

He stepped into the hall and, walking quickly now, headed for the stairs. Still no sound from down there...except—yes, something, a woman's voice. His name. "Dan-iel..."

Janine's voice, sing-songy and teasing

Mathis stopped, frozen. He waited. He licked his lips. The house was quieter than quiet now; it was anesthetic, cotton-white quiet. The pounding of blood in his chest and in his ears was the only sound.

Right?

No, there it was again: "Dan-iel...Dan-iel...meet me, Dan...make love to me...please...?"

The sound was distant, but not very. The sound was real. His cock stirred.

"J-Janine...?" he squeaked after a stunned, petrifying silence.

Nothing. Mathis stepped further into the passage. A squawk of wood underfoot seemed to saw at his heart—ignore, Dan.

He walked more quickly down the corridor to the intersection of the north hall. He looked in both directions: deserted.

A bedroom was here. Was she in there?

Mathis kicked open the door off the hallway and stepped back as it creaked slowly open. Nothing to see but darkness. Mathis spun about, looking all around. No one here.

Again he looked into the room, his head leaning into it, but his pounding heart and icy fear preventing him from entering. He peered into that darkness hard, while the house remained silent and still, and he was sure there was something in there.

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ROGER BROWN

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"Some think I should teach men the way to heaven. But I would rather teach them the way to hell, so they will know how to go around it."

Machiavelli

CHAPTER ONE

Dan Mathis knew exactly what the real estate agent was about to say, and not because he was psychic. It was just common sense. This place could not have looked any more haunted if there had been a sudden lightning strike, the shriek of a banshee and the flight of a bat.

The Victorian-era mansion appeared from behind the hilltop as the agent's car ascended the driveway. The place was huge, with gables and towers, arches and minarets; and its walls were crawling with ivy and vines. Its windows were boarded up; its roof warped, its grounds desolate.

When the mansion was in full view, agent-of-record Janine Foote cast Mathis a sidelong glance of wry amusement and said, "Of course, people around here say it's haunted."

"Really? Why?"

It was cute the way she almost started to explain then gave him a look. He enjoyed the way she smelled. Like vanilla.

Ms.—Mrs.?—Foote stopped the car some distance from the house, where the driveway began its final

loop to the grand columns flanking the front door.

"The property is twelve acres in all. Frankly, the taxes are rather dear."

"I understand. Stunning has the capital, Miss Foote," Mathis replied. "He can bid."

He was touring the house on behalf of Lance Stunning, the world-famous artist.

"Fine," she smiled. "Good." She was pretty: a model's cheekbones and lips, shiny dark eyes, black hair cut short but stylishly shaggy. She wore more makeup than was strictly necessary. Mathis suspected she had a killer body under her very conservative blue suit and winter jacket. Her smile lasted a beat or two before she bestowed her attention back to the house—and then, abruptly, back to him. "If you don't mind my asking, Mister Mathis..."

"Dan."

"Dan, you're Mister Stunning's executive assistant?"

"Correct."

"Ah."

"Why do you ask?"

"No reason." She cleared her throat. "The Institute was commissioned by Mister Hubert Janeway, an industrialist and arms manufacturer. Construction was completed in 1838. His family used this as a summer residence until the Civil War."

Mathis wondered what she looked like naked.

"Alistair Janeway re-opened the house as a military academy, but public sentiment after the war prevented its success." Foote put her car in gear. "In 1885, it was purchased as a charitable institution, a finishing academy for orphaned girls. Over the years it has been used as an asylum, as a private residence. It was restored somewhat and remodeled in the 1950s for use as a private school for boys, but it has not been occupied now for the past fifteen years."

She drove her sedan up the weed-choked driveway to the front of the Institute. She stopped under the breezeway leading to the huge main doors, which were left of center of the house. Mathis peered up at the massive columns that supported this shelter. Thirty feet high, maybe? You could herd elephants in here.

"It's called a porte-cochere," Foote explained. "It was to protect guests as they disembarked from their carriages."

Ms. or Mrs. Foote was in her mid-thirties, was Mathis's guess. That would make her ten years older. Not a problem.

In a crisp and feminine movement, she climbed out of the car. Before her coat swung back into place, he saw that her backside was spectacular. Even that prissy suit could not restrain or mute its power.

He followed Foote away from the house as she stepped daintily over the weeds that poked up through the paved driveway around the circle. Soon they were far enough away to take in the house at a glance.

It was U-shaped, two-story wings east and west in the back forming right angles to the main building, which was three stories. There were two faux towers on either end of the house. The exterior was formed from great limestone blocks, which Mathis imagined had gleamed brilliantly in the 19th century but which now were sooty and dull and mostly covered with ivy and creepers.

But even under this sad, forlorn waste he could see the magnificence. With the towers and the dramatic way it sat atop the hill—his boss would love it.

Mathis, entranced with the house, just now noticed how Janine Foote was studying him. She glanced away before their eyes met.

"What?" he asked her.

"Nothing."

"C'mon. What? Something about me being an assistant...?"

"Mister Mathis, we have a lot to cover today..."

"No, seriously – what?"

"Well," she declared shyly, "I was curious...how you came to...if you ever...that is, were you ever a model?"

"God, no, never," he said, thinking, was this flirtation, or a wicked sales pitch?

Dan Mathis had always had good luck with women, and he tried to show his appreciation to the gods by not taking it for granted, and not abusing the privilege more than, say, three or four times a week. He stood six-feet-one and had light brown hair so thick that if he let it grow long he started to look like a news anchor with terminal helmet-head. For this reason it was clipped short, always. He had a glowering brow, searching taupe eyes, a wicked smile, a mildly crooked nose, a superhero jaw and a

toned body on the slender side.

That was the menu that got him in bed with many women. Two additional items ensured his return: first, a tireless and machine-gun-fast tongue so supple that it could harden and contort in a hundred ways; and a way-larger-than-average, thick and statuesque penis. This was now concealed beneath his skin-tight faded jeans, which he wore with his faded brown leather jacket and black sweater.

He was contemplating whether Janine Foote was likely to be interested in any of his hidden qualities as she continued the tour, pointing out the quaint touches in windows and doors that gave the monstrous place its charm.

To Mathis, who was penniless, the place was unimaginably huge, equal parts castle and house. As they walked back toward the house's frontage, he asked her, "How many rooms?"

She made a quiet mew of "Let me see," produced reading glasses from her jacket and checked the listing. "Twenty-seven, but, of course, many of those are quite large, quite large. The interior, main house and former servant quarters, is 131,000 square feet." She glanced meaningfully at him over her glasses, in the fashion of a schoolteacher about to give him a good scolding. He felt the stirrings of a boner.

They had reached the corner of the house. Mathis tapped at a window board as Janine Foote resumed her pitch.

"The Institute is in the Gothic Revival style, which was very popular at the time in the Americas. In the mid-nineteenth century, men of means such as Mister Janeway were carving out their homes along the Hudson Valley, in the wilderness as it were. It was a time of great...romanticism," she enthused, her eyes blossoming. "A love of the past, particularly Rome and medieval England, and a love of nature—excuse me, what are you doing?"

Mathis had worked his fingers under the window board and was pressing his face in the gap. "Trying to get a peek inside," he muttered.

"Mister Mathis, I'll be taking you inside in just a minute."

"Can't we break in? Sneak around?" He grinned at her, still straining to peer inside. All he could see was darkness.

"Please..." She was giving him a constipated look, so he released the window board and followed her toward the western end of the house. "Drawn to the forbidden, are we?" she said.

"Big dark house like this? Damn right."

They stood in the back for a few minutes. It was warm for January, but plenty cold, at that; and the trees swayed in the chill wind. In the distance, down the hill on this side and drowning in weeds, was a gazebo. There were a few outbuildings further distant, ready for the wrecker's ball.

"An eyesore," she admitted.

They stood in silence, looking at the gazebo.

He almost didn't hear her, for the wind stirring the trees.

"You can almost taste the lemonade," she

whispered.

"Pardon?"

"Sorry, I'm a bit of a sap for the romance of this place," she said, leading him back the way they'd come. "I was saying—and don't you laugh at me—I can almost see the people of the eighteen-hundreds in their starched linens, ribboned hats and hoop skirts, sitting in the gazebo, or on this veranda, sipping lemonade. Can't you?"

"Of course, I can. The place is haunted. You said so."

"Yes, it's right here in the listing," she said, tapping her clipboard. "Haunted charmer."

They exchanged brief smiles.

She's okay for a saleslady, Mathis thought. Classy. Stop leering at her.

He scanned the tower and the gabled roof, marveling at the sheer magnitude of the place. "I know what you mean," he said. "In a place that's old, or where some history took place, you feel like...the past is still there somehow...hovering in its own niche in time..."

He surveyed the gloomy-grand edifice. Upstairs, there was a gap in the window board; and, damn, was it dark in there, like the eye of a shark, of a skull...

Dan Mathis experienced a chill, a little clutch in his chest.

I feel like I'm being watched.

You're in your twenties, he reminded his poor, frightened self. You always feel like you're being watched. Your life is a movie, and it's a hit. That's what being a

young narcissist is all about.

Forget it.

Mathis followed Janine Foote back along the columned veranda around to the front door. She had three keys to find and work before the great door to the Institute was made to creak open.

"Mister Mathis, would you care to come inside?"

If it was true that he was being watched, then there was something inside, maybe waiting for him.

As if in a trance, he walked past the real estate agent into the house.

"Hello, Basil? It's Dan."

"Dan's not here. Can I take a message?"

"No, Basil, it's me, Dan. Can I talk to Lance?"

"Dan, is that you? Listen, Dan, we got this guy Dwight M. Parker calling all the time."

"Is Stunning there?"

"Parker says he's gonna close the Greene Street gallery and the boss wanted me to ask you—"

"Parker's the lawyer for the numbnuts that impaled himself on the ice crown piece," Mathis explained. "Don't worry about it. No way he can close the gallery. Can I talk to Stunning?"

Basil yelped, and suddenly it was the voice of Mathis's lord and master, Lance Stunning, the infamous provocateur and New York artist himself.

"D.M.! Glad you called," Stunning said. "You won't believe this video thing I'm doing. I'm geomorphing from serial killers to saints, y'know, Manson to Mother Theresa. Well, this computer kid is

doing it. I'm—and this chick that runs the board for him? Tits like tree fruit, you just wanna go *brrrrrr* in there."

"Lance, are you still interested in a property upstate?"

"More than ever."

"Good, because I found a place. I think it's perfect."

"How far up? Not more than two hours..."

"No. Town called Boyle's Falls. About an hour and forty-five from the George Washington."

"Good. And you didn't say anything to them about a gallery...? Private residence, capishe?"

"Not a word, Lance."

"Good, that's good. Propitia says it's the future, big galleries out in the woods someplace, and Bennett thought it was a good move, investment-wise. But most of those towns get spooked if they know what you plan to do."

"Can you come look at it?"

"Lemme see, I got this opening on the fourteenth, we're filming the agony piece the week of the seventeenth..."

"Lance, this property is hot," Mathis lied. "It won't wait. The other bidders are closing in. I think one of them might be an artist, too."

"No shit."

"The agent didn't come out and say so, but..."

"I'll turn you over to Basil, give him the realtor's number and all..."

"I'll give him my number at the Glen Oaks Motel,

too. That way you'll be able to call, we can shoot the breeze, how'd that be?"

"Good idea. See you." Stunning dropped the phone and Mathis heard him holler, "Basil!"

Lance Stunning lived in an irony-free zone. Nothing Mathis ever said to him stung or stuck. For two years, he had handled the man's every matter, professional and personal. He'd been one of the inner circle, pumping the very heart of the New York art world.

Now Mathis wanted out. He'd had enough of Lance Stunning, of his sycophants, his enemies—the whole downtown scene. He'd volunteered to do a real estate search in the Hudson Valley, as far from the action as Siberia.

When he was done giving Basil the directions and his phone number at the motel, Mathis hung up the phone and looked around at the charmless, cheerless motel room.

What good is a motel room, he asked himself, if you can't have sweaty, noisy, dirty, volcanic, fluid-dashing, wall-quaking sex in it?

He thought about going to a bar, trying his luck with some country girls. Hell, maybe there's an upscale bar, a cocktail lounge, where he might find Janine Foote by herself...

He stepped outside. The motel was on a dark stretch of road dotted by strip malls on either side.

Yee-ha. A car rushed by him on Route 9. Mathis closed his eyes. Multiply that sound by a million, then add trucks and machines, footsteps, gabbing humans

and music from a zillion sources and you had the endless surf-sound of New York City. The clatter of china in restaurants, the thunder of music in clubs. The glitter of the women, so exotic and unpredictable. On a moment-to-moment basis, anything could happen.

Out here on Route 9 on a Wednesday night, though, chances were nothing would happen. His mental picture of Janine Foote returned: back arched, caboose outthrust over the bar stool. Ripe and round and juicy. And who's that beside her? Why, it's her husband.

Smiling, Mathis went back inside, nursing the ache that was growing in his balls. He poured himself some gin, sat on the bed and lightly pinched the end of his wanker.

He didn't miss Lance Stunning and most of his entourage, but he definitely missed the women. There were always women around. Artists, docents, guides, agents and downtown night phantoms—they were forever trying to sleep their way closer to the white-hot center, Stunning himself, and Mathis caught his share. Voluptuous goth chicks, Eurobimbos, actresses, club kids, Wall Street numbers-crunchers, poetry slam addicts. He took a deep sip of gin and recalled all the nights of frenzied fucking in bedrooms and parlors, from scuzzy SoHo walkups to Belle-epoque Upper East Side townhouses. Fucking till dawn—he'd loved that, stumbling out of a party or after-hours joint or the apartment of a slumbering wench in full daylight while, all around him, the citizens were marching to

work.

He pulled his pants down and thought of Deirdre. Straight red hair down to her tokhes and breasts like freckled pillows. The girlfriend of a good friend, so he never fucked her. For a while, at restaurants and openings when he'd run into her, she'd tuck a pair of nice used panties in his coat pocket where he'd find them later, like a love note for his schnozz, for his whole man, because that smell does go right from the nose to the cone.

He took his cock in hand and thought of Gina, with the Mediterranean skin, the body so lush it was like from another planet and the dirty midnight wiggle that would conjure the jizz out of him as if by magic. He stroked, building a rhythm, remembering Therese, with the gemlike eyes, Barbie-doll chest, slim waist and flaring hips; she liked to turn to the porn channels and mimic, with him, whatever was being depicted on screen in real time. Too weird: pounding her jackhammer-style and trying not to come and then change the channel and the TV told her to beg him to come, just beg him to please, please come in her mouth.

He had his back arched now, his knees bent to the side, jerking off like a mad monkey. On his closed eyelids came the images, women whose names he'd forgotten or never known. The frizzy-haired girl he'd made eye contact with at a gallery opening—a simple smile was all it took; she followed him into the men's room and sucked him off right there, mewing and moaning and slop-sucking for all to hear while

Mathis clutched the walls of the stall. The girl in the dark, dark nightclub with the sleepy, sleazy eyes who'd danced over to him—slithered is more like it; he was seated in a dark corner on a banquette, happy to be alone, getting slowly hammered. She sat on his lap and french-kissed him, then turned her back and started a lap dance. And it being dark, and late, and who gives a shit, she'd teased his cock out of his pants, hiding the action best she could, lifted her short white skirt and sat on him, her back to him, smiling lazy at the room as they fucked slowly, deeply, in that remote corner. The sculptress with the skylight—he'd been lying on the floor looking up at the stars and the next thing he knew she was sitting on his face. Her big ass just lowering, lowering, asses all looked big and dumb from certain angles, until his face was full with her pussy and her bum and she was working his cock with those sculptor's moves.

He tried imitating those sculptor's moves, tried to keep his mind on that woman, her jiggling bum cheeks and undulating hands; but it was Janine Foote whose mouth kept closing around his cock, her cheeks pulsing with each bob of her head, her eyes meeting his. It was those eyes he pictured as he stroked faster and faster, his whole pecker swallowed in her throat, tossing her head faster and faster until all the hunger, frenzy, moisture and friction sparked the trigger and he splashed his spoo in her mouth...in his mind.

In my mind, Mathis drowsily mused as he fell asleep with a puddle on his belly. That's as far as it's

Roger Brown

gonna go with Janine Foote. With anybody up here in the Hudson Valley.

I can use the rest.

CHAPTER TWO

Institute, Stunning agreed to come up and take a look. On the specified day, Janine Foote picked up Mathis at his motel, and they drove together to the Institute, there to wait for the world-famous artist.

"He'll be late," Mathis informed the real estate agent, and he was right. The tour was scheduled for eleven. At eleven-forty-five, they were still waiting.

It was a brisk February day. They remained in the car, engine running. Foote read her newspaper and listened to public radio. Mathis watched her.

"So, tell me what it's like to work with the famous Lance Stunning," she said quietly and suddenly, her eyes still on her newspaper.

She must have known I was watching her, Mathis thought. Embarrassing.

"First of all," he told her, "his real name is Justin Toussant." But what, after all, was real about him? Lance Stunning was slick, derivative, shallow, insincere and thoroughly unscrupulous. He had come to prominence by announcing that he hadn't actually done the works he was exhibiting at a SoHo gallery—

he had hired staff members to do his artwork while he was banging some bim in the next room. And for some reason, the art world ate it up with a spoon. But Mathis did not remind Janine Foote of this wellpublicized fact.

What he said was "I started as his secretary, receptionist, errand boy. In no time I was arranging exhibitions, museum loans, gallery openings, auctions and sales to private buyers. I wrote proposals and supervised installations." What he didn't say was: he'd worked on some of Stunning's artworks, without credit or acknowledgment. He'd arranged to take Stunning's overdosed girlfriends to the hospital or detox. He'd lied to curators, held off creditors, corrected the discrepancies in bills and accounts, juggled calls from Stunning's ex-wives, Stunning's exwives' lawyers, Stunning's children from his various ex-wives...

You lose a bit of your soul with every lie, Mathis knew. And after two years his soul was perforated to tatters. Volunteering for this mission, far from New York City, the prospect of being alone...it was his voyage of rediscovery.

"And I wrote the gallery notes," was what he said aloud.

"Like what?"

They'd been such crap, and so much fun to write, that they stuck in his head like a stubborn pop song. "Let's see, we had a chalk series on crumpled paper," he said. "I wrote that it was 'Dada polemical, delightfully oblique, subliminally lyrical and brashly

conceptual, dense with material and meaning."

"Ah." She nodded, a little smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

"Let me see...I remember I said his oil on burlap series had 'fused the chromatic and textural nuances of the Franz-Bibbi school with the linear and planar involvement of Bosch.'"

"Mmm," she said, frowning and squinting with heroic empathy and understanding.

"He did animal twitch works on mesh and fabric—don't ask—and I said...I said they 'defied the historico-aesthetic theorizing that had muddied the pop worldview, eschewing racist/sexist iconography to achieve Baudillardian metastasis.' With his paint on computer graphics works, I said he was 'expanding the picture frame beyond what had been thought of as its outer limit, exploiting his alchemical ability to transmute aristocratic etherealization into raw, pagan vibrancy.'"

"How Byzantine!" she declared with a smile. "Daniel, you make most real estate pitches seem like scripture by comparison."

"Why don't we wait inside?" he finally asked her.

"I don't think that's a good idea," she said, returning to her paper.

"Why not?"

She looked at him over her reading glasses. *The schoolmarm look again—delicious.* "Gossip. I'm not sure I should be alone in that house with you."

"Why not?"

She sighed, as if mother to child, which the child

found unaccountably enticing. "The market is very tough right now in the Hudson Valley," she explained, "and it's become super-competitive. I have to be careful how I behave around a client. I can't afford any gossip."

"But we're alone, who's gonna know? And, besides, we were in there the other day, just the two of us-"

"And one of my colleagues remarked on it. Don't ask me how people know. They just do."

"Yeah?" Mathis couldn't repress a grin. "What did they say?"

"Never you mind."

"You're married, I guess."

"Divorced."

"Oh."

"That's not the point," said Foote. She was about to tell him the point when she checked her rearview mirror. "Ah," she said. "Your Mister Stunning, I presume."

A black Lincoln town car pulled alongside Janine Foote's sedan. The driver got out and opened the door for Lance and his dish *du jour*, the lovely and shapely Candice.

"Hey, beb," Stunning exclaimed, taking Mathis in a leisurely hug, at the same time extending his hand to shake with Janine Foote.

Candice emerged from the limo, all six feet of her, stabbing a cigarette out with her heel, shaking her auburn hair back away from her face. She introduced herself to Janine Foote and pecked Mathis on the

cheek.

"We miss you, Danny boy," she cooed, like a motherly Betty Boop.

"Candy, check this out," Stunning called to her. Hands on hips, he appraised the property, the country squire, lord of all he surveyed. He turned back to Mathis. "You done good," he announced. "This place is great. We took a drive through the village and I think it'll do. They have a train station, and an exit off the Taconic"

Lance Stunning stood a few inches taller than Mathis, lanky-limbed and fair-skinned. He had an Einstein-like mane of blinding silver hair, and his shrewd dark eyes, full mouth and broad forehead arranged themselves expressively around his prominent, hawk-beak nose. He always wore expensive Italian suits over gimmicky t-shirts; today's was a faux sharkskin suit and, under it, a shirt that depicted a photo-real Rottweiler snarling at the observer with a cartoony caption: "What're you lookin' at?"

"Shall I show you around?" Foote asked him.

"Hell, yeah, let's take a look," Stunning said.

Janine worked the triple locks and pushed open the massive windowless front door. The group entered, and she shut the door behind them, creating a clash of wood and metal that reverberated in the vast, empty mansion. She led them the few steps across the butler's foyer into the front hall.

"Oh. My. Gawwd," Candice whispered.

Janine Foote flicked on the light switch, and the true enormity of the place was revealed.

"Danny, this place is great," Candice said, hugging his arm.

Mathis beamed.

The ceiling of this front hall was a good eighteen feet high, in the ribbed-and-vaulted style; the panels bowed gracefully, defined by the soaring wood supports that met in the center. Straight ahead as you entered was the main staircase of the house: ten wide steps flanked by beautifully contoured wood railings and posts, leading to an intermediate landing from which sprang two side flights, left and right, going to the second floor. The walls of this front hall were wainscoted, with a series of large wood panels sitting atop smaller dados. At one time, Foote had told him, these panels could have framed wood reliefs that might still be under the layers of paint and wood fill.

Considering its age, and its long disuse, the place wasn't in terrible shape—a film of dust on floors and surfaces, dust bunnies and broken pieces of ceramic and other oddments littering some rooms, busted furniture lying dead in others—but there was no mistaking the former grandeur.

"You done good," Stunning murmured, looking up at the ceiling.

"Understand that when I describe these rooms I am referring to their original, Victorian-era use," Foote said, leading Stunning, Candice and Mathis to the left as you entered the house, the west wing. "This was the reception room," she announced as they

entered the first room, "where the master or mistress of the house received guests."

They gazed up at the eighteen-foot ceiling, around at the twin, enormous fireplaces and ornate mantles and the deep window seat provided by the contour of the faux tower. French doors, boarded up, led to the verandah outside.

"The floors are beautiful," Candice remarked.

"Yes, quite a bit of marble in the downstairs halls, and the rest is primarily parquetry," Foote told her. "Excellent condition, for the most part."

Foote led them back through the anteroom, the reception room, across the front hall and into the very long, very impressive main cross-hall.

"This we refer to as the north hall," she said, and led them down the hall toward the greater portion of the house.

To the right, at the very front, were a series of shallow rooms with the conventional mullioned windows, now protected from the outside by ragged boards.

"These would have been offices, study rooms, storage perhaps," Foote said.

To the left as they continued down the north hall were fewer, larger rooms with twelve-foot ceilings.

"This was the parlor, I believe," said Foote, throwing her hand toward it. "Here was the library and perhaps the office of the master of the house." The rooms were dusty, pitted and dark.

Continuing along the hall, just before the narrow back stairs was a large storage closet and the bathroom.

"Pretty nice bathroom," Stunning commented, "considering."

"That's not period, of course," Foote said. "This one was probably installed in the 1950s, or maybe some of it may have been put in in the twenties."

"Oh, yeah? They didn't have bathrooms in the 1800's? What'd they use? Trenches?"

"I really have no idea when interior plumbing was installed here, Mister Stunning." Foote gave him her best schoolmarm glare, all pinched and snotty. Stunning smirked at her.

When Mathis happened to catch her eye, Foote winked at him. He had to choke back a smile.

Now on the right was the secondary staircase, and on the left was the hall to the east wing. Dark and gloomy, it was nothing more than a series of empty rooms, and they quickly retraced their steps back to the main hall. They proceeded straight to the end and through double doors.

"The dining room," announced Foote.

It was an enormous, roughly octagonal room with matching bay windows and sitting areas at either side of the south end. Here again the ceilings were high, and the architectural touches of the room—recessed niches, the vaulted ribbed ceiling—presented a shadow of opulence behind the dust, weeds, busted furniture and detritus of years of neglect.

"Beautiful room for dining. You can see that, surely," said Foote.

"All the mouse crap'd make a nice topping for a

salad, hey?" was Stunning's reply. He elbowed Mathis, but he didn't feel it. He was transfixed by the chandelier that hung by a chain in the center of the room.

"Look at that chandelier," Candice exclaimed.

It was giddily opulent, with billowing tiers of cylindrical crystals, like an upside-down wedding cake in glass. Candice let her fingers trail along the crystals, and they tinkled musically.

"How long's it been here, you think?"

How long? Mathis murmured in echo.

"It's likely that's an original fixture," said Foote. "The agent who passed this listing to me told me that at one time that chandelier was protected...the equivalent of landmark status. It couldn't be touched during a renovation. I don't believe that is lawful, but it would be a shame to move it, wouldn't it?"

Candice nodded, and the two women smiled uneasily at each other.

"We'll see about that," Stunning said quietly to Mathis. "I see this as the gift shop, don't you? Can't have a goddamn chandelier in the gift shop, now can we?"

Even in this low light, the chandelier glistened like a Technicolor dream, an inferno in a diamond mine, an undersea treasure chest spilling open in sundappled light. Its colors were hypnotic in their vividness and depth, from the smoldering-coal-fire of the yellows, oranges and reds to the deep-Coral-Sea blues and greens.

Mathis turned to Candice. "Sorry. What did you

say?"

She didn't take her eyes off the chandelier. "Nothing. Why?"

He turned to Janine Foote. "Did you say something to me just now?"

Foote shook her head no. Then, seeing that Stunning and Candice had their attention elsewhere, she playfully whacked Mathis on the arm with her clipboard.

Okay, that's flirtation, he decided. She did whisper to me just now.

A little bolt of excitement drizzled through his vitals. He wanted her.

Foote primly clasped her hands and announced, "Are we interested in the kitchens, the former servants' quarters and so on, or shall we just skip to—"

"I wanna see it all," said Stunning, and he followed her out. Candice fell into step. Mathis was last. He wondered if he had to pee. He always thought that when he anticipated sex. Or maybe it was fear. This end of the house was awfully dark.

Foote led them, via a narrow passage, through the butler's pantry, storage rooms, down short steps to the old laundry and kitchen. The old kitchens and laundry rooms took up a series of four large adjoining spaces with deep banks of counters, now containing the remnants of ancient washbasins and ovens, a ruined refrigerator and the bones of old furniture. After due consideration of this dark haunt, she led them up a set of narrow winding stairs, which

creaked beneath their feet with a chorus of aching wood.

This took them up to the "back" quarters, what had been the servant's wing. Here, and on the attic floor above, were a series of close rooms for storage or servant quarters. Foote peeled back a window board so they could take in the dramatic view of the river valley.

"This is where the squire probably shagged the servant girls, you think?" Stunning remarked. He tickled Candice, who squealed and fought him off.

Foote led them out of the servant quarters into the main part of the second floor, where, on either side of the wide hallways, large and impersonal dormitory-style rooms were flanked by more intimate and beautified bedchambers.

"A fireplace in every room. Wow!" exclaimed Candice, scurrying from one dark and gloomy room to another, as if the place wasn't in the slightest bit haunted. Running ahead.

She's the one who gets it, Mathis thought. If this was a movie, she'd be Victim One.

He noted Janine Foote watching Candice. Foote was wicked hot today: black pantsuit, sharky grey blouse, silver jewelry. Her thick dark hair was tied back in a careless knot. Her eyes shone and her body was shot through with the glow of sales gusto. Her waist was very long and narrow, and the pantsuit just confirmed what her suit under the overcoat had hinted at the previous week: she was achingly busty above and richly hippy below.

He had to pee, he was sure of it now. And he didn't want to pee in this big, empty place with Janine Foote just outside the door.

"All different styles of mantels," Candice exclaimed, re-joining the group, safe for now, not a victim of a murderous ghost. "Different styles of ceilings. They were painted, some of them?"

"Yes," Foote answered, "some had murals. See how these beams break the ceiling up into discreet areas? Each one might depict a different episode in the Bible, or a Greek or Roman myth."

"This was a bedroom?" Stunning inquired, peering into one of them. "For the family?" He said to Candice. "I couldn't fit my schlong in here. Shit." He turned to Foote. "Were people shorter back then, or what?"

Janine Foote just stared, then a light shiver seemed to bring her back to business. "Shall we take a look at the Gallery?"

She spun on her heel, and they followed her down the hall. She stopped at eight-foot ornate double doors and pulled them open with a flourish and a smile.

Mathis had to pee bad now, but he couldn't miss this: this was the room he couldn't wait for Stunning to see. It was the centerpiece of the second floor, a large room with a soaring ceiling and an entire southern-exposure wall of arched, mullioned windows.

"This has always been called the Gallery," said Foote, "because the Victorians hung paintings here, virtually floor to ceiling. It might also have been a music room. The owners during the 1970s turned it into a disco," she added with a cluck of her tongue.

Stunning leaned closer to Mathis to whisper, "We could fit the Venus de Milo in here."

Mathis nodded

"So, Mister Stunning," said Janine Foote, "what do you think?"

"What do I think?" He pretended to think, sneaking an arm around to pat Candice's bodacious fanny. "I'd like to buy it, is what I think." He burst into ringing laughter.

It was that simple to him, Mathis marveled. If God was in the details, Stunning was a devout atheist.

Candice whooped with joy and lunged at Stunning for a hug. Meanwhile, Mathis felt two emotions whirlpooling inside him: pride for having found the place and anxiety. He wasn't finished with this mansion that seemed to be...watching him. Now it was as if it was reaching for him and gathering him in with fingers of smoke. God, he had to pee.

"I see. You would like to put a bid in." Foote smiled briefly, brilliantly, at the buyer then at Mathis before returning to Stunning. "Well, this is very exciting," she declared with a girlish stamp of her foot and a theatrical shimmy. "Now, can we go over a few things?" She began to edge out the door. "I think downstairs is better light."

"I gotta go to the can," Mathis muttered, without thinking.

"There's one down the hall—right, right again,"

Janine said. "That takes you closer to the main staircase. We'll meet you downstairs."

"W-what?" he stuttered. Foote, Stunning and Candice were already walking away. In a second, he'd be alone in all this darkness. How'd this happen?

"Oh," Janine said, hopping back toward him, offering him a flashlight from her purse. "Take this."

"Uh, thanks." He couldn't tell them he didn't want to be alone up here. He couldn't point out that, in the movies, the guy who goes off on his own in a scary place always gets it.

It was too late anyway. Foote, Stunning and Candice were clopping down the hall. Mathis peered down the long dark passage, listening as their boots and shoes clonked on the stairs, as Stunning crowed about his healthy finances—his houses in Easthampton and Barcelona, his half-ownerships in two restaurants...

"...and I got this deal going for wallpaper, linens, paper napkins, maybe even designer lunchboxes. Bauhaus meets Mickey Mouse, very five minutes from now. I'll make zillions on it..." until their footfalls and voices grew faint.

And then there was silence.

Mathis took the right into a corridor, but how deep the corridor was he couldn't tell—whatever sunlight the French doors at the far end provided was smothered in inky blackness down here. Moving tentatively, apprehensively, dry lipped and jellylegged, he stepped down the hall. He switched on the flashlight and threw its crazy beam into one room, then another, then another, his need to pee growing along with a cold anxiety, being alone in all this darkness. Another room, and yet another. *Shit.* Now he stood on tiptoe and clenched his midsection—he really had to go, bad.

He turned around to check the rooms that had been on his left. Nothing, nothing...ah! A commode. He darted into the room and closed the door behind him.

Dancing with anxiety, he juggled the flashlight while trying to unzip. Finally, about to wet himself like a two-year-old, he rested the flashlight on the sink, took out Mister Happy, aimed...and nothing happened.

He waited, but no thought could coax urine out of that boy. He reached to the sink, conking his head on a wall lamp, and turned on the faucet. The pipes shuddered and let out such a piteous guttural moan he shut it off immediately.

He stood, he waited. The bathroom was relatively clean: black-and-white tiles on the floor, floral wallpaper in good repair. The low light of the flashlight gave it a nice, warm, romantic glow. And it was warm. So why this sudden pee-shyness?

He opened the door. The place was quiet...no sound at all from downstairs. Why so quiet? At the studio, you always knew if Stunning was around because you always heard him. But no voices, no footfalls. He should be able to hear something in this big, empty place.

He closed the door again. He took his dick in hand, lightly tickling it to get something going.

Janine Foote. The thought of her stirred his midsection, the little gates opened, and Mathis found himself pissing.

Mmmm, he hummed, a mellow counterpoint to the loud plashing of pee in pot. He let images of Janine float before him...

"It'd be a shame to move it, wouldn't it," Foote had said of the chandelier. Mathis envisioned her shaking her head no, slowly, first with her head, then her whole body, rocking no, no, no, like a little girl. Then biting her lip and fidgeting...

Looking at him from shyly lowered eyes, she begins to fuss with her grey blouse, unbuttoning, exposing the creamy swell of her bosom.

His cock, peeing, is also growing hard. Delicious.

Mathis sees Janine Foote giving the tour. When Stunning isn't looking, Foote pulls her pants down and, wiggling her bottom at Mathis, bends over further to expose her fine, downy pussy, offering herself to Mathis and using Candice for balance.

Delicious, randy—the peeing sensation was sending thrills through him, and now something else was sending a dangerous thrill through him. It was like a whisper in his ear, a wet smooch on the back of his neck—what is that? He was suddenly sure, convinced—and this was not a lie—someone was watching him…someone close…

He was so startled at this sudden, absolute conviction that he was not alone, the queasiness in his chest was so sudden and intense, he almost turned completely around to look who it was. But he stopped himself, keeping his pee stream on target. Doing this, he stumbled and hip-bumped the flashlight. It clattered to the floor and went out, plunging him into darkness.

"Shit."

He waited.

"Lance, cut it out." Who else would hide and watch him pee?

He waited. There was only silence, darkness, stillness. But that undeniable feeling...

"Candy, honest to Christ..."

He waited. His voice lost a little of its command strength, and it came out like a plea: "Janine...Mizz Foote... is that you...?

Mathis zipped up, taking care with that, not hurrying it, being sure, because a few years ago he'd zipped up in haste, snagged his provolone and, Jesus, that can hurt.

He bent down to look for the flashlight. Not finding it, he opened the bathroom door—slowly, wondering what would leap at him from the hall. But nothing did, and the hallway offered very little light.

Mathis found himself looking back behind him, listening closely, a queasy feeling in his chest. Was this actual fear, he wondered, fraidy-cat stuff, or sort of a fear-shame spiral—fear of being afraid of nothing?

He caught a movement, close—*Jesus!* Icicles of terror melted over his gut.

"Lance, goddammit, I'm gonna fuckin' kill you!"

Mathis hollered, and he found the flashlight and switched it on...at the mirror over the sink. He'd seen himself, moving in darkness.

He stepped into the hall and, walking quickly now, headed for the stairs. Still no sound from down there...except—yes, something, a woman's voice. His name. "Dan-iel...Dan-iel..."

Janine's voice, sing-songy and teasing

Mathis stopped, frozen. He waited. He licked his lips. The house was quieter than quiet now; it was anesthetic, cotton-white quiet. The pounding of blood in his chest and in his ears was the only sound.

Right?

No, there it was again: "Dan-iel...Dan-iel...meet me, Dan...make love to me...please...?"

The sound was distant, but not very. The sound was real. His cock stirred.

"J-Janine...?" he squeaked after a stunned, petrifying silence.

Nothing. Mathis stepped further into the passage. A squawk of wood underfoot seemed to saw at his heart—ignore, Dan.

He walked more quickly down the corridor to the intersection of the north hall. He looked in both directions: deserted.

A bedroom was here. Was she in there?

Mathis kicked open the door off the hallway and stepped back as it creaked slowly open. Nothing to see but darkness. Mathis spun about, looking all around. No one here.

Again he looked into the room, his head leaning

into it, but his pounding heart and icy fear preventing him from entering. He peered into that darkness hard, while the house remained silent and still, and he was sure there was something in there. He played his flashlight into the desolate old dormitory bedroom, once home to the indolent children of industrialist Janeway, then Victorian-era schoolgirls, then military cadets. He stepped just into the edge of darkness and kicked idly at some crockery on the floor. He turned back to the doorway and peered back into that frightful room: empty. No one here, but there had been someone. Someone close.

"Miss Foote?" he called out. It must have been her. "Hello?"

Not sure where the stairs were anymore, he decided to go back the way he'd come. He continued cautiously along the dark passage—not many steps but it seemed a long time—feeling his way, darkness, darkness, but something here, something with him. And something else...different.

Cold nails of fear pierced his chest, his gut, as he realized there was a low, golden light emanating from the bathroom. But there'd been no bulb in that light fixture. And he had his flashlight in hand.

A sheen of sweat sprang to his forehead, tendrils of dread clanged in his chest; and at the same time his hard-on would not stop growing, aching and tingling all at once.

He stepped slowly toward the golden bathroom light. It was like waking after a deep nap, when there is a hum in the ears and time seems elastic, noises are hushed one moment and loud the next, time skips by then slows.

As he drew closer, he felt a presence. He knew she was near. Mathis could now drink in the delicious scent of her from all that hair, and some mysterious deposits of perfume.

He looked into the bathroom.

Janine stood at the sink, her back to him. She'd placed her flashlight on the toilet tank, its light muffled by the wall, the light just enough to see—it was real, she was there. He could see her reflection in the mirror. She was watching him. He had to shift and tug at his pants, because his boner was laboring like Hercules to escape.

In the mirror, she watched him approach her. He let his hands rest on her shoulders...she was real. She was here. She was different: Proper Janine emitted Electra moans of pure unbridled lust as she reached an arm around to the back of his head and her hips ground into him. He kissed her neck, nestled his nose in her fragrant hair. My God, he came to understand, I am holding Janine Foote's fine boob in my hand.

She turned and they kissed—a nipping, nibbling, searching, tongue-tennis kind of kiss. Under it, she sighed and huffed and thrust her hip into his crotch. She surged against his touch, breathing hard, moaning musically, hungrily. Button, button, button, and there is her bounteous cleavage and her vanilla smell and his nose was between those fine breasts and he was sure he could pitch a tent in there live in there...

Until she beckoned him with a peevish moan and a wiggle of her hips, and he headed south. Kneeling, he undid her silver belt and removed her pants. She cooed, encouraging him, while he sighed happily, seeing the purple panties that clung so vigorously to the slopes of her ass and the vortex of her crotch. He nuzzled the satiny fabric a moment before he slowly peeled them down over the swell of her hips, until all her scents washed over him.

She bent at the waist, offering her cunt lips to him, and he lapped at them. He stuck his long, nimble tongue deep inside her then flicked it up to her button, and she reached back and pushed his face in there, deeper.

He kept at this for a long, bewitching time. He wanted to be nowhere but in her quim. His tongue never grew tired, ever, and it had a finely tuned motor that increased the rhythm by degrees until her trembling and orgasmic bucking might wake the ghosts in this place.

Janine trembled all over, like every muscle had gotten a jump-start. She cried out, half-sob, half-guffaw; and as she came her juices grew just a degree colder. Her shuddering stopped. There may have been a moment's pause, Mathis couldn't be sure. She whirled and sat heavily on the toilet seat, all tousled and blushing. Still wearing her purple bra and garters, with clouds of hair over her face, she gestured for him to come to her.

Mathis stood. Foote cocked her head, and her dark hair tumbled over her shoulders; but her eyes glittered just enough in the low light to tell him: monkey love, dirty, sweaty, nasty love. She squeezed her arms together, and her cleavage was deep enough to swallow the *Titanic*.

He stood over her. With a randy eye on his, she pressed her hand into his crotch. Breath quickening, she unzipped him and pulled his pants down to his knees. Seeing the dimensions of the bulge in his underpants she moaned and pressed her face to it. Panting more quickly now, flailing her head from side to side, she mouthed his boner through the fabric then pulled his underpants down and ran her fingers along his rigid cock.

She took his dick in her mouth with a slobbery sighing moan; and in a matter of seconds she was sucking, he was thrusting, her head was bobbing, fingers cupping his nuts, he could see the head of his dick billowing her cheek, in, out, in, out. She took it deeper and deeper as he rocked, fucking her mouth. His slick cock drilled and drilled her spitty cheeks and marauding tongue. With a pop and an exultant breath she released him. She ran her fingers up and down his aching rod, teased it with light fingers, then tugged with passion and need as they performed a dirty mambo in that bathroom—he hoisted his leg up high and on the porcelain while she leaned back to receive his dick in between her tits from above. He slid his eager prick down her neck and breast, down further into that warm pocket, slowly at first, but it was so smooth and warm, that it was all he needed until there was more; she was reaching up and gripping the base of his cock, creating delirious tingles there and now she was licking his balls, lightly, artfully, now she was taking first one in her mouth then the other in her mouth and now she was humming a fine tune while his cock was sliding in and out between those massive jugs.

"I wanna fuck your pussy, let me fuck your pussy," he said, reaching down into that moist thatch, feeling the heaving and warmth above the toilet water, and she let his balls go long enough to splutter and pant in staggered gusts, "Come on, my tits, come on, my tits and my face." And she meant it, because she ringed the base of his cock with her fingers just so and hummered his balls and nosed his asshole so that a spark crackled from the tip of his dick and the storm in his midsection whirled, a bolt flew, Mathis was crying out "God!" and "Ah!" and "Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!" like you're supposed to with a crazy lady who's urging "Yeah, yeah, oh, yeah," as he splurted his jizz into her cleavage, over her bosom, onto her face, into her mouth.

She cooed quietly and her eyes rolled as his spew slowly dribbled down her face and chest. They remained that way as their breathing slowed, slowed. Finally, he swung his leg to the floor, his knees gave way and he sat slowly on the tiles.

They just smiled at each other, puffing quietly, regaining their breath.

"I'm so glad you called me up here," she finally said, taking some of his fluid on her finger and licking it.

Mathis nodded, was about to say, "Me, too," when it hit him. The realization. What she was saying.

"We wondered what happened to you. Your Mister Stunning couldn't wait any longer, so...then I hear this 'Ja-neeen.'" Foote sang in a childish cadence. "'Ja-neen, meet me in the bathroom...come to me...'" She smiled at him. "You scared me, you bastard."

Dan Mathis's ragged breathing just sort of stopped altogether for a second as words galloped to his mouth but weren't spoken. Me? Call you? I didn't...I thought you called me...you did call me. Didn't you? No?

Then who did call me?

"What's the matter?" she asked him, pulling on her blouse. "You don't look so good."

CHAPTER THREE

athis fell into a trance, being on hold for a good five minutes. So, when Stunning finally picked up the phone, it startled him.

"Hey, Danny-boy! What happened to you yesterday? You fall in or something? Why didn't you come down to say goodbye? Candice's feelings were almost hurt for half-a-sec."

"Listen. You serious about buying that place?"

"Definitely. Bennett's submitting the bid this morning. Why?"

"If you buy the place, you're going to need a caretaker."

"I guess."

"And someone to oversee the renovation."

"Yeah."

"I want the job. I want to live there. Guard the place."

For a few triumphant seconds, Lance Stunning was speechless. "Danny...why?" he said at last. "All alone in that dump? All alone in come-to-daddy country? You're a man of the city, boy."

"Lance, first of all, I'm reliable and you know you can trust me. I can handle the paperwork, I can handle the security end. Plus, I've got the eye for detail and, hell, I know the language, too—I can talk to the tradespeople as well as the creative end, the interior designers, the architects, all those people."

"Yeah, sure, but...wait a minute. This have anything to do with that agent, that Foote woman?
"No."

"Yeah, 'cuz she's fine. Shit, is that why you didn't come downstairs? Waitin' for me to leave? Did you do her? You did! I know you did. Cool. Was she good?"

"I'll be back in the city tonight. Just tell me you'll think about it."

"I am thinking about it. Sproutin' some wood, too."

And that's how it happened. Like dominoes, like the house calling to him: In mid-February, after much wrangling, many inspections, Stunning's final bid was accepted. They closed in early April. By the third week of that month, Dan Mathis had sublet his apartment on West 21st Street and moved all his belongings up to the Janeway Institute, Boyle's Falls, New York.

Dan Mathis's first night in the Institute was very interesting, very exciting. He was just getting unpacked and settled, nibbling on pizza he'd picked up in town, when all of a sudden—it should not have been sudden, but it was, it was—darkness fell, and he

was alone on that twelve acres, in that huge twenty-six-room house.

The darkness, inky-thick, seemed to flood the house, like one of the plagues of Egypt. Mathis hurried through his rooms, switching on every lamp he'd brought. Then he sat in his rocking chair and waited. He considered turning on the TV, for company, then decided no. He wanted all his senses trained.

At first the house and grounds were quiet. Then, little by little, not so quiet. From near and far in that vast, black place: the creaks and groans of wood, the rustling of leaves, the hoots and chitters of night creatures, wind sighing through the eaves and branches tapping the boards and windows...all of it like the murmur and clatter of the restless dead. Far away, there came the dragon-breath rush of the furnace in the basement. Then, the clanging of the heat pipes. Mathis knew the sound—it was quite familiar from his New York apartment—but still he found he needed to check the perimeter; he ventured out into the hallway, where the light from his lamps was swallowed by the darkness.

As he was returning to his rocking chair, there came a sound so shockingly close, loud and sudden, it was like a hammering on his aorta. Mathis felt a brief thrill of terror, his heart squeezing in his chest, an electric drizzle in his gut. But it was only the radiator in his room clanging to life.

Mathis smiled, realized he was clutching his heart like some old biddy.

The undead? Ghosts and specters? Bring 'em on. I am Mathis the Slayer.

He waited for it to get worse. He sat in his rocking chair, waiting, watching.

Nothing happened.

He went to bed, burrowing under his covers, vulnerable as a baby chick, and waited for the ghost that had summoned him and Janine Foote that day, months ago, broad daylight...waited for it to come get him, do whatever it is ghosts do. *That ghost, any ghost...come and get me*.

He fell asleep with no trouble at all.

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That was as exciting and interesting as it got. The next night was less exciting. All in all, it took forty hours for the Institute to become about the dullest goddamn place he'd ever been outside of school assembly.

