

Fictional work depicting the life of a young Mary of Magdala.

Two Houses of Love

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Chapter I

As the lonely child leaned over the sand village she was building, a soft breeze lifted her heavy dark hair from her thin face. Her small hands, cracked and dry from wind and sand, seemed to hold the wisdom of the aged rather than the joy and wonder of a five-year old child.

Wondering when her mother would awaken, she glanced toward the whitewashed mud house with a roof of red tiles and yellow curtains billowing out of oval openings. Not yet, the child pleaded inwardly, she can't be awake this early. Even in her youthfulness, she tried as best she could to mentally prepare herself for the next encounter with her mother, Joanna. Would today be another day of horror, she wondered? No! She would hope for the best, she decided.

As the sun climbed higher into the bright sky, the child felt her small stomach churn with hunger. Rising from her sand village, taking care not to disturb the houses, she walked slowly down the road toward an empty house that had fascinated her ever since she could walk over to it. It stood proudly in starkness, dark windows beckoning to her. With her back to her own house, she began skipping down the dusty road without any thought of consequences, or her mother.

If anyone had cared enough to look her way, they would have seen a small, thin child dressed in a short, dirty tunic. Wild, black hair tangled down her back and two spindly legs ended with bare feet. Her most arresting feature was the startling blue of her eyes; their almond shape gave testimony to her Jewish heritage. Thin lips were set in a line of despair, a line which seldom curved upward into a smile so natural in the young. Only when she experienced a joy bestowed upon her by nature, a bird soaring, a puppy's wet tongue, a camel's roar, or the old beggar's soft voice, did her mouth curve to meet the crinkle at the corners of her eyes.

As she approached the vacant house her excitement grew, for this house, the *fairytale* house, stimulated her vivid imagination. The hand-hewn cypress door swung open on silent leather hinges and a cool interior greeted her with an almost expectant joy, as though the house

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awaited her visit. The earthen floor felt refreshing to her small feet as she walked around the large room. A fireplace covered one wall while the other three walls hosted oval windows cut from the thick mud. Visualizing the ghostly family who welcomed her here, she had mentally marked off the sleeping and eating areas. She imagined gleaming copper pots hanging from the rafters in the cooking area, while baskets of dates, flour and jugs of water lined the shelves on the walls. The mother she envisioned in her loving family was very kind, with soft hands that caressed and cherished her. Somehow, the father image escaped her each time she searched her meager memories for a model father. The only man she had ever known was the old beggar who sat blindly by the well.

One of her many duties was to carry water from the village well. Each time she walked the long dusty road, she eagerly anticipated seeing the old man with the velvet voice. A year ago her mother decided that she could assume the task of bringing water from the village well, and that was when she first met him. How vividly she remembered the meeting! He was almost invisible to the small child carrying an empty water jug. Ragged, dirty robes covered his emaciated body and the turban on his head matched his earthen face. Leaning motionless against the wall, he almost disappeared into the shadows. It wasn't until he opened his crusted eyelids and crinkled up his eyes that she noticed him. Then his soft voice called her name, "Marian."

Amazed that anyone was aware of her existence, much less her name, she turned quickly toward the sound. Her eyes met the silver gaze of the beggar and, even in her youth and inexperience, she knew instantly that the old man was blind. She later learned that his presence at the well was common knowledge, usually ignored by the people of the village. Only a few good souls brought him leftover scraps from their sparse meals, but many days he went without.

"A cup of water for an old man?" he asked in a voice so soft it almost sounded musical.

The child reached her gourd into the cool well water and stretched her small thin arm toward the blind man. A fascination overtook her as she squatted in the sand in front of him, staring into his sightless eyes.

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"You are very beautiful, child," he said softly. "Your beauty shines around you like a rainbow."

"But you can't see me! Your eyes are covered with a silver skin."

"I can see the glow around you. But I also foresee many burdens in your life. You must be strong, and fight the evils that will assail you in the paths you must walk."

The child did not know the meaning of all the words he had spoken, but she did know the word *evil*, and trembled at its insinuation into her life. A smile, toothless and black, crinkled the old man's face, making him somehow seem childlike and innocent.

"Do not fear your destiny, for the world will know your name for all the ages to come," she remembered him saying to her during their first visit.

