

A woman with long, wavy brown hair, wearing a red and black dress, stands in a graveyard at night. She is pointing her right hand towards a large, glowing full moon. To her left is a large, black Celtic cross. The background is dark with some trees and a starry sky.

Evelyn
Starr

Haunted
Hearts

HAUNTED HEARTS

BY

EVELYN STARR

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ISBN: 1-55410-735-0

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Coverart by Martine Jardin

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PROLOGUE

I had been frightened many times in my life. In the weeks and months following my precipitous arrival at Rosewalk, the mansion that ultimately became my beloved home and treasured center, in the rough and uncertain times when I was meeting and growing accustomed to the man who even more completely became my lover, I knew near-constant uncertainty and a tumult of conflicting emotions. Not the least of which had been fear. And even now, even after the long and instructive winter just past, in which I knew I'd grown, blossomed, become more of the modern woman than I'd ever expected to be, the uncertainty still all too frequently bloomed. At times it seized me fast with its open and relentless quivering fear that all too often turned into unreasoning terror.

But all of that, any of it, was utterly unlike the sudden harsh and jagged burst of anxiety, with no possible name *save* terror, that overcame me on the moonlit night when I looked down from the pitch-

black cave of Rosewalk's second floor sitting room to the wide swath of moonlit lawn below.

What I saw there was nothing that should have inspired such sudden and soul-stealing frenzies of fear.

I saw a figure...a *girl*.

Thin and small, even seen as she was in featureless silhouette from some stray source of light at her back, she wore a dark little skirt bunched slightly to one side. Her blouse was pale, a milk-pale blur that caught the strange light of the half-moon and became in its almost supernatural gleam the only remarkable feature of her appearance.

The girl held something in her hands. Something vague, indistinguishable and yet oddly familiar. A box maybe. Or schoolbooks. Something to go along with the impression she gave, even at that distance and in the trembling and uncertain light, of extreme youth.

On the surface, there seemed nothing to be afraid of. Though in my case that didn't really matter. I never needed a concrete reason for my burgeoning of fear. It was enough that I had found something out of place in the world I still insisted upon trying to order strictly for myself. It was more than enough that I had spotted something unfamiliar to me.

Suspicion rose.

The girl seemed harmless. But what was she doing there, in my half-moonlit yard on an early June evening?

What did she want there, and why had she gone to the trouble to find some unknown gap in the fence I'd thought so sturdy and impenetrable? Or perhaps in one of the distant hedges that surrounded the far-off rose garden that had become infamous since the events of the previous autumn?

It was one of the trials of my... our... existence that neighborhood children often did sneak in, especially on moonlit evenings when the darkness wasn't complete and all-absorbing. When it gave at least the illusion there was safety there, because there was illumination.

The children came most often on dares. They arrived trembling and shaken, egged on by less-bold peers who wanted nothing to do with all the horrors of my garden, yet wanted to know everything. They came because they were hapless, or ignorant. Or quite possibly they were victims of bullies who threatened even greater retribution than what they perceived would be metered out for interlopers on my property.

I had tried, and so had Gardner, to counteract the somewhat gruesome reputation our joined places had gained through the years...a reputation that had only been fueled and bolstered by the

discovery I'd made the October before. We had done our best, and still the garden was the focus of much morbid curiosity. As was the house next door to Rosewalk. The one where Gardner and I now lived our joined lives as husband and wife, and where we could so much more conveniently be whispered about.

So I looked down from my darkened height.

And there she was. A small slip of a thing, she stood motionless in a place where even the bravest of the brave didn't usually venture, almost directly below the window from which I watched in silence with foreboding flooding my heart, invisible in the darkness.

I stood several feet back from the outward bulge of the room's oversized bay window. I stood where the shadows that afforded Gardner so much comfort now lay thickest. I stood in a place and at an angle from which I knew no one could see me from the lawn below. Not even if he or she possessed remarkably keen eyes.

And yet the girl seemed to gaze directly up at me. She seemed somehow to *see* me.

For the longest of moments I could not move. I had caught my breath at some past and forgotten moment, and now I held it because I had forgotten how to release it. And quite probably because I feared the girl who seemed to see through pitch-black shadow and concealment might be able to

hear with equal acumen as well.

Then I found motion.

Struggling against the constriction of the slowest slow motion, a handicap that surely was a product only of my own overactive and never entirely reliable mind, I retreated deeper into my shadows. Backing carefully away from the window, I kept my gaze on the small figure that did not move. I kept it there until the last possible instant, when it became necessary to look away. To see the phone and pick up the receiver. To dial with fumbling hands the familiar number on the old-fashioned instrument I had never replaced because it had belonged to Great-Uncle Thaddeus and because, as always, I mistrusted change.

The first humming ring at the other end sounded a million miles distant instead of just next door. And then, before Gardner picked up at that end, I turned my gaze back to the moon-silvered lawn.

The girl was gone.

And in her wake she left terror, as even I was unaccustomed to feel terror.

CHAPTER ONE

“My name is Muriel.” The woman looked up at me from the bottom of Rosewalk’s front steps, juggling her small suitcase awkwardly from hand to hand as if its inconsequential weight was almost more than she could bear. She seemed unsure of herself. Unaware that it would be perfectly permissible to set the thing down and free herself of her burden.

Her greeting was low, her voice small and hesitant, and I barely heard it through the soft whicker of sprinklers whirling on my narrow strip of street-facing lawn. Indeed, I might never have noticed her at all had I not been facing the street as I swept the porch. Had I not by purest chance looked up in the exact moment the Yellow Cab pulled to a stop at the curb to allow her to climb out.

Finally she managed to free one hand from the case’s handle. And she immediately held it out to

me.

I eyed the hand anxiously. This was one of the small and 'normal' things which I had been unable to accustom myself to over the course of my first long winter of freedom...this way of greeting strangers casually, of not only inviting the touch of unfamiliar palms to one's own but of actually *expecting* such touches and familiarity to be returned.

I did not move.

Behind the woman, the sprinklers shut off with a small and somehow ominous snap.

And still I looked at the hand she offered. I looked at her, on my guard now and not knowing why.

She did not look like my typical clientele. She seemed to have nothing in common with the urban antique collectors I dealt with on a day-to-day basis. Her coat was camel hair, obviously good once but shabby now, and at least twenty years out of style, even to my unpracticed eye. Showing the effects of too-long wear, the coat looked like something a woman just in from the country would save because it was the one good and sturdy piece of clothing she'd ever been able to afford, and it must be worn only on the infrequent occasions when she visited town. Her shoes were the same. Solid and brown, they were heavy but work-worn oxfords of the very kind I'd

been obliged to wear during my years of immurement at Divine Serenity.

"Muriel Janssen," the woman said, and the hand she extended wavered slightly.

It would be rude not to acknowledge her.

Almost reluctantly, I set my broom aside. I was in no shape to deal with complete strangers...change. Today of all days, nervous and anxious after a difficult night, I wanted only the peace of my shop and my regular patrons. And perhaps a newcomer or two who would only want to browse and examine without ever bothering me or making any but the most rudimentary and essential contact. Very suddenly, my head pounded. It throbbed in a terrible way, and I wanted only to run. To hide.

Filled with a great and unsettling certainty that her presence here was bound to lead only to trouble of the most vague and yet most thoroughly alarming sort, I approached the edge of my porch, the top of my steps. And still did not lift my hand to meet hers.

"I've come about my sister."

"Janssen." I shook my head. "I'm sorry. Should I know you?" Deep inside, the bad feeling blossomed. What had previously been a small and uneasy gnawing at the pit of my stomach became another of those unreasoning, full-blown terrors with which I feared I would forever be cursed.

I did not want to know this sad-faced woman in her shabby coat.

In fact, I wanted to run from her. I wanted to hide. But she'd already come up my steps. She stood on the next riser to the top, just slightly below me, with her case dangling all but forgotten from the hand she held down at her side. Taking firm hold of one of my hands with her other, she seemed loath to release it.

"Your sister," I repeated.

"Doris Burton was my sister."

For half a heartbeat, perhaps a little longer, the name failed to register. It was, after all, just another name. One I'd heard seldom enough, even in the days immediately after its owner had become very tragically familiar to me as a person. And then I was sick. In the midst of its next half-beat, my heart sank all the way to the floor, leaden with dread. As did my stomach.

I had known the business with my...now mine and Gardner's...rose garden wasn't finished.

Instinct had long whispered I was in for more, so it only seemed logical...inevitable...that the unfinished parts of that whole sad and sorrowful mess should turn up again after their long wait. Eager and ready to fester into life at the very first opportunity.

"I see." As unobtrusively as I knew how, I tried to pull away from her. It seemed vital that I put

some distance between us.

But Muriel didn't let me go.

"Doris Burton," I murmured, hoping with all my heart that my voice didn't sound as flat and lifeless to Muriel as it did to me.

"I understand you were the one who found her body."

Muriel dropped her suitcase then, and it bounced and bounded unnoticed, rolling back to the bottom of the steps as she raised the hand that had held it. And quick as a flash, before I could move to react or retreat, before I could try again to retrieve my already captured hand from the very real danger this quiet countrywoman represented, she pressed her newly freed hand on top of mine, so that I found mine encompassed in a sick and dreadful kind of warmth. And I shivered.

Had the early-summer air gone rank and frigid around me?

Did it carry with it a whiff of the grave?

Or was that only my imagination working overtime again the way Gardner always tried to warn it did? Was that only imagination trying to devil me with things that weren't real, had never been real?

In that moment I wished for him. I needed desperately the reassurance of his no-nonsense outlook upon life, death, and all things associated with either. And I especially needed his

reassurance about the rose garden, where even now he would not venture for reasons strictly of his own...reasons wholly unrelated to what had happened to place Doris Burton there. Though it would be entirely understandable if he decided to avoid the place strictly because of his own role in those gruesome events.

But Gardner wasn't there. Out of long habit and despite the remarkable progress he'd made in the treatment of his illness that made isolation no longer vital, he was sealed away in the other house. He had taken up his usual refuge against daylight in the place we now shared as man and wife. Gardner would be at work, seated at his drawing board behind sealed and curtained windows.

I could run to him, of course. If I really tried, I could tear myself free of Muriel's determined grip and rush straight to him. Except that movement defied me. My feet felt rooted deep into Rosewalk's half-swept porch, frozen fast in the exact moment I'd spotted Muriel climbing out of her taxi and watched her approach along the sidewalk. And no matter how hard I tried, I seemed destined to remain that way. Rooted and immobile. Unable to return to any semblance of normalcy.

"Will you take me?" She began to pump my trapped hand. As if, sensing my hesitance, she

thought the pumping would help to convince me.

Take her? Where?

Still I didn't move. Didn't ask, since it was equally impossible for me to ask.

Tears appeared in Muriel's eyes. "Will you show me where you found my Doris?" she asked sadly, and then followed that with the one softly uttered, heartfelt word I could no more resist or refuse than I could resist my own innate, desperate need to seek shelter in Gardner's arms at the end of each and every day. "Please?"

CHAPTER TWO

The rose garden...what I still persisted in calling the 'new' rose garden...did not look the same as it had during the terrible days of the previous autumn. I could only believe it did not look the same because at heart it *was* not the same. Relieved of its terrible secret, with the imminent death and golden, rattling dryness of autumn and winter left far behind, it was a new place. A place transformed as much by the lifting of the weight of its secret as by the new young gardener I'd hired to care for its long neglected stalks and canes. Rejuvenated, the garden had become what Great-Uncle Thaddeus had no doubt envisioned...vibrant with life and color, virulent with blossom, a-swarm with the soft buzzing of bees making their way from one burgeoning scarlet or yellow or pink head to the next. But the moment I stepped down the rest of my front steps, my vivid violet skirts swirling uneasily around me, the moment I first steered Muriel toward the

narrow gate in the new section of iron fence that edged the sidewalk, the foreboding returned.

Instantly. Tenfold.

I shouldn't be doing this. I had no business doing this, because this was trouble, asking to be unleashed.

It wasn't necessary to remind myself that the police had never found Doris Burton's killer. Every day since the discovery I'd lived with the thought that he or she had almost certainly killed before. And quite probably since. The police believed it. And my heart, faithful follower that it always was, shared that unsettling notion that a killer lurked probably very close by. That a sick and possibly dangerous individual remained in the midst of a tightly-knit neighborhood, well aware that his or her small victim had been found. Aware and planning. Plotting.

I warned myself sternly. And as I'd already known it would not, the warning did no good. Muriel's need, the *ache* I felt inside her, was too great and too overpowering. It was the desperation of a woman left without answers for the greater part of her life, and it was a kind of desperation I knew all too well from my own very different past.

I shouldn't be doing this. But I would. Even if I'd prayed to have my peace for a little longer. Even if I'd hoped with all the depth of my heart for nothing more than serenity in my new life and

new world. Even if I'd wanted only to be given time, for Gardner and I to find our footing. For the both of us to acclimate ourselves to the world as it now stood...the one I still found so incredibly frantic most of the time, so innately confusing in its color and its sheer, unbridled variety. The one he found equally inexplicable, with the new and not-yet-embraced freedom he had been granted.

"I never believed we would find her." Muriel sounded breathless as we entered the garden.

Ever more reluctant, I kept my pace deliberately slow.

She seemed to want me to say something. She seemed to need me to respond in some way, though for the life of me I could think of nothing at all to say. Nothing that would be appropriate.

'I didn't expect to find her'?

That sounded callous. Crude. Besides, that should be obvious to anyone with half an intelligence.

'I never knew she existed before I found her'?

That was infinitely worse. As if Doris had never mattered.

So we proceeded in silence.

Graveled walks stretched before us, carefully raked now, free of overgrowth. They glittered in brightening sunlight, awash with beads and droplets of spray from the sprinklers, the grass at either side sparkling emerald-jade-peridot with

remnants of the same spray. And the roses...

They were now as I'd so naively expected and dreamed they would be when I'd first arrived at this place I'd seen only one time before...only in the height of winter, when everything had lain secret and hidden beneath a thick mantling of powder-white Colorado snow.

