

In The Belly of The Night

Jonathan Wright

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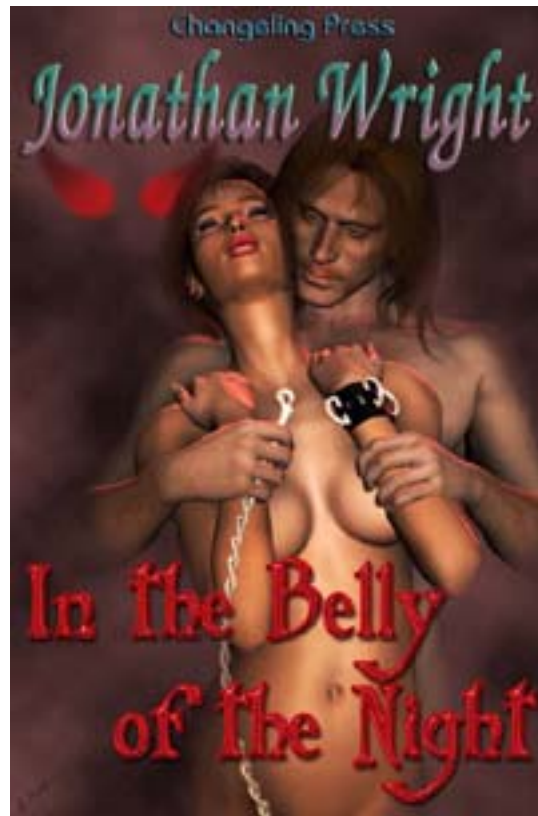
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Chapter One

Miss July, green-eyed, lithe and seductive, had returned.

Joe Horn sat outside the Croissant Place, feet propped up on a chair, reading the *Tribune*, sipping a mug of steaming coffee. Meat for the predator.

He caught glimpses of the emerald-eyed succubus as she carefully stalked her prey. *Stalking me. Yes. Not overtly. Instinctively. It's something she does without thought.*

Paranoia, leavened with a measure of grim experience, drove his instinctive assessment. He watched her, surreptitiously, and with a certain amount of prurient interest. He imagined popping the buttons of her blouse and sucking those ripe tits.

In a far, dark corner of his mind, prompted by this line of thought, the Beast stirred.

On Columbus Day the crowd at the Harborside Mall lacked the usual noise and clamor. The usual mess of screaming kids, giggling teenagers and exhausted men and women dragged themselves from one store to the next, but the retailers sweated. The summer had been bad. In a so-called booming economy a lot of people, like Joe Horn, had next to no money.

Unlike those to whom appearance was all, his chosen look was down-and-out chic. Army surplus fatigue pants and a field jacket, thoroughly broken in. Which is to say, ragged, with patches. Beat up running shoes, showing miles of wear. Good quality, though. Major budget item.

A family walked by. Mom with shades perched on frosted hair, Dad looking comfortably rumped in an Eddie Bauer way. Two kids, a girl in a stroller and a boy toddling. Mom's laser eyes hunted bargains. Dad sighed. Toddler had to go to the bathroom. Made the elusive *th* into *ff* and then *ffff*, a spray of spittle. Giggled at his own rapier wit.

Mom pointed, issuing directives to Dad, who did the sigh thing again. Mom and the stroller arced into Ms Professional. Dad picked up the toddler and headed for the baffroom. He had a bit more lift in his step, maybe thinking of a detour to Sears, where he could spend a few minutes ogling a voluptuous band saw.

In contrast to the slightly paunchy dad, Horn was on the lean side. Unlike the glassy-eyed followers of the latest diet fad, Joe Horn had come by his leanness in other ways. Like sweating in the lee of a bridge abutment while something that breathed bile and moved with the sound of mud flowing searched for him. Like creeping quietly in the dark, hoping to sneak by the place where death was just a sigh. Like running down a pitch-black alley with something fast and lethal on his tail, praying he didn't run into more of the same. A fellow could sweat off a few pounds that way.

Miss July cruised like a mako along the storefronts: Periwinkle's. The Old Bag. The Short Shop. Successfully evaded the Mrs. Fields gill net, focused on her prey.

Horn turned to the sports section. Atlanta came from behind, beat the Pirates in the tenth, evened the playoffs.

It wasn't like he'd never seen her before. That was the problem. The memory lingered, enticing him, like a hint of perfumed cyanide, like a shy smile that hid lethal fangs.

C'mon, Horn, she's a babe, not Muck-Drippy thing. The differences are pretty obvious. Like, you can count her arms...

He'd liked her eyes, from the moment he saw her, even though the initial impact had been frightening. He had a thing about eyes. Windows to the soul and all that.

Yeah, nice eyes. And a killer body, let's not forget about that. Tits to die for... Whoops, bad choice of words... He allowed himself that bit of fantasy. It wasn't every day that a chick with a pneumatic chest chose to hunt him down.

The Beast, on the other hand, regarded her with quiescent, simmering dislike. It didn't care if the stranger looked like Miss July, which in fact she did. Appearances could deceive. Deceptions could kill. The Beast did not parse clever phrases or weigh the potential meaning of a subtle inflection. The Beast's job was simple. Stay alive.

Mom emerged, staggering under captured treasures, went looking for the troops. Somebody's gotta carry all this stuff.

Miss July dodged right and left through the crowd, like Gayle Sayers slipping through the Rams front four. Sato would have liked the way she moved. He had always valued fluidity over power.

Good old Sato. Horn's sensei. Sato had a little dojo in Japan, in the mountains. Very pristine. Very beautiful. Very rugged. Very fucking cold at night. Horn had spent a few nights outside, up there at eight thousand feet, watching for the furtive movement, listening for the delicate step. Screaming obscenities when Sato inevitably caught him napping and beat the shit out of him with the Stick.

When Horn first arrived at the dojo, he'd been afraid. His fear had begun as a child, had grown through adulthood, had blossomed like a blood red rose, in a scummy bog in Vietnam, one night when the moon waned and a hideous stick figure rose out of the black water and ate seven men.

A long time ago, in a land far, far away, but their screams still haunted him thirty years after the fact. Even though they had been about to kill him. No one deserved to die the way they died.

Sato taught Horn how to control his fear. Mostly the fear of Sato, hiding behind trees and bushes, waiting with the Stick.

Horn hated the fucking Stick.

He snapped open the metro section. Man strangled his wife because she served his oatmeal cold. Horn smiled thinly. Human interest stories were his favorite.

Miss July swooped in, took the seat across from him. Let out a sigh. Pulled out her notebook. Brushed a bang out of her big green eyes. Clicked the pen. "I talked to a man who says you blew up a bar in Texas."

"Really." Horn turned the page.

She might have introduced herself, but he already knew her name. Sarah Fenton, a reporter doing a story on the homeless. She'd found him yesterday. She had nice hair, short and thick. Moved like a dancer, accentuating her sleek body. His puerile mind

invented means of disrobing her. The possibility of making her do it herself, for his considerable pleasure, momentarily clouded his mind. He noticed she was bra-less under a fairly thin top. His eyes strayed to her rather prominent nipples.

He sensed she was immediately aware, and not repulsed.

But the Beast murmured *fear her*. He usually listened to the Beast. He resolved to do so this time. Besides, he had other things to do. People were dying.

He'd chased her off last time with one of his wacko routines, mumbling about God's Wrath On Heathen Puppies. But now she'd returned, and she knew about the bar in Texas.

She nodded briskly, checking items off. "Yep. Then there was a truck stop in Nevada. And..." she paused as she confirmed her careful research, "... a warehouse in Seattle."

He grimaced inwardly. The grapevine was unreal. "Well, some architecture is an affront to good taste."

"Crap."

He shrugged. "That's what I just said."

She tried a different tack. "I also found out you're a Vietnam vet --" She frowned, looked up at him, then down at her notes again. "That doesn't make sense."

He raised one eyebrow without looking at her. "Smartest thing you've said so far."

She ignored that. "That conflict ended in seventy-five -- twenty-eight years ago. You'd have to be at least fifty, maybe fifty-five years old."

"I like the way you euphemize the deaths of fifty-eight thousand men and women. So, is being an old motherfucker a crime?"

She eyed him carefully, saying nothing. Her look reminded him of someone in a museum, eyeing a Ming vase. Like, *is it real? Can I touch it?*

"Interesting record. Silver Star, Bronze Star and then a dishonorable discharge. You sound like a real anti-hero. Care to elaborate?"

"It was Monday," he mumbled from the depths of the classifieds. "I hate Mondays. So I killed a bunch of people. It happens."

"Looks like it got you shit-canned. Court-martialed." She sounded oddly uncomfortable, and still eyed him warily.

He sighed and lowered the paper. "Wrong again. They gave me the medal for that. They kicked me out because I saved a man's life. Section Eight medical. Now I get a monthly check, as long as I remain mentally impaired." He gave her his crazy-motherfucker look. She flinched and he grinned, evilly. "That means I'm nuts." He went back to the paper. "Your tax dollars at work. What's it to you?"

"It's my job to ask questions." Her eyes narrowed a little. Focusing.

"It's your job to get your facts right, too."

"I want to talk to you about these places --"

Without looking up, he waved one hand toward the far end of the mall. "There's a travel agent down there."

"Quit being so goddamn glib," she said with a slightly disgusted air. "And I note you're not giving me the street corner weirdo routine this time. I think you're a scam artist, with something to hide."

Hoping to get a rise out of him, he supposed. "Why? Looking to buy a bridge?"

"Looking for answers. You don't smell half as bad as I expected."

"If you were more forthright we'd get along better. Staying clean isn't a real big problem. Eating regularly is."

She wrinkled her nose anyway, perhaps by instinct. "Homeless people smell. It goes with the territory."

He raised one eyebrow, feigning elegant derision. "You think I have a Winnebago out in the parking lot? Sure, most homeless people smell, because they don't take a shower every day and they don't wash their clothes or even change them, and they sleep outside all the time, and it's really dirty out there, but mainly they smell because they're fucking crazy and the smell is part of their craziness."

"You don't smell, ergo you're not crazy." She seemed inordinately pleased with that.

"Ipso facto, whereas and hereinafter, you don't have to be crazy or smelly in order to be homeless. You only have to be homeless."

She leaned closer, and her voice went down an octave. It made the hairs on his neck stand up. "Okay, Joe, tell me something. How does a war hero end up on what used to be called Skid Row?"

He felt a powerful urge to grab her and rip the clothes from her writhing body. The feeling frightened him. "Look," he said tersely, "I'm a busy man. Places to go, people to meet. Make an appointment with my secretary." He dropped the paper on the table, got up and headed for the record store. She tried to follow, but some group named Smashing Onions or something like that had a new album out and he lost her in the frantic crowd.

* * *

Two in the morning. Wandering down Broadway, thinking about that man and his kid. Why? Because he had a certain feeling, which he had learned meant someone was about to die, or maybe already had.

He hopped a bus down to the end of Broadway, by the bay. Wound his way among the old Navy supply buildings. He dodged the shadows by instinct, but they were empty. They usually were, but it only took one shadow, not empty, to end his days.

Sometimes he wondered why he bothered running. It wasn't like he had a lot to live for. No family. No home. Nothing.

The answer always came up the same. *I'm afraid to stop.*

He turned this way and that, doubled back on himself. Sidestepped when it felt right. Searching for the path.

It was like trying to find a trail in an overgrown forest at midnight. He'd stumble on it by chance, or he'd miss it entirely.

But, no, it wasn't as simple as that. He felt when he went by it, once, like feeling under the car seat for a dropped coin, passing over it briefly, then going back over the same place and not finding it. Like that.

The shadows became a little darker, a little more... alive.

He turned down a narrow alley between two buildings, a place he was almost certain was not really there. A thick mist seemed to rise out of the damp ground. The quiet was subterranean. His footsteps, usually noiseless, echoed in the quiet, like glass crunching underfoot.

The mist, he noted, was warm. A good sign, if any sign in this place could be good. It meant She was here, somewhere. She wasn't proof against any of the usual denizens of the netherworld that he sometimes wandered into, but She traveled freely within it, skirting the edge of There with practiced ease, in her search for clueless meat. If She was here, Horn figured he was pretty safe.

But there was a price.

Behind one of the buildings, someone had set up an outdoor shower. Or perhaps it existed because he imagined it being there. From one pocket in the jacket he took out a small bottle of liquid soap and a passably clean rag, and placed them at his feet.

He stripped nude under the waning moon heedless of the cold, which didn't affect him very much. Living outside acclimated one's body and soul to the harsher realities. But when he turned on the shower the water cascaded over him like warm rain, raising more steam as he washed his clothes, sudsing, rinsing and wringing them. The mist roiled around his feet, rising to his knees and then his hips, brushing him with tendrils of warmth. Unnatural in the extreme. Another sign. But he already knew he had come to the right place.

He threw his clothes over a standpipe, where they dripped in the steamy air. He let the water run. It felt good, but he didn't wash his body. Not yet.

She didn't like the cold. It reminded Her of death, She said, no irony in her voice at all. Said She liked to get away from that once in a while. He sent out the Call, merely

a willingness to be found, by Her, and in moments She appeared in the distance, emerging like a wraith from the night.

She glided toward him with the silky, powerful gait of a lioness. Tall, with white, white skin and hair stained black by the night, black enough for a man -- or a woman -- to fall into and never escape. Lips as lush and red as liquid rubies. Eyes as flat and dead as ashes.