As she returned to the present, sitting on the cool floor of the vacant house, she wondered again at the old beggar's words. How could the blind old man know anything about her? Suddenly, she tensed as her eyes were drawn down the dusty road to the whitewashed house with red tiles that she knew as home. A small shapely figure in the distance stood glaring at her sand village, then kicked each house down with a violence the child knew very well. Mother! I must hurry or she will be very angry with me. The figure of her mother grew larger as the fearful child ran toward her home. She saw a long red dress flapping in the breeze and knew it was the same dress her mother had worn the night before. A bad sign, she realized.

Children learn the language of the body before words are spoken. They comprehend the soft caress of loving hands, the cushion of breasts filled with milk, the warmth of embracing arms, and the fear of a hand held high and stiff, poised for a slap. A quick assessment told the girl that she was in for another day of hurt.

Joanna stood with feet slightly apart, hands resting on ample hips, and eyes slanted toward the road. A head that felt like hammers were carving her brain into stone images only served to inflame the rage she felt for the child. Marian ran as swiftly as she could toward certain pain and rejection as puffs of dust nipped at her heels.

Looking at Joanna, framed by a dome of blue sky, one could not help but appreciate her exotic beauty. Huge black eyes lined with

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glistening kohl were accentuated by deep blue lids and lashes curling upward, nearly touching her equally black brows. Her raven hair fell into a straight line, brushing at the blue cord encircling her tiny waist. A lush mouth of the deepest red was scowled in a pout some men find irresistible. The mixture of her heritage produced a short, upturned nose, unnatural in the Jewish people. Smooth tanned skin finished the heart-shaped picture of her face. She was tall for a woman, but carried herself with a sensuous and assertive bearing that overwhelmed many, especially the child running into the yard with eyes so large they seemed to precede her. Marian trembled in fear as she cowered before this blazing flame that represented her only tie to humanity, her mother.

"Where have you been?" The question was pushed viciously between white, even teeth.

"My breakfast is not ready, the tea is not made, the house is filthy! My head breaks from working all night while you sleep!"

A hand, ringed and manicured, grabbed a fistful of the black matted hair and pulled until the tiny feet were off the ground. Just as suddenly, Joanna released her grasp. Dropping the child abruptly, she muttered in disgust as she wiped her hand on the side of her full hip.

"You are filthy! Wash your hands before you make the tea!"

The child never uttered a sound during the whole ordeal, knowing that any sign of distress or fear turned her mother into a wild, raging spirit. She had overheard the women at the well speak of evil spirits and knew very well of what they spoke. Head bowed, shoulders hunched, she hurried into the large interior room toward the basket of camel dung she had collected for fires in the cooking hearth. A small pile in the shape of a pyramid always seemed to work fastest, she thought, as she lowered a burning candle that hung near the hearth opening. Keeping the candle lit and filled with oil was also her duty. Her mother worked hard and she did not mind doing the household work, if only she could do things without being told. If only she could remember to do them before her mother's anger was kindled. Maybe when she got older her mind would not escape to birds, or houses, or sand villages. All these thoughts ran through her mind as she hooked the pot over the flame, blowing toward the embers in an effort to make

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them flame faster. The cups were on a shelf next to the fireplace, as were the tea and honey.

Quickly, Marian placed all the items on the rough table as she glanced out the window. A glimpse of red told her that her mother was inspecting the water and oil jars. Is it time to get water today, she thought? When did I do it last? Why can't I remember these things so I don't anger her? She placed a dish with fresh dates and figs on the table along with the small honey cakes she made each afternoon. After making sure that everything was as it should be, she hurried to sit in the corner on her grass mat. Frantically hoping that she had done all that was expected, she sat silently waiting for her mother to enter.

The bright, outdoor light framed the figure as Joanna swept into the room and sat at the table. She never glanced in the direction of the silent child. Steam from the warm tea bathed her beautiful face as she sipped slowly through pouting lips. Purple figs and moist, dark dates bought from the village market filled the center plate. The woman ate slowly and deliberately as the child looked on with unwavering fear.