This morning my treasured roses nodded in profusion. Scarlet and yellow, they tumbled in wild abandon over fences. And the more prim-and-proper whites and deep-pink old-fashioned Thaddeus had doted upon stood upright in their beds, a little more remote. A little disdainful of all the wild and unbridled rush of activity near the fences. And of course there were the modern hues as well, some of them added by Thaddeus in the last years of his life, but many more of them my own. My special hues, in combinations and shaded multiples of combinations, some of them bordering on the truly dreamlike and fantastic. All of them holding magnificent court in gleaming swaths of sunlight and ethereally evaporating moisture.

Muriel gasped aloud. "It's..." She seemed enchanted. Unable to go on. And that did not surprise me.

I, who made it a point to walk and work in these surroundings for at least a small part of each day, felt my own soft awakening of enchantment

every time I stepped into their midst. Though it was a dark enchantment now.

It had been ever since the moment of Muriel's arrival.

Rounding the final bend, we reached the oldest part of the garden...the part Thaddeus had moved from its much closer proximity to the house in other days. We reached the distant and somnolent corner where previously no fence had existed. Where no barrier had stood except boxwood, as ragged with neglect as the suffering roses...a barrier all too easily breached by those intent upon their secret criminality, as had been so tragically revealed in days not so long past. We reached the farthest reaches of my property. Close to the neighboring side street.

There a wide greensward lay between hedges and retreating flowering beds. The ancient pergola still stood to one side, with the bench at its end...the damaged marble one where in the lost autumn I'd sought refuge from my own uncertainties and difficulties, only to find a whole new set of uncertainties mingled with fresh and unrelenting terror.

There stood, too, the little statue of a nun with her head bowed, her serene gaze fixed tranquilly upon the patch of ground at her feet.

That particular, always surprisingly small patch of ground, had lain bare and lifeless the afternoon

when I'd lingered on the bench. But now it was hidden beneath a close-packed thicket of ferns my young gardener somehow, miraculously, had coaxed to flourish in the dry Denver climate.

"A statue!" Muriel seemed attracted to the spot at once. By instinct, no doubt. Dropping my hand at last, she rushed toward it. "You put up a statue for her!"

We hadn't.

But I had no heart to tell her the statue had stood there for years, since long before my own arrival at Rosewalk, still stinging from the pain and humiliation of my rejection at Divine Serenity. The statue had stood long before the discovery of the fragile, pathetic bones it had guarded and protected...had quite possibly stood there before the small body that became those bones was left there.

Muriel's gratitude shone so brightly. It beamed from her plain and tired face, almost revealing to me the young woman she had been once, the vibrant and vital girl from the time when her sister had simply vanished.

I couldn't destroy that happiness. So I simply stood, as still as the little stone nun, as unaccustomed as she to the sin and artifice of lying, and hoped Muriel would not pursue the issue.

"I'm so glad." She advanced more slowly now.

With one hand out, fingers stretched straight and already seeking the feel of cool stone rather than thin and warming air. "I prayed and prayed," she murmured, seeming once again thoroughly enchanted. "Starting that very night, when Doris didn't come home from school. When my parents..." Her voice choked. Broke. "When they tried to blame me, because...I prayed every day. Always hoping Doris would turn up somewhere. Always hoping it was just some kind of horrible misunderstanding. That she'd come back to us one day, all grown up and a stranger. But alive. Our Doris, all the same."

Very suddenly, Muriel knelt. She clasped her hands before her in the attitude of prayer. And it was all I could do to resist my own automatic, ingrained and never-to-be-completely-shaken compulsion to join her.

I had said my prayers for Doris Burton long ago. I had shed my tears for her and asked for endless blessings upon her gentle soul. I had asked more times than I could count for the capture and punishment of her killer, always kneeling, and always working my rosary endlessly between my fingers.

I saw no reason to rejoin the battle now.

Not with little Doris resting at whatever sort of peace might finally have been granted her, in the McCord family plot at Riverside Cemetery.

It seemed Muriel knelt there forever, not praying after all but stroking her fingers gently through the thick-packed ferns surrounding the base of the little statue. It seemed so, but I knew it hadn't been forever, for the glittering droplets of sprinkler dew were not yet completely dried and vanished when Muriel hauled herself laboriously back to her feet and turned to face me.

Her hands scrubbed briskly, one against the other.

My own hands were knotted together before me, I realized. They were knotted tightly, and I quickly released them. One from the other.

"So..." Muriel once again looked unsure of herself.

"So." I, too, felt unsure.

"What happens now?"

Still not free to gesture and show my emotions, not even after the recently ended winter I'd spent almost exclusively in the company of Gardner's dedicated, heated tutelage, I sternly repressed a desire to shrug.

What did she mean?

What did she want from me?

I couldn't ask.

"What happens now?" She asked again, and with the question I gave voice to the one and only possibly appropriate answer when it took form inside my heart.

"You'll want to know where your sister's... where Doris is buried, of course."

Muriel nodded once, slightly, as self-possession crept visibly back into her.

"We didn't know the denomination," I murmured as I turned to escort her back to the house...back to Rosewalk. "My husband Gardner and I. No one we asked could remember the denomination. If they'd ever known. So we..."

"Gardner." I heard it in Muriel's voice. The old ring of familiarity tinged with terror and quite possibly loathing. Those tones remained common even now. Even long after the truth had come out, even long after the accusations and suspicions should have been laid to rest, just like bones I'd found in my rose garden. I heard them so clearly, even after all the improvements in my beloved Gardner's condition had returned him very nearly to unremarkable normalcy.

"There used to be a boy..." There Muriel stopped. There, she gestured toward the rearing bulk of Rosewalk just ahead. Toward, as I knew only too well, the more Spartan mansion that lay beyond and out of sight...the mansion that was my home.

"That would be my husband," I confirmed, lifting my chin. "Gardner McCord. He's lived in that house all his life."

"Such a *strange* boy."

We regained my front steps, and I reclaimed my discarded broom.

"The neighbors used to say so many very odd things about him. Like..."

"I'm all too aware of the things our neighbors have to say about Gardner," I replied stiffly.

Outright rudeness, or even the most vague appearance of it, did not come easily to me. Like most normal human responses to life in an open society, rudeness had been browbeaten and intimidated out of me at an early age. To the extent that I feared I should never have normal ability to display it or deal with it. Except where Gardner was concerned.

In the very short time...less than a year...since I had first encountered him in the darkness of the night he'd required for his survival, I had become a virtual tiger where he was concerned. As a result, my tone dripped frost. All the frost I could muster.

Instantly Muriel looked contrite. "Now I've gone and done it," she mourned. "You've been nothing but kind to me. And then I had to go and...well, let me just say I never believed a half of what my parents' friends had to say. My sister and I both. We never believed a word of all that foolishness about vam..."

"Why don't you come inside?" I suggested quickly, urging her toward the front steps. "I can

assure you Gardner and I had a priest for Doris's burial. We made sure it was done properly. I have all the information right inside. In my desk."

Muriel made it as far as the front door. But once there she hesitated again. She hesitated very, very noticeably in the instant she should step across the threshold. "This used to be Thaddeus Teagarden's house," she murmured, glancing around. "Now, there *was* a very peculiar man. Even to a child." Another glance then, a much more wary one. "Did you know him?"

"Thaddeus was my great-uncle." I didn't bristle nearly as much at the slur, no matter how slight or implied, to Uncle Thaddeus. After all, Muriel was right about him. She was dead on the money, as the people around me, the ones I even now persisted in regarding as people from the 'outside', seemed so fond of saying.

Uncle Thaddeus had indeed been peculiar.

"Have you never been inside the house before?" Stopping, I propped the heavy front door open and lifted the little free-standing "welcome" sign into place just outside. *Open for business*. Though I fervently hoped no one would come immediately. I wanted no one to disturb us...me...until we had our chance to finish with whatever Muriel still wanted. Until I had my chance to pull myself together.

"Mum would have had a fit if either of us girls

ever came near this place." She continued to glance around, all but falling over herself in her attempts to see. Bent forward a little at the waist, her eyes avid with curiosity, she peered into rooms at either side of the front hall, all the while taking the greatest, most obvious care not to set a foot in any of them. As if this was still blatantly forbidden, unconscionably off-limits territory. "And I can assure you we never did. We did whatever we could to avoid even passing by on this side of the street. Which is why it seemed so odd at the time, even young as I was, when everyone tried to insist Thaddeus..." Here Muriel stopped at last. Straightening from her painfully grotesque posture, she glanced at me now. Quickly, as if she'd only just realized who I was. As if she'd only now decided I might be offended.

"We know my great-uncle had nothing to do with what happened to Doris." *There!* I didn't sound so stiff or forbidding. Not nearly as stiff and forbidding as Mother had always sounded.

And my husband had no part in it, either. With a chill, I realized I still had no idea where Muriel stood on the matter of Gardner...what she thought of him. And I had to resist temptation that begged...that practically *ordered*...me to blurt out those words. After all, I reasoned to myself, I'd be much wiser not to bring the subject of Gardner up at all. Just in case Muriel should turn out to be one

of those rare and refreshing people who *hadn't* harbored any ridiculously ill-conceived and lurid notions about him.

"The information about your sister is in my office." I motioned her toward the back of the house, to the tiny room that had once been a pantry. It remained virtually unchanged even now, a multi-cabineted and superbly shelved room big enough for a small desk, two chairs, a wastebasket, and all the storage I would ever need right there close at hand.

"You inherited this house?" Muriel kept on straining and peering. And she didn't follow. Not a step farther.

"That's right." *If she wasn't going to move, then neither was I.* I turned back to her, turned to watch her. "Last year. When Thaddeus died."

"And now you've changed it into an antiques shop. And do you get a lot of business in this..." She looked around again. Dubiously. "Here?"

I nodded, and then we seemed to be at a standstill. Both physically and conversationally. We seemed to have reached one of those uncomfortable, ticking impasses I dreaded, with Muriel staring at me so long and with such studied intensity that I began to search for a reasonable means of escape. Any means, as long as it meant I wouldn't appear to be blatantly and deliberately seeking escape.

And then I did one of the most wholeheartedly unadvised things I'd done in my life.

"Where are you staying?" I asked.

Muriel made a sort of feeble, flapping motion with her hands. "I got off the bus and came straight here. I didn't even think about finding a place to stay, I was that anxious. But there must be someplace over to town. I'm sure they're not all booked up this early in the..."

"We've got a couple of rooms over the garage," I blurted and, seeing the light of sudden, hopeful acceptance spring into Muriel's eyes, knew there was no way I'd ever be able to reclaim the words. "A little apartment that was supposed to be a maid's quarters. But..."

Thaddeus had never been willing to risk having a maid. Or any other kind of day-to-day servant who might stumble across his secret. As if he would have been able to hire a maid in the first place, and convince her to live in a place that even then had been the seat and center of so much rampant, morbid controversy.

"It's clean," I offered, making a feeble and slightly hopeless gesture of my own. "I use it sometimes as..."

Sanctuary.

I didn't...couldn't...tell Muriel I used it as a place to become solitary and introspective whenever the world got to be too much for me.

Because that was what had been drilled into me throughout so terribly much of my life, and that was truly the only way I could sometimes...oft times...cope with the world. Because part of me would always need a place for retreat. A place for my own private reflections.

"I go there to read sometimes," I finished, knowing how inadequate and defensive my explanation sounded.

"Then I shouldn't..." Muriel hesitated. Her eager light dimmed for a second. But when I started to shake my head in argument, it flared again. Brighter, higher, in her eyes and her face. "I'd be happy to stay there," she murmured with a small nod.

Silently I handed her the key. And the slip of paper with the information about Doris' burial place. Then just as silently I beckoned her to follow me. And all the while I wondered, in the depth of a heart that felt suddenly, irreconcilably hollow, how in the world I was going to explain what I had just done to Gardner.

CHAPTER THREE

"I don't know how the whole thing came about." Barely started on my tale, I was on the verge of tears already.

Gardner, on the other hand, had not lost even the slightest bit of his cool. If anything, he looked downright amused. "It's not exactly a tragedy, Jean-Agnes."

"But I never meant to offer..."

"It was a nice thing to do. A *neighborly* thing. The kind of thing this street could stand a little more of." Clearly, in his mind it was already a closed subject. In his mind he'd already, obviously, moved on to other considerations...different and far more important considerations.

Dropping the pencil and square with which he'd been working...he claimed often to be one of the few remaining architects in the world who eschewed total dependence upon computers and actually preferred, infinitely preferred, to do the

work himself...he shoved his chair back from his drawing board.

"Time for a break." His dark eyes smoldered suddenly, in a way I knew well. His eyes said we'd be making our way to his special and secret garden right this moment if it were dead of night instead of cusp of day. And visiting the garden by daylight was something we didn't do. Not unless, even now, even after he'd been granted his conditional release from the gloom of his ages-old prison, the day rose overcast and dull instead of gleaming-bright. Like today.

We wouldn't go to the garden for hours to come. But it would wait. Just as it had patiently waited for years and years past. For the still-preferred hours of darkness. Concealment. *Secrets*.

Gardner's eyes said there were other places, though. And they would be just as acceptable.

That was one of the lessons he'd striven to teach me. It was one I'd learned well, though I'd had to struggle mightily to learn it. Had to struggle with everything I possessed to make up, with his help, for my abysmally slow start in life and the woeful inadequacies I suffered as a result.

Shivering, I couldn't make up my mind if this would be the time to draw nearer to him, or the time to shy away, as skittish and nervous as I'd been the very first time he'd looked at me with that smoky, sensual light in his eyes. So I stayed

where I was. Knowing it would be no use to shy if he really wanted me, no use to try to deny my own desire to become what Gardner needed and required me to be.

"What did you have in mind?" I worked to relax. To keep my voice calm and accept as normal my own existence and sexuality...to become a woman of the present, modern century and not some other that had long since passed. I worked, and I succeeded. Partially. At least enough that I could sound almost natural when I posed my question.

Laughing softly, Gardner extended an arm. He pulled me forward gently first and then more roughly, exerting increasingly relentless pressure until I sat upon the knee he offered.

I was ready for today's instruction. I waited for it, eagerly as well as apprehensively. And as I'd already known he wouldn't, Gardner gave me no answer.