Soon enough, the days became routine, also. The contractor canceled his appointment, rescheduled then canceled again. Finding out whether the fucker was going to show up turned out to be all the suspense the place provided. Then Stunning fired the contractor.

Mathis lay awake on the third night and thought: big mistake, Dan. Ninety-four miles from here, New York City was humming; it was rocking. Millions of people shaping careers, dining, concert-going, nightclubbing, fucking—millions of them, stacked on top of each other in those mountainous, glittering buildings.

Meanwhile, he waited for this bogus haunted

house to show him something.

Loser.

He had moved into the former caretaker's quarters, located at the back of the main part of the house. The sitting room was expansive and handsome, with tenfoot ceilings and ornate molding at the baseboards and ceiling joist. Tudor windows offered a view of the woods out back. Just off the sitting room to the left was his bathroom and, through a door on the other side, his bedroom. The door to the right of his sitting room led to a kitchenette and storage room. The quarters could be closed off from the rest of the house, so Mathis and his predecessors—a long line of bored-to-tears caretakers, no doubt—could crank the heat up.

Mathis had put up some curtains and cleaned the rooms thoroughly with broom, ammonia and water. Then he'd moved his stuff out of storage in New York and had it shipped up to the Institute. He supplemented it with some new purchases, and in a matter of days he was all set up: bedroom furniture, new computer, rocking chair, couch, big-screen TV, DVD player, videogame machine, stereo, CDs and books. There were lots of lamps, he'd made sure of that—floor lamps and table lamps of all descriptions, with a ten-year supply of bulbs. He'd also brought his woodworking tools, bicycle, tennis stuff, baseball stuff—he was happy to see his storage area a heaping mess from Day One.

A week, two weeks went by, and not one creepy thing happened to him. The place put the natural back in supernatural. By day he got on his cell phone and made appointments with the contractors bidding for the job. He took the candidates on tours. He reached out to local electricians and craftspeople. He shopped for supplies in the Price Chopper supermarket in Boyle's Falls. He stayed in touch with the office and helped Basil untangle Stunning's affairs. He set up a half-assed court in the largest dorm room with the highest ceiling and whacked tennis balls. He set up his telescope in the attic and scrutinized the river traffic.

He called Janine Foote, offered to buy her dinner.

"I don't think that would be a good idea," she'd said.

"Gossip?"

"Gossip, yes. I hate to *think* how much younger you are. And what happened...that day...that shouldn't have...not that I didn't...but I'm not the kind of woman who...goodbye, Daniel."

Click. That was his sex life. That, and drinks most nights at the Bar-Cocktails where the chunky, jeans-clad, beer-quaffing women stayed away from him like he was a herpes tree.

He tried to bait the ghosts by taking strolls down the halls of his borrowed possession. Flashlight in hand, he sought the most remote areas in the house. He picked his way from room to room, running his hand over the surfaces, looking in niches and closets and in every container, in secret corners that furniture might have once concealed, looking for forgotten knickknacks stuffed into unlikely places. He did find some crudely carved initials and love pairings and graffiti. *Edward* + *Nell. Crush the Hun. Victorious, the Red Stockings. I love Emmett.* In the basement boiler room he found scatterings of books and pamphlets and torn pages of inmates or caretakers of days past. *Nurse Nellie's Naughties. Bumps & Grinds. Photoplay. Argosy.* He would sit in the rooms or the hallways, musing for half an hour or more in silence, the dust motes spinning in air like a mini-universe, with minipoets musing to the same futile end.

Just to be outside, just to feel useful, he started clearing the weeds in the back of the house. They poked up from every step, between every tile and stone in the veranda and surged in waves from the adjacent grounds. The ground was still cold and stubborn, but he went at it with zeal. He got sweaty and dirty and it felt great. He intended to clear a path to the gazebo, maybe restore it.

It was early May. Everywhere he looked was color, and the air he sniffed was ambrosial.

If he had no appointments at the house, he might spend the day driving along the river valley. Up and down the steep green hills and along the glistening Hudson he drove, admiring the stately millionaire homes as well as the dilapidated barns and farmhouses.

He'd always enjoyed being alone; now he reveled in it. The people he did meet in town, on the phone, were uncomplicated. His New York yearnings faded. In his mind he bid farewell to the tragically hip and slinky of Manhattan, farewell to the dinner parties where the self-proclaimed fabulous, charismatic and intellectual talked about television. Farewell to the club kids who prattled on about all the fabulous, creative things they were doing when all they were really doing was going to clubs.

He liked the quiet of the country. He felt that he was at a pivotal time in his life, and this seemed like the right place to navigate it.

So, of course, just as he was achieving a sort of peace, it was shattered.

What alerted him was Oxygen.

Oxygen was a TV channel for women—talk shows about women's issues, shows about exercise and health, reruns of *Xena: Warrior Princess...*girlie stuff. Mathis had never watched it. He would never leave his TV on that channel.

But one night when he switched on his TV, it was on the Oxygen channel. He thought nothing of it. When it happened again the very next night when it should have been on a sports channel because he made sure the night before, when he turned on the TV and found an episode of *Kate & Allie*, a wave of nausea twisted his gut, and he broke out in a chilly sweat.

It was the third week of May. He'd been in the house for a month, long enough to have achieved a routine of sorts. He was in a position to notice little things. And the Oxygen channel tweaked his antennae. So, he began to observe more closely. And it didn't take a genius—something was wrong.

Different. Off.

One day it was his CDs, re-arranged; on top of the pile was the CD his mom gave him for Christmas, *Cascading Pianos*. Please. Not even out of its wrapper. The next day, he found his videogame controller set control-side-down; only an idiot would risk damaging the mechanism so needlessly. The same day, a newspaper he'd read weeks earlier he found on top of that day's.

Jesus, his beer. In Dan Mathis's refrigerator, beer belonged in the back, where it's coldest. Someone, something, had moved a can up front, right next to the milk.

Next to the milk.

He actually spun around to see if there was anyone. He listened for any sound. Needles of fear raced through him. Deep, hot beads of sweat sprang to his forehead. It was creepy. Intimate and creepy.

He went outside to whack some weeds, and it had a calming effect. He became sure this Oxygen channel-beer/milk phenomenon was just nerves. It was the isolation, the responsibility, it was nothing.

He came inside and turned on the radio. What he heard should have been rock 'n' roll, but at the sound of "all news all the time" Dan Mathis almost crapped.

There was a ghost in the house. He was rooming with a spectral channel-switching, beer-shifting, videogame-trashing asshole.

Dan Mathis was sure he was going mad. He felt so far from New York, far from himself, too. He had thought he was ready for ghosts. That was why he came to live here. But he wasn't ready, not at all.

Then came the phantom blowjob. That changed everything.

It was the first week of June. Since the Oxygen channel incident, he hadn't slept well. He'd wake up four and five times during the night, each time having trouble getting back to sleep, irritated by the same tumbling thoughts of what might be out there in the dark. But this particular Tuesday night he must have slept, because he had the sensation of someone, something, standing over his bed, watching him. And he had a sleepy-wakey moment to realize, This is the classic dream. Psychologists say it's common for people to dream that something is standing over them, observing. In the ancient world people dreamt of demons, nowadays it's space aliens. Mathis sleepy-smiled. They'll take me up in a beam of light, lay me on a misty operating table and remove my spleen.

But the space alien turned out to be Candice. She sat next to him. She took his hand. She was in a violet ball gown with intricate lace on the shoulder straps and along the bosom, which was oh-so-low-cut. Her boobs were enormous, and smooth as vanilla pudding. Her hair was done up in bows and scrunchies. She looked fine. She was his date.

"Can't we dance now?" she asked him again and again until he consented to be pulled to his feet. The dance floor was crowded. They took their place. He took her in his arms, awkwardly at first—those enormous boobs, what are you supposed to do about those? But she pulled him close. The warmth of her, the smell of her, the contour of her wherever he put

his hands—she put him in such a swoon. They rotated, slow, close, under the revolving pinpoints of a disco ball. Holy shit, the music. Hall & Oates, the crappiest stuff imaginable, blared from the sound system.

His eyes adjusted enough to realize the guy dancing next to him, the smelly, sweaty guy bumping into him, was Gil Abadanza. The girl dancing with her eyes shut was Ellie Ann Borkanski, in the arms of Tommy Flanagan. "Budman" Palapchik was acting like a goon over in the corner. Damn if little Danny Math wasn't at his junior prom. And Candice, a one-time centerfold, a former lingerie model, was his date.

He held her, had his arms around that slender waist, could look all he wanted down the massive, fathoms-deep cleavage of her shiny violet dress.

"You wanna make out?" she asked him shyly. "Right here," she whispered. "No one will see."

She was right; it was a dance floor full of people in love, with only eyes for each other. He had a thought: *But aren't you going out with Ted Stefanski?* he asked her, because Ted could kick his ass, no sweat.

"Okay, yeah, but Ted isn't here. I'm with you now. And I've wanted to do it with you for a long time."

The faces of his high school classmates were drifting by, the girls draped over the boys. Candice kissed him, her lips so moist and fitting, and a flood of heat, of need, of frenzied puffing lust flowed like syrup from her kiss down his throat. He kissed her neck, so impossibly warm, and rested his cheek on her bosom. The softness and warmth tucked him in

for the night, on his feet. His cheeks burrowed into those bouncy pillow-girls.

Because he could, because she really wanted him to, he slowly, deftly pulled her dress down and they came free, golden melons tipped with candy. He wasn't sure, but he felt people beginning to stare as he hefted Candy's enormous jugs in his palms, nuzzled them, put his nose in there and shook it. Yup. There was Betty Ann Garner, the class president, in the arms of Ted Krimm, both scowling at him and lovely Candice. He kissed Candy's nipples, flicked his tongue over them, held them between his teeth and they grew taut. Clusters of kids watched, and Mister Simons the chem teacher tut-tutted from the sidelines.

"I wanna be your fuckdoll," she whispered. I don't think we should get naked, Candy, he advised her. We'll get tossed out of the dance.

"I'll touch your cock, Danny," she whispered, almost desperately. "Please, please, touch my pussy," she panted. "I gotta have that, you gotta git my clit."

Mathis reached his hand under her dress. "Oh, yes," she whispered, like a plea. She rubbed her thigh against his dick, dug it, revolved it. When he groaned with pleasure, her panting grew faster, moister, more hungry. She cupped her hands around his dick, underneath his best go-to-prom pants and began rubbing, digging in rhythm.

"Oh," she sobbed. "Oh."

His hand slid over that smooth, warm leg, up along the dramatic slope of her hip. How do girls get so soft, why do they smell like paradise, he wondered, and how can she be sucking my cock when we're dancing like

this in front of the whole school?

He pulled her closer. He put his hand between her legs. Her pubes were sopping wet, the moistness there steaming up through her panties, and her sigh had a quiet whoop to it that told him *yeah*, *more*, *put your finger in her puss*. Her breath was coming quickly in his ear now, her hands working his hard dick through his pants. He had a boner so stout and hard he could have swatted a ball out of Fenway with it, and she was squeezing it perfectly through the fabric, pinching the head just so, rubbing and squeezing it just so that the sensation, that come-tingle, was growing. He could hear the little peeps and moans and slobbers as she sucked him, he could see her suck him, suck him...

Just as he started to come, Mathis woke up most of the way, the remnants of the dream clinging, the mystery of how a woman could give him a stand-up hand job and suck him off at the same time lost, lost, as he shot his load, crying out "Awww, awww, God, awww," not quite drowning the sound of the stroking and sucking, the sound of a woman taking it all in her mouth. It was so real, the sensation of cheeks, saliva, tongue, so real...the sensation of someone standing over his bed, so real...

His breath slowed, his muscles relaxed. "Damn," he sighed. "Jesus. God. Wow."

Was he asleep or awake? Awake, obviously. Asking the question answered it.

The sensation of someone standing over his bed. He was awake now. Shouldn't that...sort of...go away?

Mathis slowly, slowly, reached down. He didn't know how he knew, he just knew.

He felt his abdomen. It was dry. His dick still had some come on it, but now he slapped the bed with both hands and felt with his palms. The sheets were dry. He groped his hip, his belly, his legs. Dry. The ceilings were eleven feet, so let's not kid ourselves. There was no come. His come was gone.

"Holy shit!"

He sat up in bed.

The house was tomb quiet. No wood creaks or radiator hiss, no zephyrs of wind, tapping of tree branches, rustles, hoots or barks from outside. In this silence, his brain refused to move ahead, or retreat. Refused to consider what it meant that there was no jizz. Wondered if it had been just a dream, an illusion of orgasm, but didn't decide one way or the other.

He didn't know how long he sat in the still night, with his still brain. It was quiet inside his skull and outside.

Which is why he was able to hear the sound.

Distinctly. The sound of an object placed on the floor, or maybe a step. And the rustle of fabric, very slight. A whisper of fabric. He tried to ignore it, pretend it away, let his still brain just sort of file it away and forget it. But then, there it came again. A step.

Fear squirreled through him. Then, something else. Not anger. Resolve.

The time had come.

He slid out of bed, reached under his bed for the

baseball bat he kept there, and to the day table for his flashlight and cell phone. He pulled on a pair of gym shorts and tucked the phone in the pocket, in case he had to call the police.

He crossed his room. His bedroom door was open. Just outside it, the short passage to the front hall was dark. Pitch black and menacing.

He switched on the flashlight. He took three little baby steps through the doorway, into that passage, and called out in a voice he was ashamed of later, "Hello? Anyone there?" The fear squeezed his heart and sent acid pooling in his stomach.

He stopped, listened. Nothing.

He crossed the passage into the front hall, and before he was set he heard it—oh, Jesus, he heard it again. Footsteps, a rustle of fabric from...where? Close. So close there was no mistake. He raked the pitch-black hall with his flashlight, the light creating monstrous shapes with all the woodwork.

But there was nothing, no one, here. He played his light over the front staircase. Nothing there. Slide-stepping forward, he went to the foyer, to the front door. He tried the door. Locked tight. His mouth was dry, his heart crazy with terror.

He waited. There was no sound, but there was a presence. He was sure of it.

Stepping slowly now, and quietly, too, though he couldn't think why *he* needed to be quiet, he approached the parlor. The closer he got, the louder the pounding in his ears, the machinery of himself, thudding and clanking. He stepped inside. He played

the light beam around the room. The darkness and the woodwork and the harshness of his flashlight created gargoylish intruders and phantoms out of every contour, corner, joist and shadow.

"Hello?"

Nothing.

There was a moment's silence and then suddenly—his heart flash-froze—he heard steps, running, and rushing fabric, the sound receding behind him; and he turned, feeling such a wrench in his gut, like free-falling. He shouted, "Stop!" trying to muster some menace into his quivering voice.

The phantom was running down the hall, toward the east wing. His flashlight found nothing, but it was a wide hall, and a long one, and running down it, away from him, was a goddamn ghost. No question now. He started after it, the rustle and their footsteps echoing in the vast halls.

Running caused his lamplight to bounce crazily in the dark house. He couldn't see, but he could hear, and he knew he was on top of the intruder. The sound was that close.

The sound of steps and fabric stopped. It just stopped. He, too, stopped, with the bat upraised.

He played the flashlight all around, up and down. There was no one here.

Silence, except for his own gasping breaths.

Mathis waited, listened. Nothing. No steps, no rustling fabric. For a long time he listened. Nothing.

Wait, something. His flashlight picked up a glint of color on the floor. He bent down, reached out with sweaty fingers.

What they found was a scrap of fabric, forest green in color, some kind of silk with a bit of lace along its edge. It had caught on a nail.

Silk. Lace. This did not belong to any of the carpenters or plumbers.

He looked around, his overworked heart pounding against his chest wall. Then, when he returned his attention to the fabric, when he opened his palm, it was gone. He looked on the floor, brushed at his clothes. It had disappeared.

For that sick, creepy moment, Mathis almost fainted, almost puked. But he shook it off. He brandished the baseball bat and spun about, eyes upturned. He gave a shout, wanting it to be like the war cry of a barbarian. But it was tentative, high-pitched and yodely—"Yeah, and stay away from my TV!"—and was quickly drowned by the silence and darkness of the east wing of the old dark house, vast and alone on its wooded acres.

What to do? Quit the job? Call the police? Call an exorcist? Stunning?

He lunged for the phone.

"Lance."

"Jesus, D.M. What time is it?"

"I dunno. Listen —"

"Guess who just left? The daughter of that heiress, the one from Greenwich. You won't believe how I finally nailed her. I met her mom, see, and—"

"Lance, there's this ghost—"

"Bennett said I should be nice to her, the mother, I

mean, like, flirt with her, 'cuz there was a good chance she'd buy at least five pieces, the big ones, the metal sculptures. So I met her. Bottom line? I wouldn't fuck her with *your* dick. But her daughter..."

"Lance, your place is haunted."

"I got her daughter to come up here tonight, make the beast with two backs as a condition for sale. No lie. I say to her, do the math, baby. Subtract your clothes. Divide your legs, know what I'm saying?"

"I mean it. We got ghosts."

"Cut the shit."

"I only mention it because of the insurance. Are you covered if one of your carpenters goes Beelzebub and starts slaughtering his crew with a nail gun?"

"D.M., do I have to come up there?"

"Okay, never mind. You're right. I'm probably..."

Mathis felt better already. It was nothing. And even if it was something, it was nothing he couldn't handle.

Was this making any sense? Quick, change the subject. "I didn't get my paycheck this week. Again."

"Okay, I'll see to it. Basil's handling the payroll."

"Boss, Basil's dyslexic."

"Dan, I'll take care of it."

"Good. Item three..."

"Shit, man, it's one a.m."

"When're you gonna hire a contractor, Lance?"

"I did."

"Which one?"

"Fallon."

Mathis groaned. "What's'a matter?" "He's a snooze."

"Yeah, but I liked his ideas and Bennett liked his bid. He wants to take out some walls. That upstairs does not flow. A gallery's gotta breathe, gotta flow. We're drafting epiphanies, Danny boy. We are creating rat mazes, where our little guests will be led, by the nose, to truth."

"But, Lance, I think on planet earth you need permits to turn a residence into a commercial space."

"Don't worry about it."

After the phone call, Mathis could not sleep. He was dozing in his chair when Fallon arrived around ten a.m. The contractor's arrival kicked off a series of events that helped Mathis forget the ghost for a while.

Fallon was a slender man in his fifties with white hair down to his shoulders, wire-rim glasses and a walrus-y moustache. He wore a denim-and-brownleather ensemble, and spoke in a velvet-soft, sing-song-ding-dong voice like the stage patter of a coffeehouse troubadour. That voice was what guided Mathis through the foggy curtain of his sleeplessness during the four-hour tour of the Institute.

Fallon measured areas, tapped surfaces, shone his penlight in corners, read meters, fondled wires, groped pipes, scraped ceilings. He went into the crawlspace above the attic and for half an hour crouched Indian-style and peered into the void. All the while he mumbled and took notes, and asked questions of Mathis that seemed to come from the

rubbery far end of deep anesthesia: The flues would have to be cleaned; electrical and plumbing, he had no idea how much, he'd have to bid that out, sorry. Radiators are in good shape, he didn't think they'd have to make any structural changes to accommodate that. Bathrooms? Talk to your boss, see what he wants. Insulation?

"I recommend we put in a vapor-proof wall. They've been lucky so far, they sealed it with a bituminous compound, a good one, an early one, but you need that new wall in there."

Mathis knew his time alone in the Institute was over. It was as if Fallon were opening up his toolbox and turning it upside down; with a deafening metallic crash, out would spill an army of glaziers, painters, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, sheetrockers, masons and all their tools and equipment.

"We'll have to blast-clean the limestone. You got some rotted posts and sills and tenons. I'll have to take a crew in here, jack up the roof, replace 'em. You may want to consider structural iron. Let's see...cleaned, wood-treated, rodents and insects exterminated, plumbing repaired, electrical brought up to code, radon-tested..."

And that's what happened. Within days, A.W. Fallon got a fat check from Stunning Enterprises, Inc. Shortly thereafter, a crew arrived and began work. In no time, that trickle of workmen became a flood. Landscapers trooped out behind the house with a backhoe, knocked down the outlying buildings and began to clear the land immediately around the

house. Roofers began to drape portions of the house prior to blast-cleaning the limestone. Teams of renovation specialists came in to confer with Fallon, and then to drop off materials and tools.

"The parquet floors will need to be sanded, treated, sealed. They're spline-jointed, so we don't need to be relaying the floor. Very little warp, good shape. We can seal it from beneath, a non-mineral material I've used before, good stuff. You have some warping, first and second floors, we can take the boards up, replace them but not with anything here. I looked up in the attic, there's nothing, so they'll have to be custom-made, special-ordered, stained, finished. I'll look into it.

"The main hall banister will have to be resanded. In fact, much of the woodwork in the main hall will have to be sanded, the dents repaired, oiled, treated, stained..."

By the third week of June, the renovation was in full progress. Mathis enjoyed the workmen, their skills, their stories, their vulgar bullshit about money, women and sports. He loved the smell of new wood, the sound of tools pounding, lumber slamming to floor, scraping, sawing and drilling. Every couple of weeks, he had a new obstacle course to navigate: one week it was the cables, ducts, flexible conduits and junction boxes left by the electrician, the next it was massive panels of sheetrock or sacks of mixing compounds or bundles of two-by-four.

"The marble floors will have to be treated, too. That's no big deal, we have a special emulsion and soft brush procedure. We'll be scraping down the paint, but carefully, looking for different wood surfaces that might have been employed over the years. Looking for stencil-work. If it's quality, it might retain some historical value. Re-plastering only in spots, because some of the work is good. Getting rid of some of the knotty pine used in the botched restoration. Baseboards, of course. Wainscoting."

During the day, his senses were assaulted: All that noise, all that milling activity, the fumes and dust, a half-dozen radios blaring, the drills, the sanders, the hammers, the commands and curses and banter—it only made the silence and darkness of his evenings all the more stark.

Because at the end of every day, the last crew left. The door was shut. And he was left with the silence, and his thoughts, which were not pretty.

Now that the renovation was underway, the caretaker had to do a nightly walk-through of the entire house. He had to secure the windows and doors, but also ensure that the power equipment was shut down, electrical outlets clear, water pipes tight and so on. Of course, there were work lights running at night—the insurance demanded it. But the lights didn't help with the silence, the vastness. The lights didn't prevent him from hearing steps and fabric, though the sounds only existed in his head. And the lights couldn't pretty up his thoughts, which conjured images of the phantom that had visited him: a drooling, fish-eyed, snaggle-toothed troglodyte in a woman's dress, waiting for him with a carving knife

clutched in its shit-stained hands. So he didn't sleep too well. For weeks this went on.

Eventually, of course, the sleeplessness and fear made him cranky. So, late in June he did something crass and stupid. And that's what summoned the ghost once more.

CHAPTER FOUR

.W. Fallon saw to it that the crews were paid, the materials purchased and shipped; but it was Mathis who was responsible for incidental and unexpected expenses. He paid these out of the account Stunning had set up. He tried to leave enough in the account to help with his own expenses, to make up for the fact that his paychecks were falling further and further behind. But with Basil the Bonehead handling the deposits, the account was soon depleted, and Mathis's paychecks were weeks in arrears.

He was broke. He was pissed. He was sleepless.

He was passing the dining room in this bleary state one fine spring day, and he clapped eyes on the chandelier. He remembered a sign in a shop window in town: "Crystals Bought and Sold." He had glimpsed the proprietor of the crystal shop. She was a shapely woman in her thirties or early forties, with great tumbles of greying, curly hair and lustrous hazel eyes.

That crystal woman, he figured her to have a nymphomaniacal streak. The mystically minded people he'd known in New York were needy as geeks. He could see him and the crystal woman together, examining the crystals, close, a spell coming over them both, and then behind the counter, hiking up her skirts, pulling down her undies, reaching around to cup her giant, milky breasts shuddering with passion, and taking her from behind, moving in rhythm in the store, her clutching the counter, him pumping like a monkey...

There were no workmen around; not that it mattered. He grabbed a step stool and approached the chandelier. He marveled again the way the prisms caught the rays of sunlight slanting through the windows and ignited the room in an aurora borealis. It was magical, and a shame that Stunning had forced him into this position. He would take three of the middle tier of crystals—they wouldn't be missed much; three out of, how many? Ninety on the top tier, maybe sixty in the middle, another thirty in the lower?

Fuck it. Mathis reached out to unhook his three crystals. And as he did so, he felt a slap on the back of his hand.

Instantly, every pore of his body broke sweat, and a sickly wave gurgled through his innards. It was the ghost. And it was close.

Mathis found himself turning, and turning again, trying to—what? Face it? Flee it?

"Jesus Jones, it's full daylight!" he said aloud, now working desperately to unhook the third crystal. "Aren't there rules about darkness, lightning storms, or—fuck! Ouch!"

He'd felt a pinch.

After a stunned moment, which he spent gawking stupidly at the spot on his arm where he'd felt it, he looked up, all around.

"Who are you?" he shouted. "What do you want?" "Danny?" came a voice that practically gave him a stroke.

He spun. It was Fallon in the doorway. "Danny, you okay?"

"Yeah, fine, great, awesome." Mathis tucked the crystals into his pocket and backed out of the room, around Fallon.—Maybe it was heat from a ray of sun through the windows, a muscle twitch, nerves. He knew that was not so, knew it was a goddamn pinch, and wondered, not for the first time, What is with this damn place?

He hurried down the hall toward the front door, panic-stricken and sprinting like a decathlete. He started to throw on his jacket when full in his ear came a woman's voice, whispering to him from nowhere.

"Don't leave," she implored him.

It was just a whisper, but it blasted through him like a cannon shot because there was no one around, no woman, anyway, and this gentle voice was right in his ear.

Mathis ran directly into the door, banging his head, hard. Feeling a warm trickle of blood on his forehead, gibbering with fear, he scrabbled for the doorknob.

Again, a whisper, right in his ear, no one there: "Don't be frightened, Daniel."

Out the door went Dan Mathis, slamming it shut behind him. The voice in his ear was silenced, as if by a switch, and he was in his car, kicking up gravel, gone.

In his days at Columbia, then in SoHo and Greenwich Village, Dan Mathis had met many people who claimed to have spiritual credentials. He had experienced the drug-fueled, wee-hour activities of these self-proclaimed psychics: Tarot, seances, talking in tongues, goth rock, circles, runes, invocations.

Dan Mathis also had a sense of wonder. His mind was wide open, a draft was blowing, he could catch his death. Daniel Mathis was open to possibility.

But this was real enough to frighten him down to his socks.

He'd parked off the square in town, and now he sat in it and tried to quiet his nerves, which were tight and tangled like Dad's Christmas lights.

Was he in danger in that house? Hard to say. The fabric, the woman's voice—that could be a ruse by something demonic and horrible. It could all be a trick. Was he to be lured into an accident where he impaled himself on a cable? Was the house going to seduce him, steal his soul and leave it to languish for all eternity in the upstairs bathroom?

And even if the ghost is a woman, does this mean I'm any less scared?

So what to do? Quit? Go back to New York? That was distasteful. How would he explain it? What if Stunning took him at his word, and discovered the

mysterious goings-on at the mansion? Mathis would be out so fast his head would spin like that kid's in *The Exorcist*, while Stunning would go on *60 Minutes*. In the TV movie, Stunning would be played by Viggo Mortensen, Mathis by Gilbert Gottfried.

Nope. No way. He had warned Stunning the house was haunted. He'd been ignored. End of story. It was possible he was being beckoned into an experience unlike any a human being had ever had.

So a visit to that crystal woman—she might provide a clue, or she might fuck him. Either way, it would postpone his return to the house.

Boyle's Falls' town center was a green square with benches, gazebo, bandstand and a statue to a Revolutionary War patriot whose descendants had settled here. Around it were shops. Streets running away from the square contained more shops and Victorian homes. Mathis was strolling toward the crystal shop, absently rubbing the spot where he'd been pinched, when he heard, "Daniel! Daniel Mathis!"

He turned to find Janine Foote, sort of run-walking across the square, the way women will in impractical shoes.

"Why, hello, Janine," Mathis said. "I haven't seen you in a while."

"Daniel, I thought I liked you," she said, frowning at him.

"You did—for an hour or so, anyway."

"Your Mister Stunning has filed an application for a permit for roadside advertising off the highway. Something called the Stunning Gallery. Apparently, you people intend to turn the Institute into a public gallery."

"Ah."

"Neither of you ever even hinted at such intentions."

"Uh..."

"The Institute is not zoned for commercial use, Daniel, and it will never be rezoned nor will any permits be issued. We are not bumpkins, you know." Her voice was quivering now, which he found really exciting, and really sad. "We enjoy artwork, the human form, works of beauty and inspiration, even if treated with wild abstraction. But...twitching reptile limbs? Splashing blood on authentic Amish quilts? That's not art. And that, I promise you, will not happen here."

"Er..."

She spun on her high heels and marched away.

Mathis watched her go, heartsick. Working for Stunning, he should be used to this. But it was one thing to fuck over New Yorkers—they were usually asking for it. But this town, these people—it made him queasy to be on Stunning's team in this one.

He trudged to the crystal shop.

The sign—"Crystals Bought and Sold"—was still in the window. He pulled the door open and let it clap shut behind him with a merry tinkle of its bell. The place was blue-lit and cluttered. On the stereo was soaring, epiphanic electronic music. A black cat sat on a high stool by the door. On a shelf to his right,

another. They watched him, twitching their tails.

His fantasy woman *du jour* appeared from the back room, the beaded curtain flapping plastic. It was all there as he remembered it—the great cloud of hair bound in a headband, the black linen blouse and balloon pants around her buxom frame and enough necklaces, bracelets and rings to furnish a harem. He swam for a brief moment in those beautiful, sultry, smoking eyes.

Let's try some light flirting.

He nodded in greeting then nodded at the cats. "Shape-shifter security guards. Cool."

"How perceptive of you!" the crystal woman exclaimed. She giggled, muffled her mouth, shook her head no, waved her hand at him: oh, you. "They were school kids! See, if you're caught shoplifting, Gaia manifests and turns you into a cat, or an elfin forest creature, or into a...a...fungus, or maybe some sort of mold in a port-o-potty at a...at a rib cook-off."

She did sorcerer spell-flicks with her fingers while she said this and smiled merrily at him.

Oh. My. God, he thought.

"Don't mind them," said the shopkeeper. "Shoo, scat." She fluttered her fingers. The cats didn't move. She turned her Amway saleswoman's smile back on Mathis and chirped, "Dan! Hi! I'm Claire!" Out shot a hand and pumped his. "See, I know who you are," she trilled, giving him a light elbow in the ribs. "You're the new caretaker up at the Institute, am I right?"

She planted her fists on her hips, awaiting a reply.

Mathis had no reply to give. He was speechless. All he could do was nod his head.

Everything she did was broad. She had so much jewelry she tinkled with every move. Her voice was a gee-whillickers whoop. Her eyes followed his and unconsciously mimicked his facial gestures. The fantasy was shattered—this was the least sexy beautiful woman he had ever met.

He cast a hopeful glance outside, but Claire grabbed his arm.

"The Institute is quite a powerful and mystical place, you know. Have you experienced any...visions? Noises? Objects moving?"

He badly wanted to tell someone, but this woman was clearly not the one. She'd believe him without hesitation, which was, in itself, scary.

He shook his head no.

"Well," she said, shaking her head, miming him, "I do hope you'll take care of the place." She winked and wiggled her shoulders like some Bizarro-world coquette. Then her eyes fell on the crystals in his hand. "What'cha got there?"

"Crystals. Do you do appraisals?"

"Sometimes. Did they come from the Institute?"

He placed them in her palm, and she was instantly transfixed. She held one up to the light. "Was this part of the chandelier? The period fixture I've heard about? Interesting," she murmured. "I'll just...be right back..."

Her voice trailed off as she trundled through the beads and into the back of the shop.

With the crystals out of his possession, the twinge of guilt became a gouging knife of remorse. Mathis knew he wasn't going to sell them.

He took a minute to wander the shop. Geodes, crystals and stones glittered in display baskets and boxes. Glow-in-the-dark stars and mobiles were suspended from the ceiling. Magic card games and *Dungeons and Dragons* paraphernalia were neatly stacked. There were kaleidoscopes, star maps and tons of books on chakra chanting, visitations and the prophesies of Nostrodamus.

He was spinning a druidic prayer wheel when Claire came bursting through the beads.

"I would like to buy these, even if their power is partially dependent on their location."

"How do you mean?"

"I believe the Janeway place is the location of a vortex."

"A what?"

"An energy vortex, a concentration of Terran and psychic energy, where the earth and the spirit world meet. There are so few in the continental United States. Most are out west, but I do believe—I've wanted to take a team in there to check, but I can't get permission. Perhaps you—"

"There are so many workmen on the property right now, Claire, so much liability...insurance, you know. I'll have to ask Stunning."

"Oh, would you? I'd love to meet him."

"Okay, Claire, gotta go." He reached for his crystals.

"But, wait, I haven't shown you..." she said, withdrawing them with a coy twinkle of her eye.

She gestured for him to come closer. He remained where he was.

"Look at the structure within the crystal," she said. "Some process, whether grinding or pre-heating, almost like a crystal within a crystal, very unusual, quite impossible."

He did see it. It made him dizzy to stare at it.

He gently removed the crystals from her hand.

"I'm writing a book," she announced, "called *Haunted Hudson Valley*, and the Janeway property is going to be a big part of it."

"So, you know the history of the place."

"Yup. Hubert Janeway. Born 1797. Owner of Janeway Firearms out of Hartford, also owned a button factory and was awheelwright. World traveler..."

"Yeah, great, Claire. Any scandals? Murders?" "Nope."

"The house. Built on the site of an old graveyard, a battlefield?"

She gave him a tolerant smile. "The horror book writers are just like the western-oriented historians. They never get to the truth of things. One is so very Halloween, the other so Dead White Man. I'm close to the secret. And it's both. It's neither."

Mathis started backing out of the shop. The cats watched him all the way.

"No, please," Claire said, coming around the counter. "Don't leave. I'll give you fifty dollars for the

three. How's that? No. More. Seventy-five. A hundred."

"SorryClairecan'tnicetomeetyougottago," he blurted.

He went. As he crossed the street he looked back. In the window was Claire, watching him. She wasn't smiling now.

The morning after the pinching incident, Mathis approached A.W. Fallon and volunteered to do some of the woodwork in the front hall, including the restoration of the staircase and butler's foyer. He showed Fallon his kit, with scratch stock, beeswax, steel wool, Exacto blades and several kinds of oil and several grades of sandpaper. Fallon beamed at him approvingly, as if Mathis were recyclable or all-natural, and told him, *Go on ahead, son*.

He threw himself into the task. He found serenity in the slow, painstaking nature of the work, the motion of his hands, the feel and scent of the wood. The moldings, the curtail, newel caps, newels and railings of the stairs required straightforward sanding, and he would fall into pleasant meditation while doing it.

But the fine work that remained in the entryway, including the ancient bench with its elaborate carvings of hunting dogs and game birds, required more concentration. Over the next few weeks, with no visit from the phantom, Mathis methodically cut, sanded and scraped away the layers of wood, paint and wax, exposing some marvelous friezes and

delicate carvings. There was a series of cartouches, in which were light reliefs of warrior angels and gowned ladies with water jugs. He had to improvise some tools; he wrapped his sandpaper around needle-like artist brushes and squash balls that conformed to the shapes he was discovering, in order to scrape and clean them.

The drawback? Now that he'd earned Fallon's respect, he couldn't get the sonofabitch out of his hair. Fallon spent way too much time hanging out, droning on in that granola-munching voice of his, while Mathis just wanted to lose himself in the work.

It was a late afternoon in July, hot as blue flame. Mathis was sanding the railing. It was straightforward work with no finesse required, only elbow grease. Fallon sat on a pile of lumber, yakking.

"We have to support the roof in spots and pry open joints while we replace the deteriorated materials. We'll drape tarp over it at night, but you'll want to stay out of the upstairs for a couple days."

Mathis made a mental note then let his mind drift. Why hadn't the phantom reappeared?

"Lazlo—that's the master carpenter was here yesterday?—he looked at the stairs, front and back, both floors, and says the stringers and steps are in good shape. You'll need some fill and support to fix the squeaks. He'll stagger the job so you can get around."

Was she – please let it be a she – pissed off at him for looting the crystals? He'd put them back. Hell, they were only gone for an hour or two.

"Dan, you listening?"

"Every word, A.W. Please continue."

"Now the windows. Just measuring them is a whole project. I can't schedule the guy until we finalize the cleaning of the limestone outside, so what I suggest..."

Mathis tuned him out. In time, Fallon fell silent. Mathis sanded the rail. One by one, the crews left. The golden evening light of summer deepened. But Fallon remained.

Mathis kept his back to the man, ignoring him with all his might, and just worked his way up the rail. He was really beginning to resent the way the man watched him. It was almost better when he was yakking. Just sitting there quietly now, watching him.

It was almost dark when he turned. "A.W., why don't you go home?"

Fallon was gone.

Stumped, Mathis called his name, but there was no response. He went back to work. He stopped. He could have sworn Fallon had still been here. He hadn't heard him leave.

No. Wait. Think. Yes. He remembered. Fallon did say goodnight. The door had closed.

So, why had he felt he was being watched all this time?

He stood still on the staircase. The house was absolutely quiet and more still than usual; the humid summer air hung heavy.

He waited, listening.

He felt the presence. It was like a change in the barometric pressure, a shimmer of syrup, a consciousness of other, an electric charge—it was none of these things exactly, but it was something. The ghost was here with him.

He stood stock-still. The silence lengthened. It didn't matter that it might be a female, and it might not wish him harm. It was a fucking ghost, and he was more scared than he'd ever been in his life. Heebie-jeebies fear—he was blubbering inside from it, with pounding heart, sweat beads all over, a dry throat.

He stepped backwards, up the stairs. The steps creaked beneath his feet. His own breath, too, was loud in his ears.

He heard a step, not his own, and a slight rustle of fabric. *God help me. Please, God...*

He caught a scent: soap or perfume or recently washed hair.

And something else. Warmth. Human warmth, nearby.

Outside, he was stock-still. Inside, he was screeching. It's here. It's close.

This was what he'd wanted. The moment he'd waited for.

Let it go away. Please, let it go away.

Another step, a swish of fabric, a creak of wood from the stair.

Mathis held his breath. Silence. Silence. Just as he was about to expel his breath, maybe puke, maybe scream, the phantom stepped closer again. Step, swish, creak.

Silence.

Stillness.

The moment stretched intolerably.

"W-who are you?" he asked. Shrill, tremulous voice.

"I am a friend."

Mathis almost wet his pants at the sound, it was so close. In his face. And, yes, a female voice. Young or old, he couldn't tell.

But there was no one visible. The staircase was dark, empty.

"Can you show yourself?" His voice sounded a little better now, more confident.

"I choose not to."

He clutched his heart, it was banging so hard. He swallowed before he could get the next question out. "Are you...are you dead?

"Yes...and no."

"What the hell's that mean?" he asked her. It just came out.

"I will be dead, and I am dead." Her voice was not flat or inexpressive, as you would expect the dead's to be. No, her voice was lovely. What age? He couldn't tell.

"So, you're a ghost, a poltergeist, what?"

"What is a poltergeist?"

"Never mind. Who are you? What's your name?"

"I have been watching you for some time, Daniel. When you're frightened, as you were just now, you sound just like a little boy."

"Do you blame me? Jesus."

"I did not wish to frighten you. Just...meet with

you. And I had to be careful doing so."

"Who are you?"

She ignored his question again. If he'd had any doubts it was a woman that dispelled them.

"I have been with you for months," said the phantom. "I love the way you touch the wood, the ornamentation of the house. Your hands are so expressive—they linger, they caress. They are fond, respectful. The laborers, so many of them are crude. But you are different. And you are lonely."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes. You are. I see your attention straying when you speak to the workmen. You are apart. And at night, in darkness, I see you pleasuring yourself."

"Jesus Christ!" He was blushing like he hadn't since he was ten. "What kind of ghost are you?"

"There is no time to waste, ever, Daniel. Ever."

"Why are you visiting me? What do you want?"

"I will answer you by asking a question. Be honest, Daniel. You always felt you were special, did you not?" She paused. He did not reply. "And that there is more to the world than what you see and hear?"

He couldn't speak. He nodded his head.

Said the phantom, "When you first came to the Institute, I saw a man who wanted to reach across time, to touch the unknown. You *are* special, and there *is* more to the world than you can see, hear, touch or smell."

Mathis licked his lips. "It was you who pinched me...right?"

No response.

"And it was you who...well, did you...I mean, one night...somebody, something...I was pretty sure...was playing with my...you know, was..."

He heard the rustle of fabric, the light footsteps. The sound receded, fast. He bounded down the stairs.

"Wait!" he shouted.

Silence.

Gone.

CHAPTER FIVE

n one respect, it was like any other date he'd had since high school—after the bonehead things he'd said, he wondered if she'd see him again. He spent most of that night sleepless, wondering. And all the next day, while he worked on the wainscotting, carefully cutting with his Exacto, he was wondering. In his head, he rearranged his beliefs, redefined his fears, furtively exploring a world of spirits and extra dimensions.

And it was as if the real world was trying to intrude, break into his inner space through the polyrhythmic pounding of hammers, the insistent drilling, the overlapping radios, the loud scraping of sacks and thunder of lumber.

And the plodding, bumpkin voice of A.W. Fallon.

Mathis couldn't wait to be alone again in that house, to see if she would come to him. He found himself ushering Fallon out at day's end while the contractor went on about bathroom fixtures and window treatments and insulation He was still droning as Mathis shut the door on him, alone at last. He turned, and her voice was right there, in his ear.

"Hello, Daniel."

He shouted and fell back against the door, arms flurrying.

"I thought you were expecting me," she said.

"I was," he said, panting, fanning himself, "but, Jesus, not so soon."

"I scared you."

"Hell, yes, you scared me." He fanned himself. "It's still daylight. Isn't there some rule about darkness?"

"No rule that I am aware of."

He was alone with her in the front hall. It was awkward. He sidled toward the steps, looking left, right, in front, behind, for a sign.

"I'm right here," she said helpfully. "Next to you."

He tentatively reached out. He felt nothing.

"Who are you?" he asked her. This was the third time he'd asked.

"I can't tell you that."

"Is it because you don't know?"

"Such a question! Whatever do you mean?"

He had to sit down; his failing legs demanded it. He did so, on a sack of fiberfill. "Sit?"

"Yes, thank you."

Mathis sort of laugh-sobbed, seeing the sacks pressed down by the weight of the invisible creature.

"Are you—excuse me—but, are you dead and you're in some between-world?"

"No. I haven't died." She was laughing, he sensed.

"Then what are you? How did you get through? Is there a heaven, a hell? What's it like?"

"I don't know."

"Damn. Are you sure? Because if I could get an answer to that I could get a book deal for sure."

"Daniel, are you saying you would write a book about this?" The sacks crinkled, and lost their sag; she'd stood up again.

"No, no, I was joking," he pleaded, reaching out a hand to where he thought she was. "Don't go, please. I don't know how much you know about my world, but we've got exorcists, parapsychologists, *X-Files* conspiracy theorists, we've got tabloid newspapers, tabloid TV shows. It scares me to think how many people would believe me, but you'll be glad to know it would just get lost in the shuffle."

"I don't understand you."

"Just...trust me. It's our secret." She didn't answer. "Okay?" She didn't answer. "Hello?"

He was sure she had left him again—not fair, the way she could do that—when she spoke.

"I do trust you, Daniel."

He didn't know what to say to that. He was silent, waiting to hear her speak again. And he realized how much he loved her voice. It was like ginger, whiskey, an oboe and strings, wind rustling palm trees, so soothing and sensual

"I have some questions for you, Daniel Mathis," she said after a moment.

"Fire away."

"What is a 'hit?'"

He didn't understand.

She clarified. "I refer to 'all hits, all the time.'"

The phantom's questions were concerned with

television and radio, with computers, rock music and special effects, with strapless dresses and Speedos, with slicker lip polish and blue eyeliner, with WNBA basketball, female executives, no-run panty hose, hair coloring, tattoos, piercings, automobiles, backhoes, airplanes, nuclear weapons, global warming and power drills. He lost complete track of time, answering. And he was continually surprised, when he turned to make a point, to see no one.

He interrupted one of his speeches to quickly ask her, "What did you say your name was?"

But she was not tricked. "I did not say, Daniel, as you well know."

"Well, what should I call you?"

"Give me a name."

"You're not a puppy, for Chrissake!"

"No need to blaspheme, Daniel."

"All right. I'll call you Wendy. You're named after a good witch, a friend of Casper the Friendly Ghost."

"I don't care for the name Wendy."

"Neither do I. I shall call you Eve."

"That's pretty."

"Agreed. Now. Where were we?"

"The daytime dramas," she said. "I was expressing surprise at how...direct, and how willful, the characters are toward one another. Especially the women."

"In real life, people are more circumspect."

"And all of the sexual couplings. Mercy."

It was time to state the obvious. "You are from another time, aren't you? When you lived, it was

some time in the past."

Silence.

"Look, sorry. I can't help it. Are you still there?"

"Yes."

"Mind if I ask—what are your intentions?"

"I don't know."

"How did you come to...be able to do this?"

"God alone knows."

"So, you were sent by Him on a mission?"

"No. Hardly. It would be the height of pride to think that God has paid me the slightest notice."

"But you are able to...come to me. Be heard by me."

"Yes."

"By what power? What means?"

"I really like you, Daniel. I've enjoyed this talk very much."

"Me, too."

She was silent a while. He could sense she was overcome by some emotion, something mammoth and inexpressible.

"It was me...that night," she finally said. "You must think me horrible..."

"No, believe me-"

"But this power I have...it shows me what is possible, and seeing that, it compels me to..."

This time, he had no need to call out to find that she had left him.

From that point, Mathis went through his days in a trance. His life now revolved around his meetings with Eve. Everything else was rote. He okayed everything Fallon proposed, yes'd the crewmen and, especially, yes'd Stunning—he didn't want to risk his position, not now.

He couldn't wait for her to come to him. He couldn't work on his wood project for more than half an hour without taking a break to wander the house, looking for her.

"Hello?" he would whisper. "Eve? Are you there?" Percy, one of the carpenters, caught him at it and just shook his head, as if to say, *crazy white men*.

"May I ask you a question, Daniel?" she said to him one evening.

"Sure, fire away."

"What is a 'skank?'"

He almost harfed his beer all over himself. Swallowing, restoring his composure, he said, "It's a woman who is unattractive. Promiscuous. Inebriated. Unkempt. Possibly unhealthy."

"Ah."

"You've been listening to the workmen, haven't you."

"Yes, I observe them. They're very muscular, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"But the hair, and tattoos. And some of them have jewelry. Earrings and such, like pirates."

"Yeah, pirates."

"They are very crude. Not like you at all."

"Not so different."

"Oh, my, yes. Always touching themselves,

scratching at their privates and picking at their nostrils and flatulating and burping. Men in my time - "

"In your time?"

