

Into the Forest Book I- A Maiden's Journey

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*The fates come full circle
Calling forth the spirit of love,
calling forth the innocent,
who shall try to override destiny.
The ancestors live in our bones.*

May these words weave glorious healing around, within, and through all.

May they speak to the Heart and Soul of Love within you.

This book is dedicated to my children. Susanne, who came into my life at a time when I needed to remember real love. She awakened within me the purest connection of mother and child, a connection beyond time and space. Tom, who came during a time of breakdown, awakening in me the joy and passion of living life as a creative expression of fearless adventure. George, my heart baby, came when I needed to remember my inner courage and the fierce love of Mother as healer. Awakening in me the timeless bond of mother and child to heal through a courageous love. Alex, came during a time when I needed to anchor in the stable and constant love found deep within the bones of life. He awakened in me the power of manifesting the heart's true calling. Brandon, who's arrival was an answer to a silent prayer. His life awakened in me the power to protect all that I hold dear, no matter what, and who's passing, sent me farther into the truth that Love lives on, for it is where we come from and it is always where we return to. His essence reminds me that we can't get this wrong and our prayers are always answered, somehow and someday, because each and every soul is forever and ever loved, unconditionally and completely. Love is eternal and in infinity is where we truly exist.

Remember that, live boldly and love big.

Chapter One

Britain Late 16th Century

The day was particularly heavy and it lay upon her like a thick blanket, comforting and soothing. She stared through the slit in the blood-red velvet curtain, past the etched glass pane, over the dull road, and into the smoky gray tendrils of limbs and boughs. The heaviness was otherworldly, vast and familiar. Her body shook as the coach hit rocks and rough patches on the well worn path. With each bump her insides grew calmer and the coach traveled farther and farther away from the estate walls and farther and farther away from her well kept life.

Keeping her eyes fixed on the forest that ran alongside her coach, she imagined an invisible veil, much like a wall, heralding the stopping point where the road ended and the forest began. As she stared, a faint voice beckoned her to enter into the forest. The soft voice told her to go past this wall and see for herself.

Squinting her eyes tightly she imagined who or what, called to her. The magic and mystery of such a question tightened in her belly. She kept her stare sure and steady, as shadows danced, the fog sang and the voice soothed her curious nature. After a time, she saw the flutter of wings darting merrily between the boughs and branches. Flickering sunlight, moist and vibrant cast a glow upon treasures forbidden. She sighed deeply. How would she ever be able to venture into the daring forest? The question was too much for her young mind to ponder. Sitting back against her seat with a thud, she turned her head downward and fiddled with her lace glove. Her face knotted up and

matched the pull of regret within her belly. Life was quite laid out and in the broadest hope there was no room within its finely figured walls for her to adventure past the veil of the forest wall.

Her family lived perfectly tucked, hidden, and safely restricted within the walls of a lavish estate abutted against the edge of the forest. Estate walls were dull and flat, built by servant men to keep out the intruders and keep in secrets. With each passing year, the secrets grew stronger as did the deep longing for life beyond the walls. With each passing year, life seemed to both shove her out and hold her captive at the same time.

As the coach approached its destination, fog lifted and the familiar cacophony of sounds and scents from the bustling city drowned out the magical seduction of the forest. Not quite as mystical yet intriguing just the same, the city fully awakened her senses. Sitting upright in her seat, she restlessly waited for the first sighting of the market place. Forest imaginings left behind, she strained to hear the calls of the merchants and laughter of the children scurrying to keep up with their mothers. Entering into the city, gave her a sense of hope, that someday she too would partake in a life far different from the one she presently lived. This new life included the forest, yes, but also the city, for it held a magic and a wonder almost as powerful.

