

DARK PLEASURES



EVELYN STARR

The scanning, uploading and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal, and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Dark Pleasures

Copyright © 2005 Evelyn Starr

ISBN: 1-55410-596-X

Cover art and design by Martine Jardin

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher.

Published by eXtasy Books, a division of Zumaya Publications, 2005

Look for us online at:

www.zumayapublications.com

www.extasybooks.com

DEDICATION:

For lovers. Everywhere.

CHAPTER ONE

I was not alone.

Shivers traced narrow, fear-silvered courses down my spine. Long and slow courses that found their treacherous way slowly, slowly, through living flesh. Slowly, slowly, into my heart so that it seemed to freeze solid, denying me even a shadow's hope of remaining alive.

Shadows lay dark and deep at the corners of the porch...*my* porch. Light from a sparkling sliver of October moon cast only occasional, errant rays of searching radiance beneath its deep roof and into its center. But out there beyond the overhang, out there in the narrow and open strip of yard between my house and the one next door, the moonlight shone with surprising brilliance. Surprising tenacity, a milky and almost opaque light that revealed nothing. That touched nothing, illuminated nothing.

I wanted to be alone.

Because I was so tired.

Because I'd come so far on nerves and adrenaline-fueled energy alone.

DARK PLEASURES

I was exhausted, and what I needed more than anything to ease the suffering of nerves worn raw by too much happening too fast was...silence! In the midst of this city...Denver...that simultaneously dazzled with its vigor and energy and terrified with its unrelenting bustle, I needed the silence I'd been so accustomed to in my other life. The kind of silence in which I'd be able to hear quite clearly the restless tapping of rose canes against spike-tipped iron fence in my great-uncle's distant, October-dead garden.

I'd come to the porch for solitude.

Sitting on the doorstep deep within darkest shadow of the roof's steep overhang, I'd lifted my heavy, suffocating skirts. Had pulled them up shamelessly, high enough to reveal unseen curves of dark-stockinged calves and thighs. High enough that the vagrant night breeze, not very steady or dependable, could stroke when it would. Brushing soothing chill against quivering flesh that had no memory of ever feeling such relief. Such cleansing, frightening freedom.

I'd lifted my skirts high enough that Mother would have been outraged. That she would have exacted some form of severe and humiliating penance in retribution, had she not already cast me out into a world I found myself woefully ill-prepared to face. And with the lifting I'd relaxed. As much as it was possible to relax. I'd leaned against the doorjamb with limbs exposed and my back no longer as ramrod-straight, my demeanor no longer as rigidly disciplined as had been required of me before.

Then in that moment of near-eclipsing bliss, that singular moment when release had seemed imminent and the past about to slip away just as Mother had decreed it must, in that moment with my barely touched plate of tuna fish and peaches...all I'd been able to conjure up from the dusty and long disused kitchen...almost sliding from fingers turned nearly to rubber, I tumbled to the truth.

I was not alone.

Lights shone...other lights, lamp-lights...dimly from the house next door. The one that stood so unexpectedly close to mine that I thought I'd be able to touch it easily if I tried. Dim columns of dusty gold dropped lifelessly through the narrow crack where a door stood partially opened, and in its muted glow I detected no hint of movement. None there, and none behind extraordinarily thick and impenetrable shades and drapes shrouding every window.

But I knew he was there.

I knew he sat on that other porch, so breath-stoppingly close to mine, in darkness equally as pitch and impenetrable as that which concealed me. He sat silent in shadows that loomed even thicker than mine...thicker and more impenetrable than any natural shadows ought to be. Shadows as darkly opaque as India ink.

I sat frozen, unable even to right myself, a forkful of tuna fish lifted halfway to my mouth. Knowing somehow that the person I sensed but could not see was 'he'.

Somehow. With some kind of racial memory, some

kind of female radar that even now remained accurate and infallible. Even after my years in Mother's care, even after so many long and silent years isolated within and absorbed by the Sisterhood of Divine Serenity.

I was unfamiliar with men. Unfamiliar even with the concept of them. The cabbie who'd brought me here, to the house that was meant to be my new sanctuary, had flustered me. As had the officious male clerks at the bus station. They had confused, and terrified. I'd been relieved to find my bus driver from Minnesota, at least for the initial part of the journey, was a woman. Though I hadn't understood her. Hadn't understood how she could drive a vehicle, much less such an enormous one. How she could wear pants with such careless impunity and travel such immeasurably, inconceivably long distances alone. How she could compete in what seemed a completely frantic world of drivers, and passengers, and just too much happening all at the same time.

Men cowed me. And this one, silent and unseen, had the power to terrify as even the world, the city, the knowledge that Great-Uncle Thaddeus Teagarden had died and left me, a virtual stranger, a wealthy woman with his bequests had not been able to terrify.

I'd grown since the moment Mother summoned me to her presence no more than three days before and gave me permission to speak. Since the moment she'd presented me with the letter sent on by Great-Uncle Thaddeus' lawyer, in itself an unthinkable intrusion into my world of enforced isolation. Since

the moment she'd told me the bequest was a sign from God, and a gift that could not be refused...*would* not be refused.

Ever since she'd told me I no longer belonged, and never had.

Ever since she had cast me adrift in a strange and strangely riotous world, with little ability to fend for myself and little hope of success.

I had grown enormously.

But not enough for this. Not enough for the sudden, unstoppable hot rush of feeling that came with finding myself alone in the company of a man. A rush I couldn't identify or name, didn't *want* to identify or name...such was its power and its possibility of upsetting the delicate and tenuous state of equilibrium in which I found myself. Feeling that deluged me with sweltering, disconcerting waves in the instant I heard my unseen neighbor speak for the first time.

"You've bought Thaddeus Teagarden's house?" he asked, and his voice was deep. Rich. Filled with indescribable primal music that called to me on so many levels of whose existence I had never before been aware.

It was a lovely voice. A strong voice. One touched with echoes of darkness and anguish that titillated. And with melancholy that intrigued and...dare I even think it?...enchanted.

It was a voice that left me with breath held and heart hammering.

Unprepared for the disquieting power inherent in

such heated, unfamiliar surges, I tensed. And didn't relax again. "No," I replied, my own voice thin and watery. "Not exactly."

This was followed by more silence. A very long silence.

"What, then?" he asked, his voice dropping to a new level of unbearable huskiness. "What are you doing over there?"

"Why don't you come out?" I suggested, my heart hammering so hard now that it threatened to choke off every word I might try to utter. "Why don't you step into the light, where I can see you?"

"I like darkness. I prefer it."

But I saw movement on the other porch. I saw a flicker in that darkness, a shifting in its intensity and a rearranging in its depths. And then a large and towering figure...a forbidding figure to one such as I...moved to the railing. Detaching himself from the darkest part of darkness beneath his porch roof, he became an indistinct blur in the night when he sat on the railing.

I could see a hip. An arm. The pale blotch of a hand wearing a heavy gold ring that caught a flicker of moonlight when he moved. But not a face.

Still, not a face.

He kept that hidden in shadow. Deliberately, I thought, through the sudden low hum of another inexplicable sensation, this one darting hither and yon through my brain until I possessed almost no sense. Almost no reason.

"I don't want to intrude," he murmured.

Now it was my turn to say nothing. To make no moves, not even to cover the legs I knew he could not see, but which remained shamelessly exposed in my patch of darkness. Not even when my cheeks flamed with sudden, inexcusable longing to feel this man's hands upon me. To know the forbidden warmth of his mouth...of secret, scarlet acts being performed upon me.

As some long-subdued instinct told me he, and only he, would know how to perform.

"It's been a long time since Thaddeus died." The man's voice sounded sad. Bereft, even. "I've missed him."

"You knew him well?"

The man moved slightly. His form seemed almost to *ripple* behind the screen of moonlit darkness with which he sought to conceal himself. "Thaddeus was my...friend," he replied, a new and even more sultry hoarseness creeping into his tone.

My only friend.

The shadow man didn't say it. But the thought came through quite clearly. The quiet, reserved dignity in his voice couldn't cover the note of grief that crept into it when he said my great-uncle's name.

Shuddering, I felt a surge of moisture between my legs. Felt it there, in the forbidden places I had been taught to deny...taught to ruthlessly subdue as the regions of sin I had been brought up to believe they were.

Dark sin.

Scarlet, vermilion, burgundy-stained sin.

Wanton sin, unacceptable sin, burgeoning and blossoming and lurid-moist sin from which, I sensed in that instant, I would never have strength to turn away if ever I should unbend enough to allow it admittance.

"Thaddeus was my uncle," I replied, struggling mightily against all that I had long believed, all that I still knew in my heart was wrong. "My great-uncle."

"I didn't know he had relatives."

"We weren't close."

I couldn't win the battle. I knew it.

The best I could do was hold it at arm's length. Hold it at bay for a small while longer.

Still I couldn't force myself to cover my legs. Because I didn't want to cover them. Not now that they'd parted, quite naturally, with open and swelling desire. Not now that my knees had fallen away from each other and my center lay almost exposed between pinching garters and relentlessly thick and concealing stockings. And especially not now that I was free at last to touch myself if I wanted. The way I always wanted.

My fingertips ached to feel the dusky moisture that seeped from my body.

"Thaddeus was my father's uncle," I murmured, marveling that my voice sounded completely normal. That it remained even and uninflected, quiet and submissive, even as the upheaval seethed within. "I hadn't seen him in years. My father didn't approve of him. I don't know why. And then Thaddeus died and left Rosewalk...left his house...to me. Thaddeus left

everything to me. And I don't have the first idea why."

That was quite a revelation. Was far more revelation than I'd ever intended to make. To the unseen man next door, or to anyone.

When new silence dropped across our nearly-joined porches, this time it grew long. Very long. Very portentous.

"You're alone." The shadow man's voice took on another note. A peculiar one. And my back stiffened even more.

I said nothing. Did nothing, in spite of the sudden whisper of those unknown voices inside my head, urging my fingers to do what they most desired. Urging them to touch and explore, touch and stroke, touch and *plunge*...

I shuddered. Audibly, I thought.

"I'm Gardner McCord," he said after another long hesitation.

And as he had hesitated, so now did I.

After all, he'd been right in his assessment.

I was alone.

Completely alone, with no one to protect me when I knew I was unprepared to protect myself. With no one to look after me or care about me should someone...something...

Again the urge rose. Stronger than before.

Shivering inside the heavy shrouds of black I'd kept draped around myself as the shield I'd long ago been promised they would be, shields to ward off the temptations and weaknesses of the flesh, I felt my

hand lift. Felt my fingertips alight upon my knee and begin to skim. Felt them try to reach for what they desired, creatures now with wills and existences of their own, creatures dedicated to the darkness that swelled and swelled inside me.

I felt their trail against the roundness of my thigh. Felt them burn like the scalding strokes of a scourge, even through the impenetrable layer of wool that covered. Felt them find the narrow gap above that wool, felt them at last contact living flesh that sparked suddenly, springing to vivid life of a kind I'd never known before.

I *was* alone. Vulnerable. Suddenly needful, and achingly aware of the need.

But how could Gardner McCord know that? How could he know there were not a dozen others inside Rosewalk at this very moment? How could he know I hadn't brought others with me, and they had chosen to keep to themselves and hide from him in just the way he hid himself from me?

My seeking fingers found the place between my legs. Found the thick barrier of heavy cotton undergarments that protected, and mocked with their stern protectiveness.

"I'm Jean-Agnes Teagarden," I murmured uncertainly. Even uneasily. Because it wasn't a name I was used to using. Wasn't one I was used to hearing from my own lips or anyone else's. Because it was a name I hadn't heard in years. Eleven years. So many years that its appearance rendered me all but speechless now.

Gardner laughed. And the sound was nearly my undoing.

My fingers flexed automatically. They scrabbled determinedly at the insurmountable barrier they had found.

Later, something inside my mind whispered to them, deep and fecund with promise. Later, when she is naked. Later, when she lies upon some tumbled bed, later when she has exposed herself and revealed herself in the night...

Later!

I stumbled to my feet. Completely unnerved, my every movement clumsied by shock and disorientation, I bit back a low cry that would, I felt certain, reveal the depth of my depravity to the shadow man even without him being able to see me. Lowering my skirts with shaking hands, lowering them much too late, I smoothed them so that they dropped to the floor. So that once again I was covered. Shrouded, as I should be. As I was meant, determined, forever to be. Shrouded and innocent of the world and its sin beneath and behind my defenses...selfless and pure in everything those layers of clothing represented.

"Don't go!" Gardner sounded suddenly desperate.

Ever obedient to a stronger voice, a commanding voice, I froze.

"I miss Thaddeus," he explained after a tense moment. "I just...that's all. I miss the conversations we had. Here. On the porch. And...I miss the nights. They've been long since he died. Very long. Very

empty."

Something in his tone set me to frowning.

Something wasn't quite right about what he'd said. How he'd said it.

Something about it sent me back to my seat on the step next to the forgotten and no longer appetizing meal of cold tuna fish and peaches.

Drawing my knees up close to my chest, up close and tight, I wrapped my arms around them and the comforting layers of my skirts. And waited.

Not long.

"Thaddeus and I used to talk through the nights," Gardner McCord said almost immediately. "Sometimes."

"And what did you talk about?"

I might be better off not knowing. Not *wanting* to know.

"Everything, Anything. Nothing. We passed the time. Thaddeus loved his roses, and..."

"Strange." I couldn't suppress a shiver. "I didn't see a rose anywhere. If he loved them so much, then why..."

"The house *is* called Rosewalk."

"Which only makes the lack of them that much more strange."

"He moved them." Gardner sounded uncomfortable now. "Years ago. To a safer...to a larger space at the corner of his property. I'm sure you'll find them if you look for them."

Was it my imagination? Had Gardner really said 'safer' before changing it to 'larger'?

"Hmmm." Knowing he couldn't see, I shook my head. "Interesting."

Gardner didn't answer.

After another long...very long...time, I decided he wasn't going to answer. So once again, half-reluctantly though I couldn't imagine why that should be the case, I got to my feet.

"You're going inside now."

It wasn't a question. It didn't demand, or even necessarily deserve an answer. Still I felt compelled, by old and ingrained obedience mixed with the newfound, unsettling heat that still burned deep and unquenchable within me, to provide one.

"It's been a long day. I'm not used to travel, and I'm exhausted."

"Will I see you again?"

"We're neighbors, aren't we?"

He said nothing. Made no sound.

"Here?" I offered the question automatically, because already something inside me knew it was going to happen.

Tomorrow, perhaps.

In the night.

Or maybe...

"I hate to promise..." Stiffening, prickling, I felt a new shudder trace the length of my spine. And my stomach tensed, too. As I recognized that shuddering for exactly what it was.

Desire. Sharp and searing-sweet. *Desire.* Dark, and wholly forbidden.

Tensing again, tensing still more, with the strange

and automatic suspicion of a woman alone...a suspicion I'd foolishly allowed myself to relinquish in these last few incredible moments, I murmured "I have so much to do. Such a short time in which to do it. So I don't know when...I mean, how..."

Even to my own inexperienced ears the excuse sounded weak. Clumsy.

Because I had nothing to do, and I thought Gardner knew it. Nothing but buy groceries and air out a few too-long-disused rooms. Nothing but see about having the phone connected so that I wouldn't be completely isolated and helpless, nothing at all to do then but sit tight in the looming house that had so unexpectedly become mine, and try to figure out what I was going to do with the rest of my life...what I was meant to do, and what I wanted to do.

The truth was I had nowhere to go.

Nowhere I was expected to be.

Ever again.

And that was one more truth I was going to have to face. One more painful truth. One more I knew I couldn't hope to deny. Or defeat.

Gardner McCord hadn't touched me.

He hadn't laid a finger on me. Not physically.

But he'd done something far more insidious. Something far more shocking in its incredible intimacy.

He'd left me wanting him.

Wanting him to do all those unspeakable things I could barely imagine. Do them to me...to the body I'd thought to hold apart, hold pure and sacred.

He'd left me wanting, Everything.
And he was, had to be, completely aware of it.

CHAPTER TWO

I stood in chill sunshine on the ancient sidewalk before Rosewalk. A sharp wind buffeted me, making me glad for the heavy corduroys and gray sweatshirt I'd chosen to wear this morning beneath my plain black cloth coat, even if it had seemed incredibly daring to don them. Incredibly dangerous and foolhardy. But the wind still chilled me to the core. It still carried a not at all subtle promise of icy winter soon to sweep malevolently down from high mountains I could see as hazy blue silhouettes in the distance beyond Great-Uncle Thaddeus' dead and dying gardens. Beyond the rooftops and distant, shimmering spires of downtown Denver.

I stood at the very bottom of the worn stone steps leading up to my leaf-littered porch, stood with my back to the house and stared wordlessly at the group across the street. And wished I had the courage to run back. Wished I could summon the courage to run, as fast as my sparkling-new white athletic shoes would carry me, all the way back to my massive, weatherworn front door and then inside. To slam it

behind me and never come out again.

The people in the group looked angry.

There were ten of them. Twelve. Perhaps more. I found myself unable to count, unable to do anything but stand frozen in the place where I'd stopped, startled by the sight of them and unnerved by the decidedly strange sensation of the ends of my uncovered hair tapping anxiously at the sides of my face. Driven by the cold wind that in that single instant felt even colder, felt dusty and desolate and ominous, the ends of my hair tapped furtively. As if they wanted to get my attention without attracting notice from the milling crowd on the other side of the street.

Dried leaves skittered in wild whirlpools around my feet. Clacking angrily at the pavement, they seemed to want to claw their way through my shoes, and I looked down for a moment. I stared, uncomprehending, at them. And then I lifted my head. Then I looked at the gathering mob again...and it *had* gathered. Had gained new members, almost doubling in size in the short time I'd stood there like a statue, watching leaves swirl at my feet and trying to decide what I should do.

Go for a walk as I'd planned?

Find the small grocery store I'd seen from the cab and buy the supplies I'd need to survive, and in so doing acquaint myself with my new surroundings?

Or would it indeed be better to run back inside? To hide as I was so sorely tempted to hide, inside my sanctuary?

I wanted so badly to do it. Wanted nothing more in the world than to hurry back up the steps and across the porch. To kick rattling, rustling droves of leaves aside if they tried to hold me back, to plunge inside and re-fashion my life into the old one. The one I'd known before.

I wanted never to have to deal with anger. Or mobs. Or the world.

I wanted the people across the street to go away. To leave me with my peace. To let me go about my business unmolested, to buy my groceries.

But that wasn't going to happen.

They were looking at me.

Almost every face in the crowd that had grown again while I hadn't been paying full attention was turned toward me. As if...*or, no.*

Almost every face in the crowd was turned toward the house next door to mine. The house that belonged to Gardner McCord.

Curiosity won out, then, over any desire to flee. In any direction.

Slowly, feeling as constrained and encumbered as if I'd worn my long and heavy skirts and the equally long veil that fit so tightly against my face and throat that there was no room for even the tiniest breath of freshening air to pass between, I turned.

I tried to see what they were seeing.

There were just the two houses on this side of the street. Just the two, and grounds that occupied all of the city block. My house, and his, both of them large. Set unnaturally close together as if there had once

been other houses there, other houses upon what were now wide and sweeping lawns extending all the way to far corners.

Two houses that seemed joined somehow. In some less than fathomable way.

Gardner's house, like my own, was an ordinary-looking place for a mansion. Like Rosewalk, it sat close to the sidewalk. But there the similarity ended. Where Rosewalk hulked behind the protection of iron fences with spiked tips, its lawns tree shaded and brush choked, Gardner's house sat surrounded by low hedges and bare and stark, unlandscaped lawn. Where Rosewalk was old and decrepit with age and neglect, Gardner's house was neatly painted, dull gray and almost dreary-looking, but well-kept nonetheless, its dreariness encouraged by tall windows hidden by heavy, closed shutters.

His was not an inviting house. No more than Rosewalk was inviting in its shredded, weathered, paint-peeling age. But it was nothing, certainly, to inspire the kind of malevolent unease verging on anger I sensed from the milling, jostling throng across the way.

I had no business being here.

No business standing motionless in cold wind, shivering inside my hastily purchased and inadequate coat, watching as the group edged closer, ever closer, to the leaf-strewn street between the sidewalks. No business at all lingering with dry-brittle swarms of brown and gold and umber leaves whirling furiously around my feet before scattering themselves helter-

skelter across cracked sidewalk.

Trying to sweep me away.

Feeling suddenly, absolutely certain of that, I tucked my hands deep into the pockets of my coat and turned to go about my business. Only to find myself face to face with one of them.

One of the mob, a woman I'd spotted a moment or two before on the other side of the street.

Red-suited, epitomizing...for me, at least...the ultimate in smart urban chic, she'd stood out among the khakis and denim-blues and restrained grays of the others.

Now she stepped squarely into my path. Now she regarded me silently, for what seemed the longest of times. Though I felt sure it was in reality no more than a second or two.

"Hello," I said timidly, wondering what I was supposed to do...what was required of me. I did my best to smile, too, though Mother had considered smiling one more of those unacceptable, unconscionable displays of emotion that must be repressed at all costs. I did my best to smile even though I cowered inside, ready to be severely chastised for the breach of decorum, as I would have been chastised and punished in the old life.

I was badly out of practice.

My smile felt tight.

Strained.

Strange.

"Are you the new owner of this..." The red-suited woman paused long enough in her speech to sweep

an arm around dramatically in the direction of Great-Uncle Thaddeus...my...mansion. "This *place*?"

Slowly, I nodded. Once again feeling the weight of veils and skirts that were no longer there. "I'm Jean-Agnes Teagarden."

"You're related to old Thaddeus Teagarden?"

Again, I nodded.

"And you're staying alone here?"

Another nod, all I could seem to manage now that I'd worn myself out with the effort of one smile and the strain of revealing my identity.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" It was clear from the woman's face that she wanted anything but to allow me to go back inside Rosewalk. It was clear she wanted me to be...expected me to be...as meek and obedient as I'd been taught to be. It was clear she meant for me to follow her lead. Do whatever she suggested.

"I'll be fine," I replied, raising a none-too-steady hand to brush whipping strands of hair from my face.

My tone would fool no one.

I heard that myself.

But the red-suited woman didn't seem to notice.

She seemed taken aback. Maybe even insulted. So I tried again to smile, and found it no easier this time. Found it no easier to control my floating raven billows of unfettered hair as a gust of new wind, a stronger and more persistent wind, tried to knock me from my feet.

"They found another one last night," the woman said, as if I'd know what in the world she was talking

about. Leaning close to me, she half-whispered the words with an almost-wicked, harshly glittering glee.

"Another one?" Baffled, still trying to extricate the hair from my eyes, I shook my head.

"Another girl." Her voice dropped. It took on a tone so sinister, so dire and dreadful it sent a shiver through my very marrow. "In the park." Here she turned slightly, pointing to the narrow slit of open ground between Gardner McCord's house and my own, a gesture I could only take to mean there must be a park back there. Must be one in the unexplored rear territories of my property...our properties. "They're calling him the Halloween killer," she almost hissed. "Because he always strikes at this time of year. Always in the last half of October."

"They?" I was rapidly becoming baffled. Rapidly becoming so disoriented that I wished I *had* fled. While I'd had the chance.

"The press." The woman leaned closer. So close that I wanted to scream. Wanted to tell her I valued my space, needed my space, *demanding* my space.

Instead I remained silent. Mute. Unable to move, much less make a sound in protest or anything else.

"The news media," the woman hissed. "They call him the Halloween killer. This one was sixteen. And she was just like all the others."

"O...others?" I actually did find my voice then, actually did manage to back away. Just a step or two. Just enough to put some badly needed distance between myself and the suddenly unholy outrage I felt seeping from every pore of the other woman.

"That's right." The woman nodded. She smiled, though her expression conveyed none of the usual meanings of a smile. Instead it looked grim. Sinister. Almost like a death-rictus arrived prematurely. "She was a cheerleader. From the high school down the street."

I backed away again. Farther. "I'm afraid I don't understand," I whispered. "I only arrived yesterday, and..."

"He slit her throat. Drank her blood. *Drained* her of her blood. Just like all the others. Just like all the times...and God only knows how many times there have been. Six that we know of. All of them in this neighborhood. All in the park right next to this neighborhood, or close to it. Six dead. And maybe more. Maybe a *lot* more, going all the way back...all the way to that girl ten years ago. *That* one was only thirteen. She was the first to disappear, and they never found her. Never even found a trace of her, back before they knew there was a killer. A vicious and cold-blooded killer with a thirst for blood right here in our..."

Only a quick dodge on my part kept the woman from capturing my arm in a vise-grip. Capturing it so she could hold me there indefinitely, against my will and common sense, and the fear that only now began to shriek and shrill inside my skull. Common sense that begged me to run, run, *run!* To hear none of this, understand none.

"He slits their throats." The red-suited woman...blood-red, I noted in a kind of awestruck

horror...seemed fascinated by the notion. Fixated upon it, and quite possibly even obsessed with it. "He steals the blood. From their bodies. And he drinks it before he..."

"How do you know he drinks it?" I hadn't wanted to ask, wished immediately I hadn't felt compelled to ask. Because I *didn't* want to hear the answer.

The woman never paused to offer one.

"He leaves them when he's finished," she intoned, sounding almost in a hypnotic and self-induced trance. "He leaves them with their eyes open, Leaves them staring at the sky. *Staring.*" The woman's voice dropped. To a rasp. A low and breathlessly throaty sound. As if her throat, too, had been cut. "They say when they find them...when they find the girls he's killed and feasted upon...you can see the image of him imprinted in their eyes."

Shivering, I wanted to be out of there. Wanted it like I'd never wanted anything before.

"They say you can see the image of the evil they saw in the last instant before he satisfied his unholy urges with them."

Dear heaven.

I had to repress a scream. Was almost unable to repress it.

Murder? Maybe rape? Close by while I'd slept unawares in the violet-sprigged room I'd taken for myself at the back of Rosewalk because it was the room in which I'd gloried when I'd been seven, and made my only previous visit to Thaddeus' mansion?

I shivered again. Harder.

Shuddered.

I did *not* want to hear any more.

"She was the sixth." Gone was the chic neighbor with whom I'd started this conversation. In her place crouched a wide-eyed harridan with hair falling from a no-longer-smooth upsweep, with small beads of spittle collecting at the corners of her mouth and long, scarlet-tipped fingernails stroking claw-like at the smooth line of her blood-colored skirt. "But she will be the last."

The woman had gone beyond reason. Her gestures had grown increasingly agitated. The glitter in her eyes was more pronounced, the clawing motions of scarlet fingernails against scarlet fabric ever more animated, ever more frightening as she stepped forward, *leaned* forward, again. Insisting I hear. Insisting I listen, insisting I understand.

Nothing was required of me.

I had to work to remind myself of that. Remind myself firmly.

I was free to listen if I chose. And just as free to not listen.

I was free to do whatever suited *me*. And at the moment, acting on a hot and energizing spurt of independence like none I could remember knowing before, I chose *not* to hear.

Turning away, I caught a last glimpse of my neighbor, poised at the very edge of the sidewalk as if she might at any second topple over in her inexplicable frenzy. Turning away, I walked swiftly, without looking back. Walked in the direction I'd

meant to go from the very beginning. Along the spike-tipped fence and the enclosed lawn, toward the garden half a block away on Rosewalk's north side. Toward the corner where a dull-brown forest of elongated rose canes danced nervously as the wind rose again, tapping swooping stalks urgently against the iron bars of the fence.

That lovely woman, that worldly and sophisticated model of the modern woman in her bold suit and shining earrings, was afraid.

Of what, I didn't know. Didn't care to know, because it didn't, must not ever be allowed to, have anything to do with me.

"He will be stopped," she shouted at my back. Her voice rose. It became a kind of frenzied, even demonic, howl.

The sound of it set the hairs at the back of my neck and beneath the sleeves of my sweatshirt straight on end.

"You mark my words! He will not be allowed to continue!" She was shrieking now. Was wailing the words to me and to the world in general. "He will not be allowed to have another. Ever! And if you don't join us..."

Unvoiced, the threat was clear.

Uncompleted, the meaning was obvious. Even to me, who had so little knowledge of mobs, or anger, or the way a mob could turn the entire world upside down and make the irrational seem perfectly, incontrovertibly sane.

She...they, the mob, would put me in the same

league as the depraved individual who'd committed those unthinkable acts.

They had already put me into that league. For reasons I couldn't imagine, reasons I found hard to imagine.

So I did what I should have done at the very beginning.

I ran. As if for my life, my sense of relief at parting from my red-suited neighbor so thick in the warming October sunshine that I actually believed I could grab hold of it if I wanted. I actually believed I could hold tight to it if need be, and use it to steady myself. To help myself in my headlong, terror-driven flight.

CHAPTER THREE

The mob was gone when I returned with my bag of groceries in my hand and my heart hammering out anxious and nervous rhythms inside my chest.

I wasn't sure what I might have done had they still been there.

Turned tail and run again, I supposed.

I was profoundly thankful I would never need to find out...profoundly thankful the street lay deserted, peaceful at least on the surface, gleaming and glittering in now strong, now surprisingly warm October sunlight.

The only person in sight was a man dressed in gardener's khakis, hard at work sweeping the sidewalk in front of Gardner McCord's house. Hard at work sweeping, and just as hard at work eyeing me as I approached. Eyeing me skeptically.

"Good morning," I said as soon as I traveled into earshot, having to drag myself up out of my habitual reticence and silence to muster even that simple greeting.

He nodded. And went on with his sweeping, one eye trained watchfully upon me even while I could see he tried not to look like he'd trained anything upon anyone.

Coming to a stop at the opening in my iron fence where the small sidewalk branched off in the direction of the porch steps, I eyed him right back. "What happened to the..." I didn't want to say 'mob'. Didn't want to risk raising another person's ire for no apparent reason if I could help it. So I cast about in my mind, searching for another word that might come close to describing the ugly-minded group I'd seen there earlier.

"Neighbors?" The man's voice sounded much older than he looked. It cracked and wavered, in complete defiance and contrast to the easy grace and quickness of his movements as he gave the sidewalk one last flick, sending a final scatter of autumn-dried leaves into the gutter.

From the way he uttered the word, I gathered he didn't think much of the people who'd been all but ready for a lynching, earlier. And that gave me courage. Enough, at least, to nod and take a few steps closer. Just to the end of my fence and the start of Gardner's low and painfully neat boxwood hedge. Just so we wouldn't have to shout and scream at each other, and run the risk those very same neighbors...if that was who they had been...might hear every word and come back to make the lynching real.

"They were upset," I ventured.

"Yep." The voice was that of a cowboy, not a

gardener.

"They were after someone."

"Him, I expect."

I sighed a little. Not quite audibly.

I'd been puzzling over that ever since I'd fled.

The mob, the red-suited woman who'd acted as their spokesperson, had seemed absolutely certain who they sought...who had done the murders and who should be punished for them. And if that was the case...

I still hadn't quite put the whole thing together in my head.

If they were so certain, why didn't they phone the police? Why didn't they let the police take care of it?

Why didn't they let them do their jobs and investigate...let them see what kind of evidence they could come up with?

Because if I knew anything at all about logic and certainty, it seemed absolutely certain to me that someone as mentally off-balance and perverted as a man who could commit such terrible crimes must have left evidence. Surely he must be too ill to cover his tracks completely.

Surely he had made some mistake...had left behind some clue that would give him away.

It was a puzzle for which I'd been unable to divine an answer. Except to decide that where mob mentality ruled, reason and logic were highly apt to go straight out the window. And the group on the opposite side of the street had definitely been a mob. Whether I felt up to voicing the idea out loud or not.

"I'm glad they're gone," I said, a little more timidly than before. "They frightened me."

The gardener stopped his sweeping that was accomplishing nothing.

The sidewalk was already clean as a whistle, and perfect in the sunlight. So he leaned on his broom and regarded me across the top of it, his gaze and his expression perfectly serious. "*They're* frightened," he replied in a tone that said this should be perfectly obvious to anyone with half a mind, and I had to be a dolt if it wasn't obvious to me.

Unsure what to say, I nodded.

I understood fright.

I'd had more than enough of it in the last few days. Enough of all kinds, though not of the kind the mob had shared, to last a lifetime. Ten lifetimes.

I thought I knew where they'd been coming from. Still, it didn't explain much. Didn't come at all close to answering the key question.

"I'd think you'd be frightened, too," the gardener said across the top of his broom. "Living alone here. With the likes of that monster out and roaming the streets by night. In search of his next victim."

Drawing myself up, I was vaguely aware that the conversation had just crossed some sort of line. One that should never be crossed. "How do you know I'm alone?"

"Word gets around," was all the gardener would say before he went back to his sweeping, and sweeping, and eternal, needless sweeping.

"You'd best be careful," he said after a very long

while, just when I'd been about to admit defeat and turn back to Rosewalk. "Living in that particular house, and all."

Instead I frowned. "That parti...oh, because of the park, you mean."

I'd already discovered, not to my relief, that the park where the girl had been found dead the night before, the park where a small plot of ground was still marked off by tape and police cars still sat upon faded grass to guard the spot, lay directly behind my property. It was a double-block wide space of open land beneath enormous old trees, and the spot where the girl had been found...where, according to the chatter I'd heard in the grocery store, she'd been killed and her blood had been drained...lay barely forty feet from the place where my back gate and Gardner's opened side by side into the small lane that separated us from the park.

The gardener gave me a look. A very dour one that hinted I wasn't in possession of all the facts, and he had no intention of being the one to enlighten me.

"So, what *did* happen to the crowd?" I asked, glancing back and forth along the street as if maybe they'd simply moved their meeting out of public view. Moved it into some private, less obvious corner.

I saw no one. No movement. Not even a hint of movement.

"Cops came." Apparently the gardener had decided he'd done all he could. Swinging his broom around to rest it over his shoulder, he turned away toward a green and white lawn-service pickup truck

parked in the smooth-raked gravel driveway at the far side of Gardner McCord's mansion.

"The *police*?"

I had to admit the idea startled me. Much more than it probably should have, given the uneasy and ominous circumstances.

Not looking at me, tossing his broom into the back of his truck and then retrieving a rag upon which he proceeded to wipe his hands with excessive...almost deliberately time-consuming...care, the gardener gave another of his short, jerky, almost non-communicative nods. "'Course they did," he said so tersely that he sounded furious. "Situation like this, and all. Who knows what could happen?" At last he turned to me. At last he faced me, and his expression was as forbidding and unfriendly as his tone. "Who knows what could *still* happen?"

In answer, I shuddered. Visibly, I thought, hugging my paper sack of groceries tighter as a small and mirthless smile flickered around the corners of his mouth.

"If I was you," he said quietly but forcefully, "I'd skedaddle right on out of here before it's too late."

"But I own..."

"That mausoleum." He nodded again, in the direction of Rosewalk. Nodded as jerkily and curtly as before. "I know you do. Everybody around here knows you do. And that's not a good place to be owning, Miss. If you don't mind me bein' presumptuous, that's a very, very *bad* place to be owning."

I shook my head. "I'm sorry. I don't under..."

"That's not a place in good favor in this neighborhood. Nobody here favors all that went on there."

"All that..."

"Just like they pretty much hate and despise *him* for his part in it. And for all the other things he is."

There it was again.

That faintly sneered *him*.

Referring to...

For a moment, indignant, I thought it referred to my great-uncle Thaddeus.

I hadn't in truth known Thaddeus well. Hadn't known him at all. Yet it seemed entirely logical to want to spring immediately and uninhibitedly to his defense.

Thaddeus had been the only family I had once my parents passed on. The only one who'd given any sign he noticed me or thought of me. So it seemed entirely natural to open my mouth. To prepare to spew a long stream of uncharacteristically hot words to the effect that Thaddeus hadn't been a bad person.

As I knew in my heart he hadn't. Whatever other impression the neighbors and busybodies might have of him.

"The cops warned the neighbors off," the gardener went on, waylaying me. "Again. But that won't last. No more this time than any of the times before."

"Before?" Shivering hard, I had to juggle my sack to keep from dropping it when my arms took on a rubbery and useless quality I'd never anticipated.

"You mean they've..."

The gardener wasn't listening. Busy now at the back of his truck, he seemed to have lost all track of me, seemed to have abandoned all notice of me and to be talking to someone else. Someone I couldn't see, hidden in the deep bed between rakes, and shovels, and bags of mulch and other exotic, unknown substances.

"It'll come back," he prophesied gloomily. "Always does. And it's always a little uglier. Every time it gets uglier. Until one of these days..."

He left the words hanging. Left my imagination to spin and spin and spin, wildly out of control now that I'd allowed it to be unleashed.

Lifting his head, he turned his gaze to something beyond his truck.

At first I thought all that stark, frowning concentration was for the wide sweep of lawn at the side of Gardner's mansion beyond the neatly graveled driveway. Nothing but an unbroken, slightly sloped and perfectly manicured sweep of grass bordered by low boxwood that was its only ornamentation of any kind, the lawn seemed vast. Seemed endless as it rolled toward the far corner. Seemed twice as large as Rosewalk's cluttered, rose-draped, wandering mass of gardens.

"You'd be smart to get out," the gardener said again, suddenly.

I realized he'd set his gaze not on all that vastness of unrelieved grass after all, but on the park at its back.

The park with its deep and mysterious corners, its stark tracery of autumn shadow upon crushed and worn grass, its police cars standing as incontrovertible reminders of what had gone on there in the hours while I'd slept peacefully, dreamlessly, in my room that overlooked that very spot.

"You should get out before you get involved." The gardener's voice was dreamy and slow. Reflective, and not entirely a part of any reality I'd ever known. "You should make it your business to get out. Before *he* makes you a part of this." Now his gaze swept around. Now, unmistakably, he looked straight at the tall and white, boxy and porchless façade of Gardner McCord's house that, for all its neatness and perfection of repair, somehow looked more lifeless and sinister than the sagging and sad decay next door at Rosewalk.

"Gardner McCord?" I asked, astonished. "Is that who we've been talking about?"

"He charms them, they say."

Now I felt compelled to defend Gardner, though I'd known him even less than my great-uncle. "You can't be serious? You're telling me Gardner McCord is the one the neighbors believe..."

"You've met him." The gardener swung his baleful glance my way, and in the process his back stiffened. His entire demeanor changed subtly but unmistakably, so that I thought...*knew*...that if he hadn't found himself in a position where backing away from me would have him backing away from his truck in the process, he would indeed have backed

away.

"He lives next door. It only seems reasonable that I'd..."

"And he charmed you."

I hesitated.

Was that what it had been?

Remembering the way I'd reacted to Gardner's rich and deep voice, to the low timbre of something unidentifiable I'd heard in the unique way he pronounced his words and emphasized them, remembering the way I'd touched myself right there, right on the open porch under the cover of darkness as he'd spoken to me from his hiding place inside his own darkness, I had to wonder.

What else could have made me do such things to myself during the night?

What else but some kind of magic charm or spell could have induced me to lie upon my high and soft bed, so unlike my narrow cot at Divine Serenity, with my fingers stroking gently, repeatedly, wildly and unstoppably, at areas I'd never stroked before?

What else but a magic spell could have brought me to the point that I'd cried out sharply, not once but a dozen times...two dozen...as I began to plunge deep and then deeper still with fingers that sought to quench hungers and thirsts I'd never before allowed myself to feel? Fingers that, in the end, had only succeeded in making those hungers and thirsts so much more unquenchable. So much more unforgettable, so much more needed and desired and demanded?

Feeling myself go red in the face, I tried to stop a fresh round of shudders, and was only partially successful.

I'd been wanton.

Brazen.

I'd explored my body intimately, and at length. Had explored intently and, I now feared, awakened the sexuality I'd striven all my adult life and even before to quash as unnatural, unholy, unbecoming one of my desired pure and devout state.

I'd jammed my fingers, first one and then two and then more, as far into myself as I could urge them to go. Had shuddered beneath the resulting chaos of twisting, tormented feelings the forbidden touches aroused. Had tossed upon sweat-soaked sheets, my voice echoing into dim corners and corridors far beyond the room's open door, my cries fevered and anguished, fevered and unsated, fevered and demanding recognition that never came. Recognition that couldn't come in the empty vastnesses of a house I had to myself the way I'd never in my life had a place to myself before.

I'd done things to myself. Aroused things in myself that in the too-clear and too-gleaming light of this warm autumn afternoon wouldn't bear close inspection. Things for which I'd have to pray soon, down on my knees and dressed again in the safe shroud of clothing designed to remind me of my sanctity and the necessity to preserve it. I'd have to pray until my knees, my entire body, ached from long hours of kneeling on nothing but hard planks, my

face turned steadfastly toward some blank and unadorned wall. I'd have to pray as Mother had demanded. 'Til my fingers bled from handling the rosary. All the while offering repentance and hoping for forgiveness that couldn't come to one guilty of such unspeakable acts. Such mindless depravity.

I was no longer holy.

No longer, maybe, even the virgin I'd required myself to remain.

So, yes.

If that was charm, I'd been seduced by it. Seduced by the dark and hidden man himself, seduced so completely that I couldn't wait for darkness to fall again.

Couldn't wait, even now, even in the clear and all-revealing light of day, to touch myself. To plunge with searching fingers and feel wet depths close around them, couldn't wait to feel the steaming gush of earthy vitality begin to tear itself free, begin to swell and swelter, begin to pour from my agonized body in quantities that both astonished and terrified me. Quantities that didn't, for all their enormity and supposed endlessness, come even close to satisfying the need Gardner McCord had set loose upon me and within me.

"I have to p...pray." In the end, it was I who backed away. In the end it was I who escaped the gardener's small and knowing smile. I who needed the security and redemption to be found in veils, and robes, and tight-fitting wimples designed to allow only the smallest bit of face and the twin palenesses of

my hands to remain exposed to the world.

For a moment I thought the gardener was going to laugh. For a moment, I thought he actually did.

"You do that, then," he said. "But it's already too late."

"T...too..." I was still backing. Still anticipating, dreading, the agony of pain that long hours of prayer would exact upon knees, and shoulders, and the body I would not, as Mother's edicts declared, allow to sag or sway as I made my penance.

"I don't know how you met him. I don't know where." The gardener's smile disappeared as suddenly and inexplicably as it had come. "But I know you did. And I know he got to you. The way they say he gets to everyone he comes into contact with. Contaminating them with his evil."

"I..." I wished it was possible to run backwards without danger of stumbling flat to my back on hard and uncompromising pavement.

"I come here in the daytime," he declared, sounding righteous now, and very, very sure of himself. "I don't let myself ever run into him, or anyone the likes of him. I come on my contract with the lawn-service company, and I make sure I'm gone long before the sun sets." Pausing, he nodded once again in my direction, pulling open the door of his pickup. "You won't catch me within a mile of here in the darkness. No, ma'am! And if you know anything at all about what's good for you...if you care anything at all about your own safety...you'll mark my words. And you'll do the same."

I stared at him.

And he stared silently back at me.

"If it's not already too late."

And that was all he had to say. That was the last of it, before he leaped into his truck and backed it out of Gardner's sweep of perfectly ordered, perfectly ordinary driveway. Before he roared off down the street just as he'd said.

Long before night darkened the sky and concealing shadows rose around the houses, the street, the concealing trees of the park.

Just as it had yesterday, shortly after my arrival, my head began to buzz. Ominously. With headache, and warning, and the compulsion to save myself in any way I could.

Any way short of leaving Rosewalk. For I had already determined that leaving was not an option. My heart already knew that though I might wear my outward trappings of piety and faith during the daylight hours and even on into the first darkness of evening, eventually I would give in to the other life. The one I'd only barely begun to live.

Eventually I would give in to seething heat that ran rampant in the hidden regions beneath my outward trappings. Eventually I would lie upon my bed, and eventually the touching and stroking would begin.