She stopped before him. "Horn," She intoned in a voice as flat as her eyes.

Her body, hideously lush and frighteningly sensual, would drive anyone crazy with lust. Horn feared Her, and with good cause, for She was Death, terrible and filled with ecstasy. She was a wraith, a succubus, a vampire being who existed to suck the life from those who stumbled into the vague Neverland between Here and There. A pale shark with less of a soul.

Horn had first met Her while he searched for something in the ruined shadows of an alley that went on forever. He had survived. Since then, he had sought Her out, more than once. To do so was to court death, but Horn did it because he needed something She had. She always gave it to him -- for a price.

"Sally." He smiled. He didn't know her name, and always forgot the one he gave her last time, so he called her whatever he felt like at the time. Tonight he felt like calling her Sally. "Eaten any good souls lately?"

She winced, a human expression that gave her face no warmth, in Horn's view. He watched as She moved her body subtly, intimating sexual pleasure beyond imagining, but Horn showed no reaction, even though he wanted to, very badly. She had never understood how he resisted Her, and so She always came when he Called.

"Awful name. All names are awful." She smiled, if you could call it that. "I have eaten. A man and a woman, who stopped in the park to fuck. They died gloriously, praising my name. My real name." Then, "You cannot stay away. You must have me." Her velvet voice purred.

Initial jab. Opening volley. Nice try. "Wash me, bitch," he ordered. Counter move. Pawn to Queen's Bishop three.

She moved closer, coming into the silent, steady stream of warm water, letting out a strangely feminine sigh as it cascaded over her body, making her china white skin glisten. The water plastered her hair to her head, outlining the classic lines of a goddess sculpted from marble.

Her powerful sexual musk made his cock spring up. His jaw clenched.

She smiled again. Not a wicked smile. She held herself above that. "They were nude, totally, there in the park, on the grass, under the moon and the stars. Rapists and killers lurk there at night, waiting for the more innocent people who stroll through. They were very bold, and very hungry for each other. They thought they knew what they were doing, sharpening their sex by walking on the edge of death." She smiled again at the memory. "They really did not know..."

She trailed her fingers down his chest as she sank to her knees.

He closed his eyes and hissed.

"I stunned the woman and pushed the man onto his back and mounted him. I made him come quickly, because I, too, was hungry. His blood tasted sweet. Very mild, with only modest character. Not at all what I expect yours to be like."

Her voice had become a sibilant whisper. Evoking more than an image of evil eroticism, it wound around Horn's cock, and penetrated into his groin like a spike. He groaned inwardly, knowing it was part of her game, a charade, nothing more. Before she had even touched him he wanted her mouth on his, her hands on his body, her cunt surrounding his cock, more than almost anything he could imagine. But the fear held him in check.

She began with his rigid cock. Her touch would cause a man to come until he shot blood, a woman to swoon, to die screaming her bliss. She could kill in an instant, or a day, or never, the worst fate of all.

She stroked his cock with one smooth, soft hand, lightly scratching it with glossy black nails that could peel his skin like an onion. With the other, she squeezed soap onto the rag and gently washed his face, his shoulders, traced the major scars on chest. She lingered on his stomach, playing with the ruff of hair that lightly covered his belly.

His jaw clenched harder as he fought the urge to say what She so wanted to hear. The words that gave Her his life, that were her sustenance. Her nails, tickling his skin, were talons that could eviscerate him with a casual forehand stroke.

He was saved by his fear, but not his fear of Her. No one feared that kind of death. In their deepest hearts, in their grimmest fantasies, they embraced that death.

She stood and washed his back, then his buttocks, stroking them in a manner resembling a loving caress, as She continued to stroke his cock. She stood very close, not quite touching but making him WANT her touch so bad so bad so bad...

She murmured in his ear. "I could slip your hot cock into my mouth right now and wrap my tongue around you better than any cunt you have ever felt, Horn. I could suck the semen and the blood right out of you and you would scream with ecstasy." Her fingers delved into the crevice of his ass, teasing him as She cleaned him, every inch of him, as the rules of their game required, and he did not give in, because of his fear.

She thought She understood that fear. She understood many things, sex and death and fear being chief among them. But She missed the point by a mile. He never truly feared losing the game, because She never understood that there existed a fear much greater than anything even She could engender, much less understand. His fear, of Muck-Drippy thing, of the other denizens that ruled the Other Place, was so great that not even the ultimate succubus could overcome it enough to seduce him into giving Her his lifeblood.

His body steamed in the cool air, but sweat dripped off his nose and chin. He could have come a dozen times from her ministrations, but as safe as this place had to be, he never, truly, felt safe anywhere.

He sensed a cold resignation in Her as She finished the cleansing. She did not linger overlong, nor did She use any other technique at her disposal.

She knelt before him. The nipples of her luxurious breasts stood out. She brushed them against his thighs as She continued to manipulate his cock. A slight, strangled moan escaped his lips. Her dead eyes took on a spark of life.

He had been staring straight ahead, seemingly aware of nothing except her supernatural ministrations. Now he looked down at Her, and smiled tightly. "Stop."

She could, in time, break him. Unlike Her, he was human. But the rules on which they had agreed stipulated that when She had finished, She must stop. Her strength was her weakness. She must obey the rule. And She did, always, because it was her nature.

Her own jaw clenched, and a blush of color sprayed across her regal cheekbones. Her magnificent breasts heaved suddenly, as if She might shout, or sob. She released him and stood. His cock remained hard. They stared at each other, almost eye to eye.

His smile softened into something harder than it had been. "I win," he murmured. "Again." He did not gloat, but the exhilaration of having survived made the denouement almost flat.

She quivered, from head to foot. The sound that emanated from her throat was inhuman, a hiss and a growl and a grunt of pain that transcended agony the way lightning transcends static electricity.

Her eyes went past him, to the wall. He knew what She saw. The same thing She saw the last time, and the time before that. Humans were really pretty predictable, in Her opinion.

Chains, with leather cuffs, hung from the wall.

She stared at them dully. Then She looked at him, and in that instant She became she.

He returned her stare, until she looked down. The change in her demeanor always surprised him. That was not one of the rules. But he had truly beaten her, and it was in her nature, he had discovered, to be this way. If she lost, she became what her conqueror desired. Exactly.

"Do I own you, now?"

She said nothing for ten seconds. Then, slowly, almost numbly, she nodded.

He cuffed her to the wall, wrists and ankles spread.

He took the whip that protruded from a socket in the wall, where there had previously been no such thing, and touched the handle to her skin. Gently stroked her body. That alone, nothing more. Up and down. Between her legs. He stroked her breasts, twisted the end against her nipples.

She stood silent, still, staring straight ahead.

Another game. Different rules.

They had done this a dozen times before. But it had a different edge for Horn this time. "You are the queen of pain, but you are my slave. You need the pain, don't you, Sally? It was my pain you wanted, not my blood." A sudden inspiration, but she caught her breath and he knew he was right. "I know you, Sally, Sexy Sally, Sweet Sexy Sally..."

"Stop! Please don't use that name!" She moaned as he twisted the end of the whip handle into one of her nipples. She thrust her body outward, pushing against it, wanting more.

"Sally is a girl's name, a little slutty girl's name, the name of a girl who will do anything for a cock, isn't that right, Sally?"

She twisted her head away from him, but she made a harsh, gasping sound. A sound of pain.

"Beg, Sally. Tell me what you want."

Her eyes closed, and a sigh fled from her. She began to writhe, straining against the chains. She moaned.

He used the handle of the whip. Nothing more.

She made urgent, desperate sounds. Pleading sounds.

Only the handle.

"Please --" she begged.

"Please what?"

"Please -- use -- it --"

"Use what?"

"The whip! Please use the whip!" She tilted her head back, arching her body into a rigid bow as he gently stroked her neck. He let the multiple leather strands trail down between her breasts, brushing her cunt.

"Why?" He carefully twisted the whip until a few of the strands wound themselves around her breasts. Then he quickly lifted his arm. The strands grabbed her breasts momentarily before they slipped off.

She cried out. The chains snapped and rattled as she heaved her body against her bonds.

"Why?"

"Because -- I -- have to be -- punished."

"I think it's more than that." He continued to ply her with the whip.

She hung her head. "I need it," she whispered. "Please, Horn."

"Master."

"Please, Master," she said without hesitation. "I need the whip. I need it."

He lashed her gently across her breasts. The slap of the leather tails made a wet smack against her smooth, sweaty skin. They left red marks. Her breasts quickly became swollen, and noticeably larger. Exactly as he wished.

He gritted his teeth in crude satisfaction. *Once a tit man, always a tit man.* He lashed her relentlessly. Her nipples rose defiantly, signaling her pleasure.

With his free hand he stroked her cunt, confusing her with pain and pleasure. He penetrated her with stiffened fingers.

Her body jumped. Slowly she began to move to the rhythm of it. She thrust out her breasts to meet each strike. She moaned. Each time her voice inched higher, higher, higher. Finally, she gripped the chains, shrieking. "Master!" she screamed. "Master!"

Horn merely held his fingers rigid as she humped herself on them repeatedly. Her cunt spasmed hard, as she made breathless sounds of total surrender.

She sagged against the wall.

He stared at her. He had wanted to experience the ultimate thrill, the perfect sex fantasy. The subjugation of Death. He did it rarely, only when he had been too long

without the kind of sex that he had grown to need, the kind that mimicked his fear of Muck-Drippy thing and his ilk.

“Again...” she whispered.

This time it felt different. He almost turned his back on her, surprising himself. There was nothing better than sex with a succubus. Nothing. Provided you survived.

He knew what the problem was, of course.

He snorted, shaking his head. Then his eyes narrowed, his breathing slowed, and he leaned close. He stroked her again with the whip. She closed her eyes and moaned. This time the moan was not the otherworldly, inhuman sound he had come to know and enjoy. The timbre had changed. Not lower nor higher, but... different. A sound based on a voice he had heard before, that had raised the hair on the nape of his neck.

Her body seemed almost insubstantial in the warm, swirling mist. He stroked her with the whip, and she writhed languorously, undulating slowly, like a stripper enticing a client, like a woman on fire. The pallor of her skin lessened, became warmer.

Her hair seemed to shrink into her skull, ending in a short, almost bristly cut. A crude, but charming approximation of what he imagined.

Her breasts remained the way they were. *Yes, a tit man.* Probably not exaggerated, now that he thought about it.

She opened her eyes, momentarily, as he dropped the whip. No longer flat and dead, they shimmered like emeralds. Not quite accurate, but it was her nature to be more than human even when she mimicked one.

He stroked her breasts with his hands. Twisted and pulled her nipples until she gasped in pain.

“Shall I stop, slave?”

“No,” she said in a weak voice. “Never...” Her eyes closed as he rolled them between his fingers. “I need the pain, Master.”

He grasped her buttocks. Instinctively, she raised her legs and wrapped them around him. She arched her body without prompting, giving him her breasts.

He penetrated her inhuman cunt, and the liquid fire of it was almost what he wanted. He sucked her nipples, as long now and as fat as the tip of his finger, and they were almost perfect.

He thrust into her with abandon, the only time he ever let himself feel even a little safe, and her cunt gripped his cock like a mouth, moving around it like no human woman ever could. It should have made him scream with ecstasy, but it didn't.

A succubus that looked like Sarah Fenton hung in chains as Joe Horn thrust into her and mauled her breasts with his lips and teeth. She gasped and moaned and even screamed at the end, yelling "Fuck me, oh, fuck me!" in Sarah's voice, coming continuously, in thrall to his fantasy.

Horn's orgasm lifted him up on his tiptoes and he clutched her tits, gouging her nipples with his thumbs, grunting, "Slave!" He staggered away from her, gasping. He stood silent, staring at her heaving, sweating body, almost a perfect copy of Sarah Fenton.

He slowly dressed, and left her there. Her voice, sweetly submissive, followed him for a while.

Almost the same. But of course, not the same at all.

Chapter Two

He found his way back to Here and walked uptown. In an hour his body heat had dried his clothing. His mind was in turmoil, but he calmed himself, gradually.

He passed through the golden arches, bought a pile of hamburgers. Stopped at KFC, picked up a bucket of chicken. Hauling fast food at a slow pace, he thought about Sarah, with a clearer mind now. Sarah. Nice name. And obviously more than the usual enthusiastic cub reporter trying to score a scoop.

You're evading the point. You just had sex with a waking nightmare that you used like an inflatable doll to satisfy your fantasy of the perfect woman. Are you sick or what?

Not sick. Maybe something worse, though.

Oh, yeah, right. You're in love with her? Good one, Horn.

Okay, we'll shelve that issue. Something about her really frightens me, and it's not the thought that she might be a dominatrix with handcuffs and a whip hidden in her blouse. Although that would be pretty scary.

He had good instincts about this kind of thing. With no feeling of irony at all, he knew he ought to avoid her like a visitor from the other side. But he hadn't been with a real woman in a long time, and she was a dish and a half.

Maybe she likes older men. Hope so.

But something about her didn't quite fit. He couldn't pin it down. The feeling made him uneasy. *Great instincts, Horn. Lousy interpretive skills.*

He'd ask the experts.

