

Dr. Clark Roth has rented his Grandmother's cottage to the recently widowed Melody Cotton. When he is called to help her, she is not what he expected; she is young and lovely with a traumatic history. The dear cottage weaves a magic spell as Clark falls in love with Melody. With Mercy's help, he sets out a healing program.

DEAR COTTAGE

By ELIZABETH MCLENDON CORBIN

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Dear Cottage

A vintage photograph of a white wooden cottage with a porch, partially covered in ivy. The title "Dear Cottage" is written in a large, elegant script across the top. The author's name "Elizabeth McLendon Corbin" is written in a similar script across the bottom. The foreground is decorated with a field of white daisies.

Elizabeth McLendon Corbin

DEAR COTTAGE

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CHAPTER I

Dr. Clark Roth had been alerted he might be needed for the tenant who had rented his grandmother's cottage. He knew that she had arrived two days earlier. He was responding to an urgent call. He hurried up the familiar steps to be met by a frantic older woman.

"She collapsed. She's tiny but there is no way I can get her up. Mr. Charles said you'd come. Please hurry, I can't move her."

Clark stepped into what had been his childhood home. A crumpled figure was in the middle of the living room floor. He went immediately to it, turning it to face him.

The sight of a lovely creature caught him completely by surprise. Charles had told him some of her history when he begged Clark to rent her the cottage. She was a recent widow. She needed to have access to a doctor. She needed to be hidden away from demanding family members. Clark had expected someone older, someone who needed to recover from a

serious illness. This fragile lady appeared hardly more than a child. She was stunning.

Clark checked her pulse then lifted her in his strong arms. "Her bedroom?"

The housekeeper hurried ahead of him. She opened the door to what had been his grandparents' bedroom.

Clark eased the patient onto the bed. She was like a tiny princess, truly. He started undressing her.

"Doctor!" Mercy Gardner was shocked.

Dr. Roth looked up at her with a boyish grin. "That's right----doctor. We have to get her out of these clothes. This----" he had reached a tightly laced corset. "This has to go. Don't let her put it on again. She is not in a high style city."

Dr. Roth put a pocketknife to the tight laces. The corset parted revealing an exquisite body. Clark placed his arm under her to lift her. "Breathe," he commanded.

He looked up asking for something to cover her as he pulled away the rest of her clothes. She breathed. Dr. Roth settled her back against a bank of pillows.

Dr. Roth quickly wrapped her in the sheet he had been handed. He could see the housekeeper was a bright red. "A blanket too, please?"

Dr. Roth recognized one of this grandmother's bright afghans. He had the idea his grandmother would have been delighted in this use of her handwork.

The pale figure stirred. Her eyes fluttered open to find kind eyes smiling at her.

“Better?” The voice was deep and as kind as the eyes.

“Yes. I----” Melody Cotton realized she was naked under the covers. She blushed. She pulled the covers higher. She raised her eyes to the man standing beside her.

“Yes, you are.” Dr. Roth grinned at her. “You were dressed for a high tea. You could not breathe. No more corsets for you.”

“But ladies----”

Dr. Roth had turned away but he turned to look directly at her. “Ladies in the country do not wear corsets. Is this the first time you’ve been dressed?”

Melody blushed even more. This stranger knew about her. Uncle Charles had promised no one here would know. Only Mercy would know and Melody knew Mercy would tell no one. Why did this man know? And what did he know?

“I should introduce myself. I am Dr. Clark Roth---- your next door neighbor.” Clark did not also reveal that he was her defacto landlord.

“You are Uncle Charles’ friend?”

“Of many years----”

“But how?” Melody was full of questions; some which she was afraid to ask.

“Charles had told your housekeeper to call me if anything happened. Something happened.” Clark could not take his eyes from the delicate creature. Her blue eyes, framed by lush lashes, were huge in her oval face. Her skin was flawless. Her hair----he reached out and pulled restraining pins from her fashionable coiffure. Thick blond waves rippled around her face. “You cannot rest on all these pins.”

She was simply the most beautiful creature, Dr. Clark Roth had ever seen----well, noticed might be more accurate. He was considered a very eligible young man both here in the country and on his occasional visits to larger cities. He was much too absorbed in his work to pay attention to the females who melted before him. An occasional outing satiated whatever carnal lusts he had. He chose carefully and did not become entangled.

But this beautiful girl literally took his heart. She was everything he had ever imagined he might want. How he knew that so certainly, he could not say. Looking at her----even with what little he knew about her----he knew he had found the person with whom he wanted to spend the rest of his life. “Impossible,” he

told himself, all the time knowing he could not deny the truth.

Trying his best to remain objective, he reached under the covers and found her wrist. He left his hand there counting her pulse.

Melody turned her head away from him. Uncle Charles had told her one of the reasons he had chosen this particular place was the doctor he knew who lived close by. He had neglected to mention that the doctor was young----no more than early thirties and very handsome. Thinking someone handsome brought a blush to this innocent.

All doctor now, Dr. Roth called back her attention. "You are to rest. When you do get up, you are not to wear that dreadful corset. You are still weak. You must let your strength gradually return. Your housekeeper seems a sensible woman. For now, you let her judge how much you can do. Stay relatively quiet, take only a little at a time. You are in the county. Give it a chance. It will heal you. Wear comfortable, loose clothing. If you have none, I can send someone to make a few things. I want you to eat nourishing foods, everyday, three times a day with snacks in between. Charles has charged me with looking after you so I shall. I'll be checking regularly. Good afternoon, Mrs. Cotton."

Clark paused to speak with the housekeeper. He had taken an instant liking to this motherly woman. He knew she cared about Melody Cotton. "I didn't introduce myself. I'm Dr. Clark Roth." Craig held out a hand to her.

She took his hand and held onto it. "Mercy Gardner. I'm Melody's---housekeeper. She's all right? She means a great deal to me. She's been through----oh, it's too awful to tell." Tears spring to this good woman's eyes.

"I know some of it. Mr. Lang told me and arranged for me to consult with Dr. James McRae. She needs to heal. I will shortly talk with Dr. McRae." Clark gave Mercy a long look.

"I think you are much more than a housekeeper----a mother, I think, I hope. She must not return to her old life." He was thinking fast. "She must make a new life. Here is a good place for her. She is very young to be a widow but people will accept her nonetheless. When they know she has been ill, they will take her in as one of their own. Have her accept the caring. She needs it and they will need to give it."

"She will be shy. Poor baby, she is not use to kindness. You know she is hiding from her family and her husband's family? She has come here because she

has inherited a fortune and they want it. Mr. Lang sent her here to keep her safe.”

Clark had not known all of that. “I see. Then she must be protected. If there is any problem, you are to let me know right away. She needs quiet.” His thoughts were full of this fragile lady. Apparently she had been mistreated. That anyone could mistreat her or take advantage of her was incomprehensible.

“You understand?” At his affirmative nod, Mercy continued. “Doctor, she is the sweetest lady heaven ever made. Please, if you can, help her be as happy as she is sweet----she’s never had that.”

Clark found himself with every intention of doing just that. Melody Cotton’s shy innocence had gone straight to his heart. “You must be sure she does not overdo. She must spend time outdoors. I will send someone to place the lawn chairs. It’s early yet but the weather is perfect for that. Be sure she stays warm; she does not need a chill. She must eat well. Tempt her with fruits and nutritious desserts----custards and egg-nogs. She must have interests? You know them. Get her started again. Have her try new things. Keep her busy but do not let her overdo. In a short time, she will be able to let go of the bad memories. I’ll keep checking on her.” Dr. Roth placed his hat at a jaunty angle on his

head. He stepped out the door to an ecstatic greeting from a big dog. He headed home.

Mercy watched him go. Mr. Lang had assured her she would take to the doctor right away. She had. How kind he was. What a contrast he was to Kurt Cotton.

* * * * *

Clark found he could not stay away from the cottage. After all his cabin was just over a rise, a short walk away.

“Come on, Bracket. I need you to give me an excuse to call on a neighbor. This dear lady needs you.”

Bracket was an oversized Dalmatian dog. Massively built the dog moved with exceptional grace. He ran beside Clark’s big stallion as though they were one. He idolized the man who had raised him. It was rare to see Clark without his dog.

Mercy shied away when she first met Bracket. He was awfully large. Within days she was full of love for both the doc and his big appendage. It would have been impossible for her not to love both of them. The happiness brought by their daily arrival was appreciated by the ladies of the house.

The first time Melody had discovered there was a dog with the doctor, she had rushed out onto the porch

to meet said dog. Bracket had stood with great dignity as Melody knelt beside him. “May I pet you, you darling?”

Bracket had looked to Clark for permission. When Clark smiled, the big dog had become an adoring puppy. Melody spontaneously hugged the huge dog. That she loved the animal on sight was mutual with the dog. The knowledge that she loved animals----and this animal in particular----gave a delighted Clark the excuse he needed to visit daily.

Melody looked to Clark. For the first time, he saw happiness on her face. “What is his name?”

Clark, leaning against the door frame, answered, “Bracket.”

“What? Why? What does it mean?”

“Bracket. It’s the first name that popped into my head when he was a puppy. He liked it. I have no idea what it means.” He laughed. Bracket’s tail whipped at high speed.

Melody glanced to this man. What was it about him that made her so comfortable? He was certainly not like the other men she had known----well, maybe Uncle Charles. He had beautiful, kind eyes and a ready smile. He was a happy man. It did not take long to know she was happy when she was with him. He had an easy going manner that said, “I accept you”. She really liked

him coming to check on her everyday. She missed him when he could not come.

Melody improved everyday. Mercy did just as the doctor had prescribed----plenty of outdoor rest and good, nutritious food. Mercy was very conscious that for the first time her dear child was not afraid of being happy.

Jake Roth had been introduced to both Mercy and Melody. Clark had sensed that if they just ran into Jake---something that was very likely to happen---there would be an element of fear. He didn't understand but he didn't want them frightened. With pride he brought Jake to see who had rented their grandmother's house. To the two ladies, it was immediately evident that these two men were close. They were a contrast. Jake was short and on the stubby side; Clark was tall and lean. Yet they both had the same kindness about them.

The very best days were when Jake would bring Bracket to spend the whole day. Although Melody would be disappointed she was not going to see Dr. Clark, she loved having Bracket with her.

Jake was under strict pleas to take extra care of the two ladies at the cottage. Melody was shy like him but her eyes would smile when he came. He quickly understood why this girl was so important. As for Mercy----Jake found himself flustered about her. She

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was sweet and thoughtful and always welcoming. She was about making a happy home. She reminded Jake of----yes, the one he had called mother.

Clark would return home----always tired from his trip. His black horse would have carried him wherever he had been. He would let Challenger rest while he went to tend to patients here in Ralston.

He had Melody here. He was very conscious of how he looked forward to seeing her. Bracket was a good excuse for he would be at Melody's when Clark returned.

For a month he watched over her. She was stronger now. Although she had a way to go, Clark was sure she would be well.

* * * * *

One afternoon, Mercy asked Dr.Clark for help. She had found odd pieces of dish sets and wondered if there were not more pieces.

"I know exactly what you want." He took out his keys and led Mercy to a locked room. "I had forgotten this was locked. There was a tenant last year who angered me. I packed half the house in here."

He threw open the door to reveal a treasure room packed with things of his grandmother's. And, in the very center was a grand piano.

"Dr. Clark!"

"Anything you want, Miss Mercy. I can trust you with these things of my Grandmother's."

Mercy was crying.

"What is it? Miss Mercy, why tears?" Clark placed a comforting arm around this dear woman.

"A piano."

"Yes my grandmother played very well. She use to teach some of the neighborhood children. I couldn't let this be damaged. It's important?"

"You---you have no idea. Melody plays--- beautifully. She has not---not since she married. He should have been proud of her but not letting her play was a way of controlling her. Do you think---"

"I'll have men here this afternoon to move it where it belongs. It will be another step to bringing her back, I think. There's music here---"

"Her music is at Miss Caroline's. You could---"

"I'll have it here by next week. In the meantime--- here's the cabinet---" He opened a cabinet to reveal music books. "This is a start---"

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Mercy threw her arms around Clark, hugging him like he was hers. "You are a miracle, Dr. Clark Roth. Everything you do brings back my girl."

