

The Maidenstone Lighthouse

ONE

In October I came to Freedman's Cove.

Though more than three months had passed since I'd lost Bobby, I had not yet regained the ability to cope with the everyday demands of my life in the city: I was still searching the faces of strangers glimpsed through the rain-streaked windows of passing cabs. Still hoping against desperate hope that the next tallish, fair haired man I spotted coming toward me on the street would turn out to be my Bobby. Still forgetting for minutes on end that he was truly gone.

I suppose I was more than half convinced then that he was suddenly going to appear around the next corner and rush to embrace me, explaining between urgent tearful kisses where he had been for so long. Explaining why he had never called to tell me he hadn't died after all.

Denial is the clinical term for the way I dealt with the news of Bobby's death. Which is only to say that I did not deal with it at all. Perhaps I clung so doggedly to my forlorn hope of finding him again in some familiar place because that was exactly the sort of thing that might have happened when he was alive.

And then there were my daydreams.

In my favorite waking fantasy, Bobby had come home again at last. Though I was terribly angry with him over the agonies I had suffered through a hundred lonely nights of bitter tears, the pain always melted away like springtime snow at the first brush of his lips against mine. And our renewed lovemaking was possessed of an intensity that transcended mere passion.

Afterwards, naked beneath our warmest down comforter, we'd cling desperately to one another before the smoky old fireplace he'd kept promising to fix but never had. And after we ordered takeout from the little Greek place down the block, flushed from hours of lovemaking and too much of the blood red Cape wine he'd brought from a trip to Africa, I'd listen dreamily to the details of Bobby's miraculous escape from certain death.

For, despite what the Australian navy had reported, it would turn out that his plane hadn't really gone down in the shark infested vastness of the Indian Ocean after all. Instead, blown far off course by a sudden storm, and with all its radios out, the damaged aircraft had crash landed on a tiny island, an uninhabited speck of land the searchers had overlooked because it was so far off the plane's planned route of flight.

As he related the incredible story of his survival to me, Bobby's mischievous blue eyes would sparkle in the firelight, and he'd somehow manage to make the entire incident seem funny and not even very dangerous. So that by the time he was describing how he had built a clumsy bamboo hut on the beach and tried unsuccessfully to catch fish while he waited for a passing ship to rescue him, there'd be tears of uncontrollable laughter rolling down my cheeks.

But that was all just in my lovely fantasy.

Because, in real life at least, six hundred mile-per-hour business jets like the one that Bobby had been piloting when he disappeared last July do not make forced landings on uninhabited tropical islands. And, even if they did, everyone on board would almost certainly be killed in the fiery crash that an off-airport landing in a crippled jetliner virtually guarantees.

Grim reality is the proper term for that.

So absolutely nothing about my waking dreams of Bobby's return was real.

Nothing but my tears at the end.

Laura, the svelte, softly tailored Park Avenue shrink I visited a few times after I realized I was slipping deeper and deeper into my fantasies, says that delusions like mine are quite common following the death of someone very dear to one's heart, especially when there is no physical proof to confirm the awful finality of the loss.

Physical proof, of course, was Laura's delicate way of referring to Bobby's absent corpse. For, as she had carefully explained on my very first visit, without a cold dead body to see and weep over, a funeral to grieve at or a gravesite to visit, the dearly departed tend to remain forever vibrantly alive in the memories of their loved ones.

In such cases, Laura professed, it is often death itself that seems like the delusion.

I knew exactly what she meant.

Bobby dead at thirty-two! My Bobby, who had survived half a dozen near catastrophes in his career, first as a daring young Navy carrier pilot, then, later, flying tiny geological research planes into the teeth of Arctic blizzards for a North Slope oil outfit. Bobby dead! The very idea was incomprehensible to me.

Because while I was painfully aware that my handsome love had spent most of his brief adult life deliberately taunting the grim reaper in the sky, hadn't I also nagged, threatened and browbeat him into quitting that dangerous game?

I can still remember the words of heartfelt thanks I whispered to Heaven on the day he finally gave in to my desperate pleas. Because I knew it was for me alone that Bobby had traded his exciting, high risk North Slope job for the dull, blessed tedium of piloting executives around the world in the oil company's shining new Gulfstream VI corporate jet.

"I look like a damned bus driver."

That had been his joking complaint as he stood before the bedroom mirror adjusting his uniform tie early on the morning of the first day he was scheduled to fly the Gulfstream on a trip. At first I couldn't tell whether he was truly annoyed or just having fun with me.

Reaching around to help him with the tie, I had stopped to stare at his reflection in the mirror. I'd grown so used to seeing him off to the airport in his beat up old Navy flight jacket and jeans that the effect created by the dark blue captain's uniform required for his new corporate job had taken me completely by surprise.

Standing there that morning, all sharply creased and clean shaven, and with the pink light of dawn glinting on the silver wings above his left breast pocket, he had looked like nothing so much as an heroic young Brad Pitt on his way to some exotic destination where he would, doubtless, save the world.

"Some bus driver," I'd breathed, slipping my fingers lovingly inside the jacket and caressing the snowy fabric of his crisply starched shirt.

"Well, this corporate job is going to be just like driving a bus, but without the element of danger."

Bobby had laughed then, turning to flash me that devastating movie hero smile before gently kissing my lips. "Sweet Sue," he whispered, using the silly pet name he knew I loathed, "I hope you're happy now that you've thoroughly domesticated me."

"Mmmm, yes," I sighed, moving as close as I dared without rumpling the beautiful new uniform, and feeling in the warmth of that wonderful possessive kiss that he was only pretending to be upset with me over the boring new assignment.

But happy was not the word I would have chosen to describe the secret emotions I was experiencing at that moment. In truth, I was positively ecstatic, because I was so sure that I had done the right thing by forcing him to change jobs.

It's funny the way decisions that we think at the time we're making for all the right reasons can seem so foolish in retrospect. For I can clearly see now that I had only been acting selfishly then. Because I was so much in love with Bobby that I couldn't bear the thought of ever losing him.