Eventually, no matter how much I prayed...and I *would* pray, exactly as I'd been taught and required to pray...I would stroke again at the soft and alluring folds of myself. Eventually, even if I tried to resist as instinct told me I should resist, I would delight in the

DARK PLEASURES

outer softness of them. And in the sinking of eager fingers into wet whorls that opened upon countless depths of even softer, weeping and misting flesh that had never before been plumbed. Never before been awakened, never before been allowed to demonstrate its true capacity for demanding what I did not understand. What terrified me beyond reason.

Eventually, I would give in to the delight of sin.

Eventually, I would give up my holy soul for that delight.

And as before, as last night, I would revel in it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rosewalk loomed airless and stuffy around me. The house had been closed for months. The air inside had grown terribly thick, terribly musty, terribly stale. And all that long-gathered and carefully hoarded thickness could not be dealt with entirely within any twenty-four hours. Especially not when the day had been hot and sunny as this one had been earlier, and I had not thought to open a window or two to allow the staleness to escape. Not even when the stifling autumn afternoon began to release its grip at last and sink, along with lowering light beyond blinds drawn tightly and completely, toward the cooler hours of approaching sundown.

Safe now beneath my layers of heavy black, safe with the folds of my veil drawn close around me like a shroud, safe with my face turned toward my wall and my back rigidly held in the proper attitude, safe with knees burning from time spent in contact with hard, hard flooring, I worked my beads steadily through my fingers.

Hail Mary, full of grace...

How long had I been here?

How long had I prayed for strength to see me through the coming night of inhuman temptation? Strength to help me resist doing what I knew I would do...*must* do?

I didn't know. Couldn't know.

The wall inches from my face, the wall carefully chosen because it lay at an interior corner of the house from where I could see nothing of the outside, nothing but the blankness of aged, dull-brown paper, the wall so desirable because it resembled the one I'd faced day after long and identical day during my service at Divine Serenity, gave no clue to the passage of time.

As it should not.

As Mother had taught, I should divorce myself from time.

Time was unimportant. Time was irrelevant. Time, and the passage of it, was only a distraction from what I should be doing. What I should be thinking, was required to be thinking.

I didn't know how long I'd been there. But I knew it had been quite some time.

Hunger roiled in my stomach.

The familiar, weary numbness of penance had long since stolen through limbs progressed far beyond the pain of mere human flesh.

The unconscionable, unacceptable desire to sway had crept over me, and my flesh cringed. Expecting to feel the sting of Mother's cane across my shoulders when I did.

Darkness had gathered beyond my remote corner, and I felt the allure of it. I felt the desire to shed my veils and robes, the desire to rise up off stiff and aching knees so that I could prepare myself to plunge again. Into the richness and ripeness of what darkness had to offer.

For one who'd only recently made poverty and the denunciation of any kind of wealth or any kind of worldliness such an integral, the single most important, part of her life other than the faith and devotion upon which those notions were based, the idea was hardly comforting. In fact it was deeply distressing after hours spent at my prayers. Was terribly difficult to accept or come to terms with, and it left me with a mounting sense of hopelessness. That everything I'd based my life upon up until this time had been for nothing. That it had been a sham and a pipe dream, and that all my ingrained beliefs had been somehow skewed and unrealistic, all my saintly aspirations no more than a waste of precious years I could never get back.

By the time I rose from my prayer, stiff-kneed even at twenty-five, and trying hard not to limp since Mother had drilled repeatedly and persistently that I was never to show pain, never to show I felt anything even remotely connected with the sufferings of humanity, I was completely disquieted. Completely unable to focus upon anything but the sky, viewed through a narrow slit between curtains at a window on the opposite side of Rosewalk from the temptation of Gardner McCord's house.

Alone here, with Thaddeus' possessions crowded in around me, alone with only thick white candles to light my way just as candles had been the only illumination permitted in the damp darkness of Divine Serenity, I waited.

For the night.

I sat at the scarred table in my ancient kitchen, still safe in my heavy garments, and passed my time drinking tea. Forcing myself to review what little I knew of the great-uncle whose death had changed everything...had brought me here, for what purpose I could not know.

It was either that or scream in my impatience to slip outside into cover of night, and listen to Gardner's nearby and yet far-removed voice. Either that or go absolutely mad with the touching my body demanded...the touching I'd vowed to resist earlier, in my corner. Touching I'd determined sometime since would continue, but only under the strictest blanket of privacy. Touching I knew I would give in to eventually, because I was already addicted. I was already hopelessly and helplessly beholden to the surging gold and ruby of fire inside my own body. Fire that, now awakened, showed no sign it would ever be relegated back into the realms of sin and depravity where it had so long been banished. When I'd been young enough and naïve enough to believe all I needed to do was wish to be pure and chaste, and it would be so.

I sat nervously next to my window, my back ramrod straight, my feet flat on the floor in the only

attitude Mother considered proper or acceptable, my hands motionless atop my lap except for occasional sips of tea or more frequent fingerings of the rosary beads I wore at my belt. I sat with my face held serene, my head bowed to the slightest, most prayerful angle. And waited impatiently as the light took its own sweet time about abandoning the sky.

I sat, and I thought.

Not about the prayer that should have engaged me, but about Thaddeus.

I tried to arrange the things I knew of him into some kind of logical order. Something that would make sense. That would be useful in my battle to understand this new and unnervingly unfamiliar life...this new and unnervingly passion and sensation riddled life. Something I hoped would make that life tolerable.

I knew so little.

My great-uncle had been a famous eccentric. That much had been clear even long ago. Even when I'd still been living uneasily in my father's house, tiptoeing around like the shadow he'd wanted and demanded I be.

My father hadn't approved of Thaddeus. And neither, easily swayed as she'd been and easily dominated by anyone stronger and more resilient, had my mother.

I didn't know why.

Fancied I would probably never know, other than their occasional vague and overheard references about Thaddeus being 'peculiar'.

All I really knew was what I could remember from the one trip my parents had made, with me in tow, to this very house. Before whatever falling-out and difference of opinion had ended even that flimsy contact.

I remembered him only as an old man. Though that had probably been nothing more than a child's misperception. Thaddeus had undoubtedly been a man in his prime then, or only just past, I surmised. He must have merely *seemed* old to a bewildered seven-year-old.

But he had been peculiar. That much I remembered clearly.

He'd been a man who valued his privacy, even with guests in the house. Even with his only relatives, whom he'd professed to welcome unconditionally, and with open arms.

There had been something...odd...about his peculiarities. About his habit of disappearing in the late evenings, of leaving the house or retreating to the privacy of distant rooms where he must never be disturbed. Must never be approached for any reason.

And something about his oddness had made a vein stand out in my father's forehead, I remembered suddenly, with crystalline clarity. Something had made that vein stand out even farther than it normally did, so brutally far that I had heard my mother whisper more than once that perhaps we should leave. Perhaps we should go and leave Thaddeus alone with the cats he seemed to prefer over all other contact...all human contact.

Cats.

Frowning, I remembered them quite clearly, too.

They'd always been around on that childhood visit, always underfoot. And since my father had hated them so intensely...allergies? I wondered for the first time ever...I'd been unused to them. Afraid of them.

I still was.

Nervous, I allowed myself to glance away from the window and the steadily-increasing darkness beyond. Flicking a long look over my shoulder at the front hallway where shadows hung heavy in darkly seductive shrouds, I listened as diligently as I'd watched the sky only seconds before...listened, imagining the sound of claws scrabbling against hardwood floors.

Thaddeus' lawyer's letter had told me the executors had removed eleven of the creatures from the house in the days following his death. I could only hope they'd retrieved them all. So I wouldn't have to encounter one of the beasts dead in some neglected corner. Or worse, wouldn't chance upon one in such an advanced state of starvation that it would be desperate enough and maddened enough to pounce upon anything living, no matter the size.

I should not sleep so easily tonight, I thought.

I should not sleep with my door so carelessly open and my shrieks of self-inflicted ecstasy echoing so freely into every distant, forgotten corner.

I would be a little more careful from now on. To keep out all the terrors of the night.

Rising from my straight-backed chair, still limping,

I began to roam. Craving action, I needed to roam if I was to resist growing impulse to begin the touching exploration of my body.

There were the stairs. Massive ones, with gnarled and intricate carvings on every spindle. That was one of the few places I'd been happy in my strange childhood. One of the only places I'd actually been allowed to *be* a child, thanks mostly to Thaddeus. There I'd sat, clad already in dim and stifling black at the age of seven, too solemn and silent as I played with the one doll I'd ever owned or had the chance to mother. Thanks again to Thaddeus, who'd refused to listen to my parents'...my father's...objections and refused to take it away from me once I'd expressed my delight with it.

How feverishly I had played on those stairs. How I'd tried to love the doll without really knowing how. How I'd tried to nurture it and cherish it, knowing that once I went to sleep, the doll would vanish. My unbending father would take her away, and I would never see her again.

How I'd struggled to stay awake that night, long beyond my normal bedtime, knowing I would awaken alone in the morning doll-less, and required to attend the long hours of study my father supervised even during periods of vacation...studies supervised with such uncompromising rigidity and lack of adaptability that I'd found myself fully prepared and fully ready to enter the rigors of life at Divine Serenity on my fourteenth birthday.

I'd known without being told that I would never be

allowed to take any of Thaddeus' gifts with me when I left this house. I'd known then that they would remain behind and that the lovely week of evergreens and massed candles, of spicy carnations in red and white and tiny lights shaped like stars, of prayers uttered softly and gently instead of with all-consuming suffering, would be the only real Christmas of my life. I had cherished those moments. Had loved them, and loved Thaddeus for giving them to me. Cherished him and yet hated him. For tempting me with what I would never again be permitted to have.

We'd left Rosewalk in a hurry that New Year's Eve.

My father and mother had been upset. I'd known that, yet not known why. I'd sensed some kind of trouble looming for them and around them, and hadn't dared to ask or to protest when they swept me from the magic of the life Thaddeus had shown me. When they'd swept me back into the stiff and demanding one I now realized they'd planned for me from the very start...from the very moment I'd somehow been created and born out of a formal and unyielding union between two people who hadn't had anything at all in common. Two who'd had not even the faintest spark of love or desire for one another, who'd never meant to create a child, and wanted only to be rid of her as quickly as possible once she had been created.

Standing in the cavernous front hallway before the carved stairs, standing with my hand on a basketball-sized newel post carved in the form of an intricately-

wrought basket of fruits and flowers, I smiled into the encroaching darkness. I wondered if Thaddeus might have stored those star-shaped lights away somewhere. I wondered who would know, and if I might find them so that I could begin to celebrate Christmas for myself. In ways instinct told me were neither wrong nor wanton.

No more than the spiraling desires of my awakened body were wrong or wanton. No more than I should refuse to deny them, since they were nothing more fearsome than a normal part of being a young and somehow still, in spite of everything that had been inflicted upon me and denied me, healthy woman.

I wondered about those lights. And promised myself I would look.

But later.

Outside, the world was sinking at last into darkness...rapidly into darkness.

Already the inside of Thaddeus' house...and I really would have to start thinking of it as *my* house now, as foreign and anti-everything I'd been taught to believe as that sounded...had gone almost black beyond the small illumination of my candles. With blackness so dense and so unrelieved in the center of the large hallway that I could see my own hands only as a pair of indistinct blurs when I lifted them in front of my face.

There was still light in the sky, though...still, when I went to the kitchen to peer out the windows at the vast empty stretch of night lurking there, a bright

stain of indigo shot with deep gold above the far, mountainous horizon.

Instinct told me Gardner would not appear until later.

Instinct told me, for no reason I could name, he would not appear until all the light had gone. Until the entire world faded into the kind of velvet dark that had shielded him from me, and me from him, the previous evening.

Instinct also tried to tell me I was being presumptuous and foolish to think he would appear at all just because I had decided I wanted him to appear. Just because I'd somehow grown besotted with the memory of his voice and the softly rushing saturation of unfamiliar moisture the sound of it had brought to the secret place between my legs.

Instinct tried, but I shoved its warning aside.

Gardner would appear.

I told myself so repeatedly as I turned to the task of making my dinner.

He would appear because I needed him to appear. Because he'd seemed to promise he would appear.

Hadn't he?

I couldn't be sure.

I thought I remembered that promise. But again that might only be the strange and fascinated craving he'd started up inside me. Doing its level best to justify all the changes in attitude and behavior that had crept over me in a little less than twenty-four hours in this place.

I knew I wanted to remember such a promise.

And that would have to be good enough.

That would have to carry me through until...if...

Plate in hand, my servings of cold potato salad and colder sliced ham, and a beer from a package I'd bought on a daring whim of debauchery because I'd never tasted beer and had decided on the spot I really needed to know what I'd been missing, I slipped out through the back door.

Shadows had dropped across the porch.

Someone looking, someone knowing I was there, could see me if they...*he*...made the effort. But to the casual observer I would be invisible beneath the deep overhang. Hidden in my mostly-black clothing.

I settled myself on the doorstep instead of a chair, in a clear-cut act of defiance meant to insist, entirely for my own benefit since there was no one else here who would either notice or care, that I had indeed changed. I had moved a long way toward becoming who I was supposed to be...who my father and then later Mother, in their almost identical rigid intolerance, had denied me permission to be.

I was becoming *me*.

Jean-Agnes Teagarden.

A woman who indulged secret fantasies and unimaginable passions under cover of the very sort of darkness that wrapped around me even as the thought sent a shudder of anticipation and dread coursing the length of my spine.

A woman who could not, could never, go back to what she had been. What she had tried to be. A woman who, to my very considerable amazement,

now suddenly wanted nothing to do with going back. Nothing to do with giving up the secrets Gardner had bestowed upon me...the secret delights and escapes he had opened to me, the secret burnings and throbbings that had been at work between my legs for much of the day and every single instant of the sleepless, tormented, touching and stroking night before.

Gardner had given me all of that. Whether it had been his intent or not.

He had given it whether I'd been ready or even willing to accept. And now that he had...

Smiling, tightening my thighs close together beneath the flowing volumes of my skirt, I smiled into the waiting darkness.

Gardner McCord had awakened me.

For that reason alone I would wait for him. I would wait to be his slave, should he deign to ask. Throughout the night if that should be necessary.

I would wait for as long as it took to win his notice.

CHAPTER FIVE

The wait, it seemed, would go on forever.

I didn't have a watch...hadn't even thought to buy one in my mad dash through the first discount store I'd encountered after leaving Divine Serenity, since time had had that little meaning.

Up until now, that little meaning. Now, though, it seemed to crawl. Now, with darkness fully upon my back porch and the only discernable differences in the completeness of night a matter of hundredths of degrees of darkness instead of differing *shades* of darkness, time seemed not to pass at all.

I finished my small supper. Finished, and stepped back into my lightless kitchen for only the moment it took to deposit my plate and half-emptied can...I'd decided I didn't much care for beer after all, even if it was Colorado's much-touted finest...into the sink. Finished, and rushed back outside to take up my post in the darkest place of all, rushed with my heart hammering never before hammered strokes in my throat, fearing I'd missed my chance in the scant seconds I'd been gone. Fearing I'd missed Gardner,

that he had come and, finding me nowhere nearby, gone again.

I knew that was silly. Knew it was a pipe-dream. For it was I who was besotted. I who had fallen under some sort of strange and inexplicable addiction for a man I'd never seen.

I, not Gardner.

For all I knew, I reasoned around a sick and sinking heart, he could have a wife and children. A sweetheart somewhere. Or that most unthinkable of things...in my world, anyway.

A mistress.

There was no reason he should notice me. I had nothing to offer, nothing with which to attract, much less hold, the notice of a silken-voiced man who, if instinct was right, had so many things to teach me. So many delightful and just slightly wicked things he knew that I did not.

I almost got up from my perch after what I judged to be an hour.

I almost went inside.

And then, as if summoned by the very sinking of hope and the death of my silly, ill-advised dreams and longings, there he was.

The screened door swooshed open on the opposite porch. Not with a sound like mine, not with the wail of a thousand dying and suffering banshees, but with a small and barely perceptible swish that said he kept his doors in good order. He kept his hinges well-oiled and everything in tip-top shape.

For a long moment there was silence. A complete

absence of movement and, or so it seemed, a complete absence of air in a world left suddenly and absolutely without sound. Then a small screech, as of a chair or some other piece of furniture being shoved across plank flooring, several small settling sounds, and the flare of a match that seemed impossibly bright, shockingly bright, in night now grown deeply endless.

Straining at the sight of that burst of flame, I sat forward expectantly. But if I'd thought to catch a glimpse of Gardner McCord's face, if I'd thought to see even the tiniest bit of that unknown, I was sadly disappointed. He lifted his match quickly, and I saw another flare. A smaller and more perfectly round, more glowingly red one, before the match extinguished. Then the only trace that remained of it was the small orange tip of a lighted cigarette that revealed nothing to my straining gaze, nothing to my searching and wistful eyes.

"You shouldn't smoke." My tone carried a world of stern disapproval.

"Jean-Agnes." After another short moment of silence, Gardner laughed. Not in a way that conveyed any amusement or lightness of heart. Rather, it was a heavy and ponderous sound, the way I'd come to associate heavy and ponderous with everything about him.

Still, it was a pleasant sound. Deep and rich, if a little rusty. As if laughter wasn't something he was used to. Any more than I was used to smiling, or relaxing, or speaking my mind without a habitual

burst of fear and dread. As if he hadn't laughed in a very long time.

"I thought you were there."

The glowing point of light that marked the end of his cigarette traced a long arc downward. Then upward again, to flare momentarily as bright as a meteor in the vastness of some uncharted space. Then another downward arc tracing a fiery orange line through the night, and the point of light vanished. A bit of crockery rattled, the unmistakable sound of him crushing the cigarette out.

A moment later I caught a whiff of smoke on a newly risen midnight breeze.

"Smoking's not good for you." I still sounded prim. And suddenly, horribly prissy.

"If only you knew. It's one of my few vices." And then he hesitated. For so long that I couldn't quite convince myself I hadn't dreamed the whole thing before, he added very softly, "One of my very few pleasures."

"Why won't you let me see you?" I questioned. "Why, unless you're..."

Deformed.

I couldn't bring myself to say it.

I couldn't bring myself to be so presumptuous or so forward, and this time it was a matter of sheer, human politeness. This time it was nothing at all to do with the repressive atmosphere Mother had fostered in her charges and the world in which they existed.

Gardner said nothing.

He seemed not to notice I'd said anything.

And I had reached the end of my patience. I had somehow, without even realizing it was happening, reached the end of those long years when I hadn't spoken, hadn't asked, hadn't ventured any sort of opinion even when I'd burned within with my need to question and to speak.

Politeness be damned.

I had to know.

"You never come into the light. Are you...disfigured?" I said it, and no lightning-bolt of heavenly retribution forked down from pitch-dark sky beyond the porch's overhang to strike me dead upon the spot.

Through a silence grown suddenly heavy with dread, I heard a sharp inhalation...almost a gasp...from the blackness of the other porch.

"No," Gardner said at last.

But he sounded like he wasn't entirely sure of his answer.

"I have some wine," he said at length, seeming reluctant to carry on the line of conversation I'd so foolishly begun.

And it was probably just as well.

I would be wise to mind my manners. Wise to remember that whatever his reasons for staying hidden in darkness, they were *his* reasons. He didn't know me, and I didn't know him, all hot and desperate passion aside. So I had no business inquiring about such things in the first place. And even less business pursuing the matter now that he'd made it clear he had no intention of responding.

"I thought you might like some."

"Some...wine?" My head buzzed.

That was one more fabled, wonderful delight of the outside world I'd never had a chance to sample. Oh, there had been Communion wine, for sure. But judging from what some of the older Sisters had said...some of the ones who'd had a life in the outside world before setting out upon our sequestered and sternly, severely restricted existence...Communion wine couldn't and didn't hold a candle to the real thing. The kind of delicious, fruity-flowery thing I was sure a man like Gardner McCord would offer.

"You could come over and get some."

The invitation was completely unexpected. So unexpected, and so startling after the way he'd rebuffed me seconds before that I nearly cried out.

"You could come over and judge for yourself if I'm some terribly hideous monster." His voice sounded wistful. Like the idea of me appearing next to him frightened him to death. Even if it was quite obviously the one thing he'd like more than anything else in this world.

Companionship.

How long had he been lacking it, I wondered? How long had he been alone in his midnight existence, in his clinging to shadows and his secrets that had to be terrible if they'd reduced reasonable and apparently educated neighbors to the ugly mob I'd witnessed earlier in the street?

Too long.

The answer came to me from the black of his night.

DARK PLEASURES

From out of the empty and whispering voids of longing inside my own head...longing that now haunted my every waking and sleeping moment.

I wanted to cry.

Looking down at myself in the darkness, I almost did.

I wanted Gardner's wine.

Wanted it for the experience of it, for the long denied pleasure I suspected I'd missed in being denied it, as much as for the fact that it came from him, it was a gift from him, it meant I'd made some degree of the much-desired connection with him.

I wanted it, but I couldn't go to him.

Not like this.

Not dressed like this, not in the trappings of the old life I now recognized *was* an old life, and one that should be put absolutely behind me. An old life that should have been put behind me the moment Mother turned me out, closing the door to her office gently but firmly behind me with the admonition that I would leave in the morning, just after prayers, and Godspeed, still clamorous and confusing inside my head.

I could not go to him dressed in the clothing I'd still been wearing when I'd fled that night, into darkness very much like this, with the envelope containing the cash Thaddeus' lawyer had sent clutched in my hand because it was all I possessed, all there was to take with me.

I'd run then.

Staggering to my feet now, I knew I was about to

run again.

"I'm sorry," I blurted, lurching toward the door. "I can't..."

"Jean-Agnes?" Gardner's voice rose on a note of concern. "Wait! I didn't mean to..."

I didn't hear what else he had to say. Gasping for breath, so confused I didn't know if I was grieving for the old life I'd just realized was gone forever or for the fact that I hadn't had the sense to put it behind me in the moment it had truly come to its end, I ran into the unlighted kitchen of my mansion. Stumbling a little on the trailing hem of my long and thoroughly inappropriate gown, I climbed the back stairs faster than was wise. Faster than was safe.

Gasping in earnest, I ran to my room. Gasping not only because I was unused to the altitude, unused to the thin sparkle of air that even here, even in Denver before the mountains made their magical and spectacular leap from high plains into soaring, crystalline peaks, but because something inside me was breaking. Something was breaking loose and crying out for freedom. Something was demanding it not be stifled a moment longer. Not be denied an instant longer.

I'd already torn the veils from my head. Already dropped them somewhere.

It didn't matter where, because I knew, as I stumbled into my room and pulled off the rest of my clothing, I would never wear them...never wear any of it...again.

Gardner McCord had offered wine, and I wanted

to take it.

I wanted to take all the things the burgeoning hope in my desperately inflamed heart said he was willing to offer.

I had made a complete mess of things tonight. But I still had hope. Still had the notion that there might be other nights. Other chances. And in order to be ready for them, I'd have to appear 'normal' to him. I'd have to appear to be a woman from his world. With no trace of mine remaining.

That meant pulling on a pair of the corduroys I'd bought...two baggy and warm pairs of them...and a shirt and sweatshirt in subtle and severe shades of beige and black. That meant dragging a brush through hair that had already grown longer than was expected or permitted in the convent, grown shamelessly longer in the weeks since Mother had, I only now realized, begun to neglect and ignore me.

That meant creeping back downstairs once I'd changed into my new things. It meant feeling foolish for having panicked, foolish for having clung too long to what I'd been told was right for me, foolish for never believing in taking chances.

Like I believed now.

Stepping onto the back porch again, convinced I would find only empty loneliness and silence, I saw that Gardner had been there.

A glass sat in a patch of pale and milky moonlight at the top of my steps. Not just a glass, but a lovely thing made of crystal. A lovely and sparkling thing that stood tall on a narrow stem, a beautiful thing that

glistened and sparkled even in the weak light, as if every one of its myriad and cleverly wrought facets had been designed specifically to pick up and amplify the most subtle rays. As if it glowed from within, with the promise of dark and vaguely blood-like liquid that filled it a little more than halfway.

"I didn't mean to panic you," Gardner said, still sounding concerned, when I stooped to pick up the glass and the sparing moonlight illuminated the white of my hand beneath the cuff of my stiff new blouse.

"You didn't." Carefully, I retrieved the glass. Carefully stepped back into shadow and then, with my heart hammering out another of its increasingly common odd and off-kilter rhythms, lifted the glass to my lips to sip first, then to drink the silken smoothness of liquid ruby.

"Then what..."

He was close, I realized in sudden terror.

He wasn't on his side of the fence any longer, but on mine. He stood very near now. So near that I felt him and almost caught the scent of him wafting from beneath a straggling and unkempt clump of something I took to be Juniper. Something dense and dark that shielded my porch...both porches...from view of the street.

Skittish, uncertain, I backed deeper into the safety of my own shadow.

"I was being silly," I said, taking another long, another slow and satiny, draught of wine.

As Sister Margarette had said back at Divine Serenity, it had nothing in common with Communion

wine.

There was something very much *alive* about the dark potion in the glittering cup Gardner had given. Something very much like the human essence that must be his. The essence I desired again, more strongly than before, to have for my own.

The wine was a sweet blessing. And an even sweeter mystery. It was a shimmering intoxication that stole very quickly over me and through me, lighting new fire in my veins.

I finished the glass and set it down right where I'd found it, marveling at the new craving that filled me. Marveling at the way it seemed to have nothing at all to do with the man who had given this marvelous substance to me, and yet everything in the world to do with him. Simply because he *had* given it.

"It was delicious," I whispered, dizzied by even that small amount of spirit.

"There's more." A hand reached out to fill the glass that sparkled icy, almost ominous, blue-white in scattered fragments of moonlight. A hand holding a smooth and cylindrical bottle made dark by more ruby elixir inside.

"I don't know if I should."

Was wine supposed to make a person feel this way?

Was it supposed to give her such lightness of the head, such a tingling in the limbs, such a...burning...of passion unleashed? Passion unfettered?

And what about the straggling light from that slender crescent moon?

Was it supposed to be so bright? Was the sound of liquid running from bottle into glass supposed to have such a deep-red, suggestive sound? Was it supposed to evoke other images, frankly sexual and sensual images that reminded me yet again of the things I'd done to myself the previous night?

"There's plenty," Gardner said, and I realized he'd detached himself from his shelter of shadow. Not so much that I could see him, but enough that I could make out the dark blur of his form standing close to my steps. Close to the enchanted chalice I had only to accept...wanted only to accept...to make my transformation from what I had been to what I would very soon become complete.

"I'm not used to wine."

"No?"

It was a question, but somehow I didn't think it needed an answer. I didn't think Gardner expected, or even necessarily wanted an answer.

He seemed willing to accept me as I was in this moment. Without question. The way I knew he wanted me to accept him and open myself to him.

Grasping the glass, I steeled myself to feel his first touch, and lifted it once again to my lips. To taste its dark sleekness and marvel at the way it slipped down my throat so easily. So delightfully, so delectably.

Gardner didn't touch me.

He did draw a step closer, and now I had a more vivid impression of him.

He was tall.

Very tall. With dark hair worn long, worn down

around his shoulders in a thick and luxuriant fall that put my own ragged locks to shame. With deep eyes. Or so I visualized them. Deep and dark eyes that would burn and pierce, eyes made none the less hypnotic by the fact that I could still not see them as anything more than wide and dark ovals in the pale perfection of his almost-visible face.

He was not deformed.

Not disfigured.

When he turned his head, seeming to know I'd been straining anxiously, trying to assemble his features into some pattern and form my brain could recognize and accept, the pale fall of moonlight dropped across strong-hewn flesh. Across the narrow and flaring ridge of a classical nose, the firm crests of high cheekbones and well-wrought brow, across the no-nonsense lines of a squared jaw and chin, and across dark-hued lips that suddenly raised in me a new tingling that had nothing to do with the wine I'd consumed. Nothing to do with the night or the promise that seemed to rustle in its every dark breeze, nothing at all to do with the faint murmur of distant traffic that seemed part of some other world.

Gardner's mouth was wide. Generous. A full slash of incredibly rounded proportions. Lips swollen, lips full and lush, his mouth reminded me of the wine I'd drunk. Of the dark and sexually splashing liquid he was once again pouring from his bottle into my freshly emptied glass.

Such a mysterious mouth.

I wondered how it would feel to have such a lovely

mouth, such a wine-rich and drenching mouth, fasten upon mine.

Never kissed, I felt my own lips ache. Felt them tremble and soften, readying themselves for what was only a fanciful daydream. And I felt, too, another strange rumble of sensation between my legs. Beneath the thick corduroys where, strangely, it felt so much farther beyond my reach than when I'd been dressed in garments and layers and robes designed to proclaim my purity and protect it from just such unwelcome onslaughts.

This time I drained my glass straight down. Drained every last drop of blood-ruby and then carefully, because I was no longer steady and my senses seemed no longer reliable, set the glass precisely back in its place in the moonlight.

"Would you care for a walk?" Gardner asked, and I saw with my unsteady and wavering vision that he held out his arm in the courtly way the irrepressibly romantic side of me had long imagined a man would hold out his arm to the lady of his choice. "In the Midnight Garden?"

CHAPTER SIX

I stood, enchanted, upon the brink of that Midnight Garden.

"Strange," I murmured. "So very strange."

"What?" Gardner was a dim and throbbing presence next to me. The feel of his arm, the very first touch as I'd placed my quaking hand there at the inside of his elbow, still burned. Like fire leaping out of control. The burning thrill of instant recognition had been real. Profound. As had the realization, for the first time in my life, that this was a man, and I was a woman, and I wanted him.

I sensed then, as I shuddered softly, as I saw him respond to my shudder by turning toward me, that if I hadn't left everything behind before, if I hadn't become someone new and entirely different, someone who couldn't possibly go back, the searing fever of contact between our bodies had melded me to him in some fundamental way. Though I could, and eventually did, disengage myself from him by pulling my trapped hand away and putting some small distance between us, I knew even then that we had

been connected. We had already been made a single entity, through a bizarre recognition that was part of our blood, our veins, our hearts that no longer maintained two separate beats but had joined forever into one.

It was incredible. It was frightening. And it was forgotten in the sudden wonder of coming upon this hidden, moonlit space at the back of my very own property.

"It used to be the rose garden," Gardner said quietly, making a move to recapture me.

Instantly, I shied away. Not ready to feel the heat of contact again. Not ready just yet.

"Thaddeus moved it years ago," he went on just as quietly, making no further move.

"I wonder why?" My voice sounded nothing like my own. There was still the habitual quality of hushed prayerfulness and introspection about it, of course. I had a suspicion those ingrained and automatic tones would be with me for the rest of my life. But beneath that, beneath the reverence and the meekness I'd learned so completely, lay something else.

A trembling.

A tremor.

A minute unsteadiness born of the passion I'd only just discovered within myself. Passion that now, in the space of a single moon-silvered moment with the dark shape of Gardner McCord so close beside me that I could feel the aura of him charging the air around me and lifting the fine hairs on every part of

my body, wanted to rise. Passion that wanted to spill over as my hands ached to touch and to know now that the stealthy midnight hour had come. Fingers that ached to feel again my own inner warmth and wetness, to revel in it and marvel in it and delight in the forbidden and delicious sin of it.

"Thaddeus said it would be safer. The rose garden. If he moved it away from the house."

"Safer?" At last I dared to turn my head. Unnerved anew by the lack of fabric and veils to swish with the movement, disconcerted by the free feeling of cooling night air sweeping against the back of my exposed neck and the floating sensation of hair brushing there, I dared to look at Gardner.

In the moonlight, in this place that seemed so much wilder and more profound than the mundane shadows and concealment of our twin back porches, he looked different. Very much more handsome, very much more desirable. And I had to hold myself back. Had to stop myself when every inner urge insisted I fling myself at him and beg him to satisfy the indescribable ache of yearning I felt inside. Had to remind myself that I knew nothing of this sort of thing. That, despite the previous night's repeated explorations of what had always been forbidden and my body's surprising...in some ways downright disturbing...responses, I had no idea what I might be getting myself into.

So I suppressed my urges.

I ordered my runaway desires to remain strictly at bay, and continued only to look at the silvered,

shadowed planes of his face in this new and slightly more revealing light, as rapt and enchanted as I'd been by my first sight of his Midnight Garden.

That was the way Gardner had said it first, and that was the way I thought of it now.

The Midnight Garden.

Capitalized, as if it held some intense meaning. One I might one day understand, if I was patient enough and *right* enough. Some very great meaning that I might never be able to understand completely because the things it hinted, the things it conjured in the deepest recesses of my whirling, swirling, dazed and confused mind were things I could not comprehend. Things maybe better left somewhere out there in the distance. Beyond comprehension, beyond acceptance.

"What did Thaddeus mean, 'safer'?" I persisted when Gardner didn't respond.

"Thaddeus was a dreamer."

Frowning, I tried to read the expression on Gardner's face...a wholly impossible task, since I didn't know him well enough and couldn't see him clearly enough to read anything. "That's what my father said."

Now Gardner turned his head. Before, he'd stood staring at the long expanse of sculpted and marble-accented garden in the lowered terrace before us. Before, he hadn't looked at me, hadn't seemed entirely aware I stood beside him, dreaming highly vivid dreams of my own. But now he turned his head. Now he locked his gaze to mine. Locked it so tightly

there could be no hope of escaping its piercing captivity. No *desire* to escape.

"Why did I have an idea you'd never met Thaddeus?" he asked softly. Almost, incredibly, menacingly.

I shrugged, trying to maintain calm in a situation that was rapidly becoming less and less conducive to anything remotely resembling calm. "I'm sure I never said that," I murmured, digging my feet in so they wouldn't do what they wanted to do. So they wouldn't scuttle sideways, away from him. "I did know Thaddeus. But only a little. Only when I was a child. When I was seven, we...my mother and father and I...came here for Christmas."

Gardner frowned. As if trying to remember. As if he would have any reason to remember a long-ago visit on a frozen and forgotten winter. "And you're how old now?"

I should have bristled at the question. Should have been put out by it. I knew I should, though such questions had never mattered in the slightest before, mostly because they had never been asked. "Twenty-five," I said, so caught up in the spell he'd woven that I gave scarcely a thought to upbraiding him for his impertinence.

"And I'm thirty-nine," came his immediate answer. Which surprised and dismayed me a little.

At twenty-five, and that only just barely, only by a month or so, thirty-nine seemed a vast age. An incredibly ancient age. An incredibly impossible and unimaginable age.

"I had no idea..."

"I would have been twenty then," he mused, which only made the gap between us seem that much more enormous. That much more impossibly unbridgeable. "Almost twenty-one. I guess it's possible I wouldn't remember. I was still in school then. Was just getting finished with my studies as an architect, just hoping because I hadn't entirely lost hope yet. I was still...I was busy trying to make the mark in the design world that I apparently have. So I guess I wasn't paying much attention to..."

He didn't finish, and in a crazed moment of crystal clear insight, I thought he'd been about to say he'd been still 'normal' then. I had no idea why I should think such a thing, there was no reason to think it. But I did. And I thought I began to know why.

"Gardner?" My voice dropped an octave. It grew hushed. Grew husky, fallen as all the rest of me had fallen, under the spell of the moment and the garden and the man.

He turned toward me.

Turned very slowly.

Turned very deliberately, as if weighing with infinite care every possible consequence of what he might be about to do. What he might be about to say.

"I've missed Thaddeus," he said as he had before, the previous night, with a tremor of wistful longing infusing every syllable. "I don't imagine you can know how terribly I've missed him. Or how much he meant to me. How much his presence in that house so close to mine meant to me once I'd stopped..."

Another awkward ending to an awkward sentence.

I knew this time Gardner had stopped short of saying he'd 'stopped being normal'.

And I did think I could imagine how he'd felt about Thaddeus.

Something had become perfectly clear to me. Something just in this moment, something I hadn't really faced before because at Divine Serenity such topics had never been part of the regimen...would never have been approved as part of the regimen. With some visceral, inborn knowledge of human beings and human behavior that had begun to waken at last from too-prolonged dormancy, I knew.

"You and Thaddeus..."

"Were lovers."

Gardner hesitated then. As if having second thoughts about what he'd just said...just admitted. "Do you think less of me now, Jean-Agnes? Now that I've admitted to you what I've never admitted to another person?"

"I..."

Didn't know.

I supposed I'd always known there were men who preferred men. Just as, on a disastrous occasion or two, there had come into the midst of the quiet at Divine Serenity those women who had preferred women. Those who had come not for prayer and retreat, not for the silence of seclusion or the self-serenity of isolation. Those who had come all too briefly because they'd been in search of something else, of others like them, of things that had only acted

to destroy the cloistered aloneness to which we, the Sisters, had dedicated ourselves and all of our lives.

"It was a matter of convenience," Gardner explained quietly.

I wondered how and when he'd drawn so terribly close to me. So alarmingly close that I once again felt the heat of him and the swelling of desire for him between my quivering legs. So close that, while he didn't touch me or make a single move that hinted he might attempt to touch me, I felt the lure of passion radiating from him and found myself drawn to it.

Helplessly drawn, unstopably and irresistibly drawn, like a moth to its death in the flames of my candles.

"I needed someone," Gardner murmured. "When I was cut off from everyone, when my life became what it became. I needed companionship then, more than ever. When my parents died, one after the other. When I was alone inside my house and bound to it forever, I needed someone. And Thaddeus..."

Here he paused.

Here he *stopped*, seeming reluctant to say more.

But he didn't need to say anything.

Floating back from memory, I heard the sound of my father's voice, raised in fury as we'd been driving away from Rosewalk the morning of New Year's Eve, a full week before we'd planned to leave. With all my wonderful, beloved presents left behind.

He's an abomination, my father had shouted to my weeping mother. He's not fit for human society. He's a...woman!

I hadn't understood then. I didn't want to understand now. But the memory of Sister Inez' short stay at Divine Serenity, of the night she'd crept naked into my cubicle, to whisper low and enflamed things to me, the night I'd lain perfectly still on my narrow cot, frightened of her and frightened to let her know I heard, rushed back to me.

"Great-uncle Thaddeus was a..."

I knew the concept. But I didn't know the word. I'd met the concept head-on at nineteen, in my own bed that should have been safe. But it...Sister Inez...had been removed the very next morning. Removed by Mother, who'd sent the errant would-be Sister packing with sharp words of reprimand and disgust.

I had never known the word. Never been entirely sure of the word.

"He was homosexual," Gardner supplied for me, seeming to see nothing unusual about my lack of ability to express a concept that surely must, at least from what I'd observed in my few days of freedom, be a known and accepted fact to everyone in the outer world. "Does that disturb you?"

"And you?" Remembering the secret fumbblings at my body, remembering the dark lusts and fanciful imaginings of how it would be to have Gardner do those same things, in those same ways and entirely different ways, I began in that instant to feel cheated.

He laughed.

Placing his hands on my shoulders, scalding me again with the shimmering touch of flame spawned by those hands, he turned me to face him. "I am not."

"Then..."

"Thaddeus was all I had. The only one I had. The only choice I had."

And that was something I could, something I did, understand.

Having lived my entire life without choices, having existed first at my father's beck and call and then, once I turned fourteen and he told me it was time for me to leave, time to take up my schooling elsewhere and never look back, having existed at the even more strict and demanding beck and call of Mother, I understood completely.

A person did what he had to do.

He or she endured what must be endured, and survived in whatever way was left open.

In the instant I'd spent dreaming, Gardner had leaned closer to me.

Once again, I felt heat...new heat, this time, more open and honest heat...course between his body and mine. I felt again, too, the deep-seated longing of which I'd never really dreamed I was capable. I felt the dampness of it erupt within me and knew that in another second or two, surely no more, it would begin to make its way downward. Would begin to flow and stream, striking desperate and aching paths along every inch of hidden flesh beneath my corduroys until finally, perhaps long after I'd lost my mind and abandoned all consciousness, strike the night air in great and steaming clouds. Making it plain for once and for all what I wanted. What I needed, more than I'd ever needed anything.

My hands fluttered at my sides. Arranging themselves into tight fists, they strove to lift. Strove despite my best and strongest efforts to find that steaming flesh. To encourage its wanton flow. Encourage it to spring to unabashed life and unabashed lust as...

Gardner leaned toward me.

For the longest of moments I dreamed he was about to kiss me.

Dreaded that he was about to kiss me, there in the long and black garden with its dimly-seen, improbable lines of white marble columns, and fountains, and benches. Dreaded even as my head lolled back on my shoulders, because I didn't know what a kiss might involve. What it might lead to. What would be expected of me or required of me once it had begun and once it had progressed. As it surely would progress.

But he didn't.

After a moment, more disappointed than had ever seemed likely, I opened the eyes I'd closed. And sought to see him in the darkness.

"There are things you need to understand," he said quietly.

"But I thought you just..."

"Other things, Jean-Agnes."

It was a hateful name. One I'd loathed in my youth. One I'd been all too willing to surrender when then time had come to become Sister Benedict and renounce my past. But on Gardner's tongue, murmured in his voice by those full and ripe, never-

smiling lips, it became a magical name. A mantra, almost, that increased the swollen pressure I felt inside. That seemed to call forth as nothing else could...not even my own manipulative and ministering hands...fresh floods of ripe and red desire from within.

"Didn't you think it was odd?" he asked. "That the neighbors congregated across from *my* house after that girl was found murdered?"

I shuddered at the silken, lulling rhythm of his voice.

No. I hadn't entirely realized the mob had had anything to do with him.

Then. At the time. Before I'd encountered the man from the lawn service and he'd put the whole thing into words. Into terms even I, in all my innocence and naiveté, could understand.

"Didn't you wonder why they believed I had committed such a bloody and gruesome crime?" Again Gardner's voice lulled. Again it enchanted.

Again it left me powerless to speak, powerless to move or even swallow as his hands tightened at my shoulders. In a way that made it clear I would be physically unable to escape his size and his strength, should he decide escape was not what he wanted. "Didn't you wonder if I might be guilty?"

"I..." It was all I could manage. All I could think, because along with the sudden sharp and acrid odor of fear that filled what I only now realized was a scentless and blossomless garden had come a sort of unconsciousness. A sort of pre-death moment in

which all that I had known and all that I would ever hope to know had ceased to have any real meaning.

"How could I know?" I managed when I was finally able. "How could I ever have even supposed..."

"You asked before if I was deformed," he murmured, his voice losing much of its silken edge, his voice sinking back to its previous oddly wistful, heart-wrenching sadness.

"Gardner, you have to know I never meant..."

"You asked if that was why I stayed in the darkness and never showed myself."

"No. Really. I didn't..."

"You wanted to *know*." The silkiness was back. And with it a new and spurting, intoxicating delirium of terror that caused more moisture, fresh and copious moisture, to spring between my legs.

"I'd like to go inside now."

He tilted his head back. Still leaning over me, he tilted it up into the feeble light of that small and inconsequential sliver of moon. "Let me show you," he murmured, and for the first time he smiled.

Sensuous ruby lips parted as he tilted his head a little to the side, his face now perilously close to mine.

Very slowly he drew his lips back, and I saw.

In the midst of perfectly white, gleamingly white and utterly even teeth, I saw.

Glistening and slightly curved.

Fangs.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When I recovered, I found myself lying prone on one of the dusky marble benches near a dead fountain at the center of the Midnight Garden. I found myself helpless with the dark form of Gardner McCord bending over me, his face once again hidden in the darkness he preferred.

"You had me worried," he said in the moment my eyes fluttered, and tried to open.

I could only gaze at him. Too stunned and startled to do anything else.

"I've never had anyone react that way before."

