own black gowns to Leah.

They were nearly finished eating when she arrived, due to Leia's struggles dressing in the restrictive clothing. She smelled bacon cooking, probably because greasy odors lingered when the June humidity blanketed the house. She walked to the sideboard to choose something, and decided on mixed berries and coffee. The fruit choice seemed healthy to Leia until she dolloped heavy cream onto the blue and red berries. She realized she'd been eating very heavy in 1863, but that her thighs could expand unnoticed under the full skirts she wore here.

"Good morning, Leah. Deep in thought?" Brant asked, as she took her place next to him.

"Nothing you'd want to hear," she said, smiling impishly.

He turned back to his coffee and Leia continued to watch him. His profile was even more classically rugged than his full face, she thought. Wouldn't the girls be jealous if she'd met him in her own time? Sara would positively drool. Sara. Leia had nearly forgotten. Her best friend had practically disowned her the last time they'd talked. Was Sara worried about her now? At least Martin must be looking for her. Unless...the time line wasn't parallel, and no one knew she was missing.

"Leah, are you listening?" Martha had paused in the arched doorway, obviously waiting for some kind of response.

"Oh, I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"She asked if you would like to visit the Bauers again," Brant spoke up. "But I have already planned her day, Miss Martha." He briefly outlined their plan to search out the nicer glassware in the cellar and clean it up for display. After a warning from Patrick not to display any valuable items that marauding Confederates might steal, the room was cleared of the other diners.

"Leah, I have one errand to run before we can begin our search. I'll return within an hour." Brant rose to leave, nodded to the McGarlands, and disappeared without further explanations.

When Leia caught up with Brant, he was well on his way to the neighboring property. He looked immense atop the mare. She could almost picture him charging into a medieval battle, strong as a fortress, ready to do battle for what he believed in.

A very light breeze tickled the trees, but had little effect on the humidity. Brant pushed sweat from his forehead as if he were swatting gnats. He must have sensed her approach, quiet though it was in a pair of Mary Katherine's fabric slippers. The man and horse whirled around as one.

"Leah! What are you doing out here without an escort?" His eyes blinked with anger.

Leia's stomach contracted, but she ignored his question, doubtful it was her safety he

was really concerned about. "Are you waiting for someone?" That she should feel even the smallest jolt of jealousy irritated her.

His blustery gaze settled down around her, and Leia shivered despite the heat. "Are you following me?"

Amazed that a human spine could be as stiff and straight as his, Leia shook her head slowly. "Of course not. But I didn't realize you were being so secretive out here." She started to add a line about this being a free country, but thought better of it. "Shall I head in the other direction?"

He stared down at her, having the advantage of higher elevation. Leia had come on foot, hoping to meet Brant in a comfortable situation. This accusatory reaction was not what she had imagined. He didn't know her well, of course, but why was he so suspicious?

The breeze increased to a wind from the south, suddenly as if to usher in change. Brant's expression softened then, and before she knew what was happening Leia was on the horse in front of him, legs draped gracefully over one side of the animal. His height allowed Brant to see over her head as the mare trotted farther away from the McGarland property. Leia's heart beat quicker as she drew a whiff of Brant's clean, woolen scent mixed with pine and horse. She smiled and relaxed her shoulder muscles. Wherever he was headed, she was along for the ride.

Leia had lost all sense of direction when Brant finally stopped and helped her dismount. The feel of his hands at her sides made her tingle, and she sighed as he released the grip.

Brant motioned for her to be quiet as he tilted his head in listening posture. Soon Leah, too, heard the shuffling feet among dry pine needles. She gave up any ideas she'd had that he was meeting a woman.

"Stay here," he told her in his soldier's voice.

"Be careful," was the best she could whisper in reply, not knowing what he was about. Were they in enemy territory?

He nodded, handed her the lead and strode to greet the couple emerging from the trees.

Leia watched Brant, comfortable that they couldn't see her in the pines. His expression, an intense look of furrowed brows that could only be concern, caught her attention and held it. When she saw him reach for a tree, she was startled to recognize two of the Bauer's slaves approach Brant.

The trio kept looking around, as if they feared being watched. Brant touched the small of the woman's back, steadying her and guiding her in his chosen direction. It was a gesture of gentlemanly manners, completely acceptable from a soldier to a lady, yet unheard of between races in the 1860's. Yet another anachronism sent shivers down her arms, despite the heat.

Leia could almost feel that large hand on her back, warm and firm as the lumbar support

in her car. A man, obviously the woman's husband, moved behind her and looked to Brant with pure hero-worship in his eyes. Leia could see that from where she waited.

Conversation she wasn't privy to lasted for three or four minutes, peppered by vigorous head-shaking and shoulder-clasping.

Brant crossed back to where she waited. "Leah, come out."

Carefully she stepped in front of him, offering a shy smile.

He took her elbow. "Something has happened, and since you're here with us, I need to be able to trust you now. Can I depend on your silence?"

Leia looked up into his eyes. "Of course." Without a doubt, Brant had her loyalty, and although it might not be the appropriate response for a gentle lady, she knew it was the right thing to do. Time may not last long for Leia in this world, and she wanted to spend some of it with this chocolate-eyed soldier. If she could help a few unfortunate people along the way, so much the better.

Brant was impressed, pleased at Leah's stamina as they made their way through the woods. Not only was the terrain rough, but twice they'd had to hide from straggling troops. Leah had ducked and hidden with the other three, holding an unnatural position for some time, and they had not been discovered. Margaret's under used muscles would have given out long before. He shook off the memory, focusing on the present. It would not have mattered, he knew, whether the soldiers had been blue or gray, because either side would object to what he was doing.

She hadn't asked any questions, either, which was a relief. Soon enough, she'd know exactly what was going on and his part in it all. Would she then turn from him in disgust? Not if she was half the woman she seemed to be today. He reminded himself that trusting a female before had ended in disaster.

"Where are we?" she asked, breaking his train of thought. He smiled as he watched her dismount and rub her backside.

"It's probably better if you don't know. But there's a cabin around that bend in the creek, and we need to see these two there safely." He held his breath, waiting for the questions to begin. Margaret had always asked pointed questions, annoying and potentially dangerous ones.

When Leah remained silent, he led the small party across a stony-edged stream, following its curves from a clearing into a deeper section of pines. The heat of the day lessened under the tree cover, but the air still hung heavily around their heads.

"There," he said, tilting his head. "Just a few yards away, hidden in the trees." He lapsed into silence, and the group followed, quiet as well.

The cabin was rustic and neglected. The timber shivered like matches ready to spark. The door of rough, splintered wood swayed in and out, though the air was still.

"Looks haunted," Leah said, whispering while testing the stability of a floor plank with one foot.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing." The four were inside the cabin then, looking at the interior of the vacant shack.

"Leah, this is John and Bitsy. That's all you should know. It's all that's safe for you to know." He watched her face, scrutinizing it for her thoughts. What did she think about all of this?

Brant didn't learn anything, however, because she only nodded and smiled demurely at the others. She turned to inspect each of the dusty corners while John and Bitsy settled their poorly clad frames on the cracked wooden floor.

Brant leaned near the man's head. "I'll be back for you after dark falls. Get some rest while you can." To the woman he said, "Are you certain you want to do this? We don't know where you're destined for, and you may never see anyone here again."

Bitsy reached for his roughened hand, grasping it between her own, work-callused ones. "Anyplace would be better, Mista Brant. I wanta raise my baby myself. We can never thank ya enough."

"There's no need," he whispered, turning away.

"God bless you," she said, wiping a tear from her face.

"And God be with both of you, wherever that may be."

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, I think so. Brant, I have to tell you something. I've always been just a bit frightened of basements."

"Basements?"

"Cellars. You know, wine cellars, root cellars, anything underground," Leia said. "Just wanted to let you know." She had hoped for words of reassurance or protection, but Brant merely strode to the cellar door and yanked it open. She joined him, mentally preparing for the descent.

"Do you have a flashlight?"

"Have a what?" Brant asked, and Leia bit her tongue.

"That's just Baltimore slang for candle or lantern."

"Slang?" Brant was asking questions, but he had at the same time taken a small lamp from the sideboard. "Look, better than candles or lard-oil lamps. Whale-oil! We'll have plenty of light." He started down the steep steps, holding the lamp out in front.

Leia followed, holding her skirts so she wouldn't trip, and clutching the unfinished

railing. The meager light of the lamp was not sufficient for Leia, who longed for that naked light bulb of the future. She stayed close to Brant, her eyes avoiding the eerie shadows the lamp threw.

Muffled noises came from the far ends of the basement, which Leia assumed were made by scampering mice. At least, she hoped that's all they were.

"Where do we start?" Leia whispered into Brant's ear.

"I remember seeing a few pieces in a trunk over there, to the right. And you don't need to whisper, Leah." Brant indicated their direction by pointing the small lamp. Together they moved to the far corner, until Brant stopped in front of what appeared to be an antique hope chest.

Leia couldn't see what else was in the cellar, because the lamp shed so little light. Her imagination was running wild, envisioning evil creatures lurking in the shadows, so she kept her eyes on Brant and tried to concentrate on the chest. He had opened it, and was pulling items out.

"Teapot, no lid, chipped glass candlestick, a very dull knife," he said, listing the items as he lifted them for her inspection.

"Are there no windows at all down here?" she asked, keeping her gaze fixed on Brant.

"In the cellar? Of course not. Except for one tiny one, high on the far wall. Look at this, a ladies' hand mirror."

She nodded. "How about other doors?"

"Well, there is a door back near the bottom of the steps. To a closet, I believe. Other than that, I don't have any idea. I've only been down here a few times. Look at this, Leah." He held up a faceted crystal dish, the size of an ash-tray.

She recognized the faint suspicion in his voice, and the way he tried to change the subject, just like the other day in the kitchen. He was trying to keep the conversation on the glass, and off of doors. Cellar doors.

"Let me see," she said, taking the delicate piece and holding it close to the lamp. "This is beautiful. Look at the center, there are grapes etched into the glass." She ran her fingers over the pattern. Why would he care if she asked about doors?

"Leah! Look at this!" He held up a small flask this time, the kind Leia recognized was used to hold whiskey.

"A flask?" She took the bottle, handing the dish back to Brant. Examining the amber glass, she noticed a man's portrait embossed on its front.

"Look at him," she said, pointing the face out.

"Who is it?"

"I really don't know. He doesn't look familiar, but let's take this piece upstairs. And the

dish, and those lacy base candlesticks." Leia finished rifling through the chest of treasures, and wiped the dust from her hands onto her skirt.

He nodded and began putting the other misfit objects back into the chest. Leia looked around her at the dark, shadowy corners, and wished again for a flashlight. She shivered involuntarily when her eyes adjusted, and a faint outline of what could be a door appeared on the opposite wall.

"Brant! Look over there, it's another door." She squinted slightly, willing the darkness to allow her to focus more clearly, but the image had disappeared.

"Where?" he asked, lifting his head so quickly she thought he'd snap it right off his neck.

"Oh, I guess it was just my eyes playing tricks on me. I really don't like cellars, you know."

"You have mentioned that. Why are you hoping to locate another door? You're not planning to come back down here alone, are you?" His questions seemed logical, but they irritated Leia.

"I'm not," she snapped, "Let's just go back upstairs, okay?" She took the candlesticks he handed her, and waited for him to go ahead with the lamp. He stood still, looking at her. She knew he was confused by her change in mood, but she really didn't care. The whole situation was getting tiresome, and Leia felt her nerves prickly from her toes to the tip of her nose. I need two Advil tablets, she thought, shaking her head at the impossibility.

"What's wrong, Leah?" Brant's look had shifted from suspicious to concerned.

"I think I need some air, Brant. Can we get upstairs, please?"

He nodded and led the way through the darkness. She took a deep breath, but was disappointed when her lungs filled with the damp mustiness. When they reached the door at the foot of the stairs, Leia paused. She knew Brant had said it was a closet behind the door, but she just had to check. Balancing both candlesticks in one hand and against her body, she yanked the door open. Creaking hinges gave way, and she was staring into a closet-size room of nothingness.

"A closet?" he asked.

She nodded, knowing that he had been right about the door, but she had gone through what she'd known to be a door to her own dining room in the nineties, and found something totally unexpected on the other side. She had to try every door she found.

Resigned to her situation for the moment, Leia started up the stairs. She wondered what Martin and Sara were doing, if they had tried to find her. Would they think she had just run off?

Something scurried under Leia's feet and she jumped, startled. Her movement pushed her against Brant's back, in motion also, and he stumbled up the stairs. Grabbing the

rough railing, Leia felt splinters pierce her hand. The sound of glass breaking above her made her panic, and she gasped as Brant's knee went down into the shards.

Chapter 4

"She did not just run off, Jason," Sara told her brother. "Leia McGarland is a very responsible woman. She would not let her clients down, either. I've talked to two Realtors who've called wondering why she stood them up. I've made excuses for her, saying she had family business due to her grandfather's death. It's been more than twenty-four hours now. We have to call the police."

"They'll laugh at us! Not many women disappear from their own basements, Sara. Or they will suspect us of doing something to her. Let's go down to the basement again and look."

"We did that last night, Jason. She wasn't there. We found no clues." She turned to the man who cared for Leia as much as her own grandfather had. "One more time, Martin, are you sure that's where she went for the wine?"

"Of course I'm sure. The cellar door is right in the dining room! She just never came back up. If you hadn't run off you would have known that."

"And you didn't leave to use the bathroom, or answer the phone, or something just for a minute? She could have returned and slipped out then. Or maybe she just said she was going to the basement, but really left through the front door?"

Martin glared. "Look, I told you what happened. Now, I'm going down to search the basement again. Are either of you coming with me?"

Sara hesitated, then nodded slowly. She followed him down the stairs, pulling Jason behind her, wishing she had never doubted the loyalty of her friend. Now Leia was missing and they'd parted with angry words.

The shrill ringing of the phone halted Jason midway down the stairs. Martin continued down, but Sara waited, moving to the dining room door. Ignoring his girlfriend, Jason pushed past her and went back through the dining room door into the kitchen. She sat down at the dining room table and waited for his return, which happened within a minute.

"Change of plans. C'mon," he said, motioning for Sara to follow. He led her into the parlor.

"What are you doing?"

"I've arranged a deal with the Downsbury Shop," Jason said, walking toward the Chippendale commode. "They're going to take this junk off our hands." He yanked open the delicate doors, glanced inside, and whipped his head back toward Sara.

"Where are they?"

"What? The glass stuff? I don't know. But you can't sell Leia's collection! That's her stuff, not yours!" She studied him with narrowed eyes. Perhaps Leia had been right about him after all.

"Well I certainly can't sell it if it's not here!" Jason's eyes grew narrow, and he looked slowly around the parlor. He pulled on the fretwork of the hanging cabinet, and a door fell open. The cabinet was also empty.

"It's all gone," he said, shaking his head.

"It just disappeared? How can that be? Unless..." Sara said, sitting down. Where was Leia?

"Unless what?"

"Unless Leia's been back here without us knowing." Would she need money and try to sell her revered collection?

"Let's go. Back to that damn basement."

Even as spears of glass pierced his knee, Brant managed to grab his companion around the waist to save her from falling. He winced not at the actual stabbing pain, but at the burning as he tried to straighten the joint. Feels like I've been shot, he thought.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, pulling Leah toward him.

"No, just a few splinters from the railing. We have to get that glass out of your knee pronto!" Brant looked at her, once again amazed by one of her strange phrases. She was right, though, he had to take care of his knee. He righted the lamp to make sure no fire would start.

The couple hobbled up the last steps and through the dining room, which was deserted. Leah pushed him into the kitchen and onto a chair.

"I don't suppose you have a first-aid kit around here?"

He looked at her blankly.

"Never mind." She sighed. "Can you hike your pants up?"

Brant knew that the large muscles of his calves would not allow the trousers to fold back over his knee, so he was already removing them.

"What are..." Leah didn't finish her sentence. She turned back to a large pitcher of water, wetting a rag with it.

Trouserless, Brant sat back down and rolled the thin gaiter up over his left knee. He felt the blood draining from his face, and he tried to think of something else and treat his wound as if it belonged to someone else. He kept thinking about Leah, about the way she'd looked in her bed last night, when he had intruded where he didn't belong...and she hadn't minded.

"It's not as bad as it could have been," he said, plucking three miniature daggers from his skin. The glass was dark amber, from the portrait flask, and was easy to spot on light tan skin. A few drops of crimson blood appeared.

"Let me wipe that," Leah offered, dabbing gently at his knee with the rag. "Don't you have any peroxide or alcohol?"

Brant noticed her eyes wander from his knee to the top of his leg, and linger there. Her bold glances excited him. Usually surrounded by demure maidens, he assumed her appreciative gaze came from experience with her husband. Of course, the rowdy women in town might look at him that way, but certainly Leah wasn't like them.

"Alcohol? What type? Brandy? In the dining room there's some whiskey," he offered, wincing as the last shard was excavated.

"I suppose that will have to do. I'll get it. Don't move." Leah was through the door before he could respond. He wondered if the drink was to be for her or for him. Even though it was early in the day, Brant felt he could use a drink. He couldn't decide which was more frustrating, the pain in his knee or the feelings that were teasing him whenever he looked at Leah. She was pretty...no, something about her inside made her beautiful, and she had the softest skin and the tiniest waistline. Brant believed it would be tiny with or without a corset. The way she kept looking at him, was, well, exciting.

Belle had looked at him that way, and the rowdy ones, and other girls who flirted with any man they could find. Something had been missing with them, though, something like true feeling. Only one other woman had looked at him that way, with what he believed to be sincerity, and that had been Margaret. He had been fooled.

Recalling that name and face made Brant feel like a shard of glass had just spliced his heart. He must keep those painful memories fresh so he'd not develop those kind of emotions again for anyone. Once he left here, he must forget Leah and concentrate on survival.

"Found it," Leah called, sailing back into the room, her skirts swaying.

Brant held out his hand, ready to accept the bottle and drink, but she surprised him again, pouring the amber fluid directly onto his raw knee and dabbing the run-off with a rag. He winced instantly at the burning sensation, but pride held him still.

"You took that well," she told him.

"Why on earth did you do that?" His voice remained calm.

"To prevent infection, silly," she said, then handed him the bottle. "Now you can have some."

He took a few sips and handed the bottle back. "I think now you should elevate your leg," she went on, gently lifting his leg onto a nearby chair. "And just relax for a few minutes. Okay?"

"I must put my trousers on," he said, but made no move to rise.

"Not yet. Keep still a bit, let's elevate your leg, just to make sure the bleeding won't start again." She patted his hand in a motherly way and pulled a chair up to his. She lifted his

leg and propped his foot on her lap with the utmost care.

He watched her watch him, but saw nothing further of the maternal sort. Her eyes were taking in the muscles in his legs, his muscles everywhere. If she had any decency, she would look away. Brant was glad she didn't.

"Thank you. I forgot to say thank you," she began, breaking the silent tension.

"What for? You have taken care of me."

"For catching me like you did on the steps. Something scared me. It was my fault. I pushed you and made you stumble. And then you still managed to grab me so I wouldn't fall. It was heroic. Thank you." Modesty, or fear, finally caused her to look down at her hands.

Brant couldn't suppress a smile. "Thank you, Mrs. Graham, for nursing my knee. But it's fine," he said, setting his foot back on the floor and rolling the gaiter down over his leg. He rose and reached for his pants, turning away from her to pull them on. Listening for her to leave the room, like a lady would, he felt instead her gaze burning his backside. A blush rose to his cheeks, like a fever that started lower and worked its way up to his face, not a blush of humiliation, but one of arousal. No woman had ever watched him dress before, not Margaret, not even his mother. The feeling was not only a new one, but a good one.

"Do you need something?" Hettie asked, entering the kitchen with her arms full of vegetables.

"No, thank you Hettie. We will get out of your way," Leah said, taking Brant's arm. She gave him a conspiratorial glance that said...It's fine. Your trousers are on...Now.

The clip-clop, clip-clop of hooves drew Leia's attention to the approaching horseman. The rider was alone, and Leia was surprised at the noise one horse made on the dirt driveway. She watched from the parlor window, tugging the velvet draperies around her into folds of tension. The man's dark uniform appeared northern enough, but even soldiers on the right side could prove dangerous.

A noise from the side of the house caught the stranger's attention, and he dismounted. Leia watched as Brant strode toward the man, clasping his arm and slapping him on the back. Feeling as though she was watching a reunion of old friends, Leia untangled herself from the window dressing and opened the front door.

"Leah, come here. I'd like you to meet someone," Brant called to her. She raised her skirts slightly and descended the stone steps, joining the men on the dirt. The stranger bowed slightly to her.

"Captain Daniel Beck at your service, ma'am," he said, removing his dark blue cap.

Leia noticed that he needed a shave and a clean uniform. "It's nice to meet you."

"Daniel's going to be with us for a few days," Brant explained, still smiling at his friend.

"How nice, Captain Beck. Are you on your way to Pennsylvania?"

"Why, yes, I am. How did you know?"

Leia noticed his wary gaze, similar to the one she'd noticed on Brant when she had first arrived. "Just a guess, Captain. I assumed you'd be heading the same direction Brant will be taking shortly. Really," she assured him. She was amazed at how overly suspicious he acted...like Brant. It must be a soldier thing.

"Well, you know there's been some talk about female spies working for the rebels, Miss Leah. No disrespect intended. We just can't be too careful." He stroked his graying beard and looked at Leia solemnly.

"Leah's a cousin of the McGarlands, Daniel. Up from Baltimore. Widowed recently, you know." Brant spoke softly to the soldier, and touched Leia's shoulder. "She's like family to me, too."

"Forgive me, ma'am. It's just the nature of the job."

Leia fixed a sincere smile on the man. "I'll find out which room you may use and help get it ready for you." She felt warm and pleased by Brant's words about her being like family. Her rational side, however, reminded her once again of the danger she would face if the real Leah should suddenly materialize. Would they then assume she was a spy for the south? She shivered at the thought of what they'd do to her.

"How are things going, really?" Brant asked his friend as they watched Leah retreat to the house.

"Not well, Brant. Lee's coming this way. There may be fighting right here in Maryland. If this place wasn't so well hidden, I'd be concerned for your womenfolk." Daniel followed Brant, leading his horse to the stable, located behind the main house.

"So tell me about your friend Leah," Daniel began as he rubbed down his horse.

"Leah? She's just lost her husband. Nice young lady. She arrived unexpectedly a few nights ago."

"Nice? Is that all you think of her? She looked at you with more than nice in her eyes."

Brant grinned. "She is in mourning, Beck. Though I must admit she's a beauty."

"Well, just be careful. You'll be traveling north soon, for God knows how long." Daniel turned his attention from the horse to his friend.

His thoughts centered on the fact that they might never return from this one, Brant didn't answer. Could Leah possibly wait for his return? Someday she would come out of mourning...No. He would not trust a woman again.

"It seems like this war will go on forever," Daniel said, looking sideways at Brant.

"I know what you're trying to say, Beck," he replied, meeting his friend's concerned look.

"Have you heard anything of Margaret lately?"

The question bounced off of Brant's shoulders, leaving them slumped. He turned to yank open the barn's small door, pulling the wooden slat handle off.

Brant mumbled, not really wanting his friend to hear his words, and tossed the handle onto the straw-covered floor. It rolled a few feet before disappearing. He felt like disappearing, too, to escape his friend's scrutiny. Under straw he wouldn't have to think. A slight catching feeling made it hard for Brant to breath. It was as if Margaret's betrayal had just happened. Luckily his thoughts were forced back to the present when Daniel slapped him on the back.

"Sorry, Brant. I just don't want you to let yourself become...distracted, again. We're going to need your full attention on our strategy." Daniel followed Brant from the barn. "I saw Torin last week."

"And how is my brother?"

"He is well. But he's not his usual self. Already made the trip back to Pennsylvania. Can't believe any fighting will happen on Carroll County soil. It must have been very hard for you to lose both of your parents at one time. Especially to a drunken Reb," Daniel said, shaking his head and lengthening his stride to keep up with his friend. Brant was covering a great distance with each step, the soft, high grass simply bowing down under his strong feet.

Martha was standing on the back porch, apparently waiting for them. Her long, graying hair was neatly bound as usual, and her face relaxed into a smile as the men approached.

"Captain Beck," she said, "we are so glad to see you again."

"And me to see you, Miss Martha. How have you been?" Daniel glanced at Brant, who's face showed amazement at Martha's soft side revealed to the young man.

"As well as can be expected, Captain. Hettie's putting supper on the table, so please come inside." Martha led the men into the house where they pumped water to wash their hands before dining.

Seated around the food laden table, the group began a happy chatter as dishes were passed. Brant was pleased to have his friend seated to his left and Leah to his right. He passed her a plate of ham, which he noticed wasn't stacked quite as high as usual for the McGarland table. Yet, there was plenty for everyone, with biscuits, potatoes and his favorite, succotash.

Brant recalled for a moment the night Leah had arrived...Belle had been seated where Leah was now. Belle's gossipy, man-like war talk had rattled his nerves, a constant reminder of the ongoing battles. Mealtimes, he believed, should be more relaxing, an escape of sorts. He knew Belle thought of herself as flirtatious, and she probably considered it part of her charm to talk about the war. Although her figure was lovely, however, the woman's face was angular and unattractive. He considered the possibility

that Belle's incessant talk of male topics was merely a ploy for attention...Male attention.

Around the table, pleasant banter continued, but Brant's mind was now going over the events of the past week. He would be leaving to join his brother and General Diamond soon, but the appearance of Leah had given him a new interest. He wanted to learn more about the golden-haired woman next to him. He knew he should be thinking about the soldiers, the military strategy, union soldiers dying every few moments in pain...Nothing glorified about it, just men killing men they used to consider fellow countrymen. He knew he should be worrying about Torin, but he was more concerned over whether Leah would be safe while he was gone. Not that he was considering any commitments, or promises. Nor did he want to. He knew better than to let his heart, or his life, revolve around a woman again. No, he just liked her enough to want her to survive the oncoming Rebel wave.

"Well, Daniel, would you like to join Brant and me in the parlor for a cigar?" Patrick spoke up after wiping his mouth on a flax-woven napkin.

"I surely would, sir, if that offer includes one of your special brandies," the guest replied, rising to follow the men.

Before they left the room, Martha spoke. "Brant, would you wait a moment please?" She looked grim, but that was not unusual for the matronly woman.

Brant nodded and sat back down at the table. Mary Katherine and Leah joined Hettie in the kitchen, stealing curious glances back at the dining room.

"What is it, Miss Martha? You seem so serious," Brant asked, shifting his weight on the chair.

"Brant, I know you have only a short time left with us, but I really need to express my concern about something. You know I think of you as family," she said, and leaned toward him. She laid his hand over his tensed fingers.

"It's about Leah. You know she is in mourning for her husband, and will be for some time yet."

"I understand." Brant's voice was low, and he tried to hide his irritation for such a discussion a second time in one day. He pulled his hand back and watched as she wrung hers.

"Can we just agree that she needs time to grieve, without influence from a devilishly handsome soldier?" Martha squeezed his hand.

"Of course, Miss Martha. Leah and I have just become friends." Brant felt surprise that she looked so sincere in her concern, and at her charitable description of him.

"Brant, I'm aware that matters have gone just a little beyond mere friendship. Indelicate as it may sound, we're all aware of your attraction to Leah. You are leaving soon. There

will be more heavy fighting... and we are all fearful for you. Please, do not give Leah more to worry about than she can handle. She is fragile, as is her reputation."

Brant looked at Martha, his eyes narrowed in self-defense, but he relaxed at her benign expression. "Yes, Miss Martha." He rose to leave, but turned back. "I understand, but I do believe that this war has changed things. Forgive my candor, but conventions and standards just don't seem as important. Some rules feel awful trivial when a man could be dead tomorrow." He strode toward the kitchen door, glancing back to see Martha still at the table, her eyes wide and staring.

Brant paused in the doorway, looking into the kitchen that still smelled heavily of smoked ham. He watched quietly as Hettie washed dishes and pumped water. Mary Katherine took the clean dishes to dry on a piece of cotton. Leah and the day maid, Sarny, had their backs to him, and he was able to watch contentedly while Leah sorted the china into piles.

"I always helped my mother and our maid, when I was a girl. It was our time to talk," Mary Katherine was saying, presumably to Leah. "Especially since the men were then at the opposite end of the house."

"That must have been very nice," Leah said, not raising her head from her work.

"What about you, Leah? When did you get to share a moment with your mother?"

Leah turned away from the other women and caught sight of Brant. He noticed her eyes were moist, cloudy, almost as if she were recalling a fond memory, but that couldn't be it, because he saw she was fighting back tears.

"Brant, why aren't you enjoying your brandy with the men?" Mary Katherine asked, turning and startled at his appearance in a female domain.

"I merely wanted to thank all of you for another fine meal," he told her, cocking his head to one side and smiling.

Mary Katherine nodded in return and went back to her work, obviously satisfied, but Leah stared at Brant and tried to smile.

"Are you feeling well, Miss Leah?" he asked, as she brushed a tear from the corner of her eye. Looks like the cloudy eyes have started to rain, he thought to himself.

"I am fine, thank you. I'd be even better if you'd take me for a moonlight stroll. And then I could show you the bottles I've cleaned up for display." She blinked, but didn't flutter, her lashes.

Brant was tempted. He would like nothing better. Her company would be far more enjoyable than that of the men. He remembered Martha's warning, however...and Daniel's. With a sigh he chose to heed his hostess.

"I am sorry, but I really must join the others in the parlor. War talk, you know," he said, not meeting her eyes. Knowing he had caused her the embarrassment of appearing too

forward, he slipped from the kitchen, without knowing if she was as disappointed as he. Leia paused outside of the parlor door, hearing the low rumbling of men's relaxed chatter. She was glad they were occupied and entertaining themselves, because her recent offers of housework help had left her exhausted. Of course, Mary Katherine's idle chatter had dredged up memories of her parents that had left Leia equally drained.

Hettie and Mary Katherine had been nothing but kind to her, and she wished for all the world she could introduce them to a dishwasher. The ever abundant food supply in the McGarland house was, of course, served on an ever abundant supply of dishes. All of which needed careful hand washing, drying and stacking. As much as Leia enjoyed the cleaning and organizing of old glassware and bottles, however, gravy encrusted china just didn't hold the same appeal.

Leia had adopted the practice of taking time after meals to explore the cellar. Each trip into the dank chamber set her heart palpitating with anxiety. She couldn't name any particular fear...not rats or snakes, though she disliked both intensely, or even absolute darkness were panic-attack makers for Leia. It was more the basic idea of a cellar that sent chills up and down her spine and made her ears twitch. Appraising houses had forced her to inspect dozens of basements, and though she could do a cursory inspection, that part of the house definitely received the shortest report. Thank goodness the majority didn't have value that required her to do a detailed floor plan of that lowest level.

Pushing those thoughts aside, she entered the parlor when the buzz of conversation lagged.

"I came to say goodnight, gentlemen," she began, nodding at Patrick, her host. His graying beard was drooping, a sure sign the older man was feeling the strain of war, or just daily life.

"Leah, please stay just a moment," Brant said, holding a Queen Anne chair for her. Seated in front of an open window, Leia felt the June breeze tickle the moisture on her neck. The sensation was delicious. She lifted her hair and piled it on top of her head, holding it there with one hand.

"Yes, you must try this gold brandy," Daniel said to her, handing her a tiny crystal snifter. "It's Patrick's secret stash, you know," he continued with a wink.

She took a sip and felt the burning amber liquid roll around her tongue and down her throat. The burning continued on, down into her chest, reminding Leia of the prescription cough syrup she had been given as a child. Ugh.

"I think she likes it," Brant said, smiling at her suppressed coughing noise.

"Are you two through with your fun at this young lady's expense?" Patrick scoffed at the two younger men, but Leia could see the twinkle in his gray eyes...just like Grandfather's eyes.

"We're sorry. No harm intended," Daniel said. "Would you like some smooth wine, Miss Leah?"

"No, thank you," she replied, and couldn't hide a smile at their sheepish grins. Men are boys no matter what the century, she thought. Her glance took in several portraits above the fireplace mantle, set into wooden, oval frames. She assumed them to be her ancestors, even further back into the McGarland family line. One, she imagined, was certain to have those eyes that followed you around the room.

Patrick announced he was retiring for the evening, and Daniel joined him at the doorway.

"Tomorrow I must take my leave," Daniel said. "We've avoided the subject this evening, but the war's still out there."

"What are your immediate plans?" Brant studied his friend's face with concern.

"I take my troops north tomorrow. We got word late yesterday that the new General, Meade that is, has a surprise waiting for some Rebs that are aiming for shoes and such. It was made known that Maryland has no supplies the Rebs would need, no shoe factories. We're to lure them over the border into Adams County, where Meade's stashed a group of, let's call them special forces. The surprise won't be any picnic. That's the only certainty." Daniel continued to speak, emphasizing his speech with statistics.

Leia grew bored and let her mind wander. The brandy had made her feel warm and content, and she had finished the small amount in the snifter. Brant must have refilled her glass during Daniel's soliloquy, and she was sure that the portrait with the eyes blinked a few times.

"Did you see that?" she asked, of no one in particular.

"See what, Leah?" Patrick checked the two windows in the room, peering out into the dark night. Most likely satisfied that Leah was feeling the effects of the drink, he followed Daniel from the parlor.

"Can I escort you to your room?" Brant asked, taking Leia's glass and setting it on a round cherry table with pie-crust edging.

"Wow, that's sure strong sh...stuff," she said, still watching the evil portrait.

"Wow?" Brant echoed, sniffing the glass she had drank from. "Leah, it's time for you to retire." He made an effort to help her from the chair, but she bristled and pulled away.

"Look, Brant. If I'm not good enough to take an after-dinner walk with, then I'm not gonna let you walk me anywhere else." The minor brandy-buzz was wearing off. Leia's temples were pounding and her sinus passages had expanded to block her airways. She forgot to adjust her speech to the sensitivities of the 1800's man.

"Were you afraid I was going to attack you or something? Jump your dignified bones?" She cringed herself as she sniped out that last phrase. Her face was growing even

warmer, and for a split second she pictured Sara, who would be laughing hysterically at her predicament. She missed her friend, missed being able to say what she wanted, be who she wanted. She didn't fit in here, did not understand these people or these times. Leia made a fresh vow to find a way home. When she finally looked up, Brant had sat in a barrel-shaped chair by the fireplace. His head rested on his fist, and he was watching her.

"Brant, I'm so sorry. I think maybe I'd better skip the brandy from now on."

"Leah, you are not like anyone I've ever known. You move differently. You say things that leave me feeling ignorant. I am told constantly to leave you alone in your grief, to let you mourn your husband." He lowered his voice. "But when I kissed you the other evening, you weren't grieving for anyone. You were passionate. You brought out feelings in me that have been hidden for a long time. But you just as easily spit out those strange, harsh words." He shook his head to show his incomprehension, his eyes remaining fixed on hers.

Leia thought she saw a flash of anger cross the chocolate brown eyes, but it dissipated as quickly as a summer storm. She considered his eyes gorgeous, deep wells of hot cocoa, deep wells into his molten soul. At the moment, those eyes were staring at her, waiting for a reply, but she had none. Everything he said was true. She'd shown him many facets of her personality and her frustration. Everything, that is, except about her mourning a husband. The only thing she was grieving for was her grandfather...and twentieth century comforts.

"Good night, Brant," she said, rising and walking to the door. She risked one last look at the man with the evil eyes, but the portrait was still. She didn't risk another look at the man with the caring eyes.

Hettie braided Leia's blonde wisps into a neat braid, pulling gently at the sides of her face. The taut feeling was pleasing to Leia. It kept her focused on the painful things she had to think about. A gorgeous man, born one hundred and thirty years before she was, had made her feel like both Melanie Wilkes and Belle Watling at the same time. She still couldn't locate the correct door back to her home in the twentieth century. Not that she hadn't tried...and tried in a dark basement, of all places.

"Thank you, Hettie," Leia said, as the maid pronounced her 'presentable.'

"You look divine, miss," Hettie told her. "Mista Brant will be under your spell."

Leia turned to look at the woman. "Why do you say that, Hettie? I'm not trying to impress Mr. Douglas."

Hettie smiled knowingly at Leia. "But you have. Oh, I know you's in mourning, ma'am, but as soon as the proper times gone by, Mista Brant will be calling on you. That is, if he's come back from the war."

Too bad I won't be here, Leia thought. She allowed Hettie to adjust the bustline of her

dress as she allowed herself to consider her situation. If she could find her way back, she'd have to find a husband in just a few weeks, or face being out on the street. Of course, she knew Sara's family would take her in. She briefly considered the possibility that she would not find her way back, but dismissed it as ridiculous. This was real life, not a movie-of-the-week.

"Are you feeling well, Miz Leah?"

"Oh, yes, thank you," Leia replied, forcing her attention back to the present, or past? She ignored Hettie's tongue-clucking of compassionate pity. A knock at the bedroom door drew their attention. Hettie opened it to reveal the strong outline of Brant in the sunlight.

"Good morning," he said.

"Hi Brant. Did you see Daniel off already?" Leia rose and smoothed the skirt of her black dress.

"Yes, He's gone. I will miss his company, I'm afraid. Are you ready for breakfast?"

Leia nodded and Brant held the heavy door open for her to pass. As they descended the staircase, she felt his eyes burning into her back. She knew he was attracted to her. So why was he selectively avoiding her? And why did she care so much? She whirled on him at the foot of the stairs, in front of the library door.

"Come here a second," she said, pulling on his muscular arm. She opened the wood door and tugged at Brant to follow her into the darkened room.

"What is it?"

"I want to show you the bottles we found in the cellar, now that they're cleaned up."

Leia pulled open the heavy brocade draperies to allow sunlight to filter into the library. The morning rays were pale, and filled with dust particles. As she fought back a sneeze, Leia wished for a vacuum with a drapery attachment.

The clanging plunk of something striking the window made Leia jump away from it, raising an arm to deflect possible flying glass.

Brant moved forward, standing to one side of the window to allow just his head to approach the panes. His flat mouth curved upward and he waved to someone outside the house.

"Who did that? Are they trying to kill us?"

"The pebbles he threw would not likely break this glass, Leah. He's trying to get our attention, or I should say, my attention."

"Well, it worked. Who is he?" She knew her voice was petulant, but didn't care.

"Gabriel. He's the son of a slave couple in Roanoke, and he must be the little shadow John and Bitsy recalled trailing them on the last leg of their journey." Brant waved again, then pulled the heavy fabric closed again. "Come with me, Leah. I want you to

meet my young friend before he stirs up any unwanted attention."

They slipped through the back door, and made their way around the side of the house that held the library window. No one was in sight, the only noise being a slight breeze tickling dehydrated pine needles. Even with the breeze, the heat was stifling and Leia began to perspire. Actually, she knew her skin had grown damp when the window she stood beside had threatened to shatter. A girl tended to get jumpy when she found herself in the middle of the Civil War.

"Come this way," Brant said, taking her hand and leading her to the edge of the trees. Pausing, he made an unusual whistle call, then pulled Leia a bit further into the woods.

"Where is he?" she asked, looking for moving 'shadows.'

Without any noise, a three-foot boy appeared before them, smiling without benefit of several front teeth. "Here," he said, moving to stand before Brant. His grayed clothing hung tattered at the edges.

To Leia's surprise, Brant went down on one knee to greet Gabriel. She sighed, watching the small hand as it was placed trustingly in Brant's larger one. The striking contrast of warm brown in strong white hands was rivaled only by the contrast of their sizes. Brant, tall and well developed, and Gabriel, underfed and skeletal, could have been long-lost brothers judging by their actions. One manly hand completely covered the child's back below the shoulder blades. Leia held her breath as the boy teetered, but Brant carefully steadied the small frame into a hug.

Still poised on bent knee, Brant listened as the child stammered out pieces of information. Could any of this be helpful to the war effort? Brant concentrated, his deep eyes never leaving the smaller set. The wool of Brant's trousers touched a gaping hole in the boy's thin pants, undoubtedly scratching the bare skin peeking through.

Leia moved to stand behind Brant, resting her hands on his shoulders. She felt him stiffen, but relax almost immediately upon registering who belonged to the touch. Brant introduced Leia to Gabriel, covering one of her hands with one of his own. She liked the feeling, and crouched to greet the boy at his own height. He was adorable.

"Hello, Gabriel," she said, not trying to touch him so he wouldn't be startled. Something in his face made her want to pick him up and cuddle him. Of course, he really needed a decent meal first...and a bath.

The boy only looked at her, deep brown eyes wide in their surrounding features, the effect overshadowing the entire little face. Sensing his fear, Leia slowly extended her hand.

The child shot past her, moving before she could pull her hand back. Instantly he disappeared into the forest.

"Brant, I'm so sorry. I scared him off."

He smiled. "He'll be back, don't worry. He's a good little tracker."

"How old is he?"

"Six or seven. Has no parents still living, if that's your next question."

Leia felt her stomach roll over. "I know how the little guy feels," she said, thinking of her own parents, so long ago.

He put an arm around her shoulders in a loose embrace. Without any trace of sarcasm, he said, "No, I don't think you could."

"Did you ever think about having children of your own? I mean, I know you had brothers around when you were growing up." Leia asked the question in a voice she hoped came across as casual, like she was just making conversation.

He didn't answer right away, but pushed a tree limb out of her path. Silence had been the order since they parted from Gabriel a few minutes ago.

"Brant?" She followed him from the dark cover of pine into the sun's beaming heat.

"I suppose everyone thinks about such things sometime during their life. Everyone has a future to plan for, as no one has forever. Children are a way to grasp that immortality. And there's always that problem of how to continue the human race without repopulating the Earth."

Leia reached out and caught his arm, forcing him to turn toward her. "I wasn't trying to start a philosophical debate."

"Then what was the question?" He resumed walking but slower, at her side instead of in front of her.

"I watched you with Gabriel just now. I've watched you caring for the others, too. You were meant to be a father, I think."

"Oh, do you?" he asked, stopping again. He put his hands on her shoulders, shaking her very slightly. "Leia, there's more to being a father than caring about children."

She had to suppress a grin. "Such as?" Such as making love to conceive them in the first place, she thought. What a strange variation of a twentieth-century lecture on responsibility.

"Such as being able to provide for them! Such as securing a home for them with the promise of food on the table, and a loving mother to nurse their skinned knees and other childhood ailments. Such as a father who is respected and known in the community, who owns a farm or business. Such as a larger family of grandparents and uncles that can be trusted to care for them if their parents fall on bad times..."

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry I asked."

"But you did ask. And Leah...I'm not certain that I will ever be in the position to have a family. In fact, it's not very probable," he said, dropping his hands and turning to walk

away. "Let's go back to the house. You wanted to show me something?"

She nodded, though he couldn't see her. "Brant, can I just say something while we're on the subject? I promise to drop it right after."

He turned back toward her again, and rubbed his hands over his face as if he could wash away his own words. His eyes were empty of their usual hot cocoa warmth.

"I can't argue with anything you've said, not one word of it. All of that is important. All of that sums up the model family situation. I wish I'd had the parents you had, loving and watching you grow up. But I did have a grandfather and his friends, a home, and a full belly."

"Yes? Are you trying to make a point?"

She sighed heavily for effect. "Brant, the point should be obvious. I had only a few of those items on your wish list, just a few of the ingredients you spouted off, but not all of them. And I turned out okay."

"You did."

"Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that you'd be a good father. I can tell just by watching you with Gabriel...and from all of the other things you've done."

"And you'd be a good mother?" He looked skeptical.

"Exactly, but I'm not really talking about myself. I'm sure whoever you picked as the mother of your kids would be loving, and the two of you would have a lot to offer a family." She paused for a breath, surprised that her own words could make her feel envious of the imaginary woman. "You'd come up with a suitable home and kill the food yourself if you had to. You're an officer of the U.S. Army, for heaven's sake. How much more respectable can you be? And how much better of an extended family could you offer them than the McGarlands? You don't have to consider your own relatives. You still have Patrick, Martha, Mary Katherine, Hettie, and ..."

"You?" he asked, allowing a smile to turn up his previously flat mouth.

"You could say that, I think."

"Mmm," he said, taking her arm as they climbed the back steps. "You go on inside."

"Aren't you coming in?"

"Later. I need to do some chores, in the barn."

Leia watched him head for the stable, his hips lean and swaggering involuntarily. He should pass those genes on, because that butt would do very well in jeans. Perhaps some soul-searching was what he needed to do, and in that case, he would need to be alone.

He didn't want to give her up, not entirely. Yet he struggled with the idea of trusting another beautiful woman with his heart. A tiny civil war raged within him, the longing constantly forced back behind the ranks of regret.

Brant checked the dirt floor of the barn in several spots, to make certain the goods he and Patrick had buried were still hidden. Then he checked on things he had hidden by himself, supplies he'd stashed for his travelers. Was it terribly unfair if he asked her to wait for his return, and if she did, was he then obligated to propose? Couldn't courting start later?

Every man he knew had married his sweetheart before going off to fight. It was acceptable, even desirable, to know your lady had taken your name, could even carry your child, perhaps the only part of you that would survive, into a new era after the war.

None of his friends' ladies had been in mourning for their recently departed husbands, making their circumstances very different from his currently with Leah. It was just like everything else where Leah was concerned...an unusual situation.

"See that cabinet?" Leia pointed, but Brant had already located the display, and was busy inspecting an olive green bottle.

"This looks very nice, Leah. Perhaps I can bring you some additional pieces from Pennsylvania. I believe they make a great deal of glass there." He closed the little fretwork-covered door, having removed the bottles and lined them up on a side commode.

"That would be wonderful. Do you think it will be safe?"

"For me? Or the glass?"

She looked up at him with a quick head motion, but saw he was teasing her. "So, are you hungry?"

"Yes, quite famished, actually. But before we go, I'd like to ask you something." Without waiting for a reply, he closed the door to the hall.

Instinctively Leia took a giant step back, mentally preparing.

"Leah, I've reconsidered my earlier statements. I was too hasty. I'd like to ask permission to call on you, next year, or when ever it's considered acceptable. I won't be able to offer you anything permanent until I've made my fortune and purchased a farm. That won't be an easy task, if it'll be possible at all, seeing all the destruction this war's caused. I'd go to your father if he was alive, but I guess it will have to be Patrick."

"Brant, please don't..."

"Not now, of course, Leah. I may be gone for a very long time. I don't know what will happen. But I like you, I care what happens to you, and would like you to wait for me. You will be in mourning part of the time as it is. And then...then we could get to know each other better. Do you think you can do that for me?" He had closed the gap between them, and picked up both of her hands. He rubbed the finger around her wedding ring.

"Some things aren't fair in life, Brant. And some just can't be explained," she said, initiating a hand squeeze for emphasis.

"I know it's not fair for me to ask you to wait, especially with the very real possibility that I'll never return. And there are still things you don't know about me. You don't have to make any eternal commitments, no promises from either of us except to spend time together, later." His face was blank, unreadable.

