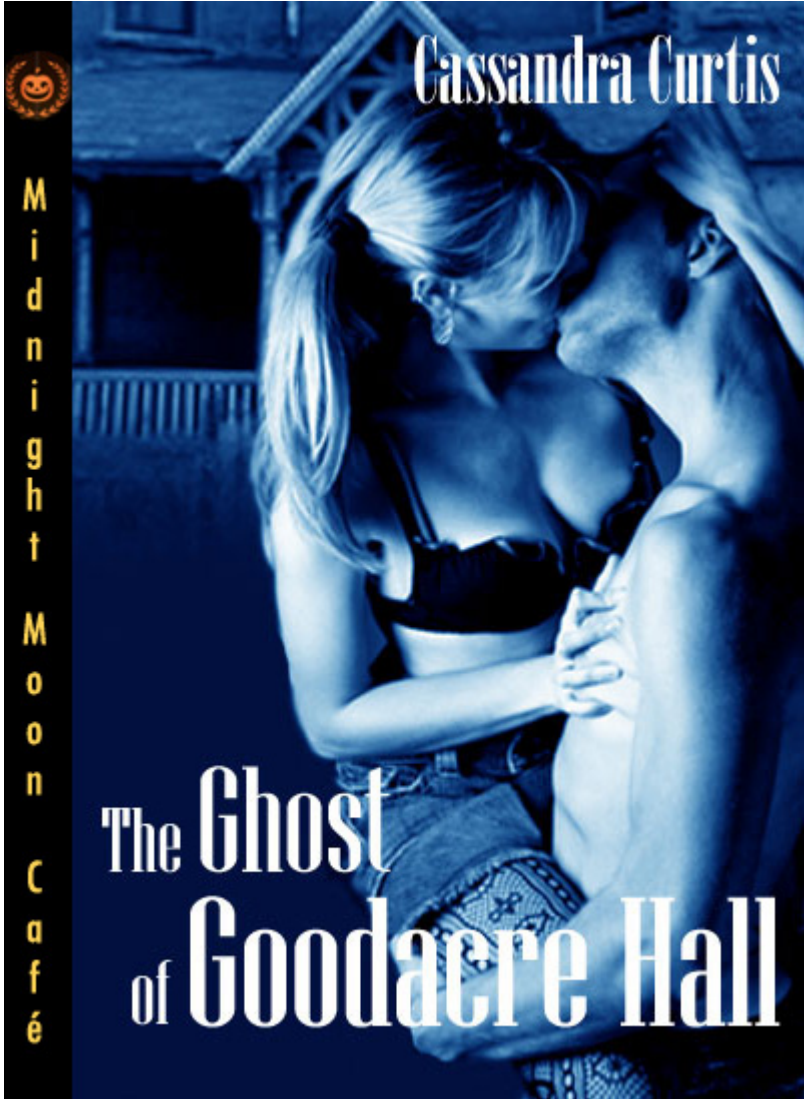




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Cassandra Curtis

The Ghost
of Goodacre Hall



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The Ghost of Goodacre Hall

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The Ghost of Goodacre Hall
By Cassandra Curtis

Chapter One

A welcome stir of cool air rustled the autumn leaves. Matthew swept the last of the debris and dirt from the creaking floorboards of the front porch and leaned on the broomstick. He wiped the sweat from his brow and surveyed the repaired white picket fence. A huge improvement from yesterday's broken and peeling wood, he noted with satisfaction.

Burnt orange foliage from the large maple cast a dappled shadow on the steps. Quiet peace settled over him as he surveyed the property.

His decision to buy the old Goodacre house was a wise one. A little fixing up and a fresh coat of paint returned the old Victorian home to its heyday. He owed the *grand lady* that much for saving his life.

Unbidden childhood memories rushed to the surface of his mind, despite the shield he tried to erect around the thoughts.

When the shrill, drunken screams and violent growls of his parents had become more than his ten year old ears could withstand, he'd run down the street and hide under the old porch's crawlspace with the spiders and ants—their bite was less painful than the leather strap his father wielded.