The village in which they lived was small and insignificant, but many caravans paused at the small oasis located just outside the village allowing the people to trade for many items which made their lives easier to bear in the dusty heat of the desert. The history of the village had many legends, the most popular being that it was founded by the Jews who followed Moses out of Egypt during their slavery. After the plagues forced the Pharaoh to release the Jews, it took many days to gather possessions such as cattle, poultry, household goods, and trade items. The Jews were tradesmen and craftsmen of high intelligence and many foresaw a future in business. Most of them believed in the one, true God and were awed by the feats of their God through Moses. However, some were weak and more worldly than their great leader. The small village in which Marian was born was reputed to have been populated by those who were frightened by the unknown and wished to cling to the closeness of Egypt, hoping for trade with its many travelers.

The small village was known for its beautiful, handcrafted jewelry and its even more beautiful women. It would seem, if the legend were true, that the beautiful and talented were the weaker of the whole,

probably due to their need to be praised rather than to praise. Therefore, the ancestors and settlers of this small village were beautiful, intelligent and talented, but lacked the faith and humanity needed to follow God and Moses into an unknown land. Prosperity was obvious as one walked to the main square of the market where many sellers of goods surrounded the well, which was the lifeblood of the community.

Near the end of the market area stood an old but beautiful bricked building. Unlike the whitewashed houses, this structure was left in the natural pink clay, which was dug from the pit near the oasis. Its inhabitants had planted flowers in rectangular containers, which rested in the windows of the imposing edifice. Ten rooms were constructed within the building, and this in itself was an oddity in a village of one-room houses. The sprawling structure was shaped so that bedrooms branched off a main hub that was used as a room for dining. Along one wall was a huge hearth, kept glowing with embers and emitting the aroma of delicious foodstuffs. Tables were set in random locations within the room. One of the walls held a long, gleaming board, which stood in front of numerous red clay jugs filled with dark, fragrant wines. The board was raised waist high by two intricately carved panels that depicted, in dark and light woods, the curved and seductive bodies of beautiful women. Yellow baskets heaped high with figs, dates, and rare citrus fruits, lined one wall. The interior was illuminated by a multitude of candles nestled in lemon and orange glowing orbs.

This was the working place of Joanna. She was there from late afternoon until she was no longer needed. Many days, when the caravans came through, she did not go home for three or four days. She considered these times to be wonderful for she earned enough money to keep herself in food and luxury for months. Actually, in comparison to the other villagers, she was wealthy. Her beauty was well known in the village, as well as by the caravan drivers. The drivers, who catered to every whim of their rich clients, recommended her often. These wealthy businessmen, bringing silks and jewels to the Egyptian courts, spread wealth among the villagers like a silken net thrown over their souls, which lured them to greater greed.

Joanna glanced at the child sitting rigidly in the darkened corner and a red heat encompassed her body with hatred so intense that she gasped

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for breath. Reflecting again on her past she wondered why he had left? Why had he deserted her? Had she not given him everything – her body, her mind, her soul – everything she had to offer? Still he had gone, leaving her alone and with child to produce that *thing* sitting in the corner like a frightened animal. The thought that he was unaware she had conceived a child had long been dismissed from her unsettled mind. In the depths of her memory she could still envision his face as though he were sitting across the table, a face so strong and square, so tanned from the ancient sun, that it gave lie to the gentleness held within. Eyes as blue as the bright Egyptian sky glowed like colored candles in a darkened room. Eyes such as his were an oddity in this part of the world and created comment wherever he went. Hair so black it shone blue in the light framed his face with soft, silken waves. His soft lips had covered hers many times, opening their petals as they enclosed her. Try as she might, she could not stop the images of his face. Her mind scanned downward to his muscled arms and flat pelvis. She could almost feel his large thighs rippling beneath her fingers. Shaking her head forcefully to repel his image, she brought forth a seething rage to replace the flashing memories. Perspiration was rolling down her arms and thighs and a light mist covered her upper lip. She rose from the table abruptly, scattering plates to the floor. The child tensed, then waited for her mother to disappear behind the silk curtains, which separated her bed from the rest of the room. Hurriedly, she ran to gather the dishes and clean the table, while stuffing the few remaining cakes and figs into a hungry mouth that was dry with fear.

The curtains gleamed of red and gold as Joanna lay on the soft wool mattress, forgetting the child momentarily. One of her business clients found her so alluring that he could deny her nothing. Allowing her to choose from five loaded camels heading for the courts gave her extreme pleasure, as well as exquisite luxuries. Huge, linen floor pillows lined the floor around her bed. Various colored glass containers filled with scented oils sparkled in the sunlight. She would rest now before preparing herself to return to the pink building. Hatred of all men made her work as a prostitute extremely satisfying. Whenever one of her clients lay exhausted across her body, she felt tremendous power

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over him. Never was she actually involved in the act, and none of them knew of the icy calm she felt as she smiled invitingly.