She shook her head at his misunderstanding. How much should she tell him? Gently, she pulled her hands away and turned toward the wall-length bookcase. They both remained quiet, the chirping of birds outside the window the only sounds.

"Leah?"

"I am sorry, Brant, but I can't make that promise. I like you, too, but there's more to it than that. It's complicated."

"Tell me."

"I can't. You wouldn't understand. You wouldn't believe me, either." She pushed a hand across her forehead, moving bangs off of the moist skin. The humidity of the time certainly rivaled modern conditions in June. Some things never changed.

"Try me."

She thought about telling him everything, just spitting the words out because it would feel so good just to say them. How she'd love to stay right here for a long time...just in her own time, but she knew what happened to women believed insane in the 1800's.

"Leah?" His voice had grown impatient, and looking at him she noticed that flash of anger again. "Is there someone else?"

"No." No! If it was anyone, it would be him.

"Then what is it? What aren't you telling me?" She knew he was probably imagining all types of scandalous reasons she could give. She also knew he could not be imagining the truth.

"Do you trust me?" His voice was soft, gentle.

She only nodded.

"Leah, will you wait for me? I need to know before I leave, which could be any time now. I'm not saying we have to make permanent plans. You can tell me your secret when I return. I trust you, too." His face was blank, except for those eyes.

She shook her head with a slow, firm motion, feeling perspiration begin to form above her lip. Keeping her eyes down, she shook it more emphatically. At last, she glanced up at him, only to see his face contorted into an expression she did not understand. She heard only the birds chirping again, and as she watched Brant raised his arms over his head. He threw them down again toward his sides in obvious frustration. His right hand flailed into the commode, as if guided by anger. The bottles fell and shattered like a line of glass bowling pins.

Speechless for only a few seconds, Leia brushed past him to leave the room. As she left, she spoke

briefly. "Be sure not to kneel in the shards this time."

Chapter Five

Leia rose the next morning and dressed in multiple layers of wool and cotton. She had secretly washed her bikini underwear, and wore them now forsaking the pantaloons. The humidity remained extremely high and Leia couldn't believe that people were wearing wool clothing that allowed no moisture to evaporate. She also skipped her chemise and petticoats, hoping no one would notice.

She certainly was not about to let Brant notice. The mean-spirited way he had smashed those bottles was unbelievable. In her heart, she knew he hadn't intended to be destructive, but on the surface she needed to vent her anger. Especially after the pep-talk she'd just given him on family. She paused, deciding to wait for Hettie to button up the last few mid-way down her back. Nothing was easy about dressing in the nineteenth century, not even a simple cotton blouse.

Noise from the yard drew her attention toward the side of the house. She went to her heavily draped window and opened it. The wood sash groaned as it gave way, and Leia was able to lift it and look out unencumbered by screens. She saw Brant and Patrick trotting about on horseback, appearing to be deep in conversation. The older man's gray head contrasted sharply with Brant's warm brown one, just the tip of the iceberg as far as their physical differences were concerned. Patrick's short, slight frame appeared almost child-like next to Brant's large physique. They did not appear to have any purpose in their activity...just two men talking. Perhaps they felt their conversation was more private out in the side yard, encased by trees on one side and the house on the other. Their words would fall only on the ears of the two brown mares.

She watched as Patrick pointed out something that was invisible to her eyes, and the men and horses took off in a hurry. She closed the window and turned back to her room, still wondering about Brant. How could such a well-developed adult male have so carelessly flailed about in anger? To Leia, it seemed that so many men had bad temper lurking just under their pleasant facades, and that fact wasn't limited to any specific century.

A timid knock brought Hettie into the room, and the maid automatically reached for Leia's undone buttons.

"I'm sorry about your bottles," Hettie began, sweeping Leia's hair into a chignon bun.

"Thanks. I am too, but there are probably more down in that awful cellar."

Hettie nodded, but didn't respond. Her dark hands made swift work of the last flyaway locks. The maid handed Leia a shawl, an open-weave pink cotton.

"Can you get away for a spell, Miz Leah?"

Leia looked at the other woman with surprise. "I have no plans for today. Why?"

"There is someone I'd like for you to meet, someone I know. I talked to her about you,

and she thinks she can help. She's waiting this mornin'." Hettie stood behind Leia with her hands on the younger woman's shoulders. Their eyes met in the wavy distortions of the mirror and Leia thought she saw a flicker of temporal recognition in Hettie's dark irises.

"You have troubles, Miz Leah. My friend can help."

Leia rose from the wood dressing table. "Okay," she sighed, "I have to admit my curiosity has the best of me. Let's go...but not a word to Miss Martha!"

They slipped down the back stairs, Hettie leading the way. Leia saw the maid could move faster than she could because she didn't have to wear as many layers of clothes. The back door was convenient to their unobserved exit, the only indication being the bent grass footprints they left in the dew-coated lawn.

Leia was glad she still had Mary Katherine's boots, for Hettie dragged her a good distance from the house. After the McGarland stable and outbuildings, the pair entered a dense green forest. Hettie seemed to know exactly where she was going, following a narrow, barely visible dirt path through the trees. The humidity clung to each breath of air Leia tried to draw, until her sinuses felt filled with water.

She figured they had walked only a mile or so before coming into a back yard of a large estate. Leia could see a stone building looming several acres in the distance, probably the family home. Hettie led her into a stone structure the size of a one-car garage which reeked of smoked meats. The air inside was thick with moisture, and Leia imagined she could pluck a sausage right out of the dense air.

"Is this the place?" Leia finally whispered to break the long silence. Hettie was looking around the small building, only nodding at Leia's question. Smiling but feeling tense, Leia sat on a crate. They waited in the hazy silence those long minutes that always feel like hours, until another black woman joined them. Actually, Leia decided she was lighter than Hettie, a caramel colored woman that could have been Caribbean or Spanish.

The woman motioned for Hettie and Leia to sit on either side of her on a crude wooden bench. She pulled a brown barrel, rough with splinters, in front of them to serve as a table. Turning to Leia, she held out a small, rough-skinned hand.

"Give me your hand," she said, in a voice much deeper than Leia had imagined.

Leia complied, placing her right hand into the other woman's with a sense of childish trust. Not having been introduced, Leia did not know how to refer to this woman that acted like a gypsy/fortune-teller. The bandanna around her head added to the image. All she needed was a pair of large gold hoops through her ears.

The gypsy pressed Leia's hand between both of her own and closed her eyes. Leia and Hettie waited, almost without breathing, for some response. Despite the heat and lack of air flow, Leia shivered in the dim light of the smokehouse.

"Hold still, child," the gypsy told Leia. Her tone was stern, but not angry. "Close your eyes." Leia did as she was told, not seeing, but hearing the distant sounds of a farm starting its day. The gypsy caressed her palm, a slow exploration that made Leia think her lifelines were being read. She had no idea if palm-reading was an activity routinely conducted in the nineteenth century.

"Now open them," the gypsy said, staring into Leia's newly wide eyes. "There's passion in your blood. You were born of your parents' first passion, were you not? You are searching for something.. something not of our time."

Leia's eyes opened wider, and she glanced at Hettie, who was nodding as if she knew all.

"The man you love is in great danger. He has a secret...and perhaps he needs your help." The gypsy dropped Leia's hands.

"But I'm not in love with anyone. And my ...husband, he has already died." Leia's protests fell on deaf ears. The woman had hit the nail on the head about searching for something not of this time, but she was way-off base with the 'man you love' part.

Hettie slipped something to the gypsy, still nodding and whispering to her friend.

"Hettie said you could help me, possibly?" she asked, hoping to learn something more about her dilemma from the gypsy.

"Yes. You mustn't travel in the near future...even if it's on the silent railway. It would be too dangerous right now. And try to help him. Learn his secret. When you help him, he can help you." The gypsy patted Leia's hand, hugged Hettie and left the little house.

"Come along, Miz Leah. I have to get back to my work."

Leia nodded and followed Hettie back into the warm sun, mentally reviewing what she had been told, physically preparing for the long walk home.

"There's been talk," Patrick said, staring into the thick greenery while he spoke to Brant.

"I know. I'm trying to be very careful." Brant soothed his horse, speaking softly, not wanting to meet the look of warning in Patrick's eyes.

"That might not be enough now, you see." Patrick shook his head and turned his mare so he could look at Brant. "I've done my mighty best to keep this house quietly out of the way, and any attention right now is just plain dangerous."

"What would you have me do differently? This is your home. What ever you say is law here," Brant said, bracing himself for his host's decision.

"I know this is real important to you, this work, now especially since slave-owners murdered your folks in cold blood."

"I---"

Patrick put up a hand. "I'm not finished. What you're doing is important to me, too, son.

I believe there will be a time when a person's skin won't determine his lot in life, you see?"

Brant did see.

"But we have to live in this here time, and our home is our fort."

"I'm sorry, Patrick, that in order to help others we have to involve your property, and your family. But there is no other way that I know of." Brant watched as squirrels scurried across the side yard clearing. The humans and horses had been motionless long enough for the little creatures to feel comfortable in their summer food gathering.

"I know. And I won't stop you, but if the war starts to knock on our door, son..." Patrick left his thought unfinished, but Brant was clear on his meaning. He couldn't argue or fault the man. Patrick was being more than fair.

"You see?" Patrick asked at last, turning his horse as a signal the discussion was over.

"I see."

Leia guessed they were only a quarter mile or so from McGarland property when they heard a noise. Her pulse raced instantly, revving its engine when she heard several sounds, coming from perhaps the other side of the woods...male voices, horses, the scraping sounds of things being moved across the tree tops.

Hettie motioned for Leia to be silent and duck down with her behind a large oak tree.

"Could be soldiers," Hettie whispered, pulling Leia close to her.

"Ours?" Leia felt herself begin to panic when the maid did not answer. Her heartbeat was a thumping drum she was sure anyone nearby could hear. Her perspiration refused to evaporate in the humid air. Heavy footsteps sounded nearer. Hettie and Leia waited. They squeezed closer together. The tree shrunk in width, grew narrower, hid less of their figures.

Hettie left the slim sanctuary of the oak, impulsively making a dash into a patch of tall grass. Leia watched in amazement as the woman threw herself flat into the grass, her dark clothing a semi-camouflage. Leia rested on her knees, hands against the rough bark for support. She gathered the courage to peer around the tree, keeping her eyes focused low. She remembered from some adventure movie that eye-whites were easy to spot.

Two men, in brownish-gray uniforms, were discussing something that Leia could not discern from her spot about two hundred feet away. The pair reminded Leia of Brant and Patrick in private conversation that morning.

If only they were here now.

She was relieved that they did not look in her and Hettie's direction. Slowly, almost agonizingly, they finished whatever they were doing and turned away. When the men had retreated into the forest, still involved in an animated conversation, Leia tried to rise

from her crouched position. Her thigh muscles were twitching from the exertion of staying still so long. She heard twigs and grass crackling which she assumed were the noises of Hettie's rising. Leia was halfway erect, her head still bent as her hands gathered the hem of her skirts, when she froze. Two black leather boots had just come to a stop directly in front of her.

A brief thought crossed Leia's mind. The boots were small and narrow. They must belong to a woman or child. She took a breath, then allowed herself to look up into a face she had seen before. It belonged to the McGarland's frequent dinner guest, Belle Boyd.

"Good afternoon," Belle began, and put a wide smile on her face.

"Good afternoon, Miss Boyd," Leia said, pulling herself up to stand straight. "Did you have any trouble with those soldiers?" She pointed toward the area of forest that the men had disappeared into.

"Why, no, I didn't see any soldiers. Are you and Hettie all right? Why, that must have been ever so frightening!" Leia felt Hettie's presence behind her, hovering. She tried to think of an appropriate response, one that would be considered ladylike and explain their presence in the woods.

"It was," she said finally, after mentally dismissing all other possible retorts. "Are you on your way to the McGarland's? Alone?"

Belle nodded. "May I walk with you?"

The question reminded Leia of Jason's similar question after Grandfather's funeral. Why did people always ask permission to walk with you, and why did that usually mean they wanted something?

The warm welcome extended to Belle left Leia prickling. Maybe the lack of social wartime activity had made the McGarlands indiscriminate in who they welcomed into their home. To be fair, Leia did not have any specific reason to mistrust the woman...except for a memory of her previous flirtation with Brant that was like a grain of sand in Leia's oyster shell. Even Miss Martha seemed to have forgotten her harsh words concerning Miss Boyd just a few days ago.

Dinner was the usual clink of china and clattering of silver amidst soft conversation. Leia chided herself for thinking the word 'usual' in respect to dinner, as if any meal she ate in 1863 could be 'usual.' How could she become so comfortable in just a few days?

Patrick refilled her goblet with a rich claret wine. The intense hue reminded Leia of the bottle she had selected for dinner not that long ago. She wondered if the days were progressing in the twentieth century the same as here, which would mean her thirty-day inheritance clock was counting down. Or could she possibly exit 1863 at just the same moment she had entered it? If that was the case, Martin may not have any idea she hadn't returned from the basement. Glancing at the now empty wine bottle on the

sideboard, Leia wondered if she could write a short message to Martin and hide it in an empty bottle in the cellar. Perhaps he could find it. But would he believe what he read? Leia was dismayed to realize she didn't even know Martin well enough to predict his reaction. He had just always been there.

So entranced was Leia in her own philosophical musings, she hadn't noticed when Brant and Belle had left the table. When she finally snapped out of her trance, Mary Katherine was smiling at her.

"Are you with us once again, Leah?"

Leia felt a warm blush rise to her cheeks. The aromas of dinner had subsided into an unappetizing odor, and Leia excused herself without answering her 'cousin.' Stepping into the hallway, she paused to hear some indication of where everyone else had gone. The noise of kitchen clean-up was in progress and from the parlor drifted wisps of cigar smoke. She heard Martha on the front porch, but the noise sounds that caught Leia's attention were coming from the small alcove near the back stairs. She started toward the source, but froze as she neared. A hearty laugh bounced into the hall and smacked Leia in the face.

"Belle, your laugh is as lovely as your name," Brant said, still unseen by Leia. She imagined the pair standing close together, and a stab of jealousy poked her in the stomach. Why? Brant was a Civil War soldier! Why should she care who he caroused with? Even if Belle Boyd was a brash woman with a pointy face, Leia thought, omitting the woman's slim figure from her mental picture, why should she be concerned? She definitely had no claim on this man. She'd made that crystal clear last night. If Brant cared for her at all, however, why would he be playing with Belle's affections so soon? For the obvious reasons! He was heading back to the front soon, and Leia had turned him down cold.

"So what brought you back to us today?" Brant asked.

Leia heard material rustling.

"Well, I was visiting at the Shellman's, and met Hettie and your cousin on my way here. I was so relieved to see them, Brant! I had just been scared nearly out of my wits by a pair of Rebels. I didn't know what they were about, but they let me go when we heard those two rifling about in the woods."

Leia drew in her breathe- probably too loudly for her concealed position. What lies this woman told! Belle hadn't been at all frightened today. She almost gagged as she listened to Brant comforting the woman, subconsciously choosing not to hear the patronizing tone in his voice. When the pair grew silent, Leia's overactive imagination went to work. Feeling tired and dejected, she turned and headed toward the front staircase. This had been the longest day of her life, or so it felt, and Leia was looking forward to resting on the softness of her quilt-covered bed.

Her fifth morning in 1863 started out like the first four had. This morning was going to be different, though, because Leia intended to find the doorway back to the future. While Hettie helped her dress, Leia's mind was reviewing the floor plans of many of the houses she had appraised. Perhaps she could find a clue in this reflection.

Most of the houses had basements which she had briefly inspected. She compared some of the older two-story homes' cellars with that in the McGarland house, present and future. There were many similarities; tiny windows, crawl spaces, closets and steep stairs, the dark, damp feeling that something was down there that could emerge at any time. Many basements had doors leading to furnace or utility rooms. Some had powder rooms. After every inspection she had emerged back into the same time from which she'd come. There had never been any unexplainable doors. Each had a specific use.

The most unusual thing she could say about her cellar door was that it was located in the dining room, a layout she'd not seen in other houses. Even in the oldest homes cellar doors were in the kitchen, hall, mudroom or on the outside of the house. She was certain a dining room cellar-door would be considered functionally obsolescent in today's real estate market.

She decided to skip the breakfast "buffet" this morning, and requested just a cup of coffee in the kitchen. Hettie regarded her with a strange look at this request, but obliged her with a dainty china cup of a black, bitter brew. The drink was so strong the steam alone seemed to contain pulse-quickenning caffeine.

After draining the cup, bad to the last drop, Leia thanked Hettie and went to the basement door. She looked at the six-panel wood construction, examining it for anything unusual. Not surprised, she observed a door like any other cellar door, and opened it. The darkness that escaped along with the musty smell intensified in the humidity. Wishing for a Coleman flashlight, she started down the steps with a whale-oil lamp that had a smell all its own. Each step creaked out its disapproval of her venture. She held the rough railing with her free hand and hoped not to pick up any splinters.

At the foot of the stairs, she paused in front of the closet door she had opened on a previous trip. She grasped the handle and once again yanked it open. Just like before, the tiny room was empty, but instead of closing it and moving on, Leia stepped inside. Telling herself she had to try all options, she pulled the door closed behind her and closed her eyes.

She allowed ten or fifteen seconds to elapse, then opened her eyes, hoping to see her own dining room. She saw only the same bare closet, but heard noises outside the closet in the cellar. Perhaps she had returned to her own time, but this closet was still the same! She opened the door just a crack, relieved it hadn't locked on her, and saw what looked like Brant over behind the stairway. He was bent over, doing something. No, he was burying something. Apparently finished with his job, he was spreading loose dirt over a small circular area of the dirt floor. What could he be hiding?

Leia left the closet and waited for Brant on the bottom step. It wasn't long before he was in front of her. Why did he have to be so good looking?

"Leah! You startled me. I didn't hear you come down the steps."

"Obviously. What were you doing, Brant?"

"Doing? I just brought down some things for Miss Martha. To get them out of the way. And you? I know you aren't especially fond of cellars," he said, leaning toward her, an amused look on his handsome face.

"Oh, really? It looked like you were hiding something to me."

Her flippant answer seemed to crush his amusement along with his good mood. "It would, to you," was his reply, and he brushed past her to climb the steps.

Chapter 6

"Thank you for this service," Patrick said, taking a freshly signed page from Brant. "It will save me the trouble of riding to the Bauer place just to see if any of the men are at home, you see."

Brant watched the older man place the sheet at the bottom of a thick stack. "I don't mind witnessing your signature, Patrick. It's only a small gesture toward repaying your family's hospitality."

"On the subject of my hospitality, I'd also like to thank you for heeding Miss Martha and keeping your distance from young Leah. My niece doesn't know this, but you see a long time ago I made a promise to her daddy. After she ran off with that Jonathan, my brother William made a special note to remind me of that promise in case he wasn't sound and able. He knew any choice she made would bring grief to herself. Now I barely know Leah, but I feel obliged, you see?"

Brant did see, but said nothing. A knock at the door signaled the end of the meeting as Hettie announced to Patrick that Martha needed him in the parlor.

"Brant, will you glance through that stack, check to make certain the pages are in order, then wrap a ribbon around it?" Patrick left the room without waiting for an answer.

The top page indicated that this document was Patrick's will. The pages were numbered in good order. Brant resisted the urge to read the will, wondering if Patrick had intended for him to see it or even check it for errors. Brant was not a real family member, however, and this was not his concern. He aligned the stack and wrapped a narrow blue ribbon around it, package-style. His large fingers couldn't create the exact bow he wanted, but he made it appear acceptable. As he finished Hettie was at the door again.

"Mista Brant, there's a messenger here to see you. He's waiting in the front yard," she said, disappearing back toward the kitchen.

Brant rose to leave the room, looking around at the walls lined with thick, inviting books. He reached to touch one scarlet-covered tome, its leather spine cool and rough under his hands. ...like a saddle, he thought. A sigh of acceptance escaped his lips. He knew without question the purpose of the messenger.

He felt ready to leave, ready to rejoin his regiment and keep fighting for what he believed in. His parents had died for this war, for this cause, like so many of his friends and neighbors. He sighed again, an unusual response for Brant, and closed the library door behind him. It might be a very long time before he saw books again. He made his way straight through the house and out the front door. The Union uniform, the horse, the man; Brant saw them in that order.

"Brant Douglas?" the soldier asked, not dismounting.

"Yes."

"I'm here with your orders. You are to report tomorrow by noon. You may join your regiment just north of here by three miles."

"Are we to march north, then?"

"Can't say, sir. Just had orders to give you that message, direct from General Doubleday," the man said, throwing Brant a cocky salute. He turned his horse and blended into the trees.

Brant remained still, mentally digesting the not unexpected orders. He knew he had been fortunate to obtain leave at all. Still, life was comfortable here, hidden away from reality in Walnut Grove. Brant walked toward the garden, to think by the fountain. He knew, even if it was hard to admit, that the real reason he was happy here was because of Leah.

Settling on the bench, he considered the possibility that he might never return to this house. If he survived the next few battles and the war ended, he'd need to travel north to his family's farm. Though a few free servants had been kept on there after his parents' death, and his brother Cameron was now in charge of the estate, there was no certainty about the condition of the property. The war could have claimed it by now, Brant knew. There was another fact he had to face: Margaret would be there, now mistress of the house. His stomach tightened.

The cherub atop the fountain seemed to be crying, displaying its own misery. Brant envied the little angel that could release its emotions. He himself could not cry, hadn't for a long time, but he sure had released his emotions in front of Leah the other night. More than released, he'd exploded with anger. Leah had no way of knowing that his stored-up feelings weren't all directed toward her, and Brant hoped he hadn't completely destroyed their friendship. She was good company, for a woman, and though he had no need of marrying now that BlueBell Ridge belonged to Cameron, he'd still like to maintain his fragile relationship with the young widow. And just who was he fooling? He desired her-- her beauty that was fragile and yet unbreakable. She was hiding so much from him, even her true identity, but he'd trade that knowledge for a chance to be with her.

Approaching voices snapped Brant out of his self-pity. The women were not yet visible, still on the path leading to the garden. Brant listened but heard mainly a one-sided conversation.

"Where will you go once the war's over, Leah?" Mary Katherine was chatting to her cousin, her voice upbeat but soft. Brant thought Mary Katherine always sounded as if she were speaking to small children.

"Oh, I don't know. Someday I hope to get home again."

"Of course you do! I'm certain Baltimore will be much more pleasant by then, don't you? There won't be as many unattached gentlemen, though. I wonder if you and I will ever find husbands."

Leia hoped the girl didn't expect an answer to that. Although Mary Katherine was attractive in a Sally Field sort of way, Leia knew from her history lessons how many eligible men were dying even as they spoke.

"Leah, do you want to have children some day?" Mary Katherine whispered this indelicate question.

"If I met the right man to father them, I think so. Maybe one or two."

"Oh, I want scads and scads of them. I want them running all through the house, the one I'll help my husband build. He'll be strong, a leader, and love to play with his children. But most of all he'll love me."

Brant had overheard the conversation, and could imagine Mary Katherine's gray eyes lighting up with the thought of small children. Leah, he could not be sure about. He wondered for a second why she and Jonathan had not had a baby in their three years together.

The feminine talk ended abruptly when the girls rounded the bend in the path and they stood directly in front of Brant.

He stood in greeting.

"Good evening, Brant," Mary Katherine said and cast her eyes down.

"Good evening, ladies," he said, amused that Mary Katherine appeared embarrassed. "You two shall be the first to know...I leave tomorrow to rejoin the troops."

"Goodness! Is that who the visitor was?" Mary Katherine looked startled and put a dainty hand to her forehead. Everything she did reminded Leia of Melanie from *Gone With The Wind*..

"I'm afraid so. Would you like to sit?"

"No, thank you. I'm going back up to the house to tell Aunt Martha the bad news. Perhaps Hettie will prepare a special breakfast before you go?" She hurried off, lifting her skirts two inches in order to go quickly.

Brant turned to face Leah, glimpsing the cherub's head behind her.

"I hope you go safely," she said, and turned as if to follow Mary Katherine.

"Wait. Please." He stepped forward to take her arm and spun her around. "I want to apologize for breaking your bottles. I lost control of my temper. It was not all about you, and I feel very bad about that. I wasn't really offering you anything, so I shouldn't have been angered when you didn't agree without hesitation."

"I accept your apology," she said, slowly circling the fountain, almost pacing.

Brant followed. The last strains of light were filtering around the garden, and he noticed that her hair shimmered like the flow from the fountain.

"After all, it was only glass. Replaceable, unlike people. Unlike you. Now Brant, tell me something about yourself before you leave," she said, leaning close to his face.

"Such as what? My brother Torin is already back with the troops, fighting Rebs and helping abolish slavery. And here I am...comfortable and safe in your company...living off of the hospitality of the McGarland family." He relaxed, seeing she didn't seem angry with him.

Leia nodded. "I understand that you feel that way. But give me something really personal to remember about you, Brant."

"Well, I can tell you that I'm not confident that I'll be returning this time," he said.

"Please come here, Leah." He patted the bench seat beside him.

"So, you leave tomorrow, hmm?" she asked as she settled beside him.

"It can not be delayed any longer," he told her. "We all have a duty."

"I know. And Brant, I wanted to make sure I told you how much I've enjoyed your company these past few days. You've made an ordeal easier for me, Brant, both you and this place. At least, most of the time."

He lifted her hand from her lap, turning it over and again caressing the wedding ring finger.

"I wish you'd been visiting under better circumstances. I know how hurtful it is to lose someone you care for." He 'd fought to keep his painful memories hidden from the world...yet this somberly dressed woman with shining hair could call forth these feelings from him in an instant. Perhaps if they met again someday, he'd learn the secrets of her name.

"Let's not start that again," she replied. "We don't have much time left, so let's talk about something pleasant."

Brant saw a genuine smile turn up the corners of her mouth. "Fine. Am I forgiven for my temporary lapse of self-discipline and grace?"

She nodded. "Sure. Just don't let it happen again." She winked at him, one eye closing for the briefest moment. It fascinated him, as it did when she teased him. "And, when and if you come across any pretty glass pieces in Pennsylvania, you must think of me."

"I am in complete agreement, Leah Graham." He wasn't certain, but thought he saw her wince at that name. Considering the strange name card he'd found with an exceptional likeness of Leia on it, he thought that was appropriate.

"Brant, one more try. Tell me about your family," Leia asked, hoping for a clue to the man's reserved personality. His stoic bearing was a facade, she was sure. She had glimpsed the caring man on the inside.

"There is not a great deal to tell, Leah. My parents are deceased now. They owned a

large farming property called BlueBell Ridge in Pennsylvania. I was raised there. We had a dozen or so free servants to help with the work. The four of us children were also expected to do our part."

"You had three brothers? You've only mentioned one, Torin."

"Yes, there were two others." His face was grim.

"Were? Are they dead?" She whispered this last question, as if in respect for them.

"One was killed in a mining accident. The other may as well be dead." His voice was even, steady, stoic. He turned to face her, revealing nothing more by his expression.

"I'm sorry. Tell me about Blue Bell Ridge. What does the house look like?" She saw his jaw clench, but continued. "That's where you grew up, right?"

"It is."

"Not any happy memories?" Leia reached for his hand, squeezing the long fingers gently.

He relaxed, breaking into a narrow smile. "Many of them. My parents were constantly doing things for us. It couldn't have been easy with four boys. Of course, as we grew older we helped with the work."

"We had a part-time housekeeper, Grandfather and I. We made dinner together quite often. If it hadn't been for Mary Beth, I would never have learned how to boil water."

"There wasn't time for us to help with food preparation. If we were not doing chores outside, we were helping each other so we could make time later for fun. That was, after our lessons were done and Mother had checked them."

"I always wanted brothers and sisters to play with. Sara lived nearby, and Jason's family, but it wasn't the same as having built-in playmates."

"Don't be so sure," he said, a smile twitching at his lips. "There were just as many bad times as good. We fought quite often. Too many males in one household."

"Male egos got in the way?"

He looked at her blankly, then grinned. "If that refers to pride, then the answer's yes. I remember one time, Torin wasn't allowed to go swimming in the pond with me and Cameron. Later that evening, our father sent us to the barn to check the latches. Torin started to taunt me about being a wet lady, or some such chatter."

"Go on. I'm sure there's more," Leia said, smiling as she pictured the young boys.

"Have you noticed I get a bit less, graceful, when I'm angry?"

"Noticed? Are you kidding? There are still bits of glass in the cracks of the parlor floor." She tried to keep her voice light and teasing, so he'd continue this childhood snapshot.

"That night in the barn, my flailing arms knocked a lantern over and started a small fire."

"In a barn? Did it stay small? Were you hurt?"

"Torin and I reacted quickly, not so much from fear of the flames as fear of our father. We beat it out with our coats."

"Did your parents find out?"

"Only when they noticed the condition of our coats a few hours later. We didn't sit down for a week."

Leia moved closer to him and embraced him with a brief, but tight, hug.

"What was that for?"

"For being human. For having one flaw in that otherwise god-like persona."

Brant couldn't resist a smile as he raised a dark eyebrow.

"After all, if you were too perfect, I'd know for sure that I couldn't keep you."

"It's very big," he said, taking both of her hands in his.

"Excuse me?"

"The house at Blue Bell. Five rooms. Wood floors and walls. Flat roof. Several real glass windows, too. I slept with Torin. Cameron and Cory slept in another room. Three of our paid servants slept in the smaller room next to mine. If they heard any noise from us, they had full authority to discipline us."

"I like your parents," she said.

"I wish you'd been able to meet them. I never expected to lose them so soon."

She pulled one of his hands over her heart. "We never do. Brant, do you believe there's life after our death?"

He looked over her head, obviously pondering that question, the back of his hand absently stroking her breast where she still held it captive.

"Sometimes. Nothing for certain. I want to believe in Heaven. Do you?"

"No specific beliefs here, either. But I was raised to believe in God, and Heaven and Hell." Not parallel worlds.

"And?"

She now looked over his shoulder. "Now, I believe in a lot more than I used to." He nodded and they sat, side by side, in silence for several minutes. Hands still clasped, Leia relaxed and tried to enjoy the last peaceful time they'd have in the foreseeable future.

"And you, Leah? What of your siblings?"

She scurried through her halls of short-term memory, searching the banks for something to say. Not wanting to be caught in a lie, she shook her head and remained silent.

Although she had shared many intimate feelings with this man, she was still completely misleading him as to who she really was.

"Come along, Leah, don't be secretive."

"I am not being secretive."

"Then why is it that I know nothing about you save that your parents and husband have passed on?" His increasingly suspicious tone of voice grated on Leia's nerves. She wondered if war always lent a mistrusting nature to men.

"There's nothing more to tell! And if you want to talk about being secretive, let's discuss whatever it was you so carefully buried in the cellar the other night." She spoke each word carefully, hoping her words sounded as scathing as his had sounded.

"What are you accusing me of doing?" His voice vibrated with tension, a sign she had achieved the effect she had striven for.

"Just of not being completely honest with me, but yet, expecting complete honesty from me." She stood and walked around the little garden, a small circle on flagstones, then toward the path that led back to the front of the house.

"Don't leave, please. Leah...I may not be back. Let's not part with words of anger."

She stopped, turning to look at him. He was staring back at her, the muscles of his face tight and sculpted. He held up one of his large hands, both an invitation and a peace offering.

"Oh Brant, why are you so damned charming?"

His eyes widened at her choice of words, but she didn't care. She joined him on the bench again, smoothing her skirts as she sat. "I don't know how I could let myself be so manipulated by a man! Though, I have to admit, a good-looking one," she added, intending to pay him another compliment.

"Manipulated? You? Oh, I beg to differ with you, Mrs. Graham. Or whatever your name is.. I happen to be aware that you are not the grieving widow you'd like us to believe."

Leia's eyes were now the ones to widen, and she looked at him with alarm. Her stomach tightened, blood pumping into her face and neck.

"What do you mean?" She tried to speak with a casual air, but her voice came out scratchy and scared.

"So, is your real name Leia McGarland? Are you related, or did you marry into the family?"

His words bit into Leia's ears, which were roaring already with the pounding of her fear-ridden blood flow. Pandora's box had flown open.

"What kind of spy are you anyway? Who manufactured the material your identification card is encased with? Was it made in Washington? Have you given out information

about my activities to the other side? Did you pick up any tips from Daniel? Tell me the truth."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she insisted, pulling her hand away from his arresting grasp. She had lifted the hem of her gown to flee the garden inquisition.

"Leah, come back here!"

She ignored his demand, breaking into the best run she could manage in Civil-War-Wear. Her knees were scratched by the crinoline of her hoop. The differences in their apparel gave Brant the edge, and he caught up to her in the thick tree cover in front of the house. Her grabbed her apron strings, pulling just enough to wreck her balance.

"Why are you running from me?"

She was breathing heavily, but Brant was in complete control. She cursed the corset that constricted her breathing capacity. As afraid as she was at the moment, she noticed the absence of anger from his voice. He stopped her with a swooping grab that toppled her into the grass. The lawn was damp and sweet-smelling under Leia's nose.

She felt his arms lifting her, wrapping around her from behind. He pulled her directly back against his chest and secured his arms under her ribs. She kicked at his shins.

"Please, be still. I won't hurt you," he said. "Leah, or whoever you are, please trust me. There's something special between us. Trust me. You know you can. I don't believe you'd betray me. I just want to know the truth."

She stopped squirming and stood still. Brant took one hand and smoothed the hair from her forehead. She assumed it had been tickling his face as he held her captive. With his hand on her shoulder, he waited. She remained quiet.

"That's good, calm. Breathe deeply, Leah. I don't want you to faint under the strain of a tight corset. Take a slow, deep breath," he instructed, his voice barely a whisper. The chirps of crickets had begun in the trees around them. "I can hear your heart pounding with fear. Are you afraid?" The hand that wasn't holding her in place moved. He laid it on her left breast, over her heart. "I can feel it."

"Brant..."

"Hush, Leah. I won't hurt you." His right hand tightened around her torso, his knees pushed firmly into the back of her knees. He molded his fingers around her breast, as if he were actually searching for her heart.

She felt his lips touch the back of her neck, which she knew was damp with perspiration. Leia couldn't move. She was frozen with fear and desire. His hand pulled back and she felt him undoing buttons on the back of her dress. Three tiny buttons, undone; the fourth ripped gently from its fabric. He paused, she presumed, to see if she would protest.

She couldn't. Her heart was still racing. This man could ruin her life while she was trapped here, but she had never wanted anything more than for him to reach inside her

dress. He did, struggling underneath the chemise and pushing aside the bodice. His callused fingers finally found the soft skin of her breast.

She felt the touch of his skin on hers and gasped at the sensation. Warmth began to build inside her, her nipples grew taut and strained to be free. His lips had found her neck again, keeping busy while his hands pushed down her dress and chemise. She released the improperly tied corset herself, squirming in the process. Behind her, she felt how aroused Brant had grown.

The evening's light had faded almost entirely when Leia turned to face him. He didn't seem to notice the environment, only her. He lowered his head to hers, lips hot and demanding as military orders. She tilted her head back, eager for his kiss, and felt him crush her breasts against the scratchy wool of his coat.

"Oh, God, Leah, I don't care who you are. You are beautiful," he said, at last raising his mouth. He took both of her hands in his and pulled her to the ground. They lay down on their sides facing each other, propped on their elbows. She felt like a teenager again, with desire overriding her common sense.

Brant's eyes seemed to meld with hers, holding them steady while he reached for the curve of her breast again. The wet grass under her skin added chilly shivers of excitement to Leia's heightened senses.

He set his mouth on her chest, roaming before settling on one erect nipple, then the other. Leia forgot she was in the nineteenth century, becoming immersed in Brant's lovemaking. She unbuttoned his coat, then his shirt, exposing his dark chest hair that covered his muscles. She experienced a brief feeling of Deja Vu, having done the same thing years ago with an old college boyfriend, but she had never wanted to surrender everything to that other boy, never ached for him like she did now for Brant. Leia bent to kiss his hard nipples, felt him shiver and heard him moan. He moved his leg between hers, pushing them apart with a scissoring effect. He worked her gown up to her thighs without taking his mouth away, just working while he held her lips hostage.

Brant moved closer, pressing his warm chest onto hers. They fitted together like puzzle pieces that had not yet interlocked. She wasn't sure if it was minutes, or hours, she only knew she had the most divine need that could only be met by this man she held. Her tongue danced into his mouth, asking for a waltz.

And then someone not connected to them cleared his throat, to cut in.

Instantly, Brant jumped to his feet to face the two Union soldiers. He bent to pick up his coat, handing it to Leia as a shield. She had already turned away to hide her body from their gaze.

"Lieutenant?"

"What are you doing here? I have already received my orders. I report tomorrow...not tonight," Brant snapped, offering his hand to assist Leia from the grass carpet.

"Sorry, sir, General Doubleday sent us to escort you tomorrow seeing as we were on our way anyhow. Didn't mean to startle you. We heard some noises and wanted to make certain the place was secure for Miss Martha. She's invited us to stay the night." Leia imagined that the men were doing their best to disguise leering, youthful grins.

Brant moved forward, leading them toward the house. Not even attempting a fight with her underthings, Leia pulled Brant's wool coat on and wrapped her arms in front of her. Her hair was damp from the dew. Her skirts were soaked and heavy, pushing down against the hoop frame. Humiliated, she followed the men.

They had turned the conversation to tomorrow's travel, and Leia's mind was planning her mad dash for the back staircase. Mentally she was kicking herself for losing control. This was not the modern, permissive time she came from. This was 1863 and women just weren't found sprawled about in the grass with men. As they reached the clearing, one of the soldiers stepped back and took Leia's arm. He guided her around several tree stumps. She was about to thank him and head toward the back of the house when the front porch came into view. Suddenly, she dismissed all thought of escaping unnoticed.

Poised for observation and judgment on the front porch, grim as the pitchfork-bearing couple of American Gothic, were Martha and Patrick.

"I told you, Mrs. Callaway, we don't know where Leia is. The police have been notified, but they don't have much to go on. And I'm very sorry, but the 1863-dress is missing, too." Sara was doing her best to keep the frustration from her voice. Mrs. Callaway, head of the project committee sponsoring her historical revue, was more concerned about the missing costume than Sara's missing friend.

"Well, dear, do you suppose Miss McGarland would have left town with the dress?"

"I really don't know, Mrs. Callaway. It's possible. I'm hoping she'll return home anytime now. Surely there's some logical explanation. And I will call you the moment I hear something," Sara promised her, and hung up the receiver. If Leia is okay, she thought, I'm going to kill her.

Her show was only a few days away, and she was a nervous wreck. An entire semester grade, along with permission to graduate, was riding on this presentation. Her best friend had certainly picked the worst time to disappear.

The front door banged open, making Sara jump out of her self-pity. "Who's there? Leia?"

"It's me," Jason answered, entering the kitchen with a box in his arms. "What are you doing here?"

"Just checking on things. And you?" She reached for the box.

"I thought I'd stay here a while. Like you...just keep an eye on things." Jason left the kitchen, taking his box up the front staircase.

"What do you mean, 'stay here a while'?" She saw three suitcases in the front hall, then followed her boyfriend up the stairs.

"Someone ought to use this place, and since Leia can't be bothered to take care of her own home, I certainly can do it." He closed a bedroom door behind him, leaving Sara open-mouthed, clutching the banister.

Having gone out for food, Sara returned after dark to the McGarland house. She hoped their silly argument hadn't caused her friend to take off. Sure enough, Jason's Mustang was still in the driveway. She was overwhelmed by his nerve and his attitude...qualities she'd not seen the worst of since middle school days. Sara had keys, just as Leia had keys to her own home, and she was tempted to have the locks changed without telling her boyfriend, but she also had to worry about her show, and precious time was wasting away. She'd check one more time for the 1863 costume, and if she did not find it, she'd drive to Harper's Ferry or Gettysburg for another. There would be not time to make a duplicate before the show.

She let herself in, quietly, and turned on the kitchen lights. Sara knew she should re-check all of the bedrooms first, but something called to her from the basement. After all, that was the last place Martin had seen Leia go, and she was still in the costume then. There must be some type of clue to the disappearance in that basement. The fact that Leia hated basements was not lost on Sara, who was convinced that there was some connection. There had been many routine house inspections Sara had accompanied Leia on just because of the basements...a boring job, but Leia always reciprocated by going with Sara on fabric-hunting expeditions.

Taking a flashlight from the counter where a collection of five had remained since the search had begun, Sara descended the cellar stairs. She clacked downward, playing the small beam of light off of each wall. They looked as always. She checked the closet door, the furnace room door, and behind the wine rack. Patterns in the dust indicated no one had come or gone recently. The one, tiny shoe-box size window was intact. The musty basement smell was typical. In fact, unavoidable with dirt flooring. Look at that! Yes, something was different here. She reached into her pockets, finding only a quarter and a shoe-horn. She used the latter as a digging tool, carefully scraping away loose, dry dirt. About six inches into the pile the plastic horn hit something lightweight.

She gasped and finished uncovering the object. Sara stared at the dirty, plastic-coated object in her hands. Although the printing was faded, there was no doubt of what she held. It was Leia's driver's license.

Sara splashed cold water on her face, as cold as the faucet could pump from the well. A few odd tears had become a small shower as she let her fearful thoughts play through her mind. She'd seen enough crime dramas and murder mystery shows to understand the implications of finding the driver's license or other personal item of a missing person. It did not bode well for her friend.

"Pull yourself together," she whispered to her reflection. She lifted her damp bangs and patted her forehead with a fluffy hand towel. Her bangs, evenly trimmed and perfectly straight, reminded her of the day Leia had attempted to play hair stylist.

"Just a few snips, that's all," Leia had promised...and so Sara had given permission for the experiment. To this day, Jason still would grab her fringe of bangs and pull in different directions, teasing about the uneven job Leia had done.

"You gonna be in there all day, Sara?" The knock on the bathroom door was Jason's. She joined her boyfriend in the hall to tell him about her ominous discovery.

"Should we go see Mr. Sanders?" she asked, after Jason had taken his turn at face-washing.

Jason shook his head. "I don't think we should bother him. Tell you what, I'll call that police detective we spoke with the other day. If he wants to see it, I'll take it right over."

Sara nodded. Jason had always been the logical one. They entered the kitchen, and he turned away to use the phone. Sara decided to roam through the huge house again, contemplating for a moment the irony of the situation. She needed her best friend here to help her through the trial of her missing best friend. She circled the first floor, then crossed back into the kitchen. Jason was still talking, the phone cord wrapped around his waist as if he had been pacing.

"Yeah.. it would be an office slash shopping complex. Maybe some outlet stores, like in Lancaster. Yeah. A Mason-Dixon theme complex."

Sara didn't stick around for the rest of the conversation. He was constantly talking business.. trying to sell this person's property for a shopping center or that person's farm for an apartment complex. Once he had practically stolen a distant relative's prime real estate plot and delivered it to a tract building developer.

A sudden thought stabbed Sara like a knife. What if he were trying to sell this house? He wouldn't, couldn't. Jason cared what she thought of him. Of course, he had tried to sell Leia's glass collection, but that was different, wasn't it? Besides, he couldn't sell something he didn't own, could he? Her pulse pounded behind her temples and Sara decided to contact Mr. Sanders' law office herself.

A thud drew her attention to the front porch. Martin had returned from town with a few sacks of groceries.

"Hi Martin, can I help?" He handed her a paper bag with protruding paper towel rolls. She followed him once again to the kitchen, where Jason was hanging the white receiver back onto the wall phone.

Sara saw Martin eye Jason with what she called an "evil eye," and shove cartons of milk and juice into the intruder's hands. The tension between the two men was far thicker than the liquids in those containers. Jason placed both cartons on the top refrigerator shelf, then turned back to Martin.

The older, black man continued to shove food products at the younger one, silently ordering him to follow instructions and put each away. Jason played along, placing each item in the spot he felt appropriate, keeping an even pace with Martin's movements. The room was silent, except for the pass and plunk rhythm. Cans, cabinet, plunk. Frozen, freezer, plunk. Soaps, sink, plunk. Bread, box, plunk. Sara watched as if hypnotized. Each man refused to let the other get ahead or miss a beat. The bags emptied but the animosity grew. It was over as quickly as it had started, ending on a jagged note as Jason stomped out of the room. The corner of Martin's mouth inched upward, hinting to Sara of the grin he was trying to suppress. Sometimes the older man displayed the most amazing perceptions of character.

Chapter 7

"You understand, now, don't ya Brant?"

"I do," he admitted, sitting very straight at the small, round library table. He sighed and rubbed the taut muscles in the back of his neck.

Patrick nodded, pouring himself and Brant crystal tumblers of brandy. "Good. My brother asked for me to watch over young Leah, you see, after her husband was killed. But I've told you all that. Now I have to fulfill that duty, Brant. It's a matter of honor. And I must say I could not find a more suitable match for Leah."

"Leah is still mourning Jonathan," Brant reminded him, taking a double sip. He tapped his free fingers on the oak table.

"Yes, that's very true. But this is war time. We must be flexible. The social graces just are not quite as important when young men are dying off. I have to do what's best. You are fond of her?"

Brant nodded, amused at Patrick's sudden concern for his feelings. "I was just sharing that same concept with Miss Martha, when she asked me to keep my distance from Leah."

Patrick snorted, a drop of brandy shooting out of his nose.

"Yes, as you have discovered, I do like her. She is quite attractive. However, I was not planning to marry anyone."

"Hmmpf. And why is that, Brant Douglas?"

"I'm not sure I can answer that question, sir. I can tell you I have nothing to offer a lady, no wealth, no property. Once the war's over I'll be just another farmer without a farm." He spoke matter-of-factly about his situation.

"Horsefeathers!"

"Sir?" Brant sensed a change in the older man's attitude.

"The minister is only a mile from here. As soon as he arrives, he will marry you to my niece."

"And tomorrow I will leave my new bride."

"Well, Leah will deal with it. She has no choice in the matter. She made her decision when she laid with you in the grass."

Brant started to explain that things had not gone as far as Patrick assumed, but he stopped. It made no difference, the compromising position had called for a proposal regardless of what had actually taken place. Brant also doubted the odds of his having a future. There were only so many times a man could be blessed with surviving a major battle. An actual, day-to-day life with Leah would probably never come to pass. So if he could spend one night with Leah in his arms...that might carry him through the next rain

of shots and cannonballs. If he should somehow make it home again, well, he'd return and solve the puzzle of the identity of Leah-Leia. And take her to bed. Again.

Patrick poured more brandy, his eyes fixed on Brant.

Brant felt a smile wiggle its way onto his face.

"Now, boy, that's more like it."

"Oh, dear, Leah Graham, how could you do this to us? Now everyone will think you are too, too. . ." "Too what, Aunt Martha?" Leia was fresh in another black gown, this one adorned with a piece of delicate white lace. Like a trail of snowflakes, the lace blanketed her bodice. Hettie was buttoning the back of the dress, at least twenty tiny pearl buttons that required expert, nimble fingers. The maid was wisely keeping quiet.

