

PATIENCE

Carla Cowles

"He loves me, he loves me not . . . he loves me, he loves me not . . ."
But it's not *his* feelings that worry me now, thought Jess. Oh, dear God,
let me know my own mind!

The sun of late afternoon shone softly on the tiny meadow, filtering through the cool trees that bordered it. Jess dodged the dappled shadows cast on the grass, letting the childish game occupy her mind. It was so much easier to play than to think. . . .

Greg had been so easy to fall in love with—or at least, it had been easy for Jess to fall in love. Two years ago, sweet summertime . . . doves crooning, lilacs in bloom, the whole bit. Jess and Greg, about to be seniors in high school, were on top of everything. Combined, they were heads above the rest of the world. Parents, teachers, friends had been leaving them alone together for years, and inevitably, beautifully, they became a couple. From the start, Jess could be comfortable with Greg, and so natural—his gaze touched something behind her eyes, and calmed her. She was so innocently happy.

The shadows were longer now, and Jess found it simpler to dodge the shrinking sunny spots. She felt a soft breeze, and shivered. Autumn again . . . the end of the Garden of Eden. Jess felt the melancholy of the changing seasons like a gentle hand squeezing her heart.

Once he had hit her. Suddenly, furiously, he lashed out, then instantly fell to his knees in remorse. But the sting of his hand on her cheek remained, and Jess could not forgive. Oh, she deserved it—she deserved to be whipped. You never call an adopted child a bastard. But pain from a hand which so often brought kindness and comfort seemed a much

greater betrayal than any word. Greg cried his apologies, cried like a baby for hours, until Jess' mothering instincts overcame her hurt and resentment. The gap between them closed, and all was well—but sometimes, when revealing her secrets to him, Jess felt the twinge of a flaw in her soul, a threat of disaster left behind.

The blue of the sky gave way to dusty rose, and the meadow became a dream world. Jess chased straggling milkweed parachutes, snatching a few from the air and blowing them far from the others. She felt useful, as though she had given them room to breathe and grow. Jess ran through the flying seedlings, inhaling the colorful vapors of evening, giving herself up to the beauty of dusk. She paused attentively, eyes closed, entranced by the nearness of the night.

They had become lovers at her desire—he offered no pressure, or even encouragement. He made love to her softly, skillfully, as she had imagined he would. They were faithful to each other, physically and mentally—both were unselfish and perceptive lovers, totally satisfied with a single, beautiful relationship. An occasional twinge of curiosity nagged at Jess' thoughts—a feeling Greg, already sexually experienced, could not understand. But she believed his claim that having sex was not always making love, and that satisfying her curiosity would only hurt her view of herself. And then, when she felt this touch upon her, the deep ache of longing and love replaced her shallow doubts with truth.

A quiet whistling brought Jess out of her reverie. Greg's tall, slim figure strode through the meadow toward her, and she recognized that good-natured smile wrinkling his face. As she answered it with her own, something caught her eye. Greg held a small object in his hand which glittered and flashed in the dim evening light. Jess didn't know if it was anything important—perhaps it was just a pretty pebble which Greg had found in the woods. But whatever it was, he was handing it to her—and she would take it. Oh yes, she decided, she would take it.