"To...you..." My words were shivery and whispery. They weren't really words at all, as much as exhalations of tortured sound. "Being a v...v..." I couldn't make myself say the word. Could hardly make myself believe I might be about to say such a word and actually mean it. "To you being a vampire?"

Now he tossed his head back. Now he laughed, openly and freely, as I had not heard him laugh before. Laughed charmingly and in a way guaranteed

to seduce and lure anyone...any woman...with moonlight glinting delectably off the short, curved but definite length of the vampire's most functional and necessary attribute. The twin white fangs he'd striven to hide from me before. Even as he now strove openly to display them.

"I'm not," he said after a while, in the same tone of voice in which he'd proclaimed himself not a homosexual. "Is that what you really think, Jean-Agnes?"

"Then..." Struggling, I braced my hands against the cold, fluted edges of the bench and tried to push myself upright.

But Gardner wouldn't allow it.

Hands dropping instantly to my shoulders, he pressed down. "Take it easy, Jean-Agnes. You fainted."

"I never faint."

"You just did."

"I was...surprised. That's all."

Saying nothing, he simply stood in the moonlight, his hair a dark blur around the almost translucently pale oval of his face, his eyes burning, glittering, mesmerizing...as a vampire's eyes were reputed to mesmerize. He wore a suit made of some gray cloth. Not shirt and pants, but jacket and pants, with an open-collared white shirt shining silvery-blue in the scant moonlight.

Something in the back of my mind, or maybe in his attitude and the nonchalant way he wore such unexpected clothes, said he was used to this degree of

formality. He was comfortable with it and thought nothing of it, even though others might well consider it strange. Or even bizarre.

I'd been afraid to reveal my secret to him, the truth about my years at Divine Serenity and the dangerous naiveté I believed they'd inflicted upon me. I was still afraid. But oh, how puny and inconsequential my secret seemed when I reviewed the twin enormities of his. That he had had a homosexual love affair...apparently a long-running one...with my great-uncle Thaddeus. And that he was...

But here I stopped.

'Vampire' was an outlandish notion, for certain.

He couldn't actually be one of those misbegotten, hell-doomed creatures. Because there *were* no such creatures.

So then how could I explain him?

How could I laugh away all his peculiarities that seemed to point entirely, exclusively, in that direction?

There had to be an answer. But it escaped me.

"I'm a man," he said quietly, as if he also had the vampire's reputed power to read thoughts and divine intentions almost before the thinker understood those intentions herself. "Nothing more, Jean-Agnes. And nothing less."

"Then..." Once again, I floundered. Pushing myself to a sitting position on the hard and cold marble upon which someone...it had to have been Gardner...had placed me as tenderly as if this was a bridal bed and I the nervous, uninitiated and

unsuspecting young bride, I knew no way to ask the question. Not without sounding insufferably impertinent and rude.

As if to prove the truth in the last thing he'd said, the reassurance about being a man and nothing more, or maybe only to steady me because he thought I wasn't entirely steady yet...not the way I was acting...Gardner slid onto the bench beside me.

He seemed actually to grow darker in contrast to the pale marble. Seemed larger, too, but for some inexplicable reason unthreatening. And irresistible.

Sweet heaven, I couldn't forget irresistible. Because he was. Completely. He was so incredibly desirable that I gave a moment's consideration to the idea that I might have fallen irreparably in love with the first man I'd encountered in any depth in all my stilted, stifled, shuttered and sheltered life.

Gardner's arm slipped around me.

Rather than withdraw in terror and loathing from what I'd only a moment ago almost truly believed him to be, I found myself leaning into the warmth he exuded from every inch of his undeniably powerful body.

If it was inhuman power, I was ready to take that chance. I was ready to...

Slowly and yet not slowly at all, Gardner reached with his free hand. To catch my chin with gentle fingers and turn my head. Not toward him, as I might have expected and in so many ways fervently desired. But away. Tilting it at the same time, around and back, so that the taut line of my extended throat lay

exposed to him. Vulnerable to him.

"Do you trust me?" His breath burned hot on exposed flesh. Vulnerable flesh. His lips brushed trails of scintillating, openly sexual, sensational fire wherever they touched. Into the column of throat that waited for him. Waited eagerly. Placidly. For whatever he meant to do.

I couldn't answer. Could scarcely breathe when I felt his lips part. When I felt the full and lush ripeness of them separate to reveal another kind of ripeness...a deeply hot, intriguingly warm ripeness studded by the hard and ever so faintly scraping threat of the teeth he'd revealed earlier.

He traced a long and sinuous path down the side of my throat with both lips and teeth. And upon reaching the base, the most vulnerable and pulsing spot, he lingered. His lips drew back even more. I felt them draw back.

For an interminable moment I felt nothing but twin points of dread pressing themselves tightly, yet not too tightly, against my pounding flesh.

And I felt a stirring. An unimaginable scorch, from the tongue behind them.

I shook. All over.

The entire world shook. As if seized by some great earthquake that left me spellbound with its violence. Unable to move and unable to resist the power it, and the man who held me, exerted.

Gardner laughed again. Very softly. Tracing his exploratory path across the most vulnerable part of my neck, he started near my ear and worked his way

downward. He found the tenderest place. Where my pulse beat hardest. Where it beat out furious, aggravated, aroused rhythms that had everything to do with the sudden hot, irresistible surging of desire I felt in every part of my still-awakening, too-awakened body.

I groaned. As softly as he'd laughed. Pushing slightly, I urged my willing throat against the seeking heat of Gardner's deadly mouth.

Laughing with a new and different, a decidedly knowing note, he closed his lips around a fold of my flesh.

I almost cried out. Wanted to cry out, and most likely would have, if any power of speech, or sound, or thought had been left to me.

In that moment I became his possession. And he knew it. I could feel him knowing it, just as I felt the strange spell he had woven over and around me. A spell of this world or not, a spell that was in reality some diabolical, hell-driven curse or not.

And it was complete.

I had fallen captive. I was his eager slave...was *his*.

"Gardner." I managed to lift a hand then. Managed to press it to the back of his dark head, Managed, just barely, to hold him to the place he'd chosen. To hold his suckling, sampling, stroking mouth to the place where it could do the most damage and yet, in some perverse and all too pleasurable way, incite its utmost delight.

"If I was a vampire," he murmured, his lips moving deliciously against my skin, "I would have

taken you long ago. I would have taken you long before this."

"I...know."

My hands had developed an existence of their own. Abandoning their grip, one on the enticing silk of the hair it had clutched and the other on the edge of the marble bench where it had sought desperate reassurance in cold and lifeless stone, they rose in unison. They fumbled with the sleeves of my sweatshirt jacket...the baggy and unflattering black thing I had chosen in what seemed another lifetime. Chosen specifically because it was heavy and shapeless, because it would hide any feminine attributes I might discover I possessed. I shrugged myself free of the over-large sleeves and swept the shirt away, swept it into inky darkness where it disappeared as completely as it if had never been. And went to work on the row of small and slick buttons at the front of the just as unflattering shirt I'd worn beneath.

"Take me," I urged as the shirt fell to a forgotten puddle on the bench around my hips. "Take me," I insisted, scarcely believing my own ears. Scarcely able to believe the reality of the hot surging that pulsed and pounded now through sensitive millimeters and micro-millimeters of the flesh I had yet to reveal. Flesh beneath heavy layers of no-nonsense corduroy and unappetizing white cotton underwear. Flesh I did indeed want him to take. However he chose to take it.

Flesh that burned to be taken. Ached to be used. Pleaded to be defiled and de-sanctified so that I, at

last, could say in all truthfulness I had been made a woman.

And then our lips touched.

It was a touch brief as a butterfly's caress, and every bit as fleeting. Over almost before it started, that brushing of lips against lips, my first kiss though certainly not Gardner's, possessed awesome power. Power never anticipated.

Power to make me catch my breath.

Or was that the power of Gardner's hands?

Finding the waist of my heavy slacks, they struggled to shove them down, and the thick underwear beneath, without disturbing me. Without disturbing the contact we'd made.

His hands were ruthless. Large. Careless.

Lifting me momentarily away from the bench, they displayed more power, significant power, power and strength I could only classify as supernatural and superhuman. They lifted as if I weight nothing at all. And shoved away all unwanted and unnecessary layers of covering.

Before they moved again.

Before they wandered, still large and powerful and yet now strangely gentle and almost reverent at the same time.

Gardner's hands moved down.

To trembling and tremulous regions where the slightest brush of exploring fingertips against the untested nakedness of my abdomen set loose a scream within me. A scream that, mercifully for both of us, had no ability to escape. No avenue for escape.

Not now that he'd forsaken his grazing of my neck and chosen to press his mouth against mine again.

Harder, his mouth pressed. And then harder still, as tiny sounds almost of despair wrenched up from somewhere deep in his throat.

I was still speechless. Still soundless, though my heart began to pound in the wildest, most unimaginable ways. In ways I thought certainly must be audible, should anyone stop and take the time to listen very, very carefully.

I wanted *more*.

I wanted all.

Before I could lose my nerve, I returned his kiss. I pressed my mouth tighter against his. My touch was less shy and uncertain but no less devastating than when he'd kissed me.

Gardner tasted sweet. Like the wine I'd consumed. And like something else. Like apricots. Warm and luscious, a robust and oddly sun-filled flavor for a man so dedicated life in shadows and darkness.

"Mmmm." His mouth opened. He seemed about to say something. But I seized the moment. Seized the opportunity I'd been given.

Running my tongue across the fullness of his lower lip, I traced a path that scalded me to my very core, just as Gardner's responding sharp intake of breath said it scalded him.

Emboldened by unqualified success, I allowed my tongue to stray farther. I allowed it to stray from gentle, and almost prim caressing to a plunging.

"Jean-Ag..."

I didn't let him finish.

Now my tongue sought in earnest. It looked for a return to the passion that roiled even hotter inside me, demanding relief and release immediately. Lest I perish for the lack of relief and release.

For just a moment longer, or maybe it was half a moment, Gardner refused to cooperate. He seemed, in that brief stretch of time, to be a man in shock. A man taken completely by surprise, stunned and uncertain how he should react. But inevitably his hands began to move again. They slipped around to my back. To my shoulder blades. They established a firm and unrelenting grip that I knew I couldn't escape even if I decided I wanted escape.

Gripping bare and tingling flesh, he pulled me close. Pulled me right up into the broad warmth of his chest.

Now it was he who returned the kiss. *My* kiss.

The points of his teeth dug small and not entirely painful channels into the yielding softness of my lower lip. They dug as if deliberately. And I tasted blood. Tasted my own blood, hot and sharp upon my tongue and yet utterly beguiling. Utterly soothing.

Gardner continued to work at me with hands that stroked in perfect unison and mouth that sought something nameless. Something formless. Something I barely understood, yet wanted desperately for him to find.

Something in my lips?

Gardner sought not as I had, to explore and entice. He sought to claim me.

That much was absolutely clear, right from the start.

He sought to claim, and then to plunder. At will. Laughing as if he knew I would...could...offer no resistance. His mouth still melded to mine...melded permanently, a part of me feared, in painful intimacy...his kiss burned deep. Thrilling. Hot.

I burned.

Inside and out, with needful flame that would not be quenched by any kiss. Flame that could only be increased, only be fanned into furies of destruction and devastation by the incompleteness of any kiss. Flame that, so fanned, could only spread. Outward. Through my chest that seemed oddly constricted and terrifyingly unresponsive to my commands to breathe...breathe deeply.

Tongues of flame lapped at my shoulders. In the place where Gardner's hands rested. And even longer tongues spread downward. Along my arms. Into my hands. All the way to tingling and tortured fingertips, ready to strike sparks that would instantly ignite anything I touched.

And my legs...

Sweet heaven.

My legs had begun to tremble. Even seated, they had weakened to the point of irrelevance, seeming to melt beneath the caress of that same wandering flame. Even seated, I knew they were no longer adequate or willing to support the weight of my body. Even seated, I began to sway. Dizzied, dazzled, I leaned against Gardner. Leaned heavily, my face turned up

to his. And opened my mouth wider.

I invited him to enter farther. Invited the savage, burning thrill he emitted to reach down into other parts of me...other extremities that were not really extremities as much as hidden places I'd never in my suddenly pathetic and useless self-explorations realized could awaken to such intense heat. Such needful, demanding, debilitating heat.

Twisting inside, I shuddered. Locked fast in the grip of desire I only now realized I'd wanted and yearned for right from the moment of birth and through all the moments of denial since, I discovered the one true, one natural and absolutely right way a woman could desire a man.

"Jean-Agnes." With an abruptness that shocked, Gardner swung me into the air. He lifted me away from the stability of the marble bench, the only stability that remained in my entire world.

"What?" Panic-stricken, the cry wrenched from me. From deep inside, where the flames he had kindled smoldered dangerously. Where I felt certain they would continue to smolder and stutter forever, even in the face of a new burgeoning of fear and uncertainty that tried, unsuccessfully, to douse those flames. Flames that would only continue to smolder, until quenched in the only way they could ever be quenched.

Until Gardner gave them exactly what they demanded.

His mouth apart from mine again, apart and maintaining its own separate, enticing existence, he

laughed. A very little. In the softest and most smoky-toned of murmurs.

Turning, he strode briskly with me still in his arms. Not back toward the houses and what little safety they might offer. He strode instead into unknown darkness at the heart of his Midnight Garden...strode past the relic of a dead fountain, an empty white blur of forgotten marble at the center of long and lengthening darkness. He carried me swiftly, carried me surely. Deposited me upon another block of marble. A larger one, a higher one. Deposited me and then, without hesitation, spread my legs as I hadn't managed to convince myself to spread them even during my secret explorations of the night before. Spread them completely. So wide that I hurt from the spreading, ached from the spreading, worried at the spreading.

Laughing again, he wrapped something around my wrist. For the moment I had little understanding of what he might be doing. Not until, subduing me with force made no less complete and no less irresistible by its very gentleness, he fastened that wrist to some unseen protrusion, some carving, possibly, hidden at the end of that long and lightly-sculpted block of marble.

"Gardner!" In vain, I tried to struggle.

"Are you a virgin, Jean-Agnes?" He asked it softly. Silkily.

"A v...v...v..." I was truly helpless now. With both of my arms tugged high over my head and spread wide, to the very corners of the moonlight altar, I'd

been secured. With thin and supple bands of leather that wrapped around my wrists almost tightly enough to impede the flow of blood. Tightly enough to inflict instant pain when I tried to move. Tried to free myself.

"You must be a virgin," Gardner replied, catching my ankles with that same commanding, not-to-be-denied grip. "The sacrifice is only acceptable if you are a virgin, sweet and lovely, beloved Jean-Agnes."

Beloved?

Too late, I thought to kick.

Too late because he'd already fastened my ankles to the stone in the same way he'd secured my wrists. So tightly that I could not struggle. So tightly that the only way to avoid suffering and pain was to lie absolutely still. Absolutely spread-eagled in pale light of the distant and glittering crescent moon that looked down upon my absolute nakedness. My complete revelation, for the first time ever, to a man.

I lay with my arms spread wide. With my legs spread even wider. Lay with the steaming and streaming center of me open and exposed. Lay helpless, his to do with what he chose. As he chose, and when he chose.

As I had wanted him to do.

"What is this place?" I gasped around a sharp edge of fear that rose to fill my throat.

"The most holy of all places," Gardner replied.

Standing back, standing motionless, he stared at me. In a way that was much more frightening, much more personal and unbearably intimate, than if he'd

laid his hands upon me right then and there. He stared at me in a way that suddenly made me want to scream. That left me aware that I was going to scream, as loudly as it was possible to scream, for as long as I possessed breath and voice to scream.

But Gardner knew that.

Stepping forward quickly, he grasped my head and lifted even as I was beginning to draw in breath for that scream. He slipped something behind it, and in the instant when my mouth opened, the scream already forming upon my lips, he slipped a sturdier band of leather, a thicker and even more resilient one, into my mouth. And fastened it quickly. Fastened it tightly, so that now I had not even that last option. Now I had no options at all but to lie silent, lie docile, lie with my dying, tortured scream forced back into my throat. Deep into my throat, with no chance it could ever be uttered.

Throat muscles working, I struggled to swallow my fear. Struggled to utter even the smallest intelligible sound. Motionless, I strained to see his shadowed, still unreadable face in sudden and total darkness as a cloud settled across the crescent moon, extinguishing even its small and insubstantial light.

Was this how it had ended for the other victims?

I couldn't think of them as *his* victims, Gardner's victims.

Even in my trapped state, even reduced to hopeless obedience and desperate docility, my mind refused to accept that any of those murdered, any of those young and innocent girls with their blood drained

from their bodies, could have been his victims.

Or that I could be...might probably be...the next.

Shivering, I closed my eyes.

Unable to watch as he moved toward me. Moved very, very close to me, still without touching me.

"This is where I came with Thaddeus," Gardner explained in the soft and oddly soothing voice that couldn't possibly...I prayed with all my heart it couldn't...be the voice of a cold and deranged killer.

"This is where he brought me my first time. And so many times after."

Unable to stop myself, I opened my eyes.

Mouth working, I struggled to speak around the relentlessness of the leather strap designed to prevent and preclude all speech.

"This is the special garden he created for me. For us. This is what he told me was mine, to use as I saw fit."

Desperate to speak, I lifted my head and swung it slightly from side to side. It was the only movement I could make. And it was pathetic. It was nothing. Meant nothing.

"This is how it was for me," Gardner went on, stepping closer still. Stepping not toward my face or my pleading, tear-filled eyes, but to my pitifully spread and secured legs. "This is how he strapped me down. How he took me. This is something I've never shared with anyone else." Reaching out, reaching down, Gardner began to stroke not me, but the glittering block of stone that suddenly gleamed as if lit from within by a moon that escaped its cover and

renewed its watch over everything that was happening here...in this hellish, private garden.

"This is where you will be taught," Gardner murmured.

Stroking and stroking, his fingers made loving passes close to my legs. Close to the quiver of exposed, anguished flesh that lay between.

I lifted my head again.

Screamed.

My eyes bulged with the effort to scream, my lips with the struggle to close around the thick strap between them, to expel it even when I knew he had buckled it too tightly. Had pulled it so tight that my mouth ached from the pressure it exerted, my entire jaw and head had begun to ache.

Please!

The sound I emitted was soft. A formless gargle. A murmur that might have been a plea for mercy, or a plea for him to continue. A plea for him to touch what he teased with those slow and irreverent passes. Passes that made me want to scream all the more desperately when they didn't connect. When his searing fingertips didn't invade my flesh, didn't show me the kind of teaching about which he would only, demonically and diabolically, talk.

Even I no longer knew what I wanted.

What I wanted him to do.

"I spent so many long and lovely nights here," he intoned, still not touching me. "With Thaddeus. When I was young, and still learning. This is where he placed me so that I would learn."

DARK PLEASURES

I made another sound, tried to whisper another heartfelt 'please'.

In response, Gardner's fingers stroked the stone again. Stroked ever closer to the quivering need at the inside of my thighs yet ever, intolerably farther from giving what I wanted so desperately.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“You never answered me.” Gardner’s hands found my flesh at last. They found my ankle, one of them, and surrounded it with soothing, stirring, instantly stimulating warmth. Surrounded it with all his devilish and no doubt debauched intentions at the forefront, and began to stroke rhythmically, in a way I knew I would not long be able to survive. Though I did try, and tried mightily.

Ans...swered – I tried to whisper around and in spite of the thing he’d forced into my mouth. Around a wrenching gasp of pleasure, too. One that threatened to tear great and gaping holes in throat, and lungs, and heart. – *what?*

Gardner could read minds. He did read mine, in that same instant.

“Are you a virgin?” he asked again.

If I’d had the strength or the ability, I would surely have laughed.

I hadn’t had the slightest chance of *not* being a virgin, had I? Not after my father had whisked me off to what had first been school and then later, I had

started to believe, brainwashing at Divine Serenity. From that point on, there had been no men to tempt, no men to torment, no men to cause my thoughts to turn in any direction save the ones in which I had been taught and required to direct them.

Now, with Gardner's fingertips tracing slowly incendiary circular motions around the altogether too sensitized skin just below my anklebone, with the fingers of his other hand wrapped completely around my leg just above as if it was tiny and frail, and hardly of any consequence, I couldn't remember what he'd asked. Just that it had seemed important for some strange and, if I remembered correctly through the misty and shimmering fog he'd unleashed inside my brain, vaguely frightening reason.

I...am! My attempts to utter the words tried once again to be a shriek. And once again failed as dismally as it had been doomed to fail. As pathetically as all my other attempts to cry out with the agony, the anguish, the unadulterated appreciation of what he was doing to me simply by concentrating all of his heat and his attention on my *foot* had failed.

"Ahhhh." He laughed. Once more.

A shiver traced a lightning path along the length of my beleaguered spine.

"I believe you are, Jean-Agnes. I believe you really and truly are that most impossible of things. I believe you are a virgin."

The things he had done to me!

What had he done?

And how had he done it? How had he gotten me here, to this place in the moonlight, this land of black and white and blue-misted illumination upon stark marble? How had he placed me here with my legs spread wide in wanton abandon, in decadent invitation for him to plunder and take at will what had never, not even in my wildest imaginings, not until I'd arrived here and fallen under this strangely delusional spell, ever been offered to any man? What had, in fact, been the last thing I'd ever wanted or now wanted to offer to any man?

What had he done? How had he...

"W...wine..." I tried to whisper it, my voice nearly useless, my lips and tongue even more useless.

Gardner laughed. Again.

He traced his circling, ever circling, ever more maddening fingertips up my prone and quivering, paralyzed leg. Traced them up above the ring of fingers that held my ankle still...needlessly, since I possessed no freedom to move on my own, no matter how I might try. "What about the wine, Jean-Agnes?"

"You d..." There was almost no sound, now. Nothing but a sighing-soft breath that carried within it, vaguely and almost incomprehensibly, the forms of words. The forms of meanings that no longer, now that the marauding fingertips had traced and burnt their way upward yet again, to my genuinely shaking thigh and the sheen of wetness upon it, had any real desire to be formed. Wetness that flowed, that continued to flow, from my own body. "...drug...it. Di...n...you?"

His fingers left my leg. I was free to try to move, if I thought I could. Free to try to escape, if I thought I dared try. Only to remember I really was held upon my marble slab, really was held in a thrall of leather straps and fascinated motionlessness. Unable to cover myself, or protect myself, or defend myself.

Gardner slipped free of his coat and his shirt. He tossed them aside, muscles rippling faintly in the indistinct light...rippling, and more heavily developed than I'd ever envisioned a man's muscles could be. Almost cruelly developed, displaying a kind of power I knew now I could never hope to resist, even if I hadn't been rendered paralyzed and entirely powerless by whatever potion...*drugs, it had to be...* he had fed to me.

He revealed his torso to me. It was the first time I'd seen a man's naked torso in my life. And now he was...I didn't want to look. Didn't want to see. Struggling, I worked to form my lips to the word that would stop him. Struggled to make them utter 'no!' in the same breathless, unconvincing, unconvicted whisper of which I still found myself completely incapable.

Nothing would come.

No sound.

No word.

Mute, I lay. Fascinated, I watched. Streaming moisture in unprecedented gushes from the hidden flesh I suddenly wanted desperately, wanted more than anything, to touch with the hands he'd rendered submissive and useless, I shivered as he slowly,

slowly, stripped off his remaining clothing. As he ever so slowly revealed to my wonderment and no small awe the secret details of his body. Details I'd never dreamed of, because I'd never known what they might be. Because I hadn't had enough information even to hazard a guess what those details might be.

But now I saw.

Eyes opened wide, my body streaming its steaming moisture onto the bed of virginal white marble where I'd been placed, where it seemed to hiss and crackle upon contact with the remorseless chill of the stone, I could not do anything but see.

Revealed, his length was more enormous than I would have imagined.

Rearing, heavily pendulous and yet at the same time brutally thrusting, moving visibly even in the dim-lit night, his shaft stood straight from his body.

I knew what it was called.

Penis.

I could not have ever made myself say it, though to my shock I discovered my lips were even now working to form the word.

Penis.

Mother would have exacted ruthless penance if she'd known I was even aware of such a word. She'd have inflicted untold layers upon layers upon layers of punishment had I ever dared utter such a word.

"Penis!" My shriek, freed suddenly from my frozen lips and throat, burst from my gagged mouth with surprising force. Burst with enough force to set it

bouncing and echoing with incredible violence off the columns and benches and dead fountain of Gardner's Midnight Garden. And bouncing and echoing, the sound of it returned to me in open mockery of my own dissolution into debauchery and all the shivering delights of sin against every vow I'd taken. Every one I'd undertaken to take.

The sound echoed repeatedly and yet, strangely, it seemed to go no farther than the boundaries of the garden. It seemed to have no power to penetrate some invisible, supernatural wall that held it firmly inside, in much the same way Gardner had bound me to my sacrificial altar upon this devil-worshipped rock.

"You like it." Reaching up, Gardner released the strap he'd placed in my mouth. Released it with a single hand, while with the other he manipulated himself.

Groaning, I licked my lips. Realized they still had no power to form words, not even in the new and sweet relief of the freedom he'd granted them.

In the still and once again silent air, I thought I could see the massive length of him jerk with anticipation.

I thought I could see muscle ripple in his thighs and his taut, hard abdomen. Thought I could see the largeness of what lay behind that straining, straightening penis grow even larger. Even more fully ready.

"You want it." Placing one knee upon the altar, he moved toward me. His fingers, the backs of his hands, brushed the flesh of my thighs when he placed them

upon the marble altar, when he braced himself with them, the enormity of his arousal now hidden from my view, but not from my thoughts and my new knowledge.

"Say you want it," he ordered, bending close over me.

"I w...want it." My mouth was dry from its recent struggles. But still the words came easily.

I had no idea if they were the words I'd meant to say or wanted to say, the ones I'd struggled with all the desperation of a frightened woman to utter. The ones I'd hoped would end my panic and my servitude to this new master who was, in so very many and incalculable ways, much more powerful than the one I'd forsaken the instant I'd climbed onto the stone and allowed my legs to be spread wide.

"Say it like you mean it." Gardner's voice was soft now. Was taunting. His hands hadn't moved; hadn't left my flesh, and hadn't advanced upon it, either.

I tried to close my legs. Just a little. Just so I could feel the burn of his touch and capture it for all time. But of course they would not move. *Could* not move.

Only my mouth had been freed. Only my tongue, and my throat, and my lungs. Only my tears, that flowed openly, flowed in boiling-freezing streams from widened eyes that would no longer close, eyes that would no longer focus upon anything but the face that hung pale and illuminated above mine. Upon the gentle curve of teeth I wanted to feel upon me. Upon sharply deadly points I wanted to feel sinking into me, wanted to feel suckling me and

draining me.

"Say it." His demand was clear now.

I would say it.

Would say what he wanted to hear. Whatever he wanted to hear.

And I would mean every syllable as I said them.

"I want it!" Another shriek. A much stronger echo inside the enchanted space. Another sound that bounced back hard and vibrant from the mysterious shrouding of deadness that lurked just beyond.

"You want what?"

"Your *penis*!"

Laughter. Soft, scintillating. Sexual in every sense of the word.

Laughter, as Gardner straightened away from me. As he rose to his knees in the darkness above my spread-eagled form and towered over it. For it was no longer a part of me.

I was inside my head.

I was all I had. All the being I had. And the waiting arms and legs, the wanting, pulsating flesh he'd aroused to genuine madness, was not me.

All of those things belonged to him now.

I knew it more than sensed it.

I didn't regret it, but I would cling to what he'd left me of my mind and my soul.

I would continue to exist!

"Do you know the word?"

"Word?" I tried to shake my head.

Could not.

"Say the word to me, Jean-Agnes."

For the barest millionth of a second my mind reeled, confused. It whirled in confusion that seemed about to suck me down. Confusion that wanted to suck me away from this wonder, this anticipation, this hot and keening need that seemed to thrum visibly from and around my supine and useless body.

"I don..."

Fuck.

The word was there suddenly. One so hideous I'd never dared to think it before. It was there, and it would not be expunged. Not in any way I could ever envision expunging it.

"Say it." Gardner held himself with both hands now. He held the moon-hewn threat of the length I craved, the one I thought I would have to feel embedded inside me or die from the lack, with both hands. He stroked himself. Stopped himself, first with palms and then the backs of his hands. And then yet again with the same fingers he'd used to torment me to such a delight of perfect, unassuaged tension. "Say it."

"Fuck," I breathed.

"You're so innocent, Jean-Agnes." The length of him pulsed between his hands. I felt rather than saw the straining urgency, since he'd wrapped both hands around it and begun to work it diligently. Work it toward an end that I, in all the innocence with which he'd just seen fit to belabor me, could barely discern. He was working it hard...working it toward results I knew without knowing exactly how I knew.

"I mean to find out where you came from," he

breathed, his voice turning as thick and heavy as the masculine organs that seemed to cause him such untold miseries of suffering.

Wistfully, I thought of myself in the safety of heavy black robes and veil. Remembered myself kneeling in prayer, content in prayer, content in the silence I'd been more than glad to obey, in the name of what I'd thought I wanted.

Then.

"Fuck!" I said, surprising even myself with the vehemence inherent in the way I said it. "Fuck!" I cried. "Fuck!" I shrieked, now aware of milky streams that spewed from between Gardner's fingers. Steaming streams of primitive moon-milk that erupted headlong from the tip of his shaft and splattered across my exposed thighs and abdomen, and all the gasping, wrenching and grasping private areas between.

"Fuck!" Somehow, I found strength to close my eyes.

Somehow, knowing what I'd never been precisely told, but what I'd at some long-ago time intuited with my own kind of primeval knowledge, I tried to steel myself for the invasion of that inconceivably massive flesh into me. I tried to tighten myself. Tried, with another kind of primeval knowledge, this one utterly hopeless but there nonetheless, to fix myself so that I would be able to resist. So that I would be able to prevent his invasion with what little sentience remained to me.

But my body would not cooperate. The folds

there...the gaping maw and the striving lips, the aching depths and the steadily streaming inner reaches, would not be tightened. Loose, soft, they would not be denied that which it had already been ordained they would have.

"Fuck?" I was sobbing openly. Sobbing with all the broken heart and dashed hope for which I'd never had the chance to sob before. Sobbing for what I wanted, what I could not have...all the many and varied, completely incongruous things I might never have.

Almost against my will, I reopened my eyes.

"You're so innocent." Gardner's voice had changed. Had become thin and thready, had seemed to take on the kind of pulsing beat that had driven the scalding moon-milk from him.

He still massaged himself...massaged with fingers that seemed to have lost much of their strength and most of their direction. "One day I will understand your innocence," he vowed in the same thready and unsteady tones. "I promise you I will understand why...how...a woman of your age, in this day and age, can still seem like some kind of medieval..."

Nun.

He didn't say it.

As if the notion was ludicrous.

And I remained powerless, with only that one repeated, pleading and cajoling word locked to my brain and my lips, to tell him how frighteningly close to the truth he'd just come.

"Fuck," I whispered all but pleadingly.

And he laughed. "One day, soon, I will do to you what you want me to do."

"Fu..." I could no longer say it now that the enchantment had returned. Now that he had so clearly decided it should return and would return. I could only repeat that one syllable, babbling it over and over like some kind of demented, delirious prayer for deliverance from what my body had become. "Fu...fu...fu...fu..."

"One day I will fuck you," he promised, releasing what was now revealed as a shrinking and shriveling remnant of the magnificent shaft I'd striven so hard to possess.

Was this the way it was?

Was this the way it was supposed to be?

No!

Tormented, the shriek rose imprisoned inside my head.

It should not be like this. The moon-milk, the delightful steaming of fluid and essence, should be within me. It should be there now, instead of spattered like some sort of useless and unwanted effluvia across stones and the flesh it had already begun to spot with hoarfrost and ice as it cooled and settled. It should be swirling inside the seething pit of me, seeking its home and its destiny. Seeking its purpose, and its...

"Fu...fu...fu..."

Laughing softly, his effluvia-covered hands reaching out to trace long and lamentable trails of waste along the insides of my thighs toward the

opening that still gaped with open need, relentless in its hunger to encompass and enfold, its starvation to satisfy and sate itself, Gardner leaned toward me.

"One day I will fuck you," he promised again. "But only when you have learned."

Learned? I wanted to scream.

"Fu...fu...fu..."

I had learned! I knew! I *needed*!

"One day, my sweet Jean-Agnes." Lifting, one of his hands drew their trail of thickened essence across my stammering lips.

And still they stammered. Helplessly and hopelessly. "Fu...fu...fu!"

"You haven't awakened enough, Jean-Agnes. Not yet." Once again taunting with every word, Gardner leaned forward farther still. To plant a branding kiss upon my abdomen. Just below my navel. Just above the seething center of me. He bent to drag the points of his fangs across that same wounded and burnt flesh, tormenting with the unspoken, unspeakable delights they could inflict, if only he would inflict them. If only he would...

"*Fuck!*" I shrieked it at last. "*Me!*"

"Ah, my darling." He drew back as, mercifully, I found it possible to fall silent again. As the walls of my imposed silence, so like my earlier life's silence and yet so startlingly, stunningly different, closed in upon me and I found myself once again a prisoner of the moonlight and the Midnight Garden.

CHAPTER NINE

I hadn't anticipated the deprivations of Gardner's hands. Or, to be more accurate, I hadn't anticipated the effect those deprivations would have upon me...the instant, inarguable, explosive effect. Perhaps because I hadn't had anything...not even my own desperate and uninformed exploratory probings of just a few hours before...upon which to build any reasonable, realistic kind of expectation.

"You aren't ready to be fucked," he said roughly, his hands finding their way to me. And I lay motionless, as I'd been forced to be. I lay spread-eagled, spewing enormous, endless quantities of my most secret essence onto cold marble, where it pooled uselessly before steaming away to nothing. "You haven't been tortured, yet. Haven't been prepared."

Tortured?

My mind reeled. It simultaneously sang its wordless, voiceless pleasure and shrieked its abysmal fear.

Tortured. As if it had been demanded by some

otherworldly force, some quite possibly sinister and dreadful force, my mind repeated the word easily. Clearly. As clearly as ever in my life my mind had repeated anything.

His hands caressed the inner curve of my thighs. "I will torture you," he promised, seeming already lost in contemplation of the things he was about to do. "Do you believe me, Jean-Agnes?"

Yes. I nodded, suddenly afraid to speak. Nodded and shivered again as clouds of strangeness and a rising, blue moonlit mist receded at least to the edges of my prison of marble.

I remained completely conscious. I knew that. Completely aware of what was being done to me. I required myself, with a rigor and an insistence of which even Mother had never dreamed, to remain fully conscious. Fully alert. Fully quiescent.

"You have to learn about yourself," Gardner said. And his hands began their work.

Beginning with two thumbs, he parted me.

My self-imprisoned shriek tore at my throat in its frenzy to break free.

Stroking softly with the tips of his thumbs, he parted and pulled, all the while massaging delirium-inducing circles at the very outermost, very most stunningly tortured and tormented layer of me.

"We'll examine you one small bit at a time," he said quietly. "You'll lie very, very still..."

Yes. Obediently.

No! In utter, stark, terror.

Yes. The overriding voice of decision made,

decision inalterable, decision to be lived with.

"You will remain powerless." His voice took on the earlier, calm and ever so slightly drowsy command it had displayed when he'd been inducing me...*seducing* me...to come to his garden and lie upon his altar.

Hypnotic words, mesmeric tones with which he sank me deeper into my self-contained captivity.

"You will allow me to torture you. You will allow me to teach you. You will allow me to waken you."

An answer seemed to be required. If only I could give one. If only I could do something besides nod my head, my capitulation complete, my agreement absolute and even eager as the last of my resistance sank into soft and pliant defeat beneath the touch of his hand that continued to circle.

To strum.

And to pinch ever so slightly beneath the touch of intruding thumbs that moved together now, only to spread again, spread wider, inside me. And then wider still with every repetitious circling motion. As those thumbs stretched the layers of my flesh until I wanted to cry out that it was too much, I was too small, I was incapable of opening to the degree he seemed to want me to open.

If only I could cry out.

But that was not possible, that was not to be allowed. And so, dutifully, I kept my silence. Conscious only of the searing ripple of pain in flesh that had never been touched in this way before, never been forced and forced, never been pulled almost, drastically, asunder with thumbs that seemed to have

nothing in mind but rending me completely in two.

My legs twitched.

My taut muscles, stretched to their limit by the way he had fastened me almost cruelly to the marble altar, burned with their effort to move. Burned and cramped with their failure to move at all.

Eyes closed, I tried to relax. Tried to find some small, imperceptibly small and overlooked amount of slack in which to shift my position. In which to alter the wide and increasingly uncomfortable spread of my legs.

"This." Gardner gave a hard prod with his embedded thumbs. A prod that threatened in no uncertain terms to turn my strained flesh inside out should he exert such tremendous force again. "This tightness."

I could not open my eyes.

Could not now even move my head. Could not make even the slight and pathetic shaking or nodding motions still left in my control.

"First I will teach this to relax."

Once again his touch became excruciatingly gentle.

Allowing my flesh to close to its natural state, he pressed his thumbs tightly together, He joined them, only to begin a new kind of pushing. An implacable pressure that had nothing to do with parting still-resistant layers of tightness, and everything to do with massaging unstoppably at that very same tightness from within. Willing it, upon the unspoken command of his touch, to relax. To comply.

I couldn't help myself.

Instantly, a low and anguished groan rising from my throat, I relaxed. It wasn't a voluntary relaxation, wasn't anything I tried to do. It was entirely the result of the expert, almost demonic touch Gardner applied to the one precise spot within me that could effect such complete and spontaneous result.

I relaxed. Jerked spasmodically, my arms and legs struggling instinctively as a long and slow tide of moisture poured out from the center of me. Out, to arouse a low laugh of approval and a murmur of appreciation from Gardner.

"That's it, Jean-Agnes." He continued his progress with the tight-pressed thumbs that had become one large, one intolerably enormous intruder moving forward and into me another millimeter. Parting the next layer of flesh that tried to resist.

I tensed again. My body tried instinctively to tense, in the only way that had been left to it. Tried even though it already knew resistance would accomplish absolutely nothing to hold him out. Hold him back. To refuse the eternally pressing, gentle and then insistent pressure he exerted at layers of flesh that no longer belonged entirely to me. That were no longer mine to control, but his.

"P...please." I struggled to say it. Struggled my hardest, my stomach contracting in terror as I heard the unintelligible, half-groaned garble that was the only thing I could seem to utter.

Please!

Tightened in its pathetic and misguided attempt to defend itself, my body stood not a chance.

Finally, unable even to sigh my surrender, I faced the inevitable.

I felt myself soften. Felt my entire self, all the resistant and never before plundered layers of myself open. There was nothing I could do but endure the next sharp tug at my flesh, and then the next and the next as I succumbed. Given no choice but to do what Gardner ordered me to do.

Surrender. As a small rush of fluid pain rippled through me.

Acquiesce, as his thumbs made their next quick and searing, rapid and startling entry through ever-resistant flesh. As they plunged, free and utterly welcome, into some hidden and endless cavern inside me. Some cavern lined with super-aroused antennae of some sort, antennae that transmitted to all the quivering and shuddering rest of me...

Heat.

Great and smoking, waves of heat scorched me.

I cried out again, more successfully than before, as engulfing pillars of flame seemed to spring full-blown from the place deep inside me that he'd touched for the very first time. Those flames soared instantly, threatening to light the midnight sky and the garden that bore the same name as they tried to consume me. As they tried to turn me into something else, *someone* else.

I was tossing my head back and forth. Wishing I could open my eyes. Knowing they would do nothing to cooperate. Mumbling my tiny and mindless, endless sounds that must forever remain locked

behind lips that could not form words, had been denied all ability to form words, I began to cry.

In delight. Fear. A thousand and one things I could not name.

There was nothing now in my world but the touch of the expert hands between my legs. Nothing but the soft marauding, the insistent pressure Gardner McCord exerted ceaselessly and with such infinite, maddeningly deliberate care.

I felt him tug again. Felt something...a million and one somethings...stretch tight inside me. Felt them adjust, then immediately felt those same things give way with a sharp rippling of moisture that wrenched another low groan of surprise and anguish from my still-captivated throat.

I felt the tearing of some fragile internal barrier I hadn't, in all my clumsy and incompetent fumbblings, damaged. I felt the rending in two of some last, vital shield of protection and then, on wave after flowing wave of unabashed and unstoppable response, I felt his thumbs slide as deep as they could into me. I felt the knuckles of his hands grind against be-number outer flesh between my legs as he pressed his thumbs all the way into me. As he spread me wide again...wider than he'd spread me before, to the accompaniment of another unprecedented surge of internal moisture.

I felt him shove.

And shove, and shove, and shove.

"You really were," he murmured after what seemed a very long spell of shoving and separating.

His voice carried a note of wonder I hadn't heard before. A note that instantly, permanently, eased whatever reserve of fear that he might want to hurt me. That he might be trying to hurt me with this beginning, this strange and intoxicating talk of tortures to be borne and agonies to be experienced.

But that was all it was.

Just...*talk*.

In fact, he was going to be my teacher. He was going to be a good one. A demanding one, but a fair one.

He would ask of me no more than I could achieve, would demand no more than I could endure and inflict no less than I could accept.

"R...r..." My mind was completely unhinged. And my voice, too...completely thready and strangely melodic as it wandered heedlessly up and down, and all over the scale.

I really was what?

As if he read my mind and all the thoughts I couldn't bring myself to speak even now that I'd been granted permission to speak, Gardner laughed again. "Imagine. In this day and age, you really were a virgin."

Really...

When I came right down to it, words had so little meaning. There seemed no point now in trying to speak them...no point in even trying to think them. Because there would never be any understanding. Would never be any true awareness, on Gardner's part or on mine, of what I meant to say. Or what the

words could truly mean in the world beyond the prison he'd fashioned there for me.

Laughing softly, Gardner pulled his hands away. So swiftly and so decisively that, shattered, I couldn't even try to cry out.

I could only lie as he'd placed me, with arms and legs dutifully and submissively spread, my eyes wide and straining, staring up at him with all the longings he'd awakened, all the yearnings he'd set in motion, written there in ways I could only hope he would see. Ways I could only pray he would understand, and heed, and oblige.

"Technically, you're still a virgin," he said. "Though in the truest sense of the word..."

The next movement, when it came, was lightning fast. And twice as shocking.

Gardner *lunged* at me.

Uttering a low and hoarse cry that belied all the careless nonchalance he'd displayed until that moment, he leaped upon me, Savagely. Leaped upon the center of me with greedy lips that in less than a heartbeat surrounded my pulsing, throbbing, already driven-to-the-brink flesh and fastened upon it. Greedy lips that seemed in the truest sense of all the vampire fantasies I hadn't ever read but knew instinctively because they are so much an ingrained part of the human psyche, to thirst for me.

Gardner drank the essence that poured relentlessly from me. From deep and secret patches and pockets of me that had been barely nudged awake the previous night in my lonely bedroom, but which had

now been brought to full and riotous life. Here. By him. Upon a virginal slab of purest white marble beneath a shimmering and dreamlike, beneficent yet somehow malevolent sculpted crescent of moon.

Gardner's mouth fastened upon me. It fastened all around me. And now it was soft. Now, after that first greedy sucking and draining, it was softer than anything imagination could ever conjure. And wetter. With a crimson-powerful wetness that claimed me. So thoroughly that I tried again, long after I'd accepted my conditions and learned to survive within my rigid limitations, to move. I tried to cry out, tried to breathe a great and engulfing sigh of relief as the air rushed from my lungs.

