

GRACE

1988

He stood there waiting in that old familiar spot untouched by time. Here, once again, his senses awakened. The same damp smell of the forest, so prominent in the fresh morning dew, permeated the air as the quiet murmuring of the crystal clear stream forever etched its path through the terrain. Above, the canopy of translucent sun-drenched leaves glowed a golden green against the blazing sapphire sky and as a soft breeze blew, sunlight splashes danced on the forest floor.

Where was she? Grace? He had named her that the first time she appeared to him.

They never spoke; she would offer only a smile as recognition. Her guarded smile that veiled a knowing doom lured him closer, a smile that grew brighter with each visit, and changed over time from uncertain alarm to promised redemption.

Where was she now? Had he possibly seen the last of her? No. She would come. She had to. Grace owed him at least this one last visit.

Still waiting, his breath heavy with anticipation, he recalled the first time she had come. Grace had emerged timidly from behind a towering oak, framed in a gossamer sunlight aura, her face solemn with hesitation. There had been a familiarity about her. It was as though he had seen her countless times before, but strangely enough he could not tell who she was, or who she might resemble. He had definitely seen those eyes before. Sad, searching eyes, that would every so often come to life and dance with joy—an artificial joy, but a joy nonetheless.

Time after time, an apparition ensconced in a diaphanous beacon, Grace materialized, her expression tormented yet menacing, with the shadow of a derisive smile at the sight of him. Much like his, her fine ebony hair fluttered in the breeze like a netted butterfly yearning for freedom, yet conversely content to remain confined and show off its beauty.

Her hands emerged from the pockets of her flowing gown holding the tantalizing little white seeds she always offered. Temptingly, she would eat them—one by one—seducing him with the bewitching look of satisfaction that swept over her. Enticed by the treat, he would advance toward her, but she would quickly stash the remaining seeds back into her pocket and return to safety behind her oak. Bit by bit, with each meeting, Grace became more at ease in his presence and would allow him to come closer and closer until eventually she willingly offered to share the seeds. Eyanescence and immediate contentment were their promise and they lived up to that promise.

Time went on and the seeds became larger, although fewer, and the enjoyment they brought was greater. Grace's shyness had turned to boldness; her demure smile grew to a girlish giggle that finally blossomed into laughter—sometimes insulting rancorous laughter, as though she held a secret from him. Playfully, she would withhold her offering, keeping it just out of reach, but she would eventually give in. And they laughed together and then he knew it was only a matter of time before he would learn her secret. They had become so close; she could not possibly keep it from him forever.

But, where was she now? How much longer did he have with her? During her last visit, on a sunny and warm day just like this one, he had thought back to the time before Grace had come into his life. How dark and meaningless it all seemed. Only a few of those wondrous seeds had remained that time and he sensed that somehow their affair would soon end. He was anxious to see her, needed to see her, like a ravenous wolf yearning to devour the exquisiteness of its prey.

His life was spent in the seclusion of a dismal attic bedroom with creaky second-hand furniture and stained dog-eared wallpaper. The damp room's musty smell and the rumble of traffic in the street below were his only company, comfort and reality. The vastness of the world outside his window frightened him and when he dared to venture out, he covered disgracefully, needing to be somewhere safe.

Fatefully, he had found Grace and his secret place where no one ever followed, where everything was perfect, at least for a little while, where he could forget the world that terrified him. No one knew the elation this place held for him. No one knew his torment when he left it. This must be what it was like for everyone else, he thought, to have a secret

escape, a place to forget, to live, and to find peace. In their haven, Grace brought him purpose and he was free to smile, to feel happiness. He wanted to hold her, keep her with him longer, but she remained elusive, allowing herself to get only so close while he needed so much more. Just one more time and he knew they would be together forever.

Finally, bathed in the glow of the sun she appeared, her approach bolder than ever. High above, each vibrant golden green veined leaf was a sculpture with intense individual detail. Once again, the lyrical echoing calls of the woodland creatures and the snapping of dried twigs on the forest floor as Grace slowly advanced were amplified to symphonic clarity and the fresh dew reawakening the slumbering soil was heavy with a heady, woodsy perfume. This was perfection. This was utopia. This time, in spite of the swirling mist of confusion that enveloped them both, it was as if a new life was dawning around them.

Face to face, they peered into each other's eyes. This was the closest they had ever been, but there was something wrong. A new torment was in her eyes this morning, a different kind of uncertainty. A hopeless sense of doom darkened them, telling of the impending storm without words. Still, they drew him in, ever searching, ever wanting.

Grace's eyes were mirrors reflecting a confusing blur. Were those his own troubled eyes staring back at him, or were they hers, filled with empty disregard? As his sight cleared and she began to move closer, he saw how deliberate each motion really was. Laughter. Chilling, tragic and frightened laughter. It was her laughter. It was his laughter. It was echoing. It was piercing.

Grace took his hand in hers. Her touch was cold, clammy, dead. His arm jerked forward against her binding grip but she held fast, restraining him, making escape impossible. Her fingernails dug into his flesh and his face twisted with pacifying pain. He was her prisoner now. Grace had finally made him hers.

The rush of the howling wind and rolls of thunder from the blackening sky dulled their mingled laughter. A numbness overtook him as her hold loosened and his mind wandered helplessly in a frenzied nonsensical vacancy.

What had she done? What had he? How could she? Why would he?

He trembled as the diminishing thunder rolled and crashed somewhere in the distance as a bright and harsh reality materialized around him, but it was too late. He could no longer be a part of it. The magical forest, his utopia, the raging storm had all faded away.

Grace, too, had gone and in her place was the reflection of his own tear stained face in the oak framed mirror over his grimy worn dresser. The grungy stained wallpaper and the noise of the bustling traffic in the street below had come back into focus and a brief regretful sadness overcame him. With his last breaths, he realized where Grace had gone and her mocking laughter was heard one last time in the tinkling of the shattering hypodermic on the tile floor.