Matthew's white knuckled grip on the broom tightened then loosened. Tiny bumps raced along the skin of his arm, alerting him to her presence. He couldn't see her, but he knew she was there, all the same.

"What do you think of the old gal, Mrs. G?" A dance of mist skirted his peripheral vision. He stood very still as delicate fingers of cold air caressed his stubbled cheek and jaw. The eerie feeling faded, replaced by the genuine warmth of affection.

"I'll take that to mean you're pleased with the renovations?" He allowed himself a miniscule smile before opening the front door and stepping into the foyer. Matthew surveyed the rich antiques adorning the parlor. He'd spent a fortune tracking down and purchasing all the original furniture. The golden-hued oak shined with loving care, reflecting the beauty and craftsmanship inherent in each piece.

He placed the broom back in the hallway closet and followed the misty presence into the kitchen. Matthew ran a callused hand along the steel finish of the new refrigerator and stove. Cooking was his passion, his art.

When the real estate agent had first told him of the house's availability, he'd acknowledged the irony of the universe and moved to grab it off the market. Now that the renovations were almost complete, only one hurdle remained—the ghost of Mrs. Goodacre.

He politely sidestepped a distinct cold spot and stood at the cook's island wondering exactly how to broach the topic foremost in his mind. If his dream were to become reality, he and Mrs. Goodacre would have to come to an agreement.

::You should be proud of what you've done here, Matthew. ::

The clipped accent was just below a whisper, yet inside his head, the voice reverberated. As a boy, he'd thought he must be crazy...hearing her voice, seeing things that couldn't possibly be.

::The old place has never looked better. Thank you.::

"You're welcome."

The only saving grace was she couldn't read his mind—at least she'd never given any indication such was possible.... He cast a wary glance about the room. Tingling traced his arm as she reached out to him, just as she had when they'd first met. She'd been dead some 80 years, the infamous ghost of Goodacre Hall.

Neighborhood children would come over to play on the sidewalk, daring each other to walk up to the door and knock, or take a look inside the old Victorian. The kids thought of these escapades as a rite of passage and he'd been no different.

::Do you recall the first time we met?::

Apparently he wasn't the only one reflecting on the past these last handful of days. "I was hiding under the front porch."

::Immediately I sensed something different that night. So I listened and sent my energies to the source.::

She saw his eyes darken and knew every detail of that night returned ten-fold. A whimpering ball of pain lay under the creaking floorboards of the front porch. From habit, she had knelt and reached out a ghostly hand toward the quivering, huddled mass. A young boy, dirty, disheveled, and bleeding rolled onto his side. He frowned and blinked back the fat tears that welled above his bruised cheekbones and uneven nose. An old jagged scar marred his chin—a scar the shape of a belt buckle.

She tried to tell him not to be afraid...that she would never hurt him, but it had been so long since she'd had anyone to 'talk' to, she'd forgotten how. And while she thought these things, an impotent rage seethed throughout what was left of her being. Something truly evil had done harm to the child curled beneath her house. Something evil that called itself human.

The boy would not come out from under the porch. He had shook his head like a pup with fleas and darted fearful looks toward the street. She'd known he could not see beyond the fenced front yard and the lit sidewalk. She also known he had not heard her the first time, so she tried again, telling him her name and not to be afraid.

His eyes had widened as he'd turned toward her gray mist-like shape. He'd then pushed out against the solid ground with his legs and had scooted backward fast, his bony rear slamming into a support beam.

She'd reached out a hand once more, and sensing his fear of her, tried to speak, this time as if to a wild and frightened animal.

::Please do not be alarmed. I mean you no harm, boy. This is my house and you are welcome here.::

Matthew dared not breathe. He'd been frozen in place, eyes round, and mouth dry. Tiny blue-white lights danced about the vaporous hand reaching toward him.

::My name is Miriam Goodacre. And, yes...I am a ghost.::

"There's no such things as ghosts! Ghosts are like magic tricks, they're not real!"

::Really? Then why did you back away from me?::

He didn't respond for a minute, since he was still thinking that last bit over.