Gardner's hands, their torment of the innermost layers of me now forgotten, found the thick crop of curls I'd nurtured untouched for far too long between my legs. Plunging deep, his fingers twisted into them with a strength that sent sudden and unconscionable pain tearing through the entire length of my body.

I moaned. A low and unintelligible quivering of sound.

And Gardner gasped. Then cried out the way I only wished I could. Cried out in a feral shriek that had very little substance. Because he quite obviously no longer possessed any significant strength or substance with which to endow it.

I struggled to lift my legs. Struggled against the thick and immovable leather bonds that held them in their place.

I wanted to lift my legs. *Needed* to lift them. High.

Needed to ease the twisted and cramped length of them and to trap Gardner within their crushing circle. Needed to wrap them around him so that I could reduce him to nothingness with the magically muscled strength of them. Needed to use them to insure he would not leave me now. Would never leave me, would only suckle harder. Only suckle longer at the center of me, plunging forever with the delicious delirium of the tongue that darted furiously. The tongue that darted freely and fluently into corners of me I had never dreamed existed. Corners I had certainly never found in my own hesitant forays into those very same regions.

Groaning, he never released the hold he'd gained upon me. Instead he plunged harder. Plunged with his tongue just as I'd wished and dreamed he would. He plunged as far into me as it was possible for him to go.

He plunged repeatedly, reaching a great deal farther, surely, than had the thumbs that now, in retrospect and in comparison, seemed the tools of a mere child playing at passion.

For *this* was passion.

This great, unleashed, foaming and effervescent monster that had sprung to life in the place of the dead and denied regions I had sought to subdue as unimportant to my own existence, was the very personification of passion.

This writhing I undertook against the bonds that secured me, this clinging to Gardner with my mind as I could not with arms or fingers, this automatic

struggle to lift and undulate with hips suddenly possessed of strength incomprehensible, strength superhuman, was something that should be denied no living woman. It was something no woman should ever think or presume to deny herself.

This sound that did its best to tear itself from my throat, this low and pulsating music I could not utter even though it sprang from the depths of my chest and my soul, was the sound of a woman come alive at last. A woman come alive after she'd thought her life long since set upon its course and locked into its barren destiny.

This was passion.

I wanted to scream my delight in it. Desperate, I made every attempt. Every effort capable of one rendered now and forever hopelessly demented.

Then Gardner screamed, As if for both of us.

Lifting his head, tugging maniacally at the thatch of hair between my legs, the thatch he'd never released with fingers that only twined deeper among its roots, he screamed so loudly it was a wonder the neighbors across the street didn't hear...the neighbors who were, by their very nature and temperament, no doubt listening for just such screams.

Or was it that they were used to such sounds?

Was it that, despite their protests and their displays of hatred for the one they believed responsible for so much carnage and savage bloodshed, they had heard this man's other victims make the same sounds? Heard them over and over and over again until they'd been hardened to them...until the sounds no

longer completely registered?

Had the neighbors become so immured to such agonized sounds that they were neither capable of reacting nor capable of feeling concern?

Was it that Gardner had done this before? Here?

No.

That was the voice of instinct. The voice of reasonable instinct. And I knew at once that it was right.

Gardner had had no other women here.

In that sense of the word, he too was a virgin.

As he himself had admitted, Thaddeus had been his lover.

His only lover.

Thaddeus had brought him here. Had taught him here, had ultimately saved him from life alone, life completely and irretrievably apart, completely and abysmally unwanted and unloved. Thaddeus had brought Gardner to life here. Had made him understand the true nature of loving, and caring. As now Gardner was passing down that knowledge to me right now. Passing it irresistibly with the feasting mouth that glutted itself upon me. That whispered and shouted and sang against devastated flesh that now, addicted, could refuse him nothing.

"Gard..." I actually managed to utter the first part of his name. It came out low and indistinct, came out secret and shaking, in the voice of a woman who needed attention of a new kind. Needed it *now*.

...ner!

The second part of his name would not come. The

second part erupted as a frenzied gasping and gagging of sound, a spewing of sound, a torrent of unstoppable and unintelligible sound that rose into the night sky and seemed to hang there enthralled and bursting with unspent energy.

The imagined force of that sound hung above us forever before it at length and of necessity shattered. Into a billion tiny shards that rained down upon our impossibly joined forms.

With another of his low murmurs, Gardner adjusted his hold upon me. Reaching down, he released my legs with a quick and easy turn of a wrist that knew exactly how to release.

At once they lifted. Ignoring the sudden, sharp cramping as they regained full movement, I wrapped them around his shoulders. Just the way I'd dreamed of wrapping them. Trapping him, I held him. Firmly. Held his mouth firmly against the part of me that had turned as greedy and insatiable as the lips that still made their useless efforts to taunt and torment.

Slipping his hands beneath my hips, Gardner lifted them. He cupped me, surrounding and warming cold rounds of flesh that had pressed too long against unforgiving stone. Rounds that had never been touched so before but would, I knew in my heart of hearts, expect forever to be touched this way in the future.

He lifted me to him.

With my help, with the help of freed legs that knew instinctively how to tug and maneuver, how to compensate for arms that remained helpless and

bound to the stone above my head, Gardner lifted me. So that I hung half-suspended in what should have been an awkward position. What imagination kept insisting should give him all kinds of physical advantage while leaving me to struggle with almost more ineffectuality than when I'd been completely bound and entirely helpless.

But as he clutched me, as he lifted me higher and higher into the demanding maw that never for a second released its suckling hold upon me, I used all the force I could muster in shoulders and splayed arms to bow my back into an oblique angle that lifted me even higher. Pressing down upon his shoulders with tightly contracted legs, I urged his mouth tighter against my flesh. I pressed its thirsting eagerness as tightly as it could be pressed into that flesh.

"Ggggggar....." Trying to utter again the single syllable I'd been able to utter before, I clung to him. Clung tight as he ravished me. Clung with fading and faltering strength as my body gave itself over entirely to the ravishment and to exultation in the ravishment. To utter, uncomplicated joy at the loss of so many years of carefully nurtured and wholly unnatural innocence with which I'd thought to make myself divine.

I felt myself pulse. Felt my woman's flesh move as if it had taken on life and intelligence of its own. Felt it *clench*, as Gardner's tongue made another of its impossibly deep and destructive plunges. I felt myself soften and then tighten, almost convulsively, as he swirled his tongue slowly and then even more slowly

inside me. As he sought out, carefully and quite deliberately, any spot he might have missed before, any nourishment he might have failed to absorb. I felt myself thunder with the mightiest, the most simultaneously alarming yet enjoyable flood of moisture I had yet endured. Yet emitted.

I pulsed. I clung. I tried again to scream. Wanting this never to end. Wanting to do this and only this, for all the rest of my life. Wanting this fever of craving, this starvation of needing, to go on and on and on, even when I knew daylight would come all too soon. And with it the end of all. The end of everything. The end of me.

I wanted this.

I had *always* wanted it...had always known it would be mine.

And now there would be no going back.

I would never want to go back.

Would never, I sincerely hoped, think of going back.

Weakened by the outpouring of more essence than I'd known I possessed, my body began to sag. I began to lose the tight-limbed grip my legs had held upon Gardner, and I felt myself begin an inexorable slippage. Back to cold, white stone.

Gardner let me slip. Never trying to stop me, he only followed after me, his mouth relentless in its seeking, merciless in its continued expert and ceaseless arousal of what surely could not be aroused any more.

He laid me tenderly upon my marble altar.

Disengaging one of his hands from the grip that had held me aloft while the other continued to encircle me and hold me close to him, he used it to free my hands. Used it to release their bonds so that they, too, fell limp against frozen stone, too wasted even to struggle. Too wasted and weak to care about struggle of any kind.

Gardner placed me back upon the altar with exquisite, infinite, tender care. He pulled his mouth from me, and I whimpered as I felt the twin points of fangs burst through my skin. As I felt them sink deep, into the most tender, most intimate and fragile part of me.

And as I felt that slicing pain, as I knew at last his ultimate claiming and changing of me, I tilted my head back as far as it could tilt it. And screamed my mindless scream. Screamed my delighted agony straight up, into a clear and sparkling, frigidly starlit and moon-streaked sky.

CHAPTER TEN

Waking late, I felt first a long overdue, at least to my current confused state of thinking, burgeoning of amazement and...I had to admit it...no small amount of shame.

We had stayed together. Gardner and I. We had stayed the night in the Midnight Garden, right up until the half-hour before Gardner said dawn was about to break. A statement he made with absolute authority, as if the hours and comings of all dawns were ingrained somehow upon his consciousness or his psyche.

We had spent long, sometimes cold and sometimes blazing hours lying in various positions upon the marble altar. Performing acts upon one another that I could not bear to consider in the chill, blue light of the autumn morning. Just as I could not bear to look toward the garden in that light, could not bear to see it too clearly revealed, its strange and awesome magic stolen, its otherworldly, intoxicating beauty rendered ordinary and mundane by sunlight. Just as I could not bear to look, either, into the mirror in my bedroom or

any of the other mirrors which Thaddeus had, in some form of apparent fascination with their power and their mystery, seen fit to make an integral part of his home's decoration.

I could not bear the sight of myself in the mirror. Because I could not bear to see the faint yet distinct twin marks on my neck...reminders of the moment when Gardner had bitten me playfully and yet bitten for real, his laughter soft and challenging in the depth of his throat.

We had repeated Gardner's initial act of instruction repeatedly throughout the night. Each time with more and more refinements and more and more delicious variation, until under cover of darkness those acts had come to seem more natural than perverted. More desirable than despicable. More enjoyable than unthinkable.

More a part of my preferred existence than not.

Gardner had escorted me home, finally, in the slumberous half hour before first light would tint the sky. He had left me at my back gate with very little fanfare, watching in silence as I climbed the steps to my porch, so week-kneed with dissolution that I feared at first I would not be able to mount them at all. Would be forced to spend what remained of my rapidly fading hours of rest lying on the grass beneath my back porch.

He'd stayed resolutely there, his gaze fixed on me as I stumbled barefoot across grass touched with a silvery limn of frost, my body too ravaged and diminished by everything he'd done to it to respond

entirely. He'd stayed, and he'd watched. As I crossed my porch. As I stepped through my back door. And when I peeked outside through the small pane of window in the door after closing it behind me, I saw that he still watched. Frowning slightly, he'd never moved his gaze from my door until the instant I'd reached for the heavy old lock and engaged it with a snap that fell barely short of a gunshot in the pre-dawn silence.

It was then that I'd glanced away. And when I glanced back no more than a second later, he was gone. Vanished, like a will-o-the-wisp. Like a puff of scarcely seen smoke on a still day, like the supernatural creature he'd been reputed to be...a creature that did not exist. Could not exist. Had never existed.

And then I'd slept.

Exhausted, aching and ravaged by the 'instruction' given in the Midnight Garden, I slept far later than I was accustomed to sleeping. Far later than I had ever been permitted to sleep, for any reason.

I awoke to the rich golden light of late morning and cloudless skies. To the distant vista of mountains kissed by snow during the hours we'd lain restless and occupied in our garden. Mountains that this morning gleamed purely white, far more white and infinitely more mystical than they had appeared just the afternoon before, when the snow had amounted to little more than a faint dusting left over from some long-ago storm.

I'd slept soundly. Without concern, curled up on

my big bed with the covers undisturbed beneath me, my clothes still haphazardly worn and only a loose throw from the divan across the room tugged over myself.

Now I sat up with a guilty start, energized by swirling dust motes in beams of midday sun that dropped through the narrow gap between drawn curtains, dropped across my bed and seized me by the shoulder. Beams that woke me.

Noon?

Had I really slept until noon?

Mother would have decried the very concept. She would have punished me for it. Punished me severely, and denounced me to all the Sisters as a lazy wretch as part of that punishment.

But I no longer cared.

I had strayed so far from her teachings. From my parents' teachings, my church's teachings.

I had strayed into...

Rising from the bed, I felt a burst of pain in the overused flesh between my legs. And felt again too, or thought I did, the pressure of teeth upon the flesh of my throat, forever marked because I still felt so clearly the prickling memory of the pain those teeth had inflicted, however momentary and fleeting it had proved to be.

Showering quickly, I shoved my old clothing, the dark robes I no longer deserved to wear and would surely never again presume to wear, into the back of my closet. I dropped yesterday's clothes, left unwearable by the night spent sleeping in them, into

my private bathroom's hamper and slipped into my other set of new clothes. The last of my fresh clothes.

I had so much to consider in the golden light of day.

So much to make my peace with. Like...

So many strange references to curses. So much talk of abominations, when I knew...*knew*, and feverishly hoped I would never again be convinced to doubt...that the old legends were not true.

That such things had never been true.

Cursed.

The single word rang over and over inside my head as I pulled on a fresh pair of corduroys and a shirt just out of the wrapper, a more frivolous pale blue one this time. Or so I'd thought when I'd wandered into the discount store in total confusion to buy it.

Cursed.

Furious with myself for having listened to such complete foolishness, such idle and destructive murmurings from a lunatic fringe on the verge of panic, I laced my shoes...not the new athletic shoes but the old and heavy black brogans I'd been required to wear with my habit. They were practical shoes. Nonsense things I'd long ago broken in, and if I planned to do any amount of walking today...

I'd awakened with an idea. The ghost of one.

Gardner had mentioned studying to be an architect. He'd said something about wanting to make his splash in the world, and finished with some obtuse reference that led me to believe he *had* made a

splash.

So might there not be something in the library about him? Might I not be able to learn more there, if I could find such a place, than I'd been able to learn in my brief encounters with him? In all the times he hadn't been willing to share much about his past and I, in fact, had been too busy with other pursuits to make more than the most casual inquiries?

Which led, as everything seemed to lead, back to Gardner McCord's strangeness and, by association, to what had happened the day before outside his front door.

Gardner was not cursed.

That was it, pure and simple.

I'd already made my mind up about that, just as I'd made it up that no matter what happened, I wasn't going to allow myself to be swayed again by mob rule and emotionally charged panic.

It was high time I took a walk.

That was something I'd loved to do as a girl. Something I'd enjoyed enormously right up until the instant all enjoyment and pleasure had been shoved forcibly from my life by others who'd wanted me to subscribe to their belief that enjoyment was evil. That enjoyment and pleasure of any kind a craven sin.

I'd loved my long and solitary girlhood ramblings. And had completely quit morning the complete sacrifice of them the instant the doors of Divine Serenity closed behind me and I found myself confined there...confined within the strictures of a cloistered life that had no room for individuality and

no tolerance for anything concerning the world beyond the thick walls behind which we...all the Sisters...had remained locked.

Walking had not been acceptable for the denizens of Divine Serenity.

I resented that now.

I resented an existence made up of enforced silence. Of endless prayer and thought, devoted to...nothing.

Nothing at all.

The one time, the only time, I'd expressed the idea that a walk might be in order, that some exercise might be beneficial in helping me clear my thoughts and set them into proper order, I'd been set to scrubbing stone floors on my hands and knees. I'd been *sentenced* to scrub them. Required to pray aloud for hours as I worked in solitude. Required to pray for forgiveness for sins I had never committed.

I resented that, too. Resented that no matter how hard I'd scrubbed those floors and re-scrubbed them, no matter how hard I'd worked or how long, my work was never good enough. My work must be done again, my punishment for the innocent crime of wanting to go for a walk must be endless.

Sweet heaven, how I'd hated that place!

The admission, even if only to myself and only in the privacy of my own thoughts, first shocked me. Then it stunned me and finally, strangely, it invigorated me.

Thrilled anew, thrilled by the unheard-of indulgence of being allowed to sleep until I was

rested and then being allowed to stand in the deep-gold sunlight and see the shimmering blue of an autumn sky, the pure indulgence of simply being free to exist and take pleasure in those small things, I ran down my leaf-littered front steps. I all but ran along the sidewalk toward the place where I knew businesses existed. The place I'd been before and desired, desperately desired, to see and feel and know again.

Rough brown leaves crunched beneath my every footstep. And that was a delight.

A stray breeze touched the enormous old trees lining my street...*mine!* It sent blizzards of floating gold to the ground. And that was a wonder.

Another puff of wind carried the smoky-sharp scent of autumn flowers, of chrysanthemums pale and gold, or perhaps dreaming lavender. And that was an enticement.

To the next step.

The next square of cracked cement in front of me.

The next block.

Lifting my hands, I ran wary fingers through the blunt-cut ends of hair I had never been permitted to touch during my days at Divine Serenity, except in the privacy of my own dismal cubicle in the few scant hours I'd been permitted to remove my choking wimple and smothering veils. And I dared to laugh.

Never again.

Never!

There had to be a library nearby.

In a city this size, there should be some kind of

library in every neighborhood. If only I could find it, if only I could lose myself in the fantastical intoxication of choosing any volume I wanted, any subject I wanted...the intoxication of reading for the sheer pleasure reading could give.

I was besotted.

I knew it.

So besotted that it wouldn't do simply to find whatever material might exist about Gardner McCord, Architect. Now I wanted to find buildings, too. Concrete things that had sprung to existence first inside his mind, only to be made real later.

I wanted to place my hands on cold stone and warm glass...wanted to feel their reality and recognize their substance, wanted to memorize every nuance and every detail to carry home in my heart. So I could consider later, at length. And in the considering could categorize and catechize during coming long nights when my hands would inevitably turn to pleasuring my body. When once again my senses would grow faint with the unexpected delights and desires of forbidden flesh, when my heart would pound with the strain of my own excesses, and I would need something...some small scrap or sliver...of Gardner McCord to focus upon.

Because of course he was all I had room for in my thoughts as my hands sought to fulfill my body's raging desires.

Crossing the street at the next corner, I hesitated. Looked both ways along an unfamiliar, autumn-shadowed street.

"You're the one from over to the Teagarden place." A man's voice, not a pleasant or warm one, spoke from behind me just when I made up my mind to turn left, toward a distant street where traffic whizzed and a few pedestrians waited to cross.

Startled, I spun.

Tripping on an uneven spot in the pavement, I reeled for a moment, thinking for sure I would fall.

The man who'd spoken was older than I. Much older. Gray-haired, dignified, he was dressed just as soberly as I, in dun-colored tweeds and a small, immaculate brown hat.

He looked like a gentleman, the way my imagination had always painted gentlemen. But unlike a true gentleman, he didn't reach out for me. Didn't offer a hand to steady me or stop my incipient fall.

He simply stared at me.

Glared at me.

"I'm Jean-Agnes," I confirmed, the rusty syllables coming a little more easily to my lips every time I had to use them. "Jean-Agnes Teagarden."

I thought it was appropriate to extend a hand in such situations. But this man looked too stern for such liberties. Too disapproving and hostile for such familiarities. So I stood very still, and I watched him in return. Waiting to see what he would do next. So I could understand what he wanted from me.

His eyes narrowed. And it was only then that I noticed he had a woman with him. A woman who'd hidden herself partially behind him as if I was some

kind of terrible threat and she feared for her life.

She was elderly, too. And dignified and stern. Almost to the point of being grim. As well-dressed as the man, her conservative pumps and gray hat were immaculate, her dark-green coat and the small bit of white scarf that peeked from the throat the very epitome of respectability and reliability.

Her eyes, though, and her expression, were no more friendly than his. "You've been living in that house," she almost spat.

I nodded, smiling though in truth it was beginning to wear on me, having to explain this as every turn and every unexpected moment. It was beginning, quite frankly, to irritate me. "It was my great-uncle's house," I replied as pleasantly as I knew how. "Great-uncle Thaddeus. He left it to me. In his will."

"You're in league with him."

"With who?" I frowned. "Thaddeus? Hadn't you heard? He's de..."

The woman drew back. A little. As if contact with me must be avoided at all costs.

"I barely knew him," I went on. "And to be in league...in league about what?"

"You dare to deny you've had contact with him?"

I'd been there before. Had heard similar allegations, similar accusations, before. But my mind still rebelled. It still struggled not to understand, not to make any sense at all of what seemed, more and more every time it happened, to be a personal attack. "I'm sorry," I denied, shaking my head even as I knew with utter certainty exactly of what...whom...

the elderly lady spoke. "I really..."

"You dare to deny it?"

Now it was my turn to back away. My turn to retreat a cautious step or two, my heart pounding, my every instinct insisting I might once again be in danger for things I hadn't done. Things I hadn't thought. "I'm sorry." Again I shook my head. "I really don't think..."

The woman leaned toward me. Maintaining a safe and strained distance, she bent at the waist and leaned the small amount closer such a posture would allow. Drawing back her lips, she bared her teeth and hissed through them. Quite literally *hissed*, with a low and deadly sibilance like a snake about to make a leap for the jugular. "He's *evil*. A vampire." Her voice was low. Almost inaudible and yet, somehow, at the very same time as crisp and cutting as an outraged shriek disturbing a silent dream.

It was the first time, I thought, that someone had voiced such outrageousness aloud. The first time someone hadn't beaten around every bush and employed every allusion possible to get that very same meaning across.

And it was no less shocking for all its honesty and straightforwardness.

Shivering, I remembered the sight of fangs shimmering in darkness. The recently ravaged flesh between my legs gave a hard throb as it too remembered, and all too logically wanted to deny what I couldn't seem to deny myself, with words.

"Gardner McCord. You're one of the..." I almost

said ‘imbeciles. Stopped myself from saying it just in the nick of time.

I might have expected the professorial-looking gentleman to step in at that point. Might have expected him to admonish his wife for being silly and foolish, might have expected him to remind her to watch her manners and to extend a hand to me in apology.

Might have.

But he had apparently become enmeshed in the fantasy as well.

Eyes alight with a crazed fury I recognized as something that had once lit my father’s eyes when I dared to disobey his direct orders, I backed away.

This was something I feared. Through long conditioning, feared the cutting words and punishments that inevitably followed the appearance of such a look.

“So you *do* admit you know him?” The man leaned toward me in the same way the woman...presumably his wife...had leaned the moment before.

“I...” My voice broke. It nearly failed. “Gardner McCord is my neighbor. But I’m sure you’re mistaken. I’m sure there’s no truth to such...Mr. McCord was the first to welcome me to the neighborhood when I arrived.”

The only one to welcome me.

But I didn’t want to say that, in the very real expectation that such a statement might very well drive the two of them right straight over whatever edge they teetered upon.

"Oh, I'm *sure* he did." This was from the woman. This was uttered with a chill rapidly bordering on hatred.

Obsessed hatred.

Shifting uncertainly on my feet, I couldn't shove from my mind the picture of Gardner that I myself had conjured. The picture of his mouth, succulent and incessant as his lips and tongue explored the folded mysteries I harbored between my thighs. Unable to shove away the heated memory of the way he'd awakened those folds and whorls, and all of me, with his sucking and his long hours of licking, probing, thrusting torment, I felt myself blush. Heavily. Deeply, the flesh of my face gleaming the unmistakable red of a harlot's gown.

Certain my professorial-looking adversary and his dangerous-eyed wife could read my thoughts at least as well as Gardner McCord seemed able to read them, I took another step backward. Never allowing my gaze to stray from them.

"I'm sure he welcomed you with all his...charms," the woman hissed. "That's how his kind works, you know. That's how he finds his victims. For his unholy ceremonies. For his unholy tastes." Pausing, she actually made the sign of the cross upon herself, and it was almost more than I could do to resist the temptation to do the same. "That's how he lures them in. How he perverts them into his kind."

The air had thickened around us...around me. It had taken on a texture not unlike some strangely fetid glue. Clinging to me, slowing my every attempt to

move, I imagined it began to harden around me. Began to try to drag me down, into some pit of debauched decay from which I should never escape.

The woman leaned again. And so did her husband.

They leaned in unison. And I wanted to turn. Wanted to run as hard as I'd ever run, to flee as determinedly as I'd ever fled, to make whatever pitiful escape I could before their insanity reached me and infected me. But I was powerless. To answer their claims. To pull my fascinated gaze away from their madness, to take a step in any direction. For any reason.

"Has he made you one of them?" she demanded, reaching for the throat I'd instinctively concealed by shrugging my shoulders up so that my collar would hide the twin marks Gardner had left there.

The bite mark burned suddenly. As if it had just been inflicted.

"Has he turned your soul to his own purposes? Has he put you in league with him against humanity? Against *decent* humanity?"

I jerked away from her touch. "This is not real."

The woman's face grew red. "I assure you, young lady. It is very real. The *evil* is very real. And if you aren't with us, if you aren't against it and against him, then you are as damned as he is. And you *will* be brought down. Both of you. Very soon. You *will*..."

She had left crazed far behind...had reached the point where insanity turns into fanaticism, where all remaining remnants of reason are left behind. This I knew absolutely from the teachings of Divine

Serenity. This I knew, and had cause to *fear*.

Just like the women seeking their own sexual fantasies, they had come among us from time to time as well.

The fanatical ones.

They had appeared with almost precise regularity and had stayed as briefly as they others...stayed only until Mother found them out and dismissed them. But their tenure, their time among us had always had great and rippling effects. Had always initiated disquieting disturbances in the obedient pensiveness that was integral to such an institution.

The arrival of fanatics had always resulted in a tearing, so to speak, in the stuff of which our reality was formed. And with it a terrible and unsettling unease within me. An unease that would take fast hold and be enormously difficult to expunge. That in many ways could never be entirely expunged.

"You will burn in hell," the woman triumphed, her voice rasping with harsh and sharp-edged notes. Almost inhuman notes.

Tears sprang to my eyes. I didn't know exactly why...only that rather than the fear and dread she'd thought to inspire with her prophecies of doom and damnation, her words inspired in me one feeling. One that overrode and immediately canceled out any other.

They left me, as I finally managed to turn and hurry away with all possible speed, with a very great, a very deep and insurmountable sadness.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

What struck me first and most profoundly about the building Gardner McCord had designed was its use of glass. Wide and soaring round-topped panes filled every possible bit of wall space. And at every corner wide swaths of glass brick gave a distinctly Art Deco feel.

And the colors!

There was no darkness here. No hint, even, of the darkness I suspected lay within his soul, the darkness that lay perilously close to the surface and barely concealed by it.

Every wall of the medium-sized office building before me, every nook and cranny and bit of smooth concrete between those soaring windows was colored a glorious azure blue. Pale blue, trimmed in a darker shade with bits of vibrant coral, As airy as a fragment of noontime summer sky floated down to take a moment's rest in a garden of scarlet late-autumn flowers.

Open-mouthed, openly gawking, I tilted my head back to gape at the towering creation constructed

primarily, entirely, of light and dreams. And quite suddenly, with nearly as much guilt as if I'd been caught peeping through a not-quite-closed blind at someone's most intimate and private moments, I knew I'd taken a look inside the soul of a man I had honestly believed I was beginning to know.

And found something I'd never expected.

No darkness, indeed.

No stain of evil, no hint of debauchery or any of the unspeakable things the neighbors had suggested, either in their mob or individually. Things I, despite common sense and instinct's rejection of such things, had halfway begun to believe myself. In some heathen corner of my soul and my heart.

But this...

This was Gardner as I'd come to know him.

This was the man who'd filled my soul with unexpected music. This was the man who'd awakened me to searing sexuality I might otherwise never have known...the man who'd set me free from a prison too zealously imposed, for no real or practical purpose.

This was Gardner McCord. The way he really was.

Open-mouthed at the sight of his creation, I knew it was.

"That's a Gardner McCord building, you know."

Startled, I jumped. My head snapped forward, then pivoted around. My hand came up to my throat and for a moment it clenched, desperate to hold in a heart that began to pound rapidly, painfully.

A police officer stood next to me, smiling at me.

Thinking, no doubt, that my wide-eyed stare and open mouth must mean I was a country bumpkin only just arrived in the city for the first time in her life.

Quickly, I closed my mouth.

That wasn't so far from the truth. Even if I had been born and spent the early years of my life in Chicago.

His smile widening, the policeman nodded at the sky-blue building.

Embarrassed, I lowered the hand I'd raised to my throat. "It's lovely," I murmured. "He's a neighbor of mine, and I was curious. So I thought I'd take a look. I thought maybe I might..."

"You don't say!" The policeman's tone filled with infinite admiration and approval. And his expression changed instantly to one of avid interest. "I knew he lived someplace around here." Then he paused. Seemed to want me to say something. To reveal, maybe, the location of Gardner McCord's hideout...the dark and outwardly quite dull house that gave no hint of its occupant. No hint that a man who could design soaring sky-colored buildings would ever want to live there.

But Gardner was my secret.

I'd long since started to regard him as *mine*, almost jealously. Long since begun to want to guard him. To hide him from the rest of the world with a zeal and a dedication that very closely resembled the all-out fanaticism I'd always feared in others.

"They say he's kind of a nut," the policeman went

on when I didn't respond. "They say he never comes out of his house. And it's *not* one of his own designs. They say he's a real mental case. Borderline insane."

I knew he was fishing. Knew he hoped to provoke me, through some policeman's tactic of acting like he already knew everything, to say something I had no intention of saying.

But I was good at hiding things.

I was good at keeping things to myself.

I'd had to be to survive as long as I had in the repressiive atmosphere of Divine Serenity.

"Mr. McCord seems perfectly sane to me," I replied, and when the policeman's expression changed again, when its avidity softened into an expression of satisfaction, I could have kicked myself.

I had fallen into his trap. A little

I had supplied some of the information he'd wanted without ever being aware I was doing it until it was too late. Until I could do nothing at all to stop myself.

If Mother was here, I would no doubt be dismissed all over again. For failing utterly to keep my own counsel and appear what I was supposed to appear one hundred per cent of the time.

Completely absorbed by the duties laid out for me, to the exclusion of everything else. The exclusion of interest in, and opinions about, anything else.

"There's two more McCord buildings close by." Apparently the police officer had decided he was going to get nowhere with me. He'd started to walk away, but then he turned back at the last minute, and

pointed in a direction off to my right and behind me. "There's two houses. Over on McAlmont Place. They're not so famous, and not so many people know about them. But they're some of his best stuff, if you ask me."

"Really?" I wished he would go. Wished he'd never stopped, never broken into my daydream.

Nodding, he looked at me curiously. As if considering that I might be someone dangerous. Someone possibly not quite right in my head who he'd want to keep an eye on in case I went suddenly, irreversibly berserk, and tried to damage Gardner's dream of a building in some way.

I flashed him a smile. My best, though I was still far from adept with the notion of smiling, and returned to my scrutiny of the soaring mass of concrete and glass above me.

Small, fan-like decorations stood at the top of every soaring reach of pale-blue concrete. Small flutings, wider at the top than at the bottom, sharply molded to stand out in vivid relief, painted the same shade as the walls. And I saw railings. Around balconies I'd not noticed before. Plain pipe railings, making up much of the vivid coral that made the structure seem somehow to sing.

There were so many levels to the place. So many hints of more within, of beauty hidden from the world just as there were levels and hidden beauties within the man himself. There were so many vantage points, scarcely noticed at first and yet undeniably *there* once they'd been spotted, from which a hidden

person, a concealed soul, could witness the world and take part in what he denied himself by remaining rigorously out of sight.

So many facets. So many...

When I lowered my gaze, I was alone.

Free to walk unnoticed in the direction the policeman had pointed.

Unfamiliar with the city, uncertain where to find McAlmont Place, I seemed to know with some inner, almost divine certainty that I *would* find it. That it would present itself to me in due course simply because I wanted to find it and because I needed to see what else Gardner had created. Needed to know if his smaller buildings would turn out to be any less intense...any less disturbing in their strangely sunlit, pastel-wedding-cake way.

I tried to put all expectation out of my mind.

Tried to let surprise remain a surprise until in due course I would stumble upon it. Tried to revel in the autumn day and sunlight that struck my face when I tilted it upward toward the sky. Tried to enjoy the free feel of wind ruffling my hair as the sun gave it warmth. Tried not to feel so revealed without the smothering security of clothing I'd loathed as much as I'd loathed life in the prison of my convent.

I felt free, and yet...

Something within me, some small and insistent part of me, longed to go home. Longed to put on the familiar clothing and begin the necessary suffering. To reassure itself that it was not too late and all was not lost, even as a fresh burst of throbbing in parts of

my body that bore distinct marks from the life they'd begun in the depths of the nights reminded me.

How much I had changed.

How intrinsically.

How irreversibly.

The throbbing called from me a misting cloud of heated need. A soft sweetness of steam that urged every one of those hidden and marked crevasses and folds to life. That refused to allow them to return to dormancy once they had awakened.

I might wear the veils, the wimples, the heavy robes and cowls again.

I might have to wear them again. At least for a while. Even if I felt certain I would never truly fit them again.

I might have to, just to give myself some rest. Some necessary peace of mind, so I could accept everything I'd never truly...

McAlmont Place found me just in the nick of time.

Just when I was ready to give vent to howls of enraged despair that I no longer knew what I wanted. No longer had a clue who I wanted to be or, more horribly, who I was *supposed* to be.

McAlmont Place burst upon me when I turned a corner, acting entirely upon impulse.

It was a small square. Kind of a cul-de-sac, though that term didn't, at least in my mind, describe the shape of it or its length in comparison to relatively narrow breadth.

It was like a miniature street. Two lanes wide, a narrow strip of fountain and concrete unrelieved by

plantings or softness down the center, and at the far end a pair of twin jewels.

Gardner McCord's houses.

One was the reverse of the other. One had its door on the left, the other on the right. One sported an enormous and bulging, almost a tumescent, bay of semi-opaque glass brick on the right, while its partner sported an equal bulge to the left. Except for their mirror-imaging of each other, the two were identical. And neither, not standing alone without its companion and not in the company of that companion, could compare to the sky-blue delight a few blocks away.

The houses were small.

Disappointingly small. Bungalow-small and flat-roofed creatures crouching at the end of their street. With no color. No radiance, no...

The bungalows were gray. Spiced with bits of white and the deep red of railings that, like the railings of the blue building, were made of plain pipe fastened to the walls with raised designs that resembled tired lilies.

I did not like Gardner's houses.

I would not care to live in them, though they were lovely.

Set side by side as they were, each forced to endure the sameness and shadow of the other, they reminded me too strongly of my life at Divine Serenity.

As had I, these two houses had surrendered individuality

They had melded into distressing oneness. Seemed to display a terrible duality of spirit even as they simultaneously spoke of rigid harnessing and corralling of spirit so that it no longer possessed freedom or true function.

Turning my back on them very suddenly, I wished I hadn't come.

What that said about Gardner, about the prison in which he appeared to have locked himself with much more choice than I'd been locked into mine, I didn't know. Didn't think I wanted to know.

But now that this facet of him had revealed itself to me, now that I'd witnessed the low and gray shape of what I perceived to be his soul's hidden despair and aborted flowering, I knew that eventually I *would* know. Knew that I'd been trapped in the inevitability of that knowing, just as surely as I'd let myself be trapped at Divine Serenity. By my own singular inability to make a firm decision for myself. To act for myself and be independent for myself.

In Gardner McCord, I had found a new master. One as demanding as Divine Serenity and Mother had ever been. One, almost certainly, as rigorous and relentless in his requirements, and quite possibly as rigid and unyielding if I did not meet those requirements.

And yet I knew he would be different.

Turning toward home, toward the only sanctuary I had left, I felt my heart begin to hammer again.

Already the sun had sunk low toward the line of purple-blue mountains in the west. Already the day,

capable all too easily of evoking in me rampant impatience for the torrid passions of the night soon to come, had faded. And my heart, displaying a distinct duplicity and duality of its own, was already turning toward those sorely anticipated passions. It was already looking forward to them with full eagerness to be possessed. To be commanded and used. As Gardner would surely use me.

The truth, in that moment when I finally accepted and came to terms with it, could not have been more clear.

I was Gardner McCord's slave.

I should always be his slave. I should always, in some manner, be slave to someone with the strength of will I did not possess, The strength that had long-ago been drained from me and broken away from me.

With my heart pounding, I began to run. As much in dread as eagerness, as much in fear as desire.

If I hurried, there would be an hour or two of light left. An hour or two of the life I could not completely give up just yet...the sanctity of life in daylight, life in anonymity, life in the privacy of myself. An hour or two in which I could take up my veils. Swathe myself in them and immure myself in the secure heaviness of them. An hour or two I could spend upon my knees on the hard wooden floor of Rosewalk's front hallway that so resembled the cavernous baptistery of Divine Serenity that it quite took my breath away with its familiarity.

Rounding the corner at the edge of my own sprawling property, drawn there by the same

unfailing magic that had led me to the twin gray houses on their hidden court, I picked up my speed.

Two hours. A few at most, to try to sort out what I felt and where I stood. So very little time before I must as a matter of course succumb to the lure of Gardner McCord.

I slowed when I came within view of our houses that stood alone on their side of the street, not unlike the twins of Gardner's creation.

Darkness hung over the two mansions. A deep and indigo duskiness of the sky that seemed to increase too rapidly. A severely localized duskiness amidst the deepening of day toward early twilight that had clearly settled over our street. That had already leached the last autumn-light color from everything around it.

I wasn't going home at all.

Passing Rosewalk by with scarcely a glance, I saw only the darkening lure of Gardner's front door. Saw only the gray and unremarkable slab of the door at the top of a flight of steps that rose abruptly from the sidewalk without the smallest grace of porch or verandah to soften their sternness.

Breathless, I turned in at the opening in his hedge.

Anxious, I mounted his broodingly plain steps and lifted my hand to knock.

Stunned, I saw the door swing inward before I ever touched it. And startled, heard Gardner's voice echo from some shadowy, secret region within.

"Come in," he said.

Compelled, unable to resist, I did as he asked.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The inside of Gardner McCord's house, like the outside of buildings he'd created for others...yes, even those vaguely disturbing in no exact way I could name twin gray houses...was a revelation.

It was nothing like I expected.

If the outside of Gardner's mansion was tight-lipped and foursquare, dark and just faintly brooding in its unornamented state, if it seemed no matter what the time of day or the quality of light a house without visible life, the interior was the very antithesis of all those things.

Shutting the door behind me, I stepped through heavy draperies that shielded the outer door from the inner world just as I was sure they shielded the hidden inner its occupant from what lay outside.

Gardner was not there.

He was not where I expected to find him, waiting to greet me as eagerly as I wished to be greeted.

He had retreated. As if in mortal fear of whatever last, lingering ray of daylight might penetrate the barrier he'd created, he'd retreated all the way to the

far end of a front hallway that was much smaller than mine, And much less grandiose. A hallway as notably lacking in carved wood and ponderous artworks as mine was, quite honestly, overloaded with them.

This hallway, which ostensibly Gardner had created for himself using the same brilliance and originality with which he had created his Art Deco dream buildings, was plainer than mine. Much, much plainer. Old wood covered the walls, painted a soft and soothing shade of pale slate. A fitting neutral background for one single point of color, a brilliantly blood-scarlet modern scrawl of paint across an enormous, black-painted canvas.

The artwork was not any that I knew. It was not anything I had any reference to, having nothing even vaguely religious in its forms, its symbolism, its content. Though even I, with my unsophisticated eye and immured lack of experience, was able to recognize the quality of the piece. The perfection of those dramatic splotches and lines of untamed color, the unquestionable value contained within the boundaries of a stark frame painted the exact shade of the wall behind it so that the painting seemed to float free.

It caught my eye, surely would catch any eye, with its symbolic bloodiness and almost ruthless vibrance. And once the eye, my eye, was caught, I found it detained. Found it mesmerized by what it found there, to the exclusion of everything else.

Including the man who owned it.

Gardner hadn't moved. Standing in dramatic

shadow at the back of the hall as if intent upon hiding from me, he regarded me with deep-set eyes.

I saw, as soon as I was able to drag my gaze around to him to catch my very first glimpse of him in something resembling normal light, that his eyes were not black, as I'd supposed.

They were brown.

Rich and simmering, whiskey-shot brown.

"The painting..." I said weakly, unable to tug myself away from the seductive lure of those eyes just as I'd been unable a moment or two before to pull my gaze away from the scarlet swirl of life upon black canvas.

"Midnight blood," he replied. "Painted by one of us."

"Us?" Shivering, I strained to see more of him. "What does that mean... 'one of us'?"

"The ones who never see the light. I thought it fitting. Don't you?"

Was it my imagination, or did his voice carry a slight lisp I hadn't noticed before, except perhaps as an innocently charming deviation from the normal?

Could it be possible...

I remembered the twin points of pearlescent teeth.

Remembered how they'd fascinated me. Remembered, and felt as if they were new and fresh, the small and stinging points of the bite marks beneath my shirt.

I shivered again.

As if he knew what I was thinking, Gardner stepped forward into a circle of muted light from a

pale-gray torchere.

He was naked.

In all my fascination with the painting on the wall and the strangely intoxicating color of eyes I'd never seen clearly before, not even when I'd been locked in nearly mortal sexual combat with their possessor, I had been completely oblivious to that. Completely oblivious to the offered and waiting magnificence that had lain beneath the cloak of deepest shadows.

He moved forward to stand at the very bottom of the stairs. To stand motionless, as if he knew all too well what I needed to do.

Look.

Absorb.

Try to reconcile the massive and softly illuminated, hard and rearing...*thing*...he carried between his legs with such unconscious ease with the much smaller dimensions I knew of myself.

Try to reconcile *how* that enormous and sculpted shaft had could ever manage to fit into my smaller space without doing incredible damage. Horrific and destructive damage.

Gaze fastened upon him, wanting despite my surprise and stunned disbelief to take his distended and no doubt throbbing length between sweaty palms, wanting worse than I'd wanted anything before to feel the exact strength of it in hands that now shook in both fear and anticipation, I licked my lips.

Slowly.

Almost without being aware I was doing it.

His gaze fastened to mine, his dark and mesmeric eyes never wavering as if he found himself every bit as fascinated with my reaction to what I'd never before had opportunity to see, Gardner smiled. Full red lips parted...lips that seemed to complement and exactly echo the bloody gashes of his startling painting. And I saw again the alabaster white, moonlit white of perfect teeth. All except the two. All except those that seemed to proclaim him, no matter what common sense and the excellent if woefully restricted education I'd received at Divine Serenity told me, a creature of the night.

A drinker of blood.

A vampire.

"We have to talk," I said twice as weakly as I'd said anything before.

Then, drawn by the magnificence of eyes that seemed to promise anything and everything I might ask, lured by the magnificence of the gleaming shaft that seemed to pulse visibly in the subtle light, I flung myself forward. Flung myself headlong into the circle of Gardner's arms. Flung myself like one of the melodramatic movie queens I'd glimpsed in posters seen all too briefly from the bus that had brought me here. To this city. This place.

Instantly, with no planning or intention of doing such a thing, I found myself encircled by the strength of those naked, muscular arms. Found myself poised with my head thrown back and my throat exposed. Willingly exposed. In clear invitation.

I wanted him to do again everything he had done

in the Midnight Garden the night before. I wanted him to brush the gleaming points of his teeth across the pulsing length of my throat. Wanted him to stroke them, too, just as before, along the still-tender ridges of my private female flesh.

I wanted the thrill that must come with being drained of my life in order to sustain his. The thrill that had to come with being made, if I wasn't already, permanent slave to this man who awakened in me such passion that I no longer cared, no longer thought about anything but the feeling of those glistening points sinking deep, deep, into the most vital flesh I possessed.

"You're not afraid of me?"

"I..." All but lifeless, I hung in his embrace. All but weeping in my frustration and desperation, I waited for the anticipated pain.

"I think," he said quietly, his lips moving gently, moving without pain or threat of pain, at the side of my throat, "we should forego the Midnight Garden tonight, Jean-Agnes."

This got through to me.

As nothing else had, or could.

"Forego?" I quavered, trying to lift my head so I could stare at him.

Increasing the pressure of his mouth against my throat, he held me as I was. "For tonight," he murmured, and pulled me closer.

I felt the scalding stab of his shaft against the softest part of my mid-section. Felt it, and shivered heavily. In anticipation. A *dread* of anticipation.

