

The clattering knock jolted Verbena out of precious sleep. She threw on her old robe, hearing a few more threads rip in the thin fabric, and hurried out from the small room in which she slept, just beyond the kitchen. Hopefully she would reach the door before whoever it was woke her father. He had come home drunk again last night, and fought her when she tried to put him to bed. The last thing she needed was a repeat.

She pushed her curly pale, sleep-mussed hair out of her eyes, the better to see. The house was barely light, only differences in shadows marked the furniture, but she knew it too well to need a candle, and there was no time, anyway. The pounding began again. Verbena flipped the bar and jerked the door open. "What is it?" she hissed in a whisper before her tired eyes focused on the person standing outside. "Oh! Why –"

She surprised herself by even recognizing the woman. Agnes, her sister's thin, pinch-mouthed, grey-haired maid, whom Verbena had seen only a few times when Edeline dropped in for one of her rare visits. What business would Agnes have here at this hour? No one of wealth got up this early. Edeline had certainly forgotten how by this time, she had been married into wealth and luxury for six years, and Agnes would hardly come on her own.

So who had sent Edeline's maid? And why? Verbena's heart skipped a beat as drowsiness gave way to the first stabs of panic. "Edeline?"

Agnes looked down at Verbena's robe with distaste. The rip must have been obvious even though the light was poor, just a bare slit on the horizon that marked the night's end. Verbena felt her cheeks heat as she caught herself comparing their two garments, her tatty robe and the woman's maid's uniform, crisply pressed even at this young hour of the day. It was as if Agnes knew that everything in Verbena's wardrobe was equally poor. After all, the Barnes were no longer comfortable enough, their house an aging façade, the whitewash worn away, the windows cracked, not something easy to hide.

A painful reminder of what once was, the days before the government started passing the laws that separated land, dividing the countryside between those who owned it and those who lived and worked on it.

And the small landholders began losing what little they had. Landholders like her family.

"Here," Agnes said shortly as she shoved a note on fine paper into Verbena's hand. "I was to bring this to you. Now I have done my duty." She ran her scornful gaze once more over Verbena's figure, then turned and stalked away.

Verbena shut the door quietly behind Agnes, watching her melt into the first faint promise of a summer's dawn, and sat down at the heavy bench by the door. She swiped again at the loose blonde locks that blocked her view and saw her name written in bold letters on the folded linen paper. Her bed pulled at her, the day's work lay in front of her like an unending road, washing all her father's clothes from this last voyage, cooking for him and the other four children, baking bread, helping the girls sweep and scrub the floor, and all the other chores they did to keep the house going. This letter from her sister delivered at such an odd time could only be bad, bad news. She had not even known Edeline and her husband were back in the small town of Thernbury. Verbena braced herself and broke the thick seal.

The rich paper crinkled under her hands as she smoothed it flat on her knee, the words a black sprawl on the paleness of the paper. Verbena held the letter closer, squinting at the words, wishing she dared light a candle, but candles cast light and smelled. Her father's room was too close, a straight line from the front door into what had once been the back parlor, before the children all came. She could never predict what would wake him, and waking him right now was the very thing she wanted most to avoid.

Edeline's childish handwriting was done in large round, hurried letters in thick black ink. She angled the paper until the letters took shape. "*Help me, Verbena. Come to Thernwood Place immediately*" – the last word had been underlined – "*and I will explain.*" There was a postscript in smaller letters, as if it had been added with only a moment to spare. "*Don't let anyone here see you come. Go the gazebo. I will watch for you. It is important.*" She had underlined the last three words so hard the quill had nearly gone through the paper.

Edeline had always been inclined to the dramatic. It was hard to take this message seriously, but it sounded like she was truly panicked. It had been so long since her last letter, and now this strange missive

with the equally strange delivery.

There had to be a powerful reason for Edeline go to all this effort, sending a maid before the sun was up. A chill went up Verbena's spine that had nothing to do with the cool summer night. Edeline asking her for help? What did she think Verbena could do, whatever the problem? Edeline was married to Andrew Thern of Thernwood Manor. The Therns owned most of the land around the village, which meant they had most of the money, too.

Verbena longed for some of that money, ached for it, some nights when she was too tired to sleep she even wept for it. Money solved everything. With money, they could buy food and not have to depend on the tiny patch of garden behind the house, they could pay for the fences the government kept demanding. With money, she could send the boys off to school. How Julius would love that!