"Yes. I am from an earlier time. I thought you had guessed that by now."

He had, but he now put on his innocent voice: "Oh? When?"

Again, she had no patience for his questions, only her own. "As I say, men in my time do these things, of course, the passing of gas and nosepicking and so on. Not the gentlemen, but the working men of modest means, they do it, but not with so much relish or show. And the way they talk, your workmen! The one who is repairing the masonry, the bricks? He talks about—oh, my—bitches this, and cunts that. He seems so angry."

"Some men will always carry that anger. It's supposed to be good to express it. The more you express in words, it's thought, the less likely you are to strike a woman or try to take her, you know, sexually. When did you say you...?"

She continued to ignore him. "Daniel, do you think men want to have relations with every women they see?"

"Umm, yes. Pretty close to all of them."

"Oh, my goodness. And do men always talk about women with such...disregard?"

"I expect so."

"I made the mistake of listening to your radio. It makes me fluttery, unpleasantly so, to hear it. The program called 'And Now the News.' And the music. So...confrontational, this music they play. It sounds so angry, much of it. And not very decorous, even the pretty songs, the love songs."

"Do you watch my television as well?"

"Yes. At first I was happy just looking out the window, seeing the sleek vehicles, airplanes and other unimaginable things. But when you moved in, and I learned to use the...the dial."

Mathis tried to imagine this gentle creature assaulted with the images, music, the violence in the movies and on the news—head-banging rock videos and smarmy audience-participation talk shows, cop shows, gossip shows, E! special erotic shows, public access rants. He tried to imagine her becoming coarse, knowing, ironic, hipper-than-thou, been-there-done-that and as boring, shallow and lethargic as all the people he had left behind in New York.

She sighed and snuck her hand into his. "The television, the radio, the workmen, the anger. The anger is always there."

It had taken him a moment to realize she had put her hand in his.

"I can feel your hand," he exclaimed. "I couldn't...feel you before."

"Yes." She gave his a squeeze. "I am more fully here."

He took his time, touching her hair (it was thick and soft and long), brushing her cheek (soft), gripping her shoulders (she turned to face him) and then moving his head tentatively forward...forward...to kiss...

Her chin.

"Up here," she whispered.

Her lips met his in a shy, delicious kiss. They were plump and a little trembly from nervousness, but delicious. The kiss only lasted seconds, and would last inside Mathis for all time.

But their faces, once this close, could not withdraw. There were more kisses, growing more heated and more passionate. He reached out, stroked her cheek. Her breath came quicker. He felt her hands scrabbling at his back. He pulled her closer. He cupped her breast, a handful and more. Her breath came even faster now, and her limbs enclosed him, this hot little invisible woman.

Abruptly, she broke away. "I'm sorry, I'm not ready yet," she whispered, panting a little.

"Okay," he said. He readjusted his prick which, far from invisible, was poking idiotically straight up in his shorts.

She rested her head on his shoulder. "I don't sense any of that anger in you, Daniel," she said, once she'd regained her composure. "The men that I know, the powerful ones, the men with means, the anger manifests in condescension and rigidity and a fanatical hold on what they perceive as their rights. And fear is there. Men are afraid of women."

"The anger comes from the fear, I think."

"The world has changed so much," she said finally. "But people, they don't change at all."

Mathis had nothing to say to that. After a while,

she said, "I blushed at first, hearing their radio, watching your television box. Now I don't blush so much. What does that mean?"

"I'm scared to say."

The new attic/roof superstructure was finished, and the insulation was pumped into the upper west wing. The glaziers came to measure windows along the library and inventory what pieces they would need to restore the windows in the Gallery, the second-floor room they referred to as "the cathedral." Mathis was on the phone with Stunning, approving prices. All the while his mind exulted, it burned, it seethed to accelerate time so that he could be with Eve again.

She did not come to him that night, and not the next. He found himself peeking into corners and tentatively whispering, "Eve, are you there?" He took phone calls and signed forms and consulted with the electrician, the roofer and many others, and he did it all in a frothing, boiling fog.

Only when the crews all left, and it was quiet again, and the phone stopped ringing, and the sun set and the night murmurs of the insects and amphibians started up did he concentrate his attention. He sat and he waited. All night. Ten o'clock rolled around, and nothing. Ten yawned into eleven. He didn't turn on the TV or radio. He waited, clutching the armrests of his chair in his room.

Approaching midnight...a sound.

He waited. It was not repeated.

"Eve?" he whispered. "Eve," he called, louder.

Nothing. Then...a light breeze on his face and, borne on it, the unmistakable, earthy, smoky scent of pussy.

He heard her breathing.

"Eve," he whispered.

Her breathing was louder, heavier, faster.

"Eve," he whispered, so small a whisper he could hardly hear it himself. "I can smell you. I couldn't smell anything of you before."

"I know," she whispered, just as softly, from somewhere in the room. "I am more fully here tonight."

He moved very, very slowly, like he was swimming in maple syrup. He got out of his chair. He reached out his hands. He stepped forward.

His fingertips brushed smooth, warm skin. Her back, he thought. He wasn't startled, wasn't scared.

"And I'm naked," she whispered.

He moaned.

"It is wicked to be like this. With you."

"No. Well, maybe," he said reaching slowly. He touched a wisp of hair. He reached further. She was gone.

"I like it, that feeling," she whispered from somewhere else in the room. He turned, slowly. Oh God, he could smell her again, the pussy, the ass. It was like she was undulating in his face. He shifted his weight that way. The scent disappeared.

"What—oh, God, Eve—what feeling?" His desire was white-hot now, his dick hard, upright, tingling and ready. He wanted to lunge for her, hold her, but

he didn't want to hurt her by accident so he was forced to search the room slowly, moving in slo-mo.

"The feeling of shame, of being wicked."

Her breath in his face - he could smell it!

"I can smell your breath now," he said. Not great breath but tolerable.

"Yes."

"And your hair. And your skin."

"Do I please you?"

He reached out to caress her. Her hair smelled of a floral water, her skin faintly of spice, of soap. Overall, she smelled just like a woman, and that wonderful scent was enough to drive him full-tilt half-crazy.

He explored. Roundness. Nipple.

She panted.

He cupped the breast. It filled his hand and wobbled—and then it was gone. This time he was quick: He encircled her waist and pulled her to him, and she hung her arms over his shoulders. She was a curvy woman, busty and hippy, but youthful, he knew, for her waist was a marvel of slimness

He kissed her, slowly at first, and then with heartfelt passion. Soon they were making out like crazed prom-goers.

Mathis was so inflamed with lust that he barely detected her hesitation, her sigh. Then she sobbed and pulled away from him and hugged him all at the same time.

"If I am wicked," she said quietly, "I am afraid you will send me away. A harlot."

"No, don't be silly. It's good, what lovers do."

"Your culture seems to have dispensed with shame, with guilt. But that is not how I was taught. Wicked, wicked..."

"Did you touch me that time?" he asked her, panting with fucklust.

"Yes."

"Did you suck me that time?"

"Yes. I know what it is to take your big warm cock in my mouth. I swallowed your lava. Yes," she whispered, "I like being wicked."

As she returned his kiss, a little gasp of surrender escaped her throat, and she embraced her wickedness fully. Their lips were a perfect match in the way they darted and probed, and all she had to do was lightly push him away and Mathis fell back, his knees gone all jelly.

He felt her fingers on him, heard her breath quicken from down below. He felt a tug and watched the impossible, his belt moving all by itself, curling like a snake as it was unfastened. The belt hung limp. Then came the tug again, and his pants unfastened and the zipper went slowly down. He heard her make a high-pitched, liquid moan, and watched his underwear pull away, up and over his stout boner. *Wow.*

He felt her cheek graze his cock as his underwear, his pants, ballooned and went down to his ankles. He took a step sideways, let her tug them off; then he watched the pants rise in air, twirl around once, twice, three times and fly to hell and gone across the room.

They both laughed at the same time, for a long time.

Mathis stopped laughing with a whooping intake of breath: she was sucking him.

He looked down. Yup, there was his rod, and there it wasn't. The head of it appeared, disappeared and reappeared rhythmically. He heard the slurping sounds, saw his cock getting slick with her spittle. There: his balls disappeared, too, for a moment as she took them in her mouth and gave them a gentle tongue-swab; and whether it was the nightmare of that or the queer ecstasy of it, he couldn't watch, because his eyes just sort of fluttered and closed, savoring it.

Again, the musk of her loins wiggled past his nose. Then, a prolonged moan of female lust could be heard. He followed his rock-hard dick through the short hallway into the bedroom in time to see the depression in his bed shift, the sheets ripple.

"Will you take me, Dan? Take me now, without delay? Hmmm?" she cooed at the edge of the bed, and ran her fingers over his aching boner. They slowly fell together onto the mattress.

He filled his hands with her—from nowhere he was swimming in smooth, fragrant woman skin. Kissing all the while, tongues probing, he let his hands ran over her lusty contours. He felt her hair—there was tons of it, thick and wavy. He squeezed her tender arms. He let his hand travel up the shoulder, along a slender neck to a cheek. He let both run down that heaving back, swoop down the slope of her waist

and up the slope of her ass. He cupped the cheeks, ran his fingers along the crack, then along her flanks. Her lust ignited, she became a warm, wriggling, undulating body against his, her breath close and hot.

She slid off him, beside him, so that he could better enjoy her large, round breasts, so warm in his hands, their nipples protruding, fully titillated. He flicked them with his tongue and nuzzled the great globes. He felt her hand rub his balls, travel upwards and grip his dick.

Now their breath rushed together and they were all over one another, their hands everywhere, and he could not predict, thrashing with this phantom, where her hands would be next. He imagined what he must look like, hovering in empty air over his bed, turning and churning, his hands working.

He ran his hand down her soft belly and let his palm apply feathery pressure to her pussy so that she bucked and cried out.

"Oh, love, oh, love, yes," she chanted, "Yes, oh, oh, Dan, love." She was so damp down there; he entered her with one finger, then two. "Yes, love, do that, can you do that? Yes, do."

She was gushing and fragrant—the smell of her permeated the room, the earthy aquatic smell of woman. Then her mouth got busy, sucking his nipples, traveling down his belly, wriggling her breasts against his cock, down further, kissing his dick, licking it, and then, after a silent, still moment, he felt the cool saliva as she took him again in her mouth. Again, the sound, her breath, like an engine,

and down further she went, until his legs were spread-eagled, supported on the wall, knocking lamps and clocks aside to do it, and, oh, God, her mouth on his balls, exploring them, not quite sure at first, and then taking them in turn, the tongue growing busy, learning every second how to please him.

Heavens, universe, all of creation in God's hat—the sensations he was feeling! The sight of his dick disappearing, sheets hovering in air, yes, sir, like ghosts. Mostly, the glorious warmth of a soft girl's expanse of skin against his own. The joy of her mouth over his cock, or her hand stroking him there, or pipkissing his balls. The wonderful roundness of breast and hip. The heavenly pleasure as he positioned himself to enter her, and they paused, with his cock just poking the lips of her coochie, and he knew he was looking deeply into her eyes, though all he saw was a pillow, and he heard her say yes, and he slid inside her wetness.

She gasped with the exquisite sensation. He filled her, and remained. The closeness he felt! Considering she was invisible, and he didn't know her real name, or who she really was—the closeness!

"Oh, Dan," she cried, so softly as he churned into her, giving it to her good, faster and faster, her legs now in air, flailing, he felt her calves against his face, her hands clambering at his butt and back, her voice reduced to frenzied wails, urging him yes, love, yes, love, faster and faster still until with a shuddering gasp and berserk thrusts of his hungry cock he came—his eyes half-shut with the pleasure of it, that jelly electricity from his dick down his midsection. She cried out, and cried out again, and again, her lust and energy ebbing, her breath slowing, until she was silent.

They lay side by side, and by degrees sleep came for Dan Mathis. The last image of that day for him was his memory of orgasm, looking down at their joined bellies, seeing that his come had collected in a puddle in air, shimmered there for a moment, and dissolved.

CHAPTER SIX

aniel Mathis greeted the following day with a sly clownish smile on his face, and it never left. Not that day nor in the weeks that followed.

She came to him most every day now, never at the same time. If she didn't appear for several days, Mathis would stomp around the Institute, out of his mind with desire, tearing at his hair, bending at the waist to contain the nuclear urgency of his weenie.

He never knew when she might appear—morning, afternoon, evening. He might be having lunch, and he would feel her near. Or walk by himself to inspect some work or check some specs, and she would all of a sudden be there, whispering, "Hello, Daniel."

Sometimes he would rush into the closest room or even a closet for their first embrace.

"Hello, Eve," he would return, and enjoy that first kiss of the day, a long, lingering, licking, probing, light-biting kiss.

"Come to me again at midnight," he whispered to her, interrupting a conference on plumbing fittings, not at all disguising his lust, just trying to please a dick that was aching to bathe in her wet mouth, her slick pussy. "I'll try."

"What prevents you?"

"I cannot predict when I will visit you."

"Why not?"

"It is not in my power."

"Can we make love here?" They were in the closet at the time.

"No, Daniel. Stop. That is for your bedchamber."

"Let's go, then."

"Let's hurry."

Sometimes when she was sucking on him or giving him a deft hand-job, his eyes would squinch shut in sex-frenzy. Then he would see on his eyelids a lovely green-and-white neon boundless dreamworld of intimacy, a vector graphic wonderland with the hourglass shape of a diva hovering over him—great breasts, slender waist, dramatically flared hips, her hair billowing slowly as if she were underwater, face turned away so he could not see her.

Then, like a break in clouds on another planet, he would open his eyes, and he would be with his invisible lover; but he could better picture her as she sat on his prick, her great hips slowly sinking to meet his, the lips of her vagina kissing the head of his cock as she undulated over him, and then his boner growing slick and gleaming as it sank inside. She continued to descend, her pussy swallowing him most deliciously—he felt it, a warm wet purse around his cock until it was fully inside her, though he could see it, wet and shuddering. She came to rest a moment.

Then he heard it: a graceful slap of her own flank, and off she went, riding him. He heard it: her quick breathing, her murmurs of love me, love me, ohpleaseohmyohyes. He reached out his hands and gripped her hips, the flesh so soft and yielding to his hand; and he commenced to rock and roll and drive his member into her gushing cooze. Her pouty cries were clear in his ears, and the smell of her soap and flesh, a unique, earthy smell, different yet not unpleasant, was a tickle in his nose.

And, Lord, the sensation in his wang, churning in all that flesh and wetness, was so silky and electric and true, and she rode him, they bucked in unison, and as he rose up, she smiled—he knew his invisible woman smiled. Then the ecstasy began to uncoil in his loins, a tap dance of delirious pleasure. As he spurted inside her, she smiled and threw her arms up—he could see it on the inside of his eyelids—she celebrated the entire time he shot his jizz into her.

She rested her arms on her head as the orgasm subsided. She hugged herself as he sank back, all the muscles going slack as they should, a curtain falling over his mind. In this drowsy, contented state, they would lie together, talking, going deeper and deeper into silliness and revelation.

"Meet me in the garden next time," he said to her one time. "I want to show you our restored fountain."

"I can't, regrettably. I can't go outside the house."

She came to him many nights. He would wait, and there she would be, like a coat of varnish lying atop him, a warm, flowing syrup scented like shampoo and soap and sweat.

"Oh, Daniel, this is so wrong of me, so deliciously wrong."

He would shush her quiet, and go down and pleasure her—finding, in empty space, the warm, soft skin, the expected odors, the nooks and crannies of woman in heat. She would raise up, he would probe with his tongue until he found her button, and she would just gasp and grip his hair. He would lick her until that ungodly shuddering would take her, scary and anarchic. She would return the favor; and in the darkness, she was like a sex engine, like a cloud of lips over him, her hands cupping his balls, her mouth on his cock, teasing his nipples, nuzzling his neck. He was free-falling in space, or in her lips, in her pussy.

And then he'd fuck her doggy-style...scissors...standing up—many times he didn't know what position they were in. He couldn't see her hips jump when she'd come, but he could feel the vibration, the budding climax, the shuddering prelude; and then she would yip and jump and thrust and wail.

Yum, she whispered.

She came to him six nights in a row at one stretch.

He loved to wait for her mouth. She knew this and would tease him. He'd sit in an empty-seeming room with her just hovering over him, a smile on her face, he knew. Then, just when he'd be about to beg, beg, she'd bob down on him with a hungry sigh. He felt it—the moisture closing around him, the tongue, a light brush of teeth. And she went to work that way

on him, her hands working the base, her mouth slurping the shaft, until he felt the bolts of yee-hah whorling in his midsection and he spurted—it took him a second to realize—into her mouth, spilling out of her mouth.

And after his pleasure was spent, he could see the portion that had collected in her mouth dissolve and disappear, and the rest was visible, oozing in air onto his belly.

Mmmmm, he heard her coo. *Mmmmmm*.

"How do you do that?" he gasped.

"You bring your lips forward over your teeth..."

"No, I mean...I don't remember what I meant..."

The mirror was not aimed at the bed, but many nights, during some athletic invisible-woman fucking, it would get knocked askew. So that now, in the quiet times afterwards, he might have a glimpse of his head, resting on her warm bosom, floating in air above the bed, gently rocking with her breath. She would stroke his hair, and he could see his hair ruffled, as if the wind were loose in the room.

They talked slowly, sometimes far into the night, or all day, as the workmen pounded and sawed outside his door. She asked him a thousand questions, most about culture, behavior, fashion; she was careful to warn him not to tell her about politics and world events. He asked her a thousand questions and got no answers. She chose her words carefully, obviously not wanting to give away anything about herself. The house, their shared territory, was a safe subject.

"Mister Fallon. The men make faces at him behind

his back," she said one lazy afternoon. "The electrician, the one with the thick spectacles? He is stealing tools from the woodworkers. The assistant to the man who is finishing the floors? The young man with the very black hair? I think he might be homosexual. He likes you. He has been in your room."

"Get the fuck out of here!" Mathis spluttered.

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry. I meant, is this true?"

"Yes."

"I'll kick his faggy ass. You're welcome in my room. Nobody else."

There was a pause. "Daniel."

He didn't like the way she said it. It spoke of something important. A change perhaps. After a silence, he said, "Yes?"

"Would you dare to take this journey?"

"Say again?"

"Would you like to visit me? My time?"

"Eh?"

"You are a courageous person, Daniel. Are you prepared for a frightening experience?"

"Visit you?"

"Yes. Visit me. My world."

Now Mathis's mouth made a series of sounds normally not heard outside a Three Stooges comedy. N's and Y's fighting for dominance, many words of concern, confusion tumbling between, lost in the foam. Then:

"Yes."

"There is no danger," she said. "But you must trust me." There was a silence. "At least, to be honest, I don't think there is a danger. I cannot claim to understand everything that is involved."

"You do this, though. You come to me, and you don't know the dangers?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Isn't this wondrous? That I can be here with you?"

"Wondrous to the max," he agreed.

"I will tell you what you must do."

Mathis opened his bedroom door and peered out. He tiptoed to the main hall and looked around. It was midday, and the crews were either out back having lunch or upstairs.

Eve took his hand in her warm but invisible one and led him down the east hall into the dining room. Some of Fallon's crew of restorers had left their tools scattered about—there were shards of sheetrock; fabric scraps; woodworking tools; cans of gums, oils, alcohols and putties and chunks of plaster and wood all over the floor and on boards set on sawhorses.

She tugged his ear to get his attention back.

"The power lies in the chandelier," she told him.

"You're kidding."

"No, Daniel, I'm not kidding."

He stepped to the chandelier and ran his fingers over the lowest tier of crystals. They made graceful musical tinkles. "You mean, the crystals are...magical,

like out of some Hobbit novel?"

Just as Claire, the village crystal specialist, had said.

She took his hand, impatient with him, and steered him to the far end of the room. "You see the stream of sunlight through it?"

He did. This northeast face of the house had no trees or other foliage to block the sun. Through the north-facing windows, which were easily twelve feet in height, great beams of the sun shone through the chandelier, creating a shimmering pool of soft light of a dozen wondrous colors. This pool of crystalline colors was cast on the dark passage that led straight to the butler's pantries and kitchens and, left, to a narrow stairway up to the servant's quarters.

"Step into the light and remain," she said.

"Step into the light," he muttered to himself over and over as she continued her instructions, and after she had gone. Sounds like some kind of New Age exhortation. Step into the light. Find the goodness in yourself, see your way to the Lord, find the life eternal.

It was too late to step into the light that day, for the sunlight was spent by the time he had kissed her goodbye, asked her to stay a while longer, kissed her goodbye again and made himself a sandwich. No, by the time he returned to the dining room the sun had continued on its arc. The room was in shadow.

The following day's sky was studded with fluffy white clouds; and he had only moments, as the sun appeared through them, to study the light, hardly enough time to actually stand in it.

"Stand in the light," Eve had instructed him, "so

that it covers you head to toe. Face the chandelier. Legs together. Hands clasped before you like so." She arranged his hands in a prayerful manner. "When you're ready, bring your hands up, fingers still laced as I showed you, and point them toward the crystals. And be still. And don't be afraid."

Afraid? He couldn't even bother to snort in derision.

The following day, she did not visit him; he waited and waited for her, for he had questions about this whole business of standing in the light. The sky was cloudless, the sun shone clear. He spent a good half-hour in the dining room studying this light. Fallon's crew eyed him with growing hostility as he stood staring at the chandelier and the light. They shrugged and went about their work applying fabric to the finished walls, retouching the molding, the tracery over the windows and the arches and corbels that radiated gracefully from the ceiling, which was finished—a brilliant, dusky sky blue.

"Great job," Mathis commented, looking up at that ceiling. The workmen thanked him, and made faces.

He realized there were only a few hours a day that the sunlight was sufficient to create this full pool of light. At this time of year, it was roughly from ten in the morning till noon.

Twelve o'clock came and went, and Mathis did not stand in the light. What if this is one of those Twilight Zone twists, he said to himself, where the plan is to free her soul? Yeah, maybe this is the one where I'm tricked into taking her place, wandering in the no-zone for all eternity while she skips out the door, into twenty-first-century

America.

Mathis knew he was kidding himself. He knew he was just scared. So, when the following day dawned bright and clear, and when Fallon's crew went outside to have their lunch break, he stepped into the doorway of the butler's pantry, into the light distilled through the crystal. First he checked to be sure he was alone, because this ramrod-straight, legs-together, hands-folded-in prayer position was uniquely embarrassing.

He was alone.

Step into the light, Jack.

He took a deep breath and did as he'd been instructed.

The light was brilliant, and it came at him from a thousand crystalline points. Dan Mathis stepped into the chandelier's pool and assumed the prayerful position and immediately he had to squint and flinch. It was like staring into a river with the sunlight glaring off it, the dappled light flecks growing, piercing. He felt dizzy, but not really dizzy, just disoriented, but not queasily so. It was just unfamiliar, this sensation, and he was afraid for a moment. But he was fine. It was like a migraine halo over everything. Like the shimmer of light off the water in a grotto ceiling, the chandelier colors dappled off the walls and floor and ceiling of the passage where he stood.

Cool, Eve, he thought. Very cool. Is this all?

Suddenly, through the sparkling colors he saw -ye gods —he saw a rug on the floor of the dining room. A

new Persian rug of vivid blue-on-beige that hadn't been there seconds before. Now the light dappling was gone, the disorientation was gone. He didn't feel as if he were dreaming, but, of course, he must be. On the wall: gold sconces where none had been, with candles installed; a fresh patina of fabric on the walls—a brilliant, dense, vertical striping of blues, purples and gold—portraits in oil and a sideboard with silver service.

And it wasn't the work of Fallon's crew, and it wasn't a dream. It really wasn't a dream.

He stepped out of the light, into the room as before: ladders, lumber, sheetrock debris, cans of varnish.

He hurried to the window. Fallon's crew was still eating lunch. Hell, they were just starting on their sandwiches.

Some kind of epileptic-type trigger here. Something...

Mathis, you idiot. You're looking for a rational explanation? You've taken an invisible woman as a lover.

Without further hesitation, he hurried back to the pool of prism light and stepped in, as instructed. Raise the prayerful hands. Blink against the brilliant light. Float, sideways. Marvel at that—his limblessness, the floating. Wait for the shimmering light, like a fog, to disappear. Now find the room, the house, transformed. Into a jewel box. A wonder.

He was standing where he had been in his own time and space—in the doorway leading to the butler's pantry. But now the passage behind him, rather than closed off and stuffed with storage, was clear of debris and fresh-painted. Just behind him, cabinets were neatly stacked with dishes and cutlery.

Mathis heard a voice. Two. A man and woman's in loud conversation called across the halls, and the tinkle of silverware.

"I'm bringing it up now, but you could snatch up the jug," came the female voice. "I got it," drawled the man, irritated.

Voices!

He wanted to walk from the butler pantry doorway further into the dining room—and he found that he could. With a simple urge, Mathis found himself moving. His real self, he knew for certain, was still standing in the light. But his unreal self could now advance, float, into the dining room.

It was as if he'd been seeing the house in blackand-white, and now it was presented to him in glorious color. Suddenly, the drab, dusty, dark and gloomy room blazed with color and texture. Mathis's heart shivered in its ribcage. His mind reeled and shut down with the impossibility of what he was seeing. Look up. The ceiling was a fresco of staggering color, depicting angels with trumpets in dense, fluffy-white clouds. To the right. There was now a brilliantly polished oak sideboard, its brass fittings gleaming, against the far wall; it was covered in a lace runner, and on it was an elaborate silver tea service. On a rack set on the wall behind were silverware, brassware and petit fours trays, all set on lace doilies. Ahead, the window glass was intact all along the front wall, and the back wall, too. The lower halves of the windows were sheathed in embroidered curtains, and the outer panels of the center windows were now set with stained glass, bright and new. Maroon velvet pillows adorned the window seats.

Look around. The walls were papered with busy floral wallpaper. The wood beams radiating from the ceiling were now free of termite pits and splits; they glistened as if oiled. Around again. The colonettes on the fringes of the rooms were painted to resemble marble. Alternating with the small columns were the wall niches, in which were set plaster urns and busts of noble Romans on pedestals. Down. The floor was free of dust and divots, and on it was a rug so new that its pattern was crisp, the colors bold, the threads upright. And in the center of the room, a cherrywood table, massive enough to seat twelve. The table was set for eight—linen tablecloth, blue china, glassware, with ornate cups and saucers and bowls and crystal glasses.

Look again—a hefty, stern-faced woman sitting at the head of the table, swabbing her face with a napkin.

Mathis let out a yip so loud and stumbled backwards so violently that he was certain the woman would scream, dishes would crash, an alarm would sound. He shouted again as a servant brushed past him. He scrambled back into the passage; but now another servant passed by him on her way to the stairs, and he scrambled the other way so as not to be seen.

The thunderbolt of panic compelled Mathis, his real self, to step out of the light.

The servants vanished, as did the rug, the sideboard, the table, the sconces. Once again he was back in the room, in his own time and space.

Fallon's crew was still outside, at lunch. In fact, they were still unwrapping their sandwiches, tearing open their bags of potato chips.

Almost no time had passed here.

"What is this?" he called out to his spirit guide, a desperate, fearful plea. His mouth and eyes worked like a toy, in an effort to reframe the question. He raked his hair with his fingers, whirled about like a skittle.

Am I mad?
"What is this?"
How could this be possible?
"What's going on?"
"Dan?"

Mathis jumped eight miles out of his skin at the sudden voice. But it wasn't Eve. It was Fallon, standing in the doorway.

"Something the matter? I heard you shouting."

"No, A.W., no. I just...the ceiling...your guys did a great job."

"Yeah, didn't they?" He folded his arms, leaned against the doorframe. "Well, you know, we had to put two coats of primer on it, then, instead of that sky-blue semi-gloss you and I saw on the chart? We found this semi-gloss at a supplier up there in Hartford that when it dries it—"

Mathis lunged at him like Zorro. "Yeah, great,

A.W., could you leave me alone with it, please. I'm so moved, I need some time."

He shoved Fallon down the hall, away from the dining room.

The day's sunlight in that room would be gone all too soon. And, Jesus, what if there was a sudden cloud cover?

"Talk to you soon, A.W. Thanks, man, bye, man, peace and love, dude."

Once Fallon was gone, Mathis whispered to Eve, "Are you there? Please come to me. I have questions, many questions."

She was not there to answer.

Hell with it. He stepped into the light. All was as before—brilliant points of light, a foggy shimmer of colorful light. The room, one minute a construction site, the next, brilliantly appointed and restored. A wonderland.

Mathis advanced into the room. All was as before, but the hefty woman was gone, and the table was not set.

He half-turned, and suddenly his blood froze. A servant—a chubby teenage girl, her hair tied up in a tight bun topped with a lace cap, wearing a starchy blue uniform and apron—was polishing the silver from drawers in the sideboard. She was looking right at him. He recoiled as her eyes bored into him…and ran on, without a flicker.

So, I'm invisible. My cry before was unheard.

He smiled then wondered, Do I have a mouth to smile?

Daniel Mathis took stock. He brought his hand up as if to clutch his head, run fingers through hair, but there was no hand there. He looked down. No legs. His body here was invisible, but it was with him—he could *feel* it. He clenched and unclenched his hands—he could feel it. He was here, but not here. As to vision, vision was flitty and loopy, like his real vision, not like the steady, craftsman-like moves of a camera. It was his vision.

He, Literal Dan, was still standing in the light in the room that Fallon's crew was restoring, while the men were taking their lunch break outside. Literal Dan was standing stock-still while phantom Dan was able to move about here, invisibly. Phantom Dan, light and fluid, could feel Literal Dan inside him—no, over him, like a heavy coat. If Phantom Dan wished to leave, he need only command heavy Literal Dan to take a step outside the light created by the chandelier.

This chandelier.

He ran an invisible hand over the crystals. The chandelier's brass chain was shiny and in good repair. Above the top tier of crystals were glazed, teardrop-shaped shades. But it was the same chandelier, and this was the dining room in the Institute.

His eyes were dreaming, but, no, he was not.

It was the dining room, long ago. Victorian times, he was pretty sure. He went around the table—he could do that, he marveled yet again—to the partially open windows. The expansive, semi-oval window seat was upholstered in plush cushions, the linen stamped with a landscape. He looked out the

window.

God almighty. Instead of the bleak and overgrown grounds he had become accustomed to along the house's frontage, here he found a vast expanse of glittering green lawn, trimmed with the care of a wedding-day haircut. At the center of the circular driveway were a floral garden and a fountain. Parked on the oval was a fine carriage, its sides paneled in gleaming burgundy notes. A man in a tophat and dark coat was grooming the horses.

Mathis backed away from the window. He wanted to allow his breath to return to normal and wait for his heart to stop its berserk thudding, but he couldn't...he couldn't. Exhilarated, mad with it, he cast almost frantically about him. There. The chubby servant girl had gathered up her bowl of polish and rags and was walking through the pantry, down the stairs.

Mathis followed her, down into what had been empty storage but was now the laundry and kitchens, the noise of it growing louder and louder in his ears until he was in the center of it. He followed the servant past a row of washtubs—look there. He stopped to admire a young servant girl, a girl as fetching and exotic as he'd ever imagined in some bodice-ripping penny dreadful. She was busty and redheaded, and angelic of face.

"Have you time to run to market for me, Mol?" came a lilting voice from the kitchen.

"I do not," hollered the girl at the washtubs, blowing a tendril of damp hair from her eyes.

Mathis continued on through the riot of the kitchens, between the rattling of dishes, the clanging of pots, the slap of dough, the gurgling of boiling liquids and an endless rush of Irish-accented gabble.

"...and he left off at eleven when she clearly expected him to remain till twelve, and when he came in the next day, Lord!"

"You're not paintin' the goose, girl, you're stuffin' it. Use your elbows."

"...and she said to 'im, all la-de-dah, don't you know, 'Oh, my, I've forgotten me bumbershoot. Would you mind terribly...?' You watch that 'un. You just watch."

Sight and sound, this is just too weird.

Literal Dan's heart started thudding and squeezing unpleasantly.

Hold on, you're safe, it's okay, it's just...too much.

There were six or more people in here, standing back-to-back, working at counters in a fog of kettle steam and errant oven smoke. Mathis walked right through them. As he did, he felt a ticklish noise in his brain and ghostly body. He wanted to stop and examine everything, everyone, but he couldn't go fast enough, wanting to see more. Around the kitchen again, past bubbling, hissing kettles of boiling stocks, fresh-killed game hanging from hooks, heaps of vegetables. Back through the laundry, a last glimpse of the fetching Mol, up the stairs, through the dining room and into the east hall.

This was the east hall? He'd always known it as bleak and empty, until the workmen had filled it with bags of cement, miles of vent piping and wiring and lumber and paint.

But now look. The walls were pine, he judged, but in most places this wood was painted or stained to chocolate brown and Moroccan leather. There were marble slabs set over the radiators, and on these surfaces were urns, clocks, vases and a dozen other knickknacks.

He floated along the hallway. To his left, the row of shallow rooms which he knew as storage were tiny classrooms and offices. He found a door closed and tried walking through it—and could! He felt the door pass through him as a strict, vertical tickle. Six young women were listening to an older woman speaking in a stiff, sing-songy voice.

"Mister Tchaikovsky has died, ladies. Yes. He only just gave the world the rather disappointing *Nutcracker* ballet. Now I understand his last piece is a mournful one. Perhaps he had a premonition."

Schoolgirls.

Their faces were different from twenty-first-century faces, Mathis realized, but in what way? Heavier? Rounder? Certainly, the complexions were not peachy, eyebrows not plucked, and teeth were not perfect, but a couple of them were beautiful by any standards.

And the way they dressed—a different world. Blouses with high collars, trimmed in lace. Dresses with bustles at the back, huge skirts to the floor. Fabrics like satin and silk. Their hair was uniformly long but tied up and beribboned.

Mathis hurried on.

To his right, he peeked into the library. A history book come to life: against a dark backdrop of leather-bound books to the ceiling, a large man with whiskers and dark suit, vest and watch fob read a newspaper.

Mathis had to see it all, all at once, and he rushed further down the hall. Every surface, it seemed, was painted or stenciled—he saw floral designs, fleur-delis, birds, clouds. On the walls toward the main body of the house were murals ablaze with color, depicting ancient Rome.

He stopped this mad rush in his beloved front hall.

It was a thing of splendor, far beyond what he had imagined. The walls of this nineteenth-century front hall were painted faux marble, with stencil touches along the molding. Depending from a chain was a chandelier, in gothic style, in pointed brass with glass panels. The Minton tile floor gleamed like new, which it very nearly was. A tall case clock guarded the faux door niche below the stairs.

The double return staircase was even more dramatic, dressed up and polished and gleaming. Mathis sighed to see it so perfect.

Near the front door there was an ornate walnut hall rack hung with light coats, hats, parasols and umbrellas. In relief, and acting as pegs and an umbrella stand, could be seen a stalwart huntsman and a hound with a quail in its mouth. The rack also had built-in twin seats with hinged hatches in which, he guessed, the butler kept various necessities. Opposite the rack was a calling card tray. He bent

down to see the cards. Incredibly delicate and detailed.

In a trance, Mathis started up the stairs, looking fondly at the woodwork, his woodwork. The corbels were, as he'd guessed, angels—plaster treated to look like marble. He ran his fingers along the bright-colored, unchipped murals in the wainscoting, alternating with stenciling. And the cartouche reliefs—he'd worked on these panels for months, and here it was, perfection. Angels, warriors, women, gowns, clouds, spears. Up on the first landing, where the stairs diverged, below the enormous arched window, now were two marble busts—George Washington and, he read, the Marquis de Lafayette, both garbed improbably in what looked like Roman togas.

Suddenly, there was a sound of a stampede, and descending on him from the west return staircase were more schoolgirls, maybe a dozen of them, their wide skirts rustling, their clunky shoes sounding sharp on the wood floors, their bustles bustling. Ages sixteen to nineteen, he guessed, all with roomy dresses full of frill, correct postures, bad skin and teeth, many of them rather plump...but attractive once you got used to the Merchant-Ivory hairstyles and clothes...the faces so close...

And that was all the time he had to take in, for he tried to shrink against the wall as the pack took the turn and galloped around him down the main stairs. He stepped this way and that, but too late—giggling, some taking the stairs with a kick flourish, a dance

step of the time? They rushed right through him, chattering excitedly.

"...seven hours long, one hundred-ten rounds!"

"Who?"

"Andy Bowen and Jack Burk."

"It was in New Orleans!"

"Gentleman Jim Corbett could beat them!"

"Pshaw! Corbett isn't half as handsome as John L. Sullivan, nor as mean or strong, and if they were to fight again..."

"'Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay...'"

"...Miss Hatchett down at the general store is saying that white and pastels will be stylish, that's what the World's Fair says..."

They rushed past him, through him; he felt them like mild tics and tickles, like a cool wind, down the stairs and left, toward the dining room.

Phantom Dan smiled. Maybe Literal Dan did, too. *My God*, he thought, *I'm a spy in a girl's boarding school*.

He willed his Real Self to step to the right, and in a flash the Victorian world was gone. He was in the barren dining room, in silence and squalor.

He hurried to the window and looked out.

Fallon's crewmen were still at lunch. In fact, they were still on sandwiches and chips.

Almost no real time had passed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

e couldn't wait to speak to her. He had a thousand questions. Fortunately, he did not have long to wait. She came to him that night, and the minute he felt her presence he reached out to embrace her.

"Oh, my love," he exclaimed. "Oh, my God, that's the most amazing, most astonishing experience I've ever had."

"Yes, I daresay," she said, offering her cheek for his kiss.

"But what is it? How is it possible?"

While he spluttered and burbled, her voice flowed over him like caramel: "To all of your questions, I must answer 'I don't know.'" She waited while he stopped huffing. She took his hands and directed him to sit. "I call it the Crystal River," she said. "You see why, I think. You get that sense of flowing, from my era to your own."

"Yeah. Yeah, I do. The crystals exist in your time and my time...and somehow they create a warping in time and space. Sunlight in both times, interacting with the crystals. There must be sunlight on both sides for there to be contact."

"Contact. Yes, I suppose so."

"Quarks. It must have something to do with quarks."

"Quarks. What a funny word."

"Yeah, hilarious. Quarks are these subatomic particles that can exist in two times at once. That's what physicists think. Einstein proved that space bends, so maybe time bends, too. Maybe the crystals bend time somehow, creating a...a dynamic quark pocket. Same space, another time. Can I travel to other times in the history of this place? Folding time and space. Can I do that?"

"If you can, I don't know how. This time, your time, is the only one open to me. I came here to be alone, until I met you."

"You are so sweet," he exclaimed. He leaned over to kiss her forehead and got her right eye. "But why your time and mine? If the chandelier has been here for all time in between, why don't we stop someplace in between?"

"I don't have answers for you, Daniel. All I've learned is that the life we live, the day-to-day life we all recognize, is just one facet of...Life. This Life, the Afterlife. God's plan."

"How did you discover it?"

"Pure chance. I learned how to navigate it by myself."

"You are a clever one. I was invisible there, of course, but I had no substance, as you do when you visit me. Why is that?"

"I only know that certain steps, gestures and

postures place me here, with you. I hoped that a certain posture would bring you into my time. It did."

Mathis opened his mouth to speak and felt her invisible finger stopping his lips.

"Daniel," she said, "I wouldn't want you to investigate on your own. I do not know what the consequences might be."

"Fine, I won't, but let me ask you—what if it's a cloudy day? What if one of us stays too long and it gets dark? Are we trapped forever in another time or crushed in a black universe?"

"My, you're an alarmist. No. No actual time passes. You stand in the light for a very short time."

"I understood that. And in order for it to work, it does have to be a sunny day in your time and in mine?"

"An interval of sunlight in both. Yes, that is what creates the River."

"So, we can't be stranded in the other's time, or ripped to shreds if we're traveling the River when a cloud flies over."

"What a dreadful thought. No, I don't believe so."

"What about diseases? I mean, couldn't I bring germs or viruses into your culture, something that could be lethal in your time?"

"No. I've had neuralgia and dyspepsia and, when I entered the River, into your world, I was healthy. And one time I had a cut on my arm. When I entered your world, it was healed. When I returned to my own, it was still there. And..."

"And what?"

"And, well..."

He could tell she was blushing. "Go ahead," he said. "Tell."

"I don't think I can get babies, from what we're doing."

"Ooh, good point, wench." He tickled her. She fought him. Soon they were on the floor. It's not easy wrestling an invisible woman, and sure enough, Dan Mathis lost. When she had him firmly pinned, he asked her, "Who are you? Tell me."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

Silence.

"But you live in the house, in that time," he prompted. "Clearly."

"Yes."

"Aha. See, what I'll do is, I'll listen to all the voices of the women there, and I will match your voice."

"You may try, but I believe that my voice sounds quite different, carried on the River, than it does in life."

"Why can't I know who you are?"

"Because you would be disappointed."

"No, I wouldn't."

"Yes."

"Hell I would. Station and class and money don't present the barriers they do in your time. We don't have those prejudices."

"Don't you?"

She left him some time during the night. He woke up

with the smell of her on his fingers, on his face. It was still dark.

He could not sleep any longer, waiting for the sun.

The morning found him setting up a vigil in the dining room. The crews were busy on the Gallery upstairs. He had the room to himself.

He watched the sunrays as they first breached the near hills, lanced through the windows and splashed on the far walls. "Come on," he heard himself mutter, impatient with the sun. He watched the rays explore the room, spread, then climb. At last, they reached the chandelier.

He didn't waste a second. He stepped inside, duplicated his previous stance: legs together, hands raised in prayer. After a long moment, the River took him.

The voice of a woman echoed in his head until the light formed into a Victorian picture, and he was there.

"...she's a fine girl, Mister Wingate." The voice near to him, a woman's.

"I'm sure she is," came the reply, a deep manly voice, slow and dry.

The dining room was empty. Again, Mathis was startled by the sudden color and texture before him, like he was drowning in crayons, or in a picture book. Again, he recoiled. Again, he recalled that he could not be seen. He collected his wits, and his curiosity.

The voices were coming from behind him. Mathis spun his invisible self around. At the other end of this short passage was a fat woman he'd seen in the

kitchen on a previous visit. Her jugs drooped in a white blouse, her hips ballooned from a blue skirt of rough wool. She was addressing a tall man in black attire: black jacket, dinky tie tucked in a waistcoat.

"Weskit," Mathis said aloud. No one could hear.

The tall man was standing at the door of an office—a closet in Mathis's time—crammed with nooks holding keys and papers and a miniscule desk.

This, Mathis would learn, was Wingate, the butler and factorum to Headmaster Kimbrough. Wingate ran the house but not the school. Easily six-foot-three, he was bone-thin, had a splotchy complexion and now looked at the woman—Miss Bailey, or Cook, as she was most often referred to—without really looking at her.

But Mathis had lost interest in their palaver. He floated through the dining room, along the east hall, past a young woman in white blouse and blue skirt who was dusting and arranging glass figurines on a shelf, through the front hall, into the reception room, the first door to the left as you entered the house.

This was, Janine Foote had told him, the room where guests, male or female, would wait to be received, or remain throughout their call if not well known to the family. The room had both a masculine and feminine feel to it, with a bear rug on the floor, a Steinway Grand dominating the righthand side and functional wooden furniture alongside more plush, overstuffed Italian Renaissance settees. The ceiling was a vivid blue fresco of angels and a *trompe l'oeil* rendering of a ribbed ceiling.

On the mantel was a clock with an elaborate metalworking of Zeus and Hera and a portion of a Hydra. Flanking it were oil lamps and flasks and, over all, a giant, gilded, gold-framed mirror. An ottoman wrapped around a Roman column in the room's center. In the corner was a cast iron sewing machine and, nearby, a Renaissance Revival sofa with deep-button velvet upholstery. On most pieces of furniture were draped delicate antimacassars, which, Mathis remembered from his history, were in place to protect the fabric from men's hair pomade.

The next room, the parlor, was where the women traditionally retired after dinner and where, Mathis recalled, families might gather at night for readings or stories. It was blessed with two enormous fireplaces, one on either side of the double doorway. Arrayed before each of the fireplaces was a sofa with a cameo placed on its backrest. Behind that, dominating the room, were two five-foot-tall gold-painted statues on pedestals—Mathis recognized them as Cupid and Psyche. They stood before three French doors with stained glass-paneled transoms.

Mathis could zoom close, closer than in real life without his eyes losing focus, and he could appreciate the detail. The vertical stripes in the wine-colored wallpaper were not stripes at all, but rather each was a rendered Doric column. In the details of the gilding on the mirror frame he could see depictions of the ordeals of Odysseus.

In fact, everywhere he rested his eye was texture or bric-a-brac—figurines, sculptures, plants, hanging

baskets, clocks, urns and vases. The shelves and chiffoniers were stuffed with all that, plus birdcages, tea sets, powder horns and miniature ceramic hats.

Mathis spun through the house, exhilarated at the sheer scale of appointment and decoration of this manor. It was like fag heaven, cubed. And he could see it in three dimensions, in lush Technicolor. There was hardly a floor space or surface of this huge house that was not crammed with something intricate or exotic. Needlework, doilies, tidies, flower stands, embroidered or crocheted textiles. Every room was stuffed to the rafters with furniture—davenport sofas, upholstered and wooden chairs, parlor cabinets, library bookcases, art cabinets and display cases. Most of the furniture was etched or embroidered with some bucolic or historic or mythic scene.

Cabinets were crammed with vases, statuary, glasswork, ceramics, Florence flasks, pinboxes, pillboxes, matchboxes, many carrying proverbs and pictures. There were gewgaws from Asia, Africa, South America and the islands—miniature gongs, painted seashells, seashell sculptures, animal hooves, flutes, rocks in soil, folding fans, scrolls in ribbon, pince-nez, kaleidoscopes, locks of hair or fur, beaded bracelets. Pressed flower aquatints, pieces in porcelain, glasswork, bonework, woolwork, quilts and dolls. There were teapots and coffee biggins, decanters and bottles, tobacco jars, plants and beadwork.

There was hardly a surface that was not textured or decorated or papered, the papers showing dense architectural designs, *trompe l'oeil* leaves, crosses, floral patterns and pastoral scenes. In the parlor, running along the woodwork above the window seat, was a series of papers in vivid colors and deep tone work depicting a panoramic view of ancient Rome. Over many windows and doors were colored glass panels, showing nature in the wild or religious symbols.

Where a flat surface was not papered, it was painted as faux marble or limestone or, in the case of the front doors, bronze. If not painted or papered, a surface might be covered in an embroidered or crocheted textile. Textiles were hung or draped everywhere, often portraying exotic scenes of the Orient or great moments in history up to that time. History, too, was found in the paintings, which were hung in gilded frames and standing on easels in every room in the house. There were also filigreed murals along walls, bright-colored frescos on ceilings, delicate cartouches along the great staircase, inlaid decorations on woodwork.