An almond fragrance wafted throughout the house as the small child reached up to place the freshly baked cakes on the window ledge. Silently she walked over to the water jug while her mother was resting before she left for the work she hated. The jug was almost empty, and she knew her mother would be furious if she had no water with which to bathe before returning to work. Quickly, she poured the water remaining in the jug into a smaller container, which could be used for dish washing later. A braided leather strap was hooked through the handles of the jug, then passed under her small, thin arms and tied across her chest. Thusly, she carried the jug each time it was necessary to replenish their supply of water.

The sun was high and the day was hot as she walked slowly toward the village. An old yellow cur dog followed by her side, as he usually did on her trips to the well. He belonged to no one in particular and foraged from house to house for food. The many kicks and beatings he had received from the child's mother made it necessary for him to join her at a distance from her home. He was well aware that during their trek a honey cake would appear in the small hand, and his moist pink tongue rolled from side to side as they made their way toward the cool well. Every now and again he brushed close to the girl's cracked legs, knowing a pat on the head and a small smile would surely be his reward.

Even in the heat of midday with the jug strapped clumsily to her emaciated chest, the child's brilliant blue eyes scanned the horizon, searching eagerly for soaring birds, bright stones, comic camels, anything that would distract her dusty journey toward the village. Finally, in the distance, she saw the first small huts of the poorer members of her community. These dwellings were inhabited by workers who gathered camel dung, swept booths, loaded goods, cleaned houses and served the wealthy. The sick or invalid depended upon the goodness of their poor neighbors for food, or they begged in the streets.

Marian's eyes were drawn to a hill in the distance, stark and forbidding. A chill ran up the child's sweating arms and she visibly

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shivered. She knew the hill contained the cave of the lepers, people who were deformed and stinking of disease. Many times her mother had threatened to give her to the lepers if she did not instantly obey her commands.

Gradually the larger, more influential homes came into view as Marian neared the well, which was surrounded by the marketplace. There was the jeweler's shop with its brass and gold household items, intricately carved and gleaming in the sunlight. Sweet almond smells came from the baker's shop, which displayed various breads and honey cakes. The cheese shop, wine shop, clothes shop, and various eating establishments also circled the well. Glancing toward the end of the dusty street she saw the pink building with its ringlet of flower boxes, and wondered again what was sold there. The odors and sights of the small market stimulated a slight smile from the lonely child as she approached the brick water well. Then, there he was, tan and dusty, almost invisible to the passersby. The dog eagerly ran to the old man, licking a clean path up his dirty face, and a smile lit the beggar's silvered eyes as he turned toward the child.

"Hello, child. Is it water time so soon? The sun is not yet on its way toward evening."

The soft, velvet voice caressed her small being, otherwise completely empty of love and affection. She actually put her small dirty hand over her mouth to cover the wide, white smile that brought light into her dark face.

"What have you done today? Played? Sang? Skipped around? Tossed a stick to our friend?"

A giggle slipped from Marian's lips and she quickly glanced around, hoping no one had heard. Laughter was unknown in her life, and she was embarrassed by the uncontrolled sound she had made.

Hesitantly, softly, she replied, "I cleaned the house, made the honey cakes, and now I'm getting the water."

Momentarily, the old beggar's sightless eyes saddened, but he managed to smile, softening his age.

"Child, do you know there is a place filled with love waiting for you? It is a city of gleaming roads and palaces of gold. Everyone living

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there loves and cares for one another. There is no sickness or blindness or hunger or thirst."

An internal warmth filled her small body as she imagined the place the beggar described. Many times he had painted these pictures in her imagination and, unbeknown to him, a ray of hope in her painful life. The friendship between the two had grown from a need that surpassed age and wisdom. It was the need one had to be human, looked upon and valued by another. To be meaningless, insignificant, of no value, is to be dead. The two, along with the yellow cur dog, made up a triad of living beings who cared for one another.

"I must go, old one, before my mother awakens to find no bath water," she whispered.

Hurriedly, she strapped the filled jug onto her aching spine and turned to leave.