But, of course, I lost him anyway. And, irony of ironies, it was the "safe" plane, the thirty million dollar high tech corporate jet that I had so calculatedly pushed him into flying that had carried him to his death.

If...if he really was dead.

If...

That was invariably the first word that ran through my mind every time I thought of Bobby's dying. Because it just didn't seem possible that he could have kissed me goodbye on that last glorious morning in July and then simply flown out of my life forever!

But that was exactly the way it happened.

Weeks passed after I got the news, then months, the initial shock and numbness of my freshly minted grief slowly turning to doubt and, finally, conviction that Bobby might somehow have survived. Until no matter how I tried I could not put away the feeling that there had to be some grotesque mistake, that he could not be gone.

And even knowing to a logical certainty that there was no possibility of a mistake did nothing to alleviate my guilt and pain.

I began imagining that I had caught fleeting glimpses of Bobby, speeding by me in a passing subway train, ducking into a doorway across a traffic-filled street. That was when my giddy daydreams of his safe return began to haunt me, in the end making me fear for my own sanity.

Predictably, Laura the shrink had assured me in her best clinical manner that there was absolutely nothing at all wrong with my mind. Nothing that time and modern pharmacology would not eventually heal. So she prescribed an anti-depressant and had me join a grief management group comprised of other miserable souls who, like myself, had recently lost loved ones of their own.

I went to one group meeting where I wept uncontrollably for a distraught young mother whose beautiful five-year-old son had darted out in front of a midtown bus in pursuit of a wayward kitten and been instantly killed, and left feeling even worse than I had before.

"Well, group doesn't always work for everyone." With that remark and a small wave of a perfectly manicured hand Laura casually dismissed her first shot at ending my anguish. She had then prescribed a new and even stronger anti-depressant and suggested that I go away for a while, preferably to a place where I had spent little or no time with Bobby. A place that was essentially free of his memory.

Praying that she was right, for I had no wish to spend my life in perpetual mourning, I threw away Laura's new prescription and went to see Damon, my partner in the antiques appraisal and authentication business that we had founded together half a dozen years earlier, when we had both been penniless art students.

TWO

How can I possibly explain Damon if you have never known him? After nearly a decade of friendship I still find it difficult to accurately describe my odd and funny little partner in any terms that don't seem hopelessly clichéd.

Oh his physical description is easy enough. Imagine if you can a wild tangle of untamed dreadlocks surrounding a shiny round ebony smiley face. Place that silly head atop a short comical figure that seems precisely as wide as it is tall. Now drape the whole lopsided creation in a wardrobe tending toward the sort of shiny skin tights and billowing sleeves you might find in a bad high school production of 'The Pirates of Penzance' and you'll have an approximate snapshot of Damon.

Not too surprisingly my strange friend's manner closely matches his clothes. For he is always flamboyant, often outrageous and, sometimes, thoroughly ridiculous. Bobby once jokingly remarked that Damon reminded him of the Michelin rubber man on uppers.

However, when it comes to antiques, and particularly when it comes to period regency furniture, Damon is nothing short of brilliant.

Damon has an eye that can spot from a hundred paces the slightly improper curve of the 19th century feet that have been cleverly "married" to a 17th century French Provincial sideboard, with the devious intent of elevating its value by some tens of thousands of dollars. Let him poke around removing drawers and examining the piece for a few minutes and he'll identify the wood by its grain and color alone, and name its precise region of origin. Given a few more minutes, Damon will probably come up with the exact year of manufacture, the cabinetmaker's name, and then go on to inform you that it was actually the man's youngest son, a deaf mute, who added those tiny, exquisitely carved floral relief to the drawer fronts.

In the highly competitive world of high-end antiques, Damon St. Claire is more than conventionally brilliant. He is legendary.

When we were at NYU together Damon frequently skipped classes in order to haunt the museums, junk shops and galleries of the city, in search of beautiful furniture. And while I often went along on his excursions for fun, I was generally content to merely observe and admire the rare and valuable objects that he invariably discovered.

But not Damon.

Damon had to lay hands upon the satiny woods, sniff the scents of the centuries-old glues and lacquers, trace with his short stubby fingers each cunningly wrought curve and plane of the exquisite Italianate chair found tucked away in a forgotten corner of the Met, or the dusty Georgian settee discovered in some Village pawnbroker's dusty storeroom, as if by so doing he was able to somehow read the secret history hidden at the heart of each lovingly wrought masterpiece.

Visiting a museum with Damon was like participating in a terrorist raid. And many's the time I served as his lookout--me, the demure young college girl lurking in a doorway, pretending to study an exhibit brochure--while my dwarfish accomplice was behind the velvet ropes in the next room, mumbling like a demented witch doctor over some priceless artifact or other.

Despite the fact that we actually lived together for more than a year--if sharing two drafty rooms in a Soho walkup could actually be called living--everyone who knew us then was absolutely certain that Damon was gay. And perhaps he is, though I have never heard him utter so much as a single word expressing lust or longing for another living soul of either gender.

As far as I know, Damon's passion is and always has been reserved exclusively for the fabulous objects of earlier times.

When we were living together our small circle of artist friends considered Damon's obsession with furniture to be nearly as hilarious as his appearance. At least that was how they felt until the incident that later came to be known as The Armoire Affair.

It all began with the news that an extremely rare and beautiful Louis XV armoire was to be sold at auction. Damon, who even when we were starving always managed to obtain the elaborate and glossy catalogs that exclusive auction houses send out to carefully pre-selected buyers, usually at a cost of several hundred dollars per copy, had merely glanced at the full page color photo and accompanying description of the fabled French armoire.

Then he pronounced it a fake.

Because he claims to loathe writing, he drafted me to compose a brief note to Christie's, the auction house that was handling the sale of the armoire. In the letter I carefully explained why the alleged masterpiece could not possibly be genuine.

Not surprisingly, Christie's was underwhelmed by our brash analysis of the Fabulous Object. In fact, they did not even bother replying to our letter. Three days later, we read that the French armoire had been sold for \$450,000, at the time a near record price for a piece of 18th century European furniture.

So you can imagine our astonishment when, several months after the auction had taken place, we received a mysterious luncheon invitation from Sir Edward North, Christies' senior curator of European decorative arts.