Down on Market Street, east of the Convention Center and Seaport Village, the looming hulks of abandoned buildings stood like silent sentinels at the edge of the warehouse district, still resisting the wrecking ball, but losing. Booger, Cruiser, Fat

Freddy and some others were huddled around a barrel in the rail yard, burning garbage to keep away the dampness. Horn would have been welcome without the food, but it pays to look out for your friends.

They lived in the shadows, shuffling along Main Street by day, curling up on oily gravel at night. Dying by the knife, gun, drugs, booze and rain. And once in a while, something else.

Fat Freddy scarfed down a drumstick and biscuit, spat a piece of gristle into the oily yellow flames. "Lady's been askin' 'bout you, Joe." He smiled a little mischievously.

"Yeah, I met her." He chewed thoughtfully on a Big Mac. "You give her my name?"

Freddy laughed loud. "Shit, man, you think I'd give a white boy's name to a woman with tits like that?"

The others laughed too, a big, bad sound.

Joe smiled. But he didn't want anyone messing in his life. The world was fucked up. He was fucked up. Leave it alone.

Nobody else spoke for a while, except old Elmore, who muttered under his breath, shuffled his feet and wouldn't eat. Booger offered him a drumstick, but Elmore drew back, giving him a bug-eyed look.

Booger shrugged and bit into the chicken. "Thanks, Horn," he said in a voice muffled by the Colonel's secret recipe.

"Is she legit?"

Freddy smiled a sly smile and looked sideways at Cruiser, who affected not to notice. But his bloodshot eyes got a little clearer, just noticeable in the flickering, red-orange light. He nodded once, almost to himself. Spat something into the flames. "Bitch-and-a-half," he muttered.

That meant something, coming from Cruiser, who got his name from frequenting bars in search of indiscriminate soul mates.

"She turned you down?" Horn asked.

Cruiser snorted. His thin mouth drew into a half smile. "Yeah. Wrinkled her nose." He laughed, cawing like a crow.

Horn nodded, smiling. "No taste."

The others laughed again. More of the big, bad sound.

Freddy guffawed, slapping his knee. "Gotta be a shit, a motherfuck, plenty piss in that..."

Freddy jabbered on, emitting a continuous stream of profanities. He had a disease, a *condition* for which there existed a fancy name, which had slightly scrambled his brain, causing him to spout obscenities in public, rolling and shaking his head and flailing his meaty arms, when he wasn't drunk on Thunderbird and pissing in alleys behind restaurants.

He trailed off, but kept smiling, like he knew some piece of ancient wisdom far too complex to bother trying to explain to mere mortals. Which might be the case. When he was calm and thoughtful, there were few men Horn admired more.

Fire crackled in the barrel, throwing gloomy shadows, defining the limit of their existence. Joe listened while they talked, of places seen, jobs held, then lost, the old lady kicked me out, assholes in government who let people live this way, best dumpster to scrounge this week (Italian restaurant on Sixth, down in the Gas Lamp Quarter).

Elmore sneezed, pulling at his ragged coat.

At dawn he walked up Fifth toward Broadway. Bought a paper off Louie at the kiosk on D Street.

Metro section, little item on page three: Man with his two-year-old son, missing since yesterday, from the Harborside Mall.

Horn stood there for a couple of minutes, just holding the paper, saying *Shit*, very softly under his breath, about a hundred times.

Chapter Three

Horn watched people go into the bathroom. Watched them come out. He had a sign under his coat, a bomb in his pocket and a song in his heart.

A two-year-old kid, with his dad, the biggest, strongest, smartest, best person in the whole world. Should have been a car on the street. Disease of the week. Something normal and understandable... not a spider-thing in the corner.

Maybe it hadn't been the spider thing, the muck-drippy thing that he'd been running from for a long, long time, the thing that occasionally came out of the corner, dropped in for a bite to eat. Maybe Dad had a girlfriend. Maybe he decided to take the kid and split, go meet the sweet young thing in the parking lot, pile into her Firebird and lay a patch toward Houston.

Maybe. But probably not.

So how did he know? Sato once told him, "Hah, stupid *gai-jin* meat-eater! You go with your gut, you find the refrigerator. You go with your Ki, you find the answer!"

And then, wouldn't you know, Sarah suddenly appeared, like the Cheshire Cat, grinning.

"Hi."

But there was something behind the grin.

He sighed, but felt suddenly light inside, as if he'd just got a dose of something illicit.

She looked him up and down, and noticeably did not wrinkle her nose. "You're clean."

"You know," he said, "if you keep giving me straight lines like that, I may fall in love with you."

She looked startled.

"But I have a dirty mind. C'mon, catch up."

She snorted. "I'd like to get some straight answers this time."

"I'd like some peace and quiet," he lied, but a straight line is a straight line.

"Maybe you could start by explaining how you managed to scam the V.A. all these years."

He looked down at her, and gave her the Dead Look. It had scared more than one person. But it didn't seem to faze this broad. For some reason Horn liked that.

She glared back. "You're supposed to be fifty-something. You don't look much over forty, if that, and you've been on the street a long time, and that kind of life ages people fast. I'll bet you're thirty-five, tops. Ergo, you're a liar."

He shrugged. "Women lie about their age. All I'm asking for is equal time."

She looked exasperated. "The penalty for scamming the feds can be measured in years, you know."

He smiled without humor. "Okay, I guess you got me. I admit it, I'm a first degree criminal, shaking down Uncle Sam so I can live the life of luxury about which peons like yourself can only dream."

He kept staring at her, not sure why. *Like we haven't had this conversation before. Her eyes aren't as green as Sally's, but they're nicer.*

"Bullshit." For a moment she seemed to have lost her place. Then she visibly shook herself. "Anyway, there -- there's a pattern. People died in those places where you were seen. Then you blew them up. Like that warehouse. Turns out to be old government storage. Supposedly just office furniture. I'll bet. What was it, really? Were they storing nerve gas that leaked? Nuclear waste? I smell political cover-up."

He grimaced. "You smell Pulitzer. Jesus, I could be an axe murderer. Don't they teach you any common sense?" He shook his head then had an inspiration. "It was Muck-Drippy thing." This might be better than the Heathen Puppies line.

She blinked.

Horn explained. "A monster I know. Or maybe one of his friends. Slimy guys who eat people. Slavering fangs in the dark. Kind of like right wing male chauvinist

war mongering industrialist pigs. They're not politically correct, so they tend to keep a low profile."

She blinked again. "No kidding."

"I never kid about politics."

A tiny bit of humor seemed to flicker across her face. "Where did you come from anyway? No one I've talked to knows shit about you."

"Maybe you're not looking under the right rocks."

He left her there, and went down the corridor, attempting simultaneously to ignore her charming obtuseness and the cold ball in his gut.

Looking around, he felt like a fool. *Don't mind me, I'm the building inspector.*

A woman came out, looked askance. *There's your monster, officer. Probably cut up that man and his little boy right here, flushed them down the john.*

Fuck it. He went in. Had to piss anyway.

The place felt like a meat locker. His first clue. It might have been A/C, but he didn't think so.

Toilet paper spilled out beneath a stall. Dirty water pooled around the floor drain. Nobody here. But a guy in jeans and a sweater, one running shoe down by the heel, had come in here, about twenty minutes ago. He hadn't come out. There were no other exits. So where did he go?

Horn knew, but didn't want it to be true.

He looked around, disgusted. Then he got that feeling again.

Jesus, why me?

He found a running shoe in the trash can. Bloody. Like the water in the drain.

Cold shivers went up and down his spine. His gut rolled over. He felt the Big Silence. Like in the movies, when the viewer figures out what's happening, just before the next victim. About now the creepy music would start.

The feeling became a little more intense, a little more urgent.

GET OUT.

Not subtle, either.

GET OUT!

Something about the voice in his head seemed familiar. Like it wasn't his, or something. But he had to ignore that, because he thought he heard something. Maybe a slight gurgling sound. Like water way down in a drainpipe. The water on the floor, the bloody water, had drained away. As though it had been sucked down.

He hung the "Out Of Order" sign on the door, armed the bomb, and got lost.

* * *

Horn had a past. He just didn't think about it any more than he had to.

'Nam, '74. Joey the Geek, fresh out of college, clutching that really useful Liberal Arts degree. Not a problem, got a job for ya, son. Raise yer right hand, repeat after me, sign here. Hop the next plane to Viet Nam, go kill them gooks, son.

Second Lieutenant Horn. Platoon commander. Forty lives in his hands. A new beginning. Yeah, and the same old shit. Three other platoon CO's took him snipe hunting. Horn didn't like killing birds. Went along to be one of the guys.

They left him out there, naturally. The point of a snipe hunt: make somebody look like a fool. In the middle of the fucking jungle, in Viet Nam.

He made it back, at midnight. Just beyond the perimeter, he heard something in the bush. *Oh God, Charlie's found me, oh Jesus.*

Heard his name. "Joooeey."

Ran like a fucking scalded cat. Tittering behind him. Only just avoided getting his head blown off by a sentry.

In the morning, the old man had him for breakfast. Didn't keep his voice down, either. The others stood around and snickered. The dark closed in on Joey the Geek, a million miles from home, and there was nobody, nobody, who called him friend.

The rest of them could come back from a patrol, drop their guns and relax. Sit around a piece of plywood set on an empty fifty-five gallon drum and play cards and drink beer and forget for a while.

Not Joey.

Here's how it works. They shit on you enough, you start thinking that's what you are. You sit there in the mud puddle and cry. Or you get up and spit in their faces. There isn't much in between.

So this was it. Sit in the mud puddle, or get up.

So he got up.

Like anybody cared.

But he changed. Nothing dramatic. Just learned his job. Led patrols carefully, conservatively. Figured as many of the angles as he could before he went out.

Got his men out of a bad place, once. They liked him a lot more after that.

Except Sergeant Hawkins. The Hawk could care less about the asshole lieutenant. *Just don't get in my way, man.*

One time, the Hawk would have let three men die, pinned down by machine gun fire.

Horn shouted, "No!"

Hawk said, "Fuck you, we can't save 'em!" Shouted it to his face, half a dozen of them lying face down in the long grass.

Lieutenant Fucking Horn went off on his own. He got them all out. Killed six VC doing it. Didn't puke until he got back to the base.

The Old Man put him in for a Silver Star.

One of the men he saved was Private Harry Lightfeather. Two weeks later, in a rice paddy, Harry took six bullets that would have cut Horn in two if Harry hadn't pushed him face down in the mud.

Horn carried Harry seven miles on his back, got another medal for his trouble, but Harry died anyway. That's the way it works.

* * *

She found him three nights later. Midnight on Broadway. Occasional cars slipped through the stark lit canyon. She dogged him up Fifth to Ash, slogging uphill past the massive high rises and sweating in spite of the chill off the bay. Fog obscured the tops of the buildings.

"Where the hell have you been?" She sounded exasperated. When Horn got lost, he got lost.

"Miss me?" Sipping on a Diet Coke With Caffeine.

"You did it again."

"Did what?"

"Blew up a bathroom."

He took another long pull and belched grossly, but she ignored it. "Messing up your facts again. I never did a bathroom before. And I didn't blow it up. There was no explosion, per se." He leaned down and whispered, "That's French." He straightened and continued in a normal voice. "It's a small thermite charge and homemade napalm. Kind of poofs and then burns real hot."

She didn't take notes this time. "I ought to turn you in."

He stuffed the empty can in a large pocket. *Remember to recycle.* "Read your own paper? Man missing since Monday. Third case in a month."

"Yeah, a little half paragraph filler on page three of the metro section. Big deal. So?"

"I saw him go into that bathroom. He didn't come out. Same with that other guy with his kid. Now no one else can go in and not come out." His voice hid something angry and sad as his eyes roamed the dark. "And I suspect that the families of those people might think it was a pretty big deal, in spite of what you say."

She observed silence for three paces. In memoriam, he supposed.

"So how does blowing up the bathroom solve the problem, assuming you aren't just destroying evidence of your own guilt?"

"I found out that it messes something up, somehow, even if the structure is repaired. Like putting a garden hose down a gopher hole. You don't always get the gopher, but he doesn't want to live there anymore." He glanced at her. "Why the interest? You've already heard enough from other people to think I'm a loon, which is the usual opinion about the so-called disenfranchised. And it doesn't have a lot to do with your story."

She hesitated. "You don't know what the story's about. Maybe it's changed. What are you doing out here?"

Still scanning. "Talking to a nosy reporter. Sorry, that's redundant." Looked at her again. Spoke slowly and clearly. "Read my lips: Homeless."

"Where do you sleep?"

"Outside. Is that an offer?" Saw two men on the other side of the street. One waved. He waved back, one hand in his pocket.

"In your dreams. That crazy old guy, Elmore, says you don't sleep, you just walk the streets like 'the ghost o' lonely'." She sounded skeptical.

He shook his head. "Good old Elmore." Always watching the shadows.

Turned left on Laurel. Passed stately Gothic restorations, offices for doctors and lawyers. Their windows were dark eyes. No healing there, no defense against death.

She looked around, like she might be catching his mood. "What are you afraid of, Joe?"

"Dark stairs." He skirted an alley. "Dying in my sleep." Turned right at Twelfth. "Haven't you got it yet? I'm paranoid. Delusional."

She persevered. "When you came out of there your face was white. Like you'd just seen Death."

"Padres blew the playoffs. What can I say?"

She stuck with him, apparently unable to plumb the depths of his wit.