There was no need for one, in any case. Because I knew what he was thinking already. I felt the heated weight of each and every one of his thoughts almost before they formed.

He was thinking of the garden, too. He was remembering, no doubt, the things we'd done there in the past, to each other and with each other. And just as surely, he was looking ahead to things yet to come...soon to come.

A small, chilly sliver of delight wormed its way through my flesh. Cold and yet heated beyond comprehension at the same time, it was exactly the kind of visceral thrill I'd been misguided enough in my previous innocence to try to deny.

Smiling, laughing again more softly and twice as seductively, Gardner ran the tips of his fingers...just the barest, most inflammatory, tracing tips...along the inside of my arm. He stroked from wrist to elbow, and I shivered again, still not used to having flesh, much of any flesh, left bare. Even the previous fall, after my ignominious release from Divine Serenity, I had been incapable, physically as well as psychologically, of baring more than the minimum flesh necessary to avoid drawing stares and undue comment in the world 'outside'. Then had come winter, an unusually cold one, according to Gardner. And with it the blessed, reassuring necessity to conceal myself completely again, in order not to freeze.

But of course winter passed, and June arrived. June, with its returning, rising warmth. And the return to my struggle with the concept of bared arms, revealed legs, free-floating hair. My struggle with all the things Gardner insisted I embrace wholeheartedly.

He laughed again when he saw me shiver. And the sound of it, diabolically muted and

deliberately delivered as it was, set me to shivering again. Harder.

"I think it's time we make time for a little exploration, Jean-Agnes."

Unable to reply in any intelligible way, I lowered my gaze.

I had tried to forswear sex once, too.

Oh, how hard I had tried! But with Gardner, in the presence or even the distant proximity of Gardner, forswearance was never feasible. He was simply too...too...

Even now, I had difficulty forming words to describe what I felt when he touched me.

"What would you like to learn today, Jean-Agnes?" Again his fingertips traced with demonic deliberation the most tender line of flesh, beginning at the pulse point of my wrist and ending somewhere in the vicinity of the equally throbbing point inside my elbow.

"Is there anything left for me *to* learn?" My face took to flaming. Visibly, I knew, in the frustrating way it had of turning to unmistakably brilliant flame whenever my too finely honed insecurities were aroused.

I didn't look at him.

"There's a lot left for you to learn." His stroking finger deserted my arm. Arcing upward, it found and touched the underside of my chin. And touching, brushing, burning, it lifted.

I wanted to close my eyes. I felt certain I tried. But I was already caught by his gaze...by the darkly powerful magnetism I found glittering there. And caught by the strangely mesmeric quality they possessed, I could not physically or emotionally turn away from their power.

Enchantment.

That was the power Gardner wielded so mercilessly. Such an unusual quality in eyes of such dark color, such shadowed substance. And I thought again, as I'd so often thought in the early moments of my enchanted helplessness, that that must be one of the reasons...quite possibly the biggest reason...why so many bizarre stories had been circulated about him. His magnetism, the way he exercised it almost without intent had to be part of the explanation for why he struck such overweening fear into the hearts and minds of neighbors who otherwise seemed sane, intelligent, and normal.

Seemed.

And that was the key word, wasn't it? That was the key truth? That with all their tales of monstrous acts and beliefs in impossibly ancient superstitions, the neighbors themselves had always been the ones with the problem. It was they who'd never been able to accept and co-exist with Gardner, not the other way around. It was they who couldn't seem to understand or accept

even now, when his admittedly unusual course of treatment was working and he'd achieved his new state of existence. Instead, if anything, his recent release from the prison of porphyria, from the prison of shuttered windows and heavy curtains designed to keep even the tiniest ray of living sunlight at bay, had only deepened the superstition. Had only increased the wary distance from which those around us regarded him. And me as well, through the simple fact of association. Even now...more than ever now...the old tremors of hatred and loathing lingered, hidden from all but the most perceptive of views and yet dangerously, precipitously near the surface.

Yes. His dark and glittering, dark and smoldering gaze was most decidedly to blame. To one...*anyone*...caught in its magnetic power, there was no escape. And I was caught now. I was wrapped up in the sheer delight of the one small point of contact, where his fingertip sizzled against the underside of my chin.

I wanted more. *Craved* more.

Laughing again in the way only Gardner could, with the silken-smoky overtones of promise inherent in every trembling note of his laughter, he lifted his free hand to the front of my blouse.

"This is better," he murmured, working already at the single fastening tied off-center just above my hip.

I blushed. I *felt* myself blush. Because I knew what he meant.

He'd complained right from the start that my wardrobe, such as it had been then, was dull. In both color and style. He'd declared it unimaginative, un-youthful. And even after he understood why, even once he well knew my background and the way it had made any emphasis on appearance or the worldly indulgence of individuality a matter of grievous sin and promised damnation, still he had kept after me. Still he had whittled away, day after day and hour after hour at my safe blacks and grays, my pathetic duns...my basic clothing that covered completely while doing nothing at all by way of adornment.

This blouse was new. This one was silk, strawberry-pink, sprinkled liberally with what for me was a radical print...a tiny repetition of ferny flowers and curlicues in deepest, darkest red against that mouth-watering background. The blouse was Gardner's choice, as were most of the garments I possessed. And it almost...*almost*...did not carry with it the weight of revealed-flesh sin in need of stern retribution and unflagging punishment.

"I like this." Finished with the tie at the side, having released it in one deft and dexterous tug, Gardner now turned to the hidden button that

held the edges firmly together.

Released, the blouse fell away.

It revealed what I wore beneath.

The bra Gardner had bought for me on one of his very first forays into the daylight world he'd previously denied. It was one of many he'd bought since, at mind-numbing cost, claiming I had no taste in lingerie and no business choosing it for myself.

The bra was part of a set. And he required me to wear those matching sets as rigorously as Mother had required concealing robes and heavy veils.

This bra was red. Deeply red, viscerally red, stiff with satin and heavily crusted lace, hard-boned and not at all comfortable. My breasts, lifted and mounded above its rigorous support, lay revealed almost in their entirety. Only the smallest, teasing lip of lace barely covered nipples that maintained constant arousal and constant sensitivity beneath its especially designed touch.

I was always moist between my legs because of that brushing. Always in a state of agitated readiness. As Gardner demanded I be.

And now, exposed...

I shivered.

Shuddered.

"You forgot again," he reproved, slipping the sherbet-soft silk of my blouse...also expensive

enough to send the mind spinning...back from my shoulders. And down, to drift in a weightless and effortless wisp to the floor in front of his chair.

"I was only coming inside for a minute," I explained around another shiver. "I have to get back to the shop. It's supposed to be open now, and I need to..."

"Nevertheless. You know the rules, Jean-Agnes. *My rules.*"

Helpless, hopeless, I shivered again.

"The shop will wait," he went on. Inspecting with a small smile the garments he'd chosen for me to wear today, he set me back on my feet, not entirely willing now that my legs started to shake and tremble, to reduce to the consistency of softest, most pliant and pliable rubber. Hooking his fingers into the waistband of my skirt, he shoved it to the floor. And bade me with silent pressure exerted upon my hips to step out of it. To kick it to the side.

This was what I had forgotten. That I was required to remove my outer clothing whenever I entered the house...whenever I joined him behind the blinds and curtains that covered every window and opening, even if only for the briefest moment or two.

I was required...permitted...to wear only these scant sets he ordered especially for me. These perfectly matched bits of nothing that

incorporated into their insubstantial size so many exotic forms of torture that I couldn't count them, even as they afforded nothing at all in the way of privacy or modesty. Nothing I could by any stretch of imagination consider concealment.

It was part of my training, he said.

It was part and parcel of what I would become for him.

"Stand before me," he commanded.

Long accustomed to obedience in all things at all times, I instantly obeyed. Standing before him in my carefully created garments, I held my hands at my sides. I kept my feet slightly parted, my gaze focused entirely upon his face and his captivating eyes. As he required.

"You must be punished," he reached for me. "The strap needs to be fastened."

I tried not to wince.

Wincing was not allowed.

Only acceptance was permissible. Only complete and unquestioning obedience would be permitted. The tightening was inevitable, and there would be no argument. No discussion. If Gardner decreed the garments I wore were fitted too loosely to my body, they would be tightened until he was satisfied. And then I would thank him for what he'd done. No matter how painful it became. No matter how unbearable.

"Please do, Sir," I responded in the way he had

taught me to respond and expected me to respond. "I was careless. I ask for your punishment."

If the bra I wore, that wired and stout creation that allowed no freedom, no ease, was uncomfortable, its matching piece could only be called the work of fiends. It could only be called the definition of diabolical.

The shorts...for they were shorts indeed, fitted things that reached to my knees and encased all of my hips and thighs below their extremely low-cut waist...were tight already. Almost brutally tight, fashioned like the bra of lace and satin, and crisscrossed inside with tormenting bands of some reinforced stuff that felt like steel. Bands and supports that in and of themselves restricted movement grievously. Making each bend and stretch of my body in the pursuit of my daily activities a trial. The shorts, completely open between my legs so that my thighs, my most intimate regions, and much of my backside lay ruthlessly exposed, boasted one extra, one added and unquestionably diabolical feature.

There, between my legs, dangled the infamous strap.

Such a device was present on each set of my singularly unusual lingerie, both the present abbreviated model and the even more restrictive version that constrained and constricted all the

way to my ankles. It was thick, formed of layer upon layer of folded satin, reinforced within by some unknown, deadly and merciless substance.

I had been permitted to move this morning with the strap hanging loose from the front of my shorts. At times such as these, the strap was merely a nuisance. It was merely a dangling irritant that constantly tickled and teased the skin of my legs, forever reminding me of its presence, constantly warning me of its inherent... painful... potential. But at other times, most of the time, when it was fastened, the strap was sheer agony.

"Turn around, Jean-Agnes."

I did as I was told. Arms still at my sides, with Gardner's fingertips trailing teasingly across the satin-constricted round of my hip, I still did not dare allow myself a grimace.

"Hold on to the chair."

Once again, I obeyed. I took up a firm stance with legs parted, clutching the top of the indicated chair with white-knuckled fingers, and dragged in a deep and silent breath. To steady myself. Ready myself.

Gardner let his fingertips trail fondly across my private flesh for one more instant as he passed the deadly thing between my legs. He trailed them slowly, allowing the moment of pleasure to build and build, allowing tingling flesh to sensitize and moisten before he pulled the band of reinforced

satin up high and tight against it.

The jerk of it was quick. And the pain of it, as Gardner made an adjustment only he would deem necessary, as he pulled it tighter and higher into my flesh, was intense. As if I would soon be torn asunder.

I gasped involuntarily, knowing the sound, any sound, would reward me only with additional tightening.

Just as I expected, Gardner pulled again, until the strap cut deep between the ridges of my private flesh. Laughing softly, he pulled one last time before he set to work fastening the thing through one, then another and still another small ring fastened to the back of my shorts. He took the greatest care to fasten it in a way that it would not come loose, no matter what I did or how I moved.

The heated suffering of the strap settling itself into intimate flesh around my secret opening was meant to last much longer than the single instant the adjustment required.

Much, much longer.

"Now, then." Sounding pleased, Gardner patted my backside. He grasped my hips with both hands and turned me to face him, eliciting from me an immediate shriek of purest, most immeasurable agony when his fingertips found their resting place upon the twin ridges of flesh forced to bulge outward by the taut device that

passed between.

I shrieked mindlessly when he *stroked* my suffering flesh.

CHAPTER FOUR

“What do you say to me, Jean-Agnes?”
His fingers would give me no release. Allow me no relief.

“Thank you,” I breathed in my most reverent tone, still staggered by the pain of what he had done to me. “Thank you Sir, for my...”

“Punishment,” he murmured, finishing for me. And he stroked again at the distended, struggling ridges of flesh between my legs, in a way that very nearly sent me to my knees. “You still have so very much to learn, Jean-Agnes. So much of punishment to understand and to learn. As you have to learn about pleasure.”

I cried out softly beneath the torture of those wandering fingertips.

So much to learn?

I doubted that.

Especially about the sort of punishment at which he was so expert and which he took such inordinate delight in inflicting.

Sexual punishment.

As he was so fond of pointing out, the division between punishment and absolute pleasure was very thin. Very, very subtle, so that one might easily pass from one state to the other without entirely realizing the shift had taken place. In his patience and his persistence, his encouragement and his support, he had helped me to grow. And to learn.

In pain, he taught, lay ultimate pleasure. And in punishment, supreme knowledge. And without knowing one, it was impossible to know, impossible to understand or to appreciate, the other. All of which he now seemed determined to prove.

"You enjoy this." His voice became a low and silken murmur, almost a purr of self-satisfied delight. And his fingers continued their maddening circling, stroking, petting along the agonizingly strained ridges of me.

I wanted to collapse.

My knees trembled violently. And the distended ridges, already stressed and very sensitized by the very nearness of him and the wanton desire such nearness never failed to conjure, already driven to the brink of sensual exhaustion and unconditional surrender, screamed for release that was only their due. They screamed at me to drop flat, to lift my knees and spread them

so that his touching could continue unabated. So that his touching could, in fact, *escalate*.

I wanted to collapse.

I did not dare.

Not until Gardner made it clear the time was right. Not until he gave his permission for me to give in, to react in any way I wanted.

"P...please," I whispered.

This time it was not an automatic and conditioned response to what Gardner said or did. This heartfelt plea was not offered out of any sense of duty or obedience. This time it was more than a plea. It was a true beseeching. A true plea, for what my body needed.

"You like your torture." Gardner's smile turned slow. Almost lazy.

"Yes, Sir."

Another required... conditioned... response as his fingers continued their deadly flicking-fondling.

"You like it at least as much as I enjoy giving it to you."

"Yes. S...Sir."

I shook from head to foot. From the inside out, so violently that a new worry appeared. That I might suddenly black out. That I might lose all consciousness, all sensibility.

That I might miss some terrible, terribly delightful stimulation.

Trembling, I was near to complete collapse as

Gardner continued...again intensified...his attentions. The constant misting of the flesh he'd already aggravated with the heavy pressure of the strap he'd fastened, then tightened, turned in another instant to a long and heated trickle. Only to immediately transform into a scalding torrent that coursed in burning waves across my thighs. Onto his playing fingers, and onto the taut lace of my girdle.