She decided to give the boy something else to chew in his brain.

::I see I'm making you nervous, so I'll go. But should you ever wish to hide again, please feel free to come into the house. I will leave a key for you under the steps.::

Matt also remembered that night. The strange mist disappeared just as the voice inside his head stopped talking. He slowly edged toward the opening of the crawlspace, and then wiggled through it to stand beside the railing. All the kids said the place was haunted, that was part of the fun of coming here. But before he'd met the ghost, he'd always thought it was just a big old, empty house—nothing more.

Matthew had slowly crept to the front of the house and knelt by the stairs. A glint of gold metal caught his eye. He had reached under the first step and grabbed the key, running the metal teeth across his fingers.

As he had walked home that night, so long ago, he'd cast backward glances at Goodacre Hall, thinking maybe he was stupid and half-crazy, like his old man said. Then again, maybe the creepy place was haunted, after all. His younger self had gotten an idea, one that eventually saved his life. If the lady ghost liked him, then the old house made a great place to hide. No one would think to look for him there. And all these years, he'd kept the key, his personal talisman.

* * *

The musical tones of his cell phone interrupted Matthew's wandering thoughts and pulled him back to the present. "Hello. Yeah, the old rolltop arrived an hour ago." His eyes followed the faint pattern of flowing light as it disappeared into the pantry. "What was that? No, no, that's okay."

::Why, you have enough food in here to feed an army, Matthew! Goodness, all these giant cans of tomato sauce and vegetable stock can't be just for you. Surely they won't keep that long once opened?::

"No! Oh, not you...hey, can I get back with you later? Thanks, bye." He wasn't ready for this. *Damn.* He'd planned to ease into it slowly. Get her in a mellow mood before he told her his plan. The pantry door swung open and gently closed. It would have been easier if she *could* read his mind. For so long, he'd tried to convince himself the *voice* was a figment of his imagination, caused by his troubled youth.

After he left Falls Church, the *voice* had become a silent thing of the past. He'd shoved the first fifteen years of his life into a small compartment, and bolted the door for all time, or so he'd thought. He'd grown into a man. Inside though, where truth lies dormant, yet ever watchful, he'd known.

The past had a way of returning to life. Forced to acknowledge the facts, no matter how bizarre, he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt, Mrs. Goodacre was no figment of an active imagination. He watched as fog, shaped like a woman's head, passed through the large storage freezer, and popped up quick as a jack-in-the-box.

"Maybe its time we had a talk."

::Are you planning an Ice Cream Social, Matthew? I see you have an exorbitant amount of cardboard containers marked ice cream.::

"No one has ice cream socials anymore, Mrs. G."

::Why ever not?::

"Society is different today. Most people are too busy to socialize, even if they wanted to. And if they do, they go on their computers and use the internet."

::Oh. What year did you say this is?::

"2008." Matthew tried to contain his frustration. He had to get her cooperation. All his goals, his hopes and dreams along with his investment could be down the toilet if she didn't agree to his plan. "Mrs. G, I really need to tell you something important," he said in a rush before she could interject. He rubbed the scar on his chin.

"When I ran away, I never planned to return. I had to escape," he mumbled under his breath, eyes downcast.

::I know, Matthew. ::

When he looked up again, the ghostly essence was closer. "Maybe it was just an odd coincidence. Hell, maybe it was fate, but when the real estate agent called and said he'd found 'the' house I'd been searching for, I simply knew. I asked where it was and when he said Falls Church, I laughed." He gave her the lopsided sad smile that broke her heart. "This was always your home, Mrs. G."

::Our home, Matthew. Ever since I met you, it became our home.::

"If you still feel that way, then hopefully you won't be upset. You see, this past year I've been looking for property to develop. My plan is to open a Victorian bed and breakfast—here." He waited for an energy fluctuation, anything, to clue him into how well she was taking his news.

::Of course, I'm not upset! It's a splendid idea.::

"Are you sure? I thought ghosts hated it when people remodeled their homes and turned them into businesses."