"Oh, don't be fresh young lady. If you could have seen yourself brought to the porch forcefully by a military man! And you, with your dress down to your knees and your bodice torn. No one has their bodice torn anymore." Martha wrung her hands, a trait Leia had come to associate with the older woman.

"Please, Aunt Martha. It wasn't that bad. Nothing really happened," Leia said, sitting down so Hettie could arrange her hair.

"How can you be so calm? So stubbornly calm? You have been compromised. It doesn't matter what actually happened. Now you're being married off while still in mourning. Oh, it's so shameful."

Leia felt very calm. After all, this was not her real life, and would mean nothing once she returned to the future. If she was going to finally surrender her virginity, which she really didn't think was something all that special, it may as well be to Brant...handsome, strong, caring Brant, who could not have possibly been exposed to HIV. Why hadn't she met someone like him in the 1990's? And now that she had met him, she couldn't even enjoy her status. He thought she had been married! He would expect her to be experienced, not scared.

"Miz Leah's already had one weddin' night," Hettie injected.

"Yes, that's true I suppose. That would explain her serene posture. However," she clucked her tongue, "she should at least feel remorse for the predicament she's caused Patrick and the family."

Leia risked sounding sleazy to take a jab at Martha. "I am sorry, Aunt Martha. I honestly must say I was not thinking of your feelings at all while Brant was kissing me."

Martha's cheeks glowed tomato-red and she left the room in a flourish of matronly skirts and disdain.

The small, informal wedding party assembled in the front parlor. Brant and Leia stood facing the fireplace with Reverend Kelly poised in front of them, Bible open in his spread palms. To Leia's left stood Mary Katherine, her white hands folded in front of

her. Patrick stood beside Brant. The group was silent, solemn.

The vows were repeated and the prayers said quickly. Before Leia knew it, she was married to a Civil War soldier. As the minister proclaimed them to be man and wife, Leia thought of her grandfather. Was he with her parents now, up there somewhere, watching this? She knew they'd want to know she was married, but she wondered how they would take this cosmic joke.

Brant turned and pecked her on the cheek. It was a perfectly chaste, respectful kiss. Leia could not help but wonder if her grandfather had somehow arranged all of this, from his angelic new home, since she was not doing so well on her own in the love department. She wondered if this would count for the requirement of the will. Could she possibly take Brant home with her? Would the marriage be legal?

Suddenly Mary Katherine, Martha and Hettie were kissing her cheeks and hugging her. Martha took Brant aside, chatting about procuring a wedding ring, and Patrick took Leia's arm to pull her aside.

"Leah, my dear, I do hope you understand why I insisted on this wedding. You see, I promised your daddy before he died that your next choice would be a good man..."

Leia broke in mid-sentence. "It's fine, Patrick. Really. I'm sure you had my best interests at heart." She kept emotion out of her voice, set her irritation aside as well, and laid her hand on the man's fatherly shoulder.

The smell of melting candles drifted through the room, reminding Leia of childhood birthday cakes. The flickering light threw shadows over the family members, and Leia's gown was nearly invisible in the darkness. Only her lace trim reflected the candlelight.

"Mrs. Douglas?" Brant asked, coming from behind her to whisper in her ear. "Will you come with me upstairs?"

Leia glanced around the room at the remains of the impromptu wedding. A few wine glasses, a few waning candles and a few grim faced McGarlands were the only remnants. She knew a proper new bride would blush, not rush, upstairs with her groom. She smiled and hooked her arm in Brant's.

"Yes, I'm ready to call it a night."

Hettie eased Leia from the constraints of her black wedding gown, and into the coarse cotton of an off-white night dress. The maid lit three candles and an oil-lamp, brushed the bride's hair until it fell smooth on her shoulders, and then left.

Knowing she had only a few moments alone, Leia took the time to offer up a prayer. She didn't know if God, or anyone, would hear her, but it seemed like the thing to do.

Running her hand through the freshly combed hair, Leia wished for a modern conditioner to ease the straw-like texture she'd developed in this time. Glimpsing her left hand, Leia saw her mother's wedding ring. Would that upset Brant, thinking she still wore another man's ring? Perhaps he didn't believe she was a widow anymore, so the

ring wouldn't matter. He had not had time or chance to even think about a ring for her, if they were even available during this time of war. With a sigh of uneasiness, she left the ring on her finger.

A knock at the door was followed by Brant's grand entrance. Leia assumed he had borrowed a dressing gown from Patrick, and noted that even an old man's robe could not detract from her new husband's masculine appearance.

"Good evening, Mrs. Douglas," he said, entering the room with two glasses and a short bottle. He stood behind her at the dressing table, setting the glassware in front of her.

She nodded and their gazes met in the wavy mirror. "Brant, I know you didn't want this marriage to take place any more than I did," she began, but then had no idea of how to follow-up.

"Don't," he said, placing warm hands on her shoulders. "I'm not upset, Leah. I'll call you Leah for now. But I must confess, I have a very bad feeling about the upcoming battles."

"What do you mean, a bad feeling?"

"I can't explain. Just don't burn your black dresses, Leah." He moved to pour a liqueur from the decanter into their glasses.

Leia shook her head, speechless. Even as a time-traveler, she had no clue as to Brant's future. She was just as helpless as he, as any wife waiting for a husband to come home from war. Her insides twisting uneasily, she took the glass he handed her.

"Let's just think about tonight," he said, and pulled her to her feet. The warm glow of the bedroom seemed romantic to Leia, the cordial was warming to her insides, and she was ready for Brant to kiss her. She took both of their glasses and set them on the dressing table. Surprising Brant as well as herself, she reached up and threw her arms around the tall man's neck.

That was the only signal he needed. His lips came down on hers with an intensity she'd only thought existed in movies. Leia tasted the drink on his lips. She smelled his clean, masculine scent that seemed to intensify with their kiss. She felt her lips, almost bruised, opening at his tongue's request. Passion swept through her body, her stomach contracted, excited her, made her tremble and contract in other places. It was then that she realized she wasn't sure who she really was, and it didn't matter. She only wanted to be in this man's arms.

He sat on the edge of the bed, pulling her to a standing position in front of him. He undid a few tiny buttons, then pulled the gown over her head and tossed it aside. Leia was naked beneath the gown. She shivered, suddenly completely exposed and feeling vulnerable. Brant began with his large hands on her shoulders, touching her arms, her neck and face. The anticipation was racking her nerves when he at long last touched her breasts, filling his hands with their softness. He moved to cover and feel every inch of

the small, firm cones, and finally moved his lips to their ice-cream hard tips. He kissed every bit of her creamy vanilla colored skin, and Leia felt her insides begin to melt.

"You are lovely," he said at last, "Your figure is better formed than your finest bottle. And I can not believe I am allowed to touch you like this."

"Not just allowed," she said, allowing her own hands to tease his flat nipples.

"Expected."

He groaned, pulling Leia onto the bed next to him. He lowered his voice to a whisper. "I will make you forget him," he told her. He kissed her belly button, the tip of his nose snuggling into the indentation.

Leia started to ask who he meant, but caught herself. The moment of truth, as it was said, would be on her soon enough. She stopped him from talking by kissing his lips, thrusting her tongue into his mouth. Their chests pressed together as they lay on their sides, in the same position they had been caught in earlier that night. She felt his hand dip down between her legs, gently touching her feminine folds. This time, she couldn't hold back a groan.

"You are ready," he said, a hint of amazement in his lusty voice. He took a finger, probed inside her, then touched it to her nipple. It shivered and grew even harder under the moisture. She reached down and stroked him, unconcerned if the move was too bold in 1863.

"So are you," she said, using two hands to further entice him. "I think it's going to explode." Brant needed no further encouragement. He was on top of her in an instant. She loved the feeling of this strong man's body on hers, and arched her hips toward him. He guided himself to her opening, paused for only a second and then entered with a confident thrust. She felt the problem before he did.

"My God, Leah," he mumbled, having pushed through the thin barrier, then slowing at her gasp. "I didn't know...you and your husband, did not?"

"I never have," she said, "but please don't stop now. It will get better from this point." She pulled his shoulders, starting a rocking motion.

He stopped asking questions and continued on. Leia began to enjoy the feeling just as Brant finished, the tiny remnants of pain vanishing. She knew she'd have to wait until the next round to feel any release, something she'd known just from being an observant citizen of the twentieth century. Making love was exactly as she'd always known it would be, except for one thing. As a young girl, dreamy and romantic, she'd always imagined her first time to be accompanied by oaths of eternal love.

Still in Brant's arms, Leia watched him stare at the ceiling. He had not spoken after his intimate questioning, and Leia was worried about what he was thinking. She watched his tanned chest, covered with soft brown hair, rise and fall with his breathing. Being held securely against his muscular body made Leia feel safe, ready to answer any questions

he might come up with.

"Brant," she said, wanting to break the silence between them. "I think we should talk."

He rolled over to face her, propping his head on his hand.

"I think that's a very good idea. Would you like to start by telling me who you are?"

Leia took a deep breathe. "You were right before. My name is Leia McGarland, and I am most definitely related to the family that lives here. Just not in the way you think."

"Are you a spy for the Confederacy?" he asked, voice soft.

Leia sat straight up in the bed, taking the sheet with her. "Of course not! How could you even think that?"

"What am I supposed to think? You hid your true identity. You hid a document covered with some clear substance I've never seen before. Very suspicious. You claim to be the widowed cousin of this very nice family, and yet you've never been with a man before tonight. If I took you to Baltimore right now, would the Graham family even recognize you?"

She shook her head, hanging it so the loose wisps covered her face. Everything he said was true. This was the time she'd been dreading since her arrival...admitting where she was from and risking being thought insane. Well, better crazy, she thought, than a war criminal...She thought.

"Okay, here goes. I ask only that you keep an open mind. I am not crazy or disturbed. But Brant, I was born in the twentieth century. I'm from the future. I'm not sure how I was transported back here to your time. I went through a door in my cellar and came out in the same house, but it wasn't my house, it was my house as it must have been in 1863." She paused to take a breath, not looking at her listener.

"That is some story," he said. "Tell me, are fashions still the same in your time?"

"No, of course not. I was dressed in a costume for a historical revue."

"Ah. Convenient. And you brought the card with your picture with you, then, from the future?"

She nodded. "It was tucked into my dress, hidden in the sleeve. Brant, I am sorry I couldn't tell you all of this before, but I thought you'd consider me insane and lock me up. So when Martha assumed I was Leah, I played along. But you are right, I have never been married. I've only dated a few men, actually, and was waiting until my wedding night to make love. You see, in the 1990's, there's an incurable disease passed by making love with an infected person, and it's killing people all the time. So people are starting to wait until they get married, like they did in this time."

"Do you mean there was a time they didn't wait?" He sounded amazed.

"Oh, yes. The 1960's, '70's, even the '80's, people slept with whomever they wanted to.

Young girls got pregnant and had the babies without husbands. I was actually considered unusual for stopping short of that, uh, final step. You know, even with all of the improvements, the future has a lot of dark spots, Brant."

"So, do you improved people own slaves?"

Leia shook her head with vehemence. "No, slavery was abolished right after the war. We pay anyone who works for us: servants, gardeners, laborers, everyone. In the United States, at least, everyone has basic human rights."

"Suppose I believed you. Then you would know all about the war, wouldn't you?" Again, Leia was bothered to hear a bit of suspicion creep into his voice.

"Well, I know who won, and where the major battles were. Having grown up so close to Gettysburg, I heard Civil War talk all the time. And we studied it in school, of course. Did you know I went to college and graduated? Women have careers in my time, Brant." She had begun talking quickly, trying to fit in everything she wanted to tell him. At least he was listening.

"And so who won?" He had sat up in bed, leaning against the wall with his hands behind his head.

"Why, you did. We did. The Union, that is. It's common knowledge that the North won the war. Every year in Gettysburg, people interested in what happened dress up and re-enact the battle." She was facing him now, telling a story as if to a child.

"What? That is absurd. No one would want to relive this hell." He shook his head to affirm his opinion.

"Some do. We don't have the sense of honor in our time that you have, Brant." She reached over to caress his face.

"What do you know about honor? Are you telling me the truth yet?"

She pulled her hand back, as if he had slapped her. She stared at him, fighting to control her emotions which were tightening her stomach. Neither spoke for a moment.

"Will you return to your time? Is anyone waiting for you there?"

"I don't know. I'm not completely sure how I got here. It's possible I could return through a door in the cellar, but I haven't found it yet." She looked at Brant, but his eyes were cast down.

"Brant?"

"Yes?" He answered, but still did not look up.

"Well, I need to get back. And soon." She explained the situation with the will, and the thirty day deadline. "To be honest, though, there's no one back in the nineties who'll really miss me, except maybe my friend Sara."

"What were you doing before you found yourself here?" He looked up at last, his voice

cold.

"Well, my grandfather has, had, just passed away. That's why I really was in mourning. He really did raise me after my parents were killed. I told you the truth about that. And now, I'm not sure I'll ever see my friends again, or my home the way it was, or be able to do my job again." Her voice wavered as a few teardrops of self-pity rolled down her cheek. She turned her head away from Brant's gaze, embarrassed on top of everything else she felt.

"Come here," he said, and reached for her. After a brief hesitation, she allowed herself to be smothered in his arms. He rocked her for a few minutes, waiting for the tears to subside, and stroked her hair, "I knew your grief was real, if nothing else."

She could only nod her appreciation of that fact. At least he hadn't thought she lied about her parents' death.

He wiped her face with the corner of a soft blanket. "Can we start again?"

She nodded again, tightening her grip around his waist. She had just told a Union soldier that she had lied to him consistently, was really somebody else, and yet, he still wanted to know her.

"I'm Brant Douglas, ma'am."

"My name is Leia McGarland, and I'm from the twentieth century."

She saw him nod, and watched his face. She knew he didn't believe her, at least not completely, but he accepted her. He cared about her. And she was falling in love with him.

Before light had started to spread, Brant slipped from his bed, dressed and went downstairs. He did not wake Leia, who was sleeping like an angel, a swollen-faced, pink-cheeked angel, but still an angel. He wasn't sure he'd gotten any of the truth from her last night, but it was what she believed to be the truth. The woman was an enigma, but not one he had time to solve today. As much as he had enjoyed making love to her last night, today he started back to the front, probably for the last time. He wanted to remember Leia just the way she had looked this morning, natural and content. He smiled at the thought that she had been a virgin. Well, at least we were legally married, he thought. That should have met her criteria. He hoped she would have some fond memories of their wedding night, for he realized he truly cared what she thought of him.

"Brant?" Patrick was beckoning to him from the library.

"Patrick, you are up early this morning." Brant sat with him at the round table.

"Since you are now married to my niece, and I am responsible for that, I have made a small revision to my will. I want you to read it, and witness it."

"Patrick, you did not have to do that. I could not take anything from the family," Brant protested, shaking his head at the older man's generosity.

"You can't refuse," Patrick said, holding his palm up. "It's done. It is only a small gesture, the house and land are passed down according to tradition." He pushed the document to his nephew-in-law. "As before, please witness and secure it. I'll be on the front porch when you are ready to leave."

Brant watched him go, wishing he had something to give back to the man. He turned his attention to the will, scanning the pages for his name. He found it near the end, and was pleased to see that Patrick had left him a small amount of gold he had hidden away, along with a few rifles and a horse. It was something, Brant thought, to help him when, and if, he returned from war. Patrick knew that Brant's oldest brother Cameron had inherited his parents' farm upon their death. He also knew that Cameron had married Margaret, having taken her away from Brant, and that Brant would be neither overly welcome nor comfortable at BlueBell Ridge after the war.

He noted that if he himself died, Leah was to inherit these things, and that the couple was welcome to live at the McGarland home as long as they liked. He signed the spot indicated for a witness to the codicil, and flipped back through the stack of pages. An underlined clause caught his eye. It stated that according to family tradition, any McGarland family member that was to inherit the home, male or female, must be married by age twenty-five to inherit. He wondered how old Mary Katherine was, but then stacked the papers and wrapped them with ribbon. It was time to join his military family, and two of his 'brothers' were waiting for him on the front porch.

Chapter Eight

Leia rose early, but not nearly early enough to say goodbye to Brant. Her soldier-husband was up and gone before dawn, with the chickens, as Hettie announced. After a large breakfast with the family, Leia realized with some unease that she had an entire day still stretching before her. The heat and humidity had already risen beyond comfortable levels. Not for the first time since her arrival in this century Leia wished she had tucked her deodorant into her costume pocket.

No one mentioned the hasty wedding that had taken place the night before, or the fact that the groom had now gone off to fight. Leia wondered if they were trying to spare her feelings or their own with their silence. Hettie and Mary Katherine insisted she not work with them in the house today, that she rest, so with nothing but time on her hands, she considered searching the cellar again. If she had come through a doorway portal in time, how could that doorway have disappeared? It should still be there, unless it had changed into some other kind of portal. Maybe another dimension was involved.. maybe some unknown force controlled when and where it existed. Maybe...she thought with a jerk that straightened her spine...the door was always there, in the cellar of her house, but not always visible to the naked eye.

If such a portal existed in other houses, would she have recognized them? She'd seen hundreds of basements. At least half of the houses she'd appraised had them. That would take time to consider. She wandered upstairs, through the hall and past her own room to Martha's. Her aunt had told her to look sometime at her whatnot, a shelf arrangement in the corner of her room. Below it sat another of the Heppelwhite chairs with delicate legs, clearly positioned there only for display. Martha's was the only room in the entire house to be wall papered, a panoramic landscape scene lush with forest and blue sky.

Martha's whatnot housed small glass bottles, similar to Leia's own, a figurine of a young girl on a horse, several painted thimbles, scattered dried flowers and seashells. When had Martha ever been to the ocean? More than likely someone had brought the shells to her. Just like one would suddenly become aware that one's mother had once been young, Leia smiled as she pictured Martha younger and in love.

Leia touched an amber colored shell flecked with white, its glossy surface cool on her skin. She replaced it, turning to go, when a crack in the wallpaper caught her eye. What was that? Leia touched the rough paper, feeling the fissure that had previously been hidden by the image of a brown tree trunk. The weather must have made the wall swell or something, she thought, trying to smooth the paper back in place.

The wall swung open.

"Oh my God," she said to herself, then stuck her head into the entrance. A narrow, darkened staircase descended just behind the wall papered door, and Leia could see that it circled down and toward the front of the house. Toward the dining room.

Toward the cellar.

Leia looked around, certain that her wildly beating heart had attracted someone's attention, but she was alone. She made her way back to her own room and took the tin whale-oil lamp, lit it, and checked the hall. It was still empty.

Stepping lightly to make as little noise as possible, Leia made her way back to Martha's room. With one quick check to ensure her little quest was unnoticed, Leia started down the steps, around and then down straight into a wall of wood planks. Solid wood planks.

Before frustration could take over, Leia reminded herself of how she'd made the bedroom door open, so she estimated the same place on the wall in front of her, and pushed.

Nothing happened.

Moving the oil lamp across the wall, she pushed on several spots that appeared to be mere knots in the wood. They were mere knots. She tapped on the wall with her knuckles, like the detectives on television did to test for hollow spots. Nothing gave way.

About to retreat, Leia spied a tiny seashell wedged between two planks, just inches above the floor. She pushed on the shell, and the invisible door opened. Looking in, Leia was confused at first, because it seemed that she'd only found a closet, but there was a handle, a wooden block, and she found that opened easily, right into the McGarland cellar...right into the closet Brant had told her not to bother with.

Leia went out to the back porch and caught sight of Hettie heating water for the wash. Could she ask her about the secret passage? With one final thought of the door, and a wish for her deodorant, she moved toward the steaming kettle and offered to help.

"Now this is the honeymoon of my dreams," she said, softly to the kettle.

But Hettie's ears heard all. "What's this honeymoon?"

"Just an expression they use in the city. It refers to a trip a newly married couple takes to get to know each other," she said, stretching a cotton petticoat out full length. The material was hot, heavy with water and smelled detergent-ad fresh. The sun was beating down on the two women, who were comfortable finishing their task in silence. Leia was reminded of time spent with Martin when she was small, stretching freshly laundered clothes out over the back yard line. Martin said the sunshine and fresh air was better than using the dryer. She wasn't required to help Martin any more than she was required to help Hettie, but she had always enjoyed the company and feeling of accomplishment.

The pleasure of seeing her work finished was one of the things she liked about appraising houses. After an inspection and local research, she'd compile her report, photos, floor plan sketch, and maps. Her name was printed on the first page, the invoice, and the official signature places. The thick, slick finished project was worth more than three hundred dollars to mortgage companies and banks. In 1863, that sum was probably more than a year's income. The job would have been even more satisfying if she'd

found a secret passage in someone's house. Her life would have been more satisfying if she'd found this particular passage in her own home, in her own time.

"Leah," Martha called from porch, "Mary Katherine, Patrick and I are walking to the Bauer's today. They've invited us for dinner, bless their hearts. Will you come? If I don't see someone outside these walls soon, I'll just go plumb crazy." She laughed. Mary Katherine waited behind her, smiling.

"Yes, please come, Leah. We can announce your marriage. Did you know Patrick sent the announcements to the Carroll County Democrat and the Sentinel ? They may not print social items right now, but they will surely in the future, and perhaps by that time you'll be..."

"Out of mourning?" Leia nodded. "Thank you, but no. I'm going to stay and help Hettie. I'm not really in the mood for visiting, and the circumstances around my wedding were certainly not festive. I'm sure you understand, this is, delicate." She cast her eyes down, hoping to look grieving and embarrassed.

"Of course, dear. We do understand. It's just that there's so little happy news these days. Well, we won't return until this evening. So Hettie, please don't make a large noon meal. Perhaps tomorrow we'll have the chicken, but the hens are dwindling," Martha said, wringing her hands.

The bellowing of Patrick's fatherly voice called the ladies to embark on their trip.

Once the last soggy garment had been stewed, Leia and Hettie retreated to the kitchen for a break. Leia began to ask for ice cubes for her tea, but caught herself. When the maid offered her hot pork and potatoes, Leia declined.

"We need to eat a light meal in this kind of heat, Hettie. Do we have any uncooked green vegetables in here?"

Hettie nodded and presented Leia with a head of cabbage, some dried beans and a green bell pepper.

"Do we have any tomatoes?"

"Tomatoes?" Hettie's eyes grew wide. "Don't be eatin' those things, Miz Leah. They'll kill you."

Leia was amazed. Would it hurt anything, she wondered, in the time line of history, to introduce one family to the tasty, vitamin-C bearing source of meaty, red tomatoes? Without meaning to, she had already changed the future for one Union soldier.

"Well, never mind then. Let's cut these things into small pieces, and put them into these two bowls. Is there any leftover chicken?"

Hettie followed Leia's instructions, making two neat salads in the process.

"Now, we need a dressing. Do we have vinegar?" She couldn't come up with an oil, so

she added a small measure of sugar and pepper to the vinegar.

Hettie watched, mouth agape, as her new friend poured the strange concoction over the bowls of raw food.

"Voila! Salads, light and nutritious," Leia announced, and invited the maid to join her at the kitchen table. She watched Hettie shake her head, perplexed at most everything Leia said and did. And although the dressing was not exactly what Leia had in mind, she noticed with pleasure that Hettie finished her entire salad and wiped the bottom of the bowl with a bread crust. Leia promised herself that she'd find tomatoes for next time.

After assisting Hettie with a few other minor chores, Leia settled on the front porch with a book she'd found in Patrick's library. It was about architectural styles, with sketches, and she found it fascinating. The first two mansions described had hidden staircases. Before she could turn more than a few pages, the sound of trotting horses distracted her. She watched two men approach, erect on their steeds and decked in gray coats. Gray coats! Confederates, Rebs, Southerners, the enemy!

Leia tossed her book aside, uncaring as it bounced off its spine. Her face froze into a half-smile. She stood with her hands balled into fists at her sides. Where's Hettie? she wondered. She'd read that sometimes soldiers wore whatever color uniform they could find that fit, but she judged by their bearing that these men were from the opposite side of the war.

Leia pulled her spine up straighter still, trying to impersonate a lady of 1863. She would be proud and would not tolerate Rebs on her porch, telling herself to think like Scarlett.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" she asked as they came to a stop in front of her wooden base.

"Yes'm. Afternoon to you. We're looking for a Union man, Lieutenant Brant Douglas. Have you seen him?"

She shook her head, feeling her hair stick to her neck. "I'm sorry, but I just arrived from Baltimore. I don't know this man, Douglas. Shall I tell the family you called?" She decided to play the dumb young lady.

"Well, reports are that Douglas was hiding here, ma'am. And we need to find him."

"Why is that, sir?"

"Because he stole some of our slaves, damn his Union-blue hide! The law is clear. And we demand the rightful return of our property!"

"There are no escaped slaves here, gentlemen," she said, gripping the wood railing for support. Her insides had turned to gelatin, quivering with fear. She hoped to maintain a calm exterior, but she was afraid. "Where is your unit?"

The men exchanged glances and proceeded to dismount. Panic gripped Leia's stomach like a virus, and she hoped her insides would hold up. Sweat was running freely from

her underarms and forehead, but she stood straight.

"Where is your family?" The counter-question alarmed her further. What did these evil men have in mind? The older of the two approached the porch. He touched his tongue to his slimy lips, and Leia tried to avoid swaying under his licentious gaze. She had no weapon. There was no one home but Hettie...who was probably in the back yard tending the drying laundry.

"Well, since you're new to the county, Mrs...."

"Graham."

"Mrs. Graham. Are you aware that this family is suspected of harboring runaway slaves? That's against the law, Mrs. Graham. Did you know that?" Both of his black-booted feet were now planted on the first porch step.

"No sir. I sincerely doubt that fact. These are good people, and we have no slaves here at all, escaped or otherwise." Second step. Leia knew any screams for help would fall only on the pines, which were firmly anchored and as helpless as she.

"So, are you all alone, Mrs. Graham?"

"Absolutely not! We have many free servants, any of which will be out here shortly."

The Reb in the yard chuckled. "Aw...she's scared, Nathan. Guess our little hostess has only our needs to see to after all. Maybe we should do a slave-search." He approached the porch.

Third step. Both men stood in front of Leia, looking down at her, making her feel tiny. She could smell their pungent body odor comprised of sweat, horses and wool.

The sun seemed to brighten as Hettie appeared behind Leia on the porch. The men, obviously now convinced that servants were at home, tipped their ragged caps. They thanked Leia for her time and left as quickly as they had come. Leia turned to Hettie, threw her arms around her, and hugged the damp woman.

As Leia sipped tea with Hettie in the kitchen, patting her skin dry with a cotton rag, a messenger arrived from the Bauer home. The women, jumpy from their earlier encounter, listened patiently to his message.

"The family has decided to stay the night with the Bauers. Mr. Patrick's taken to feelin' poorly and has already retired."

Hettie gave the man tea and a slice of pie before sending him back on his long walk.

"Looks like it's just you and me tonight, Hettie."

"Yes ma'am."

Leia was relieved in one sense, looking forward to an evening alone. She'd always enjoyed her privacy, spending much time alone growing up. Her privacy was one of the casualties of time-travel, having been in short supply as of late. ...and then there was

Hettie. Hettie was not the long time friend Sara was, but she was quiet and a good listener when needed.

"Hettie, have you seen any slaves here that didn't belong? Or servants?"

"You mean runaways?"

Leia explained the purpose of the Confederates' visit, but Hettie clammed up. Questions about the passage would have to wait.

Immersed in lukewarm bath water, Leia let the day's stress begin to wash away. The scene with the two men stilled played over and over in her mind, like a video tape looping non-stop. Why had they been so sure that their slaves were here? Did the McGarlands really have a reputation for hiding runaways? It didn't make sense. She had never seen anyone around except Hettie and her part-time helper, Sarny.

She needed to speak with Brant about...Brant knew. Brant knew about the time-travel door because he had sent slaves into the future to help them escape! Maybe he didn't know where they were going exactly, just that they went somewhere on the silent railway! Underground railroad! That's what the fortune-teller had meant. Leia grew excited with her dawning ideas, and she splashed water over the sides of the tub onto the wooden floor.

If Brant could send slaves through the portal, maybe he could help her find it again. What a risk that man had been taking to help runaways and risk the wrath of their masters! No wonder he was suspicious of her interest in the basement. ...That closet door passage! Everything was coming together. Leia filled with pride at the character depth of her new husband. He had been risking his neck to help other human beings. Her heart filled with love for Brant, pumping up aerobically. She had to tell him. He had left not knowing how much she cared for him. She hadn't been certain herself until just now. Perhaps when she explained her time-travel, she had cleared up the doorway mystery for him, too.

She dried off, fighting an urge to begin perspiring anew. She called for Hettie to help her dress quickly.

"Hettie," she explained, as the maid buttoned her into a navy dress. "I have to go after Brant. I have to warn him that those Confederates are looking for him. They're probably tracking him right now!"

The maid was shaking her head vigorously. "Oh, no, Miz Leah, you can't be prancing around the countryside with the enemy so close. Those two men today could've killed you...or worse."

Knowing she was right, Leia didn't argue or try to reason. She spoke softly, "I'm going, Hettie. I'm going to warn my husband that he's in danger. Your friend was right about that. And I'm going to tell him something else, too."

Hettie looked at her, one dark eyebrow raised. "What's that?"

"That I love him."

Riding on horseback was an activity Leia had tried a few times as a young girl. Growing up in the country had provided the opportunity, but Leia had preferred her bike and later, her car. Hettie helped her prepare somewhat, but Leia felt unstable and uncoordinated as her bumpy ride commenced.

The brief discussion she'd had with Brant did not prepare Leia to actually find him, but an idea of the general direction did help. This was Carroll County, after all, even if the modern landmarks she'd grown up with were not even built yet. Leia handled the brown mare, Patsy, with shaky hands as she wished for composure. She knew the horse could sense her anxiety and would react to it eventually.

She passed the Shellman house, the estate Hettie had brought her to when meeting the seer. The woman had known Brant had a secret, and about Leia's own feelings for him. The ride continued as pleasantly as could be expected until the sun began to set. It was only then that Leia began to doubt the wisdom of her plan.

Her thighs aching, she munched on a hard, flat cracker substance that Hettie had supplied, something soldiers ate, she had said, that didn't spoil. It was hard, chewy and tasted to Leia like a flour and water torture item. She noticed pieces of similar foodstuffs littering the grass in one area, a sure sign Brant's group had come this way. The hardtack wasn't even growing mushy in the now dew-covered grass. A few scraps of cloth joined the crackers and appeared to Leia like Hansel and Gretel's carefully dropped trail.

The flash of something pale gray caught Leia's eye a few dozen yards ahead of her, something that slipped between the trees. Panic began to grip her, just like earlier that day, and she pulled on the rein to slow her horse.

"Shhh," she murmured, to herself as much as to Patsy. She glanced around, hoping to spot a hiding place. The pines were tall and thick, but not wide enough to hide them. A rustling sound piqued her attention, and her mouth dropped open as Belle Boyd stepped out of the trees ahead.

"Miss Boyd," she said, letting out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

"Leah! What are you doing out here? Are you lost?" Belle came closer.

"Oh, no, I'm just...going after Brant's party. He left this morning. I believe they came this way."

Belle nodded. "I saw them this afternoon. Keep heading north...but you have a long way to ride. Is it something urgent?"

"I'm afraid so. Otherwise, it would be crazy to go after them."

"And dangerous."

"Will you ride with me, Belle?" Leia's hopes shot up at the prospect of having company during the hours of darkness ahead.

"For a short while, I think," Belle said, "My horse is beyond that clearing. Do you really need to do this, Leah?"

"Yes."

"Oh, it must be true love," Belle sighed. "How I envy you. Brant's a handsome beau." She mounted.

"Belle, Brant and I were married last night."

"Oh, do tell!" Belle's eyes lit up, with some emotion Leah couldn't identify, and she begged for the story.

Leia recounted the strange series of events; her argument with Brant, how they had made up on the front lawn and their eventual discovery by Brant's fellow soldiers. Patrick's anger, Martha's hand-wringing, Mary Katherine's blessings and the hasty vows. She enjoyed unloading the tale, it was like making a soul-cleansing confession.

The darkness was final by the time Leah finished. Belle had listened intently, saying little. Stars sparkled above them, and a half moon helped light their way. The moment Leah had been dreading arrived.

"Leah, I must turn back now. My hostess will be concerned. She's probably already very worried. Do you think you can find Brant, if you ride straight?"

"I'm sure of it. I should be in Adams County after I pass Carroll Hill, and then I'll ride toward the first factory I find."

"Factory, why?"

"Because General Meade has a trap waiting for a whole bunch of Confederates that are aiming for shoes. Everyone knows Pennsylvania makes the best shoes."

"An ambush?" Belle licked her lips.

"I guess that's the term for it. Thank you, Belle, for keeping me company this far."

"When you return home, give Miss Martha my greetings. Goodbye, Leah, Good luck." She turned and disappeared into a copse, and like a fairy or elf, she was gone.

Leia rode on alone, swatting at mosquitoes in the moonlight. Riding through one section of a tree-lined dirt road, Leah saw hundreds of fireflies flashing on either side. She remembered a similar experience, years ago in high school. She and Sara had slipped out of the Smith's house one summer night, heading for town.

They had walked down Maple Lane, a narrow road lined by woods on both sides. The lightening bugs had been wild that night, too, and the girls had imagined the bright flashes to be camera flashes. Pretending they were movie stars, they had strutted down the lane posing for their firefly fans, turning this way and that. Smiling and mouthing glamorous "thank-yous," they had humored their imaginary fans. She could use Sara's sense of humor right now.

Unaware of how many hours had passed, Leia rode on, speaking softly from time to time to Patsy. Once, to her left and not too far in the distance, a howling noise startled her. She kept riding. Later, on the right, buried deep in the trees, a growling rumbled through the night. Putting mental blinders on, Leia kept Patsy moving. Once the cannons began to ring out, the task proved more difficult.

Chapter 9

Brant poked a stick around, spreading the last of the embers to put out the cooking fire. Careful not to waste precious water, he doused the light that threatened to signal the camp's location to enemy eyes. The unit had been extremely fortunate to take down a deer for their dinner. Most nights would have found them dining on salted pork and hard-tack biscuits, but tonight, it had been fresh, barbecued venison. He remembered that aroma from his childhood, when his mother had helped Bessie in the kitchen and the results had made his mouth water.

The hunting and subsequent cooking project had taken much longer than General Diamond had expected. Brant had watched his commander's face grow tense as he urged the men to clean up and prepare for sleep. Coming across the deer had caused them to make camp earlier than Diamond wanted, so he urged them to sleep so a very early, pre-dawn start could be made.

With so much on his mind, Brant knew sleep would elude him. He had volunteered for the first watch shift, found a semi-comfortable position and laid a carbine rifle-musket across his knees. In the past twenty-four hours, he had been humiliated in front of friends, married to a woman he barely knew, and then spent a wonderful night of passion with her. He had been made a beneficiary to a dear friend's will, and just now enjoyed the most unexpected hot meal. He should be very, very tired, but he wasn't. He felt anxious, as if his heart would throb to a point as to eventually burst forth from his chest.

The will. The will had bothered Brant, more than he wanted to admit. In fact, he would ask Patrick to explain that one section, since Leah was now his wife. A noise grabbed his attention and he jumped to his feet, rifle ready.

"Who's there?" he asked. A twig-breaking in the middle of a country night could mean anything from a small critter to an enemy soldier.

No one answered, so Brant pointed the barrel of his rifle toward the trees where the sound seemed to have come from. Brant felt he was being watched.. sensed that it was no mere possum or groundhog that was roaming nearby.

"Brant, is that you?" A feminine voice called out to him, as yet unseen.

Brant leaped forward, letting his rifle point toward the ground. His heart pounded.

"Leah! Where are you?"

She emerged from the thickest trees, on foot, leading her mare.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, taking her in his arms at the same time.

"Please don't be mad. I had to warn you," she said, talking too quickly.

He led her to his guard station, then let his arms go fully around her. He brushed his lips to hers as he bent his head down, then unsatisfied, crushed her lips with his own. He knew he was being too rough, slamming into her soft lips and tongue, but he could not

stop, did not want to stop. The kiss pounded on for minutes. He did not want to relinquish her mouth, he wanted to punish her for so foolishly following him. At last, his self-discipline allowed him to break loose. He stepped back.

"Sit," he said, waiting for his rising temperature to settle back to normal. He joined her on the ground and arranged his weapon.

"Now, why are you here? I should turn you over my knee, you know, for risking your life this way."

Her eyes widened, but she leaned toward him, a determined look on her face.

"Brant, two Rebs showed up at the house today looking for their runaway slaves...looking for you! They think you helped their slaves escape." She finished telling the story, leaving out any details of her own, personal fear.

Brant questioned her about who had been home, who had seen the men, and if they had left peacefully. He was satisfied that they had not harmed her, and she concluded her story by relating the ride to find him.

"I don't think I was in any more danger this afternoon than this evening. I couldn't let them take you by surprise, Brant."

"I do appreciate your concern, but I'm here with an entire cavalry unit. And yet you still worried about me."

"I think that's because I realized something after they left." She stood up and turned away from him.

He wondered if she was embarrassed. She should be. "And what is that?" He shifted his weight so his legs wouldn't stiffen during his watch. "What is so important that you risked rape and murder to follow me out here?"

"I love you," she said, so softly he wasn't sure he heard correctly. "I love you. I know what you've accomplished with the door. I wanted you before, cared for you when I saw you with that child, and now... I know what a caring man you are, Brant Douglas. I know I want to be with you." Her voice had risen by the end of her sentence, and she was looking at him, waiting for a reply.

What did she expect? he wondered. That he would swear his eternal love for her? He recalled the will he had read earlier and his temper flared. Her unexpected declaration sparked a realization in his own mind. The will that explained why Leah needed a husband, oh yes, he recalled those words.

"You love me? You love me because I'm so kind-hearted, is that it? Because I help others, even illegally? My wife travels out here alone at night, possibly revealing our camp location to anyone who might be watching, because she loves me? You've put the lives of all of these men in jeopardy, Mrs. Douglas." Now his voice was rising, and he stood facing her, still clutching his rifle.

"Brant, please, I didn't mean to make you angry." She stepped back, looking properly alarmed.

"But that's all part of the plan, isn't it?" The pieces suddenly came together in Brant's mind, making him spit out with the anger he could usually suppress. He made certain his rifle was out of arm's reach, to ensure no accidents were caused by his growing temper.

"What plan? What do you mean?" She stepped back again, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

"Patrick added me to his will today since I married his niece."

"He did?" She sounded surprised.

"Yes, so you and I could have a small start on life after the war. But you don't need his small token gifts, do you?"

"Brant, what on Earth are you talking about?"

"The fact that I just married you. The fact that you're from the future, and you're single there. And that you're almost twenty-five years old."

"So?"

"So? So, Mrs. Douglas, I'm sure you are aware of the McGarland family tradition that in order to inherit the family home, one must be married by that twenty-five year mark. Was it not so convenient and well-timed for you to find a husband just now?"

"What?" Her hand went to her throat, and to her credit, she did look taken aback. "Are you telling me that Patrick has the same terms in his will that my grandfather used?"

"Are you saying you didn't know? Is it true you need a husband in the future?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying, and the same thing I told you last night. I thought he did that to protect me...because I was incapable, or a woman, or something."

Brant stood still, watching her face and considering her reaction. Her words made sense. "Go on."

"Brant, it's true. I was devastated when the attorney told me. Here I was, completely happy being independent...supporting myself. It's different in the future, women take care of themselves. Sometimes they take care of whole families, too. And that's how I was.. am. And then, Grandfather died, and I found out I was going to lose my home on top of everything else. How do you think that made me feel?" She dropped her arms and began pacing a few yards, back and forth.

"Is everything all right, Lieutenant?" Another man had come up behind them. Brant kicked himself for being caught off-guard once again.

"Fine, Corporal. Do we have a tent for my wife?"

"No thanks, Brant. I'm outta here," she said. "I can't deal with you when you're so

suspicious of me. I believed you the other night, when you said you trusted me...even if I had secrets. Now you're the only one with secrets. I'm leaving." She walked toward Patsy.

"Dismissed, Corporal," Brant excused the man. When they were alone again, Brant turned back to Leah.

"What secrets do you mean?" He grabbed her shoulders, but she shook free.

"Please stop playing this game, Brant. I've figured it out. I think you should help me find the correct portal back to the future. And I found the passage way to the cellar from Martha's room. What a great idea. I never knew it was there. Please help me find the portal home...doorway, that is...and come with me. You don't need to be caught helping slaves escape. It's still against the law." She sighed, and he saw she looked exhausted.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know, but you must try to come with me to the future...before those slave owners find you. And, I need your help to find the door."

"You need my help? I should desert my post and follow you? Are you mad? What do you really want from me?" He fought to control his rage. She was deliberately trying to distract him, perhaps threaten him with what she knew. Women always wanted something. He knew exactly what she wanted, what she needed. She needed a husband to arrive with her in her future home, before her birthday. What an actress his new wife was! Just like Margaret had been, when she swore her love for him.

"Go home, Leah. Take Patsy and go back the way you came. You shouldn't encounter anyone before dawn." He shook his head, ignoring her open-mouthed stare. He assisted her to mount.

She paused only for a moment as her shoulders rounded suddenly, then let him plop her on the mare's back with quiet resignation. Without looking at him again, she started back into the trees.

"Douglas, your shift was over hours ago. Why don't you get some sleep?" General Diamond loomed over Brant, more fatherly than military in loose trousers and open shirt.

"Sir, I don't think I could sleep right now if you held a conbine to my head," Brant said from the ground. He carefully laid aside his weapon, which had served as his security all evening. If he was busy protecting the camp, he couldn't worry about Leah... As much.

"What's the problem, Douglas? You can talk to me about anything," Diamond said, sitting on the ground beside his soldier.

"Well sir, there was some disturbance earlier...came from the woods over there," Brant began, pointing to where Leah had first appeared.

"And that was..." Diamond prompted.

"My wife."

The General turned toward Brant with a quick head spin. "Wife? When did you get married and why wasn't I invited?"

"General, it only took place last night."

"Is this young woman carrying your child, Douglas?"

"No, sir. It wasn't like that. But we did marry quickly because I compromised her, at least in her family's eyes. She's Patrick McGarland's niece. I really just met her. But sir, she's not like any woman I've ever known. She's a tiny, delicate woman who at the same time is hearty and independent. She hasn't told me the whole truth about herself yet, but she seems to be very honest about her feelings. Would you believe she followed me here to tell me she loves me?"

"I see you are quite taken with her, Douglas. Did you not want to marry her?"

"I didn't want to marry anyone. I have nothing to offer a wife. And you know what we're facing here, Sir. The odds. And if I do live through this, I have to start fresh without property. Land's going to be the only thing of value, after all of this destruction, and what woman would be happy without land?" Brant avoided his superior's face, but continued to stare out into the trees. He hoped he hadn't sounded too bitter.

Diamond stared forward also, presumably to not further embarrass his friend. "So that's how it is. I'm sure you didn't risk leaving her with a child, then, did you? How honorable." He didn't wait for Brant to respond. "Douglas, I haven't heard you say this much about one subject, especially a personal one, in years. If it's security that worries you, you know you'll always have a position with the army."

Brant nodded, silently adding that the position of course was dependent on the Union's victory. He rubbed his eyes, feeling he deserved the burning it induced.

"Does she really love you?"

"As I said, she claims to."

"Do you love this woman?"

"I don't know."

"Do you still love Margaret?"

"No," Brant snapped, irritated at the General's interrogation. "Forgive me, Sir. But I was over her soon after I discovered how petty she was. She's my brother's problem now."

"What's my problem?" Torin asked, having walked up behind them.

"Not you. Cameron."

"Oh, we're talking about Margaret?" Torin settled himself on the ground. "Brant, did you know you're going to be an uncle next year?"

"Thank you, Torin. I have been trying to buoy your brother's spirits," Diamond said, reprimanding his younger soldier in a teasing tone. "What we need, I suppose, is a game of baseball. Ah, well, another time."

"I'll take the watch, Sir, so you two can sleep."

Brant and the General rose, gathering their weapons and stretching their legs. Before Diamond slipped into his tent, Brant stopped him, needing to confess.

"What is it, Douglas?"

"I sent her home, alone."

"You what?"

"My wife. After she came here, we argued, and I told her to go back to the McGarland house." Brant looked around, helpless, as the sun was already starting to rise. He had had a mule as a child that had been less stubborn than he knew himself to be.

"Permission to follow her, sir?"

Diamond put his hand on Brant's shoulder. "You let your anger get the best of you, man. I am sorry. And yes, you shouldn't waste another moment..." His words were cut off by the booming thunder of a cannon, not far in the distance.

Gunfire came next, closer, rifle shots whizzing past their heads.

"On the ground! Douglas, Preston, Hazard, front flank," General Diamond shouted out the orders. There would be no more sleep this night...and Leia was on her own.

Tears streamed down Leia's face, nearly obliterating her vision in the darkness. Patsy seemed to know the way, for which she was grateful. The horse even seemed to sense how Leia had been wrongly accused and hurt. How could he say those things to her? She had come out here, rode half of the night, to tell him she loved him. What a fool she had been! She had been trying to save his hide! He was the abolitionist, not her. ...And he had thrown everything she had said back into her face. There was no trust between them. He threw back her love, her trust, her admiration and her concern. Reaching for a piece of petticoat to blow her nose, the noises of her emotions spilled out into the silent countryside.

It seemed to Leia that the trip home took much longer than the trip out had, probably because she'd lost that glorious anticipation of seeing the man she loved for the return trip, that feeling of tingly excitement that urged a person in love to hurry, the feeling that if you don't tell them at once it will be too late, was replaced with reverberations of fighting behind her.

It had been too late for Leia, though. Her stomach contracted with a sinking feeling of despair and disappointment. Her emotions seemed to push down from her stomach straight through her toes, leaving nothing to hold in the great sobs and shudders. She had felt it when her parents died, though it was at a six year old level. When Grandfather had

died, she had felt this way again, like all was lost and life was without hope. Tears had been shed for his memory, for the fact she'd never see him again and for the regret of things she should have done differently.

Leia didn't know what she should have done differently where Brant was concerned. The choices she'd made since her arrival had seemed the best for her survival in this unfamiliar time period. If Patrick had been the one to start the inheritance tradition, Brant would just have to believe her that she'd not tried to trap him into marriage for that reason. Hell, she could have married Jason Maxwell if that was her only goal, but then, she'd never have met the sandy-haired soldier that had so tenderly loved her on their wedding night. Even if he hated her now, which she really doubted, she'd always have the memory of that beautiful night together. Perhaps she had hurt his pride. Stroking Patsy, she sighed.