"You live for your torture, Jean-Agnes."

"Yes. S...Sir."

He stroked harder.

And I screamed. I emptied my lungs in a doomed attempt to achieve the only possible release allowed me.

Gardner permitted me to scream.

He *preferred* for me to scream.

In some perverse and not entirely unpleasant way, the sound of my screams satisfied him. They gave him a kind of release of his own, one that would ultimately affect me when it drew us closer, unstoppably closer, to the instant when the pain *did* turn to pleasure.

"You want more, Jean-Agnes. Do you not?"

"Y...yes, Sir!" Screaming, crying, still not permitted to move and now not *wanting* to move, with tears coursing down the slopes of my cheeks because I had not been given permission to lift a hand to brush them away, I could endure no

more. "Please, Sir. P...please let me..."

He moved. Suddenly. In the way he had, of moving with lightning speed, shocking speed. "You may," he growled, and lifted quickly. Shoving me backward, he placed me atop his drawing table.

The crash of my landing shattered the stillness. I felt the table shift, shudder, strain, and I wondered why it did not collapse.

With one hand, Gardner supported me upon the angled surface and the slick litter of papers from whatever project he'd been working on when I'd interrupted him. Cupping his hand around the desperate flesh between my legs, he smiled when it continued to steam and stream its rivulets of pure *need* over his fingers and between them.

He cupped me, supported me. With one hand. And reached for the decanter with the other.

"Nooooo?" I pleaded abjectly.

There were several decanters. Not all of them were deep-green like the one he lifted from the low table next to the work table. Not all of them flashed deadly, dreaded and absolutely desired emerald. Some were red, some blue. And some were amber, crystal, amethyst. They waited in every conceivable place. In every conceivable room of our house.

I didn't know where Gardner found them, or if they had been here all along. I thought they might

have been secret treasures hidden away in one of the myriad cupboards with which Gardner's father had fitted our house in the time long before the house had become ours. And then again, sometimes I thought certainly they had been recently acquired. But for sure I didn't know where he acquired the contents, or even exactly what those contents were. I knew only that the rainbow decanters had appeared mysteriously one afternoon, shortly after our marriage, their deadly glitter and marvelous secrets enticing me to escalating depravity from the first.

When I asked, whenever I pressed as forcefully as I could ever press about anything, trying to learn where he obtained the intoxicating contents of decanters kept tightly locked beneath their specially-designed stoppers, he would only smile vaguely. And respond just as vaguely, murmuring strange words about rare and valuable elixirs, about great cost and great difficulty, and even hinted danger and illegality from some nameless 'Slavic country'.

All of those vagaries and innuendoes conjured up dark and foreboding, vaguely disturbing images that only made the decanters and their elixir that much more appetizing. That much more darkly enticing, because of my increasing perception that whatever the decanters contained, it was expressly forbidden.

It was a growing *addiction*.

I knew so little.

I knew I had been, or was perhaps yet being enslaved by what waited within. And I knew that as much as I did not want what this decanter or any of the decanters contained, still I craved the draught that would soon be mine. The one Gardner would pour for me.

The liquor was deadly green. And I would not be allowed to refuse.

Already my overtaxed body thrummed wildly, singing unnaturally in anticipation of the heated exhilaration that would soon be coursing through me. My body sang wantonly, demanding the effect the draught would have upon me...the mindless surrender to some sort of magical dream-state from which I should never want to recover. A state that would fade all reality to dim gray, leaving me at the center of an ever-tightening circle in which I would find myself subject to the wildest and most pronounced of sexual, sensual, sinful fantasies, even without Gardner's touch.

And when, inevitably, he added his touch...

"No." I tried to turn my face away.

I was determined to be resolute this time. I was determined not to give in, not to allow myself to succumb to what I did not understand. What I feared, because I could not control the effect it had

upon me.

Smiling very slightly, Gardner continued what he had started.

He unlocked the specially-fitted chased silver top of the decanter that could not be opened except with the single handmade and tiny silver key he wore on a glittering chain around his throat.

He opened the lock. Released the heavy metal catch.

"No." I whispered my protest this time. Still mesmerized by the movement of his hands, the magical movement as he dealt skillfully with the object of my utter enchantment, I stared unblinking. Unable to turn my gaze away even when I tried.

I licked my lips.

My belly burned. Ravenous. My veins ached from deep inside, each and every one of them a heavy and hot strain upon the flesh surrounding them. Each and every one generated its own separate and unique sensation, and each and every one of those heaped additional, untold tortures upon my already overloaded body and mind.

"No," I begged. Licking parched, starving lips again.

Gardner released the tiny emerald-colored glass that lay beneath the silver fitting at the top of my

decanter.

My decanter.

Mine!

Licking my lips repeatedly, in an almost obsessive frenzy, I tried once more. One last time.

"No. Gardner..."

Paying me no attention, he fitted a tiny slotted spoon carefully over the rim of the glass with long and sensually agile fingers.

Now my more intimate regions began to throb. Still enduring the torture of the strap that in another moment, ten at the very most, would metamorphose into pleasure most extreme as the liquor found its way into me, my flesh began to thunder. To ache, and flow with quantities upon quantities of what I knew the damned, irresistible liquor would release in even greater quantities.

I watched, breath held, as he placed a cube of sugar...just one...onto the spoon. 'No' was no longer even a remote possibility as dribblets, first of inebriating green liquor and then of crystalline water poured from a glittering carafe, worked their way over and through the sugar. Disintegrating it. Making it vanish as certainly as the resulting potion would make me vanish once it passed my lips.

'No' was no longer a part of my life. Or my language.

I wanted what he offered.

"Please," I whispered, as fervently as I had tried to refuse in the minutes and seconds before.

"Please," I entreated as the thundering flesh between my thighs released a fresh torrent of steaming need across the papers upon Gardner's drawing table.

Gardner lifted the glass.

I was not allowed to touch. I had tried more than once, and always suffered enormous penalties in retribution.

Knowing better now, I clasped my trembling...*violently* trembling...hands behind my back. And I leaned forward, my lips parted, my mouth straining eagerly and desperately for what it needed.

Gardner pressed the glass to my lips. He pressed it hard enough to hurt my soft tissues. Hard enough to pinch them between sharp-pointed, exquisite heavy glass and the aching, tingling hardness of my teeth.

Now even they needed the release of his magic potion.

Eagerly, I tilted my head back. And greedily drank what was offered, at once dreading and anticipating the smooth suffusion of unreality that would accompany the small, unsatisfying amount the green glass contained. I drank greedily, because I needed that suffusion now. With an unholy need.

The taste was slightly bitter, of gall mixed with sweetest floral essence. It assailed my tongue as I sipped desperately, trying to savor and cherish its brief slaking of my thirst. And then I drank, spurred on by the pressure Gardner exerted as he shoved the green glass harder to my mouth, forcing my head back against my shoulders.

He poured with a single, swift motion all that remained in the glass into my mouth. Into my raw and burning throat.

I drank. I extended my tongue in a purely animal way that had no connection with the human being I had once been. And I licked hungrily, ravenously, at the inside of the glass. I licked hard, extending my tongue even farther as Gardner slowly, tauntingly moved the glass away from me. I licked, I strained, and I sat with my tongue extended to its farthest length and fullest extent, wanting only more.

I could not control myself.

As I had known it would, heat flashed burning tracers through my veins.

Enlightening me.

Alarming me.

Debilitated, debauched, I continued to thrust with a greedy tongue that found only thin air, yet could not stop its thrusting and searching. I thrust until my tongue rippled with searing pain, wishing all the while that I could pull it back. That

I could retain at least a small shred of the dignity and self-possession of which the green substance robbed me so completely.

I sat with my tongue extended, my body streaming columns of sweat, and need, and most vital animal essence. And I made deeply feral, entirely animal snarlings of unmet need that approached no known human sound. Snarlings that could not approach the human, around the desperate pulsing of my outthrust tongue.

The warmth of Gardner's liquor insinuated itself into me. Already, less than moments after the sipping and the greedy licking began and were finished, I felt the peculiarly unnerving effects of whatever I had drunk. I felt them everywhere.

For a moment Gardner sat back, watching me as I searched for more of the elixir in heated, sultry air that would yield none. He listened as I growled and groaned, rendered wordless by the tongue I could not control. And he smiled a little at the spectacle of desperation and debauchery I must represent in my hideously inflammatory garments.

The effects of his elixir were highly, oddly conducive to creativity. They were mind-expanding, allowing me to contemplate things...actions...I would not consider otherwise. Not even in my fevered, most repressed dreams. The effects were not only conducive, but were

almost irrevocably sexual.

Sex was the only thing that existed for me, then.

The engorged, enraged need for sex was all that mattered.

Gardner said the effect was pronounced because I was receptive. Because I had kept myself purposefully virginal in my old rigid self-denial of every natural instinct. He said it was because I'd been pure not just in my body, but in all fundamental ways. In my mind and especially, particularly, in my soul. He claimed it was my purity that enhanced the enlightened sexuality offered by the grass-shaded elixir I imbibed so greedily each time it was offered. And was that, then, what he meant when he dubbed the stuff 'dangerous'?

Did he mean it was dangerous in and of itself...inherently dangerous for anyone who partook? Or was it simply one more of those harmless substances he in particular was unable to tolerate? Was it one of those things that set in motion the peculiar and terribly limiting symptoms of the disease he bore forever within his body, hidden now but never truly forgotten?

I would never have a satisfactory answer.

And now, I was more obedient to Gardner's whims and his wishes as the heated flush of simmering green danger spread its unstoppable way into the distended, struggling flesh he began

to fondle again. He plied that flesh with new, outright fierce determination to drive me completely away from all vestige of sanity. And in response, in my only response, I spread my legs.

I spread them as wide as was physically possible. I propped my heels against the rim provided to keep the table's burden...*whatever* burden...from sliding to the floor. And I allowed my knees to glide apart. Propping myself up on my elbows so that I could see the opened center of myself, I then immediately allowed my head to loll back, nearly lifeless.

The flesh between my legs bulged headily with my new position. And bulging, it strained against the tight restriction of the strap I knew Gardner would never release unless he chose to do so...unless the releasing suited him, suited his needs. My straining flesh felt like it had swollen enormously, swollen unaccountably and monstrosly. To twice its natural size, three times its size. Or more. The way it always felt when Gardner's mysterious elixir gained its predatory hold upon me.

I was shaved.

That was another of Gardner's requirements. Another of the acts he would not permit me to perform for myself, and which I must endure him performing at great and torturous length upon me. Making an insufferable ordeal of a very

different yet wholly sensual kind of act.

I was shaved.

My delicate ridges and whorls, my every fold of flesh meticulously and scrupulously bare.

Gardner kept me that way. Completely exposed. Readily available, and utterly unprotected in any way from any of the myriad, varied acts he might decide to lavish upon me at any time, in any place, without warning.

"Are you ready, Jean-Agnes?"

I heard the smile in his voice rather than saw it. Closed, my eyelids were no longer responsive. They were far too heavy to be opened, my eyes far too intoxicated with the peculiarly different form of intoxication he wielded with his marauding, striking fingertips to see, even if they could open.

"R..." The rest of the word slipped from my weakened lungs in a single long, very nearly explosive rush. "...eady."

His laughter would have been enough to plummet me straight over the edge, had his hands not succeeded first.

He caressed. Feeling his way delicately, almost as a blind man reads Braille, he made his way across my swollen and drunken ridges.

My body burned.

Tingled.

His every touch was as a licking of fire to the private, vulnerable flesh he had awakened with

his maddening elixir. His every touch snaked like the lick of a whip across sensitized flesh. Stinging-cold at first, each of his touches melted quickly to an agonized searing of outrage.

Catching my breath as explosion after explosion of sensation burst within and from the taut morsels he tortured so deftly, I began to quiver vigorously. Violently. Inside.

Especially inside.

The quivering began at the extremity of me...the *private* extremity. It began as a deep and terrifying, delightful quiver that soon, immediately, coursed outward and into all the other extremities of which I was possessed. Into palms pressed flat against the slippery surface of the drawing table. Into fingers splayed and strained with the effort of holding my body half-upright, my shoulders still raised, allowing my head to loll back in wanton abandon. I shoved against the table with palms gone almost tropically wet.

Intoxicated sweat poured from them, poured from me. I imagined I left clammy traces where my hands slipped and slid upon the surface they could no longer grasp. And the tingle of infatuated excitement reached my toes as well. It found them and then, discovering it had nowhere else to progress, seemed to circle in them. Seemed to circle painfully around and around, creating its

own sort of electrical energy. Making my feet jerk. Almost convulsively. Electrical charges made muscles cramp suddenly in my legs and hips, and my entire, wasted body.

I cried out. More. In even more pain.

"Are you ready for your lesson, Jean-Agnes?"

"L..." I had to pause. I had to scream again, emptying my lungs in true desperation as his fingers flicked faster, with the shimmering rhythm of a butterfly's pulse. "Lesson?" I finished finally, too debilitated to say more, to move, or even to shrink away, had shrinking been permissible.

I had forgotten Gardner was there.

Sunk in my agony, I had been conscious only of the fingers that maddened beyond endurance. And not even of the fingers themselves. I was aware only of the *effect* his tender, feather-light stroking had as it continued unabated, mixing and combining with a soft pinching. A soft separating of my flesh that drove the damnable, interfering brutality of the strap with which I was afflicted deeper into me...deeper, tighter, into the needful and yearning center that could not be satisfied while the strap remained in place.

"You need to learn patience, Jean-Agnes." Gardner's voice was almost... not entirely... cajoling.

Patience?

"H...haven't Iiii?"

Briefly, between waves of the fluttering external unease with which my own body now betrayed me, my mind flicked back. To the seemingly endless eternity I'd spent at Divine Serenity's silently reflective, endlessly forbidding and cruelly restrictive world in which patience had been the order of the day. In which patience had been expected and demanded.

I had learned patience.

"I don't kn...now why you th...th...think I..."