Sir Edward, a scholarly Englishman who looks as if he belongs in an Oxford lecture hall, apologetically informed us that our letter had been misplaced until long after the sale of the French armoire. But when he had finally gotten around to reading it, the prim curator confessed, he had instantly realized that he and his firm had been embarrassingly duped by a clever antique forger.

A forger who was clever, but not as clever as Damon.

What had impressed Sir Edward most, he continued during the course of that extraordinary luncheon, was not the fact that Damon had detected a subtle inconsistency that exposed the fraud--an exotic hardwood mentioned in the catalog as part of the armoire's inlaid marquetry was a rare mahogany found only in the Brazilian rain forest, a section of the world not explored by Europeans until well *after* the reign of Louis XV--but that he had done it without ever having seen the armoire itself.

The persistent curator had then offered Damon a staff position at Christies that seemed like exactly the kind of job my eccentric friend might have spent his whole life dreaming of.

But to my utter amazement Damon had flatly refused, explaining that he wouldn't consider any job that required him to remain in one place every day, much less one that involved the writing of long and dreary appraisals. He had to be free, he said, free to wander his beloved museums, galleries, junk shops and libraries, as his whims, appetites and hunches dictated.

Desperate to have the mad genius at his disposal under any terms, Sir Edward had immediately countered by offering Damon a position as a consultant with a generous monthly retainer. At that point, Damon had looked over at me and asked if I would be willing to write up his appraisals and handle the finances of such an arrangement.

Thus was born our little company, St. Claire & Marks, official consultants and appraisers to Christies. A long list of prestigious dealers, insurance companies and private collectors had quickly followed suit, all in time becoming loyal clients.

In the six years that we had been in business together, I had never once asked Damon to write an appraisal or even to make regular appearances at our small Midtown office.

But now I had no choice.

Because of my growing inability to deal with Bobby's disappearance, I absolutely had to get away from New York for a while. Perhaps a very long while.

And though I knew he loved me like a sister, I was not at all certain how my free spirited partner was going to react to my urgent request that he take over the daily running of the business while I was gone.

I should have known better than to worry.

"Of course you need to get away, Susan. Isn't that exactly what I told you ages ago?" Damon fumed in the soft Louisiana drawl that ten years in deepest Manhattan had failed to appreciably alter. He spent a few more minutes lecturing me like a naughty child, mostly for having wasted \$150 an hour to have "some god awful pill pushing headshrinker" give me the same advice that he had so wisely dispensed for free.

Then, with tears running down his shiny ebony cheeks and splashing onto the floppy collar of his striped magenta shirtfront, he enfolded me in his arms and assured me he could run the company single-handed for however long I needed to be away.

"Just you go off and heal yourself, girl," he whispered throatily. "That's the only thing that's important now."

Of course, I had suggested to him that he might want to think about what he was getting himself into before committing. And I reminded him of his professed need for absolute freedom and of the difficulty he had always had putting his thoughts on paper.

At that Damon's round Buddha features had contorted into a sly puckish grin. "Sue, honey," he laughed, "it's not that I can't do all of that boring bullshit that you're so wonderful at organizing and keeping track of, it's just that I won't. Not without a very good reason." Then he stood up on his tiptoes and softly kissed my cheek. "And you are the very best reason I can think of," he sniffed. "Now get out of here before I come to my senses and change my mind."

THREE

At home came one final daunting task. Pack up Bobby's things. I'd left everything just as it had been the morning he kissed me good-bye and then vanished. The dream that he would come sauntering through the door and back into my life was fading along with my sanity.

His clothes and shoes went into boxes for the Good Will and so did most of his sports equipment. I stacked the boxes near the front door and returned to the living room for the part that would be the hardest. It was these smaller more personal things that brought on my tears. Holding his battered flight jacket to my face caused yet another rush of memories. How many times had my cheek crushed the butter soft leather when he held me in his strong arms? I laid it gently in the box as the tears continued.

The dust covered ski trophy had been a particular source of pride for Bobby and was a warm memory of our first romantic trip together. "Romantic? Are you nuts? You were alone most of the time," my rational mind, I call her Miss Practical, chided me.

My romantic side, often at odds with Miss Practical dredged up the memory of the day we spent in front of the fire when a storm had kept the skiers off the slopes. Bobby and I had spent the entire day making wonderful, languid love.

Miss Practical snapped me out of my reverie with a reminder that it had been the only trip we took together, not the first. She was right, like so many of Bobby's big plans none of the vacations we meticulously planned ever materialized. I tossed the trophy into the box.

This was the box I had intended to keep, mementoes of my life with him, our life together. But it really was just more of his stuff. None of it represented us. I finally decided that it should go with the others and set it atop the stack to be disposed of by Damon as he saw fit. A gesture I greatly appreciated since Damon and Bobby had, in all reality, hated each other.

It always saddened me that the two most important men in my life could barely tolerate being in the same room together.

From the beginning Damon had insisted that “there was something not right about Bobby,” he was smarmy and insincere. He even went so far as to claim that he’d seen something evil in Bobby’s eyes. Bobby had convinced me that Damon was simply jealous of the time I spent away from him.

That seemingly logical explanation didn’t stop Bobby from defaming my eccentric business partner and friend for the way he looked, acted and what Bobby said was an arrogance that made him nothing more than an uppity N... I was shocked at Bobby’s use of the N word and he apologized profusely with multiple mea culpas, convincing me, as he so easily could, that it had been a simple slip of the tongue and he was heartily ashamed.

But the truth of it all was that the only time Bobby and I really fought was over Damon. And while I was angry at both of them for making things so uncomfortable I dealt with it the only way I could. Never discussing home with Damon even when there had been times that I could have used the ear of a good friend; for there were times I wondered if Bobby really loved me. At home I no longer discussed work no matter how exciting a particular estate or single piece that we had been called on to appraise.

Occasionally my resentment and frustration of the enforced silence would get the better of me. A snide remark from Damon or an inflammatory comment by Bobby would send me out into the night. I would walk the city streets alone. Angry that it was necessary to be away from them.