Pink streaks of light were appearing by the time she arrived home. She was empty from her stomach to her throat, raw from crying. It was unlike her to give in to total feelings of hopelessness, but the feeling was all encompassing.

"Pink sky at morning, sailor take warning," she muttered, leading Patsy to her stall. The smell of bad weather hung in the air, that smell of fat worms lolling around on the ground like stranded travelers. The smell sickened Leia, far worse than the odor from the stable, for it was hinting of impending decay. She rubbed down Patsy, speaking softly to her, made sure the animal was comfortable as best she knew how.

With another sigh that signaled the end of the tears, Leia approached the back porch. Her exhaustion was catching up to her, just as the adrenaline rush had worn off after her rejection. The morning sky had grown more intensely mauve-colored, and she looked into the angry sunrise and kicked off her leather shoes.

Her thoughts were of strong coffee as she pulled open the door, only to let it bang closed again at the sound of footsteps behind her. Heavy, male footsteps brought on some fresh adrenaline and made her whirl around. Too tired for panic, though, she faced the trespassers with calm.

"What do you want? Did you follow me?"

"You know, missy, we want our slaves returned to us," the tall one said, "without delay."

"And you know, sir, that I have no idea where your slaves are."

"We followed you from your slave-stealing lover's arms, missy. And we've been mighty patient. Now," the short one said, "Do we have to force the truth from you?"

The other man grabbed her upper arm and pulled her from the porch steps onto the grass. His touch was rough and Leia cried out in pain.

"Let me go!" She pulled her arm free with such a quick jerk she heard the fabric rip from her shoulder. "Hey!" Anger kicked in to overtake the fear. She knew she had to keep it subdued, so she forced a deep breath into her lungs. The men now stood to her sides,

each claiming an arm as captive. Through the now ragged material of her sleeves, she felt rough hands bruising her skin.

"Okay," she said, as the proverbial light bulb lit in her mind. "I'll tell you what you want to know."

"That's more like it now."

"Speak up, then missy."

"Well, I have seen people, coloreds, in a room in the cellar. I don't know if they were hiding, or something else. You must not tell anyone I told you this!" She shrugged her shoulders and they loosened their grips, but the brutes hovered above her head still, listening.

"Anyway, if you go down to the cellar, check all the doors. You have to look closely, because I'm not sure which door it is," she said. At least that much was the truth. Her imagination conjured up 'Let's Make A Deal,' with something hidden behind every door.

"And this is the truth?" The punishing grip eased.

"Yes." She was able to back away from their mistrusting glares.

"Shouldn't we tie her 'case she's lying?" The short one seemed concerned.

"Nah.. she's not going anywhere. Are ya?" The other grabbed Leia by the neck, squeezing with considerable force to emphasize his meaning.

She could barely croak out the words, "I'll be here." He released her, shaking her once for good measure. Leia felt her head could have snapped right off its stem.

Stomping in haste, the men were through the back door to the house before Leia's vision had cleared. She was shaking, and knew she had to find a hiding place...And pray.

"Miz Leah?"

Leia looked up to see Hettie approaching from the side of the house.

"Miz Leah? You all right?"

"Yes, yes Hettie. We have to hide. Those men may come charging back out here."

"What they doin' inside?"

"I sent them to the cellar." She stopped, not wanting to explain her irrational hopes that the men would not return. "C'mon," she said, pulling Hettie by the hand. "We have to be sure." The women went into the hall, to the dining room, and paused on either side of the door to the cellar.

"I don't hear nothing," Hettie whispered.

"Good." Leia rubbed her neck where they'd squeezed it.

The maid caught sight of Leia's torn sleeve and red, finger-printed neck. "Miz Leah,

you're hurt!"

Leia put her finger to her lips. "Shh." She opened the door, peering cautiously down the dark stairwell. The only light was cast by Hettie's small lantern, and it did not reach past the stairs. Hettie had grabbed two knives from the kitchen. They waited.

The minutes felt like hours. Leia and Hettie allowed themselves to sit on the dining room floor. The tension lessened only because their energy was easing away from their tired bodies.

"Where'd they go?" Hettie asked, finally noticing that time had passed and the sun had risen quite fully on the new day.

"Far away, I think," Leia answered. This had been the longest night of her entire life. Not only had her husband rejected her overtures of love, but he had sent her away, into the dark and dangerous night. ...And it had proven dangerous, she thought, rubbing her shoulder. Her neck and arms promised to glow black and blue before long.

Leia and Hettie both dozed off in their sitting positions, the dining room walls absorbing their stress like a sponge. The aroma of fresh brewing coffee forced Leia's eyes open.

"Coffee? Hettie, wake up, someone's in the house."

"Must just be Sarny. Said she'd be by today to help me make soap," Hettie said, trying to rise on obviously stiffened legs.

Leia giggled, barely rising on her own weak limbs. "We're getting old, Hettie. Umm, that smells great. I need some."

Leaning on each other, the two rumpled women moved toward the kitchen, aware of, but ignoring the sound of cannon fire in the distance.

"I've been meaning to ask you, Hettie. Have you ever heard from your brother since his escape?" She purposely used the term, hoping Hettie would reveal some of what she knew.

The older woman just snorted, and leaned heavier on Leia.

"Hettie, I would like some paper and a pen," Leia said to her friend. "Before the McGarlands get home."

"Do you need to write a letter, Miz Leah?"

"Of sorts." She didn't explain further her plan to hide a note in a bottle.

Hettie handed her crude writing materials. "So you can read 'n write?"

"Of course. Most women in the...the city of Baltimore can. Does this mean you can't?"

Hettie didn't answer.

"I'm sorry. I can help you learn. I don't have specific teaching skills but I can try, if you

like."

Hettie smiled and turned away, and Leia was afraid she had insulted her friend. She would find a way to teach Hettie, maybe tomorrow they'd do the alphabet.

Leia considered several possible messages she could write and plant in the cellar. Perhaps, with a little luck, someone in the future could find it and then her. Coming so close to possible fatal injury today, she'd decided she must have leave some sort of message. Even if it was found after it was too late for her, someone would understand where Leia McGarland had disappeared to.

What message would be appropriate? To whose attention should it be directed, or did that even matter? Leia had no idea. She just did not want to die in 1863 and have no one appreciate her sacrifice. Brant had ruined any hopes she'd had to remain in this time and live happily ever after, or to escape with him back to the future. Now, seeking escape seemed much more important.

Baltimore's macadam streets, already saturated with June heat, bounced wavy illusions as the heat rose in front of Sara. She stood in front of the converted row house store front, the glass window proudly displaying the neon letters spelling "Sister Maura," and an outline of an open palm. Sara climbed the four marble steps, Baltimore landmarks, and knocked.

The door swung inward immediately, opened by a slender girl with Spanish features and a young face.

"I'm Sara Smith. I have an appointment with Sister Maura?"

The girl introduced herself as Maura, and ushered her customer into the dim room. Sara was surprised, and slightly disappointed, that no one was dressed in flowing robes, gypsy dresses or turbans. Sister Maura invited her to sit at a small, round table, draped in purple cloth, then lit a black candle that gave off a heavy, sweet fragrance. Incense burners around the room added to the intense smell. Sara thought the combination should be considered a drug.

"You're worried about your friend," Maura began, taking Sara's hands in hers.

"Yes, like we discussed on the phone." That had been no secret.

"Close your eyes. Concentrate on her face."

Sara tried to comply, but she was nervous holding hands with this unusual stranger. She checked to make sure her purse was still beside her chair, on the floor, then closed her eyes. She pictured Leia's small boned, heart shaped face, straight nose and even straighter blonde hair. Then those thick brown eyebrows. She recalled how happy Leia had been in high school when heavy, eyebrows became the latest style.

"She is pretty, no? Blonde? Short?"

"Yes."

"Ah," Maura said, then hummed a little tune. "Your friend, she has gone to someone just like me for help. She needs you, too, and she feels trapped."

"I knew it!" Leia couldn't be kidnapped and have gone to a psychic.

"I see a railway station. The train's coming, very blurry, no sounds. Silent. The train's full of black people; men, women, some children. The last car is full of white men in uniforms."

Sara gripped Maura's hands tighter. "Is Leia on the train, Maura?"

"No, no, she's trapped on the other side of the tracks. She's wearing an old-fashioned, long blue, no, black dress, and a wedding ring."

Sara nodded. "Yes, yes, that's what she was wearing when she disappeared."

"Good. She's not in danger, but someone she cares about is."

"Oh, no. Tell me, Maura, where can I find my friend?"

"It's not so much where she is. It's more when she is." Maura broke the link and wiped her brow.

"I don't understand," Sara said, unable to keep the frustration from her voice.

"Look for messages from the past," Maura replied. "That's all I can tell you." The vision is gone. That will be seventy-five dollars, please."

Chapter 10

As Leia had expected, Martha had delivered a quite stern lecture on the perils of adventuring out alone at night. Patrick sat in the corner of the parlor, observing the speech and alternately nodding and shaking his head.

Martha ran out of steam after thirty minutes or so. She gave her final wring of the hands and went to oversee dinner preparations. When the family had returned the night before, Leia and Hettie had already been asleep. Luckily, Leia thought, they hadn't known the women had been up all night the previous evening and couldn't have been roused for anything short of fire.

Sarny had given a few details that worried Martha, causing Hettie to spill the beans about Leah's nocturnal travels. Now, she was awake and refreshed, and facing Patrick's stern countenance.

"Leah," he began, not rising from his corner. "I promised William to guard you like a daughter if anything happened to him. You know that. How can I keep this oath if you take on such dangerous pursuits?"

"I am sorry to put you in that position, sir. It won't happen again. May I ask if you are feeling better?" She looked down at her hands. The only reason she was truly sorry was because Brant hadn't reacted the way she had hoped.

"Yes, I am. Just a touch of indigestible food, I vow. Now, may I ask you, girl, why you felt the need to follow Brant's unit?" He looked at her without blinking, his gray eyebrows knitted together.

"Yes sir. I went after Brant because we had argued, and I hadn't told him something I should have before he left." She was pleased to be honest with the man that reminded her of Grandfather. A feeling of warmth flowed from him, as if his brandy poured from his personality, no matter what he was actually saying.

"Could it be that you love him?"

"Am I that transparent?" She looked down at her hands.

"Only to me, child...I'd like you to stay in the house where I can keep my eye on you for a few days. I need to keep you safe for your husband, and I have a feeling you're already planning something or other, you see. Go talk to Hettie. She understands you, too."

Hettie did not approach the subject of the slave-owners, and Leia thought she knew why. She believed the maid was well aware of the special doorway in the cellar and was most likely frightened by it. The nineteenth century was notoriously superstitious and fearful of anything paranormal. Leia obtained a small piece of paper from the maid, then decided on the message she would leave for the future.

Martin or Sara/The cellar trapped me in 1863/I'm fine/Searching for home...Leia

She rolled the tiny paper and slide it into a dark green bottle. After corking it, she took

the bottle down to the cellar and placed it on the lowest, most hidden rod of the wine rack. If anyone unintended was to find it, they would not necessarily recognize the name Leia...Or so she told herself.

With that task complete, Leia turned her attentions to teaching Hettie to read. She needed to devise a way to introduce the subject without insulting her again. Possibly, Hettie could help her with the doorway in exchange for the lessons.

Patrick was feeling well, much better than the night he spent at the Bauer home. Leia considered going to him and asking about the contents of his will. But how much was a woman allowed to pry in 1863? There was no logical way to explain to him how his decisions would affect her life over a hundred years from now.

The days grew longer and longer, constantly more tedious for Leia. She spent four or five days.. she lost track...on mind-numbing chores in ninety-eight degree heat. She knew her local weatherman would have cited a heat-index of well over one hundred degrees considering the humidity. Leia was lucky that Mary Katherine loaned her a few short-sleeved dresses, though the entire ensemble still weighed more than her two winter coats combined. Even better, though the dresses were far from being bright in color, at least they weren't black.

Because she couldn't embroider or knit, Leia tried to help Hettie to keep busy. Every chore was back breaking work, from laundry to cooking to floor scrubbing, but it was the only exercise Leia was getting. She hated to think of her thighs spreading freely under the hoop skirt.

Continuing reports of fighting in the surrounding areas kept the small family inside and anti-social as June drew to a close. After reading the books Patrick had on architecture, Leia tried her hand at free-sketching. She made several very realistic drawings of split-foyer houses and colonial two-stories, then hid them from view.

She read aloud to Patrick one evening at his request. The words were long and the action was slow, but the rhythm was perfect for putting the older man to sleep. Leia tucked his blanket under his chin, put out the oil lamp and left him to slumber. She would definitely miss Patrick when she got home.

Getting home...that search for a doorway back to the 1990's...was Leia's final chore each day. She tried searching at dinnertime, the time of day she had first found it. She tried searching with a wine bottle in her hand, carrying the cool glass with one hand while touching the damp walls with the other. Sometimes she thought she could glimpse a partial outline, but it eluded her every time.

One evening she gave up in frustration and decided to open the bottle in her hand, Martin, she thought, as a proverbial candle lit over her head, could very well be Hettie's escaped brother. If the silent railroad was the same thing as the historical underground railroad, then Martin could have been one of the travelers. She would ask Brant about it as soon as he was recovered. Provided, of course, that he recovered and that they were

able to carry on a civil conversation.

Martha and Hettie were up with the sun, bubbling around the house as if they were drops of water the sun had set to boiling. In and out of Brant's sick room, they seemed pleased with their handiwork of the night before. The shoulder wound had been superficial, just a nick, and likely to heal quickly without complications.

The thigh wound was deeper, but still not the worse she'd ever seen, Martha had declared. As long as the fever didn't set in, which was Martha's understanding of the symptom rather than the cause, Brant should regain his health and walking ability, eventually. In the meantime, Patrick was working on a wooden crutch for Brant to lean on during recuperation.

Leia watched the women change the dressings, hanging back as they fussed over their patient. Brant was awake and aware, and keeping the pain he felt in check. Mary Katherine brought a broth of chicken, trying to feed Brant a few spoonfuls.

Unfortunately, the bed covers sopped up more of the nourishment than the patient.

Brant glanced her way from time to time, but Leia was not sure if he was pleased or irritated to see her there. She knew the glassiness in his brown eyes was a reflection of physical pain. With a warning to Leia not to upset the patient, as if were a small child, the three nursing musketeers left the room. The heat of the day was full by then, and the humidity swelled through the room like a damp, sticky cloud. Beads of perspiration broke out on Brant's brow, and his forehead grew shiny. Leia moved to mop it, and saw him watching her. Their gazes locked for just a second, and Leia was certain she felt a spark. The static receded quickly, and Leia turned away.

Her thoughts ran through their last encounter. How happy she'd been to share her feelings for him, and how quick he had been to send her away. It was all a misunderstanding, which she'd been certain they would have time to straighten out, but now he could die. What if she never got a second chance to tell him? Or what if she did, and he rejected her again?

Leia turned back toward the bed, determined to read whatever emotion was in those dark chocolate eyes beyond the pain. She hoped for just a clue, but when her gaze set on his face, Brant was asleep.

The casualties were substantial in Westminster, enough so that no doctors could make the trip to Walnut Grove. Once again Leia found herself comparing her situation to a scene from *Gone With The Wind*, but healing rifle wounds was a far cry from "birthin' babies."

Patrick obtained a small supply of quinine from the Bauers, which he mixed with whisky for Brant. The idea was for the mixture to prevent fevers, as could follow an injury. Penicillin was still in the future, though Leia was not sure exactly when it was first used. She considered herself lucky that the McGarlands of 1863 had even the tiniest inkling about preventing infection.

"I can't believe you wasted good money on a quack like that. Where's your common sense, Sara?"

"Jason, sometimes psychics actually help solve crimes, especially missing person cases. So don't chastise me like a child. Besides, do you have a better idea?" Sara tossed her head, hoping he noticed her hair was curled just right today, though her pride hurt by his brash rebuff.

"Well no," he admitted. "Leia will show up when she's good and ready. Now, will you please go get dressed for the fund-raiser?"

"You're just acting all cold and callous because she wouldn't agree to marry you and split her grandfather's money with you. I know all about it. You've changed, and nothing's so important as your all-mighty dollar. Not even me."

"Sara, please go get ready. There will be people at this thing that I should meet."

"I'm tired of these things. They aren't any fun without Leia, and I don't give a fig if you meet the right people."

Jason's expression softened. "I know, dear, but on the bright side, at least you'll always have something to wear. You always look terrific. And if you don't have just the right little number, you can whip something up. You've almost got your design degree. In fact, I'm going to rent you a nice, choice location in my new mall."

"New mall? Where is this mall, Jason?" She was immediately suspicious of his plan.

"Well," he began, a cautious tone in his voice. "I have several sites in mind. The best spot, as you know, is right here in Walnut Grove. Then, right over the state line, there's an estate owned by one of the charities you've done work for. There's a chance they'll turn it over to me, my company, for a shopping center location if I make it historical, with a Civil War theme. Then they get part of the profits. But so far, they haven't made a firm decision. There are a few other locations, but I don't have many details on them yet."

Sara sat still, watching his serious expression. "Can I give you a little advice?"

"Of course you can," he said, looking at his diet soda can. "What is it about?"

"Oh, I think you know. Leia's coming back, sooner or later, and she'll own this house. She'll work it out so it's legal. If you want to develop some poor, innocent tract of land, you'd better start making some charitable contributions, if you get my drift. This house is off limits. Do I have to talk to Mr. Sanders, or are we clear?"

"I get it."

She could tell he didn't like it. "Good, now if you'll excuse me, I have to get dressed. I don't think I mentioned it, but I've invited another friend to this shindig."

"Who?" His eyes narrowed.

"Just an old friend from school. We'll help you suck up to the charity people." She left

him, climbing the large staircase. Peggy would keep her mind off of Jason, and Leia, and all her problems. Peggy would be a buddy, understanding she was there for Sara to maintain distance from Jason, her lover who was now demoted to friend status. ..And that was the truth, all of the men she dated turned out to just be friends. She'd have to warn Peggy that her female friends seemed to turn out to be possible prey for Jason. This would be their last social event as a couple.

Brant had been shot on June thirtieth, and by the time he could remain awake for large chunks of time, the battle of Gettysburg had been decided. He slept right through the fourth of July, but Leia saw no fireworks, no celebrations concerning the country's birth. She watched Brant for signs of infection, the only way she knew how, by watching for vomiting or fever. He slept so much, she was sure Patrick had slipped him something strong like morphine or even worse, opium. She'd read in time-travel books that people from the future sometimes used moldy bread on wounds, to prevent infection, but the idea seemed a bit far-fetched for her. She certainly didn't want to make things worse.

Something they had done must have been right, because on the fifth of July Brant was awake. He was wan, and weak, and could barely lift his aching muscles, but he was lucid, and he was starting to heal.

Leia had spent a lot of her time contemplating the calendar. Her own time clock was ticking by fast. She knew she wouldn't make it back to the future in the thirty day period...Unless, if she made it back someday, she'd enter the twentieth century at the same point she'd left. That would sure be a life span-extender. Otherwise, what would happen to her house after the month was up? How ironic that she had gotten married in time, just as the will said, but no one would know!

"Torin," Brant said, his voice a dry whisper.

Leia was pretending to read in his room, and she snapped to attention at the sound.

"Brant! How are you?" She went to his bed and felt his forehead. Damp, but cool, she sighed in relief.

"Torin?"

"Your brother brought you here, and left that same night. He was fine at the time. We haven't heard anything since then, but I'm sure he's okay." She lifted a cup to his cracked lips.

He made a feeble grab for her wrist. "My leg?"

Leia assumed he was afraid to check under the blankets himself, in case he was now an amputee. "We think it will be fine. But you won't be dancing for awhile." She watched his face, keeping her own expressionless. She hated this feeling of anxiety, of not knowing what to expect from him. She'd always detested the need to walk on eggs around anyone.

"You?" The word asked for more information than Leia was ready to give.

"I'm fine. I'll tell the others you're awake," she replied, picking up the empty cup and leaving the room. She figured that response had been more than he deserved to know.

Brant now found sleep hard to achieve. His wounds were sore, his leg a throbbing drumstick and his shoulder an itching, healing irritant. His head was foggy, as if he were trying to surface from a sea of drugs. Every muscle weighed several pounds, and his leg felt as heavy as a cannon ball.

Brant thought someone must have scooped soggy oatmeal onto his eyelids. That's how heavy they were. When he could force them open, however, he saw Leah sitting in the chair, a book open but falling to her side. It was the first time he'd noticed she no longer wore black, and he grimly recalled his comment that she'd better keep those black gowns handy. He knew how close he had come to making that half-jesting statement a reality.

With the arrival and departure of his wife several times to his room, Brant decided he'd have to make the first move. She was acting aloof, asking only how he felt physically. It would be nice if he could have her to talk to during the long, quiet hours of his recovery. It was obvious no one else in the house was going to keep him company. Perhaps they all were waiting for Brant and Leah to come to some sort of understanding. After all, they had both hurt the other, made each other feel alone. It wasn't one-sided. He'd ask her to talk this afternoon, he decided. With any luck he'd be able to sit up by then.

"Okay, Brant, I'm listening," Leia said, arranging her skirts to fit the chair. She had tried to keep the aloof quality in her voice, but her control was wavering. She really wanted to hear what he had to say, though she knew she should reject whatever it was.

"I want to apologize, Leah, for sending you off alone at night. It was very irresponsible of me. You may not believe this now, but I do care what happens to you. I care very much. Will you forgive me?" His voice was low, raspy.

She didn't answer his question. "Brant, you think I plotted to get you to marry me. You accused me of a really low tactic, just to inherit property. Your brother told me you had said you'd never marry. Do you mistrust all women?"

"Torin said that? Well, I probably did say that to him. He did a lot of listening. After Margaret, I needed my brother's ear."

"And who is Margaret?"

"Margaret was my first love," Brant said, sighing. "We were to be married, our plans were made while we were both young. I thought she was beautiful, and, well, I was young. But my older brother had his own plans for Margaret. When the war started, and land became the only security anyone had, he proposed to my Margaret, promising her he'd inherit my family's land. And sure enough, my parents are gone now. Margaret and Cameron run the farm. I suppose war changes people, and it sure changed her values. I was bitterly disappointed, and then when I thought you were maneuvering for land, I just

lost my temper. I knew I should trust you, but I couldn't."

"Brant," Leia said, and went to sit on the side of his bed. She touched his cheek. "I'm very sorry. I'm sure that really hurt, to be so betrayed." She leaned over to kiss his cheek, and he pulled her closer. Still in a supine position, he could only see her well if he pulled her lower. He moved his good arm to stroke her hair, then he stopped and pushed her chin upward.

"God, Leah, what happened to your neck?" He lightly touched the bruises, which she knew had faded from violent purple to a yellowing blue.

She returned to her sitting position, remembering the fear of that night, and told him how she'd been followed and accosted. She watched his face grow red, the familiar temper rising. Well, good, she thought, he should be upset over what happened.

"And you are certain you are fine? They didn't harm you otherwise?"

"Everything they hurt, you can see. Except you can't see that I was afraid." She folded her hands in her lap, not meeting his eyes. Still perched on the side of the bed, she felt him stroke her leg.

"I had no idea. What a fool I've been," he said, his voice hoarse. "I let my temper get the best of me once again, and it almost took your life. I promise you, Leah, I will have better control from this point on. I won't let anything hurt you again." He wrapped his good arm around her, pulling her gently closer to him on the bed.

"You know, I've only helped a small number of slaves escape. I'm surprised those men figured it out."

At last, a confession.

"Was one of those men Hettie's brother?" Did he trust her now?

"Yes. I know it's wrong, it's illegal. But I just have to help them, Leah. I'm just so sorry my actions put you in danger."

Leia leaned over, resting her head on the top of his. "Please, when we're alone, call me Leia."

Chapter 11

"What happened to your third brother, Brant? Was he the one who died? I've met Torin. I know about Cameron, but that leaves someone missing from the story," Leia said, feeding him sweet green grapes, one by one.

"That would be Cory. We lost him to the coal mines a few years ago. He was so determined to earn a fortune, to make our parents proud. I miss him, especially when we have family gatherings. He and I would try to rouse the others for a game of ball. The best game we had was organized by General Diamond. Remember meeting him? Of course, he wasn't a General then, just a nice man who was good with a bat and ball. But now, well I guess there won't be any more of those gatherings." Brant closed his eyes.

"I am so sorry. I hadn't thought about the holidays yet myself." Leia felt her stomach grip, and she blinked, tilting her head up to hold back tears. What was Christmas, her favorite holiday, going to be like if she was all alone?

Brant took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "We'll be together," he said.

"If I'm still here," she said, "in this time."

He squeezed harder. "Either time, we'll be together, if we choose. We just need to settle some things between us."

"Do you believe that I'm from the future?"

"I believe that you believe it. And I believe you're not from Baltimore, but somewhere much further away, either in time or space."

"I guess that's a good answer. But Brant... you think I trapped you into this marriage, because of the will." She was still disturbed by his mistrust at the camp.

"Well, Lea...Leia, I've thought about this quite a bit while I've been bedridden. I think Patrick trapped us in this marriage, don't you?"

"We trapped each other, I guess, right out there on the front lawn." She smiled at the memory, lightly blushing at the memorable scene.

"And you trapped your attackers in the cellar, by yourself," he said, struggling to sit up higher. He wrapped his arms around her. "Although I find it hard to believe that two Southern Rebs are now running loose in the twentieth century."

She checked to make sure he was smiling, and felt herself giggle. "It's the right time of year for it. They'll probably be mistaken for re-enactors. I hope they make it into Pennsylvania."

"Well, wherever they are, I'm just grateful that they didn't hurt you...more than they did. I wouldn't have been able to forgive myself if anything had happened. When I realized they had come after you because of me, my heart almost flew through my chest. I do have to say I am impressed by your skills in dealing with those ruffians."

Leia saw admiration in his eyes and it was directed at her. It warmed her, physically. She felt like she was sunbathing. "While we're casting about praise, can I mention how wonderful I think you are to have helped Hettie's brother escape?"

He looked at her, waiting. "Yes?"

"Absolutely. It's given her a small peace of mind."

"Like you give me. After all, this is the second time you've tended my wounds. Leia, I'd like you to bring my pack over, please," he said. "I have something for you, if it made the trip without damage."

She pulled the sack onto the bed, eyeing the tattered bag warily. It was hard for her to believe anything could have made a safe trip in that thing.

Brent unfastened the crude clasp and reached into the brown leather bag. A smile erupted on his face as his hand appeared with first one champagne glass, then one short blue bottle.

"Ohh," Leia said, reaching for the bottle. "How did they make it back here intact?"

"I wrapped them in all my socks," Brant admitted, grinning at her from under long, dark eyelashes. "All five of them."

Leia reached for him, grasped his shoulders and planted a kiss on his receptive lips. "Where did you find them?" She held the bottle up so light could dance through the blue glass.

"I met a man in Taneytown. He was packing his belongings, preparing to move his family farther east. Well, his wife was complaining very loudly that her china and bric-a-brac wouldn't make the trip safely, and that it was all too heavy for her, and he got so irritated that he took these two pieces and held them high over his head as if he was going to smash them. So I stopped him just in time and he let me keep these pieces for you. I told him that I had a lovely new bride waiting for me, and that I had already risked losing her by being stubborn. Then I helped him move some large crates in payment."

"I'm impressed, Mr. Douglas."

"You should be. You see, if we were moving our household I would not have asked you to help carry heavy crates." He stroked her hair, brushing her face with his fingers.

"Well, you know, dear husband, if we were living together as a family, I'd still want to be independent enough to carry some of my own crates. I'm not one of those, frail, useless princesses," she said, hoping her tone was playful, but still conveyed her meaning. "You know, a woman of the nineties."

"No, I don't know," he replied, sighing as he pulled her closer. "But I guess I'll learn?"

"Yes sir, Lieutenant." She gave a mock salute. "You know, Belle would have made a

good woman of the nineties." She explained how Belle had ridden with her the night she had followed him to camp.

"And although she asks a lot of questions, she's really very nice...Very independent. You'd really like her." Memories of Belle with Brant, in the dark alcove, still stuck in her mind. Leia couldn't help but try and gauge his interest.

"Good, I think. Now that's settled, and you have a new collection started," Brant said, ignoring the remarks about Belle. "One which I intend to add to regularly." He rubbed the spaces between her fingers. "Have you ever considered learning how to make these things yourself?"

"Well, not really, but I could perhaps take a lesson someday. Oh, Brant, I had the best idea the other day. I want to give Hettie reading lessons." Pleased with herself, Belle forgotten for the moment, Leia smiled at Brant and waited for his pleased reaction. It didn't come.

"I'm not sure she'd like that, Leia. Have you asked her?" His eyebrows knit together in concern.

"Not exactly. I just realized that she couldn't read recently, when I asked for pen and paper to write a message." Leia bit her lip, wishing she could take back the words.

"What kind of message?"

She waited, not wanting to admit her intentions. "Well, I thought, maybe I should try to hide a message, maybe in a bottle, so that my friends in the future will know what happened to me."

Brant's face reflected her own conflicting emotions. She didn't want him to be mad at her, just to accept her decisions. She watched him struggle for a response, picked his hand up in her own.

"So you want to go home so very much?"

She swallowed. "I'm not sure anymore."

"Maybe you should," he said, his tone turning from soft to brusque. "There's nothing for you here. If I survive the war, I'll either remain a soldier or take a menial job. You wouldn't want to live as my wife under those conditions, I'd wager. So yes, Leia, by all means go write your message." He closed his eyes, like putting a period on the end of his sentence, and crossed his arms over his chest for the exclamation point.

Startled by his change in attitude, Leia left the room. She was worried by his reaction, glad she hadn't told him she'd already hidden the message. She couldn't help but smile realizing how Brant would have loved to stalk from the room himself, had he been able. He probably would have smashed into her new glassware before he made it to the hall.

Closing the door behind her, Leia tried to push all of her emotions and thoughts to the back of her mind. Brant was not himself. She knew that. He was feeling disabled,

useless and pessimistic about his own future. All she could do was be there, be supportive and disregard any sarcasm while he mended. ...And that included questions about Belle Boyd.

A thud on the front porch caught her attention, and she hurried downstairs, through the hall to poke her head out the heavy front door.

Patrick was crumpled in a heap on the porch. A Reb had Mary Katherine by the hair, pulling on it to keep her by his side. She was clearly trying to reach the older man, but the Southerner was stronger.

"Let her go," Leia demanded, pushing through the doors. She went to kneel beside Patrick's motionless form before the Reb could do or say anything. She felt for his pulse, and thanked God silently when she found the weak signal.

"He hit him over the head," Mary Katherine said, her voice raspy.

The Reb shook her into silence, then reached into his dirty gray coat. He withdrew a small, black pistol and pointed it at Mary Katherine's head. "Get up," he said, to Leia.

She rose slowly, having no clue as to what to do next. A pistol was one weapon she hadn't expected to see in this era, not even sure if they had been invented in time for the Civil War.

Mary Katherine was openly crying. The Reb had let go of her long hair, obviously considering the gun to be a sufficient restraint.

"Enough. I want to know where my Monya is, and I want to know now."

"Monya? Who is Monya?" Leia asked. She stood directly in front of the man, and despite her shortness of height, she was on eye level with him. Her stomach was contracting in fear, but she pulled her spine as straight as possible. So far, she was pleased with the steady voice she had maintained.

"My slave girl, Missie. My property. Word has it that this is the place to look. You're hiding her here and I want her back now."

"Why do you think we're hiding her here?" Mary Katherine sobbed out the question, sounding innocent and unfairly accused.

Perfect, Leia thought. She either doesn't know about Brant or she's a fine actress.

"Douglas," he said. "My buddies just paid you all a visit, didn't they?"

Mary Katherine looked blankly at Leia, who refused to meet her eyes.

"That's an ugly rumor," Leia said, glancing at Patrick who had moved and groaned. She felt some of the fear turn to relief that he was conscious. He should live. She knew Hettie and Martha had gone to the Bauer's earlier, so Brant was the only one inside. So perhaps she should send this jerk to the cellar and hope for time travel.

"Either you tell me what I want to know, or missy here gets a hole in her pretty head."

"All right! Let her go! Then go check out our wine cellar. First door on the right, then it's the door on your right in the dining room." She prayed silently that she'd be lucky with this ploy a second time. From the corner of her eye she saw Mary Katherine's shocked expression.

The man threw his hostage into the wood railing and charged past Leia into the house.

"Are you okay?" Leia asked, helping Mary Katherine to her feet. When the girl nodded, still breathless, she turned back to Patrick.

His eyes were partially open, fluttering, and he was trying to sit up. Dazed, he looked at Leia in confusion. "What happened?" he stammered, holding his head with one hand and propping his body up with the other.

Leia checked him for injuries, but any problems, she concluded, must be internal. She worried about the man's heart.

"Mary Katherine," she asked, "Can you stay with him?"

When she had the two of them huddled together, Leia slid back inside the house. It was quiet, too quiet, as Leia stuck her head into the dining room. The cellar door was closed.

Assuming the best, Leia went back to the hall and plopped on the stairs. She allowed herself to relax just a little, mentally comparing this incident with the last one. With any luck, this Reb would find himself a portal to some other time. He deserved to be punished, in whatever time frame. How could anyone hurt a gentle old man like Patrick? These southern men should take lessons from their own proclaimed 'gentility.'

A door's slam to her left made Leia grab the banister in fear. She snapped to attention, her spine an electric rod. Fresh adrenaline coursed through her veins, and panic sank another anchor into her stomach. The Reb appeared in the hallway.

"Nothin' down there, Yankee. As you surely know," he growled, striding toward her. "I'll get you to talk," he said, grabbing her by hair and wrist.

Before Leia could react, he had her captive, pushed her back flat against the wall. Despite his small stature, the man was wiry and Leia couldn't break free. She fought to hold back tears, feeling the wells puddle behind her eyes. Why hadn't he found the door? She prayed, fear throwing her back to her religious upbringing.

"Where is my slave?" he asked again, knocking her head into the wallboard.

Leia got a fuzzy idea of what it meant to see stars, as a cartoon character with stars circling his head filled her mind. She felt the cold metal of his pistol tap her breastbone, and having never been so threatened in her entire life, she closed her eyes and tried to hold her bladder in control.

A rifle clicked, from above them, grabbing the Reb's attention. Leia turned to see Brant at the top of the stairs, rifle aimed at the other man's head, or heart. His aim was not steady. He wore only his trousers, and she watched the large muscles of his chest pulse

under the strain of being out of bed. He looks heroic, she thought, like the cover of a romance novel.

"Move away from her," Brant commanded, letting himself lean against the banister post. He appeared relaxed and confident, but Leia knew beneath the swaggering facade he was in serious pain.

To her surprise, the man did as he was told. He backed away, releasing Leia, and let the pistol hang at his side. She rubbed her throbbing head, thankful the stars had gone away.

"Now, put down the gun," Brant continued, his calm voice not wavering.

Again, the Reb obeyed.

Brant's arm remained fairly steady on the intruder, and Leia realized his controlling arm was the one attached to the healing shoulder. Her admiration for him increased even more if that was possible.

"Put your hands on your head, turn around slowly, and get out. If you ever show your ugly Rebel face here again, by God, I will kill you. You are the enemy, and this is war. If you ever, ever, touch my wife again, I'll do worse than kill you. You will suffer."

Leia sighed in relief as the man followed Brant's orders. As soon as his intimidated butt was out the door, she charged up the stairs.

"Brant, my God, are you okay? Let me see your leg."

"I'm fine. Just help me back to bed, please," he asked, leaning on her.

Leia walked him back to the guest room, supporting his weight the best she could with her shoulders. She saw his trouser leg had turned brownish-red.

"You've reopened your wound," she said, settling him on the bed and removing his pants.

"It will be fine," he told her, leaning his head back onto the wall.

A knock on the door sounded as Mary Katherine burst through it. "Is everyone safe?"

"I'm fine, but Brant's bleeding again. Can you help me?"

Mary Katherine started to work, pressing a fresh strip of cloth to Brant's leg. It didn't seem to bother her that he had no trousers on. She would have made a great nurse.

"Is Patrick okay?" Leia asked.

"Yes, he'll just have a throbbing head for a few days, I think."

"Me too," Leia said, rubbing her neck. She looked at Brant, who had closed his eyes.

"Leah, why did you send that man to our cellar?"

Leia saw Brant's expression harden, then relax into a half-smile. Ah, she thought, he's going to enjoy my discomfort.

"Yes, Leah," he said, opening his eyes. "Why did you send that man to the cellar?"

Both of them looked at her, waiting for an answer. As if he didn't know, she thought. How wicked of him. She picked up a bottle of brandy from the night-stand, pulled the cloth from Brant's leg and callously poured on the antiseptic.

As she had expected, he changed the subject.

Chapter 12

"Leah, do they really believe we are hiding escaped slaves here?" Mary Katherine was drying a china plate, as opaque as her expression.

"I don't know," Leia lied. How much could she confide in Mary Katherine? She was helping her clean up from the small dinner they had shared. Patrick was tucked in bed, as was Brant.

"It's such a tragic part of war, don't you agree, Leah? That just when folks need their men at home for protection, they're off at war, or nearly crippled from the fighting they've already seen. I suppose we're really very fortunate that Brant was even here today." Mary Katherine had moved on to wiping the wood counters.

Leia was taken aback. Mary Katherine hadn't spoken with such wisdom the entire time Leia had been here. How on Earth could she know what was going on in Leia's subconscious?

"Why do you say that, Mary Katherine?" Leia rinsed her cotton rag in tepid water.

"Just an observation," she replied, pausing to smile at her cousin. "Brant's a good man, Leah."

Leia nodded and wiped her hands on a towel, finishing as Hettie came through the back door. Martha followed, bursting with some news she wanted to share.

"Mary Katherine, Leah, I have an invitation. It seems the Bauers' grandson, Charles, has stopped by on leave from his unit. So, despite the fighting, the Bauers are giving a small dinner party on Friday. Mary Katherine, you are especially invited. Charles can't wait to meet you. Leah, you must come and introduce your new husband, the war hero."

Leia rolled her eyes, her head turned away from Martha's enthusiasm. She saw Mary Katherine torn between flushed mortification and repressed excitement. With a wink to her cousin, she turned back to Martha.

"Thank you, Aunt Martha. But I don't think Brant will be up to visiting so soon."

"But my dear, Mrs. Bauer especially wants to meet your husband. Don't say anything yet, dear. I'll check with you tomorrow or the next day. And don't worry, the Bauers are not concerned that you married so suddenly." Martha bustled out of the kitchen, like a tornado blown in and out of an area with equal intensity.

"Well," Mary Katherine began, "it seems as though we're all especially invited."

"I can't attend a social function now, Mary Katherine."

"Leah," she said, coming to stand directly in front of her. "Please reconsider. I really want to meet Charles Bauer, and I couldn't do it without you by my side. You're strong about these matters. So please, won't you do this for me?"

Leia looked into imploring gray eyes, immediately feeling guilt at her selfishness. "Of

course. For you, Mary Katherine," she said without emotion. "But I can't speak for Brant," she added, and went to say goodnight to her husband.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, laying a hand on his forehead, which remained cool.

"Much better, thank you. The bleeding's stopped and the throbbing has subsided somewhat, thanks to Patrick's brandy, most likely."

Leia perched on the side of his bed. "I'd like to thank you, Brant, for coming to our rescue today. And I'm sorry if I made you feel bad about not being here for me the first time the Rebs showed up. It wasn't your fault you weren't with me. After all, it was my own idea to travel alone."

"Since we're speaking of rescues, has anyone found your message and tried to rescue you from me?" His voice was cold, tired, as if he asked whether the fighting had stopped.

"Please don't hold a grudge about that. I had to let them know I'm okay." Her chest tightened, anticipating another argument.

But Brant's voice remained calm. "Did you write in your message that you're married?"

"Well, no," she admitted. "I wrote a very brief message. But I told them I was fine. Besides, you don't want me to using our marriage to meet the terms of my grandfather's will, do you?" She was pleased that she had thought to mention this point, but Brant didn't soften.

"Regardless, you left a message in hopes of being rescued by someone other than me. Goodnight, Leia," he said, dismissing her as if she were a servant. In fact, with less courtesy than he'd show to a servant.

Brant lay awake long after Leia's departure. Patrick must still be in bed, he thought, or the fatherly man would have been by with something stronger than alcohol for Brant's pain.

His thoughts reflected on the strange day. How could the first two Rebs have been captured by the time door while today's Reb couldn't? What mysterious force controlled that door, or portal, as Leia called it? Only Hettie knew for sure. And only Hettie knew how Leia had first made her way through.

Leia. His beautiful, mysterious wife. They'd been through so much, but he still didn't know if she cared or was trustworthy. She'd lied so much in the few short weeks since they met. But under the same circumstances, he might feel a need to use the same lies. He'd feel trapped...much as she must now.

But wasn't he trapped too? He hadn't wanted to marry anyone. Lust had taken over his senses, something he'd thought he could control better as he grew older. Even now, the thought of her soft lips was stirring him inside.

He had been ready to walk again, until today's events. His thigh, luckily the shot had

landed there, not elsewhere, was going to be in use very soon. His decision was based on pride and a tad of boredom, not physical evidence. If someone or something tried to answer Leia's message, he had darn well better be there, and walking.

The days between Sunday and Friday blurred together in Leia's mind. The sounds of fighting had completely ceased, yet the silence that followed was just as nerve-wracking. In efforts to keep busy, Leia spent several hours with Hettie, demonstrating the basics of the alphabet on scrap paper. She had procured the agreement of the maid, who was hesitant, only as a personal favor to herself.

Leia knew Brant had been up and moving. She had heard the cane thumping in his room as he got his bearings. She let the others take his meals up to him, hoping a breather between them would help clear the air. There were a few times she was sorely tempted to sit on his bed and feel his forehead, for she missed the contact. A nursing contact would have been better than none at all.

Friday morning found Mary Katherine a nervous mess, following Leia and endlessly chattering, but Leia didn't mind. Anticipating an actual social event with Mary Katherine reminded her of being with Sara. In fact, tonight's dinner would be a lot like some of their double dates.

"Please, Leah, let me select your gown," Mary Katherine requested, eyeing her cousin's dark, plain dress.

Leia nodded, and rifled through Mary Katherine's tall, free-standing closet. "I don't think I could wear any of these," she said. "They don't seem to have any necklines at all."

"Girls," Martha called, entering the small bedroom. "Everything is settled. Brant has agreed to come, and Patrick has agreed to bring out the carriage for the evening. Brant couldn't walk yet, you know. So girls, wear your daintiest slippers. I hear Mrs. Bauer has even arranged for a bit of dancing tonight."

Mary Katherine gasped in pleasure, but Leia was nonplused.

"This is a small dinner, right, Aunt Martha?" Leia asked.

"Of course, dear. There are too many families in mourning that would never attend a party right now. Very, very small. And Leah, since you have abandoned mourning clothes, have your cousin select something appropriate for you to wear." Martha wrung her hands. "I have so much to do, so much to do," she said, and left the room.

"I should go see about Brant," Leia said, turning away from the row of gowns. She could not imagine any of those garments looking good on her.

"Oh, don't worry about him. Patrick has seen him walking. Maybe he wants to surprise you with that. I know you haven't spent much time with him lately, but anyway, we've altered black trousers for him, and cleaned his coat. I patched the shoulder as well as I could, but I'm afraid the one epaulet will always be crooked."

"I'm sure it's fine," Leia said, thinking how quickly Sara could have repaired the coat on her super deluxe, ultra-modern sewing machine. Even better, Sara would have just whipped up a whole new coat.

"Thank you again, Leah, for agreeing to go tonight. I'm terrified of meeting Charles, yet excited at the same time. It feels as if little insects were crawling around in my stomach."

"It's called having butterflies in your tummy," Leia said, laughing. "And we've all had them."

Leia had her own butterflies when she was dressed and ready to leave the security of Mary Katherine's room. She had never worn a gown with so little material at the top. The bodice pushed her small breasts up, giving the impression of much greater size. Her shoulders were completely bare. A tiny puff of a sleeve appeared midway down her arm. The gown was so tight at the waist Leia felt sure the corset would come bursting from beneath the emerald satin.

Mary Katherine had insisted on lending her a necklace that formed a 'V' into her bosom. Hettie had swept her hair up into a twist, leaving a few unruly tendrils to hang free. She definitely felt like she was ready for a ball, maybe Cinderella's Ball, not a mere dinner.

It had taken more than two hours for Leia to dress, so she wasn't surprised that she was the last to be ready. She walked to the top of the stairs gingerly, testing to see if the borrowed ballet-type slippers were slippery. Her nerves made her unsteady under the weight of the gown, and she took hold of the banister for support.

Two steps down, Leia felt Brant's eyes burning into her. She saw him, waiting for her at the foot of the staircase, leaning on a wooden crutch. He had never looked so dashing, she thought, then smiled at her choice of words. Standing his full height of well over six feet, he didn't hunch over the crutch.

She saw something in his eyes, some lusty, proud emotion that made her catch her breath, but almost instantly, three more steps down, it was gone. She descended the stairs to find him aloof and distant...Or perhaps she had imagined it all.

He offered his hand as she reached him. "You are a vision," he said, without emotion, and kissed the top of her gloved hand.

"So are you," she said, and dipped into an amused, informal curtsy.

The McGarlands and Douglas's left through the front door as the sun had begun to set. Once settled in the carriage, Leia noticed how lovely Mary Katherine looked. Her cousin's extremely low cut silver gown shimmered, making her large gray eyes gleam as well. With dainty hands folded demurely in her lap, Mary Katherine was the picture of femininity. Perhaps it was Leia's imagination, but it seemed that Brant noticed, too.

At least two dozen people were milling about the Bauer home, and Leia wondered what number would constitute a 'large' dinner party. She watched from a distance as Mary

Katherine was introduced to Charles, then three other young men. Obviously, Charles had brought some of his buddies home with him, and they were all vying for Mary Katherine's attention.

Martha introduced Leia as Brant to a few other couples, mostly older men and women who had not lost family members to the war. One very young couple was present with a toddler. The husband had recently lost a leg.

The mood of the group was festive. Laughter pealed across the room, probably from Mary Katherine when she realized she was the only single female present.

When the announcement came that dinner was ready, Brant dutifully took his wife by the arm. The dining table was very long and elegant, and Leia found her seat directly opposite Brant's. Charles Bauer was to her right, with Mary Katherine across from him. Beyond that arrangement, the lack of females had ruined the boy-girl seating.

"Mrs. Douglas," Charles began, tilting his head toward Leia's.

"Please call me Leah," she said, bringing her goblet to her lips.

"Leah, tell me what you think of Walnut Grove. You're from Baltimore, I understand?"

She nodded. "Yes, I am, and the few places I have seen are lovely. I've not seen the town."

"What? Are you a prisoner at the McGarlands? How shocking," Charles said, teasing.