::Well, I don't. You will be staying, though, won't you?::

"My personal furniture should arrive tomorrow. So no more sleeping bag. I'll be permanently moving into the master suite."

::You realize, 'they' still live here in Falls Church...::

"So I've been told. But I think its time I faced a few of my old 'ghosts' and laid them to rest. Don't you?" A slow smile curved his lips.

::About time, dear boy! And I have a splendid idea!::

Matthew watched as the mist gathered and appeared to solidify her form. The temperature in the room dropped. Whatever her idea was, she was obviously excited by it!

::We will have a grand opening for the bed and breakfast, an open house. ::

"I already planned something along those lines." Matthew told her.

::I hope you plan to send out invitations. ::

"Two sets. One for society's finest and one sneak preview set for some special guests." Matthew's eyes gleamed. "Dear old mom and dad."

::Very good. I think I shall enjoy meeting your parents—especially your father...yes, I think I will enjoy that very much.::

Miriam Goodacre, resident ghost of Goodacre Hall, produced a thin, yet wicked chuckle.

Chapter Two

Miriam watched in fascination the flurry of activity in her new kitchen. Soon, the prominent elite of Falls Church would descend on her home, eating free food while they toured the formerly vacant eyesore. Her late cousin's young wife, Amanda, had let the house go to ruin. Spoiled, vain, and selfish, she'd kept the money meant for repairs and remarried a man young enough to be her son. She'd heard they'd moved further north. *Good riddance to bad rubbish!*

At least, she'd had the good sense to sell the house to Matthew. Of course, that left poor Cadence, her great-great niece without any inheritance from her last remaining relative. Hmm. Maybe she should do something about that. Matthew and Cadence would make a fine match, if only she could get them together! If Miriam had physical lips she would have grinned.

She spied the stack of envelopes on the roll-top desk with the invitations. It would require every ounce of energy conversion she channeled, but it would be worth it.

Matthew sat in the parlor, talking on the phone. The last of the deliverymen and crew had left. Now, she thought.

She willed both time and space, dimension, and focus, to lift up the pen. The scrawling script was nothing like the cursive penmanship on which she'd so prided herself back when she was alive, but a beggar couldn't complain. The once simple feat of writing a note or addressing an envelope took enormous conversion of energy. She pulled from every nearby heat source, and pushed her will, making the pen scratch the surface of paper. There. Done. Exhausted, she faded into the nothingness of the void, a thin string, a weak pulse of faint mist, then gone.

When she returned several hours later, she noticed all the envelopes were stuffed, addressed, and stamped, ready for the next day's mail. Wondering where Matthew might be, she thought his name, and sensed him in the kitchen. He sat yawning over a cold bowl of soup at the table, almost asleep. A lock of unruly dark brown hair brushed his forehead and his eyelids closed. He needed a good woman to care for him and deserved to fall in love, she thought. She knew in her 'heart' she'd done the right thing, sending an invitation to Cadence.

::Matthew?::

The spoon plopped into the soup with a clatter. He jerked awake and sat up. "Mrs. G.! You startled me."

::You should go on to bed, dear. Tomorrow is another day.::

"You would have made a great mother, Mrs. G."

::Howard was impotent. We tried everything, but of course this was before your time. I've heard your generation has all sorts of medicines for that now...if that commercial I heard on your T.V. box was correct. Up to 36 hours!::

Matthew put his fingers in his ears. "I don't want to hear this. You're going to creep me out, Mrs. G!"

She tapped on his hands. *::Silly boy. I'm not speaking, so plugging your ears does you no good. But I can see this conversation is embarrassing you, so I'll refrain from asking any questions.::*

"I'd appreciate that. Sorry, but there is just something inherently weird talking about erections with a woman old enough to be my great-great grandmother."

::I was never a prude. I thought myself to be quite the modern woman.::

"And this was back in...?"

::Never you mind.::

* * *

Matthew spent the better part of the next few days organizing and finalizing all the preparations for the grand opening. Also trying not to think about parents he hadn't seen since he was fifteen years old, and at the same time, wondering what they would say.