"Don't forget the golden road as you skip back home, little one," he called out in a voice that penetrated her heart and soothed her anguished soul.

The trip back home was long, hot, and much harder on the child as she trudged onward, bent over with her sloshing burden. Tongue dragging, the dog kept pace with her small footsteps, frequently looking up to see if the child was noticing him, hoping for a soft pat or word of encouragement in the stifling heat. Bent and perspiring, the child, with thoughts of golden roads beneath her feet, smiled at the dog while she loosened her hold on the jug to quickly pat his head. They made their way back toward her house, and a mother rising from sleep enclosed in a cocoon of red and gold silk.

Where is that useless child, Joanna demanded inwardly? She's always late with the bath, skulking in corners, recoiling at my touch. Me, who feeds her and supports her! Why must she anger me? A slight shuffle attracted her attention as she turned to see the child dragging the heavy jug into the kitchen.

"What took so long? You have kept me waiting, sweating in this heat!"

Dragging out the copper tub her mother used for bathing, the child tried to avoid the blazing eyes striking her with fury. Joanna's hatred flared at any provocation, real or imagined, where the child was

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concerned. This little piece of humanity was a thorn that continuously tore at her, a constant reminder of humiliation, rejection, lost love, all the emotions that fueled cruelty, revenge, and hatred. The child filled the tub slowly and cautiously, for she knew that even one drop spilled on the floor would bring instant retaliation. A few drops of the sweet oil added to the water gave the child brief pleasure as she inhaled the fragrance. Correctly placing the glass stopper back into its ornate container was difficult for Marian's small fingers, and a hot flash of terror gripped her insides as it slipped from her grasp. Joanna's hand grabbed the flask as the other slammed into the tiny face. Blood spurted from the nose, which had so recently enjoyed the forbidden fragrance, and cracked hands covered a small face bathed in fear. Marian lowered her eyes in complete submission, looking down at the carpet on which she was kneeling, knowing she must remain still and quiet even though the pain was excruciating. A swift kick knocked the breath from her lungs as she awaited the familiar order.

"Get out of here you clumsy dirty animal!" Joanna screamed, out of control, shaking with rage, madness flaring out of unblinking eyes.

Crawling slowly back onto her mat in the corner, the child remained still, making no sound. She breathed softly through torn nostrils until she heard the splash of her mother's soft sponge as it trickled over white mounds praised by men of wealth.

The chair-bearers arrived at their appointed time. They had black skin, wore loincloths of crimson, and bangles and bracelets in gold armbands. They were a magnificent contrast to the desert background. As Joanna mounted a small step into the gilded chair, the child could not resist a glance out the oval window. A scene of beauty and opulence greeted her, as it had so many times before, never failing to amaze and fascinate her. She glared at her mother, beautiful, glittering in royal blue silk, bejeweled in rings, bracelets and necklaces, which embraced her scented body. The eyes, which recently had cut through her, were now kohlringed, framed with blue lids and black lashes. They glared out at the world with a haunted expression that marked the hatred simmering just beneath the tanned voluptuous body. Her dark, red mouth held a sarcastic smile that beckoned the outside world to sample its pomegranate juices. She was a glory to behold; beautiful,

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desirable, and untouchable. Awe filled the dirty face framed by the oval window, and the child knew that she had been bad, again, to be punished by this beautiful creature.

Why do I always do the wrong thing, she wondered? Why can I never please her? Have the caravans arrived? She knew that her mother might stay away many days if the caravans had stopped at the oasis.

Tentatively, she wiped the dried blood from her face with an old rag dipped in the bath water left by her mother and the fragrance seemed to sooth her pain. Suddenly she decided to bathe in the water left for her to empty. Never had she even imagined doing such a thing because her mother would smell the perfume on her and fly into a fit of fury. But if the caravans were here, as she suspected, surely the odor would disappear in the days to pass before her mother returned. Slowly, painfully, she slipped out of the rags that covered her thin, bruised body and slid down into cool, scented water that caressed her body, which had been denied cleanliness for many years.

Chapter II

Joanna, in all her splendor, felt empty, hollow, and drained of emotion. Why did she hate the child so? Even in her unreasoning madness, a small place in her being realized that she was uncontrolled and cruel. But she had good reason for these feelings, didn't she?