Leia smiled, glancing at Brant across the table. His face was unreadable, but Leia felt he was not happy with the conversation. She noticed that Mary Katherine was in constant banter with the other young men, and thought perhaps Charles was talking to her to make Mary Katherine feel jealous and capture her attention.

"So, Brant, are you keeping your fair wife a prisoner? Perhaps a prisoner of love?"

"Leah does as she likes, I assure you," Brant said, now sporting an unpleasant smile.

"Anything she likes?" Charles went on, oblivious of the building tension. "Hmm, that could prove interesting."

The serving man came around to freshen their wine glasses, and Leia was relieved. Was Charles flirting with her? What purpose could that serve with her husband directly across the table? Leia drank from her glass, the crisp wine biting as it went down in a rush.

"Would you give me the honor of a dance after dinner, Mrs. Douglas?" Charles was swirling his wine around in its glass, staring into it with a casual air.

Leia put down her fork watching Brant's facial muscles tense at this new request. "I don't know if that would be appropriate, Charles, but thank you for asking. Perhaps Mary Katherine would care to dance. She's very graceful, you know, and she had so looked forward to meeting you."

"Well, I just thought that since your husband is not, shall we say, capable, at this time, I'd step in. Just for a dance or two," Charles went on.

Brant's glass crashed to the table. "Would you care to step outside, sir, to contemplate just how capable I am?"

Leia was speechless at Charles' thoughtless remarks. Having not socialized in this century, she had assumed everyone would be so much more refined. This man had deliberately provoked another guest, and Brant's temper was rising. Mortified, Leia looked around the table. Every person at the long table was watching the scenario, openly curious and dismayed.

After a few moments of humiliating silence, the sounds of dinner resumed. Having lost her appetite, Leia pushed her plate aside and her eyes met Mary Katherine's. The gray doves of her cousin's eyes were confused and a bit sad.

"I'm sorry." Leia mouthed the words to her friend, then left the table. She needed air, and time to sort out what had happened. Mentally, she ran over the introductions and the dinner seating, trying to see if she had done anything to encourage young Charles Bauer.

She made her way to the back patio, relieved that a cool breeze had picked up to wipe away some of the humidity. With a sigh, she settled on a bench where she could see the half-moon rising. Soft strains of violin music filtered out from the house, and Leia assumed that happy couples were dancing.

"You never answered my question," a voice taunted from behind her.

"Charles, I think I did. Please, do me a favor, go ask Mary Katherine to dance."

He moved closer, resting his hand on the back of the bench. "Just one dance, Leah. Let me hold you for one dance, and then I'll leave you alone."

"I think you'll leave her alone now." Brant's voice was deep and steady.

Leia sighed in relief, wondering what had taken him so long to follow her. She moved away from the bench and went to stand beside her husband, grateful for his height and muscular physique, even with the crude cane.

Brant slipped his free arm about her waist, pulling her close while staring down Charles.

"Sorry, good man," Charles began. "I just wanted a dance," he said, and turned away.

Leia watched his blonde head as he went back to the house. "Thank you for yet another rescue."

"Why did you come out here alone?" He didn't release her, but tilted his head so he could see her eyes.

"Just to get away from him. Honestly, Brant, I don't think I caused any of this," Leia said, wrapping both of her arms around her husband's neck. Looking behind him, she saw the French doors push open and dancers spilling out onto the porch.

"Look at me, Leia," he whispered, locking her eyes and holding them as laughing couples spun around them.

"Always," she said, willing him to kiss her. But he just looked at her, looked into her. The eyes are windows to the soul, she thought, I hope he can see mine. She wasn't sure how long they stood there, like patio statues, eyes locked, but she couldn't break away from his intense gaze.

The guests prepared to leave, thanking the Bauers repeatedly in the great foyer. Almost like a reverse receiving line, Leia watch in amusement as the Bauers moved from person to person.

"It was very nice to meet you," the young mother said to Leia, gathering up her toddler.

"Are you leaving now?" Leia asked, extending her hand.

"No, actually, we're spending the night. Thomas is overly tired. He gets that way since they had to take his leg, and the Bauers were kind enough to offer. He's over with Mrs. Bauer now, arranging to send a message to my family."

"A message?"

"Yes, I don't want them to worry when we don't arrive home promptly. Don't you think that's the polite thing to do?" She frowned, small wrinkles lining her young face.

"Oh yes, I do," Leia agreed, and then turned to look at Brant.

He looked irritated, at her first glance, but a change softened his face within seconds. He came to stand closer behind Leia, and leaned to whisper in her ear.

"I'm sorry," he said, then turned her to face him. "You were right about the message." He bent his head over hers and claimed her mouth in a full, no-holds-barred kiss. She felt him take his cane in both hands, behind her back, to pull her even closer. Her insides melted when his body pressed upon hers at every point possible, his heat steaming through their layers of clothing.

Leia tried to pull away. She knew everyone would be gawking at their indecent display.

"Brant..."

Without words, he told her he didn't care who watched, and that he intended to show them all that she belonged to him.

Brant held Leia tight against him, feeling her snuggle her head against his chest. He knew the swaying of the carriage had rocked her nearly to sleep. Martha and Mary Katherine were in their own little world, whispering to each other on the far side of the carriage. Brant knew they weren't pleased with the Douglas family this evening.

Patrick, however, had been amused by the events. Just after tucking the women into the carriage, he had leaned to Brant and whispered his commentary: "I thought I insisted you two get married so we could avoid these public displays." And then he had slapped

Brant on the back lightly, chuckling softly under his breath.

The pounding of hammer to wood drew Leia's attention away from the sewing materials sprawled across her lap. With a mumbled excuse to Martha and Mary Katherine, Leia escaped. She reminded herself that she couldn't sew a straight stitch in eighth grade Home-Ec, so she shouldn't get frustrated by the same problem now.

Poking her head around the corner of the alcove, she found Brant working on some type of construction. He sat on a low stool, his healing leg out to one side as he stretched over his project.

"What's that?" Leia asked, sitting on the floor beside him. Her hoop rose around her like a mushroom cloud, so she struggled back to her feet. So much for sitting Indian style in 1863, she thought, smiling at her own lack of grace.

"Ladies don't sit like that in long skirts," Brant said, extending a hand to help her. Still strong despite his recovery time in bed, she was up righted instantly. "At least, they don't try it in front of anyone else."

"Now you tell me." Leia smoothed the fabric over her hoop frame and brushed off her butt. "Anyway, what are you making?"

"It was going to be a surprise, but I guess that's hard to achieve in close quarters. It's a cabinet, for your bottles and glasses. A wedding present, if a little late."

Leia sucked in her breath. "Oh Brant, that is so sweet. I didn't know you could make furniture." She loved all the antique pieces she saw appraising houses, occasionally thinking the furniture was worth more than the house.

"I don't, really. Just basic types. Look at that chair," he said, indicating an ornately carved walnut corner chair. It had two backs, and the point of the seat fit neatly into the corner.

"It's gorgeous. Did you---?"

"No, my father made that for Martha, years ago."

"Wow, I'm impressed."

"It's a nice piece, a replica of one from the 1700's. He made my mother a china cabinet as a wedding gift. He spent a year carving it, perfecting it," Brant said, shaking his head.

"What happened to it?" She had to ask, even if she suspected the answer.

"Margaret and Cameron have it." He spoke quietly, continuing to fit the wood together as he spoke.

She watched him work with the dark wood, pulling up an upholstered wing chair. "This is going to be beautiful. I hope I can get it home someday."

He stopped working then, looking at her. "I hadn't thought of that, since I consider you as being home now. Where ever home is for us, we'll take it there. Or I'll build you a

new one."

She reached over and put her hand on top of his. "As long as you and I are there, it'll be home, no matter what things we possess."

He nodded, accepting her answer. "I cut these pieces in the barn. Would you hold the end of this board while I fit them closer? There'll be a shelf for glasses and goblets. And one for bottles. The bottom section will be deeper, for vases or jars or what ever you'd like."

"And I didn't get you anything."

"Oh yes, you did." He filed a rough edge with a flat, beveled piece of metal.

Leia smelled the wood as he shaved it. "What did I give you as a wedding present?"

The look, or leer, he turned to her answered her question.

She laughed. "I don't mean that. I mean something concrete, tangible. Something you can point to and say...my wife did that for me."

"Oh, well, that's different." He sat his tools aside and stroked his chin. The light beard he'd started gave him an older, wiser look. "What if I say that my wife gave me back hope for a future? A future with the possibility of a family. And all without even knowing for certain if we'd have our own home. I'd say that was a gift."

She stood and circled Brant, admiring the work he'd done so far. "I do have one concern," she said, stopping in front of the little corner chair, touching its smoothly polished arms.

He spun halfway on his stool. "Yes?"

"Did you ever build something for Margaret?" Leia studied his cheek bones, defined so clearly above the whiskers.

His facial muscles relaxed as he released a beat of laughter. "Not a single thing."

There was a time, he thought, when he would have striven to build Margaret mansions and gazebos, furniture and anything else she wanted.

He'd been younger then, however, thought any woman he loved would be loyal. Of course, he'd also thought his country was at peace.

Brant started as a splinter pricked his hand. He could pick it out later. Now, he wanted to show Leia how much she meant to him, and a small gift was a beginning. The fact that she wanted to accept it, was eager for something from his heart, showed she didn't mind that they had no place to put it. Could he count on her to wait for a home of their own?

Chapter 13

"These smell heavenly," Leia said, flipping flat cakes as they sizzled in the cast-iron pan. They were wafer-thin disks made with wheat, eggs and milk and absolutely lacking in preservatives.

She hummed to herself, her mood far better than she would have expected, considering the circumstances. Since the night of the Bauers' dinner, Leia had spent each evening with Brant. He talked with her now in a soft version of his deep voice, like he had the night they met. He had touched her, with a gentle caress she could still feel on her face and shoulders. She had lain beside him on the bed, stretched out so that her full length touched his. Determined not to damage his slowly healing wound, she had only watched as his arousal became evident. Her own body had grown warm and wet, the anticipation and need to wait adding to her excitement.

'Miz Leah!" Hettie called, her voice urging Leia to notice the blackening pancakes. She hurriedly flipped them, bringing her full attention back to the kitchen and away from Brant's bedroom.

A noise from the dining room signaled Leia that someone had come down for breakfast. She dripped a new batch of cakes on the fire while Hettie chopped fruit into mouth-sized pieces.

"What the..." a man's voice bellowed, trailing off as he took in his surroundings.

Leia spun at the sound, recognizing the voice she hadn't heard in weeks. It was Jason.

"Leia?" he asked, his mouth remaining open and his brows knitting together. He looked from Leia to Hettie, then around the room at the antique furnishings.

"Hello, Jason," Leia said, amused at his confusion. "Long time, no see, huh?"

"What is this?" he demanded, sweeping his arms, "and where have you been?"

Leia looked at Hettie, who was staring at Jason, obviously wondering about his khaki shorts and red polo shirt. The maid's eyebrows lifted, and Leia stifled a giggle, imagining what Hettie thought of Jason's long, hairy legs.

"I've been right here," Leia said, sweeping her own arms in a grand gesture.

He ran a hand through his hair, as if willing the brain underneath to comprehend.

"And this," she went on, "is the McGarland kitchen, as it was during the Civil War."

Jason was shaking his head. "Did you do this yourself? No, Leia, this is going too far. No."

"Oh, yes it is, Jason. But you're not crazy, I felt the same way when I arrived a few weeks ago."

Jason's facial muscles twitched, looking as if the fury of a red-devil was emerging.

Leia enjoyed his reaction, mentally punishing him for taking so long to find her and for the way he'd acted before that. She arranged the flapjacks on a china platter, turning her back on Jason, but sneaking a peek over her shoulder.

"Are you going to talk to me, Leia?" he asked, his voice calm. He opened the dining room door for Hettie to pass through with two round fruit bowls and a puzzled expression.

Jason moved closer to Leia. "Well?" She could feel the irritation coming from him in waves.

"Of course I'll talk to you. But first I'm helping with the family breakfast."

"What family?"

"The McGarlands, I told you. Oh, and the Douglas's, too."

Jason snorted. "Whatever. We have to talk. Your birthday's almost here, Leia. We could lose the house. Have you given that any thought while you've been playacting?"

She turned toward him, forgetting the flapjacks forming in the pan. "Of course I've thought about it. But there's not much I could do from here. Did Sara find my message?" She glanced at the door to the hall as several thumps bounced in from the steps.

"What message? It doesn't matter. Forget this charade. Leia, do you want to get married? I've secured a license. If you do, we have to get back to where ever soon." He grasped her upper arm. "Last chance, Leia."

Another sound caused Leia to look toward the door, realizing they weren't alone. Brant had come in from the hall, and was leaning against the oak piesafe. He crossed his arms neatly in front of him, allowing the cane to project into the room.

"She is married. To me," he said, his voice dripping with casual, nineteenth-century arrogance. He is magnificent, she thought. Rhett Butler couldn't have done it better. He stared at Jason, unwavering. The strength he projected rivaled that of the night he had saved her from the intruder. "And who are you?"

Leia had never heard that tone in Brant's voice, and she was ashamed to think she liked it. She saw a threat in his gaze, too, which she knew was directed at Jason. The sounds of silverware and coffee cups sifted in from the next room, but the kitchen became deadly quiet as the two men faced each other, neither able to grasp the identity of the other.

"Okay you two," Leia said, "let's take this out back. It's bad enough Hettie's already seen Jason in these clothes."

The men silently followed Leia through the centered hallway and out onto the back porch. Brant leaned against the wood railing and Jason, refusing to let the other man have the advantage of height, perched on the railing directly opposite.

"Jason," Leia began, taking a chair between them, "how did you get here?"

He cleared his throat to answer. "Well, I got up this morning and went to the kitchen for juice. I heard a noise, which I thought came from the basement. I took a flashlight and went to check it out. Nothing was wrong until I came back upstairs and found you, like this," he said, motioning to indicate her long dress.

"Are you saying you slept at my house?" She looked at Jason, tilting her head with curiosity.

"Sara and I have stayed there sometimes, yes, to keep an eye on things."

"House sitting, huh?" she asked, and watched him swallow. "Have you thrown any wild parties?"

Obviously embarrassed and unsure if she was kidding, Jason just smiled at Leia. "Sara's really worried about you," he said after another swallow.

"I'm sure she is," Leia told him, seeing Brant shift his weight. "Although she was pretty unhappy with me before I left, and if I recall correctly, that had something to do with you." She was impressed by Brant's stoic patience.

He ignored her comment. "Are you really married, Leia?" Jason looked at Brant, folding his arm to mirror the other's movement. "And if you are, is it legal?"

"Only you would ask that right now, Jason. Brant and I were married a short time ago. It's perfectly legal, as far as I know. What's the date at home? Is it July there, like here?"

"Yeah...it is...and we're running out of time. Sanders has already set up an auction for August first."

Leia drew in her breath. "You're kidding! What a snake. He couldn't wait for me to return? The bastard." She glanced at her husband, who remained quiet, barely disguising a smile at her outburst.

"Don't worry, though," Jason continued. He moved closer to Leia and grasped her wrist. "I'm going to outbid everyone, if I have to. I have a backer."

The news hung in the air, as heavy as the humidity. Leia couldn't breathe, feeling as if her head would explode with anger building in her blood vessels. How dare he! Pressure pumped behind her eyeballs, as if hot air helium was filling them.

"What," she asked, clipping the edge from each word, "are you talking about, Jason Maxwell?" She shook his moist hand from her wrist.

"Yes, what?" Brant asked, looking less amused.

"The auction. I didn't want Leia to lose the property, so I did some homework."

Leia wanted to believe that his intentions had been honorable, that he had done what he had for her, but it wasn't likely. "Jason, did you propose out of friendship at all, or just to gain control over my house? How much do you stand to gain by all this?" She spoke

softly, but stood and began to pace the porch. She felt her face flush and her hands ball into fists at her side. Jason took a step back, indicating she'd achieved the effect she wanted.

"Please, Leia. It's not like it sounds. When I told you I cared for you, I meant it," he said, raising his open palms to her.

"You care for her?" Brant had been paying close attention. As he moved away from the railing, Hettie opened the back door.

"Miz Leah, would you and Mista Brant be wantin' any breakfast?"

Leia glanced at Brant, who shook his head. She certainly wasn't hungry. Actually, she felt a little queasy.

"I have some questions for your friend," he said, nodding toward Jason.

"I'd like a biscuit. I'll be right back," Leia announced. She followed Hettie inside, hoping Brant and Jason could interact civilly until she got back. Leaving them alone hadn't been the best idea, but her stomach was uneasy and needed something to settle it. Probably tension, she thought, and a dry biscuit sounded good.

The family had scattered, and Leia found her snack in the kitchen. The tender top flaked off in her mouth, followed by a taste of melted butter imbedded in its layers.

"This is wonderful, ladies." Leia moaned her appreciation to the woman. Sarny was working at the counter, and she flashed a grin of gratitude at Leia for the praise. Hettie was working at the other end of the kitchen and Leia moved to stand beside her.

"Hettie," she said, so Sarny couldn't hear. She reached for a rag and wiped a shelf. "About Jason, his sudden appearance today, and his clothes."

"Yes, Miz Leah?" Hettie kept working, knowing not to alert the younger maid.

"Well, he's not from around here."

Hettie stopped, turning then to face her friend. "I understand perfect, Miz Leah. Perfect. Now, I will go find him something decent for him to wear? Seems he might be with us a spell, and he'll be bumping into the family."

Leia could only nod gratefully as she dropped her rag and pulled Hettie into a hug. She didn't know what or how much Hettie knew, but it didn't matter. She finally had a female ally in the McGarland house.

Leia wasn't as grateful when she returned to the back porch. Loud, masculine voices were reverberating in an argument. A thud of wood on wood told her Brant was using his cane to make a point. At least he wasn't using it on Jason, she thought, pushing through the door onto the battleground. They were both Yankees, but from opposite sides of the time line.

"You had no right," Brant was saying, standing only a foot from his foe. He stood

impossibly erect, the cane positioned in front of him. His eyes flashed with anger, though his voice was calm.

"And you have no rights, old man," Jason retorted. "In fact, where I come from, you're already dead."

"Well, he's not dead now, is he?" She sat on the highest wooden step, her back to the men, and smoothed out her skirt around her. "And he has plenty of rights as far as I'm concerned."

The silence settled on her shoulders like dewy mist, cold and lingering.

"As I was saying," Brant went on, his voice unperturbed. "You had no right to try and marry her for her property. That's not what marriage is all about."

Was he thinking of Margaret?

Jason's voice was louder. "And I thought arranged marriages were all the rage back then...now. Perhaps that's true, but then, tell me, just why did you marry her, soldier man?"

Leia rested her elbows on her knees, and her face in her hands. Jason couldn't know the circumstances surrounding her and Brant's hasty wedding, but his question had left Brant speechless. The sun began to beat on the porch, warming the planks and Leia's dark clothing.

She felt the perspiration begin above her lip. "Jason," she said, "I have real feelings for Brant."

"How can you know after so short a time? You've only known him a few weeks."

"That's true. But I've known you nearly all my life...but then again I never really knew you at all, did I?" She twisted to look at him, and he had the grace to look at his feet.

"I've always loved you," Jason said, slowly raising his eyes to her. "Ever since you and Sara set Tommy Hightower's hair on fire in the second grade."

"That was an accident," she said, mostly for Brant's benefit. She didn't have to look at him to know his eyebrows were arched at her. "And you used to give us a hard time, all the time. Remember?"

"Yeah, I had to, if I wanted to get your attention. Then you both grew up and turned into hot looking babes."

Brant cleared his throat.

"Sorry, old man."

Leia faced the yard again, propping her chin on her fists. "Jason, you've changed too much. Maybe Sara doesn't realize it, or wouldn't admit it. But that's all in the past now. Then again, so are we." She stood up and walked to her husband, who still leaned against the wood railings.

Leaning back against his chest, facing Jason, she was glad when Brant's arms came around her waist. "Doesn't Sara mean anything to you? She loves you, or did. You were her first love Jason."

Brant's grip tightened her to him. "He and your best friend were lovers?"

"Yeah, I loved her too. She was a good girl, but not like our Leia here. Leia was immaculate."

Leia gasped. How could Jason say stuff like that? Would Brant understand the implication?

"You sound as if that was unusual, or undesirable," Brant said, but Leia had already told him she was not the typical 1990's teenager.

"It was, for our time." Jason stuffed his hands into the pockets of his shorts. Looking Brant square in the eye, he asked, "Was she worth waiting for?"

"Without a doubt." Brant answered easily, as if he'd been asked if she was a good wife, not if she'd been a virgin on her wedding night.

"Oh, God," she murmured, face back in her hands, rubbing her eyes. Brant kissed the back of her neck as the door opened onto the porch.

"Miz Leah," Hettie said, popping her head outside. "Let's git your friend into some work clothes."

"Good idea," Leia said. "Jason, would you please go up with Hettie? You can use the back stairs. Trust me, it'll be safer for you, if you, um, look the part."

Without a word, just a look tossed her way she couldn't interpret, Jason followed Hettie into the house. Leia felt the tension melt from her shoulders and leaned back with more of her weight onto her husband. "End of round one."

Brant didn't ask what she meant, because his tongue was in her ear.

Hettie worked her good magic on Jason, turning him into a typical man of the sixties, the 1860's. He was introduced to the family as a friend of Brant's. Leia thought it too dangerous to pretend he was anyone else.

Brant took him into the library after a brief house tour, and pointed out some of the older books, and newer ones, to confirm the year. A dated copy of the Carroll County Times, fresh and crisp, was the clincher.

Leia told Jason how she'd initially believed him to be behind her time travel, as some scheming mastermind, and that it had taken a trip off McGarland property to convince her otherwise.

"Thanks for the compliment, but I really couldn't have arranged all this. Those bottles," he said, pointing to several pieces of glassware. "Whose are those?"

"Mine. I've had to start my collection from scratch a few times. When better than in

1863?"

"Uh-huh," Jason said, "that makes sense." He scratched his head and moved around the room, drinking in the unique objects, fascinated. Dollar signs seemed to light his eyes.

"Bet you're wishing you could take this whole room, just as it is, to the antique auction, right?"

"Leia, your friend needs a brandy," Brant said from his seat at the desk. "He's actually blushing."

To her amazement, Brant moved to the cabinet and filled a glass. Leia knew they'd both figured Jason out pretty well, and that Brant probably figured he didn't need to be jealous anymore. When Jason took the drink, Brant was grinning.

Jason remained quiet during dinner, his white knuckles reflecting off the shiny fork. Leia watched him closely. His manners were impeccable, and she was relieved enough to relax her own tightly gripped fork. The McGarlands seemed to sense Jason's anxiety, and avoided their usual social guest grilling. Luckily for them all.

"This salad is wonderful," Mary Katherine said, finishing her small plate of greens and tomatoes. "Wherever did you find the recipe, Hettie?"

The maid smiled and turned toward the sideboard. She stirred the contents of the oval soup tureen, preparing to serve the main dish of pork and rice. Under Leia's advisement, Hettie had served the salad as an appetizer and was saving the pork for the entree. Finally, Hettie served steaming ears of silver queen corn, setting each on a plate like a lone set of pearly white teeth.

"This tastes so much better than cut corn," Martha admitted, spreading fresh butter on her ear as Leia suggested. "Even if it's not fashionable."

Sighing to herself, Leia remembered sultry summer evenings munching sweet white corn with Grandfather. Just like Hettie, Martin had resisted serving the entire ear, wanting to chop the kernels off into neat little piles. The memory made her smile, just as the ear-eating escapades of the McGarlands did now. Patrick refused to hold the ears when they burned his fingers, but later would complain the corn was cold. Mary Katherine ate her corn in a disorderly pattern, digging in here and there and missing a good many kernels. Martha tried to be dainty, failing as a pat of butter was spotted clinging to her chin.

Leia enjoyed this intimate moment with a family, even it wasn't really her family. With a longing look that swept the entire dining room, Leia began to gather dishes. Approaching voices and the clapping of horses stopped her in alarm.

Patrick and Brant were out of their chairs and through the hall before Leia could think. Jason followed, slowly as if unsure of direction. The four women kept quiet and glanced at each other's taut, white faces. The comfortable dinner atmosphere was lost in a moment.

The tension lasted less than a minute. Pleasant voices drifted in from the front hall, both male and female. Into the dining room strode Torin, two black men and Belle Boyd.

"Torin," Martha said, wiping her chin. "How nice to see you again. You are the portrait of health. And not at all wounded." Martha and Mary Katherine began to hover around Brant's little brother, checking for injuries as if he were a child hiding a skinned knee.

"Please, ladies," he laughed, putting hands up in mock surrender. "I'm fine, just passing through heading south. I wanted to see my brother and his lovely wife."

Leia could have sworn she saw Belle smirk at that statement, but perhaps she was the one feeling jealous. Why was Belle here this time?

The other men hovered in the hallway, not taking part in the greetings. That is, until Hettie caught sight of them. She threw her arms around both men, almost simultaneously, greeting what must be long lost friends. Leia saw true feelings of happiness on her friend's face.

Mary Katherine leaned toward Leia to explain. "They were friends, years ago, with Hettie and her brother. Then these two were sold to a plantation owner in North Carolina."

Hettie didn't bother introducing her friends, but showed them into the kitchen.

Brant introduced Torin to Jason, and Leia felt the two took an instant liking to each other. She watched as they clasped hands with a hearty motion.

"So, you've known Brant for a good while?" Torin asked of Jason.

"Actually, I..."

Martha interrupted with typical timing. "Torin, Belle, are you hungry?"

"Well, something does smell heavenly," Belle said, "May I trouble you?"

"I'll get something for you," Brant offered, and left for the kitchen before anyone could argue.

Leia was surprised at his action. Did he want to follow Hettie's friends, she wondered, or did he want to take care of Belle? Mentally, Leia slapped herself for the ridiculous thought.

"Enough," she said.

"What's that dear?" Martha asked.

"Oh, we do have enough food for all of our guests," she murmured, glancing at Belle. The woman had already seated herself at the long table, chattering vivaciously to Mary Katherine about new fashions in Godey's Lady's Book.

Torin stood in the doorway, turning toward Leia. "So my brother has recovered?" he asked, smiling. He looked a bit older than the last time they'd met, but the fine lines

looked good on Torin's strong face. His hair was still brown and tousled looking, like his brother's.

"Almost fully. He may need that cane for a while, though. That thigh wound was nasty." Leia pulled Torin's elbow, spinning him so he could follow her to the hall.

"Torin," she said, settling her skirts around her on the stairs. It seemed all her important conversations took place on steps. "Thank you for not asking too many questions of Jason. You see, you won't remember him because he's actually an old friend of mine, not Brant's."

"An old beau?" Torin grinned, showing straight white teeth.

"Something like that. But it was easier to tell the McGarlands he was Brant's friend." Leia thought Torin's boyish smile would burst from his head, as if he was imagining all kinds of things.

"No problem, Sister dear," he said, leaning down to pat her hand.

"Torin, do you know why Belle's here?" Leia asked. Since Torin was being so cooperative, Leia decided to push her luck.

"No, I don't," he said, and sat beside her on the wide step. He unbuttoned his uniform jacket. "She was just there, on Carroll Manor Road, when I looked up from a sack of hard tack. I got the strangest feeling that she'd been watching me." He shook his head. "But that is ridiculous."

"No more ridiculous than me thinking she's interested in Brant."

"Perhaps we are both becoming cynical as we age, Mrs. Douglas," Torin said, looking straight ahead toward the front door. "It certainly seemed that way in Gettysburg."

"What do you mean?" Leia was startled by this change in subject and mood.

Torin turned to look at his sister-in-law, allowing her to see the deeper change in his face as well. The boyish quality she had admired had disappeared, replaced by grim lines of reality and a harsh glare in his eyes. He aged ten years in that moment.

"I'll only say our plans went awry," he said, and picked up Leia's hand. "I only want to see life now, no more death. I've seen too much death, Leah."

She gave his hand a squeeze. "I don't know what all you've seen, Torin, or what you've had to do. But I'm glad you're back and so is Brant. In fact, I wish you could meet one of my other friends," she told him, anxious to reinstate his good mood.

"Is she as pretty as you?"

"Sara's a lot prettier than I am. She has flaming red hair, smooth white skin and blue eyes like little ponds. And, she's tall! In fact, with her coloring she resembles Jason."

Torin began laughing.

"I've been trying to cheer you up, I'll admit, but what on Earth did I say that was so funny?"

"I just pictured Jason in skirts," he said, laughing again.

Leia smiled. "Maybe I'd better rephrase that."

"Tell me about Jason," Brant asked, pulling Leia close to him on the bed. He had wanted her again since this morning when she'd leaned against him so trustingly.

"There's not too much to tell, really. I've known both Jason and his fiancée, Sara, since I was six years old. Everything he said earlier is true. When I moved into Grandfather's house, I found that they lived nearby. Sara became my best friend, and Jason, whom I had dated a few times, eventually fell for her. But we're all really good friends. At least, I thought we were." Leia twirled a piece of her hair, then tickled Brant's nose with the blonde tips.

"Just friends? Did he not propose marriage to you this morning?" Brant turned Leia's chin so that she faced him, met his eyes.

"Well, in a way. You see, he found out about Grandfather's will. And he thought we could marry, so I could keep the house."

"There are two possibilities. Perhaps he wants the house very much, for some reason? Or, he uses the house as an excuse to pursue you. What is Jason's occupation?" Brant released her face, and dropped his hand to her shoulder. He pushed the cotton sleeve down, and traced small circles on her white skin. Determined to understand this Jason, and be sure of his place in Leia's life, Brant was willing to slowly draw the information from his wife.

"I'm not sure about his reason, Brant, except that as I said, he was a good friend. Before I told her about his proposal, Sara wanted me to meet Jason's brother, telling me what a great pair we'd make. But I didn't want to, because there's nothing about Jason I find attractive. If I'm not attracted to Jason, it's not likely his brother ..actually, I guess I should say his half brother. ...would have much appeal either. As to his occupation, Jason is a commercial Realtor and developer. He buys and sells property. And by the way, I am attracted to you that way."

Brant relaxed a bit, letting some of the tension in his stomach go. Her direction of speech had worried him at first, but even now, she hadn't revealed everything he wanted to know. "Leia, you told me that things were very, relaxed, in your time. How relaxed were you with the men you dated?"

She sat up. "Brant, you know I was a virgin on our wedding night."

He nodded. "That's true, my widow surprised me," he said, pulling her by the shoulders back to a supine position. "You most certainly were. I am trying to ask if Jason, or anyone, touched you, on those dates." He didn't like himself for pressing the issue, but felt like he needed to know.

"Why are you asking me all this?" she questioned, turning onto her stomach and resting both palms on his chest. "Are you jealous?"

He reached for her bottom, and cupped a cheek in his hand. "Well, if he had touched you here, I might have to deal more severely with him." He rubbed circles on her lower back.

"Ohh, that feels so good," she moaned. "Brant, Jason never touched my butt or anything else for you to be concerned about."

"Good," he said, moving his lips to her neck.

"But Brant," she went on, and he tensed in anticipation of what she was about to disclose. "I wasn't completely Puritan. I mean," she spoke quickly, as if embarrassed, "the guys I dated expected so much. I tried to make them happy, without, uh, full contact."

"Because of the disease you mentioned?"

"That, yes, but there was another reason. I wanted the first man inside me to be someone I loved. And that turned out to be you."

Brant released the breath he hadn't known he was holding. Shoving his hand into her hair, he pulled her head to his lips. "God, Leia, I love you too."

Leia awoke, her skin stuck to Brant in the humid darkness. "Are you awake?" she whispered.

"I am. Are you ready again?" he asked, guiding her hand.

"Not yet. I want equal time, Brant."

"What do you mean?"

"I want to know about your first time. It clearly wasn't me," she said, trying to keep her voice even and factual.

"Are you sure you want to hear this?"

"Yes," she said, running her palm over the silky hairs on his chest. "I'm already jealous."

He chuckled, almost harshly to Leia's ears. "Don't be. It was Margaret."

Leia was surprised. "The girl you wanted to marry?" Should she feel better or worse?

"We met when I was fifteen. She was lovely, with white skin and long, dark hair that reached her waist. Her figure was very well curved. I was very young, and unknowing, and I thought her looks would make her the ideal wife."

"What happened?" Leia asked, feeling skinny and inadequate after hearing the description.

"We met at several dances and barbecues, and spent time together when we could slip away. Each event was well chaperoned, but we managed to be alone a few times. My brother, Cameron, had made it no secret that he was interested in Margaret, but she

saved her dances for me, and it was me she met behind the barn. I didn't have the discipline then that I do now, and I took her innocence that summer. I felt terrible and proposed to her. She agreed, but before I could speak with her father, Cameron had." Brant grew quiet, as is that was all that needed to be said.

"So she did prefer you?"

"I believed so. Before her wedding, I took her aside to apologize for everything. It was then she told me she'd never have married me because she had learned Cameron would inherit BlueBell Ridge. She told me she couldn't bear being penniless after the war, or having no place to live, because her parents had lost everything when the war started."

"So your brother didn't care that the two of you had been intimate?"

"I don't know. The last time I spoke with Margaret, she told me it had been a mildly amusing yet informative experience, and not to worry, she was not with child."

"Oh, Brant, how awful for you," Leia said, her jealousy melting to sympathy. How could that bitch have treated him like that? She pressed further. "And was there someone after her?"

"Leia, do you really want to hear more?"

She nodded, irritated with herself but wanting, needing, to hear.

"There were others, women one would not consider marrying, no one that meant anything to me. No one like you," he said, "No one with shining gold hair and the tiniest waist. No one that touched me like you. No one that made me care."

"I'm glad."

"I hope you are still glad, Leia, when we have no home or income except a soldier's pay. As a husband, I can't provide for you now."

"We'll be fine," she told him, rubbing his temples. She hoped she was right.

Jason joined the men outside the next morning, his borrowed clothing allowed him to fit right into the pastoral scene. The improper fit didn't hinder the man's capacity for work, Brant noticed. He was impressed by Jason's endurance as they hoisted bales of scratchy yellow hay.

"So, is everyone strong in the next century?" Brant asked, wiping sweat from his forehead.

"Only those of us who pump iron at the gym three times a week. After sitting at a desk all day, it's a requirement, for me, anyway," Jason replied, obviously pleased.

Brant was surprised not only by Jason's physical condition, but at his mental one as well. The man seemed happy, pleasant, content with his highly unusual situation. Was he the type of man to interest Leia? Lifting two bales at one time, Brant considered what Leia had revealed about her life the night before. There was no reason he should be

worrying about competition from this man, whom Leia had rejected long before, or actually after, she had married Brant.

Collecting iron implements to be put away, Brant loaded enough for three men into his arms. To be fair, he spoke to the helping Jason again.

"I do appreciate your help, Maxwell," he began, hauling his heavy load in front of Jason and then to the corner pegs. He kept one rake out to smooth the barn floor.

"How do the McGarlands manage when you're off playing soldier?"

"They have a lot of friends more than willing to help out. Hard working men, and women, who come and go often." He wanted to add 'like yourself,' but didn't want to answer any more questions.

"Well, since I can't get to the Nautilus, I have to be creative," Jason said, lifting saddles to clean under them.

Brant felt that Jason was inventing more work, doing more than what was needed in the small barn. Perhaps he wasn't certain how to take care of horse's quarters. Could things have changed so much in the future? Jason was almost as muscular as Brant himself, so hard work must still be valuable in his time, but he had mentioned sitting at a desk all day, like a teacher or banker.

"Maxwell, are you intending to attempt to return soon?" Brant paused, leaning on his rake as a substitute cane. He rubbed his healing thigh, which itched like the devil, cursing the wound for ebbing out some of his strength and stamina.

"Yes, I have business to see to."

"And Leia?"

Jason stopped working, settling on a bale. "I think if Leia was meant to have found her way home, it would have happened by now. She's told me about all the times she's tried to find the door."

Brant nodded, and resumed raking. He had many reasons to mistrust this man, but some things he said made sense.

"I just hope," Jason continued, "that I am meant to return."

I hope so, too, he thought. Brant actually began to feel concern for Jason's situation, and wondered how Leia would feel about that. As he wiped his forehead with the now soaked rag, he heard a woman scream.

Jason and Brant reacted immediately, with Jason moving faster. Brant grabbed his cane and followed him out of the barn and down toward the thick trees. The scream came again, shorter in length but just as ear-piercing. The pines threw the men into total shadow as they entered its canopy of limbs. The screams had stopped, but Brant heard a woman's voice tremble, "Oh please, oh please."

He felt the damp hairs on his neck stand up. The voice alone did not identify the woman in distress. Brant nearly matched Jason's pace as he swished through the tall grass with his cane.

Jason's face was frozen into a grimace as he took no heed of his own skin wading into the woods. Brant thought he heard the man mumble something about 'lime disease,' and made a mental note to ask him about the citrus problem later.

"Oh please, oh, no, please," drifted toward them, the words almost visible fragments of someone's fear. Brant forced his legs to move faster, noticing the rubbing of his wool trousers helped the itching wound. Thick sheets of sweat poured down his face and chest. They were getting closer, but who was it they heard pleading with an unknown evil? He wished he'd taken the time to get a rifle. The only weapon he had on him was a short knife kept in the barn. Images of drunken men with soiled gray coats flitted through Brant's mind. He imagined their slimy hands on Leia's fair skin, her white throat and face, the same men that had killed his parents, he presumed unreasonably. He wondered what Jason imagined.

Jason pushed what must have been a spider web from his face, still leading the way. He paused and looked to their right once, as if he heard something there too.

A soft, muffled crying noise was now just ahead. The men remained silent, and pushed forward.

Chapter 14

"Torin," Leia said, following him from the hallway to the front porch. "Tell me about your parents." She sat on edge of the railing, which pushed her hoops out to the front.

"My parents? Why, what has Brant told you?"

"Not much. I think it hurts him to talk about them, the grief is still too fresh. But since we are married, I'd like to know a little about his family." Leia looked at her brother-in-law, who now lounged with legs sprawled over the side of a wood chair. "You're pretty interesting, too."

A slow grin eased over his boyish face. "Aw, shucks, ma'am."

"Don't get too excited, now, I'm in love with your brother."

He passed a hand through his hair, a gesture that reminded Leia of Brant. "I know, you have this perfect girl for me back home. With red hair."

Leia smiled. If only she could get the two together; Torin and Sara. Ah well, match making wasn't easy in any century, and when two separate centuries were involved ...

"There were four boys in my family. Has Brant told you about Cory?"

She nodded. "He died young."

"Yes, too young. And you know about Cameron, the oldest, and his wife Margaret?"

"I've heard enough about those two, I believe." She arranged her skirts and began to pace the porch, her soft slippers making little swishing noises, like ballet slippers on a dance floor. "Were your parents very loving toward you boys?"

"They were the best." Torin turned in his chair so he could follow her movements with his head. "We were lucky to have them. And they were healthy, so we were all healthy, too. Cory was ruining his lungs in that coal mine, but that turned out to be the least of his problems. Cameron will be the first of us to have a son, so only time will tell."

"Or daughter."

"Possibly."

"Do you remember your grandparents?" Leia stopped at the opposite side of the porch, staring out into the leafy trees. Her own grandfather would have loved this lush forest on the property.

"No, sorry, they passed on years before we were born. How about you, Leah, any fond memories?"

She considered the question, and decided not to bore him with childhood moments.

"Quite a few, actually." Leia changed the subject. "Torin, do you think your parents would have liked me? As a daughter-in-law, I mean?"

Torin burst out laughing.

"Was that funny?" His laughter stung, but Leia kept her eyes fixed on his face.

"Not at all. I'm sorry, but I just had the most rotten thought." He stood up and stretched. "It was in poor taste. I've got work to do on my saddle," he said and started to leave the porch.

Leia grabbed his arm. "Not until you clue me in on this rotten thought, Torin Douglas." Not that she could restrain him with physical force, but she knew he was teasing by the gleam in his dark eyes.

"I was just thinking that while my parents, especially my mother, would have loved you, she would have absolutely hated Margaret. As a daughter-in-law. Can I go now?"

Leia stood on her toes to press a kiss on Torin's cheek. "Sometimes a girl needs to hear something rotten."

The snake's head was poised like a lover staring into Belle's eyes. Jason and Brant approached quietly, taking in the woman on the rock and the uncoiling copperhead before her.

"Just be still, Belle," Brant said, "it won't bite you." he moved toward the snake with Jason behind him now. He hoped it wouldn't attack, but all that screaming hadn't calmed the snake.

"We don't have a gun," he continued, "but don't worry." Inching closer, he approached the blotchy copper and gray demon. He motioned for Jason to stay back, and was pleased to see the man could take orders, either that, or Jason was afraid of snakes.

"Brant, I'm so afraid," Belle whispered, her first words since the pleading heard in the distance. "I've been through so much, things I can't even mention, and I've never been this frightened."

"I know. Just be still another moment," Brant said, stopping a yard from the snake, watching its side as it watched Belle. "Don't scream again." His own fear was trickling down his face, though he knew the copperhead was unlikely to attack.

He heard Jason breathing heavily behind him, and a glance confirmed his notion that Jason was sweating buckets to Brant's bullets. Jason nodded back at Brant's silent query, however, that he was all right and willing to help if needed.

Moving still closer, Brant scanned the immediate area for weapons of any sort. It appeared the only rock around was the one Belle sat on. He knew what he had to do. He moved closer. Two feet from the creature, Brant took his cane in both hands. With a sweep of the smooth wood, and one giant footstep forward, he whisked the slimy thing into the air. It flew into the trees without a hiss, its tail flailing behind its tiny head.

Brant swallowed, took a deep breath and held out his hand to Belle. She was frozen to the rock for a few seconds until she realized the danger was gone. Blinking, she accepted Brant's hand at last. When he had her pulled to her feet, she found her voice

again.

"Thank you," she said on a whisper as she wiped her hands on her skirt.

Jason cleared his throat. "Do you come out here often...alone, that is?"

Brant thought that was a good question. "What are you doing out here, Belle? All alone and sitting on a rock?" He watched her face contort, wondering if her brain was working that hard to find an answer. Perhaps he'd try to follow her the next time she slipped away, if he noticed. If she wanted to meet the enemy, he might never catch her maneuvering.

Belle smoothed a few frizzy, dark locks from her forehead. "Of course I don't come out here often," she snapped. "But today," she continued with a softer tone, "I just needed some time for myself. Alone. There are so many people at the McGarland's now. It's really quite busy."

"As always. They have always been hospitable, Belle. And not just to you and me."

She nodded. "You're quite right."

"Miss Boyd," Jason spoke up, offering his arm to the woman. "May I escort you back to the house? Perhaps you could use a drink?"

She took the arm and smiled up at Jason, who then turned his head back to wink at Brant.

Chuckling under his breath, Brant followed the interesting pair from the woods, Belle's skirts swaying like a clapper from her namesake.

Leia watched Jason approach the house with Belle on his arm, Brant following a pace behind. She couldn't imagine what the trio had been up to in the woods, but she decided it had not been a leisurely stroll. Giving the bean in her hand an extra hard snap, she tossed it into the pail with the others. Her perch on the back porch steps gave her a full view of the back yard and out buildings, and now the three musketeers. They approached the house smiling and talking like three good friends. She snapped the next bean with even more force.

Torin emerged from the stable, probably having heard the little group. Leia watched them, watched Jason telling a story with his hands and tapping Brant's cane. Belle looked at Brant with hero worship in her gaze. The hearty laugh that came from Torin seemed to vibrate the porch under Leia. She watched the Douglas brothers, relaxed for a moment in conversation, and her stomach gave a flutter. How handsome they were...especially Brant!

His rugged good looks had only improved as he recuperated. His sandy hair had grown more adorably shaggy, but his skin and eyes had grown clearer. Perhaps from the pain endured. When he turned from the group, he saw her on the steps and waved.

Her flutters increased and traveled lower. She watched with a growing flush as he made

his way toward her, his gait a little surer with the cane.

"Leah," he called, "I hope you're working on dinner. I'm hungry as a workhorse." He sat beside her on a step, his hip touching hers. "Very hungry, indeed," he went on, looking at her with an intense hunger that food couldn't ease.

"Me too," she said, letting whole beans slip into the pail. She couldn't take her eyes from his. The deep brown pools glimmered with excitement, and Leia wondered what had happened in the woods. She only wondered briefly, however, for the glimmers soon convinced her that they shone for her only. Leia felt her soul meld with her husband's, closing her eyes at last as his lips brushed hers. Shivers rippled through her as she realized Brant's recovery was almost complete.

"Leah!" Torin called as the stragglers arrived at her feet. "I hope my brother's told you how we've worked up our appetites." He waited in front of Leia.

Tearing her attention from Brant, she at last looked toward the others. Torin was smiling, but Jason and Belle did not look amused. Just what had gone on out there?

"Will you be staying for dinner, Belle?" Leia asked, remembering her manners. She used the sugary sweet voice she usually reserved for deadbeat appraisal customers.

"Yes, thank you. That would be nice," Belle replied, fluttering her eyelashes at Jason. She still clutched his arm, smoothing the reddish blond hairs of his forearm.

"Oh, beans," Leia muttered, drawing the gaze of her companions.

"What?" Brant asked.

"I said, um, beans, I'm preparing these beans to go with dinner." She tried to paste a matching sugary smile on her face.

Brant grinned.

Throughout the meal, Leia was sure she saw Jason flirting openly with both Belle and Mary Katherine. She didn't understand him at all. Wasn't it just a few weeks ago he had professed his love for Sara? Perhaps he was now trying to goad her into being jealous. As if that would work. Or maybe he'd figured out that he'd never have Leia or Sara, but as she realized before, she really didn't know the man that well.

At least Brant seemed immune to Belle's charms tonight. Someone must have told her once that her voice sounded like a bell, because she seemed to like the sound of her own laugh. Leia hadn't forgot that night she'd overheard them in the alcove. Even though she knew Brant had not been interested, it hadn't stopped Belle from trying to...seduce him?

She watched Mary Katherine touch Jason's arm after he told a story of some sort. What kind of story could he tell a girl from 1863? She prayed he wouldn't plunge her into any sort of scandal. How could she get him back to the future where he belonged? Or where she belonged, for that matter? Maybe they could find the portal together, and then should she go with him? She loved Brant. Would love to stay married to him and have

his children. She closed her eyes and pictured herself nursing his baby, Brant watching, proud to be a father. He had no prospects for a career or a home, though, and if she stayed in this time, neither did she.

Hettie began to clear dishes from the table, and Leia moved to help her. A crystal tumbler nearly crashed to the floor as Leia tried to balance dishes and dilemmas. Surely as strong and smart as Brant was he could find work after the war. Hadn't she read about the workers needed for reconstruction? Even more surely, the McGarlands were going to need help right here getting the farm back in working order. Unfortunately, Brant's pride might not accept that solution.