He stopped at Wong's All Night Chinese Take Out. At one in the morning, the line ran out onto the sidewalk. "Try the Kung Pau Chicken." He bought.

She stood in front of him and turned to speak. Her vee-necked sweater presented nice cleavage. "You act pretty flush for a derelict."

He leered salaciously. "Low overhead."

She noticed the direction of his gaze, but did nothing to interfere with the view. "So, how old are you, really?" Maybe hoping to catch him off guard, or something like that, but it sounded just a wee bit ominous.

"Why?" Not liking the way this was going.

“Because --” She hesitated. “Because that coffee cup you left behind the other day, in the mall -- I -- took it to this guy I know, he’s in law enforcement, and he dusted it for prints and ran them through the FBI fingerprint database.”

Her eyes held a curious mixture of fear and awe.

He really didn’t like the way this was going. “You just happened to know someone with access to a highly classified criminal investigation tool?”

She ignored him. “The prints were a match against Joseph H. Horn, Caucasian male, DOB five one fifty-two...” She stopped, but continued to stare. “Who are you?”

He leaned closer, trying not to fall into those eyes, which were getting bigger and deeper by the second. Carefully, in a voice that matched hers, he replied, “The poster boy for Botox.”

She blinked. Her voice barely above a whisper, she said, “I -- I don’t believe you.”

He smiled, and felt it go up into his eyes. “That’s okay, as long as you still believe in Santa Claus.”

She stepped back.

“Why do you care?” he ventured, sampling a bite of chicken, and noisily smacking his lips.

“I -- don’t,” she said, with a lot of conviction. About as much as if she had said she did still believe in Santa Claus.

Horn’s hawk-like gaze spotted a table that had been vacated scant seconds before. They swooped down on it. Sarah continued to watch him warily, as if he might dissolve into smoke if she glanced away. She graciously admired the quality of the food.

A man peeled off from the crowd and joined them. He looked like a trash collector.

Joe smiled. “One of my legitimate friends. Mac, meet Sarah the Newshound. This is Mac. He does dirty work at night.”

Mac was about forty-five, bulky and balding, with dirt under his fingernails and grease on his pants. "City Maintenance," he said, like Joe Friday would say his beat was Homicide. Grimaced as he spread blueprints on the table, forcing Sarah to rescue her chicken.

He talked about plumbing in the Harborside Mall, turning the pages with elaborate care. His thick fingers mangled the paper. He traced pipes and drains, from the top to the street, rumbling like a 45 on 33 1/3.

Sarah looked bored, like she already knew everything she wanted to know about plumbing and this refugee from the dusty back room of life.

Joe focused intently on the plans. Things were starting to make sense. In a hideous way. He bought a round of coffee as he studied the prints. Mac held his styrofoam cup in both hands, slurping noisily, trying not to appear to examine Sarah's chest.

Joe smiled. "Thanks, Mac." He passed a few bills over the table. "Stay away from the juice."

Mac grunted, but looked pleased. A professional doing what he did best. He gathered up his pile of paper and left, moving deliberately into the night.

Sarah grimaced. "That's what you call a legitimate friend?"

Joe watched him go. "Mac doesn't live like you. He works the night shift. Gets drunk on something strong and cheap about once a week. Somebody finds him in an alley, takes him home. A room in the State Hotel. That's his life. He doesn't get to meet cute chicks very often."

"Oh." Then, "So, what was that about?"

"Basic research." He stared out the window, not liking what he felt.

She snorted with exasperation. Her eyes narrowed. "This strong, silent macho crap is starting to get on my nerves. Are you for real? You sound like a whacked out Clint Eastwood. You're so drawn and ragged, you kind of look like Clint Eastwood. On a very bad day."

He ignored her, watching Mac.

A block down the street, Mac stopped at an alley, and looked in. The fog hung low and still, partly obscuring the view.

Just like that, Mac disappeared. Papers scattered in the damp air.

Joe could have said he wasn't sure, maybe Mac stepped in there to take a piss. That would be his style.

Sure.

He bolted for the door, digging into his pocket as he dodged a group coming in. Outside, he ran past the X-rated bookstore, the dusty appliance repair place, the Mexican restaurant smelling of chili and refried beans. Stopped short of the alley, flattened against the wall, soda can in one hand, hoping like hell a black-and-white didn't pick this moment to cruise by, with him standing there waving a piece of illegal ordinance. Hoping it would.

He listened.

He heard nothing. A real bad kind of nothing.

So naturally he went in there.

Brick wall on one hand, eight-foot wooden fence on the other. Garbage cans and crates and no lights. Total darkness swallowed him. He moved quietly, like Sato taught him. A drifting shadow in a trough of ink.

He heard a wet, slithering sound, and froze, terror clawing at his throat. Without conscious thought, he sank into his *hara*, the center of his soul. In his mind he plunged into a pool, like a spear, shot down into the cool depths, water lying placid above. He felt nothing, he *was* nothing. Less than a shadow, less than the thought of death. He was not there at all.

Silence.

Plop. The sound of gravel, crunched. Something -- a presence -- oozing.

Terrible eyes, searching.

It reached out.

Closer.

Horn sat quietly within himself.

Groping. Testing. Hesitating.

Something like a sigh in the darkness moved, further back down the alley.

Distracted, the presence receded.

Silence.

Horn came back, a step at a time.

Silence.

He moved forward, quieter than before, nerves humming like banjo strings. Run into a fly and he'd be in the next county. What the Hell was he doing here?

He sensed the copper smell of death. He heard the voice again, in his head.

GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT --

"Joe, what the hel --"

Fifty feet behind him, but it sounded like someone banging a pot in his ear.

He took off like a shot, heard it coming, pulled the tab and dropped the soda can, caught her with his shoulder below the ribcage. She whuffed in terror and surprise. The can went off behind him, intense heat and a very bright flash, big WHUMP. Carried her out of there at a dead run, across the street, collapsed on the sidewalk.

She tried to scream at him, probably obscenities, but only managed a tortured groan. She crouched, bent and wheezing, blinking from the flash. If looks could kill he'd have been a pile of cinders.

He reached into another of the big pockets and produced a flashlight.

They waited.

He did not like to think about going back. No, not at all. But he had to. For Mac.

No fire, because of the dank alley, and the detonation hadn't been complete. *Have to be more careful about the mix.*

One minute. A car went by.

Sarah decided silence was golden, or less painful. She wheezed quietly.

Another minute.

He crossed the street.

Sarah followed, huffing.

Terror rose like bile. Sato said, "That's one reason we have Ki! It gives us strength to carry on!" Practically chanting, in Horn's memory, standing over him as he puked his guts out because he was so tired and beat. Sato got on his nerves sometimes.

On the wet, crumbling asphalt of the alley they found scraps of bloody clothing.

Sarah backed up, eyes wide, hand to mouth as though that would stop the rising sound.

Horn expected a shriek, but the noise she made sounded worse somehow, for being a low moan.

The flashlight hung limp in Horn's hand, illuminating a storm grate that belched a bubble of rotten, putrescent gas, offering images of green-black slime and crawling things.

They got out of there, fast.

* * *

Nothing to do. Tell the police your friend got eaten -- "Look, here's a scrap of bloody cloth!" -- they make a discreet call, large pleasant fellows come and take you away.

They caught a bus downtown. Neither spoke.

The bus shuddered and lurched down Sixth, along the park, growling like a huge bear. An old man slumped against a window, wheeze-snore, sleeping something off.

Sarah rocked against Horn, nodding. Terror does that. The body survived; now it had to rest, get ready for the next time. He put his arm around her.

At Broadway, she woke with a start.

Horn unwrapped himself.

She sat up and rubbed her eyes, groggy. Then she remembered, and moved close, shivering.

They caught the 209 back up to Hillcrest, grinding up the long rise on Fifth through the swirling fog that offered glimpses of high rises. Then smaller, low rise shops and office complexes, a little seedy, but attempting a respectable façade.

At the top of the grade they rolled past apartments and condos that looked across the street to Balboa Park, deep and black and unknowable in the indistinct night.

"This is where I get off," she said vaguely, as she stared out the window. The bus rumbled and shuddered another block and a half before she pulled the cord. Her eyes seemed unfocused. Or focused on something inside herself, maybe. "Life is pretty shitty," she murmured as she turned to him. The bus lurched to a stop.

He stood up to let her out. She rose and grasped his sleeve with a small hand. He noticed her nails were clean and short. "Could you -- come with me. Please." She did not look at him.

She had a third floor studio walk-up in a genteel old place. Wood floors and eighteen-inch masonry walls, the stucco texturing of which had aged like old ivory. She had a couch, a table and a bed that occupied one corner. She stood in the center of the room, hugging herself, with her back to him.

He stood behind her, waiting. Thinking of all the reasons he ought to just slip out the door.

Still turned away from him, in a low voice she said, "I used to be afraid of the dark. Growing up, I wouldn't go down in the basement, ever. So one night our cat got locked in down there. He wandered around, crying, and I was so scared, but I hated hearing him in so much -- anxiety. The basement had one little naked light bulb, and there were dark corners and shadows and it was scary, but I went down there and found him and brought him out, because I loved him and didn't want him to be afraid."

She paused.

"I'm still afraid of the dark, but I'd go down into the basement again, if I had to." She turned to face him. "I'm -- sorry -- about your friend."

He didn't say anything, but he wanted to dive into her big eyes that were like portals to another world, a world he used to know, but had been away from for a long time. A place where life was a little simpler, and sanity had some meaning.

"I guess I'll understand if you say no," she said in a small voice, "but I'd really like it if you'd fuck me."

She didn't seem vulnerable or afraid, just lonely and in need of physical affirmation.

He gave her a sexually charged response. "I need a shower."

"Is it safe?" she asked, probably thinking of the storm grate in the alley.

"Nothing is safe." *Great erotic conversation, Horn.*

But her lips parted in response.

He sensed her immediate, impulsive arousal at the prospect of not being safe. It provoked a similar response in him. *Maybe that's what turns her on. The danger. But there's a difference between danger and terror.*

We could be very bad for each other.

Without preamble, she peeled off the sweater, revealing nothing but firm, smooth skin, swelling breasts and prominent nipples. She stripped with an economy of motion that nonetheless failed to disguise her abundant sensuality. When she stood nude before him, she waited a moment as he appraised her.

"Do I pass?" Tremulous words, with a hard edge underneath.

"You're not meat," he said softly, shrugging out of his jacket. "You're a beautiful, sexy woman, and right now you're doing what beautiful, sexy women do best."

"What's that?"

"Getting me hard."

She licked her lips. "I -- don't -- think I can -- wait --"

His clothes fell to the floor, revealing a tall, lean body. Scars crisscrossed his chest.

Her lips, lush and full, parted again. "You've -- been hurt --"

"Mistakes." His cock throbbed.

She stared at it. "Now I know I can't wait." She knelt in a quick motion, right in front of him. "Can I --"

He said nothing, but his eyes narrowed, and she read him correctly. She grasped his cock and guided it to her mouth. Her lips closed over it and he almost closed his eyes as she enveloped him in her wet heat.

He thrust his cock deeper into her mouth. She grasped his buttocks, pulling him deeper still.

As she rode him with her lips, her hands went between her legs. He held her head and slid his cock in and out of her face. She made muffled sounds of pleasure as she masturbated. Her teeth scraped his cock, making him hiss in suppressed pleasure. He fought mightily to not come, to not lose control.

To lose control meant death.

She rocked her body harder and faster, and her muffled moans became little squeals, and then she stiffened, trembling except for her hips, which gyrated in little circles as she came.

He pulled out of her. She fell back, gasping, bracing herself on her arms. The position made her thrust her breasts out at him. He wanted to grab them and suck them into his mouth. Her eyes were fogged and heavy lidded. "You -- you -- didn't come..."

"The shower," he said.

The steaming water sluiced away some of the aches and cares of the day. Horn held himself carefully in check, as her soft, strong hands moved over his skin, soaping him down. She stood close to him, with water running over their heads, kissing him softly as her hands found his cock. She managed to remain controlled in her motions as she cleaned him, but her breathing suffered under the ministrations of Horn's lips and hands.

"Careful," she whispered in a husky voice. "I'm involved in a delicate operation here --"

"I like living on the edge," he said as he ran his hands over her strong, lean back and cupped her firm, round buttocks. He winced when she squeezed a little too hard, but she did not seem to notice.

Her hands stopped washing him and began to stroke his cock. "Are you going to fuck me here in the shower?" she breathed.

He kissed her closed eyes, gritting his teeth against his raging hunger. "How carnal do you want to be?" he murmured. "I prefer the phrase 'take you here in the shower'."

"You're a Neanderthal," she moaned. "Can you pick me up --"

He cut her off with his lips and lifted her by her ass. She gasped at the suddenness of it, but grasped his cock and firmly guided it into her cunt, as she wrapped her legs around his waist. Then she reached overhead, grasping the shower nozzle.

As he thrust into her wet heat, she arched her body, presenting her breasts and incidentally banging her head against the wall. Her hips churned hungrily. The steaming water cascaded over her glistening, writhing body, tumbling like rivers between and around her breasts. He bent forward, first sucking then gently biting her nipples, which grew inside his mouth.

She yelped, not in pain, then moaned as she humped him frantically. "Oh! Give it to me! Harder!" She seemed desperate, as though she had to get her pleasure, her love, now, as fast as possible, before someone snatched it away. "Harder! Please!"