I stood in the entry way after depositing the small box with the others and just stared at the door. No he would never come through that door again, Bobby was gone and I didn’t need to walk on eggshells anymore.

I went to bed tired from the effort and emotions.

The next morning I threw some favorite research books, a battered case of drawing materials from my art school days and a few casual clothes into the back of my blue Volvo. Thus prepared for travel, and without a backward glance, I abandoned the city and the lonely loft apartment with its overflowing trove of bittersweet memories.

Where do you go when there's nowhere else to go? When you don't want to see anyone to whom you might have to explain why you may suddenly burst into tears at odd moments. When you wish to be alone with the tattered remains of your once happy life.

I couldn't think of anywhere better suited to those particular needs than Freedman's Cove, Rhode Island.

Tucked into a tiny indentation along the rocky Atlantic coastline north of Newport, the village of Freedman's Cove is known locally for its succulent lobsters, a postcard pretty waterfront and the scores of extravagantly overdone Victorian summer houses that line the surrounding shore.

The Freedman's Cove Victorians, as they are often referred to in New England travel brochures, originated in the late 1800s, a time when America's super rich were sparing no expense in attempting to outdo one another by building palatial retreats along the beaches of Newport, a few miles to the south.

When it comes to money and fashion some things never change. And, as is still the case today, wherever the truly rich congregate the near-rich and the wannabe rich are sure to be close at hand.

So, around 1885, when Rhode Island became *the* fashionable place for the very rich to summer, plenty of well off families with slightly lesser means than the Whitneys and the Vanderbilts were more than happy to build little mini-mansions of their own, just up the strand from their financial and social betters. And so during the hot months of the year it became fashionable for the wives and children of prosperous Eastern bankers, factory owners and investors to flee the teeming and unhealthful cities for the pleasant seaside community of Freedman's Cove.

There, attended by a favorite family servant or two, the families of the near-rich resided from June until September, bathing, sailing, picnicking and calling upon one another in idyllic Victorian splendor.

Their industrious men folk, meanwhile, remained hard at work in the steamy malodorous canyons of Boston, New York and Philadelphia, commuting up by rail on weekends to join their pampered dependents by the sea.

More than a century later the pattern of summer living in Freedman's Cove has changed only slightly. Entire families of prosperous city folk still escape the heat and humidity by flocking to that pleasant northern shore. But now they generally arrive together, Mom, Dad and the kids renting one of the charming old Victorians with a seaside view for a week or so at a time, then returning as a unit to their modern air conditioned homes and condos in the cities.

And, nowadays, thanks to easy highway access and ample facilities for dining and lodging, Freedman's Cove also plays host to a new breed of short-term visitors. These are the day trippers, in town for an afternoon. Or the lovers who come for long romantic weekends.

However you wish to classify them, from the first of June until Labor Day, hordes of sunburned tourists wander Harbor Street, licking triple-scoop ice cream cones served up at the magnificent marble counter in Brewster's Ice Cream Parlour & Confectionary or squinting through the wavy mullioned windows of The Ancient Mariner Nautical Emporium. They all stop in at Cora's Olde Tyme Fudge Shoppe and pause to finger the Taiwanese Hummel figurines at Shelly's Victorian Gifts. And most wander down to the old commercial pier to see the lobster boats, or rent bicycles to ride along the shaded streets of brightly painted Victorians on their way out to the historic lighthouse on Maidenstone Island.

Or sometimes they simply drive in to dine at Krabb's Seafood House on the wharf.

But no matter how the tourists have changed over the course of the past hundred years, one aspect of Freedman's Cove remains completely unaltered by time: when summer ends the city people still go home again, leaving the village to face the coming storms of winter on its own.

The day after Labor Day the sounds of clattering hammers echo along the deserted streets, as the tourist shops and B&Bs along Commodore Milton Lane are snugly shuttered and battened down. And when the work is finally done and the beach floats and umbrellas have all been folded and stored for another season, the few hundred full time residents of Freedman's Cove settle in to enjoy the brief peace of autumn and brace themselves for another harsh New England winter.

By mid-October, chilly breezes foretelling the first big storms of the season are already sweeping south from the Canadian Maritimes. Bulky fisherman's sweaters have replaced tee-shirts as the favored garment for outdoor wear. The long lines of strangers clogging the checkout counters in the Food Mart with their baskets of beer, suntan lotion and picnic supplies are merely a fading memory. And there are once again plenty of parking spaces out in front of Krabb's, the only restaurant in town that remains open year 'round.

Within another week or so the last of the sailboats down at Maury's Marina have been hauled out and had their bottoms scraped and painted for next year. The magnificent old maples in the square are already beginning to shed their colorful autumn foliage. And before the month has fully gone, Freedman's Cove, Rhode Island has once more become an excellent place to be alone with your thoughts.

My decision to flee Manhattan for this strange little summer tourist destination was hardly accidental. But neither was it based on any particular research or some Manhattan travel agent's slick brochures of quaint New England retreats.

Freedman's Cove was simply the easiest choice. A no-brainer, if you will. Because my great aunt Ellen had lived most of her long life in one of the town's famed old Victorians. And though it is a place that Bobby once visited with me, the two of us had remained there for only part of one very brief and unhappy weekend.

FOUR

Our trip to Freedman's Cove three years ago was supposed to have been a glad occasion. Aunt Ellen, who was actually my father's aunt, had always been my favorite relative. I spent every summer of my childhood in her big yellow and green Victorian by the sea. So the old place held many happy memories for me, memories that I had wanted to share with Bobby.

But on that spring weekend three years ago when we drove up to see her, Great Aunt Ellen, who was well into her eighties at the time, made no effort whatsoever to disguise her instant dislike for my dashing young pilot.

Bobby and I had arrived late on a Friday night. And the old lady's cranky hostility had been evident from the moment we stepped through the front door. To his everlasting credit, Bobby handled the unexpectedly awkward situation with grace and understanding--which is far more than I can say for my own behavior that weekend.