"You've been a very apt pupil, Jean-Agnes. A very pliant and receptive one. So maybe it's time for a little...reward. For all that you accomplished last night. For being so patient upon your altar."

"Reward?" Deep inside, I quivered.

Deep inside, something broke loose and began to demand exit.

Deep inside, wanton moisture collected in a deep and dark pool that took mere seconds, less than seconds to form. Moisture that then, immediately, found its way free in a long and scorching gush of sultry moisture that poured from me. And just as instantly I softened. Just as quickly my flesh opened for him. Quivered for him.

"What will you teach me tonight?" I asked, my voice so thready with need that he could not possibly mistake it for anything else.

"What would you like me to teach you?"

"Everything," was my instant reply. Still shakily.

Locating the waistband of my slacks, his strong hands tugged. Impatiently as the stiff and still-new fabric resisted. Tugging harder, he shoved it away. Shoved all that I wore below my waist down, and away from my hips. My thighs. My calves. He pulled away the restraining shame of sensible white panties, tugging them from my body with a powerful, a soul-shattering ripping.

The air inside the house was not cold.

It was almost summer-like. Was heated gently and perfectly by unseen vents.

But so hot was my newly exposed flesh, so

steaming in its anticipation and it streams upon streams of uninhibited moisture that it felt like I'd been struck by a tide of glacial winter.

It seemed I would be frozen forever by the winter in that first touch. So that I should shatter at the very next.

"Step free," Gardner ordered.

I did, and he kicked my fallen clothing away. Into the farthest corner.

"I think I shall keep you naked forever," he said approvingly. "I think I shall keep you my prisoner, doomed to hide forever in your nakedness." And in the same moment, without any warning or preamble, without my ever being prepared for such a thing to happen, he joined his thumbs back to back and jammed them upward, much as he'd jammed them last night, briskly into flesh that had waited so helplessly for whatever he might choose to do now.

Startled, I cried out.

His sudden motion, the way his thumbs plunged without hesitation into my softest, still wounded and too-sensitive flesh sent a slashing of fresh pain through me. Pain so blinding that for a moment it was all I could feel. All I had room or breath to feel.

Gardner's knuckles slammed into the outer ridges of me. Slammed hard. And inside...

I cried out again.

Inside, his thumbs didn't stop with that simple invasion.

They continued.

Upward, inward, slicing the truest, most unerring

path imaginable into the deeper and even more wounded flesh beyond the outermost layers.

Jerking upward with an agony of hurt, he continued with his jamming and ascending motion until he lifted me. Actually lifted me from my feet, so that I found myself dangling before I ever had the chance to react. Dangling with my hands automatically clutching his shoulders to steady myself, my entire weight centered upon stretched and straining tissue that seemed, in another second and no more, in danger of tearing violently. IN danger of gushing again, though not with the same delighted moisture that continued to pour, despite everything, from the deepest inner core of me.

My body threatened now to gush with the dark-red blood upon which Gardner depended. Upon which he *feasted*.

"Balance yourself against my shoulders," he commanded. And there was little else I could do.

Suspended upon the joined points of the digits with which he'd so skillfully and harshly pierced me, suspended in a way that left my feet dangling inches from the floor, I had no choice but to lean upon his shoulders. Just as he demanded. No choice but to dig my fingertips deep into hard muscle that strained with the effort of holding me as he did.

Closing my eyes, I bit back a sob.

The leaning accomplished nothing.

It gave no ease. Not even the smallest measure of ease from my pain.

The leaning only pulled my overtaxed flesh tighter.

It only forced it into a new and not entirely comfortable straining against the ramrod rigidity of the thumbs he did not move an inch. Not even a fraction of an inch.

Gardner took several steps backward. Several steps until he reached the wall upon which the bloody painting hung. Several steps so that he could brace himself against it, sliding down the smallest bit so that his knees bent. So that my useless legs dangled helpless between them, and I began to hope my feet might once again touch the floor.

But that was not to be.

Carefully orchestrated, his movement only served to give him a firmer base from which to inflict his torture. It only made it possible for him to relax slightly the arms that supported me as he bit out another command.

One I knew he meant to be instantly obeyed. Completely obeyed.

"Feet," he said. "On my thighs."

Anxious to please, I did as I was told.

Anxious to escape the torment of pillaged flesh, I complied.

But as before, relief was not to be gained.

"Arms out," he said, and when I lifted them away from his shoulders...when, uncertain, I lifted them so that my fingers dangled next to his jaw...he made an impatient sound. "Arms out straight. At your sides."

Once again, I did as I was instructed. And found myself balanced upon a fresh and all new point of torment. Balanced precariously now, in considerable

apprehension, I gasped when Gardner spread his thumbs apart. When he spread them as the night before. Spread them wide inside me, tugging outward, and downward now as well. Seeming determined to stretch me out of all human shape and proportion.

I screamed. In genuine fear this time.

Very softly, he laughed. "I've soundproofed my house," he murmured with a quick and what could only be expert flexing of his thumbs. "You can scream all you want, Jean-Agnes."

The agony was unbearable. As was the almost immediate release when he suddenly pulled the intruding digits together again.

It was sweetest joy of relief. But it was suffering, too. Suffering all the same. Because I knew the impalement would return. I knew I would be expected to tolerate more of his 'reward' before this night was through. Knew I would manage to tolerate, because I had no choice but to tolerate. Until he finished.

"I don't care for sounds from outside," he murmured, jerking his hands up with another not-quite savage motion that nonetheless flung me upward and caused my feet to slip from their precarious place upon his thighs.

Flailing madly, flailing helplessly, for ten agonizing seconds I feared I should fall.

But somehow, controlling me with the hands that tormented me, Gardner didn't allow that to happen.

"When I'm ill..." he said, and now his hands sank.

Now they dropped, but not away from me. Because I sank and dropped with them. The descending weight of my own trapped body, my helpless body, leaden and already aching arms still held perfectly straight at my sides, followed the motion of his hands as religiously as I had ever followed Mother's inarguable teachings.

"When you're..." My voice was breath only. My voice was strained, tight, desperate. Without strength or substance. "...ill?"

Gardner let me sink again. Let me touch, barely, my searching feet upon the thighs that offered no real and firm surface. No real and absolute hope of escaping when the embedded thumbs once again spread. So that what should have been, what I'd prayed would be a moment's respite turned into one more searing, scarring agony of suffering.

"I can't tolerate sound," he replied. "So my house is soundproofed."

I rose again. My feet again lost their pathetic precariousness that was all the security he would allow.

My arms ached. Felt as heavy as ten arms. Twenty, thirty, all supported by muscles that had never been meant for such effort, never been schooled in any kind of activity that might prepare them for such supreme and never-ending effort.

"No one can hear you scream, Jean-Agnes. No one will come to your aid. Not that anyone ever would, of course. Any more than anyone went to the aid of those girls...young women...who died in the park."

Sobbing, I shuddered.

Wished for a single instant of permission to lower my arms. A single instant in which to rest myself and re-group my fading and failing strength.

"I'm sure they screamed," Gardner mused, pulling my flesh far tighter than he had ever pulled it before. Far tighter, and far wider. "Don't you think so, Jean-Agnes?"

"I...d...don't..." I could not finish.

Gardner didn't wait for me to finish.

"I'm sure they screamed and screamed," he mused, never stopping his torture of me.

Was I truly to be the next victim?

Did I even care if I was the next victim?

"I'm sure they pleaded for their lives. I'm sure they begged for mercy. I can almost hear their voices now, can't you?"

Helpless, sobbing, I shuddered again. And rode the twin points of flesh I was required to ride.

Rode them endlessly, obediently, ceaselessly.

"Their voices must have been shrill with anguish, Jean-Agnes. They must have been so unsteady. With desperation to keep on living."

I strained to keep my arms in their required position. Strained harder and then ever harder as Gardner began to piston with his hands. As he began to move them rapidly, up and down and up and down and up and down. With me riding firmly atop them.

Agonies of pressure transmuted themselves into the agony of my own limbs. Agonies he repeated over

and over again.

And my body...my traitorous, delighted, dessicated body...continued to pour forth its response. Copious, endless volumes of liquid-silver response.

"And you don't want aid." Gardner's gaze, fastened upon mine, grew powerful. Hypnotic. His dark eyes held mine so steadfastly that I could no more easily have looked away or convinced mine to close than I could have climbed down off the hands that vaulted me skyward specifically so they could allow me to plummet. "I can feel it. I can feel you come, Jean-Agnes. Like you've been waiting your entire life to come."

I sobbed.

"I can feel it." His voice went soft. Cajoling, in the same way it had been the previous night, when I'd lain paralyzed beneath its spell, strapped to the white altar of what I'd thought then was going to be my ultimate sacrifice. "I know you don't want anything more, Jean-Agnes. No more than what I'm willing to give you right now."

And I knew.

I hadn't yet sacrificed *anything* to him.

"This position has many names," he said suddenly, almost instructively, in a change of subject so abrupt and so completely unanticipated that my befogged brain refused to understand. "It's in all the old texts. The sexual texts."

"*Sexual* texts?"

I hadn't known such things existed.

For some reason the idea appalled me. Almost as much as it enthralled and captivated me.

"You'll study them," he replied. "Soon enough. I'll see that you study them in the greatest detail. Because I'll want to test you on every aspect of them. Everything that's in them...every single exercise. Whether it be simple or difficult, righteous or perverted." This was accompanied by the most vicious uplifting yet. One that sent me reeling off balance and refused, when Gardner ordered me in a gravelly and unforgiving voice to keep my arms stretched out wide, to let me regain that balance.

Drunken, reeling, I was unable to stop hot tears that flowed down my face.

"But my name for this position is 'The Flying Nun'."

My head swam. My ears rang.

How could he know?

How could he have found out?

Did he truly, then, have supernatural vampire's powers I could not hope to comprehend?

"In my younger days...before I found myself confined...I went to school, Jean-Agnes. There was a nun there. A very lovely, very young one. Such a lovely young woman. And I used to dream of her. Do you know what I dreamed, Jean-Agnes?"

"N...no."

Yes!

I did. Instinctively did.

"I used to sit at my little Catholic desk, in my proper Catholic school, and lose my way in those

dreams. That someday I'd have what she denied. I'd sit and grow hard, grow long, and painful, and distended, as I dreamed of all the ways I would take her. Of all the ways the pure and holy look would drain from her face. The exalted look that came from not knowing the things I could do to her...things I wanted to do. But then my confinement began. Before I knew if I'd ever really meant to act upon those dreams. And that's when I began my real studies. Of those old texts. Of this position." Laughing softly, Gardner gestured. With hands that rose and then fell, thumbs that added even more pinching pressure to my strained, enthralled, enslaved flesh. "Of course it was her I always pictured here. The way you're here now. With tears on her beautiful face. With her sacred garments torn, her pure flesh pure no more, and the light of sheer life shining from eyes that had only held illusions of life before."

Saying this, he lifted. So that I dangled anew, no longer possessing strength to cling to the ledge of thighs he still offered as a means of support.

I dangled completely. Limp and lifeless.

He lifted.

And I soared. To incredible, impossible heights. Of sheerest pleasure, mind-numbing pleasure, soul-altering pleasure. I soared upon my instruments of suffering and education, only to drop with stomach-shattering suddenness in a way that made it clear the pain, the glory of my suffering and torture had not yet even begun.

I dropped hard when he jerked his hands

precipitously downward beneath me.

Connected to him, now a permanent part of him if that was what he wanted me to be, every fold and whorl of me joined to him by some spell he cast, I followed his descending hands without question. Without hesitation.

"But how did you know..." My tears saved me from the admission I was not sure I should make even now. My tears would not stop as my voice lost the last of its human quality. As it melted into a low sob that tore from the back of my throat, born of the searing ache of ravaged flesh.

I cried openly, fearing Gardner would take away from me what he had only just given. What he continued, his strength seeming boundless, as if he was indeed some supernatural being without the concerns of mortal flesh, to give.

I cried freely, fearing he was about to take away what I wanted him to keep giving. And giving. Forever.

"Now, Jean-Agnes."

"N...now?" My arms burned. Still outspread, they ached with a kind of ache I'd never been able to imagine.

I could barely see Gardner through the film of my tears. I could barely think, dared not think, as I continued to ride as he'd ordered. Continued to ride hands that opened me wide. Hands that plundered me and plunged into me. I could see him not at all as, struggling, teeth clenched and the cords in my neck straining tight and hard against the skin of my throat,

I barely managed to keep from screaming out all the things he'd made me endure and accept.

All the things he'd made me *like*,

Whether my original plan for life had included them, or not.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Only one thing is missing,” Gardner growled through pearlescent teeth that seemed more white now than ever against the dusky backdrop of his brooding and bloody painting. Teeth that seemed...longer...too. Somehow. Not that they could have grown. I knew better than that. But even so, the illusion was quite...

“Wh...what?” I stammered, not at all certain I wanted to hear his answer.

His thumbs tore at me.

They forced me wide.

Forced me to endure a kind of sensuous, sensual, searing stimulation I would surely not be able to endure. Because I was human, and nothing more. Human yet, as far as I knew and as far as I believed.

I had not succumbed to the ageless curse with which the neighbors insisted Gardner was afflicted.

Or had I?

Might not the acts performed upon the marble altar the previous night have effected inside me the same kind of transformation? Something of which I hadn't

yet become aware, despite that fact that already I recognized within myself dozens and dozens of other changes? Might not the thundering force of the orgasms he'd taught me to endure, the thundering and draining force of the way he'd seemed to suck the very life fluids from my prostrated body have made of me what he wanted? One of his own.

Even now, might not this stupendous calling forth of helpless thunder from between my trapped and tormented folds be making me even more akin to him? Making me exactly like him, in all but the very most fundamental of ways?

And when the sun rose tomorrow, as it would of course do, as it would do on every tomorrow to follow, would I not be required, would I not be compelled, to shy away from its light? To once again hide my face behind veils and layers and screens thicker and more imprisoning than any I had subjected myself to in any previous life I might dream I had led?

Might I not already be, like Gardner, a creature destined to wander and languish in an endless world from which all trace of sunlight must forever be banished?

I didn't want that.

Some small remnant of what I had been before, of who I had been before, told me I wanted no imprisonment in darkness. Inner or outer. But it was a very small remnant.

Faced with the insidious stretching and tormenting of my body as Gardner plied it with his locked

thumbs, as he initiated me into a new darkness of sexual delight from which I knew I should never recover completely, that remnant was terribly, terrifyingly small. Pathetically small. And growing ever smaller.

"I pictured doing this to Sister Rosemarie while she wore her holy and concealing robes," Gardner murmured. Somehow he'd moved his head very close to my ear. So close that the breath he exhaled burned harsh trails upon my tremulous skin. So close, indeed, that I felt the preliminary scrape of elongated teeth along that same aggrieved flesh. So close that I waited, utterly silent now because I'd caught my breath and held it deep, deep within the tightened and straining column of my throat, tipping my head again to expose it to him. I waited for the first penetration. For the sharp sting as twin points sank deep, fatally deep, to drain away my blood. And my soul.

For with the loss of the first, didn't it stand to reason I must also lose the latter?

"I pictured Sister Rosemarie not in the mockery of a habit she wore in the modern world. I pictured her in the ancient garments. The heavy veils and medieval cowls. The layers upon protective layers that always seemed so much more fitting to one of her station."

I shivered again. Instinctively.

Those were the very garments I had worn.

Medieval.

The very ones to which I still tended to cling in

some futile hope that the woman I had been, the denied and saintly woman I still in some measure wanted to be, could continue to exist. Could have a chance to exist.

"I always pictured her in something utterly fitting," Gardner murmured with a soft and incendiary laugh, his teeth fondling relentlessly my now-eager flesh. And he pulled just as relentlessly, just as without noticeable trace of mercy or human consideration at other flesh that seemed equally ready to capitulate to his wants. His needs. Tight and strained flesh between my thighs. Private flesh that, beneath the layers of my cherished *medieval* habit, had been intended for no man.

"I pictured her in clothing that made her not the attractive, foolishly self-denied woman I saw every day, the one who thought to keep me out with her flimsy vows and sacrifices even when I burned to take her and possess her. I pictured her in clothing that would make of her something other than a woman. I pictured her in long and flowing robes of the outright *forbidden*. Robes that would only make the taking more sweet. Only make the invasion of her body more delicious and more...do you know what I'm talking about, my sweet, tormented, trapped Jean-Agnes? Can you possibly have the smallest idea what I'm talking about?"

"I..."

Of course I did.

He pressed upward as I tried to speak. Abandoning the softly tantalizing grazing of teeth

against my throat, he now devoted everything to the very center of my body. To pressing deep again, to shoving upward and forcing me to rise or be torn in two as he resumed the widening motion that now, in some indescribable way, became a slowly circling, absolutely incendiary rotation inside me.

"Do you?"

"D...do I wh...what?"

My mind refused to function.

"Have any idea what I'm talking about?"

"Yes!" My response was instantaneous. It came from some instinctive part of me that so far had not been touched by his inflammatory actions and remained, relatively at least, in control.

"How can you possibly?"

It was in my mind then to tell him right then. I knew I should tell him, knew the waiting would only make the telling more awkward and upsetting when it finally came, as of course it must.

I actually opened my mouth the tiniest bit, thinking I possessed the courage to tell him I possessed just the garments he'd described. That even now they hung in the big, old-fashioned wardrobe in my violet-sprigged room. Awaiting my return from this night of debauchery. Waiting to be donned in the event I should need solace, not as the sacred garments they'd once been but as a sort of punishment now. An all too vivid reminder that I had failed utterly in my primary purpose of remaining pure. A punishment I knew I would eventually, sooner rather than later, force myself to endure. Because I hadn't yet reconciled

what I'd become in the space of a few short nights in Gardner's company with what I had cast aside with so little thought.

It was in my mind. But of course I didn't. Of course I couldn't.

That last thought...all the unreconciled emotions and conflicting desires that went along with it...kept me from revealing anything.

Because now was not the time.

It would never be time. Not until I had a chance to think long and hard, had a chance to really and truly think as so far I'd managed to avoid thinking about anything so vitally important. About what I did want. What I did need, and expect, and hope for.

Then Gardner spoke. Then he issued a new order and my instant, eager and unthinking compliance took my breath away.

"It's your turn," he said. "Now that you understand this position, now that you understand what will be done to you and what you will permit to be done to you, it's your turn."

Heavy, leaden through and through now that I feared a mortal quantity of my life's essence flowed from me, delirious as circling and rending thumbs began to exact their toll of response that made the inflicted pain seem small and even inconsequential by comparison, my arms tried to drop. They tried to give in to an increasing malady of the muscles and bones and sinews that made the effort of holding them as I'd been ordered, wide and outstretched, impossible. Inhuman.

"Your arms will stay as they are," Gardner ordered.

And they did.

"And you will take me. You will show me with the only part of yourself that has any true meaning now, what you want from me."

"What I want?"

"Lift yourself, Jean-Agnes." His thumbs ceased their motion. The widest of their stretching torment eased as he closed them to a width that was now endurable. A width that somehow, even as the pleasure of having the torture eased, left me disappointed and yearning for the agony I'd just moments ago thought I wanted out of my life for good.

"Use your legs." Once again his voice rang softly, hypnotic in its very softness. Once again it would not, could not, be disobeyed. "I've allowed you the use of them, Jean-Agnes. Now, I want you to do it. I want you to use them."

I understood.

Without thinking twice, I pressed the soles of my feet, small feet, bare and grasping feet, against the heavily muscled meat of his thighs. Seeking the best grip I found. And then, acting upon instinct that insisted this was what I had been meant to do all along, no matter how much I might have thought otherwise, I lifted myself. Up. Off hands that had very nearly been the death of me.

He moved them only a little. Only enough, lifting them to follow the rising of my body, to ensure that I

would not escape completely.

My head lolled back upon my shoulders.

Throat exposed, throat begging to be ravaged the way I'd moments ago pictured and half-dreaded being ravaged, it rolled uselessly backward. Closing my eyes, I turned them to the ceiling, hearing for the first time the sharp and persistent rasp of my own breath straining to enter, then straining just as hard to exit each time my body declared it must.

I pressed my feet to Gardner's thighs and lifted.

I felt the rich and raw shimmer of my flesh dragging itself and scouring itself against Gardner's ever-present thumbs. I felt the way they caressed the inner and responding layers of me at the same time that they brutalized.

I felt delight surge from and through that very same flesh as my rising continued. As Gardner's careful moves of utter and absolute control allowed me the thinnest illusion of being in charge of my own destiny. As he worked subtly, almost unnoticeably, to ensure destiny would unfold in whatever way he might select for me. Whatever way he might deem it should unfold.

I rose upon him.

Using all but the very smallest ounce of the strength I possessed, I held my arms as I'd been ordered. I held them straight out at my sides, all too painfully aware that if I allowed them to drop, Gardner would allow *me* to drop. That he would put an end to this phase of my 'education' long before I wanted it to end. And quite possibly, most probably,

my ensuing punishment would be to endure an eternity in which this lesson, this delight upon delight upon as yet untold delight would never be repeated.

If it wasn't, if the anticipated punishment should ever become real, I knew I would yearn for the denied repetition. I knew I might someday very soon find myself pleading for repetition. Only to suffer the worst form of humiliation when he refused.

I held my arms out. And I rose.

Upon him.

I rose as far as my straining muscles would allow me to rise and then, crouched in shameless nakedness and craven longing atop thighs that seemed against all the odds and realities of human existence to remain rock solid, I lowered myself.

But that didn't begin to describe what I really did.

Slowly, I moved. Reverberating with shock-waves of sheer, unadulterated pleasure, I gasped as my body rippled open. As it softened eagerly, reclaiming instruments of torture that had somehow, incredibly, become objects of my every desire. My fondest and most liberating desire.

I sank, my flesh flowing open at Gardner's touch. And continued to sink, flowing closed upon him and around him.

I wanted to entrap him. More, even, than he had once entrapped me.

Once.

Because I was no longer entrapped.

I had left so much of myself behind, rejected and shed so many of the old beliefs and rules as the

outmoded trash I'd begun to regard them that there could be no question now of entrapment.

I was Gardner's slave, yes.

I was his conquest.

I was subject to his every whim and every command.

I had no choice but to obey, and be utterly willing. Utterly obsessed. Utterly in need of each small and incredible thing only he could teach me. Only he *would* teach me. Every one of the things he had promised lay between the covers of his mysterious, tantalizing and enchanting ancient texts.

Most of all I had no choice but to want the lesson he was teaching now. To want it and need it. Because I should quite probably die without the continuation of it. Just as I now knew I would ultimately die if I did not endure the lessons he had promised were yet to come.

Descending, I took him in eagerly. Took his thumbs in eagerly, struggling to maintain my position that second by second, instant by instant, became increasingly difficult to maintain. I slid down a little faster than anticipated, yet not nearly fast enough, onto thumbs that jammed themselves into me this time through no action of Gardner's. Only through my own greedily insatiable sinking.

I plunged myself onto him. Then quickly rose again, a cry of startled discovery rising in my throat just as steaming hot tides of smoldering essence rose and burst within me as my body tried to ease the friction of our contact. As my body murmured and

adjusted, moistened and smoothed, making my strokings the purest, most white-hot and brilliantly blinding delight possible.

My cry changed upon my next descent. It grew harsher. Twisted itself into something low and feral. Into a sharp and yet simultaneously subtle animal sound that coaxed from Gardner a low and sultry, thoroughly engaging and absolutely infuriating laugh.

"Tell me, Jean-Agnes," he murmured, not moving at all when my greedy flesh claimed and devoured everything he offered. As, mindless of anything now but my own quivering satisfaction and its own rivers of moistened, swollen, choked and engorged desires, I rose again.

"Tell you what?" My whisper was a torn sound. A broken one. The final gasp of a woman approaching certain death.

"What you feel. Tell me everything you feel."

"Warmth," I responded promptly.

"You can do better than that. Tell me how this feels." And he spread his thumbs again.

I continued to move. Was unable *not* to move now that I had discovered the glory and the delirium that came with movement.

"Tell me in detail." He murmured softly, enticingly. And once again tugged me open to my limit. Then past, threatening more harshly than before to tear my living flesh to shreds that would never be healed. Because to heal from injuries so absolute and so grievous would be beyond the powers of any mere,

mortal, human woman.

"Hurts," I gasped.

"Good. Tell me."

"Stretching." I could barely form the words. Held as I was, unable to move in any way that might conceivably help myself, I tried anyway. Tried mightily, tried with some never before recognized wellspring of strength and determination.

I tried to overcome what would never be overcome until Gardner said it should be overcome.

"You're pulling me tight."

"Better. Pulling what tight, Jean-Agnes?"

"My..." I hesitated. Nothing in my experience, nothing in all my sexless and colorless former existence, had given me a word for the flesh he handled so expertly. Nothing had made a name for that particular flesh necessary, or even permissible. Even in the privacy of my own thoughts.

"Your what?" he coaxed, pulling harder. Pulling with relentless strength and pressing, too. Bending his embedded thumbs so that the tips of them exerted killing force against previously unmolested inner layers of me. Pushing out and down, pushing me from the inside he stretched me in ways I'd never realized flesh could stretch. He stretched me wider than I'd known was possible, in ways that declared he would continue. And continue, and continue, and continue. With no end ever in sight.

"Surely you must have a name for it, Jean-Agnes. Surely you know what it's called?"

"L..."

"What am I pulling tight?" he demanded silkily, and increased his pressure. Increased it until, with an uncontrolled shudder, I showered his fingers and hands with all the sultry warmth my overtired and overtaxed body had to offer.

Unsure what he wanted, sure only...as sure as I could possibly be...that I was inadequate and the wrong person ever to give it to him, I tried. "My lips," I murmured, the words starting as a barely audible sighing of breath across my tongue but ending in a fiery shriek of hell-begotten agony as Gardner applied enough pressure, surely, to puncture the flesh he manipulated with such callous disregard for its ability to feel. Such disregard for its ability to suffer and to inflict endless sufferings of delight upon all the rest of my body.

"No," he insisted. "You know the word. In your heart, you know the word I'm looking for."

"I can't..."

"But you can. You will. You must, if you are to complete your lesson. You have such difficulty saying the words. But they're part of the lesson. They're part of the creation of what you were meant to be. What I want you to be. Now say it, Jean-Agnes. What am I stretching?"

"Cunt!"

It was a word I hadn't even known I knew.

But it was the perfect word. The only word.

"You're stretching my cunt!" I screamed into the thick silence of his soundproofed house. "You're stretching my cunt until I think it's going to tear!"

You're stretching my cunt so wide and so tight that I want to die. You're making it come, making me come until I don't know how I can...you're making me..."

The pressure was gone. The stretching, too.

Absolutely gone, removed in less than the time it took my heart to give one desperate, jerking beat.

It was all gone. And once again I sat solidly upon the combined and suddenly woefully unsatisfying pin of Gardner's joined thumbs.

I was free to move again.

And I did.

With blood pounding to my brain, hot and fevered blood pounding in the tormented flesh I'd only just been able to name, hot and tormented blood pounding and pounding and *pounding* until no amount of stroking, no series of risings and fallings, could ever ease its torment, I moved. I lifted myself quite freely. Quite joyfully.

"What am I making you do, Jean-Agnes?" His voice took on a soft bite. A goading one to which I couldn't, didn't, fail to respond. "What do I make you want to do, just by touching you?"

"Fuck!" I screamed, my body becoming a mindless thing. Shoving upward, it dragged itself desperately against the now too small reward it was offered.

"Fuck!" I screamed again, and rammed myself down as hard as I could. And as fast. Rammed all of myself down onto all of what he offered.

"Fuck!" I fairly shrieked, my mind gone. And all my reservations, all my shynesses.

I tore myself back upward again. Clutching now

with secret flesh that tightened itself around what it had been allowed. As if the frail hope that it could ever find satisfaction or release in such an action would be enough. As if it truly believed it could be somehow satisfied by making itself smaller. Narrower. Shallower.

"Fuck me, Gardner!" I screamed, my mind an agony of surrender and desire, my body already at the limit he would allow me to retreat.

My legs had nearly straightened.

I nearly stood upright upon his taut and unwavering thighs. And I was shaking all over. No longer aware of the arms I'd held out for so long that there now seemed no other way I could ever hold them.

I stood upon his thighs with his thumbs, raised once more to mirror my every movement, still buried within my flesh. And my flesh in its turn pouring out unimaginable quantities and qualities of itself.

I stood, and I looked down at him. With eyes I knew must burn. Eyes that were not now. Eyes that would never again be the eyes of the innocent and unassuming young creature who had come to this house...come to this place of surrender...barely forty-eight hours before.

I looked down at him with eyes I knew shone with the greed of wanting he'd awakened in me.

"I want you to fuck me," I declared, and didn't move. Declared in a suddenly calm and reasonable, suddenly utterly level and uninflected voice. "I want you to put yourself inside me. I want your penis

inside me. Want to feel the hard throbbing of it. I want to feel it pulsing inside me."

"Good, Jean-Agnes. And what else? What more do you want to feel?"

"I want the pain of having you. I want the delight of your..." Unbidden, my gaze strayed to his lips.

He held them pressed together. The way he almost always held them.

"I want to feel your teeth against my throat," I nearly whispered, enchanted by the picture my own words brought to mind. "I want you to take me. Want you to fuck me. Want you to drain me. I want to belong to you."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Friction mounted.

With every wanton stroking of my body against the small part of Gardner's that I was allowed to have, with every searing swipe of flesh stimulated almost beyond the point of human survival, I gasped for air.

At some point I gave up my shrieking and screaming. And my stream of subtly foul and yet thoroughly intoxicating descriptions of everything he was doing to me in the guise of forcing me to do them to myself.

And he gave up insisting I continue. He gave up all sound except breath that rasped as heavily as mine, harsh with desperation as the two of us, together and individually, strove toward some kind of unimaginable peak.

But I continued my frenzied strokings.

Finding new strength, my body became an insatiable thing. A hungering force. A wild and uncivilized fever that could not be reckoned with,

could not be controlled, could not in any way be brought back to reason.

The desire Gardner had wrought with his strange allurements of sin and evil and destruction was all-consuming. It was the kind of intoxicating consumption I imagined had led women, beginning with ill-fated Eve in her magical garden of temptation, to their doom. Their destruction. To states of utter depravity that, while repugnant to the sheltered creature I had once been, were now the most desirable states of existence to the woman I had become. Was still becoming.

Stroking myself and stropping myself against the hard and unflinching rod of flesh Gardner had created by joining his thumbs, I decided depravity was not necessarily a bad thing. That dissolution and decadence, that all the forbidden searing shriekings of secret and ravaged flesh were not bad things at all.

They were the things I had been created for. The things I had, with some kind of weird desire to disavow my own predestined existence because I'd somewhere gotten the idea that that existence was *wrong*, denied myself for far too long. Things that, now that Gardner had drawn me screaming from my shell, seemed completely natural. Things I could no more imagine living without than I could imagine refusing the air I breathed with every shuddering gasp of fulminating desire. Or the cool breezes that would touch me once those desires were sated.

If they could ever be sated.

Sweeping myself up, I incorporated a new, slight

swirling-shimmying motion of my hips. And it made all the difference.

All the incendiary, completely unsurvivable, completely unimaginable difference.

Surely nothing else in the world could fulfill the burning, bottomless pit of sexual addiction that had ignited inside me.

Surely, there was no *man* in the world who could do that.

My head toppled back against my shoulders again, and once again my eyes closed. This time refusing to reopen for any reason,

My only hope, the one I clung to with all the same desperation with which my flesh clung to Gardner's was that Gardner would turn out not to be a man at all. That, as in my dark fantasies of the night creature I had still not completely acknowledged could be possible, he would turn out to be the most inhuman form of depravity possible. The personification of sin and damned innocence, the very living proof that evil had its inarguable charms. That evil possessed some awesome power that soared so far beyond the perceived good of chastity and purity and sacred vows that I could not have helped but tumble. Had been *born* to tumble, and destined to do it right from the beginning.

I lifted myself as far as I could.

But no matter how high, Gardner was always there. His *hands* were always there.

He'd begun to alternate their position now. First he opened his pinioning thumbs wide...almost too

wide...forcing me to drag flesh not completely able and not certain it was entirely willing across the impossible width of them as I rose. And then he closed them again. Very quickly. Just in the instant when my descent began...closed them so completely that my flesh shimmered with the sweetness of relief as it slid effortlessly back down, drawn by gravity and chasing the tantalizing lure of the hands he lowered quite deliberately. The hands he pulled away so that now it was I who followed him. Now it was I, my mind a turmoil of anguish and anxiety, who refused to let him retreat entirely.

"God!" I screamed, my face turned blind to the ceiling, my eyes no longer capable of opening and even if they had been, surely no longer capable of focusing upon anything except the dark and blood-shot swirlings of blackest desire I felt pressing in upon me from every side. "Have mercy!"

"There is no God." Gardner punctuated this with a sudden up-thrust of his hands, a sudden widening of what remained inside me. He thrust sharply, making his point. That any movement, any further attempt at movement, would be the most painful and excruciating thing I had ever felt. Ever believed I would feel.

Instantly, obediently, I stopped. I went back to my awkward crouch, half-erect upon his thighs, my feet beginning to slip as my legs weakened. As my legs declared they no longer wanted to support my weight.

I stopped, and I hung there. Entirely dependent

now upon Gardner, upon that one single, punishing point upon which I was able to support myself, I hung, with flesh seared and aching, the exquisite pain he had taught me forming the new center of my existence.

My entire existence would from here on out, forevermore, amount to the few scant centimeters of outer flesh he had conquered. And more importantly, would center upon the deep and awakened regions beneath. The regions within.

My arms dropped at last. Limp and useless, they fell to my sides.

And Gardner made no comment.

He offered no protest.

"There is a God," I whispered. "There has to be a God. Otherwise, my entire life, everything I..."

"How can there be a God?" Gardner's hands twisted at me. Not quite viciously. But he pressed into me again, pressed hard and relentlessly.

Once, not so long ago, numbed by the overstimulation he inflicted upon it, my flesh would have quailed at the fresh infliction of suffering. But this time, now, it sprang to life. Delighted life, accompanied by a shrieking wail of pure suffering, pure anguish, pure and never again to be surrendered joy.

"I..."

"Answer me, Jean-Agnes. How can there be a God? How can there be some divine being who would allow the creation of something like me? Of an abomination against nature like me?"

"Bec...cause..."

"Look at me, Jean-Agnes."

I struggled, but could not. My eyes, their lids paralyzed, made useless by the passion that had overcome me, would not open. My head hung upon my shoulders, too heavy to be lifted. And too uncooperative.

Gardner twisted harder.

The shriek his actions wrung from me this time was final. So very final. A loud and ululating cry that seemed never to end. The cry of a woman who could take no more and yet, knowing she must endure forever and ever the kind of tortures no man could ever know, had already abandoned herself completely to the one who inflicted them.

"Look at me," he hissed.

Jolts of delightful pain, searing and heart-stopping jolts of mindless pain, shot from the tormented softness between my legs. With shocking and terrifying speed they reached every part of me that had not been touched, never been touched, never been tortured.

Finding strength, I managed. To lift the enormous weight of my head. Somehow managed to force the equally enormous twin weights of my deadened eyelids to rise. Somehow convinced my gaze to focus. Upon Gardner's face.

"How could He exist?" Gardner demanded. Lips parting, he paused for the longest of split seconds to run the tip of his tongue across the even row of his upper teeth. And he paused again, even longer, each

time he found the shimmering peak of the pointed and gleaming fangs I could no longer ignore. No longer regard as anything except what they truly were.

The objects of my impending destruction.

My damnation.

The objects that would plunge me into darkness from which I would never escape.

The objects that had become, more than any desire for piety or prayer had been in the past, those of my deepest, my most demanding and most treasured desire.

I wanted him. And my body moistened.

I needed him, and it flowed, flooding and gushing velvet essence I could not stop producing as I realized I would very soon have him.

Forever.

"How could God allow me to be created?" Gardner demanded.

His tongue lingered long, lingered lovingly, across those twin points of pure-white, death-white enamel that must forever mark him as something apart from all of humanity. Apart from all of reality and all of sane belief in reality.

In that split second I realized I had come to believe what the neighbors believed.

What Gardner himself seemed to be insisting I believe.

"How could there be a God when I've been forced to live? How, when He was supposed to have created me in His image?"

"There..." Gasping, I leaned forward. I used deadened hands to cling to his shoulders. "...has..." Shuddering, I gripped as hard as I could, gripped with almost no force at all, to steady myself atop the teetering, twisting, swirling and sparking point of contact between our bodies. "...to be a G...G..."

"Spoken like a true, fucking, Goddamned nun," he snarled, and quite suddenly threw me.

The crash was deafening as my back hit the hallway floor.

It had to be deafening, though in my state of shocked surprise I was completely incapable of hearing it.

"You're no nun, are you, Jean-Agnes?" Gardner demanded this of me. He demanded it in gravelly and barely recognizable tones, his hands finding my spread legs.

His fingertips bruised the quivering flesh of my thighs.

I offered no resistance. No impediment. I simply lay, spread-eagled and stunned by the moment of unexpected, unprecedented violence, and allowed his hands to slide beneath my hips. Allowed them to lift them...me...toward him.

"What kind of nun would you be, and what kind of God could there be, if he allowed something like me to do this?"

I heard my own scream as he plunged into me. As he inserted into me, with quick and brutal skill, the shaft that seemed longer than it ever had before. And larger. Hotter than before.

He clung tight. Grasped me with hands that hurt, with fingertips that bruised. Grasped me so that it was impossible to slide backward, impossible to slide away from him.

I never tried. To resist him. To evade. To escape.

I simple screamed as he held me down with the shaft that had parted me, I feared permanently, into two separate and shaking halves. I screamed as hard as my lungs would allow, as loudly as the limited amount of air I could force myself to inhale would permit. I screamed long and low, long and desperately, screamed the single word, the only word, that continued to have any meaning. The single word I sensed would now be the center of everything I was. The center of everything I would ever want from life.

"Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck!" I screamed to the ceiling and the unseen world beyond, and all the quivering, startled layers of air that lay between the two. "Fuck me, Gardner!"

"What kind of nun, Jean-Agnes?" he demanded, grinding the heaviness of himself into me.

"Fuck!"

It was all I could say.

I met his gaze deliberately. Met it almost calmly as some new and previously unsuspected part of me opened wider. Opened to accept what he immediately plunged in to fill the void. Opened to accept the entire length of him, the entire unimaginable girth and size and potency.

"Fuck," I said again.

"And what the hell kind of God?"

"Fucked," I replied, and laughed. Almost insanely. Groaning, Gardner tore himself from me.

Once again I offered no resistance. My body splayed across the floor of the hallway, my hair flung and tossed in every possible direction, my eyes glazed and yet able to see with utmost clarity, superhuman clarity, every single detail of my surroundings and the man who held me down, I offered not even the smallest token of resistance.

But Gardner behaved as if I did.

His grip, already bruising, tightened upon the rounds of my buttocks. Jerking spasmodically, he pulled me forward, dragged me physically across the smooth and yet rough pale-wood floor to meet his next advance. Shivering, shuddering, he shoved himself into me repeatedly. Shoved roughly, each time urging from me one of those long and unholy cries of absolute greed and utter enjoyment.

"Fuck!" I screamed.

"Fuck!" Shrieked, as if determined all the world would hear and understand.

"Fuck," I whispered when the air ran out and there were no more screams left.

Gardner's breath rasped.

He was nearing his end.

Inexperienced as I was, ignorant of the delicious contents of the ancient texts he'd promised, the ones that would detail acts I would never refuse myself, never again be able to refuse myself, I knew that much.

Gardner, jerking harder each time he plummeted

into the open and seething, accepting maw at the center of me, was rapidly coming to his end.

For now, hard and relentless, hard and punishing, he held what he perceived to be the power.

But in the end, smiling a little in a secret way instinct told me could only arouse him to more hopeless illusions of dominance and victory, writhing beneath him now that my body had found a course and a path of its own, murmuring my single expressive word over and over again as he fell upon me and I pressed my mouth close against his ear, I knew.

The power was *mine*.

He would end. The shocking, brutal vitality of his penetrations would end.

But I would go on.

I would persevere, unchanged and unchangeable.

The ultimate power poured from between my thighs. Moistening and easing every deep-shoving plunge of his rigid, straining, struggling and explosively over-primed shaft.

"Fuck me, Gardner," I whispered into his ear as he began to shake with a terrible palsy. "Fuck me forever. Fuck me until I tell you to stop."

Twining my arms around his neck and my legs around the trimness of his waist, I made sure he could do nothing else. I used the strength I suddenly found in those arms and those legs to draw him to me. Draw him into me. I held him inescapably tight, held him with inner flesh that like my arms and legs felt infused with a sudden influx of new and almost

terrible strength, so that he was helpless.

I held him, murmuring my word of demand and affection and instruction. Held him tight as his quivering and sweat-sheened body at last met the flow of my own. As it pumped enormous, filling and brilliant quantities of himself into me.

I held him, and I laughed. Low. Softly. Laughed as seductively as it was possible for a de-frocked and de-flowered Sister of Divine Serenity to laugh about anything. And opening wider, opening completely so that the seed he spilled into me could find its place and its purpose, I allowed him to take from me, finally and completely, the virginal innocence I surrendered with one final, hair-raising shriek as he came into me and I came onto him.

"Fuck me!" I screamed.

And he did.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

In the aftermath of our encounter I left Gardner alone and badly depleted beneath the bloody swirl of the painting upon his hallway wall. Pulling on my clothes with shaking hands, stunned to find I had shed only half of them, only the lower half that had made our activities together possible throughout the long night we'd spent on the floor, I stumbled home in the first gray, pre-dawn light.

The tortured, awakened awareness of the flesh between my legs was almost too great to allow me to walk normally. Gardner had stirred something new inside me during the night just finished. Something even our previous efforts upon the white altar in the all-but-forgotten rose garden hadn't. So I stumbled across the short distance to my house in a kind of daze. I staggered back to my violet-sprigged room, back to the habit that hung dutifully, awaiting me, back to the existence I had denied, yet once again couldn't feel sure I wanted to deny.

This had to stop. I knew it.

This wild see-sawing of emotions wasn't good for

anyone. Unanswered, unaddressed, it could cause the most terrible, most permanent kind of damage. To anyone. But to someone in my already depleted emotional state, to someone still reeling from the removal of all that had been familiar, all that had given the illusion of safety and purpose, of serenity...

I had to make a decision.

Had to make it soon.

But for now, imagination was too powerful, too pervasive to be ignored.

Sinking onto the carpet at the foot of my bed...the one I'd scarcely slept in since my arrival, imagination had me slipping the familiar robes over my head. It had me cinching tight the leather belt at my waist and drawing on the starched wimple that would immediately begin to strangle as I fastened it tight around my throat and close to my face.

The truth was, I wanted both of my worlds.

That was why the decision was so hard for me. Why it was so elusive, so impossible to glimpse even when I tried.

I wanted the outer trappings of my old world, though intuition told me I had long since shed the inner workings of that world. If I'd ever really subscribed to them at all.

I wanted, so desperately that I burned with the wanting, the staggering weight of veiling drawn over starched headdress. I craved the flowing, clinging, opaque cloud of black that would protect me from reality...wanted all of those trappings more now, in a way, than I'd wanted them when I'd had the virgin's

privilege of wearing them.

But I wanted the other life, too. I wanted as desperately as I could want anything the fresh rawness of flesh that had known pleasures and agonies unlike any Mother had ever dreamed. Unlike any she'd been willing to permit herself or any of her charges to dream.