The dominant colors of the house were ochres, maroons, russets, spice hues of browns and orange and earth colors. Mathis was struck by how vivid and saturated the colors were in the wallpapers—sea blues and bright greens and vivid reds and yellows. He admired the high polish of all the brass and silver, the luster of the wood.

He was running his invisible hand along the stair railing, which, in a hundred years or so, he would sand and oil, when it suddenly struck him—the house

was awfully quiet.

Where is everyone? he wondered.

Where were the girls? Other than a few servants, there was no one at home.

He peeked out the windows at the back and side of the house. In the backyard was a croquet lawn, further distant a gazebo, and then vast greenery down to the drop to the river, with well-tended stands of flowers punctuated by classical urns, vases and classic statuary.

There was no one out there.

He hurried down to the kitchens, which, he now noticed, were situated directly under the dining room, and were connected to it via a dumbwaiter. He took in the huge wrought-iron woodstove with an enormous hood suspended above it, the six-top range, the reservoir for hot water, the warming oven and the cylindrical water heater standing in the corner. Through a narrow door was the servant's dining room. The icebox was just outside this room, situated near the side driveway for delivery of the huge chunks of ice. Past the servant's dining room were the boiler rooms and storage rooms.

There were only a few people in the kitchen. Cook was just now shouldering a scrawny younger servant away from the stewpot, saying, "Here, let me." Another young girl slapped dough on a wooden table. Crossing the kitchen on her way to the scullery was the alluring redhead, with a mouthful of clothespins and an armful of sheets.

Where were the students?

Mathis hurried back upstairs to the front of the house and along the small rooms of the east hall—and heard a sound from outside.

Horses.

He peered out the window of one of the front rooms. A pair of horses pulled a carriage around the oval, past invisible Mathis at the window. He listened to the rising sound of hoofbeats, the jangle of harness, the multiple creaks and groans of the carriage, which was itself magnificent, with gleaming brass fittings and wine-colored panels. The sound was loud and echoey under the porte-cochere.

Mathis had just a glimpse through the columns; the driver, having reined in, scurried down off his perch to fix the footstep and open the door.

Mathis left the small office. He hurried to the front hall. The tall, sallow figure of Wingate appeared and opened the door, admitting two very large people. First was a broad-faced, thick-lipped, hefty man in his late forties with an impressive sweep of greying brown hair. He puffed with every move, every word. Mathis would soon learn that each sentence he spoke was accompanied by wheezes and puffing. He tended to prolong his vowels when making pronouncements, and these impressive, stentorian words devolved in wheezes and hoarse breathing. This was Horace Kimbrough.

Behind him was Harriet Kimbrough, or Mistress Kimbrough, as the girls called her. The school's headmistress was the very embodiment of the sepia photographs of the period—a chunky, huffy,

unsmiling monument to dour disapproval. Her dark hair was thick and pulled up into a bun. She wore a sky-blue dress with the dramatic hoop flare in the back, which made it look like some farm animal was trundling after, and a great bustle fixed where all the fabric was gathered. Over her shoulder was a gold-flecked crocheted shawl. On her head was a wide, swoop-brimmed yellow hat with flowers spraying from its matching blue ribbon. Mathis later learned, via the students' late-night gossip, that Mistress Kimbrough was ten years out of fashion.

The butler took the man's hat, stick, gloves and coat, and then the lady's parasol, hat and shawl.

"How was the service, sir?" said Wingate.

"Splendid, Wingate, splendid," replied Horace Kimbrough. "Reverend Curtis was particularly eloquent on the subj—"

"Wingate, do be sure when the students arrive," cut in the Missus, "that they place their hymnals in the box. In the box, Wingate. Last week we were finding them in every nook and cranny."

"Yes, ma'am. The ladies will be following?"

"Yes, in three-quarters of an hour, I expect. Miss Cecil will be stopping to point out the fauna, as is her wont."

"Yes, sir."

"Tea," said the Missus.

Wingate acknowledged the order and was gone, laden with coats, shawls and hats.

As soon as the butler had his back to them, the manner of the two Kimbroughs changed; where seconds before they had been direct, authoritative and benevolent, their postures now sagged and their facial expressions dissolved into sour tics.

Kimbrough lumbered to his study and Harriet Kimbrough to the parlor. Doors were shut. Except for the distant, measured tread of Wingate's shoes on the parquet floor, the house was silent.

When they next met, Mathis reported his observation of the Kimbroughs' behavior to Eve.

"The Mister and Missus, they're unhappy, do you think?" she replied, surprised.

"Oh, yes."

"But they're both so pious, so...generous in their attentions and compliments to one another."

"At dinner. At gatherings of the school or staff."

"Yes."

"And you think that is how they are to one another, always?"

"I did think so, yes."

Mathis didn't answer.

"They are fine people," she insisted. He could tell she was annoyed with him.

"I'm sure they are."

"They are so good to us—I mean, the students, the staff. Everyone."

"Of course."

"You understand that it is a charity, the school. Most of the girls are orphans, and the few of us...those with living parents still could not afford such a lavish education. The school is entirely funded

by Mister Kimbrough's own fortune."

"Yes, love, I understand. I didn't mean to question their character. In fact, that's the irony, isn't it? That two good, generous people could be so unhappy together."

"I don't believe that is possible."

"I see it all the time. People don't always get what they deserve, dear. In fact, almost never. Your parents. Were they happy together?"

She was silent. "I wish we could be married, Daniel."

"Well, we can be, but the wedding...that's gonna be tough to arrange."

He felt her hand, like a sweet breeze, brush his cheek. He felt the moist kisses, little stamps on his forehead, and soon he was holding the whole bundle, invisible to his eye but warm, wiggly and responsive.

It was the year 1893. Mathis discovered this by peering over the shoulder of Horace Kimbrough, snapping open his June 29, 1893, copy of *The New York Observer*. Grover Cleveland had been elected president the previous year. Iron and steel workers were going on strike. Sherlock Holmes was the hero of popular fiction. The Chicago World's Fair was to open in a few weeks.

This was, indeed, The Kimbrough Finishing Academy for Young Ladies he had read about at the library. In addition to Horace and Harriet, there were about twenty girls ranging in age from fifteen to eighteen in residence. They shared three west hall

dormitory-style rooms upstairs and a bathroom, upstairs, which was just for bathing. The "earth closet" was located in the downstairs north hall. The Kimbroughs' bedroom, not very large to Mathis's eye, was in the upstairs east hall. Also living on the grounds were Miss Bailey the cook, Wingate the butler, Molly the scrubmaid and two additional servants, Lily and Mary, demure Irish girls who helped Cook get the kitchen started in the morning, then assumed serving and cleaning duties. Additional household help arrived and departed at appointed times, on foot.

Two others lived on the grounds. One was Duncan, the gruff, balding, muscular, red-haired groundskeeper—or the "you there" man, as he grumbled to his underling, Henry. "You there, empty the earth closet. You there, the weeds are lickin' at the cherubs." Duncan wore overalls over a grimy white shirt, boots and a cap. Henry was an older, misshapen version of Duncan. The two men were responsible for the grounds and the maintenance of the coal stoves—sifting ashes, laying the fire, emptying ashes, carrying coal and kindling, blacking the stove to keep it from rusting. They also removed waste from the earth closet and garbage from the kitchens, hauling it to the compost heap and the manure pile on the edge of the property.

The other live-in employee had a room in the upstairs south hall, near the students. Miss Cecil was in her mid-thirties, or perhaps younger. She was an instructor, and she acted as the students' governess:

she made sure their lights were out at night and that they were up promptly in the morning, that they ate sensibly and that they had proper (1890s-style) health maintenance. Miss Cecil fascinated Mathis for several reasons, not the least of which was that she was so hot. She was of Spanish or Italian blood, he guessed. She had full lips just made to smolder, to kiss, to pout...though mostly she used them to frown at the students. She had black hair—not just dark, black—high cheekbones, flashing dark blue or violet eyes. He could get, and did get, very close to her and still could not determine their color; it seemed to change not only with the color of her blouse but with the color of the wallpaper she stood near or the carpet on which she trod.

Mathis haunted the house for so long a time over the late weeks of spring that he was able to read the full spectrum of colors in Miss Cecil's eyes...and to observe the house's rhythms.

Cook and Duncan were first up. By five a.m., they were padding sluggishly into the kitchen and furnace room to start fires and kettles and make coffee. Other servants followed: Wingate, Molly, Lily and Mary from upstairs, the others through the back door from outside. The stovetops were fired by gas, but the supply was unpredictable; and Mathis saw Duncan singe his hair and eyebrows several times. On the days when the gas did not flow, wood for the stove had to be lugged.

Meantime, chunks of lard and butter had to be cut from great blocks, along with giant hanks of meat. Peas and corn had to be shucked, noodles made, bread baked. Over the course of the day, puddings and casseroles were constructed.

The schoolgirls were up at six, aroused by Miss Cecil. They are breakfast in two shifts, six-thirty and seven-fifteen. The Kimbroughs took their breakfast at eight while the girls took their first classes with Miss Cecil.

The main classroom was located where, more than one hundred years later, Daniel Mathis would have his quarters; Mathis's bedroom, sitting room, kitchenette and bathroom were, in 1893, one large room. It held four rows of student desks, a large desk for the instructor at front and a chalkboard.

Miss Cecil began each day's first class by leading the girls in a recitation: "In books and work and healthful play, let my first years be passed, that I may have for every day, some good accounts at last."

The girls moved in various groups from the classroom to the library to the Gallery upstairs, and the more intimate rooms in the main wing. Miss Cecil began the day with penmanship. She also taught literature, composition, cultivation, music, drawing, history of art and elocution. Horace Kimbrough taught calculation, physical sciences, languages, history, geography, rhetoric and exercises of memory. Harriet Kimbrough held classes in poise, deportment, domestic duties, calisthenics, Bible study, catechism and sacred history. Mathis was struck by how much time was spent in copying, in memorizing and in reciting.

There was a seventy-minute break for midday meal and a short promenade around the grounds, and then it was back to work. Meanwhile, Duncan and his crew gathered wood, tended the lawns and gardens and effected repairs on the house. The kitchen staff prepared the evening meals and prepped for breakfast. Molly and her team washed and hung the laundry. The house servants polished the knickknacks, washed the floors and windows and fetched Kimbrough his teas and snacks.

As darkness descended, servants would go about the house igniting the oil lamps on tables, in sconces and chandeliers so the house glowed with a soft, golden light. Evening meals, too, were taken in two shifts. Horace presided at one, Harriet the other and Miss Cecil at both, the adults seated at either end of the mahogany table, in close correcting distance to the girls. There was no talking, except when called upon, and only one person was allowed to speak at one time. Every girl had to finish her plate.

And such plates! Each morning the table was laden with eggs, fried potatoes, wheatcakes, porridge, sausages and other morning meats, breads, including doughnuts, fruits, jams, jellies and more. At lunch and at night there was no shortage of beef (Mathis never saw pork or lamb) and such a wide variety of fruits and vegetables that even the Kimbroughs remarked on it; apparently, the abundance was due to the recent development of refrigerated shipping. The students, following Miss Cecil's lead, were allowed only one small piece of meat per meal. And there

were salad greens and tomatoes, which Miss Cecil positively beamed over.

"It is the very latest thing in France, you know," she would remind the scowling Harriet. Cecil would enthuse over the different varieties of lettuce and tomatoes, which had robust names such as the Conqueror and the Paragon.

There was an intense preoccupation with digestion, which was discussed at any time, at any length. Harriet Kimbrough urged the girls to chew each bite thirty times, and bottles of Drake's Plantation Bitters and Radway's Ready Relief were always within reach. Dyspepsia was the enemy. If a girl was reluctant to finish her serving or lost count of her chews, "Dyspepsia!" Horace would intone, and Harriet would chime in with "Cleansing!"

For cleansing, an enema bag was kept in the upstairs bathroom. The medicine cabinet up there was also stocked with blood builders, cough syrup, stomach bitters, celery compound, bronchial troches, chlorate potash tablets for sore throat and hoarseness, slippery elm lozenges and aromatic cashew.

In the evenings, the girls would gather in the parlor, and one of the Kimbroughs or Miss Cecil would read aloud from various classics and correctives, while the girls would needlepoint, sew, create dry flower arrangements or other crafts, or chop vegetables for the kitchen. At nine, Miss Cecil led the girls upstairs. Washing and evening prayer took half an hour. After Miss Cecil doused the lamps at nine-thirty, gossiping in urgent whispers occupied

another hour or so of the young girls' time.

The house in 1893 had heat and plumbing, up to a point, Mathis discovered. There were cast iron heating stoves in the parlor, library and kitchen—the clunky radiators he had seen and assumed were old as Methuselah had not yet been installed in 1893. During winter, the heat traveled by way of grills in the ceilings from the first floor, but it barely warmed the upper floors; and Mathis understood that during the coldest times the girls had to resort to hot water bottles and heated stones to keep warm.

Coal was still used for stoves, furnaces and water heaters, and the soot was a mighty task to clean up. There was talk of converting to gas for these functions, but Kimbrough was still studying the matter.

As for plumbing, pipes had been installed a few years before, the water carried from a reservoir a mere twenty miles north and east. The water was conveyed to the kitchen for cooking and clean-up, and one pipe stretched up to the second floor bathroom. This bathroom contained only a modest sink, vanity table and bathtub, which each person in the house was entitled to use once a week, on a strict schedule supervised by Miss Cecil. The water ran complainingly through the pipes with high-pitched thrums and groans and loud bangs.

To pee, the house members had three options. There were chamber pots in every room, and people used them as necessary, especially at night. There was a privy, called the "necessary house" by Mrs.

Kimbrough, outside, and that was used mostly by the kitchen and grounds staff. Students and faculty used the "earth closet," which was located on the first floor of the north wing. In this unpleasant, tight closet, dry earth was stored in a hopper beneath the wood commode. When the person was finished, he or she pulled a crank, which released earth on the waste. It was Duncan's and his brooding associate Henry's task to empty chamber pots, clean the privy and empty this earth closet hopper twice a day, leaving the whole for the night soil man, who came to collect it in the wee hours.

Until the last two years the house had been lit exclusively by kerosene lamps, Mathis came to understand. Recently, gas lights were installed because a gasworks had been established a few miles down the river. Kerosene lamps were still used, but they were odorous and required that the house be vented in all weathers. One of the main duties of the house help was the trimming, rewicking, filling and wiping of the few lamps still used.

Electric lamps were being introduced in the cities, but Kimbrough had just purchased a set of incandescent mantles for the house and was not about to consider changing to electric. This mantle was a gauze hood that fitted over gas burners; it softened the light, but it was still green, and Miss Cecil complained on behalf of all the women in the house that this green glow was not flattering to the fair sex.

Mathis was so mesmerized by the quaint behavior, the alien decor, the history-book hairstyles and clothing that it didn't occur to him to intrude on the privacy of these people. One of these women was Eve, and he didn't feel right in indulging his voyeuristic side.

Of course, that didn't last long. A twinge is nothing to a man like Mathis, and is easily overcome. One night he found himself in the house late. It was quiet. The girls had been ushered upstairs by Miss Cecil. The Kimbroughs had gone to their chamber as well. Lamps were doused by Lily. Mathis didn't want to leave, and somehow he found himself alone with one of the girls in her room.

It was Molly, the scullery maid. He lingered in Molly's room to see if she read books, did she have any stylish clothes or a collection of knickknacks. She stood at the window brushing her hair, and he stopped his floating. There was a twinge of guilt or anxiety, to be in such close proximity to this private moment, but he went closer and gazed into her eyes. In daylight they were a dazzling splash of green; they were expressive, mischievous eyes. He loved watching her watch others, because she seemed to see much but say little, and she took no shit from anyone downstairs.

Now, though, in the low light of her oil lamp, much of the color was washed out. He got close. No matter how close he got, Molly was not alerted to his presence, so he got closer still.

He wondered if this could be Eve, his spirit guide. Molly's body seemed the right type, she had the correct hair, but this was an uneducated girl, and his guide clearly had some schooling and the hint of a proper background. Also, Molly's clothes were a nubby wool, not at all the silken garments he removed from his spirit.

He inspected the freckles on her neck, the thick, reddish-brown hair she was brushing. He peered outside, to see what she was seeing; but it was only tree branches, full of spring leaves, against a starry sky much more vibrant and glittery with stars than in his time. Mathis wondered what dreams were dancing behind those eyes, what speculations.

And then she reached back and started to unbutton her overblouse. Still with the faraway look in her eye, with that businesslike/dreamy way of the girl, she undressed. Mathis was rooted to the ethereal spot.

Button, button, button...and then off it came, and he was gazing at some impressive cleavage. Unlace, unlace, unlace, and her rust-colored woolen skirt plopped to the floor. Now he was gazing at some firm, shapely, freckly thighs. Then she began to work the small laces on her bodice, unlace, unlace, unlace, and her breasts spilled free, and Mathis was this close to them-fruitstand firm, the pink nipples erect, all the little bumps twinkling in the sudden cold. And her bush, it was so thick. He felt the stirrings of a boner in his real-life body, while his spirit body nothing less than floating, aching became a ectoplasmic woody.

God, how suddenly he lusted after this woman, how frustrating it was not to be able to touch her. He hovered at her hips, he got this close to her quim, the lips visible behind that thicket of reddish pubes. How he wanted to be in there, licking it, and feel the juice on his face. He wanted to lap them up in a frenzy, wanted to see her, eyes closed, head lolling to the side, hear her pant and moan to the rhythm of his tongue lapping at her, deep in her hole then up the lips, deep, then up, finishing with his firm tip just pressing the button until she bucked wildly, smothering him in pulsating pussy and bum.

He looked up, and she seemed to be looking right at him. He fled the room, right through the wall.

He stepped out of the River, blinking at the late morning sunlight and wondering at himself. This shame was so unlike him. Was it out of respect for Molly—dead in her grave Molly, remember—or for Eve? What would she think of him spying on these other women? A ghost lusting for a ghost?

For hours, then days, he burned with shame and wonder and excitement, seeing those breasts again with the lovely pink nipples pointing at him in embrace, the stippled bumps and the dark aureolas, the little blue veins in the cloudy white globes. And her stout hips...and he started to become curious about her ass, which he had forgotten to evaluate. And he trembled with desire to see her again. He knew it was wrong, an intrusion, but he knew he would not hesitate to see her, to see them all, again.

And from that point on, he felt no shame about it.

One fine sunny morning, Mathis strolled into the dining room and, to his horror, found it as dark as a

closet. Outside, boards rested against the windows, and a huge blue dumpster was placed about two feet from the house. Not a trace of sunlight could get through.

"A.W.!" he screamed. "Yo, Fallon!"

"Oh, yeah, hello, Dan." Fallon's goofy walrus moustache and groovy specs appeared in the window, like the host of a children's TV show.

"A.W., the dumpster, it can't go there!"

A.W. Fallon cupped his hand to his ear. "Can't hear you. The trucks."

"I said, the dumpster! It cannot be left there!"

"But that's where we're putting the chute. All the scrap materials from the attic and the upstairs, see, they go down the chute into the dumpster."

"All that scrap material flying past the dining room windows? Something's bound to break."

"No problem. We board up those windows."

Mathis almost choked. "No," he declared. "No chute, no dumpster. Call the rig back and haul it around to the south face."

"We were concerned that the patio stones might crack, we put it there."

"Fuck it. They're not period. Put it there now."

"Okay, but why?"

"While we're talking about it, I want the crew to finish up in here, the dining room. What's left? Electrical? Wood finish? Paint?"

"Exactly."

"I'd like you to put some extra people on it. Get Michaelson's people on the wiring. I want the room finished."

"I was waiting to call in Michaelson until the parlor—"

"No, call him in for a day. I want the dining room finished."

"Okay, but why?"

Think, Dan. Ah. "Stunning is bringing in some people soon, show them the place, and he wants at least one room completely done."

Fallon shrugged. "Okay."

Most of the women in 1893 were stouter than Mathis was used to. Damper. Oilier. Many of the Victorian faces bore the stamp of the old country, the farm, the village—the too-close-together eyes, elephant ears, broad forehead, misshapen head, the hillbilly features that had been bred out of existence in the New York-glitterati, California-buffed Eurotrash world. In general, these nineteenth-century faces were puffier, with a greater preponderance of dark rings around the eyes, wens, zits, splotches, scars and psoriatic flakes. Some of the girls and servants had long hairs protruding from moles, or moustaches. These were the days before aerobic fitness and decent nutrition. The days before dermabrasion, rhinoplasty and depilatories.

But the lovely girls in this house would be lovely in any age. Lustrous eyes. Clear skin. Fine cheekbones. Voluminous hair. Handsome figures. At first, the clothing of the time threw him off. It was hard to tell, just by looking, if a woman was full-figured, as Eve

was, or slender or even borderline obese.

Mathis watched most closely the girls he found most attractive, whether physically or...well, physically. He darn well hoped that Eve was one of the ones who quickened his heart and tightened his trousers.

He inventoried the beauties of the house:

The alpha-chicks of the Kimbrough Finishing Academy were Bethann, Suzanne and Hope. They were the best students and wanted everyone to know it. They volunteered to help the teachers. They knew their Bible and sang loudest in chapel. They abhorred vulgarity and "common" cultures and behaviors.

Of course, as prim and proper as they could be with the teachers, they could be utterly cruel to their fellow students. They often borrowed clothes from the others; they seemed to think it was their due. They were often unkind and impatient. They were high-handed with the servants.

Bethann was, in her eyes and the eyes of her followers, the premiere student in the school. She would make a great prom queen, thought Mathis, pretty, with light-green eyes, auburn hair and a fine figure. She knew how to use the eyes, too—they could grow moist and dreamy, like an actress in a shampoo commercial, and you'd forget that she was also prudish, judgmental, dismissive, vain, shallow and unkind. She often wore the infuriating smile of She Who Has the Answers, the superior airs much prized by Horace and Harriet Kimbrough.

Suzanne and Hope were her toadies, following her

everywhere and aping her irritating ways. They, too, were pretty, with bright eyes and thick, dark hair.

The betas of the Academy were lesser students but, to Mathis's way of thinking, far more interesting. In strictly Victorian ways, they resisted authority and exhibited interest in sexuality, sports and popular culture: stage plays, penny dreadful novels and popular songs.

The leader of the betas was Caroline. She questioned the teachings in Bible studies, and this got her in trouble often with the Kimbroughs. She threw herself into word games, croquet and guessing games with gusto. She liked to laugh—the betas were always laughing and whispering, much to the consternation of the schoolmasters and the alphas.

Caroline had insatiable curiosity about romance, sexuality and the lurid crimes committed in the back alleys of the big cities. Her brown eyes, framed in her light-brown hair, were shrewd, bordering on dangerous, and her boobs were just enormous. She read a great deal and had a store of forbidden books hidden in the house's attic.

Caroline also had toadies who followed her about—Madolyn and Justine, and there was a third girl, Cecilia, who sort of functioned as a sub-toady, idolizing Justine in her every act and word. They were all stout, busty, with impressive haunches.

The third Finishing Academy clique Mathis dubbed the wannabes. These were the girls who were not inclined to cleave to either group. Among the wannabes was Gwendolyn, who watched others,

other activities, and always took a quarter-step backwards, reflexively cringing against contact.

Jane snapped at everyone and everything, and frowned at her tasks with a completely over-the-top ferocity. She was an old woman in the making. Her huge jugs and ocean-blue eyes were the only characteristics that vaulted her into Mathis' hall of fame.

Elinor was a sort of poet, wan and pale, always looking about wistfully, dramatically. Margaret was very smart, very quiet, very composed and stubbornly kept to herself but was gracious and poised in conversation when cornered. Addy was Margaret's only friend.

Addy was a major babe, as far as Mathis was concerned. He liked her because she was usually in trouble with the Kimbroughs but beloved of the kitchen staff, as she spent most of her free time downstairs learning to cook and making herself useful cleaning or prepping. Addy was a great favorite of Miss Bailey and Molly, though Wingate would often shoo her away from the kitchens.

"Not proper, Miss," he would admonish her.

I wonder...is it Addy? Mathis mused. Could she be my spirit guide? He had spent one afternoon watching her as she tried to memorize a poem, and she was so cute: She had a mane of curly brown hair, preternaturally round, dark eyes and modest but perfectly formed breasts. Rolling her eyes, protruding her tongue, she struggled with the poem. Mathis fell half in love, and hoped she was Eve.

On school days, the girls customarily wore a tight basque and matching overskirt of brown, black or subdued pattern. Decorative buttons, a lace bib and a modest pin or pendant were the only flourish, or there might be a ruffle or floral accent along the front. The waists were drawn as tight as possible.

Other days they wore a puffed-sleeve blouse and, over it, a Balmoral jacket buttoned to the throat or a morning coat over a waistcoat, with a necktie and collar. Again, buttons—many displaying intricate decorations or graceful contours—were the only decorative touch. The girls removed their jackets for each lesson or activity but were required to wear them in between, and at meals.

On their feet, they wore chameleons, modest shoes perforated to reveal the stockings, which at this time were fashionably black. Two hairstyles dominated: pulled severely back and fastened into two braids (a la Madonna, it was called), and braided and arranged into coils on the back of the head (the chignon). There was much more fuss and flounce on Sunday. And there was politics: unending rounds of borrowing and fighting over every ribbon and pin.

Miss Cecil was more fashionable, and when she would go into the village or to Brewster on errands, she would wear one of a number of her hats, some with brims, others without, usually with a floral flourish. A ribboned or lace jabot would be applied to decorate her dress, and she would carry a very fashionable, very large ostrich-feather folding fan. On such occasions she wore elbow-length silk gloves in

blue or green.

If she were going out at night—a rare promenade along the riverfront in the village or into Brewster for a soiree—she might wear her Little Lord Fauntleroy dress with its emerald green velvet tunic and white lace collar. She also would carry a parasol or a fan and wear her favorite shawl, Persian pear, or perhaps her pomegranate. The girls would gather on the staircase to admire her and see her off, and she would shoo them away before heading out to her coach.

"I saw that in *Vogue*, that new magazine?" Bethann would declare to one of the lesser lights. "I'm sure you haven't seen it. You're so busy with *Godey's* and *Peterson's*."

"Have too seen it."

"Is that so? Then why were you admiring the princess dress in Dunwoody's window? Everyone knows it's been out of fashion for years."

The combat among the girls was waged night and day, in every room in the house. Mathis, befuddled in his quest for Eve's identity, next studied the character of the girls, seeking a clue. In chapel one day:

"Bethann, can I sit next to you?" said Jane.

"No, it's Suzanne's turn."

"My turn," chimed in Suzanne, sitting down with a toss of her hair. "We don't like you anymore," she added, and Hope, on the other side of Bethann, nodded.

"But why?" Jane asked.

"That collar...with your hair pulled back? It's so unflattering," said Bethann.

And at night, after lights out, endless remarks across the rooms, and from room to room through closed doors:

"I think Sir Gawain found the Holy Grail and hid it for safekeeping."

"That's nonsense. Why would he allow Arthur to die for lack of it?"

"It's the way God wanted it."

"It's the way Guinevere wanted it, so she could carry on with Lancelot."

"You're talking rubbish."

"Arthur didn't like to do it, but Lancelot did."

"Did they do it in the woods, you think? On the ground?"

"That's evil."

"How big were castles back then? Could you find a place to be alone with your beloved?"

"Stop it, stop it, stop it."

"You're not close to God, Addy, but we are."

"There is no God."

"Don't say that. Blasphemy."

"Truth. How can we know?"

And on it went, hoarse whispers in the night.

After his enjoyment of Molly the scullery maid's disrobing, Mathis had intended to follow Addy, to watch her fling her undies aside and bare her curvaceous self to him; but the first night he had the opportunity, he instead found himself drawn to the chamber of the alluring Miss Cecil. He hovered there, watching her alone in her bedroom, waiting for her to undress, of course, but also looking for some clues as

to whether there was evil or wit or an adventurous spirit hidden there.

He watched her as she sewed, mending her clothes. She stared out the window. At precisely nine-thirty she went on her rounds, bidding the girls goodnight, snuffing out the oil lamps. She returned to her room and shut the door quietly. She read a book, sighing now and then.

Unknown to her, there was a spirit in the room, waiting for her to undress.

He waited.

She turned the pages of her book.

He waited.

Her bedroom was not large. None of them were large by the standards Mathis was used to. The largest bedroom belonged to the Kimbroughs, naturally, and it measured perhaps fifteen by twenty-two. Each bedroom was fitted with a bureau, a chair, a chamberpot, a washstand with a wash bowl and water pitcher, a sponge, a towel for each resident, plus a strip of oilcloth under the table for the protection of the floor. Most of the rooms were wallpapered. There were Persian rugs on their floors, and a large wardrobe for their clothes, and their patterned linens were finished with lace pillowcovers and covelets.

Miss Cecil had a towel rack in her room, with Moroccan-style fringes in her towels, and a vanity table, a cheval glass dressing mirror and a davenport. Many of the finer bedrooms had *trompe l'oeil* frescos or murals on their ceiling, including some of the girls'

dormitories, though the paints there were fading, and the images of stars and romping children were beneath their age.

In the hall outside the bedrooms of Cecil and Kimbrough was a speaking tube shaped like an eyecup. Kimbrough or Miss Cecil could flip open the lid and speak to Wingate in his quarters.

Mathis was tapping his invisible foot, finished with his inventory of her bedroom, when Miss Cecil yawned most sweetly and stretched like a kitty. She put aside her book—tonight it was *Island of the Golden Knight*—stood and unpinned her hair. Mathis's invisible pecker began to stir, beholding her lovely, thick dark hair, luxuriantly wavy; her tiny waist, almond eyes of blue or violet, full lips, fair skin. As he admired her, she let down the last of her hair and looked down, so that it tumbled over her face. Meantime, she began to unfasten buttons at her waist.

Mathis had learned that the Victorians referred to underwear as *dainties* or *unmentionables* or *kicksies* or *don't mentions*. Miss Cecil had the most complex array of undergarments of anyone in the house. The students' underwear, he would learn, was somewhat simpler.

First, Miss Cecil removed her overskirt then her underskirt, and then briskly unbuttoned her blouse. Mathis reveled in the fair skin and delicate cords of her neck. He could also see her ankles. That was all he could see so far. Still, she was quite lovely in her delicately embroidered bodice and petticoats; these were silk, bordered, frilled, flounced and beribboned,

quite an impressive display of craftsmanship, only for her eyes—and his. With sidelong, frowning glances, her mind far away somewhere, undressing for a sheik or a prince or that knight on his island, perhaps tickled in some way by Mathis's presence, Miss Cecil undid the front laces of the bodice and removed it.

Now was revealed the camisole, a sleeveless under-bodice. She gripped it lightly in both hands and pulled it over her head. Mathis feasted his eyes on the famous corset, made of heavy cotton with stays of bone to reinforce it; it gripped Miss Cecil from her bust (creamy) to her hips (delicious), and it was so tightly fitted to create Miss Cecil's wasp waist that Mathis did the ghost equivalent of holding his breath. He had all the time in the world to gaze on this exotic creature from another time—the corset was hooked in front and laced in back, and the dark-haired schoolmistress took her time removing it, her sideways glance remote, dreamy.

Once the corset parted and fell away, she gave an audible sigh of gratitude—but still she was not naked. In one sexy shimmy, she pulled the many ruffly petticoats to the floor and folded them over her reading chair. Now she stood in the final barrier, a silk undervest. But Mathis was already well rewarded, seeing the swelling bosom and rich thighs. She shrugged her shoulders and hitched her arms and Mathis watched, transfixed, as she let the undervest fall to the floor. Her cleavage had not deceived; her breasts were smooth and full, tipped with large brown nipples. Below that tiny waist, her bush was

full and untrimmed. Her bum was large by fitness club standards, but well formed and inviting, swelling almost supernaturally from the backs of her thighs.

Mathis started forward, close, and closer still, to look under that canopy of hair. To see that lovely face, the large, round dark eyes, the full lips, now frowning at her task—straightening the sleeves of her nightdress.

Down here, so close to her breasts, under a tent of her hair, he could not smell a thing. But his soul could squeeze in between those magnificent boobs, nestle right there, see every bump on her aureole, the plucky little nipple. Still, he could not feel their warmth, nor sniff the fleshy, earthy, woman-scent of her. He rose to hover at her ear. No, he could not scent her flesh or her hair, but he could see the fuzz at her cheeks, the birthmark near her ear, the few, tiny imperfections in the skin at her jaw and neck, and the loose strands of hair, all haywire along the part.

He descended and swam around her hips—to the bushy pussy and under, along it, between the legs to her tush. He hovered there as he had between her breasts, in the valley of her great bum, remained there as she walked across the room, and the cheeks danced. He followed, and then a shadow fell around him. She had put on her nightdress. But he remained as she sat at her dresser and pinned up her hair and applied creams and picked at her teeth and lay back in bed. He hovered inside that nightdress, along the armpits, at the nipples, along her mouth...and then he

lingered right before her eyes, first one, then the other, close enough to see the sunflares of her irises. Trying to get her attention.

Miss Cecil sat up in an attentive posture. She looked about her, faintly frowning, as if she had heard something.

Or felt a presence. A spirit.

He bestowed a phantom kiss goodnight, and departed.

It was still mid-morning in the real world. Mathis hustled past the workmen in the east hall into his quarters. He closed the door and feverishly jerked off, thinking of Miss Cecil.

CHAPTER EIGHT

re you Miss Cecil?" Mathis asked Eve the minute they were alone together.

"Why do you ask? Do you find her lovely?"

"There, you see? This isn't fair."

"How so?"

"Because if I say yes, and you're not her, I'll hurt your feelings."

"No, you won't."

"There! See?"

"See what?"

"If you don't care, then you hurt my feelings."

"How so?"

"Because of the way I feel about you."

"Which is?"

"I...I..."

"Yes, Daniel?"

The L-word was like a coat of lead on his tongue, but he managed to yodel it out into the open.

"I l-l-love you."

She was quiet.

"Even though I don't know who you are, even if you are invisible, even if you are deceased in the strict sense, I really love you a lot."

She was still silent.

"Eve?"

Mathis realized — *idiot* — that she was weeping. She hugged him. He felt her wipe her nose on his shoulder.

"I haven't told you?" he said. "I thought I'd said it a thousand times."

"During lovemaking, yes, which doesn't count."
"Oh."

"I do love you so, Daniel."

It was the sweetest kiss ever. And the longest, tightest hug.

"What makes you think I am Miss Cecil?" Eve sniffled.

"Her authority. Her will. Her self-confidence. Plus, her body looks the way your body feels to the touch."

"How do you know?"

Mathis blushed.

"So, you watch us, you watch us undress."

"No, not everyone..."

"But Miss Cecil..."

"Yes."

"I like that. I want you to watch us. Sometimes I think that you might be watching me, and I get wet down there. I watched you."

"You did? Hell, of course you did."

"It was my first view of...of a cock."

"What did you think?"

"Oh, my! I didn't think. I was frightened. And hot. And I didn't want to...violate you, but I couldn't take

my eyes off it."

"Me, too. I didn't want to. Now that's all I want to do."

"Then do it."

"But..."

He heard the springs of his bed groan, the rustle of silken fabric.

"All of us," she said from above him. "Watch us naked."

"B11t "

He never saw it coming. Suddenly, there was the warmth of a body, the smell of pussy—she shushed him by wiggling her bottom—lower, lower—and slowly sitting on his face.

Some of the most interesting exchanges and activities—clothed—took place in the room that Mathis came to understand was the imaginative refuge for the girls: the Gallery.

Fallon's workmen were right to nickname it The Cathedral. The ceiling was vaulted, the enormous beams exposed, like a belltower, and the huge arch in the far wall introduced the cathedral window.

But the changes in this room, from the dusty, battered, boarded-up, doleful place it was when Mathis saw it on his twenty-first-century tour to its sparkling 1893 version, were dramatic. The windows! They were so colorful it was dizzying. A large central pane was surrounded by small stained-glass panels carrying images of nature and farming, archangels and heavenly choirs, all of it framed by intricate

geometric metalwork. One of the lower panels, he noted, was clear and had a magnifier, or telescopic, pane, meant to enhance the view of the green lawns and the river beyond.

The many paintings that hung on the walls here were framed in baroque frames of gilt and burnished wood. Some were hung so high they were impossible to see, except by someone who could float, like Mathis. They were packed so tightly side-to-side you couldn't fit a toothbrush between them. Most of them involved heroic themes of Greek and Roman mythology and tales of Arthurian legend. There were depictions of fantasy creatures such as fairies and trolls, angels, figures from history and myth, pageants and battles.

Packed into the Gallery were numerous pieces of furniture — chairs. wooden and upholstered; ottomans; divans. In this maze of furniture, the girls would gather in pairs or groups of four or five. They played games such as whist, euchre and flinch. They sewed. Some pursued woodburning projects, called pynography. They discussed the modern world, which was changing so quickly for them—in the big cities "actualities" were being shown, lifelike moving pictures of a man sneezing, a girl dancing. Typewriters were being widely used now. Books concerning Jews, like Ben-Hur, were being published. New heroes, like Eugene Sandow, the modern Hercules, were to be admired. New foods, like Nabisco Shredded Wheat and Cracker Jack, were being introduced. There was the future to consider.

Will I be a Harvey Girl in restaurant service, or a Gibson girl and work in an office? Or perhaps one of those new telephone operators?

"They say that men will never take such jobs. They're far too argumentative and rowdy," said Madolyn. They dreamed of meeting a rich man, like Andrew Carnegie, and of advising him on which museums or libraries to build. They discussed stores they had never even seen: Hess Brothers, Kroger, Woolworth's, Sears & Roebuck. They pored over the Sears catalog.

"Oh, and look—Princess Tonic Hair Restorer! And the Princess Bust Developer, with Bust Cream and Bust Food, unrivalled for enlargement of the bust. From the Cerco Chemical Laboratory in Chicago. New Scientific Help to Nature!"

The stereoscope was kept in the Gallery. When a girl pressed the device up to her eyes, she beheld three-dimensional scenes of Niagara Falls, Philadelphia and the American West. The cards depicting boxers and baseball stars cards were well worn and used, while the "conduct stereos," which demonstrated proper behavior and posture, were never touched. It was in this room that the girls, their heads close, whispered about boys glimpsed in church, their whispers lost to the world, as far as they knew. But there was Mathis, part of this moment.

"I saw Duncan again. And that servant from the Talmadge estate."

"Did they do it on the swing again?"

"Oh, yes. She goes on the swing, like this, on her

belly? Raises her skirts and offers her fanny to him, and he puts it in her. Sometimes she sits on it and he puts it in like that."

"You're lying!"

"Am not. He does it while the rest of us are at church. When I have the croup and stay home, I see him! I see his manhood. She touches it."

"I had a dream...of a castle, and behind it a field of combat. I'm a slave girl, or a princess in a torn dress, I cannot be sure, except that I am in the power of whoever is victorious. And this gallant knight, fighting on the field, vanquishes his opponent," related Cecilia, scanning the group with her glistening eyes. "He strides manfully toward me, his arms swinging like this. Don't laugh. He removes his helmet. Oh, so handsome, but not like a town boy, a schoolboy. No, a man, with eyes that burn with his fire within.

"Sweat-soaked and musclebound, he raises his sword in victory. He pulls me onto his horse and we ride. We ride together a long way. The horse's great flanks pound me, the rhythm of pounding, as the trees sweep by, is so delicious to me that I abandon all that I knew, including myself. He takes me to a cave. He undresses me, ever so slowly. He takes out his thing and makes me a woman."

"Does he fill you with his sauce?"

"He fills me, yes. We do it a dozen times."

"It's not pee that comes out, you know, it's more like cream."

"It's sticky, too, isn't it? The cook that was fired a

few months ago, Enid, she told me it tastes salty."

"She drank some of it?"

"She said her man would spurt it on her belly, and she was curious."

To this, all the girls made a sound that was similar to the twenty-first-century teenage cry of "Ewwww! Gross!"

"I must insist that you stop this talking," Betty Anne objected, snapping the cover of the book she was holding. "It's late...and it's improper."

The girls in the story circle, as one, made a face at Betty Anne.

In early August, Fallon's crew finished reinforcing the main staircase. Now Mathis was free to begin work on the staircase rails, posts, moldings and the exquisite reliefs on the adjacent wall.

He threw himself into the work, glad for the chance to keep busy, be useful. The first stage was repairing the many dents, bruises and scratches to the wood. Each one required a different remedy, and from his kit Mathis drew putties, fills, files, sandpapers and shellac sticks. When it was called for, he applied a wet cloth to the surface, pressing it with a metal cap and heating the cap with a soldering iron until the wood swelled back into place. It was intricate work, and it was a miracle he didn't burn himself.

Because, for the most part, he lived his present existence in a trance. He was spellbound by his life in the nineteenth-century. He was intoxicated, besotted, gone.

He held conversations with the workmen without hearing a word. He had meals he couldn't remember preparing, meals he couldn't taste anyway.

As he worked on his woodworking, his mind wandered back to his voyeur's paradise, the anonymous intimacy with the long-dead people of the Kimbrough Academy, their private moments when they thought no one observed. Moments that likewise should be long gone, buried in the past but that lived still:

Harriet Kimbrough snapping at the servants, complaining that her tea was too hot or not hot enough or too sweet, and so on, every time a different complaint, the only constant being Harriet's righteous toss of her head as the servant exited and the disgusted murmur of the servant on her way back down to the kitchen. Horace Kimbrough enduring long gas pains and discomfort, sitting at his desk with little to do but fuss with the objects on its surface. Awkward and fearful Jane, sneaking a molasses cookie when Cook was elsewhere. Cecilia. in an effort to impress Justine, placing noodles in Hope's hair. Suzanne, after lights-out, praying quietly to Artemis, goddess of virgins, to keep her pure for her husbandto-come "for I have such terrible thoughts at night." Cook, after a few glasses of whiskey, becoming teary, mawkish and apologetic. Miss Cecil, teaching the girls dances. The girls paired off and stepped through the minuet, the gavotte, the mazurka, the bolero, the tarantella, while Harriet pounded the piano organ.

Mathis recalled the day of the pineapple, when the brand-new canned pineapple was brought to Cook and she distributed it, every member of the house getting a small chunk. The looks on the faces! The dreamy face of Addy, pretending to swoon. The sharp approval of Bethann, as if her approval was necessary for the future of pineapple. The momentary pause of Molly, and then the ear-to-ear grin, like a child. The shrug of Harriet Kimbrough.

The girls doing "calisthenics" on the back lawn—Mathis hovered at the windows as they did straight leg toe-touches, shoulder-touches and other limp exercises, sometimes with poles and dumbbells. There was much exhortation by the horsy Harriet Kimbrough during calisthenics of "bad air and the movement cure," "muscular Christianity and the athletic revival," and "dietetic righteousness." Lily, the target of the wandering hands of Henry, slapping him away without a second's pause. Cook trying to catch the eye of the widowed iceman. Mary casting jealous glances at the students.

Mathis smiled, remembering Harriet's lessons on The Principles of Domestic Science.

"We are no longer farmer's wives, my dears, with the men and women working side-by-side in the mud. No. Our men now go off to work, and the woman is left to be sure that the domicile is run correctly. We will be studying the economy of the kitchen, how to deal with servants, the rearing and management of children, how to make preserves."

Horace Kimbrough in a windy dinner-table lecture

to the girls about the importance of education.

"Education's sweetness and light shall be bestowed on you unworthy girls, as it should be on all girls of means or fortune, because each will someday be mother to a boy or boys, and it is in the interest of their proper development that the upstairs of the home be an educated one, roundly so.

"What is it that Rousseau said? 'A woman's education must therefore be planned in relation to man."

Mathis recalled Kimbrough hosting a dinner for some friends. Afterwards, cigars and port in the library. How formal it all was, Mathis had thought, even as the men got drunk.

"Edison's General Electric Company won't last another year."

"Do you really think so? They're wiring up all of New York."

"Yes, and have you been there? Wire and switches and sockets, shocks, sparks and so on. No, thank you."

"Telephones and what-have-you. They even have an automaton dispensing sandwiches, as I understand it. Bosh!"

"Yes, and interior electric power causes freckles. So say the doctors. It's in all the papers there."

"I took the Missus to New York. Trolley then train, you know. Saw that stage show, that *Fink's Mules*. She didn't like it. Too much reminder of the epizootic of '72, too much gaseous humor, if you understand me."

"The Stanwicks purchased a motorcar, and I must

say I'm impressed. Too dear for me, though."

"The Germans have an internal combustion engine, so they claim. What do you think, Kimbrough? Is it possible?"

"Now that Tennyson's gone, you might as well consider the poetry game good and dead."

"What about Whitman?"

"That nancy boy? Bosh!"

Mathis would be lost in his memories of the voluptuous girls, of those mutton-chopped men all bound up in their starch collars and jackets and ties and cufflinks. And then his reverie would be interrupted by one of Fallon's workmen, with their godawful mullet hairstyles, tattoos and grimy workclothes.

"Yo, Danny, I been callin' you. What the fuck you dreamin' about? Fallon wants ya, ya prick."

It was a Sunday, and Mathis had the house to himself. Not only was it a Sunday, but it was a mostly sunny Sunday with a high of 82. He might take two, three visits to the otherworld on this fine Sabbath. He went to the window of the dining room and checked the sky. Mighty, grey-tinged clouds were up there, but the sun was hanging brilliantly between them. He didn't know how the rest of the day would be, but there would be sun for at least the next minute, all the time he would need.

That's when he saw the limo. It appeared like a ghost bird rising from the hill then pulled smartly around the circle to the porte-cochere. The driver scurried to open the door.

"Shit on a stick," Mathis fumed.

Lance Stunning emerged from the limo into the sunlight. Mathis's sunlight. Other familiar faces appeared. Stunning had brought guests. Mathis was heartsick. The day was lost.

Or no. He might just have time to squeeze a visit in.

He stepped into the pool of crystalline light, but his moment had passed for now. The light faded as a cloud scudded before the sun.

Stunning and his followers tumbled into the mansion like drunks. Mathis shambled forlornly down the long hall to greet them—the cretinous Lascivia Foxx (muse, hanger-on), the odious Pitok Juno (collage artist, no-talent, no competition for Stunning, therefore, friend), the execrable H. Stephen Dindia (agent) and the hideous Binche (self-mutilating performance artist). Mathis was surprised at how odd they looked to him: their pierced ears and noses; the studied casualness of their expensive, trashmaster hairstyles; their elaborate accessorizing and labor-intensive fashions—not to mention their desperate, self-conscious hedonism.

This was me five months ago, he thought. Damn.

"Surprise inspection, D.M.," Stunning announced, giving him the trigger-finger.

"Where's Candice?"

"Who's she?" Stunning drawled. The members of his retinue laughed.

"Lance dumped her," Lascivia confided. She

smelled of pot.

Mathis's anger and irritation gave way to a crushing sadness. Candice, used and discarded. He didn't pay any attention as they yapped, "Nice to see you, Daniel."

"We miss you, Danny."

"You look mah-velous, kiddo."

"You like it here?"

"Make me a moonshine martini, would you, Dan?" Laughter. "You got any beer?"