"Jason, could I speak with you a moment? Outside?" Leia asked as he finished his meal, joining the clean plate club.

"Certainly," he said, rising and folding his white napkin.

"I'll follow you," he added, nearing her at the door. She saw Brant throw Jason a cold look, but she left the room anyway. Some things just needed to be said.

They turned left from the dining room and went straight out through the front door.

"We need to talk," Leia began, settling herself on the porch railing. She held onto a post, and laid her head against the wood also for support.

"You're right," he agreed, hopping onto the railing beside her. "Do these people have all of their conversations on porches?"

She smiled. "Well, it's private." The evening air had cooled, and a drying breeze blew across the front of the house, dragging the scent of fragrant, ripe honeysuckle with it.

"Don't you miss the privacy of your own home and time, Leia?" Jason's voice grew serious. The hum of summer crickets began beyond the porch.

"God, yes! Sometimes I just about go nuts with so many people around all the time."

"Then why are you still here?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Not really, unless you mean you haven't been able to get back."

Leia began swinging her feet back and forth, kicking playfully at lightening bugs.

"Remember when we used to catch them?" she asked, closing her eyes to see the memory.

"Yeah. We had a lot of fun as kids."

"And you, Jason Maxwell, you pulled them apart and made light rings out of their little bodies." She sat up straight, her eyes open and accusing.

"But I always gave the rings to Sara and you," he said softly.

"I know you did. But you still had to hurt the poor, innocent bugs. You had to own them,

control them."

"We're not talking about lightening bugs anymore, are we?"

"I don't think so."

He stood, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "I intend to go back, Leia."

She nodded. "I know. I think you're supposed to go back. Maybe I'm not. After all, I haven't found the way back. And believe me, I've tried."

He swatted at mosquitoes. "Damn bugs."

"Jason, listen to me. I love Brant. If it's possible, I'm going to stay here with him. I want you to take care of the house, but don't sell it. Perhaps if I'm gone ten years, you could sell it."

"But it's being auctioned off on the first of the month. I can't stop it. You know that." He let his arms drop to his sides and walked over to her.

"But I'm married! I made the deadline." Leia let her voice trail off, aware of how silly her statement was. No one in the twentieth century knew she was married.

He stood directly in front of her, looking into her eyes. He stared, not mentioning the obvious facts about the situation. There was no need for him to speak.

A single tear squeezed past Leia's resolve. Was there no way for her to have her love and her home? With a tired glance around the front yard, she noted that none of the fireflies were lighting up. The night was dark.

Leia realized they had been outside longer than they should have when they came in to see Torin disappearing through the cellar door. She caught sight of Torin's blue coat from the corner of her eye. Without a word, Jason followed him.

"Where are they going?" she asked, not to anyone in particular.

"Oh, Torin's hunting for brandy," Mary Katherine said. "Patrick's teased the men with a hidden bottle somewhere." She hauled an armload of dishes through the kitchen door.

"Let's help them," Belle suggested, her voice tinged with excitement.

Leia nodded and followed Belle through the door. Martha and Patrick had just retired to the front porch to take advantage of the cool air, passing Leia and Jason on the way in, so only she, Belle and Brant remained.

"Brant, are you coming?" Leia asked, pausing at the top of the dark staircase.

He reached for his cane. "Yes," he said, but his voice was low and raw.

Leia saw his face had a closed expression, as if he was hurt. Perhaps he was upset that she'd been outside, alone, with Jason. She also knew he feared she'd disappear from his life through the portal. He followed her, though, like a dutiful husband, closing the cellar door behind them.

The brandy-seekers were plunged into darkness, their path lit only by Torin's whale-oil lamp. Belle seemed nervous, clicking her teeth, still clutching Jason's arm.

Torin looked up from his position at the wine rack. "You all needn't come down. I can find it. Brant, take your wife upstairs, for heaven's sake. Jason, you're a guest, take Belle back to the parlor."

"And let you have first crack at Patrick's special brandy? No way, Jose," Jason said, ignorant of the strange looks his words received in the dark.

Leia held her breath as Torin checked many of the slots still holding bottles. Sure enough, he pulled out the bottle from the corner spot where Leia had hidden her message. A faint gasp escaped her lips, despite her efforts.

"What's wrong, Leah?" Torin asked, examining an empty bottle.

Leia relaxed and touched Brant's arm. She was relieved the message was gone, but who had found it? Brant must have read her thoughts, perceptively covering her hand with his.

"Nothing. I'm fine," she said. Did someone in the future now have her message? Martin? Sara? Someone trying to buy her home? With a sigh, Leia started to turn, but her eyes caught a glimpse of something light colored in another bottle. After grabbing the wine bottle, she turned and faced what she believed was the opposite end of the basement, away from the stairs. She saw a horizontal line of light, about three feet wide. Then, about six feet below it, another line appeared in the dark, making a giant equals sign. Though faintly visible, to her, it was neon.

She tugged on Brant's sleeve, her stomach tightening in fear. "Look, Brant," she urged, turning him toward the image. The entire group turned, anxious to see something unique. To her chagrin, Torin and Jason moved toward the light.

On impulse, Leia looked back over her shoulder to where she thought the staircase should be. Of course, she was wrong. There was only one way to go. She, Belle and Brant followed the others toward the steps. Jason and Torin had climbed them; Torin also clutching a bottle of something. Their footsteps thudded on the wooden steps, echoing softly from the openness. When he yanked open the cellar door with his free hand, something electrical settled around Leia and she gasped again. Had anyone else felt it?

"Torin, wait!" she called, wanting, needing to stop them. Suddenly it felt imperative that she stop them. The force hovering in the air challenged them to change history, to disturb the time line, but it was temptation, and who knew if the portal was good or evil? She watched the two men move, almost in slow motion, but they were through the doorway too quickly. Light from the other side was flickering, beckoning, like a scene from a horror movie. Leia was frozen on the bottom step, clutching the railing in one hand and pushing against Brant's chest with the other.

The door slammed closed behind Jason, shaking the stairs and railing under Leia's damp palm. She could smell the musty air encircling them. The charge dissipated.

"Did you feel that?" she whispered to Brant.

He nodded, squeezing her hand.

"Wait for me." Belle laughed, as if they were playing a game, but Leia knew better. The lighted outline faded, the cellar blackened. When Belle, acting like a team mate left behind, pulled on the closed door, she found it locked.

Chapter 15

"I don't know where my boyfriend is," Sara said, sighing in exasperation. "He's off somewhere, probably working on some new deal, and the owner of the house is still missing. And even when she returns, the house may not be auctioned off at all. So please, consider this project offer withdrawn."

Smiling, Sara pulled two scraps of paper from her purse. One contained a cryptic message, presumably from Leia. She'd found it in the cellar, in a wine bottle, of all places. The other held the phone number of the charity that had offered Jason property for development. She dialed the number in Pennsylvania on Leia's rotary phone, pulling her finger from each number's spot sharply, as if pricked. A sense of purpose filled her. She knew she was doing something special for her friend.

"Hi, this is Sara Smith. May I speak with Sister Delia?" She listened to the receptionist. "Then may I leave a message? Okay, please tell Sister that Jason Maxwell agrees to her offer for the Pennsylvania property, including the stipulations about profit donations and volunteer work."

She hung up, feeling more cheered than she had in weeks. She straightened the kitchen and stuffed the paper back into her purse. Not only had she helped Leia, but dozens of children would also benefit from some of the money Jason would make developing the Church's property. And wouldn't Jason actually enjoy spending some time with the kids on weekends? Any minute, a half-dozen grown kids, male war re-enactors, would be assembled on the front porch for photos. Sara looked forward to seeing them decked out in her uniforms they would model in the show. Now that she'd seen to Jason's business, she could worry about her own.

"Oh, hi there. Why didn't you leave with the others? You're going to be late for dress rehearsal at the auditorium," Sara said to the young man she found in Leia's hallway, stopping in mid-motion, her car keys dropping to her side with a jingle. He was absolutely gorgeous, she thought, and wondered how she had overlooked him in the group photo. The man was staring at her with unabashed awe, his brown eyes wide, sensual mouth gaping.

A blur of red hair passed through the hall as Jason emerged from the kitchen. He paused in front of Sara. "Hey, I found her."

"Where have you been?" she demanded, temporarily forgetting the other man.

"Sara, I'm trying to tell you. I found Leia."

"What?"

"The bitch somehow got herself married...to his brother," Jason said, pointing a finger at the uniformed stranger.

"Torin Douglas, ma'am," he said, smiling.

"Well, where is she?" Sara looked from one man to the other, confused and irritated. Was this some sort of game? Leia was married?

Jason spoke slowly, as if he dreaded each word. "From what I have seen, your friend is right here in this house...but in 1863. It's some kind of time warp. Her husband's a Union soldier, along with his brother here."

Jason and Sara turned to look at Torin, who was smiling. Sara looked closer at his uniform. Not only had she not worked on it, the fabric was dirtier and more coarse than anything she had done for the show. The buttons were thicker, different.

"And what year is this?" Torin asked in a pleasant voice.

Sara couldn't take her eyes off of him. "You really don't know?" she asked, tapping her keys against her thigh.

"Not only do I not know, but I've never seen any woman with hair as red as yours, like flames licking around, no, dancing around, your face," he said, taking a step toward her.

Sara wondered if he meant to touch her cheek and self-consciously pushed a few strands of hair behind her ears. She saw Jason stiffen, slightly, from the corner of her eye, and heard him mumble something unpleasant. "It's okay," she whispered. Why didn't Jason get jealous and say something? Didn't he care about her? Silly question, she thought. He wanted Leia now. I've got to get out of here.

"What's your name?" Torin asked.

"Sara. Miss Sara Smith." She caught Jason's frown, but didn't care. This man, whoever he was, this incredibly boyish, handsome man was staring at her in apparent fascination...and he liked red hair. Sara was torn between talking with this man and learning about Leia from Jason.

She tilted her head. "Are you trying to tell me that you're from the past?" she asked, unknowingly making her decision.

"Well," Torin said, looking around the hallway adorned with photos of modern houses in plastic frames, lit by electric bulbs. "I am, if this is the future."

After Jason stomped out to his office, Sara wondered if he remembered how he was dressed. It would do him good, she thought, to have to explain his Civil War attire to a bunch of stuffy old Realtors.

Torin explored the world of television in the parlor, and that miracle invention known as the remote control. She enjoyed watching him discover technology, but right now she couldn't spare the time. Dress rehearsal was due to start in ten minutes, and she was at least twenty minutes away.

Despite Jason's testimony and the evidence of Leia's note, Sara couldn't quite accept that this man had materialized from the past, but, she did like his enthusiasm and old-fashioned charm.

When she jingled her car keys, he looked up at her from a rerun of Married, With Children.

"I'm sorry, am I delaying you?"

Sara winced as Bud Bundy pleaded with God for a real woman with bigger breasts.

"Well, I do have to get to town. I'm directing a show, actually, we're modeling Civil War fashions." She blushed. How stupid that sounded when spoken to Torin. She moved further into the room, reaching for the remote.

"Don't be embarrassed," he said, reaching for the black controller first and clicking the set off. "I must admit, you look lovely with a glowing blush...and you do have great hooters."

Definitely blushing by this time, Sara turned and spied the shelf where she had last seen one of Leia's glass pieces. Although the set had been missing for weeks, there were now five items on the shelf, as if waiting to be cleaned and put on display in the cabinet. Had Jason brought them back with him? She moved to the shelf, touching the champagne glass, flask, dish and candlesticks. The blue bottle, unique in its squatty shape, was her favorite. Shaking her head, Sara turned back to her guest.

"Are you admiring those pieces?" he asked.

Sara nodded. "Yes. I've never seen them before."

"I have seen the bottle before. Brant found it, and gave it to his wife. Seems he broke a good many pieces she had collected, and wanted to make amends. I think they found the other items together. They're hard to find, you know. The war's destroyed much of the artistic things, especially delicate things such as glass. Or humans." A sad note pierced his voice.

Sara struggled with the idea that these things were items Leia had acquired in the previous century. "I'll figure this out later. Torin, would you like to come with me? I mean, you'd fit right in with the others in costume. And we could talk some more in the car."

"Car?" He was interested.

"Like a carriage, you know, but no horses. A machine makes it go."

"Does it have remote control?" He was definitely male.

"No, I have to drive it," she said, brightening. This could be fun. "Let's go, Torin, we have a show to do."

Belle had been unnerved. Leia found herself pleased at the thought, happy that the woman had left last night. Not that they all hadn't been freaked out. Jason and Torin were nowhere to be found...nowhere in 1863, that is. For some reason, they had been allowed to leave through the portal. Who was the determiner? God? Fate? Or magic?

Another thought crossed her mind...Since Jason had most likely made it forward in time, would he tell Mr. Sanders that she was married? Leia wanted to think he would, but in her heart, she knew she was kidding herself. Jason, despite his kind words to her, would try to take control of the house. She would have to accept the fact that, unless she could return to the twentieth century within the next three days, her home would be lost. Fat chance!

"Are you sorry that he's gone?" Brant had come outside without a sound, joining her without her noticing. She smiled at his striking face, but then his question hit her as if she'd been struck.

"Do you mean Jason?" How could he not? She stroked the head of the mutt at her feet, a scruffy, dirty dog that had wandered up during the night. "Of course not."

"Who's your friend?" Brant asked, bending down to scratch the animal's head.

"Oh, just a stray, like me. Isn't he cute?" Leia continued to sift the dog's hair with her fingers, trying to smooth out rough tangles. "I used to see a lot of dogs in houses I appraised. Just like people, some were mean, some were nice. But this one seems so alone. And such a mess! I think I'll call him Scruffy."

Brant smiled. "I'm sure Hettie will be thrilled with your guest. Do you think he'll stay here long?"

"Never can tell. He may be from the future," she said, trying for a deeper response from her husband. She was tired of this small talk, and wanted to discuss what had happened last night.

"Leia."

"No."

"Pardon me?"

"No, I won't miss Jason one bit. After our conversation last night, I realized he never was really interested in Sara or me, not unless he controlled us and our possessions. So I don't have to feel bad about hurting him anymore." She sighed. "I'm sorry that Torin's gone, though."

"He'll be fine."

"I know. In fact, I have a feeling he will find what he's looking for in the future." Belle had not understood, but Brant and Leia knew where Torin had gone. They had shuffled back to the center of the basement last night, taking baby steps in the dark. At last they had found their way, connected like an inch worm, to the staircase they needed, the staircase back to 1863.

"You could have gone with them," he said, a quiet offering.

"No, I don't think so. Because I'd have to be really sure I wanted to go, and how could I

be? I think my life's here now. My place is with my husband, whom I happen to be in love with. I have Mary Katherine, who's become a good friend, and there's Hettie's reading lessons, and now there's Scruffy."

The dog barked his agreement, turning soulful eyes to Brant.

"Well, you've made a place for yourself here. Now, if your husband just had a place in the world," he said and turned away. Leaning more heavily on his cane than usual, he moved toward the stable.

Leia took her few free moments to crack the wine bottle she had found in the cellar, and delicately remove its paper contents. Her fingers tingled with anticipation. Could this be a message from Martin or Sara? Had someone found her note, or had she just discovered someone else's old and faded note? The paper was yellow and dry in her fingers.

She uncurled and separated three cracking pieces, scanning to the bottom of the top paper for a signature. The script was tiny, flowery. It was from Sara!

Dear Leia,

I found your message, brief as it was, and showed it to Martin. We are so relieved you are safe. Martin was calm the whole time, and he said he could get messages back to you, if I trusted that you are actually in the past. He seems to know what's going on, so I'm believing, but shocked. Imagine time-travel!

Did something happen to your bottles in the past? I mean, did you change something? They disappeared from the house. I'm sorry I got mad at you about Jason's proposal. I've been avoiding him lately...he's more concerned with his new mall project than me. But I guess you knew that before I did. Unfortunately, he's camped out at your house most of the time now.

I searched the cellar for a clue to what happened to you, and did find your driver's license. Why on earth was it buried there? Of course, I assumed you were in serious trouble, abducted or something. I wanted to go to Mr. Sanders and the police right away, but Jason convinced me to wait, that it would be dangerous for you. I didn't know what to do and you weren't around to ask! I miss you so much, I love you, and again I'm sorry for not believing you about Jason.

I'm almost finished with school...I had to go to Harper's Ferry to find another dress like the one you disappeared in. Please come home soon.

Love,

Sara PS Martin can't stand Jason hanging around, and it's really funny to watch them together. Martin misses you, too.

Sara unrolled the second page, a photo copy of a letter.

Dear Mrs. Callaway,

Since Leia has not returned, I have not retrieved the 1863 dress. We've notified the police, but even if we locate her soon, there's no telling what condition the dress will be in. I've found a substitute and am driving out tomorrow to obtain it.

As I mentioned when you called, Leia may or may not be able to actually model in the show. As the McGarland family is sponsoring the event, their name will remain on the program. I will take Leia's place so there are no holes in the line-up. I realize my entire semester grade is riding on the show, and can guarantee an interesting revue. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

Sara Smith

With a sigh of regret for the trouble she was causing her friend, she read the last note.

Dear Leia,

The police think I'm crazy and suggested I see a psychic. Ha! I did that a long time ago, with girls from school. I've never held much stock in their abilities, but then again, I've never experienced time-travel, either. It's all confusing. A bit of bad news: I overheard my now former fiancée making plans for your house. He's determined to marry you or outbid everyone at Sander's auction on the first. He's got actors dressed as Civil War soldiers walking around to promote his theme mall. I don't know how to handle him. Your lawyers are now convinced you're going to marry him by the deadline. If you can, send a note telling me what to do.

Sara

That's just great, Leia thought, Sara wants me to tell her what to do. Like I know. She couldn't get home, was not even sure she really wanted to. The events going on in the twentieth century didn't seem that important anymore, but she did want to know if Jason and Torin had turned up there. The notes weren't dated. Martin had probably advised Sara not to risk dating anything going back in time. Leia ripped the notes into tiny shreds.

"Your pie is always excellent, Sarny," Leia told her. Standing side by side in the kitchen, the women made a good clean-up team. Brant was pleased that Martha had given Hettie the night to herself, because the woman had looked overly tired and tense, and Sarny's meals were almost as good as Hettie's.

Brant's mood had improved since earlier in the afternoon. A bit of self-pity had crept over him, and he didn't like Leia to see that. Not that she hadn't felt her own share of self-pity over the past few weeks. It was just not the most attractive quality in either of them, and it didn't solve any problems.

"Mista Brant, can I ask you a question?" Sarny was suddenly speaking to him. A damp

towel over one shoulder, and flour sprinkled liberally on her dress, Sarny was a picture of domestic help.

"Of course. What is it?" His curiosity was peaked, because Sarny rarely spoke to the men in the house.

"What happened to John and Elijah?"

"Who?"

"The other slaves that came in with Mista Torin the other evenin'. They didn't ask for food, or say goodbye, or anythin'. They wasn't caught, or anything bad?" Her little face was grim, and Brant imagined the girl feared the worst for her friends.

Brant glanced at Leia, who looked back with a blank expression on her lovely face. How should he answer? She gave no clue.

"They said to tell you goodbye, Sarny, and to Hettie as well. They were in a great hurry, and no, they didn't get caught." It was the best he could tell her, and he hoped that it would satisfy her.

It did. She nodded and turned back to the counter.

"Brant," Leia said, finally finding her voice. "Let's take a walk."

He wondered if she just wanted to talk to him alone, or if she really wanted to walk. Walking, he had observed, must be very popular in the future. Brant followed Leia through the front hall, and out the door. The evening air hit him in the face, so heavy with humidity it was almost visible.

Leia took his hand, pulling him off the porch and into the yard. He realized she was leading him to the garden, and his heart began to beat faster. The wet grass lapped at his ankles, and Brant remembered a night when the wet grass had lapped at their entwined bodies. A smile crept over his lips.

When they reached the cherub fountain, Leia whirled to face him. She threw her arms around his neck, urging him to bow his head to hers. Brant lowered his lips to hers, eager for the intense touch. His body began its familiar contractions, the ache for her built quickly.

Tossing the cane to the ground, Brant pressed his hardness against Leia's thigh. She kissed him harder, slipping her tongue further into his mouth, amazing him with its dexterity.

"Thank you," she mumbled, pulling back just enough to speak.

"Don't thank me yet, wife," he replied, filling his hands with her bottom. She felt so good in his hands, firm but still pliable, as if he could mold her into anything.

"I mean for John and Elijah," she said, moving her arms lower to wrap around his waist. "I think," she went on, burying her face in the wool covering his chest, "that you are the

bravest man I've ever met. And you know what else?"

Brant only mumbled an incoherent response, so involved was he with her hips. The slender thighs had grown just a little since her arrival, and he was pleased. In fact, her slim figure had swollen just a little, all over. She had needed a little more substance to her figure.

"It's been so long," he said at last, "tell me what else, Leia." He tried to make himself concentrate.

"I think," she said slowly, pulling her head back so she could make eye contact, "that you helped Hettie's brother escape."

"And?"

"Any my grandfather's accounting partner in the future, Martin, is Hettie's brother." She smiled, obviously pleased with both herself and him.

"Come closer," he demanded, neither confirming nor denying the statement. He pressed her small body against his own, wincing only slightly as she pushed on his thigh.

"Brant, your leg!" she protested, having seen his face.

He said nothing, burying his face in the top of her head. Her hair smelled like roses and rainwater, the perfume stirring his senses further. One hand reached for the small of her back, the other to cup her breast. It had been so long, he wanted her more than he even remembered, the scent of her hair was a powerful intoxicant. Stoically, Brant ignored the protests from his healing wound. So many men had been less fortunate than he, and would never again make love to their wives. A sore, yet healing, leg was nothing.

She looked up at him, her eyes glassy but reflecting deep, smoldering emotions. Her lips were puffed from kissing. She looked beautiful to him. He knew his wife was beautiful...and she had chosen to stay, when possibly she could have made it through the door to the future, her home. Even more amazing, she had stayed despite his lack of land holdings or wealth. He pulled her body tightly against his.

"Brant, I can't breathe," she said, her voice muffled by his chest.

He released her immediately. "I'm sorry." His smile rose again. "Let's go inside. I think this soldier has healed long enough, and I don't want Patrick to catch us creating a public display."

Leia giggled, bending down to retrieve his cane. "You're right...and you sounded just like him." She straightened her clothing and then stopped short when she looked at him.

"Are you okay?" she asked, reaching to touch his cheek with a gentle caress.

He hadn't realized he was staring so directly at her, almost unblinking. His heart was beating fast, pounding actually. Could she really care about him? Reaching to take her hand, Brant said, "Yes, I may finally be, OK."

"Leia," Brant began, carrying a basket of wet clothes from the tub. "Before we were married, you asked me about BlueBell Ridge. Do you remember?" Balancing the basket against one hip, he managed it easily, supported by the cane. Leia and Hettie followed, though Leia hoped the other woman wasn't watching his backside as closely as she was.

"I remember. I'm an appraiser, and I like to know what houses look like. It's what I do for a living," she said when Hettie had moved away.

"What for? I mean, what did you look for?"

"Houses are extremely expensive in the future. People have to get loans.. mortgages, in order to buy them."

"That happens now," he said, handing her a damp, silky blouse for hanging.

"True. But a lot more of the population can afford homes. Blacks, whites, Indians, whoever. It really depends on how much income they earn and if they pay their bills on time. My job is to make sure the property is worth what the bank thinks it is."

"Why is that important?" He handed her another item, still dripping.

"In case someone stops making their mortgage payments. The bank might have to try and sell the house again."

"I see. Does this happen often?"

She could tell by his expression that he pictured the entire business as some unethical practice, with a cartoon villain harassing the family for the bag of mortgage money.

"No," she said, "I help the home buyers, too, you know. They want to be sure they're getting a fair price."

He nodded. "Have you seen people lose their homes, Leia?" His eyes met hers over a pair of wet trousers.

"No, never."

"Well I have."

She waited for more, but no further explanations came. He simply turned, picked up the empty basket, and headed back to the house.

He'd seen others lose more than their homes., their dignity, their freedom, their very lives. He couldn't expect Leia to understand all of that...she had not experienced it first hand. At least she had a good heart, and could help him with his mission. In fact, he respected her all the more for helping him when she had not lived with the terrors of slavery. What would it be like to live in a slave-free world? That's why he and his family were fighting, why they'd sacrificed so much. He could almost resent Leia and her world, being safe and comfortable in a country he had helped build, but he couldn't hold it against her personally. She was too sweet and eager to do what was right...like helping Hettie with the laundry.

Brant watched her from the porch, where he paused by the back door. A wall of pines framed the picture of her hanging soggy garments on a rope stretched between trees. She had asked Patrick to craft tiny wooden pieces to keep the clothes on the rough rope. She'd even sketched how they should look.

Her gown was thoroughly soaked with the sweat of her efforts. The bodice clung as if she'd skipped the corset again. He knew if he peered under her skirts the pantalets would be missing as well. Not that he blamed her, after she had explained how little clothing she wore in her time. A smile stole onto his face as he pictured her shapely legs covered only by tiny, short pants. Next he imagined the bikinis she had described, and his smile became a grin he could feel stretching his skin.

As if she felt his gaze, Leia turned suddenly and smiled at him, squinting. He nodded and then went into the house, amazed at the effect she had on him, even from a distance. Brant held the basket in front of his mid-section until he got to his room.

Leia smiled at Hettie, thanking her quietly for delivering another of Sara's messages. Hettie smiled back, without asking questions, and left Leia to the privacy of her room.

Dear Leia,

I did it! I went to see a psychic reader. Sister Maura, remember, from downtown Baltimore? . There were candles and incense in the dark room, just as you'd expect. Right off Maura began, telling me I was worried about a close friend. She held my hands, made me close my eyes and imagine your face. She knew you were pretty, and blonde. She told me you felt trapped, and that you'd seen a psychic too. She knew what you were wearing the night you disappeared. Don't worry, Sister Maura said you were not in much danger, as long as you were careful, but that someone you cared for was. The weirdest part was...she told me to look for messages from the past, perhaps from the railroad. Isn't that wild? That was about it. Can you believe it?

Sara

Leia,

As you can imagine, Jason harassed me about Sister Maura. So, of course, I responded maturely that he was mad that you wouldn't marry him. And the conversation got nasty after that. Can you believe he offered to rent me store space in his new mall, since I'm now a design-school graduate? (Well, after next week's show) Anything for a buck, that Jason.

On the plus side, he has started talking with a local school that's selling some property. An alternate site, he says. They want the land used for anything historically devoted to the Civil War; even a mall. Don't worry too much, Martin and I are keeping our ears and eyes open. I have a few plans for dealing with Jason, in case you can't get back in time.

Miss you.

Sara

"Who is Spot?" Hettie asked, "And why does he run so much?"

Leia sighed, looking down at her handwritten primer. She had used the simple sentences she remembered from childhood to create practice for her friend. Run Spot, run. See Spot run. Jane runs with Spot.

"Spot's the dog. He looks just like Scruffy."

Hettie snorted. "Well, let's keep Spot and Scruffy out of my clean kitchen."

Perhaps I should have studied teaching in college, instead of business. She had to admit she had no clue as to proper teaching methods for reading. Simply having good reading skills herself did not help. At least she'd been successful with the alphabet and a few simple words. An idea grabbed her right before she would have given up.

"Hettie! Let's do something totally different. Instead of you trying to read about make-believe people, let's work on things you're familiar with." She tore pieces of rough paper into small tags. On each, she wrote a word representing a household item.

"We'll do it this way; lamp, table, kitchen, chair, clock, candle." She looked at Hettie, who finally wore an expression reflecting interest and intelligence. Leia placed tags in front of or on the appropriate items.

"And flowers," Hettie added, pointing to a vase of gold-petaled, daisy-like blooms. Their black centers told Leia exactly what variety they were.

"Why, they're black-eyed Susans," she exclaimed, moving closer. "Our state flower."

"What do you mean? We have many types of flowers," Hettie said, shaking her head as if Leia was daft.

Leia had never seen a vase full of the black-eyed beauties, however, since it was illegal to pick them growing wild as they did in Maryland. Once, she had trampled a small patch of them by accident, backing up, trying to find the best angle to photograph a multi-level contemporary house. She hadn't noticed the flowers until they were flat and broken.

Leia spelled out f-l-o-w-e-r on a scrap of paper, adding it to the word collection. Mary Katherine entered the kitchen then, her face expressing her usual cheerful demeanor.

"We have a visitor," she announced. "An important one. General Diamond."

Leia looked up. "Brant's commander?" Her skin prickled at the thought of Diamond coming to collect her husband.

"Yes, isn't it exciting? Especially after hearing Torin's description of the Gettysburg battles. The General was so courageous. Brilliant, really. Oh, I wish Torin was still here." Mary Katherine was pacing the kitchen as she spoke, touching the small off-white tags.

"Me too," Leia agreed, "Then he could be coerced into telling the battle tales yet again."

She smiled.

"What a wonderful idea, Leah! You should be teaching children." Mary Katherine liked the tags.

"Where is the General?"

"Out front, speaking with Patrick."

"Is he alone, Mary Katherine?"

"I believe so. Martha said to set one extra place for dinner. And I'm on my way to make ready the spare room for him, as he's requested a place for a few nights."

"Requested?"

"Well, demanded, but in a pleasant sort of way. Where is Brant? I'm sure he'll want to know the General's here."

Leia shook her head. "I'm not sure where he is at the moment. But he'll be back for dinner, no doubt." She took the last sheet of paper and wrote out their names for Hettie: Leah, Hettie, Mary Katherine, Martha, Patrick, Scruffy and Brant.

"Last thing for today, Hettie. Proper names."

Hettie nodded and bent her dark head toward the letters. She was a good student since she'd overcome her initial resistance.

Leia caught Mary Katherine's gaze over Hettie's head, and they smiled at each other. Mary Katherine's warmth radiated into the room as if she were an oven.

"Leah, please come upstairs with me for a moment. Help me select a dress for dinner." Her pretty face was blushing a light rose.

Leia rose from the table, looking at her cousin quizzically. Hettie slipped a sheet of paper into Leia's apron before she left the room.

"After all, General Diamond's a single man, is he not?"

Startled by Mary Katherine's bold statement, Leia mutely followed her from the room.

"You surprise me," she said, as they climbed the wide front staircase.

"Oh?"

"When I first arrived here, you acted timid as a church mouse. And since the Bauer's dinner party, you've seemed, well, more outgoing." They entered Mary Katherine's room, closing the door behind them. Leia loved the sunny yellow silk that covered her windows and bed, and every time she entered the room the color cheered her.

Mary Katherine pulled open the doors of her wooden armoire. "That's because of you, I believe."

Leia groaned inwardly, having feared as much. "Well, just don't tell Aunt Martha that. She and Patrick already think I'm a brazen hussy."

Mary Katherine smiled, but turned her attention back to the wardrobe. Leia wondered if that meant she also thought Leah was brazen. She decided to ask.

"Do you think I'm a hussy?" She whispered the question.

"I think," Mary Katherine said slowly, equally quiet, "that you're a very lucky, married woman. I think you're my cousin and I love you. And I think, as I have since you arrived, that you're very different. ..A city girl, with bolder thoughts and beliefs."

Leia didn't respond, just looked at Mary Katherine.

"I think that I want to be more like you. I'm just a simple country girl, but I need to try and meet someone. I'd like a home of my own, a family with children. Of course, even if I marry we could live here. I'll inherit this house when Patrick passes on, if I'm married before I turn twenty-five. That's a nice dowry, don't you think?"

"Damn right," Leia replied, taken aback by Mary Katherine's blunt admission. "Yes, dear cousin, you've come a long way, baby." She smoothed tiny wrinkles from the blue dress Mary Katherine had selected. Then she made a snap decision.

"This won't do," she told her, going to the closet herself. Leia shuffled through the modest selection, pulling out the last gown she found. Would she be changing the future, perhaps the future of the house itself, to help Mary Katherine find a husband? Shaking off the thought like she would a fly on her arm, Leia handed the other woman her choice.

"Wear this," she told her. The dress was long and black, and cut nearly down to the navel.

"Do you think it's proper?" Mary Katherine asked, breathlessly intimidated. But her excitement glowed on her cheeks, growing rosier as she held the dress up to her chest. Her dainty hand trembled, rippling the fabric.

"Of course not. That's why it's perfect."

Leia could not have hoped for a more satisfying reaction from the General. He rose immediately upon her and Mary Katherine's entrance to the dining room, his eyes greedily taking in Mary Katherine's face and plunging neckline.

"Good evening, ladies," he mumbled, dabbing at his mouth with a napkin. Noticing no one else had risen, he sat down casually. The ladies took their places.

Leia wondered if the man was trying to be stoic, the kind who wasn't prone to showing emotion. His jaw was wide, a very stern housing for his very nice, straight teeth. Nondescript brown hair hovered around his head, where his dark eyes almost danced in the dim room light.

"We were just discussing the fact," Brant said, "that my General was the man to fire the first shot for the Union at Fort Sumter."

"My goodness," Mary Katherine said, buttering a slippery roll.

But Leia couldn't feign being impressed. Starting war was wrong, killing was wrong. Nothing to be proud of. "Doesn't that bother you now, sir?"

Patrick choked on a mouthful of something, coughing into his napkin. Martha characteristically wrung her hands over her plate. Brant reached over to lay his hand over his wife's.

"In aiming the first gun fired against the rebellion, I had no feeling of self-reproach, for I fully believed that the contest was inevitable and was not of our seeking," Diamond replied, in a quiet, even voice. Then he smiled. "Well, those aren't actually my words. But I agree."

"So you did what you had to do?" Leia questioned him further, as the sounds of dining began again. She knew every human being found himself in that position sooner or later, of putting duty before personal feeling. Obviously the General had put thought into his answer, probably having prepared and given the same statement before.

"So it seems," Diamond said, thoughtfully touching one of his shoulder epaulets. "We all did." Leia's gaze followed the man's hands up the double-breasted jacket, past silver buttons and a white collar. very much like Brant's uniform, though newer-looking and decorated with a brilliant, blood red sash.

"Where are you from, General?" Mary Katherine asked, blessedly changing the subject with the grace of a gently bred lady.

"New York, originally. I went to school in Cooperstown."

Lightweight chatter continued as the meal progressed, and Leia paid scant attention. It had occurred to her that she was sharing a meal with a very real, very important figure from American history. What would happen if she were to cause alterations in the normal progression of events? She remembered a story she'd read in junior high about a man who'd traveled back to prehistoric times. The only change he'd made was to accidentally crush a tiny butterfly under his heel. However, when he returned to his present time everything around him had changed, from lifestyles to the President. Ray Bradbury's story had stayed with Leia for years, as a point to ponder, not as something she'd find herself embroiled in.

Brant's hand reached for her knee under the table, drawing Leia's attention back to dinner. She smiled at him, hoping her love would be reflected in her eyes. The feeling of his large, warm hand always sent ripples through her entire body.

Leia reached to brush a crumb from his upper lip, caressing it in the process. When her index finger lingered on the full lip, Martha cleared her throat. Leia dropped her hand and eyes to her lap. After a proper lapse of time, she raised her head to see the General staring at her with cold, unblinking eyes. For just a second, they seemed to shoot icy arrows at her.

Catching her breath in a small gasp, Leia watched Diamond's gaze soften, but not warm. Leia wondered if she had imagined the arrows, hoped she had imagined the cold look. Perhaps he was concerned that a wife would take Brant from his military career. She made a mental note to ask Brant about it later.

After helping Hettie clear the table, Leia went to join the men in the library. She entered to a conversation involving sports other than battle. Baseball was the chosen topic.

"And you got them all to run around your diamond, eh?" Patrick was asking, chuckling. He sipped at a small brandy snifter. "I tried to organized such games, years ago, you see. Requires great cooperation."

"Yes sir," Diamond replied, drinking his own brandy. "Mrs. Douglas," he added, to acknowledge Leia's presence in the doorway.

"Come in, dear," Patrick said, motioning for her to join them. His usually stern facial features were lit up with youthful enthusiasm tonight.

She accepted a small crystal tumbler of sherry from Brant, who managed to touch her hand with a promising, sensual gesture. He protectively slid his free arm about her waist.

"We are discussing the merits of organized team games," Patrick informed her.

"Baseball?" she asked.

"Have you seen it played?" Diamond asked, leaning toward her with new interest.

She couldn't tell him that not only had she seen professional games played, she herself had donned the pajama-like uniform and played herself a few times.

"Yes, in Baltimore. Very exciting. In fact, my father quite loved the game. He had a wonderful pitching arm, as I recall."

Leia saw Patrick's curious glance, and she hoped she hadn't said anything too outrageously out of character for her 'father.' Brant squeezed her waist reassuringly.

"I have heard," Brant said, "that the games with sticks and balls have spread greatly through the state, with many variations." He emptied his glass.

Thank God for Brant, Leia thought, smiling at him before downing the balance of her own drink. Looking up, she caught a glimpse of the haunted portrait that had seemed to look right at her before. Tonight, it seemed peaceful and content...and familiar.

"That's your great-uncle James, Leah," Patrick volunteered. "Mary Katherine's father."

"Did he pass away very young?" she asked, aware that Leah would know this stuff. Her own father's name was James, but she was also aware that she couldn't reveal that fact.

"Actually, you don't know him because he disappeared thirty years ago. After his wife Louise died giving birth to Mary Katherine, he was never the same. One day he just left without a trace, but prior to that, James was a real fan of stick and ball games."

"I knew him," Diamond said. "We met at the tavern in town. Had a grand old time discussing baseball. In fact, I shared a few of my own developments with him."

"I didn't realize you knew James," Patrick said, pouring a second glass of brandy from the crystal decanter.

"Oh yes. In fact, once we met out in a field, near Taneytown, with other young men who wanted to play." Diamond paused, as if searching his memory for more detail. "We were so thirsty, it being a hot night like this one. I shared some whisky I had brought, I recall. It was in a handsome amber flask, an embossed bat and ball on its face. Well, James was so taken with it, I gave it to him in exchange for his wooden bat. It was polished nicely...a very good swap."

Leia stared at Diamond, then forced her eyes back to the portrait. The familiar face didn't seem so threatening now. It seemed, well, fatherly. Shivers ran up her spine and her neck hairs stood on end as the full implication hit her. Could her father have come from this past? Could Mary Katherine's father have been hers as well?

If he hadn't disappeared, she might have met him as a young man, but if time was running parallel, that was impossible. His absence now made Leia's own birth in the future possible. This was all speculation, of course, she had no real proof. The flask was now nothing but shattered shards of memory, since Martin had broken it after Grandfather's funeral. Glancing up at the man in the portrait that had scared her on a previous night, she knew the menacing image wouldn't return, because she at last knew its secret.

Chapter 16

Snuggled close behind Brant, Leia couldn't suppress a smile. Not only had General Diamond revealed a major key to her own past, he had put a shine on Mary Katherine's cheeks that had never been there before. Mary Katherine, her very own sister. How much would the twentieth century change in relation to all this? How different would her life have been if these things had never happened in the past? Caught in a loop of temporal thoughts, Leia decided to put them out of her mind and move closer to her new husband.

Molding her abdomen to his backside, she wiggled slightly to see if he was awake...no response. It was amazing how a recuperating man could sleep so soundly, yet she knew if any danger were present he'd be alert in an instant. She had felt safe all day, with one exception. For one brief, heart-stopping second, she'd been fearful of General Diamond. The intense hate in his eyes had been directed at her, the very opposite of the admiration she'd seen him direct at Mary Katherine. She had not imagined the venom in that stare.

Remembering at last the notes Hettie had slipped her in the kitchen, Leia reached for her apron. She was amazed at the amount of correspondence she'd received from Sara since Martin had stepped in. Two half sheets of dry paper fluttered to the bed. Both appeared to have been photocopied onto an old paper stock.

From: JML Developers

Dear Miss Smith,

Thank you for advising us of the disappearance of your former associate, Jason Maxwell, as well as the notification of his lack of authority in offering us the McGarland property at this point. We have sent notices to his home and to our attorneys. Please note for your files that the offer is hereby withdrawn.

Yours Truly,

J.M. Laughton

President

Dear Sister Delia,

I have been authorized by Jason Maxwell to accept your offer on the Pennsylvania property, to be developed as a Civil War Historical Theme Mall, and to include all stipulations we discussed concerning profit donations and volunteer work. Please have contracts sent to Jason's attorney, B.E. Sanders.

Sincerely,

Sara Smith

Leia closed her eyes at last, elated at Sara's negotiations. The pleasure almost pushed out her agitation over the General's glares, willing her mind to stop making mountains out

of molehills. She ran her hand down Brant's side, enjoying the hardness of his form. Damp with the humid air, his masculine scent permeated their small bed. Her hands ran through his limp locks when she heard a noise, a thump-and-scrape sound, the kind that would have sent a twentieth-century woman scurrying for the telephone or alarm keypad. Sitting upright, Leia clutched the scratchy bedclothes to her chest, looking about for a dressing gown.

Brant was awake and out of bed before she could even focus, signaling to her with his hand to stay in bed. He pulled on the woolen trousers of his uniform, wasting no time to care for the worn fabric. A strong yank had the door open into the hallway, and Brant's head followed, turning right and left. When he slipped his entire body from the relative security of the room, Leia slid into action.

Wrapped in Brant's uniform coat, she started her own investigation. Down the back stairs, she met her husband in the center hall.

"Someone's in the library," he said, softly with a tilt of his head toward that door.

"Would you please go back upstairs?"

"No," she said, stepping toward the noise of heavy furniture scraping the wooden floor.

With a disgruntled sigh, Brant strode toward the heavy oak door. Just as he reached for the knob, it turned by itself. Leia and Brant both jumped as General Diamond's military form posted itself in the doorway.

"General!" Brant drew up taller, unconsciously taking a soldier's stance. "Can I help you with anything, sir?"

Diamond looked surprised, his lips pursed and his forehead wrinkled. He regained his composure quickly. "I was hoping to find a novel. I have trouble sleeping sometimes, and thought some fine literature would relax me. Often I have admired the McGarlands' collection, but rarely have I had the opportunity to browse."

Leia thought he troubled himself with too much explanation, almost as if he was nervous. Could he have been snooping through Patrick's things?

"And did you find something?" Brant asked the question in his logical manner, indicating with his head the General's empty hands.

"No, Brant, I grew tired and ready for sleep just perusing the shelves. Patrick has an extraordinary collection, don't you agree?" Diamond yawned. "If you'll excuse me. I don't want to keep you newlyweds up all evening."

Leia stood with Brant until the General had climbed the front staircase, then they exchanged glances.

"What was all that about?"

Brant shook his head, then stepped back into the library. "I don't have any notion, but let's look around the room to see if anything's disturbed."

They moved through the square room with the oil lamp from their room. Dim shadows clung to the corners, swaying as if they wished to be independent of the four walls.

"It looks fine," Leia said, scanning rows of leather-covered books. "Patrick's desk is just like he leaves it." She touched the dark wooden furniture, carefully, as it seemed like an antique to her.

Brant paused, looking down at the polished surface, which reflected the decision he was about to make. He pulled a tightly-fitted drawer out toward him. Then his facial muscles sculpted themselves into a frown.

"What is it?" Leia peered over his shoulder.

"I'm not sure. Maybe nothing. Some papers are disheveled in this drawer, but that could be Patrick's lack of organization." The drawer shut with a gentle thud.

"We're probably just jumping to conclusions," she said. "But I did think something was strange. Did you notice that the General didn't look me in the eye, didn't look my way at all just now, not even once?"

"Should he have? After all, you are dressed only in my coat."

"Well, no, you're right. He shouldn't have been looking me over. Still, it's an odd feeling. I think perhaps he doesn't like me."

"Now who's jumping to conclusions?" Brant smiled at her, then took her hand. "I can tell you one thing, my dear wife, and that is I do like you, and require your presence in my chamber."

"Whatever for?" Leia stifled a giggle.

"It seems I am also having trouble sleeping."

"Let's not talk about the General, or Mary Katherine, or the war," Brant said, settling the basket of food items they'd collected from the kitchen onto a yellow blanket.

"You've got it," Leia agreed, smoothing the corners of the cloth to lie flat. "The grass is still a little damp, it's so early."

Scruffy trotted up to them then, and Brant gently shooed his furry grayness from the picnic area.

"I can take care of him. Hettie sent out this bone from last night's soup." Leia took a bone, nearly bald of meat, and tossed it a few feet away. Scruffy took chase. "He's really cute."

"His tail is the perfect size and texture to swish inside your bottles for cleaning. Do you have any pets waiting for you at home?" Brant watched his wife set out plates and pieces of cold chicken.

"My Grandfather was always allergic to animals. Sara has a cat, but they make me sneeze. I guess growing up on a farm you had a lot of animals."

He nodded, accepting the plate she held out. "Thank you. Once, a hunter from another county wandered too close and shot one of our horses in the leg. My uncle tried to save him, and I was so angry I nearly set the barn on fire again. My father found the man, who offered to pay for the horse, but we didn't take money from him. The life he took was more important than that."

They sat in silence, then, eating the chicken, bread and tomatoes.

"I never knew how good tomatoes were until I met you," he said, finishing the last of his food.

"I never knew how good a lot of things were until I met you." She felt her cheeks begin to vie with the tomatoes for color, but it was the truth.

The air was unusually dry for mid-summer, making the day cooler, and Leia's hair less frizzy, even in the sun. She joined Brant, who now stretched out on his back, staring up at the bluest sky...a color Leia had never seen in her modern world, not just because she hadn't been looking, but because this particular shade of blue didn't exist then. not in nature, not in a Crayola box.

Holding clasped hands between them, Leia allowed her eyes to close as Brant's had. The birds, orioles, she thought, singing sadly, were almost obliterated by the white noise of all the insects. This would make a great audio-therapy tape, she thought.

It would be easy to lay here, feeling happy and content in this natural setting, where she could imagine the taste of the watermelons Martin had cut up and served on lazy summer days, but she couldn't forget that the blues and greens she saw here were running red with soldiers fighting not too far away. She couldn't completely forget, not even for a picnic's worth of time, that men were taking each other's lives on the battlefields and in the cotton fields.

"So how many people have you helped? Have you been doing this long?"

He hesitated, then spoke, confirming what she had imagined. "It's been a few years." He rolled from his back to his side, facing Leia. "We've probably helped forty or fifty make good escapes. Why?"

"That's wonderful, Brant. I was just curious, and wondering how many came through the cellar door while I was home, or not home, and if Martin was there to help. How did they blend into society?"

"I'm sure there are connections in your world, beyond your house, to help. I don't know the connections that happen before me here. I don't concern myself with anything past getting them away from here. I'm just part of the chain."

"You're always impressing me. What a team player!"

"That's one way to think of it. The problem with being only a small link is that it feels I've only helped a small number, and that even as a team, as you say, we've only made a

small mark in the number of slaves who need us."

"You've made a huge mark. Not only did you save the adults, but any children they might have, too, and not just from captivity. You saved them from the rotten times ahead in history, after the war.