I wanted the outer trappings, yes. But I wanted the abraded flesh beneath to be deliberately bare. To be deliberately ready, deliberately exposed, deliciously in a state of eternal ache from activities I would never stop now that they had begun.

I wanted both.

Could not have both.

Could not make the decision.

Lying atop the richness of hand-loomed rug that stretched from my bed to the towering fireplace across from the foot of it, I shimmied free of my corduroys and lifted my legs. Lifted them so I could touch myself. Touch my hands to myself. I lifted them so that I could stroke and soothe, in the only way I knew now. So that I could play with myself until I came again. Until the torment of trapped essence spilled again, steaming across searching fingers and spilling onto the violet-sprigged carpet. Leaving stains that would be my badges of honor or shame from this moment on.

I tugged at myself.

Stroked myself.

Listened in half-aware awe as my breathing turned to a stuttering rasp in the silence of the multi-roomed

mansion that existed now and forever exclusively for me. Exclusively for any pleasure in which I might care to indulge in the new existence I had modeled for myself.

I could not have both.

I would have to choose.

The truth of that haunted me even then, even when I'd so preoccupied myself that nothing at all should have been able to haunt.

I would have to make my decision, and soon.

But not the way I'd tried before. Not through constant examination and re-examination of fantasies that dazzled my mind and continued to dazzle, of unexpected revelations that fogged my thinking and ultimately spawned strange realms of more darkly frightening fantasies that could not be true.

That way hadn't worked. That way had done me no good. Not in body, and certainly not in soul. So at length, exhausted but in no way satisfied, I rose. Pulled on my clothes and headed out, as before, to walk.

And thus, hopefully, to think with some degree of rationality.

In the light of a brilliant, blue-gold autumn morning that seemed to have no relation to Gardner's sequestered world of night, I knew I had fallen victim to my own imagination, sharpened and honed by the undeniable and unprecedented attraction I felt for the man next door. And once again the only possible solace, the only possible way to subvert the imaginings...the burning, raw and unhealed sexual

longings...the only way to gain at least a few hours' relief from the torment was through activity.

I walked in a new direction this time. Determined to do what I should have done long before, what I'd grown too clouded and dazed by Gardner's attentions to have done thus far, I set out to explore my property. Staying inside the spiked iron fence that encircled my domain, I set out in search of the rose garden. Not the old one, not the one Thaddeus had uprooted and left in its present strangely erotic state, white-columned and bearing no flowers...bearing nothing of consequence except those towering columns and the oddly appropriate altar upon which I had surrendered myself.

That, I could not face in the light of day. I thought I might not be able to face it at all. Not as long as scorching memories rose within me, searing me with reminders of all that had gone on there. All that had happened to me and, if what Gardner had told me was even halfway the truth, all that had happened to *him* there, as well.

That would do nothing at all to help me in my current state of confusion and uncertainty. So I carefully avoided it, questing instead for more distant territories. Ones that, when I reached them at last, stumbling upon them quite unexpectedly even if I had known they existed there somewhere, still gleamed with the displaced roses.

Rosewalk's famed roses.

Spread in breathtaking dying-summer splendor amidst burning gold leaves that shimmered on every

tree and wandered in lovely drifts across pathways and still-green grass, they shone as the last, fading gasps of summer they truly were.

Shining leaves dropped in golden-crisp drifts when a small wind arose. They crackled beneath my feet as I wandered among scarlet, and blush, and perfect white blossoms on long-untended, nodding canes.

In places I had to turn sideways to negotiate cane-choked pathways. But negotiate I did, stunned by the size of the gardens and the number of bushes they contained.

Eventually I came to a pergola.

Unlike the fantastical marble columns of the garden I'd so studiously avoided, this was a construction of wood, once painted white beneath a staggering burden of red and yellow climbing roses. But now it was neglected. As thoughtlessly neglected as everything else in my domain.

Beneath its dreamy tunnel lay nothing but barren flagstones. And just beyond it, at the far end of it, a single bench slumped unevenly atop a small and rising patch of unmowed grass in a shaded corner where the rose canes tangled especially violently.

On the surface, when seen from a distance, it seemed the perfect place to rest. Far from the house and all its confusion, it seemed just the place I'd needed, designed for contemplation and deliberation. One where I might actually have the chance I needed to come up with the answers I sought.

Cracked and battered, the bench was made of the same white marble I'd seen in the other garden.

Gardner's garden. A rusted shovel leaned crookedly against it, and vague remnants of blue paint from some long-ago forgotten project stained the top and sides of it.

But I was wrong. I realized that as soon as I sat.

There would be no contemplation here.

For one thing, I was too close to the neighborhood beyond the fence. Somehow, though I'd thought myself miles and miles away from the nearest houses after my wanderings, a quick look around revealed I was actually closer to the street and the neighboring houses on its other side than if I'd decided to sit and think upon my own front porch. And once I recognized that closeness I couldn't help but feel a renewal of the strangeness...an echo of the bizarre attitudes of the people who lived in those houses.

It came to me then, as it hadn't before, not even on the morning I'd encountered the gathering mob on Gardner's doorstep, that any decision I might make about my future had to involve more than just the two of us. Any decision would quite naturally have to involve the neighbors as well, and all their attitudes. All the strange and quite possibly malevolent outside disturbances I'd sensed were so rife among them...among us all. Disturbances that had long since been primed, and set ready to explode.

Something was wrong here.

I knew that...had known it almost from the beginning. But I was no closer to finding the answer to that strangeness than I'd been in the moment when I'd stepped all unawares from my taxi to take

possession of Thaddeus' house.

And that, I knew suddenly and with absolute certainty, was the real reason for my indecision. For my waffling back and forth between my two worlds, each of which had its definite charms and its woeful drawbacks.

And I knew something else.

Until I, the newcomer, and a thoroughly unwelcome one if my brief contacts with the neighbors was any indication, learned the truth, there would *never* be a decision. Never be anything but an uneasy and tenuous equilibrium that could easily be disturbed. Would inevitably be disturbed by even the slightest mention of vampiric mesmerization. Or any one of a hundred-thousand other completely unrealistic, utterly unreasonable imaginings.

That was what I needed to do.

Understand the neighborhood.

Understand all that was going on here, all that lay just beneath the surface and seething so terribly close to it, Only then would I be able to make up my mind about what I was going to do and how I meant to go about doing it.

As I'd been lost in thought my gaze had taken to wandering.

It always did.

That had been one of the things Mother found most unsuitable about me. My constant questing for something more than I'd been given. Something more that I'd been told to do, and to think.

Insatiably curious, my gaze forever sought new

objectives.

And found them.

This time it was a not-so-distant corner of Great-uncle Thaddeus' rose garden. A corner separated from the street only by a low and ragged barrier of boxwood with no spike-topped line of fence at its center. There, previously unnoticed, stood a statue on a pedestal.

It was a small thing. A lovely thing. A figure of a woman wearing old-fashioned, flowing dress and veil not unlike those I'd so naively thought to wear for the rest of my life. She stood with a basket balanced delicately upon a hip, her eyes turned demurely downward, forever willing as I had never been to limit her sights and her thoughts to the prescribed patch of solitude directly at her feet.

A statue of a nun?

I sat up straight.

In Great-uncle Thaddeus' garden?

It wasn't an impossible touch, I supposed.

Just an unlikely one.

Enchanted, disturbed in some way more than I had been before, drawn irresistibly by the sight of it, I rose from my bench. I went to it and reached up to it. Slowly, fascinated that she was so completely life-sized, I ran an inquisitive hand across her delicately wrought features.

Beautiful.

A testament.

Almost a memorial?

Quite naturally, my eyes dropped. As if they'd

been instructed by the same inexplicable force that had drawn me to the statue's side in the first place, my gaze followed the path of hers. To the barren earth surrounding the pale marble square upon which she stood...earth that once had supported a riot of some bright and fragile annual flowers. Earth that now lay rough and bare, eroded by some recent rain or quite possibly by the wind that rose again even as I half-consciously knelt to inspect some slight oddity in the evenness of that earth. Some slight irregularity in its consistency.

The wind took on an almost human voice when I did. A voice that seemed not to come from the quiet-eyed and forever placid statue, but from somewhere else. Somewhere turbulent. A voice that very suddenly wailed at me. Berating me, and shrieking at me to run away. Run now! Run before I did what I had already begun to do.

Reaching out, I touched the thing that lay partially exposed in rough earth at the statue's feet.

It was round.

White. And badly cracked. As though it had fallen from some remarkable height. Or been struck a terrible and crushing blow with some sharp-edged object.

Whirling, I fastened my gaze upon the shovel next to my marble bench.

How long had it rested there, coated with its dried-blood film of rust? How long had it been forgotten with its handle still sporting faded stripes of paint, the hardened wood still intact and showing surprisingly

few signs of age or decay?

Most of all, *why* did it rest there, as if it been abandoned in some moment of extreme agitation, by someone who...

Whirling again, I dropped to my knees in the shadow of the statue.

Reaching out, I grasped the white and rounded object and tugged. First gently, expecting it to move easily at my touch, then harder and harder as I realized it had buried itself deep in the eroded soil.

I knew, almost from the instant my palm came into contact with its smooth and even surface, what it was. But it took one more tug, one more hard and furious pull with fingers biting into the sandy soil surrounding the buried thing, to set it free. So suddenly that I sprawled gracelessly across the fading grass, spread-eagled in a position of which Gardner would have whole-heartedly approved, staring straight up at the cloudless and sun-shot October sky. And my hand, the one that clutched as if it would never let go the thing I'd unearthed, flew up and back so that I found myself face to face with...

I screamed.

As I'd not known I was capable of screaming.

The sound tore from my throat, emptying my lungs of all air without difficulty, leaving no breath behind. And even when the last of my breath had gone, even when I knew further screaming was impossible, I continued to try.

Scrabbling to my feet, slipping awkwardly in my frenzy, I flung the object away...thought I flung it.

And ran, blind-eyed and unthinking, in the first direction that presented itself.

I found the break in the hedge as easily and effortlessly as if I'd known exactly where it was. Mindless with horror I ran through it...ran headlong into the narrow side street beyond. Regaining my breath, I found myself screaming again. In an utter frenzy of screaming, flying across the sidewalk and onward. Straight into the path of an oncoming car I never saw until I collided with it. A jolting but glancing blow with the side of it that flung me backward to the ground, still screaming like the world had come to an end.

Brakes squealed.

I heard a door open, then slam, and through my fog of ever-escalating terror, the sound of a man's voice filled with alarm and concern.

"Jesus, Lady, are you all...what the hell?"

Dazed, unable to form a rational answer, I stopped screaming. But was able only to shake my head. Weakly.

"Put the skull down, Lady." The man's voice took on a new authority. An inarguable one. And that was right because, squinting up at him as my vision began to clear and reality to return, I saw that he was a police officer.

"S...skull?" My voice came out thick. Ragged. Stupid with confusion.

The officer had been joined by a second. "That's right," the second man said. "The skull. The one you have in your hand. Just put it down, and tell us where

it came from."

Still barely able to think, I looked at my hand.

The object I'd been so certain I'd thrown away seconds before was still there. And it was without doubt a skull.

Grinning. Eyeless. A human skull.

Even without forensic training, I could tell it was real. Judging from its size, from the way my hand was able to grip the damaged roundness of it so easily, it was the skull of a child. And I shrieked again. Once. Shrilly, throwing it again. Throwing it for real this time.

The skull met the side of the police car with a dull thud and bounced off. Still intact, it rolled beneath, rolled mercifully out of my sight.

"Damn," the second cop muttered, and went to retrieve it.

"Where did you get the skull?" The first officer's, the original officer's, voice hardened with suspicion.

"I...I...I..."

My words, and his, reached my ears indistinctly. As if my head had been cracked as badly as the child's. As if I had somehow managed to survive and it had been wrapped repeatedly in thick layers of gauze and cotton for the express purpose of muffling my cries of pain and suffering. As if to foil every effort to communicate what had happened, and how I'd come to be in such a position.

"Take it easy, Lady." The policeman's expression, his voice, softened a little. "Are you okay?"

"I...I..." My head had cleared. A little. I had

regained some steadiness. Enough to nod in reply.

"You sure?"

Again I nodded.

"Good."

He'd started to eye me again. Suspiciously. And now his partner moved in, skull in hand, to stand directly behind him with one hand, his free hand, on the protruding, dark butt of his gun.

Backing the first officer up.

"Now, then." It was the second officer this time, the one who raised the skull to glance at it before he locked his deadly-grim gaze upon me. "Tell us where you got this."

Wordlessly, I pointed. Back. Over my shoulder. To the opening in the hedge that seemed more pronounced from this side, and certainly more noticeable.

"Show us." The second officer helped me to my feet. Once I was standing he made a show of holding my arm to assist me.

But I saw right through it.

He wasn't trying to assist me at all.

He didn't want me to escape.

Because I had just become a suspect.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Dimly, through a fog of confusion and an odd and alarming grayness that kept trying to reach up from somewhere beneath the very unsteady ground to grab me and pull me down, pull me flat, I became aware that the policeman at my elbow was speaking.

He was speaking to *me*.

The other officer, my original one, had disappeared, and the reason soon became obvious.

Off in the distance I heard the sound of reinforcements approaching. I heard the sirens of many, many reinforcements. As if they'd discovered a murder in progress and a victim still alive instead of one terrified woman holding a long-buried skull. And off on the other side of the street, in the brief moments when the heavy curtains of fog that enveloped me parted, I saw that neighbors had begun to appear. On porches, in upstairs windows, from garages and back yards, all of them with curious and avid looks on their faces.

They had begun to appear. To watch.

My stomach twisted tight.

There was something terribly not good about that swiftly forming mob. Something very, very...

The policeman was still speaking. He was still saying things to me, and I could only shake my head. To let him know I wasn't understanding any of it.

"...anyone else here?" he finished, raising his voice as if I were stone-deaf instead of stupefied.

Again I shook my head.

"Jesus," his partner complained as he came back from the patrol car. "Is the woman..."

"What's your name?" the questioning officer demanded.

There, at last, was something I could understand. Something I could wrap my mind around and handle if I really, really put some effort into it. "J...Jean," I gasp-stammered. "Jean-Agnes Teagarden. I..." More unsteady now almost than ever, I pointed to the statue with its downcast gaze. I pointed to the plot of earth upon which she gazed with what now seemed eerily ominous intensity.

The skull's abrupt departure from the earth had disturbed and uprooted a great amount of sandy soil. A large crater had appeared as if by magic and at the bottom of it, like a small grouping of sun-bleached stones, lay what I'd subconsciously expected to find ever since I'd uprooted the skull.

Bones.

Small ones. Fragile ones. Bones wrapped in the tattered and rotting remains of some kind of red-plaid garment.

A dress, maybe.

A young girl's jumper.

Closing my eyes, I swayed on my feet, gratified for the firm support when one of the policemen...I had no idea which, for I was incapable of seeing just then...took hold of it again with a grip that was entirely, mercifully, of the world and the living.

"Bones," I whispered, knowing I needed to sit but having no idea how to express that need. Or who to express it to.

The policeman who held my arm seemed to understand.

Gently he led me to the place where I'd sat before. The marble bench where the horror had begun. Very gently, he lowered me onto it. "Ma'am," he said, "I know this has been a terrible shock. But there are a few questions I have to..."

"There are b...bones. In my g...garden." My voice didn't sound like mine at all. If anything, it sounded like the whispered, ghostly voice of a corpse. Perhaps the one at the bottom of that gaping hole?

"Your garden?" Producing a small notebook, he prepared to write.

I nodded. "I live here. T...two days now. This is my place. I inherited it from my uncle...g...great-uncle. Thaddeus Teagarden. His name."

"Mmm-hmm." The officer scribbled. "Two days, you say?"

I nodded. Weakly. More weakly than ever when I saw that the mob of neighbors across the street had once again begun to form into just that...a mob. A tight-knit and staring one, more ominous than the one

I'd had to face down the day before.

Over by the statue, other policemen had moved in. Shoving stakes into the ground around the bone-pit. Stringing yellow tape. And waiting. All of them staying carefully back, quite obviously waiting for something else to happen.

"Is this a c...crime scene?" I wavered.

My officer just looked at me. "So you've been here for two days. And before that..."

"M...Minnesota. I can give you the address..."

He nodded, and I did. Not the part about Divine Serenity or anything that would mention a convent. I didn't honestly feel up to explaining that at the moment, and I figured they would find it out for themselves soon enough anyway.

"Is that a ch...child?" My voice, my stomach, all of me, was getting more and more and unstable by the minute. "In my garden?"

The officer wrote.

He didn't answer the question.

"And had you ever visited your uncle... Thaddeus?... here before?"

"Great-uncle. I was here once. A long time ago. When I was a little girl. But never since. My family had a misunderstanding, and...why would a child be buried in my garden?"

"And you just happened to come out here this morning and start to dig in that spot? Just on impulse, you happened to unearth the remains?"

This time when I shook my head, I was more firm about it.

I didn't much like what this man was suggesting.
What I thought he might be suggesting.

"I never really dug at all. I was just sitting. Right here. And the statue caught my eye. I'd never been in this part of the garden before, and the statue just sort of...appealed to me. So I went to take a closer look. And that's when I saw the...the...something round. Sticking up out of the dirt. And I...you're sure it's a child? Tell me it's not a child!"

The policeman closed his notebook. "I think that'll do it for now. Can we reach you here, Miss Teagarden? When...if we need anything more?"

I nodded. "My phone's not working. I'll have to get it working, but...and the bones? How..."

"Sam!" Turning away from me, my policeman gestured toward one of the younger officers clustered in their waiting game around the boundary of yellow tape. "Escort this lady back to her house, will 'ya? See she gets inside and has whatever she needs."

"I would rather..."

I needed Gardner. Needed him badly. Needed him more than I'd ever expected to need any man.

But I wasn't going to reveal him to the police. I wasn't going to subject him to their cold eyes and skeptical scrutiny. Instinct told me that, just like the silently hostile crowd on the other side of the street, their interest could have no conceivable good outcome. So I lifted my head. I turned away and said, in a voice that sounded so much steadier than I felt that it had to be a miracle, "thank you, officer. Thank you all. I'll be fine."

And I walked away.

I could feel the crowd's eyes upon me as I made my way slowly, much too slowly for someone of my age and supposed youthful vitality, back to the house. To Rosewalk. I tried to ignore them, tried to ignore the rage I could feel boiling up from them. But I heard their words. Heard snatches of them all too clearly. Heard enough wind-borne hints of conversation to follow precisely the direction of their thoughts.

"I told you, Harriet..."

"...found that child. The one who's been missing..."

"...serial killer..."

"...buried right there. Right under our noses in that horrible old man's yard..."

"...shouldn't have to tell you we all know what the old man was..."

"Shouldn't have to tell *you* we all know who..."

I wasn't going to make it. Wasn't going to reach my own front door, or swing the heavy thing wide. Wasn't going to be able to close it behind me even if I did, or stay on my feet once I had.

I needed Gardner.

More than ever, I needed someone who would truly support me. Someone sane and dependable who would listen and soothe without judging. Who would listen and tell me I hadn't lost my mind. Who would tell me the things the neighbors were saying couldn't possibly be...weren't...

"I'm sorry." Gardner spoke so unexpectedly, appeared so unexpectedly from the ink-thick

shadows inside the lightless hallway beyond his own kitchen that I was startled to find myself there.

I had no clear recollection of getting there. But I knew I had, and all by myself. Because it was still light outside. Still daylight. And he would never have braved the terrors of that. Not even, I felt sure now, to come and rescue me.

Somehow, wandering in a daze, I'd found my way to him. Somehow, I hoped as devoutly as I had ever hoped or prayed for anything, I'd made the journey without notice from the muttering crowd across the street. Somehow I'd found my way to arms that reached out for me even as I faltered in the narrow archway leading from his kitchen into the front hallway where we'd spent so many delirious hours the previous night. Unsure if I'd be any safer rushing to him than into the crushing midst of the mob gathering outside.

"Sorry?" I asked. "Why should you be sorry?"

He waved a hand toward the heavily curtained and shuttered front windows, and what lurked beyond...the neighbors. The police who went about their gruesome business far out of sight of this house. "I'm sorry you had to go through that. Had to find..."

At that point I did back away from him. A little. Just enough for emphasis. "How did you know what happened? How did you know I found..."

"Police scanner." This time he nodded in a new direction. To a small, black and crackling box set on a low table in his living room. "When you're shut inside most of the time, you learn to make do. I heard

about the ruckus over at your place. And I guess I just figured out the rest. That none of the neighbors would set foot on your property, so the 'woman' the police mentioned had to be you. And I truly am sorry you had to get involved in something like that. I'm sorry you had to make a discovery like that."

"They think I had something to do with it, Gardner."

His arms never wavered. Not even when I didn't immediately rush into them. "That's nonsense. They'll figure it out soon enough."

"You might come out and tell them so." Knowing I was being unreasonable, not understanding completely why I felt so compelled to be unreasonable, I continued to hang back. To glare at him.

"Jean-Agnes, I..."

"Did it ever cross your mind that I could have used some help when that...what did you call it? When that ruckus started?"

"Jean-Agnes, there's something..."

"I don't believe in all this fear of the daytime, creature of the nighttime stuff," I declared hotly, more sure of it in that instant than I'd been sure of anything in a very, very long time. More sure than I'd been of anything since the instant Mother had summoned me to her side and announced I had some money coming. Ever since she'd declared me thoroughly unsuitable and said it was high time I left.

"I was scared, Gardner. To death. With the police asking all kinds of hideous questions, and...I've never

had any kind of dealing with them before, So I didn't know if I was saying things that might hang me, or get me arrested, or..."

"They have no earthly reason to arrest you."

"That...*thing*...turned up on my property!"

Gardner made a soft sound. Of despair. "Listen. Jean-Agnes. About that...about me coming to your defense. You know I would have, if...there are things you don't understand. Things you don't know, and..."

From beyond the front windows came a loud shout. Then a small chorus of only slightly less intense voices.

Frowning in that direction, Gardner shook his head a little. "And I don't think this is the time to go into it. But I promise you. As soon as..."

The shouts died into an angry muttering. One I probably only imagined I could hear through thick drapes and shutters and even thicker walls.

Part of me longed to spring to the windows. Part of me wanted desperately to see what was happening out there. But another part, the sensible part, I felt sure, longed just as desperately to run...but, no. I was finished with running. Finally and forever finished with running from anything and everything that might have a tendency to disturb, or to upset.

That was a breakthrough. For me, a major breakthrough. But it didn't stop me from wanting to find a place to hide. In some remote and distant cellar or dungeon, if I could find one.

For sure all of me, every last breath and heartbeat

and measure of conscience I possessed, knew that whatever was going on outside, it wasn't good. For anyone.

"The skeleton was..." I shuddered.

"Don't." Gardner took me into his arms at last. Just as I wanted to be taken. He held me just the way I yearned to be held, protecting me from the horror I'd felt creeping along my back ever since I stared into that eyeless, grinning remnant of what had once been a young face.

"It was small," I said, knowing that no matter what Gardner might say I had to do this. I had to face up to it, or become so craven with fear that I would never recover. Would never stand the smallest chance of recovering. "It looked like...oh, God. Gardner, it looked like the skeleton of a child."

He said nothing. Merely wrapped his arms around me as tightly as they could wrap and rocked me from side to side as if I were the child.

"Who..." I hiccupped a little, trying to release some of the terror I held inside for fear I should collapse into a mindless and screaming heap if I didn't. "Who do you think it is?"

"The missing girl, I would presume."

"G...girl?" Swallowing another hiccup, I pushed away from his chest. Pushed away far enough to peer up at him, and no farther.

Concerned and frowning, he looked like what he of course was and had been all along. A perfectly normal, perfectly human if devilishly charming and outrageously seductive man. "Remember I told you

about her? Yesterday, or...I can't quite remember, Jean-Agnes. You know. The girl who disappeared a few years ago? The one whose disappearance has had the neighborhood in an uproar ever since, and thinking strange things? Making even stranger accusations?"

Like I'd done.

Embarrassed, I ducked my face back against his chest. Gardner's chest. And took a deep and soothing breath of his now-familiar...now so dearly, intimately, incredibly familiar...fragrance.

He smelled like soap. Faintly, almost undetectably, like brandy. And fresh-cut wood. After-shave, I supposed, though I was completely unfamiliar with that aspect of life in a world that included men.

Delicious after-shave.

"The police told me way back then, when they interviewed me, that they believed the missing girl was dead," Gardner said softly. Quietly. Almost too quietly. "They said they were ninety-nine percent certain the same person took her who'd killed the others. And it wasn't part of his...or her...game plan to leave living victims."

"They interviewed you?"

Now I was afraid to look up at him. Deathly afraid.

Laughing softly, Gardner tightened his hold upon me. "Of course they did," he murmured, bending his head over mine so that I felt the soft scald of his breath insinuate itself around and into the roots of my hair. "Didn't you know? My neighbors, the same ones who are gathered out there right now, watching

what's going on in your rose garden, swore all along that I was the killer. They swore it on stacks and stacks of Bibles. Swore I did it. With the help of your dear, departed and slightly odd but in no way harmful uncle Thaddeus, of course."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

We'd fallen asleep.

I had vague memories...only the very, very most vague and unformed, of Gardner lifting me off my feet just as I was in the process of collapsing. Of him lifting me more tenderly and easily than it seemed possible for any man to lift anyone.

I remembered him depositing me on the firm-soft grey suede couch in his living room where dim lights burned even in daytime. Lights necessitated by the heavy curtaining and screening of every opening to the outside. And I remembered my refusal of the glass of gleaming-brown whiskey he'd tried to convince me to drink...remembered the way he'd bent over me to snug a dark-plaid blanket around me as I lay shaking, and shaking, and shaking. As if the world was soon to end. Or already had.

I remembered all of that in the instant when I opened my eyes to find myself still tucked beneath the heavenly warmth of that blanket. When I woke to near-total darkness broken only by the vaguest and most distant of beam of light filtering in from the

hallway. Or maybe from the kitchen at the far end of the hallway.

I remembered everything quite clearly in the instant when something, some unidentifiable yet completely known sound, jerked me out of a dreamless state in which I'd finally shed some of my terror.

Some, though certainly not all.

That would be asking too much...would be asking the impossible.

For there was that noise. Echoing somewhere, in some far corner of my brain. Where it had imprinted itself. Where it alarmed me repeatedly, and more and more, with every second that passed. Alarmed me so badly that I sat up in my impromptu bed and stared around, eyes straining at suffocating, unwanted and utterly terrifying darkness.

"What..."

"Shhhh, Jean-Agnes." Gardner sat on the floor next to my sofa. His arms were folded upon its edge as if he'd only a moment ago rested his head upon them. But he was alert now, too. He sat bolt upright just as I did, his head tilted slightly to one side.

Listening.

Hard.

His gaze, like mine, had gone straight to the windows at the front of the room. Straight to the place from where the sound of a none too happy crowd of muttering, murmuring people emanated.

"Gardner?" I clutched the blanket to my throat with a single hand in a classic expression of

uncertainty and terror.

As curious as I was filled with dread, I was not about to be left behind when he shoved himself to his feet. Ignoring the way he said "stay here" and the implicit command in dark eyes he turned all too briefly my way, I shadowed him closely as he moved into the front hallway.

"What do you think they want?" I breathed, as if fearing they would be able to hear me and the hearing might in some way incite in them unimaginable impulses. "Do you really think we should..."

"If you'd just stay back, you'd be perfectly all right." Gardner almost, not quite, snapped at me over his shoulder.

Opening the inner door to the front vestibule, he stepped through. Once again with me tight in his wake. And brushed aside the heavy drape covering one of the narrow windows at either side of the outer door.

The crowd had grown.

As if no one had ever left, it filled the sidewalk directly across from us. It filled the narrow strip of lawn there, too. The one between sidewalk and street, and overflowed into the space where no car would dare to travel now.

The crowd hadn't quite reached the curb on this side. Our side.

But the time was coming.

It didn't take much imagination to see that that was where it was headed. Or that it was going to get there very, very soon. Was getting there even as I watched,

my heart pounding out sickened rhythms at the base of my throat as I peered under Gardner's upraised arm.

It was a motley crowd.

One gray-haired gentleman, portly and dignified...the gentleman I'd encountered with his wife in the street, I thought...clutched a crucifix. An enormous and elaborate one, a treasure torn hastily from a parlor wall to be held above his head as solemnly as the Pope would hold such a sacred object. His lips moved in silent prayer, joined by a pair of elderly twins I'd seen before, walking a dejected cat on a leash. The two of them pressed shoulder to shoulder, bent over what I took to be a prayer book. And from somewhere, in a moment when a preternatural and thoroughly disturbing silence crept through the midst of the massed bodies in the street, a voice took up a hymn.

The Old Rugged Cross.

At first it was just one voice. A woman's voice, piercing-sweet in pure soprano. Then it was joined by another. And another, and another, and another, until the street rang and echoed with the sound of it.

"Gardner?" I took my gaze off the crowd long enough to glance up at him. But if I'd hoped to read some kind of encouragement, if I'd hoped to read anything at all, in his expression, I was sorely disappointed.

His face was impassive. It wore no expression at all, really. Or at least none I could detect in the light that wasn't as uncertain as it might have been since

the street seemed oddly brilliant for the dark hours of the night.

Oddly brilliant because, my confused mind realized after some very real effort to understand, blue-white work lights blazed at the corner of my property. Blue-white work lights blazed near the statue of the nun and the ill-fated plot of earth she'd guarded until I'd uncovered...

"If you leave now," Gardner said tersely, "if you go out the back way, you'll be all right."

"Leave? Why on earth would I leave you alone here, when..."

I knew what the mob wanted.

I didn't even have to think about that. Didn't have to hear the shouted words in a man's voice, demanding "Bring him out here!"

It was the old gentleman. The one with the crucifix.

When I looked into the street again I saw that he held it high over his head now. As if he was about to march into battle, and depended upon it to protect him and defend him.

His crucifix was so enormous, so riveting in its gilt-glittering intensity that I'd missed the fact that there were others. Dozens of others. Crucifixes of all shapes and sizes, all colors and materials, brandished by all kinds of waving hands.

"Bring who?" I asked weakly, though I felt certain I knew the answer to that one already, too.

"You can get back to your house under cover of darkness," Gardner said tensely. "Slip out the back, and no one will see you. If you run like the devil. And

then I want you to lock every door. Make sure you lock every window at your place, and call the police. Tell them..."

"My phone's not turned on. Can't we call from..."

Gardner didn't wait for me to finish. "Okay. So slip on down to the corner. Once you're in the garden, no one will see you. No one will notice. All their attention is on me, and you can get to the police there."

"Bring out his whore, too!" one of the women shrielled.

With a sinking heart, I knew she meant me.

I knew that was what I had become in the eyes of the world.

A whore.

And wasn't that how I'd behaved?

Wasn't that how Gardner had treated me, how he...

"Don't listen to them," he growled. "They're insane. I'm safe here. The house is secure, and the police aren't far away. It's not like this is the first time..."

Something hit the door.

And I shrieked. Completely involuntarily I pressed my hands over my ears and as much of my face as I could manage, and ducked back. Ducked away from the rocks, or bricks, or firebombs. Whatever they might turn out to be.

"Here, here, now!" A quick glance, almost against my will, showed this came from a policeman. One lone policeman, one very young and ill-advised

policeman, attracted from the scene of the diggings. "What's going on here?"

As if angered by his appearance, the crowd surged.

The singing increased in volume as incredibly, almost comically, they took up *Gloria In Excelsis* though nothing about the scene could have been farther from Christmas-like in either tone or appearance. Reaching the sidewalk in front of Gardner's place, trampling over and through the low hedge that formed a thoroughly inadequate barrier around his bare if perfect front lawn, they reached the young policeman and engulfed him. They swept him forward, struggling to stay on his feet as some unseen hand pressed a small brass crucifix into his.

They swept him right up onto Gardner's front steps.

Bewildered, befuddled, realizing too late that he was sorely outnumbered and desperately in need of help, the young officer looked around. Looked down. He turned and with a careful hand, almost a reverent one, placed his crucifix in the mailbox next to Gardner's front door. So he could confront the mob with both hands free, both hands upraised, his palms turned toward them in a gesture clearly meant to hold them back.

I didn't think it would work.

Apparently, dragging in a sharp and hissed breath between clenched teeth, neither did Gardner.

"Get him out here!" somebody shouted. "Get the vampire out here! Make him answer for his crimes!"

"Too bad there's no sunlight," someone chimed in

with savage glee. "Do away with him that way, is what I say!"

Then one voice, the voice obviously of a preacher of some sort who'd studied projection and knew how to make his words ring through even the most impenetrable of chaos, rose above the others. "The words of the wicked are to lie in wait for blood!" he proclaimed.

The crowd surged again.

It roared again, its unqualified approval.

"But the counsels of the wicked are deceit!"

Another roar.

"The wicked are overthrown, and are no more. But the house of the righteous shall stand!"

"Uh-oh." Gardner muttered almost into my ear. "I don't like this. I don't like..."

Then all hell broke loose beyond the door.

Moving as if with a single mind, the mob surged all the way onto the lawn. Filling it, they rushed Gardner's front steps to crowd, bodies tight-pressed in a unison of horrible agreement, onto the porch. They shoved the young policeman back and knocked him off his feet. Would no doubt have trampled him to death had he not had the common sense to tuck himself into a tight ball and roll as close to the side of the house as it was possible for a grown man to roll.

Sirens had begun to wail along the far reaches of the street.

Other policemen had begun to appear finally, streaming at a dead run from the excavations in the rose garden.

But they were going to be too late.

I didn't have to think to know that.

Already the door was under assault. One pair of fists had begun to pound and pound. Then they were joined by five more. Ten more. A thundering and unstoppable galaxy of hands. All with one objective. To smash. Destroy. Gain entry, and...

"Go, Jean-Agnes!" Gardner shouted as I'd never heard him shout before.

I actually did back off a step. A few steps. "What about you?" I quavered. "If you think I'm going to just *leave* you..."

"Go!"

The door was as sturdy as it appeared. Pummeled, hammered by crazed and maddened fists, it stood fast. But almost at once glass shattered. One of the tall and narrow windows next to the door gave way. Mindless of shards that clung in the frames, hands penetrated the opening. Reaching hands, groping hands, hands searching for...

One of them found the lock. And turned it, even as Gardner leapt forward to press his shoulder against the sturdy panel that in another second, another milli-second, would be no match for those determined to gain entry.

"Go!" he screamed at me, his eyes wide with either terror or exhilaration.

I could not tell which.

Then the door gave way.

And I found myself surrounded.

I felt the touch of hands, the brush of crucifixes

pressed against my face, my arms, even my bare feet and ankles.

The preacher was shouting again. More Bible passages, I thought, though now even his words were rendered unintelligible by the wordless howling of the mob that swept into Gardner's home. Overturning furniture, shattering anything that would shatter, ripping the bloody painting from the wall to smash it and stomp it to nothing beneath their ecstatic, jubilant feet.

The preacher was screaming into my face.

He was praying for my lost and damned soul, though with my head lowered and my hands covering my ears, I could hear little of his actual words.

Others rushed the stairs. They reached the upper floors, and I heard a crash. Then another...a terrible and splintering crash of furniture falling to its destruction, followed by a hoarse cry of victory.

And then the police.

Suddenly they filled the hallway.

Suddenly they seemed actually to outnumber the chanting, hysterical members of the mob.

Instinct told me the confusion of their arrival was only temporary. Instinct insisted the moment of confusion would be very soon followed by a regrouping that would put the previous frenzy to shame.

Somehow I found Gardner. I pressed myself against him, buried myself in the circle of his arms as much to shelter him from the escalating wrath of

unreason as to be protected from it myself.

"Gardner?" My voice rose on a high and shrill note. One that very nearly cut through the din of singing, praying, orating that filled every square inch of air inside the house and all around the outside of it.

"I need a minute to think," he said, unbelievably, into my ear.

"But..." I didn't know what else to say. Except, "we're out of time for thinking."

The rest of the police arrived.

The ones in riot gear, wearing dark helmets with closed visors.

The ones with canisters held in uplifted hands. Canisters swirling gray-gleaming, almost spectacular curls of smoke that permeated the air at once with the sickening, throat-scalding stench of something so vile that I could no longer stay on my feet. Something that tore at my eyes and wanted to rip them, still living and seeing and helpless to *stop* living and seeing, straight from their sockets. Something that singed the lining of my lungs and toppled me, still locked tight against Gardner, to the floor where others...hundreds of others, thousands and maybe even millions of others...already writhed and gasped.

Already whimpered in sheer agony.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I suppose it was only inevitable, what with night upon us and an uneasy truce established in the neighborhood, with the police promising the neighbors to keep an eye on Gardner and Gardner to keep an eye on the neighbors, that we should end up together. That more than that, we should end up climbing the wide stairs to his second floor, to clean the shattered remains of several picture frames and one large vase that must, in its undamaged prime, have been a spectacular piece off the wide bed in the big master bedroom that, much to my chagrin and titillation, looked directly across the space between our houses. Directly into the side window of the violet-sprigged room I'd chosen for myself in the other house. Should the shutters and curtains ever be flung open to the view.

There seemed something almost indecent about that.

Something vicarious.

Something that started, with no or very little input from Gardner, the sweet and decadent flow of

moisture between my thighs. Expectant moisture that could scarcely wait, would not wait, to be met and encouraged.

"There's so much I have to tell you," he murmured doubtfully, looking at me across the vast, white-white width of the bed I'd just made with fresh sheets and blankets.

"Can't it wait until morning?" Torn between curiosity that had mounted steadily since the first instant I'd seen the gleam of his cigarette in the night and realized I wasn't as alone as I'd thought myself to be, and the odd mixture of exhaustion and anticipatory moistening, I stared back at him.

"I just thought you had a right to know..." He motioned toward the lower floor and the front windows that now stood boarded over but open and vulnerable to further attacks should the police relax their vigilance and allow the mob to start forming again. "You must have so many questions."

Hands, shaking, I began to remove my clothes. The ones I'd pulled on so many hours earlier that it actually seemed a lifetime of lifetimes had passed in the interval. "About why people seem to believe you're a vampire?" I asked, trying hard not to look at him.

Of course that proved as impossible as had the notion of returning to my own house. To the rambling, dusty mansion that had too many doors, too many windows, too many rooms. That would echo crazily, sending ominous suggestions about interlopers who weren't really there no matter how

many lights I might decide to leave burning, in no matter how many strategic locations.

I could do nothing *but* look at him.

Nothing but stare, my hands fluttering to a stop in the act of tossing my shirt aside, at the man who through some indescribable, very possibly sinister magic had been come as enthralled with me as I forced myself to admit I'd become enthralled with him.

Nothing but realize, as I took in the dark fire of eyes that weren't quite black, not all the way black with their whiskey-colored highlights, as I absorbed the proud tilt of a perfectly formed chin and the slightly haughty expression of a face kept too carefully under control and too deliberately lifeless, that he looked not at all sinister.

Rather, Gardner looked lost. And not suddenly. Not in any way that indicated his eyes and his expression had changed recently in some fundamental but just as indescribable way.

I knew now that in the chaos and discord of all my other emotions...the inexpressible titillation of sexual arousal, the sudden dropping of so many barriers I'd maintained so uselessly and for so long, and the degree of fear I'd allowed to possess me in the face of his unquestioned strangeness, I had missed that look.

I had never noticed it even though it had been there right from the start. Had never taken time to see beneath the surface I'd been so convinced was real.

For that, the fault could only be mine.

"Wouldn't this be enough to convince?" he asked,

and parted his lips. Smiling. Revealing what I had once taken to be all the evidence needed to prove even the most improbable of assumptions.

The twin, perfect points of teeth that, oddly enough, seemed almost normal now. Seemed almost entirely explicable as merely an odd aberration from the norm...no more disturbing an aberration than an uncorrected overbite or a perfectly rational unevenness in the way his teeth sat in his jaw.

"I have to admit I did wonder." Clothing shed, my body naked and on display for him without the slightest hint of shyness, or shrinking, or any horror of embarrassment, I put a knee on the bed. I shifted my weight onto it. Shifted all my weight, and lifted the other knee to join it. "Until I got hold of reason and got my thinking under control, I have to admit I suffered some of the wildest..."

Moving deliberately, moving slowly and as seductively as I thought I knew how, I stretched out on my back on the bed. On top of the crisp white sheets.

I didn't know what to call it.

That thing I'd suffered.

A nightmare, a fantasy, an illusion? Or perhaps a *de-lusion*?

It didn't matter now. Because whatever it had been, it was gone and *this* was reality.

This. Right here.

This was the very *stuff* of reality...Gardner pulling off his clothes in much more haste than I'd done, Gardner placing a knee on the bed just as I had, then

his hands with fingers balled into fists upon which he rested the greatest part of his weight.

Reality was Gardner leaning over me. Leaning closer to me. Always closer so that my heart, never very steady or reliable where he was concerned and his presence was involved, took to beating wildly. So that I feared he would see it beating beneath the fragile layers of flesh and bone that were all that protected it and concealed it. So that I feared in seeing he would know. Would understand all too perfectly that I wanted him. Craved him. Despaired of surviving until the moment he would touch me at last. Would brush me with the molten heat of his flesh. With whatever part of his flesh he chose to make that first contact.

"There is an explanation," he said quietly, now visibly reluctant to go any farther.

"I'm sure there is."

My heart could take no more.

Jerking, desperate, it warned me it would soon cease altogether, seized up into a useless, pain-riddled lump of dead nothing if it did not have what it wanted. If my body did not have what it wanted.

Him.

"There will be time," I replied, lifting my arms and opening them in the clearest invitation I knew how to give. "In the morning."

Briefly, he looked almost hurt. "You're not interested?"

Laughing, I couldn't believe the sound came from my throat. Couldn't believe it was a part of me, an

expression of me.

My laughter was low. Dusky, and husky, and vibrant. It shimmered in the barely-lighted air of the room where we'd turned on one very small lamp, located in a distant corner where it did nothing to chase away the darkest realms of encroaching night...nothing to illuminate or reveal except in the most rubescent and sensuous of tints anything existing inside the night.

"I'm very interested." My despair now complete, I lifted my arms higher. Lifted them as high as I could, wanting only to know the feeling of him there, the feeling of him between them. "But not now, Gardner. Not when..."

I lacked words to explain.

But he knew.

I saw the knowledge in the fresh sparking of his eyes. In the sudden and unmistakable eagerness that flared in their whiskey-highlighted depths to shatter the lost and aching look I'd hated to see there.

"Come to me."

It wasn't a request.

I would know how to make a request like that.

It was a simple statement of fact. The purest, most simple and sublime expression of mounting, soaring, flowing need that I could summon.

And he did.

With a soft and astonished sound, almost a growl of complicity, Gardner came into the bed. He didn't slip beneath the crisp and cool upper sheet, didn't seek to conceal the naked and gleaming magnificence

of his body between their layers any more than I'd tried to conceal mine.

And I was glad.

I hadn't seen him before. Hadn't *truly* seen him, not in any kind of reasonable light. Hadn't had my chance to scan the long and muscular planes of a body that seemed, to my limited and entirely instinctual knowledge, as perfect as any man's body had ever been.

I hadn't had any chance to take in the tight strength of shoulders that shone with the pale and luminescent whiteness I would expect of a man who, for whatever unknown and still unexplained reason, never saw the sun.

His arms were long. His legs longer.

The thick dappling of hair at the center of his chest gleamed dark as the shadows he preferred, dark as the night in which he forced himself to live. Narrowing a little beneath the center, beneath the darkly-pink rounds of nipples that stood firmly erect, that luscious pelt continued to narrow as it approached the center of his torso. It narrowed and narrowed, until it was barely wider than the small and perfect scar of his navel as it passed, only to flare abruptly below. Only to flare into wide and curling, lush and not at all concealing luxury in the area between his thighs.