He'd envisioned the moment for so long, how they would be proud of him, his mother crying at seeing the independent and self-sufficient man he'd become. Not the shy, sniveling embarrassment he'd been as a child. Maybe his father would even apologize for the years of torment he'd caused his only child during his drunken rages. Then Matthew could throw it back in their face and tell them exactly what he thought of them. Of how he had suffered and yet managed to come through it all, whole. A wash of cold air hit the back of his neck. Mrs. G. had her own opinions.

::I think we should tell everyone the inn is haunted. Put it on all the flyers and brochures. People love that sort of thing.::

"I don't want anyone bothering you, and taking pictures. Or trying to exorcize you." He rubbed the back of his neck.

"Besides, we don't need gimmicks. The good food and the cozy atmosphere, the antiques and the history, should be enough to draw customers to the inn." He hoped the dedication he put in now would pay off with bookings later. If the inn failed, he'd be back at square one, and practically broke.

A knock at the door drew his attention. Mrs. G. thankfully stayed in the other room while he went to check. The woman standing at his threshold appeared fresh-scrubbed, with rosy cheeks, her golden, dark blond hair pulled back in lop-sided, twin ponytails. Blue jean cut-offs revealed long, shapely legs in black patterned tights. His eyes traveled back up and rested on the lacy black bra peeking out the top of her blouse before he forced his gaze higher.

Her hazel eyes sparkled with an inner light he tried to define. A natural beauty with an eclectic and artsy style—the type of woman he generally avoided.

"Can I help you?"

"I received the invitation to your open house and wanted to stop by before the event tomorrow and take a few photos if it was alright."

He looked down and noticed the digital camera clutched in her left hand.

"I'm Cadence Martin."

"I'm sorry. I don't remember a Cadence Martin on the guest list."

She reached into her purse and pulled out the invitation, handing it to him. “I thought perhaps the new owners had learned of my connection to the house and sent the invite.

“Owner,” he corrected. He glanced down at the card in his hand. “What connection?”
“Why, the ghost of course. Miriam Goodacre was my late mother’s great aunt.”

* * *

“What makes you think there’s a ghost?”

“You’re kidding, right?” She’d heard the old family house had sold and immediately wondered if the new owners had gotten to meet Miriam yet. She had to bend her neck slightly to look into his hooded eyes.

The house’s new owner—singular, not plural—was tall and broad-shouldered, with an athletic physique any woman would appreciate. Nut brown hair brushed the edge of his collar and feathered across his forehead in a casual wave. Her fingers itched to reach out and smooth a stray lock from the gray eyes peering down at her in equal amounts frustration and denial.

“Every kid in the neighborhood for like five generations has known Goodacre Hall is haunted. My mother brought me here when I was a little girl and introduced me to the ghost. The property belonged to a distant cousin of ours, but my mother would come by to check on the house anyway and I would come with her. There used to be a key...” Her eyes glanced down at the glint of metal suspended from the chain around his neck.

::Matthew, why are you keeping Cadence standing on the porch? Let her in.::

A twitch at his temple was the only indication something had happened to change his decision. “By all means, won’t you come in?” The man opened the door wider and waved her through.

“Thank you.” The first thing she noticed was the gleaming hardwood floor and the amber shine on the balustrade of the staircase. She remembered running to the very top of those stairs as a child and then sliding down the rail, her dress thick with dust by the time she reached the bottom.

“I apologize. I didn’t introduce myself.” He struck out a hand, saying, “Matthew Lambert.”

She clasped his hand and shivered when a cold spot formed where they stood. The door swung shut behind them. She would have pulled away, but his grasp tightened, forcing her to look up into his eyes.

“Do you hear her?”

“No. Is she here right now?” Cadence looked around.

He seemed to hesitate, and then with a deep sigh, confirmed her suspicions. “Yes.”

“You can see Miriam?”

He shook his head, “I feel her and I can hear her. On rare occasions I see a misty form, sometimes like fog.”

“Wow! You’re lucky. I’ve never seen her or heard her, but I’ve felt the cold spots before. I’d love to take some pictures, with your permission, of course.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea. I—”

"They would only be for my own personal use."