Clark hugged Mercy. In many ways, she reminded him of his grandmother. "Miss Mercy, I want her to be well. Each step is to make her stronger. You'll have your girl back, better than before, I think."

The men came. Melody did not understand. Mercy took her by the hand bringing her to the storage room. Melody burst into tears. Mercy led her back into the living room.

Dr. Roth was there telling the men how to arrange the room so the piano could sit back where it belonged. He had it done in minutes really. Within an hour the piano and the bench and the music cabinet were all in place.

Melody was sitting stunned. "I can't believe it. How did you know?"

"I took Miss Mercy to the storage room for dishes. I had not realized it was locked. She told me." Clark knelt beside Melody. "It was my grandmother's. Will you play it, please?"

"I don't think I remember."

"You will. It's something you cannot forget. Try." Clark pleaded. "It will need tuning. Someone is coming tomorrow."

Melody stood and went to the piano. Clark raised the keyboard cover. He would remember her face forever.

She looked up shyly to him. "Do you play?"

"I used to. It's been a long time." He touched the keyboard, skillfully running a scale from center C. He laughed delighted that the tuning had held pretty well. He moved the bench and guided Melody to sit. "Please. I'll leave your with it. Play, Melody----"

He was at the porch steps when he heard a scale ripple up the keyboard. He leaned against a porch post. Slowly she tried a bit here and a bit there. And then she was playing. He recognized a Chopin waltz his grandmother had loved. Her touch was perfect, delicate and yet commanding. This could be what she needed. Certainly it would help.

* * * * *

"I understand Dr. Clark is going to be out of town for the next week----business, I suppose. Melody, Dear, how would you like to have Dr. Clark and Jake to dinner?" Mercy needed to give Melody something outside of her present drifting, "We have been here over a month and they have been very nice."

Melody put aside her embroidery. "Can we do something like that?" Her little face was reflecting fear, hope and anticipation.

"My Dear Child, you can do anything you want."

"I've never----"

"Never is over for you. You are independent of any previous demands in your life. With no worry, you can financially afford to do anything you want----be extravagant." Mercy loved telling her dear child she could be extravagant.

"Mercy, I don't know how." Melody did not. No one had ever given her the opportunity to learn.

"Then you are going to learn. You are going to learn to become delightfully extravagant."

Melody had to laugh. Mercy had always had to be so careful with any money, to hear her spout that Melody was to be extravagant was terribly funny. Though she had not wanted to she had often been the one responsible for sheltering Melody. Everything had been done for Melody. The only time Melody ever got in trouble was when she protested doing what she was told by her father.

This time in the country had shown her much. She could choose from an assortment of riches. For her to say she preferred scramble eggs to soft-boiled had been a major step for her. Such a small a choice but she had

never been asked before. She detested soft boiled eggs. She declared she would never eat another soft-boiled egg.

Mercy, being guided by Dr. Clark, had become an expert at setting up conditions where Melody had to make a choice. How astute he had been in knowing from that first day that this was essential for Melody to regain her health.

Dr. Clark Roth was a wonder to Mercy. Mr. Lang had certainly sent Melody to someone who like himself was unafraid of caring. Dr. Clark's daily visit, to Mercy's joyful surprise, was welcomed by Melody.

"Mercy, do you think they would come?"

Come? Wild horses could not have dragged the young doctor and Jake from dinner at Miss Mercy's----well, at Mrs. Cotton's but Mercy was doing the cooking. Each of them had already had tidbits of her cooking. They envied that dog that got the best everyday.

The evening could not come quickly enough for all concerned. Mercy had cooked the whole day. At Melody's asking why, she explained that they were two hard-working men who had to have big appetites.

Melody, who had been to many formal dinners in her life, was excited. This was her own dinner. She helped arrange the table----beautifully. She brought

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flowers in and arranged them for the whole house. She generously used the men's grandmother's lovely things.

When the gentlemen arrived----dressed for such a dinner in the city---they were taken back to when their grandmother had lived. For them, it was the validation that Melody and Mercy belonged here.

The evening was spent with tales of what it was like to have grown up in this dear cottage. Their grandmother came alive to Melody as she heard what this wonderful lady had been like. These men had loved with deep affection this lady who had inspired them to be who they were today.

There was much laughter. The house rang with happiness for the first time since the men had lost their love. The food was good country cooking, nothing fancy but like their grandmother's, delicious and filling. When Mercy announced dessert, all groaned until they saw it was a lemon meringue pie. It was eaten with gusto.

There would be left-overs for the next day so Jake was to come again. Clark groaned he would cancel his trip. But of course he could not do that.

The ladies stood on the porch to watch the gentlemen leave. Each felt the evening had been successful. Mercy had watched the doctor as he watched Melody. The suspicion she had felt from that

very first day was no longer a suspicion. The doctor was clearly taken with Melody. While Melody, who knew so little about such things, was delighted with what she knew was Jake being taken with her Mercy.

* * * * *

Rounding the curve in his roadway, Clark found Bracket. His dog was openly adoring a girl kneeling beside him. It was Melody. She was gaily laughing like he had wanted to see her laugh. Bless that crazy dog for being able openly to love her.

Melody was completely unaware of Challenger's approach. Silly Bracket gave not a hint. There was no way she could expect it. Dr. Clark had said he would be gone a week. She was lost in a moment of wonderful fun with her doctor's dog. She was lovelier than ever. He had been sure short walks in the fresh air would put rosebuds in her cheeks. He wanted her always to be this happy.

He reined in Challenger beside the happy pair. "Trying to steal my dog?"

Melody raised her face; pure terror pushed aside her happiness of only moments before.

Clark quickly dismounted beside Melody. He reached out a hand to steady her, "Melody, Dear, I was just teasing."

She hesitated. She looked up again and into twinkling, kind eyes. "

"Melody, what is it?"

Melody took his hand. This was Dr. Roth----none of the horrors of the past.

Gently Clark helped her stand. Softly he said, "Whatever caused that reaction, it's in the past. You do not have to be afraid here."

She smiled then----one of those endearing smiles that broke his heart. He knew enough to know she had suffered much more than he had been told. Charles had hesitated and Mercy had hinted. His instinct was to protect her. He knew he had, for the first time in his life, fallen in love. He determined that she was never to be hurt again.

"I could not steal your dog, Dr. Clark. His heart and soul belong to you." Melody touched Bracket's head. "Long week?"

"Some weeks are. I've come home to a bug going around causing sniffles and a cough. It has to be watched----nothing serious so far but many. Two years ago the sickness became severe. I had to bring in an out of town doctor. Fortunately all came through it."

Challenger picked just then to give Clark a hard nudge. A frightened expression crossed Melody's face.

"Hey there, you brute. You'll scare the lady." Clark gave his big horse an affectionate slap. He went to his saddle bags. "He was just playing. You're afraid of horses?"

"I don't know." Her eyes were reflecting Challenger. "The only horses I've ever know----I didn't know them, just saw them."

Clark was stunned. He knew she had grown up in the city. He had understood all eligible young ladies were trained to ride and well. "You don't ride?"

"No. I have never ridden. My father----was afraid I was not strong enough."

They were strolling toward the cottage. Clark handed the big horse an apple. The dog jumped beside Melody and ran between Clark and Challenger.

"Would you like to ride?" He wanted her to say yes.

"Oh, yes. But I don't know how and I don't have a horse."

"I have a horse that would be perfect. She is a little black mare who doesn't get ridden often. She's too small for me to ride. But Challenger is attached to her so I keep her." Clark laughed shyly. The little black mare had captured him three years ago. Challenger was just a good excuse.

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They had reached the cottage. Challenger nudged against Clark again. Clark moved to his saddle bags, removing a feed bag. Looping it over the horse's head, Clark chuckled to Challenger, "He deserves it. He's carried me all day."

"You love him."

"Challenger? Yes. And Bracket. And Jake. My family. Your family?"

"I---my father but---there's---" She stopped, obviously she could not continue that thought. "I love Uncle Charles and Aunt Charlotte and dear Mercy." Melody leaned and kissed the top of Bracket's head. "And now Bracket---and here. I love being here. I've never really had a home before. Oh, I've lived in houses but they were never a home. This is a wonderful home."

Clark smiled at her happiness. "Grandmother would be happy that someone could so appreciate her cottage."

"Why didn't you live here" Oh, excuse me I should not have asked that---" For a moment there was fear again in her eyes.

Clark smiled at her gentleness. "I grew up here. Then I was off at school. I returned and had lived in the cabin for several years before I lost Grandmother. I think perhaps there were too many memories. I was talked into renting it to some cousins. That was a

mistake. I had just gotten some of it put back in place when Charles called.”

“Oh, you had intended----oh, I shall find somewhere else; this is your home----” The fear was there again.

Softly Clark said, “I had not yet intended anything other than putting the cottage in order. I’m sure my grandmother would be delighted with you and Miss Mercy.”

Melody realized that they had reached the cottage. Her heart rate increased as she looked at the dear place---dear cottage. It looked like a fairy story setting. She had found great happiness here. She ran lightly up the steps of the porch.

She turned when she realized Clark was not with her. He was standing with one foot propped on the bottom step, Challenger’s reins held loosely in one hand. He was watching her questioningly. “How would you like to learn to ride?”

“Oh” her face brightened with anticipation----then clouded with, “I couldn’t.”

“Why not?” His question and his smile were encouraging.

“I don’t have a horse.”

“I just told you I have a horse.”

“You’d never let me ride Challenger----”

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Clark laughed. He knew he had hooked her. "I have other horses. I have the very best instructor----Jake. He's an expert. People come from all over the state to plead with him to teach them. It would be perfect to make you stronger. I think you would enjoy it."

"But to choose----"

"Melody, you are free to choose. You only have to say whether you want a side saddle or to ride astride."

"Astride? I could never----why it simply isn't done."

"This is the country----not the big proper city." Clark smiled winningly. He enjoyed telling her she did not have to follow the dictates of city society. "Either way, you must have the right clothes so get with Miss Mercy on the clothes. It won't be right away but soon." Clark turned away from her and mounted an impatient Challenger. He sat watching her, "You can tell us at dinner. Jake tells me we have been invited."

* * * * *

Dinner that evening was as wonderful as the first dinner. Bracket had been included this time. He was so funny running first to Clark and then to Melody and then to Jake and finally to Mercy. He had a bite of

everything being served. The humans thought he was adorable----a puppy again.

“You must realize he has been perfect all week. Every morning he has been here and he has been into everything we were doing. You realize, he does not know he’s a dog?”

Clark was grateful for that. He had sent the dog to stay with her because of a sense of imminent danger. He could not explain but he was not going to be there. Though Jake would take care of Melody and Mercy, he could not help them if either was ill. But then neither could Bracket if they were ill. What was it? He did know that Bracket would protect Melody and Mercy until Jake could get there. So he sent his dog.

After dinner, Mercy and Jake wandered off to tend to the chickens that Jake had brought. Earlier in the week he had constructed a kitchen coop. This was so the ladies could have fresh eggs at their fingertips. Their gentle clucks indicated her chickens were ready for bed. To Jake’s delight, Mercy knew about chickens----quite a lot.

Clark followed Melody into the living room. She was lovelier than ever this evening. Seven weeks and the country was working its wonders. She was openly happy. Clark knew this was an enormous change for her. “Will you play for me?”

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Melody became shy. She had always been shy of playing for anyone other than Charles and Charlotte. But this dear man was allowing her to play an instrument that surely meant a great deal to him. "What would you like to hear?"

"Chopin. He's a great favorite of mine. He was a great favorite of Grand's."

Melody had been practicing. She played one waltz after another. She spun through the Minute Waltz and stopped.

When she turned, Clark was watching her. She had improved so very much and yet----there was something missing. There was nothing artificial about her. Clark's experience with women had been that they presented a picture they wanted a man to see----not who they really were. Not Melody. He saw she lived up to his initial moment of wonder. But there was something----

The evening was over. Both men walked back to their separate cabins; their minds fully occupied with thoughts of these two so new in their lives. There had been a big change.