My back came up off the table upon which I lay. My eyes snapped open at last, and in the opening I felt them bulge wide, wide, wide. A scream tore from my throat, mingled with the single most heartfelt prayer...the most *genuine* one...for mercy I thought I had ever prayed. "Please, Gardner!" The words, like the scream, ripped from my throat in a great and jagged shard of sound. Energy. Sheer desperation.

It provided no relief. None whatsoever.

Laughing more softly than ever, in lower and even more smoky-silken overtones, he continued the stroking exploration that, strictly speaking, was no longer a stroking at all. It had become entirely exploration, avid and persistent, of the most aroused and most sensitive, most helpless regions of me. His stroking had become torture inconceivable.

"Pleeeeeease!" I shrieked with all the force my

failing lungs would allow. And I fell back upon the table, a huddled mass of human remains and tears that streamed down cheeks that no longer felt a part of me.

Searing, scalding wave after wave after wave of essence literally exploded from me...essence that, in the timeless instant when the bursting and the sublimity truly began, began to seem the *entirety* of me.

"Pleeeeeease?" I screamed again, to the pale-colored ceiling. Because no one else would be listening.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gardner was a man of his word. As always. He had set out to teach me patience, of a kind and a suffering intensity that even Mother, in all her veiled and robed, innocent forbearance, all her strictures of inhibited passion, had never conceived. Never, I felt, even *imagined*.

For sex had been a forgotten desire, a harshly repressed and denied one, in the shrouded world of Divine Serenity. Forgotten. Forbidden. Forsaken. Except for me and perhaps, for some of the other youngest inmates of that desolate and barren society. Those of us who had gone woefully against Mother's strictures and spent the dark solitude of our nights experimenting hopefully. Doing to ourselves and with ourselves the very intimate things that would never be done with another...that we would forswear forever as a condition of our continuance within that society. Giving vent to secret desires and haunted instincts that were entirely human, yet deemed supremely

evil.

Evil!

As I lay motionless, destroyed, upon Gardner's drawing table, it occurred to me that the real evil, the truest evil in that other life lay in the horror of the denial itself. The most terribly terrible sin lay in a system that expected young and vital women to deny their own instincts...*encouraged* them to the denial with shame and guilt, at ages when they were not nearly mature enough to make such decisions. And for what? Some misguided reverence for a higher, unseen power I now thoroughly suspected was non-existent?

That was blasphemy. All my early teachings had made me sure of that. But there it was. Out in the open, at least in my thoughts. And I was not about to go back. Not about to so much as *look* back.

It was blasphemy, but I no longer cared.

I had changed since my hurried departure, at Mother's orders, from Divine Serenity.

Gritting my teeth as the teasing torment Gardner inflicted continued unabated, I decided I had changed in every way possible since my time there. I had changed in every way it was possible for me to change and yet remain myself. And in no way had I changed more than in my fundamental perception of...my understanding of...the true meaning of 'patience'.

This was patience. This, which Gardner had taught so repeatedly and at such endless length over the course of the long and shuttered Denver winter...this, that I wanted only to tell him, wanted with every fiber of my tortured and tormented soul to *scream* at him, I'd already learned.

As well, as completely as it was ever possible to learn.

Patience.

Of kinds Mother had never fathomed.

"Please!" My body continued to strain. Hopelessly, with shoulders lifted and tight, shoulders pressed hard back and together as if I'd been ordered to the strictest kind of military attention. And with my head back and too heavy to be held erect, with showers of hot and sultry lightning strikes persisting, utterly decadent, utterly painful pleasure coursed through me.

There was no feeling now except this.

Gardner's touch.

The brush of his hands was diligent in its skilled attention. Demonic in its singular ability to drive me to depths...heights...of resounding pleasure even *he* had never before inspired.

I caught my breath.

Grimaced anew.

Grimaced harder as the demon-driven stroking escalated. As in the escalation it took on a new

tactic. Still caressing with superb gentleness the swollen and engorged, tense outer ridges of my flesh, his fingertips now turned to a more *inner* fondling. They began to part what was already painfully parted by the cruelty of the tightened strap that passed between. And that very tightness...that very, abysmal cruelty and enraged tension, only made the gentleness in the way his fingertips wandered through me that much more potent. That much more insanely, intensely arousing.

He parted my folds so incredibly gently. And laughed in his softly intolerable way as he did so, murmuring “patience, Jean-Agnes” once. Or maybe twice. There was no way in a shifting, debauched world to know. No way at all to be sure.

Patience.

I cried out. In new desperation, fresh desperation, as his exploration advanced to the deepest possible depth it could attain against the tight constriction of the infernal barrier he’d tied so firmly in its path. I cried out at the futility of my own hope, and the fruitlessness of this entire exercise.

I already knew Gardner would not allow me the pleasure and release I most craved...the deep and soothing penetration of hardened male flesh.

It was one of his most special abilities to drive

me all the way to the brink and even beyond with all manner of seductive foreplay, only to leave me abandoned upon that same brink. Only to leave me with the deep burning of unsatisfied longing destined to seethe unsated within me for hours. Or even days.

Never more than days, I reminded myself grimly as my back arched helplessly higher and my body worked more despairingly to satisfy itself with the completely unsatisfying release of its own essence.

Limited by the strength and demanding immediacy of his own sometimes insatiable physical needs, Gardner could not withstand his own inflicted torments of denial and waiting for more than a day or two. In that one regard I had the advantage. All the advantage. And I smiled to myself.

Patience really was a virtue. And more than that, it was all mine.

Gardner made a low sound. A guttural one.

Even through the rising impotence of my own soon-to-be-aborted arousal, I could hear his desperation mounting precipitously close to the breaking point. I could hear him pushing himself close...perhaps perilously close...to his own limit.

My smile widened.

My eyes could not open, and my back could not release its terrible, arching tension. But elsewhere, inside, something changed. Something important.

I was still in agony. There could be no questioning that...no changing it until eventually, inevitably, I won the victory I needed. Until I won everything I needed. But the agony had just, suddenly, become bearable. Just the knowledge that Gardner had gone farther toward his own need for satisfaction than he'd ever intended made me smile. Made me feel lighter, somehow, and more free.

I was still in agony. But I knew from Gardner's past lessons, some of them so intense they made the present one appear to be child's play, in patience and my own reactions that I could survive the interval between absolute torment and complete, victorious, relief.

Gardner groaned a second time.

With immensely more suffering.

His fingers flicked upon me. Inside me. Creating fresh sparks to fuel the fire of ravenous *need* he'd already ignited there. My back arched higher, and this time I did not scream. This time I could *not* scream. I could only whimper pathetically. That was all I had left when his fingers followed that initial flick with a persistent, buried fluttering.

Tendrils of heat shot...*rocketed*...through the heart of me.

"P...patience," I intoned in the only voice I could still manage...a breathless and surrendered

one. "I've learned patience, G...G...Gardner. I s...swear I have. I've lived with p...patience for more years than you can...oh, Gooooood!"

His marauding fingers found the hated strap that now more than ever threatened to slice me in half. They began a new stroking against the most outraged flesh of all...the swollen and more vitally sensitive than ever bits that came into direct, unremitting contact with the instrument of their torture. And this was not a stroking against that bit of flesh at all. This was a somehow even more erotic, even more arousing suggestion of a shimmer of touch against the taut strip of fabric that made all other...all *real*...touch impossible. That confined the tender bit of flesh so brutally, and held it prisoner.

"You haven't learned anything, Jean-Agnes." Gardner's voice shook. But not with anger. The suppressed thing I heard filling his tone and coloring his every word was clearly something else entirely...something I knew well. Something upon which, in the weaker and entirely human moments I had been taught to regard as sinful to the extreme, I had often gloated.

"I lived with patience," I gasped again, still arching and straining, but gaining a little better mastery of mouth and lips and tongue on this second try. "I was f...*forced* into patience. In ways you can't even i...magine...oh, God, Gardner.

Don't stop, don't ever stop! I was forced to be patient long before you ev...ver knew the c...concept of being patient."

"I doubt that." His laughter was low. Taunting. His fingers were persistent in their work upon me, and twice as merciless. "I'll have you remember I survived my own version of total confinement."

Confound his inhuman soul!

How could he continue to sound so calm? How could he sound so nearly unaffected by what had...*had*...to be tearing him apart?

Whimpering again, I tried to move. I tried to find a new position and a better one...one that might remove me in some small way from the constant infliction of torture between my legs.

"Don't," Gardner ordered. "Don't move." Not snapping or snarling because in truth Gardner never snapped or snarled, he nevertheless made his meaning absolutely clear.

That I was to obey.

And accustomed by lifetime habit to just such tones and just such orders, I did.

"I knew constriction and imprisonment more severe than any your Mother Superior thought of imposing," he murmured silkily, stroking again, stroking harder and sending more tendrils of swirling heat twisting through me. More repetitively than ever before.

He murmured, and I relaxed as much as it was

possible for a tortured woman in my advanced state of deterioration to relax. His fingers abandoned me, giving me a sweet moment's release. But it was a moment only, a very short one which he used to his best advantage, to change both his tactics and the tools with which he chose to implement them.

I breathed a great and deep sigh into lungs that had long since needed and *craved* the sustenance of breath. Cleansing breath. Allowing the tight, high arch to drop from my back, I also allowed the painful process of relaxing too-long cramped muscles and tendons to begin. But then the straining resumed again almost instantly. And my back arched higher, tighter, than before, when Gardner's mouth closed around me...around the center of me. Soft and succulent, steaming-hot in their very nature, his lips enfolded me. They enfolded the savagely suffering ridges and whorls of the flesh he'd so cruelly and perpetually disturbed...the ones he'd punished so effectively already.

Gardner's mouth burned against me, more painful even than the flickings and flutterings I'd previously thought must herald the end of me. Of my world and my sanity, and everything I'd ever known.

Now there could be no question I would not scream. Bowed higher, tighter, into a suffering arc,

I emptied my lungs in an ululating torrent of sound directed not so much toward the ceiling overhead as toward the heavily shuttered and curtained windows in the wall at my back.

I emptied my lungs fully. Pitilessly. I emptied them completely as the first enfolding of his mouth claimed me and crushed me. And then I emptied them again, though it seemed thoroughly impossible I should have breath enough remaining. I screamed a second time. Louder, if that was possible.

Gardner sucked and suckled for what seemed an inordinate stretch of time, though I suspected even in the midst of it that the reality was something else entirely...suspected it was in truth a matter of mere seconds.

Hours, eons, seconds. The true amount of time did not matter. It was the *effect* of that time...the effect of all that happened within it...that held real importance. That encompassed the searing rise of passion, the final settling-in of the sexually charged liquor I'd imbibed so thoughtlessly. But not unwillingly. Not completely against my will, either.

The deadly combination of the two ignited a slow burning of heat within as Gardner sucked. Stroking as he had before, except that he used his tongue now, in much the same way he'd used his devastating fingertips just moments before. And

this new stroking, this new form of stroking, was so much hotter. Was drenching, sultry, steaming wet. So wet.

"Gooooood!" I shrieked again as my body slipped into the first, preliminary stages of paroxysm. My thighs quivered, their substance reduced to nothing usable or stable beneath the onslaught of scorching caress. My lungs burned, aching and struggling with the effort to inhale air enough to sustain even this tortured version of life. Straining, struggling, they locked tight. They succeeded only minimally.

"Please," I whispered in a broken, jagged shard of my former voice.

Gardner's only reply was a deepening of his intolerable lavng. A new slipping in of and reaching deep with his tongue for the imprisoned and equally shrieking sliver of enraged flesh buried so deep inside me. The sliver that could not easily be reached, and could not therefore revel in the heated softness of the attention he directed its way. He made some soft sound as well...of unadulterated appreciation, I thought. Though I certainly could have been wrong.

I was in no condition to make rational judgments. Of any kind. And I struggled to lift my arms. My hands ached, *yearned*, for something to clutch. Something to grasp.

At first my effort seemed entirely in vain.

Besotted, my arms at first refused to move. But then slowly, ever so painfully slowly, they did stir. Did lift, only to fall back dead in their useless weight to the table at my sides. Then they lifted again. Through some miracle of concentration, and hidden strength, and sheer determination, I managed to make them lift. Jerking as all the innermost regions of my body began to convulse in spasms of debilitated delight and impending surrender; I was just about to give in entirely to the delight.

At last my trembling hands made their way to Gardner's hair.

At last, finding the thick and resilient crispness they so desperately craved, my fingers curled. Not in the way they'd curled before, hooking themselves into tight and frustrated claws. Now they twisted, gripping. They plowed deep furrows into black silkiness that soothed in some odd way with its very blackness and its uncommon thickness.

Gardner's tongue, his lips, continued their deadly searching. They sought out the most revealed and vulnerable, intimately secret parts of me, then continued to toy with me, taunting and teasing the unsatisfied deeper flesh that still would not, could not, be eased.

He *continued*.

And so did I.

I felt a rippling inside. Of my body, at last realizing the hopelessness of its situation, beginning to take care of itself. Already moist and misting heavily, it now began to flow with a free abandon, a deep and effervescent release of essence I still found startling. Even after the long and cold winter spent in the warmth of Gardner's tutelage, even after the hours upon pleasurable hours of his constant and at all times highly creative tutelage, I found myself startled. Mostly, I presumed, because I had never in my past life expected to be the recipient of such tutelage. Or such an apt pupil, where spiraling desires and mounting effervescence were concerned.

Shuddering deeply, shuddering viscerally, I endured a last ripple of internal gathering. I suffered another deeply debilitating thrust of soft heat from Gardner as he slashed his way deep into me and through me. My entire body was *alive* now with the fire of longing he ignited. I was afire. And ready to consume myself from within. I was completely afire, and I needed only...wanted nothing but...

I shrieked in earnest when he left me. "Nooooo!" The sound of my scream was more than explosive. It rebounded savagely, off corners and hard surfaces so that it very soon returned to itself. To feed upon its own force and energy, and regather strength from itself. "Nooooo!" I insisted

in my agony of emptied loss.

But already it was too late.

Laughing in his softly enraging way, Gardner was gone. Withdrawn. And I was alone. So utterly, horribly bereft in my aloneness.

"Patience, Jean-Agnes," he murmured ever so quietly. And I felt the sighing susurrations of moving air across my heated flesh. I felt more than ever wickedly, helplessly vulnerable. And destroyed.