Breathless with surprise, my throat and mouth and lips suddenly parched drier than the dusty bones I'd unearthed in my rose garden, I made myself look where I didn't want to look. Where I simultaneously

wanted, with all the awakened and awakening curiosity of one far too long and far too foolishly denied, to look.

I made myself study his shaft. His fully erect member that stood proudly above that dark furring.

Impossibly large, masterfully created and visibly throbbing, that shaft could not...*not*...have ever fit into the narrowness of my body. Could not, without inflicting the most grievous and irreparable of damage.

Yet it *had*!

"Jean-Agnes." Catching my hand, Gardner pulled it to that standing length. He pressed it against that pulsing heat.

I gasped when I felt how hot was this bit of flesh.

Hotter by far than normal flesh, than the rest of his flesh, hotter even than the secret and inner regions of myself at which I'd marveled because then, when I'd been exploring them, they had seemed the epitome of heat. The very source and sense of all heat.

But Gardner was hotter.

And smooth.

Silken beneath my touch. Silken, and throbbing as I allowed my hand to do what it wanted. To caress, first with knuckles, then with palm, then back to knuckles again. As I ran my hand up and down, not grasping but merely touching in the most speculative of ways. The most exploratory.

"Jean-Agnes." His voice sounded thick. Hoarse. Shattered. Broken into a billion and one star-like, raw-edged fragments.

"What are you going to teach me tonight?" I asked, fascinated almost into rapture by the movement of my own hand. By the sight of it plying itself repeatedly along a distended length that was so much more than I'd ever expected. That was yet exactly what I'd expected with some kind of primal, primitive, inborn female knowledge of what she wants and needs. What will give her greatest delight and maximum pleasure.

"Love." Turning his head, his gaze met mine.

His eyes had stopped glittering. They'd gone as soft as I felt inside. Not just in heart, and lungs, and stomach, though all of those had gone incredibly soft, almost too soft to sustain life. Gardner's eyes were now as soft as I felt in the lower parts of me. The parts I'd explored by myself and in his company, the same ones I wanted him to explore again at will. To ransack at his convenience.

I softened.

Moistened.

Felt the smooth and insidious murmur of desire uncoil itself and stretch itself out so that in another moment it would encompass all of me and both of us. So that it would be unmistakable, even visible, steaming and smoking in chill night air.

"I'll teach you to make love now, Jean-Agnes."

Confused, too lost already in my dreams and enchantment to think clearly or even to care, I frowned at him. "Love? What have we been doing all along, if not..."

"I've taught you sex."

Gardner rolled to his side. One of his hands came up. One of his fingers escaped the fist that hand maintained and, upon escaping, stroked along the side of my breast...stroked straight to the peak of it. Straight to the straining nipple that began to send out the most amazing signals.

To issue the most dangerous commands.

Gardner touched the point of my nipple with a fingertip. And I gasped as a quiver of twining electricity shot out from that single point of contact. As it shot all the way down and quite mysteriously into the waiting, shivering, quivering flesh between my legs.

He stroked his fingertip very deliberately around the dark aureole surrounding my nipple, and I caught my breath.

I'd have liked to scream. But I had no strength. No willpower, no stamina, nothing at all as the maddening circling of his finger enticed my tormented nipple into a state of pebbled hardness. Of upright agitation and outright expectation.

"I've taught you what to do with your body," he said dreamily, seeming hypnotized himself by the constant circling and circling of his fingertip and the corresponding straining and lifting of my body. The center of my body, as I shoved my hips away from the bed. As I lifted instinctively, my back bowed tight and high, straining to have more of his touch. More of everything. More of *him*.

For a moment, as I'd known he would, Gardner refused to comply.

And then suddenly, so unexpectedly that I had scant time to prepare and none at all to adjust, he leaned over me. Leaned with a *purpose*, leaned to fasten his mouth around my other nipple. The one he'd ignored in his apparent fascination with the first.

Never abandoning the circling and stroking that had led to such unparalleled and astonishing arousal, he fastened his mouth upon my other breast and sucked. Not hard. Not enough, really, to amount to a suggestion of sucking. And with his tongue...

Oh, lovely, heavens.

With his tongue!

My back arched higher.

Gardner laved. He stroked similar and yet completely, utterly different and separate sorts of circles around my suddenly enraged nipple.

In less than the space of a heartbeat it hardened. Painfully hardened, with eruptive, enslaved ferocious intensity.

I made a sound, then.

Not a scream, for I was still completely incapable of anything fitting that description.

This was more like a mewling. More like a small and dying moaning, followed by the whisper of his name across my lips. "Gardner! I...can't...won't..."

"I'll teach you how to make love," he promised again, his mouth still pressed against my breast. "I'll teach you what it's like to love. To be loved, and to want to go on loving for whatever eternity might exist for us. For you. Me."

"Gardner..."

Somehow one of my hands found his hair.

Somehow the fingers of that hand, limp and flaccid, useless thing it had become beneath his latest and unprecedented onslaught, found the strength to close around a lock of his hair. And to tug. Not hard. Not successfully. But enough to get his attention.

He looked up.

Removed, thank God, the sinful torture of his mouth from my flesh. And even ceased the circling with the fingertip that had all but driven me to ecstasies of sheer, unimaginable madness.

"I want..."

He smiled. The sweetest of smiles with lips full and swollen. As if he'd just gorged himself and sated himself, just satisfied whatever normal and healthy appetites any man in his position would feel.

His eyes flared when his gaze met mine.

"Are you ready, Jean-Agnes? Incomparable, indescribable Jean-Agnes?"

"Yes!" My gaze never left his.

"You're so much a mystery," he mused, looking suddenly thoughtful.

"I..."

"There's so much I only now realize I don't know about you. So much I can't explain. So much I wonder if I'll ever explain."

"In the morning." Tugging again, no harder, with hands and fingers that had no more strength than before, I urged him toward me. Urged successfully, but not nearly as quickly as I'd have liked. As I needed.

"The morning," Gardner's eyes, his face, said he almost didn't understand the concept. Or maybe he didn't want to understand, if not understanding would prolong the night and the moment and all moments yet to come.

"The morning," I murmured, closing my eyes as my legs opened of their own volition. As they spread themselves and bent themselves, tipping my hips upward in revelation of all I had to share and give. And "the morning," I murmured again as at last Gardner moved over me. As at last I felt the silken brush of fire as the tip of his shaft found with its deadly delightful accuracy the one place where I meant, if there truly was a God and a heaven, to keep it from now into forevermore.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Whatever I'd thought I'd gleaned about men and women, about the relationship between them, from my encounters with Gardner, whatever small truths I'd thought leaned at such incredible price, I knew at once that I'd been mistaken. For this time was nothing like those that had come before. Nothing at all.

This time he was gentle.

The way I imagined he might have been the first time, had things gone differently and had he truly known it was my first time.

Gliding, shimmering, striking opalescent sparks that vanished into suddenly heavy, suddenly sultry and seething air in almost the instant they were kindled to life, his fingertips wandered slowly across the open planes of my mid-section. After giving my nipple one last, far gentler and in the process far more unnerving whisper of a caress, they left it behind. Left it crying out, trying to shrivel to dry and wasted nothingness, trying to maintain the soft quiver of delight with which he'd gifted it long after he left it

behind.

Still gliding, those fingertips roamed on. Exploring super-sensitized flesh beneath my breasts. The same flesh that lay above what unquestionably, inarguably, was his only and ultimate goal...agitated female flesh against which he stroked, with the same maddening and outrageous lightness and gentility, the long and hardened shaft for which it yearned. For which all of me yearned.

"I've never had the chance to just enjoy you," he murmured, tracing a line down the center of my abdomen with a single finger. A line that made me gasp and bite down hard on my lip, so hard that I tasted blood, in my effort to remain still. To allow him to move where he would and do what he would, when all the time deep inside me some small and unquenchable instinct insisted this would be the greatest lesson of all. The most wonderful, and marvelous, and unforgettable lesson of all.

This would be the one lesson out of all he might offer that I would want to be sure not to miss. Not even the smallest instant of it.

Commanding myself, exerting iron control over my own will and physical body that I'd never dreamed possible, not even in the harshest and most stringent of my days at Divine Serenity, I lay still. Very, very, inhumanly still.

"You're beautiful." Gardner's tone soared in wonderment. It lightened enough that I thought the air in the room lightened as well. I thought it lost some of its heavy expectancy and began to shimmer.

Shifting the slightest bit to take on some of the qualities of his wonderment. Stealing them for its very own.

"I'm not."

But how would I know?

Had I not shunned all consciousness of beauty, male or female, long ago? Had I not, under my parents' and then later Mother's strict guidance, formed myself as a creature who thought little of outward trappings, believing they were not for me?

So, how would I know?

How could I ever hope to judge the appeal in the swell of a breast, the rightness in the circumference of a waist that Gardner could, if he so chose, circle easily with his large hands? How could I ever hope to know for sure if the dark brown shade of my hair was right, if the hazel of my eyes was alluring, if their position in a face that had never been allowed to matter in my pure and would-be-holy life was correct? If it would be enough for a man like Gardner McCord...a man so much more experienced than I, even if his world was more constricted than any I had ever known?

I couldn't know.

But I felt I had to protest.

I felt, with more of that strange and exciting knowledge of things I'd never been prepared to know, that it would be unseemly to accept such a comment without protest.

As usual, Gardner seemed to know exactly what I was thinking. And he laughed.

Softly.

The sound shivered through me. It alighted within me and grew there...grew until I felt I could endure no longer. Should be expected to endure no more, no matter what the circumstances. No matter what...

Then, finally, he touched me. Firmly, with the head of the shaft that knew its business and meant to go about it in thoroughly different ways this time. Thoroughly enchanting ways that, had I not been captivated and caught already, would surely have done the job.

Held over me by arms that locked tight, arms that bulged becomingly with muscles strained only the smallest bit...lovely, well-developed muscles that hinted the power he used now, the same power he'd used to such admirable advantage in the past, was only a shadow of the power they actually possessed...Gardner moved.

Slightly.

Urging his body into a restraint I could *feel* in the taut and nervous air that floated between us, he allowed himself the smallest degree of movement forward. And down.

Into me.

I felt my flesh part. Felt it flow in that oddly liquid way it had learned. Felt it give way beneath the slight but irresistible pressure he exerted. Felt it part before his insistence. Part gently, part willingly and even expertly now that my rush to learn, my rush to be instructed in so many things I should long since have known had come to an end. Now that I had caught up to some semblance of the place I should be at twenty-

five. The place other young women of my age, the free and thoughtless creatures I'd glimpsed from the bus that had brought me to Denver, had long since reached. With no useless self-examination, no terror of doubt and self-loathing, no questioning that the most basic and natural urges of their young bodies could be anything but right.

How I'd envied those girls! How I'd envied the way they laughed and moved in their smooth-fitting jeans that hugged every curve and made the most of every swelling of the bodies beneath. How I'd envied the way they flirted openly, flirted outrageously and with consummate skill in their lacy, frilly, bare-shouldered camisole tops that barely concealed anything. While I, crone and repressed crow that I'd been at the very same age, sat in my heavy robes and suffocating veils, watching through dirt streaked windows and yearning for what, at the time, I had believed could never be mine. Because the robes and veils had meant everything to me. Then. They'd been all of my existence, all of my knowledge of existence, all of my hope for the continuation of existence.

Sighing gently, still afraid to move as Gardner eased the pearlescent tip of his flesh into the darker, ruddier, grasping and greedy opening of mine, I realized I'd had a lot to learn.

But I'd made up admirably for my lack of experience.

I'd made up dramatically, in ways the veiled and wimpled crone on the bus could never have imagined. Because, even though she'd possessed the

instincts and the primal, inborn knowledge all along, she would never have permitted herself to imagine.

Now, though...

"Gardner." At last I allowed myself some degree of movement.

At last, moving side to side across the smooth-starched sheets upon which this latest lesson, this most important one, was to be conducted, I attempted to take him in. Attempted to capture more of him than just the penetrating, tantalizing, thoroughly inadequate tip I'd so far been allowed.

"Not so fast," he murmured.

"But I need..." It was all I could do to restrain myself. All I could do to not give in to a desire to lunge wildly, lunge ferociously toward him as new essence, fresh essence, sweetest and most undiluted of all essence, poured from my body in shimmering, sparkling waves.

"You need to learn the virtue of slow," Gardner murmured, then proceeded to demonstrate. He proceeded to take it slow.

Take *me* slowly. So slowly that he seemed almost not to move.

The spark-inducing drag of his flesh against mine seemed neither to increase nor to subside.

I opened to him. Opened myself in every way I knew how and every other way I had only previously imagined. Begging him in ways instinctive to all women from the very beginning of time to have me. To take me. Use me.

But the forward movement of his shaft continued

by the most maddeningly minute and miniscule degrees. He entered without seeming to enter at all. Entered while seeming only to stand still in a moment between times. A moment between moments.

I wanted to cry out.

Maybe I did.

There seemed to be some kind of murmur afloat in the dazzled air, but I had no way to tell if it had come from me. Even if it seemed likely. Even if it seemed all but certain.

"Millimeter," Gardner murmured and moved forward for sure now, though no farther than that. "By millimeter."

I groaned.

Seething tides of moisture erupted within me. They drowned themselves against awakened and sensitized flesh, only to vanish immediately without satisfying anything. Without *trying* to satisfy even one millionth of the thirst Gardner's every stroke, his every gradual and undemanding millimeter, incited within me.

I groaned again. Louder.

Closing my eyes, I rolled my head from side to side as if to deny what was happening to me. What was happening inside me. Even as the swelling rise and fall of my undulating, writhing body confirmed it *was* happening.

Closing my eyes, I shook my head.

And opened wider the legs I could barely feel now. The legs I could barely use, the ones that seemed to end in truncated stumps as did all of the rest of my

body, the scantest millimeter from the center of me. The smallest millimeter from the single part of me that had become the entire focus of everything I was. Everything I would ever be again. The entire focus of everything Gardner had planned for me, and planned to do to...*with*...me.

I opened my legs, and he accepted the invitation.

In his way.

He still eased forward. Eased so terribly slowly that it was almost worse...was infinitely and unendurably worse than the abrupt and at times harsh ways he'd taken me before.

He eased with such mindless control, such diabolical control, that I flung my arms out to grip hard at the sides of the bed. In so doing I lifted my back away from the bed again, lifted it higher this time, curving it into a more pronounced arch as my head remained firmly upon the pillow, my hair streaming out in wanton and decadent flowing waves across pale linen.

Gardner eased forward ever deeper, ever farther past the quivering, pleading opening of my flesh.

At last the full thickness of his shaft filled me. Meeting that unsated and unsatisfied place within me even as I lifted myself toward him, it filled my flesh and pulled it taut again. Awakened me anew in its exultation of entered. And still the easing continued. Still, even after I poured forth another dark-wine rush to entice him and lubricate the way so that he wouldn't have to ease, would never have to ease, that was all he did.

Creep into me.

Creep with movements that counted only as torture. Of the worst, the most absolutely unconscionable and unendurable kind.

"I want you to participate this time," he murmured.

In reply, I laughed. Shakily. All but inaudibly. "Haven't I been?"

"A woman needs to be broken first," he declared as the easing...the slow torture of the easing...continued.

I should have been outraged.

Even repressed as I was, and decidedly behind the tone of the times, I knew I should have been outraged by a comment...a concept...like that. But I had lost too much of myself. I had surrendered so much of myself and succumbed to too many of the unsuspected cravings I'd found inside myself to truly care. About anything except lying beneath him, obedient as he advanced. Obedient as life had taught me to be and ordered me to be. I could only catch breath and tongue between sharp-edged teeth as at last, by another of those incalculable and to all appearances meaningless millimeters I reached an extent of tightening and tautening that made it clear his words were the law.

His words were to be heeded, to be obeyed, to be taken absolutely seriously.

"A woman needs to be taught to ride a man's shaft," he went on, still easing, still stretching, still with maddening intent that drove me closer and ever

closer to some never-before-reached precipice from which I would plunge, forever enslaved. Forever obedient, forever under firm and more unshakable control than any Mother had ever thought to exert...ever known *how* to exert. "Don't you agree, Jean-Agnes?"

"Yes." My hands found some ability to move at last. To some small degree. Enough, somewhat ungracefully and with shocking lack of real coordination, to scrabble at the sheets beneath me, to try to find purchase on their shifting and slippery surface. Only to abandon the attempt before it had any chance for success, to rise to clutch him instead. "But, Gardner, I..."

"A woman has to be kept in her place," he continued, and now he had struck bottom.

Now, with a great and yet infinitesimal last easing, he placed himself as far inside me as he'd been meant to go. And reaching that bottom, that limit, he shoved harder. His engorged hardness rammed itself tight into my deepest reaches until, straining, his arms beginning to quiver visibly, he pinned me to the bed. Completely helpless. Completely at his mercy.

Pinned me, and looked at me with flaming eyes.

"Spread your legs for me, Jean-Agnes."

Whimpering, I tried to obey.

"This is where you belong. This is how you belong. This is what will have meaning for all the rest of your life."

"Yes. Yes!"

I was struggling now. Struggling desperately.

Pinned relentlessly, pinned in a way from which I could never possibly find the will or the strength to escape until I was permitted to escape, I nonetheless tried. Lifting my shoulders, hooking my hands into claws, I tried in every way I could, pounding upon the smoothness of Gardner's back. Clawing at the rigid iron of his arms. Screaming half-aloud in frustration and alarm when he simply laughed and drove his impaling shaft that much deeper into seared and devastated flesh that wanted the impalement every bit as much as I tried to fight against it.

Sobbing, choking, I struggled to the best of my ability, my legs now useless and sprawled across the tangled sheets, my legs bent at the knees and spread wide to accept him. Spread wide in a way that precluded any kind of meaningful movement. Not even when I realized that if I could move them, if Gardner would allow me the chance, as I must now seek permission for anything I might wish to do, I could satisfy myself.

The little motion he did allow taught me that.

By sheer force of mind triumphing over matter I managed to shift him inside me. By the very tiniest of degrees. I managed to shift the killing, imprisoning pressure to other parts of me, and by continuing my struggle could keep that slightest changing of pressures and directions of pressure from ever repeating itself. From ever growing predictable or monotonous within me.

Gardner allowed me barely enough room to move myself around him. Barely enough to continue the

struggle to lift myself higher onto him and farther, to shift the aching, surging center of myself in the ways I wanted to lift and shift.

Laughing softly, he stayed as he was and where he was and allowed me, barely, to struggle around him. Upon him. Beneath him.

He allowed me, with bulging eyes and sweat-soaked hair, with clawing fingers and convulsing muscles, to try to achieve the release I craved. The debilitated addict's release that, by very nature of my impalement and the way release was utterly forbidden to me, made the dream of it that much more sweet. That much more alluring and that much more insensately, impossibly, urgently necessary.

If I was to live through this latest, greatest, and most incendiary of lessons.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Fight, Jean-Agnes.” Gardner’s voice was soothing. Was as gently commiserating as his hard and controlling body was taunting. As it was relentless in its desire to teach me this particular lesson. This brutally agonizing new understanding of denial and the role that denial would play for all the rest of my days. A lesson designed deliberately to remind me of the continued need, a more pressing need now, to be obedient. To keep my focus narrowed only upon what Gardner could give me. What I must have him give me.

“Fight,” he urged again in his silken-soft voice...the one that could do nothing but aggravate an already grievous situation. Nothing but inflame already inflamed passions to the point that they must explode into...what?

I had no idea.

But “fight,” he said in his most delirium-inducing voice.

And that was exactly what I did.

With all my strength, I fought.

For release.

For relief.

For *more*.

Straining, struggling, teeth clenched and hooked fingers gripping Gardner's flesh hard enough to dig deep, painfully deep, into muscle and sinew, I used every bit of the tiny measure of movement he allowed as I fought to free myself. Fought to insert myself deeper still into the thoroughly delightful prison he'd created for me with the simple act of pinning me to the bed in a single glistening thrust that seemed to have no end. No need of an end.

Sighing softly, Gardner ground the fully engaged length of himself into me. He moved his hips a very little. Just enough that each shifting of his position, each varying of the degree and force of the penetration he maintained stoically through it all was enough to complement my own shifting. My own vagary. And at times, most times, was enough to directly combat it. So that even as I struggled, even as rivulets of sweat poured down my back and soaked endlessly into the roots of my hair, I accomplished nothing.

Almost nothing.

For wasn't there still an element of release in the combat in which we engaged? In some perverse way that defied all attempts at explanation or clarification, wasn't the very act of straining my flesh around his, of straining to move that flesh and soothe its aching, tortured and dying torment a result in and of itself?

A new warmth suffused me. Springing from

somewhere deep inside, it was an unprecedented warmth, one that was more soothing, more pervasive and more complete than any I'd felt before. Than any Gardner had ignited for me before.

This was something born of some inner place far beyond the tormented point at which he held me captive against the bed. It came from some place even deeper than the center of me that he seemed to have reached...far, far deeper than the point around which I and my very existence now revolved.

This new warmth, this warmth that would never desert me and never again leave me wanting came from my *soul*.

Sighing again, still moving in his barely there back and forth rhythm, the one that did nothing to allow my own movements to increase, Gardner pressed himself even deeper.

Shoving, his arms shaking, his own body now agleam with a fine and polished patina of sweat and effort and self-denial, he pressed hard against the inside of me. Hard against some unsuspected place that suddenly, magically blossomed beneath the pressure. He pressed, continued to press, and then, with a low and animal cry that made it clear I was not the only one who needed an end to this agony and not the only one who needed the sweet freedom to ease my sufferings in any way I might, he retreated.

The absence of him inside me was shocking.

So shocking that I cried out, too, in loss and bewilderment. In the sharpest and most overwhelming desire. To have him back. All of him,

instantly.

Gardner slid smoothly, with none of the earlier dragging and scouring of hard and relentless flesh against pleading, needful flesh. This time when he pulled back, so far that only the molded tip of him remained imbedded, devilishly inadequate between the absolute outermost layer of me, it was a long and controlled glide.

This time my body gave him up easily. Gave him up far too easily, because the moisture he had generated within me, the weakness and gasping readiness, made it impossible for me to grasp him. Impossible for me to retain him. Even if that was what my body wanted. Even if that was what my stunned and numbed mind expected.

He slid away from me.

I imagined it as a long and blue, sweeping and pearly hued stroke. And in all my fervor and furor of imagining, I missed the sensation.

Or maybe I only thought I missed it.

Because suddenly the sultry air felt cold against my exposed skin. Suddenly it felt absolutely frigid against my sweat-streaked body, and took on a piercing quality that seemed to drive jagged blue shards of ice straight through me.

I shivered.

And Gardner hung in his place. He hung in a sort of motionless limbo that, like almost everything about this new and unforeseen way of taking each other and sharing each other, defied rational explanation.

It simply *was*. A pause between symphonies. A

moment between eons. A waiting hush between prayers.

Eyes closed, face just as closed and almost haggard with the effort of what he inflicted upon himself as much as he inflicted it upon me, he hung over me for the longest of milliseconds before, with that same long and glowing smoothness, he relaxed his arms. Allowed his body to drive itself downward. Allowed the force of gravity to pull him down, placing him back within me, his pulsing length buried as quickly now as it had been buried slowly and with premeditated torment before. He buried himself so deeply that the pulsing in him found and amplified a matching pulse within me.

I felt it.

Felt the steady thump, thump, thump. Felt the low-keyed yet unmistakable murmur of flesh set in motion, flesh newly afflicted with some sort of bizarre nervous tic that resulted only in more tics. And more, and more, and more until all of me, all of the outer me and the awakened inner me seemed to leap and cavort and cartwheel with a million and one tiny, linked pulses. And most of all I felt the burn. Not the same burn I'd known with Gardner before...not the searing of flesh pushed beyond its limits or the scorched agony of flesh forced to go far beyond those limits and endure things for which it had never been prepared. Endure without hope of knowing what was to come next...what further agonies must soon be endured.

This time I was ready for the burn. For whatever it

was and whatever else Gardner might wish to do or have me do. This time I was prepared, I was expecting it, I was eager for it.

Eager For his next withdrawal.

Eager for the long and sensational slide of it that would be as smooth as the one before. On the surface. While underneath, in some fundamental and indefinable way, it would be...*was*, now that he'd commenced it and was proceeding with it even as I thought about it...altogether different. Altogether new, and the most exciting sensation I'd ever known.

This time his withdrawal carried with it a deep-seated rippling of something unsettled. Some craving, longing, whatever I might choose to call it, that had only just realized it was there and still needed to be satisfied.

It was barely there. Nothing more than the subtlest of ripples, something sensed more than felt. And yet I felt its potential. Knew its potential to dominate and destroy. Knew that now that it had begun it would never be diminished. Never allow itself to be disrupted.

It was pleasure. Sheer, silken pleasure. Of the flowing of Gardner's flesh against mine. Of smoothness that had almost reached its limit again. Of masterful control that had almost met its downfall.

I glowed within. Poured out quantities of welcoming moisture and tingled in a thousand-million ways never before achieved. And yet, when all was said and done, I was far less gone, far less lost in the rapidly advancing promise of the end than

Gardner.

I still had miles and miles of stamina to spend. Still, as my flesh pulsed and flickered, opening wide again in completely involuntary ways born of the need to be filled over and over and endlessly, I had much more to spend than he. I still had limitless quantities to spend because, and the knowledge hit me like the proverbial ton of bricks in the next split second when Gardner pulled back and out of me, the woman always had more.

The male, the advancing, invading, forceful half of this delightful whole was in reality the most fragile of creatures.

He was limited by his own anatomy. By his anatomy's greed and inability, in the final moments, to withhold itself or even a part of itself.

He...Gardner...was limited by the virulent force that built within him as he stroked himself into me and dragged himself out of me. He was limited by the very ecstasy that caused him to close his eyes and clench his teeth. Was limited, too, by the profuse outpouring of sweat that left him twice as drenched, twice as shimmering-shiny with heat and life as me.

I understood it all then.

I understood that he was entirely at the mercy of what went on inside him. Of the awful forces and insufferable pleasures that I couldn't imagine...could never imagine, because I would never have to endure anything even remotely like them.

Because when I built to the point of explosion, I could release. As I did in that moment of startling

revelation, I could allow my body to go limp. Could allow it to soften and weaken. And then in the next instant, as he advanced with much less control, much less silken ease and far more of the ragged desperation I decided I liked so very much more, I could build again.

I could release again. Release fresh gluts of moisture and heat that poured endlessly from me as if each additional release was in reality merely the first. Gluts that always, immediately, seemed to renew themselves so that I could do it again.

And again, and again, and again.

Murmuring something, some wordless sound of discovery and astonishment, I tightened my muscles. I resisted a little, playing with him, when he plunged. Simply for the fun of it. For the chance to pay back, in my own small way, all he'd forced me to endure.

Laughing a little, more under my breath than aloud and more for my own benefit and self-excitement than to communicate any specific thing to Gardner, I made it more difficult for him to enter. And for my reward, my utterly delightful and satisfying reward, I felt him jerk. Felt the not-quite-refused shaft jerk when it...he...realized what had happened to it. Him. What was being done to it.

"Name of God, Jean-Agnes!" His voice jerked too. In almost perfect rhythm and synchronicity with his shaft. It jerked and strained as if his words were a vital part of his shaft's existence. And so much a part of its sudden struggle that the two could never be separated. Never be allowed to exist one without the

other.

I relaxed.

Opened tightened flesh.

Allowed him to reach the limit he'd found before.

And then, when he was seized with his terrible, final paroxysm, when he reached the peak of his ordeal, I allowed him to pull back so that he could ram forward again once more. Easily. With no pause, no difficulty, at all.

"Name of God!" His cry reached the ceiling. High as that ceiling was, dim and unremarkable in the far reaches of my unfocused vision as I stared past him, giving in to the tides of sweet darkness that rushed in to fill me and claim me from all sides, his cry battered itself against its lightly-carved surface.

His cry wanted to escape. Into the night beyond the ceiling. But it could not and so, infuriated, it dropped back upon us. With harsh and punishing pressure that only added to, only fueled and accelerated the swift-burning excitement rising within me.

I attempted to hold Gardner again, then. Attempted to grasp his shoulders and wrap noticeably failing arms around them. Attempted to keep him close. To inundate him and drown him, to sweep him away with the next bursting tide that promised to break free at any moment.

I tried.

But of course I was doomed to failure.

Of course his flesh was too saturated with its sheen of sweat to be grasped easily. His flesh was deluged now with the moisture of the heat he'd generated.

The moisture of impending, promising, demanding release as our mutual ending approached with all the speed and tenacity of a freight train barreling full tilt on a long downhill grade.

As immeasurable as my strength had seemed a moment ago, as limitless and forever-renewing, I lost it then.

Gasping, groaning, I gave up and allowed my arms to drop, useless.

My fingers were able to maintain only the most tenuous and flimsy grip upon wilted, twisted sheets.

Gardner plunged.

His body quivered. Every muscle in it quivered and contracted as he groped obviously for strength. Just enough strength for one final retreat. One last leaving-behind of what he would only take again, immediately and completely. Forced by his own body to take. Forced by the gnawing need my body, the mere act of possessing my body, created within his.

This was power, and I liked it.

Craved it.

Delighted in it.

This was power. And in those very last seconds, as Gardner's movements became more erratic, as his struggle to control them and guide them grew more difficult, more obviously and brutally difficult, I was willing to exercise it to its fullest. Simply by seeming to relinquish it. Simply by going limp beneath him, by going soft and pliant and to all appearances compliant beneath his tortured, straining, working form.

In those same seconds he seemed to lose all control. Seemed to lose any capability of directing his energies or channeling them into any other pursuit than the one they'd decided upon. The one that had him thrusting forward hard and repeatedly, thrusting forward as if he was a dying man and his only hope of salvation, of survival, lay within the opened flesh I presented to him. In the way I murmured softly deep in my throat as each and every thrust, each and every retreat that could only, inevitably, be followed by another and longer, harder thrust stripped away a little more of my own control. As each and every thrust edged me closer to the penultimate moment when, with no effort and no thought, I would become a part of him and he of me.

Gardner sobbed. Aloud.

Thick in his throat, his breath struggled for freedom.

"Name..." He couldn't seem to say more. Though it was obvious he tried. Obvious, in the way his muscles worked in his throat, obvious in the way he dragged in breath in harsh and small bursts, only to end up exhaling them without saying anything useful or intelligible at all.

Now I lay still.

The building of internal heat and pressure left me suddenly heavy. Incalculably heavy. It demanded I lay still so that it could...

The bursting of my own need, timed perfectly and without any conscious planning or forethought to coincide with Gardner's own explosive outpouring,

nearly killed me.

I thought it had to kill me. For *here* was power. Here was the seat of all power, known or imagined. Real or fantasized.

Here, in this dark-red mutual tide that dimmed my vision and left me almost incapable of breathing, almost incapable of thinking, lay the real power of the universe. The utmost, irrefutable, most sublime and supreme power.

Power granted by *God*.

The same power I'd tried so desperately to ignore, in the self-righteous delusion that the greatest tribute I could pay to that God was the denial and refusal of this very same power. This very special power I had been granted in the expectation that I wouldn't deny it. Wouldn't refuse it. Wouldn't refuse to use it in the only way it had ever been meant to be used.

Freely and gladly.

Wholly and thoroughly.

I had been a fool.

Quivering now, pouring forth quantity upon quantity of essence from some impossibly deep and mindlessly giving reservoir I'd never before tapped, I felt the chill sting of tears upon my face.

I had been meant for this.

All of life had been created around this. Created *for* this.

And as Gardner shook with a new tremor, as his body finished its agony of emptying and depleting itself, as he groaned thickly through a throat that seemed no more capable than my own of creating

useful human sounds, as he rolled away from me with his vigor gone and all his strength and steadiness, I shook too.

As he dropped to the rumpled bed next to me my tears flowed harder.

Faster.

I *had* been a fool.

Of that there could never again be any question.

A silly, posturing, deluded fool.

As were all the women who'd given their lives over to being shut away from the world. Who'd given themselves up to denial of the delights and very natural pleasures of the world...the delights and pleasures God himself had given us. The woman who'd thought so very, terribly wrongly, that the center of this or any world lay in silent prayer and shrouded lives. In forbidden dreams and lost imaginings.

As Gardner lay motionless next to me with his face pillowed and hidden against folded, still visibly shaking arms, I moved.

Lifting myself away from the bed, I rolled to my side and reached out.

My hand was shockingly steady and certain, unnaturally steady and certain, as I touched the long plane of his back. As I stroked it, making a new kind of vow to myself. One I'd never in all my years of foolishness and stubborn yearning for absolute entrapment, thought to make.

I vowed that I would never let Gardner down.

I would never again let *myself* down.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The morning, as had the one before it and no doubt every one before that, seemed far removed from the secret sanctuary of Gardner's bedroom. It seemed to have nothing to do with life inside that sanctuary, that house, that insulated and insular world he'd created for himself. And now I, lover of sun and rejoicer in the freedom I'd only recently been granted, had begun to sink into his shadow world. I was beginning to feel so much impatience with hours of endless light and sun, was in so many ways beginning to feel more a part of Gardner's darkness and secrecy than of the outdoors and the reality that went on there day after day after sparking October day.

The idea terrified me.

"There's so much I need to explain," he said suddenly in the quiet of the dining room we'd put to rights again before retreating to the kitchen to make a breakfast of eggs, and toast, and coffee.

I looked at him across the bare expanse of pale-wood table. "You don't have to explain anything."

But was that true? Was my voice more timorous than usual? Was my heart more afraid...terribly afraid...of the kind of revelations and admissions he might be about to make?

"I think I do. You deserve to know what that was about last night."

"The..." I hated to say the word, but at the moment could think of no other. None that would be right, none that would adequately describe, at any rate. "The mob?"

When I did say it I had to control myself strictly in order to keep from choking on it.

Grim, his eyes glittering hard and almost deadly in the softly diffused light, Gardner nodded. "They think I'm guilty. You know that, don't you?"

"Guilty. Of the..." This time I *couldn't* say it. So I simply motioned feebly in the general direction of my house and the rose garden beyond. In the direction of the gruesome activities I could only assume still went on there.

"Of that one. And the others."

"Gardner, I don't..."

"I suffer from a disease," he said quietly. Suddenly. Sounding very, utterly tired.

There seemed nothing I could say to this. No way I could allay or eliminate the hard and sharp thrusting of the fear I'd battled for too long now.

So I didn't.

Say anything.

I didn't even try.

I simply waited, my gaze fastened upon his face,

my expression carefully calm, carefully neutral.

"It's called porphyria."

He seemed to expect me to say something then, though I really had no idea yet what that something should be.

"Por...phy...ria?" I rolled the unfamiliar syllables around on my tongue, hoping that would be enough for him. Because there was nothing else. Nothing at all inside my mind except a dim and disastrous whirling that said this didn't explain anything. This could never answer any of the bizarre things I'd seen and heard and felt since my arrival barely...I had to glance at a calendar on his kitchen wall then, amazed to discover I had been here only three days.

Three nights.

"I don't believe I've ever heard of it."

Gardner's gaze met mine across the short, yet somehow enormous space that separated us. Lifting his head a little, into an almost combative posture, he looked straight into my eyes. "I'm not surprised. Most people haven't. And that's the problem. That's where the ignorance comes from. Most of the people in this neighborhood are intelligent. Above average in intelligence. Good, solid working people who have let something they've never heard of and don't want to hear of turn their lives upside down. They've let it destroy their common sense and rationality."

I shook my head. "I still don't underst..."

"Porphyria," he said again, sounding more tired than before, more tired than ever. "It's a rare disease. They think. Or if it's not so rare, the diagnosis is. In

either case, extreme cases *are* rare."

"Extreme cases?" I ventured with my heart in my throat. "Like yours?"

Grim-eyed, Gardner nodded. "It's inherited. I've always had it. Since I was born. Though the worst of it..." Shrugging, he pulled his gaze away from mine, and it wandered. Seeming unable to fasten for very long upon any one object.

Nervous, increasingly worried, I watched it roam around the room. From tabletop to ceiling. Around to the door through which we'd entered from the kitchen, then back to the floor, then come to rest at last with morbid fascination upon the heavy drapes concealing shutters that held the world of daylight and life at bay. "My mother had porphyria," he said after a very long time. "So did my grandmother. And if I ever bothered to trace the history of their family, I'm pretty sure I'd find dozens of others affected to one degree or another."

"But what..."

"The symptoms are never the same with two people," he explained quietly. Carefully. "That's part of what makes the diagnosis so difficult. That's why most people who have the mildest cases probably don't even know the reason for their illnesses...their allergies, their intolerances, their odd sensitivities."

"So you're saying this is an allergic problem?" I was more confused than ever. And it showed in my voice.

"That's as good a way to explain it as any, I guess."

"But there's more. And in your case, it's..."

"Extreme." Sighing, Gardner lowered his gaze from the mesmerism of the sealed window to stare at his hands. Smiling a little, thinking hard, he remained silent for so long that I thought now that he'd made me want to know...made me want to hear more and hear all...I was doomed to hear nothing. But finally he lifted his head. Finally went on with his story. "Everyone has different symptoms," he said again. "Some of them can be...bizarre...to say the least. I've had some of mine all my life...anemia, insomnia, bouts of the most incredible, debilitating headaches that make my entire body hurt. But even so I was what you'd call 'normal' when I was younger. The symptoms came and went, and most of the time I was like any other kid. I went to school. Had friends. Played in the park. I was sick a lot, though. For the longest time my parents didn't know why." Pausing then, he frowned. "My *father* didn't know why, because my mother..." At that point his gaze did lose its focus. It seemed to see something that wasn't there. Something hideous, because the normally alabaster sheen of his face lost even that small amount of color. As if what he saw had the power to terrify him as nothing else ever could. "By the time I was nine or ten, my mother was in no condition to see what was happening to me. Or to recognize it. She was already...gone. For good. So there was only my father to..."

This time when he fell silent it was such a complete silence, such a lengthy one, that I knew I would have to say something. Knew that was the only way it

would ever be broken, the only way this terrible, ticking and thunderous waiting would ever be brought to an end.

"But something changed," I ventured, not as hesitantly as a moment or two before. "You got worse."

Slowly, Gardner's eyes focused. Slowly, awareness returned to his gaze. "One of the very few typical things about porphyria...almost the *only* thing you could call typical...is that it escalates at puberty. So when I was thirteen or fourteen, suddenly I couldn't tolerate the smell of oranges. Citrus of any kind. I couldn't even touch such things because they'd leave blisters on my skin."

"Acid?" I guessed.

"Extreme sensitivity to the acid. And there was garlic. Tomatoes. Onions. Roses. Other flowers, other smells and tastes. I couldn't tolerate them at all, and had to learn to avoid even the smallest contact with them."

"So you shut yourself inside. You quit going out, and..."

"No. Because there was my old man. There was his insistence that all my mother's problems, and she was so much worse than me, were made up. All in her head. There was his bizarre and inhuman notion that her madness was the cause, and not the..."

"Madness?" My hand came to my throat. It *leapt* to my throat, to clutch tight, then refuse to let go.

"That's one of the outcomes of porphyria. Wild-eyed, raving madness. That's what became of my

mother and her mother before her. The old man insisted she thought up her other problems out of that madness, and refused to believe it could be any other way. He refused to believe oranges or tomatoes made me sick. So he made me eat them. Made me wash my hands and my face and my...genitals in their juice. He couldn't explain the blistering or the pain, the way I'd collapse to the floor and be unable to get up for days. So he'd lock me in a completely lightless room. In the cellar. He'd force me to eat and lie in and smell enormous quantities of the things that made me sick."

"Gardner!" Shocked, stunned, my voice was little more than a whisper.

"He called it 'desensitizing'. Said he was 'saving me from being a neurotic'. Like my mother."

"Oh, Gardner, I..."

"Of course, in the end I escaped the madness. I'm thirty-nine now. My mother was eighteen when her mental problems started." Here, pausing, he ventured a small and crooked smile. "The old man always blamed her for not telling him her family was 'crazy as loons'. That's another of his sweet little phrases. So there she was, well on her way to insanity when he married her. There she was, speaking in strange voices, reverting to long periods where she made only animal sounds, spending hours tracing a crack along the wall or the floor, a crack that wasn't even there. And banging her head against the floor. Against the bottom stair, right out there in the hallway. Just banging, and banging, and banging, and nobody could get her to stop."

It was all I could do to not turn. Not look at that very stair.

"When I was small, before my father had her taken away and locked up, I've never even known where, I can remember her on her knees. With her hands twisted into little claws that she couldn't use for anything, babbling and shrieking. And barking. Always crying like she wanted to stop, but didn't know how. That was when she'd start to bang her forehead against that bottom step. She'd bang it until she was bloody, bang so hard you could hear it all over the house."

"Stop! Gardner, please..." I held up a shaking, palsied hand. "Just stop."

"I'm sorry. You're the first one since Thaddeus who ever..." Gardner sighed again. Heavily. "She was eighteen when that began. In one of her lucid moments she told me it happened at seventeen with her mother. So I think I'm safe now. I think that even with all the terrible things that have happened to my body and continue to happen, I've been lucky. I've escaped the worst of it. The..." His face paled again. To the exact shade of death. "But I'm still afraid. That one day I'll bark like she did. That I'll go on and on the way she did, until my throat is raw and my voice gone. And still have to keep going. She'd look at my father and me, Jean-Agnes. She'd stare at us, begging us with her eyes to do something. To help her. But..." He shuddered. "I made a vow to myself way back then. That if I ever start to bark, even once, I'll kill myself."

"Kill yourself?" Horrified, I drew back. I knew I did, when I saw the fleeting phantom of a smile flicker across his face.

"You don't believe in suicide."

"Most Catholics don't."

Certainly not the kind of devout, quite possibly deluded Catholic I'd been.

"You think I'll be damned for all eternity if I ever have to take the gun I bought and put it in my mouth the way I've planned."

Weakly, I nodded.

"But don't you see? I'm damned already, Jean-Agnes. I'm damned right now. Never to see daylight again, because that's one of the things I can't tolerate. Never to..." His voice thickened. Stopping, he swallowed hard. Shook himself a little, and finally reverted to a much earlier topic. As though he'd never let himself be lured or sidetracked away from it. "I managed to finish school. Managed to go to college, get my degree...though by that time my problems with light had begun. So I did most of my college work at night. Still...and then Thaddeus found out." Gardner's smile remained faint, but was more definite now. Was a little more than the ghost of a smile he'd flashed before. And it shone with genuine affection. "Thaddeus found out the roses bothered me. That I couldn't go anywhere near the garden." It was his turn to make a vague, pointing gesture. "The one out there with the marble. The one where we...that he designed especially for me. The one where he and I...Thaddeus had the roses dug up. As much as he

treasured them and doted on them, he had every one of them carted away and banished forever to the corner. Where they wouldn't be a threat to me. And..." He lowered his gaze again. Unexpectedly. Lowered it to the floor and then simply sat. Silent. Refusing to look at me again.

"What, Gardner? What is it?"

When he finally did look up, he appeared ancient. Exhausted. "I haven't been sure how you would take this, Jean-Agnes. You seem...I don't know...devout in some strange way I can't exactly explain."

"I was." I kept my gaze steady. Kept my voice as even and calm as it was possible to keep them. "But a lot of things have changed. *I've* changed. And my ideas about the world and my place in it have definitely changed."

He smiled. "Then it won't upset you to learn that Thaddeus and I were married?"

Married?

Oddly, it didn't.