With money she would not have the humiliation of depending on her sister's remembering to send a little something so Verbena could buy food or clothes or shoes for the children.

Verbena held the letter to her chest, fretting anxiously. Go now, at this unbelievable time of the morning, with the sun not even up? Something must be desperately wrong in the Thern's house, if Edeline required her to sneak a visit to the gazebo, and at such a ridiculous hour.

A thump came from across the hall, followed by a curse. Her father was awake.

Verbena jumped to her feet in the small square entryway, her fingers curling tightly against the fine paper. No doubt Agnes's knocking had finally penetrated his drunken haze. He was going to be in a foul temper. He had been so terribly drunk when he got home last night, his first day back in town. Thomas Barnes never wasted much time catching up from the months of enforced sobriety at sea.

His door bumped open and he stumbled out, holding onto the stairway's solid wall as he stared around. She did not need light to know his eyes would be red and bloodshot, or to see the veins the last six years of drink were painting on his nose. The odor of whiskey washed out with him. He was not a tall man, but the muscles he carried from all his work at sea made him look bigger. His dark blonde hair stood up in a thick shock of speckled grey, an unlikely halo. Verbena stood quietly, hoping he would not notice her. The shadows were fainter than they had been mere moments ago.

At the end of the stairway wall, Barnes made the right turn toward the dining room with almost military precision and she heard him collide with the table, its heavy legs scraping along the wood floor. He belched a shocking word out of his mouth. He was doing it again, going outside to take care of his business. He had a chamber pot in his room, but seldom used it.

The back door creaked open before she could make the dash through the dining room and the kitchen into her room, and he stumbled in again. She followed his path by the scraping of his feet. When he came into sight his eyes were no more focused than when he first appeared, fixed straight ahead, blank and unseeing, a narrow sliver of reflection. By some oddity of drunkenness, this time he missed all the furniture on his way back to his room, walking as if pulled on a string, placing each foot carefully on the floor in slow motion. He made the same precise turn as he passed by a second time, what remained of his attention fixed on that bedroom door. He went down the hall with no major damage, and the door slammed shut.

When she heard his body flop on the bed, the still-sturdy frame complaining, a quiet sound through the heavy door, Verbena made her decision. Married or not, Edeline was still her sister. If she wanted help, it was up to Verbena to provide it. Edeline had, after all, done her duty in providing funds for her siblings. Where would they have been if not for her? Verbena hurried across the worn wooden floor to her room, avoiding by long practice the places where it creaked, moving so fast her robe filled with air like a curtain in the wind.

Once inside, her own door shut tight against any stray sound, Verbena threw off her robe and nightgown and grabbed the closest dress from the peg. In the half-light, she could not tell which gown it was, but it hardly mattered. None were any better than the others, and she was going to be running through the woods to get there.

She pulled her mother's silver-handled brush, a treasure she carefully hid from her father, through her hair, and tied a ribbon tightly, hoping it would stay in place through the woods. One more moment to pull on her boots. They were well made, another hand-down from her mother, high-topped and low-heeled, perfect for a run through the woods. As quietly as possible, ever-mindful of her father's too-recent waking, she crept back through the kitchen. Everything was becoming visible now, even into the dining room where she could see the long table, the bench that always got in the way, their father's large flat-

backed chair. Verbena eased the kitchen door open, slipped out, and hurried down the path.

When she reached the Thern's fence at the forest's edge, Verbena stopped at the wooden guardian, a silent 'no trespassing' warning. She paused and looked around as she put her first foot on the fence, but no one jumped out, no dogs howled a warning, so she swung herself over the top and landed on the other side with a swirl of skirts.

Then she took off, racing along the stony track that ran parallel to the sweeping drive toward the wide, gracious doorway of Thernwood Manor, holding up her skirt to speed her way, dodging the branches that draped over the neglected, unkempt path, more visible with the hints of pink and yellow creeping over the horizon and tinting the leaves, each exposed color a reminder of how little time she had, the risk she took.

Part way there, she stopped to catch her breath and ease the cramp in her side. It had been too long since she had run so hard. This spot was the perfect place for a rest, her special place, and it was so long since she had been here. In the days before the fence's barricade, she had always found an excuse to rest on the old log that had fallen along the path some time in the past and was taking its time going back to the earth. She was out of sight of her own house, and of the Therns' large mansion, from anyone who might see her.

No one had ever caught her here except *him*. Damon Thern, Edeline's dark-haired, dark-eyed brother-in-law. It was a memory Verbena had never shared with anyone.

