



A MISTRESS FOR MARCOS

By

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It was always my intent, upon hearing that Lucinda Barnwell's estate had gone up for sale, to renovate the building to its once former glory, as I remembered it as a child when I visited my aunt during those glorious endless summers of my youth.

But then, I was one who leaned heavily towards fancy, or so my father kept telling me, 'a flare' he called it, best reserved for my romantic stories and not real life. As much as I hated to admit it, he was right. What chance did I have, as a struggling author, to even buy, let alone refurbish, a three-storey sprawling estate? I barely earned enough to support my one-room apartment. Yet the news brought to life so many glorious memories of those magical weeks with Aunt Lucinda, memories I suspect were sweeter because I saw them through rose-colored glasses of a child's innocence.

The welcomed news that the house had finally been bought, even though not by me, suddenly turned sour. The mystery buyer who purchased the house had simply disappeared. And no one else came forward. The estate, which had been in a state of ruin for many years, was finally condemned. It was subsequently slated for destruction.

There was a movement by a group of historians who argued that the two hundred fifty year old property should be preserved for the sake of heritage, but in the end their arguments, noble and persuasive as they had been, were overruled. Seemed no one was truly prepared to invest the amount of money it would take to keep the building in existence. No stay of execution was offered.

What darkened my heart even more was the ridiculous rumors that had begun to circulate.

It was said the Barnwell estate was haunted. It was said the sound of cars' wheels on the gravel could be heard at dusk, that laughing and singing and faint music could be heard from the vacant ballroom, that a woman's face could be seen in an upper window staring out over the neglected gardens, dabbing her tear-filled eyes, that phantom horses galloped through the fields, and screams, indistinguishable as to either male or female, occasionally erupted from inside the stables. Ignorant vile tongues, I scoffed. I suspected one or two souls had ventured to the house one sunny afternoon and heard a screech of wind through a broken window. The rest of the gossip came from ignorance. Nothing more.

Others went even further with their bitter words, and whispered that the house was cursed and the 'unholy sins of carnality' that were regularly practiced there. Orgies of food and drink took place there and inevitably led to presumed lusts of the flesh. The curse on the building, they said, was inflicted by Lucinda's last husband before he died, clutching his chest as his weak heart gave out, despite what was perceived as his stellar health. He had only enough breath to swear that only the unholy could live there and he was dead by the time he hit the floor. It was this curse, they said, that secured the estate's fate that it would remain uninhabited.

All of this foolish talk disgusted me because, search as I might, I never recalled witnessing such things as drunken orgies of either food or drink. And the only coupling I could recall were memories of beautiful couples who danced gracefully together across

the ballroom floor! This was just idle gossip; these unjust rumors did not come from those who frequented the house during its days of glory. These poisonous whispers came from the ignorant townspeople who lived narrow uneventful lives, jealous of Lucinda's wealth, while they barely eked out a living with mundane jobs. Of course Lucinda would be their target. None of them took the time to get to know her.

For the years the estate was left derelict, the town's children would creep through the overgrown lawns in the dead of night to play their mischievous games. Windows were broken, fires were started, and obscene graffiti was painted over its once luxurious walls. I was angered at such disrespectful treatment of the house. If nothing else it was a piece of history. But I said nothing. I refused to stand up and profess its innocence, to loudly shout out that Lucinda had been kind and honorable. If anyone could have spoken out, it was me. Now, because no new buyer stepped forth, the lonely house waited for the final death blow of a wrecking ball, and all that I had to cling to were the echoes of the past that lived in my memory alone.

The uneasy peace I made with these memories seeped into my novels, even though I was far from a literary success. As a writer I was, quite simply, obscure. I felt sad and uneasy about the house being torn down, and a melancholy tone seeped into the book I was writing, a tale of lost romance, with what was considered an unconventional and unsatisfying ending. When my somber manuscript was finally published, its grave nature didn't help sales much. Seemed no one was interested in my dark Gothic tale.

I felt my loneliness was shared with Aunt Lucinda's estate. My voice, one which I believed to reflect honesty, was muted. My book was a failure, shredded by the critics, as heartlessly as the stones thrown into the estate's windows by the wicked children.

And then something rather odd happened, something that started a series of events, like the tumbling of dominoes. I dreamt of being in the house, following a voice laced with sorrow. The source, however, was elusive. With each room the voice leapt ahead and again I would drift through another room only for the occurrence to repeat over and over because dreams are, as everyone knows, peculiar like that.

Certain that it was Aunt Lucinda's spirit that wept I called out, "Wait for me. Please, I've come to say good bye. I've come to say I'm sorry." The weeping lured me forward until I reached one final room, one I could not recognize.

Every door throughout the estate slammed shut. I was left alone in darkness and silence, except for the reflection of my own pale face in an oval mirror. I stepped into the dim light of it, mesmerized by the contorted expression that shimmered there. The eyes that peered back at me were not my own. Nor did they belong to my Aunt Lucinda.

Then I woke. Neither startled nor anxious, I was simply caught up in an emotional need to visit the estate one last time. I wasn't exactly certain, during my waking hours, which haunted me the most or why or whether a visit would exorcise anything except my fragile conscience. My guilt over never standing up for my Aunt Lucinda's innocence weighed heavily on me. Orgies indeed! The very thought made me laugh with incredulousness.

At the very least I would apologize for my silence. Except for my failed novel I had said nothing about the home's grandeur. So, I decided to make one last trip, and ask forgiveness.

A cold autumn wind scattered the fallen leaves across the road. Abhorring the chill of the season I dressed for warmth, not style. Aunt Lucinda would vehemently

disapprove of a young lady wearing jeans and a sweater, a travesty to the feminine form, I could hear her say. I had kept all the lovely laces and cottons she had adorned me with. Although her summer parties--'soirees' she called them--went on late into the night I was the center of attraction only for the few minutes I was allowed to make an appearance before being sent to bed. I was only a little girl who visited a short while but, oh, how I had felt like a princess! The guests were, to me, like royalty -- tall handsome men in their velvet suits, strikingly elegant women in flowing gowns of silk and chiffon. And me, dressed as a doll, admired by everyone.

"I feel like a princess," I had said to her then and she smiled and said in return, "In this house, Madeline, you can be whatever you want to be." My blonde curls were arranged just so, and often she would attach a little jeweled tiara to complete my ensemble. I had it as a special treasure in my jewelry box, along with the single pearl necklace she had given me for my twelfth birthday. These I could never part with; my sentimentalism was far too strong.

Despite my somewhat shabby attire I did, however, feel the need to wear the necklace on this, my last visit. If her spirit still resided within the walls of the fated estate she would, at least, approve of my choice of jewelry.

For the duration of the drive, several hours, I sifted through my recollections as though they were photographs in my mind. With each came a revival of emotion. The trepidation of learning to ride on a pony called Midnight and the wondrous sense of freedom when I was allowed to take her on my own around the field; the sudden shock of not being able to find my way out of a maze of hedges deliberately pruned to befuddle the inhabitant; the delight of playing for hours on end with a massive dollhouse complete with hand-crafted Georgian furniture; and then, of course, the parties. Oh! What magnificent nights of light and laughter and music they were. For days the servants would busy themselves with preparations--the ballroom floor was waxed and polished, huge bouquets of flowers were placed carefully along the foyer, caterers would stream in with crates of fruit and wine and whatever else was ordered by the hostess--sweet smells would waft from the kitchen, strings of lights would go up around the stone pool, tables decorated with center pieces of little statues and goblets and berries, the buzzing of voices readying for guests, and each weekend during those endless summers when I visited I would discover on my bed a new dress especially tailored for me to wear to make my short but grand appearance. My heart expanded now as it did then! Yet then I didn't realize, as I did now, just how magnificent those times actually were.

The emotion took its toll on me; tears flowing down my cheeks. An era was over. Those summers were gone. Aunt Lucinda was gone. Soon the estate, as well, would live only in my precious memory. Rather than brush my tears away I touched the necklace, the one physical object that remained a solid connection to what once was.

My heart sunk when I turned into the circular drive. Father had told me of the ruin but without seeing for myself I refused to believe it could happen. No longer could I cling to naive hopes. I sat for a long time inside my car. Yet I could deceive myself no longer. My eyes demanded I accept how poorly this place had been treated. My innocence was as broken as the building itself.