The market place was not however, their destination. Nothing quite as exciting could call her family into the city square. The cathedral bells rang loudest of all and its spires were the final stop for the carriage. Standing tall in all its grandeur amidst the budding excitement of the city, the home of God stood perfectly coifed and guarded by saints, angels and gargoyles. As a very little girl she was intrigued by this immense stone creation and had many questions about the presence of such gruesome demons. She had however stopped noticing the gargoyles fierce stares, and the angels and saint's faraway looks, long ago when no one seemed as interested in them as she. None of the adults seemed to know nor care, therefore, it was up to her to create the story that would suffice her

curious mind. The immense stone gods were frozen in time, perched upon the cathedral to warn of the fear and doom that would befall each and every person who stepped foot inside. Yet, no one heeded the warning. They all went inside, listened to the sinister men deal fearsome messages, and then left to help spread these messages across the land and through whatever means necessary. She also surmised that the stone statues were lucky, for they did not ever have to enter into the walls of the cathedral, sit still and listen, with pretend care, to the long winded old men waxing on about how dreadful everyone was, reminding all in attendance of the unworthiness of their souls and shouting about the various punishments of utmost horror that would befall them if they went against God, or the King.

This house of God was petrifying and the rants of the holy men questionable, as they spewed stories of hangings, burnings and beheadings of the heretics, most especially the Catholics and the witches. She brought it to the attention of her father once and he had told her in a matter of fact way that witches were not real, they were the imagination of those who could find no other way to solve differences. And as far as the Catholics go, Father had confirmed that Mother's family had been Catholic a few generations ago, but now they all attended the established church, the Church of the King, so presumably she was a saved soul. Father also assured her that she was untouchable. She was not sure what the untouchable part meant.

Being the thoughtful young girl, laden with common sense, she had taken her own counsel. Reaching into the depths of her being, she discovered a few satisfying answers of her own. God did not care if one were a Catholic or recusant or if one attended the new church, for she most certainly doubted that God lived in such a menacing place. She figured out, with the help of her eavesdropping skills, during the long evening gatherings Father held in his study, that it was the kings and queens that were playing God and all the people that lived upon their lands were their

flock. God was something else and somewhere else. Perhaps it was God who gave her the gift of common sense, which seemed quite possible. She did not dare speak of such knowing to anyone, not even Father, for she did know better than to defy authority, so she kept her understanding, knowing, and good common sense tucked safely inside, as best she could, for now.

When attending church services, she had found a way to use her imagination to ignore the stifling fear and trepidation that filled the air. She simply removed herself from all manner of praying to a god that she knew was not there and instead spent her time in a story of her own design. Her well-developed imagination and keen mind assisted her through the depths of boredom that would surely overtake her if she did not do something to the contrary. The story started thusly; she scanned the crowd looking for the most beautiful maiden present. Upon spotting her, she then took in every detail of her gown, hair and jewels, naming each headpiece and color of fabric used. Imagining herself in conversation with the maiden as if they were dear and trusted friends delighted her to no end. They shared their deepest secrets, nothing was left out, not even their similar distaste for Sunday services. Her dear friend would then let her in on the juiciest, most scandalous secret ever; she would divulge the name of her true love. It was then that she would scan the rows and rows of seats looking for the most handsome young gentleman. This was a most difficult task for she could not let Father know she was looking around the Cathedral when she should have been praying. Luckily, Father was in his own world, either lost in thought, eyes closed, or staring blankly. Truth be told she was one of the only maidens who attended Sunday services anyway, for it was a place filled mostly with men and lads about to be men. Once she spotted the handsome lad of her best friend's affection she went on to imagine their life together, seeing their wedding festivities within her mind, deciding the number and names of their children and before she knew it service was over and she was free! This was indeed her most favorite game to play in the deep dank recesses of the city Cathedral and weekly service.

On that particular gray, heavy day as she and her father and brother traveled into the city, after catching the momentary glimpse of the forest fairies, she merrily became lost in the world of her own. This very morning, she had decided that on this day there would be a devilish twist in the game. Instead of finding the most beautiful maiden, she herself would play the part of the maiden in love. The thought sent a chill of excitement up her spine as she delightfully remembered the morning's events.