::Matthew, tell her she may do whatever she pleases.::

"Mrs. G.?"

"What did she say?"

"You can take your pictures."

"Tell her thank you for me." Cadence looked over his shoulder, then to his left, wondering where Miriam was. Just how do you look someone in the eye when they didn't have one—or any sort of visible body?

"She can hear you."

::Matthew, why are you being so surly?::

"I'm not."

"Pardon?" Cadence asked, pausing to study the antique hall tree.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"That would be great. Water, please."

He nodded and turned to leave. She stood and watched him walk all the way down the hall and into the kitchen. His faded denims hugged more than his hips. *Oh my.* Her heart thumped while her hormones danced for joy.

Down girl. All her good intentions to behave herself were lost when he handed her the glass of water and the napkin floated free of his fingers to land on the floor. He shifted and bent to retrieve the paper, giving her an unrestricted view of the sinfully hot butt less than two feet away. Her mouth went dry and her face warm.

"Sorry about that."

"No problem." She took the napkin from him and held the cold glass against her throat before she sipped the water. *Better stop those wicked thoughts or he'll think you're a nympho.* She decided to steer clear of temptation. "Are these antiques original to the house?"

"Some are."

"Been doing a lot of auction shopping I bet." She set the drink down on the whimsical coaster resting on the old coffee table. Two cherubs played around the painted edge. Not an item she would associate with the handsome, powerfully built man standing next to her. His wife or girlfriend probably picked it out. Just another reason to behave herself.

The temperature in the room dropped a few degrees. October's chill? Or was Miriam Goodacre about to make an appearance?

She adjusted the zoom on her digital camera and snapped a picture.

::He's not married, dear. And I don't believe he has a girlfriend.::

"Did you say something?" She asked.

"No."

Cadence focused on a picture hanging over the fireplace mantel and pressed the shutter button.

"Miriam Goodacre in all her glory." Matthew spoke, adding, "She was stunning."

"How old do you think she was in that picture?"

::The portrait was a birthday present for my husband Howard. I was twenty-seven and he was thirty-nine.::

"I heard it again, a murmur." She looked over at Matthew.

"Mrs. G. said she was twenty-seven when she posed for the painting."

"I can almost hear her."

"She must like you a lot. She's never tried to communicate with anyone before, well, except for me."

Cadence took two more pictures in the parlor and then started down the long hallway that led to the kitchen. "No antiques in here. I love your kitchen."

Sunlight filtered through the blinds and periwinkle blue curtains. Not the type of color you'd expect a man to pick out, although she liked the shade. Combined with the white cabinets and steel finish on the appliances, the room was bright and cheerful while also being very utilitarian. It was the type of kitchen she'd be thrilled to have as her own.

When she turned to leave the room, her foot tripped over a small wastebasket she was sure had been under the counter. Off-balance and pitched forward, she fell into Matthew Lambert's arms. The solid heat of his chest acted as a barrier, protecting her. He pulled her closer still. The silent moment stretched. A lick of fire raced through her as her thigh brushed against the thick ridge of his cock straining against the button fly of his jeans.

Low thrumming need built in her womb as she stood wrapped in his arms. Embarrassed, she looked up, ready to apologize for her clumsiness, and met the smoldering embers barely contained in his eyes.

He angled his head and took her lips in a sensuous, hungry slide. Unable to resist the urge, she stroked her fingers through his silky brown hair and opened her mouth, inviting a deeper kiss.

His tongue traced her lips, and then took what she offered. Each breath shared, their mouths clung feverish hot. He held her chin in one hand, tilting her head further, while his other hand now grazed the bare skin of her abdomen as he explored underneath the fabric of her blouse.

When he cupped a lacy covered breast, teasing the already pert nipple between thumb and forefinger, she whimpered, needing him to fill the lonely ache throbbing between her thighs.

Cold air swirled around their shoulders. Cadence pushed against the solid wall of muscle, reason returning to her overheated brain. Matthew stood dazed and tried to pull her back into his arms.

"No. She's here and watching."