* * * * *

Miss Mercy encouraged Clark coming to see Melody. He laughed at her boldness but also

appreciated her approval. They both wanted Melody to be happy. He could not hide from this perceptive woman that he was profoundly affected by Melody.

Melody gradually found that she still had a life. In fact, it was a great improvement over her former life. She began to greet each day with no feelings of fear. She could smile and burst into song anytime she felt like it. She loved that the dear cottage was surrounded by a lush garden bursting into full bloom. With Mercy's help she set out to learn the names of every flower there.

Jake had opened a small barn to one side of the cottage. Out came wonderful rustic chairs for the garden----including a chaise----and beautiful white wicket chairs for the porches. Clark often found her napping in the late spring air. She looked like Sleeping Beauty to him. He wondered if a kiss could awaken her to knowing how much he loved her.

One fine day, in late spring, Melody felt something drop into her lap. She opened her eyes to find a black ball of fur with intense green eyes, starring at her. "Oh, how darling! Who?"

Melody found Dr. Clark grinning behind her chair. "Like him?"

“He’s beautiful.” Melody picked up the little kitten. His green eyes were very wide in awe of this new person. He reached out a paw to her face.”

“He’s yours.”

“Really? I---I’ve never had a pet.” Melody snuggled the kitten beneath her chin. “Is he really for me?”

“The minute you name him. His name must be something special---not Midnight or Satin or Satan.” He knew she was pleased. Melody seemed incapable of hiding her feelings from him. “He’s eight weeks old and weaned. His mother is our stable cat---Challenger’s best friend. This young man was the only boy of three kittens. His mother is black and a sweetheart. The girls are tigers who all went to good homes. I thought---well, he’s handsome and sure to be sweet. You’ll keep him?” Clark had not been sure. She might not like cats.

“I’d love to have him. Just think---I can choose to have a pet. You can’t know what that means.” Melody’s eyes teared.

“A name?” Clark diverted her. “Someone special to you would be a good choice.”

Melody thought. It was tempting to say doc but she shied away from that. “I know---Charles, Charlie.”

Clark laughed out. “Perfect.”

“What’s perfect? And what’s so funny?” Mercy had come out to get Melody before the air became too cool.

“Look, Mercy. Look who Dr. Clark brought to me.” Melody held the little kitten out for Mercy to see.

“The bitty thing.” Mercy declared horrified, “He’s black.”

Clark did his best not to laugh but it came in a roar. Mercy whirled on him in surprise. “Solid black, Miss Mercy.” And he laughed again.

“But black, Dr. Clark----”

“I promise you, black is very good luck in England. It’s traditional to let out a black cat to run in front of the bride and groom at English weddings.”

“Well----well, we could certainly use that.” Mercy had taken the kitten from Melody. He had her charmed in only a moment. She handed him back to Melody. “He’ll need a name----”

“Charlie.” Melody giggled.

“Melody!”

“Mercy, it’s perfect. He’s rescuing me like Uncle Charles has always done.” Melody cuddled the kitten, smiling happily.

Charlie made himself right at home. If he missed his mother, he did not show it. He worshipped Melody and Mercy. In no time he was ruling the house.

DEAR COTTAGE

Within the week, Mercy whispered to Clark that he was a genius.

* * * * *

Dr. Roth started to mount Challenger when he saw a buggy coming from the South. He was smiling as he swung into the saddle. So----the ladies----for he could see there were two ladies----had changed their minds.

He would take a bet that Miss Mercy was behind this success. He had suggested that Melody should take a ride into town, to shop and to meet people. The townspeople had met Miss Mercy the first week the newcomers had arrived. She had taken to them and them to her. They were curious about the young widow and wanted to welcome her to Ralston.

Jake was alighting from the buggy as Dr. Clark guided Challenger to beside them. Melody saw him first. "Dr. Clark, look at us. Jake insisted we come today. He claimed the horse needed the exercise. This is wonderful. I had no idea Ralston was so beautiful."

Clark Roth tipped his hat with a wink to Miss Mercy. He dismounted and held out a hand to Melody.

She blushed as she placed her tiny hand into his. This was very different from him being her doctor. There was something she had never felt before with a

man----well, with Uncle Charles. It was trust. She smiled shyly and took Dr. Roth's offered arm.

Mercy was out of the buggy and moving up the steps. She had already been to the Emporium. She wanted to see her girl's face when Melody stepped in the door.

Melody was obviously excited. She looked up to her doctor, "I've never shopped before."

Clark hesitated. "Never?" Clark had not thought of that. When Mercy had explained that Melody had been sheltered, he had not understood the extent of the sheltering. He was beginning to learn he had a lot to learn about this darling who had completely captured his heart.

"Never. Whatever was deemed necessary was brought to me. I had no choice but to accept whatever was put before me. I might be tainted by thinking for myself."

"Well, that time is over. With Miss Mercy helping you, you'll soon be freely choosing." Clark held open the door and led Melody into the Ralston Emporium.

Now there was nowhere on earth quite like the Ralston Emporium. It was filled from ceiling to floor with every imaginable that anyone could possibly want. The front of the large store was for the ladies----

everything they might want. The back was for the men---farmers and businessmen who inhabited Ralston.

Melody gasped. Never in her imagination could she have thought of such a place. "It's like a fairy tale----"

"Ah, so it is. Visitors come from miles around just to see it and then to shop it. It's successfully different from anywhere."

"To Ralston?"

Clark had to laugh. He had to wonder what Melody's idea of Ralston was. Surely Mercy had told her that this hamlet was in farming country but more cosmopolitan than many large towns. It was a favorite hang out for the wealthy who came here to find the comfort and peace offered by good people. It was home to its people who had lived here for generations. "It's different."

"Well, I have nothing to which I can compare." Melody withdrew her hand, stepping away, her eyes sparkling with a child's delight.

"Melody, Dear, come this way." Mercy gathered her charge with such affection; Clark remembered Mercy had been with Melody since she was born.

That first day Mercy had introduced herself as "the housekeeper". Some housekeeper. Dear Mercy was a mother and----the list was endless. No wonder Melody

loved Mercy so. Clark watched as the two of them happily laughed in the material/sewing department.

“Dr. Roth----”

Clark turned to see Janet Lowry.

“Ah, Mrs. Lowry, how is Harold’s arm?”

“Itching.” Janet laughed. “He’s coming to work tomorrow----cast and all. He can’t stand not being here. I’ll be glad to have him back. I know nothing about his machines. I need to tend to the ladies. You----” Janet tilted her head to look up at Dr. Roth. She was swept by nostalgia. She could remember when he was still a little boy, a darling little boy and she had, had to look down to see him. Now here he was a grown man and a doctor. He had told her still to call him Clark but she delighted in calling him Dr. Roth. “You seem to know these two ladies.”

“I do. They are my new neighbors. The younger lady has been very ill. You remember Charles and Charlotte Lang? She is very dear to them. They needed a doctor near----me. And they thought Grandmother’s cottage would give her the peace and quiet she needs. She is improving already. The lady with her is a lifelong companion.” Clark had finally thought of a proper title for Miss Mercy. “Take extra care of them for me.”

“With delight. Your packages are here----”

“Will you have Leland take them to my place. I still have two patients in town.

“You take care, Dr. Roth.”

Clark grinned at her, the same little boy grin of years ago. Here he was a man to be admired and she did admire him. She hoped his dear grandmother could look down from heaven and see her grandson.

Janet Lowry turned with renewed interest to help the new customers. “Are you finding what you need?”

It was Melody who faced her. “Oh, yes. It’s all so lovely.” Encouraged by a look from Mercy, Melody picked up a lovely robin’s egg blue material. “Please, I would like a dress length of this. Mary Kelly is sewing some comfortable clothes for me. Dr. Roth has forbidden me to wear Atlanta fashions.” Melody blushed.

Mercy took over. “Come, look here----”

An hour later, the ladies left with their arms full. Janet, realizing the ladies could do fancy work, invited them to a sewing circle that met on Wednesdays. She had liked them and remembered Dr. Roth’s request to take care of them.

* * * * *

“Dr. Roth----” Melody rushed to the front door to welcome their neighbor and his large Dalmatian.

Bracket circled around her and then rushed off to the kitchen. He knew Mercy would have something just for him. Clark looked down at his neighbor to find her clutching pretty material to her chest.

“Come in. Come in, please. Mercy’s putting the finishing touches on supper. Bracket knows right where to go.”

Clark laughed. “Then we should to there----”

“Oh, let me put this down.” The cloth spilled from Melody’s arms onto the sofa. There was beautiful, colorful stitching on what Clark knew had been plain cloth.

“It’s been so much fun. The Emporium had everything I needed to get started again. All my things are in----” She had started to say Atlanta but she shut her mind to that awful house. She hoped never to see that house again. Aunt Charlotte and Mercy had promised to get what few things she wanted from it.

They were at the kitchen and there was no need to say more.

Clark had seen the sudden close down. How could anyone have so hurt this dear child? No, Melody was not a child. In these two months, the woman lurking behind that childlike front----that woman was coming

forward. Clark had observed a temper and enthusiasm he was sure she had not dared show in her past. He continued to be amused at Mercy's nods of approval. "Miss Mercy, Jake will be a few minutes late. He asks for you to excuse him."

"Of course, as for you, sir----no men in the kitchen." Mercy stood with a wooden spoon aimed at the doctor.

"Bracket is a man and, from what I've see, he has free reign of the kitchen." Clark's hand slipped around her and swiped a biscuit. "And for this, I can risk a battering." He grinned at Mercy. She already knew his weakness for biscuit.

"You're like a bad one who I think has somewhere had plenty of experience." She slapped at Clark's hand but was laughing as she did. In these weeks she had come to adore this man. She had been raised with six jolly brothers. He reminded her of them.

"Melody, come help so I can get him out of the kitchen."

Melody joined Mercy. She was just learning. She loved it. Her happiness was catching. And she had no fear of showing the happiness with these two people. She glanced at Clark as she knew this was true.

Clark took bowls too. Melody might seem stronger, certainly greatly improved, but he knew she was still fragile.

“So----tell us about your Emporium trip----” The delicious meal was finished. He sat back in his chair and winked at Jake. He placed a hand on his big dog’s head.

Melody smiled shyly. Yesterday had been a marvelous adventure. “I don’t know where to start.”

Mercy was nodding her head. She could still see her Melody hesitating about choosing anything.

“You see----it’s hard for me. I have never chosen before. Mercy had to keep reminding me that I can choose. It’s the strangest experience. I’m afraid I overdid.” Melody glanced shyly at Mercy.

“You’ll not be saying that, child. It was a delight to see you so happy with what you wanted.”

“But it was so expensive----”

Jake was watching the interplay of these people. He particularly watched Clark----seeing what no one else might have seen. And he was pleased. He liked this sweet girl and her companion. He liked the sparkle that they had brought to Clark and himself.

“I’ll remind you of what Mr. Charles said----you can afford anything you want. I can say in front of Dr.

DEAR COTTAGE

Roth and Jake that you are obscenely wealthy. You never have to worry about money.”

“Dr. Roth?”

“I agree. You should do and have anything you want. Miss Mercy has explained you’ve----” Clark ducked his head. He had deliberately asked Mercy why Melody was so shy about much. “Miss Mercy has explained you were extremely sheltered.”

“Mercy?” Melody looked to Mercy. What had Mercy told the doctor? How much?

Clark laughed. He laughed! “Not to worry----no deep secrets, just that you were sheltered. Charles has also said you were sheltered.”

“Yes. I have a great deal to learn. Mercy is an excellent teacher and what she doesn’t know, she calls Aunt Charlotte.”

“Well, I’m busy learning too. Miss Charlotte has educated me so I could educate Melody. I was just a lower stairs maid when she told Melody’s father to let me take care of his suddenly motherless baby girl. It was the beginning of a lifetime of learning, teaching and wonderful friendship.”

“And protecting,” Melody echoed. She smiled lovingly at her companion. “She did everything, with Aunt Charlotte’s guidance, that my mother would have

tried to do. My father----was not interested in day to day.”