But even now I can't help smiling as I recall the gallant wink he gave me as Aunt Ellen, all of five feet tall in her tiny bare feet, her long white hair coiled in a giant untidy braid atop her head, abruptly announced that she had prepared a nice cot for him out on the sun porch at the rear of the house.

Naturally, I was mortified...and angry.

For though the crafty old girl knew damn well that Bobby and I had been living together for more than six months, and had never once voiced a word of disapproval in her frequent letters to me, that night she'd seemed hell-bent on preserving the illusion of my chastity by pointedly consigning Bobby and me to sleeping quarters at the farthest possible distance from one another.

I hadn't known what to say.

During the whole of the long drive up from New York I had been describing to him in exquisite detail my sweet old auntie and her wonderful house. And I had been especially enthusiastic about the splendid bedroom high up in the turret facing the sea, the room that had always been mine.

From the lovely Italian marble wash stand with its painted china bowl and pitcher to the delicate lace curtains that on soft summer nights fluttered like the wings of butterflies in breezes from the bay, I had not left out a single detail of that marvelous room with its breathtaking view of rocky Maidenstone Island, the picturesque Maidenstone lighthouse and the Atlantic beyond.

Thoughtlessly, I now freely admit, I had assumed that Bobby and I would be sleeping together in that lovely chamber, where by the flickering glow of a tiny blue art glass fairy lamp I had woven a thousand girlish dreams.

And though I was completely at fault for having failed to take into account Aunt Ellen's Victorian-era sensibilities regarding the matter of co-habitation by unmarried lovers, my embarrassment at her rude and tactless behavior that Friday night had prompted my usually restrained temper to flare.

Fortunately, Bobby had seen the warning glint of fire in my eyes. Before I could open my mouth to complain, he'd yawned theatrically and told Aunt Ellen he was positively desperate for a little shuteye after the long, long drive from Manhattan, embroidering his huge lie--because he had actually spent the previous hour in the car describing in lurid detail all the wicked and depraved things he was going to do to me the moment he got me alone--by assuring her how much he loved sleeping out in the fresh air.

Great Aunt Ellen had simply grunted suspiciously and led my poor deprived lover away through the kitchen to his lumpy cot on the sun porch.

I'm sure she would have had a heart attack on the spot if she'd known what happened after she limped upstairs to her lonely spinster's bed that night. For less than an hour later, when I was sure from the buzz saw drone of the snoring from her room that she was fast asleep, I crept down from my virginal chamber and went to Bobby on the sun porch.

At the foot of the deep backyard there is a little curve of sandy beach hidden from view by a thick screen of wild rose and oleander. Taking my smiling lover by the hand, I had boldly led him to the water's edge. And there under the stars, on the very spot where once I had built elaborate fairy castles in the sand, we peeled off our clothes and made love until dawn. Then, giggling like the naughty children that Great Aunt Ellen obviously knew we were, we had crept back to the house and our separate beds.

Needless to say, the planned weekend in Freedman's Cove turned out to be more than a little awkward for all of us. As a result, Bobby had spent virtually no time at all in the house. We had a late breakfast on Saturday. And as soon as it was over he had volunteered to take a long hike across the stone causeway to the lighthouse on Maidenstone Island, so that Great Aunt Ellen and I could "visit."

So, after we silently cleared away the breakfast things, the old lady and I had sipped herbal tea dispensed from the solid coin silver Shreve & Co. tea service in her claustrophobic front parlor, with its funereal wine-colored draperies, heavy clawed furniture and drooping rubber plants.

As was always required on such occasions at Aunt Ellen's, I dutifully pretended to examine her faded albums of long dead ancestors by the feeble glow of a prized Tiffany lamp, and listened for the hundredth time to her rambling recitations of who had married whom, who their children and grandchildren were, how they were related and what had become of them all.

Then, after a while, something unusual had happened. Great Aunt Ellen had casually uncovered a photograph of a pretty, dark haired young woman in a high-collared turn-of-the-century gown. My anger momentarily forgotten, I had immediately picked up the photo, remarking on the loveliness of the girl and asking who in the world she was. For hers was a face that I could not remember having ever before seen in the familiar ancestral gallery.

The old woman had scowled and her teacup trembled slightly in her frail hand. "Now that one up and went off to New York years before I was born. Around about 1910 or thereabouts," she had muttered darkly. Then her thin, creaky voice dropped to a mere whisper, forcing me to lean forward to hear.

"They say she was carrying on with a man down there," she'd continued, pointedly fixing me in her watery, gray-eyed gaze. "A Bohemian artist who painted pictures of naked women..."

"Aunt Ellen," I laughed, suddenly understanding that the mysterious photo was intended to warn me against my current romantic folly, "Bobby is a wonderful man and I am not 'carrying on' with him, as you so charmingly put it. We're both very deeply in love and we are probably going to be married someday..."

"That's what that Bohemian painter promised *her*, but I can assure you that men like that do not marry." she said, casting a knowing glance out the window toward the island. There had next followed a long silence as Aunt Ellen sadly shook her head and gazed down at the pretty, unsmiling face looking out at us from the sepia background of the ancient studio photo.

"Her father, that would be my mother's Uncle George, went all the way down to New York on the train and pleaded with her to come back home," she finally went on, "for the sake of common decency and the family name." Aunt Ellen had gazed at the old photo again and then abruptly snatched it from my hand.

"What happened to her?" I asked, by then genuinely intrigued. For the scandalous story, and even the existence of the anonymous young woman in the picture, had obviously remained a closely guarded family secret for generations.

"She came to a no good end. And that's all I'm going to say about it," the old lady stubbornly concluded, the somber finality of her tone making it clear that some unspeakable fate had befallen the wayward girl.

Then, as if a light bulb had been switched on, Aunt Ellen's bloodless lips had suddenly stretched into a semblance of a smile, unappetizingly exposing the pink plastic gums of her dentures. "Now then," she had said, slipping the scandalous photo into the back of the album from which she had taken it, "I suppose that whatsisname feller you brought up here with you will be expecting me to fix him some kind of a big shore supper."

"Aunt Ellen," I said sharply, "since you deliberately trotted out that old photo in order to justify your antiquated and prudish view of Bobby and me sleeping together, the very least you can do is tell me who the girl was and what became of her."