Her submissive squeal set off the animal in him, and he growled softly as he mauled her breasts with his lips and teeth. He thrust hard enough to hurt, but she only cried out, "More!" Her legs tightened around him like steel cables. "Ah, yes! Yes!" she screamed as she came. She let go of the showerhead and clutched him fiercely. He staggered a little under her weight. "Do it!" she hissed. "Do it! Take me!"

To avoid impaling her on the faucet handles he turned sideways and shoved her up against the wall. Her feet banged against the shower door and her head hit the screen of the small window high up on the wall. "Take me!" she yelled.

His paranoia kicked in, as he thought of who -- or what -- might hear her, but the feel of her strong, lithe body writhing in his grasp, responding to his touch, his words,

his imperative, washed away the fear that had been a part of his life ever since that time in 'Nam, and made him think only of the carnal, erotic present.

"Oh, God, Joe, I'm coming again!"

Her passion only made him more like an animal.

She clutched his head and moved his lips from one breast to the other and back again. "Suck my tits! Yes! I love it! God, I love this! Fuck me harder!"

He held himself in check only by the fiercest exercise of his will, but he had learned over time that his will could be very strong indeed. He wanted to please her, make her come again and again, because she deserved the chance to be momentarily free from the uncertainty of terror and the abysmal insanity of reality. And because he had not felt so alive in a long time.

She came a third time, squeezing his cock with her cunt, his body with her well-muscled legs, thrusting her breasts into his mouth "My body is yours!" she squealed, then subsided, gasping and trembling.

For a minute he remained motionless, thinking about what he had done. She quivered in his grip.

He had lost his focus. For a moment -- perhaps a minute, or even more -- he had not thought about Muck-Drippy thing. Precisely when he should have, here in a small, confined space with only one quick exit, perhaps two if one counted the little window, through which he would have to launch himself like Superman in that event.

He shivered as he considered what he had done, and vowed that it would never happen again. Never.

They toweled each other dry. He wrapped her with it and she snuggled against his chest, still trembling. Eventually, she began to cry.

He stroked her damp hair and said nothing. Her weeping suddenly exploded, as something spilled out of her. She clutched him, bawling like a baby for five minutes. After she quieted, she blew her nose half a dozen times.

Without comment Horn picked her up and carried her to her bed. His cock still throbbed with pent up hunger. He lowered her carefully to the bed.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what happened..."

He smiled, and it hurt his face. *I haven't done that in a while.*

She smiled, too. "I meant the crying. You *are* a Neanderthal," she whispered. She noted his still prominent erection. "Please take me again, you beast."

His eyes narrowed. He had not expected sex from this woman, but now that she had given it to him, he intended to take all she could stand. He told himself it was just because he hadn't been laid in a long time.

He braced his arms on either side of her. The bed had a wrought iron frame, with bars at the head and foot. "Put your hands over your head. Grasp the bars."

She did so, stretching out her body and arching her back. "Like this?"

Instead of answering her, he began stroking her body. He listened intently, but heard no stealthy movement, no scummy *plop, slurp, ooze.*

One can't be too careful.

She moved gently under his touch, letting him have his way with her. He moved his hands between her legs, stroking her cunt. Sculpted her breasts and teased her nipples. "Do you like being submissive?" he asked.

"Yes. Very much." She closed her eyes, moaning in a low voice. "I like feeling helpless, sometimes." She made a sensual cat-sound, "Mmmmm." Then, "Tie me to the bed."

He started slightly. "No," he said quickly, with an edge of fear. He calmed. "Too... dangerous..."

Mechanically, he continued to arouse her. His erection remained strong, in spite of his momentary jolt of fear. He allowed his mind to wander, with his hands. *Must not lose focus. Must not...*

He bent and kissed her breasts, because he loved women's breasts. She lifted them to his mouth and moaned.

"I'll beg," she murmured.

"I'm afraid," he protested.

"You don't sound -- like it --" She moaned again, louder, and squeezed her eyes shut, as he bit her nipple. "That drives me crazy! Please, tie me..."

Her words made his cock throb harder. He gritted his teeth in anger and frustration. "So, you want to be my slave? Is that it?" *I want her like that --*

He stroked her cunt with his tongue, and then penetrated her with it, playing with her clit, and she gasped with pleasure. "Please! I'll call you master! I'll do anything! Take me like a slave! Please!"

He snarled, grabbing the curtain cord that hung next to the bed and snapping it off. One end of the curtain rod pulled loose from the wall and a screw flew across the room and pinged on the floor. The curtain sagged alarmingly.

"Okay," he growled. He quickly wrapped her wrists together and then tied them off against one of the bars.

As he did this, she writhed and moaned beneath him. "Yes," she moaned. "This is what I want."

He knelt between her legs. The end of his cock teased her cunt. "How badly do you want it?" He couldn't stop himself. She acted like she wanted to die! *But she doesn't understand what can happen!*

She ought to know better, seeing what happened to Mac.

But she didn't SEE...

She stared at him as though she had suddenly realized he was serious about something she had thought was only play. "I --"

"Badly enough to be my slave? Badly enough to beg me to beat you?"

She looked afraid now.

Good.

"No --"

He stiffened the fingers of one hand and slowly inserted them into her cunt. "Really? Aren't you ready to beg me to treat you like a slave?"

It's the beast in me. The one that keeps me alive when Muck-Drippy thing is around. The Beast knows only pain and rage and the hunger for life. The essence of survival. It's the Beast!

He thrust his fingers into her.

Her body stiffened as she shut her eyes. "Ah!"

He didn't know if she was crying out in pain or pleasure. He didn't care. He kept thrusting, manipulating her cunt. With his free hand he pinched her nipples. "This is only a little taste of what I'll do to you!"

She gasped then squealed, "Ah! Yes!" She writhed like a snake. "God, yes! Yes!"

He changed the rhythm of his hand, stroking her from the inside out. "You're shameless, aren't you?"

"Yes! I want it like this! Please!"

"You want my cock?"

"Yes! Now! Please!"

He spread her legs, thrusting into her with animal ferocity, fucking her like he didn't care. She responded with animal sounds of her own, egging him on, compelling him to take her, use her, hurt her, because she deserved it.

He tried to control himself, but her siren call of pain and passion was too strong, too much like the fear he carried in his gut all the time, not a heavy, dead thing, but something fiery and alive, that kept him awake when others slept and died. He fucked her like a slave, but she held him in thrall. Her beautiful, sensual body claimed his cock, her cry of love claimed his soul, and his orgasm blinded him with a terrible silence that seemed like death.

Awareness came to him as if he had wakened from a deep sleep. A small, rational part of him noted that this was not logical since he had not actually slept in thirty years. The larger, irrational part began the slow quake that preceded total collapse of the normal, civilized functions, making way for the juggernaut that was the Beast.

He heard a soft moan that alarmed him more than the sibilant hissing of one of the denizens of his waking nightmares.

His awareness expanded to encompass the owner of the voice. His arms and legs tightened as he prepared to move.

She lay beneath him. Her skin gleamed with sweat. *Have to take another shower.* Her lovely breasts rose and fell rapidly. When she spoke, she sounded out of breath. "Ooohh..." Her head lay to one side, eyes closed, mouth open, sucking air.

He stared at her, but his mind ranged about the room. Listening, checking. Was that the sound of a careful motion, methodical, oozing, relentless as they all were? Or was it the roaring of his blood in his ears? The thudding of his heart in his chest.

She turned her head to look at him. Her heavy lidded eyes seemed out of focus. "I -- what did you do to me?"

It happened again. He slowly withdrew from her. Without answering, he released her bonds then lay down beside her.

She moved close, wrapping her legs around one of his, putting her head on his shoulder. "I can't believe... you made me feel like..."

He stroked her hair as he stared at the ceiling.

"So, are you really that old?"

He snorted. "Yes. Am I in trouble for screwing an underage girl?"

"I'm a twenty-six-year-old *woman*, thank you."

He smiled again, enjoying the feeling. "To a man my age, practically all females are girls."

"Okay," she whispered. "I'm your girl."

* * *

'Nam again. Hoo boy, the flashbacks just keep on comin'.

The venerable Sergeant Hawkins was a dealer. Horn turned him in, MPs took away the sullen sergeant. Joey the Geek had grown hairy balls.

But the Hawk had friends. They got Horn one night, making sentry rounds. Dragged him a couple of miles into the bush, next to a bog. Tied him to a tree, beat him until he coughed blood.

Then the Hawk appeared, took out his K-Bar fighting knife and went to work, muttering, "I had a nice network goin', and you FUCKED me boy, you FUCKED me." As he carved a ragged Z in Horn's chest.

And Horn remembered Murphy and all the other things he had hated and feared, and he wished for the fear, wished hard, and...

... in the background, something rose from the bog, tall, spindly, muck-drippy.

It took Vondenbarger, pissing in the black water. *Urp.*

The Hawk added a line here.

Gunner, humming a little tune, cleaning his wire rims.

One there.

Doc, screaming.

The Hawk turned. "Jesus Mary Chri --"

The knife fell.

Ridenour died shooting, running off a hundred rounds from the M60, screaming.

The rest ran.

A minute later, more screams in the distance, no, God nooooo --

Then nothing.

Horn managed to snag the knife with a boot tip. Listened. Still nothing.

Contorted himself, popping joints, got hold of the knife.

Rustling in the shadows. *Joey...*

Cut himself loose, lost some skin.

Comin' ta get ya...

Run. Forget the pain. Run.

* * *

"So, why don't you have a home?"

Hard to explain. Being over there. Seeing the little shacks, the hopeless stares, the children who carried guns and grenades. The smell of napalmed flesh.

The attitude when he came back.

The things he thought he'd left behind. But hadn't.

"I kept breaking the windows."

Chapter Four

He meant to leave her as she slept. He felt pretty tired himself, but he never slept, and eventually he got restless. But instead of leaving her, he stroked her body, enjoying the feel of her smooth, soft skin and the firm muscle underneath. The curves of her body fascinated him, and he continued to stroke her, lightly, softly.

The air was warm, and the covers were pulled down around her waist. He played with her nipples, very gently, and was pleased to see them gradually stiffen. His eyes narrowed. *Even in your dreams you like being played with.*

His cock stiffened. *Pretty good for an old guy.* But he had rarely seen and certainly had never fucked a woman like this. Ever.

Not even Sally.

And now he lay beside her in her bed, having fucked her into submission more than once already.

Now THIS is a fantasy...

He leaned close to her ear and softly whispered, "You're mine to fuck as much as I like."

She moaned softly and stirred.

He continued to stroke her body. He delved between her legs, stroking her cunt. She responded by gently rocking her hips.

"You want me to play with your body, don't you?" he whispered.

She moaned softly, and perhaps she was half asleep, or perhaps she was half awake. She moaned again.

"Cross your wrists behind your head."

Slowly she moved, still with her eyes closed, and brought her hands up behind her head. Her breathing became heavier. Her eyes opened slightly.

He grasped both her wrists with one hand, as he continued to tease her body with the other. "You're acting like a little slut who can't wait to be fucked," he said.

She answered with another moan, turning her head away as if in annoyance, or shame.

"You can't help it," he murmured. "I own your body and you can't help doing as I command."

She gritted her teeth. Her body writhed under his touch. He probed her cunt with his fingers, teasing her clit. She moaned.

"I'll make you come this way, to show you I'm in control of you," he murmured seductively.

She closed her eyes and arched her body off the bed. "Ah!" she cried.

"You're mine!" he hissed as he played with her cunt.

"Yes!" she moaned.

"I own you."

"Yes!"

He almost lost control, but refrained from rolling over on top of her and plunging his hungry cock into her. *Wait... Wait...*

"Please..." she squealed. "Please..."

Wait. Make her say it.

He felt the Beast in him, in his forebrain, goading him, guiding him. It, too, needed to feed, and something like this was nectar for it.

I am the Beast and the Beast is me. And I'm not far from being the crazy motherfucker most people think I am...

"Please!"

"I like to hear that, Sarah," he said. "Say it again."

She undulated like a snake. "Take me, Joe. Take me. Fuck me. Own me."

Her body hummed with sexual energy. He bent and sucked her nipples and she arched her body to give him more. "You own me," she whispered. "I'm yours. Fuck me. I'm yours."

"What do you want?"

"More!" she cried.

"Beg for it," he said in a harsh voice. The voice of the Beast.

"Please give me your cock," she whispered. "Please give it to me."

"Will you be my slave if I do that?"

"Yes! Your slave! Anything!"

He moved between her legs, and she hissed with wicked pleasure as he thrust into her.

"Ah, Joe," she moaned. "I love it when you penetrate me! I love it!"

She thrust back, lifting them off the bed. "Ah, yes! Yes!"

"You're helpless, Sarah. I can do anything to you that I want. Anything at all. You're mine to use as I like."

She moaned and wailed at once. "Use me, Joe, use me, take me, fuck me, I'm yours."

He still held her wrists together behind her head, pinned to the mattress. *If Sally was like this I'd be dead in a second. And I'd love it.*

She squealed with joy as she came. He felt her ecstasy as if it were his own, which it was.

Making sure she slept, he left her in the early morning, before the false dawn. *I could stay here and fuck her for the rest of my life, but that might only be five minutes...*

As he made his way downtown, he became aware of the shift.