Weeds were growing through the cracked stone steps, the Sphinx-like pillars on each side were toppled and broken, and paint was used to not only deface the images but my aunt's integrity. 'Whore' was scrawled across one; 'witch' across the other. I gasped

with disbelief. Why would anyone say such thing? Lucinda Barnwell was a lady. Never had she uttered an unkind word about anyone. This made no sense to me and anger soon replaced my grief.

“Stupidity,” I muttered aloud with repugnance and jumped from the car as though possessed. Yet I felt so angry and alone and impotent in the shadow of this debauchery. My voice in defense of the home’s great majesty would fall on deaf ears. It was too late to argue. The damage had been done. My affection for this wonderful lady, however, doubled.

I made my way up the cracked stone steps, scanning the broken windows along the lower floor, and braced myself as best I could for further ruin within.

The chain across the front doors had been snapped; the sign that read: CONDEMNED: DO NOT ENTER was on the ground. I kicked both aside and pushed open the one door, already loosened by an unsteady hinge.

The foyer was damp and unwelcoming. Someone had piled together wooden chairs and tables to create a fire at the base of the stairwell. The floor was blackened where the charred cinders remained. I bowed my head, again remembering the soft glow of the house so proudly displayed on those weekends when everything echoed with the sounds of merriment. “So sad,” I whispered, feeling I must say something out loud so the walls would hear my lament, understand that a living soul felt badly about the debasement.

“Madeline.”

The sudden shock of hearing my name froze me where I stood. My pilgrimage, I was convinced, would be a solitary one. It never once crossed my mind that someone else might also be in the house. Or that this someone else would know my name.

My first impression was that this was a ghost and that all those silly rumors had had an affect on me after all. I lifted my eyes and squinted through the gloom to see that he appeared from, it seemed, the wall. It was a trick of the dull light, of course, and it didn’t help my wild imagination to see that his lengthy jacket matched the colors of the dark paneling. I gasped and took a step backward, which caused him to stop. “Who are you?” I asked. It was a reasonable question considering the tales I had heard of haunting.

He placed the candelabra on a table, struck a match, and lighted every candle. The glow illuminated his face. In his clear dark eyes was an expression so trustful, so affectionate that I was instantly at ease. Like a sudden tide what arose in me was the single thought that he was very familiar. I suffered an intolerable longing to place him, his long black hair framing the olive skin, those untamed gypsy good looks, but try as I might, I couldn’t.

“I am Marcos,” he said softly, and waited, as though his name should mean something to me.

I shook my head apologetically, not wanting to appear rude. The only Marcos that sprang to my mind was a character I had created, a deliciously romantic hero, who saved the damsel in distress, as only devastatingly romantic heroes can.

“You have done well for yourself, Madeline,” he said. “She always said you could be whatever you wanted to be.” His words faded and he lowered his eyes to clasped hands.

This only added to my confusion. “I am sorry,” I said. “But I don’t know you.”

His wide shoulders lifted in a heavy sigh.

“What is your affiliation to this house? Why are you here?” I asked.

He stared at me, as though I had asked something shocking. “Like you,” he said, his full lips drawn into a broad smile. “I am here to recreate the past.”

“You are mistaken, sir. I am here only to say good-bye.”

With this, his expression dropped. He slumped as if an invisible weight was slung across his shoulders. “Never good bye,” he sighed. “Until we meet again.” He straightened. “And we have met again.”

I stood in silence trying desperately to understand his meaning. He was familiar, eerily so. I calculated that he was not much older than me, but I had been the only child to play in these rooms. Lucinda had married three times, had been widowed three times, and was left terribly wealthy each time. But when she died she had neither an heir nor money. I couldn’t help but wonder if perhaps this man had something to do with her lost wealth. The mystery deepened, and suddenly I was filled with anxiousness that perhaps I had stumbled across, not a man of means, but a madman which, of course, meant that I may have stumbled into a precarious situation. I was alone. No one knew where I had gone. If I screamed for help it would be futile because no other soul resided within a three mile radius. My heart had begun to beat double time. Inadvertently I took another step back.

“Oh,” he said. “Please, don’t be afraid. I mean no harm. Only, I am so pleased you have come. I have been so lonely and now that my days are soon to end I want only to share what once was.”

Yes, I thought. *He is mad.* Yet there was such yearning in his voice I was comforted with the belief that what he said was true--he meant me no harm. Accompanying my relief was laughter. “What do you mean your days are soon to end?” This was absurd because he didn’t seem old. In fact, he was the vision of health. An unexpected arousal rose deep within me, one that a woman feels for a stunningly handsome man.

The yawning hole of my own loneliness stretched out so intrusively I empathized with his words.

“Let’s walk together, you and I,” he said, holding out his hand for mine. “Let us be whatever we want to be.”

The blurred impression that we were kindred in spirit came into focus and I agreed. To refuse would abandon the magic that poured through me, the mysticism that oozed from his presence. It was a luxurious sensation, one that became exceptionally stronger once I took his hand.

I was so enthralled with him that I was vaguely aware his hand was cold.

* * * *

Fire flashed through my heart as we strolled together into the once glorious ballroom. Even though it was barren from neglect, I only saw the splendor of former times. Once again I was a child, dressed as a princess, mingling with exotic guests who patted my head and cooed praises of my sweetness. My visions were so vivid that I could hear the music, Scott Joplin’s rag-time, energetically played by four musicians who regularly graced Aunt Lucinda’s soirees.

“It was here,” I said, taking my hand from his so I could point to the corner beside the patio doors. “The orchestra played here.” The staccato notes echoed through my mind, a few strands, and then faded. My heels resonated through the emptiness as I

moved to the spot where a grand piano sat, the once glistening waxed floor scuffed, dirty. Panels were torn from the walls, most unsuccessfully, leaving lengthy tears, like open wounds. "Played here," I muttered again, the ache of ruin rising in my heart.

"Yes," my companion said. I turned to the sound of his voice and noticed he had placed his hand, the one I had just been holding, over his heart. "All happiness flowed from this room. Life blood, coursing through each passageway like veins. This heart still beats."

"Are you a historian?" I asked. "One of the society that tried to save this place?"

"No."

"You speak with such affection, I thought that--"

"Allow me the pleasure of this dance, Madeline," he interjected. The invitation was accompanied with a graceful bow, one so gentlemanly that a tickle fluttered through my stomach. He lifted his eyes to mine from his folded stance and smiled. With a wink he added, "I shall be the romantic hero from your book."

Heat rose in my cheeks. I felt embarrassed. I'm certain his remark was meant as an innocent tease about my lukewarm success as an author, and this of course, let me know how he knew my name. I wondered if he had read my Gothic tale about the memories the house had created for me. And then to dance in the middle of the ruins? It seemed terribly foolish to pretend that gaiety swirled around us. Ah, who would know, but him and me? So I curtsied in response, as Lucinda had taught me to do when greeting her noble guests. "Thank you kind sir," I said demurely. "I would be delighted."

We met in the center of the dusty floor. His sensual gaze reminded me I was no longer a child. Delight warmed me as he took me into his arms and, oh, how we danced! His rhythm and grace were impeccable and I felt awkward in comparison. Not once did he fumble, and he carried me with ease. I laughed at the joy of our imagined revelry. Whether the physical exertion or the delight of his elegance, or both, I was left breathless. When our dance ended, and we stood together in the center of the room where we had begun, he leaned toward me and sighed. My exhilaration was compounded by his continuous composure. I was weak. In his arms my limbs were lifeless.

He pulled me close. For a moment I was convinced that he would kiss me, and I welcomed the gesture. Yet I pushed him away, as I was not inclined to submit so quickly to a man's charms, regardless of how compelling they might be. I was not faint of heart as my literary heroines were.

A twinge of fear replaced my delight.

Despite my refusal to be held, he clasped my arms. Not hurtfully. Quite the opposite. I sensed he was clinging to me, as though frightened that I might vanish; his eyes shimmered with a loneliness that was unfathomably deep. So vast was his melancholy that I searched for something comforting to say but was as silent as the imaginary music we had danced to.

"You have her smile," he said finally.

"Whose?"

His thumb brushed over my cheek, sending currents of electricity through me. Strands of black curls tumbled over his shoulders, framing his olive skin and I was wrought with that elusive feeling of recognition. I could not recall the memory.

"Please," I said sternly, my frustration showing. "I don't understand."

A gust of autumn wind rattled the patio doors. I felt the cold air swirl around my

feet, carrying with it dried leaves. Its chill was lessened by the icy shiver that ran through my veins. I may not have been able to place him but it came to me that there was something abnormal about him.