Her dignity visibly shaken by the harshness of my accusation, the old woman had set her fragile china cup on the magnificent silver tray and rose slowly to her feet. "Why, Miss Susan Marks, I cannot imagine what you are going on about," she proclaimed innocently. "And you have no call to raise your voice to me, young woman."

"The name, Aunt Ellen. What was the damn girl's name?" I shouted at her in frustration.

The blood rose to her face then, centering in two bright spots on her heavily powdered cheeks. "That person's vile name has not been spoken in this house for more than eighty years," she hissed in reply. "And I do not intend to speak it now, or ever."

Then, without waiting for my reply, she had turned her hunched old back on me and hobbled out to her whitewashed kitchen, muttering to herself some inanity about the boiled lobster and parsnips she was planning for supper.

Bobby and I left Freedman's Cove shortly after he returned from his hike out to the lighthouse that afternoon. As I angrily tossed our belongings into the car, Great Aunt Ellen had stood on her front porch, stubbornly pretending not to comprehend what she had done or said to drive us away.

Anxiously wringing her gnarled old hands, she had at the last moment even partially swallowed her stiff-necked New England pride by begging us to at least stay on until after supper.

She was still standing there in the chilly afternoon breeze as we drove away, a tiny bent relic from a bygone age when the universally accepted wisdom of one's elders allowed and even encouraged them to lecture their foolish young folk when and as they pleased.

"You sure you don't want to go back and give the old girl another chance?" Bobby was looking at me with genuine concern as we drove slowly down the charming, sun dappled street.

I turned then and glanced back at the frail, white-haired figure standing there small and alone on her big old-fashioned porch. I could feel the hot tears of frustration and anger welling up in my throat as I shook my head and fumbled in the bottom of my purse for a crumpled cigarette, even though I'd quit months earlier. "Oh to hell with her," I sobbed, punching the lighter on the dashboard. "Just drive."

That was the last time I saw Great Aunt Ellen alive.

A few weeks later I received a call from the town constable, informing me that my aunt had suffered a massive stroke and passed away in her sleep. She had been discovered dead in her giant four poster bed, by her cleaning lady.

When the news came Bobby was somewhere far out in the North Sea on a mysterious month-long assignment for the oil company. So, overwhelmed with guilt at the horrible way that Aunt Ellen and I had parted, I drove up to Freedman's Cove alone and made the arrangements for her funeral.

Nobody else was at the gloomy service but the cleaning lady, a few other old people that I didn't know, and my aunt's elderly lawyer. Following the burial in the little cemetery behind the sternly whitewashed Unitarian Church, the lawyer took me aside and informed me that my Great Aunt Ellen had left me her entire estate, which consisted mainly of the house and all its contents.

Feeling absolutely rotten, for despite our last ugly encounter Aunt Ellen had for most of my life been like a mother to me, I had called and asked Damon to come up and stay with me while I dealt with the house. And though he loathed flying, my dear partner had bravely caught the first commuter flight to Newport.

Surprisingly, Tom Barnwell, the boyish real estate agent I had called, mostly because we'd dated for part of one breathless hormone-charged summer right after high school, also immediately came to my rescue. Driving a new BMW convertible and looking far better in faded jeans and crew neck sweater than he had any right to, he had arrived at the house bright and early the next morning.

Touring the cluttered rooms with Damon and me, Tom had suggested I brighten up the old place, whether I wished to sell or turn it into a summer rental: Aunt Ellen's house, with its secluded private beach and spectacular sea views was the last of the Freedman's Cove Victorians that had not yet been converted to a summer rental. And, according to Tom, it would command a handsome weekly rate.

Later, as we lunched together in a window booth at Krabb's, Tom had offered to find reliable workmen to do the necessary remodeling, and said he'd personally take charge of the house after I returned to New York.

Initially I was baffled at the extraordinary attention Tom Barnwell was lavishing on a potential realty client. Then Damon had excused himself to go to the restroom and my old beau's motivation suddenly became clear. "Sue, I've never forgotten that night we spent together on Dad's boat," he said huskily. I felt myself flushing bright crimson as he suddenly leaned across the table and squeezed my hand.

"Well, Tom," I replied, patting his big capable hand and injecting what I hoped was a carefree tone into my voice, "we were a couple of wild and crazy kids, weren't we?" In fact, I had never forgotten that night either. But then, I don't suppose many people do forget their first genuine sexual encounter. For that was what the night aboard his father's sleek new motorsailer had been for me. And, I suspected, it had been the first time for Tom as well.

Thankfully, Damon had quickly returned, ending the awkward moment. Tom had sheepishly gone back to discussing the lucrative summer rental market in Freedman's Cove, sparing me the necessity of reminding him that he was married, or boring him with tales of my handsome and fabulous lover.

The next day we went to work on the house.

While I went through countless boxes, trunks and closets, deciding what to keep and what to dispose of, Damon took charge of the redecorating. Helped by Tom, he hired workmen to redo the place inside and out, including a modest updating of the old-fashioned kitchen. Partly because of the clutter at the house, but mostly because of my unpleasant memories of my last visit with Aunt Ellen, we had both stayed at a pleasant little B&B a few blocks away.

Damon and I drove back to New York after five days, leaving Tom to see that the decorating was properly finished. We took with us only Aunt Ellen's silver tea service, the Tiffany lamp and a few other items that she had treasured. Everything else had been either left for the use of summer renters, given away to local charities or, in the case of Aunt Ellen's innumerable boxes of letters and old photos, locked in the still unexplored attic, to be sorted out later.

I soon forgot all about the embarrassing incident with Tom and I did not return to Freedman's Cove again for almost three years. Not until the October after Bobby disappeared.

FIVE

It was very late when I pulled into the narrow drive beside the house and switched off the Volvo's engine.

Stepping wearily out of the warm car I stretched my numbed shoulders and looked up at the proud old Victorian. While she was still alive, Aunt Ellen had always kept a light burning in the parlor at night, so the house would seem warm and inviting to visitors, she said. But now the windows were dark and the place looked inexpressibly sad and empty.