Mercy took up the story. “He didn’t want to be bothered at all with what he at first considered an unnecessary nuisance. Then a lady of his acquaintance saw Melody. She was five by then and exquisite. For the first time he took notice and began to concoct his evil scheme.”

“Enough, Mercy. I’m sure these gentlemen are more interested in the dessert you’ve made.”

Mercy smiled at Clark. She had deliberately opened Pandora’s Box. In there were the answers to the many questions Mercy had seen cross his face.

Melody was a conundrum. One moment she was a delightful happy child; the next she was a serious mature woman. One would follow the other; repeatedly endearing her to Clark. There was something hidden, something he needed to understand----none of it changing his first reaction to this lovely creature. The flash decision he had made that moment was still with him. Each improvement in her health raised Clark’s hope and yet there was something.

Dessert was floating island. These men had not had that since the dear Gran was alive. They felt like they were boys again. Mercy and Melody were bringing that back to them.

DEAR COTTAGE

Mercy watched and approved what she saw. These two beautiful people complimented each other. What Mercy did not see was that Jake was watching her.

* * * * *

Melody sat in the swing Jake had installed on the front porch. It had been in storage when the cottage had been rented. Jake had hauled it out two days ago. She had no idea that it was Clark who had remembered the swing.

She was humming happily as she gently swung. Her smile was brilliant as Clark, minus Bracket, stepped onto the porch. "No Bracket?"

"Not today. Smithy picked me up in that automobile of his. Bracket does not like that mode of moving." Clark stood beside her.

Every time he saw her she was improving. It was as though there was magic in this dear cottage. She was absorbing being free and it showed. It was such a change from the sad girl who had come here. Clark was grateful for the change. Somehow from hints from Mercy, he knew Melody's previous sadness had not been grief over losing her husband. What then?

"I know I'm a bit early but it was a perfect day for a stroll. I'm not too early, am I?"

“Oh, no. It is a beautiful day to stroll or swing without a care in the world. Mercy ran me out of the kitchen. She claims she’s late because of my incessant questions.” Melody laughed, “I just want to learn. I would love to make biscuits like hers.”

“Hers are something else, that’s a fact. Jake says hers are the very best and he makes pretty good ones. There’s an art to it, he tells me. I’ve tried but Jake always discourages me.” Clark who loved biscuits anyway he could get them, settled on the steps below her. “He learned from Grandmother.” From his pocket he withdrew a bundled length of colorful cords.

Melody watched in fascination as he carefully separated the cords and then began to braid them. His hands were beautiful as they skillfully wove the cord into several pigtails. She blushed at thinking his hands were beautiful

She surveyed him, really looking at him for the first time. She could have said he had beautiful eyes, a kind smile. She had been conscious of how tall he was and how his shoulders filled out his jacket and how long his strides were because of his long legs. She had blushed at such thoughts. Today she saw the total man. He was very handsome.

He glanced at her right then. She blushed. He went back to his braiding.

DEAR COTTAGE

“Is that an exercise?” she asked trying to cover the blush she knew he had seen.

He smiled as he began to unbraid the strands. “It keeps my fingers nimble. A doctor has to have skill in his fingers.”

“What made you want to be a doctor?”

Clark grinned as he looked at her and then he looked down quickly, “It’s been so long ago, I don’t exactly remember.”

“Always?” She really wanted to know. Knowing that Melody and Mercy were renting the Roth cottage, Jake and Clark were often the subject of the sewing circle gossip. They were much loved by the community. Everyone had stories to tell of some miracle Clark had performed and of Jake’s generosity to families in need.

“Just about. I was always rescuing and repairing poor defenseless, helpless creatures.”

“Like me?”

Melody was looking down as he turned toward her. “You’re not helpless anymore.”

Those gorgeous eyes of hers came up to meet his. “I am better.”

“Yes. You will continue getting better until you are well. This dear cottage has helped.”

“Why are you a country doctor?”

“Because I want to be.” Clark’s voice turned hard. Did even this innocent think he should be “something more”? Little did she know.

“I didn’t mean to pry.” Melody withdrew some from him.

“I didn’t mean to sound so harsh. I find it hard to understand why people think I should not be satisfied with the work I love. I always wanted to come back here after school. These people clearly needed a regular doctor. Dr. Wells came later. He and I were in school together. He came to visit and found what he was looking for here. When I have to be away, he takes over for me. When he has to be away, I take over for him. It has worked very well for us.”

“The people here love you----”

“I grew up here. This is home. Most of them I have known all my life. These are good people. They love their families, their land and their God. Ralston is becoming more modern but it has not changed the people. City people come here to escape their city life. Ralston is very attractive to them. Many of them, like Wells, end up staying. The Ralston people rarely leave. They understand that though life can often be hard here, it is also good.”

“Your Grandparents----”

“All the way back to my great-greats,” Clark chuckled. “They worked this land.”

“It’s not a farm now.”

“Oh, yes, it is. Jake helped make it a great success even while my grandfather could enjoy the triumph. And he has continued their work. Jake is many things. He is one of the foremost horticulturalists----something new in farming----in the country. His horses are legendary. I think I should explain about Jake.

We are not blood brothers. You don’t seem surprised.”

“I thought maybe cousins.” Melody had thought about it. The two were very close.

“I’d better start from the beginning. Jake was a ragged run-a-way from the state orphanage. He came into the yard here hoping someone would give him a bite to eat. What he found was a squalling baby in a basket right beside the front door. He couldn’t let the little fellow cry. He picked him up and knocked on the door to get some help for the child who had immediately quieted in his arm. A nice lady came to the door. She took in what was going on and opened the door, welcoming the two derelicts.

She gathered the little one into her arms. She knew. It was an awful knowing. I was an unwanted baby of

parents who had no time for a child----her very own grandson.”

“How could anyone not want a baby?” Melody asked softly.

“My parents. They didn’t want the inconvenience of a baby. They sent me with someone who had not even bothered to knock on the door. Grandmother was horrified. She called for Grandpa and told this ragged child to wait. She loved babies. She loved children. She never looked back from that moment----as she told it, we were both hers. Grandpa took one look at the ragged, little boy----for Jake looked about ten if he was lucky----and rushed him into the kitchen for a filling meal. Within days Grandpa had Jake working for him. He saw right away that this tragic looking child had the love of the land in him. He had no name other than Jake. His back was raw from a whipping that had caused him to run away. He could not remember ever being anywhere but the orphanage but he had nice manners and a gentle way about him. My grandparents took Jake to heart. They were bitterly disappointed in their only son----he was ashamed of his working/farm parents. Jake and I seemed like gifts from heaven. My grandparents could not have been happier----they always teased us that we were two for the price of one. Jake and I, well, we were one from the beginning. He

DEAR COTTAGE

always claims that I took one look at him and settled into his arms. We had both found a home. Neither of us ever saw another day of not being wanted. We four were a family.

Jake was a natural born farmer and amazing with animals and his little charge---me. He became my grandfather's shadow. My grandfather saw his dreams could be true with a son like Jake. Already a successful farmer and horse breeder, he saw he had found someone who loved this land and its work as much as he loved it. Me? I was a given. How I was loved---by my delighted grandparents and by my brother. I only knew I wasn't wanted when I was old enough to handle it. By then, I certainly knew I was loved. My grandparents wanted both of us to know that we were loved. They found that they could adopt both of us. And they did. Jake was fourteen by then and I was a terrible two. January fifteenth of that year, Jake and I became brothers----and so we have remained.

Jake has been there----teacher, confidant, disciplinarian, brother----always more than friend.

I wanted to be a doctor. Grandpa never blinked an eye. My father had wanted the same. My Grandfather paid for all of it. Then his son turned his back on his father. Grandpa knew there was a difference with me. I really wanted to be a doctor; my father had only wanted

to make money in a socially high brow profession. I went to school with Granpa's blessing.

I was in medical school when he died. I wanted to return home. Jake said I couldn't. He had his marching orders as he called them from the man he called "Dad". Grandmother needed us both to stick to what Grandfather had planned. Grandfather had educated Jake to take over what was by then, the most successful farm in the state. Jake could have left. He was offered jobs to teach and to run other farms. But that love of the land that Grandfather had seen from the start was deep in Jake's soul and his adopted family was too. Grandfather had been sure. He left each of us one-half of this land. That made us partners----to take care of his beloved. She, Grandmother, loved deeply and knew that she was as deeply loved. Nothing could have kept us from taking care of her.

The Jake you see in overalls like a field hand is one Jake----Grandpa's Jake. There is Grandmother's Jake---an affluent, highly educated man. This area with which you are familiar is just a small part of a large, productive farm with a hobby of breeding the finest horses in the South. He's the one who keeps everything in working order. He is my best friend, my business partner and my brother. We're a complex pair."

DEAR COTTAGE

Melody looked wistfully at Clark, "You do not let it keep you from being two of the kindest people I have ever known."

"Why thank you. Jake will appreciate that. He tends to be shy like you. Here he comes now. He's looking forward to another dinner."

"I'm so glad. Mercy loves to have him come."

"Does she? I have to tell you he's very shy of her."

"Why?" Melody innocently asked.

"I think because he likes her." Clark grinned. He didn't just think. He knew Jake liked Miss Mercy. Any excuse, and Jake was at the cottage.

Melody's eyes were twinkling, "Really?"

Clark just smiled for Jake was with them.

Dinner was grand. Mercy had outdone herself for this evening. Melody was realizing that it was not just for Dr. Clark. By the time dessert was served, Mercy was blushing and Jake was not nearly so shy.

* * * * *

Clark settled into a front porch chair. The furniture had been brought from winter storage and gave the porch the look of home. In addition Clark noticed that Jake had brought out one of his prize Boston ferns----its

very size making it royal. His Grandmother had loved ferns and this one in particular.

He watched as Melody touched the delicate fronds. "I've never seen one this beautiful."

"God's work with a helping hand from Jake Roth. He grew this one for his lady-love-----he called her mother, my grandmother."

"She's been gone----"

"Two years. He says she keeps this one alive to let the two of us know she is still with us." Clark smiled at her. He had begun to figure his Grandmother had somehow brought this lovely girl here. "I was wondering if you might like to go to church tomorrow?" He watched carefully to see how Melody would react.

"Church?" Melody had looked up hope springing to her eyes. "I've not been to church in a long time.

"Miss Mercy goes with us, Jake and me, every week." Clark's voice was quiet. He remembered when Mercy had asked him if he was a church member. He smiled at the memory of the shy request to go with him.

"Yes. She has told me. She is the one who use to take me in Atlanta. She pointed out the church here when we went to shop. It is so picturesque but looks like it belongs in New England."

“The Episcopal minister who started it was from New England. It was started at the beginning of Ralston becoming a town. It’s quite old.”

“Are you an Episcopalian?”

Clark laughed. “As are you according to Miss Mercy.”

Melody looked up with that awful sadness Clark wanted to erase. “I am. Dear Aunt Charlotte tended to all of that. My mother was an Episcopalian. Aunt Charlotte conspired with Mercy and----” Melody hesitated. Her emotions were in turmoil over this. “They always managed to slip me out of the house for Sunday service.”

“Slipped?”

The haunted look she gave him made him wish he had not asked.

But Melody was answering. “My father was always too busy for what he termed foolishness. I----I was so happy when they would slip me away. Church was a haven of quiet and peace. Until my father finally took an interest----” Melody did not go on. There was that part of her life she dare not presently think about.

Clark needed to know but he did not want to bring back pain to her. “It could be a haven of peace and quiet again. You do believe in God----“

Melody's eyes brightened with what could only be termed happiness. "Oh, I do. Mercy has encouraged me to turn to Him always. I have found great comfort in knowing He loves me."

She became shy again. "I don't need church to know He is with me."

"Nor me either. Yet I go if I am not with a patient. It helps me say thank you to Him for all the times He is with me."

"That's lovely. I'd never thought of it that way." Melody's face was bright with happiness. She looked up to Clark and whispered, "If I'm well enough, I think I would like to go----tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow is Sunday." Clark wanted to shout with happiness. He and Mercy together had plotted this knowing Melody would gain added strength from attending church. Quietly he continued. "It will be a privilege to escort two such lovely ladies."