I stepped back. "You must tell me this secret you have. Or I shall be forced to leave."

Wind shrieked through the broken glass sounding every bit a pitiful cry. He lifted his chin towards the sound. Palm against my back, he guided me toward the doors and together we gazed out over the empty stone pool, once filled with crystal clear water and enormous golden fish. Beyond it were the stables, the roof half crumbled, the boards weather worn. It was a dark silhouette against the dull light of a dying day.

In the distance were the fields where I had ridden the pony called Midnight.

He stood behind me, his mighty arms folded beneath my breast, a silky wash of cascading hair against my neck. The steady rhythm of his breath touched my ear. Instinctively I pressed back into his embrace, inhaling the sweet musk that was his scent.

Gently he swayed, lulling me into what I could describe only as a trance, such a curious sensation, grounded by his body tight against mine, yet drifting without any consciousness of time. Stranger still was that the scene before me changed--the dull colors of autumn pulled back as though nothing more than a blanket--revealing the vibrancy of summer's bright light and life. The pool was ablaze with sparkling blue water; the garden's foliage was green, peppered with red berries and blossoming flowers. Song birds fluttered; insects buzzed. All of it was as I remembered! We moved without effort, the arms across my breast protecting me, as we floated past the garden, my escort and I, our ghostly track towards the stable unvarying.

Without him I would surely have concluded that I was the one who had gone completely mad. With him I felt only immeasurable joy. Together we were magically remembering a long-buried grandeur.

The day was sultry. Muggy air saturated the yard and I could smell the horses that had once wandered around the enclosure. She loved her horses, Aunt Lucinda. She came here often. I smiled, not frightened by this mystical passage into memory, and twisted within the arms that held me.

"I saw her come to these stables every afternoon," I said, wanting to look him in the eye. Yet he would not let me turn, however, and simultaneously my need to converse was lost. The summer haze or the drunkenness of my dream, or both, affected my dulling senses. I blinked to stay awake, for all of it was a wondrous journey.

None more so than when I shifted my gaze to see her! Aunt Lucinda was walking toward the stable, a white cotton blouse tucked into her belted skirt, ankle-high boots flipping the edges of her skirt as she strode determinedly past us. I gasped, so close had she come to where we stood and dimly in my mind I understood that she could not see us, for she was in her time and we were ... somewhere else.

How I ached to be able to reach out and touch her, experience the joy of peering into her sparkling eyes, see once more that beautiful smile! The arms around me flexed, reminding me that this was nothing more than a waking dream, a memory of my summer visits.

"I loved her," I managed to whisper.

"As did I," purred the voice in my ear.

She glanced quickly from side to side, her long auburn hair glistening in the

sunlight, and she disappeared inside the stable, its door not latching because she was in great haste.

The passing moments were undefined. So profound was my desire to see her again that it seemed as though hours had passed. Finally we walked, my escort and I, through the door that had gradually creaked open.

My heart was flushed with the innocence that was like a child's; the unfolding scene was so puzzling that I could not take in what I was witnessing. The man's back, his long dark coat melting into the shadows in the corner, slender legs protruding on each side of the jolting material, his black hair tossing with each quick gyration, and the soft sighs that rose above the deeper more guttural sounds of ... pleasure. They were making love!

I gasped. The woman in me understood. "She has a lover. Aunt Lucinda is having an affair!"

"Yes."

I stared shamelessly at the apparitions. Shock bolted through me. I was certain that my heart had stopped. "Who would have the influence to turn her head this way? Who?" I had to know. She was a lady and ladies did not indulge in such disreputable behavior.

Despite my attempt to free myself from the arms of my escort, he would not let me free. "Wait," he said. His fingers fluttered across my breast. This voyeurism had wakened my own searing arousal. My hand fell lightly on his. He moaned -- and the vibration of it rippled across my shoulder. I sank against him; his arousal too, was evident, the hardened mound pushed against my back.

I couldn't see the stranger's face shielded by the flowing locks, even when he shifted, turning her over the bale of hay that was their lurid bed. Her skirt was bunched high on her hip, exposing the bare white skin of her thighs, her blouse unbuttoned. She reached, her wrists together, and her lover wrapped a leather strap around them. From his neck he took a checkered bandana and tied it around her eyes. She exhaled with a hiss of air through clenched teeth. He nudged her legs to sprawl, cream-knitted stockings tugged to the clasps of her garter belt. He slapped the flesh of one buttock and in response she smiled in a twisted, contorted grin of approval.

I suffered such shock of this indecent behavior I turned my head, but fascination drew my eyes instantly back again. "I can't believe this," I confessed. "She's acting like a common ..." The word 'whore' died on my lips.

"Be whatever you want to be," Marcos whispered in my ear.

Their act intensified. She stretched out on her stomach over the bale of hay, blindfolded, hands bound, and her legs spread open before him. The material of his wide coat shifted as he moved in behind her, clasping his erection, slipping it sternly between her lily white thighs. His head was bowed to watch the proceeding penetration. He lurched forward and she shrieked, her fingers clawing the air, wrists tethered, straining.

My internal muscle constricted, so salacious was the scene that stretched out before me. I pulsed in rhythm, a fire growing in me. My sighs echoed inside my heavy mind while the body behind me seductively flexed as only a man could. Such eroticism could not be dispelled and for the duration I felt him inside *me*. How could this happen? A gripping rapture left me paralyzed; his arms were all that kept my legs from withering away beneath me. I felt as though I had been the object of intense desire!

“Do you love me, Lucinda?”

“Yes,” she cried, and with one final ruthless jolt he folded over her bunched skirt, his mass of hair hiding both his face and hers.

A sudden thump near by woke me from the saturating bliss that kept me weakened. A figure stood between the lovers and the daylight that streamed through the stable door. An expression of nothing less than sheer horror was etched across the man’s face.

Edward. He had walked in on their lovemaking!

I remembered him only barely. He had been Aunt Lucinda’s third and final husband. He gasped, knife-thin lips parted, eyes widened in despairing disbelief. “Unholy lust,” he seethed, shaking with fury, flushed purple with rage.

I heard his voice; I doubted that Aunt Lucinda did, if any of this fantasy was believable. Yet when he turned his glare directly to me and garbled, “In front of this child,” I believed in the sincerity of what must have been--I had, as a child, actually stood there- seen this affair and yet had blocked it from later memories!

Instantaneously the black coat had enveloped the intruder. So fast and furious was the vicious assault that the husband had no chance to react. There was one short anguished cry as he stiffened, gasping for air. Yet the huge hands around his throat allowed no such luxury and he sank to his knees; the attacker squeezing ever harder, until the limp husband collapsed on the hay-strewn boards of the stable floor. One leg twitched before going still.

My presence had been discovered. Aunt Lucinda’s lover slowly lifted his veiled eyes and I, in turn, screamed, as there were no other features, a gray blank slate, except for those demonic eyes and the twisted smile on full malevolent lips. I was caught in the stare of sheer evil that was this possessed lover.

No arm could keep me in the presence of this horror. I bolted. I didn’t stop until I reached the estate’s corner, out of sight of the stables and there I slumped to my knees on the gravel, my thoughts scattered and confused. My eyes burned with stinging tears of panic. Madness. The affliction had fallen on me, not the mysterious inhabitant I had had the misfortune of meeting. Me! And I was trapped in a time that should have already passed.

Summer bathed the scene; this was no hallucination. I felt the warmth of sunlight, the heat of the stone wall at my back. If I was lost in the world of the past, then its effects were total.

“Come on, luv, give us a kiss.”

I cringed. Yet another familiar voice from the past. Curiosity got the better of me, even though my heart raced with fear that I was trapped in this by-gone age.

Slowly, I peeked round the corner. His overalls were stained and mucky, his short-sleeved shirt yellowed with perspiration. The gardener--Jimmy--often I had seen him trimming the hedges of the maze as I skipped between the high walls of foliage. “Careful, wee lassie,” he’d sing to me in his funny accent. I had often tried to teach him how to speak English properly, that it was ‘house’ not ‘hooose,’ to name one lesson of many, but he’d only tease me and thicken his tongue when I was in his sight. “Ye get lost in there we may ne’er find ye for days.” And I’d laugh because I had the route memorized since I had run its twisted course so often.

His attention was drawn this peculiar afternoon, not to the trimming of foliage,

but the maid who wiggled inside the circle of his arms. "Shame on you," she scolded, without making any real attempt to flee. "Have you no ounce of integrity?"