He certainly would never recall the event, assuming she ever even saw him again. It was her memory. She had been carrying a large basket of her mother's bread to several tenant farmers of the Therns who struggled daily to survive on their small rented patches of land. As every other time, Verbena had taken the usual shortcut through the Thern woods. Her mother insisted she dress up as if making a call upon a valued friend when making the deliveries. "You will show them the same respect you do those above you," was her mother's motto.

Such extravagance of attire had never made sense to Verbena. It smacked too much of emphasizing what they had that the others did not. When she had tried to argue with Mother, she had gotten a disappointed stare, as if she had said something so crushing that her mother had been too wounded to speak. So she had been wearing a blue sprigged muslin gown with a lace ribbon that tied under her breasts. She had pushed off her hat and it hung down her back, but even now, in the crispness of the summer morning, Verbena could remember the warmth of that day. Her hair had been freshly styled, her half-boots neatly polished, the perfect young lady except for being alone in the woods.

That day might have been one of many, just one more trip like so many other trips she had made in better days, but for him. She had rounded this same bend, the basket getting heavier and heavier, when a tree root snagged her ankle and she had tumbled into the small clearing. The basket went flying as she threw out her hands to catch herself. Her palms stung when she landed.

A sound, a resonant rumble, came from very close by.

Startled, Verbena had looked up from her ignominious position on the ground. And looked up. And looked further up.

Damon had been there on the small trail she used, sitting like a prince on his steed. A blush heated her cheeks. She knew him from their village church, where his family had their own pew right at the front, knew his name, even his moniker. Damon the Demon, for his wildness. He was the most handsome man she had ever seen, curly dark hair visible even under his tall hat, mysterious near-black eyes, and taller than usual on his huge chestnut horse, towering over her where she sat on the path.

He dismounted with smooth grace and hurried over to her. She sat up quickly, brushed off her abraded palms before he reached her, and hoped nothing was bleeding. He reached her before she could tell.

"Are you hurt?" he had asked in a deep voice that raised the soft hairs on her arms and sent shivers down her spine. He hardly seemed to be living down to his reputation.

A gloved hand appeared in front of her face. "No, I thank you," she had answered, and her voice had been breathless. It might even have become so from the fall.

Damon crouched down beside her, seeming to take pity on her strained neck, and watched her, those dark eyes following her movement. She had never seen him up so close. His hair was as black as a raven's wing, and the curls looked as soft as her baby sister's hair. She had been tempted to reach out and touch them to see if she was right. Her brothers hated curly hair, although her mother said they would outgrow it. Did Damon's waves embarrass him?

While she was staring at him, he noticed her hands. "You are injured." He had taken both her hands

and turned them over, looking at them with a frown. He released one hand, but kept hold on the other. She remembered the surprise as he pulled out a white handkerchief and pressed it against the very area that stung the most as if it mattered not at all that her hand was dirty as well.

He took the handkerchief away, and it was spotted with red. "You see? You are bleeding." He put the cloth on her palm again.

"Then it just started. I was not bleeding when I looked." Calling that brief glance 'looking' was a vast exaggeration, she knew.

Damon raised one dark brow and said nothing.

She felt another flush of red creep up her cheeks. She must look like a ripe apple. "Clearly I am now."

He wrapped the handkerchief around her hand and tied it in a neat knot across the top. "Do not take this off until you get home." He settled back on his heels and frowned. "I hardly expected to see a young woman wandering about the woods alone. Do your parents know that you are out?"

"I'm known in the village. No one would hurt me." Verbena remembered how she had met his gaze bravely despite the quivering inside.

"I would not be so certain of that." He had looked at her again, more carefully, but nothing in his gaze made her uncomfortable.

"They know I bring bread, and many of them need it." And then Verbena had seen the basket sitting on its side. "Oh, no! The bread! How many are lost?" She scrambled to her feet, pretending not to notice the large hand that again appeared at the edge of her vision, and hurried over to the basket.

Somehow he managed to beat her there. "Just one, I think, will have to be left for the birds." He picked the basket up, but made no effort to give it to her, just stood there holding it. "Lucky birds. These smell delicious. And to think I had no breakfast this morning. My stomach is scolding me soundly right now." His dark eyes had twinkled at her across that over-sized basket.