"Yeah, a little drink wouldn't kill me."

"And that which doesn't kill me makes me wasted."

"Daniel, darling," ventured Dindia, "that village off the highway. It's ever-so-Ohio, but they must sell butts and beer. Would you mind? There's a sport."

"Fuck off, Stephen," Mathis replied.

There was an electric silence. Stunning was looking at him queerly, and then decided it was funny. Everyone laughed.

"Fridge's this way," Lance called, moving toward Mathis's kitchenette. "We'll have a pop, then I'll give you the tour."

As Stunning's minions looted Mathis's fridge, Stunning put a fatherly arm on the caretaker's shoulder.

"You okay, bud? Maybe the isolation is getting to you?"

"Lance, in the best way, I'm fine." He meant it. He wanted to say more, but Stunning was good and done with the subject of Dan Mathis's welfare.

"Did I mention we got an appointment with the Boyle Falls board?" Stunning asked him. "It's a hearing about the permit, just a formality, but I'll want you there."

"Great." That'll be another day lost.

Beers and snacks in hand, the group returned to the front of the house. Stunning was about to initiate the tour when he stopped and turned, hearing the crunch of auto tires on the driveway.

"Oh, crap, forgot about her," he said.

"You had to invite her," taunted Binche.

"She's so granola," complained Lascivia.

Mathis went to the window in time to see Claire, the crystal shop lady, getting out of her car.

"Lance, Jesus Christ," Mathis complained. "What is she doing here?"

"We ran into her—no, she ran into us—in town," said Dindia. "She recognized Lance..."

"Was gushing all over him," said Lascivia.

"Wanted so badly to see the house," said Binche.

Stunning shrugged. "We'll give her a quick tour and kick her fat ass out. It's good community relations."

"Whoo-oo!" came the high-pitched voice from the front hall. "Hell-ooo!"

Stunning and the rest went to greet her. Mathis followed.

"Hello again," she chirped, wiggling her fingers at Stunning and his retinue, and finally at Mathis. "Remember me? The lady from the crystal shop? Thought you did. The place is beautiful!" It was hardly beautiful. Most everything was sanded raw and covered in sheetrock dust.

Lance led the tour, though he had only a vague notion of the layout, no concept whatsoever of the history and only a faint, mostly condescending appreciation of the aesthetics. Mathis walked in front, too, if only to tell people to watch your step, watch your head there, mind the bandsaw—but no one was listening. Everyone blathered nonstop from room to room, hall to hall, with party-hearty urgency, just too-fabulous-for-planet-earth, their voices clobbering the house as they rushed through it.

"The house does look fabulous, spooky though, eh, Lance?"

"And the location is, let's face it, Godawful, but suppose it will do."

"Daniel, why so sullen? You're not saying much."

Claire was pathetically eager to fit in, her eyes lighting up at every comment, laughing heartily at three jokes at once.

Mathis averted his eyes as Claire and Stunning's toadies ran their hands over his woodwork.

"This can't be period, this weave of myth and fantasy in the reliefs. I'd say it was done in the forties. Take 'em down or you'll be a laughingstock, Lance."

He tried to ignore them as they struck heroic and erotic poses in wall niches and on pedestals.

"You look marvelous, Lascivia, very statuesque. We'll have you gilded."

"And I'll have you gelded."

Har-dee-har-har. Mathis tried to block his ears as

they made snide, ill-informed comments about the restoration.

"This wallpaper is so Doris Day! Did you pick this out, Danny Boy?"

Mathis tried to steer them away from the dining room. He had the tour planned so that it bypassed the wing altogether—but, of course, with Stunning in the lead, playing the Big Man, there was no stopping it.

"In here's what you wanted to see, Cheryl," said Stunning.

"Claire," she corrected him.

He flung open the double doors and ushered his evil crew into the dining room.

And as they entered this room, *his* room, something snapped inside Dan Mathis. He made a strangulated sound, which he covered with a cough.

"My," said Lascivia, walking right up to the chandelier, "I see what you mean, darling. Beautiful, but not really in keeping with the gallery concept."

"That thing? It has to fucking go," Stunning remarked.

"No, I like it," Juno said, "but not there. Perhaps in that first room."

Mathis flinched and twitched. His entire body flatout *jerked*.

Nobody noticed.

He forced himself to stand against the wall. In seconds, he found his hands fidgeting and wringing. He clamped them in his armpits.

He watched the hideous Binche standing near his spot, admiring the sunlight through the crystals, and the marvelous rainbow on his white shirt.

Mathis slammed his fist in his hand and sort of snarled, like a foiled villain. Stunning copped a glance at him.

Claire walked around the chandelier, peering up at it with the naked eye, then through reading glasses, then through a loupe, back to naked eye, squinting, advancing, reaching up to caress one, gently pinging it and listening to its gentle music.

"I'd be happy to take the chandelier off your hands, Mister Stunning," she said.

"Yes, so you've told me, Carla," Stunning replied, rolling his eyes for the appreciation of Lascivia. "We'll see."

"Perhaps it could be—yes," Lascivia purred, also walking around and underneath the chandelier. "Have you ever seen a black chandelier? Neither have I. Can't you just picture it? Could be a marvelous part of the collection..."

Lascivia's proposal wrenched from Mathis a snort of derision so honky and monstrous it was like a sneeze. They were all looking at him now, every one pretending not to, looking at him, at Stunning, out of the sides of their eyes.

"There are glazing techniques..." Lascivia ventured, looking worriedly at Mathis, reaching for Stunning like a blind woman.

Waving his arm like the Frankenstein monster, bent over like Igor, Mathis spat a full-throttle snakehiss: "Touch the chandelier and I'll rip your lips off!"

There was a nuclear silence. Dumbfounded as they

all were, no one was more surprised than Mathis himself.

Silence, until Stunning jerked his head once, murderously. "Outside, motherfucker."

"Lance, look..."

"You are way the fuck out of line, mister!" It was a roar.

Mathis was nauseous, seeing the whole thing come apart on him.

Do something, Dan.

Stunning was screaming at him: "I will do whatever the fuck I want with this place!"

Act, he urged himself as Stunning's rage sprayed him like acid.

"Who the fuck do you think you are to tell me what I can and can't do?"

For Eve's sake, your sake, suck up to the man like you've never sucked before.

"You're right. I'm sorry," said Mathis. Ringed in flop sweat, he went on, "I don't...I just...I've grown to love this place so much, I want everything to be perfect. I'm sorry. Honestly. Lascivia, everyone, I apologize."

Stunning nodded, abruptly, grudgingly. Once again, silence.

It was Claire who spoke up at last. "Goodness, look at the time. I must go. Thank you very much, Mister Stunning. Daniel, I wonder if you'd walk me to my car."

Mathis was still recovering, trying to regain some control, and just stared at her. She took his arm.

"Please."

Of course. Good idea. Get away. Thank you, psychic woman.

He and Claire walked to the front hall while Stunning continued the tour into the old kitchens and the upper floors.

"Grown attached to the chandelier, haven't you?" Claire said, smiling slyly at him. "I'm not surprised."

"It's a beautiful piece, Claire, that's all." Mathis mopped his brow.

"No, that's not all. It has power."

His Waterloo moment was forgotten, instantly.

What does she know?

He tried to keep his voice neutral. "What do you mean?"

They were outside in the glorious sunlight. They slowed, approaching her car.

"When you brought the crystals into my shop," said Claire, "I ran what's called a Hicks test on them. The configuration I found helped me fill in some blank spots on the research I was doing on Alfred Shanks. I had to go to the Brewster Public Library, and even in the archives in New York and the Goth Shop down there on West Broadway, but I stitched together a story, and it's fascinating."

"Shanks was just an interior designer or something."

"Hardly. Alfred Shanks was a scholar, an archeologist—he got his degree from Harvard. He later became a mystic, recluse, world traveler. Why, he was one of the original team to explore the pyramids!" Claire paused a moment, to let that sink

in. "Then you have Hubert Janeway," she continued, "who was a Christian, of course, but he'd spent some time overseas and apparently picked up some pagan beliefs about a house's safety and protection.

"In 1837 he hired Shanks to plan and execute some finishing touches on his mansion. Shanks entered into contracts with one D. Thomas Fairbanks of Brewster."

"And Fairbanks was...?"

"A glass blower and artisan of world reputation. It stands to reason: Fairbanks made that chandelier, and Shanks supervised the work. Why? Why hire an archeologist-mystic to supervise installing glasswork unless...unless...listen..." Claire paused. Her eyes sparkled. "Fact—Alfred Shanks was driven out of Nepal by the authorities, something having to do with him desecrating sacred sites. Dan, Shanks visited some of the most important spiritual, transcendental sites on the planet in his travels. It was said he chipped stone from statues on Easter Island, Stonehenge, the pyramids, the Bah'u temple in Thailand..."

"So you think Shanks gave stone chips or powders to Fairbanks, and he made the crystals on the chandelier, or some of them, with the powders acquired from sacred sites."

"Yes. Whether Fairbanks was using flint or sand to make his crystals, the mix could easily accommodate a small amount of limestone or sandstone or whatever Shanks had gathered, if pulverized to a fine grain."

"So?"

"So it's possible the chandelier or some of the crystals have mystical powers. Have you by chance noticed anything unusual?"

"No." He opened her car door for her. "But I'll keep my eyes open, promise."

She stepped closer to him, her eyes wide with fervor. "Danny, your boss, those people, they're talking about scrapping it or mutilating it with paint or appliques... Wouldn't it be better off in my hands?"

"It isn't clear to me that Stunning has the legal right to turn this property into a gallery. I haven't given up on keeping the chandelier right where it is."

"Okay, but say he is within his rights. Let me take it off his hands. I'll pay for the removal. And then I'll keep it intact, give it a place of honor in my home. You can visit."

Mathis smiled for the first time all day.

"But if your Mister Stunning realizes how interested I am," Claire continued, "and how much I'm willing to pay, he'll raise the price through the roof. Can you put in a good word for me?"

Mathis was dizzy again with these continuing assaults on his turf. "Sure, Claire. You bet. We'll see how it pans out."

"Fair enough."

He watched after her as her tires crunched gravel, driving around him and away. Inside, the shrill laughter of Stunning's toadies echoed in the vast house.

How much time, he wondered. Me. Eve. How much

time do we have left?

CHAPTER NINE

ver the next weeks, Mathis threw himself into the project with zeal – the project being to see as many of the girls naked as he could, for as long as he could. Body type, after all, was the best clue to Eve's identity.

He had no control over what time he arrived at the Kimbrough Academy – not the day, not the hour, just as Eve had no control. He was happiest, though, when he arrived close to nine p.m., when Miss Cecil would herd the girls to their bedchambers.

The girls slept seven or six to a room in three adjoining dormitory rooms. After Miss Cecil ushered them upstairs, they performed a complex choreography in the half-hour before lights-out. They would undress together only up to a point; at that point, basins were filled with water and the girls took turns standing in one basin and washing themselves with the water in the other. When it came time for the final moment—Mathis' favorite, the few moments between nakedness and nightgown, when all that girl-flesh would shimmer in the lamplight—the other girls would leave the room or peer at a book or turn their back. No fuss or ceremony was made over this.

Mathis, of course, did not avert his eyes.

Elinor, the poet, was one of the few who did not possess much modesty, and she would linger, naked, for a few moments, lost in her reveries. Mathis liked watching her undress anyway—she possessed the thin, small-featured face one sees in medieval paintings, and her facial expressions changed with the dopey suddenness of a baby's. One minute biting her lip, frowning at perceived imperfections, meeting her own gaze in the mirror with steely disapproval. The next, smiling fleetingly. Then wistful, then all soupy innocence, wide-eyed and frowny. Finally, blank, just the light of her youth and loveliness spilling like sunspray from her eyes.

These expressions filled the long pauses between the removal of garments, and then she would wake, move suddenly, heedless of the clothes, pulling at the laces of her stays, wrenching the garments off with relief. After her silk undervest was removed, she might take a moment to inspect herself in the mirror—the supernaturally firm tush, as only youth can have, smooth and without blemish; the breasts tiny but perfectly formed, with very modest, dark nipples; the pubic bush, a perfect triangle, perhaps a bit thin yet. With a dramatic sigh, she would pull on her long-sleeved linen nightgown, standard issue for the girls of the Academy.

After the washing and undressing, after a few minutes of reading, after lights out, some of the girls would gather to tell stories. Usually it was Caroline, Madolyn, Justine and Cecilia, all in their nightgowns,

their eyes taking in the stories eagerly, dreamily.

"I have a magic bath oil," said Justine one night. "It is a concoction of my own—herbs and oils in precise measurement. I put it in a steamy bath, and I place candles around my bath in exact alignment. And it opens a gate to the far world.

"And as I lie there, naked, the waters start to boil and bubble and rising from them is a man. This man is so fair and strong, with lovely thick hair and eyes like lamps. His smile for me is so cruel but loving, I almost faint. He kneels in the bath. He rubs his manhood over my bosom, pressing it against my buttons so that they grow hard and cold and lovely. I run my hand over it, so hot and smooth and long. He puts it in my purse, a feeling like an ocean storm inside me, creating funnels and thunderheads, and the water sloshes over the tub but we don't notice; he's entering me with that huge pole, it goes in and out, faster and faster, deeper and deeper, and we're in love."

Hsss, like a snake, came the sound through the door from the next bedroom. *Hsss*. It was Bethann.

"Stop those sinful stories," she whispered heatedly. "Stop it this instant, or I will -"

"—tell Mistress Kimbrough," chimed in the members of the story group.

Oh, yes, Bethann. A major star in his firmament was the prom queen, self-appointed student number one, the Bible-thumping Bethann, with her glittery green eyes and coppery hair. It was probably her priggishness that drove Mathis to be particularly

interested in her ablutions.

At night, by lamplight, when she let down all that hair so that it almost reached her waist, the prudish Bethann was a centerfold candidate. Mathis was transfixed as she undid the many buttons of her skirts, her stays, her petticoats, her underskirt. By the low lamplight, she was quite intriguing in the few moments between the time she unbuttoned and the time she shrugged on her flowered nightgown: large bosom, quite firm and beautifully sculpted; shelf-like fanny; thick and provocative pubic thatch; firm legs and arms and shoulders. In profile, she was almost a lampoon of a baby doll, the way her fine titties jutted forth, the way her back swayed in and then sharply out at the bum. And that thick cascade of hair that she let down at the last minute, when all was sheathed in her nightgown.

And though she pulled out a Bible and held it on her stomach before lights-out, some nights she would conceal another, smaller volume behind it. Mathis read the penny dreadful titles: *Heaving Bodices, The Pirate of Tortuga*.

"A shy boy courts me," Mathis heard Caroline relate one night. "He wants me badly, and I want him, I think, but neither of us is grown-up enough to know how to go about it. Seduction. Completion. And then he buys a magic poem from a gypsy, and on our picnic he reads it to me, and there is a breeze, and the light changes. The little tatty blanket we bring with us seems to take on fluff, and luxuriate across the bank of the stream. He finishes reading, and in the gypsy

spell we lose our clumsiness and worry. Our kiss now is just as sweet as before, but now it's graceful, too, languorous and spitty, and with flicks of his fingers my dress comes down to my waist, and my bosom is bared to him, and his palms run over them, and I thrill, like I am riding a bolt of lightning.

"I never thought of my bosom as something beautiful before, I don't know why, I could hardly look at them in the mirror, and never dared touch them except to wash, and now his hands palm me, play with the tips, and I feel this rush through me, whispers and tickles. And my hand reaches down, how audacious, and past the waist of his pants and down, and through the fabric of his undershorts, and grip his warm knob, a thing I have dreamed of, and run my fingers over it, and cup the sac, just as described, under there. And his sigh, his cry, is the music of the spheres to me.

"He mounts me, he enters me, oh, and it is like a parade of silks and flames and fireworks in my channel, so wonderful, enough to drive you mad with smiles!"

"Our Father, who art in heaven..." recited the flustered Bethann from her bed.

Mathis had no need of prayer or of shame. He was spinning down into a spiral of perversion, and he reveled in it. How close he could get to them, so close he could see the dimple of their flesh, the folds of their labia, the wink of their bumcheeks. A favorite site was the bathroom, as the rotating schedule brought him a new girl or servant to luxuriate in

nakedness for a full half-hour. He could be right there in the water as they bathed, in there with the bubbles and run of the suds on their smooth flesh. He could be there, in the cleavage, between the bobbling boobies, between the gleaming thighs as the skin shone from wetness, and the practiced hand of the girl ran over herself.

Some nights he would remain after lights-out and float over their beds, catching some of them furtively exploring themselves in the dark. How enthralled he was by their rapture, by that vigilant, alert cast in their eye as they stroked their silken pussy bush or cupped a breast and let it fall back with just the tiniest jiggle. He would float under their blankets, deeper, under their nightgowns as they slept; and by the scant light from the corner lamp or moonlight, he could enjoy the smooth flesh close up—the peachy fuzz on their thighs, the little blemishes, the slight movement of their lips in sleep. He could skim like a hovercraft along the long, girlish legs, savoring every curve as he went, up over the cocked-tight buns, around and around the sleepy bosoms, down to the pussy, dark and dreaming.

One night he decided to linger in Miss Cecil's room a few minutes past her lights-out. Her face, by the moonlight streaming through her parted curtains, was softened even more, and he began to see her as quite angelic, a different animal altogether from the stern she-bitch of the daytime. So transfixed was he by her face, hovering there so close to the eyes softened by the curtain of darkness and the skin smoothed to marble, that he almost failed to see the bulge rise in her blankets, her knees bending, the shift in her shoulders as her hands began to descend to her midsection.

And then he caught the moisture of her lips as they parted, and the way her eyes fluttered, and he floated backward and found her, yes, in fact, her legs splayed under the covers and her back arched, and he hovered under the sheets and followed the arms to the hands which were busy at the moist petals of her cookie, her legs spread wide, the finger exploring up the lips to her button.

Cecil. My word.

Happily, he waited there under the blanket, watching as her legs trembled, her hips, pussy lips wide and wet, heaved heavenward, her torso gave another shudder, and she collapsed. He lingered over the smiling face, watched as she sniffed her finger and smiled more. She was soon asleep.

Sometimes, he would leave the river and rush to his room to jerk off—and Eve would be there. She would take him in her mouth. He would be so frenzied with desire from seeing the young Victorian girls that he would stand over her and drive his dick in her mouth; and he could hear the muffled sighs and grunts as he pumped away, and she would cup his balls and run her fingers over the shaft, ululating with increasing pleasure until he would shoot his wad into her mouth. Other times, she would suck him off at a more leisurely pace, he sprawled on his back, she, invisible to him but closer than any woman he

had known, gobbling it from above, hungrily, like a prehistoric woman.

He liked to reach out and run his hand over her thigh, up her bumcheek, lay his fingers in the crack and burrow under, into the warmth, the oven; and she would part her legs, sighing, so he could work his fingers into her damp purse, and she would writhe in welcome. He would lay a light, wet finger on her clit and leave it there until she was vibrating with pleasure, quaking with it, and then bucking, coming madly at one end and working her mouth around his boner at the other until he shot ropes of jizz over her face and tits.

Most times, he slid his engorged prick into the warmth and slick of her pussy; they might lie tethered together in that way, cooing nonsense into one another's ears, slowly undulating together. Other times they would pump away like crazed wolverines, hooting and calling to God until Mathis shot his spoo deep inside her and they collapsed in a heap, panting wordlessly. Any way it happened, they were connected across time, for all time, in love.

When Mathis heard the rap of the front door knocker, he fell into measured step with Wingate. Together, ghost and butler, they answered the summons.

"Edwin Skinner to see Mister Kimbrough."

"He is expecting you, sir," Wingate responded.

Edwin Skinner carelessly passed his bowler to Wingate as he stepped past him into the front hall. Mathis had never seen Skinner before.

This was an experiment on the part of Mathis. Lately, he'd been wondering if, perhaps, he was spending too much time with the girls. As a sort of palate cleanser, he decided to spend some time with the men of the house, at least until lights-out.

Too much time with the girls? It was a silly notion. But, as it turned out, a fortunate decision. For Skinner's appointment would eventually change everything.

Skinner was thin and short. He had a beakish nose and his eyes were set so close together he was like a cyclops. As Mathis watched, those dark eyes darted hungrily over the splendid house. Meantime, his hands fluttered nervously at his watch chain and his thin-lipped mouth displayed sudden, unpleasant, inappropriate smiles. His jet-black hair was thinning, and he had it arranged in a ghastly comb-over, plastered down with a lake of pomade.

He wore the customary clothing of men of his day, but the fabric of his jacket and pants was cheap, it seemed to Mathis, and brown, which had to be a fashion crime even back then.

Wingate had evidently announced Skinner to Kimbrough, for now he returned and said, "This way, sir," and led Skinner through the library to the estate office, as it was called.

The library was an immense room with high ceilings and rosewood walls festooned with hunting trophies, antique blunderbusses, several spittoons and he-man paintings, such as portraits of gladiators in Coliseum combat. There was a table with games set on it and a globe. Three large, free-standing bookcases, a rocking chair, seven individual chairs of Gothic Revival style and a small bookcase on wheels with a writing surface completed the room.

Kimbrough's office was entered through a modest gothic arch from the library, an arch that no longer existed in Mathis's time. In this smaller room, Kimbrough had a Wooten desk, with its many compartments and huge doors on wings. An oil portrait of a stern industrialist looked down upon the visitor, and the ceiling was a fresco of hunting themes.

As Skinner entered the room, Kimbrough lurched, squirmed and pumped himself out of his desk chair and shook hands. Skinner took the seat adjoining, and the two leaned together for conversation.

They were quite a pair. Both wore frock coats (Kimbrough's black and Skinner's brown, as noted) with matching pants, and a waistcoat (Kimbrough's matched, Skinner's contrasted). Skinner also had on a tattersall vest of loud checks that, Mathis would discover, he wore quite often. An Oxford tie was knotted on the heavy cotton shirt.

Underneath were braces to hoist the pants and gaiters for the ankle. Each had a watch fob, Skinner's on a gleaming gold chain, Kimbrough's on a black ribbon, and a handkerchief in breast pocket. Kimbrough's belly protruded so far as to drown his belt in fat, and his shirt buttons strained to dam the tide, while Skinner barely filled his suit.

"So, my appointment is confirmed," said Skinner,

flashing one of his vulture smiles.

"Yes," said Kimbrough. "Welcome to the Finishing Academy. We're honored to have you."

It seemed to Mathis that neither man meant a word he was saying, that both men knew it and both men were accustomed to deal in this way with the world.

"I trust your rooms at Mrs. Leicester's are adequate?" Kimbrough added.

"Not at all, actually, but I suppose they must suffice for the nonce," replied the other sourly.

"I'll be turning over my calculation of mathematics lessons to you. You said in your letter that calculation was within your grasp."

"Quite."

"Yes. Well. I suppose I should introduce you to the staff, the students and so on." Kimbrough slapped his knees lightly, signaling an end to the conference.

But Skinner did not move. "In your correspondence to New York, and from your manner here, I am detecting objections to my appointment. Would I be correct, sir?"

Kimbrough bestowed Skinner with the broadest, most humorless smile he could muster. "No, I accept it as business. What I conveyed to our mutual acquaintance was if you must be here, why not as a groundskeeper, as a cook?"

"Because I am a gentleman, sir, and even in dumbshow, I must be a gentleman. And besides..." Skinner looked about him and licked his lips. "...the groundskeeper's level does not afford me such a view. As I must be here in any case, it is not a hardship to be around such treasures, eh?"

Kimbrough reddened, and moisture popped from his every pore.

"We won't have any of that. None of it!" he thundered, struggling to his feet. "If I catch you making insinuations or acting improperly in any way toward these girls, you are out, sir. Out, sir, no matter what they say in New York! They would agree with me in New York."

Skinner had lost his abashed smile, and after slowly rising to his feet, he meekly nodded his head. Kimbrough fixed him with his stern glare for a moment more, and then gestured for Skinner to walk ahead of him.

"It is certainly no comfort to me that women one day will attend colleges, work beside men, even own businesses and run for public office," Eve declared. "The women of your time have that, Daniel. I want that freedom, too, now, today, in my life."

"That's the spirit, spirit," Mathis said. They were sitting on a pile of replacement beams in the Gallery, watching the sun set. Fallon and his crew had gone home hours ago. Her disembodied voice was full of indignation.

"Men praise us for our weakness and frailty and dependence on them. There's all this talk of Charles Darwin and how the force of history and—what is it called?—evolution places women in the nurturing role of homemaker. It is the natural way, the only way. Do you promise to pound me later, put it in my

mouth, my bottom, everywhere?"

"Uh, sure, but..."

"Virginity, docility—these are the ideals for the girl brought into a good home. Woman is wife, is ornament. Woman is patience, resignation and other gentle virtues. Will you put it between my bosom, rub the tip against my nipples?"

"I promise."

"A woman is to be adored but not respected. I once heard Mister Kimbrough say to Elinor about the little poems she likes to write, he said, 'Your personal talents are insignificant here. Singing, painting, poems...all very nice but of no use to you in a home. Happiness is being in your proper place.'"

"Yet you don't believe that. There must be others."

"How are we to know? When people look at me, they would never know I have such angry thoughts, such frustration with the way of things. They would never know I was so dissipated."

"But you're not—"

"I am wicked, so wicked to do the things I do with you. To think about it so often, to let that fever stir in me night and day. But it is because I love you and, I confess, something more. It is my rebellion. No one in my world will ever know. They look at me and see a decent girl, an obedient girl, but with you I am a temptress, a sinner. And I don't care."

He had no words so he nuzzled her ear. He lowered her dress and kissed her breasts. He palmed them gently, placed his face between them. She drew him closer, her breath coming in torrid gasps.

They fumbled with her clothes, unfastening laces and buttons in a frenzy. As soon as she was naked, she drew him to her breasts again and slowly, slowly, sat on his cock, burying it to its base in her damp, furry cooze.

"That feels so good, yours and yours alone," she whispered. "How can it be wrong?"

"It isn't, it isn't."

She began to rock. He gripped her hips and let her ride him.

When they were finished and lying in a drowsy heap together, Mathis said, "When can I visit the house as you do? With a present body and a sense of smell and touch?"

She was silent for a long moment, until: "Oh, Daniel," she sighed, "I am haunting an empty house. You would be haunting a full one."

"I know, but—"

"It's not that I don't trust you. I admire the people at the Academy. Some are my friends, and you might frighten them without meaning to."

"You don't trust me, though, do you?"

"You would want to touch the girls, I know you."

"But I love you."

"I know that. And I like it that you watch us naked. And if I helped you with that power, you would want to touch the girls. And what I'm afraid of...I would want you to."

He had no answer for that.

Edwin Skinner had well begun his classes in

calculation of mathematics by the time Mathis checked in again. Mathis didn't know how long the man had been at it, but he could tell by the pained, bored, distracted faces of the girls that it had not taken long for him to drive them away.

Skinner spoke in a halting manner, presented his lessons in a confused structure and was not skilled in interacting with people. But what Mathis hated, and he was sure the girls hated, too, was the way the man regarded them. His words were perfectly polite, but his smile was so far from warmth and humor as to not be a smile at all. When he thought a certain girl was not looking at him, his eyes ran over her wolfishly, rapaciously, yet coweringly, with a hunger and fear that was pitiful to behold.

He did not approach any of the students. However, one afternoon when Mathis was prowling the north hall he spied Skinner tiptoeing up to Lily, the thin servant girl, as she was on her knees, scrubbing the floor with a brush. After a series of foot-stamps, nervous coughs, rolls of the eyes and grotesque grimaces—all of which Lily ignored—Skinner made bold to reach out and squeeze her leg. Mathis was delighted to witness the vehemence of her refusal, slapping at his hand.

"Sir!" she exclaimed. In a tumble of convoluted phrases, Skinner subtly threatened her job if she did not favor him, and she called him on it right quick. "I might just explain to Master Kimbrough that your hands have taken liberties, sir, and see which of us he believes."

Skinner retreated, turning lollipop shades of red.

Skinner was afraid of Horace Kimbrough. The nature of their relationship puzzled Mathis. It seemed to go beyond schoolmaster and instructor. Mathis would sometimes drop in on the library office, and he would often find Skinner there. Kimbrough and Skinner would be reading newspapers or books or poring over ledgers, and there was no mistaking the ice-cold tension between them. Often, Kimbrough would stare keenly at Skinner until Skinner felt the prickle of the stare on his neck and looked up, but Kimbrough would always have returned his attention to his ledgers by the time Skinner would shoot him a glance.

Mathis was haunting the library office one day when one of the older students was summoned to a meeting with the great man.

"Sit down, Hortense."

"Thank you, sir," she quietly replied and took a seat.

Kimbrough contemplated her a while from the great height of his magnificence. Skinner glared at her from his perch in the corner.

Then, shifting a bit on his huge haunches, Kimbrough said, "We're quite pleased with your studies with us, Hortense."

"Thank you, sir." Such a small voice she had. And she kept her eyes downcast, no doubt blinded by the light of Kimbrough.

"A position has come to our attention, and we think you are ready to assume it."

"Sir?"

"This being an orphanage school, we are responsible for the placement of our young ladies. As you know, the professions are strictly out of the question. A job in a factory might be arranged, store clerk, perhaps, or perhaps one of those new telephone operators. But, of course, we like to think that we have finished you girls, prepared you for a life quite above the grime and toil of a factory. Yes?"

"Yes, sir. Quite prepared, sir. Thank you, sir."

"What we pray for is the situation of governess, or companion to a young lady of society. That is the primary purpose of the education we have provided you. Such a position has opened."

Kimbrough held up a pince-nez and peered at a paper. Hortense cocked her head as if to read it.

"The house of a great man in the Pittsburgh area. Steel man, don't you know. Big business in that steel, Hortense. Big, big future there."

"Yes, sir."

He knitted his brows in a fair imitation of thought. He stood and walked around his desk then set one huge, unlovely haunch on it, rested an elbow on its corresponding knee and leaned down to Hortense. By the time he was finished with this act, he was schvitzing eager, hot sweat from every pore, his eyes had taken on a gleam of fervor, and moisture appeared on his lips, which he lapped with a quick, serpentine tongue.

"It is a good family, a Christian family, and I am sure you will find favor there."

Hortense nodded her head tentatively, then again more assuredly. She was ready to accept this as an adventure, it seemed to Mathis, but as she looked up at Kimbrough and over at Skinner, a glimmer of doubt showed in the face of the young orphan.

CHAPTER TEN

aniel Mathis was terrified. He felt as if he were hurtling along a tunnel of color and sound, faster and faster, until he started to splinter.

I'm sorry! he screamed. It was a mistake! He screamed until his vocal cords burst, his neck came apart, and it all flew away, caught in this sickly wind—his lungs, his heart...gone.

He was so sick and scared. He wanted to step out of the River and return to his own time, his own world. All he needed to do was lift his foot and set it down outside the pool of light. He was trying...but his foot was slow...he'd begun to lift it a long time ago. Now he could only wait for it to take him home...

And endure this prolonged rushing sensation of color and sound, a pulling on him as if he were rubberized, as if he were a television and someone was ripping up and down the dial—images flashed, sounds exploded and dimmed, a riot of colors and sounds, of half-formed images. The world itself was ripping, his own head, ripping, and through this sickening, elastic vision he caught tumbly glimpses of

the dining room in 1893, the dining room in his present, other times he couldn't identify, furniture there and gone, people, shadows, scurrying.

And then Skinner in his face. He screamed.

Skinner moved through Mathis and remained and suddenly, horribly, Mathis was Skinner, Miss Cecil was with him, voices were echoing, such prolonged, insistent echoes that words, Cecil's and Mathis-Skinner's overlapped: "Now you ride me, is that it (*it...it*)?"

"Yes, I ride you (you...you)."

"Mayhaps I could ride you first (rst...rst)?" Cecil had a lopsided, wicked grin and a devilish glint in her eye. Clothes flew, and they were naked. She preened. Her dark-tipped breasts wobbled and preened, too, her fine pussy lips glistened with moisture. Skinner/Mathis got down on all fours, and they heard a giggle from above, and then the wonderful sensation of Cecil's legs around his side and her warm rump on his back.

"Giddyap (ap...ap...ap)." Instantly, he was bucking and rolling, she was laughing giddily, her laughter overlapping itself, a mad house. And his voice, his and Skinner's: "Spank me (me...me...me). First, spank me, for I am bad (ad...ad...ad). And then I shall spank you (you...you...)" echoing, endlessly echoing.

[&]quot;Daniel, you are a bad boy."

[&]quot;I don't know what you're talking ab—"

[&]quot;You know very well," Eve snapped. "You have been trying to swim the River yourself. Trying new

postures. I can't have it."

She was right. He hadn't been able to help himself. He was more than curious. He was a driven man, delirious with his experiences on the River. He wanted more.

He described the experience for her. He'd stood in the pool of light and tried new postures: hands-overhead, feet slightly apart, he'd tried rotating his body until his back was to the chandelier, and nothing had happened. But then, on a rotation back, his hands on his head or something, he'd been swept into the River—a particularly horrid current.

He told her of his headlong, nauseating plummet, and then of his entering the dream or thoughts of Edwin Skinner.

"He must have stood in the chandelier light briefly while you were on the River. Oh, my heavens, Daniel. Do you see how dangerous this is?"

"Yes, I do." He shivered, thinking of Skinner's fantasy. He also smiled, thinking of Skinner's fantasy.

"Daniel, this is nothing to smile about."

"Sorry. But I must ask you...how did you know?"

"And I will tell you. At dinner the other night Cook was just placing the stew on the table when there was suddenly this titanic, deafening sound, like a cat howl—'yeeeowww!' It was so loud and scary that Cook dropped the stew, Mistress Kimbrough fainted, the girls screamed, glassware was flying everywhere. We all needed some bitters to recover ourselves. I alone knew what it was. You."

"Uh. Sorry."

"It was you, somewhere, sometime, on the River. I can't have it. If you persist in this I will be forced to remove some crystals from the chandelier. Steal them, yes, and risk accusations as a thief. But that will break the River."

"And you and I—"

"Will never see one another again. Do we understand one another?"

"Yes, dear," he recited, head hung low.

One thing was certainly odd: Mathis was becoming as intrigued by Horace Kimbrough and Edwin Skinner as he was by the curvaceous young students.

The headmaster and the new teacher were spending a great deal of time arranging the appointments for the older girls who, like Hortense, would soon be leaving the school for employment. And though the two men seemed to be taking extraordinary care in the appointments and safe arrangements for the discharged girls, their manner in going about this generous task...well, it puzzled the young ghost who lurked unseen in the corner.

One exchange, for example: Kimbrough and Skinner were sitting at Kimbrough's desk, poring over some papers. Mathis glided behind and saw they were typed profiles, in a nineteenth-century, clumsy style, of families: address, number of children, description of house, pets, etc, and of the community—environs; population; major industries; access to train, trolley or coach; cultural activities; churches and so on.

"Cecilia, I think, for this one."

"Yes," said the other, absently. Soon, they began to pencil in names of the girls in the margins. Mathis realized that these must be the placements.

They went on in this way until Kimbrough, peering at one profile, and at the list of girls, said, half to himself, "Justine is perfect for this one except for...yes, I believe she spent some time in the Baltimore area. She might be familiar. Let's change this to...to Salisbury, Connecticut. How would that be?"

"Fine," murmured the other, as if it was of no concern.

Mathis took this to signify the two men were saving Justine some potential embarrassment or disadvantage in the community. But they were being rather offhand about it, to his eye.

Another thing that caught his attention was their continuing debate over a person by the name of Chalfont—Kimbrough holding out for the continued employment of this Chalfont and Sknner arguing for a change.

"I know of a fellow, speaks several languages, has been at sea, served in His Majesty's Navy, in fact."

"There you are," returned Kimbrough. "I don't want a military man. Too squeamish. No, Chalfont has done for five years now. He'll do again. He is discreet, he's gentle when he needs to be, of iron when that is called for. His crews fear him. That's an important factor."

Mathis took this to mean that some of the girls'

appointments would be taking them overseas. Well and good. But...the tone and content of these discussions was most odd, in relation to a girl's finishing school. Most odd.

But it was nothing sinister, Mathis was sure. Kimbrough may have been a pompous, hyprocritical, ill-informed windbag, but he was zealous in his protection of these girls' virtue. Mathis's dislike of the two men was coloring his perception, that was all.

He abandoned the principal's office to go see what was going on in the bathtub.

He was almost to the bathroom. He could hear a succulent young thing splashing in there. He rubbed his invisible hands with invisible glee at the thought of all that moist flesh in low lamplight...and he heard his name called.

Danny-boy! Yo, Danny-boy!

His invisible heart squeezed with terror.

He'd been discovered!

He turned around, and around again.

Mathis! You here?

But how did they know him by that name?

Like waking from a dream, he snapped out of it. He quickly understood that Stunning was down the hall, the twenty-first-century hall, calling for him.

Mathis wrenched himself from the Crystal River in time to see Lance Stunning rushing on those long legs up the hall into the dining room. What a hellish jolt to his senses.

"D.M., it's me, man. Didn't you hear me calling?

We're here for that zoning board hearing, me and Bennett. Place looks great. You look like shit, though. S'matter, you sick? You look dazed. What're we gonna do with this?" He jangled the lower tier of crystals then mimed a baseball bat. "Piñata time. Whaddaya think?"

What I think, Lance, is that you're a putz.

Nathan Bennett, Esquire, stood in the front hallway.

"The place is coming along, Dan," he said. "Fine job." Bennett was a bronzed and buffed man in his fifties, with a head of immaculate gray hair, an expensive suit, conservative tie.

"Come to the hearing," said Stunning, pulling Mathis out of the dining room. "You're gonna love this."

There were three crews working today, but Fallon was on the premises so Mathis felt okay about leaving the place. He put on a clean shirt and climbed into the limo with Lance Stunning and his lawyer.

On the way to town, Lance, as usual, talked. "Think there'll be any press on this? Guess not. Ah, well. We sewed it up too tight, Nate. A controversy would've been good. What the hell. Probably just make the papers anyway. You see that AP shot of me at the premiere of that Kahlo movie? My chin, lookit it, I look like Jay-fuckin'-Leno, f'chrissake. I wore black and I still look fat, those bastards. No, I'll tell you, it's not worth it unless you get in the newsweeklies, or one of the New York magazines. There you got coated paper, good repro, photo

editors with some class...Hey, here we are. Main Street US-Fuckin'-A."

The limo circled the town square on its way to city hall. "We gotta get some restaurants on this square," Stunning commented. "Some bars."

City hall was a quaint Greek Revival home, lovingly restored over the years, but not recently. Mathis's heart sank as they pulled into the small parking lot. Waiting at the steps was Claire. She was smiling brilliantly, just beaming as Lance Stunning and his entourage approached the seat of government.

"Remember me, Mister Stunning?" she called, extending a hand to him. "I just wanted to tell you good luck. We need you in this town."

Stunning nodded in agreement.

Claire winked and rolled her eyes at Mathis as he walked by. To the charge of being a kiss-ass, she was pleading guilty.

The Boyle Falls Town Council and Zoning Board was arrayed on one side of a vast bleached-wood table in a large, high-ceilinged room. Stunning and Bennett took their places facing them at a smaller table. Mathis was about to take a seat in the corner when he spotted Janine Foote, the real estate agent he'd so pleasurably rogered in the upstairs bathroom at the estate

She was sitting beside Creighton Hutley, the chairman of the city council, and when Mathis met her gaze, she looked away. He could feel her disappointment, her sense of betrayal, from across the

room. He felt a flush of shame.

He slipped out of the room just as the meeting was called to order. Checking outside, he saw that Claire had gone. Coast clear, he sat on a bench and waited.

Mathis had no doubts about how the meeting would go: The city councilmen would assure Stunning he could create all the artworks he wanted on the grounds of the estate but he had no legal right to exhibit them to the general public. Stunning—and Bennett—would then pull an astonishing, thoroughly slimy sleight-of-hand of real estate law; and presto, Stunning would have his gallery.

And Mathis would benefit. He didn't know what he'd do if he couldn't be with Eve. Not just for the sex but the companionship. She was the best friend he'd ever had. A ghost, a dead woman, had become a great friend he just wanted to fuck every chance he got. It was perfect.

But did it have to be at the expense of this charming, backward village?

Enough guilt, he decided. He had had been on his way to the Victorian-era bathroom when Stunning had interrupted him. Now, Mathis's thoughts drifted there, to what he'd seen there, to what he might be missing now. Yum: Miss Cecil, on Saturday morning, when she had bathtub privileges. All that buttery flesh as she sponged herself, the suds spilling slowly over her sleek skin. Kneeling in the tub, arching her back to wash her nether regions, the suds glistening like diamonds in the curly hairs of her bush. Jane, before her bath, losing herself in wonderment at the

enormity of her boobs. Hefting them a bit. Turning, to see them in profile, perfect, gravity-defying—then, catching herself at it and quickly going about her business. Addy, standing in the basin, the white suds slowly, slowly oozing down that Valkyrie body, so voluptuous and curved and soft Mathis wanted to kneel before her and just bury his face in her soft belly, still warm from the bath...

Suddenly, the doors of the village hall burst open, and out came Stunning, surrounded by reporters.

"Mister Stunning," one of them said, thrusting her voice recorder in his face, "can you tell us what will be the character of this gallery?"

"Hell, yes," Stunning thundered. He stopped, planted his feet and fired off his rant at the microphones all around: "I want to press on the nerves. The proper aim of art is clearly not to portray beauty or reality or even subjective reality. That's been over for a century. No, all that is left is to shock and disturb and upset preconceived notions. Here's what you can expect, because I've already started talking to some of my artist friends, all over the world.

"In the Stunning Gallery of Modern Art you might see vaginal lip tapestries, super phallic sculptures, saints pissing on the Bible, Christ as a thrill killer, the Pope on the potty, religious symbols of the world—India, Japan, China, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs—all crushed together with Western symbols. We're gonna rain fire down on their sacred cows and carve 'em up for steaks. We're gonna shake this town up so hard

it's gonna froth."

Mathis watched Janine Foote squeeze past the knot of reporters and walk briskly away, toward the parking lot. Sidestepping like a bad spy, he caught up with her just as she reached her car.

"Hey, Janine, can I talk to you a sec?"

She was uncomfortable but put on her best formal smile. "Certainly. Hello, Daniel."

"First, I want you to know, when I looked at this place I had no idea he was gonna pull something like this."

She'd been glancing about nervously, afraid someone on the council might see her with him, but now she looked right at him.

"I believe you." She threw her purse in the car and started to get in. "He's a piece of work, your Mister Stunning."

"How'd he do it?"

Mathis could see she was fuming, but she held her anger in check. "He and Mister Bennett went back to records dating to 1940, when the Boyle Falls charter was remade, and all zone restrictions were reviewed," she said. "The Janeway estate did undergo deed restrictions, and the parcel was zoned for private residence only. But, apparently, that rezoning was never properly ratified, as stipulated in the town's constitution. There are signatures but no stamp, no seal.

"Thus the institutional-slash-commercial use of the property is grandfathered in, and, apparently, in the deed that was issued to Mister Stunning for the purchase of the property, certain paragraphs were reinstated at Bennett's request due to changes in tax and insurance laws. Commercial use is allowed, who knew? So you see, we were snookered."

"I'm sorry."

"Me, too."

Janine started to get into her car.

"Wait, Janine. Something else."

"Yes?" She leaned an elbow on the car roof.

"I just want you to know how hot you are." She blushed.

"Seriously," he pressed, " you should know how great it was being with you that day."

She lowered her voice, though no one was within twenty yards of them. "Me, too, and you, too...you are a fabulous lover. But, Danny, we can't have any more of that, especially in light of...of this."

She tilted her head toward Stunning, outside village hall, still raving to the reporters.

"You folks will all be singing a different tune when the roads into town are jammed with cars carrying money—money for trinkets, drinks, picnic lunches, sunblock, fancy dinners, pricey bottles of wine..."

Mathis tried his best not to listen. "I understand," he said, turning his attention back to Janine. "See, I wanted to ask you a favor."

She stood straight and bristly. "What is the favor?"

"I was wondering if you could create a delay. Some kind of paperwork hold-up."

"You want us to delay the renovation?

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Let's just say, I like to needle my boss. I thought you'd enjoy it, too."

"Nothing would make me happier," she agreed. "We will review the permits and deeds and so on."

"I just thought maybe there was a local historical preservation commission, maybe if they imposed a designation that might limit what he can do with some of the architectural features, interior installations..."

She looked queerly at him. "I'll look into it." She hit him lightly on the arm with her file folder, got into her car and drove away.

Mathis prayed the ride back to the Institute would be quiet, that Stunning would have spent himself in the meeting, but no. Bennett and Mathis looked out the windows at the lovely countryside and wellcared-for homes rolling by while Stunning, who only had eyes for himself, continued his rant.

"It might have seemed like too much in that little room, but, believe me, that's the whole point. To be an artist you have to be...too much. Too aggressive. Hell, look at the natural world. Your crickets and spiders and rhinos, your trees and flowers—the natural world rewards aggression. It is the dominant chimp or the aggressive buck that leads the pack.

"Show me the evidence that the meek will inherit the earth, show me a shred of a suggestion that God favors the humble. All the evidence points the other way. Every example of life, God-given life, shows us that aggression and dominance are His favorite. So I look at my nature, some of the things I've done, and I gotta say, God bless me."

"What's the matter, Daniel?" Eve's voice was like a prolonged sigh of pity and concern. He hadn't even heard her approaching.

"Nothing."

"That isn't so. I've been watching you for a quarter of an hour. You haven't moved."

"What we're doing is bad."

"I know. Isn't it delicious?" She knelt quickly by his side. Her smile was so brilliant he could almost see it.

"No, what *we're* doing is wicked. What *Stunning* is doing, what I'm helping him do, is...not right."

"Tell me what has happened."

He recounted the meeting for her.

"Was he truly so...gleeful?"

"Yes, he was rubbing their noses in it." Mathis was silent for a while. She settled in his arms. It helped, some.

"Stunning is right about one thing," he said. "The good man is at the mercy of the evil man. Good has to get mighty lucky to win, while evil has no need of luck."

"Perhaps," allowed Eve, "but I believe there is a malignancy inside the evil man. His evil is his punishment. His emptiness and aloneness and cowardice and jealousy...he suffers."

"Maybe. Stunning is a miserable wretch, but he isn't aware of it so how does he hurt? And tell me,

how is his happiness, or Stalin's, different from the happiness of a saint or a priest or a social worker or a young person in love?"

"Who is Stalin?"

"There is no difference. And what if there's no afterlife? Then, hell, evil does triumph over good. It's nature, that's all. There is no good, no evil. It's an anthill crawling over the earth, which is itself part of a solar system spinning in a galaxy, one huge spray of nature working itself out in a void."

"I believe in grace," said Eve. "I believe that the person who lives in a state of grace sees beauty, knows beauty and love. And that is our earthly reward. As to heaven, I can't say. But in this world, the person who loves and sees, who gathers family and friends around him, is the happy man."