The beacon from the lighthouse on the point swept across the pale yellow clapboards, illuminating the tall angular structure like a flash of lightning in a cheap horror movie. In that instant I had the fleeting impression that a face was peering down at me from the high window of the turret bedroom. Then the light moved on, plunging the house back into the darkness of the cold moonless night.

I stood there a moment longer, staring up at the blank window thirty feet above and wondering if it was possible that the place could be occupied. For though summer rentals of the property had far exceeded my most optimistic expectations, no one had ever taken the house after mid-September. And I hadn't even bothered calling Tom Barnwell before leaving the city to tell him I was coming up.

Anyway, I was almost certain that I had only imagined the face in the window.

A chilly blast of wind from the sea riffled my thin sweatshirt, sending a chill through my exhausted body and driving me back into the car for my keys and purse. From the cluttered rear seat I retrieved only a small overnight case and the bag of basic groceries I'd picked up at a mini-mart just off the interstate. Everything else, I decided, could wait until morning.

With my arms full I hurried to the front porch and climbed the broad steps. On the off chance that the face in the window had not been merely a trick of the light I pressed the old-fashioned doorbell and listened to the sound of chimes echoing through the house.

When after several seconds no light came on inside and I heard no footsteps on the stair I fumbled with the unfamiliar new lock that Tom had installed on the oak framed glass door and

let myself in. From memory I located the switch on the foyer wall. The glittering Austrian crystal chandelier blazed to life at my touch, flooding the marbled entryway with light.

"Hello," I called out loudly, just to be absolutely certain that I wasn't stumbling in on some poor couple snuggled in for a romantic New England autumn weekend--something that Bobby and I had often talked about doing but had never quite gotten around to.

Somewhere above my head, in the vicinity of Aunt Ellen's old bedroom, I thought, a rafter groaned under the buffeting of the rising wind outside.

The house was otherwise silent.

Satisfied that I was alone, and feeling just a little foolish, I sighed heavily and dropped my overnight case onto the worn pine deacon's bench beside the front door. Then, switching on more lights as I went, I walked back toward the kitchen with my groceries.

As I passed through the parlor and the dining room a small smile of pleasure crossed my lips. When Damon and I had left Freedman's Cove three years before, the workmen were still finishing up the remodeling and the place had been a complete mess. Now, however, with my aunt's best furniture neatly rearranged and gleaming with lemon scented polish and the clutter of painter's drop cloths and ladders gone, I realized that Damon's hurried makeover had done absolute wonders for the Victorian.

Gone, along with Aunt Ellen's somber, densely patterned wallpaper and heavily swaged velvet draperies, were the horrid rubber plants and the grim portraits of my stern New England ancestors that had hung, late 1800's fashion, tilted away from the cheerless walls on braided cords. Now those funereal trappings had been replaced by expanses of creamy white plaster, simple sea green curtains and a few good nautical prints, all of which perfectly accentuated the wonderfully molded floral copings below the high ceilings and showed the busy lines of the sturdy old period furnishings to best advantage.

Compared to their former melancholy atmosphere the big rooms now felt positively airy. And I imagined how pleasant they must be on bright summer days, with puffs of soft sea air wafting in though the tall cased windows.

In the kitchen, a similarly pleasing transformation had been accomplished with new cabinet facings, re-tiled countertops and parquet flooring. The removal of decades worth of yellowing paint from the stamped tin ceiling, and the addition of plants and modern appliances cleverly designed to replicate the antiques that they replaced had turned the room into a bright and cheerful space for work and living.

After peering briefly into cupboards and drawers stocked for the convenience of renters with adequate supplies of everyday utensils, I found some tea things. And while the kettle was coming to a boil I checked to be sure the gas and water were turned on and that the new refrigerator was working.

A few minutes later, with my little stock of groceries stashed safely in the fridge, and balancing a small tray in one hand and my overnight case in the other, I wearily climbed the narrow back stairs to the second floor...

Upstairs, Damon's pleasing handiwork was everywhere evident. Each of the three formerly cheerless guest bedrooms was now pleasant and welcoming, with brightly colored comforters on the beds and light, attractive wall coverings setting off the natural tones of lovingly polished woodwork.

My pleased smile faded as I reached the end of the hall and paused in the open doorway of Aunt Ellen's room. For even the pleasant new floral wallpaper and the gaily colored patchwork coverlet could not disguise the massive four poster bed in which the poor old dear had died so alone and lonely three years earlier.

As I stood there, tired and heartsick, I suddenly found the words that I had not been able to say at her funeral. "Thank you for all that you gave me Auntie," I whispered to the empty room.

As if in reply to my heartfelt words a few spatters of freezing rain from the approaching storm rattled like grains of shot against the windows. So I turned out the light and proceeded down the hall to the short stairway leading up to the turret.

My old bedroom, half a story higher than the rest of the upstairs, looked just as it always had. When I was fourteen, Aunt Ellen had allowed me to redecorate the small round space to my own taste.

I'd spent most of that delightful summer choosing the colors and fabrics and the wallpaper with its delicate pink cabbage rose pattern, then laboriously painting and papering the entire room myself.

When Damon had taken charge of the latest remodeling the turret room was the one place in the house that I had absolutely forbidden him to change. But, ignoring me as usual, he had pointed out that the room's tiny closet was entirely inadequate for renters. And over my loud objections he had hauled an old square maple wardrobe up from the basement where it had stood for decades gathering dust and old periodicals.

I had laughed out loud when I saw the huge piece of furniture he proposed moving into the small room. But to my great surprise the wardrobe had fit perfectly into a nook beside the windows. And, once relieved of its grime and gleaming with fresh beeswax, it looked as if it had always been there. So I had grudgingly allowed it to stay, secretly delighted to have the extra storage space.

The smile returned to my lips as I set the tea tray on the dresser and looked around my snug little space. The turret's three tall, closely spaced windows overlook an unimpeded vista of Maidenstone Island and the sea beyond. So that, late at night, with the lighthouse beacon flashing in the distance and moonlight sparkling on the water, it is possible to lie in the elaborately carved, feather-soft bed--salvaged from the captain's cabin of a New Bedford whaler that had foundered off the point in 1889--and imagine that you are in the wheelhouse of a great tall ship.