Prior to that, she would never have thought such dark eyes could twinkle. But they certainly could, and did. At least his had. A gentle smile curved his lips, and for the first time she had noticed the shape of his mouth. It fit his face, she thought, firm, thin upper lip, slightly fuller lower. She wondered what it would feel like, just to touch, and another new, forbidden thought came, to kiss. The woods had suddenly seemed quiet, as if all the birds were holding their breath just as she was.

Verbena's heart had pounded, the only sound her ears heard. She did not know what to do, or if she wanted to do anything but savor this slice of time when Damon Thern looked at her and saw her. But then her mother's voice had seemed to come out of nowhere. *You will take these loaves to the neighboring farms.* Was the voice a divine nudge, saving her from herself?

It had been insistent, that quiet echo of her mind, pulling her away from her foolish daydreams, dreams of a girl poised on the edge of womanhood. The mundane world came back, the birds chattered in annoyance at being interrupted. She had reached for the basket, and after a brief delay he let go. He gestured at her hands. "You should wash those off as soon as possible. I have heard that is the best way to avoid infection. Perhaps you should go back to your house and take care of your scrapes first?" His eyes were still gentle. "I would be happy to escort you."

"Thank you, no," she said, but she had not backed away. "You have been most kind, but I must get these to the other farms."

"But you will wash your hands thoroughly and get all the dirt off?" His face went soft with worry when usually it was imposing, all sharp edges, a strong face to go with his strong body.

So she had promised, and then she had gathered all her courage and asked a question that had flown around the village for weeks. "Is it true that you will be putting more fences up?"

Damon said nothing for a moment, his face suddenly shaded. All the softness of a moment ago was gone. A muscle flexed in his jaw. She could still feel the slight chill that had washed over her. He was a Thern. Everyone knew the fences were going up at their instigation. In a burst of unexpected courage, she had said, "Because of all these fences, farmers and hunters around the village have been threatened with arrest for going into lands they have used for centuries."

"You are slightly misinformed." His voice had turned as stiff as his posture. "We have nothing to do with the decision to fence the land. It is a government order, and everywhere you go, everyone is doing the same thing. It has been going on for years and I fear there will be no stopping it."

She said nothing, just absorbed his words. This was happening everywhere?

He sighed. "As long as you have heard this much, and since you are clearly curious, I should tell you I

have heard Parliament is working on still more Enclosure Acts. The fences are expensive for everyone. One hopes they will tire of passing these laws soon.” Damon said it with finality, and she knew their conversation had come to an end.

“What about your cloth?” Verbena had looked down at her bandaged hand, the best she could gesture while clutching the basket. A design in blue in the white fabric had caught her eye, letters she could not make out then.

“Keep it. I have so many, I won’t even miss it.” He was probably even telling the truth. Why would he want it anyway, now that it was bloodstained and dirty?

Funny she had not thought of that handkerchief in years, but now, standing in that small glen, she remembered exactly where it was. She had washed it as clean as she could, and saved it, thinking some day she might be able to give it back, have one more chance to talk to him, to see if they could recapture those moments past when they stood, however briefly, on level ground. She could hardly have used it, not with the embroidered initials, the blue DT that had caught her eye. The day had never come when she could talk to him, remind him, and return it, but she had kept it.

That had almost been the end of the memory. There had only been a moment left together, when Damon touched a finger to the brim of his hat, gave a graceful bow, mounted, and turned the horse, trotting down the path where he soon vanished behind the thick curtain of green. He must have kept her trespassing secret because no one ever came to order her to stay off the wood path.

How prophetic he had been. By the time the Enclosure Acts had hit the Barnes and their small bit of land, land that had housed a cow, a pig and several sheep, and they found out the fees for the fences that they were forced to erect, her mother had been dead, her father had begun his drinking bouts, and money had been far too scarce. The Therns had closed off the last of the common lands, cutting everyone, including them, from the grazing areas the entire village had enjoyed as far back as anyone’s tales went. Not just grazing disappeared, so did the calves and kids and piglets that arrived regularly from the neighbors’ animals that shared the once-open fields.

Her family still had a tiny bit of land left that had not yet had to be sold to pay for the fence, enough for a small garden and some chickens, and they had the house, but for how long?

Verbena did not know why that one moment of her life had stuck with her. She must have been all of fifteen then, seven years ago, and he was already a grown man. He must be over thirty now.

Her breath was back now, the stitch was gone. That memory was such a silly thing and there was no more excuse to linger. She started running again but her recollections kept her pounding feet company, only those and the startled rustle of bird’s wings.