It happened once in a while, when something from the other side tried to get through. Pushing on the membrane of reality that separated the two planes, or something. He had learned to feel it. He felt it now.

He stopped. Typically, it had crept up on him. The streetlights had dimmed, and were getting dimmer, as the darkness became the Darkness.

The air felt icy cold. Death resided on the other side, in an infinite number of forms, in a place devoid of the warmth of life. In the place he simply called *there*.

Horn let the K-Bar slide into his hand and kept moving. If he ran, he might run into It as It emerged. Worse, he might run into the other side. He had been there a few times, and did not care to repeat the experience. There was not like the Neverland place where Sally hung out. Neverland held some interesting surprises, but that was Sally's domain, at least this sector of it, and she didn't like scummy tentacled creeps messing up her living room

Fog had rolled in, adding to the icy chill that cut through Horn's heavy field jacket.

He checked out the entrance to a building, found it vacant. He pressed himself into the slight depression of the doorway, and waited.

He knew that special sound, *slurp drag plop*. Horn stuck his head a little way out of his piece of shadow. He saw a hint of movement, about a hundred yards away. Just a hint.

The situation was not good. Right now he stood on the edge of *here* and *there* and he didn't know which way to run. One way meant death, the other life. The shape in the fog moved closer, emitting no sound that even vaguely resembled a human.

Sudden movement at his feet made Horn look down. He stared into the little red beady eyes of a rat that had to be as big as a small dog. It stared right back at him, and those eyes were not a rat's eyes. No, not at all.

He looked up and saw the form, the thing, whatever it was, no more than thirty feet away. Long, snake-like tentacles wandered about it, like Medusa's hair. The fog itself had thickened to the point of impenetrability, so none of this was certain. But Horn didn't need proof.

Fear and pain are difficult to remember. A survival mechanism, designed to give the organism a sense of hope.

But Horn remembered the fear, as it came screaming back to him from the bog in 'Nam. And he remembered the pain, of the razor edge of the blade in the Hawk's hand, carefully drawing a bloody trail in his chest.

Horn ran. The thing came after him, alerted by the rat-dog that squealed gleefully as it kept pace with Horn through the pea-soup fog.

He barely dodged a lamppost, then nearly fell running off a curb. He cursed and kept running, but changed direction on a whim.

Something swished by him, passing through the space he had just occupied, and slapped the side of a car, smashing a window and setting off the alarm.

The rat-dog scuttled around his feet with eerie speed.

“jooooeeeyy.”

Shit. It's Muck-Drippy thing.

jooeeyy.

The rat-thing squealed gibberish as it paced him, bounding along on little stick legs. Marking him.

The thing in the fog changed direction, coming toward him with more speed than it ought to be able to muster. That gave Horn the clue he needed, as if he hadn't figured it out already.

It had started trolling at the *here* edge of reality, moving back toward the *there* part, the direction Horn had been running.

Real smart, asshole. You're being herded like a deer.

... this way...

He changed direction, on a whim, following the voice. The kind of thing Sato had called *action without thought*.

The little rat-thing followed, and he knew that if he didn't lose it MD would get him, but he didn't have time to stop, and in any case stabbing a leaping, dancing rat in the fog at midnight was a little problematic.

Just as he figured he'd used up his options, he felt the sigh of movement again, like he had in the alley where the thing had got Mac, and then the rat-thing was gone, squealing indignantly, then squealing in severe, well-deserved pain and then squealing no more.

He ran at an angle to the thing, hoping it could not cast its tentacle quite this far. Hoping he wasn't already too far into *there*, where direction had no meaning.

He never heard it coming, but he sensed it. He twisted, the K-Bar flashed again, and something hit him like a chunk of lead pipe. He grunted in pain as he went down, then grunted again as he hit the pavement and rolled. Thank God for the heavy jacket. The K-Bar saved him, slicing the tentacle like string. The cut end flopped and tried to grab him anyway, but he scrambled to his feet and took off like Carl Lewis, down the middle of Fourth, toward Broadway.

He ran right out of the fog, into the comparatively bright-lit area of Ash.

He slowed, then bent and braced himself on his knees as he puked into the gutter. *I'm getting too goddamned old for this.*

He looked back. The thing hadn't followed.

Something moved in the shadow of an alley to his left, where the streetlights did not quite reach. He looked that way, and saw nothing.

He knew better than to investigate shadowy alleys, but he got no sense of *there*, no feeling that he might end up as lunch.

He approached it warily. At the entrance lay the mangled remains of a sizeable rat.

He glimpsed movement up the street, right at the edge of the fog that lay like a wall across B Street. Something human-like. It hovered for a moment, then faded as the fog dissipated.

Chapter Five

Freddy rolled along Broadway. Horn couldn't figure how he could weigh three hundred pounds on what he ate.

"Helluva woman, Joe."

Horn nodded, strolling with his hands in his pockets, fingers wrapped around a soda can, from habit.

"You been lookin' for somethin' a long time, boy. Maybe you foun' it." Freddy, who had an MBA from Stanford, let his Alabama roots show when he was thinking deeply.

Horn listened. Sato had taught him respect for wise men.

"Sometimes, you think you fin' it, like you do that thing in Sea-tall. But nobody lay it on wit' Death like that, an' call it a livin'. Mebbe time to come in from th' col'."

Horn followed him in silence. It didn't surprise him that Freddy knew about Seattle.

Booger panhandled the corner at State, looking bent and awkward. Wore the frayed Padre jacket, like always. Having an okay day. Seven bucks and change.

Saw Cruiser in the square, leaning on his shopping cart, petting his little mutt, Jake.

Somebody they didn't know preached on the corner.

Late morning crowds swirled around them. Freddy breached the waves. Horn trailed in the eddy of his passage.

Helluva woman.

* * *

Horn spent the next night in the railyard. Fog packed the dark with cotton, but he felt safe. He had strong Ki. If Muck-Drippy thing dropped in, he'd know. They had a connection, he and MD.

He perched on a siding, sipping warm beer, and thinking about Sarah Fenton. Elmore wandered by. Sat. Hawked and spat. Reeked like nothing Horn knew. Horn offered him the beer.

Elmore drew back. "Fish don't sleep."

Horn nodded. Finished the beer. "Goddamnit." Thinking of Sarah.

Crushed the can and tossed it into a barrel, where it made a hollow, booming sound. He sighed. "What am I gonna do, Elmore?"

Elmore scratched himself and muttered unintelligibly.

* * *

She answered the door in an old robe. "Where have you been?" Her eyes looked daggers. Not so submissive now. Well, people were complicated.

"I got restless."

She snorted. "Think you can just come and go as you please? Fuck me like you'd eat a candy bar? I'm not impressed, Mr. Horn." She tried to close the door in his face, but he stiff-armed it, pushed it aside and walked in.

He shut it behind him. She turned on him, breathing heavily in anger, looking ready to cut out his heart and make him eat it.

"You mad because I skipped out without leaving an itinerary?"

"I don't like being treated like an easy lay."

"Yes, you do," he said, instinctively. "Take off the robe."

He didn't know how she felt about him right this minute, but he knew how he felt about her. That feeling had brought him here. He suspected his look spoke volumes.

She held the robe together with her hands. They loosened their grip, and the robe parted, showing her nude body.

He got hard in an instant. His eyes narrowed, as they had before, as they always did when the Beast stirred within him.

She stared at him like a bird mesmerized by a snake. Her body trembled. "Are you going to hurt me?"

He couldn't tell if she was concerned or hopeful. He suspected both.

Instead of answering, he slowly pushed the robe back over her shoulders. As it fell to the floor, he held on to the cloth tie. He admired her lithe curves, before turning her around. "Hands behind your back."

She bowed her head as he tied her wrists together.

"You're helpless, Sarah. Meat for Muck-Drippy thing. Do you want me to fuck you this way, knowing you could die in an instant?"

She trembled more than before. Her voice sounded fragile. "Yes." Then, after a slight pause. "Please..."

He stripped, quickly, because he did not want to be caught by Muck-Drippy thing, and because he couldn't wait to fuck this magnificent sexy bitch. As he stood behind her, his hard cock bumped between her legs.

He ran the back of his hand up and down her body. Reached around with the other hand and gently teased her nipples, which immediately stood out in response.

"You're easy," he breathed in her ear.

She closed her eyes, moaning.

He hugged her to him, back to front, and played with her breasts with one hand. With the other he stroked her cunt.

A mirror on the wall reflected his manipulation of her body. She stared at it with half closed eyes, her mouth hanging open. He turned her sideways to the mirror, pushing her to her knees, then bending her forward until her face touched the slick, polished wood floor.

She caught her breath as she turned her face to one side, watching herself in the mirror. "Please..."

He slowly entered her from behind. She closed her eyes again, moaning louder this time, as he began to pump her. He reached under her and squeezed her breasts, rolling the nipples between his fingers.

"More," she whimpered. "Please, more."

He pumped harder, more frantically, as his orgasm began to build. He knew he would lose his control, his focus, because of his hunger and need for her. The fear ate a hole in his gut but he couldn't help himself. He had to have her. Had to. Had to.

Had to.

"God, yes!" she screamed. "Yes! Fuck me, Master! Fuck me!"

He felt himself going over the edge, into the place where he found the ultimate pleasure, the ultimate love, but Muck-Drippy thing would find him even there, and Horn wouldn't see him coming.

Sarah writhed beneath him, screaming his name. He felt her come, maybe the third time, it didn't matter. He stopped, withdrawing from her, trembling with fear and lust and anger at himself, and unreasoning anger at her. He untied her. Started to reach for his clothes, to dress and leave. He didn't belong here.

She lay on her side on the hard floor, gasping, staring at him. "Don't go." Her voice did not plead, but did not command. "Stay a while and use me. Make it all go away..."

He understood then a little of what she needed, and why he needed her so much. *We're the same. We want to get away from the pain, whatever it is. Maybe that's what everyone wants, but few people can articulate. Maybe it's like they say, that only the truly insane can deal with reality. And if you're not really crazy, then you pretend for a while.*

Going away from her brought Horn closer to death. If Muck-Drippy thing sensed the prey was helpless, he would be here in an instant, flying in from whatever corner of Neverland he inhabited.

But her passion compelled him more powerfully than the threat of death. As though she had more life than death could absorb.

He crawled over to her, pushing her down on her back. "Spread your legs."

He entered her again, feeling his resolve dissolve like smoke in a breeze. He would die here, in her arms, with her voice in his ear and her nails clawing his back.

“Take me, Master, take me!” she cried as she thrust herself against him. She clutched him frantically, as though gripped by fear. He grabbed her wrists and pinned them to the floor. She turned her head, shutting her eyes. “Yes! You own me, Master! Fuck your slave! Fuck your slave!”

She sounded like she wanted to believe what she said but really didn't, not quite, but Horn didn't care a bit. Her words drove a spike into his groin. He thrust savagely, pounding her body mercilessly, heedless of the pain he had to be causing her by grinding her beneath his weight on the floor. “You're mine!”

She squealed, thrusting hard enough to lift them both off the floor. “Yes, Master! Yes!”

He felt her come, hard, as her voice became incoherent. He held her wrists with one hand then used the other under her back to lift her to him, bending her backward alarmingly, as he sucked each breast into his hungry mouth. She grunted in pain and pleasure, then shrieked as she came again.

Her submission drove him into an animal frenzy, so that he saw only her beneath him. She filled his vision and his soul. “I love you!” he cried as he came. “I love you!”

* * *

He watched her sleep. Stroked her hair. Thought of staying. Knew better. Played with that fantasy, though, for a while. Staying. Settling. Waking up in the same place twice in a row.

Felt the shift again. Like he had on Fourth a couple of nights ago.

He got out of bed and found his jacket, and the K-Bar.

The air got cold. The darkness in the room remained the same, except that it was... thicker.

In the relative small and confining room, only the door and the window offered escape, maybe the bathroom in a pinch, but that would be a great place for something to lay waiting for him to bolt through the door.

He grabbed his pants, slipped on his shoes, then knew he had no more time, he had to *go now. NOW.*

But he couldn't leave Sarah. And she slept, still. Unnaturally. The things on the other side could manipulate stuff like that. One reason he never slept. Medical science said it could not be done, that no one could Not Sleep. Medical science didn't believe in Muck-Drippy thing, either. Fuck medical science.

His body screamed at him to flee as the light, smoky tendrils of something -- fog? -- slipped under the door.

Okay, this is where the cavalry arrives, right?

He heard footsteps, in the hall. They stopped right where Horn knew they would. The knob began to turn. Horn prepared to die. He had faced death many times. Too many times. This feeling was way too familiar.

Maybe it's time.

The door opened. Slowly, just like in the creepy horror flick.

Horn waited, all his senses on high alert.

A shape, vaguely human, advanced into the room.

Horn waited.

The shadow, the one he had seen on Fourth two nights ago, stopped. It reached out an -- arm. Maybe. Horn could not be sure in the unnatural darkness. He sensed it as much as he saw it.

"Okay, motherfucker," he murmured, "come and get it."

But nothing happened.

After a time the arm lowered, and the shape withdrew from the room. The door closed. The fog dissolved.

Horn started to shake. The K-Bar dropped from his hand and clattered on the floor. Sarah stirred, but did not wake.