As the bearers carried Joanna toward the pink house, the rhythmic sway of the chair relaxed her, and she began to daydream of days gone by, of youth and young love. Lost in her thoughts she remembered greenery surrounding her as her two small feet dangled in the cool, soothing water, dappled in the light and shade of a pool encircled by palms. The oasis was her favorite hideaway, her place of dreams. Many days she escaped the wrath of her mother to lay on the damp sand, budding breasts pressed to its coolness, black shining hair spread out like a halo of darkness. In this age of awakening womanhood, Joanna was a beauty, and admired in the small community. Even though they were poor in contrast to their neighbors, her mother supported them well enough. Her father, who had left them one day to join a caravan on its way to faraway places, had planted the first seed of distrust in the beautiful child, but this had not dampened her youthful joy, her youthful dreams. The many men who made their way to the small cottage she called home made her realize that her beautiful mother must have something they desired. She went to the oasis frequently, and for long periods of time, because of the callers her mother entertained, which necessitated her retreat from the small house. She did not dwell on the reasons she must leave, only the feeling of freedom and lightness as she skipped toward the green lushness, which was her canvas of dreams.

Now engrossed deeply in her memories, Joanna remembered the bright blueness of a spring sky, the green of newly budding leaves, the feel of damp sand, the coolness of clear water. She could recall every detail of the day *he* arrived at her oasis.

How tall he looked as he dismounted his Arabian stallion! She had never seen a horse of such beauty, black and shining with a coat like the liquid that bubbled up from the desert. The stallion's nostrils flared

in anticipation at the scent of water, mane and tail flying as he pranced and stamped the sand with impatience. He was truly a magnificent animal. The square, tanned hand that held the red and gold bridle showed no tension at this display, for it was in complete control. The saddle, ornate with gold scrolling on its red leather, seemed like a jewel on the black, silken fur. Her eyes followed the hand holding the bridle to a linen clad arm, a chest huge in a white linen tunic which opened to expose tanned skin beneath, and a neck muscular yet graceful, all of which led to the most exciting and handsome face she had ever seen. Its squared boundaries were roofed with waving, black hair and black brows hovered above thick curling lashes, which lay on tanned cheeks as he looked down at the dappled water. She was sitting in her favorite spot, enclosed by palm trees and bushes, where she could clearly view each visitor to the oasis. As he bent to cup water into the hand she had so minutely observed, her eyes traveled downward to his thick calves and thighs, which were exposed as he knelt. So close was she that she could hear the slight sucking noise the horse made as he drank. The man turned toward a palm tree, slightly distant from the water, and she saw him raise his linen tunic, fumble briefly with his loin, then relieve himself as he aimed at the bottom of the tree. The horse neighed softly, calling him back, as he looked up into the greenness of the trees. The shock of his eyes froze her, as she had never seen eyes the color of sky, and was both fascinated and fearful of the bearer of this strange phenomenon. Was he an evil one? He did not seem so, but she shivered in the cool shade. The horse raised its head suddenly, stared directly into her hideaway and snorted loudly, kicking up sand with a front hoof. The man tensed, realizing he was being observed, almost as if the horse had told him so, and from which direction. Turning as if to leave, he mounted the nervous horse and rode slowly around the boundaries of the oasis. After a while she relaxed, for he had gone about his business, and plunged a dainty foot into the cool water. She concentrated on the game of swishing the water back and forth, making small pools and waves. Suddenly, a strong hand covered her mouth and pulled her back roughly onto the wet sand.

“So, you are the one hiding in the bushes so quietly! I will not hurt you. Have no fear.”

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Twisting around, she found herself staring into the strange blue eyes, but somehow had no fear of them. He looked at her with amusement, as a smile exposed straight, white teeth surrounded by the softness of deep red lips. A gentleness emanated from him, the same gentleness that calmed the fiery stallion, yet never lessened his command. She was surprised at his youth. From a distance his bearing made him seem older in years than he actually was, in his early twenties, she guessed, as his eyes searched hers. Finding her unafraid, he relaxed somewhat and sat down beside her.

“You are very beautiful,” he whispered.