I'd had almost no contact with such things. Except for the occasional, I'd thought then, isolated episodes at Divine Serenity. Because even with those intrusions we'd remained sheltered. The 'sinners' had been removed from our midst quickly, as soon as they were discovered. And the rest of us had been called upon to pray for the salvation of their souls. The salvation of those Mother claimed had given themselves over to sin of the most wicked kind.

"Married?" I asked finally.

Gardner nodded. "You have to understand that my

options were limited. My contacts with other people were limited. So eventually Thaddeus and I...he meant everything to me, Jean-Agnes. With his understanding, his willingness to overlook the things that were wrong with me, to work with my limitations and never, ever blame me for having them. So we were married. Out there. In the dark of midnight, in the garden that was mine because he made it for me. By the marble altar where he'd already taken me, already showed me that he wasn't afraid of me. Wasn't afraid the intimate contact I needed just like any young man needs it would contaminate him and curse him."

I watched him silently. With wide eyes and, I fervently hoped, an expression of understanding upon my face.

"It wasn't a legal marriage, of course. It couldn't be. But to us it was as real as if it were. We'd had a ceremony. Exchanged rings. Said the proper words, before a minister in a robe. And while it lasted, it was perfect. It was love, Jean-Agnes. I don't expect you to understand that or accept it..."

"But I do. I...know, Gardner. I didn't have much love either when I was small. My life was nothing like what you've described, but even so..." I shrugged. "My father didn't want a child. At all. He thought I would only take the attention away from him. So he kept me at home. Had me schooled there, kept me hidden there. And when I was thirteen or fourteen, he found a way to get rid of me. He found a place to send me, where I would never..."

There, I stopped.

Coming on the heels of so many other terrible revelations, I wasn't ready to mention Divine Serenity. Not yet. I would have to in time, would have to very soon. But for now the focus must be on Gardner. Must be on the rest of the story, on the things he still hadn't told me, the things I sensed would bring us around to the ugliness that had happened on his doorstep and in his quiet, sealed house the night before.

"None of this explains why those people...the neighbors...seem to believe you had something to do with the body in my rose garden," I said after a while. After I'd gotten hold of myself and gotten control of myself.

"It doesn't?" Gardner smiled, and this time it was a full smile. A wide one. A gleaming one, revealing the deadly points of fangs that hadn't been imagined. Hadn't been...

"Well, certainly it doesn't explain that," I said, my heart in my throat as I lifted a hand to point to his smile. "Or why you seclude yourself here. Why you never go out, why you never lead a normal life."

His smile vanished. "What exactly is normal?" he wondered aloud. "For me, this is. It's hard for me to understand people who live any other way. Who *can* live any other way."

"You're avoiding the issue."

He flashed his disturbing smile again. "So I am. People, Jean-Agnes, ignorant and mis-informed people like the cross-wavers last night, call porphyria

'the vampire's disease'. Because so many sufferers, like me, can't tolerate sunlight. Because if the sun touches my skin for even an instant, I blister and burn. Because if it touches me for more than an instant, I fall to the ground. In the worst pain imaginable. With my joints frozen and my skin destroyed. Because even the sight of sunlight, even from an odd angle and a protected place, threatens to destroy my eyesight. Because the sight of it starts headaches, and once they start they don't stop. For days. Weeks. Because a single encounter with the outside world in the daytime can make me an invalid, I go about my business in darkness. When other people sleep. It's the only time I can take my own car out for a drive. The only time I can visit an ATM or go to a grocery store. The only time..."

"Electric lights? They don't..."

He shrugged. "Some do. Most don't. I learn where the dangerous ones are, and learn to stay away. Learn to limit my existence a little more."

"And the...your..."

Laughing for the first time in memory, truly laughing out loud and with real amusement, Gardner lifted a hand to touch a finger to the point of a tooth. "These?"

I nodded.

"These were Thaddeus' wedding present to me."

Now I frowned.

"They were our little, private joke. On the world. On the ignorant fools who whispered about me and said incredible, vile and unbelievable things even

then. Another of the effects of porphyria is receding gums. It gives the appearance of having fangs. And I had that symptom. That appearance. So Thaddeus arranged for a little creative dentistry. He found someone who would do the work, and do it at night."

"And you're...okay...with that?"

He continued to touch the point of his tooth. "I have been. You might think I'm as crazy as my mother...probably will think it. But somehow this has lightened my life a little. It's seemed to put everything in perspective and make it a little more bearable. Because even after a lifetime of dealing with it, there are times...why, Jean-Agnes? Do they bother you?"

I shrugged. "They startle me sometimes. But I think I'm getting used to them."

"Good."

"And the skeleton in the rose arbor?" I wasn't about to let him evade me on that point again. Wasn't about to have it, and all its horrible implications shoved aside and into the background ever again. Because I had the feeling...the most portentous, ominous one...that this was going to be vitally important to both of us, in days and months and quite possibly years ahead. "How do the fools in the neighborhood connect you with that?"

"I think the skeleton you found is of a girl who disappeared about ten years ago. She was twelve or thirteen, and she was on her way home from school. To a house right across the street. She was coming home late, when it was already getting dark. A man at the corner, in a flower shop that used to be there,

waved at her as she walked past, and that was the last anyone saw of her. She just vanished. And there were rumors even then. Thaddeus was in the process of digging up his rose garden to move it for no reason anyone but the two of us understood. I'm sure that fueled the talk that something strange was going on over here. My old man had already punished me aplenty because people were talking about us. Because I'd taken to wearing hats and gloves and heavy coats even on the warmest afternoons. Because they'd all heard my mother shrieking and raving, and the rumors had never stopped after he had her carted away. I think that's the body you found. And it's more of the same old rumor. That Thaddeus or I, or both of us, was responsible."

I gasped. "But that's nonsense! That..."

"Is it?" When Gardner looked at me the way he did then, almost evilly, I could well imagine why someone not acquainted with him might think such a thing.

But to say it? Aloud?

"That still doesn't explain why..."

"Think about it, Jean-Agnes. Think as rationally as it's possible to think about something that has no rationality to it at all. Here are two men. Strange and reclusive ones. One is known to have physical characteristics that follow the bizarre stories Hollywood has created and nurtured. About creatures who roam the night in insatiable search of blood. Creatures who die when the sunlight touches them. And the other man by his own choice stays

inside. Avoids contact. Then add in a young girl who vanishes from the face of the earth on a cold winter evening. Who leaves behind no trace at all except a bloody smear on the snow right in front of her own home. Right across the street from the two strange men. It's not a big leap of faith to put the two together when you're hysterical, and frightened half out of your wits."

"But for all these years?" I shook my head. "Ten years? That's a long time, Gardner. That's way too long for people to..."

"True." His voice turned grave. His expression, too. "That memory might have faded away completely. If there hadn't been others in the years since."

"Others."

"Eight. Maybe ten over the years. More than half of them after the girl across the street went missing. Eight or ten bodies found in this neighborhood and the park behind this house. Bloody bodies. Mutilated, torn, savaged bodies of girls and young women. And one young man. Every one of them had been bitten. On the throat. Every one of them nearly drained of blood, and me living here, me with all the talk..." Gardner didn't go on this time.

I knew he couldn't.

"So they blame you."

It was his turn to nod.

"And you're innocent."

There could be no mistaking the sudden blaze I saw in his dark eyes.

A blaze of fury. Outrage. Indignance.

"Of course I am!" he almost shouted, sending me back in my seat as if he'd actually threatened to strike me. "I wear my fangs for my own amusement. Because Thaddeus thought they were funny in a bizarre way, and attractive. Because *I* like the way they look. But to use them?" Vehemently, he shook his head, and when he spoke again his voice was a little softer. A lot more reasonable. "I'm not a killer. Other than myself, if the worst should happen, I have no desire to kill. No desire to taste blood or wallow in it. If you want to know the truth, the sight of blood sickens me. It makes me want to puke."

"So, then." I chose my words carefully. Knowing they had to be chosen carefully, had to be chosen very deliberately to avoid any suggestion I might be one of the fools who believed him capable of such heinous crimes. "You've had a lot of time to think about it."

"More than a lot."

"Who do you think is responsible? Who do you think is the killer?"

His eyes took on a stranger look than ever. A haunted one. "Someone close by," he replied without even a show of hesitation. "Someone in the neighborhood. Someone in that mob last night, for all I know. Someone who watches what goes on over here, knows my disability, and sees it as the perfect chance to live out some very dark and bizarre, very terrifying fantasy of his own...her own. Someone who fuels the talk, and raises the emotions of the others to what you saw last night."

The preacher.

For some reason, my mind focused on the preacher from last night, the one who'd read from the Bible with such impassioned frenzy that I'd thought for a terrible second he was actually going to spit in my face when I refused to go along.

"Why don't they do something to catch him...her...then?"

"I'm not a cop." Again Gardner smiled. Again it was a full smile, a revealing one and an obviously genuine one. "But I don't think it's that easy. I've been questioned. Every time. You have to give them credit. They know there are no vampires here. They're smart enough and compassionate enough to understand the medical reports my doctors give them, smart enough to know that everything I tell them and the doctors tell them is true. If there's any salvation in my life...any small hope of salvation at all...that has to be it. But to catch the real killer when he's so careful to cover his tracks?" Sad-eyed, grim-faced, Gardner shook his head. "That's a whole different story. Isn't it?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

In the afternoon, I ventured out again.

I found myself fast becoming used to making my way around. To finding the correct bus and negotiating the one or two transfers necessary to get me to where I wanted to be...the big and modern public library next to downtown Denver. Just across the wide City Park from downtown's glittering spires.

I was mystified by the things Gardner had told me.

About the peculiar and unpredictable disease I'd never heard of.

And I meant to investigate. I felt I had to investigate, felt I owed it to him and to the fragile new relationship we'd been forging to learn whatever I could and as much as I could about the problems that plagued him.

So I could figure out what we were going to do about it?

I didn't want to go that far. Didn't want to make the kind of promises to myself that I would probably never be able to keep.

But we *had* become a 'we'. We had become as much one, in our own unique way, as Gardner and Thaddeus had joined their lives in the past. And that was reason enough for me to want at the very least to learn how to deal with all the implications of his illness.

As I imagined any truly thinking, any genuinely concerned person would want to do.

I didn't much relish the idea of pawing endlessly through some small mountain of dry and dusty, mostly incomprehensible medical texts and treatises that probably hadn't been opened in years, just to find there was nothing, really, to find about a condition as rare and unknown as Gardner had described. But if that was what it took...

I had no intention of backing away from it.

"Here you are!" Smiling brightly, as if she'd lived just for this moment, just to assist me in any way she could, a college-age library assistant dumped a heavy armload of books and magazines onto the table in front of me. "Everything I could locate on porphyria, except...you'll be glad to know some of this is fairly recent and up-to-date, too."

To my relief, a quick thumbing through and an even quicker glance showed none of the publications was even remotely the kind of hideous, tedious medical dissertation filled with impossibly technical words that I'd been dreading.

I sighed a little, in relief.

"There's more," my assistant-for-the-moment breathed, looking so crestfallen now that I worried

she might be about to launch into tears. "There's *lots* more, actually, but it's all that Doctor kind of stuff. And I didn't know...didn't think..."

"It's quite all right." I picked a magazine from the top of the slithering, disintegrating pile.

"I mean, you didn't look like the Doctor type. So I thought you might appreciate something a little more...*civilian*...oriented. But if you..." She was already turning. Already had the single-minded look I'd noticed before, when I'd first approached her at the research desk, a little timidly, and asked if she could help me locate the material I needed.

It was a look that had frightened me then. One that frightened me more now.

I already faced several solid hours of work, just to read and decipher even the 'civilian' stuff she'd put before me.

"No!" I cried. And when she turned to look back at me, openly confused and startled by such an outburst, and in a *library*, I softened my tone. "Honestly. I was getting a headache thinking about some of the words I was sure to find in the Doctor's books. Things with seventeen syllables and a dozen Greek suffixes that would take me years to figure out."

The assistant flashed me a smile. An uncertain one, maybe. But a smile just the same. "If you're sure..."

"I think you've brought me everything I need."

"Then you know where I am..."

I heard her words trail off. Knew, dimly and with the one very tiny part of my mind that automatically

remained vigilant even as I dove into the stack of books and magazines that she hesitated. But for the most part, I was lost already in the first article. One of the recent ones. One that appeared in a slick but well-written and, I suspected well known and respected health magazine that could very well be of interest to everyone. Including doctors.

I soon learned that what I'd thought, based upon the almost defeated undertone of Gardner's voice as he'd explained the terms of his life and conditions for his continued survival, was not entirely correct.

He'd given me the idea that hope was non-existent. That hope was nothing more than a far-fetched dream on a distant horizon created by an imaginative and not altogether realistic science-fiction writer. When nothing, it seemed, could have been so far from the truth.

It was probable, even highly likely, that Gardner had lived with his diagnosis for so long and expended so much thought and energy upon his fear of going mad that he'd lost sight of all the marvels that were happening every day...things that as recently as yesterday had belonged to the future of those very science-fiction writers.

Research.

It only stood to reason, didn't it?

Someone, somewhere, was always doing research on something. Conceivably, at any given moment someone somewhere was doing research on every single thing that could be researched...every single thing of any interest. And porphyria, as described

both by Gardner and all the books and articles that backed him up in every word, seemed to be one of the most interesting subjects around. Certainly the most unpredictable and the most varied.

Tugging out an ancient steno book I'd found in Thaddeus' desk, I began to take notes. Lots of notes, checking and double-checking as I went, rejecting those I didn't glean from more than one source.

Slowly, a list began to emerge.

A very special kist, painstakingly compiled, of important bits and pieces knowledge. Things that had been discovered. Things *I* was discovering about porphyrins, those mysterious chemicals which were present in every body, but which ran amuck in some. Which were the cause of such a vast and confusing array of symptoms.

I printed carefully. Making sure I made no mistakes, on a page I set aside and marked with a line of carefully drawn stars at the top and the bottom.

A page I intended to show Gardner just as soon as I could.

A page listing what little I understood of the more reasonable treatments that had emerged in the years since he'd accepted himself as he was and apparently given up thinking there might still be something he could do about it...something newer and better, something quite possibly just around the corner where it was almost visible. Almost available.

I worked as hard as I could, my teeth clenched and my hand cramping. Wanting to return to Gardner with a solid foundation in what I was reading and

learning. Wanting to share, in my mounting hope and excitement, some of what I'd gleaned found in page after page written by some of the most respected researchers and doctors. Subconsciously I wrote harder and faster as time wore on, all too aware of a sky that grew steadily dimmer and ever darker beyond the sweeping windowed walls of the room in which I worked.

Twilight was coming.

Twilight was nearly here...was very, very near.

And I couldn't forget there was danger out there. Very real danger, from a very real world in which I was only half-prepared to fend for myself, a woman alone. A woman defenseless, and never schooled in subterfuge or suspicion. A woman brought into adulthood in the simplistic innocence of a quiet world in which only the most altruistic and unassuming virtues existed...in which honesty, and faith, and respect had been expected of everyone.

A woman who faced, at the end of that two-transfer bus ride, a four block walk home. Alone. In a neighborhood where gruesome things had been known to happen, and recently.

Gathering my things together, I was dismayed by how dark the sky had become while I'd been lost in that other world. How stained with deep and ever deepening, gold-shot indigo purple hints of the night soon to come. The night Gardner would welcome and which someone else, some unseen and unknown predator, would welcome as well.

I got to my feet.

My notes would be enough.

They'd have to be enough. For my study during the long afternoon had had its effect. I'd been depressed by the things I'd read, the anecdotes and case studies of terribly afflicted people who were real, people who even now existed in spheres of existence so limited that Gardner's looked positively sweeping by comparison. People who lived day to day with a kind of restriction even I, smothered by the penances silences of Divine Serenity, could not truly comprehend.

I couldn't imagine myself coming back here for another day.

My notes would have to be enough.

At least they should be enough to make Gardner think. To get him to act, to see whatever doctors he surely saw as a routine part of his life. To get him to seek out the one or two names I'd gleaned from my articles and stories, the one or two who, remarkably, lived and conducted their practices right here in Denver. Where they had to be reachable in some way. Even to a man to whom daylight was forbidden and nighttime the only safe and tolerable form of existence.

Surely these notes, this small distillation of the vast quantities of material I'd studied, sometimes understood, and eventually had to set aside before I felt truly satisfied just so I could move on to the next bit that might hold out even more promise, would be all the ammunition I'd need for a plan that had been hatching in my brain for some time now.

A plan some might call far-fetched, some might call desperation, and some might call the purest form of sense.

Gathering up the books and slippery-covered magazines as best I could, I looked around for my assistant.

She'd gone.

Even her bright-red corduroy jacket, a delightful little thing that had had me for the first time in my life wanting to buy something like it for myself, was gone from the place where it had dangled almost carelessly from the back of her chair.

I hesitated.

Before I could take a single step another assistant, or maybe the librarian herself since this woman was considerably older than one with the delicious red jacket, appeared at my elbow.

"There's no need," she said kindly, yet firmly.

"But I..."

"Just leave them there. I'll be glad to put them away for you."

"But the mess..." The training of Divine Serenity and the image of Mother's prim face, both of them completely disapproving and intolerant of any kind of leaving traces of oneself behind, flared inside me. Flared so bright and so real that I began to shake in earnest. I began to shake until, able to do nothing else, I was forced to drop my unwieldy load back to the tabletop my old training insisted I leave as pristine as bare as if I'd never been there.

"It's no problem." Already the librarian was

gathering up the materials. Already she was sorting them into neat little stacks according to some mysterious system of organization of which I hadn't a clue. And smiling to herself. As if *she* had lived every moment of her life exclusively to clean up after the messy and the careless. So she could put away what others threw down without thought. "You'd better get a move on," she said when she noticed I was still standing there. "It's rush hour already, and it's starting to get dark. And the radio says it might even be getting ready to snow."

Snow?

Snow!

Bundled deep inside my coat that suddenly seemed much too thin, painfully thin and pathetically inadequate, I shivered to my very center as I hurried down the stairs toward the door.

And stepped outside, into rapidly gathering darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Thalidomide.”

I couldn't read Gardner's face when he said it. Certainly it didn't mirror the excitement that had boiled inside me ever since I'd closed my last magazine hours before.

“I read it in...” Consulting my pages upon pages upon pages of scrawled notes, I was unable to find the reference I wanted. “Well, actually, I read about it in several places. The important thing is that it's supposed to have all kinds of promising...”

“Come here.” Gardner reached for me. Reached determinedly, obviously intent upon re-kindling the passion we'd been generating almost every instant we spent together. Right from the beginning.

My body burned for his.

It ached and throbbed for the feeling of his, hard and silken as it pressed tight against mine.

Very soon I would give in to those very urges, Urges that would not be denied. Urges that had become such an intrinsic part of me, a part so overpowering in its urgency that I thought it must

light me up visibly from within...it must beam in scalding golden waves from my eyes. From my every aroused, newly aware pore.

For a long moment Gardner said nothing. Once again his old mask of aloof and iron-willed control was in place. It had slipped there easily and without effort as I'd talked, rambling on and on about the things I'd read and the things I'd thought I'd learned, until I was aware now more than ever just how impenetrable that mask could be.

Rising to his feet, he began to prowling the perimeter of the kitchen. Aimlessly. Or so it was meant to seem. But I sensed in him a danger of slipping. Of revealing something...many, many somethings...I felt certain he neither wanted nor intended to reveal. Not even now. Not even after all we'd been through together and all we'd been to each other...all we'd become to each other. Not even after all the furious chaos of twisting, terrible need he'd set to seething inside me with the simple act of his nearness,

I thought he owed it to me to be a little more forthcoming.

A little more honest, and a whole lot more considerate.

Shivering a little, unable to contain the impulse, I swiveled around in my chair. I turned myself almost completely around so that I could see him again even though he'd positioned himself behind me. Clearly wanting to remain out of my sight.

"Jean-Agnes..." He sounded resigned. Or maybe frustrated.

"I just thought you would be interested." My excitement was starting to wane. The first hot flush of elated discovery had long since faded to nothing and all the rest of it was following fast.

And I didn't want it to fade, curse his infernal soul!
I had found an answer.

Found hope.

For both of us.

Maybe it wasn't a brand-new answer, or a perfect one. But it was a possible one. And so what if it wasn't a perfect hope, either?

For me, at least, it was more than I'd had a few hours ago. More than I'd ever thought I'd have again once he'd finished telling his terrible story.

Somehow, maybe because I was naïve and inexperienced, or more likely because I was just terminally optimistic, I'd thought it would be a fresh hope for him, too. I'd certainly thought he would pay it more attention than he had...treating it all like a series of passing remarks in the midst of his never-ending drive for sex and gratification.

Damn it.

It was getting easier and easier for me to swear. That was something I'd never done before I'd come here and met up with Gardner. Not even in the privacy of my own thoughts.

I still found it shocking. Still, long-conditioned creature of habit that I was, I almost made the sign of the cross every time I found myself doing it. Almost uttered the automatic prayer for forgiveness that hadn't meant much of anything when I'd done it as a

matter of course at Divine Serenity, and meant even less now. But it felt good to think such things. To say them if they were what I meant. It felt really, really good...almost as good as the heated, shimmering sexuality that permeated every one of my encounters with Gardner.

Sexuality that, like the ability to curse, I'd discovered within myself in shocking quantities. At times disturbing quantities.

"Damn it!" I shouted without warning. And knew Gardner had noticed my strangely old-fashioned reticence and reluctance to use the language of the real, modern world. I knew it instantly when his perfectly shaped eyebrows lifted in open surprise.

"For the love of God," he replied. "I was beginning to think you couldn't possibly be real, Jean-Agnes. I was beginning to think you must be some kind of...of...I don't know. Some kind of *nun*, or something."

"I was."

I said it, then right away clapped a hand over my mouth.

Apparently I'd shed, as easily as I'd shed the concealing layers of the habit that had kept me from realizing so many truths about myself, many more things than just virginity and purity that hadn't really meant that much in the end.

Apparently I'd shed my hard-won ability to keep my thoughts to myself. And that was one thing I hadn't wanted to shed. Not after so many years of struggle. Not after so many reprimands from Mother,

and so many endured punishments. Not after I'd suffered the inevitable consequences of my outspokenness more times than I could ever count.

The ability to hold myself, my own individuality and personality, in at will was one of the few things, quite possibly the only thing, I'd learned at Divine Serenity that I'd decided had any practical use or value in my new life in the outside world.

And it was gone.

Just like that.

"You were what?" Gardner's eyes narrowed. He studied me intently, his feelings no longer controlled or hidden. "A *nun*?" And then, before I could answer or even think of a possible answer that might prevent the truth from coming out this way...so abruptly, and before I'd thought about how I wanted it to come out...he spoke again, his eyes flashing fresh and vivid interest. "It fits."

"It does?"

I wasn't sure what he meant by that.

"It most certainly does. Sometimes you act like you're even more out of touch with what goes on in the world than I am."

"I do?" Strangely, I felt hurt by that. Even if it was true.

"Sometimes." Interest still gleaming in his gaze, he came toward me.

I wished I could back away from him. Wished I could evade the touch I knew would start me to humming with the wildness I still hadn't completely accepted within myself. The touch that would

inevitably start me down the not so very long path to wanting all manner of things I couldn't allow myself to want until all of the rest of it had been cleared up. All of the business about the answers I'd found in the course of my research, and now the business about the time I'd spent at Divine Serenity as well.

But I was seated.

I was trapped, still in the place where I'd flung myself, too excited to remain standing an instant longer, when I'd first burst into Gardner's kitchen.

"Jean-Agnes." His hands dropped, as I'd known they would. His hands found my shoulders and lay there, searing and stunning in their warm heaviness. And at the same time his voice turned terribly, terribly gentle.

Heat rose within me.

As I'd known it would.

Tingling heat. Insufferable, demanding heat. Heat that wouldn't be thrown off or cast aside.

Not that I tried.

There were simply some parts of this new life, my body insisted, that were too fundamentally important to be thrown off or cast aside.

"You were a nun?"

"I don't want to talk about it." That was a pitifully poor response, but it was the only one I could come up with. Not that I thought Gardner would accept it. Not for the smallest fraction of a second.

"You can't just tell a man something like that and then expect to keep it to yourself. Not after..." His lips curved in a slow, delighted smile.

Once again I felt the untamed surging within.

Once again I felt it try to escape, try to take over, try to reduce me to...

"I'm not going to be reduced," I declared.

Gardner frowned. "What the hell are you..."

"I had something to tell you." Somehow, through some kind of epic form of willpower I'd never before found within myself, I managed to keep my voice level. Managed to keep it even, with only the tiniest bit of inflection. Only the very smallest bit, just enough to make it crystal clear how serious I was about this. "I wish you'd have the common decency and courtesy to listen, after I spent all afternoon..."

"About the thalidomide."

I nodded.

Sighing, Gardner released my shoulders. Moving a little heavily, like a man who'd only just become aware of the back-breaking burden life forced him to carry, he walked around the table. Back to the place where he'd been sitting when I burst in. Back to the same chair, where he sat down heavily. As if he no longer possessed enough strength to remain on his feet.

"I've had so many treatments over the years," he said quietly.

"But this..."

"Jean-Agnes, none of them worked. With all my chemical sensitivities, some of them actually did more harm than good. Some of them made me suffer more than my disease ever has. Surely you can understand me when I say..."

"But this one...I know thalidomide is a terrible thing. I know what it did in the past. How much damage it did when it was given to expectant mothers. But this is different! All of those articles said as long as you're not expecting and make certain you never get to be expect..."

"I've heard of the treatment." Gardner sighed again. He almost groaned. "In fact, my doctor has already suggested I try it. He seems to think..." Pausing, Gardner frowned. "Well, I'm not a chemist. I have no interest in anything to do with such things. He's tried to explain it, and apparently he's of the opinion that something to do with the chemical make-up of thalidomide and the chemical make-up of the things I don't tolerate are dissimilar enough that..."

"And you didn't *try* it?" I was almost shouting. Almost getting ready to curse again...really, honestly curse until my ears rang this time. "Why in heaven's name wouldn't you?"

"Would you?" He looked sad. Tired. Worn out, exhausted, depleted.

"Well, I'm a woman of child-bearing age..." A fact that had never before, in all the moments of my life, mattered in the slightest. Never mattered in any way, any shape, any form. "But it would be different for you. It might be the answer."

"I'm not going to be cured, Jean-Agnes. I'm never going to be cured."

I shook my head. "I never said I expected a cure. That would take a miracle, and frankly I've always been skeptical when people started spouting about

miracles and such. But I..."

"And you a nun!"

"Ex-nun. Dismissed nun. Incompetent and inadequate nun. Nun who didn't believe in keeping her silence and obeying orders. Nun who didn't believe in miracles, or subservience, or a whole slew of other things she was supposed to believe just because somebody *told* her to believe. No, Gardner. The whole thing about miracles is just a part of it. Just the tip of the iceberg. Just one of the reasons I'm *not* a nun any more."

His face slipped into one of the easy smiles, uncommon and so dazzling in all its slightly evil and decidedly vampiric charm that it stole my breath away. That it left me reeling and utterly defenseless. Utterly ready to capitulate at the breath of another word from him. No matter what that word might be.

"You're certainly not a nun any more," he agreed, his smile widening.

I felt myself flush. Furious, anxious, startled scarlet.

"Will you quit changing the subject, and at least consider the possibility of what I'm trying to..."

"If I say I'll consider it, will you tell me something?"

"What?"

I might not remember how to keep my unseemly and unwanted thoughts to myself, but I did know how to quit while I was ahead. If and when I put my mind to it. Like I put my mind to it right then.

"Did you wear a habit?"

"If you'd been looking out your window the evening I arrived, you'd know I did," I shot back. And immediately wanted to kick or otherwise brutalize myself for my insensitivity.

Of course he hadn't been looking out his window.

Any one of his windows.

The sun had been shining that afternoon.

Sun that would damage him with its slightest brush.

Could maybe kill him with its continued brush?

"Oh, Gardner. I'm so sor..."

"What did it look like?" His eyes fairly sparkled now. With avid, insatiable interest like I hadn't seen since the last time we'd...

"What did what look like?"

"Come on, Jean-Agnes. Stick with me here. What did your habit look like? The one you apparently still have for some inexplicable reason, probably hanging in your closet in one of Thaddeus' better guest rooms right this minute."

"I have it because I ran when Mother Superior told me I was no longer welcome and would have to leave. I have it because she gave me a bus ticket and the money Thaddeus' lawyer had sent, and I just...lost my head. I guess. I couldn't stand to see the look in the other Sisters' eyes. The pity, as if I'd just been doomed to some ghastly, inconceivable damnation. Or the knowing, in some of them, that I'd failed because I wasn't good enough. I just..."

"You were devastated."

I looked at him sharply. "How did you know?"

"I see a remnant of it in your face. Hear it in your voice. But now...what did it look like, Jean-Agnes? Tell me. In detail."

"What would you expect it to look like? It was hideous. A black thing that..."

"Long, like they used to wear in the olden days?"

"Long, all the way to the floor. Like they still wear in orders that have never left the olden days. Long, and downright...*medieval*."

"With a long veil that covered everything but a little bit of your face?" Gardner was looking positively radiant now.

That was a bizarre way to express it. But it was the only way.

He looked radiant, and sounded like a man who'd just stumbled into something more exciting than he could bear. And I felt suddenly certain, absolutely certain, that should he decide to stand up and reveal himself to me, I would see beneath the smooth fitting denim of his gray dress trousers the unmistakable ridge of his excitement. The ridge that, with just as much and just as absolute certainty, would be inside me very soon. Would be filling me, and satisfying me, and all too probably surprising me yet again with its potency and its...

Dimly, breath-held, I was aware that I'd begun to respond.

Hot and sultry moisture had begun to flow from the hidden flesh between my legs. Flesh I had never meant to arouse here and now. Flesh that, once aroused, could never be *unaroused* save any means

but one. Or possibly two.

No more than three.

"With layers and layers of veils," I answered in the shakiest voice imaginable...the shakiest I had ever heard from myself. "And the most horrific wimple you can imagine. A starched thing that fit tight around my face and throat so that sometimes I thought it was going to strangle me. Until sometimes I thought that was why they forced us to wear them. So that we would never be comfortable, never be human, never forget that we were..."

"Chaste," he finished for me, more breathless than ever.

Grimly, I nodded.

"I want to see you in it."

"What?" I was on my feet now at last. I was backing away, backing toward the door, so I could escape into the night and run. The way I'd only recently promised myself I wasn't going to run any more. For my life. For my new and cherished existence as a free woman, a real woman,

I shook my head. Vehemently. "I'm going to burn it," I declared. "The second I get home. I'm never going to put it on again, never going to feel the *heaviness* that comes with wearing it. The way it tries to smother me, and choke the life out of me. I'm never..."

"I want to fuck you in it."

Our eyes met across the center of a room that seemed almost to *smoke* with the import of what he'd just said.

"I want to take you out to the altar." His voice turned as smoky as the air between us. His eyes, too. "I want to lay you on the marble and arrange the layers of your nun's veils around you. I want to spread your legs wide and pull up your long and pure nun's skirt. I want to reveal what you thought you could hide beneath it. I want you to lie there with your legs spread. With your cunt revealed. I want to see you, and touch you, and taste you. I want you to lie very, very still for me, all dressed in your long and holy habit, and I want to do everything to you that I can possibly do. I want to do unspeakable things that will make you a very different kind of nun."

I shivered. "You already have."

"I want to make you my slave-nun."

I shivered again. Harder.

He already had.

"I want to fuck you while you wear your pure and chaste habit," he declared.

And when our eyes met again across the room and the tabletop that separated us, I knew the truth.

I was going to let him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

We were to meet at midnight.
In the night-drenched garden with its waiting marble altar.

In the end, though, I wasn't able to dress as Gardner wanted. As he'd fantasized.

I hadn't been able to bear the thought of covering myself and draping myself...hadn't thought my thrumming and needy flesh would tolerate being separated from the silken sensuality of his touches and his glances by so many horrible, impenetrable layers.

I thought I might even die should I try...die in my heart, and my mind, and especially in my tormented, troubled body. If I was ever again forced, if even for a few fleeting instants, to endure existence in which I was not free to feel night air stroking cool fingers through my unbound hair. In which I was denied the sheer, fire-riddled pleasure of Gardner's fingertips smoothing relief into parched and thirsty skin.

So I made a few modifications.

Using a pair of dull and dusty scissors, I snipped

and snipped at the concealing black gown that formed the basis of the nun's habit I would never wear in its original form again. I cut until the long sleeves vanished. Until my shoulders and back lay bare, and only the smallest part of the high and unforgiving neckline remained. I cut until what had been a habit was transformed somehow into a plain, but to my way of thinking alluring, evening dress.

And I refused even to consider the wimple and cowl. Instead I separated one long layer of pale-bordered veil, banded that way to signify that I had never spoken my final vows, never attained the status of full Sisterhood that had once meant so much to me.

Sheer and flowing, the fabric took on an oddly bronzed gleam when seen that way, as a single layer instead of as one of multiples upon multiples. Gathered at the throat with a scrap of dusty gray ribbon, it became my headdress. My flowing, floating cape. Draped loosely over my hair, billowing behind me in the breeze I generated when I finally slipped from my house a scant few minutes before the assigned hour of our meeting, it allowed the night air in just as I'd wished. Just as I'd been loath to forbid. It allowed the night air to touch and caress, allowed the autumnal chill of it to slip easily across bared flesh disturbed by the sudden, ratcheting thunder of my pulse beneath.

Silently, I slipped along, my completely black gown and improvised cloak blending seamlessly with darkness that pressed around me.

Silently I glided, my feet bare and barely aware of

the rough wood of the steps or gravel and grass in the upper part of my yard.

I made my way forward. Intent only upon my goal. Aware in only the vaguest way of anything not involved with that goal...the altar in the secret place that belonged to the two of us...Gardner and I...now.

Somewhere an owl murmured his faint and hesitant question. Then he subsided to silence as if the question had been satisfactorily answered. As if my right to float here, murmuring along the pathway, had been established beyond doubt.

The sound of my own pulse leapt higher and higher with every step I took. It leapt full-blown into my ears, loud enough to shake the night awake.

In response the night seemed to stop in its tracks.

The night fell strangely silent.

Expectantly silent.

I might have been floating through deserted countryside a thousand miles from anywhere, so silent did the night become and so remote the city that lurked mere blocks from here.

Down marble steps I fluttered, aware that for a single instant the darkness I wore must be highly visible to anyone hidden and watching...a fleeting, inky shadow against gleaming, milk-pale perfection.

Gardner was there.

Somewhere in the darkness before me. Darkness relieved only by the barely-perceived, soaring shapes of the pale marble columns with which my great-uncle had seen fit to adorn his peculiar, blossomless garden. Gardner waited for me. Unseen. Hidden by

the depth of shadows he craved and upon which he depended for his very existence.

He waited, his pulse pounding as urgently as mine, his body calling out to mine with hidden and unheard music that nevertheless acted like a siren song upon my fluttering heart.

Siren song that drew me forward. Onward. Deeper into ink-thick darkness.

I could feel his pulse there.

Could feel *him*.

"Gard..."

Why was I so breathless?

Was it because I knew what he had planned for me? Because he had laid out in such graphic detail only hours before?

Was it because I was excited by the prospect?

Or maybe it was because the night had turned to silken fluid around me.

The sensation of it, flowing across bare arms and shoulders, touching the suggestion of a revealed bosom, was novel. Unexpected. So alluring that it set me to humming in other ways. New ways, similar to the ways Gardner had instigated in me before, yet ways grown intolerably intense this time. Ferally intense, magnificently intense, magnificently aroused.

Was my breathlessness due to...dare it be due to...

Yes!

The truth came suddenly. With a hot and luscious gushing between my thighs. A whisper at first, then a torrent of all the essence I had thought to save for the moment, spread-eagled upon the altar, when Gardner

would claim it for his own. When I would surrender it without qualm, surrender it willingly and eagerly.

I wanted him.

Wholly, fully, ravenously. Wanted him, wanted all of him. Wanted him to do to me the things he'd described. So very many things upon the carefully placed block of marble at the bottom of our midnight garden, the heavy mass of it only just visible to me in the next step I took. Visible as a pale blur through darkness and a sheer drifting of autumn mist. Visible only barely, at the very farthest fringe of vision.

I hesitated at the bottom of the marble stairs. Hesitated on the verge of the lower terrace of grass that had once been the heart of Great-uncle Thaddeus' rose garden.

"Gardner?"

There.

That was better.

That was still breathless, incredibly breathless. A mere exhalation. But at least it was audible. A long and thin quaver with just enough power and force to reach beyond the very small sphere of night warmed by my presence. By the rising, surging urgency of my presence.

In response to my whisper, I heard the softest of rustlings. Close at hand, yet not close at all. Coming from everywhere, it seemed at the same time to come from nowhere, a slightly stealthy sound that conjured afresh in my mind the most bizarre images. Many that should be disturbing, Many that should set me to quaking and quavering in terror.

None of them did.

Advancing slowly into the center of the wide swath of grass that seemed incredibly vast, almost as vast as the night itself, my skirts swirling deliciously around legs and all else I had left bare beneath, I strode into the center of the night. Strode with inexplicable and yet unstoppable certainty, as if I knew the exact place I sought. As if I must find it quickly, before...

What?

Stopping suddenly in a place surrounded, or so it seemed to my dazed and no longer accurate senses, by the pale phalanx of columns, I raised my arms.

Here!

I could feel *them* here.

Both of them.

Good. And evil.

Was vampirism real? Did it exist anywhere in its truest form, its most physical and needful form, other than in the minds of the imaginative few?

I could not say.

I knew only, in that moment when I spun around to take in the faint glimmer of pale columns lighting the night around me that there was a seduction in the very idea...in the concept as a way of life.

There was seduction in the darkness. In the secrecy and secret rituals performed in hidden places in the darkness.

There was perceived good. And perceived evil. And if I looked hard enough and long enough, I should be able to *see* them. Able, perhaps, if I was

lucky enough and persistent enough, to touch them as well, with hands I lifted slowly. As if caught in someone's...*something's*...magical trance.

I knew I would be able to hold good and evil. Would be able to weight them one against the other, and...

Suddenly my waking dream came alive.

Suddenly, as if the intensity of my own imagining caused them to be, I truly could. See both.

Good, on the one side. The goodness and decency that was Gardner McCord. The goodness and decency and desire to demonstrate those qualities to the very people who hurt him by refusing to believe such qualities could ever exist in one such as him.

Good in my left hand.

Good in the hand legend held to be a direct route to my heart.

Good, a glowing and luminescent ball of imagined light in the hand I lifted a little higher automatically. As if to use it to illuminate all of existence with its faint, born-of-mist-and-mind blue radiance.

And in the right hand, evil.

In the dominant hand, ever-present and ever ready to consume should there be any lack of vigilance and any hesitation to believe in the power of the good, I held equally radiant, just as luminescent and perfect, the counterpoint to good.

Evil.

Good, and evil.

They both existed.

Were both a part of everything. Everyone.

Even the neighbors, even that small and intense crowd of chanting, cross-wielding fools who should have known better, even that mob who'd pitted themselves as the good against the perceived and lurking evil of the bad...my lovely and beloved Gardner.

Even *they* were made up of both.

Even they possessed some modicum of the evil they'd assigned exclusively to Gardner and, through my association with him, to me.

Enough of the evil to balance, as my hands naturally and inexorably sought no matter what I did or how I tried to change the relative importance of the shimmering globes of light my mind had conjured, the side they'd insisted they favored.

Good and evil.

For a moment longer I stood bemused, staring at my hands, believing I saw the embodiment of those two opposing forces there.

For barely a moment longer, my heart threatening to explode at any moment within my chest, so powerful had its needful throbbing become, I stood very, very still in the center of the garden between the marble columns. And for that part of a moment, as tendrils and runners of rising mist wove shimmering mesh around me, I held my glimmers of light aloft. My glimmers that in reality existed nowhere but inside my thoughts. Nowhere but in my disturbing desire to see them for myself and hold them. To prove to myself that both existed and both could be understood.

Then the lights faded.

Then they were gone. Never really there at all.

And still I moved not a muscle.

Made not a sound.

Because I could not. Move. Because I could scarcely breathe.

From somewhere the owl asked his eternal question again, the softly haunting sound snapping me from my reverie.

Turning, I began to run.

Not toward the house. Not toward empty rooms and echoing corners that, for all their loneliness still meant safety and security and surety.

I ran in the other direction.

Toward the place where I would meet my love.

Gardner had said he would come to me in the garden.

He had said he would come at midnight. And that must surely be the time now.

I'd never owned a watch. Never needed one. In the ways of those truly unconcerned with time, who'd never allowed the concept to become a part of their lives, I had developed my own instinctual ways of judging it, and its passage. I had developed a deeply internalized consciousness of the rhythms that went on around me. The rhythms of the seasons, the days, the nights, the stars and moon and sleeping earth beneath. Rhythms most people never noticed, but which had dominated me for as long as I could remember.

Midnight.

It was time.

Up ahead, waiting as it had through all the years when I'd thought and prayed and struggled to find the meaning of my existence elsewhere, waiting as if it had been ordained for me from the instant of my conception inside my mother's womb, the gently curving bulk of the white marble altar loomed.

I ran to it.

Embraced it.

Fell prostrate before it for the space of a heartbeat, my face pressed tight to the fecund and fertile spice of the earth upon which I'd moments before stood.

I whispered a secret prayer. An urgent one.

Gardner had said he would come to me.

At midnight.

I prayed it would be true.

And then, even as the midnight rustling happened again, even as I saw his pale form materialize from deeper darkness behind one of the marble columns, even as I heard the whisper of his movement across moistened grass that revealed no real whisper at all, I mounted the block of white marble.

Laying back, I spread my legs just as he'd said he wanted them spread. I lifted my arms above my head and stretched myself into a long and swooping curve of black atop cold stone.

I lifted my legs.

Bent them at the knees and propped them beside me so that when the skirts of my gown were lifted, all of me would be revealed. All of me would be offered.

I stretched again, turned my head so I could watch the slow approach of the figure, dark-haired,

alabaster-skinned, clad in nothing but the mists of the night, approach slowly. I watched as he stopped beside my altar, his dear and well-known face hidden by the shadow that was indeed the very essence of him.

I watched in silence. Waited in silence.

Gardner mounted to the altar. Gardner knelt over me. Knelt between my uplifted thighs and then I waited again, scarcely breathing, as he fumbled at the black drift of my remodeled habit.

I waited while he lifted it. Carefully. While he folded it back atop my abdomen as if it was the holiest of relics and he its chosen keeper. And then, my breath held even tighter, I waited some more.

Gardner bent over me

The warm succulence of his mouth closed over the spread flesh between my thighs. His mouth closed firmly over that flesh, and the first long, electrifying streamer of awakened passion curled through me as his tongue made its way inside.

As his tongue parted velvet folds and entered me with a single swift, steaming and scalding stroke of pure moisture. With a softness that seduced me.

And I cried out.

In exultation, and victory at all I had won.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A native of a small town not far from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Evelyn Starr always had a passion for the glamorous, the exotic, the sensuous. And she's always been willing to travel the world in search of them. Among her favorite places are Boldt's Castle in the Thousand Islands, Tasmania, Australia's tropical Queensland, and all the nooks and crannies of the Rocky Mountains she now calls home.

Like her wanderlust, Evelyn's fascination with words and stories began at an early age. She remembers being able to read and write before she started school, and by the time she'd finished first grade, she was writing her own little one-page stories. Following graduation from high school, she left her small-town home and hasn't looked back. She majored in journalism, romance, and adventure, and eventually married her college sweetheart, who remains the most romantic, and the most adventurous, hero of them all.