* * *

She woke as he shrugged into his jacket. "You're leaving," she said in a chilly voice. Like before. The cool Sarah.

Her eyes were flinty. All the submissiveness had disappeared. "Come when you please, go when you please. Pretty cavalier with your relationships." She got up and pulled on the old robe.

There was an air about her, just a little, of artifice. The alluring image of the nymph, bed-ready, clashed with the hard eyes. But he had a feeling she really didn't want him to stay. She'd been left before. Her eyes said so, and the tone of her voice. Somewhere, sometime, she'd learned to like being treated like a whore. And part of the pleasure involved giving back some of the pain.

"I don't sleep very well anymore," he said, understating the situation somewhat. "Something knows I'm here. You're not safe."

"And a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do," she said, her voice flat.

"You don't understand. You really aren't safe around me."

"Yeah. Sure."

Exasperated, still full of the fear the shadow creature had instilled in him, he snapped, "You're mad because I'm leaving like other men have left you --"

"Knock it off, Sigmund, and get out of here." She turned away, hugging herself. Her whole body shook, once, as she stifled a sob.

"You know who I am," he said in a gentler voice. "Long term relationships don't work. I don't have much to say about it."

She turned to face him, with tears streaming down her face. "I know who you fucking are, you bet! You're Mike and Tom and Dave and about sixteen other guys who treated me like a piece of day old hamburger and threw me out when they realized they didn't want to be 'tied down.' Well, I don't either, but I'd like to hear some man tell me I'm worth more to him than a fucking roll in the fucking hay!"

She stared at him, blinking and sniffing. "I thought you were different! I did. I've never been so... I wanted to give myself to you, just you, forever..." Her voice trailed off. She stared at him, puffy eyes and wet face.

He sensed something building inside her. "That's not all --"

“My father left me when I was ten, okay! He just fucking left the way you’re just fucking leaving, in the middle of the motherfucking night, without waking me to say goodbye or give me a hug and he didn’t even leave me a note that said he really loved me but he just couldn’t live with my mom anymore. He left! He left! He left!”

She stood there crying, her face screwed up like a prune, sobbing and shaking.

Horn didn’t know what to do. If he touched her she would push him away. If he spoke she wouldn’t listen. He wanted to tell her he loved her, but he knew if he did that he wouldn’t get out of here, and the walls were starting to close in already. After the shadowy visitor, he could not stay here. Could not.

But she was ripping his heart to pieces, so he walked over to the window that looked out over Balboa Park. Nothing but dark out there, which suited him right now.

Behind him, he heard her say. “When -- when I -- was nineteen -- I started looking for him. After about a year and a half -- I got a lead -- I found him in a little steel town in Pennsylvania. In a cemetery. He’d died the year before. Broke and alone. He never once tried to contact me. Never once. I spat on his grave.”

He turned to face her.

She stood in the middle of the room, all alone. “Please go.”

He let himself out.

Chapter Six

Dawn. Weak light slanted into the cold, empty rail yard. Elmore stood in shadow. Belched and scratched himself. Mumbled something about Fat Freddy in the belly of the night.

Something about the way he said it sent a chill up Horn's back.

No one had seen Freddy. Horn cruised Broadway. No Booger or Cruiser, either. Checked in at the downtown clinic, the plasma center, the soup kitchen. Zip. Alleys, dumpsters, empty lots. Nothing.

A squad car slowed, gave him a once over. They knew him. He was clean, never pissed in doorways, slept at bus stops or lurched down the middle of Union mumbling obscenities. So they went their way.

He thought about the blueprints, and Mac.

It knew. It didn't look over his shoulder and read the arcane plumber's language, or eavesdrop on the meandering conversation. But somehow it knew. Like Horn sometimes knew things. Sato's training had been hard and relentless, and very effective. Primal instinct, honed by primal fear. Horn let it guide him now, like a divining rod.

To find the clues, he had to walk the edge of *there*, and it scared him quite a bit. Horn would not normally have done it. Would not have considered it. It meant going where Muck-Drippy thing lived. Where he and his buds hung out, slammed down the brew, dropped the eight ball in the side pocket, slurped down the occasional stupid human. It was suicide, with red flashing lights.

But Freddy and Booger and the others had disappeared. So Horn went.

The fog rolled around him, an eerie cocoon. The first part of the shift.

Following his instinct, Horn turned off Sixth, about a block before University, into an alley, a little side street that cut through to Fifth. He followed it, then turned left at a smaller alley. A lot of people thought back alleys were just narrow byways behind buildings, little streets to nowhere. Not now. Not here.

Empty cardboard boxes, upended garbage cans, skittering of claws on cracked, oily concrete. A lumpy wraith waddled down the alley ahead of him, taking its sweet time, like it owned the place.

The biggest rat Horn had ever seen turned and regarded him with beady red eyes. Really red.

Just like the one he had seen on Fourth. Maybe the same one. Just because he'd killed it didn't mean it was still dead. This time the rat didn't dog him, but shambled off into an alley narrower and darker even than this one. As it disappeared into the roiling murk, Horn saw it loom suddenly huge and amorphous. He tensed, but then the swimming fog occluded the alley entrance. He waited for the count of ten, but sensed nothing.

He kept on. He knew this place, even though he had never been here before. Not this *here*. They were all different, but they all looked alike. He need only stay in this alley, not wander, not stray, not be tempted by fear or lust or deadly curiosity to *zig* when he ought to *zag*. Only that.

He had developed the ability, over time, to find this place, the in-between place that marked the vague border between *here* and *there*. He didn't know how he did it. It probably had something to do with all the times he had run into Muck-Drippy thing and his ilk.

Other things about him had changed as well. He had developed a sensitivity to Muck-Drippy thing, a kind of scum-finder that warned him when MD was near. He really hoped it worked now.

And gradually, over the years, he had become aware that his reflection in a mirror still showed the face of a man much younger than he was surely getting to be.

He didn't know why. He hoped it wasn't because MD was keeping him alive somehow, young and fresh and ready to run, for the sport of it.

He didn't know what he would find here, or when, but he knew beyond a doubt that it would not be good.

* * *

After a time that had no meaning, he found a shoe, run down at the heel, evidence of Freddy's splayed stride. Bloodstained. Next to a storm drain that emitted strange, noxious fumes.

Cruiser's shopping cart sat all alone at a place where the alley widened, that looked a lot like the intersection of Market and Fifth. Covered with scum, flies swarming in the misty shadows.

A little further, Booger's baseball jacket. Crawling with maggots. One ragged arm trailing from a half open manhole. As he watched, the tattered remnants slid down into the black mouth.

He could search farther, maybe find more clues, but he knew the score, now. As he navigated his way back to reality, his jaw clenched and unclenched to the rhythm of his stride.

On the edge of Neverland, he saw Her.

She stood partly in shadow, and the dirt around her feet receded a little, pushed away and hidden by the lapping mist.

Nude, as usual.

"Sally."

Her eyes were deep brown, her skin ebony, along with her thick, curly hair, still short as he had wished it the other night.

"I did not take them."

He opened his mouth, then realized he didn't know what to say.

"I would -- have you -- as mine."

"I didn't come looking for you, Sally. No game tonight." Not one of the rules, but he wasn't in the mood to parse.

"I know what you really fear."

He had no snappy answer for that, so he waited.

She could stare down a mountain, but when he looked into the things that represented her eyes, She looked away. Remembering, perhaps. "I -- opened a way. Let it in."

"Let what in?"

"The thing you fear."

"Muck-Drippy thing?" he whispered.

"It talked to me. I hear voices -- get messages -- from things. They want meat. Sometimes I give it to them. Like feeding dogs. After you made me your slave and then took the other woman, I was angry. I listened to the Muck-Drippy thing, and it told me it wanted YOU, so I opened a way for it." She tilted her head. "You're wanted a lot."

"It makes me feel warm and fuzzy."

"You escaped anyway. Now it wants me." She actually shivered.

"Sorry, Sally, can't help you there."

She snorted. "It's scummy, but that's all." Then her face softened, or else She made it seem that way. "I want you."

The waves of sensual lust poured out of Her.

"If you come with me, you will live forever, and be mine forever. I'll even -- let you have me as your slave from time to time." Her eyes smoldered.

She was serious. Horn couldn't remember the last time a chick had come on to him like this. It frightened him almost as much as MD. As well, he doubted one could call existence with Sally *living*. But perspective is a funny thing. He shook his head. "It's no good, Sally. I've made my choice."

Her eyes became dead, flat black in an instant. "You call that a choice?"

But Horn was already moving, because while they had been talking something that Sally might not worry about but that Horn wouldn't care to meet had been inching closer in the alley across the way.

"Wait!" She pleaded.

He turned. "I love her, Sally." Saying it didn't change anything, including what he intended to do. But it made him feel good.

She stood in the middle of a puddle of warm mist and watched him go.

* * *

Fog rolled. Water lapped the pilings.

Horn smelled the damp, rank air off the bay. The pier was empty, except for a dumpster.

Storm drain dumped out here.

He waited, hand in pocket, soda can warm and heavy. K-Bar strapped to his forearm. He'd had experience with these things.

It was here, somewhere. It ate all the big bad laughter. It left a trail to follow, mocking.

He waited.

Footsteps. He moved to the shadow of the dumpster.

Silence. A splash, then more silence. Possibly a fish.

Fish don't sleep.

She stepped into view. He managed to stop himself from heaving the can.

"Joe!" Breathless, husky voice.

He had an instant tactile memory of her on the floor under him. Made him hard in a second. A woman like that, walking the waterfront at four in the morning, must have balls the size of cantaloupes. He sighed. "What are you doing here?"

She tossed her head to get a bang out of her eyes. "I can read plans, too, smart ass."

That wasn't what he meant, and she knew it. She looked different than she had in her apartment. Harder. Darker. Trying real hard to mask the pain and failing miserably.

Or maybe you're just hoping she still wants you.

He looked around, force of habit, and sensed movement again. Pulled her close, flattening both of them against the dumpster. She didn't resist, but didn't exactly snuggle, either.

Came a shuffling step, irregular, alien, but somehow familiar. A shape materialized. Bent figure, oblivious to the night and the fog.

Elmore.

Horn stared, speechless. Then said, "What the hell --"

Elmore stopped and turned and looked at him with that ungodly Elmore stare. Didn't say anything, just tugged at the edges of the ragged, greasy raincoat, eyes bulging like he was suddenly frightened.

Terrible eyes. At the best of times, Elmore was not all there. This did not seem like the best of times.

Terrible eyes. Holding Horn, beckoning him, pulling him down into black, turgid depths. Arms reaching, slow, sinuous, snake-like, mouth opening, opening, opening, like the universe turned inside out, the underside of everything exposed, a black hole sucking in the world, shockingly soft tentacles wrapping him up, tenderly, dragging him into the warm embrace of a dark and slimy ending...

Her voice brought him back, screaming like a goddamned banshee. *What a pair of lungs.* As he instinctively shifted into the high gear of controlled terror, the K-Bar jumped into his hand. He slashed, pulled free and groped for the can. He found it, then lost it as the tentacles came back.

He's a goddamn hydra.

It went for Sarah and Horn threw himself between them, and then it got him again. He glimpsed her and saw that her eyes were wide and empty, as cold as the bottom of a grave. She threw the soda can as the tentacles dragged him into Elmore's scummy mouth.

* * *

Colored lights swept the fog in the false dawn. Voices muttered. A couple of strobes flashed. On the pier, a few pieces of something still popped and sizzled, like

burgers on a griddle. A uniformed cop stood by with a Purple K bottle. An empty one lay at his feet. The dumpster was a ragged mess, blackened, torn metal and smoldering garbage.

A plainclothes man straightened from inspecting blackened concrete, blew out a sigh. Forensics might make something out of the scraps, but unless they found a skull, with a few teeth that had been drilled, there was no way they could ID this one. Horn shook his head, waved at the man with the extinguisher. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Chapter Seven

She helped him into her car.

He groaned.

"Jesus, you stink. You're dripping scum all over my car. And you still need a bath." She didn't look a lot better. Her clothes were torn, and she had cuts and abrasions, but she hadn't taken a thermite bomb in the gut.

The jacket hung in shreds, with only a few charred pieces still attached to the kevlar lining. Only that had saved him.

She made him get out of it, and threw the remains in a dumpster.

Horn said nothing, lying back and breathing through clenched teeth while she strapped him in. The soda can was supposed to be mainly heat, not much bang, but he'd got the mix wrong again, and the explosion had thrown him into the bay. He was alive, but it felt regrettable.

As she drove, he talked. "You're not a reporter..."

She didn't betray her surprise, if she felt any. "Really?"

"I should have guessed when we met. You're too -- feral."

She snorted. "Sounds like the pot calling the kettle black."

"Let me out here."

She glanced at him, concern in her eyes. "What -- you're ready for intensive care --"

He gritted his teeth and hissed, "Here."

She pulled over. Her face was still and calm.

He got out, wincing. Fourth Avenue, about a block from the mall. The ribs were a problem. He took short breaths. "You're illegally parked."

She shrugged.

“What agency do you work for?”

Another shrug. “You wouldn’t know it, unless you’re in the business.”

“I’m not.” He looked around, the usual habit. Watch the shadows, always. “Now do you see how it is?”

Her eyes wavered, momentarily limpid, yearning. Then she shoveled the flint back into place. “Yes.”