"How kind. I know Mercy is behind this." She looked like she was teasing him.

"She does have her ways." Clark grinned as he rose to leave.

"You too?" Melody was laughing.

"Me too. It's very easy to be caught up in Miss Mercy's ways. I have found her ways wise. She loves you as though you were a treasured daughter."

DEAR COTTAGE

“I know. I think you should know, Mercy is really the only mother I have ever known. Mine died soon after I was born. Her maid----how I hate Mercy being referred to as the maid----was put in charge of the disappointing baby girl. Her first instructions were to keep me out of sight. Aunt Charlotte saw she could do as she wished with her dearest friend’s baby. She recognized immediately what a treasure she had with Mercy. She saw to it that Mercy learned everything I needed to know. Clearly Mercy has always been----so much more than a maid. I have had the security of her love all of my life. I had someone I could love. I Had Aunt Charlotte and Uncle Charles too but it was Mercy who was always with me. I do love her.” Melody wanted Clark to understand.

“She knows.” This picture before Clark made him realize more than ever that he loved this wonderful girl. “I shall be here at 9:30.” Clark placed his hat on his head at a jaunty angle. He stood and nodded to his hope. “I have rounds to make. Until tomorrow”

Melody had an air of anticipation about her that Clark welcomed.

CHAPTER II

In the following weeks, Church on Sunday became a regular beginning to the week. Clark watched as Melody and Miss Mercy were taken into St. Luke's community. The church was very active. With encouragement, the ladies found themselves at home.

Clark decided it was time for Melody to start riding. Jake took her out one time and declared her a natural. Every other day he would arrive with the little black mare saddled and ready to go. Melody had decided on side-saddle at first. She quickly switched to astride.

Clark frequently joined them. She teased that didn't he ride enough to see patients? All laughed at Challenger literally courting the little black mare. How she flirted back with him. Melody watched and learned.

In no time, Melody rode as if she had always ridden. Clark forbade her to ride by herself. Well, she really couldn't for the horses were at the stables.

Her first visit to the stables gave her conversation for days. Jake's stables were beautiful. He claimed his

horses deserved that. He showed Melody how to groom Juliet but withdrew at the saddling, "You are not that strong yet, young lady." Jake had quickly grown to love this delicate lady.

Melody teased Mercy unmercifully until Mercy said she would like to ride too. Clark and Jake stood back; sure Mercy would show Melody a thing or two. And she did. Mercy had grown up on a farm. She could ride, Jake declared, like a champion.

Clark insisted that if he was not available Jake must always accompany the ladies. It was not their riding that worried Clark. It was that something that he could not explain. That was fine with Jake. Whatever he was doing was not too important to take him from being with the ladies. He had fallen completely under the spell of this dear girl and her Mercy.

Though there was not much chance of it happening, Clark and Mercy had a conference that Melody was never to go off on her own. Mercy had told Clark that if her family found where she was, Melody might be in danger.

Clark did not pressure Mercy to tell him why. Apprehension had already warned him he did not want Melody left alone. It was the why of his leaving Bracket with her when he had to be out of town. He could not explain why for he did not understand it

himself so he could not explain his worry to Jake. But Jake felt something too. They both became very protective of both Melody and Mercy.

The fourth Sunday, it was just Jake who came to escort the ladies. The doctor had been called late the afternoon before. A baby was on the way.

By Sunday night the doctor was still not home. Jake came to dinner. He had heard from the doctor. The delivery had gone badly. Twin babies had been born; both had died. Clark was struggling to save the mother. He would be home when he was sure the mother was safe.

Monday morning he had not yet come home. Jake was worried and took his worry to Miss Mercy. "He's never been out this long before. I know how he is. He can't let go until he's sure. But this----"

Melody heard what he had said. When she looked at Mercy, her eyes were full of fear. "Jake, go after him."

Jake said he had to wait a while yet. Mercy took him to the kitchen to feed him. Melody paced the living room. Somehow the doctor had become indispensable in her life. If anything happened to him----

Then suddenly Challenger was there. Calling Jake and Mercy, Melody flew out of the screen door and down the front steps.

“Clark, oh Clark, we’ve been so worried----” Melody was beside Challenger as Clark raised his head, “How----how did I get here?”

“Challenger brought you. Oh, Clark, come down before you fall----” Melody reached out to try and steady him. “Clark, please, you are exhausted----”

Clark was exhausted. He tried to dismount. Fortunately Jake had reached him. While no match for Clark’s size, together he and Melody got him on his feet. With Clark protesting, they guided him up the porch steps.

Mercy met them at the door. “Get him in the kitchen,” she ordered.

“No.”

“Yes, Dr. Clark, you do as you’re told with no nonsense.” Before he could protest, Mercy had him in a kitchen chair with a brimming mug of hot coffee.

Clark’s hands were shaking so; it was Jake who held the coffee so Clark could drink.

“When did you last eat?” Mercy demanded as she put a heaped plate of eggs and bacon and biscuit before him. Clark tried to look up at her, “I don’t remember”

Melody moved in to pick up a spoonful of eggs. “Please eat, Clark.” Her voice was soft and sweet.

Clark turned his head at her calling him Clark. For months he had been Dr. Roth. He ate the spoonful of eggs. Tired as he was he still could appreciate her sincere concern.

Mercy and Jake exchanged looks and winks as they let Melody feed Clark. Mercy particularly was excited to see Melody taking over. He was hungry. Mercy's food was always something he would eat but this was Melody feeding him. Finally he waved he could eat no more, "I must go home now."

"Go home? Not today."

At the look of disbelief at Mercy's declaration, Clark tried to stand only to stumble. Jake steadied him. Mercy moved to his other side and together they managed Clark to an extra bedroom.

"I can't stay here----think of the talk----" but Clark was already seated on the bed.

Melody was busy fluffing pillows, "You'll do what Mercy thinks is best. Mercy is in command mode and nobody tells her no."

Jake stood by grateful for the ladies taking over. Clark could be a handful when he was this tired.

"No one is going to do any talking----Melody had been ill all night and you're here taking care of her." And what Mercy said was the truth.

Clark raised an eyebrow. Melody looked fine to him.

“Lie down, Dr. Clark. Jake, get off his boots.”

“Miss Mercy----”

“Now, Dr. Clark. Jake get his legs up on the bed. Melody, get the quilts. He’ll go into shock if we don’t keep him warm. I don’t know what made you think you were infallible. The idea!”

Clark mumbled, “I lost ‘em, Miss Mercy. They were twins and I couldn’t save even one. And Louise went bad----I saved her but not the babies, not the babies.”

Melody busily tucked the quilt around on each side and whispered, “You go to sleep, Clark. Everything will look better then.” She began to sing a sleeping melody.

Clark did not hear her. He was asleep.

“I’ll stay with him, Mercy. You and Jake get some rest. I think he will sleep a long time.” Melody settled herself into a large chair near the bed.

Late afternoon sun was streaming in the bedroom’s window when Clark first opened his eyes. Disoriented, he knew he was not in his own bed. He turned his head to the side to a vision. Melody was seated where she could use the afternoon light on her embroidery. Clark

closed his eyes. Upon opening them again she was still there. Always lovely to him, she was literally an angel.

He drifted to dream that this was how he wanted the two of them to be. He wanted to awaken everyday with this precious darling beside him. He wanted to go to sleep every night with her cuddled in his arms. He wanted her in his life for the rest of his life.

Melody, reaching for another color, realized the doctor, "You're awake." She came to the side of the bed and smiled down at him. His hair was rumpled and he needed a shave but his eyes were bright and his smile warm. He looked like himself.

"What am I doing here?" Clark struggled to sit up.

"You don't remember?"

"Ah, no----"

"Your very wise horse and dog brought you to help. You came under the command of the indomitable Mercy Gardner. When she commands in a crisis, she is to be obeyed. She took over before you were good in the house. This morning, you were too exhausted to fight her."

Clark ran a hand over his face as yesterday came back to him.

"John Stuart came a little while ago. He wanted you to know Louise is sitting up and taking nourishment. He is very grateful still to have her."

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“He loves her.” Clark answered simply.

“You’re up!” Mercy had heard voices. She was still in charge, “You look like a new man. You’ll look better after a shower and a shave. Clean clothes and your razor are in the bathroom. Come on; get busy, supper’s almost ready. Scoot, Melody.”

Mercy turned to grin at Clark. My he was a handsome devil. She could see he was recovered. She knew her baby was seeing him, a man, without fear.

* * * * *

The doctor in Clark finished bandaging a broken finger. The man in him saw a figure appear to the right of his vision field.

It was Melody. She was running a few steps then walking a few steps, then running again. She looked back over her shoulder then her head went down and a hand came up to brush away tears. Something was wrong.

Clark stood. “Janet, can you finish here? I may not be back.”

Janet Lowe looked up to see Melody Cotton in obvious distress “Go to her, Dr. Roth.”

Long, balanced strides took Clark to the point where he could interrupt Melody's fleeing. He deliberately stepped in front of her. "Melody----"

Melody looked up in terror and then saw it was Clark. "Dr. Clark----"

"Melody, are you all right?"

"No." Her voice was choked with sobs. She ducked her head. As Clark reached out to steady her, she flinched at his touch.

"Honey, what is it?" He had slipped up calling her honey but she was in such distress she didn't notice.

Melody turned into Clark's arms. She mumbled, "I want to go home, Dr. Clark----now----please."

Clark held her close. She was trembling in fear but he was sure it wasn't fear of him. Something had triggered what he was sure were dreadful memories. He looked passed her and saw Theodore Warren expectantly standing at a distance.

"Hush, Dear, you shall go home. We'll have to find Miss Mercy and Jake." Clark kept a supportive arm around her waist. He knew where Mercy and Jake were.

Mercy came running to them the moment she saw them. "What happened?"

"I don't know."

Melody turned into Mercy's arms. "Mercy, I want to go home----"

Clark nodded his head yes as Jake came beside them. The sight he took in made him know that something was very wrong. "Come, we'll go right now. Clark, help Melody."

With that, Clark picked up Melody in his arms. Right that moment he cared nothing for what any observer might think. Melody needed caring. After all everyone knew he was a doctor and Melody was a patient----didn't they?

They were abreast of their carriage with Clark handing Melody in to Mercy when he heard a sneering voice, "Hey, Doc, is the pretty widow your private field to plow?"

Clark whirled around to find Theodore Warren smirking. He didn't know what had happened to his Melody but whatever it was Clark was sure this man was behind it. "Mrs. Cotton is a patient."

Clark climbed up beside Jake. Let's go, Jake." He turned to see Melody was crying again, cuddled in Mercy's comforting arms.

Once at the cottage, Clark lifted Melody in his arms to carry her in. She protested but he did not release her until he had her in the living room. She was softly crying as Mercy led her away.

Clark sat. Jake joined him. Jake was sure that what he had suspicioned about his brother was true----Clark was in love with this precious girl.

Mercy came back. Clark jumped to his feet. "Is she all right?"

Mercy nodded her head toward the kitchen. Once there she said, "She is very sorry for causing you so much embarrassment."

"She didn't cause me any embarrassment. What happened?"

Mercy eyed him. She had grown very fond of this fine man. No, it was more than that----she loved him, like a mother loves a son. "It may seem----you are a man, Dr. Clark."

"And a doctor." Clark waited.

"The man who made such crude remarks as you were putting Melody in the carriage----do you know him?"

"I know him. I also know his reputation. He is not someone I want around Melody."

"He is not a friend then?"

"He is temporarily president of the Ralston bank. After today, he is very temporary." Clark had the authority to have Warren discharged.

"He is----a monster. Melody was hot and tired from working with the children. She saw a bench under a

shading oak tree. She went there to cool off. The man came by; very pleasant he was. She was trying very hard not to feel fear. He started complimenting her. She must have blushed. He told her she was a very desirable woman. She stood to leave. He told her he knew she was a resent widow so he expected she was hot for a man. At her shock, he grabbed her and, as she termed it, mauled her. Someone came on the scene and she managed to escape him. Oh, my poor baby. She thought anything like this was in the past. Oh, Dr. Clark,----I----
,,

“Don’t worry, Miss Mercy. Charles has told me some of this.” Clark looked off in the distance, through the kitchen, out to the garden where he had seen Melody regain her health and much of her strength. He felt guilt. He was the one who had encouraged her to try today. The people at the celebration were mostly friends she and Mercy had made through the church. What could possibly happen among people he knew so well? Apparently plenty could.