She had been so lost in her thoughts that when the track curved around the last stand of trees, she was startled to find she was already there. Thernwood stood before her in all its immense glory, magnificent even before the sun was fully up, dark brick, white window frames, and pillars marching like white statues, muted in the dark. Verbena grabbed a trunk to stop herself from bursting into the manicured lawn that surrounded the whole house. She saw the drive ahead leading to broad entrance, then curving toward the stables, pale worn double lines left by carriage wheels. She did not know where the gazebo was, but it could not be that hard to find.

Verbena stayed in the trees, following their shield as she circled behind the house, wondering how Edeline would see her. She’d never been so close to the mansion before. One did not come uninvited.

Although Edeline’s letter classified as an invitation of sorts. From the furtive way her sister had summoned her, Verbena suspected the Therns would not see it the same way.

The windows on the lower level were covered, drapes drawn tight in an odd summer defense against the cool air, as were most of the windows on the next floor. One of the curtains on the main floor twitched, a tiny gap opening between the panels, leaking a swath of light. Verbena backed further into the trees.

She slipped between the trunks, looking for the Thern’s gazebo. It would have been most helpful if Edeline had sketched a map. A rush of color to her left, a jolt in the fading greyness of dawn’s arrival, scared her, and she jumped, tripping over a root and falling against a tree.

It was Edeline, fully dressed, running toward her. Her soft brown hair had been pulled up on her head, but it was coming loose, pins no doubt raining onto the lawn. Verbena saw a curl slip loose and tumble down to her sister’s shoulder, but Edeline did not seem to notice, instead pointed frantically in a muddled direction, her arm a pale wave flapping back and forth, and kept running, her gown wrapping around her

legs and impeding her progress. Verbena kept pace, staying within the trees' scant protection.

When they got out of sight of the house, Edeline stopped, wrapping an arm around a trunk for support and gulping for air. Verbena eased through the trees and joined her.

Edeline put a hand to her chest, her deep breaths pushing against it. Her words came rapidly, but still hushed. "Come quickly, before someone sees us!" Her blue eyes were wide and glazed. "We have to hurry. Someone might have heard me slip out." Her face had lines that had never been there before, and her skin was pale and grey. She grabbed Verbena's arm and pulled her along through the edge of the trees. She was shaking, her hand almost vibrating on Verbena's arm.

Verbena glanced at the mansion appearing and disappearing through the stand of trees as she followed her sister. "What is it? Why did you send the note?"

"Not here," Edeline whispered in a rush. "The gazebo. No one will see us there." She led the way around the sheds tucked behind the mansion, another layer of protection keeping them shielded from the house. Rosebushes past their first blooming tried to snag their gowns.

The gazebo appeared, nestled in the center of a man-made glade where the rosebushes had been trained over an arched opening of ornate metal. Small trees surrounded the many-sided little white building, and flowers circled its base in splotches of fluffy light colors, giving only hints of their true hues. Glass panes were covered with ivy working its way up the sides and over the top, a heavy tracery of dark leaves layered one upon another, lifting with the breeze. It must be beautiful in the daytime.

Verbena looked back at the path they had taken. She never would have had the courage to venture this far into the Thern's property, she never would have found the gazebo on her own. Thank goodness Edeline had seen her from the upper window.

If that watcher was Edeline. She had come out rather quickly for having been on the second floor.

Edeline slid the latch and waved Verbena inside. Sheltered by the trees and the vines, even in the dusky half-light the gazebo felt like a place apart. The white stone walls and floor gave an eerie glow, amplifying the coming day.

Flowers scented the room, blending like a delicate perfume. Roses, wallflower, sweet peas, violets and lavender, all delicate in the early morning, made their presence known from the other side of the white walls. It was a room for lovers, for good news and restful moments, not for the dread that filled it now.

Edeline dropped down on one of the fancy white wooden benches that lined the wall, and sighed, her face a pale moon. "We're safe. At least for a little while." Something thrummed through her voice, a tension barely held in check.

Verbena glanced out the door, but nothing changed, nothing moved. They were hidden for the moment. She turned back to her sister. "Edeline, what is going on? Why are you so frightened? Tell me, what is it?"

Just that quickly, Edeline buried her face in and burst into tears, loud, noisy sobs breaking through the need for quiet, as if some inner anguish could no longer be contained. "Oh, Verbena! Andrew is dead . . . and I am pregnant."