"Nay, ne'er a one."

"The Mistress will be back soon from the cemetery. What a shame she has lost another husband. A bad heart he had, they say."

The gardener chuckled. "Is that what they say?" His persistent molestation of her upper torso never wavered.

"They say the marriage bed remained cold. How odd if it's true."

The gardener never hesitated with his determined seduction, nibbling her ear, and throat. "Nay, not odd. Just the way 'e wants it."

The maid pushed him far enough away so that she could peer into his face. "What do you know? Is there gossip? Tell me."

"Always gossip when it comes to them who dabble in the unknown," he chuckled, clamping his palm fully over her breast, tugging so quickly that two buttons from her apron bib broke off. He pursed his lips to hers. "Ye ne'er mind that. Come on now, we got time for a quick tickle before the grieving widow returns to her stable lad."

"No," she said firmly, her eyes widened with hunger of what illicit news hung the gardener's lips. Provocatively she twisted, twiddling her fingers between his legs. "Tell me first and then I'll share a little something with you."

He winced, holding his breath and then started, talking so quickly his words slurred together. He must have concluded sharing a secret was worth the price to procure his 'tickle.'

"Mistress has had a laddie on the side fer too many years to count. And 'e ne'er gets older and is said he was born of this very hoose and ye see, my wee little luv, he pleasures her in ways no betrothed could do, but dinna ye expect to see 'im cause 'e's like a warm gust of air that flutters up yer skirt." With that the gardener laughed, thrust his hand up her uniformed skirt, and touched a place that caused her lips to clamp shut. "And a hot-blooded lassie like ye needs more than air and I'll pleasure ye just the way nature intended." His shoulder flexed as he rubbed her vigorously.

She sighed, "Jimmy, darling, that feels so nice."

"Aye," he cooed. "And that's just the beginning. My biggest talent be hidden."

There was a burst of high-pitched laughter as he jostled her to the grass under the shrubbery, its lower branches shaking as the couple maneuvered within. The laughter dulled to wistful moans while his guttural groans left nothing to my adult imagination.

I glanced warily around, concerned that not only the tryst would be discovered but so, too, would my brazen voyeurism. No one cared about either. No one else was there.

Or so I thought.

"Marcos," I whispered. He had appeared quickly beside me, his dark face etched with concern. I wanted to fall into his arms. Instead he spun me around and my cheek rested instead on the warm brink of the building. He pushed against me, cushioning me between his hard body and the stone. "What are you doing to me?"

"I want you to listen. Be still and listen."

My ears pounded to the thrashing of my heart. As he cradled me, however, my angst dimmed. I did as he asked and listened. What special sound I was meant to wait for I wasn't sure. But I was far too weary to protest.

Nor did I object to his hands on my breasts. He nuzzled his chin into my neck, his

breath warm in my hair. I felt he was making me his lover by the intimacy of his touch, a lover who would be kept and treasured and doted on. I needed to feel loved. His dancing fingers soothed away a bitter emptiness that had constantly been my burden. He had that way about him--oozing sensual magic--taking me beyond myself with merely his touch. Better than the horror of the scene I had witnessed in the stable. Better than the rough play of the gardener on the maid. I closed my eyes, trying to ward off both images, to think only of him and the tenderness of his embrace.

He kissed my neck. His lips were moist and gentle, alluding to a deeper passion he had in store for me, one that was highlighted by the way he pressed his hard groin against my back. My mind was thick with the sultry presence that was him.

He moaned softly in my ear. "What can you hear?" he asked, his lips moving slowly, warm breath tickling my flesh.

"I hear your voice."

"Yes." His fingers continued to play with me, crawling up under my loose sweatshirt, exploring every curve of my breasts, massaging my nipples through the thin bra. "What does my voice say to you, Madeline?"

I was a woman who longed for such intimacy. So much that I could hear no other request than to be made love to. "You want me."

"Yes."

He swayed his hips in short circular movements. I was powerless against such seduction. I would not struggle. I wanted him, too.

"Tell me," he said, taking a deep breath, his chest expanding. "Tell me your fantasies. Spare nothing, even what might be dark."

I forced my eyes to open, catching the cascading tumble of his black hair across my cheek. "Dark?" I asked warily.

"There is much pleasure in what is forbidden." One hand dropped to my jeans. Slowly he reached farther down. "Do you listen to your own voice, Madeline? The one that asks to try what is unheard of?"

The vagueness of his request struck me with shock. "I don't know what ..."

"Does your voice ask me to explore? Does your voice want me to teach you to trust the wildest passions within, those that ache to be found? I will do that for you. I will be your guide." He thrust his body to mine. "No limits. No inhibitions. No pleasures hidden between a Mistress and her lover."

The stone wall heaved under my ear, as though it had sighed as he had sighed. The pounding heart I heard was not my own. It was within the house! Bricks and stone and mortar breathed!

"I have always been inside you," he said. "And you have come back for me. Only I can love you as you want. There can be no other but me."

My mind blurred with confused possibilities. What was he saying to me? We had once been lovers and I had forgotten? That I had called out to him to fulfill my every fantasy? That I was destined for him and him alone? Absurd! I was a woman free to choose whomever I wanted to be with.

The ragged edges of my sensibility cut into my consciousness. He was suggesting what was unnatural and even though I could not grasp just what defined this unnatural need, I could not accept. All of these bizarre events--the day, the place, his presence, sex and death--had become too confusing.

He sensed my alarm and moved away. "Please," he called, his voice fading into an unfathomable distance. "Please, Madeline, don't forsake me. Don't let them murder me! My life is yours!"

I whirled around, seeing nothing more than the open fields. What was happening? What was he trying to tell me?

Then, while I desperately wondered what to do next, a gritty scraping noise rattled the earth around me; the sky split in two as though an airborne quake had ripped it in half, and a forlorn cry urged me to move. "Madeline--here--follow me!" I hobbled through noise and motion, finding a gentler asylum at the mouth of the garden's maze, now a dark and shadowy unkempt labyrinth.

I ducked inside, fearlessly, because I knew every twist and turn. The mystery of escape was known to me. Was. This labyrinth of unkempt hedging was different in this ongoing chimera and every turn took me to a dead end. The more befuddled I became the worse my panic grew. Even more tantamount was the unbearable loneliness. "Alice," I said aloud, "You've fallen down the rabbit's hole." Nearing the point of conceding defeat I made one last turn. There was the very center of the maze.

Exhausted beyond words I would have preferred nothing more than to simply lie down on the warm earth to rest. I could no longer try to make sense of any of the recent events; my weary mind would not allow me to do so. The tangled maze shuddered and inched with growth, as though reading my thoughts, and its fingers of vine interlocked behind, closing off the small entry, walling me into a square room.

In it a beam of light funneled down from a cloud-ridden sky onto a writing table and chair. An enormous gilded book, like a church's grand Bible, lay open on the table. But this book was not filled with the stuff of Sunday sermons; this book was filled with lurid images--sketches, water colors, smudged oils--all of them portraying couples in various sexual positions. This was a Bible whose God was carnality.

Accustomed as I was to writing about sexual positions, I was not prepared for the unabashed promiscuity of these pictures. My written scenes were limited with modesty at the forefront, between heroine and hero, and always in the throes of deepest affection. But these images! Such obscenity! If not for the backdrop of strange goings-on I would have closed the book in disgust. Overwrought with the eroticism smoldering inside me, I studied each picture thoroughly.

Every page was dedicated to a room inside the estate. The cast of characters were varied, their features blurred except for frenzied eyes, blue, green, gray and brown. Voluptuous women's bodies were scantily clad when clad at all, the men around them naked, a few were masked. There were scenes of bondage, masochism, sadism, sodomy--an orgy of pleasures--some of men with men, women with others, threesomes and more. Varied as well were the stages of performance, some during foreplay, some during the act itself and others during aftermath. And as I turned the pages, dumbstruck that my Aunt Lucinda's home could be illustrated this way, I noticed one common denominator. Fragmented in the shadow, one tall dark figure, his long coat blended into the dark paneling of the wall. His eyes were unmistakable, a deep crimson, set within a featureless face, fixated on the stills before him.

To double check this eerie oddity I rechecked every page; he existed in all of them. Always watching, this strange being was depicted as omnipotent. This was the God of the Orgy, the Prince of Carnality. This book, I believed, was some perverse

adulation to him.

