

CHAPTER 1



Patience Small: 1862-1885

Time: Past, Present, Alternate

The old woman could fall down the cellar stairs. A little shove was all it would take to send her catapulting to her death. She would barely have time to cry out before the deed was done.

Patience could feel her heart race behind the wall of her chest. It was possible to kill the old bitch and get away with it. The only problem then would be finding another post.

No easy thing. Her thick body and wide, large knuckled hands, her fleshy face and disquieting eyes had been off putting to the other ladies for whom she had interviewed. It was, in the end, only Astrid Snipe who had taken her in out of the cold and given her shelter in exchange for great quantities of labor. Patience both needed the old woman and hated her.

* * *

The room around her shifted and changed and Patience felt herself slipping again into the corridor of some past

place and time. She could no longer control the amorphous stuff of which her consciousness was made. Time was all mixed up here, in this holding place between life and afterlife. Her ghost self shuddered.

* * *

The man was dark and dangerous, with his unshaven face, flashing eyes, and broad muscled chest. He strode across the room, closing the distance between them and catching her in his arms. The breath went out of her as he crushed her to him, trailing kisses down her throat while his hands worked to pull the pins from her hair.

Her body yearned for his touch, for his command. At last she would be fulfilled. She would be loved and she would be desired. His mouth devoured and his hands possessed and Patience knew the taste of ecstasy.

As quickly as he had captured her, he thrust her away. She reeled backward, crashing into the wardrobe in her tiny servant's bedroom.

"What are you?" He asked, horrified.

She gasped in pain and surprise. Gaping up at him, she struggled to right herself, reaching out to him with clumsy hands.

"Miserable troll." His voice was hard and filled with contempt.

Patience cringed and cowered, the hair he had unbound dripping about her face in stringy tendrils.

Calling out in a wordless cry, she lunged for him, claspng his hand in hers. He tossed it away in disgust.

"Do not touch me, abomination. Do not ever presume to touch me again." Grimacing, he threw open the door and strode from the room, his booted feet echoing on the hardwood floor.

Patience crumpled to the floor and slid without awareness into another dimension.

* * *

Patience: Age 8, 1870 (A Memory)

Hugging her skinny knees to her chest, Patience wept. She looked out through bleary eyes at the tree, sky, and stagnant pond of her beloved woods. The trees swayed. The water and sky rippled.

Squeezing her eyelids tight together, eight-year-old Patience Small wept for all that had been and all that would never be. She wept for the mother she had never known and the brother who was lost to her. Her tears were bitter on her chapped lips as she licked them away.

Breathing deeply, peacefulness surrounded her and tears dried on her tiny face. The clearing was hers alone. Hers and the animals, she corrected silently. The animals accepted her. The animals loved her.

The sky tilted and bled blue into the moss green of the pond and trees. She tried to hold on, desperate to stay in this place, and could not. She yearned for cohesion, for acceptance, for love.

At times she knew it was far too late for any of those things. At times she knew she was dead. But to remain in that knowing was a nightmare all its own.

To remain in that knowing meant she had to face the cold reality. No one wanted her in life and no one wanted her in death. To slip away from that reality, even if it was to relive, in jumbled up pieces, the tragic life that, so very long ago, had been hers, was respite of a sort.

* * *

The blue-gray mists of the room surrounded her, choking the air from her lungs. The dead place. The fragrant woods were nothing but a memory. Rage swelled like red fire and flamed within the husk of her body. Others would feel her pain. Others would know her degradation.

Wind gusted, rocked the house. Windows cracked and blew outward in shards of shattering glass.

**Thank you for reading an excerpt of
Shades of Gray, by M.J. Simon.**

**Be sure and visit her web site at
www.melindasimon.com**