Neither of them spoke for a moment, a little spit of time that was far more comfortable than Horn ever wanted to admit.

“Do you -- hate me?” she asked, staring into the dark distance, down toward the bay.

He shook his head, staring at the dark behemoth of the mall. “No. Never.”

He started walking. Limping. Headed west, then he stopped at the entrance to an alley he knew, but passed it up. Something about it didn’t feel right. Might be anything at all, but Horn didn’t take chances if he could avoid it. And he’d had a little too much intercourse with the unreal lately.

He limped on. Checked another alley. Looked okay. Went in. “I didn’t catch on to Elmore because Elmore wasn’t MD. I can usually tell when Muck-Drippy thing or his ilk, the real badass monsters, are around. Elmore was just one of the store-bought, Campbell’s Soup variety. MD would have eaten him for breakfast.”

They were directly behind a trendy restaurant. He reached behind a battered trashcan, hauled out a filthy but otherwise serviceable fatigue jacket. At her look, he said, “I have these things stashed all over town.” He shrugged into it, carefully. Checked the pockets. Two soda cans.

She stepped back, waving her hand in front of her face. “Christ, Joe.”

“I’ll clean it later,” he said a little defensively. “Everybody thinks They Walk By Night, but the truth is They walk whenever They damn well please, because They know how to stay outside the edge of your vision, hiding in the blind spot.”

She looked at him like she thought him truly crazy.

He shrugged, smiled a thin smile, flicked a bug off his collar. "You were there the day Elmore got the kid and his dad. The day he got the guy in the sweater. The night he got Mac. This morning, when he almost got me. You hung around my friends. Fat Freddy. Booger. Cruiser. All of them. And they all died. Vienna Sausage for Elmore."

She blinked. "Yeah."

He stared at her for a moment. Then he softly said, "I've done worse."

"You?" she practically shouted. "You're the fucking war hero --"

"I tore the fabric. Let them in..."

"Let who in?"

Horn shook his head, clearing old memories. "Tell me the truth."

She said, "Elmore was a scientist at... a lab. Something went wrong. He contaminated himself." She looked away, remembering. "Two other scientists were contaminated. Some of the stuff we do is very sensitive. And very strange. The operating rules are pretty harsh."

"The other guys were killed, weren't they?"

She nodded. "You probably think I didn't care. But you weren't there when I did it, and so you have no fucking idea what it was like, killing two -- *things* -- that used to be people -- I actually liked..."

Horn went on relentlessly, because if he stopped now he'd end up holding her and telling her it would be okay. "You killed the other two because they were failures. Elmore was a success, right? He had plenty of chances to get me. Why didn't he?"

She bit her lip. "Elmore used to be -- a man named Donald Wyman. He was a nice middle-aged man with a wife and two daughters. He knew what he was doing, messing around with genetic code, but he really didn't think it would be used the way they intended," she said softly. "That's why I came along, in the end. I kept hoping there was something I could do. But I couldn't keep track of him, much less talk to him. I mean, he could disappear down a sewer grate..." She shivered. "Maybe he remembered something about what he used to be. Maybe he didn't want to kill, at least not all the time..."

She turned and walked away then stopped and looked back. "When they sent Elmore, I told them I didn't want to go, but they made it an order. I didn't kill your friends. Elmore did that all by himself. He was uncontrollable. I told them that, but they didn't care. He was programmed to get you, that's all, and they didn't care who he ate in between. And I was a good little soldier. So I'm responsible. But I never wanted it to happen."

"I know."

Horn almost stopped, then, but there was something he had to know. The whole point of this little diatribe, he supposed. "You blew up Elmore when you were supposed to let him get me. Why?"

"Well, you're a really good lay," she said calmly, without hesitation. Almost as if she had been waiting for the question.

"I don't think that's it."

Her jaw tightened. "That's it. Look, I guess it doesn't mean much, but I'm sorry."

It did mean something, but Horn didn't know how to say it. So he said nothing.

After an awkward silence, she turned and left.

Chapter Eight

It happened again, that evening. The shift. Horn was ready for it this time. Sitting at a bus stop on Market, reading the paper, all the stores and empty lots quiet and dead.

Waiting. Because he had finally figured it out.

The fog slid into place, the temperature plummeted. He dragged his collar up around his neck, for what little good it would do.

The evening was not too far along, maybe nine o'clock. Cars had been rolling by, in ones and twos, but now they ceased.

Horn waited.

A shadowy figure appeared at the edge of the mist, which was warmer than it ought to be.

She stepped out into reality, just for a moment, so Horn could see that it was Her. He thought She looked distinctly Asian this time. She said nothing. Then She disappeared back into Neverland.

Another figure appeared out of the mist. Strolling down the middle of the street. Stopped ten feet away. Then it came forward, and sat on the bench next to Horn.

Horn saw a man about his own age, big and beefy, thick forearms and open-necked work shirt. Big, balding head. Darkness where the eyes would be, but that was no big deal. The dead didn't need eyes.

The man handed Horn an envelope. His voice, soft and gravelly, reminded Horn of soft snow falling in the quiet woods in the north of Pennsylvania.

He gestured at the roiling mist, now a good deal colder than it had been. "Couldn't get through before. She showed me the way."

Horn nodded as he took the envelope.

The man stood up and left. After two strides, the fog sucked in around him and he disappeared.

* * *

She answered the door in the old bathrobe. "It's two in the morning again. Your timing is pretty good for a guy who doesn't even own a watch." She stepped aside and let him in, presumably not willing to test the limits of his machismo.

"Why are you still here?" he asked. "I thought you had to report back to the boys in the home office."

She turned away. "I retired."

Horn raised an eyebrow, even though she did not see. "I thought that wasn't allowed."

She looked over her shoulder. "Euphemism." She shrugged. "I told them to fuck themselves. What do you want?"

Horn held out the envelope.

She turned to take it, then stopped. "Where did you get this?"

"A man gave it to me."

Her eyes got bigger. "Don't play games with me. They showed me his things and asked me to take them away or they would have to dump them in the garbage, and I said... no." Her eyes went back to the cemetery. "That's when I spat on his grave." She came back to the present. "How could you have this?"

Horn said nothing, just stood there with the envelope in his hand.

Slowly, as if fearing it would bite her, she took it. Then she fumbled in her haste as she ripped open the envelope and pulled out the letter.

It had been hand written on a single sheet of paper. She stared at it, one hand at her mouth, as she felt her way across the floor and sank down onto the bed.

Horn stared out the window into the inky blackness of a moonless night.

After a minute, he heard a muffled, hiccupping sound.

He turned and saw Sarah doubled over, one trembling hand gripping the letter. She bit her fist as she cried, rocking back and forth like a child.

Horn sat beside her, but did not touch her.

She reached for him and he held her as she cried and cried.

When she was done, she got up and blew her nose.

She turned to him, looking frumpy in the old robe and puffy-eyed from crying, and all he could think of was getting her naked and under him.

Something in his face -- or maybe in his thoughts -- transmitted the message to her.

"You want me -- like this?"

"I'll take you any way I can have you." *Stupid. We have no future. No chance of a future. Stupid.*

She stared at him. "Any way?"

He nodded.

"As your mistress?"

He did not miss her meaning. He shrugged. "I'd try --"

She smiled. "I'll bet."

He realized he had never really seen her smile before. He thought it would be a good thing to see first thing in the morning.

"The question is unfair," she said. "You are what you are, Joe. It's unfair of me to expect you to be anything else. Just as I am what I am." She opened the robe, showing him her nude body. She seemed to find it easier than before.

"You don't want me to change?" His gaze roamed the sinuous length of her body. "I thought that was against some cosmic female law."

She licked her lips. "Sometimes the point is to know when to leave well enough alone." Her voice had become a quavering whisper.

"What are we, then?"

Slowly, she knelt before him, sitting back on her heels, with her hands on her thighs, completely relaxed. Her sensual serenity overwhelmed him. "You are my master," she said. "And I am your slave." She bowed her head.

"I'll bet."

Her lips curled into a smile.

He stood and took off his clothes. "Do you know what you have to do?"

Without looking up she whispered, "Anything you want."

"Have you ever been a slave?"

She shook her head. "Have you ever been a master?"

"No." He chuckled. "How am I doing?"

"Pretty good." She smiled again. "Can I tell you something?"

"Yes."

She looked up at him. "You don't have to be afraid. For me. I believe what you believe. I know it's the truth, now. And I know there are some nasty things out there and maybe even in here, waiting to kill me. But I'm only afraid of one thing."

"What's that?"

"Losing you."

His cock rose. He knelt before her. Taking her hands in one of his, he bent her back until she lay on the hard floor with her arms stretched out over her head. "Is this uncomfortable?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"Beast."

"Do you want me to fuck you like this?"

She grimaced as she began to writhe beneath him. "Not -- really..."

"Liar." He stroked her body with his free hand.

"Jesus, stop -- no --"

"Stop what?"

"The neighbors --"

"Will hear? That's a good one."

She closed her eyes, moaning. "Bastard --"

"Wrong title." He kissed her softly on the lips, then leaned down and bit her nipples.

She gasped and moved against him. Her legs moved apart.

"You're getting impatient."

"Fuck me!"

"And presumptuous." He moved between her legs, letting his cock lightly touch her cunt. Teasing her with it. He felt the surge of powerful lust that she brought out in him. He held himself in check, but knew he could not wait much longer.

"Please!"

"Please what?"

"Fuck me!" She arched her body. "Take me!"

"Are you really my slave?" He meant to say it playfully, but the intensity of his feeling frightened him. *Man, you're scared of everything.*

"Yes! Always! Forever! Take me, Master!"

He succumbed to the flaming need to impale her with his cock, entering her slowly, slowly, teasing her still. "Beg some more, slave," he whispered.

"Oh, God, Master, take me! Own me!"

"Very good," he gasped. His control faltered. He momentarily feared that she would feel it and fault him for it, but then he decided he didn't care. "I love your body." He drove into her, toward the ultimate fear that he knew he had to face.

Not now.

She pumped her hips greedily, moaning and crying in his ear as he gritted his teeth to keep from screaming.

Still pinning her wrists to the floor, he braced himself with his free hand and reared up to look down on her.

Passion and pain suffused her face. Her legs twined about his like steel cables. She tilted her breasts up to him. "Please! My nipples! Please!"

He gently bit them, pulled them in his teeth, sucked them with his lips. He felt her come when he did that, her cunt clenching his cock like a fist.

A single, hard cry exploded out of her. "Yes! Oh, yes!"

He continued to pound her lovely ass into the floor. "You're mine, Sarah. I own you! You're mine!" His voice became louder and more insistent.

She opened her eyes. They stared at each other.

Her eyes captured him. They showed him his fear.

"Yes!" she hissed. "I'm yours! You own me! You own me! Forever!"

She came again, a strong, rolling surge of sexual heat that overwhelmed him. He cried out, falling on her, crushing her beneath him as he thrust into her with all his strength. She answered him with a cry of her own that went into his heart like a lance.

He came with a hard, pulsating power that left him breathless.

He realized he had lost his focus yet again. This time, he did not feel the terror of exposure.

The Beast, he noted, was quiescent. *Good boy.*

His knees and elbows hurt, from holding his whole weight off her, to keep from really hurting her, as opposed to treating her roughly, which she wanted. The glow he felt went beyond his feelings for the sweating, trembling woman under him.

He carefully rolled over on his side. She groaned theatrically, but he knew he hadn't really hurt her.

"I think I figured it out."

"What?" she whispered hazily. "How to kill me with your cock?" She chuckled. "Not this time, but nice try."

He smiled. "Why I was afraid."

"Of what? Never getting laid again?" She kissed his chest. "You have gray hairs." She seemed to find this interesting.

He nodded, holding her like he never wanted to let her go.

Eventually, he rose. As he dressed, he watched her.

She lay on the floor, relaxed, with her arms still stretched out over her head, wrists crossed. "I could stay here for hours if you keep looking at me like that."

He held out a hand and helped her to her feet. "You have to leave," he said, bringing up the specter of harsh reality and showing her that he understood that truth; that she had to leave him, and not the other way around.

She nodded as she came into his arms. "They -- asked me to reconsider, of course. It's not the mafia, you know, just a deep, dark government office that not even the president knows about. They're all assholes, at least the administrative types are, but I can deal with that. But I have to go back and give them what I know."

She stared up at him with eyes as big as the universe.

"You'll be back," he said.

She continued to stare. "And I'll come looking for you."

"I'm not easy to find."

"You wish."

"I love you," he said, shattering, with simple finality, the last vestige of the fear in him.

"I love you," she said.

As he walked down Fifth toward the bay, he saw that dawn had begun to light the sky.

THE END

At least for now...

Jonathan Wright

By day, Jonathan Wright disguises himself as an ordinary middle-aged insurance underwriter. He lives in southern California with his wife and daughter, both of whom believe him to be supremely cool, though slightly deranged.

In pursuit of his career as a horror/romance/comedy writer, JW strives to expand his experiences, in order to relate them to his readers with authenticity. Skulking through everyday life is not enough for JW, no, he pushes the envelope (and everyone's buttons). He calls this "research."

Their dog, Rex, thinks this is all great fun. The two cats, who have unique and appropriate names, but do not answer to them, and are therefore both known simply as "Cat," could care less. His wife generally forgives him, as long as he remembers to take out the trash.