The last picture was framed with calligraphy, spider-webbed writing, words I could not decipher, except for one plainly written: Mistress. The lovers within the sketch, however, were clearly identifiable. The figure that had watched unobtrusively in every other page had taken its place, situated firmly between the sprawled legs of Aunt Lucinda.

I struggled for breath. This pictured act was what I considered utter debauchery. Total acquiesce, submissive to cruel domination. Ultimate immorality.

"No limits. No inhibitions. No pleasures hidden between a Mistress and her lover."

"Sodomites," I whispered, choking back my repulsion.

I closed the book; a thud reverberating through the heavy air. In the silence that followed I sank to the ground, forcing as best I could to remember. If such torrid behavior went on here surely I was a witness. Or, had my eyes, that of a child's innocence, seen such acts yet couldn't understand them? Or perhaps I had understood and the shock had blanketed my delicate conscience with forgetfulness?

I found no answer. My aunt was a lady. She would never stoop to such lowly animalistic behavior! This must be madness.

Fatigue consumed me. My lids closed; my mind emptied of soiled images. The heavy blanket of sleep soothed my tumultuous imagination.

"Madeline, there you are, you naughty girl! I've been looking everywhere for you."

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes while the gentle hand tugged my shoulder. I blinked, the summer sunlight distorting my vision. I sat up. The book beside me was *Alice in Wonderland*. The voice above me was Aunt Lucinda's.

I gasped, capable of uttering no other sound. She was as I had remembered her, her kind smile, her immaculate dress, the musical lilt to her voice.

"Wake up, princess," she sang. "Our guests will soon be arriving and I have put your new dress on your bed."

Rational thought had forsaken me, of this I was convinced. I saw her as I remembered her and she ... she scanned my apparel with disapproval. Her ruby lips pinched tightly together and she shook her head, auburn locks twisting over her starched cotton blouse.

"I never thought I'd see the day when a princess would wear boy's clothes." Then she smiled, unable to keep her chastisement anything more than a fleeting tease. "Come now," she added. "This is a special night for you. We have much to do to get you ready."

I was empty inside. My identity had been torn from me. And my heart cracked in two with emotion--so real was this apparition. "You're not real," I whispered, finally finding my voice, dry and cracked. "None of this is real." To say it aloud might bring me back from this incredulousness and I would run to my car, leave, and never return.

"Look at you," she said, ignoring my disbelief. "You've grown into a beautiful young woman." Her words were drenched with such pride my desire to escape softened, although a lingering dread laced through my soul.

"I saw you with *him*," I blurted. "In the stables. I saw what he did to Uncle Edward! He murdered him and you said it was a weak heart that killed him. You kept his

money and your lover. I thought you were a lady!" I was screaming.

Her gentle expression never altered.

"The book. Witchcraft. This house is possessed with a demon of your lusts. It's true, all of it! You were a whore and a witch." Tears burned down my already heated cheeks. How could I condemn her of such things? Words others had said and I tried so hard to dismiss.

She heard nothing. "Come now," she said softly. My frustration doubled.

Despite my terrifying revelation I followed her, back through the maze, towards the house and the room where a new dress waited for me. Where I would be readied for what I could not comprehend.

* * * *

The latch clicked behind me. I was locked in the room that was once my own small oasis of joy, consumed now with a haunting I could not escape. What was I to do? I was trapped in the mêlée of this ghastly existence, trapped not in childhood but as a woman. Futile as I expected it to be, I rattled the doorknob. It held firm, refusing to budge. The window was blackened, its panes unbreakable. All that was shattered were my memories--those of virtue and happiness--replaced with the horrors of evil wiles, an oppression I could not understand.

My only light was a single candle. And when it burned to nothing and spluttered one last time, then what would happen to the thin threads of my sanity?

All of this was a façade but for what? What intentions were meant for me this night? I could no longer cling to the belief that this upcoming soiree was meant merely to introduce a gleeful child to a host of guests, for I was no longer either a child nor gleeful. My spirit was wracked with grave misgivings. The evil here had risen from dereliction for a purpose and I felt, deep in my gut, I was the center of what was to be some foul ceremony.

This house was alive and I was lost. No one would hear me scream.

"Be whatever you want to be." The deep voice was gentle.

Yet I turned so quickly that I was lightheaded. "Marcos! Help me." My dizziness subsided as I fell into his arms. I needed his comfort, the serenity I had felt when we danced, the passion of his voice as he spoke to me against the stone wall, and he gave it to me. "I'm so frightened. I don't know what to do."

"There's no reason to be frightened," he said calmly. "No one here means you harm."

"Then you know of the ghosts?"

"Yes. I know of them."

I pressed my cheek against his chest for comfort. "Are you their Master?"

"They seek my guidance," he answered.

If not for the solid mass that I pressed against, I might have believed he, too, was an apparition. That and the steady cadence of his heart that was beating in unison with my own. Even so I felt compelled to ask. "Are you like them?"

"I share their fear."

"What are they frightened of?"

"Impending doom. This is their home. You, Madeline, are their salvation. You are my hope."

"Salvation? Even if I could I wouldn't wish to preserve such iniquity." Steadfast

in my belief in morality I pushed away from his arms. "And don't think for one minute I shall take part in any promiscuous act this house is accustomed to host." I thought of his attempted seduction of me. His request for what was forbidden.

He laughed. Laughed! I fixed on him an icy glare, to reiterate the profound depth of my conviction.

"She loved you, Madeline," he said quietly, the humor melting from his expression. "She said you were her chosen, that you would be her heir." He moved with grace, to the bed and sat, his coat fanning out on each side. Beside him lay the gown that had been prepared for me, white lace, tiny beads sewn into the bodice, so lovely--like that for a bride. His brow furrowed as he peered to me. "You came back."

"I told you I only came back to say good bye. I came here for no one but myself."

"No," he said. "You have come to take your rightful place as Mistress."

"Mistress of desolation and rot? I don't think so."

He stood, opening his arms, his chest expanding to a deep breath. "What of me, Madeline? Is there no room in your heart for me?"

The question, delivered with such seriousness, troubled me. His dark eyes seemed to penetrate my very soul, as though searching for one last hope, hope that resided in my answer. "But ..." I flushed. "Why me?"

"Because your love for this place is genuine."

"What I loved is now only a memory." By saying this, an enormous gloom tightened my breast.

Instantly he towered over me. "Your memory lives." He took my hand and placed it on his chest, confirming his existence.

I shook my head. "None of this is real. Aunt Lucinda is gone. The house is in ruin. I am no longer a child."

His eyes widened, a dull glow. I caught what was a glint of crimson before it winked out. "True," he whispered, titling his head to one side, his lips nearing mine. "You are no longer a child. Your needs are those of a woman." A soft kiss fluttered on my mouth, causing my blood to heat. "I can satisfy those needs, if you but only say the word."

I was thoroughly intoxicated by the hypnotic tone of his deep-graveled voice. The house, wrapped in confusion and fantasy, was no longer important to me. So dulled were my senses that I couldn't imagine we were even standing in a house; I was alone, with him, enveloped by a cloud. I tasted his lip, nibbled it lightly, expecting the briefness of my act was enough to demonstrate my willing involvement. He didn't react, except to squeeze my hand against his heart tighter still.

"Madeline." My name was uttered through pain. I lifted my eyes, our mouths a breath apart. "You are inside me. It's where you want to be. We both know this to be true."

"To be ..." I echoed, incapable of my own thought.

"You are obliged to do nothing, but stay and I promise you endless rapture."

My lips tingled even though we barely touched. I could fight against him no longer. "What must I do?"

"We will dance, you and I, surrounded by our friends, our music, our joy. These guests of ours will congratulate us for our vows. There will be lights and laughter, wine and food, and a passion for what is life. And then we will love. Our souls will be as one."

The future will belong to us; fate will have no jurisdiction.” His fingers trailed through my hair and he smiled. “Look at you, Madeline, a beautiful woman.” He pinched my chin, turning my eyes to the white flowing garment that was stretched across the bed. “And there is the gown your aunt has created with her own hand, given to you to wear this night. This special night.”

“Why?”

“Be mine. Keep me from the ruination of Death.”

I brought my face to his. “Death. Aunt Lucinda’s husbands all died here. Murder has nothing to do with weak hearts. He was her lover; he kept her as such. He was evil, Marcos, I saw those eyes and the blood on his clothes.” I shivered. “The eyes in the book, on every page, except the last. Oh, does it reside here still? Is this why you are afraid?” The shadows seemed to darken; I clung to him tighter.