CHAPTER SIX

By the time I regained enough presence of mind to pull myself together and return to my antiques shop, word had obviously spread.

In the way neighborhoods seemed to have in general and ours had in particular, the news of Muriel's arrival upon my doorstep had made its rounds.

A welcoming committee of sorts waited for me on that very same doorstep.

There were three of them. Standing at the bottom of my shop's front steps, they milled around, but never left the security of their tight and unified knot. I recognized the faces well. They were from the neighborhood, people I had seen often enough, but with whom I'd never had any contact except the kind I sensed I was about to have in the next minute or so...the terribly upsetting, in no way at all pleasant kind.

The three of them glanced periodically at Rosewalk's front door. They glanced *pointedly* at

the door, appearing on the surface to be nothing more than the most clean-cut of avid collectors, and I had just acquired the one rare piece that would complete their collection. Though I knew for certain two of them had never set a foot inside my shop.

The third, the one who had ventured inside several times, always on the sly, like she was committing some sort of terrible, unthinkable crime, was the one to approach me. As I'd known she would the instant I spotted them standing there.

"Good morning, dear," Elderly Mrs. Crimmins said in her deceptively mild way, underscored with a note of stern iciness. And moved right up...almost...to the bottom of the steps.

"Good morning."

I noted with sour amusement that her husband moved right along with her. Keeping pace with her. Hovering protectively next to her.

They were of another generation, the Crimmins'. An older one, whose conservatively narrow viewpoint made even my previous repression beneath Mother's strict and stern rule seem wildly, extravagantly carefree.

There was no informality when dealing with them.

None was allowed.

Sighing a little to myself, I regarded them with

a proper air of respectful deference. That much, at least, of what Mother had taught so rigorously, was proving invaluable on the 'outside'. That I was able to stand calm-faced now, *stone-faced* and unmoving, gazing at them...all of them...with a serene placidity I very honestly did not feel filling my eyes and my expression, an expression I felt sure revealed nothing of the sickly cold creeping of dread I felt inside, was a testament to the effectiveness of her training.

"What can I help you with this morning, Mrs. Crimmins?"

"Well, you know, dear, I hate to criticize or cause trouble..."

I resisted an urge to grimace. One that was almost stronger, almost more compulsive than my memory of and automatic obedience to any of Mother's firm edicts.

I knew better.

At the very least, I highly suspected better.

In every angry mob there had to be a mastermind. A ringleader in charge of stirring everyone up and fomenting whatever particular brand of mischief might be on the agenda of the moment. In our neighborhood, though there appeared candidates in abundance for the position, I had quietly and by dint of careful observation ruled each of the others out. One by one, until I grew certain it was this quietly dressed

unpretentious woman, the one who made such a great show of deferring always to others, this one who never actually participated in the occasional episodes of mob behavior who actually ruled the others.

I had reached that conclusion in large part because Eleanor Crimmins *did* come into my shop. Because she was the *only* one from the neighborhood who came into my shop. She never bought a thing, but asked plenty of questions about everything in her quietly unassuming way. Which was the biggest reason I had finally decided she was in reality spying upon me...us. For the neighborhood mob.

So I expected the worst.

Setting my jaw firmly, as firmly as I knew how, I squared my shoulders and faced her directly. Head on.

"The news is really most distressing this morning, isn't it?" Mrs. Crimmins began to flutter in a way I knew all too well. Peering past me, she craned her neck to peer over my shoulder. And when that didn't work to her satisfaction, she stepped to the side, peering harder. As if she expected some horrific person or *thing* to hurtle helter-skelter out of my genteel, old-fashioned shop filled with nothing but genteel, old-fashioned, non-threatening things.

Gardner.

Automatically my spine tensed.

Of course.

She was looking for Gardner. And instantly I wondered what had happened to put the neighborhood on full and battle-ready alert.

"What news?" I inquired as dispassionately as I would have uttered a request for some inconceivable thing...a pair of dancing shoes, say, and a collection of rock and roll records to while away my dull and lonely hours at Divine Serenity.

"Why, that that...*woman*...is here, of course."

"Woman?" I was certain I already knew the answer to that. Just as I was certain my dispassion slipped noticeably, even when I uttered it as a question.

Only one woman had recently arrived in the neighborhood. Only one I knew about, and certainly only one the inestimable Mrs. Crimmins and her cronies could regard as such a threat to her...their...carefully ordered and controlled world that they would deign to make a physical appearance upon my property.

Muriel.

The only surprise in all of this was that the word had gotten around so quickly...gotten the local mob so upset in just a few hours' time. That had to be some kind of record, one that even after so many months in their midst and experiencing their peculiar methods of minding everyone else's

business nonetheless amazed me with its speed and eerie accuracy.

"You know who I mean." Mrs. Crimmins' tone and expression lost a noticeable amount of their mildness as her voice raised a notch. Just a single notch, but enough to make quite clear the degree and depth of her displeasure. "You were seen talking to her earlier this morning."

"Mrs. Janssen," I replied, hoping the use of Muriel's married name would mean nothing to these people, when mention of her given name might stir at least one or two of them to memories I'd much rather see left unstirred.

"What did she want?" Mrs. Crimmins had definitely left friendly and gentle behind.

And I had left Mother's teachings on meek and compliant just as far behind. Because I had had enough of this. *All* of this.

"I run an antiques shop here," I responded.

Mrs. Crimmins' eyes narrowed.

"Isn't it possible the woman you saw here was a customer? Come to buy a rare book? Or an antique silver tea service?"

She didn't answer. And now Mr. Crimmins closed in. Taking his wife by her elbow, he took a step or two closer. Protectively.

Even the third visitor, the neat young man with his dark blue sweater knotted around his shoulders and his russet spaniel trotting

obediently at his side, moved in. Closing ranks, the little group closed the distance between us.

They were presenting their most united front this morning.

"That woman is Muriel Burton." The younger man had a flat and nasal voice, a slightly whiny one that set my every nerve on edge. A voice not at all in keeping with his studiously prep-school appearance.

He was a genuine fake. But I wasn't going to call him on it. Not this morning. Maybe not ever.

"She told me her name was Janssen," I replied, stalling for time.

And my visitors were aware of it.

"Nevertheless, she *is* the sister of that girl whose body turned up in your rose garden last fall." The preppie neighbor, especially, wasn't buying it.

"Now, how did you know about that?" I had no reason to be so eager to protect Muriel from any of the bile and vitriol my neighbors could spew in such enormous quantities.

Muriel was nothing to me. No one I had asked to know. But she was involved, and so was I. And she *had* lost her sister. Quite tragically. She'd been little more than a girl herself when the terrible thing happened. And from something she had said, or something I had spotted and recognized in her eyes, perhaps, when she knelt before the little

stone nun to stroke longing hands through the thickness of ferns at the nun's feet I thought it a certainty that the loss of her sister had had a decided effect upon her life. A decidedly *terrible* effect.

There was no earthly reason why Muriel should be subjected to this group's utter, cruel foolishness.

"Why has this woman come here?" Mrs. Crimmins demanded.

Of all the things I'd learned and learned how to deal with in recent months, I now uttered a silent and internal prayer of thanks that the ability to stand firm without flinching or wavering seemed to be one of them.

I had Gardner to thank for that.

And just as much, though much more indirectly, these very neighbors.

Mrs. Crimmins looked surprised.

Apparently one more story had made its rounds, had come to be considered incontrovertible fact. That Jean-Agnes Teagarden McCord was a pushover. An easy target. Fair game for anyone with an inborn desire to push, and bully, and gain his or her own way through application of brute force.

To some extent all of that was still true.

I had begun to quiver and quake inside, the way I always had when confronted by the

necessity of confrontation. Rolling nervously, my stomach took to aching and my feet had long since readied themselves to do what they'd done so automatically in the past...turn and *run* at the first hint of the kind of discord I saw mirrored right now in my neighbors' faces.

"Ahhh...rump." Mr. Crimmins had remained perfectly silent, without even his usual clucks and mutters and huffs of disapproval at everything in general, and me in particular. Now, releasing his wife's elbow and standing up a little straighter, standing a little away from her, he fixed me with his most firm-eyed glare. The one I felt sure he'd used to maintain discipline and order in the long-gone days when he'd reputedly taught English, or French, or maybe both to what I myself had heard him describe as 'an unruly pack of savage junior high-schoolers'.

Mr. Crimmins' glare was a pale imitation of Mother's. As such, it didn't inspire me to trembling acquiescence the way he obviously hoped it would.

"There's no need to be stirring up a lot of things," he lectured anyway, sounding more out of sorts than usual. "Now that all the fuss and clatter has finally died down, and everyone is happy."

Happy?

I certainly wasn't!

Not in that regard, anyway. And if my dream of the previous night, a thing that still turned me cold with fear, was any indication, the ghost of poor little murdered Doris Burton was not particularly happy, either. Though I wasn't about to announce that to the neighborhood delegation. And that hidden, quivering, trembling thing, that almost-*anger*, rose up inside me again.

"I don't believe anyone is trying to stir up anything," was my response. And a thin thread of that unsteady rage, barely there and yet perfectly audible to anyone who might really listen, quavered in every word I spoke.

"Then why is she here?" Preppie demanded.

"I'm sorry. I don't understand. How are all of you so *sure* anyone of any interest to you is here?"

"Well, dear, half a dozen people saw..."

"I know what people *think* they saw, Mrs. Crimmins. But that still does nothing to explain this ridiculous conclusion that..."

"Now, see here," Mr. Crimmins started to say. But Mrs. Crimmins cut him off.

"Ridiculous?" She was huffing now. And chuffing. As much, more, than I'd ever known anyone to huff or chuff before.

"How *dare* you suggest such a thing, young woman?" That was Mr. Crimmins. Also huffing. Also chuffing.

"I'm sorry. That was inappropriate of me." I

wasn't backing down. No more than I absolutely, positively had to back down. "But the fact remains that all you saw, all anyone saw, was a woman. Visiting my shop."

Their expressions said they had. Or at least had heard about it from someone who had.

"You saw her go inside with me."

Their faces admitted that, too.

"And the simple explanation is that she was a customer."

"Before you were even open?" Preppie demanded, a touch defensively.

"People do. All the time."

Their expressions told me they had noticed that...were well aware of that...too.

Preppie shuffled his feet.

Mr. And Mrs. Crimmins exchanged guarded looks.

And silence fell.

In that moment even the birds, previously busy with morning song and springtime business in the ancient, towering trees that lined our old street, fell quiet. Absolutely, deafeningly quiet, as if they'd just spotted the largest cat in existence. Or maybe they just hung on our words. Maybe they'd sensed the greatest import in whatever was about to be said, and wanted to be sure they didn't miss a syllable of it.

So.

There was a little more to this visit...visitation...than I was being told. I'd more than half suspected that from the very beginning, when I'd found it mildly annoying.

It was growing infuriating now. But I knew better than to try to push. With these people, and the several dozen others of their ilk who lived on our street and several surrounding it, pushing was of no value. Pushing never had any of the desired results, and in fact almost always had exactly the opposite of any desired result.

If I pushed the matter, no matter how subtly, they would close ranks. They would refuse to talk. They would spread the word as quickly as they'd ever spread anything that no one else was to talk, either.

And I would never in my lifetime have the answers I needed so badly.

I shrugged. "Now, if that's all...I have a business to run. I have new items to unpack, displays to arrange. So if you have nothing else..." Half-turning toward Rosewalk's partially open door, I kept an eye on them.

No one moved.

No one seemed even to *breathe*.

As I'd expected, no one divulged a thing.

But they would, I reassured myself as I stepped into the cool and familiar...*safe*...surroundings of my shop and the quiet world I'd made for myself

within.

It was only a matter of time.

Something had set the busybodies into motion. Something had put them on edge. And sooner or later, it would boil to the surface. *Sooner*, I guessed, the way it always did. And in the interval before that happened I...Gardner...would need to prepare.

For anything.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was Muriel herself who supplied the answer.

I was sitting on the floor of what had been Thaddeus' downstairs bedroom, the small room that now served as my combination holding area, napping place, and work space. I sat thoroughly engrossed, lost in the somewhat ribald diary I'd discovered in the midst of a dry as dust shipment of old textbooks, reveling in the author's decidedly checkered career as tart to the rich and foolhardy 'gentlemen' of Denver's forty-years-before past.

The woman, known to me only as Isabel, had had more than a few adventures, and she told them in a style that set me to tingling all over. She was just about to ply her singular craft with a powerful and questionable business tycoon whose descendants still wielded considerable influence in and around the city when Muriel appeared at the entrance to the room.

"We've got to find the killer!" she declared

before she even stopped to greet me, as breathless, as if the same idea hadn't occurred to me at least a hundred times since the day I'd sat in my garden and noticed the anomaly that turned out to be Doris Burton's skull.

It was an explosive line. Of which the hot-blooded coquette of the diary would no doubt approve.

Reluctantly, I closed the little blue-bound book.

"The police tried," I began, knowing already that it was a hopeless argument, and no more excusable today than when it had first been used, all those years ago when Doris had disappeared. "The police..."

"Obviously didn't have a clue where to look." Clearly agitated, Muriel flung herself onto the end of the narrow bed in the corner. "They didn't know *how* to look. They couldn't find Doris *or* her body, even when the clues were hot. How can anyone expect them to do a halfway decent job now?"

"With all due respect, that's what they're paid to do. And they have all kinds of resources we couldn't possibly..."

"We have to make a list."

"The police did that, Muriel. Right after I found the...Doris. They went around, and they talked to everyone in the neighborhood. Just the way they did the first time. When Doris first went missing."

What had they called it?

Canvassing?

At this, Muriel sat up. Straight on the edge of the cot. Looking like a tired gray bird just given new life. Just about to spring into a flight of joy, the likes of which she hadn't enjoyed in years. "They did? Do you have a copy of this list?"

"Wellllll, no. It *was* a police thing. And anyway, once they were finished with me, and decided I couldn't have had anything to do with it, I just preferred to let them dig up my garden while I stayed out of it."