His square, tanned hand gently caressed her cheek as a long, thin finger outlined the fullness of her lips. A shiver ran through her lithe, young body. She saw the softness of his lips come closer to hers, opening slightly. A feeling shot through her body of such intensity that she gasped beneath the soft, pliable moistness. Never had she been kissed, not even by her mother. Now she was being kissed by an exotic stranger. With eyes wide, she looked into the blueness that was his, and saw something she could not define. Was it surprise? It felt like the heat of a flame as his eyes seared hers. His hand traveled toward the hard, budding breasts that strained against her thin garment. Softly, gently, shyly, she felt a cool breeze on her bare skin. Surprised, she saw the nipples of each breast reach outward toward his fingers – of their own will, she thought. As his fingers rolled each tip slowly around and around, she felt a strange wet fullness. His soft exploring mouth trailed down her tense neck, soft shoulder, then down toward the straining nipples. Panic raced through her nerve endings as she felt him rise, kiss her slowly, then turn to leave. The horse stood silently watching with knowing eyes, awaiting his master’s commands. The sound of straining leather told her he had mounted the horse as she looked up toward his tan leg.

“Your name?” he commanded.

“Joanna,” she whispered, eyes downcast, embarrassed.

Before she could bring herself to look up, he was gone, silently, almost dreamlike. Had he really been there? Was she making up a prince to fit into her daydreams, dreams mirrored in clear, shaded water held in the boughs of leafy green spring, brought on by the desires of

budding youth? Surely this was the case, she thought. But looking down she saw her open robe, the rosy red of hardened nipples, and she knew the truth. A heat just beneath her skin caused perspiration to ripple down her breasts, and she felt an awakening, an agitation, a joy, and the emotions of young love. Slowly, she undressed and stepped into the coolness of oasis water, feeling each drop caress the throbbing of her newborn body. Will I ever see him again, she wondered?

Her thoughts were interrupted as the undulation of the gilded chair stopped at the entrance to the pink house, and her memories were instantly replaced by the intrusion of reality, the cruelty of life. Had she again been in that soft, green cocoon of first excitement? A harsh laugh escaped the lushness that gave lie to lips bruised by men who bought passion. A quick assessment told her that the caravans had arrived. Much gold will be earned this week, she smirked.

Tables gleamed in the darkened entrance, each holding a pool of liquid orange light wavering beneath a candle, while exotic expensive glasses reflected their blue and gold stems. A rustling sounded as girls moved slowly and seductively, serving clients who smiled and fondled them appreciatively. These men represented the wealth of Egypt. They were men of intrigue, of knowledge, of corruption, men who denied themselves nothing. Alike in their Egyptian heritage, to Joanna they were one and the same, pigs rooting and lusting for power, fame, luxury, and self-gratification, loyal to none but themselves.

Like a pail that has overturned, draining its life's substance into the thirsty sand, so felt Joanna as she entered the room. She was drained of emotion, hardened by life, oblivious to her surroundings, beautiful, empty, a shell no one could fill. Fortunately, none of this was obvious to the jeweled men whose eyes were feasting on some of the most beautiful women they had encountered in their many travels.

Stiff backed and regal, yet promising more, Joanna walked through the darkened room to a room reserved for her only, the star of the pink house. Dark red silk drapes covered every wall. Low inlaid tables were laden with dates, figs, sweet cakes, and fruits. Odors of incense gently rising from intricately carved golden burners drifted down upon huge pillows of blue, red and gold linen as they crouched on wool and silk carpets. It all escaped her notice. The many nights spent in this

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beautiful cage had lost appeal to the young woman seated among the glitter. Seven years had hobbled by on legs encrusted with tears, despair, sadness, desolation, then finally hatred and hardness. Her royal blue silk skirt was spread out like a web, covering many of the mushrooming pillows. As she reclined against their softness, she thrust out her large white breasts, which appeared even whiter beneath the gauzed blueness of the material with tiny golden straps holding the flimsy covering. A wide expanse between her covered breasts and the golden girdle holding the flared skirt displayed a soft, smooth skin, dimpled with a jeweled navel. Her legs, slightly separated beneath the skirt, were sleek and tan with promise. Years of practice had taught her to show enough to titillate, but not enough to bore. Thus, she held her bronzed legs only slightly closed to the viewer, wondering who would pay Lita, the house owner and whore owner, the most gold for the first viewing.

Young, scantily dressed girls brought each client into the bathing room before he met with his paid companion. These bathing rooms were a luxury easily afforded by the patrons. Steam rose from sunken, tiled pools, wafting the air with sweet perfume.