Clark walked through the house thinking how happy Melody had become in the six months she had lived here. Damn it she belonged here. He tapped on her bedroom door.

“Yes?” came from inside.

Clark entered and stood silhouetted in light from the living room. "Are you all right?"

Melody was propped against an array of lacy feminine pillows. Her golden curls surrounded the saddest face Clark could remember. "I'm sorry I embarrassed you."

He came to the side of the bed. "Melody you did not embarrass me. On the contrary, I am very proud of you. You kept your head and said no to someone who was completely out of line. You do not have to put up with any man accosting you." Clark felt his chest tighten with anger at any man touching Melody. He shook his head at his reaction.

"Mercy told you!" Melody was horrified that her ordeal had been told to her doctor.

"She was right to tell me, Dear."

Melody turned her face away from him. "I am such a weakling."

"You-----Melody, are a dear innocent." Clark's voice was gentle.

She turned back to him. He was so unfailingly gentle.

"Are all men like him?" Melody's eyes were huge with her innocence.

“You are asking a man, Melody.” Clark was fighting the smile her question had triggered. How very dear she was in her innocence.

“I’m asking you. I have no one else to ask.” Melody needed an answer. With the exception of her Uncle Charles, she had only seen brutality from men. This man with her was a doctor, her doctor with Uncle Charles’ approval----surely he could be trusted.

“I’m----I’m not sure how to answer you. Men are human, Melody. You are----” Clark hesitated. He wanted to say so much, so much he knew Melody could not accept, could maybe not ever accept.

“Yes?”

“You are every man’s dream. That is no excuse for Warren’s boldness but it explains it. You are also very eligible and very wealthy.” Clark thought he had explained men very well. He had left out the fact that Melody was very desirable. There it was again----the undeniable fact that he was irrevocably in love with this lady.

“Then I shall become a recluse!”

Clark laughed outright. Here was a contradiction to the spirit he had carefully nurtured. “Turn from a world that has accepted and welcomed you? In what has really been just weeks, you have become an active member of this community. This has been achieved not by your

eligibility or wealth but by the gentle, charming personality all of your own. You and Miss Mercy have, from the beginning, not been seen as outsiders. You must not withdraw from what has brought you back to life. Instead you will enjoy your success and let Miss Mercy enjoy hers.

Of course, someone must always be with you---to run interference if there are others as bold as Warren. Until you are strong, whoever, must be intercepted. You must accept the fact that you are independent----free describes it best, I think. Your wealth is what may draw the most attention but it is also the cushion that allows you to make your own decisions.” Clark hoped. Charles had assured Clark that he had Melody protected. “Are you better now?”

Melody peeked up at him and gave him what was a very seductive smile. It was a good thing he knew it was just a smile to her.

* * * * *

Melody looked shyly at Dr. Clark. “I’m going to Atlanta at the end of this week.”

Clark looked directly at her. “Yes, I know. Charles wanted to be sure I thought you could. After Sunday, I am concerned.”

"I have to go. He has found a buyer for Mr. Cotton's house----well my house. He thinks I----" Melody hesitated, shifting from the confident woman of recent weeks to the child. "He thinks I should come choose what I want from the house."

"Do you want to do that?"

Melody turned stricken eyes to look at Clark. "I----I don't know. No, I don't. There's nothing there for me---not really. Aunt Charlotte has already brought what trinkets and needlework I might want. And she brought out my mother's sewing rocker to keep at her house. Mercy had saved that for me."

"Nothing else?"

"Nooooo----" There was a look of such pain, Clark had to look down. "I shall never wear the clothes. The jewelry is already being sold. All of that was to show off his affluence----none of it my choosing."

"And the house? Do you want it sold?"

"Yes. It's a horror of a place." Melody, the woman, was back. "It is all for show and no comfort."

Mercy had heard the last of that. "It was not a home. This child----"

"Mercy, no."

"No, Melody, I'm going to say this. This child has never had a home until she came here."

"Mercy!"

“Well, it’s true. Ask your doctor. You are changing”

“She’s right, Melody. Physically you have had much healing here----no fainting.” Clark smiled teasingly at her. “Think of the choices you are making--daily.”

“I’ve had thoughtful guidance.” Melody blushed. Mercy had guided her all of her life, always encouraging her to----to live. Uncle Charles and Aunt Charlotte had always been supportively there. And oh, how she had needed them. She looked up to the knowledge that someone had been added to her life. This dear, gentle man had slipped under her shield. She smiled gratefully to the two here.

* * * * *

The auditorium went to buzzing the moment the ravishing Melody Cotton and entourage entered the building. She had matured in the six months, no, eight months since her husband’s death. She was more beautiful than ever, turning heads to watch her as she, on Uncle Charles’ arm, made her way to Kurt Cotton’s box.

The box had been chosen to show off Kurt’s prize of a wife. He had dressed her and paraded her like a

puppet. Melody had acquiesced ----she really knew of no other way having acquiesced to her father before Kurt. Internally she had fought her battles but she had presented a serene loveliness that no way indicated her intense turmoil. She would do the same this evening.

Melody hated returning here. She was before the public, their whispers and their looks of curiosity. Yet, here she was again in the public venue. Charles had decided that this presented the best opportunity for her father and Arthur Cotton to approach her. They would have to behave to some extent because of the witnesses. Charles was sure that their acute sense of decorum would demand a degree of civility. She knew her father and brother-in-law would be there. This was a place where they could be "seen".

Melody looked over the railing, into the floor of the filling auditorium. Yes, there they were----whispering and pointing up to the box. Melody blanched. She had expected them, had wanted them to be here. She wanted the control their being in public was affording her.

"You can get through this," she told herself. She had found that she could feel fear of these men and yet it was not overwhelming. She had a life, a life without them----Uncle Charles had promised her she could get through this successfully and quickly return to her sanctuary in the country.

“Melody----”

Clark’s voice sounded far away. He could not be here. She had left him in Ralston but----miraculously she turned to find he was here. He was holding out a bouquet of white flowers. He indicated they were for her.

“Thank you----” she whispered, her eyes reflecting her happiness at his thoughtfulness.

Clark smiled. “You were a million miles away.” She had looked so lost; Clark had wanted to carry her away from here. He knew Charles’ plan. But something more had triggered her lost look.

“Aunt Charlotte and----”

She didn’t finish before Clark stepped back to show Melody that both Charlotte and Mercy each had bouquets of their own.

“Oh, you are thoughtful. We all love flowers. And Mercy----I would like to have seen her face----”

“For all those biscuits that have my clothes fitting snugly.” Clark winked at her.

“Just who do you think you are?”

The abrupt question caused Clark to stand tall, “I beg your pardon?”

“You----who are you?”

“Mrs. Cotton’s doctor----and you?”

Clark heard Melody's soft voice, "This is my father."

Looking down at her, Clark found her controlled.

"This is unseemly, Melody. You are newly widowed. How dare you embarrass your family by appearing at a social event? You are in mourning."

Clark started to answer but was pleased when Melody quietly spoke, "I wanted to see *La Traviata*. And, for the record, I am not in mourning." Her chin lifted in defiance of the man in front of her.

"That is enough, James. You can leave." Charles Lang had come back to the box. "You still have time to make it to your seat."

"What is he doing here?"

"He is Melody's doctor. He was in Atlanta so I asked him to join us."

"From where?" James Bass was red with anger.

"Why from his home, James. The lights are dimming----" Charles stepped to one side as James rushed from the box.

"Shall we all relax and enjoy the opera. Melody, Mercy, my Darling----I don't think he will come back." He shook hands with Clark, very glad the younger man was with them. There was still Arthur Cotton to endure.

Clark took the empty chair beside Melody. He saw very little of the first act, lost in watching her glow with

happiness. Of course, he knew she loved music. This though was still another side of her. Charles had warned there were multiple sides to this fascinating lady. "You'll like them."

Clark stood to stretch. Mercy and Charlotte stood to say they wanted to go see the McCalls in the next box. Charles excused himself too. Clark and Melody were left together.

"You could go too. Charles said my father will not be back." Melody smiled shyly. This was very different than being in Ralston with her doctor.

"How could he be so sure?"

Melody laughed, "I am not dripping in the famous Cotton jewels. That has given him something to consider especially after I stated I was not in mourning."

Clark was satisfied that her laugh was genuine, "Jewels?"

"Yes. They are famous----or so I've been told. I had to wear them but I never liked them."

Clark noticed Melody was wearing a single strand necklace of pearls. They were beautiful against her perfect skin.

"These are Aunt Charlotte's," she said as she saw he had noticed.

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Clark took another look at her. This was the Atlanta Melody. He knew Mercy had brought the dress from the country. It was not new----definitely not for the country. Except for the first day, Clark had not seen Melody in the high style of the city. Her golden hair was in a stylish coiffeur----elegant but not her to him. His heart ached for the real, lovely and happy girl of Ralston.

“Did you like the first act?” She glanced toward Clark wanting him to talk. She needed to distance herself from her father.

“What do you mean by showing yourself in public? This is an embarrassment to your whole family. And with an escort----Melody have you lost your mind?” A whirlwind had stormed into the box.

“Arthur, I don’t think what I do is of any concern to you.” Melody did not feel the confidence she sounded.

“You dare sit there and talk to me like that? You are destroying everything my brother built by flaunting yourself here. You come with me now and put a stop to this!” Arthur reached out and pulled Melody up from her chair.

A shocked Melody said nothing but tried to pull away.

“Let her go----” Clark had stepped from the shadows of the box.

“Who the hell are you? This is my sister-in-law and she’s coming with me.”

“I am her doctor and she’s staying here. She should not be here. But she is and she is to enjoy herself not be treated with such rudeness.” A strong hand opened the hand holding Melody’s arm. “Now---leave.”

“You’re stepping into something that is none of your business.” Arthur was shouting.

“Dr. Roth is her doctor, Arthur. What he says, she is to do, she is to do. Melody is still in recovery. You will please leave.” Charles had come back to the box.

Melody had fallen back to her chair, her face covered by her hands. Clark stooped beside her and reached to comfort her.

Arthur pushed Charles to one side. “Don’t you touch her, you opportunistic bastard. You’re only after her money.”

Clark looked pass Arthur straight at Charles and laughed, “Get out, Mr. Cotton, before you make even more of a fool of yourself.”

“Come on, Arthur. You’re over your head here,” Charles led Arthur into the hallway.

Clark returned his attention to Melody, “Did you know this would happen?”

“I had to face them sometime. It was better here where they neither one could literally kidnap me. They

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have threatened, Dr. Clark.” Melody uncovered her face. Mercy was back. Clark backed away to let Mercy comfort her.

“Uncle Charles----I won’t slink out like they expect me to.” Melody was standing. “We shall see the rest of the opera, please.”

And they did. When it was over, she took Clark Roth’s offered arm. They walked through the lobby----an absolutely stunning couple. With the doctor and Langs at her side, her family silently let her pass.

* * * * *

“Charlotte,” Clark entered the library of the Lang home.

“Clark, Dear, I thought you were already at the hospital.” Charlotte raised a cheek for Clark to kiss.

“The surgery was postponed until tomorrow. The patient wanted to wait until all of his family is here. Did Melody and Miss Mercy get off earlier?”

“Yes. Charles thought it best. Her family would not expect an early departure. Melody needs to be back in the safety of the country. She is doing so well.”

“She’ll continue to do well. I believe she’s happy there. She fits the cottage. She has moved out into Ralston as though she was born and raised there. She is

terribly kind and then there is the added advantage of Miss Mercy. All knew Miss Mercy first and that made it easy when Melody was well enough to venture into town.”

“Isn’t Mercy a marvel? They are happy there. Mercy says you have seen quite a bit of them.” Charlotte watched as Clark blushed.