"Then we've got to make a new list. One of our own." Already she was bending forward. Reaching down to scoop up the clipboard and pad on the floor by my knee. "*Two* lists."

"Two? Muriel, what..."

"A list of all the people who live in the neighborhood now," she replied, scribbling busily. "And a second. Of all the people who were here when Doris..."

Died.

Was brutally, savagely murdered.

I knew she couldn't bring herself to say the words. And I didn't blame her.

Glancing around, at the pad and what she'd already written upon it, I saw she was working on her list of everyone who lived here now.

It was a surprisingly complete list, starting with

the Crimmins, Mr. And Mrs., who'd lived here forever.

The Ryalls and the reclusive old widower Herbert Lane, who seldom appeared except for regular trips to the nearest liquor store were there. And all of the early entries seemed completely rational, and highly logical. They'd all lived here for the longest time. But the rest...this morning's preppy visitor Rod, and his decidedly snobbish little wife Jodie, the flamboyantly red-suited real estate agent Harriet Hunter, who forever persisted in trying to sell Gardner's and my houses right out from underneath us in a series of patently transparent bids to be rid of us forever, the same Harriet who'd been one of my first and still most unpleasant encounters during my first days as a resident here. They were all on the list. As were the Spivaks, whom I'd scarcely met myself in the two months since they'd bought the old Carstairs place. And the McLurrs, the Klinkes, the Harts. All were too recent for Muriel to have known them back when. All of them were far too recent to have ever known Doris either, though I was willing to bet the entire contents of my shop they had all heard about her, and aplenty.

All of it came as a very disturbing surprise.

How the devil had Muriel managed to compile all those new names in such a short amount of time?

How had she managed to gather what looked

like, in one or two cases startlingly accurate and extensive notes on temperaments and personalities?

"You missed the Dunhills," I pointed out drily. "All five of them. And Grandma Burke who lives out back, in the apartment above their garage. And the lesbians down on the corner. I'm not sure if there are two of them or three, but I do know you should have inc..."

"Thanks." Muriel scribbled again. Adding, adding, adding. "That should complete Exhibit One. Current residents."

Exhibit One?

I almost laughed. I might actually have done it, had she not looked so dead-earnest and serious.

"Exhibit One," I replied, giving what I considered an absolutely credible imitation of someone who saw nothing amusing, nothing even remotely peculiar, about the entire exercise.

"This gives us something to start with." She sounded very pleased with herself.

"You also didn't include my husband and I on your list," I pointed out.

"Yes, but you were both completely cleared by the police. And if you'd been guilty, why would you have dug up Doris' body and called them in the first place?" Her tone suggested she might not, perhaps did not, at all agree with at least a part of that.

I didn't have to ask which part.

I didn't *want* to ask.

"So this is a list of suspects?" I asked instead.

Sighing heavily, she nodded. "*Everyone* is a suspect."

"Well, then. I'd think Gardner would have to be at the top of your list." I didn't much like what had to be said next. But it had already been said...debated almost endlessly, discussed and dissected...dozens of times before. In my hearing and most certainly behind my back. So what, really, was one time more? "Most people still believe Gardner or my great-uncle Thaddeus was responsible," I declared tersely. Hollowly. "Or at least that one or both of them had something very, very important to do with it."

"Yes. Thaddeus." Muriel wrote on her pad again, right at the top of a page she'd titled 'Past Residents'.

"Nothing much has changed in that regard," I went on. "Not really. Not even if there was never a shred of evidence against him. Not even when the police, then and now, and several times in between, said there was absolutely no reason to believe either Thaddeus or Gardner was guilty of anything more serious than having a few eccentricities. And minding his own business, of course."

Well-launched into her second list, Muriel did not look at me. "I'm afraid memory fails me," she

murmured sadly after a time. "The whole thing was so traumatic. And my parents never discussed the disappearance...anything about it. Once they gave up ever finding Doris or knowing what had happened to her, once I got married and they moved to Kansas City to try to start what was supposed to be an all-new life, they wanted to act like none of it ever happened. Like there never was a Doris."

"That's just...wrong...Muriel. I don't know a lot about the world. I don't know very much of anything, in fact. But even I know that's just not right. Or healthy."

Looking morose, she nodded. "And they did it all in the name of 'healing'. They thought it was best to never have a picture of Doris in sight. Or to ever mention her name, or let anyone else mention it in their presence. So I guess I just followed their example after a while. I guess I just tried to block the whole thing out of memory."

"That's not only wrong, Muriel. That's sad."

My heart went out to her.

It really did.

But none of this had anything to do with the subject at hand...finding a killer who probably would never be found, because too much time had elapsed. This had nothing to do, either, with any idea that my very own husband, my beloved and treasured Gardner, had done nothing ever to

warrant the hatred that had been, continued to be, leveled at him from almost every side.

To Muriel's credit, she didn't compound the wrong. She didn't do what any person, me included, might have expected her to do. She didn't add Gardner's name to her growing list, no matter what suspicions she might harbor about him. And for that I would be eternally grateful to her.

Loyal to her.

"The problem is," Muriel said sadly, "there's so much I *don't* remember about Doris, and about the time she disappeared. There's so much I can't remember. Like..." She sat then. Silent. With her head tilted to a thoughtful angle. She sat that way for so long that I felt compelled to prod a little.

"Muriel, I don't know what I can..."

Jumping a little, she smiled at me. Sheepishly. Apologetically. "I just wish I knew more about...things. That's all. I just wish I had some clue about what all really went on back then. I wish my parents hadn't been so secretive about Doris' world. Who was in it in those last days. Who were her friends at her school, what happened from day to day, and how it might have affected her. What it might have had to do with what happened to her."

"Her school?"

Now, this was interesting.

"She was your sister, Muriel. Didn't you both go to the same school?"

"Oh." Laughing, Muriel looked embarrassed. Maybe even a little resentful in a hidden and guilty sort of way. "Land sakes, no! Doris was special. Everyone said so. She was a genius, according to most. Daddy was a storekeeper. Had a little cigar and sundries store over on Colfax. It was enough to support us, but no way would it ever have paid to send one girl to that fancy private school, much less two. So when Doris won a scholarship, it was time for her to move on. Time for her to move into another world where I didn't belong, and would never belong."

Saddened, I nodded.

I knew something of that myself, in a different sort of way. Because though I'd never found myself in a situation exactly like it, had never had a sister with whom I needed to compete, my situation had certainly been close enough to allow me to understand.

I had known a similar sense of isolation, and loss, and separation. Unwanted by parents who were busy with other things, with their own lives, I'd spent my own childhood separated from the other children in my neighborhood. Destined right from the start for the life my parents had decreed for me, the one for which they'd groomed and brainwashed...yes, *brainwashed*, me so completely,

I'd never been permitted to go to school with the others. Never been permitted even to play with them, or even to know their names.

"There are some yearbooks," I suggested, shoving my own bitter memories to the back of my mind as I prepared to get to my feet. "Maybe they will..."

"Yearbooks?" Muriel said it as if she'd never heard the word before. As if she found it impossible to grasp the concept. Then she shook her head. "I really don't know how some old yearbooks could possibly..."

"I bought them at a yard sale last fall." Already I was moving toward my little pantry-cum-office with its superb supply of shelves perfectly designed for holding things I thought I couldn't sell, things I didn't want to sell, things I'd decided to hang onto for no apparent reason except that it was what I wanted to do and I'd been denied for far too long the right to do what I wanted to do. "I bought them at a yard sale in the neighborhood."

"I still don't see what..." Muriel followed along close behind.

"I don't know. It just seems like we need to do something and failing anything else..." I pulled the carton of ancient books, literature textbooks, and forgotten novels in cheap covers, and the yearbooks, from the bottom shelf in the far corner. I'd tucked them away there once I'd retrieved the

collection of lacy linens for which I'd been required to buy the entire box...once I'd found little else there that I'd thought I had a chance of selling. "I figure if they came from down the street, they might be...well, I never took time to glance through them. But what could be the harm?"

Muriel watched doubtfully. But expectantly, as I lifted several of the literature books out of the carton, raising a cloud of nose-tickling dust in the process, in order to reach the buried yearbooks.

"There wouldn't happen to be anything from Centennial Academy in there?" She sounded hopeful at last.

I felt guilty suddenly. So guilty and heartless for getting those suddenly shining hopes up and probably for nothing.

Reaching past me, she dug into the stack of books. At first it seemed nothing there caught her interest. She thumbed through them with hardly a glance for any of them. Until she reached a green-bound leatherette volume near the bottom of the stack.

"Yes!" she exclaimed in excitement, discarding the upper part of the stack onto the floor. "I remember this! I think we had one just like it at home." Perching on a corner of my desk, she leafed through the pages. "They're from a time a little before Doris went to school there. I think the

headmaster might have given a copy to my parents when they were trying to recruit Doris to go there. But I think..." Pausing, she flipped quickly through the pages, stopping to stare at a photograph here or read a passage there. "Look. This girl," she tapped a student portrait. "Donna Parvey. I know her. Or I know *of* her. She's a freshman in this picture. But the year Doris started at Centennial, Donna was a senior. And Donna was assigned to be Doris' monitor. Donna was supposed to ease Doris into life at the school."

"Really?" I leaned forward to take a better look at the photograph. "Well, that's something."

I didn't really think so.

But Muriel had that look again. She had that gleaming-eager shining look that melted years and worry, eradicating them from her face.

"And the teachers." She turned a page. "Doris always raved about her teachers. At the time I thought it made me want to be sick. Now I realize it was more like..." She cast me a sideways, almost a furtive, glance. "You're going to think this is terrible. You're going to think I'm a horrid and despicable person."

"Probably not." Taking one of the other yearbooks, a dark red one also labeled 'Centennial Sentinel' from her I began leafing idly through it. But it was a much later edition. Ten years later. And I knew none of the people in it, none of the

people who'd been involved in Doris Burton's life.

Best to let Muriel do the looking, I decided with a soft sigh, and closed the book.

Even with her blocked memories and hurt, she would be far more likely to find answers than I.

"Poor thing," Muriel said so quietly I almost didn't hear. "My own sister. She loved her classes so, and all I could do was hate her for that. She loved her musical arts teacher, Mrs. Romero. And her English lit teacher, Prof. I remember how Mrs. Romero used to stop by our porch sometimes on her way home from the school, when Mum and Daddy were sitting outside. She used to tell them how much she enjoyed having Doris in her classes. And sometimes..." Here she glanced at me again. "I don't know why I'm troubling you with all this old stuff. You don't need to be hearing things like this."

"It's okay." I was getting into a little more familiar territory now, and the familiarity put me at ease. "It helps to get it out in the open. Get it off your chest."

Confession is good for the soul.

If I'd heard that once from Mother and the Church, I'd heard it a million times.

Sighing much more heavily than I'd done, Muriel closed the yearbook and folded her hands atop it. "I feel terrible about it. But it was always 'Mrs. Romero this', and 'Mr. Crutchfield that'. Or

was his name Cummings?" Lifting her hands, she waved them a little. "I guess I never actually knew his name. We always called him Prof, and I always used to hide when *he* stopped by. He was just...I don't know. Gushy. I never saw what Doris saw in any of them, and..." Abruptly, she got to her feet. "I thank you for your time, Jean-Agnes. But now I've taken up enough of it." Setting the remaining yearbooks on the desk, she turned toward the door. "You have a business to run, and I have plenty of things to do on my own. Like finish what I was doing earlier this morning."

"Oh?" Relieved at her imminent departure, feeling more than a little ashamed of myself for that relief, I was no longer paying close attention to her. "What was that?"

"Calling on the neighbors," she replied just before she slipped out of the room. "I was interviewing them. To see if any of them know about my sister."

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Tell you, there's going to be trouble."

Wrapping my arms tightly around myself, I shivered in the first embrace of rising night breeze. "The neighbors are starting to get agitated again. I had a visitation from one of their little delegations today."

"Well, what did you expect, Jean-Agnes?"

I couldn't see Gardner's face in the fresh darkness filling the approach to our secret garden. But I could hear quite clearly the note of amusement that crept into his tone.

"I guess I was hoping it was all over and forgotten."

"It will never be over. Or forgotten."

"It's just..." I sighed. Heavily. "It's been so quiet these last three or four months." Knowing how foolish and pathetically naïve that hope was, knowing how doubly foolish it sounded when spoken aloud, I felt my shoulders droop.

"Like I said," Gardner replied as placidly as it was possible ever to placidly completely dash a

woman's last hope. "It will never be forgotten. That's just a fact of life, Jean-Agnes. Nothing's going to be forgotten around here, as long as so many questions remain unanswered."

"It's just that I thought after so much time..."

Laughing softly, enticingly, he pulled me to a stop just at the entrance to our enchanted garden. He pulled me to a stop just at the place where marble steps swept downward and away from us, heavy with haunted shadows where we stood, then shining milky pale in the light of a rising, near-full moon.

"What did your friend Muriel do to set the mob to stirring? Or should I even ask?"

I was startled. "I wouldn't say Muriel's exactly my friend. Anyway, how do you know she did anything?"

Another laugh. "It stands to reason, doesn't it? The crowd gets all stirred up every time something new or different happens to change the story. And as far as I can see, Muriel's the only new thing this time around. I know you wouldn't do anything to prod them into action, so it stands to reason..."

Me?

The very idea made me shudder. I couldn't quell it.

I had been the new thing once, myself. Not long ago. And the memory of it...the terror of it, since I

had been completely innocent and unsuspecting, far more unprepared for such things than Muriel would ever be...still left me cold inside.

Frozen-cold, dangerously cold.

Turning me, poised on the very brink of the marble flight that led to such succulent, delirious promises in the darkness beyond, such delight of remembered moments and fantasies lived, Gardner cupped the points of my shoulders with enormous hands. "Don't you think you've worried enough about this?"

"I don't think I've worried nearly enough, when..."

"What's destined to happen is going to happen," he insisted quietly, fixing a gaze I couldn't quite see upon my face. And now innuendo slipped into his tone. All kinds of innuendo.

What's destined to happen is going to happen.

Involuntarily, I shivered. A very different...very welcome and warming...kind of shiver this time.

Gardner's hands began to move. Lightly, they stroked. Tracing lovely paths of fiery anticipation along flesh that goose-bumped beneath his every whispering touch.