At least that is what I used to do when I was a little girl, sailing away in my dreams to wildly romantic adventures in the East Indies, threading my way among the starlit islands of the Aegean or cruising the dangerous coasts of darkest Africa, always with a brave and handsome lover at my side.

I have never known such feelings of happiness and exhilaration as I experienced in those half remembered girlhood dreams. And, deep inside, I suspect, by returning to Freedman's Cove I was hoping to ease my grief and longing for Bobby by recapturing a bit of that dimly recalled childhood magic.

So, on my first night back home, I walked slowly around the wonderful old room, touching familiar objects and happily ignoring the fearsome sounds of the wind and the sea raging just outside my windows.

After a few minutes I took the old electric space heater from the tiny closet, for the house's newly revamped central heating still does not include the turret room. I plugged the heater in and switched it to high. And, as the glowing red coils drove the late autumn chill from the air, I lifted my overnight case onto the bed.

Opening the lid, I took out the protective ball of underwear wedged between my hair dryer and shampoo bottles, and carefully unwrapped the soft package to expose the tiny, sky-blue fairy lamp that I had brought back with me from New York. I placed the delicate antique object on my nightstand and touched a match to its slender wick. Then I turned out the room lights and stood back to admire the effect.

Just as I'd always remembered, a flickering azure glow suffused the circular room, magically transforming the swirling white textures of the domed plaster ceiling into a twilight sky alive with soft cottony clouds that might have been painted by the hand of Maxfield Parrish.

Pleased with myself for having remembered to bring along the treasured lamp, I yawned happily and traded my wrinkled jeans and sweatshirt for a thick terry robe. Then I slipped downstairs to try out the *piece de resistance* of Damon's remodeling job.

Undoubtedly the biggest drawback to Aunt Ellen's house had always been the second floor bathroom, a big, clammy, linoleum floored chamber containing all of the necessities and none of the comforts of modern plumbing. The awful room's worst feature had been without

question the great clawed iron bathtub that had dominated one corner like a Medieval torture device.

Adding to its grim demeanor, patches of cold black metal showed through the ancient tub's yellowing porcelain finish. And the greenish copper taps had clanked and hissed menacingly before spewing out uncontrollable volumes of rust tinged water whose only temperature variations were scalding and freezing.

Two years before, Damon, who values his creature comforts mightily, had taken one look at the scabrous old bathroom and shuddered theatrically. "Positively barbaric," he'd drawled, scowling at the ancient tub, the cracked wooden toilet seat and the stained medicine cabinet mirror. "Sue, darling, no civilized person even will consider staying in this mausoleum once they've visited the loo," he'd announced, sweeping away my feeble protests about the unthinkable expense of remodeling the bathroom.

"If, as you've said," he reminded me, "the only way you can afford to keep this house is by renting it out to well heeled summer tourists, then you can't afford not to fix the bathroom."

So once again he'd had his way, covering the glossy white walls in soft green fabric and wood and replacing the cracked linoleum with thickly luxurious carpeting a much darker shade of forest green. All of the hideous fixtures had been replaced with attractive new ones. And he'd added a bidet for good measure, a move that I'm sure would have sent poor Aunt Ellen into a swoon.

But finally, and best of all, Damon had junked the massive cast iron bathtub, replacing it with a gorgeous sea green replica of the elegant claw footed tub Queen Victoria herself had installed in Windsor Castle. Unlike Victoria's tub, however, the updated version came complete with a full set of gleaming Jacuzzi jets and an infinitely controllable temperature dial.

Turning the gleaming taps full on I sprinkled lavender salts into the rushing water. Then I slowly undressed and slipped into the blessed warmth of the fabulous new tub. As the glorious tingle of rushing bubbles massaged my aching spine, I reflected that Damon had been absolutely right, as usual.

I closed my eyes and blessed my business partner for his spot on wisdom. Then I sank back into the soothing veils of steam. And as the scented water swirled around me I thanked Aunt Ellen for leaving me this lovely old house.

Once again I saw the scowl of disapproval as Bobby and I left that afternoon three years earlier. The sight of her tiny form on the porch as we drove away was a painful memory.

I pushed the guilt ridden thought aside and instead went back to the very first visit I remembered.

At six I was something of a tom boy and my mother had long since given up trying to keep me in dresses playing with dolls. Aunt Ellen was horrified by my unladylike antics and had made efforts to reign me in; but after several heated arguments with my mother she stoically refrained from further comment.

I smiled remembering how much all my cousins feared her but even at six I somehow saw through the gruff exterior and wouldn't let her dismiss me the way she did the others. I became her favorite. A fact she would have denied vehemently.

It was that summer the turret bedroom became mine.

In her best no nonsense voice she told me that I was being consigned to the room farthest away from the living spaces because she wasn't used to having children in the house and want to retain as much peace as was possible with a rambunctious little girl around.

I smiled remembering seeing the room for the first time, the curved walls and domed ceiling, the mullioned windows looking out on the raging sea. I'd become a princess in the highest tower in the castle. I was thrilled and threw my tiny arms around her legs. She'd gently disengaged me saying I was wrinkling her dress but I could see in her eyes that she was pleased.

Aunt Ellen. She didn't give hugs and kisses but I always knew she loved me. I hoped she knew how much I loved her.

I stretched and sank lower in the tub so the soothing jets could do their magic on my neck, stiff from the long drive.

And another drive swam into my thoughts. I still have nightmares that have the truck cross the center line and smash into the side of the car. I cringed.

Even at ten mother insisted I sit in the back seat buckled into the middle. She'd read somewhere that air bags were dangerous to children. So I was safe, not a scratch on me but because the truck hit the side of the car mother's air bag didn't save her.

My father and I were alone.

It was Aunt Ellen who was there for us, for me. I never saw her cry but her strength helped my father and me through that first horrid year and after that I spent every summer here.

Starting to prune, I got out of the tub and went upstairs to bed.