“I do live just a step away. And my Bracket has fallen in love with the ladies. When Melody first came I had to check on her daily. She was very ill, Charlotte. She has done so well but she’s----”

“She has had to overcome a great deal, Clark.”

Clark thought and then stated, “Charlotte, I think there is much beneath the outline I have been given by Charles and Dr. McRae. I need help.”

“Oh, Darling Boy, don’t ask me. Melody has forbidden both Mercy and me to tell anyone what really happened.” She looked closely at Clark. She dearly loved this fine young man. She had known him since he was in his teens and had come into a huge financial settlement. His Grandfather was already a client of Charles’. He put Charles with Clark and their relationship had been solid from the beginning. Jake and Clark, both, were like family to the Langs----who had no children of their own. Melody had been the daughter they wanted. But somehow the young men

were never around when Melody was. Now, here was Clark blushing. Charlotte had wished out loud and had her Charles laugh at her; she had wished for exactly to have happened what seemed to be happening.

“Clark, Dear, have you fallen in love with Melody?”

Clark’s head snapped up, “Am I that obvious?”

Charlotte felt a surge of joy. “Only to someone who knows and loves you. You do, don’t you?”

“Yes. I think it is too soon for her to know how I feel. I sense she will not---not love easily.”

“You do love her.”

“Yes, Charlotte, I love her. I need to know----”

Charlotte raised her hand to stop him. “Don’t, Clark. I can’t tell you. But Charles can. Go to him.”

* * * * *

“Charles, have you told me everything---about Melody?” Clark had come to Charles Lang’s office. He had been taking care of Melody Cotton for six months. Although Mercy had done everything Dr. Roth counseled, Melody was still weak. She should be better.

“Sit down, Clark, please. You seem---concerned.”

“Charles, I am. What you and Dr. McRae have told me, as awful as it is, was not enough to account for

such a slow recovery. Miss Mercy will not tell me anything but broadly hints there is more. Charlotte would tell me nothing but sent me here. She says you can tell me what I need to know.”

Charles knew it was time for Clark to know the whole sordid truth in order for Melody to be helped. “It is not pretty, my friend.”

“How bad?

“I’m sure Dr. McRae told you the basic medical course. He did not know all; he only came on the case the four weeks before she was sent to you. Even as a doctor, I don’t think you can imagine.”

Charles reached for his pipe and lit it. “Charlotte and I have known the dear girl since she was a baby. Mercy, bless her, has known Melody as long. Charlotte and Melody’s mother were friends----as near a friend as the poor woman could have. Her husband, Melody’s father, was a tyrant. To this day, I hold him responsible for Jean’s death so soon after Melody was born. The devil is still with us and trying his best to locate Melody----not because he loves her, you understand. He must not find her. He has all he is ever to get from her; for her might better express it.” Charles paused. He knew what he had to tell Clark would remain confidential. What he had to tell was painful for he had been helpless to help Melody.

“Charles?” Clark waited.

“Melody’s father realized that he had a rare, exquisite prize in his daughter. He decided that with the right promotion, he had a highly salable project.”

“A What?!”

“A salable project.” Charles waited for Clark’s burst of temper to settle. “He educated her----She plays the piano very well, is a talented artist and does prize winning needlework. He dressed her like a porcelain doll. He showed tantalizing glimpses of her at high society affairs; then would whisk her away before anyone could know who she was. He was showing her as though she was a prize horse. She was exquisitely beautiful, talented in all the graces of a lady and a virgin. He let it be known that she was his daughter and that he would let her go to the highest bidder. To my horror, he did just that----auctioned her off to the highest bidder. On the basis of her ancestry, Karl Cotton paid her father \$200,000. A huge society wedding notified all of the elite that Karl Cotton thought he was now on an equal footing with them. He took Melody away from what little security she had ever known----mainly Mercy. Mercy came to work for me. I had to have someone who could help me keep an eye on Melody. Charlotte and I were desperately

worried. Melody had been deliberately sheltered----all to make her more desirable.”

Charles stopped, trying to gauge what else to tell Clark. “You love her.”

Clark could not look at Charles.

“Cotton had a terrible reputation with women. Even prostitutes would not willingly go to him. He had two mistresses who were rarely seen in public. For a year, Cotton showed off his young wife----she was only twenty when he married her. He relished in the envy of other men as he paraded Melody in public. She was dressed in the most expensive clothes and accessories. She was not happy but then Melody didn’t know any different. She found her happiness in little things----being with Mercy and Charlotte when she could. She is naturally a happy girl----outside of the presence of her father or husband. A year passed and Cotton decided to collect that for which he had paid. Only, instead of appreciating the lovely creature he had married; he beat her into submission and repeatedly raped her during a long night. Servants found her the next morning and went for Mercy. Somehow they brought Melody to our home. Charlotte and Mercy nursed her until she was somewhat healed. Cotton demanded her return. Terrified, she had no choice but to return to him.” Charles showed how much telling this was hurting him.

With all his expertise as a lawyer he could find no way to keep Melody with them.

“Mercy would slip into the servants’ quarters. Melody would come down to see her. She was shattered but she maintained a brave front. It was not three months later when Mercy came home with the awful news that Melody was pregnant. Thank God, Kurt had not touched her since the rapes. Melody welcomed the pregnancy, hoping it would protect her. Cotton bragged to everyone who would listen that his lovely wife was with child. He courted her with every extravagance he could brag about. She told Mercy she was happy about the baby. Then suddenly Cotton upped and let most of his household staff go. He had found Melody with Mercy. He went berserk accusing Melody of infidelity and more. Despite the pregnancy, he returned to beating her. One night, as she was full term, he beat her and again repeatedly raped her. He stormed out of the house, not to return that night. The staff, what was left of it, panicked, all but the cook, and fled the house. The cook found Melody unconscious at the foot of the stairs. She called for help but it was too late for the baby. He was dead and Melody nearly dead. The doctor was able to get her into her own suite and posted a guard. He did not know what had happened but he did not want a repeat of it. When she regained

consciousness, Melody asked for me. At that point, she had no one she could trust except her faithful three. Her husband did not come home. We went to stay by her side. After three days, the police came to call. I met them to explain Melody could not see them. They were there to inform her that Cotton would never come home again. He and his newest mistress had been shot dead by the woman's husband who then shot himself." Charles paused to relight his pipe.

Clark remained silent. That his darling had, had so much pain explained a great deal to him and it hurt, terribly. He still could not look at Charles. He wished he had known all of this from the beginning and then he knew he was better off not having known.

"Melody was too ill to attend the funeral. She was nursed, at home. She was protected from her father and brother-in-law. When she could be moved, she was moved to our home. There we were certain she would not have to confront her relatives. Fortunately, I was Kurt Cotton's lawyer. He had died without a will. As his wife, Melody was the legal heir and only heir to his considerable assets. Officially she was independent of her father and brother-in-law." Charles stopped. He and Charlotte had wanted Melody to stay with them. They had no children of their own and Melody was like a daughter to them. "She had excellent medical care but--

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--she was getting no better. Finally Dr. McRae, who had come into the case, felt Melody should go to the country to recover."

"Why me?"

"You are an excellent doctor----a necessity. Charlotte and I thought of how we love your Grandmother's cottage. When we would visit her, we had always felt it was more home than our Atlanta house. We knew you had rented it but that it was now vacant. Melody was so very fragile. She had to go somewhere, where she would not be found by her family----as they called themselves. They were frantic with her the inheritor----and, believe me when I tell you, I saw to it that they had no access to her wealth. At first she wanted nothing from Kurt Cotton. When she realized that left her penniless and in danger of the same life she had led, she began to listen to me. With her fortune, she can command them rather than they her. I will manage everything for her. She does not yet understand all that concerns but she can when she is stronger. More important now is to keep her away from her father and Cotton and get her well. And so I called you. I knew I could trust you with her. And you said yes."

Clark sat looking out the office windows. He was lost in a dozen memories of how ill Melody had been

when he first met her. "I think she is some better now. Ralston and its people and the dear cottage have worked wonders. Miss Mercy has had a big hand in the success of these few months----bless her. I wish I had known from the beginning----perhaps I would have helped in a different way. To think that she has suffered so----it should never have happened to anyone but to someone like her----she'll never be able to trust any man again."

"Oh, yes, she will. She trusts me." Charles smiled. He was beginning to understand how affected his young friend had become of this dear lady.

Clark laughed, "You have Charlotte."

"Yes. And you have Mercy." Charles knew he had guessed right. Clark had fallen in love with this tragic girl.

"Mercy?"

"Mercy. She has called Charlotte singing praises to the skies for us sending Melody to you." Charles had not been surprised.

Clark leaned back in his chair. He wanted nothing more than to see Melody happy and healthy. There had already been times when he was certain she would recover----until he had learned all he had learned today. He now understood why Melody's happy laughter brought tears to Miss Mercy's eyes.

DEAR COTTAGE

They had shared such delightful times----something that as an adult, Clark had never really allowed himself. There was their love of animals; it seemed all animals. There was her delight in the flowers and the total of the cottage itself. She had excitedly enlisted him in exploring every nook of the house and the garden. He had introduced her to life-long friends and to Ralston itself----seeing so much anew through her excited eyes. Yes, there was a person healing----and yet----

Charles took a hard look at Clark. Here was one he had known for many years. There was no person he admired more than this young man. While his original intention had been to put Melody in a safe place with a good doctor; Charlotte, romantic soul that she was, had mentioned before Melody left for Ralston that her two favorite young people would be together for the first time.

Looking at Clark, Charles was sure Clark was enchanted with their Melody. And why not? Clark was single. Melody was single. They were both extraordinary young people. Recovered, Melody would make a lovely wife for a dedicated doctor. It was long passed the time when Clark should have found someone. He would be a good, kind husband. Melody would be gently loved. Charles found himself liking the idea. "You must not let Melody know I have told you

all of this. You can tell Mercy for I know she has wanted to tell you. Melody doesn't want anyone to know. If she denies it, she hopes it will go away."

Clark stayed still. He knew so much more. He had sometimes seen fear at the most innocent of things. Now he understood. He felt a surge of protectiveness, much stronger than before. "She is safe with me."

"I know that, Clark. But caution is necessary. Even as careful as we were in bringing her to the country, she might be found. At present everything her father and Cotton want to control has to go through me. But I worry. They are both determined to control her. That she has been controlled in the past indicates they could control her again. You know what her father and husband have done. Her brother-in-law will be as bad or worse. You've seen them up close. She must be strong to combat them."

"She's not there yet." Clark felt helpless. Melody needed time.

"You are going home today?" Charles was glad Clark had come.

"Tomorrow afternoon. The surgery is scheduled for early morning. When it is over, I can leave the patient with Chalmers. There is plenty of work at home----and there is Melody."

DEAR COTTAGE

* * * * *

Mercy found Clark standing on the back porch. He was intently watching Melody playing with Charlie. She had not yet seen her doctor. She would play and then try to return to her gardening. She belonged here.

“What was she like before----before she married?”

Clark faced Mercy and took the coffee she had brought him.

“Very much as she is now. She has always been a lovely girl----sweet and able to find happiness in small things.” Mercy’s pride showed.

“Perhaps happier?” Clark took a swallow of Mercy’s delicious coffee.

“Why do you ask?” Mercy knew before she finished asking. “You’ve talked to Mr. Charles.”

“Yesterday. What kind of animals are----well, were---her father and husband? Yes, Miss Mercy, I know it all.”

“Dr. Clark, she wanted no one to know----to know how awful it was. Mr. Charles promised. Why did he tell you?”

“I asked. And she had not made him promise. I knew there had to be something more than I had been told so far. I insisted he tell me. Physically she is recovering. Yet she is fearful, I think----something is

missing. Charles could not explain but I think you can. You know her better than anyone else. Help me get her truly well, Miss Mercy.” Clark felt Mercy might hold the key. Melody was at a turning point. She could stay as she was----not truly recovered----or she could move out into the happy life Clark longed to see her have. “Has she ever been happy?”