Elizabeth of Cumberland boldly decided that it was time for her to be a real maiden. She did not know quite what that meant, since there was no one in her life at the time that could help her with such things, yet she had declared today to be the day. To prove her determination and independence, she made a bold albeit cumbersome move. She shunned her servants help with any of the morning's dressing routines. She could not be bothered with the snooping and questioning from her Nanny Matilda or her dressing maid. If one servant was to know a thing, it was assured all would surely find out. No one need know that she would be going to cathedral as a maiden. Elizabeth was known for demanding her privacy, so she hoped her servants would not find her desire to dress herself this time to be too out of the ordinary.

"I am quite fine on my own!" she yelled as her maid knocked politely on the locked bed chamber door. Elizabeth had been trying to tie the ruffle under her neck for many a minute and it was not cooperating. She threw it under the bed in exasperation and instead opted for her second choice at defying the dress code of her father, via her dressing staff. Elizabeth rarely showed anger to her maids or any of the servants in the household, yet she so wanted to dress without the opinion of another for once in her life. She went to the door and whispered.

“I will dress myself today, Nell.” She searched for the words that would make such a request plausible. “I’m not feeling well, wouldn’t want you to catch ill.” She whispered and coughed for good measure.

“Oh, my Mistress, would you like me to fetch ya some remedy? Would you like me to tell Master Cumberland you will not be attending services?” answered Nell.

“No, no, that will not be necessary. I shall drink the brew you left for me earlier and all will be well. Thank you Nell, that is all.” Elizabeth waited until she heard the patter of footsteps trailing down the hall. She stared at the cold brew and laughed, congratulating herself on a job well done. She quite liked this precocious game she was playing. It suited her well and added much to her otherwise dowdy existence. Full of mischievous glee, she turned to the task at hand.

A small silver hand mirror that she had stolen from the dressing table of her mother would help assure the perfectly placed golden braids upon her head were still perfectly placed, after the tenuous ride into town. She tucked the mirror deep into her petticoats, smiling at the thought. A rush of heat ran through her belly. To steal from her mother, to hide the forbidden mirror, and to raise her petticoats in the holy prison was a true dare, punishable by exactly what, she was not sure, but punishable to say the least.

Elizabeth pulled the mirror out once more, and stared into its shimmery face. Heat from her fingers warmed the plain silver handle. Tarnish offset the shine of the precious metal and the one large ruby, inlaid delicately on its back, glistened in the early morning light. Holding the mirror close, she stared at herself with curiosity. Her features were full, mouth and cheeks rosy and as much as she desired, she dare not use any of mother’s white powder to hide her flaws. At least not quite yet, that would wait until next time. She had stolen a jar of the coveted white power, along with the

mirror, and it lay hidden beneath the boards of her bed. Extending her arm, she continued to look over her reflection. Pushing up her bodice, she grimaced with a fanciful wish. "I wish this part of me was as full as my face." She whispered aloud. "Oh well, I shall have the look of a proper maiden someday. Mother is beautiful, and Father says I favor her."

Elizabeth's cheeks flushed hot as she recalled the time spent in secret, rummaging through Mother's jewelry and finery. No one could ever know of her escapades into the delight of Mother's chambers and she had become quite clever at entering into the dressing chambers unseen, carefully planning the caper when Nurse Beatrice was not doting over Mother's every move. Mother barely moved at all and spent most of her day neatly tucked in bed, barely visible among the clouds of blankets.

The touch and feel of the silky coolness, and rich softness of Mother's ball gowns took her to another place and time, when her now life-less Mother accepted callers and entertained guests donned in these fanciful and ever so beautiful pieces of fabric art. Elizabeth especially loved Mother's jewels, for she named each piece, and created a story as to how they came to be hiding away in Mother's jewelry cabinet. She believed each jewel as a gift from Father, in expression of his love for his one true love. The jewels were surely acquired on great jaunts upon the sea when Father was a successful sea merchant. Elizabeth could only surmise what life was like for her parents so very long ago. The mystery of both Father and Mother's past intrigued her to no end, but far be it for either of them to share any of the stories. She craved to know where she came from, and mostly, what life was like beyond the estate walls, yet she was left to her own imagination to weave the story of the history of her own flesh and blood.