“I am not afraid if you promise yourself to me.”

“Yes, I will. I will do whatever it is that has to be done to keep us safe.”

His lids fluttered shut, an incredible relief exhaled from flared nostrils. I seized the moment’s precious eroticism and kissed him. He cupped my head, I sensed his touch, oddly cool against the blistering heat of skin. “This,” he sighed, “and so much more. Put on your dress. Tonight we celebrate our joining together.”

His coat shifted with the grace of his turn. Three long strides and he was gone. I squinted past the candle, supposing the paneling could give way, so he could leave through what must have been a secret door and passage. But when I threw my hands on it there was no echo behind, no rattle of hinges, no hint of limited borders. He had walked through the oak as though it were air.

I felt his touch, heard his voice, accepted his kiss, and yet he was like them. Those were his words and of it I was convinced. He was Marcos, as elusive and fanciful as my favorite romantic hero. Simultaneously he was what I wanted him to be, flesh and blood. With my private disclosure however, I was at peace.

And so I dressed in the long white gown to prepare for the night’s soiree.

* * * *

The latch was no longer locked. My chamber door swung open. With my candlelight to guide my step through the passageway I felt that I too was an apparition, my flowing gown trailing behind me. The yellow hue was all I needed to pass along the familiar hallway and as I passed each closed door, I sensed the walls heave slightly to a gentle sigh. This was where I was meant to be. I was the Mistress. This night belonged to me.

My satin slippers no sooner reached the landing when the strands of music drifted up from the great ballroom below. Mixed throughout were voices--gay and cheerful--laughter and singing. With every descending step the jocularity rose like a thunderous roar. I took a deep breath as I turned, reaching the final set of stairs that would reveal my presence to our guests.

I blew out my small candle and placed it on a table under a portrait of Aunt Lucinda, her oil eyes gleaming down, satisfied, I believed, that I had taken my rightful place. Pride expanded my breast. Then exhilaration. He waited, my romantic hero, on the bottom step.

Marcos. The little girl in me needed a prince and he was indeed such a prince. It was what I wanted him to be.

His long hair fanned out over wide shoulders. He wore a gray silk shirt, loosely laced, his chiseled chest partially exposed, the skin smooth, glistening brown like the oak walls. My eyes dropped, drinking in the perfect physique. Belted trousers, a darker gray, clung tight to thick thighs, leathered boots hugged his calves. When he turned, presenting his upturned hand for mine, the light in the foyer caught the jewel that hung around his neck, a golden tear.

"Madeline," he said, smiling warmly. "You are divine."

I thought the same but was unable to speak so immense was my infatuation. My gaze locked to his I continued my descent, slow motion, finally reaching the hand that clasped my wrist, drawing it to his lips for a kiss.

His dark eyes never once blinked. "Fortune has favored me."

Forgotten fragrances like an intoxicating incense, sandalwood, wafted from his flesh and hair. My breast tightened with adulation. I was lost in love, it was true, and I could tell that he was with me because of his unwavering elation. I could suffer no heartache as long as we touched. I would not release his hand. Arm in arm, we took our rightful place within the ceremony, amongst a fraternity of ghosts.

Only faintly was I aware of the numerous guests within the grand room, their admiring gasps of exultation dim in my ear. The shuffling of feet swept the polished floor, parting aside for us as we danced, my lover and I. The music's tempo slowed so that our bodies would close in against each other. A warm summer breeze drifted in from the opened patio doors, the scent of flowers and berries was carried with each delicate gust. Hundreds of candles decorated the elongated hall and we danced, he and I, bathed in its glorious glow.

I could not be happier. I was what I had always wanted to be--captive to love--as deeply enslaved as any heroine my pen could create.

But even a dream could not last forever. For awhile Time seemed to dance with us, favoring our swaying spirits, keeping us together in each other's embrace. When the music stopped so, too, did Time. In its interim, we kissed. The magic, like an ancient perfume that tickles the memory, would be our guide.

"Confess the contents of your heart, Madeline," he said, the sweetness of his lips on mine. "Make your vow known to these, our honored witnesses, so that they too, will rejoice."

"I love you," I said, secure in my newly cemented emotion.

"Your heart and soul are mine?"

"Yes."

A murmur erupted, like the distant roar of an ocean, waves crashing on the rocky shore.

"Eternally?"

"Yes."

The rush grew louder, vibrating through me.

His arms thickened with a surge of strength. He spoke to the guests, his voice thundered through the room. "Our vow has been spoken. Salvation is with us."

I held on to him, frightened that I would wake, find myself cold and alone, that he might be gone and I would be surrounded by nothing more than ruin. If this was indeed a waking dream I prayed it would never end, that it would be as eternal as our vows. I would do whatever it took to remain right here, in this mysterious time and place where

no other could hinder our existence. Only rejoice within it.

He had sprung from the pages of my novel, had become what I wanted him to be, and I was wrapped in the glorious rapture of an endless summer that was a little girl's memory.

"Then we are ready to bid our guests good night?" he whispered to me.

I sensed a change in him then. Wildness overpowered the gentle sway of what was our sensual dance. His muscles flexed, shoulders thickened, and I was pinched inside his steely grip. The prospects of fiery possession excited me and I succumbed to his will.

Effortlessly he carried me. The sounds of merriment faded behind us as he made his way up the staircase. The passage was ablaze with light from candles. So too, was the room where he took me.

His sultry gaze never left my face as he lowered me onto the bed. Ornate tapestries were draped as curtains from the four posts. Beneath me the quilt was nothing more than a cloud. I pulled his body to mine, my fingers under his mass of hair. An impetuous rush of eroticism gripped me as I languished with prelude. He was moving over me with ease, gracefully and measured, uninhibited by time which seemed to be our constant friend.

His lips pressed damp kisses against my throat. I closed my eyes, stretching my arms above my head, finding the soft pillow and clutching it. He worked without hurriedness to unlace my dress, to turn me slightly from one side to the other. I sensed this was a luxury of prelude that he used to stir the embers within my womb. And I welcomed his leisurely tactile exploration. I gleaned satisfaction that he was taking pleasure in doing so. Through my arduous breath I heard his purring admiration.

His hands swept over my breasts, my stomach, and every fine hair on my body erupted to attention. His thumbs trailed paths down each of my thighs, taking with them the knitted stockings that were part of my finery. The satin shoes were slipped from my feet. A draft caused me to shiver. With the involuntary action my spine arched. Slowly I opened my eyes.

"Madeline," he said, his voice drenched with anticipation. "My own."

Emotion overwhelmed me. I didn't want to recognize the childishness of its effect of me. I was a woman, being loved by one who was beyond expectation. I tried strenuously to keep tears from flowing. But as he crouched beside me on this magnificent bed and shrugged from his shirt I could do little to stem the tide.

A strand of hair tickled my neck as he lowered, the tip of his tongue taking the tear from my cheek.

I lifted my hands, touching him, reassuring my mind that he was real. On this night my definition of what was reality had significantly altered. Senses could not lie to me, not now! His skin was a blanket of brown silk, pulled over steel. Each shoulder flexed beneath my palms as he unbuttoned his trousers. I ran my hands down his back and let my fingers dance over his firm buttocks.

He peered sharply into my eyes, an expression contorted with enormity. Simultaneously he lifted his hips. His throat bounced to a swallow. "Take me in your hand," he demanded, so severely my heart skipped a beat.

I inched my hand under him and took the rock-hard erection solidly in my grip. He flinched, only slightly, the strands of hair that framed his gypsy good looks shivered.

His full lips pinched together, his lids closed. Mighty forearms locked against my shoulders, pinning me thoroughly beneath his dominion. Yet as I moved my hand, pulling the velvet skin that covered the steel bar within, I was in control, if only for those few sweet seconds.

Then his dark eyes snapped wide, his lips contorting to an elongated growl, the brutality of it rippling through me with an excitement I had never known. He rose up, towering above me with the prowess of a mythological god. In so doing my insides flinched tightly. His fingers dug into the soft flesh of my hips as he hoisted me up, small streaks of pain intermingling with the incessant need. And with a monstrous pitch forward he had buried himself completely within me.

I gasped with the enormity of him. It was as though he expanded three-fold and I shifted to accommodate the pressure. He held the stance, unmoving. His chin tipped up, balancing some invisible object. His chest rose with a deep breath, nostrils flared. Whatever beast had possessed him I wanted to share; I stroked his penetrating mass by contracting my internal muscle.