He didn't answer.

"What can I do for you, Danny?"

"Don't get caught. Keep the River open as long as you can, and I'll do the same. I need you here. I need to be in your world. I need to be in a world of goodness and kindness."

She held him close, but it would not be enough. Mathis's admiration for her world, his belief in its goodness, would not last the week.

Mathis was sitting beside Elinor in one of the front rooms, watching her rough out a poem. It was just the two of them.

You can never get this close to someone in real life, he realized. Even a wife or lover—they would be self-

conscious, tell you to stop staring, ask, What's up with you?

But he could go inches from her eyes, watch them scan the paper, look up at the walls in effort of thought, in dreaminess. He could almost see her discard, consider and pluck thoughts from air.

Her eyes shifted. Their mutual attention was taken by the sound of a coach. Elinor pulled the curtains aside to watch it as it pulled around the circle and into the porte-cochere with a louder-than-usual clop of hooves, jingle of harness, creak of spring. Mathis left her to go see who was arriving.

Wingate was reaching for the front door when it was pushed open, banging his knuckles. Edwin Skinner brushed past and hurried into the house. Wingate's icy glare fell uselessly against his back.

Mathis, curious, followed Skinner into the office. Kimbrough could hardly be bothered to greet Skinner until he heard the tone of the man's voice.

"Horace, my good man, we are rich!"

Kimbrough peered at him over his spectacles. "Is that so?" he said coolly.

Skinner took a seat then half-stood to pull it closer to Kimbrough's desk. Sat. Pulled it closer yet again, while saying, "Don't be angry, my friend, do not. Our New York associates, and I, too, of course, recognize that you preferred matters as they were, to finalize affairs, mingle with that quite colorful harbormaster But I believe, dear Kimbrough, that your anger will evaporate when I recount the terms I've settled upon with the captain of the *Santo Christo*."

"Yes?" said Kimbrough, unwilling to concede

excitement.

Skinner had finally drawn his chair all the way to Kimbrough's desk, but now he barely sat in it. He was leaning far forward, so eager to impart his news. With a flick of his eyes left, right and behind, he spoke to Kimbrough in a moist whisper.

"I inspected the ship with the agents of Waysmith, and it is perfect. They examined the hull, engines and so on, and I had a look at the ladies' quarters. It is all that was promised."

"Ventilated? Not too warm?" Kimbrough intoned with a warning in his voice. Skinner shook his head and Kimbrough continued: "The kitchens, clean? The cook, fastidious? The soil house, correct? The crew, disciplined? The captain, in command? Because it will not do to lose a girl on the passage over."

Mathis raised a palm as if in solemn avowal.

"Their papers, bills of lading and so on, are in order? Because it will not do for the ship to be searched."

Skinner was already shaking his head, smiling triumphantly. "All, as I say, is as promised."

"The harbormaster agreed to the arrangement?"

"As you predicted, Kimbrough, as you predicted."

"Yes, just so," Kimbrough sniffed. "I've filled that man's pockets for some six years now."

"And he sends his regards."

"And so, the terms?"

Skinner waited a dramatic moment and said, practically hissed, "Three hundred."

"Three hundred—only three...American dollars?"

Kimbrough sputtered.

"Three."

"Why, if the ship is as you say, and the clients pay over as before—why, we stand to make..."

"Rich. We're rich."

Kimbrough smiled broadly, spread his arms beatifically and reached over to take Skinner's hand. They shook, jubilant.

"I told you our association would pay off."

"Indeed it has. A glass of sherry on it."

"Agreed." Watching Kimbrough prepare the glasses, Skinner's eyes narrowed. "The ladies are set to graduate on time?"

"Yes."

"No family has come for any of them?"

"They are ours."

"Virgins all? Guaranteed?"

"Virgins all. Guaranteed."

"Because I warrant you, we cannot fetch the price we have asked if they are not virgins. We will hear of it, I assure you."

"I have been graduating classes for six years, my dear Skinner. I know the variables of price."

It finally, finally, dawned on Mathis what was taking place; and his invisible, incorporeal knees buckled, and he sat upon the floor of Kimbrough's office, stunned, feverish and nauseous.

"If you don't mind, Horace, I'd like to go over the list again. The Arabians, the Turks, the Maltese, the Brits, the Africans and so on."

"The student-client list-why, of course, Edwin, of

course," Kimbrough agreed with the most horrific of smiles. He turned to his desk and plucked a paper from a cubby. "We still have a month to post it, and it will reach our agent in Spain in plenty of time."

"Never hurts to count again, though, does it?"

"No, it does not."

The men raised their glasses and drained them and regarded one another with the predatory smiles of snakes over a puppy basket.

"White slavery," Eve repeated, almost in a whisper. "I don't know what you mean."

She did know. She didn't believe.

Mathis went over it again The conversation between Skinner and Kimbrough. The papers they mutually inspected, with invisible Mathis right behind them. The *Santo Christo*, out of New York, bound for Cadiz, Spain. The agents waiting there. A short hop to Morocco. The list of clients, waiting to take possession. Turkish merchants. German industrialists. African potentates. The destination names, largely unknown to Mathis. Farflung corners of the globe.

"Whatever do you mean?" Eve cried angrily, fearfully. He followed her voice around the room as she paced to-and-fro.

"I am telling you that you—the students, if you are one of the students—you will be sold overseas and..."

"...and forced to...to do what? To...to..."

"Yes, above all, that, yes."

"No! Daniel, no." She was pacing, pacing, as he

had for hours, waiting for her to come to him so he could tell her the dreadful news. For hours it had been stomp, stop, turn on his heel, do an abrupt about-face and stomp in another direction, pacing hard, as if to drive his feet into the earth, crush the problem, surround it, defeat it.

"It all makes sense, sick sense," Mathis added. "I've read some history. I remember reading about immigrants, foreigners, being shanghaied into prostitution. It was common in your time. Happens in my time, too. So it stands to reason, to sell white women and girls into prostitution...or to sell them overseas, to men who could afford it...especially virgins."

"Well, of course, virginity is the greatest prize of all, but...no, no! White slavery, this is just an invention of the penny dreadfuls."

"You are all orphans, yes? With no one to inquire after you?"

"That's correct."

"So, who's to know? Who's to stop them?"

"No, I cannot believe that Mister Kimbrough would...why, Mrs. Kimbrough would know about it, too. It is impossible."

"There is money involved. Nothing is impossible."

"No, I won't let you say so." He sensed her stamp her foot, and a sob escaped her lips. "There are files, photographs as well. Mister Kimbrough has them. Good families and fine houses in New Canaan. Cleveland. Savannah. Tucson. Good homes."

"It's just hocus-pocus to keep you all happy. It's

just lies, you have to believe me. I heard Skinner and Kimbrough going over material on those fine homes. I thought something was odd, but I never expected this. Jesus," Mathis concluded, "we are one sick, fuckin' species, excuse my language."

"No. You could be wrong. I trust what you tell me, Daniel, but you could be wrong, you must be."

"I saw the list. Madolyn is going to Turkey, Bethann to Damascus, Justine to the Belgian Congo, Caroline and some others to Germany, Cecilia and a few others remain in Morocco."

"But why all the classes? The education?" she asked listlessly.

"No doubt they can fetch a better price for cultured girls, girls with poise and musical talent and an ability to discuss, a fluency with languages..."

"And we are to do with as they please. To kill us, if they wish."

"Yes. Hey, you want to know how shitty this really is? Did you know that, in your time, in some European and Asian countries, men who have venereal diseases think they might be cured by bedding a virgin? Well, it's true, and such people are on Kimbrough's list. I heard him say so."

"Oh." she said. "I don't feel well at all."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

aniel Mathis spent the next few hours in that hopeless man-state of trying to offer comfort and assurance to a disconsolate woman. His mind was seething, but his brain was empty and his tongue silent.

She lay her head on his leg, and he stroked her hair. After a while, he said, "Now, I think, would be the time to tell me who you are."

"No." Her voice was wavery as she sat up. She sniffed. He offered her yet another handkerchief. The previous two she'd drenched with her tears and griefinspired nose runs. He watched the fabric wave in air, wiggle, crimp and grow moist as his beautiful ghost lover snuffled and honked.

"The River is my discovery," she said after a while. "My love for you is the foundation of my soul. This could be the finest time of my very small life. I won't have it interrupted by them. No. More than that, *fuck*, no."

He sensed her smiling. He reached out with gentle fingers and felt her mouth to be sure. Smiling, yes. She pulled his ear.

"Well," said Mathis, "if you won't tell me who you

are so we can plan sensibly, then you must go to the police."

"My police?"

"Yes, your police, knucklehead. Mine won't be much good. The best I can do is an historian."

"There will be no police," she said.

"I thought you were supposed to do what a man tells you."

"We do it wickedly," she said, ignoring him. "Nightclub bordello madhouse wicked."

That stopped Mathis in his tracks. "Say again?" She did. Nightclub bordello madhouse wicked.

"No, no, no," Mathis reproved her, having no idea what she was talking about. "What we do is, you go to the police."

"Dan, the Kimbroughs and Miss Cecil watch us day and night. When we go to town, she is with us. I couldn't go to the police."

Mathis sat bolt upright with the thought. He seized his lovely ghost by the shoulders. "Cecil—does she know?"

"Daniel, how would I know what she knows? I didn't know until now."

"Point."

"Knucklehead."

"Hey, who cares whether she sees you do it? Go to town and go to the police."

"If I were to bring a policeman to the school, it would be Master Kimbrough's word against mine. Now, you know the outcome of that in my time."

"Got it."

"No, Mister Daniel Mathis. The only way to undo this, is..." He felt her hand on his pants. She found his prick and lightly pinched it through the fabric, just beneath the head, just so, then pressed her hand against the whole shaft and he was this close to coming in seconds.

"I fear, Daniel, that I have seen far too much of your music channels, your fashion channels, your movie channels. I've seen Triple X, I've seen the dancing, the hips grinding. The huge cleavages, the thong bikinis, the men with their bulges, the frenzied coupling by strangers. I was not meant to see it, but I have and I am changed by it. I've come to know your time too well to handle this with any...trust. Or sense."

She had his belt undone and his pecker exposed to air and was rubbing it with fond hands, up and down the shaft. "Will you put this in me?"

"Yes."

"And do it with love."

"All my love."

"And trust me in my plan?"

"Oh, now," he growled in frustrated passion, "you're cheating."

"Trust me?" She stopped her rubbing.

"Yes, yes, whatever you—" He yelped as she pressed her lips to his balls and hummed.

Triple X, indeed.

Do this, she had told him.

"When you take your position in the crystalline

light, extend your hands in prayer, as before, and then bring them to your nose, like so."

"Like this?"

"Oh, my gosh, no. That'd kill you. Tuck your elbows in."

There was silence as he pondered whether she was kidding him.

She kissed him goodbye, a long one that tasted of his own cum. "I love you. Whatever you do will be for good."

"Tell me who you —"

"No." Gone.

That was the infuriating thing about the River. She always got the last word, and vanished.

The next day broke cloudy but by late morning it was sunny and clear, and the light streaming through the chandelier sent diamonds of soft, colored light shimmering on the dark wood wall. Mathis calmed his beating heart by placing his palm on his chest and waiting, as if he were standing for the national anthem. The sound of the crews hammering right above his head was muted by the din of the power sander in the north hall. The house was rocked with pounding, power tools and hoarse shouting.

He closed the doors of the dining room. He took his position. Waited for the sensation. Brought his hands up in prayer and rested them on his nose.

The sound of hammering and sanding was swept away, as if by surf and wind. The light shot through him in tingly liquid bolts, and sounds of moaning, weeping and crashing could be heard all around. The air he swam in was like a diorama, a picture, and now it focused. The air shimmered, and cleared. He was, as usual, in the servant's nook.

She had warned him that with this new step he would gain two things: the ability to be heard, and a sense of smell. He had been so looking forward to using his voice here that he wasn't at all ready for the smell, and it hit him like a wet slap in the nostrils and eyes-the dense, oily smell of kerosene, the sharp smoky smell of wood and coal, the medicinal smell of the many polishes being used on wood and silver, the pungency of broccoli boiling up from the improperly vented kitchen, the heavy moisture of the washtubs, all mingling with the raw earthy smells filtering in from outside, the sweaty body smells of these people and their infrequently washed clothes, which was fought by the items they wore to disguise it-flower waters the girls splashed on, the heavier musks that Miss Cecil used, the many flowers the women young and old wore pinned to their clothes, plus the ether of the men's pomade and the oil lamps, the gas jets, the cigar smoke...

"Jesus Henry Christ!" Mathis complained.

Behind him, in the nook, Lily shrieked and dropped a silver dish. Mathis jumped and had to bite his invisible knuckles to prevent from crying out again.

You can be heard now, Daniel. Careful.

Lily, looking all about her, backed out of the pantry and hurried downstairs. "M'um!" she called to Cook.

It had begun.

Mathis followed the sounds of girl-chat and girl-laugh to the back of the house. He pressed his incorporeal nose to the French windows in the parlor and admired the sunrays spraying down through the trees onto the brilliant green lawns and colorful gardens.

The girls were clustered in three groups, each rather ineffectually and lazily hefting the equipment and practicing the necessary strokes in croquet, lawn tennis and archery. Miss Cecil and Harriet Kimbrough marched from group to group, trying to keep the activity in proper order.

There was Bethann, the Prom Queen, Self-Appointed Number One Student, her auburn hair lustrous as treasure in the sunlight. She was playing with her braids, standing on one foot and rolling her eyes at Jane, who was brandishing the archer's bow like a fervent Amazon. Mathis stepped sideways to get a better view of Bethann, his quarry for the day, and in doing so almost walked through Gwendolyn.

Gwendolyn, her hair tied up with far too many red and white ribbons, sat in a chair in the parlor and glumly watched the activity. She was forever making excuses, skipping activities such as this—the dancing, singing lessons and so on. Here she sat, watching with a stony expression.

His plan had been to approach Bethann first, but what the hell. Perhaps the first seed should be a quiet one.

He knelt beside Gwendolyn, very close. She, of

course, did not sense him.

He leaned closer. Her eyes continued to fix on the gameplay outside. He was inches from her face. He opened his mouth, and the first thing the Ghost that Haunts the School said was "Uhm."

Gwendolyn's eyes popped wide. She shot upright in the chair, her eyes raking the air.

"Don't be frightened," Mathis whispered to her.

Gwendolyn screamed a scream that would wake the dead, past and future. She flew from the chair and ran about and shook her hands and generally made such a din that, within moments, the kitchen staff, house staff and student body had converged on her.

Miss Cecil and Cook got to her first. "What is it, child?" they both cried.

"Ghosts! A spirit spoke to me! Ahh, help!"

Aw, hell, Mathis thought as Miss Cecil murmured comfortable endearments, Harriet hectored, the girls babbled among themselves, and Molly sensibly offered to fetch a brandy. Mathis slunk out of the room, stoop-shouldered and dejected, a complete failure as a ghost.

Gwendolyn's "voice" was the talk of the house that day. Everyone, from the Kimbroughs to the students, was of the private opinion that Gwendolyn had had a fit born of dyspepsia.

"She's one of those quiet hysterics," Bethann whispered to Justine in deportment class. "I've read about them in the *Saturday Evening Post*."

Upstairs in the bathroom: "A good cleansing

should unstop her ears and spirit," declared Harriet, hefting her enema bag.

Resolving to do better next time, Mathis wafted about the house, listening to the excited exchanges at dinner and afterwards. An hour or to later he came upon Hope, quietly at prayer in the chapel in the north wing.

She was in the front pew, eyes squeezed shut, lips moving Mathis did not go quite as close as he had with Gwendolyn. From a few feet away he whispered, "Hope, He has heard you."

Hope yelped and leaped from the kneeler, banging the back of her legs. Mathis also sensed a spray of pee from under her many skirts. She spun about.

"Who's there? Who said that?"

Mathis waited until she was standing still. "Don't be afraid," he whispered.

Again she jumped and though her mouth worked like a marionette's, she did not scream. He left her there, the poor dear, her chin working and her eyes crossed in watchful terror.

People pray for a sign every day, Mathis pondered. Apparently, God is wise not to answer.

Hope did not report the incident to Miss Cecil and the Kimbroughs, much to Mathis's delight. Stunned and shaken, she went about her activities and meals catatonically, as if she herself was a ghost. The nine o'clock call to go upstairs seemed to rouse her, and she followed Bethann closely. As soon as she was alone with Bethann, upstairs, preparing for their

ablutions, she reported the visitation.

Bethann colored a bit and her eyes spun with confusion, then anger. "You should have some barley water, you and Gwendolyn. Obviously, hysterics." She tossed her braids and sniffed, "Why would an angel appear to you, rather than me? It's preposterous."

Before Mathis stepped out of the River for the day, he heard the word spreading from Bethann to Suzanne to Cecilia and on: Hope claims a visitation, too. Who's next? Edwin Skinner?

There was laughter and teasing. And many, many signs of the cross.

When Mathis next stepped into the River a mere half-hour later of the same day he arrived in the evening, as the second dinner seating was just ending.

He wasted no time.

He sought out Elinor. As the most inwardly directed of all the girls—morbidly so—and the most poetic, as the one who most vigorously explored the heavens but without prayer books and rosaries, he felt that she deserved an early visitation. He followed her as she joined the sewing circle, and Miss Cecil commenced a reading of *Missy Tillinger's Voyage to the Orient*. Mathis was about fed up with Missy Tillinger and her snippy judgments of the "Yellowmen" when Elinor quietly excused herself and went upstairs to fetch a special spool of thread she had been saving.

Mathis hurried ahead and waited for her to search the trunk under her bed. "Elinor," he whispered.

Elinor did not jump like the others nor did she look about like a frightened bird. No. She stood up from her trunk and slowly turned around—though with a look of such terror that Mathis's heart tugged.

"Do not be frightened," he said to her.

"I...can't...help it," she answered. She swallowed, licked her lips, and her eyes roamed the walls and ceilings. "Who are you that pays visitations on this house?"

"I am from the realm beyond earth." Listen to yourself, Mathis thought. You're in a first-season episode of Star Trek.

"Heaven?" Elinor asked.

"Heaven is one of your words for it."

"Heaven, though. Not the other place."

"No, not the other place."

Elinor tentatively waved the air with one arm. Then both. Then she marched around the room. "I cannot feel you. You are not real."

"I am, or I thought I was."

Elinor's brows knitted. "I wish you sounded more certain. Are you an angel?"

"Come, Elinor. You don't believe in angels, I think. Your path to truth and beauty is not the path of these others."

"You see into my soul," Elinor whispered rapturously.

Mathis moved closer and dropped his voice to a whisper. "Do you know Dionysus?"

Elinor's eyes remained shut. "I have read of him."

"Then you know that it is through abandon that you know truth and beauty."

"Abandon? In...drink? In...play?"

"In love. I am speaking of ecstasy."

Elinor sighed like the lovedrunk, mewed like a kitten. Her mouth worked until words formed: "But...spirit...what if I prefer the Eastern mystics, who teach us that truth and beauty are only found in stillness and quiet and repose?"

"When are you more still than after lovemaking?"

"I wouldn't know." Her voice was trembling, it was falling, it was crashing.

"I could teach you," whispered Mathis.

Her knees gave way, and Elinor fell gently on her bed. He left her there in the soft light of the kerosene lamp, her eyes scanning the ceiling, a smile flickering to life.

Only an hour later, he found Bethann alone. The other girls had been sent upstairs. It was Bethann's turn to tidy up the parlor and sweep up the stray threads from the sewing session. This she was doing, but not without some muttering and the odd shake of her head.

As his plan was dashed and revised, he had been tempted to leave Bethann entirely out of the visitations, considering her haughty, superior attitude even to the supernatural. But she was so damn beautiful—he wanted to see her swoon.

"Bethann," he said simply.

She jumped, screeched and farted in alarm, a

sound like a baby bird plucked out of the sky by a hawk. She stood, panting, in the center of the room, her eyes bulging and her fist gouging her mouth.

"Is that God talking to me this day?" she ventured at last, in a stage whisper.

"I can't lie to you. No."

"Who, then? An angel? The archangel Gabriel?"

"No."

"Michael?"

"No, will you –"

"One of the lesser archangels, then..."

"No. If I could explain..."

"Oh, Gabriel, I hoped you would come to me! The others, I'm not sure they're capable of my depth of faith. Surely, you sensed that." After the long silence, she piped, "Gabriel?"

"That's a nice name. Sure. Okay. Yeah, it's me."

"Here to announce the Second Coming?"

"The first—of many, I think."

"So, the kingdom is open to us, one person at a time?"

"Yes, okay, sure." She was gorgeous, but what a drip. "Bethann, I will come to you again..."

"Don't go. Let us pray together."

"I must go, but I will come again. And I will show you, if you wish, a gift that God has left for man and woman on earth."

"A gift? For woman, too?"

"Oh, yes, for woman." He stepped close to her and despite himself felt a stout chubby growing at the sight of that coppery hair, the Caribbean-green eyes, the freckling on her neck under the errant wisps of hair, the womanly breasts, slender waist and, now he could smell her, the rosewater, the molasses soap.

"Bethann, if you will say yes to me, I will enfold you in my wings. A feather will tickle every pore of your skin, until you are tingling, like sparks in a flaring fire..."

"Will you take me all the way to God?"

"All the way," Mathis the friendly ghost assured her. "All the way."

Bethann kept her visitation by the archangel Gabriel a secret for a good twenty seconds. After smiling tightly to herself, saying a quick prayer and beaming beatifically, she ran upstairs shouting, "He has visited me! And he will come again! He promised!"

By the time she reached the upper landing of the main stairs, she was surrounded by every girl, every faculty member on the premises. Bethann held her arms tight to her body and her eyes heavenward to better sop up all that heavenly grace.

At the bottom of the stairs, Mathis sat with a grim smile on his spectral face. He and Eve had devised a strategy that involved terrorizing some of the girls and extracting promises of absolute secrecy, creating a pressure cooker of sorts, the idea being to divide the house along predictable lines. It would be an experiment in human nature, goading the house into an exquisite emotional implosion.

But they'd quickly discarded that plan after Gwendolyn had blabbed to the whole house. Now Mathis and Eve were following a free-form strategy, hoping to bring the house down in a tumbling-dice manner. The result was all this public hysteria and communal discussion. Mathis particularly enjoyed (he couldn't wait to tell Eve) the panicky look in the eyes of Horace Kimbrough and his battleaxe wife as they ministered to the melodramatic Bethann.

The next morning (1893 morning), Mathis was fortunate to be present when the Kimbroughs marched into the kitchen, a rare visitation, indeed. Duncan, who was always malingering here, gulped his coffee and hurried outside. Lily and Mary, working at their customary dawdling pace, suddenly bustled, and even the bold Molly stepped aside and seemed to shrink into the walls as the Kimbroughs passed.

They drew Cook aside. "This nonsense about the ghost," said Harriet.

"Yes, m'um, I've heard about it, though I've not heard it myself, owing perhaps to my—"

"Yes, of course, Miss Bailey," Harriet interjected. "To the point. Horace and I are certain that you are pinching in a bit too much onion. Cut back, please, on the onions and all spices until the girls have recovered their equanimity."

"Yes, m'um."

Time passed in the twenty-first century, but Mathis hardly noticed. He only lived for the hours when the sunlight streamed into the dining room. Otherwise, he scarfed his meals down without tasting them; he watched TV without seeing it. In his dealings with A.W. Fallon and his crewmen, he was always two steps behind: "What? Sorry? What did you say? Say again? Pardon?" He was out of synch in his own world.

He worked on the front hall woodwork as if in a trance. It was intricate work, repairing the many dents, bruises and scratches to the wood.

Even when a bomb was dropped on him, it took a few moments to register: He got a call from Stunning one morning, and his boss's voice was nothing but white noise in his ear until: "...I was gonna send some people to remove that chandelier...and don't you say a word, hear me...and maybe some of the wood details, but it'll have to wait. Those fuckin' suits in the village—Dan?"

"I'm listening, Lance."

"Those pricks from the Historic Preservation Commision of the county got a stay of interior renovation for seventy-two hours while they review the work done so far. But after that, kiss your chandelier goodbye."

It could be over at any time. Pfft.

So, he accelerated. Twice and three times a day, depending on the sun, Mathis entered the River and created mischief on the other side. But the unpredictable way that time passed on the other side now started to concern him. As before, many days might have passed between his visits, and he feared that he was running out of time, that the girls would be dispatched to their fates before he could effect his

plan.

He regretted that this plan did not include the classic ghost ploys. How he wanted to play notes on the chapel organ when no one was seated there, or move objects in air, or give out a good disembodied wail, in the style of grammar school Halloween pageants and cheesy funhouses.

Instead, he had to content himself with whispering in the ears of Justine and Charlotte and Madolyn and so many others when they were lying in bed, preparing for sleep. His words poured like sweet honey poison...and words rarely failed him. Sentiments that would be laughed off the stage or dismissed as obvious in the irony-plagued-beenthere-done-that millennium worked smashingly well here.

He visited Miss Cecil one night alone in her bedroom. Not wanting to frighten her too badly by whispering directly into her ear, he kept his distance. From across the room, he called her name.

With a spastic jerk of limbs, Miss Cecil fell against the wall of her chamber and pressed herself against it, as if trying to escape a fire.

And perhaps she was.

Mathis stepped closer and said simply, "Do you know? Are you a part of this?"

Her fright, of course, concealed any guilt or innocence she might have shown.

"Do you know where these girls are being sent after graduation?" He waited. She showed only terror and confusion. "Ask Kimbrough," Mathis added, and left her.

It was a Sunday evening, an hour scheduled for domestic crafts. Most of the girls were in the north hall assembling their flowers and greenery for some sort of basket project. Addy had been sent to the kitchens to fetch proper knives and scissors, and Mathis rushed ahead of her down the east hall. When the curvy young beauty reached the final door before the dining room—a door to a dark, cramped classroom—he spoke her name.

She stopped. Her eyes turned slowly, uncannily in the exact direction from which he spoke.

"Yes, and what shall I call you?" she said in an eerily calm voice.

Ah, Addy. I knew you would show no fear.

"What name pleases you?" he asked her.

"I shall call you the marquis, a deceased and decadent member of court. I do not believe you are an angel." She plucked a candle from a nearby sconce and advanced into the dark classroom. She held the candle aloft, confirming for herself that the room was empty.

Mathis followed her. "What then?" he prompted her. "What do you think I am?"

"An incubus. Come to seduce the girls in this school."

"You are a clever schoolgirl. What do you think of that idea?"

"It appeals to me. Which tells me it is a sin. Which tells me you are a lying spirit, a devil."

"Does everything that appeals to you strike you as sinful? An ice cream soda? Warm sun on the back of your neck? The kiss of a boy?"

"No. But I know that men—and demons—lie to get their way. And that their lies are attractive."

"Just consider, Addy, that you are gifted with an independent spirit and a vigorous mind. Consider that you should think for yourself, act as you see fit, according to your needs, throw out what you have been told by people pretending to know the mind of God. Believe me, from where I am, I know...there is no limit to God's dominion, and His plan is so vast that it is beyond our understanding. There is no man, no priest, no Pope who can rightfully claim to know the mind of God. Even a spirit, like me, from a world beyond yours. To claim to know God's will is blasphemy, it is a sin of pride."

"I see."

"And man, that is, men, have created rules, and so many of these rules can turn out to be false. Just think how many things you are taught, commonplace observations about a woman's nature, that you know to be false. Throw off these shackles. Uncloud your mind."

"This sounds like the song of a devil, for it has such sweet music."

"I know you are a sensualist. I know that you dream of the touch of your lover, his hands caressing your cheek, your neck...and then your lover's hand brushing your breast with a fingertip, and both strong arms enfolding you."

"I do dream such dreams. But there is time..."

"If you do not feed the body, doesn't it starve, and thereby extinguish the soul, and thereby lay waste to God's greatest gift, life? And if there is no love, how fares the soul?"

Her eyes fluttered.

"Addy, put out the candle," he instructed. He was worried she might drop it and set her petticoats alight.

She did.

"To think of yourself only in light of a man—a future man, a phantom, like me—is to vanish, to waste God's greatest gift, life. To see yourself only as a wife, mother, manager of a house—these are good things, but they are tomorrow. Today you are young and lovely and in trembling need of love, of touch."

She was blushing, eyes rooted to the floor, but then she lifted her head, raised her eyes to the ceiling, shining with moisture. "I would like to be touched...I would like your hand on me..."

"So, you do long for the touch of a man's hand?"

"Yes, I do," she admitted, eyes downcast.

"And do you feel...bad...evil for having such thoughts?"

"Yes," she replied, a tear forming.

"But God is love, don't you agree?"

She nodded, that loop-de-loop nod of the uncertain.

"And God would smile on the exercise of love, yes?"

"He does, but within the confines of marriage."

Mathis ventured a guess: "So, when you touch yourself, sometimes, just sometimes, at night...this is sin?"

"You see everything from heaven, don't you?" Addy paused. She hung her head. "Yes, it is wrong." "Yet you do it."

She nodded. "In moments alone I do let my fingers tweak my bosom's buds, and they grow so hard, and I can feel the tingle go down my belly. And I grow wet there. Should I grow wet there?"

"Yes"

"Or sometimes, when no one is around, I run the crack of my bottom against the rails on the back stairs, just press it in so forcefully."

Mathis blinked at that one. He recovered, saying: "Those feelings are me, trying to reach you. The spirit of Eros."

"I want you to reach me," she said fervently. "I want you to touch me. Will I feel that thunder in my girl's place...?"

"Thunder and lightning. The tingles you get when someone pinches you...imagine it as pleasure, imagine you begging God not to let it stop. You will feel wet, so wet, and flushed, and your nipples will grow hard, and a musk will steam up from your skirts..."

"But it would be wrong, I must save myself for that man—"

"How complete is a woman if she knows not how to please a man. Let me teach you..."

"Do you love me? Tell me you love me." Addy

flung out her arms and brought them to her breasts.

"I will love you. Until you are filled up. Until you sizzle with joy."

"Ohhh..."

He took a moment to admire her, in all her confusion and fervor, and then he left her, still quivering.

CHAPTER TWELVE

've been chosen," Addy gushed to the girls at the dining room table as she eagerly took her seat. The Kimbroughs and Cecil had not yet come downstairs, and many of the girls from the first sitting were lingering. Most of the student body turned their attention to the flushed, wild-eyed Addy.

"Me, chosen," she added. "He is here, among us."

"You? No. Why would Gabriel appear to you?" Bethann said.

"The saint as well as the sinner shall be saved in time," Suzanne reminded her, and Bethann cuffed her on the shoulder.

"Who is he?" Jane asked, her usually stern eyes wide and most charmingly spellbound.

"He's not an angel, I think he's an incubus, sent to seduce us all," Addy said. She shot a glance toward the kitchens, toward the hall—no sign of Cecil or the Kimbroughs yet. She looked directly at Bethann. "Did he strike you as completely pure?"

Bethann blushed.

"I call him marquis," Addy said. "He is high-born to be sure."

"I doubt he's nobility," Gwendolyn advised. "I'd say he's a changeling. He was once a wolf."

And then all the girls, all at once:

"An elemental."

"It is a druid, come up from his underground lair. We should look about the grounds for a tunnel."

"It's a trick, to be sure. It's the wee ones, their voices intoxicating. Meant to tease and deceive a girl."

"It is Thorolf Clubfoot, the Scandinavian vampyre. A seducer who will drag you to hell."

"Yes, with a smile on your face."

"I recognized the manner of Agioto, the African leopard man. So frightening but alluring."

"I think it might be Nivek, the master-dwarf."

"Or Ammez, the well-dressed dwarf, the one the others all hate. He is said to have a voice like fine wine, but he is ugly and foul."

"Dwarves are wealthy, so I'm told. Wouldn't he be wealthier than most?"

"This one is not a dwarf or a leopard man. His voice came from up here. He is tall."

"Is he a centaur perhaps? They are amorous, and attracted to human females."

"Centaurs have big things. Horse things."

Gales of shrill laughter drowned out Bethann's "How very rude!"

"There is no question in my mind, at least," said Caroline, "that he is a satyr. Pan himself, perhaps."

"Yes, their voices go in the ear, down the neck to the place."

"To the bosom. Say it."

"Yes, I get tingles there. They make a girl's acorns point."

"A voice does that?"

"Fairies and sprites make sounds like smoke."

"I tell you, it's Pan, or one of his goatish brethren."

"But muscled like a man, and compelling, with eyes that...taunt, but peer directly inside you."

"Yes, his eyes. Like the voice of a fairy."

"Make your bosoms go warm and bubbly, like fiery foam..."

"And they compel my eyes, down and down."

"To his manhood."

Mad giggles.

"Oh, it will grow so big."

"It will just appear from his manly thatch."

"Extend and grow thick."

"So that you need two hands."

"It's like a mast."

"It will fill you at night."

"And send white lava inside you, until you burn together."

Sighs, and silence.

The silence lasted until Kimbrough hurried into the room and, sensing the queer tension, planted hands on waist.

"What is this, then?" he inquired. "Who will say grace?"

"I think Clarisse should go to the Indian fellow's estate in Malta," said Edwin Skinner. "She is well read, has an interest in history, am I correct?"

"Yes, I believe so," Horace Kimbrough replied.

Mathis dropped in on the gruesome pair now and again, just to remind himself what he was doing, and why.

"And Margaret, most definitely to the Algerian, that Frenchman."

"Her musical ability..."

"Exactly what I was thinking."

"Still..." Skinner mused, his eyes off in the high middle distance, "it is a shame, young Madolyn. Pity I can't buy her myself." He gave Kimbrough a glance. "Or ride her once, just to break her in, eh. Those bountiful pillows of hers—"

Kimbrough had colored upon hearing Skinner's lubricious tone, seeing the repulsive leer on his face. "I will thank you, sir, not to—"

"Yes, yes, I know, keep my remarks to myself."

"And if I see you so much as smile in an untoward way in the girl's direction, I shall see to it our business relations come to an end. I shall contact your people in New York and you will be out!"

"How dare you speak to me that way, you who can hardly budge your eyes from the fair young Addy."

"Outrageous!"

"But true! You have affection for her, no matter how well you keep it in control."

"And that is the point I will linger upon, sir—that I keep my feelings in control at all times."

"Bumhole," Mathis whispered.

"What did you say?" Kimbrough spat at Skinner.

"Who, me?" Skinner replied. "Nothing."

"Shit for brains," Mathis added in rhythm.

"How dare you!" Kimbrough fumed. "Such language..."

"I should like to bugger you," Mathis added in Skinner's direction.

Skinner gaped at the man. "I do believe you are losing your mind, sir, to speak to me thus."

"Thus?"

"You wish to bugger me?"

"I—I—" Kimbrough goggled then: "Wait, I have it," he declared, finger wagging the air. "The ghost. It is the ghost."

"The ghost! The ghost?"

Both men jumped from their chairs and spun as if their trousers were afire, scanning the room for the ghost.

Later, Mathis was witness when Kimbrough reported the incident to Harriet.

"What is a dickbrain, do you suppose? Or a weenie?"

"I don't know," Harriet replied. "But I confess I've been hearing whispers as well. Whatever is meant by blubber-butted twat?"

Mathis had been extremely fortunate in the weather this summer. There had been cloudy days that ruined his chances of a River trek, sometimes two days in a row. But all-in-all, weather had been his ally.

Then came the inevitable: a full week of overcast skies, clouds and rain, six days in which Mathis shook his fist at the pewter-colored clouds that sagged in the sky, shook his fist literally, like King Lear. Eve, his spirit guide, could not visit him, either.

He stood in the dining room, where the light should be, hoping against hope something would be ignited. He masturbated feverishly, thinking of his invisible love, of big-hipped women with pre-Raphaelite hair smelling of oil soap and woman musk. It was all just out of reach.

He turned his attention to his woodwork. The repair and burnishing phases were over; now it was time to begin staining, which also involved matching grain patterns with a squirrel brush, running a cake of beeswax over every surface and polishing with steel wool to fill grain pits. It was still enjoyable, but every few minutes he just stopped.

He ached. He stomped around the house, barked at the crewmen, hung up on Stunning twice.

"D.M., did I tell you? I'm going out with Willow, that chick my brother was dating. I mean, I love my brother, but, hey. Whether she can make it as a model or not is beside the point. She set her sights on that life. My life is closer to that life than Mister Public Relations' is. You can't ask her to be something she's not. It's nature."

Click.

At night, during this week of cloud cover, Mathis ran about the house naked, in the dark, sometimes to lightning storm accompaniment—ran around naked in the dark, knowing that there was glass, saws, metal scraps and all sort of other sharp edges he might impale himself on or neuter himself with.

When the sun at last reappeared that fine Wednesday morning, he practically wept with joy. He stood in that dining room and watched the sunrays flow across the room, and knew there was a God.

Returning to 1893, Dan Mathis discovered that the stew he and Eve had concocted was bubbling along nicely. At the midday meal that day, the girls commenced to giggling and wouldn't stop. Horace Kimbrough inquired as to what was so amusing. They could not answer him. Miss Cecil started to remonstrate with them, and when Kimbrough left the room they explained to Cecil what they were going on about—Jim Corbett's boxing trunks. Miss Cecil burst out laughing, and soon the entire table was convulsed.

It was as if the house were gathering a fever.

To further stoke it, Mathis crept up behind Edwin Skinner, who was putting his teaching tools away. Mathis couldn't help but observe for a moment Skinner putting away the chalks at random in a tray then arranging them by size, and then reversing the size. Putting notebooks away, largest on the bottom, smallest on top, and then doing it again, marrying them inside each other, then clucking his tongue and doing it the first way again.

"Edwin Skinner!"

"Achchcha," Skinner shout-hissed, bolting from his chair, pressing himself against the wall.

"Yes, it's me," Mathis whispered.

Skinner rushed to the adjoining wall, pressed

himself to that, toppling shelves and books, several of which bonked him on his oily skull. He was about to bolt from the room when Mathis whispered, "Did you think I would forget the one true man in this house?"

"Eh? What's that? Who's that?"

"You've heard the girls talk about the ghost. You doubted before. Now do you doubt?"

Skinner's shook his head no with rubbery violence. "Y—you appeared to me before, in Kimbrough's office. I—I—I—"

"I know. You think I made jest of you. In fact, I was making light of Horace Kimbrough. Him, a typical great man who is much less than great. A man who cannot see the worth of the likes of you. And why? Because you are his better."

Skinner blinked spastically, absorbing this.

"From the realm beyond we see all, and here we see what no others can see," Mathis continued. "We see a man who is powerful, brilliant...and a sensualist."

"I am those things."

"But no one here seems to appreciate it."

"That is true."

"I have a sister spirit, she has observed you...and wishes to love you."

"I—I—I—I" he gibbered, spewing the syllables out, shaking his head.

"Such pleasure you cannot imagine, when an angel comes to call on you. Her celestial hands on you, her warm lips, tasting of heaven..."

"Why...?"

"Why you? Because the heavens bless the clever man, the powerful man, the man who harbors such power that only special people, and spirits, can appreciate it."

"Yes, that's—that's—that's—that's—"

"She has looked into your soul, and sees power not unlike that of God the Father."

Now Skinner's palsied head began to shake halfno, half-yes, acknowledging the possible truth of this.

"She is so beautiful, Edwin, a ripe body like a peach, lips of sweet honey, eyes like...like gemstones, like the gates of heaven themselves..."

Now his head was shaking a full yes, and his tongue had appeared. Seeing Skinner's tongue, Mathis wanted this over with, pronto.

"She will appear to you soon," he said, "but she must appear as a familiar first. No one must know she is here."

"As someone familiar to me?"

"Yes. Her true, otherworldly beauty has in the past killed men who beheld it too suddenly."

Skinner absorbed this. His head stopped its shaking.

"She will appear to you as..." The ghost paused, for effect.

"As Madolyn?" Skinner ventured.

"...as Harriet Kimbrough. The two of you will be alone. She will give you a signal that it is not Harriet, and you will be one. When you kiss her, she will be transformed into her true beauty."

"A...a signal?" Skinner gulped.

"Wait for it. You will know it," Mathis whispered, and left him.

It so happened that Mathis's next swim in the River landed him in the Kimbrough Academy at suppertime. One minute he was in the present-day dining room, as quiet and empty as outer space. The next he was in fully furnished surroundings, packed with people and noise. Students rushed to take their places, Miss Cecil directing them; the Kimbroughs were admonishing them, and servants bustled about, clattering dishes and tinkling glassware. It was jarring and anxiety-provoking: Mathis couldn't shake that initial sensation that he might be caught.

Calm, Dan. You are invisible.

Lily flitted past him with a tray of boiled potatoes. The girls on the door side of the table looked right at him, looked right through him. His phantom muscles relaxed, and his phantom heart ceased its pounding.

The talk was formal, Kimbrough intoning the latest news—"The Brits finished rebuilding that summer palace in China. Nuisance." "I read today that in Ohio they've formed an Anti-Saloon League. And I say, about time!"—comments on the victuals, the new hymn books and so on. He droned on for some time, and Mathis was thinking he'd rather go watch Molly scrub some pots when Kimbrough censured Betty Ann about her fidgeting.

"Sit still, Betty Ann. You rise on your haunches as if gas was troubling you. If so, a colonic may be in order."

"No, sir," Betty Ann replied matter-of-factly. "It's my bottom, sir. It hurts from the paddling."

Miss Cecil and the Kimbroughs exchanged a series of glances. Betty Ann just smiled serenely.

"Paddling?" Kimbrough finally squeaked.

"Yes, sir," Betty Ann assured him with a warm smile. "Quite disturbing and wanton thoughts have been put in our heads by Gabriel, and I said to him, it is not good for a girl to have these thoughts, and he said, it is good, but if you like, have yourself a spanking and consider yourself cleansed."

"Angel Gabriel? Child, you have a fever..."

"No, he did, he was in my room. I heard him whisper to me..."

"Me, too. He has whispered to me," Madolyn put in. "He talks of love, of touching..."

"Stop, that is quite enough," put in Cecil, primly wiping her mouth with her napkin and making as if to rise.

"Yes, so Madolyn came to me after lights out last night," Betty Ann reported.

"I was with her, for I needed a paddling, too," assured Charlotte.

"Yes, and Madolyn asked that I hike up my nightdress, which I did, and turned about, over the bed, bent over, you see."

"Her fanny looked different, bent over like that. You could see her parts," Charlotte said. "Did mine look like that?"

"Rather," said Madolyn. "The hair around your

southern lips, like a little beard..."

Harriet groaned before her head hit the table in a faint. Horace, turning a dozen colors, jumped to his feet to see to her.

"She commenced to spank me," Betty Ann resumed.

"Yes, little spanks at first..."

"Such a sound! Slap! Slap!"

"It hurt my hand a little, too."

"I think that's the idea."

"Do you? Interesting. What you do is, you slap and slap, waiting for the jiggle to stop."

"Yes, the jiggle of the cheeks. It jumps and wiggles with each slap. You wait for it to stop."

"And the girl to stop crying out."

"She kept making it harder and harder, until I was crying out with the pain...the delicious pain..."

"You were begging me to stop, but I wouldn't..."

"Did her fanny turn red, do you suppose?" Cecilia inquired of the group.

"Oh, yes, I'm sure it did," Caroline answered. "It was dark in the room, I'll guess, but I'm sure it was all rosy on her bottom."

"You could tell by the warmth," Madolyn informed them all. "I ran my hand over her fanny and it was so warm..."

"You did?" Caroline exclaimed then confided: "I rested my face against it for a moment, and it was warm."

"And it still feels warm, a little," Betty Ann said with a smile. She spoke to Madolyn. "Will you spank

me again tonight?"

"Please, I'd like to..."

Kimbrough had managed to rouse his fainted wife.

"Girls, go upstairs!" Harriet squawked, first thing.

"Yes," Kimbrough agreed, "Why, it's an outrage," he thundered, doddering around the table. "Everyone, upstairs to bed! No! To chapel!"

Harriet nodded eagerly, while Miss Cecil fanned herself, quite dazed.

"No pudding tonight! To chapel immediately!" Kimbrough hollered, but he could hardly be heard for the squealing girls, the laughter, the blushing, all that blood in the veins, blotting out all sound.

Mathis had one hand probing Eve's pussy, the other kneading her fine left boob. Two of his fingers were inside her gushing wetness while his thumb rotated on her clit. Her ass clenched and bucked in orgasmic pleasure. With each spasm, she drove his cock deeper in her mouth, lathering it with her tongue and tickling his balls. They were thrashing in a 69 position on a fine Sunday morning, no workmen scheduled for the entire day.

Then the doorbell rang.

"Who could that be, my love?" Eve asked him, releasing his cock with a loud, wet pop.

"I have no idea," Mathis replied.

He had to get fully dressed and pad all the way to the front of the house, adjusting his mighty boner. He opened the door.

And to his horror, there stood Lascivia and two

men he did not know.

"Hi, Danny. How are you? Sorry, am I bothering you? It's Sunday, wow. Should have called, I guess, but you know how it is." She talked at mach speed, and would not stop. "Anyway, this is Neal and Phil. Guys, say hello to Danny, he watches over the place for Lance. So, Dan? Lance said I could remove that chandelier. I have a project in mind for it, it'll only take a sec, we have this dolly, we'll just box it and roll it out, okay? Can we come in?"

There was a long, uncomfortable pause. Dan Mathis had lost all track of time, standing in that doorway, staring at Lascivia and her two hulking teamsters. She had on a boa and a feathered hat mismatched with a Gidget-style blouse and clamdiggers. Neal and Phil were super-fit health club rats.

Mathis just stared at them, and they stared at him, until he said, sure, come in. And he stepped aside.

As she stepped past him, Lascivia eyed Mathis with queer suspicion—and she jumped a foot in the air when he suddenly hollered, "You've come to get the chandelier, is that right?"

Lascivia looked at him as he if was insane. "Yes," she said. "I just said so."

Mathis nodded. He remained near the foyer. He had a clear view of the three of them walking down the long east hallway, their steps echoing. He was a good twenty yards from them when Phil, or Neal, whichever, suddenly stopped and yelled, "Oww! What the fuck! Who did that?"

He swatted the air and spun around. "Neal, what the hell?" he whined.

"I didn't do anything!" the other pleaded. All three looked behind and saw it was not Dan—he was still way back there at the foyer. He waved to them. After a huffy pause, they continued up the hall. Three steps, and it was Lascivia's turn: a shrill scream and "Ouch! Who pinched me?"

All three looked back at Dan Mathis.

"Everything okay down there?" he called to them. And that's when the tarp covering a stack of replacement floor tiles rose in the air before them and filled out to near-human form.

"I am so jealous," Mathis muttered.

She must have whispered a curse or a warning to the three, or wailed like the restless dead—he never asked her what, exactly, but it was enough. With a pissy little squeal, Neal and Phil clambered backward, spun on their heels and fled, dragging their dolly behind. They flew past Mathis and outside into their truck. Lascivia hurried past him, too, stopping long enough to try to say something but no words came out. She risked a look back: the tarp, arms flapping, was flying along the hall toward her. Squawking in utter terror, Lascivia rushed to the truck, and off it went.