"Who's here?"

"Miriam. I can feel her. Feel the coldness. Can't you?"

::I only expected you to kiss her, Matthew. I didn't intend for you to make love to her in my kitchen!::

Cadence grinned as she too, could now hear the feminine voice inside her head.

Heat flushed Matthew's neck and throat. "Mrs. G!"

The ghost of Goodacre Hall laughed.

Chapter Three

Matthew was understandably nervous. He would be seeing his parents for the first time in years and confronting the monster that drove him away.

"Mrs. G., I thought we agreed you'd wait upstairs while my catering crew was here," Matthew spoke in a loud whisper.

::Pish posh, dear. They can't see me.::

"I see you. Why can't they?"

::I am in stealth mode?::

"What?"

She almost chuckled at his open-mouthed stare. Goodness, he was so much fun to tease. He was almost as stuffy as her first husband. Matthew had hurried Cadence out the door yesterday, but she'd also noted how he'd asked her great-great niece to come back for the open house tomorrow. They would indeed make a good match if the kiss she had witnessed was any indicator.

::They won't see me unless I purposely reveal myself. I can still hide from them and project my image to you at the same time. Quit worrying so much. Everything will go according to plan.::

"I'm glad you have so much confidence!" Matthew touched the key at his throat.

The doorbell rang. Everything was in place. Matthew nodded to his crew. They left through the back door as arranged. In case things turned nasty, he wanted no witnesses. Matthew took a deep breath and went to greet his long-lost parents.

Time and circumstance had physically changed the man and woman on his doorstep. Or perhaps it was his own perspective that had changed.

"You gonna let us in, or just stand there eyeballin' us?" A good-natured grin did not accompany his father's question. Bullies didn't grin unless they were causing pain.

Matthew stood back and waved them inside. The door closed behind them with a cold snap. He noted he and his father had the same build, shared the same slate gray eyes. But there the resemblance stopped. The old man sagged, where once he'd loomed tall. His scalp pinkened beneath the wispy salt and pepper hair.

"So where's the free food?" asked the bully again.

"Help yourselves." Matthew guided them into the parlor to the buffet table. His mother seemed tiny, insignificant. She piled hors d'oeuvres on her plate, and then looked around, a bird unsure where to land. He watched her finally settle on the loveseat and nibble the food, a watchful—even nervous, air about her.

"Glad somebody decided to do something about this old house. Always thought this was an ugly place. Kept expecting the city to condemn it or somebody to bulldoze it. Land underneath must be worth something. Owners are crazy to think anyone would want to stay here, though."

"And why is that?"

"Haunted," a small voice answered.

Matthew looked over at his mother.

"I don't believe in any of the stupid old wives tales, but I can't see anyone paying a dollar to stay at some fancy bed and breakfast in this neighborhood," his father stated.

"You might be surprised."

"Yeah, well, we'll see. But I bet your boss loses his ass on the deal. Must have cost him a pretty penny to fix this dump. It's a sure money pit," his father declared before sucking the meat off a large Buffalo wing.

The hair on Matthew's arms and back of the neck stood straight out, even as the room's temperature dipped. He knew Mrs. G had heard enough.

Lambert Sr. lowered his bulk into a wing-backed chair, intent on his food. His fork flew in a summersault to land imbedded in the seat, dangerously close to his groin. The mantle clock chimed the hour, and then a minute later chimed the hour again, the arms swiveling round.

"What the—?"

"I told you we shouldn't have come. I told you this place was haunted! But you had to see didn't you? Had to be nosy." Matthew's mother stood, her plate clutched in her hands.

Miriam's portrait wobbled on the wall and a disembodied moan rattled through the hall.

"Shut up, Gloria."

"No, you shut up! I'm leaving." She set her plate down on the coffee table and ran to the front door. She tried to twist the knob, but it wouldn't turn.

"Please, please let me out of here!"

The door opened and she fled down the stone path.

"So that's your angle. Fix it up but spread the haunted house legend. Bring in all the curiosity seekers. Smart move," he said, nodding with approval.