A giggling girl, eleven in age, undressed a large man. His clothes, though expensive and well made, were dusty from the long journey toward the courts of Egypt. The girl's small hands felt like butterflies' wings as they quickly stripped him. These ministrations, as they were intended, caused heat to rise in his groin. Quickly, he lowered himself into the steaming pool, letting its soothing waters wash sand, dust and tension from his tired body. The child handed him a glass filled with a fruity red wine, which gleamed against the clear water. Slowly, sipping this nectar, the man envisioned the beautiful lady of the night he had selected. When the caravan driver described the pink establishment as a restful diversion from travel, he never imagined he would lower himself to buying passion. Never had he done so, for many women sought his favors, other than his wife.

Boredom was not a problem in his marriage. Like many married couples of the wealthy class, they had no real love between them. Their marriage was simply a joining of two families who wished their wealth to continue and multiply. He must admit that his wife was beautiful in

Marlene Thevenote

the bargain and, to his knowledge, had not taken another man to her bed. If all truth were told, he had taken only one, and this episode was only vaguely remembered in a fog of wine administered by the woman. He still wondered at her motives, for she was the wife of a very powerful military man who had the emperor's ear at court. These thoughts raced through a mind that was finally relaxing, unwinding, and refreshing itself from a long trek, which took him to inspect his holdings in the outlying provinces.

As he rose from the steaming waters, the child wrapped him in a long towel and escorted him to a low table on which he was to lie while she dried him slowly, softly, and seductively. Again, he thought of the beautiful woman he had chosen and wondered at her bearing. There was something about her that intrigued him, other than the fullness of her body. An untouchable aura, an absence, something intangible, fascinated him and he looked forward to their meeting. The small soft hands had done their work well, for he felt aroused and heated as he rose from the table and was led to the red silk room.

A scene of planned excitement met him at the entrance as he stared at the thrusting breasts, the jeweled navel, and the slightly parted legs that hid the ultimate pleasure. The smoldering, flashing eyes, slightly flared nostrils, and parted lips moistened by a soft, pink tongue interested him immensely. This woman, he realized, was only in her early twenties, and he wondered briefly what brought her to this place of purchased pleasure. Her eyes, which seemed to flame, he realized, glittered with reflected light, not passion, but vacancy. Of the many men who had mounted her, he was the only one who looked beyond her body to see the absence of soul. As he contemplated these astute insights, for which he was renowned, he reached toward a clasp at the center of her top garment. Instantly, his attention was completely on the large, soft breasts facing him. Gently, she raised one with a small bejeweled hand, an offering to him, but he held himself in check, waiting to see her next move. This, his first time with paid love, was proving to be interesting in itself. Pulling his face forward, she pressed her soft breasts together, urging him to put both tips into his mouth. His control faltered and he wondered how much he could stand when she loosened the golden girdle, which held the diaphragmous skirt around

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her hips. The dark mound she revealed was in sharp contrast to the two lighter ones he had just enjoyed. If, in his desire to learn more about this young beauty, he could have looked into her eyes at this point, he would have read hatred so intense that his ardor would have cooled.

When he was between her legs moaning out his strength, she gloated. She crystallized her anger and hatred into insane fury. Her first customer of the night always affected her in the same manner. Afterwards, all these emotions left her and she became a vessel, which was filled and refilled with the seed of evil.

He felt remorse at his lack of control, and some remorse for the mankind that had led this young beauty into a world of loveless self-gratification. He handed her a necklace of intricately carved birds and animal gods with ruby eyes and shining glass and turquoise wings. The wide collar necklace was an example of old Egyptian jewelry worn at the time the pyramids were built. Her eyes widened with pleasure.

“Well,” he said, “I finally captured your attention. You seem to enjoy fine things. If ever you are in Rome, find me. I will give you many more. Just show this necklace to the court scribe and he will contact me.”

No one had ever hinted at making her his own property before, and she wondered at this huge man who was so unlike the others she had encountered. He was gone as quietly as he had arrived. Looking up she saw her next client, short, fat, hooked nose, and like all the others. He did not wait for her to seduce him, as had the first of the evening. Rudely, he grabbed her breast while he pulled down her girdle. Like a candle blown out by a cold wind, she retreated into her darkened shell, not to reappear until the chair-bearers returned many days hence.

Fictional work depicting the life of a young Mary of Magdala.

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