His sculptured jaw dropped. He moaned. Loudly. And drove me into a state of feral carnality. My own cries echoed his voice.

He shook my hips, pumping my body as he knelt there, this merciless god, each wrench of my body further securing his ownership of me. His claim. His seed.

I clutched the bed, jolting to the frenzied coupling, my sex burning in increasing waves, a sea of fire, washing farther over me. My mind closed down to everything except the harshness of this barbaric act. I wanted more. I needed more. "Harder," I cried out, not recognizing the voice that fell from my own parched lips. If he broke me in two and secured my demise in the process I accepted, as long as I felt the rapture first!

But I was strong as well. The beast within me reflected his. I snarled, glaring up into his wild eyes, air hissing from my clenched teeth.

He let go of my hips. My muscles strained to keep the position. He squeezed my breasts, taking my nipples firmly between thumb and forefinger, lifting them. The pinching pain bolted over my flesh, the pleasure of his cock gyrating inside me, both culminating in my gut wrought with lust.

A great chasm loomed near. He pushed, clawing my breasts, his voice deep, husky. I fell. Ecstasy enveloped every nerve ending.

The interim didn't linger. Immobile, weakened, my hips lowered to the bed. He left my body, yet the glaze in his eyes had not vanished. He crawled over me. I felt the hard muscle of his thighs as he straddled my breasts. His scent, intermixed with my own, wafted into my nose. His fingers held the steely girth. His eyes were fixed on my mouth.

One palm gently caressed my jaw. He held my head, my hair pulled to his grip. An unmistakable demand. I pursed my lips to accept. If this would pleasure my lover, I agreed.

I expected that he would find his culmination here. No sooner had he slipped inside the watery confines of my mouth than I tasted a short musky spurt. I suckled him harder, the ebb and flow of his body my only indication of his mounting pleasure. He sunk in, the tip dabbing my throat and then he withdrew, through the hardened strain of my lapping tongue. But it was as though he was merely testing the limits of my compliance. With a grunt he hoisted his leg over and coaxed me to turn.

He clamped my wrists together, binding them securely with one of my stockings.

The other was quickly around my eyes. He pushed me, his palm on the small of my back, to lay flat on my belly. The soft material of the quilt smooth against my cheek. The pillow was inserted beneath my torso. My heart, never being given the chance to slow, thrashed wildly in my ears.

"Keep your legs together," he ordered gently and I suffered a tremor of what was forbidden and truly lurid.

He stretched out over me, his body agile, hard and moist.

"I must know," he said, directly in my ear, his breath tickling my cooling skin. "That my every desire will be your desire." His hand lingered on my lifted buttock, his thumb stroking the crease. "Will you take me, in every way?"

My eyes widened behind the thin veil of my stocking that had become a blindfold. I had reached the limits of my promiscuity. To allow any other action, the sordid behavior that had obviously laced his request, would lower my standings to that of a--

"No," I gasped. "Not this."

"Why are you afraid? There is pleasure in total submission. You have submitted to me, have you not, Madeline?"

His thumb toyed with me. My whole body stiffened.

"You demand too much."

"I demand this of every Mistress. Not one has regretted taking me." As if to confirm a gentle persuasion he nibbled my earlobe, sighing heavily. "I must know that you are devoted to me. That you will be my servant, my lover, my caretaker. That you will be my always."

"It's just that I've never--"

"New beginnings, Madeline. No regret, no broken dreams, no inhibition."

His words were gentle, his tone hypnotic. I had relaxed, the flow of tension soothed away.

"Do you love me, Madeline?"

"Yes, yes I love you."

"Trust me?"

"Yes."

"Then let us consummate our vow with this final act."

A scented oil, an ancient spice, was swathed over my body, his hand slick. Thick thighs squatted over me, and I felt his fingers massage me, pulling my buttocks, running the sticky oil over me. Then he lowered, the tip of his coated cock finding the crevice that was his final desire. This was the forbidden, the one final act of possession, the guarantee of my unfailing and lasting compliance.

If wrapped in love no act was lurid. My misconceptions dimmed. He pushed slowly, gently. "Yes," he hissed.

My instinct was to contract but I fought the tension because I ached to have him continue, to take me fully. And I cried out, firstly with the shock and then, as he glided ever deeper, the sensation of heightened bliss.

My wrists strained to its tether. I clawed the air as he sank, expanding me, this our only physical contact. I shuddered. Nothing had ever felt like this! My mind swirled to the totality of his dominion over me. His body pushed inside to the point where he could press no farther.

"Oh," he groaned, lurching a little, his possession complete. "Oh, yes."

He reached under, his fingers stroking my sex. With a placid glide he moved back and in again, pinching the small hard ball within the petal of my flesh, rolling it briskly. The combination, buried deeply inside me and the pinch, was explosive. I shrieked with a sudden climax and with it a quick frenzy overpowered him as well. He dived and wrenched, a liquid heat filling me with a tremendous spurt, and he leaned over my shoulders, a guttural moan filling my head.

“Do you love me, Madeline?” He snarled. “Say it! Tell me it is so!”

“Yes,” I cried out as the final wave of ecstasy ebbed inside. “I am your own!”

He stretched out fully covering my body, his breath slowing. He softened while still inside my body, but I wouldn’t move, so desperate I was to keep him there.

He strummed my waist, his cheek on the bed beside my mine. My eyes still covered yet I saw shadow and tasted his lips on mine.

“Precious Mistress,” he cooed. “Servants to each other.”

“Always,” I whispered, sensing a total loss within the trance-like state that was the embodiment of pleasure.

* * * *

It was the cold that awakened me. The sheets against my naked body were like ice, the spot beside me empty. I scanned every corner of the vast room but Marcos was nowhere. Draped over a chair were my clothes--jeans and sweatshirt--and I dressed quickly. Swallowing thickly and realizing that the dream had finally ended, I called his name. The only response was a deep sigh. The walls heaved slightly to the mournful sound.

My hands trembled as I turned the latch on the door and crept out into the elongated passageway. Faintly I heard my name and turned my head, trying to pin point the elusive call. “Marcos? Is that you? Where have you gone?”

The moan was one of agony. The whole house seemed to weep because of it and I moved quietly to where I sensed this suffering originated--one door at the very end of the corridor--a room I did not know.

I pressed my ear against the cool oak. Another heavy moan convinced me that within some dastardly event was unfolding. I took a breath, steadying myself, and turned the handle.

Morning’s hue washed this small room with a dull haze. It was barren of furniture except for one narrow bench. Marcos lay there on one shoulder, his back to me. The fireplace offered no warmth, the cinders black. His naked body convulsed, the mass of tangled black hair shivered over the side on the bench. I was frozen with fear for him. My lover was ill and my powerlessness sharpened my anxiety. I rushed to his side, kneeling, touching the curve of his hip. His flesh was like death.

Tears formed in my eyes. “Marcos,” I gasped. “What’s happened? What’s wrong?”

Cold sweat bathed his temples, his locks stuck to his head. I patted back his hair and his eyes were open yet unseeing. A ripple coursed through his body.

“Madeline,” he groaned, barely moving his lips.

I stifled a shriek. His skin was torn, narrow stripes blemished, one layer peeled back. On each thigh were scrawled the horrid words: witch and whore. Between his legs his hair and flesh were singed, blistering open sores. What ghastly torture was this? Who could have done such a thing? I clasped my palm over my mouth.

Throughout the room the air was heavy. The walls heaved, sighing, mourning. As he drew a labored breath so too, did the room.

I cradled his head, pulling his face to me breast. Tears streamed down my cheek. My lover was dying. What had gone wrong?

"Marcos," I wept. "My darling love." As I held him, I heard through the open window a rumble of noise. It was the roar of huge machinery, engines spluttering, closing in.

"They're coming," he garbled. "They're coming to destroy *me*."

I could see the slow progression on the horizon, the clouds of dust thrown high from massive wheels--bulldozers and trucks and wrecking balls--great prehistoric beasts bent on destruction.

The floor trembled beneath me, sharing our fear of demolition. Cruel reality had closed in on me. The future had come crashing in. "The house," I lamented. "They mean to destroy our house."

He turned, struggling to lift his dimming eyes. "Madeline," he whispered. "Don't you understand? *I-am-the-house*."