::You want to see the real thing, Monty? Here you go!:: And with that, Miriam Goodacre pulled all the heat from every available source she could sense and converted it into energy, propelling it toward Matthew's father. The chair flipped sideways while the plate full of Buffalo wings took flight.

Lambert Sr. sat on the floor, a stunned look on his face. "How did you do that?"

"I didn't. She did." And he pointed toward the thickening mist.

A face formed in the center—a woman's face. She stopped within ten inches of her target, pursed her 'lips' and said, "Boo!"

Matthew's father scrambled to his knees, got to his feet, and ran from the house.

The ghostly lips curved in a self-satisfied smile.

"You do realize that I never got to tell them I'm their long-lost son."

::Oops::

Chapter Four

Cadence knew she was early for Matthew Lambert's open house, but she'd lain in bed last night, thinking about the incredible kiss they'd shared, and simply couldn't wait to see him again. Her heart gave a little thump as she spotted him talking with a deliveryman. She decided to wait for him and sat down on the back porch swing.

::You look pretty, Cadence. I'm sure Matthew will be happy to see you.::

"Miriam?"

::Do you think another ghost lives here?::

"I guess not. Where are you?"

::Beside you, sitting on the other end of the swing.::

"Can I ask you something?"

::Of course, dear.::

"Why do you stay here? Don't you want to go to the light?"

::Matthew asked me that once a long time ago. I told him that this had been my dream home, built especially for me by my late husband. I had no desire to move on. But the truth was Matthew needed me. All the lost ones needed a loving hand.::

"Lost ones?"

::Children abandoned, neglected, or abused. I offered comfort and solace. They gave me companionship...I didn't feel so alone. The After-death is such a lonely thing if you choose to stay here.::

"And Matthew was one of these *lost ones*?"

::Yes.::

"Then his parents—"

::When and if he wants to tell you his story, he will. Ah, I think he's spotted you. Good luck with him, Cadence...and be gentle with his heart.::

"Hi." He stood in front of the swing.

"Hi yourself."

"I want to apologize for my behavior the other day."

"I have a theory about yesterday. Want to hear it?" Cadence got to her feet, her hands brushing the curling dark hair on his forearms.

He didn't answer, choosing to nod instead, eyes fixed on her face.

"I think we have a matchmaking ghost. If Miriam can draw in energy and cause cold spots, she might be able influence our temperatures, our hormones too."

He leaned in closer. "If you're right, what can we do about it?"

"That's the best part. We do absolutely nothing." She slid her arms around his neck.

"Works for me." His hands cupped the full curves of her bottom and pulled her tight.

Cadence wrapped her legs around his waist and tugged his head down for a hungry kiss.

The End

About the author:

A former journalist, instructor, and fine artist, Cassandra Curtis spent most of her life traveling the globe.

When Ms. Curtis isn't writing she enjoys the magic found in nature. She is an avid gardener and wildlife enthusiast. Her other interests include: art, antiques, astronomy, astrology, folklore, mythology, genealogy, music, eastern philosophy, and collecting arcane curios and occult artifacts.

Ms. Curtis won the 2006 Amber Quill Press Heat Wave Contest with her novella, *Cup of Fate*. In 2007, she was a finalist in the EPIES (EPIC Awards) with her novella *I Put A Spell On You*.

She now makes her home in the misty bluegrass hills of Kentucky with her husband of twenty-one years and an odd assortment of wild critters who consider her backyard a five-star restaurant.

Web:

www.cassandracurtis.com

Blog:

<http://www.cassandracurtis.com/blog>

Group Blog:

<http://midnightmooncafe.blogspot.com>

Cassandra Curtis Booklist:

Available Through Amber Quill Press

Erotic Paranormal Romances:

Shifting Tides 2: Song of the Sea

Shifting Tides 1: Beneath A Midnight Sea

Black Magic Woman

Cup of Fate

I Put a Spell on You

The Midnight Effect

Erotic Contemporary Romances:

Compulsion

Free Downloads Available Through the Midnight Moon Café

Shimmer

Mummy Dearest

Stroke It