"Step back," Eve instructed Mathis. "Now turn around. Yes, I like it. That is assuredly the costume."

"Yeah? You think?"

"Yes, you look like an incubus."

The Lascivia incident had accelerated their timetable. It was time for Mathis to become fully corporeal in 1893. Eve, his spirit guide, would show him how. He would be able to touch and feel. He would be fully there, in the school, among the girls.

And he would be fully visible.

"I don't think this is such a good idea," he said for the tenth time.

"Shush," she said, adjusting his sparkle.

Since he would be visible, the ghost/Angel Gabriel/marquis/incubus/sprite needed a costume that said *spirit*. It should say *seducer*. It should not say *tacky dork*.

He and his spirit had considered and discarded many items-blue-tint sunglasses; a faux tuxedo Tshirt; leopardskin pants; a hat with Mercury wings; a hat with pig ears; glasses with spiraling, hypnotic eyes; glasses with eyeballs on springs; Spock ears; a sleeveless T-shirt with a demon crest; electric-blue sweatpants; a black T-shirt with the image of a ribcage and spinal column and sneakers with flashing light diodes. They'd even tried applying temporary tattoos to his face – delicate flames that framed his eye sockets—that made him seem too menacing. Finally, they settled on fabrics and colors no Victorian had ever dreamed of—a skintight T-shirt with a pink lightning bolt, a neon-glow-in-the-dark davglo greenish ring to wear around his neck, dark blue spandex pants and just a very light dusting of sparkle on his face. His hair he left alone, all spiky and wild. The desired effect: to startle and please.

"This is dangerous," he reminded his spirit guide.

"Yes," she agreed happily.

"It's crazy. It's probably mean. It's certainly selfish and wanton and I can't believe you want me to do it."

"That was the plan. We should continue the plan."

"How can it be that I'm the prude here? You want me to...to..."

"Say it."

"I'm to deflower as many of the girls as I can."

"Oh," she mewed, "I thought you would say fuck. I like it when you say *fuck*, and *pussy*, and *titties*."

"I don't want any of them. I want you."

"You're a liar." She kissed him. "Daniel, if it is virgins they prize, then we must deny them virgins. Disruption. Chaos. Libido. This house is structured on order, ritual, Christian values. We turn it topsy-turvy. We go mad with it."

"What about you? I love you."

"I love you, too, and I still want you to...defile as many of the girls as you can."

"But that isn't the way love is supposed to be. What happened to jealousy?"

"Aren't you tired of sitting by while evil men prosper?"

"Sure, yeah, but that's why the police—"

"Living with injustice, suffering under the heel, that is what people do. Virtuous people, people of all stripes. How we deal with oppression and lies, it's part of what defines us," declared his spirit guide. "Do we let ourselves be tempted, be lured? Or do we triumph over it, and manage to live a life of purpose

and goodness? Do we suffer in silence, or do we fight back? There are times for that, too."

"You sound like my high school valedictorian."

"I can think of one other reason. You remember I lured that woman, the one who showed you the house, I lured her into...into sucking your cock."

"I do recall that, yes."

"I liked it then. I like it now."

His marquis costume shifted, experiencing its first boner.

"You say I will be fully visible," Mathis said after a moment.

"Yes."

"And you could have visited me in that way at any time?"

"Yes."

"Then I tell you what. I will do it. I will deflower and defile every woman in that school, and when your turn comes, I'll know it."

"No, you won't."

"Yes, I will. I have tasted your kiss, felt your fine bottom and your ripe breasts and I will know you again."

She was silent for a while. He held her hand and waited.

"Are you ready to learn the new step?" she said after a while.

"Yes." He took a deep breath.

"You stand in the light as before. You bring your hands before you in prayer, as before, then to your nose, as before, and then sharply down, still pressed together, before your midsection. Like so. Good. Remain in that posture until after the red rush."

"The red rush?"

"Yes, that is your blood jumping into our time. When you arrive, you will be facing the stairs. And remember, you can be seen, so..."

"So...so what? I could land right in the middle of dinner."

"Then you step out of the crystal light immediately."

"You're sure I can still do that? What if, in this new step, I give myself up to this experience, abandon myself, and forget how to get out?"

"When danger signals, you will know what to do. Once you arrive, take the servant wing stairs upstairs, until you become accustomed. Try not to be seen until you are quite ready." She kissed him. "Good luck."

"You're really gonna let me nail all these virgins."

"That was the plan."

"I was drunk when we hatched this plan."

He felt her kiss on his lips, and she was gone.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The next day's sky was overcast all morning, and Mathis was quietly relieved that he would not be visiting the Kimbrough Finishing Academy for Girls. Maybe tomorrow. Fine.

But then, late in the morning, the sun burnt through. He stood at the windows of one of the front rooms and stared dumbly at the sunrays spraying through the house.

"Aw, shit," he said.

He went to his room and climbed into his costume. He flecked on some sparkle—not much, just a little. All sparkly and dressed in skintight clothes, he was extra-careful crossing the hall to the dining room. He hid behind a door, waiting for Fallon and the tile crew to break up a meeting in the east hall.

Bingo. Meeting over. He ran to the dining room and shut the double doors. Sunlight was still streaming through the magic chandelier. Mathis took his position. Legs together, standing straight. Hands together in prayer, touch to nose, then down, arms straight.

It was as she said—he was enveloped in light so bright it scoured his skull; there was a vacuum stillness, and then the sensation of a wall of blood rushing at him so fast and loud, hitting him, hurtling him down a tunnel shooting sparks.

The tunnel fell away, the colors shimmered, focused: the dining room. Empty. Behind him, the pantry. Empty.

Thank God.

Looking down, he saw himself. There was his hand floating in air before him, the first time he'd seen it in the nineteenth century. He bit it. Normal pain.

He went to the mirror over the sideboard. My God, there he was, in a neon neck ring, dayglo shirt, spandex pants and glitter.

Twerpy, yet alluring—he gave his hair a quick finger-comb.

There was a sound from the kitchen, and he dashed up the back stairs. He slowed at the top and looked cautiously both ways. The servant's wing was quiet and still.

He took a left and entered the main upstairs east wing. It was quieter up here, far from the kitchen clatter. He looked out the window and saw from the light that it was late afternoon. There was still daylight.

He heard the *thwock* of a croquet ball and, checking to be sure he was not observed, ran from the east hall to the north hall and along the windows there until the field came into view from a window seat.

Yes, there were the girls. Under the willow tree, a large group was seated in a circle, listening to Cecil reading. Closer, on the croquet course, Bethann,

Hope, Suzanne and Gwendolyn were having a game. Suzanne and Gwendolyn were slapping at each other and sticking out their tongues. The others—Bethann with her coppery hair, Hope with her golden curls—posed prettily, lining up their shots carefully, hitting them badly.

Mathis sat on the window seat and watched with serene pleasure. To his left, the girls listening with girlish concentration to Cecil's story, playing with their hair, their clothing, fighting to sit up straight, like ladies; and to his right, the girls in their beribboned hats and wide skirts clumsily striking at the ball...until Hope, wiping her brow from the heat, allowed her eyes to stray to the upper floors and saw him.

He had a moment to remember he was visible. He stood. He held her eyes.

The mallet slipped from her fingers as she just stood there and stared. Her blue eyes, caught by the sun, glittered with wonderment.

He gestured for her to come, come.

She stepped backward. She stifled a cry with her fist.

Mathis gestured: come to me.

Fist still in her mouth, she shook her head no.

Mathis didn't know what to do now. Gyrate? Stick his tongue out, snakey style? Gross.

Instead, he did what came naturally. He sat abruptly, put chin on hand and pouted.

Hope's arms dropped to her side. She looked down at herself and shivered. Mathis knew her pussy was wet, her nipples hard. She looked up at him in the window, her eyes shining.

With a slow glance left and right, Hope picked up her mallet, handed it to Bethann and wandered toward the house, out of his sight. His blood quickening, he waited.

He heard her feet in the back hall. Heard her exchange some words with Miss Bailey. A coo from Cook: you poor dear. The heat, I suppose...

Mathis's heart was racing. He wanted to run. Run from an eighteen-year-old schoolgirl. No. He would stand here. Wait for her. Fully visible.

He heard her on the stairs. He fussed at the window, losing his courage, almost willing himself to leave the River, go...

Hope stood at the top of the stairs, looked down the hall at him. She was not frightened, it seemed. Her eyes on him, she pulled the ribbon that secured the hat under her chin and slowly removed the hat. Her hair tumbled to her shoulders.

He slowly approached her. They stood facing one another.

Then came the harsh bark of Harriet Kimbrough, approaching from the adjacent hall.

"Come along, Enid! The floors won't wash themselves."

Hope made a little peep of terror. She looked from Mathis to the spot where Harriet would appear any second.

Mathis took her hand and drew her into the closest bedchamber just as Harriet rounded the bend. He closed the door behind them.

Mathis and Hope stood, cheek-to-cheek, as Harriet Kimbrough's heavy steps, followed by Enid's lighter ones, could be heard approaching. For a terrifying moment the steps were right outside, loud, and Mathis was sure they were coming into this room. He stared at the door handle, waiting for it to turn, poised to jump out of the river, his twenty-first-century self tensing in the sun's rays.

Then the steps rushed past the room, grew faint. Then, gone.

"You know who I am," Mathis whispered to Hope.

"The ghost of the Marquis de Champlain," she replied, pressing her ear to the door, listening for any further sign of a Kimbrough thereabouts.

"Correct."

They both jumped as Harriet Kimbrough's voice could be heard, not too far down the hall: "Start in the *corners*, girl. What are you thinking?" And Enid: "Yes, m'um. Sorry, m'um."

Hope and Mathis waited a moment, both staring at the door. The sound of Enid's mop now could be heard. Hope turned to Mathis, trembling, and whispered, "How can I be of service, Marquis?"

"I want to be of service to you. What do you dream of?"

"Of this. Being alone with you."

"And?"

"That you do things to me. I have thought about it until I could think of nothing else. God will forgive me, I'm sure, but...I would like to be touched by you. I want your hands on me."

"Put your back into it!" barked Harriett Kimbrough out in the hall, way too close for comfort. "You're not cleaning one thing!"

"Yes, m'um. No, m'um."

Mathis reached out and ran a finger along Hope's smooth, soft cheek, and then to her neck. "Do you feel my hand on the back of your neck? Do you like it when I run my fingernail every so lightly, a baby touch, along your skin?"

This close, Hope was even more lustrous than he remembered. The supernatural ripeness of young woman, a caricature of voluptuousness, with that huge tumble of curly blond hair, those enormous bosoms, the tiny waist gathered by the corset and the great swell of hip. Her eyes flashed as he took a step closer to her. Her breath quickened, her eyes fluttered.

"You have such power," she whispered, as they were inches away now. "Such incredible power."

"Thanks. You like it? I just got it."

He kissed her. She tasted like mint and, faintly, pork.

"Perhaps you could show yourself to me," he whispered.

"You want me to be..." Her head swooped again, her skin flushed red. "...to be naked? Naked for you?"

"Yes, I would like that."

As his hands approached the buttons of her dress,

there was a quick but very sexy roiling of confusion in her eyes. As he began to loosen the buttons, she tossed her head so that her blond curls fell over her shoulders and back.

Outside was heard the wet slap of mop, and the stern voice of Mistress Kimbrough: "There. And there."

Hope's dress tumbled with a rush of fabric to the floor, and she darted him a quick glance, a half-smile. She turned for him, arms upraised, as he began on the laces of her corset, casting the occasional, fearful glance at the door.

"Now rinse," snapped Harriet Kimbrough. "Rinse, girl."

"Yes, m'um."

Then off came the underskirts—he slid them over her hips, down to the floor, kneeling. She watched him. In Hope, there was none of the cliché attitudes of the twentieth century, neither the cheesecake gaiety of the 40s nor the full slit-eyed lubriciousness of the 90s, no undulating or winking or leering. In her last remaining garment, the silk underblouse, she stood proudly, eyes shimmering, her shoulders thrust back as if offering herself as a pagan sacrifice. She held this pose, so that he might see her smooth shoulders with the cascade of golden hair just covering the few dimples there, see the fine taper of her rather hairy legs, the half moons of her tits rising from the silk.

Mathis slowly, slowly undid the buttons of her blouse, as Hope watched the door, shyly, apprehensively: Enid was washing the floor just outside, and Harriet was still with her; they could hear her labored breathing, her tut-tutting Enid's technique.

With a final, gentle tug, Mathis removed the silk underblouse. It fell to the floor, and Hope stood, stooped at first, eyes to the floor, and then she rose, her posture straightening, her eyes growing proud, her shoulders back, and her round breasts thrust forward, her bum protruding, hips flaring, the pieshaped tangle of pubic hair, all the darkness and mystery there.

This was no airbrushed *Playboy* centerfold standing before him, but a girl/woman whose eyes slid shyly to the side as her arms came up slowly to cover those great, milk-white breasts. She was so real, the flesh so succulent with its light imperfections, the sincerity in her eyes as they came around to regard him, her shining wish to be of some pleasure, some use to this presumed spirit, that she was as beautiful as any woman he'd ever seen, and completely desirable. She quivered, perhaps feeling his desire for her.

He stripped his clothes off. Hope watched him, though her eyes flickered nervously toward the windows each time she heard the faint smack of mallet on croquet ball, down to the floor at the rattle of plates from somewhere downstairs, and toward the door at the voice of Harriet Kimbrough ("We do not have all day, little Miss Enid." "No, m'um.").

"Don't be nervous, Hope, my love," Mathis whispered. "You are safe with me."

When he removed his fire engine-red bikini

underwear, and his erect pecker stood free, Hope gazed at it raptly.

"I am safe with you," she agreed. He took her in his arms and kissed her. His dick fell happily against her soft belly, grazing that generous thatch of pussy hair. Their flesh joined in a rush of delicious warmth. He ran his hands over her back, over her ass, gripped her hips. Her kiss was stiff, immobile and dry at first, but he gave her lips little licks, applied his kisses at odd angles, sucked her lips free, and she quickly grew facile. Her breath quickened. He parted her lips with his tongue, frenched her a good one, and her breath rushed at him in a gale of lust.

She smelled of molasses soap, a bouquet of flowers and sweat—it wafted up from her armpits, and as he kissed her neck and nuzzled her breasts he could already scent her pussy, strong and undeodorized, from that abundant, musky bush.

She reached down for his dick and gripped it—whoa!—way too hard. He laced his fingers in hers, released, and instructed her. Soon she had it: running her cupped fingers up and down, up, down...and again, her breath quickened, a furnace blast of want.

They tumbled onto the nearest bed, and he tasted every part of her. At first she lay still, nervous and expectant, but somewhere around the time he was between her great breasts, in that world of bosom, sound muffled, nostrils filled with her scent, skin tantalized by the baby softness of skin, she started to writhe. She rolled atop him and he was smothered in Hope. He sucked her nipples in turn while his hands

converged on her ass, clutching it, patting the wondrous fatty slopes; and she collapsed on him, laughing a little, puffing, wheezing. Now it was like nuzzling an undulating tent of hot flesh. He hugged her leg to him, slurped her thighs, tongued her belly button. She tried to wrench his head away as his tongue danced south, south, into her fragrant nookie bush, east and west to her thighs, and then due north again, gently, slowly along her moist pusslips, north and south in a growing rhythm until it was time to flick her clit; and once he made contact with that engorged button, she gasped and fell back. He kept at it, flicking it with motor-like quickness until her juices were foaming over his face, until she arched her back and bucked and came with a mournful, muted wail.

She parted her legs, eyes glistening in the half-darkness. He parked his throbbing prick at her parted pink lips, and sank it slowly, slowly inside her. Her eyes rolled, her eyelids drooped, and a sigh, a little kitten mew of surprise and delight, escaped from her. He withdrew his dong, which was now slick with her juices, the light glistened off it, and then he plunged it back in, faster now. He ground against her, and her eyes popped open with the sensation, and her arms lolled in air and then enclosed his neck again.

She writhed, like a dragoness, and let out a low, keening sound, which he took as his signal and he began to pump like mad, his cock sliding in and out of her pussy in a blur of motion, and he could feel her muscles trembling, the orgasm bubbling around her booty. Her legs climbed up his back until her feet

were on the back of his neck. Her hips were shimmying to receive his prick, her hands were clambering at his butt. Her low wail became a desperate, panting squeak as she came, they both came, he spurted so much jizz in her he was shocked he had that much. Her eyes on him were wide with disbelief. Their breathing slowed. Their limbs unclenched. They collapsed in each other's arms.

There was a long moment of panting, of mutual support in exhaustion. Then, as they recovered their breath and their muscles gave out, their eyes met, and there was the beginning of awkwardness.

But the Marquis de la Whoever cannot be awkward.

Mathis figured, Why not?

He gave her a light kiss on the lips. He told her she was beautiful. He said goodbye. And he stepped out of the River.

It was the nightmare of the country squire, a nightmare that many city people had as well. It involved strangers dropping by for a visit, announced or otherwise.

Dan Mathis was living it.

Investment people, art dealers, gallery owners, New York-based artists, bimbos that Lance Stunning wanted to impress. They were starting to show up from New York, and Mathis was expected to give them tours. Stunning might call ahead but more often than not he would forget, and people would show up, unannounced and full of their own entitlement.

Local artists and no-talents from all over the region were also arriving at Mathis's door, wanting to show Lance Stunning their work. One showed up with his pick-up truck laboring under an immense bronze sculpture of what seemed to Mathis a furry spatula. Another hauled a huge canvas of a polar bear in a snowstorm to the front door, and one of the plumbers accidentally plunged a length of #8 pipe through it. Velvet paintings, lewd mobiles and collages snipped from *TV Guides* were all trotted out for his inspection.

"He's not here. We're not open," he would inform them.

"When will he be here, then?" Dirt-poor, unconnected and untalented. But entitled.

Also, even though the house's renovation was hardly near completion, state and county inspectors were arriving at odd hours. Plus curious villagers and members of the zoning council and, sometimes, small TV news crews.

Some of these interruptions did wrench Mathis from his far more intriguing life on the Crystal River. But that was not the worst of it. The worst of it was that each time a person walked by the chandelier, or a tall person bumped it and sent the crystals tinkling against one another, he felt time running out on him, his world shrinking, imploding.

"Why do you hold me so close tonight, Daniel?" Eve asked him one night.

"I don't know."

"You seem afraid."

"I am. It seems that this, you and me, should last

forever. Except that I know it can't."

"No, it can't."

"But I want it to."

"We're no different than any other lovers, in that way. So many things out of our control, time short and precious, the end unforeseeable."

Her back to him, he felt his wanker stiffen and grow between her thighs, so warm in there. She arched to welcome him, and he entered her, sliding joyfully into her wet pussy.

"I love you so much, Daniel."

"I feel so close to you, but I don't know you," he said to her, thrusting into her with mad dog urgency.

"Yes, that's it exactly," she said.

Hungry for more sex, Mathis stepped into the River. As the light engulfed him and he began his headlong spin through the tunnel of fire and color, he wondered if anyone would be in the dining room or pantry when he appeared out of thin air. He wasn't as nervous as last time about it, he simply wondered.

The answer was: Mary, the stoop-shouldered servant. When the room came into focus, and he was visible in it, he found Mary setting the table.

She had her back to him, but only for a second; she was just turning around to gather up some silver. Mathis pivoted, rushed into the pantry and up the servants' wing stairs.

"Hallo?" he heard Mary call nervously. She must have caught a glimpse.

To his relief, the upstairs was empty. He looked

out the window and estimated the time to be late morning. There was no one in the backyards.

The sound of singing reached his ears as he entered the north wing. Female voices, raised in hymnodic praise. He stepped quietly down the back stairs. He peeked around the corner. There was no one in the hall. Now the sound of the entire student body singing "Rock of Ages," accompanied by the stylings of Harriet Kimbrough on organ, was full and unmuted.

With another glance up and down the corridor to be sure he was unobserved, Mathis tiptoed to the chapel door and peeked in.

And came face-to-face with Margaret. She had apparently just finished collecting hymnbooks and was in the act of stacking them on a little table in the back of the chapel.

Mathis had to resist the urge to duck back, run, put his fingers to his lips. No, he had to play the spirit, fully in charge, unafraid.

So, he just stared at her, and she, eyes widening, showing facets of wonderment and terrible fear, stared back.

Margaret had an Italian or Greek beauty—olive skin, full lips and thick, black hair. Her eyes were almond-shaped, very dark and expressive so that when Mathis finally gave the slightest gesture of come-hither, he could read immediately in those eyes she would.

First, she stole a quick glance over her shoulder—the Kimbroughs were up front and elevated, and very

much into themselves, singing; everyone else had their back to her. Margaret stepped out of the chapel

Mathis took her hand and led her down the hall. They hadn't gone five steps when the measured tread of Wingate could be heard, growing louder, approaching them from the far end. Mathis opened the closest door, ushered Margaret inside and shut it.

They were in a large, walk-in closet full of furtrimmed woolen winter coats. They waited until Wingate had walked past, then Mathis opened the door a crack to allow some light in. He turned to Margaret, who was trembling from head to toe.

"They said I could ask you a question—"

"Who said, Margaret?"

"The girls, everyone, said it, though truly, one girl said I could ask you three questions, like Princess Arabu and the troll on the bridge, but I just have one and so my question is this..."

"Shh," he whispered. He ran a slow hand through her tightly coiled hair. He removed a hairpin, then another, and her chignon started to fall, the black hair a cloud over her shoulders. "Relax. Slow. I'm not a devil or a spirit. I'm a lost soul who wants a hug."

"I'm frightened," said Margaret.

"Don't be fri-"

"No, but I am. Most emphatically. Frightened and ashamed. We shouldn't do this."

"Do what?"

"It's wrong. I should save myself for my husband."

"If you feel that way then, of course, we won't do a thing. Not one naughty thing. We'll talk."

"Pardon? What?" she practically shouted.

"Shh." He listened. The chapel had been silent; now Harriet Kimbrough's indelicate fingers played a flourish on the organ, and the congregation resumed its singing.

"Now I'm confused," Margaret said, too loudly.

"Don't be. I'm not a spirit to take you over..."

"But aren't you and I...aren't we intended to...naughty, yes, naughty."

"Yes. I want you in my arms, to engulf you in kisses."

"I'm warm. Is it warm in here? I'm warm."

"To run my hands over you..."

She took a step forward, while looking sideways and wringing her hands before her.

Mathis placed his hands on her tense, quivering shoulders. He ran his hands over her arms, planted them on her hips. Drew her closer. In a single step, she managed to stumble.

"I'm full of turbulence," she reported. "I feel funny. Warm and dizzy."

He filled his hand with her bosom. Through the fabric they were warm and full and smooth, and Mathis let out a steaming moan of desire, of heat, and it met hers in mid-air, for she seemed to sag under his hand, and she mashed a kiss on his face, a twisty-turning, lippy, tonguey kiss. Her hands found his buttcheeks and she slammed him to her in the tight confines of the closet.

Slowly, the kiss broke, with a lingering, gentle bite by Margaret.

"This is what I want," she whispered. She looked him in the eye, and then her hands were on Mathis in a perfectly hungry but instinctively successful hand job. She just scooped his balls and rested her fingers on his wanker with such hunger, with such longrepressed need, that he rocked with it.

"Shall I hoist your skirts for you?" he panted.

"Quickly," she answered.

The small, dark closet was a confusion as, panting like dogs in August, they worked at Margaret's many buttons and laces, stumbling together, dislodging coats from their hooks and hangars so that they tumbled onto the lovers, onto the floor, her dress coming off, then her corset. Unable to wait, Mathis fell to his knees atop a soft bed of coats, lifted her underskirts and hugged her warm thighs, the skirts falling over him like a tent, and he was home in all that feminine warmth and odor, running his hands up and down those strong legs, planting a hungry kiss on her hips and burrowing his nose into her cooze, feeling the downy triangular bed of hair through the silk chemise.

Her knees gave way and she collapsed on him. His head bumped the door open and he reached over to shut it most of the way. She was now pulling on his clothes and he on hers—the last garments came off and he was drowning in her warm, smooth flesh. She hugged him to her breasts and he managed to nuzzle them, fondle them, place his face between them while she slid her hands under his pants and gripped his dick.

"Oh. Oh, my," she panted.

They stretched out on the bed of coats they had unwittingly created. He hugged her to him, his hand running from her breasts along her flank to find her pussy, which was so wet it was almost frothing, its moisture spilling over her hips, running down her big legs. She reached around again and with uncanny skill cupped the base of his shaft and his balls, running her palm over them, balls and cock, now gaining a rhythm, and they worked each other, he with two fingers, then three, probing her yang, thumbing her clit, she running her hand up and down the shaft, tickling his balls.

From next door came the sound of twenty people taking their seats. Moments later, Kimbrough began his sermon. "All of us, not just Mrs.Kimbrough, Miss Cecil and myself, but all of us should be disturbed by the events of these past weeks. The most charming ornament of a young girl is her seductive innocence. That is why we must avoid..."

Mathis stopped listening as, with a low peep, Margaret took his cock in her mouth. She snuffled and squeaked and began to work around it. She emerged, gasping, then fixed him with a smile and descended again, licking his nuts, flicking his shaft with her tongue, then taking the entire thing in her mouth, bobbing her head like a crane. Mathis began to whinny and scrape the walls with his fingers, delirious with pleasure.

"...to warn you of the frightful dangers of amativeness in all its forms, particularly fantasy,

leading to hysteria, leading to onanism..."

Margaret climbed to her knees and slapped her hands, loudly, on the wall of the closet. She wiggled her shapely bum in his direction. Mathis got down on all fours and burrowed in there and slurped, licking her dripping beaver from behind, burying his face in all that hot, fragrant booty, while she bucked and slapped the wall and cried out high-pitched nonsense of ecstasy.

When he paused to lick her hip, get some air, she reached back and guided his cock into her wet snatch. They churned together, Margaret rotating her hips in a gentle rhythm that was designed, whether she knew it or not, to bring little tweaks of silken ecstasy from Mathis's happy penis to his balls and midsection, creating sparklers in his vision. Sparklers danced around Margaret's bobbing breasts, her rotating flanks, the glitter of her eyes resting against the wood closet wall.

"...science teaches that sexual feelings in the female are very moderate compared to the male. Some have argued that no feelings exist at all. In rare instances, women might enjoy these relations but in general are happy to abstain, quite happy."

Mathis had been pounding Margaret from behind so furiously that her dreamy smile was mashed against the wall, and her high-pitched moans were barely muffled. Now Mathis collapsed and slipped from her, falling back, conking his head on the other wall of the closet. Margaret squeaked woefully at this absence of dick then, with a bearish growl, climbed

atop him. She was far above him, those bouncing boobs, that narrow waist, flared hips, and he watched as she guided his cock inside her. It was unbearably pleasurable, the sight and sensation of that wet fleshy purse closing over him, and now those great lips kissing him, and he hugged her to him, tasting her nipples, while she rocked atop him, their four feet slapping the wall in jungle rhythm. Faster and faster she went, her breasts jumping now, her eyes shut, head high, a keening of delight growing low in her throat and higher and higher, until suddenly her eyes shot open, her mouth gaped and a machine-like shuddering overtook her. With this, a jagged cable of pleasure shot through Mathis, he splurted his spunk up into her and they rocked this way, out of control, careering off the closet walls like pinballs.

"What in the name of heaven—?" Kimbrough thundered.

Apparently, they had been loud.

They heard footsteps out in the hall, the excited babble of the girls, the stern commands of their elders, ignored.

"I hate to leave you, love, I really do," said Mathis, gathering his clothes while his cock remained rockhard inside her. He kissed her.

He stepped out of the light, but before he arrived fully in the twenty-first century, he heard the shrieks of surprise, and the booming exclamation: "Margaret!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

athis arrived in the twenty-first-century dining room, crowing loudly his triumph and pleasure. He strode about the dining room, arms overhead like an Olympic gold medalist. He refreshed himself with intakes of fresh, twenty-first-century air through the window. A mere five minutes later, his dick still aching and limp from his encounter with Margaret, Mathis stepped back into the River.

The 1893 dining room was empty, the kitchen quiet. The newspaper on the table told Mathis it was a Sunday. All of the girls were at church, and quite a few of the kitchen staff as well. Almost forgetting he was visible, he started down the east hall—and stopped.

There was Molly, taking advantage of the empty house to scrub the front hall. From behind the dining room door, he watched her at this task for quite some time, as she was bent over most pleasantly, her flanks strong, her plump rump not visible under the billowing peasant dress. He considered approaching her, but on a Sunday morning? And her with that temper...

Still, he was formulating what to say to her when

the phone rang. She didn't move to get it. She didn't seem to hear it.

Shit. Of course, it was his phone.

He stepped out of the River and stomped to the phone.

"Did you read the *Post* today, page six? No, you wouldn't, I forgot you're stuck up there in Buttfuckville."

Stunning.

"You remember page six. The gossip column? So today there was a picture of Candice—remember her?—at an opening, looking damn fine by the way, with Nolan Freewel, that sadass no-talent cocksucker. I threw her ass out so it could land it in *his* bed? I am gonna make it my business to destroy his career."

Stunning, you self-centered, pea-brained fuck, Mathis wanted to shout. Guess what? My life is more exciting than yours.

"Say, did Lascivia pick up that chandelier?" Stunning said. "I haven't heard from that skank in weeks."

I am having the wildest goddamn time in my life, in anyone's life, Mathis wanted so badly to say, but couldn't because if he did it would all be over.

"She isn't even taking my calls. That's a big fuckin' no-no, know what I mean?"

Lance, you weenie! I'm getting my dick sucked by eighteen-year-old virgins! I have the pick of the litter!

"Danny, are you there? Say something. I pay you enough, you could at least agree with me."

And at day's end I fall into the sack with my one true love, a ghost, who has learned to give me hummers, Lance!

"I love you, Eve."

She didn't answer, just nodded her head.

"I love you."

She took his cock from out of her mouth. "I know," she said.

"I want to be sure you know."

He was on top, fucking her in the mouth, fucking her while she moaned and cooed and huffed with desire. Now that she knew he loved her, he slid down and buried his tongue in her fur. They writhed together like horny snakes, twisted around until she was on top, taking it all in her mouth, tickling his balls, too, while she settled over him, pressed the weight of her hips on him, and he ran his tongue up and down her cooze, lingering on her clit, up and down, lingering. She came over his face, so wetly he dripped with her juices.

"Oh, God, how I love you!" he cried.

"Sshh," she said, licking his nuts.

"I can't get enough of you," he announced.

She wheeled about, positioned his prick between her hungry pussy lips and sat. She started rocking on it, and he hugged her to him, pressed his face to her bosom, let her hair fall over his, tickling his ears. They danced like that for a long time, with Mathis making noises of desperate desire, until he felt the ticklish sizzle building in him, and he thrust so hard she hoisted her hips, parted her legs, wailed and squealed while he pumped her full of his jizz.

Afterwards, they lay in a heap. His mind,

notoriously empty after sex, was full of melancholy.

"What's the matter tonight, Daniel?" she asked him.

Mathis sat up, found her hand, held it in both of his. "Am I looking into your eyes?"

"No, my ear. Look right. Your right. Further. Too far. There. Oh, I like it when you look at me."

"I'm looking through you to a magazine cover. Barbra Streisand. Ick."

"What did you want to tell me?"

"Can you remember something? When you get back to your time, you must write this down. Will you do that?"

"Yes."

"Promise."

"I do."

"Save some money. You know of the stock exchange? Find a way to purchase stock. There must be people who will help a woman do that. Invest in J.P. Morgan Bank, Carnegie Steel, Standard Oil, Ford Motorcars, General Motorcars, perhaps some railroads. Coca-Cola, too. Kodak is good. Eastman Kodak. Sell it all in first quarter 1929, then reinvest. You'll know when. Advise your children to look for International Business Machines, Apple, Microsoft."

She was laughing. "I'll never remember all that."

"Here, I've written it down. Put the paper in your mouth. Maybe it will come back to your time with you. If not, we'll keep at it. You'll memorize."

"What is the matter, Daniel? You're all on fire."

"I just...I don't know how much time we have

left."

"I'm not very experienced, but I believe that is a problem all lovers have."

"I want us to be together, always."

"That can't be," she said.

He put his finger to her lips, to silence her. "Always," he insisted, with a pang.

It was with that lingering sense of imminent doom that he next arrived in 1893.

It had been a fine sunny morning in the twentyfirst century, the day after he had done the dirty mambo with his spirit lover. Trying to shake off his blues, he jumped into his costume, applied a light dusting of glitter and hurried into the dining room.

As expected, the red rush and shimmering light of the Crystal River dissolved, the dining room in 1893 came into focus. But wait, no! Mathis' heart hammered against his ribs, seeing that Lily and Mary were both in the dining room, placing the bread and vegetables for dinner.

He pivoted and made for the pantry, and the stairs to the second floor.

But there were students galloping down the stairs, almost far enough to see him —

He pivoted again and made for the dining room—but the servants had turned and would see him. He wheeled about and rushed down the other stairs, toward the kitchen. The sound of Cook's voice stopped him cold.

"You'll work late if you need to," she was hollering

at someone. Mathis waited on the lower stairs as the students rushed past and above him into the dining room. Hearing Cook approaching from below, still yakking ("...spotless for tomorrow's inspection or we'll be tramps for sure...") he rushed up the stairs, through the pantry, up the back stairs to the second floor.

And straight into the arms of Addy.

"Oh, my!" she exclaimed.

It seemed like an eternity before he could gather his wits.

You're the ghost, Dan. You're in control.

"The lovely Addy," he declared coolly.

"Marquis...is it really you?" she wondered, stepping back, fanning herself.

"In the flesh."

"Yes..." She slowly reached out and touched the glowing neon ring at his neck. Touched a fingertip to his glitter and caught some. "Since we spoke, I've thought of nothing but you," she said, studying the glitter. "Pretty." She looked at him. "Have you come for me?"

At last, things were going his way. Very much his way.

With her blue eyes wider than usual, her large lips parted in wonder, she was lovelier than he'd ever seen her. Temperament, brains and classic beauty—curly brown hair, porcelain skin, chiseled cheekbones, enormous breasts, tiny waist—she was perhaps the most alluring young lady in the house.

"I've come for you," he agreed.

"Ladies!" Harriet Kimbrough trilled from below. The dinner bell rang, a nervous little tinkle.

Addy looked down the stairs and back at Mathis, in some distress. He took her hand and led her down the hall. Addy cast worried glances left, right, ahead and behind all the way down the hall, but she allowed herself to be led into the Gallery room. The lamps had not been lit here. He slowly closed the door and studied her by the moonlight streaming in through the great windows. In the deep blue shadows and silver light, she was achingly beautiful.

Faintly, they heard the sound of the dinner bell again.

"I've wanted you to come for me," Addy said, in a different voice.

The silky, seductive tone—immediately he felt a woody straining against his spandex pants.

"Have you ever had a lollipop, Marquis?"

"Yes, I have, Addy."

He squinted at her through the moonlight, and found in her the universal symbol of virginal seductiveness: the upturned eyes, all smolder and surrender, and the pouty mouth.

"I want to be licked. Like a lolly. All over. Will you do that for me?"

"Will you be delicious?"

"Promise."

And she was.

They undressed quickly. He left on his neon ring, which she watched in fascination as it swooped and bobbed in the dark. When all their clothes were hanging in ragged piles over the overstuffed couches and chairs, she walked apart from him. Placing her hand on the back of the couch, she waited for him to approach.

He took a moment to admire the phenomenally slim waist, the preternaturally flat stomach, the perfect legs, the great, proud breasts, the outthrust bum, the untamed muff. She could feel his eyes on her as he circled, and she let her eyes drop shyly to the floor.

A distant voice could be heard through the closed door. "Adele!" It was Harriet, calling from the dining room.

"Lolly," Addy whispered.

Mathis stepped behind her. He kissed the back of her neck—that was how he announced himself—and she preened and instantly began to huff and puff and churn a bit at the waist.

Her skin was perfect, flawless, except for a trio of moles on her back. Smooth, baby-soft, tasting of lilac-scented soap. Mathis reached around to pet the humongous, upright breasts. He nuzzled her neck and she preened, her hands performing a dance in the air that wanted to wave him away and stretch her arms to God. Finally, she reached back and ran her hand across his cheek, welcoming him to cup her breasts and squeeze their massive, heaving warmth, to thumb the plucky nipples, to bury his face in that fragrant neck, under the canopy of hair, smelling of honey and rosewater.

He stopped, hearing the voices of Harriet and Miss

Cecil rising as they approached and passed the door then fading. While he was listening, Addy had reached around to cup his wanker in her hand. She stroked it like a cat.

"Lolly," he murmured, kissing her back, lower, lower, until he was on his knees behind her. Her pussy, like the others, was in its natural state, that smoky, dockside scent that sent tentacles of thrill through his head, down his body to tug achingly at his rock-hard prick. The spheres where her thigh met her fanny cheeks was impossibly sheer, and he spent much, much time nibbling at the spot, while above him Addy moaned and, rather than bending, arched her back to make that shelf even more pronounced. Her bum was so dramatically flared that the valley between the cheeks was fathomless, or so he pondered before he began to lick at that, too. Surprised, Addy bent over to admit him. He stiffened his tongue into a spear and poked her there, and she twitched and sighed.

"I like that," she whispered so faintly he barely heard her. He flutter-licked her hole, then up and down her bum, up and down he lolly-licked her there in rhythm, until she was crying out nonsense syllables and prayers, a sweet gibberish that went straight to his heart, to his aching, hungry groin.

"Will you take me, Marquis?" she cooed, with English uplift. "Will you drive your hard pole inside me, move it about until I feel the gates of Heaven opening inside me, all trumpets and angel wings?"

"Something like that, yes." Mathis panted,

standing, rubbing his member against her fanny, sliding it up her back as she collapsed over the back of the couch onto the seat. He tumbled gently after her until his cock rested quite naturally between her boobies, where it found a warm, pillowy home.

"Inside me, spirit, inside me now."

He put it inside her, and with every inch she cried and moaned and cooed and wept and laughed, until it was buried to the ball. He started to pump, he saw the slickness, all silvery in the moonlight, and she raised her legs high in air and began to undulate to receive it, and they were so lost in their bucking, rutting and snuffling that he was only barely able to hear the steps coming along the hall, and the cry of "Adele! Adele!"

Mathis held up, with his dick fully inside her, and their eyes, so close together, peeked over the couch back and stared at the door.

It was flung open, and Miss Cecil stood at the threshold.

Mathis ducked. Addy squirmed. Mister Happy lost his warm, moist home.

Miss Cecil held her oil lamp aloft and took in the tangle of Addy's clothes.

"Adele?"

"Here, mum." Addy stood, naked as Venus.

"Adele?" Miss Cecil sputtered. "Whatever are you—"

Mathis peeked, and saw Harriet and Horace Kimbrough join Cecil in the doorway, quite amply filling it. Horace beheld Addy's nakedness and turned away, cawing like a strangled crow.

"Practicing onanism, mum," Adele responded. "Pleasuring myself. I'm dreadfully ashamed."

Mathis slithered to the floor, well out of sight. He could step out of the River and escape, but what would he do with this massive, hungry boner? It needed to be fed. He remained still and listened as Miss Cecil and Harriet gathered up Addy's clothes, Harriet launching into a shrill lecture. He caught a glimpse of Addy: pooching a kiss at him; she tossed his clothes quickly over the couch.

The voices faded. The door shut. The room was quiet and dark. Mathis remained there for a while, waiting for his chubby to subside, aching for release. He listened to the noise of the house, suddenly energized—the girls running along the halls, talking excitedly; Harriet, calling after them, sharp and singsongy; Skinner calling for Horace, an edge of hysteria in his voice.

What is Skinner doing here after school hours? Mathis wondered.

He gathered up his clothes and scampered naked across the Gallery to the door that gave into the next room, the sewing room. He entered and closed the door after him.

The room was small. There were seven chairs arranged in a circle, several chests overflowing with fabric and thread and a long table on which lay bolts of fabric. At the far end was a deep, triangular window seat with a well-crafted pillow bed. The window seat looked comfy, but Mathis hurried to the

other end of the room. He stopped short of the door leading into the hall and lay naked on the floor near it, the better to listen to the house.

Seconds later, as he anticipated, two of the students entered the Gallery room. He heard them call to the marquis, the spirit. They sniffed about, giggling, unwilling to leave.

Mathis flattened his ear on the cold wood floor and let the sounds and vibrations of the house, carried on wood surfaces, flow into him. There came the sound of many loud steps creating wood squeaks and groans, the scraping of chairs, the placing of objects, distant, indistinct voices, low and high, rumbling and piercing.

"The ghost, the spirit, he is here tonight." He heard the message whispered heatedly. Somewhere else, he heard Lily and Mary, murmuring their fears. Cook, clapping her hands, rousing the troops back to work. The girls, the students, growing louder, voices teasing and giggling. Lilting hellos for Duncan by various of the girls. Skinner and Kimbrough: "Can't have this...came as soon as I heard...the girl is unhurt but she...naked, you say...of all the helldamned luck...state inspector...tomorrow...from Albany...blast..."

Mathis was absorbing these last remarks, smiling to himself, when, suddenly, he felt the rumble of footsteps converging from all corners of the house, joining, growing louder as they thundered up the main staircase. And voices: the Kimbroughs, Duncan, Wingate, Miss Cecil, Cook, Molly.

And the order: Search the house.

Kimbrough's voice was loud as thunder: "We'll take the east hall, you the north."

They were right outside the door of the sewing room.

Mathis shot to his feet and backed up to the center of the room, clutching his clothes to his chest. He wondered what the hell he would do if they—then, again, he remembered the River and relaxed. He could escape any time he liked. He decided to wait. He felt his heart pounding, nonetheless, and smiled at the game he was playing.

He heard someone enter the Gallery room, walk around it thoroughly then leave, closing the doors. The same person walked purposefully toward the sewing room. Mathis watched as the doorknob revolved.

The door was flung open, a lamp held forth. Mathis stepped out of the River...but remained.

It was Miss Cecil.

He stepped out of the River yet remained. Something wrong there, but he didn't let it panic him. Miss Cecil's dark, fathomless eyes flashed over the room and found him. A spike of fear showed in hers, but for only a moment. She looked his naked body up and down, staring first at the neon ring around his neck, the glitter, then his cock. A subcurrent seemed to run quickly through her, and her eyes grew unfocused. She bit her lip.

He waited, that other worry forgotten.

She stepped further into the room and shut the

door. She locked it. She walked—posture perfect—past him to the door adjoining the Gallery room and locked it, too. She then turned, most lady-like, her skirts sweeping with her,

"So. You are real."

"Yes."

"Are you a demon?"

"No."

"Wouldn't you lie if you were?"

"Beats me. I don't know any demons."

"I am curious," she announced, keeping her chin aloft, her eyes fixed on his eyes, though they strayed to his dong every few moments. It was growing stout and levitating under her inspection. "Curious," she said again, clearing her throat. "Were you intending to call on me?"

"I was. If you would have me, I wanted to love you last, so that I could have you forever."

She swooned a little. He took her hand, gently took the lamp from the other, placed it on the nearest table and led her to the window seat, where she sat.

Miss Cecil was probably thirty-five years old, an older woman for Mathis, and he couldn't contain his excitement. His nuts were full, aching, and Mister Happy was fully erect. Standing over her, it was bobbing, suffused with loving blood, nearly in her face.

"What have you wished for? What are your dreams?" he whispered to her.

Muffled by the door were shouts of the other searchers. Miss Cecil didn't hear. She shook her head.

Both a smile and a good cry were tugging at her face, like kids kicking under the covers.

"They're wicked," she said.

"Good, that's good, I want to hear them."

"Are you wicked? You seem—you look—so kind."

"I'm both."

"Is that possible?"

"In the bedroom, yes. What do you think of at night when you get wet down there?"

With a desperate groan, she darted forward and took him in her mouth. She pumped his pecker, running her tongue and hands over it, all the while moaning and gasping with desire.

When she came up for air he asked her, "And then what?"

With another desperate gasp of desire, she knelt on the window seat and offered herself to him. "We don't have much time," she panted.

Mathis reached to the nearest table for the scissors—big, clumsy nineteenth-century scissors, but they did the job; she was trembling a bit but held still for him as he snipped the laces of her dress ("Yes, do that.") and growled feverishly as he snipped the laces of her corset ("Hurry, spirit, do."), nodded frenziedly as he pulled at the clothes, yanked down her petticoats, and with each harsh move Miss Cecil let loose a louder, hoarser, animal cry.

Now clad only in her silk undergarment, she began to undulate like a pole dancer. Mathis let his right hand reach up under the fabric. He ran his hands over the swell of her rump, and from under the cloud of hair that had come loose from all her vigorous undulating she whimpered. The underskirt was not tight, and though it was easy to work his hand in and rest on her mountainous rump, he took his time, and then to wiggle his fingers to her bunghole and rest there a while, in the warmth and animal scent of her. And then he ran the straps over her smooth, soft, warm shoulders, and the skirt tumbled with a whisper of silk to the floor.

Now his right hand could comfortably wiggle between the resting thighs to her pussy, which was wet and warm, allow his fingers to enter her, first one, then another. She was able to accommodate more, but he let the third finger tease her clit, and in time he got a rhythm going, which he increased, watching her by the moonlight streaming through the great window, watching her mouth quiver and teeth nip at her lips, her eyelids fluttering, looks of worry, focus, suspense, delight, worry play over her face, letting the two fingers churn in the moist gush of her, and the pinky just flick the clit, or rest there, just rest there, until he could feel the come in her, feel the quake generated in her midsection, spreading heat to her back and neck and breasts; and she came, explosively, bucking on him, biting the fingers of his left hand.

She reached down and pulled hungrily at his dick, and an electric thrill shot through him. He slid his dong inside her willing quim and a coiling bolt of yum unfurled from his midsection throughout his limbs to whirlpool in his skull. "Whee-hah!"

"We must be quiet, people will hear," Miss Cecil

cautioned him and then commenced to pant and squeal like an alleycat. He drove his pud into her puss from behind, watching her fine booty cheeks jiggle with each thrust, while her eyes half closed and a dreamy half-smile played on her lips and her hips wiggled and bounced. Somewhere amid all this double-fast pumping, she was able to grip his dick, work it over and place it back inside her. He fucked her and fucked her and then, so fast, so eager, she would reach back in a frenzy and take his cock in hand, run her hand over his shaft, and glide it back in, so fast she wouldn't miss the rising frenzy inside her. She smelled this hand, licked this hand while he pumped her, and then she'd reach back and pull it out again, rotating the angle of her hand, gripping it, pumping it, teasing his balls, and then ramming it back into her churning quim, all-out pumping it and rubbing it against her bum cheeks and grinding the crack against his crank, and then stuffing his crank down into the crack and wiggling and stroking it, all at once, until he felt the tickly, delirious sensation, and he told her, oh, yeah, yeah, baby, and she said it, too, baby, baby, and she came—came so hard, so fast, so startlingly that she yipped and reared, whipping her hips hard in her pleasure.