Elizabeth found a way to weave together bits and pieces of her parent's past in spite of her family's tight lips, for her talents at thievery and eaves dropping far surpassed any obligation she had

to respectability and privacy. She was quite good, not only at slipping into her mother's dressing chamber, but also hiding in the most elusive of ways and listening to the conversations that passed between the loosed lipped adults of the estate. Her escapades and talent at thievery and mischief allowed her to artfully create a very real story about her mother and father and it had nothing whatsoever to do with the sleeping woman who lay alone in her bed chambers for days upon days. The mother of her present was surely not the mother of her past.

Today was the day that Elizabeth decided to step forward in her boldness, with or without her silent parent's consent or knowledge. Today was the day that she would be the maiden of the cathedral and today she just might find a young lad, soon to be gentleman who would catch her fancy, ask her to be his wife and take her to be the lady of her own estate. Yes, today was the perfect day, for she could feel true maidenhood was upon her and it would not be long until she would be choosing a mate. Her father would be the one to choose, with her consent of course and she wanted to be ready, for Father would surely want to know her preference when it came to matters of the heart.

Elizabeth sighed a great sigh as she was brought back from her musings of the morning, and continued to stare out the coach window. The grayness was truly oppressive today, yet failed to dampen her spirits. The forest was becoming thinner and the pine scent was giving way to the stinging odors of the approaching city. It would not be long before they arrived at their destination. Slowly clutching the hand mirror that hid under her petticoat, she readied herself, heart fluttering as she felt an unfamiliar stirring deep within her belly.

Elizabeth was startled at such an unfamiliar feeling and she started to wonder what could be the matter. Had she gone too far? Was she ready to enter the cathedral as a maiden? Sitting back, she forced her attention onto her brother Henry. He animatedly chatted with Father and Elizabeth

stared at him with concern. Her thoughts easily diverted from her own discomfort and landed with familiar discord upon her ailing brother. She noticed that his skin had a slight ashen look, quite usual for a child with his weakened lungs. But was he more pale than usual? Was he laboring for breath? She watched him intently, as a mother watches her sleeping infant, noticing the rise and fall of his chest and noting the level of ease or difficulty in which his body took in air. She was satisfied that his breathing was sufficient and shifted her gaze to Father, who sat solemnly across from Henry. Father was still and quiet, properly dressed and handsome, the familiar faraway look frozen upon his face. Resting his hand upon the seat next to him, he clutched one of Mother's gloves as if Mother was really there. Mother was too ill to attend services again this week and Elizabeth could not remember a time when she was not too ill. In all her thirteen years, Mother had been ill. Father must have remembered Mother accompanying him to services, for why else would he hold her finely embroidered glove each and every Sunday? The glove looked like a lifeless ragdoll in Father's large hand, his knuckles white from the strength at which he clutched the delicate material. Mother was never there, yet her ghost always was.

Elizabeth pulled her gaze away from the lifeless remnant of her mother and settled her eyes upon Father. A bitter taste rose up from the depths of her belly and into her mouth as she took in the sadness. She drew her handkerchief up to cover her lips, just as the coach fiercely jolted and cries caught everyone's attention.

"No, no, we will not go with you!" Screams blasted through the thin walls of the coach. Horses whinnied and the coach tumbled with the movement.

Henry flew onto father's lap. Elizabeth slid off the seat, hit the side of the coach wall and landed on the floor in a heap of swirling petticoats. Jumping up, she pushed back the curtain to see where the screams came from before Father could stop her.

“No, leave us be!”