"What do you mean?" Propped on one elbow, Brant looked adorable to Leia. She leaned down and kissed his mouth before replying.

"After the South's surrender, the whole country is shell shocked for a while. I don't remember a lot of details from history class, but people called carpet baggers from the North swooped down on the South to make their lives miserable. Lincoln did free the slaves with the Emancipation Proclamation, but most of them had no where to go. Many of them stayed with their white families, but the plantation owners were wiped out by then, and couldn't pay them, some couldn't feed themselves." In Leia's mind, she pictured Tara after the war. Even though the mansion still stood when its neighbors did not, Scarlett's family had little to eat.

Long minutes passed in silence. Leia plucked a few dandelions from the grass and toyed with their yellow petals.

"We all know what you say could happen. We just don't want to admit it. Tell me, are blacks treated so much better in the next century?"

"That's a tough question. To a degree, they are, but every ethnic group gets treated poorly somewhere in the world. And they're not called blacks or darkies, or any other derogatory terms. They're referred to as African Americans, and that's exactly what they are. They are respected members of society, for the most part. A certain part still has it really rough, though."

"Oh."

"Brant, don't be disappointed. If Martin's been helping everyone you sent forward, they'll be so much better off than they were here. There's more opportunity in the twentieth century. You have done a wonderful thing, you and Hettie, and Mary Katherine. Wonderful."

Brant warmed under his wife's praise. He wasn't doing it for personal gain, but when an activity is so secret, and must be clandestine to continue, one wasn't accustomed to hearing accolades. He reached over and rested a hand on her arm. It was warm from the sun.

The summer wouldn't last, though, and the McGarland farm needed a lot of work before cold weather arrived. Carroll County could get very nasty by December. He would have to ask around for someone to come and help Patrick if he wasn't here...or able.

Leia must be right about the post war problems. He'd seen enough dead husbands, soldiers and slaves, to know the world would never be the same. It seemed the best way to go on, and stay sane, was to focus on his part of the service, the traveling.

It had brought him Leia.

"Penny for your thoughts," she said, tapping his shoulder.

He hadn't realized he'd closed his eyes. "That cent will buy you a lot of thoughts."

"Not in my time."

Brant looked up at her now. "Did Mary Katherine put your hair up like that?"

"Yes, do you like it?" She patted the crocheted cover holding it in place.

"Come here," he said, and when she complied, he pulled the little blue cover free. Her golden hair fell around Leia's shoulders, and Brant pushed the locks back away from her face. One stray strand caught in the little blue thing, so he gently worked it free. "Your hair is too pretty to hide."

She laughed. "Well, I'm an old married woman now, not a young girl looking for a husband. I have to look respectable, at least according to Aunt Martha."

"And you remember that, Mrs. Douglas." He pulled her closer for another kiss, enjoying the teasing banter they'd started. They may have given up courting time, but this in many ways was better because after playing all day, he could take her upstairs.

Cannons rumbled in the distance. Brant sat up and looked around, scouring the woods surrounding the property, his eyes narrowed, alert.

Leia reached over and touched his shoulder, the warmth of her hand penetrating his thin shirt. "Relax. It's only thunder."

Leia watched, relieved and happy that Mary Katherine was spending her afternoons with General Diamond. At times he appeared to be a romantic teenager, others a hardened soldier. Mary Katherine was treated to the adolescent side of his personality. The pair held hands and walked through the garden. They gazed into each others' eyes at dinner, though Mary Katherine ate little. Her delicate frame had lost a few pounds during the General's stay, a sure sign that she was in love.

Patting her own rounding hips, Leia smiled. Here she was, hiding her cousin's extra five pounds under her hoop skirt. She could never have gotten away with that in the twentieth century, and would have been dieting obsessively. Once again, Leia found herself totally absorbed in this other life, this ancient time period. Shouldn't she be more concerned with getting back?

Brant entered the parlor where Leia stood before the great window. Moving behind her, he slipped his arms about her waist and pressed a kiss onto her neck.

She picked up a glass bottle from the windowsill, one shaped exactly like her own body. "Do you like this shape, Brant?" she asked, forcing him to raise his head.

"I like your shape," he said, disregarding the piece of glass to resume his nuzzling.

There were too many layers of skirt in the way for Leia to press herself against him, but

she tried when his hands reached her breasts. Her head whipped around to ensure no one else had entered the room.

"No one's watching, Leia," he said, taking further liberties. "I could lift your skirts right here and..."

"Brant! If Martha caught us doing that she'd have a coronary."

"What's that?"

Leia shook her head, and caught a glimpse of movement outside. "Look."

Brant leaned over her shoulder and drew back the heavy draperies. Cheek to cheek they watched Mary Katherine and General Diamond stroll toward them, hand in hand. They didn't seem concerned that the downpour threatened to start any minute.

"Would you look at that?" Leia whispered, noticing Mary Katherine's disheveled hair and clothes.

"I would, but I'd rather look at you."

"I knew that low cut black dress would work. Some things are timeless. Do you think that she is the only reason he's still here?"

"The General was not given permanent command of his troops after General Reynold's death, Leia. After serving the Union so well by holding off the Rebs that first day at Gettysburg, he expected a promotion. Instead, he feels demoted and taken advantage of."

"Guess he's not a happy camper," Leia said, still watching him from the window.

Brant looked outside, ignoring the strange comment. "He's not happy, unless Mary Katherine is working magic on him."

"Well, it certainly appears that way. She must be helping him with the bitterness. Here they come, and they're smiling." Leia smoothed her own hair and slipped into the foyer to greet her love swept cousin.

As Leia followed Mary Katherine up to her room, she overheard Diamond speaking to Brant. Thunder crashed louder, closer to the house. The General's serene mood had seemed to disappear, replaced by callous authority.

"Brant, I need to speak with you, in private. It's about your wife."

A crisp tension filled the air, as Brant led General Diamond to the library. Worse than the impending storm, the formality of their meeting raised the hairs on Brant's neck, as he took a chair and waited.

Diamond perched on the corner of Patrick's desk, looking as uncomfortable as Brant imagined he felt emotionally. What was this all about, and why the secrecy?

Brant broke the tension. "Does this have anything to do with Torin?"

"Your brother? No, it doesn't. But where is Torin? I expected to see him here."

"Just taking care of some personal things," Brant said, wishing he hadn't brought it up. He'd have enough explaining to do later if Torin didn't return. "What do you have to say concerning Leah?"

"How long have you known your wife, Brant?" Diamond spoke in a quiet voice, leaning forward to hear the response.

"Not long. As I told you in camp that night, we really just met. I compromised her, and Patrick insisted we marry. Why do you ask?"

"So you have never met anyone else that knows her, that has known her since childhood?"

"Well, of course the McGarlands have known her since she was a baby."

"I mean, now that she's an adult, can anyone confirm this young lady's identity as that of Leah Graham of Baltimore?" The General's voice grew frustrated.

Brant's mind recalled the plastic card he'd found, and Leia's claims to be from the future. What could he tell this man?

"I thought not," Diamond said, crossing his arms over his chest. "Tell me this, Brant, does your wife know Belle Boyd?"

Brant ran a hand through his hair. "Yes, we all do. She's a friend of the family."

"A friend? Do you know what you're saying?" Diamond coughed deeply from his lungs, his face reddening.

"No, obviously I don't. What's going on, sir?"

"Belle Boyd has a record of several arrests. She has been detained and questioned on different occasions for conveying information to the south. Brant, the woman you call Belle Boyd is suspected of being a spy...Known to be a spy for the Confederacy."

Brant swallowed back an exclamation, instead rising to pace the floor. "I had no idea."

"Are you sure? No clue, no hint from her actions?" He sat back, his arms crossed in silent disbelief.

"She has always asked a lot of questions," Brant admitted, urging his mind to recollect events previously considered trivial.

"What kind of questions?"

"About the war. She just seemed interested, concerned about our welfare. She flirted. She made conversation, and she always asked questions about our plans. It all seemed innocent enough." Oh Heavenly Father, he had been one of the fools who provided her with information. He had aided a spy.

Brant sat back down in the chair, heavy with disappointment and guilt. Belle had been seen with Leia, himself, Torin and now Jason. She could be placed talking with every

member of the McGarland family. "Are you certain it was her?"

Diamond nodded. "That's not all of it."

"What else?" As he barked out the question, he remembered Diamond saying something about Leia. This could not be leading to anything good.

The General cleared his throat. "Well, Brant, it has come to the army's attention that Belle and Leah have become good friends, and have traveled together during these past few weeks. Now, it may or may not mean anything, but they were seen together the night she came to camp, just before Gettysburg. The night you sent her home alone, as I recall."

Brant felt his stomach contract with fear. "Sir?"

"I'm sorry, Brant, but it looks as if Leah has been working for the South. I'll need to question her tomorrow." He looked toward the window, as if uncomfortable with his news.

"And then?" What would they do to her?

"I'm not sure. It depends on what we learn. I am sorry it's your wife involved."

"We? Who's we?" Brant began to drip sweat.

"I can't question her alone. You know that. I've sent for military investigators."

"General! This is my wife you're talking about. She's no spy! This sounds like a formal inquisition! Where's Belle? She'll tell you that Leah is nothing to her, nothing to her efforts. She can clear all of this up."

"We're searching for her. Until we find her, we must proceed. Too many good men gave up their lives in Gettysburg, Brant. Our plans were traded to the Rebs. It must have come from someone who had access to the information. Traitors must be punished."

Brant swallowed hard. He opened his mouth to protest further, but closed it again, remembering Leia's night time trip to his camp. They had been on their way to Gettysburg, and fresh from the McGarland library where they had discussed plans for the ambush. And she had been there, sipping brandy too strong for her and looking delicate. Or acting delicate. And listening.

"Brant, are you all right? I know this is a shock."

"I need to think, sir. Would you leave me, please? I'm not going anywhere."

The General patted Brant's shoulder on his way from the room. "You're a good man," he said, leaving him then in silence.

Brant moved for the brandy decanter, pouring himself a generous portion. Had he been a fool all along? At first he had been incensed by the General's accusations, but as he calmed, the things the general said made sense. Leia had shown up in a place where she would not be recognized. She had been secretive about her past. She had talked and

ridden with Belle Boyd. ...And she had let him touch her so soon after their meeting, with little hesitation or shyness. Could she have gone along with the marriage because it would further her treacherous career? Now she knew all about his underground work, too.

A soft tap on the door brought Brant from his reflections. "Come in."

"Brant, are you okay?" Leia slipped into the room, closing the door behind her and leaning against it. Her eyebrows drew together.

He looked at her, searching her face for the truth, but in all honesty, she looked like she always had, pretty and sincere. His gaze met hers and they both stared deeply, neither comprehending what the other was thinking.

"Brant? What is it? I heard the General mention me." She moved to the fireplace and touched the mantle, staring down into the fire as if she sensed the danger.

Where could he start? Should he start? If there were any truth at all to Diamond's fears, she could be a great actress, pretending to care for him while she collected information, and yet, he was certain he'd taken her virginity on their wedding night, and wouldn't a spy have given herself to many men? If she had truly been the widowed cousin from Baltimore, she would have been with her husband before him, however.

"Leia, come here," he said, shaking mental cobwebs from his mind. All the questions were getting him nowhere. Hadn't he trusted her with the escaping slaves? Perhaps she hadn't realized what was going on around her. Nothing had been said or confirmed, until today.

"I love you," he said, pulling her to him. He sat in the chair and wrapped his arms about her small waist.

"Brant, I love you too. What's wrong? What did the General say?" She pushed his hair from his forehead, caressing his skin.

Burying his face in her dress, he hugged her tight. "Nothing important. War talk." He decided to prove her trustworthiness by involving her in the next day's escape.

Leia pushed his head backward, so she could look into his eyes. Without either of them speaking, he knew she knew he was holding something back. She didn't question him further, or make demands. She trusted him. He wanted to reciprocate. Didn't they all have secrets? Tomorrow, she'd witness another one of his.

Chapter 17

"You need to wear something to really attract his attention," Sandy said, watching Torin discuss the Battle of Gettysburg with a half dozen re-enactors. "He's dreamy."

Sara smiled. "Yeah, he is. Somehow, I seem to already have his attention." On cue, Torin smiled at her from across the stage, sending her stomach to her toes. "Can you believe it?"

Sandy looked at her watch. "Sara, rehearsal was great, but I gotta run. I'll see you at the show." She gathered her purse and an overflowing tote-bag of accessories.

"And we'll be design school graduates. Stop by my place after the show, Torin and I are having a few people over." Sara continued to watch Torin entertaining the troops, tapping a rifle on the wood floor, the echoes punctuating his words.

"Torin and I? So it's like that, is it?"

"I sure hope so." He most certainly possessed her attention.

"You need to wear something to really attract his attention," Leia said, rifling through Mary Katherine's dresses. "A luncheon with the boring Bauers will force you two together for a while. You'll have to entertain yourselves." She looked at the young woman's face, glowing as only a romantic hopeful could.

"Thank you so much, Leah. I could never have gotten this far without you. Are you certain you wouldn't like to come with us?"

"I'm sure," Leia said, selecting a royal blue dress with puffed sleeves. "Here, try this. You shouldn't sweat too much in it. Anyway, Brant says he has something planned for us to do today."

"Do you have any idea what it could be?"

"Not a clue. But he did have the most devilish gleam in those brown eyes when he mentioned it." Leia sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for her sister-cousin to change her gown.

Turning away to shield her modesty, Mary Katherine became curious. "I do wonder what he thinks sometimes. Even before he met you, he often seemed far away. But always so kind. I hope you two can make a good life together, Leah. I like you both so much."

Leia smiled and turned the girl around to do the buttons up her back. Spun right into the chiffon material, the buttons became nearly invisible to the naked eye. "Everyone is kind to you, because you are so sweet. Now, get that blue ribbon and I'll pull your hair back."

"But not too taut. Alvin likes long, loose hair on women." She looked down at her hands.

Leia laughed. "Well, too bad. When he's ready and got the nerve he can just reach over and shake this bow out. But it will be his move, right?"

"Oh, yes. But it will have been my idea."

The quartet set off for their lunch date, leaving Brant and Leia in the kitchen with Hettie. Leia noticed that today the woman's movements were slower than normal, as if arthritis or some muscle pain was ailing her. The slim black hand that raised the milk jug was shaking, though she tried to hide it. Leia tried to ignore her situation, as she knew calling attention to it would only embarrass Hettie. She also felt relieved that Brant seemed to understand that too, and spoke about everyday items as he finished his coffee.

"Leah and I will return before supper, Hettie. Perhaps we can eat a very light meal tonight, since it will be just the three of us? Leah, did you wear sturdy shoes today?"

Leia answered first. "Yes."

"Anythin' you want for supper is fine, Mista Brant, just let me know."

"How about salad, then?" Leia asked, smiling at Hettie. "I'll check around for some tomatoes while I'm outside."

"Tomatoes?" Brant sounded scandalized. Hettie came toward him and patted his arm.

"Yes, and you sure will like 'em." She teased Brant while she slipped Leia a yellow note, discreetly to avoid questioning from him.

"And when did you eat tomatoes, Hettie?" Brant scolded in a mock-angry voice.

"Why, at the Bauer place with Miss Leah."

"Yes, she did," Leia confirmed, then allowed playfulness to fade. "I wonder why the McGarlands spend so much time there, anyway. And the Bauers never come here."

Leia waited, but no response came from Hettie or Brant. She did see them exchange glances, almost guiltily. In her own time she'd think these two were having an affair.

Brant said, "Leah, let's go outside. I want to take a walk."

She followed him then, enjoying the sight of his firm backside leading the way.

He led her across the same path they had taken to the cabin in the woods and as the dense greenery grew closer Leia realized what he had planned.

"Are we meeting someone?" she asked, struggling to keep up with his long strides while annoying material pawed at her legs like clinging puppies.

Brant paused, turned to survey the area. "Yes," he said, then took her arm. Leading her into the deep, mossy woods, he said nothing else. When they reached the clearing by the stream, he turned to face her.

"Do you remember this place?"

"Of course. We came through here before we met Bitsy and John." She wiped a trickle of perspiration from her upper lip. The humidity hung thick in the air, making everything feel and smell wet.

"Have you seen either of them since then?"

"No, now that you mention it, I haven't. Why?" She waited to hear if he would reveal anything to her, or would create a story. He could not know how well she understood his actions or his motives. He could only operate on trust.

Brant shook his head and began walking again, pulling her behind him. His other hand held the cane he still relied on.

"The cabin's just around the bend." He stopped abruptly, then turned to face her.

Leia pulled free and rubbed her arm. "Gees," she said, "Now I know what a Radio flyer feels like."

"Leia- please listen. We will be meeting another couple in the cabin. These two, well, they aren't as well-off as John and Bitsy were."

Leia met his gaze, tilting her head up to him. "What do you mean?"

"They have been hurt, by their...by the people who bought them. I just wanted you to prepare yourself for seeing them in a poor condition."

She stood straighter. "I can handle it. Don't worry. We can help them."

Brant's face contorted with emotions Leia could only guess were trust and distrust, warring within him. She continued to meet his eyes, willing him to understand that she was not only trustworthy of his secrets, but that she cared for him as well, and for those people he wanted to help.

He closed his eyes for a few seconds, tilting his head back. An oak leaf tickled his nose, making him reach for it. When his eyes opened, Leia knew he'd decided and that she was about to enter into the most hidden part of her husband's world. Her heart turned over and her insides warmed down to her core. First, he had touched and entered her physically, and at long last, he was ready to follow emotionally. Perhaps he'd dismissed the doubts he'd had about her last night. She smiled at him, reached up, and pushed the wispy branch of oak leaves behind his head.

"Let's go," she said, taking his hand this time and pulling him behind her. Leia smiled to herself at the sound of Brant sidestepping her long skirts, and once even bouncing off her rounded hoop.

Inside, the cabin's four walls were just as neglected as Leia remembered. Heavy dust was relieved only in the places they had made footprints the previous time. Floorboards were missing. Huddled under a cracked window was a woman in dirty clothes, her knees hugged to her chest. In the nearest corner a man leaned, his arms crossed against his thin chest. Less smudged than the woman's clothing, his shirt was torn and his pants frayed.

Brant wasted no time. He looked at the man and asked, "Are you ready?"

The couple moved towards Brant, nodding. They stopped in front of Leia, not casting eyes down but meeting her with a level look.

"This is my wife. We can trust her," he told them, again waiting for their nods. This pair did not seem to know Brant well as John and Bitsy had, shifting their eyes from his grim face to hers.

Leia extended her hand, resting it on the woman's arm. "Please let me help you," she said, hoping she appeared as sincere as she felt.

"Let's go," Brant said, leaving no room for further concerns. He and Leia led the way. They worked their way around the back of the McGarland house, keeping in the cover of the pines. The slaves, nameless souls, followed like baby chicks but without a peep.

Leia found it hard to breathe in the sultry air, her lungs near bursting to keep pace with Brant. Fresh horse manure was the perfume of the day, and the group had to sidestep the steamy piles. Sweat dripped down Leia's sides, pasting undergarments to her skin. Leia did not complain, however, determined to prove herself to her husband and help him at the same time.

They passed the stables and neared the back porch. Hettie stood on the top step, a sentinel guarding the castle. She only nodded at the bedraggled slaves, whisking them into the back door before they could hesitate and before anyone outside could take a second look.

Echoes of emptiness were all that waited in the house.

"Everyone clear?" Brant asked of Hettie.

"Sure is," she said, leading them to the dining room. The cellar door waited, open, beckoning to them. Hettie handed Brant a lit oil lamp, then stepped back. She closed her eyes and crossed her arms in front of her chest.

Leia waited until the small group had descended, then turned back to Hettie. "Are you coming?"

Hettie shook her head, eyes still closed. "No...you go on Miz Leah. I have to stay here." She shooed Leia through the door, shutting it behind her. The darkness of the stairwell threw Leia into a small spell of anxiety, but she told herself to breathe fully and hold the handrail. She made her way down, and caught up to the group in the center of the basement.

Brant turned to her, and let a smile cross his lips. "Come," was all he said.

Shuffling much as the group had the night Torin and Jason disappeared, they made their way to the opposite side of the cellar...Or perhaps they made a circle, Leia wasn't sure, but she did recognize the dim outline of light at the top of the stairs, even less bright than she remembered it to be.

What would happen to these two if they made it into the future? Martin would help them at first. Could Brant be sure of where he was sending them? Why could they find the right door, if it was the right door, when she had not been able to? The questions swirled

in Leia's mind. She smelled the musty walls and sweaty bodies, and suddenly the stairs seemed to be spinning. She grabbed the handrail for support, feeling a splinter pierce her hand.

"Ouch!" Leia's pain was stifled by Brant's threatening gaze.

"God be with you both," he told the couple, like a priest blessing churchgoers. They scrambled up the steps and through the door, not looking back. The door, as if weighted with lead, slammed closed behind them. The air pressure changed suddenly, and Leia's ears popped.

"What if we tried to go through too?" she asked, as Brant began to guide her around the cellar.

"We would not make it, not to where you want to go." They seemed to find the other staircase easily, and climbed it.

"What about another time? Is there any chance?" She licked her hand where she had pulled the scrap of wood loose.

"I don't know, Leia. The only thing I know is that the door will not be there forever. Tomorrow, we have two women to help. Are you willing?"

She nodded. "Of course, whatever I can do to help."

Brant left the house as soon as he had finished eating. Patrick and Martha retired early, making excuses of fatigue from the walk in the heat. The General sat politely at Mary Katherine's feet in the parlor, holding a skein of yarn while she worked with it. Leia paced the hallway, back and forth through the center of the house. The wooden planks creaked under her feet, reminding her of the old Taneytown five-and-dime. She pulled out the most recent message from the future.

Dear Leia,

Thank you, thank you, thank you for sending me Torin Douglas. Jason's explained who he is, and where and when he's from, which is where you are, right? Congratulations on your marriage! I'll let Sanders know right away.

Torin fit right in at the dress rehearsal, and I'm going to ask him to model in the revue. The only problem is he makes the other soldier models shrink in comparison. What a body! Jason left me alone with Torin, not in the least bit bothered by him. You were right all along, Leia, he wasn't the man I thought he was.

One more thing, your bottles and glasses are back. I don't know if they're the same ones, but Torin recognized a few pieces as ones Brant gave you. What happened to the original set?

Still miss you...

Sara

They had made it. Torin and Jason had safely returned to the twentieth century. Relief swept from Leia's heart to her toes. Everything she had been worrying about seemed to be taking care of itself. She shredded the tiny note and put the pieces in the fireplace, smiling at Mary Katherine and Alvin as she walked by. They did not even notice her.

What Leia had thought to be heat lightening became brighter, followed by the thundering cannon-booms of a July storm. Pelting rain soon began, and Leia helped Hettie and Sarny to close windows and shutters all about the big house. They used rags to dry the fat drops that had found their way inside, and lit more candles as the darkness enveloped them.

Leia paused at a front window, hoping Brant would be okay in the bad weather.

"Scruffy!" She noticed the animal outside, matted and drenched, trying to reach the house against the odds of the storm winds. A quick dash out into the rain had her as soaked as the dog, and the two of them waited in the foyer for Hettie to bring more rags.

"Don't you trot across Hettie's clean floors until I dry you. How did you get left outside, anyway? You should've been safe in the barn." Excited to be in the house, Scruffy tore up the front stairs, leaving Leia laughing behind him. She hung a towel around her neck to dry her own hair, then bent from the waist to dry the roots.

She gasped when the front door opened into her backside, tumbling her to the floor.

"Leah?" Brant asked, glancing around before helping her up. He tossed his rain-drenched hat onto a wall peg.

"Yes, that's my rump you bumped, but if you give me a kiss I won't hold it against you," she said, wishing he would hold it against her, so to speak. She handed him the damp towel.

"Were you outside?" he asked, brushing raindrops from his own shoulders.

"Yeah.. just for a minute."

Brant's eyes widened and he stopped drying himself. "What for?" His tone was nonsense.

"It's okay, Brant, really, I don't catch a cold that easily and I won't melt."

He dropped his towel and grasped her shoulders. With his voice soft, he asked again.

"What for?"

Though his expression was blank, she realized that once again he was suspicious of her. With an exasperated sigh, she said, "To get the dog in from the storm. That's all." She gathered the rags and towels and took them to the back porch, leaving her husband in the foyer. Leia felt his eyes burning a question mark into the back of her head.

He'd not known Leia to venture out into summer storms before tonight. After the veiled threats the General had made, he didn't know what to think about his wife's actions.

Trust was a precious thing between husband and wife, and Brant wanted to uphold it in his marriage. He strode through the house, checking door and window locks. The bond he felt developing between them was still so new, and yet, it felt centuries old.

He put out an oil lamp someone had left glowing on the kitchen table. He wanted to trust his wife, there was nothing or no one he believed in more. Sometimes she just made it so danged difficult.

Leia had arranged the covers around her body, keeping the material loose so air could flow. The cool breeze that had come in after the storm subsided was a pleasure, tickling her skin as it evaporated beads of perspiration. Sleep would not come quickly, she knew, since the knot in her stomach was still tightly wrapped.

"Leia?" Brant opened the door, intruding with only his head and a lamp.

"Yes?" She whispered her response, anxious about his state of mind.

"Can we talk, please?" He stepped in, leaving the door open.

Expecting harsh demands, the gentle question took Leia by surprise, and she sat up in bed. "Of course. Come to bed." She watched as he came in and undressed, putting out his lamp. Only hers was lit, casting an angelic halo around Brant's strong body.

He sat beside her on the bed, not moving to climb under the sheet. "I'm sorry for my reaction earlier. It was that of a soldier, I know, and not of a trusting mate." He picked up her hand. "I warned you I wasn't ready to be a husband. I'm not very good at it yet."

She didn't reply, knowing part of his attitude was born of the way she had just appeared in his life. However, the way he used the word 'yet' was encouraging.

"Forgive me?"

"Oh, Brant, I don't blame you for your doubts. You haven't had much worth trusting in your life, have you?" She reached for his free hand and gave it a squeeze. Then she moved to encircle his neck, leaning toward his lips with her own. As he rolled toward her in response, the bed shifted and a squeal ripped up from underneath them.

Startled, Leia and Brant watched Scruffy wriggle from under the bed and make a break for the door. Brant's chuckle came first, then Leia's, and finally the kiss.

The next day seemed to be almost an identical copy of the one before. Sweltering heat, thick wet air, and the fragrance of stables greeted Leia as she went to meet Brant. The only difference was that Mary Katherine went with the McGarlands on a picnic, and the General had business of his own to conduct. He left for town before breakfast, promising to join the group later in the day. Leia overheard him tell Mary Katherine he needed to speak with Patrick, and she was elated. Her matchmaking had worked!

With a light heart she joined the small party at the cabin, pleased at the events and surprised at the ease with which everyone's plans were unfolding. She knocked on the cabin's wooden door, keeping with her superstition about good luck. No sense in jinxing

things, she thought. Her lightness of spirit dipped substantially when they left, seeing the physical state of the slaves in the light of day. My God, what have those people done to them?

Their soiled clothing was torn, slashed from what Leia assumed had been whips. Of course she couldn't ask and shouldn't stare, but she was shocked. Her stomach began to bubble, churning with nausea. The taller of the two women, a very dark chocolate black, had slashes across the front of her dress as well as the back. Yet they both held their heads high, more dignified than Leia could have imagined. With a deep breath, she turned her eyes away and pulled Brant's hand.

"We have to get them out of here," she said.

He only nodded, and started the little group on its trek through the woods. Politely avoiding looking at the women, Leia knew he was embarrassed for them. She cast a few encouraging, small smiles back at the women, who followed silently without complaint or comment.

They reached the stable, and waited for Brant to look around the side wall toward the back porch. From her position behind him, Leia saw his spine stiffen. She smelled men, sweaty men.

"Don't move," he said, his deep voice a whisper.

Leia turned and relayed the message to the women, who nodded. With an icy stab in her stomach, she knew that helping slaves escape their captivity was not as easy as she had presumed.

Brant turned toward them. "Back to the woods. Not a sound," he said.

Leia turned but saw only the backs of the fleeing slaves, already following Brant's command. Within seconds they were safely hidden from view, and Brant grabbed Leia's damp hand.

"Not a sound from you, either," he said, and led her from behind the barn and toward the house.

Two men in butternut gray uniforms were speaking with Hettie on the back porch. One looked just like Colonel Sanders of fried chicken fame. Brant swung Leia's hand, as if they were returning from a leisurely walk.

"Can we help you, sirs?" he called, as they closed the gap.

The men, both of whom had been watching their approach through one eye, turned then toward Brant. The smaller of the two, younger than Colonel Sanders, reached inside his coat and left his hand there, presumably ready to draw.

"I'm Major Durnmore, young man, and this is Captain James. Received a tip last night, from an unknown source, of course. We were told to look here for some of my slaves trying to escape. Two females. Trying to run for the North, I was told, and with the help

of some of you Northern sympathizers." He drew out the last word, giving the word an evil intonation. "I don't reckon you know anything about that, do you?"

Brant shook his head, spreading his feet apart into a wide stance. "No, I can't help you Major. I must admit I am a Northerner but I certainly wouldn't cotton to breaking the law. Slaves are your property, and until the law's changed, we all respect that here in Carroll County."

The younger man pointed to Hettie. "She a slave?"

"Hettie's a free servant. But, there are several homes in Walnut Grove that keep slaves. You may want to ask there about your missing ones."

Leia was proud of Brant's even voice and smooth responses. Her admiration for him increased once again. Quick thinking was a most definite asset. Her pride led to a dizzy feeling, and Leia sat on the steps to steady herself. The men stepped down to make room for her, pardoning themselves. Obviously satisfied, they tipped their hats and left.

Her feelings of relief were short-lived. When Brant finally turned from their departing backs and looked at her, she saw anger glaring from his cocoa eyes.

"Brant," she began, taking a step back with a twist to her ankle. "You don't think that I ..."

His scowl relaxed. "No, I don't. Last night you were out with the dog, as you said, not delivering information to the enemy. Today you were just as surprised as I was." He reached for her and pulled her tight against his chest.

"I was. Thank you for trusting me. I really do want to help you, umm, help others." Leia turned to see Hettie disappear into the house. "What are we going to do about those women today? Are they still in the woods, do you think?"

"No, the understood secondary plan is for them to find a hidden spot, or stay in the cabin until they're contacted. A few times we've experienced major delays, and there have also been times the slaves were discovered missing before we got them through."

"How awful. Doesn't the stress get to you?"

"Tension? I try to deal with it. Most times I can control my feelings while I need to, but when they let dogs out one night looking for a tiny, fragile woman called Posy, I felt like dying inside." Brant had sat on the top porch step, and Leia joined him.

She brushed a lock of sandy hair from his forehead, strands still damp with emotion.

"You are wonderful. I never imagined people like you had lived once."

He looked at her. "I did and still do. As for the wonderful part, there are so many more that need help and I'll never get to them. Our lines of connection are narrow, and we're always losing someone at some point in the chain."

"It's the nature of the business, huh? Wait 'till I show you networking and

communications in the future."

"But you have no slaves to save?"

She looked at him sideways. "Well, not in America. I can't speak for the rest of the world." She picked at a thread on her sleeve. "Brant, do the McGarlands know what you're doing?"

He nodded, leaning back on his elbows as they rested on the porch landing.

"And the Bauers?"

"No."

"Do you think there are other portals in other homes?"

"I couldn't say. None that we're aware of. That's why we're the last connection in the chain."

"The last railroad stop," she said softly, then pointed. "Look! Here comes everyone."

From the back of the property near the woods, the picnickers approached. Diamond carried a rusty-brown rattan basket, with a red linen cloth dangling from one corner. Patrick and Martha trailed well behind the younger folks, whom Leia suspected would soon announce their engagement.

The sun was still high in the sky, taking its time in setting as it did every Eastern summer evening. Smiling and relaxed, they walked out of the sunset, like an old movie in reverse.

"How was the picnic? Good chicken?" Leia called as they neared.

"Fine, thank you," Diamond said, sitting the basket of remnants on the steps next to Leia. He avoided her eyes, looking only at Brant. "I do need to speak with you again, Brant, privately."

"Oh, no, General, it's way too soon for you to be dragging my husband back to the front," Leia said, using her teasing tone of voice.

He ignored her.

"I just spoke with two Southern officers within a half mile of this place. Seems they were lost, hunting for some escaped slaves the locals were complaining they lost. Funny thing is, they thought you might be hiding them."

"Why, that's ridiculous," Leia said, rising to meet the General at eye-level, then backing up one step further for a height advantage. When she met the man's eyes, an icicle plunged into her stomach. My God, she thought, this man must detest me.

"How is your leg, Brant?" The General began a different line of questioning, most likely encouraged by Leia's earlier remark.

"Better, sir. Healing takes time, though, and I won't be sorry to cast this stick aside real

soon." Brant looked at his thigh, and so did Leia, who reached to touch the bristly fabric covering him. She didn't want him to heal quite completely, ever, if it meant going back to the fighting.

"Heard from your brother yet?" Diamond's voice clipped each word, irritating, but not yet accusing.

"No sir, he's probably rejoined our unit by now."

Diamond nodded and excused himself, heading into the house. Leia watched Mary Katherine's face as the admiring smile drooped slowly into a disappointed pout. What was she thinking? Did she wonder if the General was suspecting them of something unfairly, or that Brant was actually guilty of something?

Mary Katherine remained outside with Leia until the rest of the group had retreated into the cooler environment of the house. She watched Leia, almost studied her face for a few moments, then climbed the stairs as if to pass her. Pausing at the top, she let one slim hand rest on Leia's shoulder.

Leia could feel the warmth. No words were spoken, but an entire conversation was held between them through that reassuring touch.

The moment was shattered when the General opened the back door. "Mary Katherine, dear," he said, more a snap than an endearment. It was a command. And the warmth was taken away.

Chapter 18

Supper was a brief, quiet affair that evening. With the setting of the sun, temperatures had chilled both inside the house and the atmosphere. Leia had felt the chill like a fog around her, hesitating over her head like a dark cloud.

Brant and Diamond left the house when the moon lit the entire yard, walking into the trees as Leia watched from the relative safety of the front porch.

"Leah, are you feeling well?" Martha asked from her favorite knitting chair.

"She's fine, Aunt Martha. Just worried about her husband, out there vulnerable during these times. Just as I'm worried about Alvin. I'm sure they have important war business to attend to," Mary Katherine piped in. Leia knew she was thinking about the General in the same way she herself thought of Brant, unprotected, in the woods among either friends or foe.

"Martha," Patrick said, rising from his wooden porch chair. "I'm retiring now. Just can't stay awake like I used to, you see." He nodded to the younger women.

"I'll help you upstairs," Martha offered, setting her needles and yarn aside. "I hope you aren't coming down with some ailment, Patrick McGarland. Both you and Hettie are getting on in years, I suppose." She wrung her hands before taking his arm. Leia wondered if the hand wringing was an exercise for keeping knitting fingers supple.

Alone on the verandah, Mary Katherine smiled at her cousin. "Would you like to take a walk?"

"Great idea. I'd like to ask you about General Diamond, Mary Katherine." She watched Mary Katherine's face for clues to her thoughts.

"That's good," Mary Katherine said, looping her arm through Leia's. "I'd like to talk to you about him, too."

The grass was damp with July dew, drenching their soft slippers instantly. The sensation was cold and pleasant on Leia's feet. Why had she never felt anything like this at home?

She sighed. "This is so beautiful. You get to live so close to nature."

"And Baltimore is very far from it?"

"You wouldn't believe it," Leia said, smiling into the shadows. "Mary Katherine, what have you planned with the General? Do you care for him very much now?"

Mary Katherine paused, turning to face Leia. In the light of the half-moon, Leia could see a distressed face ringed by sandy-brown hair.

"Oh, Leia, I really do. But today he's been so strange, especially where Brant is concerned. Have you noticed?"

"Have I? He's given me a few looks cold enough to freeze a wood stove. I was hoping you could tell me what was going on in that man's head."

"I don't know, Leah, honestly." The tinge of distress had reached her voice.

Leia decided to ease her friend's tension. "I think I do."

"Pray tell," Mary Katherine said, walking further into the trees.

"Well, I think he suspects that I'm a spy for the South."

Mary Katherine gasped. "No! Not Alvin, he's so good-hearted, and intelligent. He knows better than to think that."

"If not that, then he thinks I've convinced Brant to help slaves escape, and hide the runaways." She said it quickly, unsure of her friend's reaction.

"Everyone suspects us of that, Leah." Mary Katherine spoke softly, obviously aware of the impact her words would have.

"Why?" Leia issued a demand, not a question.

"You know why, Leah. Brant told me you know. And that you're willing to help, and that makes me love you even more. I wish you were really and truly my sister."

"Well," Leia said, suppressing a grin. "Isn't that a nice thought?" If she only knew!

They walked on in silence for a short time, enjoying each other's company. A sharp and sudden slap made Mary Katherine jump.

"A mosquito," Leia explained. "Mary Katherine, I have an idea. Let's go to that cabin, and check on those two women. The ones that tried to go today. Let's make sure they're comfortable, at least. It must be so hard to be caught in a tiny room just waiting, not knowing if some Reb's going to catch up with you and..." She let her voice trail off, not sure what she had been thinking was even correct.

Mary Katherine tilted her head to one side, contemplating Leia's idea. "We really should not go there alone, and definitely not at night. But I would like them to check on us, if our situations were reversed. You are a good influence on me, Leia. Let's go," she said, steering Leia's arm in the right direction. What would they find at the cabin?

Leia's thoughts were interrupted with uncharacteristic questions from Mary Katherine, who grew bold as they tracked through evening shadows.

"Leah, what was Jonathan like? Do you ever miss him?"

Leia's mind went blank for an instant, then like a camera flash she remembered and pulled her thoughts together. Jonathan was Leah Graham's husband...Dead husband. Her mind still foundered, but she needed to say something intelligent.

"Leah?"

"I'm sorry. Can I be honest with you?"

Mary Katherine nodded, her sympathetic expression not lost on Leia in the darkness.

"Of course you can. You're the closest thing to a sister I'll ever have."

"Well, the truth is, I feel as if I never really knew him at all. It all feels like a hundred years ago." Leia suppressed a smile at her clever answer.

"I'm sure that's so. It's because of Brant, isn't it?"

"You're so perceptive. Brant's like the first man I've been with," Leia said, avoiding her cousin's eye. "In a short time, I've come to feel I know him so well. We just look at each other, and I get this feeling of connection. Is it the same for you and Alvin?" She asked the last question in what she hoped was a subtle tone, meant to draw the attention from herself.

"I thought so, for a while. But now he's grown different. He's closed me out a bit, I'm afraid." She plucked a sprig of leaves from a tree branch, spraying dewy mist over both of them.

"Evening tears," Mary Katherine said softly.

Unsure if her cousin referred to the dew or herself, Leah was glad to point to a spot in front of them. "The cabin's just around that bend." She knew Mary Katherine was experiencing the dull ache of possible rejection when she was still very much in love with Alvin Diamond.

Leia had felt those same aches before, when she'd feared Brant would not accept her, and when she'd feared he'd be killed at war, and whenever she considered going back to her own time, without him.

No lights were lit in the shack, but the women knocked before entering. They pushed through the door as quietly as possible, wincing with the creak of the rusty hinges.

"Hello? Is anyone here? It's okay, it's Leah and Mary Katherine," Leia called, her voice a gentle tone just above a whisper.

"We're here," a voice replied from the far corner. Not willing to risk any form of illumination, the four met by touch that developed into a four-way hug.

"Are you two all right?" Leah asked, squeezing someone's hand. The skin was roughly callused, the nails ragged. The stench overwhelming.

"We're fine. Someone brought us food a while back. What're you ladies doin' here?"

"We were concerned," Mary Katherine said.

"Thank you, that's awfully kind of you. But you shouldn't be here. It's too dangerous, that's what Mista Brant'd say."

"We know. But some things are just important," Leia said, feeling her heart expand for these women who were concerned about two white women's welfare. As they carried on a conversation, she felt her heart grow three sizes, just like the Grinch discovering Christmas.

They huddled for a secure feeling, despite the heat. Mary Katherine lifted Leia's hand

and laid it on the bare arm of the women, unidentified in the dark. Leia felt deep scars from a whip or lash striping her arm. She caught herself, checking the urge to pull back in revulsion.

"Is your back like this as well?"

Mary Katherine spoke for her. "Her back and front, Leah. Her owner whips chests of people, men and women alike."

Leah felt her own breasts tighten inside her clothing at the notion. How barbaric.

"You'll have luck with you tomorrow," Mary Katherine assured the women. "Leah, we must go back now, before we're missed."

It was too late. Mary Katherine and Leia entered by the back door, some twenty minutes later, closing it in silence behind them. Waiting at the wood block table were Brant and Diamond. Hettie hovered at the pantry door until Brant asked her to leave. With a hand on one tilted hip, Hettie hobbled from the kitchen.

"Why'd you do that, Brant?" Leah asked, surprised at his cool dismissal of the maid.

Diamond cleared his throat. "Where have you been, Mrs. Douglas?"

Leia looked at Brant, who met her eyes evenly and without emotion. "Mary Katherine and I took a walk in the woods after supper. Why do you ask?"

"General Diamond's just keeping track of everyone, Leah. Did you see anyone while you were out?" Brant's voice was as cool as his gaze.

Mary Katherine spoke up. "No. Not a soul. It was a beautiful walk."

Alvin ignored her. "I'm asking Leah. Did you meet anyone in the woods?"

The abrupt dismissal cast a look of pain across Mary Katherine's face. Though it was fleeting, Leia noticed. Alvin had just treated his girlfriend like a servant.

"Did you meet Belle Boyd tonight, Leah?" Alvin stood, addressing Leah now by her first name. He leaned over the table, balling his hands into fists and resting them on its edge.

Leah felt a tickle of fear in her stomach. "No, we met no one in the woods." At least that much was true, the women they met had been in the cabin. Thank goodness lie detectors hadn't been invented yet.

"Did you meet anyone for the purpose of giving them information, at any place tonight?"

"No! I told you, no one. Brant?" She looked toward her husband, imploring his help.

At last Brant rose. "That's enough, sir. My wife and Miss McGarland have made their statements. They are honorable women and we should treat them as such."

"Who's in charge here, Douglas?" Alvin's face was reddening.

Leia's mouth dropped open at the discord between the men.

"Of course you are, General. However, I feel..."

"Thank you, Douglas. But I am..."

"What in blazes is going on here?" Patrick's voice, though not loud, boomed from the hallway entrance.

"Patrick. I was just asking a few questions of your niece. It seems she may have been involved in some questionable activity." Diamond managed a fleck of apology in his ominous statement.

Patrick came into the kitchen, then rested one hand on the back of a chair. "Are you accusing her of something?" His voice was still low, calm. He sat.

Leia felt lightheaded, and pulled a chair out for herself.

"I wasn't prepared to, no."

"That's good, You see, she's my responsibility, and Brant's now too. They're both family to me, Alvin." Patrick nodded toward Brant, who sat with his arms crossed in front of him.

"It's a distinct possibility," Diamond went on, unfazed by Patrick's subtle threats. "That your beloved niece is a danger to the Union. She may be a spy, and as for her husband, he may be unaware..."

Both Patrick's and Brant's chairs flew back in unison, scraping across the wood floor. Leia gasped as the men faced off over the table.

Mary Katherine's hands flew to her face. "Alvin, what are you saying? You know that Brant's the absolute epitome of loyalty! How could his wife be anything less?"

Leia looked at her cousin, surprised by her choice of words.

Alvin was not impressed. "This does not concern you, Mary Katherine," he told her, no longer disguising his blunt, military voice of authority. "Please leave us."

"Alvin!" Her eyes had widened further than Leia would have thought possible.

Diamond turned to her like a parent facing a naughty child. "Mary Katherine, dear, please, this is military business."

"Alvin Diamond!" She turned toward Patrick. "If he speaks to you, Uncle Patrick, at another time, please be aware that I WILL NOT marry this man. And," she went on, lowering her voice, "you should know he has made improper advances."

Brant and Patrick turned toward Diamond, not speaking, but studying the man's face.

"Has he hurt you?" Brant asked. The room grew quiet.

She shook her head. "Not yet. But he made it clear he wouldn't wait until our wedding night to take me. Said he may be killed at war anytime, and he couldn't die without having me."

Leia watched in awe as Mary Katherine demonstrated her acting skills.

Diamond sputtered. His lack of control was gratifying. "This is utter falseness, a pack of lies! The girl is lying, Patrick."

"He touched my breasts, Uncle Patrick," she said, lowering her eyes. A rosy blush had appropriately bloomed on her cheeks.

A wave of relief washed over Leia as the discussion was directed away from herself, even as light perspiration dampened her forehead. This wonderful, virginal sister of hers was helping her out of a most difficult situation. And by doing so, she humiliated herself. What a girl.

In spite of Torin's immense curiosity, dress rehearsal had gone well. His dashing smile would be a welcome addition to the photographs taken by the Carroll County Times though Sara hadn't claimed to have designed this particular, authentic costume.

She watched Torin's eyes widen with each new discovery, but was certain he hid the full depth of his shock. A child-like fascination with everyday objects Sara took for granted made her feel warm and appreciative inside.

Sara decided that food was in order, and that her new friend would enjoy the taste, if not the substance, of modern fast food. For the sake of the restaurant, she turned into the drive-through lane.

"How do you feel about beef?" she asked, "with fried potatoes?"

"I'll try any food you recommend," he said, reaching across the seat to touch her hand as it rested on the wheel. He trusted her.

"Welcome to McDonalds of Walnut Grove. Can I take your order?" The voice squawked from a small speaker box, and Torin's mouth dropped open.

To his credit, he closed it and kept it closed as they drove to the second window and were handed a paper bag by a white man in his late sixties.

"After we eat," Sara said, aiming her car back into traffic, "I'll find you something of Jason's to wear. Do you mind coming to my house?"

"I would consider it an honor," he said, worshipping a french fry. "These are wonderful potatoes."

"Well, to be honest, I heard they aren't made from real potatoes anymore. They're made artificially for these places, with chemicals, I think."

He held up one hand, the other still buried in the cardboard fry holder. "Please, don't tell me anything else. I'd rather just enjoy them."

"That's what I say, too." She smiled at him. Should she tell him what was really in that burger? Nope. She wanted him to enjoy that, too.

Sara's phone was ringing shrilly as they entered her small apartment. Torin watched

closely as she spoke, standing so near that her skin tingled.

"What the hell did you do to me?" The words were so loud she winced. Torin stood by her, looking concerned.

"I had no choice, Jason," she said into the receiver, lips pressing close together.

"So you know what I'm talking about?"

"Of course I do. You had just disappeared off the face of the earth, without filling me in. So typical for you, Jason Maxwell. So I had to make the decision...or else you'd have lost the opportunity!" She twirled the phone cord around her fingers, wishing they were instead twisting through Jason's hair...so she could pull harder.