The graffiti on broken pillars, the heartless fire in the foyer, paneling stripped from the walls to fuel the fires, all of it manifested on his body. A home once filled with the passion of life and love was in ruin. Its soul raped and tossed asunder.

Such abject hopelessness fell throughout me. This was my love. I could not allow change. I surged with anger that any hand might try.

Every door within the house slammed shut. The deafening echo shook me to my very core. Above the empty hearth an oval mirror shimmered. The reflection that peered down was not my own.

"Aunt Lucinda!" I pulled my lover's face closer into my breasts. "Help me!"

The phantom lady stepped into the room and knelt, the withering body between us. She smiled and stroked his cooling flesh. "Madeline," she said in a stoic voice. "It is up to you, sweet princess, to keep him with us. My duty has been done, as those who have lived here for decades past. Every Mistress has taken him as their lover and has taken whatever course they must to keep his spirit alive, regardless how cruel an act. He has claimed you next as I had willed it to be. You love this place then, so too, you love him."

In the silence that followed I understood. She had taken husbands of wealth to keep the house, to keep her lover. This was the ultimate goal of every Mistress. Her heart belonged to him; her body was given to him. Now it was my responsibility.

"He was the one who made love to you in the stables."

She nodded. "He was."

"He murdered your husbands."

"He did."

"Why?"

"Survival. It was as I wanted it to be."

"The book." It was all becoming clear to me. "His face was in every page."

"Yes." Her unblinking eyes lowered to the shivering form on the bench. "His flesh bears the infliction of years of desolation. He has carried a great burden for far too long. That must change, Madeline. The mantle is yours. You must find a way to protect this house. Find a way to protect your lover." Her eyes lifted to me, pleadingly. "Even if

mortal sin is involved.”

I doubted my courage, not my love.

“He will reward you with pleasures you will find nowhere else.”

The rumbling outside had grown louder still.

“Aunt Lucinda,” I whispered. “I’m sorry for thinking you were a--”

“Whore. A witch. Don’t fret, princess. In this house I was exactly what I wanted to be. Now go, and do what you must to keep your lover alive.”

She vanished into the mirror. I felt I would never see her again. “Good bye, Aunt Lucinda.”

In a quiet voice that was unmistakably hers I heard, “Never good bye. Only until we meet again.”

I leaned forward, kissing the damp hair of his temple. “I am the Mistress now,” I said proudly, collecting my nerve. “I will not fail.”

With that, I leapt to my feet and raced to the yard.

* * * *

The huge trucks had stopped just outside the gates, their engines idling like the collective roar of a dragon. A sleek black car had obstructed their path, and I strained to hear the excited conversation. Two men were arguing, one with a hard-hat, carrying a clipboard; the other was dressed in a three-piece suit. Hands flayed and fingers pointed and try as I might I could not decipher the words, only the tone.

Minutes ticked on. An envelope was produced and then a cell phone. The man in the suit leaned lazily against the car, arms folded in defiance, and waited, as I waited, to see what would be the outcome. Finally, the Hard Hat bobbed in confirmation and I caught a few apologetic words. The conversation ended with the men shaking hands. An incessant beep-beep of vehicles backing up ripped through the autumn air.

The passenger’s door flung open and from it dashed a little girl, no older than I had been when I first visited the house on that first summer day. She dashed up to me and grinned, her button nose peppered with freckles, her curly blonde hair tussled over her shoulders. “Hi,” she squeaked.

I sat on the step so I could look directly into her bright blue eyes. “Hi,” I said. I nodded toward the black car that was slowly gliding into the yard. “What happened?”

“That’s my dad,” she said. “He bought this house only this afternoon. He said no one else wanted it but it’s so ... beautiful.”

My heart skipped a beat. “You’re right. It is beautiful.”

“He’s famous, you know.”

“I didn’t know.”

“He writes books,” she said proudly.

“Really? So do I.”

“He’s rich.”

“How nice.” My guts were twisting. “Where’s your mom?” I asked innocently.

“In heaven,” she answered matter-of-factly.

“Oh.”

“Do you live here, too? Are you going to be my new mommy?”

The house sighed behind me. Any other ear would hear the wind rustling through dead foliage. I heard an immense gasp of anticipation. Hope. Salvation.

“Elizabeth,” the man called as he got from the car. He eyed me warily as I stood

up, smoothing my hair with my shaky fingers.

"Daddy," the little girl said. "This lady writes book, too."

He was, in relation to my age, much older. His tanned face was lined, especially around his deep set eyes, but there was also a ruggedness to his physique--a man who enjoyed the outdoors--and kept his youth alive with health. His eyes never left me. He extended his hand. "I'm Cleo Flemings," he said.

A *New York Times*-bestselling author, several times over. I remembered seeing his name on various literary lists.

I told him my name; his hand lingered in mine. He was studying me, as a man studies a woman with intent, the kind of intent that nature approves of.

"Sorry," he said with a slight flush. "I wasn't expecting to find anyone here, and ... " He drifted.

"I spent summers here," I said, explaining my presence. "One of the former owners was my aunt."

"Is that so?" He sounded genuinely interested.

"I had come back to say good bye. I didn't think the building would be standing much longer."

"Luckily, I called in a few favors and got a last minute deal. I liked the look of this place and needed a get-away for Elizabeth and me." A melancholy veiled his expression. With a quick scan of the building's exterior he cheered. "A fixer-upper they said, but I think it'll be worth it. This is a lovely area."

"Yes, it is," I agreed.

It came as no surprise to me that the house had begun to heal. Hope breathes new life into death's face. The pillars were erect; the graffiti had been magically washed away. I suspected the interior was also stirring to a metamorphosis. Its heartbeat, strong and sure, echoed in my ear. It reflected my own.

"Well. It was nice to meet you, Mr. Flemings." I took one step towards my car parked off to the side.

"No, wait," he called out, as I had hoped he would. As I *knew* that he would. He had shoved his hands in his pockets and stumbled for words, which made me smile. He reminded me of a bashful school boy, preparing to ask a long time crush for a date. "God," he mumbled, glancing to the gravel beneath his polished shoes. "It's been so long since I've even tried this."

"Cleo?" I asked, startling him a bit.

"Madeline, would you be so kind as to stay awhile, show the house to Elizabeth and I? Tell us a bit of its history; maybe give me a few ideas about its renovation, about how it used to look." He swallowed. "Then it'd be my pleasure to take you to lunch. That is if ... " He hesitated.

"I'm single?"

"I don't want to cause any trouble. I mean, I did notice you weren't wearing a ring, if I may be so presumptuous."

"No trouble, Cleo. I think a tour and lunch would be an excellent idea." I slipped my arm through his. His high forehead creased with surprise and then relaxed.

The little girl was standing on the top steps waiting for us. "Guess what I am?" she cried out with a pirouette, her arms extended to each side.

"No, Elizabeth, I can't guess. What are you?" her father asked.

“I am a princess and this is my castle.” She pointed to an upper window. “Every castle has a prince. He waved to me from that window, up there.”

Her father chuckled. “I guess she gets that wild fanciful imagination from me.” His palm went on my arm and he smiled longingly to me.

“It’s all right,” I whispered, so that he had to lean a little closer to me to hear what secret I was about to tell. I squeezed his hand with tenderness. “In this house, she can be whatever she wants to be.”

As we strode up the steps my eyes lifted to a window above. There was a figure, tall and strong, his long black hair cascading over his coat, watching me and nodding. My breast expanded with unfailing love and devotion for him alone. I had said I would do whatever it took to keep the house alive, to keep him alive, and this was a promise I meant to keep, regardless of the sacrifices that might have to be made.

He had recovered. Fate was kind to both of us. Our future together, as lovers, was secure.

Once the house was restored to its former glory we would have soirees, Elizabeth and I. She would dress in her lace and cotton dresses; I would give to her the pearl necklace around my neck to wear, and our guests would coo praise on a little girl who was a princess. A princess who would grow to become a beautiful woman.

Just as I had done.

And when the years dissolved, as they inevitably would, the mantle would be passed to her. She might mourn the sudden passing of her wealthy father but the glorious memories of her step-mother’s adoration would warm her heart, bring her back to revisit the estate, so that then she could meet and fall in love with ... *him*.

She would be Mistress as I was Mistress.

As Lucinda had been Mistress.

In the autumn breeze I heard his voice inside me. *“No limits. No inhibitions. No pleasures hidden between a Mistress and her lover.”*

It was as I wanted it to be.

The End