The cries came from a lad, who looked to be about her age. He stood tall and defiant in front of the shire reeve. Behind him stood a group of smaller children, huddling together and cowering in the presence of the shire and his men. The lad held his arms back, herding the little ones as they moved closer and closer together in a tight bundle as if they were a stack of kindling sticks ready for tying. Elizabeth counted five little ones, dirty and shoeless. Rags were their only protection on this cold spring morn. Grime covered their little faces, streaked at the places tears might fall.

“Lad, you and your little army are coming with us. Your devil ways are over now and forever!” The shire yelled and tried to pull the lad away from the children. The tall youngster was stronger than the shire thought, for his arm would not budge from the protective ring he had formed around the other children. The shire motioned to one of his monster men to help and Elizabeth watched in horror as the burliest, ugliest man she had ever seen waddled over and grabbed the lad’s thin gangly arm and pulled hard. She heard the cracking of bones. The monster man did not stop; instead he swung the lad around by his broken arm and threw him into the cart.

“Run, run. Save yourselves!” shouted the lad to the others. The children however, stood frozen.

Elizabeth felt something rush up from somewhere deep inside of her. So deep, she thought it came from within the bowels of the earth itself and so powerful in its force, it seemed as if nothing would or could ever stop it from emerging. The bitter bile was evident upon her lips as she screamed.

“Great Mother, help these children NOW!”

All heads turned toward the coach. Elizabeth could feel the heat of the shire's furry directed towards her. Something was terribly, terribly wrong and now she felt as if she were a part of it. She did not however back down. She licked her tainted lips and spoke the cursed prayer aloud again.

“Great Mother, help them!”

The children did not run and the heavens did not open and scoop them up. The shire and his two men turned back to their crimes and proceeded to throw each child into the cart, binding them all together with a large rope. Now they did indeed look like kindling. Human kindling, ready for the fires. Before they could bind the oldest lad, he lifted his fractured arm and touched each one of the little children, as a father would touch his child after a fall or scrape. Elizabeth felt the sorrow and the love reconciling deep within her.

Father pulled Elizabeth away from the window. Closing the curtain tightly, he reprimanded her.

“Elizabeth, sit yourself down upon your seat. It is not proper for you to be staring.” Father commanded with eyes lowered and lips pursed.

Elizabeth sat and stared at the blood red curtain. There was no place in her that could make sense of what she had witnessed. Her insides were torn apart and ached deeply. It was as if she herself was tied tightly to the bundle of children and their fate was her fate. The bitter taste in her mouth returned and was unbearable. She pulled out her handkerchief and spit into the embroidered family crest. She had to get the taste out of her mouth but it would not leave. She looked at her Father and a great shame and panic arose within her. He quickly turned away from her fierce glance. Her voice and spirit returned.

“But Father, those children...where is their mother...their father? Why is that shire treating them so? Did you not see?”

She demanded an answer as she peeked out the window to get another look. Father did not answer and refused to look at her. The carriage started moving again with a fury that matched her own. Elizabeth held onto the strap with one hand and kept her moist handkerchief closed tightly in the other. The curtain flounced open just enough for her to see the cart of dirty children following alongside their carriage. She stared at them and one small girl in particular caught her eye. This child looked to be about Henry’s age. Elizabeth’s eyes filled with tears and terror for the plight of this tiny child, yet she quickly wiped the tears, for the lass could see into the coach. Elizabeth forced a smile.

“Help us my lady!” the lass cried. “Help us please! They have hung our mama.” Her eyes cried out to Elizabeth with more pain than she had ever witnessed. Elizabeth waved at the girl, hoping to ease her fright. Her wave caught the eye of the guard sitting with the children. He grabbed the little girl and started to beat her with his large fist.

“Shut up you little brat. How dare you burden the Cumberland family with your pleas.”

The guard’s booming voice made Elizabeth’s ears ring as if he had shouted directly into her. The little girl covered as the monster continued hitting her, blood oozing from her nose. The bitterness rose up within Elizabeth again, this time consuming her whole being. Swallowing hard, she yelled.