The line went silent. Of course he should be speechless. There was no possible argument. She was right, and she had probably saved the church property for him from some other money-grubbing business type.

"Okay," he said at last. "Can I come over tonight?"

"I'm busy tonight." She clipped each word.

"Tomorrow, then. We should talk. And I miss you..."

Aware of Torin's steady gaze on her, Sara turned toward the wall. A blush swept over her face, warming her cheeks as she pictured the evening she'd like to spend with this hard-as-a-rock soldier.

"Hold on, I've got another call coming in," Jason said, clicking softly off the line.

Irritation flowed through Sara's veins. How just like him to keep her waiting while he talked to someone else. Well, it was going to stop. She had no more interest in Jason.

"I'm back. Sorry. Business. But I can't see you tomorrow. It seems that I've been drafted to help move some furniture off of the church property."

"That's okay, Jason, I'm busy tomorrow too. Good bye." She smiled as she hung up, knowing the final click signified more than the end of a phone call. "Torin, we're in luck. What would you like to do tonight?"

She enjoyed watching his expression, all boyish and playful but at the same time reserved. A tiny element of hesitation tickled his cheeks, as only a time-traveler must feel when out of place.

"Is Jason still special to you?"

"No," she said, turning her eyes to him with honesty. "He hasn't been special to me for a long time. What about you? I never thought to ask, if there is, or was, someone waiting for you at home?"

"Never found a lady like your friend Leah."

Sara nodded. "She's a nice girl." Was that a stab of jealousy she felt poking her stomach?

"Yep, mighty fine." He grinned. "But she's not the one I'm thinking of right now."

"Oh?"

"I've always been partial to ladies with strawberry colored locks," he said, touching a length of Sara's hair.

She let out a breath she hadn't known she was holding. "Do you know what kind of man I've always, secretly, yearned for?"

Torin shook his head, using her hair to pull her closer.

"Old fashioned."

It didn't take Leia long to find Mary Katherine. Curled into a ball, as tightly as hoop skirts would allow, she was huddled in the garden near the cherub fountain. Rocking herself for comfort, she reminded Leia of the many hours she'd spent in the same garden after the death of her parents, sobbing, wet and wilted.

Without speaking, Leia went to her cousin's side and sat, spreading her own skirts on the warm ground. She pulled Mary Katherine's head to her shoulder, brushing soggy strands of gold hair away from her face. Leia joined the rocking motion, allowing self-pity to bond her to the sad scenario. A few drops squeezed out, but the hurt she felt seemed too deeply pitted in her stomach to flow from her eyes.

"It's okay," she said, out of habit more than anything else. "This probably won't make you feel any better, but I'm glad you found out his true nature before you married him."

Mary Katherine quieted the sobs. "You're right. I've had this feeling about him for the past few days, like something had changed."

"I think the war's changed everyone," Leia said, stroking Mary Katherine's hair. "But not you. You're still sweet, and you'll find the right man some day. If you want one, that is."

"But how could I have so badly misjudged Alvin's character?"

"I don't think he's a bad man, or overly unfair. He's just worn out by fighting, and leading the fighting, and then not getting the recognition he deserved. Maybe he has something to prove to the world."

"Well, maybe, but he can't ruin Brant and your good names in the process. You are family, and family comes first."

Leia hugged her shoulders to Mary Katherine's. "You're wonderful. So how can I cheer you up?"

"That's easy. Take care of Brant and make me an aunt. At least an honorary one."

Leia placed one hand over her abdomen, feeling the flat surface beneath her clothes. For the first time in weeks, she went over her monthly schedule in her mind.

"There you are," Brant said, approaching them. His gaze drifted down to her stomach, and his voice became concerned. "Are you ill?"

Leia snatched her hand back to her side. "No. I'm fine. What's happening inside?"

"The General's looking for Mary Katherine." Brant looked down, offering a hand to each woman. "But I told him she'd be out for hours, probably went to the neighbors'."

Mary Katherine nodded, accepting the hand. On her feet, she reached up to plant a kiss on his cheek. "Thank you. I'll be back later," she said, and slipped into the cover of the trees.

Brant looked at Leia. "She's lived out here her entire life. She'll be fine."

Leia nodded now, standing to slip an arm around Brant's waist.

"Uh, Leia," he began, after a hesitation. "Diamond wants to see you, too."

"Oh, God," she said, grimacing the way Sara had always told her would wrinkle her face.

"He'll be with you. So will I."

"You know," she said, dusting grass from her skirt, "if Diamond can wait a few hours for Mary Katherine, couldn't he wait just as easily for me?"

A grin was her reply. "Just what are you suggesting, Mrs. Douglas?"

"Let's take a long walk. I believe we need to check on the cabin."

Brant took her hand and led her through the trees, around a few rocks and ditches. When they reached the large, flat rock Belle had climbed to avoid the snake, he stopped.

Leia was perspiring daintily, her white skin glittered even under the forest roof. Was it the heat, he wondered, or an anticipation of her warmth? He stepped onto the rock and she followed. Before she sat, he stopped her.

"Wait. Let's take care of something," he said, and lifted her outer skirt.

"Brant."

"Wait," he said again, smiling, and loosened the ties that held her hoop skirt in place. In an economy of movement the wiry bell fell, collapsed onto the ground in a white puff. Brant kicked it aside. "Now we can sit."

Thigh pressed against thigh, they made the rock their own special place. Brant's body was well aware of Leia's presence, warm and firm next to him.

"I'm afraid of him, you know," she said, beginning the conversation, staring forward.

"You mean the General?"

"Who else? You know I can't get back to where I came from, at least not at my own discretion. He thinks I'm a spy, Brant. What if he hauls me off to some prison? Or

worse?"

"Leia, that's not going to happen. All of the McGarlands are on your side." He traced the outline of her hand, then laid it on his leg.

"You know what Mary Katherine said wasn't true, don't you?" She still faced forward, away from Brant.

"Yes. And I love her for doing it. Loyalty is so admirable, so rare." He rubbed small circles on his thigh with her hand.

"But what if it doesn't work?"

He said nothing for a few seconds, then pushed his free hand through his hair. "Do you really want to know?"

"Worst case scenario, please." She finally turned to look at him. Her eyes shimmered with tears, whether for herself or him he couldn't tell.

"What's that?"

"Never mind. Just tell me this...if I have to leave, what will you do?"

"I couldn't serve the General any longer if he hurt you, Leia." He spoke softly, feeling his stomach tighten with the thought. The sunlight filtering through the treetops kissed her blonde hair, creating a halo of light. He hadn't thought of her as an angel before. Angels don't stay in one place, everyone knew that. What would he do then, after the war? He had no land, no skills that would serve him beyond farming and soldiering. Then again, no one would be around to expect his care if Diamond cost him Leia...and his career.

"You can't let me alter your plans," she said, touching the corner of one eye with her finger. "I appreciate your faith in me, but you never intended to marry me in the first place. Stay with the Union, Brant. It'll be safer soon."

He moved a finger to the inner contours of her ear. "Everything's going to change, isn't it?"

She shivered at his gentle touch. "It has to. Brant, I got another message today, from Sara. I think you should read this one."

"Torin again?"

She nodded. "Sara really likes him." She handed him the curled paper. He scanned it briefly.

Dear Leia,

I took Torin to McDonald's last night, after rehearsal. He's in love with french fries and the Big Mac. His fascination with everyday things is wonderful, and has made me look at the world with new appreciation.

I'm teaching him to drive. You'll have to come home and see that for yourself.

Jason found out about my hand in his property plans. I made him see that if I hadn't interfered at all during his trip, he would have lost all the eligible properties. He asked to come over, but I'm holding up here in my place with Torin. When Torin asked me about Jason, I could honestly say that I had no more feelings for him. Isn't life strange?

Love you,

Sara

"Leia?" He kept his tone serious and crumpled the paper.

"Yes, Brant?" She seemed to hold her breath. Did she think he'd be upset by this?

"What's a Big Mac?"

She giggled.

Brant positioned his arm around the small of Leia's back, and she moved closer to lean her head on his shoulder. He breathed in deeply, straining to impress on his memory the scent of her rainwater-fresh hair. She couldn't possibly be a spy. He'd seen all of her secrets. Did the future really need to have her back? Would the fates consider Torin going forward a fair trade? With eyes closed and head tilted back, Brant set all of his doubts aside and wished that they could lead a quiet, dull life as man and wife. It wasn't likely, but it was a nice thing to wish.

"Leia, we should head back. If we stay here any longer, the General will come looking for us and find us in one of those compromising positions, perched on a slab of rock."

She tilted her head, flashing a pearly grin. "And hard as one."

After a silent walk back to the house, hand-in-hand, they entered through the back door. As the door slammed closed behind them, Brant's ears perked up at the sound of men talking. He barred Leia's path with his arm.

"Someone's here." His voice was a ragged whisper. It was happening already.

Her face jerked toward him, alarm spreading like a rash. "Oh, God."

"It will be fine, Leia. Let's breathe slowly." He inhaled, and exhaled loudly. Be brave for her, he told himself. He almost wished she'd never arrived here, never exposed herself to such risk...almost. He breathed air out again.

She did the same, showing a fake smile this time. "Okay, let's go in."

The parlor was full, crowded with faces both military and civilian. The air smelled of damp wool. Leaning against the mantle General Diamond stood, booted foot propped on the stone hearth. The McGarlands sat together on one long settee, quietly observing the proceedings. Mary Katherine stared at hands folded neatly in her lap, while Martha wrung hers continuously. Patrick looked older than he had this morning. Leia took another deep breath. Now that she and Brant had arrived, everything really could

proceed.

Four soldiers, dressed in faded but clean blue uniforms, stood at near-attention by the doorway. A woman Leia didn't recognize sat on a straight-backed wooden chair, her spine straight and her blonde hair the same. She looks familiar, Leia thought.

Brant steered her into the room by the elbow, presenting her reluctantly to General Diamond. The leader looked tired, almost benevolent, nodding at Leia absently before turning back to Brant.

"You wanted to see us, General?" Brant asked, a formal tone in his voice. Leia thought his voice quivered, but she was probably mistaken. He wasn't the one to be questioned.

"Yes. Brant, please take a seat with the McGarlands." When Brant complied, he turned back to Leia. She stood alone in the center of the room, ringed by McGarlands and military. Her knees dissolved into Jell-O Jigglers, and she was grateful for the long dress that hid them from sight.

"Leah Douglas. There has been a change in my plans since this morning. You are being placed in Union custody. You are not to leave this house until tomorrow morning, when you will be questioned by my commander." He said the words blandly, his face a blank canvas lacking feeling. No apologies, no sympathy for Brant were expressed or implied.

"What?" The McGarland and Douglas voices gasped in unison. Leia's stomach dropped to her toes.

One of the soldiers stepped forward. His uniform indicated he was more decorated than the others. "Mrs. Douglas, was it your intention for your husband to be shot before reaching Gettysburg? Who did you warn about the ambush?" He looked at her with eyes cold as frozen blueberry ice. A flavor she used to love.

"What are you talking about?" Leia felt her head spin, the heat and humidity were swarming around her. She needed something, or someone, to lean on.

"Your activities the night before your husband was shot, Mrs. Douglas," he said, still staring. "That's what I'm talking about. What can you tell me about those activities?"

Swirling nausea painted her insides. She couldn't breathe. Behind her, she heard Brant coming to her defense. His words were paisley marks on her already patterned field of vision. She felt his arm go around her, steadying her.

"Something else you should be aware of, Brant," Diamond was saying above the hum in Leia's ears. "Do you see the blonde lady sitting there?"

Brant looked toward the woman in the chair, and nodded. Leia's heart seemed to stop. Oh, no. It couldn't be.

"That's Leah Grahm, the widow from Baltimore. The real Leah."

Patrick spoke up from his spot on the sofa. "How can that be? This here is the real Leah,

you see. She's my niece."

"And she played that role very well, sir. In that chair is your niece, Leah. Standing in front of me here is Belle Boyd's contact. She's a spy." Diamond leaned closer to Leia.

"And Belle's in prison now, miss. I wouldn't expect to hear from her anytime soon."

All bedlam seemed to break loose. Every voice in the room rose to a fevered pitch, in defense of, or attacking, Leia. The soldier that had spoken earlier strode to stand before the General.

"There is one way to be certain, sir." All eyes turned to him, and the din lulled.

"Go on." Diamond's voice was gruff. Could he be as displeased with these events as Leia?

Through the mirage of faces that Leia saw in the room, it seemed this soldier, too, was uncomfortable as he spoke. As if he cared. As if he had anything at risk.

"Well, the report is that the real Leah McGarland Graham bears a birthmark about four inches below her naval, sir. It's a round mark her mother had as well." He looked pointedly at Leia's middle.

"That's correct, sir," the blonde in the chair said. "But to prove I bear the mark could be rather, indelicate." Her voice quivered.

Leia couldn't ask where he got his information, couldn't respond with horror at the implications, couldn't lift her skirts for these men. She could only fight to stay conscious, fight to keep her stomach inside her body. She never fainted. This couldn't be happening. Brant was her life-preserver, but even the best couldn't keep you afloat in such an all-consuming storm. With a final wave of what felt like ocean water drowning her, Leia slumped to the floor through Brant's arms.

Chapter 19

"You knew all along, didn't you?" Brant sat with his head on his arms, slumped over Patrick's desk. Inhaling the wood furniture smell would from now on remind him of this night. The house had cleared, but soldiers remained outside. The library, quiet as if mourning its earlier peace, provided Brant and Patrick a haven from the chaos.

"Drink this," Patrick ordered, setting a brandy in front of Brant. He touched the younger man's shoulder, patting it a few times in a fatherly fashion.

Brant straightened slowly, and pushed the drink away. "Thank you, but I need to keep alert. You didn't answer my question."

Patrick sighed, and sat across the desk from him. "Did I know Belle was a spy? No. Did I know Leah wasn't really Leah Graham? Yes."

"Why didn't you say something? You let me marry her, for God's sake!" He rubbed his eyes and the bridge of his nose, trying to ease the pressure. At Patrick's continued silence, he asked, "Why would you let me marry a woman whose identity was in question?"

"There were several reasons, you see. For one, you love her. You loved her from the moment she interrupted our dinner that first night. I could see it in your eyes. For another, I knew she would work with you, help you with the traveling. She has more fire in her than my real niece will ever have, especially since the real niece in question will never stop grieving for her husband. I've no doubt of that. So the traveling Leah was the perfect woman for you, and I could see she was quite taken with you as well. We hadn't seen my niece since she was a small child, and the resemblance is obvious. Please don't pretend with me that you didn't know your wife was an impostor. You're more intelligent than that." Patrick refilled his own glass after delivering his speech.

Brant was speechless.

"What will you do now, son?" The quiet room echoed with the sound of Patrick's glass hitting the wood desk. It sounded as hollow as Brant felt.

"I have an idea," Brant said, leaning across the table. What he was about to tell Patrick was for his ears only, and perhaps those of Mary Katherine.

"I hoped you would."

Leia awoke in her room, her mouth dry and pasty. What she wouldn't give for a capful of Scope mouthwash right now. She stretched, arms and legs extending in the narrow bed.

Brant stood by the window, looking out at some unknown object or scene. His shoulders were slumped, his neck arched slightly. She'd never seen him look so dejected and it was her fault. He didn't deserve the trouble she'd brought to his life.

"You're awake," he said, replacing the curtain panel he'd held. The heavy damask

allowed little light through, making the room glow royal blue...as blue as he sounded.

"Brant, what happens now?" she asked slowly, moving to a sitting position. Her mind was foggy on how she had gotten into the bed, but she clearly recalled the military accusations.

He moved toward the bed, then as if on impulse, sat beside her. Pushing aside layers of covers, Brant made room to sit next to her, his hip pressing against hers. He must have undressed her, because only her chemise separated her white legs from his blue trousers. The scratchy wool rubbed through the flimsy cotton, irritating her skin as much as her situation irritated her.

"We answer the questions, in the morning." He made the statement simple.

She knew it wasn't simple. "They won't believe anything I say, will they?"

He looked pained, his face drawn into tiny lines. "It would be unlikely. The General seems to have made up his mind about you and Belle."

She knew most people would assume the same. "Did you know about her?" Leia couldn't keep the edge from her tone. "That she was a spy?"

The lines grew deeper, becoming furrows on his sculpted face. "I had no idea. I thought she was looking for a husband, not Federal secrets. Torin doesn't know, and I'm sure the McGarlands didn't. Until now."

"And there she was, spying on you all that time. Did Belle know about the slaves?" Leia hoped she hadn't brought more problems down on McGarland heads.

Brant shook his head and reached for her hand. He pulled it loose from the bed covers she was busy rumpling. "I don't think so. I've never shared that with anyone outside the McGarland family, who had to know since they live here. No one has made me even begin to trust them, not since..."

"Not since Margaret?" She had to ask, aware of how green-eyed she sounded.

"You mean more to me than she ever did, Leia. I know less about you and your family, but I love you like I've known you forever." He clasped her hand over his heart.

"Margaret would never have helped me free the slaves." He laughed, but it sounded bitter. "She would have wanted them to be taken to BlueBell Ridge."

"Would Belle?"

"Only if it would have served her own traitorous cause. I do hope she doesn't mention the cellar door when they question her, if she hasn't already."

Leia's head snapped up. "Oh God, she was there. She saw it all...when Torin and Jason disappeared."

"She has a lot more to worry about, Leia, than one cellar door. She's been trading information to the south for years, they say. We found out she's already seen prison

twice. Unless she decides to plead insanity, she won't mention people disappearing through a doorway. It's not likely she'll claim to be crazy, either. That fate would be worse than any prison. This way, at least she's a hero to the South."

"I'm scared," Leia said, pulling her knees up to her chest. Hugging herself for comfort, she looked up at the ceiling so the tears she fought couldn't slip down her cheek.

"I know. We'll just answer the questions honestly and everything will come out fine. We've done nothing wrong." Then he dropped his voice to a whisper, and he held a finger to her lips. "I have a plan."

A flicker of hope, very dim, made Leia sit straighter and release her knees. "Yes?"

"Stay quiet, in case someone's listening. Patrick and I worked it out, hoping no one overheard. In a few hours, when everyone's asleep, we are to meet Hettie in the cellar. It has to be very dark. We can't chance a light. Do you understand?" He paused to let her absorb his meaning.

She swallowed, knowing she couldn't afford to let a phobia deter her now. As if her flicker had been turned up by a dimmer-switch, she felt more hopeful. "Brant, I've tried to find the door. You know that. It's never worked to let me through after that first time. What if we can't find it?"

"Hettie controls the door. I thought you knew that," he said, speaking so softly she wished she could read lips. "She's going to help us, but she can't go through herself, or the door's gone forever."

"How does she know that?"

"How does she control the door? How does she understand its rules? Who knows? All that matters now is getting you through it before dawn. Hettie's prepared. The guards are stationed one on each side of the house. They don't expect any problems from us, but perhaps they expect Belle's allies to show up. The General's in his usual guest room."

"What if he wakes up?"

"Our emergency plan would take over. Mary Katherine will be waiting in the hall while we go downstairs. She's prepared to, um, distract the General, if needed, with tears, or wiles, or whatever it takes to give us time."

Leia sucked in a deep breath. What was she costing this family? "Brant, I need to know. Did Belle tell the Union that I, or any of the McGarlands, helped her?"

"Not as far as I'm aware."

"So it's strictly guilt-by-association, then."

He looked at her. "In a way, yes. If you hadn't come after me that night, there might be less evidence against you now."

"I don't call any of this evidence. It's circumstantial at best, and I'm really sorry I

followed you, too. My mistake." She had lost her cool.

"That's not what I meant." He took her chin in his hand, turning it so she had to meet his eyes. "Your love means everything. I just didn't realize it then, but I did know from the first time I kissed you it wouldn't be easy for us."

"But you thought the extent of our problems would be finding a way to live and feed ourselves after the war, should I prove loyal enough to love you for who you are, not what you have."

"That seemed very important at the time. I felt concerned about my honor, or pride, because of being betrayed, and then because I couldn't provide for a family."

"And now?" She prodded him with a gentle hand, having waited so long to hear this.

"Now...now all I want is freedom for us to be together. That's all that really matters."

"I have to ask you something else, and then I promise no more questions."

"For a while."

"Right...For a while. I need to know this before, or in case, they get to question me. Did you say anything to the General about your mistrust of me, that night at the camp? Did he know about the suspicions you had before you came to know me?" She held her breath.

"No. I told him we had disagreed, and that I had sent you away. Mostly I told him I was concerned for your safety, and disgusted with myself for sending you off like that. I shouldn't have done that, no matter what I thought at the time, and Diamond agreed. He was put out with me and concerned for you then as well."

"Then?" she asked, well aware of the answer.

"Then. He was concerned for you then."

She only nodded, having expected the answer. Now he was concerned only with her as his scapegoat.

"Are you ready? We leave soon."

"I need to put my own shoes on, and the underwear I had on when I arrived. I wouldn't want anyone to find it."

"What about your dress?"

"It's the black one in the wardrobe." She chuckled. "The only black one I kept once we got married."

"I remember telling you to save them, in case you were widowed again."

"Was that before or after you found out I was a virgin?" She used a teasing tone, ruffling his hair with her hand.

He reached for her then, slipping the cotton straps of her chemise from her shoulders.

When he'd worked the soft material down to Leia's hips, he buried his nose between her breasts. She sighed, enjoying the instant tightening of her inner core.

"You are so shapely, so plush and womanly," he said, his words muffled by her body. No one had ever said that type of thing to her before, especially when talking about her breasts.

He moved lower, pushing the chemise down her body and onto the floor. When she was nude, he pulled her legs to the edge of the bed and knelt between them. She began to protest, pushing up on her elbows and taking his face with her hands.

"You're beautiful," he said, pulling free from her hands and staring down at her with lusty eyes. His voice sounded gruff, raw to her.

"Brant, please come up here and kiss me," she said, embarrassed.

"I will, but first I'm going to kiss you down here. Your golden petals are blooming, Leia, and you smell like a fresh rose, damp with dew," he told her, instantly dissolving her concerns. This man could have been a diplomat. So who was she to argue?

She laid back and enjoyed the negotiations.

Too soon, Brant pulled his trousers on, urging her to don her underwear and dress. Leia drew a deep gulp of air, wanting to remember everything about this time, in case something went wrong in the cellar. She wanted to remember the musky, male scent when her head was on his chest, and the smell of the oil lamp that illuminated their lovemaking.

Her own shoes felt tight after wearing Mary Katherine's soft slippers. She propped a foot on the chair to tie the laces and Brant came from behind her, strong arms circling her.

"We have to go," he said, bracing her waist while she tied the other shoe.

"Let's do it." She followed him from the room, certain he had carefully assessed the hall. Mary Katherine, as promised, was waiting in the dark. Leia found her by touch, and pulled her close for a hug.

"I'll miss you," Mary Katherine said, "I'll take care of Scruffy. You take care, whatever happens."

"I'll miss you, too. You've been the sister I never had. Thanks for everything. And please thank Martha and Patrick for me. They've been like grandparents." She pulled away after whispering her heartfelt good-byes in Mary Katherine's ear.

Clinging to Brant's arm and the banister, Leia made it down the front stairs. With each step she lifted her feet high, placing them lightly on the floor to be certain of where she walked. The house was dark and silent, as if already mourning their departure. She couldn't believe that just a few hours ago the house had been like a military court room. Now it was as quiet as a...raffle drawing right before they chose the winner.

In the blackness, Leia could picture both the nineteenth and twentieth century furnishings and how they would be laid out. She shivered, aware they had reached the dining room...and then she froze.

From above, Mary Katherine's feminine voice was engaged in small talk. Flirtatious small talk.

"...just said those things so Uncle Patrick wouldn't think I was too forward...and you really did touch me, after all, yes, I like it...oh, touch me there again..." Mary Katherine giggled.

Leia couldn't move. She waited, listening, horrified by what her friend had to do...for her. A hollow thud silenced Mary Katherine, and Leia was certain she'd been pushed up against the wall. Did the General have his hands on her now?

Brant pulled on her, "She can handle him. If she can't, all she has to do is scream and the whole house will be in the hallway. She knows it. And we can't be standing here if that happens."

He was right, but she didn't like taking advantage of her friend like this. At her protest, Brant held firm. They had to get to the portal before it was too late, and Mary Katherine's efforts would have been for naught.

Brant squeezed her hand. "We're going down the cellar stairs. Don't lose your balance."

She nodded, but knew he couldn't see her in the dark. She grasped his upper arm, took the handrail with the other, and pulled the cellar door closed behind her. "Wait, Brant, my cabinet..."

"Forget it. I'll make you another one." He guided her down the steps, gentle, but firm.

Hettie waited for them, shoulders slumped, nearly invisible at the foot of the stairs. She said nothing, just guided them further into the desolate nothingness, her pace slower than normal as she led them further away from the time period Leia thought of as history. Humidity hung in the air, cooler and sharper below ground level.

Leia fought back nausea, telling herself that nerves were normal under such circumstances. She couldn't think about Mary Katherine right now. Though she knew only sixty seconds or so had passed, she felt as if she'd been wandering in the darkness for hours. Without her sense of sight, she lifted her feet higher than necessary. Black seemed to whirl around her, giving the illusion of floor where there was none.

"There," Hettie said, turning Brant's shoulders sharply right. Her breathing tore ragged from her lungs, but she stood straight. Brant turned Leia so the three of them faced a staircase topped by a doorway so dimly outlined Leia feared she was imagining it.

"Hettie," Brant whispered, "why didn't you tell me how ill you are?"

"Wouldn't do no good, Mista Brant. The door just keeps gettin' dimmer and dimmer. Can't get what I need in this year, you know."

"What does she need? What are you talking about?" Leia asked, suddenly worried about Hettie too, on top of her concern for Mary Katherine, overlapping her fears for her and Brant's fate. She could scarcely breathe in the heavy, wet air.

"Nothing, Miz Leah," Hettie said, "Don't worry about me."

Brant touched Hettie's arm. "Do you know what you need? Is it available then?"

"I believe so. I heard some talk from travelers one time. But it's too late."

"You have to come with us. It's the only way." Brant turned to Leia. "Hettie needs to come forward with us, to get medical attention."

"But she won't consider it because that means no more slaves can escape," Leia said, suddenly understanding. "Hettie, you've helped so many. Now you must help yourself."

Brant grasped an upper arm of each woman and started up the narrow staircase. Leia turned sideways to accommodate the trio, testing each step before planting her full weight on them. The wooden planks groaned under them. Halfway up, a noise from the cellar stopped them cold.

"Douglas...you down here?" The masculine, slightly intoxicated voice bellowed into the deep darkness, echoes bouncing off the damp walls.

"It's one of Diamond's guards. What's he doing down here?" Leia whispered the question into Brant's ear. The little group stood motionless, the steps silent.

"Who's over there?" The voice called out again, followed by movements of what sounded like glass knocking glass. "Where's the damn..." A piece of glass on the dirt floor told Leia the man had gotten thirsty on duty and stumbled across the wine.

They started to climb again, hoping the guard would be busy with his spilled drink and shards. They had no such good luck. A lamp was lit at the foot of the stairs, where they had stood just moments ago. The man held the lamp over his head and took two steps up.

"Douglas, you have an underground passage here? That why we keep hearing 'bout you stealing slaves and setting 'em free? You're on that underground railroad, ain't you? You letting this darkie go free tonight?" Round sweat stains ringed the man's filthy shirt, and his breath filtered up the stairs, sour with wine.

Leia shuddered at the man's crude words, but kept climbing and reached the door. Feeling the rough wood under her palm, she accepted a few splinters before finding the knob. Brant remained a few steps below her, between Hettie and the guard. She watched the little scene, unsure of what to do.

Hettie swayed, leaning on the handrail for support. Leia knew she had to act, because the door was fading before her eyes. She turned the knob and yanked, ready to plunge through the portal.

"Leia, go," Brant urged, maintaining his position, not taking his eyes from the guard.

She wanted to go, but she wanted Brant to go with her. If she went alone now, or went and took Hettie with her, Brant would be charged with running an operation to steal and free slaves. A major offense in 1863, even if your wife wasn't under suspicion of being a spy. She couldn't leave him alone to that fate. He must get through the door. She let it close.

"Brant, it's stuck," she said, trying to get his attention. Hettie looked up at her, not understanding.

He groaned and whirled quickly, dashing up the stairs and squeezing past the women. When he opened the door easily, Leia pushed him through. The last thing she saw of him was the surprise in his cocoa eyes. Next she pulled Hettie up the two remaining steps, aware of the guard climbing the steps by twos.

"Miz Leah.."

"Go!" She pushed Hettie through the door, aware of the guard's hand on her left arm. Brant was pulling her right arm, gently but with persistence. She briefly thought of a wishbone, too much adrenaline pumping through her to be terrified.

"You're not getting away from me," the guard said, hissing into her ear. His strong hand only grasped her arm, the other supported himself with the handrail. He was strong for his condition, but Leia felt the right side of her body go through the portal, not that it felt like anything, but she was closer to Brant.

The guard laughed, so confident was he of capturing his prey. "You'll be joining your friend in a real rough place, Mrs. Douglas. No more slaves are going to slip through this station, no ma'am. Spying and slave stealing! You've got quite a future in a Union prison." He seemed to be in no hurry now, keeping his firm grip on Leia's arm but not pulling as hard. The guard reached over with his free hand and pinched Leia's breast. Leering, he said, "Oh yes, you will make a fine prisoner."

Perspiration soaked Leia's dress, trickling down her sides. The man-made material of the modern dress absorbed no moisture. With heart pounding in her skull, Leia closed her eyes and prayed. Maybe Grandfather was listening. Maybe her parents. Maybe God.

"Leia, hold on," Brant said, seemingly unable to cross back through the doorway. "I love you, just don't move."

Like she could. The men's pulling pressure increased on both sides of her body until she felt tears behind her eyelids. She offered up a few words of prayer, asking to die rather than end up in nineteenth century military hands. Without notice, she felt her right leg whipped out from under her. In a split second the left sleeve of her dress ripped free, leaving the guard staring stupidly at a piece of ragged material.

She landed on her back in the dining room of her house. Her beautiful, modern house registered while she caught her breath. Hettie slammed the dining room door shut behind

them.

"It's over," she said, leaning against the door.

Brant knelt over Leia, testing her back and limbs for damage. "You scared me. You shouldn't have pushed me through first. Does your back hurt? Leia, do you know what would have happened to you if you hadn't made it through? Why'd you do that?"

"Couldn't let you be caught," she said as breath began to refill her lungs. "You two have done so much good, helped so many people. I just wanted to do something good."

He pulled her to his chest, crushing her to him. "You are good. You helped us help the slaves, Leia. I would've stayed. You didn't have to go through that."

Hettie opened the door, looked down, and closed it again. She drew a heavy breath that seemed only partly from relief. "Don't worry, there'll be no more traveling that way. I ended it when I came through. And Mista Brant, be glad you didn't sacrifice yourself by staying. Your wife's gonna have a baby."

Brant looked down at her, eyes widened. "Is this true?"

Leia blushed. "I think so. I didn't say anything because I wasn't sure. There was no drugstore to buy a home test kit."

"We haven't been together that often," he said, helping Leia to her feet. "You can test this at home now?"

"Yes. My mother got pregnant with me on her wedding night. It must be hereditary."

"What?"

She laughed, feeling better than she had in a long time, overlooking the dull ache in her lower back and the developing arm bruises. "Never mind. Let's look around. Someone may be here." The group moved through the first floor of the house. Leia gazed in awe at each room, now decorated so differently. Antiques had been replaced with contemporary glass tables, electric lamps and leather furniture. Home!

In the kitchen, Hettie called out. "Here's something. A note that says: Martin, please wake me when you come in. S."

Leia hurried to examine the note. "That's Sara. She must be upstairs." She turned to face Hettie, who was grinning at her broadly. "Did you just read that?"

"You're a good teacher."

Leia grinned back. "Let's go surprise my friend Sara." She rubbed the small of her back, a chore which Brant took over for her. They climbed the front stairs, and she took great pleasure in touching her photographs of houses and the electric lamps over them. Leia led them to Sara's favorite bedroom in the house. Electricity!

Without knocking, Leia entered.

She gasped.

Stretched out on the bed, side by side facing each other, were Torin and Sara. His arm draped gracefully over the curve of her waist. Naked from the waist up, the rest under covers, they also gasped at the intruders. Then everyone, except Hettie, spoke at once.

"Leia! You're back!" Sara exclaimed, pulling the covers up to her neck.

"Torin, what's going on here?" Brant asked, big brother-like.

"Brant? How'd you get here?" Torin jumped from the bed to embrace his brother.

"Sara," Leia said, sitting beside her friend. "Are you okay?"

"Are you? I mean, traveling back in time and all, I was afraid I'd never see you again. Jason told me what happened. Is that your husband? My God, he's a real hunk."

"Of course, I see you also approve of Torin," Leia teased, relieved that Brant's brother had been wearing boxers when he threw back the blankets.

"We got married," Sara said, sitting up and reaching for a sweater, seemingly undaunted as the sheet fell away from her chest.

"You're kidding!" Leia stood, shocked, and turned Brant away so Sara could dress.

Brant was busy slapping his brother on the back. Once her clothes were on, Brant reached for Sara. "Let me welcome you to the family," he told her, pecking her cheek.

"We're sisters now," Sara said to Leia, smiling. "I knew it would happen someday." She leaned closer and said, "I'm so sorry for not believing you about Jason. Forgive me?"

Nodding, Leia felt happy, lighter than air, but just a little sad that she'd left her other sister behind. Mary Katherine could never have married and inherited the house, however, if she had not. She could never have passed it down the genetic line, and Leia would never have met Brant. She'd have to do some research and see whom Mary Katherine had eventually married.

She was snapped out of her thoughts when the bedroom door was filled with a large, dark shadow. For the second time in just minutes, a voice boomed out, "What's going on here?"

"Martin!" Leia grabbed the tall man and hugged his waist. He returned the embrace, but set her aside after a moment.

"Martin?" she asked, wondering what was wrong. As she watched, Martin moved toward Hettie, who stood immobile near the bed.

"Hettie?" he asked, moving nearer, arms extended, eyes wide.

Then they were in each other's arms, not lustily, but like a brother and sister who had been separated for many years.

"Let's leave them alone to talk," Brant suggested, and the four young people left the

room. Brant touched Leia's arm in the hall. "We need to take Hettie to see a modern doctor."

"Come with me. I have some things to show you. We'll start by calling a doctor right now. I could use a blood test myself."

Torin laughed. "You're going to love the telephone, big brother."

Sara was more concerned. "Are you sick, Leia? Did the time-traveling hurt?"

Leia took her friend's hand. "No, but I may be pregnant. I need to find out." And if she was, how could she find out if time traveling affected the baby?

Sara squealed. "Oh, that's wonderful! And you're married, and you get to keep the house, right? Can Brant stay here?"

"He has to. The portal's gone for good. I guess we need some paperwork on the wedding, since Jason might push to see it."

"He's left for Pennsylvania. I don't expect him back anytime soon."

"Really? Why?"

"I'll tell you all about it later, but it suffices to say I nixed his deal to sell this property out from under you. He's involved with some property a church gave him to develop, under certain conditions. And you know, these two men appeared out of nowhere one day, dressed as Confederates, and Jason took them in as partners in this Civil War Mall he's doing. They're helping do some of the charity work required in the deal. It was really odd."

Brant and Leia exchanged glances, realizing fully where and when these two men had come from. She'd have to tell Hettie about the men they'd chased into the future, too.

"Hettie is wonderful," Leia said, pulling Brant close for another hug. "I think you and I need another honeymoon, a real one, don't you?"

"I don't know about a wedding trip with a woman who's already with child," he said, his eyes large with feigned concern.

"That reminds me. C'mon, we're going to call my family doctor." She led him to the parlor phone, and amazed him at the conversation she had making an appointment for Hettie to visit. A blush warmed her cheeks as she explained to the secretary, whom she had known for years, that she also needed a pregnancy test. She hastened to add that she had married, but would be keeping her own health insurance for now.

As she replaced the receiver, Leia spied her glass pieces, intact and on display. The Chippendale cabinet hosted some of them, the windowsill even more.

"Look, Brant, my glass is here. Even the pieces you bought me are here!" She moved to examine them, delicately lifting each piece of cool, smooth glass. Seeing one particular item, she jumped, almost dropping a blue bottle.

"Brant, this is so weird. The pieces you smashed are here, at least, I think these are the same ones. My goodness, this collection has really multiplied," she said, shaking her head.

"Like you're going to do?" Sara's playful voice came from the arched doorway.

"I hope so," Leia admitted, setting the bottles back in place. "Brant's going to build another cabinet for me, for my display. He made one as a wedding present, but of course, I couldn't bring it with me through the portal." She sighed. "Not that I didn't want to."

Sara tilted her head and said, "Leia, you might want to check out the wood cabinet in the alcove. I had never seen it before, but it's beautiful. There are champagne glasses in it now." She lowered her voice. "I think it's an antique."

Brant and Leia exchanged glances. Could it be?

Torin came in behind Sara. "Has your bride demonstrated the remote control and television? You're going to be beside yourself. And then, you must go for a ride in an automobile. I think.."

"Wait!" Leia held up her hands in surrender. "I give in. There's a ton of things Brant needs to see. But I have to get back to my business. There are mortgage companies to call and appointments to reschedule, if anyone will still speak to me."

"I could help you with that, Miz Leah," Hettie said from the doorway. "It seems that I'm stuck here too, and you know my brother Martin will get to driving me crazy before too long, and I'll need something to do."

She turned to Martin. "I can read now, too."

"Hettie, that would be wonderful. I trust you with my life. Why not my work? I'll take you into the office tomorrow morning and we'll get started. And then the next day, I can show Brant a few modern conveniences." Leia turned and headed for the alcove, fingers crossed superstitiously. As she flipped on a wall switch, warm light from a Tiffany table lamp filled the room.

"It's here," she said, frozen in place. The cabinet Brant had made her, with his own hands, was waiting for her in the corner. The angled corner chair was gone, but the cabinet's polished darkness gleamed like new. Someday, she'd give it to her child as a wedding present.

"We didn't have to carry it here, did we?" Brant asked, slipping into the room behind her. "All we had to do was put it into history." He wrapped his arms around her from behind, whispering into her ear. "Our history."

"Thank you again for my wedding present." Her eyes filled, along with her heart.

"And thank you again for mine."

Leia settled everyone into a bedroom for the night. The fatigue from stress showed on every face, nineteenth and twentieth century alike. Brant closed the door softly behind him, signaling the retiring of the host and hostess for the evening.

"We are successfully free," he said, leaning against the six-paneled door with an ease and confidence Leia admired.

"I'm sorry that you can never go back, for your sake. Will that bother you very much?" She waited without breathing, hoping for a negative response. She got one.

"There's nothing to miss, Leia. My brother's here, and he's all the family I had left...All the family I valued, that is. Now," he said, raising an eyebrow, "we can make as large a family as we want."

She giggled. "Come here, you big hunk of man."

"What?" The other eyebrow raised.

"That's what Sara called you. A hunk. It's a very modern, very complimentary term for a strong and handsome man." She patted the bed beside her.

He obliged, aligning their hips and thighs as he had back in 1863, in the narrow bed. Reaching for her stomach, he gently rested his hand on it, and leaned his lips toward hers for a kiss.

She gasped, taking his tongue into her own mouth. "God, you do it to me even when I'm pregnant."

"Do what?" He turned a mischievous eye to her.

"Heat my insides."

"If you're pregnant, I guess the weight you're gaining will eventually drop away."

"I hope so." So would he, once he'd seen fashion magazines.

"Too bad. I like the swell of your breasts," he said, taking them in hand. "I like these fuller thighs, too. They make things easier."

"Brant," she said, barely able to catch her breath. She wrapped her arms around his neck.

"And soon you'll look like one of those shapely bottles in your collection."

"Brant," she said again, wondering if her words reflected her blush.

"They're my favorite," he said, and quieted her with his mouth.

Leia woke to the smell of brewing coffee, and hurried downstairs for a cup. Fresh caffeine, mildly roasted from Colombian beans, was something she had sorely missed in the nineteenth century. When she reached the kitchen, Martin stood at the counter, as if waiting for her.

"Good morning," he said, his white teeth gleaming like a commercial for toothpaste.

"Martin, you don't know how much I need this coffee," she said, reaching for the extra large mug he offered. The steam drifted up to her nostrils, tickling them, until she couldn't stand it and sipped indelicately.

"It's decaf, just in case. We're all glad you got back, Leia. Was it very hard for you?"

"Actually, I enjoyed it sometimes. I met Brant, and that was great. Sometimes were downright scary, like when I was alone in the woods at night. I think the hardest part was exploring the cellar last night, to find the passage, without using any lights." She sipped again, watching Martin's face.

"Is something wrong, Martin?"

"I have a confession, Leia. As you know, I am Hettie's brother. We worked together for a long time, coordinating the escape plans of fellow black Americans. Slaves. I couldn't bring Hettie forward and still expect the passage to work, so I have born the guilt of my sister's servitude for many years. I wanted to thank you for befriending her, and teaching her to read, which I always wanted to do."

"Martin, how did I go back in time? How did I find the cellar portal into the past that day? Did you do that?" She had to ask, not caring if she sounded foolish with her questions. "And were you responsible for helping Sara send the messages?"

He nodded, not meeting her eyes. "I apologize for altering your destiny, Leia. I saw you living a miserable existence here, lonely and too concerned about property. I knew you loved your job, but that wasn't enough. Once I loved a girl, before I came forward, and I hoped someday you could experience that too. The happy part, though, not the pain. It all started when I broke your father's flask, which enabled you to travel like he did."

"And you knew all along about my father, and that I'd meet my sister in the past?"

"I had a debt to this family, Leia, and making you happy was the only way I knew to repay it. You're like my own granddaughter."

Leia stepped into his arms, hugging the older man around his waist. "Thank you, Martin. I have you, and Hettie, to thank for finding Brant, don't I?"

He stepped back, setting her away from him. "You also have something else to thank me for, Leia. You see, when I first escaped and arrived in your cellar, you were a tiny blonde tot playing with Tinker Toys. On first sight of me, this tall, dark figure, emerging from your cellar door into your dining room, you screamed and ran to find your mother. What I'm trying to say is, Leia, I caused your fear of the basement. I am truly sorry."

She stared at him, nearly speechless. "Martin, it doesn't matter. I've overcome that. You gave me the chance to meet Brant, the man I believed could never possibly exist." Leia snapped her fingers. "And my father! You came through the very first time with him, didn't you? Oh, Martin, I love you," she said, trying to hug him again. "Would you be the godfather of my baby? I know Grandfather would approve. Hettie's going to be the godmother, you know."

He didn't answer verbally, but he squeezed her tightly and kissed the top of her head.

"What are you doing?" Brant asked, watching Leia try to dress. How could it be so difficult when the women wore so little clothing now? No corsets, no crinolines. Sometimes not even these bras, just bare skin under thin cotton. Not that he minded, but seeing all those breasts so clearly outlined severely tested his...patience.

"Isn't it obvious?" She struggled to lace a summer camisole of thin rayon. "I've grown and my stupid clothes don't fit." He could see she had begun to perspire with the effort, and felt his body tightening in response.

He moved to stand in front of her, his hands roaming her body. "I like the way you're expanding," he said, "it feels very nice." Her skin felt so good. "And I am very pleased that my child is growing right here." He made small circles over her belly.

"Glad you think so," she said, stripping off the camisole and trying a Lycra sports-bra. It covered everything and apparently didn't hurt, so she left it on. Donning a floral tee-shirt and elastic shorts, she told Brant she was ready to take him driving.

"Hettie's covering the office phones. She's great with people! Thank heavens, my clients are giving me another chance to earn their business. I'm not sure I'd give me another chance after that disappearing act. But they seem to be pleased that I'm a married woman now. Can you believe it?"

He looked at her, hoping his eyes showed her how much he loved her. "You're too beautiful for other women to trust, so being married helps." He leaned in for a kiss.

"No one's ever called me beautiful before, never," she said, then returned the touch of his gentle lips.

"Never is such a long time, and we've seen a lot of time, darling wife," he said. "And just so they are positive you are a married woman, I'm going to replace your mother's wedding ring with one of my own."

"You make jewelry, too?"

"Sorry, no. But I'm earning money to buy one. Torin and I have done a little talking, and we will purchase gold bands for our wives, together. The world will acknowledge us as your husbands, and our families will prosper for a long, long time into the future. Perhaps into the next century. Am I dreaming?"

His heart danced when she pulled the clothing back off the top of her body, her skin glowing with humidity and anticipation. She unbuttoned his shirt, slowly, as if each button was a valuable coin, and said, "If you are, it's my dream, too. It will never be long enough. I'll want you forever, in the past, present and future. Lock the door."

Epilogue

"Thank you, Dr. Kingston, I'm so relieved. We'll get Hettie's prescription refilled right away. She's improved a lot since she started seeing you. Did you know she's the godmother of our child?" She twirled the phone cord through her fingers, watching Brant across the room. He held a baby girl in his arms, a tiny blonde bundled in pink and yellow.

"Really? That's great. What's the child's name?"

"We named her Mary Katherine Douglas. Do you like it?"

"It's a lovely name, Leia. Very Irish. We'll see Hettie next month at the regular time."

Leia replaced the phone, and turned to take her baby from Brant's fatherly arms. "Are you leaving for work now?" She propped Mary Katherine on one shoulder and rubbed her little back.

"Yes, I'm training new police recruits, demonstrating hand-to-hand maneuvers today." He leaned in to kiss her. "Torin's going to assist me. What do you have planned for today?" He touched the side of her breast, teasing her.

"First Mary Katherine has her check up. I know the doctor gave her a clean bill of health, but I want to monitor her for a while. We're very lucky the time travel didn't affect her. Then later, I have an appointment with Mr. Sanders, Grandfather's attorney," she said, looking him directly in the eye, preparing for his interrogation.

"Why?" The question was abrupt, rough.

"Because I have a family now, you and little Mary Katherine. And an expanded family; Torin and Sara, Hettie, Martin."

Brant touched his daughter's cheek. "And?"

"And it's time I made my own will, revising the family tradition. I don't want my daughter to take a husband strictly to inherit the house."

He smiled at that, now touching Leia's cheek. "God, you're beautiful. I've never met anyone like you, in any time." He kissed her goodbye with a soft caress, working around the baby.

Brant left for work in the car Martin had taught him to drive, and Leia roamed the colonial structure, appreciating the walls that had brought her such happiness. She locked the back door, checking the latch. After setting Mary Katherine in the car seat waiting at the front door, she stuck her head into the dining room. The infant rattled plastic keys while her mother checked the house. A mild draft floated up from the basement.

She closed the cellar door to the past, certain that since time could be altered, traveled through and guided, her new will would be based on love, not time.