“Melody? Oh, yes. It does not take much for her to respond happily. You’ve seen her with that dog of yours. And look at her with that silly black kitten. She has had the ability to face whatever and find happiness in between. But----” Mercy knew what was wrong. If she told Clark, she could see no way he could right Melody’s present pain.

“Is she doing that now? Is she pushing to the back what is really worrying her? Miss Mercy, there’s more and you know what it is.”

Mercy lowered her head to consider. There was no way Mr. Charles could have told Dr. Clark what only Mercy knew. Being men, could either of them understand? She looked up into the kindest eyes she had even known. And she saw something she had not been sure of before; Dr. Roth was not being just a doctor.

“Please, Miss Mercy, help me help her.” Clark touched Mercy’s arm. “She deserves more than the best.”

“I do know. It’s the baby, Dr. Clark. Melody loves children. She very much wanted the baby she lost. She could have borne all if she had the baby. That monster deliberately cost her the baby so he could control her soul. He killed that baby just as surely as I’m standing here. I’m glad he’s dead.” Mercy ended with a fierce declaration about what she felt about Kurt Cotton.

“Of course----that could be it.” Clark looked back to the garden. Melody was coming toward them, her arms filled with flowers. She was alight with the happiness of the flowers and, unknown to herself, the happiness of her neighbor being home.

Clark stepped from the porch to help her. She was exquisite. The blue peasant dress she wore accentuated her beautiful blue eyes. They were filled with the happiness of this moment. Clark could see what Mercy had meant about Melody could find happiness in small things. Could small things bring her to where he felt she belonged? How he wanted her to be happy.

“Here, let me help you.”

“I can’t believe this. I’m use to flowers being delivered all arranged before I see them. I know I’ve picked too many. Mercy is always telling me I pick too

many. But each one was prettier than the last.” Melody laughed as Clark helped her with the flowers. “I promise myself each time, I will not be so greedy the next time.”

“You can be as greedy as you like as long as they make you happy.”

“Where’s my dog?”

“He doesn’t know yet that I’m home. I came to leave packages Charlotte Lang sent.”

“I wish she would come visit.” Melody moved gracefully up the steps. Her visit had been too short for she never had enough time with her Aunt Charlotte. She longed for her to see how happy she was at the cottage.

“She said she might in a week or two.” What a difference seeing her after having talked with Charles. “You’re a favorite of hers, I think. She doesn’t want you in Atlanta though.”

Melody looked up sharply. She did not want to go to Atlanta. This dear cottage was more home to her than anywhere she had ever been. “Atlanta holds no charm for me.”

Clark said nothing. What he had learned from Charles made her statement no surprise. He found himself grateful that she was content here.

Mercy came running with vases. She was happy her Melody was content.

DEAR COTTAGE

Clark showed Melody the packages he had brought. As he was leaving both Melody and Mercy insisted he return for dinner----only if he would bring their dog and Jake.

The feeling of unease that both Clark and Jake had felt was confirmed to be real. Clark did not tell Jake everything. He did explain that Melody had been physically and emotionally abused by her family and her husband. Like Clark, Jake reacted. He had grown to love these ladies and, though shy about showing it, the love grew with each passing day.

* * * * *

“You are going back to Atlanta with me----today.” Arthur Cotton shook his fist at the frightened Melody.

Frightened she might be but Melody had no intention of leaving Ralston and certainly not with her brother-in-law. “No.”

“Don’t you tell me no. You tell that woman of yours to pack your bags. I want to leave in an hour.”

“You may leave before the hour. Melody is staying here.” Clark’s voice was soft but in no way could its firmness be mistaken for weakness.

Arthur Cotton whirled to see the tall, strikingly handsome doctor striding into the room as if he belonged there. The doctor.

“You! I’ll have you know, Melody is my sister-in-law. I am in charge of her and her welfare. She will go with me.”

“Charles Lang is in charge of Melody Cotton’s welfare.”

“How the hell do you know? Just who do you think you are anyway?” The impudence of this stranger to speak to a Cotton in such a manner.

“You know I am Mrs. Cotton’s doctor.” Clark walked to Melody and raised her wrist to take her pulse. It was fiery hot and too rapid. He had been right at the sight of her. She was terrified and something else----sick. Mercy had called earlier to say she was worried. Clark had had to finish with an emergency and then had come directly here. “You are to go lie down.”

“Oh, Dr. Clark, I can’t. I have company.”

“Melody, Dear, this is not Atlanta. You are not well enough to entertain anyone let alone your brother-in-law. Come----” Clark moved to help Melody only to have her collapse in his arms. Clark picked her up and called out, “Miss Mercy!”

“Where do you think you are taking her?” Cotton demanded.

Clark looked down at the shorter Arthur Cotton. "To her bedroom. Miss Mercy!" Clark called again. Looking down again, he stated, "Get out of my way." The command was issued with an authority that even Cotton did not dare disobey.

Mercy was with them before Clark had Melody on the bed. She moved to assist in loosening Melody's clothes.

"I thought I told her not to wear this damn corset." Clark tore open the bodice of Melody's dress.

"She insisted when she knew he was here. There was no reasoning with her for she was already burning up." Mercy looked helplessly to her doctor.

"Here, here just what do you think you're doing?" Arthur Cotton had stormed into the room.

"Get out!" A pocketknife in Clark's hand once again ripped the lacings of stays. Clark ordered Cotton from the room. He reached for the covering Mercy held out to him. "Miss Mercy, go get her some juice."

Clark worked rapidly loosening Melody from the binding fabrics.

"You have no right----"

"I have every right, Cotton. I am the lady's doctor and she must breath. Get out." This time the get out was uttered in a dangerous guttural sound.

"Get your hands off of her."

Clark was intent on Melody. He cradled her in his arms and urged her to breath. "Come back, Honey. Come on----"

Melody's eyes fluttered. Clark held the juice to her lips and coxed her to drink. "That's my girl. Take some more."

In trust, Melody turned closer to Clark. She raised a hand to his chest and lowered her head there. To Arthur Cotton's suspicious mind, the doctor and his sister-in-law looked like lovers.

Clark saw the look and smiled to himself. At the moment, Cotton was way wide of the mark. Melody was not involved----just trusting. That Clark was hoping someday to claim her was none of anyone's business but his.

"Finish this, Melody.----Miss Mercy, get me some ice packs. She is burning up. We must get this fever down."

Mercy ran to get the ice. Clark saturated wash clothes with cool water Mercy had already brought. He began bathing Melody's arms.

"You stop that!" Arthur Cotton had not left the room.

"I told you to get out." Clark stood his full height. "Melody is very ill. She needs care only a doctor can

give her Since I am the only doctor here----that means me. You get out.

Miss Mercy is here. She knows how to help. Now get out so we can work. Miss Mercy, we need to get her out of these clothes.”

“You’ll do no such thing!” Cotton was hysterical now.

Mercy turned on Cotton. “You heard the doctor. You get out of here so he can work. He knows what he is doing. Out.” She stalked toward Cotton until he was out the door. Once she had him out the door, she shut it and locked it.

Clark had to laugh. “That won’t work, Miss Mercy. My bag is at the front door and we need more ice. Go and call Jake to bring more ice and alcohol.

Have him call Charles Lang and get him up here as soon as possible. Tell him to keep Cotton out of the way.”

Clark finished stripping Melody and wrapping her in sheets with ice placed down the sides of her body. “If Cotton gives you any more trouble, you tell him to stay out of the way for, if he doesn’t we might lose her.”

“Dr. Clark! You can’t mean that. Oh, dear Lord, not my baby.”

“Go tend to what I told you and get right back here. We’ll have to work probably all night. Everything will

depend on breaking this fever. Bring plenty of water. With your help, we'll succeed."

* * * * *

The afternoon and the night moved with aching slowness. Both Clark and Mercy bathed Melody with the cool water and with alcohol. She would become cool and then the fever would come raging back.

Clark could find no reason for her to be so ill. She was not congested----a fact for which he was grateful.

He and Mercy changed her gowns several times. They would be so wet they could have been wrung. They finally gave up and changed sheets instead. Clark would lift Melody while Mercy dried her and then wrapped her in dry sheets. Melody was fragile as Clark would put her back on the bed. He sat holding her hand in case she rallied and rolled off the bed. And he prayed. Mercy took in every gentle movement this kind man made with his patient. Mercy was sure he was this way with every patient. She had heard tales of how he could bring life back into patients. He was a miracle to Mercy.

Melody had had good doctors in Atlanta. They had been compassionate men who had done their best to keep this dear girl alive. They had saved her but had not

been able to give her the will to live. Clark had done that for her.

Clark Roth was more than special. Mercy realized more than ever that the young doctor was in love with his patient.

Through the night Melody would become restless, panicked. She would seem to be running, running away, running, running. Clark would take her in his arms and talk softly, soothingly until she was quiet. In her own way, even with the horrors the fever was reminding her of, she was showing that her doctor meant a great deal more than just being her doctor.

Just at dawn, the fever finally broke. Clark picked up this treasured girl holding her close as Mercy once again stripped the bed.

“What are you doing?” Arthur Cotton was suddenly in the room.

Mercy quickly covered Melody who was naked in Clark Roth’s arms. She finished the bed.

“I asked you a question. I want an answer----NOW.” Cotton demanded.

Clark carefully placed Melody back on the bed, keeping her covered to shield her from Cotton’s eager eyes. “Miss Mercy, please get her a dry gown. You, sir, get out.”

“You are a lecherous beast. Keep your hands off of her.” Cotton was coming on in fury.

Clark stood and moved toward Cotton. “Mrs. Cotton is very ill. She needed and has received the very best of care. Thankfully she is some better. What she needs is quiet rest. That does not include you barging into her private quarters.” Clark wanted Cotton gone. Melody needed no reminders of the life she had left behind. Just the few minutes he had seen her reacting to this autocrat had been enough for Clark to keep him away.

“You can’t tell me what to do.”

“No, but Charles Lang can. He will be here by noon. Suit yourself but a wise man would be gone.” Clark turned back to Melody.

“How?” Cotton did not know how to stop demanding----at least not yet.

Clark did not bother to face Cotton. “I sent for him.”

Clark turned to helping Mercy dress Melody. Cotton charged toward the bed. Clark let Mercy finish with Melody and bodily picked up Cotton and threw him out of the room.

Mercy was buttoning the top of the gown when Melody opened her eyes. Her first sight was of a very tired doctor. “Clark----” she whispered.

DEAR COTTAGE

“Yes, Pretty Lady. Feel better?” Clark touched her to be sure she was still cool.

“Weak.” She tried to smile.

“It will pass.”

“Mercy?”

“Right here, Dear.” Mercy leaned close, hugging Melody. “You gave us a scare, my little sweet.”

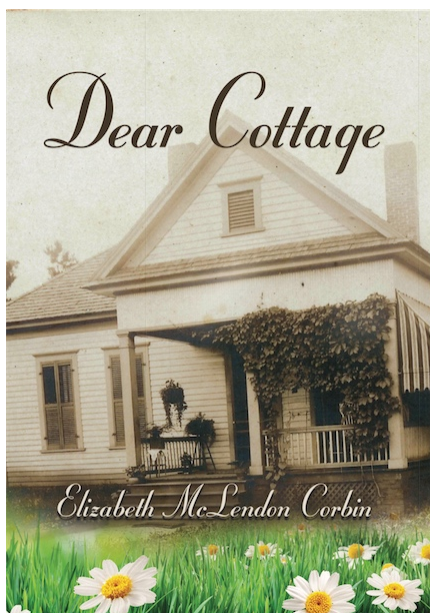
Loud voices were heard coming from the living room. Melody froze.

“It’s going to be all right, Melody. Charles is here. You are to worry only about getting well----doctor’s orders.” Clark winked at her and the wink broke her fear.

Melody giggled, “You look like a pirate----”

“Do I now? A shave and a rest will solve that.” Clark grinned at her. She was better.

* * * * *



Dr. Clark Roth has rented his Grandmother's cottage to the recently widowed Melody Cotton. When he is called to help her, she is not what he expected; she is young and lovely with a traumatic history. The dear cottage weaves a magic spell as Clark falls in love with Melody. With Mercy's help, he sets out a healing program.

DEAR COTTAGE

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