“Father...Father! Stop the carriage, we must help the children.”

Elizabeth leapt up from her seat and sat hard upon her Father’s hand, the one that still clutched Mother’s glove. She swung the curtain open wide.

“Look Father. Look at what they are doing to that child. Why are they treating her so? You must do something!” Elizabeth cried.

Father turned quickly away from Elizabeth, but not quick enough. She saw the softening of his grey blue eyes.

“No Elizabeth, I will not look. I believe these young ruffians are the children of the thief who was hung last week. I am sure they will be hung too. The children of a thief are surely thieves themselves.” The softness in his gaze turned to slate, as flat and cold as the words he spoke.

“Father, they are just children,” Elizabeth cried softly, retreating back into her seat. Seeing Father in this confused state, his eyes saying one thing, his words another, wiped the rage from her heart and left her with a most frustrating sadness. She dared not look out the window again for fear of what she might see. The heaviness of the morning choked her and filled her with panic. She wanted to cry out to Father again, yet it was now her little brother who was in need.

Henry interrupted her despair with a deep cough that surely signaled a spell would follow. Wide eyed and panicked, Henry stared at her, the coughs and sputum erupting over the whole lot of them. He tried to hold it in but it burst through his puffed cheeks and the moistened air landed on Father. Father quickly pushed his handkerchief over Henry’s mouth.

“Stop Father!” Elizabeth demanded. “You know very well that to hold his mouth shut during these spells will only aggravate him and cause his breath to weaken.”

Elizabeth turned the despair for her father’s complacency into what she knew best; caring for Henry. She was ready, always ready to care for her younger brother. She fumbled for a moment until she found the vile of medicine tucked neatly into the pocket inside her cloak. Henry was now in a

full fit of coughing and wheezing, his hands grasping for the coach door. The spells always had him wanting to flee.

“Hold his hand Father and pull him slowly towards you. Do not cover him or upset him in any way.” Elizabeth commanded. “Henry, come sit, I have your medicine.”

Father held Henry tightly as he struggled to free himself. The coughing was weakening him fast. He was not listening and she had to act. Prying his mouth open, she emptied the vile and his medicine splashed onto his tongue. She knew how to do this, for she had done it hundreds of times before.

“Turn the carriage around.” Yelled father to the driver.

The carriage stopped and reeled around. They were now heading back toward their estate. Elizabeth sat in silence, holding her brother’s hand and stroking his hair. His body heaved until the calmness of his sister’s touch and the effects of the medicine led him gently into a rhythmic breath. As they entered onto the road that ran next to the forest, Elizabeth muttered a quick prayer to the forest fairies to protect those children as well as her little brother. She then remembered the strange but familiar prayer that had burst from her being. *Mother in Heaven, save them.* She shouted the prayer over and over within the quiet of her mind as she stared into the forest and beyond its wall. She knew that she saw the faint glimmer of light. The light pulled, awakening and soothing something deep within her being.

Elizabeth headed toward the kitchen to help Cookie bake the cakes for the week. Whispers from the pantry stopped her in her tracks.

“Yes, it was quite a sight, it was.” said Cookie. “They were all five standing with the same look upon their grimy faces.”

Elizabeth felt faint. She knew of what Cookie spoke. Cookie continued and Elizabeth went unnoticed.

“And the ropes went about their necks, nearly knocking the smallest ones over with the weight. Never a sight a mother would ever want to see, I tell you. They were all hung in a row, bodies dangling. Their faces went blue in a matter of minutes. I tell ya lassies, watching that, I prayed harder than I ever done, in hopes that the urchins were really the devil’s children and the devil he ‘self would save them. But, alas, he did not.”

Cookie searched the shelves for some missing ingredient, her large body sweeping the remnants of the days baking onto the floor. Elizabeth saw the big wet tears fall from Cookie’s face and disappear into the thatch along with the bits and pieces of crusts and herbs. Cookie swiped her feet, grinding in her tears and sending a pleasant and familiar scent of rosemary wafting upwards.