Mathis couldn't help it. He kept driving his dong in that moist patch, but she was done, finished. She pushed him away, turned around and hugged his waist to her breasts, warm to hot, she teased the nipples over the tip of his rod, and mooshed her boobs together and snuggled it there, and he gripped her hair, gave her head a nice, loving cat scratch while she shimmied her bazooms up and down his cock. His panting was so loud in his own ears, and her animal-like moans—a chorus of animals, a zoo at feeding time—so that he did not hear the jiggle of the doorknob and he shot his wad all over her tits, onto her chin and cheeks. As he continued to sploosh, she turned her head as if in a waterfall, laughing and googooing like a baby.

And then his explosion became a dribble, and she scooped some in her hand and held it in wonder. In the sudden silence, they could easily hear the knock on the door.

"Miss Cecil, are you in there?" It sounded like Molly.

Miss Cecil lay back on the plush window-seat cushion. Her faraway gaze traveled to the window and out.

"Miss Cecil," Mathis ventured, "I think maybe you should get dressed."

She sighed and shook her head no. "That was wonderful," she whispered. "When can we do it again?" She lazily played with her hair and scooped some of his come off her bosom, examining it on her fingers with a faint smile tugging at her mouth.

The door rattled with a vigorous knock. Someone tried the lock. "Are you all right, mum?"

After a long while, Miss Cecil roused herself to answer, "Yes, I took faint. I'll be out in a minute."

"It's just that Missus Kimbrough's got her mitts full, the girls being frisky tonight. She wonders could you come down."

"Yes. In a minute."

Mathis decided to give Miss Cecil the full spirit treatment: he would vanish before her very eyes. "Love you, see you, bye," he announced. She turned her head from the window to him, smiling.

He stepped out of the River.

But he remained in 1893.

Impossible.

It had happened a few minutes before. Impossible then, impossible now: He was trying to leave but couldn't.

A helpless, sick feeling wormed through him.

He focused his mind on Dan Mathis, standing on a late summer morning in the dining room of what would become Lance Stunning's Art Gallery, and told that Dan to simply step out of the light, break contact with the River.

It didn't happen.

Miss Cecil was watching him, smiling slyly, eyes at decadent half-mast. She raised her arms to him. "Come to me, my phantom lover."

"Uh, yeah, I will, I promise, just..." With this stuttering, spectral speech and many nervous hand gestures, Mathis backed out of the room, through the side door, into the Gallery.

Get away from the woman. Yes. Alone in a dark room. Now. Step out of the River.

He couldn't. He didn't.

Hot, prickly beads of sweat erupted from every pore of Mathis's body.

He was marooned here.

That's when Duncan, armed with a pitchfork, flung open the Gallery room door and stepped inside.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

athis dropped soundlessly to the floor as Duncan, pitchfork in one hand, oil lamp in the other, clomped into the huge Gallery room. He crawled behind one of the many massive couches. His brain was screaming, Why am I still here? What's gone wrong?

Calling to his spirit guide: *Are you there? Help me!* Knowing it was futile.

Duncan began to plod around the room, through the maze of furniture, holding the lamp high and muttering a continuous string of gibberish, like Popeye, something about, "Ghosts is it...tease a man, all them spices. Kimbrough...right on the snout...divils...me bottle."

Duncan's swaying lamp cast funhouse shadows on the paintings on the walls and the dense forest of furniture, and underlit his face, making him seem like a sozzled Satan. Mathis, peeking over the top of the couch, caught sight of the icepick-sharp tines of the pitchfork and knew he could be hurt in this world—if he could come like a porn star he could damn well be stabbed like a trespasser.

On hands and knees, naked except for his neon

ring, facial glitter and fire engine-red underwear, Mathis crawled behind a succession of throne chairs, couches, davenports, day beds and divans, making his way to the front of the room and the hall door as Duncan worked his way back toward the windows, muttering all the while. Checking to be sure Duncan was not looking his way, he scooted out the door into the hall.

Not ten feet away, back to him, was Horace Kimbrough. He was speaking to Molly, probably about Miss Cecil's sudden indisposition. Mathis wheeled about and hurried down the hall. Just as he reached the main staircase, he spotted Cook at the far end of the hall, turning the corner toward him.

Kimbrough behind him, the possibly dangerous Cook to his front. Instinctively, Mathis rushed down the main stairs. At the first landing he peeked around the corner, down. No one in sight. He briefly considered waiting right here for the coast to clear upstairs, but then he heard the ponderous clump of Kimbrough's shoes, his grotesque puffing and wheezing coming closer; and he knew the man would soon be descending the stairs.

Mathis scrambled down the rest of the stairs two at a time. At the bottom, half-naked and exposed in the front hall, he stopped.

Damn! Wingate was right there, reading a ledger in the vestibule at the front door, at his post, guarding it from intruders or fleeing trespassers. He hadn't seen Mathis yet, but any moment now...

Behind him: floorboards creaking, Kimbrough

lumbering down the stairs.

His options shrinking, Mathis bustled in long goofy strides into the parlor.

Damn! Skinner was in here, poring over a huge volume on a wheeled book caddy.

Mathis spun around to make his exit. He darted into the front hall again.

Damn! From the west hall, the entire student body was spilling from the chapel. Behind them, Harriet Kimbrough was sweeping her arms like a conductor, calling, "Early to bed! Upstairs, come, come!"

His options down to zero, Mathis hopped like a cartoon Daffy back into the parlor and to the corner, where sat a marble pedestal supporting the bust of Augustus Caesar. There was a substantial arrangement of vines and flowers affixed to the pedestal, and this jungle seemed substantial enough to hide him from casual scrutiny. He crouched behind it.

While the girls passed in the hall, giggling and murmuring excitedly, Mathis saw Skinner look up from his book and grimace, perhaps trying on a charming smile for them. Meanwhile, Mathis tried to calm the heavy thudding of his heart and to ignore the metallic taste in his mouth, which had gone dry as the Gobi.

He was in a serious pickle. Quite apart from the drunken Duncan's menacing pitchfork, there was the possibility that he'd be discovered and taken forcefully from the house, hauled off to the sheriff. He didn't remember exactly what Eve had told him,

except that he could not, could not, leave the house.

If he were forced out the doors, would he be obliterated? Or maybe condemned to walk the earth forever as a ghost in glitter and red underwear?

The terrible prospect choked like a bolt between his heart and his panicky, mumbling brain. He must not be caught.

Now his heart twisted again as Harriet Kimbrough entered the room. She stood not a foot from where he hid.

"Why, Mister Skinner, you still here?" she said, not warmly.

"Yes, ma'am, I thought I might linger a while, considering the excited state of our charges and..." His voice dropped to a confidential, insinuating croon. "...and the impending visit of the state inspector."

"He is not due until midmorning. We're arranging to have Cook prepare a special breakfast drink of Radway's and barley water," Harriet answered. "They'll be quite docile, I'm sure."

"Good. Their passions do seem quite...inflamed this evening."

Harriet turned a quizzical eye on Skinner at this remark. The vile man drummed his fingers on the volume he was studying, licked his lips and watching her with crocodile eyes.

"Whatever is the matter with your face, sir?" Harriet demanded. And she turned away — Christ! Looking right at the bust of Caesar!

"I-I-I—thought this book might help the

situation," Skinner announced hastily, loudly. Harriet turned away from Mathis's hiding place to regard him. "Yes," he said, his eyebrow dancing, a weenieish smile erupting on his face. "Help us understand what is occurring so that such hysteria doesn't...ever again...endanger our enterprise."

"Our enterprise," she repeated coldly. But she approached him. "What is that?" she said and tapped the volume imperiously.

He stepped back to allow her a view, all the while running his eyes wolfishly over her mammoth frame. "It depicts the Rape of the Sabine Women," he explained. "All of the women in question are naked or nearly so, as you can see, while the conquerors are toga-clad."

Harriet peered at the page. She didn't say anything.

"But if you look closely, you can see some of their...their manlinesses are poking from flapping togas and stout armor."

Harriet just clucked her tongue.

"I understand that people are growing taller," Skinner offered desperately. "The historians tell us the ancients were a good eight inches shorter than we are, on average. Think about Cleopatra's dental care for a moment. Her actual height and dimensions. Or Helen of Troy. And look at those penises. I wonder—were they smaller as well? It's a historical wonderment to me." His face was now a boiling pot of tics and eyebrows. "What do you think?"

"Of what?"

"Strange, small penises."

"Sir!" Harriet huffed. "I will thank you to—"

"It is you," Skinner murmured, advancing.

"I beg your pardon?" Harriet blurted, retreating.

"The succubus in disguise," he said, his head now bobbling like a dashboard ornament. And with a desperate, animal groan he snatched Harriet around the waist.

Mathis took this opportunity to bolt from the room. As he was crossing the front hall and dashing up the stairs, he heard Skinner burbling in terror, the screechy war cry of Harriet Kimbrough, wet and fleshy smacking, squeals of pain, the crash of ceramics and glass. And then her deafening bellow, a cross between a longshoreman and a T-Rex, a cry so piercing and thunderous it rattled the entire house: "Horace!"

Mathis was in the main upstairs hall by the time this awful summons was completed, and he saw Duncan and Cook and some others begin to rush to see what was the matter. He slipped inside the closest door. The bathroom.

There he found Bethann and Suzanne, buck naked, standing in the bathtub, which was situated in the center of the large, white-tiled room. They were rubbing each other with large sponges that gushed with thick, white soapsuds. They were so absorbed in their activity they didn't notice him. He closed the door and stood against it.

Ropes of suds seemed to bind the golden-tressed Bethann and the raven-haired Suzanne. Great clouds of suds dripped off their eighteen-year-old breasts—firm, smooth, dark-tipped, bathwater-glistening titties. Their bellies, under the snowy sheen of bubbles, were taut, their legs perfectly tapered, their beaver bushes glistening, their fannies sculpted like pears. They were two of the prettiest girls in the school, with bright, expressive eyes, model cheekbones, model lips.

They didn't notice Mathis in the room with them but fixed their eyes on their washing and whispered together with teary voices: "Are we pure yet?"

"Almost. One more thing."

"If the spirit should come to me, I don't know if I can resist."

"You must resist."

"But I want to know bliss, I want to know the world beyond—it is a way of touching God."

"Shush, you. Here. Now bend over."

Gripping the side of the tub, Bethann bent at the waist. Behind her, Suzanne pulled the enema bag stand closer. She gently cleared soapsuds from the strawberry blonde's sudsy tush.

Bethann moaned.

"Shush, you," Suzanne repeated and slapped her lightly on the ass. She took the nozzle and inserted it slowly in Bethann's bunghole. Bethann twitched and mewed. Suzanne pushed it in further. "This will clean away such thoughts." She pumped the bag and Bethann cried out, wiggling her pert fanny. "I confess I am tormented by such thoughts. Thoughts of the phantom lover." She pumped the bag. Bethann

moans were prolonged and musical as water spilled out of her ass. She turned her head to see what was happening back there—and her eyes found Mathis.

"Oh, my," she said.

Suzanne looked. "Oh, no," she said.

Mathis stepped closer, to see better. The girls' eyes widened. Reflexively, Suzanne pumped the bag. Bethann's eyes popped then glazed over. She bucked. The hose quivered, plugging her delicate brown ring.

"What is it you want?" Mathis whispered. "Shall I watch you purify yourselves, or shall I..."

"Put it in my behind!" Suzanne wailed. "I want it there, I want it to hurt."

Bethann could not speak, for Suzanne was pumping the bag so frenziedly that all the blonde could manage was an ululation that was somehow both guttural and shrill.

Mathis peeled down his underwear. His schlong, so recently spent over Miss Cecil's bosom, was ready again, aching for it.

Both girls gaped at his cock, Suzanne looking sharply down over her shoulder, Bethann from her upside-down position, bent over, hips high, at the tub.

He stepped closer. He patted away suds on Suzanne's shapely bum and ran his fingers up the crevice. She squealed. He pressed his dong to her puckered butthole. She repositioned, bending further at the waist. Mathis slid his cock inside, slowly, slowly; and Suzanne smiled, nodded her head, bit her lip and then let loose a ladylike, low-keening howl,

which persisted throughout his gentle pumping of her. In and out it slid, teasing the tissues around her anus. Her howl grew higher and tinnier, and her hips shuddered faster and faster.

From outside, the angry bellow of Horace Kimbrough: "Skinner!"

Mathis reached around to Suzanne's belly, then down to the wet folds of her coochie and back up to rest one finger on her swollen clit. Now her howl grew shrill, rich with lusty vibrato, and the quiver in her hips was like the shimmy of a car engine.

"Where are you, you scoundrel!" Kimbrough's voice was louder.

As Suzanne's orgasm exploded, her buttcheeks jiggling with each volcanic convulsion; she gripped the enema bag with Herculean strength, sending a bolt of warm water into Bethann's ass, which Bethann absorbed with a bum-bobbing, eyes-popping, mouth-pooching squeal. The cries of the girls—their startling vehemence, their sheer delight—peaked, subsided; and as one, they gently collapsed into the sudsy water. With this, Mathis' dick popped from Suzanne's tight hole and he stumbled backwards.

Next thing he knew, solid wood was flying at his face. Like bat to baseball, it connected.

Kimbrough had flung open the bathroom door, clocking Mathis on the head and sweeping him behind it, out of view.

"Skinner!" Kimbrough snarled. "Is he in here?"

"No, sir," replied the girls. They were tucked close together in the tub but sunk quite modestly out of

view.

Crunched behind the door, Mathis roused himself. The pain-inspired stars cleared from his vision, and he spied the pistol in Kimbrough's hand. A frost of fear chilled him from the back of his neck to his gut.

"A ghost, is it? No, girls, no! It is that devil Skinner, and I will send him to hell!"

With this melodramatic pronouncement, Kimbrough shut the door. A moment later, it opened again. "Sorry to disturb your bath."

The door was pulled closed again.

Pitchforks. Guns. What's next?

Mathis tried again. He screamed at twenty-first-century-Mathis to move out of the goddamn light, but nothing happened. Where once he had worn that other Mathis like a shadow, now there was nothing. No one home.

He became conscious that Bethann and Suzanne were watching him. Their heads resting dreamily on their hands, which rested on the lip of the bathtub; their wide eyes stared. With their hair slicked down with suds, their shoulders bare, they could have been from any century, and lovely for all times.

"Mind?" He grabbed one of the sponges and washed down his prick. "Cleanliness, godliness, you know."

They nodded, their eyes never leaving his aching wanker. Tossing the sponge back in the water, tucking his dick back in his shorts, he opened the door a shade, glanced up and down the hall and snuck out.

He needed a place of refuge until he could figure out what was wrong with the Crystal River. A storeroom, perhaps, or up in the attic.

He passed the main stairs without incident and headed along the east hall. As he approached the back stairs, he heard the annoying, rumbling voice of Horace Kimbrough again. Tiptoeing to the staircase, he peeked around the wall, and down.

Yes, there was Horace. With his gun tucked under his armpit, his huge head beaded with sweat, puffing and gasping with agitation, he was writing a note. Standing by, wearing a shawl and a slouchy but charming black hat with a single flower springing from its band was the ever-fetching Molly. A great fall of her coppery-red hair sprayed from the hat.

"Wingate and Duncan are readying the carriage," Kimbrough said. "You'll go to the Spyglass Hotel. You know it?"

"Yes sir."

"You will ask for a Mister Feeney. Repeat, please."

"Mister Feeney."

"A guest there. You will hand him this note. He may have questions. You will say to Mister Feeney that tomorrow's inspection would be...inconvenient. Yes, a mistake has been made, and the day after would be much better. Yes. If he has more questions, tell him our gas lines have ruptured, we need a day of repair. Repeat, please."

"Gas lines ruptured, yes, sir."

"And then go to the constable's office. You know

it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell them to ignore the pistol shots, in case any are reported. We are...we are putting down some pests, tell them. Woodchucks and rabid raccoons and the like. You have it, Molly?"

"Yes, sir."

And she was gone.

Molly was often selected to carry out errands in the village because she took no guff from the town boys, was sharp with the clerks and did not brook any straying from orders or short-weighting the produce. Mathis was disappointed to see her dressed to go out, because he'd hoped to have a go at Molly, get his hands on those plumpish bazooms, give her a stout kiss, yes...

He was so lost in this fantasy he didn't hear the footsteps approaching him from behind or sense the hands reaching out to grab him.

"Oh, naked man! Phantom savior! Help me!"

Mathis almost jumped out of his glitter-flecked skin, so startled was he by Edwin Skinner's groping of him. Skinner's left eye was puffed and closing. His clothes were ripped, his hair standing up in absurd, pomaded tendrils. He was sweaty and foul-breathed and panicky, and Mathis couldn't back away from him fast enough.

"Hide me!" Skinner blubbered.

"Begone, putz," said the ghost. "You getteth what you deserveth for selling those girls into slavery."

Skinner was clinging to him like a tentacled seabeast, but all Mathis had to do was plant a palm on the man's oily forehead and shove. With a squeal, Skinner fell back, bounced off the far wall and tumbled down the back stairs.

Mathis listened happily to the sound of Skinner's fall, the repeated conk of skull against wood in syncopation with a medley of pained squawks, whines and yodels, finishing with a fartish splat. He thought the man was finished; but no, he heard him clambering back up the stairs, panting, "No, please, hide me!"

Mathis performed an about-face and marched to the closest dormitory room. He turned the knob, opened and closed it in one movement and pressed his back to the door just as Skinner reached it. The knob rattled, the door was pushed, but Mathis stood fast. A moment later, he heard Skinner's strangled cry, and the man's frenzied dash down the hall. Another moment later, Mathis heard Kimbrough pass quickly by, the heavy clumping of his feet, the huffing of his overtaxed lungs, the mumbled curses, vows and threats.

By now, Mathis's eyes had adjusted to the darkness within. But he didn't believe what they saw.

Caroline, Madolyn, Cecilia and Justine seemed to be staging some sort of private costume pageant—it was like a cross between Victoria's Secret and a pre-Raphaelite fantasy painting. The four beauties were in the far corner between two beds, beneath the low, golden light of a kerosene lamp. Gwendolyn and Jane

were also there. A trunk was open, and from it spilled dainty clothes. The six girls each preened before mirrors held by the others, adjusting one another's outfits: long silk nightgowns with brocade flourishes, lace-trimmed camisoles, sheer corsets, other items of underwear or sleepwear that gave Mathis a generous view of thigh, cleavage, shoulder, back and the undercheeks of girlish bums. Some of the girls wore floral garlands in their hair. In the low light of the lamp on the nearby table, they were such lovely creatures: kissable lips; alert, intelligent but dreamy eyes just visible, glowing through the curtain of dark hair that tumbled, wild-child-style, from their garland-wreathed heads.

One by one they became aware of his presence in the room. Some looked sidelong, others directly at him, others were twisted around from the hip—but all were now looking at him.

"It worked," whispered Caroline. "I told you. I played the summoning card, and he's here now."

"Flip another," whispered Madolyn.

"Come, spirit," called Caroline. "Come into our magic circle."

Mathis crossed the dormitory, threading the network of beds, and stood over the circle of girls.

"Welcome, Marquis, into the circle we make this night," recited Caroline.

"Yes, welcome," others chimed in.

But Jane, ever the practical, impatient one: "Okay, flip another."

Cecilia slowly took a card from the deck and

placed it on the floor. By candlelight, all could see it was the rope conjuror, tied wrists and ankles to a pair of great trees.

"Ohhhh" and "Ahhh" were the sounds that greeted this card.

Mathis himself was mesmerized. Justine had playfully flicked a strap of Madolyn's gown; now it sagged, exposing a lovely booby, which both girls stared at as if they'd never seen one before. So entranced had he become with the beautiful Madolyn he was only barely conscious that the girls were easing him down on the near bed. Their faces hovered over him. They were smiling. A devious, promising gleam was evident in their eyes. Jane's nightgown billowed as she stood over him, and he could see all the way up to cupidia—her legs were like a highway, leading off to the mountainous, mysterious horizon of her fluffy pubic patch, pussy lips, buttcheeks. He could scent her, too, and her nature's perfume sent him in such a tizzy he was only half-aware of the ticklish sensation at his wrist.

It wasn't until he was solidly bound that he realized: they had tied him to the wrought iron bars at the head of the bed.

"Uhh, ladies, I don't think this is a good idea, not at all."

Shh, he was told. Madolyn placed a finger to her lips and held up the rope conjuror card.

"We do as the card says," she informed him.

Mathis pulled at his bonds. They didn't give. He craned his head and bit at the binding of his

wrist—no good. He tried to tell Real Mathis to step out of the crystalline light of the chandelier.

No go.

How to explain that there were men with pistols and pitchforks looking all over the house for him, that, helpless like this...

Slowly, Madolyn turned to look from him to the floor. "It is done. Another card, Caroline, please," she intoned.

From where he lay, he saw Caroline flip a card, though he could not see it.

"Truth card," he heard them whisper happily.

"Story card."

"Dream card."

Caroline turned to speak to the group, who had taken seats on the floor below Mathis and on the bed all around him. He smelled all that hair, all that skin, the subtle fragrances of the floral waters they splashed on. He was lying in a field of girl flowers, and he was quite content, gun or no gun, pitchfork or not.

"I saw a naughty picture when I was a little girl," Caroline said. "At my orphanage, I was bringing lunch to the caretaker. I entered his shack and saw these picture postcards on his table. The picture on top...oh, Lord, how I am shamed at how much I think of it, have thought of it since that time. I didn't understand it then. It confused me. Now I do understand, and I thrill to its dark allure."

"What did you see?" Cecilia asked her.

"It was a picture of a woman, a large woman, with

bosoms and thighs. Naked. She is the first thing you see. Then you notice there is a man lying prostrate, face up and that she is sitting squarely on his head, her big fanny—oh, my…"

She was breathing hard, swooning.

"Do as the card says, then," Madolyn said.

Caroline stood and turned slowly. The girls sitting with Mathis scooched aside. Caroline stood up on the bed with her feet on either side of his chest.

"Hike up your nightdress," Mathis whispered. All around him, the girls sighed and giggled.

Caroline stood still for a full twenty-five seconds, not a sound from her. Then, slowly, she hitched her thumbs and pulled her dress up. Without further prompting from him, she knelt and lowered herself on his face. He had a glimpse of her head, hidden behind the copse of hair, and the smooth, sheer sweep of her back, eclipsed by the lowering bum, the great globes of her ass, the dark vertical crack between, with the tufts of beaver pelt. Her thoughtful face was far away and up there, remote; it was just Mathis and this booty. She gently lowered the rest of the way, and rested, and he was full of her, her skin, her scent.

He wanted to grip her flanks, but the bonds prevented him, so he just burrowed in there, his mouth and nose working, and she began to buck. He ran his tongue up the wet lips again and again, working closer to the top. She arched her back so he could reach her clit, and he flicked it slowly, lightly, then faster, rat-a-tat-tat, over and over, until the surging inside her busted loose and she came, letting

out such a wail, a joyous choral fibrillating gadzooks, that all the girls around laughed and clapped their hands. It was such a din that soon footsteps sounded outside the door—the heavy tread of the equine Harriet Kimbrough.

There was a flutter as Caroline hastily pulled her nightdress down, and Mathis's heart hardly had a chance to miss a beat before it was fairly crushed beneath the weight of five teenage girls sitting on him.

Muted by all that fabric and flesh, Mathis could just hear Harriet Kimbrough fling the door open and step into the room.

"What? Who? What is the matter?" she demanded. "Someone in here? Edwin Skinner in here?"

"No, mum," someone replied. "We were just playing a card game."

"Lights out, no playing tonight."

Mathis heard her pull the door shut.

The girls sat up.

"Ladies, ladies," Mathis announced. "I am the spirit of beyond. You don't tie up the spirit. Perhaps you should unbind me lest I call on the thunderbolt of Zeus to strike down..."

"Flip a card," they whispered heatedly to Justine, ignoring him thoroughly.

Justine reached for the stack on the floor and flipped. Again, it was a story card, a dream card.

The girls huddled close as Justine whispered her story, very quiet lest a Kimbrough return yet again. Her big eyes traveled from person to person in the tight little group as she whispered, "I knew a French girl in the city where I lived. I played with her in the alley behind the foster home in Boston. And I would listen while she told the older girls about things...I was always...hot, listening. What she was saying was so unimaginable, horrible...but while she was saying it, her eyes were full of smiles and delight. A hunger, like she'd remember the flavor of a penny candy. And for years afterward, I thought her wicked-mad, a shedevil."

"What was it she described? Tell us," Cecilia urged.

"She told me...that you take the man's...the man's...phallus in your mouth, and..."

"And?"

"And lick it. Slurp it like an ice. Move your head up and down and around, like you're trying to get a better view of a melodrama...and it gives him sensations, joy..."

Mmm, Mathis murmured.

Ahhh, cooed the girls.

In a matter of seconds, Justine was on her knees on the bed. "Oh," she peeped, pulling down Mathis's underwear and at last coming face-to-face with his one-eyed trouser snake. Wonderingly, she reached out, patted its length slowly, slowly, and then, instinctively making an "O" with thumb and fingers, ran her hand along the shaft, up and down.

"And there are...balls, I'm told," she whispered, and like a child poked her head lower and closer. She reached forward and probed, poked them lightly and then ran her palm over them, a whisper of a touch. "You smell like the garden," he heard her whisper just before she took him in her mouth.

By the lamplight he saw the slickness of her glisten as she withdrew it, then forward again, and it was buried in her wet smile, eyes closed, so earnest.

Another card was flipped. There was a cry, which was quelled by *Shh*, *quiet*.

Jane showed him the card: a devil, surrounded by capering demons.

Cecilia joined Justine down around Mathis's happy boner, and Caroline, too. They studied each other, studied Mathis' ball sac and dick like scientists. Cecilia edged the slurping, head-thrusting Justine gently away and licked the tip of Mathis's crank.

The others were capering around the room like damsel demons, Jane pulling her nightgown up over her hips and letting the fabric sway, Gwendolyn doing a hoochie-coo with her arms, letting her breasts tumble from the camisole. Madolyyn had pulled her nightdress up over her head and now was childishly twirling, naked but for the fabric obscuring her face.

Cecilia paused with the tip of his joint pursed in her lips, fish-kissing it for a moment, and then stopping altogether. With her eyes downcast and the hair strands a jungle in her face, he couldn't read her expression; and just as he was wondering why she had paused, she took it all in her mouth, adjusting her knees for the angle, she swallowed it down to the base, paused again there, with the sensation of that wetness, no teeth whatsoever, praise God, his joint

treading water happily in that saliva and tongue. She raised her head and he saw the slickness of that pool, his cock glistened like a jewel; and then she took it again, cupping his balls gently, and up again came her head, and down, like a piston, with moist smack sounds and slurps. She increased the rhythm, her hair shaking in a blur, the jungle in a hurricane.

With his head rocking back and forth, gasping with pleasure, Mathis caught glimpses of the dancers, who'd now settled on the next bed. Gwendolyn was massaging her exposed bosom, gently, gently tweaking the nipple into a cool erection. Jane had hiked up her nightdress and was exploring herself, petting her pussy in a steady rhythm. Madolyn lay on her belly, holding a small, ornately framed mirror so that Jane could see her own pussy lips.

He was startled to feel a light slap on his face.

"Enter me, slave," Caroline snapped.

Mathis was surprised yet again, to find that all the girls were naked now. They flung their nightgowns and chemises to the air and danced around, their hair still crowned with garlands. Their boobs bounced gaily, their buttcheeks quivered, their hair waved like wheat in the wind.

Slap. "Will you fill me with your pole?" Caroline demanded.

She pulled at his bonds, slapped him again and quickly turned her back on him. She lowered herself—he watched that perfect, pear-shaped tush lower and lower until her pink purse swallowed his bone. She positioned her self on her knees and began

to rock. Now all the girls gathered around him and watched as he fucked Caroline. Gwendolyn stood and watched Caroline's face as she rose and sat, rose and sat on Mathis's hard cock. The others knelt or sat and watched it enter Caroline's pusslips, withdraw and enter again, in and out to the beat of a rhythmic fleshy gurgle.

"Me next," someone said. "I want him to fuck me, too."

There were gasps.

"Yes, I said it, fuck. I want him to fuck me."

"And lick me, lick my hole."

The girls closed around him. The sight of Caroline's long back jumping, her ass jiggling, her vaginal lips nipping at his boner, was now obscured by a shower of hair, and more bosoms than he could count. It smelled like heaven at springtime.

Mathis peered through the forest of legs and arms to see Cecilia crouching and sticking a finger in her own ass. Justine went down, as if by magic, and took his balls in her mouth, lightly humming a hymn, and Gwendolyn reached up under Jane's nightdress, he saw her turn her arm, he saw Jane grow weak at the knees. Gwendolyn turned her hand, turned it, withdrew her hand and reverently smelled her finger, then let the others smell...and they all smiled and cooed.

"Lick my hole, slave," someone commanded him. They had pulled him down until his arms were stretched and slithered on top of him, until he was buried under girl. He wasn't sure what was thigh and

what was flank or back or belly; he was tantalized by the sight and smell of women's midsections, all curves and crevices, and their overpowering dungyfishy-earthy-funky scents.

Caroline was standing over him, parting her cunt lips, and he licked them, took her clit in his mouth—it was so swollen—and gently worked it with his tongue and lips. She shuddered, yelped and fell away; and Justine took her place. She stood over him, the picture of feminine perfection, girl in full bloom with round, perfect breasts, soft stomach, tapered waist, sturdy legs; and she lowered herself, positioned his cock at her gate and then took it inside her. He was able to watch her face light up with the surprise, the pain, the delight. She flattened her hand on his belly and was pumping up and down. Her breasts were bobbing, and he filled his mouth with them, chased the nipples with his tongue.

Madolyn squatted over the porcelain pan, and he could hear the pee strike it hollowly, loud at first and then trailing off. She giggled, someone else did, too—they all laughed, except for their bound slave. He was trying to muster some coherence, but no, the girls' giggling was suddenly muffled, all light was gone, there were so many girls burrowing up against him. Buried under ass and bush and bosom, he thought he heard—far away, far, far away from harm—a gunshot, screams, the rumble of feet in the hallways, but he couldn't be sure, and he didn't care. A hand was working the base of his cock, where Justine's pulsing puss could not reach. Tongues were

lapping at his nuts, and he felt the stirrings of a tsunami in him. The distant gunshot was just the starter's signal.

A pussy swam into view, he drove his nose into the thighs, lightly biting and licking until it wiggled and squirmed close enough. He spent a moment admiring the delicate petals, and then he hardened his tongue, stiffened it like a lance and he fucked that pussy with his tongue as hard as he could, his head darting, tireless; and its owner whooped, he heard it from a distance. He was immersed in warm, smooth woman-flesh; he could feel them all over him, on his face and chest and snuggling up at his side and slithering over his legs. Soft girly skin against every part of him—it was so outrageous, delightful, ecstatic, like oxygen had become flesh.

Through the heaving waves of soft skin he just caught a glimpse of girl tonguing girl, slowly, thoughtfully—he didn't know which two—both with long, full, flower-crowned hair, one with her head tipped, her nose raised, her mouth open as if to savor her delight, while the other dipped between her slow-flailing legs, while he felt two or twenty mouths on his prick and slathering over his nuts and he wanted to hold back, to hold his jizz, to experience this forever, but he couldn't hold back, he wasn't sure if that was a cooze or a mouth over his dick, going so fast up and down it, he couldn't see because of the girl that was sitting on his face, grinding herself into him, but something frenched his balls at just the right time to ignite the fuse that sparked in his loin and

jetted up his shaft—he stuttered, *I'm gonna, oh, I'm gonna* and someone pumped his nob and someone teased his nuts and someone rimmed his ass and all nodded eagerly and meowled as he came, the most feverish and pleasurable orgasm he'd ever had. It was like his first wet dream, his first fuck, first anything—the girl atop him moved and he saw a huge spouting of come, a glorious fountain of come, the thick-haired women fairly dancing in it, frolicking in it, laughing and shrieking in delight as it dribbled out of their smiles, spackled their breasts and glazed their bellies.

Musical, girlish sighs and coos, a chorus of them, serenaded him. His muscles relaxed. His vision dimmed. The girlish sighs grew faint.

As if in a dream, he heard gunshots. Pounding on doors. The drum of feet in the hall. Cries and commands. He knew he was caught.

Take me outside, sheriff. I'm gone. I'm gone.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

an Mathis woke to the sound of the doorknob rattling. He tried to rise and found that he was still bound to the bed. The oil lamp had been extinguished. There was enough moonlight beaming through the windows to see that the girls were gone.

The door opened. Someone came into the room and closed the door again. While the door was opened, though, he heard unfamiliar voices from downstairs. Male voices: lecturing, hectoring voices. And some familiar voices, too—the Kimbroughs.

Mathis could have sworn the Kimbroughs were bleating, pleading.

The person who had entered the room now spoke from the deep shadows on that side of the room. "Hello, Daniel, my love."

It was her! She! Eve! His spirit guide!

He said, "Untie me, love, and gimme a kiss."

She didn't move. Instead, she said, "I must ask you, why are you still here? It's dangerous for you to be here."

"I'm stuck! I can't get out! The River won't let me."

"No. That can't happen."

"I'm telling you it has. Would I let myself be

trussed like this if I could escape? I may be here forever. Come here."

He controlled his tone, which was verging on hysterical. He was so eager to know the identity of his lover of these past months, so frazzled by being marooned in the nineteenth century, he'd forgotten himself, super-cool in any century.

"Please," he added.

His spirit guide stepped into the room from the deep shadows.

She was Molly, the scullery maid.

"You?" was all he could manage.

She sat on the side of the bed and regarded him with those knowing, insolent brown eyes. She bent over and kissed him.

"It *is* you," he said, savoring her familiar kiss. "But, but, but..."

She made a face at him and commenced to untie his bindings.

"You didn't sound like you," he pointed out. "You didn't...dress like you."

"I mimicked the accent. It was fun. Did you notice how being a ghost, you naturally become something you're not?"

"Well, yeah, but..."

"As for the clothes, whenever I visited you, I took off my woolens and put on my one silk dress."

"But why?"

She finished untying him, and now she rested her arms on his chest and faced him.

They had had hours of conversation, their faces

this close. But now, at last, he could see her. Even in the dark room he could see the freckles, the keen glint in her eyes, the plumpish lips forming her lopsided grin, the red hair—everywhere.

"Why didn't you tell me who you were?"

"At first," she said, "it was because I am a servant, and uneducated. I know how to read, but still...I was so used to thinking of myself as only deserving a lowborn man. That no one I wanted, no one of substance, would ever want me. Then I came to understand your world, your time, a little better, and who you are, what a fine man you are...but by then..."

He felt a drop on his cheek, another. She was crying.

"What, my love? By then, what?"

"By then I knew we would only have a short time together. And that I must share you with everyone. I thought it best to remain in the shadows."

"Oh, I've wanted you for so long..." He hugged her, kissed her.

She pulled away. "Liar. You never once haunted me." She folded her arms, huffy and hurt.

"I was trying to find a way. I didn't want to frighten you. And," he admitted, "I was quite sure you'd brain me with a frying pan." He nuzzled her neck. All this familiar territory, now with a name, an identity. "I wish Kimbrough hadn't sent you out tonight," he said. "I was ready to jump you, I really was."

"I'll bet you were," she scoffed. "A scullery maid,

pshaw."

"Molly, I did want you, I did admire you. Servant or not. You have more guts than anyone in the house. And guts will take you far in this world."

She looked at him, her eyes brimming with...hope? Love? Something powerful, anyway. Then she shook it off.

"Enough of your blarney. Come look." She took him by the hand and hoisted him out of the bed. She opened the door to the hall, checked outside, and signaled him to follow her. Together, they walked to the main staircase and down to the first landing. The unfamiliar voices, much louder now, droned on.

Molly signed for him to look. Mathis peeked around the corner, down the stairs. There, in the front hall, he had a glimpse of a tall man with muttonchop sideburns and a stately pince-nez dressed in the standard frock coat-waistcoat ensemble. Beside him was a stocky policeman, his black-billed cap clamped under his arm. Sitting on the stairs, heads downcast, were the Kimbroughs. All around on the marble floor of the front hall sat the students, many of them still dressed in their provocative underwear. He glimpsed Miss Cecil on the boot bench in her nightdress, smiling dreamily, her fingers lazily playing with her hair.

Molly pulled him back upstairs into the dormitory room.

"What's happened?" he asked her.

"Our plan," she said, bestowing on him the most dazzling smile. "Instead of telling the inspector not to

come tomorrow, I brought him. The sheriff, too. They walked in to find schoolgirls dancing about half-dressed, gunshots, a missing schoolteacher...a mess that will need to be sorted out."

"Investigated," he agreed. "So, we've won."

She nodded. They hugged. For the thousandth time he thrilled to the seamless, sensual way they fit together, imparting strength, exchanging love, taking solace, taking refuge, all at once.

Now their words came in a rush of moist whispers and kisses.

"Oh, my girl, you're so beautiful...I've wanted you so long..."

"I love you, too, so much, so much."

"Molly, we have to find a way..."

"We can't. There is none."

"But I'm a prisoner here. Perhaps for all time."

She shook her head. The tears formed in her huge eyes. "I fear that this will end it," she said, nodding downstairs. "It will be over soon. They will close the school. I won't be able to...they'll lock the door, board the windows...no more..."

It would soon be over at both ends, he realized. She had known it all along. By bringing Kimbrough low, they would be putting an end to their River connection.

Mathis rested his hand on her warm breast. She looked deeply in his eyes.

"We can do this now," she whispered, smiling.

"This I could do forever."

They were silent. Another kiss. Her lips were

plump and supple. Her tongue lashed along his teeth. "I will never forget you," she said.

"You—" he started to reply, and there was a flash of light. The room melted. Mathis was no longer holding Molly in his loving arms in the dormitory bedroom. He was in the empty dining room, wrapped tightly in the arms of Lance Stunning. They were just now stumbling together out of the beautiful, warm, shimmering crystalline light.

With a violence born of shock and disappointment, missing Molly horribly already, Mathis wrenched Stunning loose, and they staggered apart.

"Dan-tastic!" Lance whooped, smiling big-time. "I thought you were asleep on your feet." He made a pistol with his fingers. "Gotcha."

"You were hugging me," Mathis said. That's why he couldn't step out of the light. Stunning had snuck up behind him and had been holding him in place.

"Yeah, well, I was just fuckin' with ya."

Mathis stared at Stunning. "What are you...?"

Stunning seemed to be flying sideways.

"What are you...doing here?" The whole room was flying, spinning.

Or was it him?

Dan Mathis crashed to the floor in a dead faint.

He sensed her with him. Saw her, knew her and was thrilled. They stepped together in a hug, whirlpooled and were together. Molly wrapped her cozy naked legs around his hips. Images tossed in his head of a tenement—shabby, cramped room, rats, cats, stale

bread. Loving grown-ups, parents, there and gone, horribly gone. Another room, larger, institutional. Girls with hollow eyes. Kimbrough, and a cold smile. Dan Mathis, and a kiss. He ran his hands up his leg, not his leg, and pressed his palm against a vagina, his. Hands on her stout buns, he entered her, and entered her, and entered her, and entered her, until he was way inside. She, too, was inside him forever; they were joined as no lovers had ever been. A second skin to him, a shimmering set of memories.

Mathis woke. Had she visited him again? He slept.

He woke a few more times. Each time he rolled over and went back. He did not want to emerge from this sleep because here he was with Molly. She was lying next to him. When he rolled over he saw her and could snuggle her, he could smell the spice of her reddish hair and watch her breathe in sleep, her mouth slightly pursed, her eyes shut, lids fluttering. He could trace the slope of her hip and haunch. It was not a dream, because when he woke and went back, there she was, still.

Stunning's voice: "What's wrong with him?"

Fallon: "I think it's exhaustion. He hasn't got a fever but maybe we should call a doctor."

"Fuck, no. He better wake up soon, is all I can say." Eventually, Mathis rolled over and reached for her, and she was gone.

He woke up in his real bed, and she was, of course, not there. His digital date/clock told him, September 20, 2005. How could she be here?

Logy from his long sleep, Mathis slowly dressed and trudged out of his quarters. Fallon and some others called hello to him, but he plodded past them, down the east hall to the dining room, to reassure himself that all was still okay.

But it wasn't. It was far from okay.

Mathis's stomach dropped, his face burned. He sensed Stunning behind him, and words were starting to slide out of the artist's mouth, words to the effect of, "Oh, Sleeping Cooty is awake at last—"

"Where's the chandelier?" Mathis quietly asked. He whipped around and advanced on Stunning, saying it again, loudly, and then a third time, this time grabbing Stunning by the lapels of his Italian imported cerulean green jacket. "Where's the chandelier? What have you done?"

Stunning tried to twist away from Mathis's grip. "I told you to get rid of it, you wouldn't do it, so I sold it to that Claire chick," he snapped finally, shaking Mathis off, backing away, looking alarmed and then angry and then defiant and swinish. "You seem to forget who owns this place. You somehow managed to scare Lascivia away from the thing, even though she had my permission to take it. Who the hell do you think you are? I oughta fire your ass."

"Fire me, fuckface." Mathis lunged for Stunning's throat, and the man ran away. Literally ran down the hall, yelping like a puppy. Mathis chased him halfway down the hall then had a second thought.

"Hey, fuck you, Mathis, you're fired. Get out!" Stunning was screeching at him from around the

corner, on the main stairs. "I said, get out!" When Mathis didn't answer, Stunning went on: "Before you go, you oughta know your precious chandelier is dust. Yeah. I sold it to that Claire, but it's busted. Gone. Fallon's crew got the thing down, boxed, and outside okay, then a truck backed over it."

He laughed, a high-pitched, annoying, madman chuckle.

"The guy that was directing the driver said he got distracted by some chick that drove up in a Ferrari. Said she had a bitchin' bod. Thought I'd understand. Inbred fuck. I fired him like I'm firin' you. Now get out. Pack up and go." Stunning paused. "Did you hear me? I said—"

"I heard you," Mathis said.

During Stunning's tirade, Mathis had gone up the back stairs and around then down the main stairs to sneak up and whisper, ghost-like, in the man's ear. "I heard you."

"Aghgh!" Lance yipped, and stumble-scurried down the stairs. At bottom, he shook a schoolmarmish finger at Mathis. "I'll call the cops!"

And he ran away.

It was quiet in the house. Maybe the workmen, hearing all of Stunning's yammering, had stopped work.

Didn't matter. Silence.

Mathis ran his hand over the bannister he had spent so many hours sanding, oiling, finishing. He reached over to the cartouche near the top of the left wall of the staircase. In the center of the simple oblong frame was a low relief rendering of an angel in flight—man or woman angel, you couldn't tell. Long hair, flowing robes and unusually full lips. Mathis had taken extra time in restoring that detail, scraping away old paints and waxes with meticulous care.

"That's my favorite," his spirit lover had told him, months ago. "Every time I pass that sculpture—"

"It's not a sculpture, it's a relief," he'd said.

"As you say. When I pass it, I run my fingers along the angel's lips and think of you."

The lips were as smooth as he could make them, in the time allotted.

Dan Mathis hauled his bags outside to his car. He was surprised to discover that autumn had arrived. The leaves were still mostly green, but gold, red and orange highlights were beginning to show; and as he looked around at the near trees and those on the far hills it seemed that all of the branches in the world were rustling, showing off, though the wind was very mild. He turned his face to the sun. He felt as if he hadn't been outside for years. It smelled great.

Lance Stunning watched him load his car from the safety of a second-floor window.

Mathis' anger was gone. He didn't see the point of telling Stunning what he thought of him, of his gallery. Whatever Mathis might say to him, Stunning's mind would do what it did best—it would rationalize, filter out data and refit memory until all was as it should be. Lance Stunning, center of the universe.

Mathis no longer believed in heaven and hell. Like Molly, he now knew that we carry that place around with us. He finished loading his car and looked up at Stunning, framed in the gothic arched window. His hell was to be bored with himself, with his metronomic, small and fearful mind. Someday, that mind would collapse from lack of nourishment, because he never listened and never learned.

Mathis turned his back on the haunted house.

Driving down the hill, He tried not to think about the years he'd wasted, helping to burnish the reputation of Lance Stunning. Looking ahead? His own future prospects? Empty, empty, empty.

He was peering so intently into the abyss of himself that he didn't see the blue Ferrari. It was parked just past the wrought iron gate and limestone arches that marked the Stunning property, and he was headed right for it.

He slammed on the brakes. There was a roar of gravel and a huge cloud of dust. After a long skid, he came to a stop. He couldn't see out the windshield for all the dust.

From the cloud a woman appeared. She came right up to his driver's side window and leaned down to say, "You okay?"

She was in her mid-twenties. Super fit. Brown hair, stylishly cut. Dressed in European-style brown leather jacket, jeans, cotton blouse, cowboy boots, leather belt, silver buckle. Diamond earrings. The package? Expensive.

"Did I hit you?" he asked her.

"No, just missed." She brushed the hair from her face. "My fault. Pretty stupid place to park a car."

"My fault. I was going too fast."

"You live up there?" she said, nodding toward the house, which was hidden from view.

"No. I did for a time."

"I hear it might be turned into a gallery."

"Yup."

"I was up there a few days ago. Is Lance Stunning in there now?"

"He is."

"I've always wanted to meet him."

Mathis's heart sank. So much for cosmic coincidence, the great wheel of fortune, destiny. Her brown eyes, her posture, her self-assurance—it had seemed to say something to him...

"Yes. Of course you want to do that," he said glumly. He started to put his car in gear.

"My great-grandmother used to live there," the woman said.

Mathis squinted at her, doing a little head-slink of reappraisal. "Don't you mean she worked there?"

The woman fixed him with a look—sharp, suspicious. "How did you know?"

Mathis just smiled. He was on top of the world, looking down at the whole damn universe, innerverse, vicey-verse.

"Is he having me investigated?" she said to Mathis, her fingers gripping his window frame. "Listen, all we did was make an offer on the house. We're doing Stunning a favor. He's going to lose it, anyway. That scam he had going with the dealers, keeping the price of his works up? It's over, they're talking to the press. The IRS audit, the foundation grant forgery—it's common knowledge. We had nothing to do with any of that. My family only wants to prevent this horrid gallery."

Mathis held up his hand to stem the angry torrent. "Are you an heiress or something?"

"That's none of your business," she said. She pushed away from his car and strode quickly to the Ferrari. Opening the door, she shot him a haughty glance: suspicion, superiority. She revved the engine and drove away.

Mathis was again lost in a dust cloud.

She's staying in a motel, he predicted as he put his leased Toyota into gear. She may be an heiress, but that's where she's staying.

He eased the car through the settling dust and onto the road.

Motels are the sexiest places on earth.

END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roger Brown is the author of six previously published works of nonfiction and one published novel. He lives in the eastern United States with his wife and two children.