“It was told that their mother’s screams could be heard for miles around when the last of her children were dead. It was told, yes that the witch herself rose up from her grave and screamed in grief.”

“Is that true, Cookie? Did you hear it? Did you hear the mother’s screams?” asked Annie, the laundry maid.

“No, me myself did not hear it. I only saw five dead children hanging. No one come to save them, no one to claim them.”

Cookie’s ample body moved fiercely as she opened the barrel and scooped generous amounts of flour into a bowl, sending powdery dust flying. Her voice rose as she continued.

“All the royalty sat and watched...all the bastards with the coin smiled as those babies hung. I saw that with me own eyes!”

Cookie’s voice quieted as she leaned into the two servant girls as they attentively listened. Elizabeth squirmed nervously, not wanting to make a sound and be discovered. She was very good at moving undetected, yet the servants were also very good too. She gathered herself, froze in place, almost stopped her breath. and continued to listen.

“Anyone who has not the riches to defend themselves could be next. Anyone who lives as the peasants do must beware.” Cookie gasped for air, the restraint of her voice made her bosom heave mightily. “Anyone who uses the old way is doomed! I hear the mother witch was caught birthing a babe. Now, we know that kind of thing happens still among the peasants, yet this wily witch had the gall to come to the aid of a Lady. She helped birth Lady Fortner’s babe. And for that she was hung.” The two servant girls backed away from Cookie in unison, both clutching their tiny bosoms in protection.

“But don’t you worry yourselves, dears.” Cookie consoled. “We are safe here, for Master Cumberland keeps us so. He may be one of them, a bastard...with riches, but he is...different...lost in his own misery. That keeps him right here with us. In a way, he is one of us.”

The girl's eyes widened with mock horror at what Cookie had just said. They turned to each other with confused looks upon their faces. Cookie did not notice for she swung away from the girls and was nervously wiping clean a pantry shelf, over and over. Her back was turned towards the shocked servants, and her voice high and shrill. Then as quick as a pantry mouse, she turned and faced them. She bent down low to keep her bellowing voice safely tucked in her round cheeks. "Let me share with you my trick." She whispered. "Keep the Master well fed and treat him to a bit of humor when needed. Always do as he commands and..." Cookie's voice shot out from her throat as she straightened her spine. "Never, ever anger a man of the gold or a man of the cloth! You can't trust em and yee sure can't trust em angry."

Cookie's hands flew in the air, crumbs flying. The girls ducked as the dried bits and pieces of cakes, cookies and mouse droppings landed inside the crooks of their hair bonnets, down the ruffles of their corsets and into the pockets of their linen aprons.

Elizabeth stood frozen, hands trembling, as she took in the words "*they were all hung until they were blue*". A vision of her father in the coach that day, with his ice cold stare, danced inside her head. Her belly felt as if a pile of rocks had found a home. Her body defied her and it was impossible for her to turn away from what she had just heard, until she felt a hand upon her shoulder. She still could not turn to see who had witnessed her spying on this very private horrific conversation. The hand pressed down harder.

"What are you doing here, child?" came the familiar voice of her nanny. She was one of them, the others, yet all her life Elizabeth trusted Matilda. At least to a point she did. Understanding seeped in. Elizabeth was truly alone inside this estate. She did not belong with her servants, Father, Mother or even Matilda. Who was she and where could she be safe? How could she be safe from a world that would murder innocent children and safe from people who could not or would not do

anything about it? Elizabeth inhaled deeply and turned to face her nanny. She would carry on, she had to, she still had Henry, and Henry needed her.

“I am going to my bedchambers to finish my studies.” She said.

Elizabeth inched passed Matilda and strode quickly down the halls, making a vow as she went. “As long as I shall live and however I might, I will protect the children. I shall find a way.”