"There are other things to think about right now," he murmured close to my ear. "Far more important things. Things over which we have

some measure of control."

His hands continued their skimming. I shivered again...shuddered again. Shuddered harder.

"There are things we both want," he went on. "You know there are, just like you know this place makes us desire them."

I did.

I knew.

And I shivered even more.

"Just like I think you know neither of us can resist for long. And shouldn't try to resist."

Another instant of that stroking, strumming, skimming, and I would go mad. Remembering the way he'd brought me to magnificent climax earlier with nothing more than the power of that touch...admittedly dedicated and diabolical, under the influence of mysterious and nameless elixirs touch, but mere touch just the same...I thought it wouldn't take much more. Much longer.

Quickly I glanced toward the darkened, secret garden.

As it had so many times before, so very many, immeasurable nights when we had come here together to be hidden, come here as hot with anticipation as we'd been on the star-struck night when he first took me there, the garden whispered around us. Marble gleamed cool, blue-white in moonlight strong enough to approach the

brilliance of day. Towering pillars, fluted gently from bases to curled and vine-carved crowns, supported nothing, but simply soared over our heads, reaching for the star- and moon-gilt sky.

Gardner pressured me gently with the weight of a hand, urging me to begin the descent to light-misted dark spaces between those sky-seeking shapes,

Suddenly eager, I licked my lips.

Wide stairs and moon-shimmered white benches waited. Their gleaming shapes beckoned softly. And at the far end of the space between, at the very end of the garden in a place where it lay almost hidden by the deepest shadows of ancient and overhanging trees and by distance so vastly dark despite the moon's efforts that my vision could not quite surmount it...

The altar.

I shuddered again. With more strangely warming anticipation, I shuddered so hard this time that Gardner couldn't help but notice. So hard that his hands stopped their lazy motion upon the points of my shoulders...so hard that in the next second he clasped me and pulled me to him. He surrounded me with strength, warmth, sureness.

I could not see the altar.

But I knew it was there.

I could *feel* it there, could feel its sweetest siren

song. The one that thrummed steadily through cooling air, and inside my veins. I could feel the vaguely irresistible and erotic summons of it in my bones. All the way to my aching, pleading marrow.

The altar.

That place of places, that one very significant place.

Its pull, aided by the persistent pressure of Gardner's arms as he turned me even more, as he attempted once again to guide me and urge me toward the far-distant and summoning regions, was almost more than I could resist.

I wanted to go.

Wanted to lie stretched and motionless upon smooth sculpted white stone that would warm beneath the suffering heat of my body. Stone that would almost as quickly take on the texture and substance of my flesh, in much the same way my flesh would inevitably and inexorably begin to take on the unyielding characteristics of marble.

We would meld, the stone of my altar and me.

If I gave it a chance, we would...could...become one.

But...

"Muriel," I breathed, making one last attempt to resist.

The pull of my distant place of rest and torment was so strong. So delightful.

But...

"What about Muriel?" Gardner inquired, never easing his pressure upon my shoulders. "What possible part could Muriel have in anything we do in our own garden? Anything so completely personal? So completely private?"

"We can't do anything with..." Nervous, I glanced the other way.

Light shone gentle gold through the newly summer-full trees. Light as warmly serene and beckoning in its own way as the light from an enormous, soaring moon gleamed chillingly, exciting with invitation. Light from the little apartment above the garage, where lights did not customarily shine during the hours Gardner and I chose to visit our midnight garden.

It would not be easy for anyone there to see here, to where we stood, much less all the way to the altar at the far and hidden end of the garden. It would maybe not be possible to see anything at all.

But the night was clear.

The air was smooth and deep, ripe as wine and as rich in its purity.

Sounds could...did...ring astonishingly audible in such chilled and silken air.

So, yes. It was possible, almost entirely probable, anyone in that little apartment would hear quite clearly the sounds we would make, should we proceed all the way to the altar. It was

inevitable, even, that someone, Muriel, would hear and come to investigate.

Inevitable, and completely unacceptable.

Gardner looked where I looked.

"You're right," he said slowly. Regretfully. "She does complicate things."

"I wish I'd never asked her if she'd like to stay."

I could feel tension return to him. Much the way I'd felt it relax and retreat such a short while earlier.

When he moved close again, it was different. *He* was different.

He didn't pull me as close as before, though the heat of our mutual sexual awareness...our shared sexual arousal...was still apparent. Was quite possibly even more apparent, in the perverse way such sexual attractions had of becoming stronger in any moment when they were amplified by some small amount of forced separation. Some infinitesimal hint of the attraction being forbidden...being impossible.

Lifting his hands, Gardner caught my face between them. Brushing his thumbs in small, not quite circular motions across the sensitized rounds of my cheekbones, he bent his face closer to mine. So heart-stoppingly close that I felt certain...*knew* for certain...he was about to kiss me.

"You're so very right," he agreed again, stopping just short of doing it. "The only question

now, Jean-Agnes, is what are we going to do about this intolerable situation? How are we going to rectify the unconscionable injustice of it?"

"I..." Too dazzled by the imminence of the kiss...by the way his mouth didn't quite move against mine when he spoke, I couldn't think. I didn't *want* to think, not about anything as mundane and superficial as the logistics of what we would do next...*had* to do next.

Desperate, knowing the haunted plea inherent in my gaze would go unseen in the darkness of the shadows in which we stood on the brink of our forbidden delight, I looked into the dim distance again. I looked past the relic of a dead and forgotten fountain at the center of the long space between rows of towering columns, toward the altar...my altar, *our* altar...again.

My altar.

Barely seen, really nothing more than the soft-hazed suggestion of a lighter-hued blur even now that my eyes had had their chance to adjust completely to darkness and night, I felt its presence more strongly than ever. I wanted its delights more than, in those moments when it was expressly forbidden and had never been so far out of reach, than I'd ever wanted it... anything... before.

Wanted, so desperately.

Needed, so consumingly.

"Jean-Agnes." Gardner's mouth wandered away from mine. It took up new and lingering residence near my ear. It brushed the top folds of that ear with astonishing jolts of lightning-lit fire as he kissed, finally, there. "Your dress."

"Wh...what..." I was too far gone to speak with any degree of clarity. The word slurred. Faded. Shattered, before it was completely uttered.

"Lift your dress for me."

Shaking, my hands rushed to comply.

They grasped swirling masses of passionate-violet silk, a color as thoroughly and unmistakably passionate as all the colors Gardner chose for the clothing he wanted me to wear were always more passionate. They grasped with no small difficulty, gathering soft-clinging and cloud-like folds together as the lifting began.

Balmy and motionless, night air struck cold-white sparks against fresh and heated stickiness at the inside of my thighs.

Already, reacting upon the promise inherent in Gardner's smallest touch, I had begun to well up inside. I began to respond, the folds of hidden flesh topping my thighs aching, still confined and constricted by the strap that remained now just as Gardner had fastened it much earlier in the day. Already the twin folds that surrounded it and bulged uncomfortably around it seemed to droop heavily, glugged and engorged. Though I knew in

my heart the glutting and the engorging had scarcely begun.

Feeling the first touch of night air against my heated readiness, I groaned aloud. Softly, though certainly that quality of sound would soon change.

I felt a rustle of movement from Gardner.

Felt, rather than saw, because my eyes had shut and would not open.

Already my fingers and hands, even the lowest extremities of my arms, ached furiously with the strength of the grip I maintained upon the bunched violet of my skirt.

Already I quivered internally. Exposed and offered, the spill of my preliminary essence coating my shaking thighs even more heavily and searing the flesh there anew, I stood dutifully. I waited as the vague rustling continued, repeated, continued again.

Then I had what I had desired.

Part of what I had desired.

I had Gardner's fingertips, stroking me so softly. So succinctly.

Just...stroking.

This time my groan was louder. This time it was much, much louder. Not verging upon a scream or even approaching that point as of yet, my groan nevertheless had a new sound...a heady and scarlet undertone that hinted a scream lurked trapped, and waiting. Trapped and searching,

seeking the smallest chink in my self-control, through which it might manage to escape.

Weak at best since I'd first become besotted with Gardner and all the explicit sensuality he offered, even that modicum of control was ebbing quickly.

"G...G...G..."

I could not say his name. I could not even try to form it with lips that lost all feeling as the teasing tenderness of his touch explored and examined my distended ridges. Quaking now, fearful of dropping in a leaden heap if I let my guard down, if I did not find some means of support soon, I lifted my hands dutifully higher. I lifted eagerly the clenched folds of silk that seemed heavier than lead. I lifted them higher. And once lifted, I pressed them, pressed the hands that clutched and held them, heavily against his shoulders. Insistently against his shoulders.

As always, Gardner's strength was unflagging.

He was my support.

All the support I would ever need.

"I can't," I whispered as my body swayed against his. Into his and so close to his that not even the thinnest substance of air existed any longer between us. So close that nothing would now separate us, or define us as distinct and separate individuals.

"Ahhhh." His murmur was low. Thready. But

not so the murmur of the fingers that took up their deadly work upon my steaming folds again, in earnest. "But you will, Jean-Agnes." With that murmured promise, the pressure of his touch increased. It became a woefully incomplete and inadequate penetration of fingertips merely hinting at penetration. Fingertips stroking over-agitated flesh at the edges of the binding strap, fingertips that painfully flirted with the idea of insinuating themselves beneath its tight torture. "You unquestionably *will*, if I say you will."

"N...no." My fingers dug deeper, wickedly deeper, into the meat of his shoulders. My knees turned increasingly to manically swirling, unreliable water. "What I meant..."

A finger, deftly dexterous and as thoroughly delightful as a human finger could ever possibly be, penetrated then to the full extent permitted by the barrier.

One finger penetrated.

It moved.

Within.

My head rolled back against my shoulders, nearly lifeless and far too heavy to be carried erect for a second longer.

The groan that slipped from my throat this time more closely resembled the scream I'd held for so long at bay...the scream of despair I'd not yet been able to release though I'd certainly wanted to.

Certainly *needed* to. The same scream that now inched closer to the surface, still unable to make the jump to final release but still looming with every flickering shimmer of Gardner's fingertips against the most sensitive...*inner*...part of me.

I could not.

Bear.

Another instant of this insane, inexcusable treatment.

My next sound shivered and quivered across parted lips that felt swollen as well even if they'd so far been steadfastly ignored. Steadfastly denied their desired attention and left to pine pathetically in want of it.

My next sound was a rising mewl. *Dangerously* rising, even as I sank deeper and deeper into the yearning, yawning abyss Gardner opened for me.

My next sound rose so precipitously that both our gazes flicked automatically toward the distant shine of light from the small garage apartment.

"Don't," Gardner warned, his tone so terse and his voice so unsteady that I knew he too felt the pull of the same, seething abyss. I knew he too sensed the beginning of the irreversible slide into the passion-laced heat at its very bottom. "Don't," he repeated in a harsh and ragged whisper. "Remember Muriel, Jean-Agnes. Remember..."

Remember.

And as I tried, before I could form an answer

that would at best be woefully inadequate, Gardner scooped me up.

His hand abandoned its mind-altering pursuits between my trembling thighs, and swooped down. His arm caught me squarely, firmly, behind my knees.

In need of no urging at all, they buckled.

And I dropped. Into his arms.

Groaning softly himself, in a way I'd seldom before known him to groan, he swept me up. Away. Through night and moonlight that flowed and murmured viscerally around us.

He swept me back toward the safe haven of his house. *Our* house.

CHAPTER NINE

*S*ometimes it was like this. Sometimes there was no occasion for instruction. For the punishment, pleasurable as it might be, that so often and usually went hand in hand with instruction.

Sometimes Gardner and I devoted ourselves entirely and exclusively to mutual pleasure...to *sex*, with no greater purpose than our own mutual pleasure.

I lay motionless. Exactly as Gardner had placed me at the end of his simmering rush into the house, up the stairs, along the hallway to the bedroom at the rear corner. At the end of the long second floor corridor. I lay as he'd placed me after carrying me into the bedroom I had created for the two of us to share, with me nestled securely against the breadth of his chest.

I lay with my skirt raised like the wanton I had become. I lay waiting, expecting, *dreaming*, while Gardner stood over me. Looking down at me from

the greatest of heights, from the dark glint of eyes I could no longer read. Looking so intently and for so long that I began to worry.

"G...Gardner?" Summoning all the strength I possessed, I lifted my arms. I held them out to him in the ages-old gesture of supplication...of a woman desperate to hold and possess what instinct told her she loved more, even, than her own life.

I could not bear more torment.

Could not bear the rising, rising, always rising of pure torment leading toward unbridled ecstasy. Could not bear a bit of it, when I knew it would only be ripped away at the last possible instant. Before the final passion. The way it had been so egregiously ripped earlier in the day.

I held my arms out to him. Said not a word and made not a sound, yet pleaded eloquently, all the same. Pleaded with longing eyes and aching throat, with lips that opened slightly, and moved with the soundless promise...threat...of speech soon to come.

Gardner gazed at me for a moment more.

But no longer.

Then, shuddering both visibly and audibly, he bent over me. He released me from the things, the restrictive clothing, he forced me to wear...the things he found so oddly and unaccountably sexual.

My skirt went first. It was flicked away from me, a quick and floating flutter of violet foam very near the exact shade of indistinct shadows that filled every corner and out of the way region beyond the amethyst-blue glow of the single lamp he'd lighted inside our bedroom. The skirt was instantly lost, even before its flight came to a floating and fluttering end. And then my blouse followed. Its tie loosened with a single tug of enormous yet gentle hands, its hidden button deftly undone, Gardner's fingers snapped sparks of uncontained electricity wherever and whenever they touched the suddenly still, breath-held flesh around my exposed hips and mid-section.

Those sparks burned. With the fury of the Hades I'd been taught to fear my entire life.

I closed my eyes. I squeezed them tight against the onslaught I could not control, but could only endure. Against the surging and welling of sultry pressure within my own body. Against the fine misting that burst and sparked in its own right, stinging, between my wide-spread thighs.

I closed my eyes and took a deep, deep breath.

And Gardner's hand moved on. To what I'd worn beneath the softness of my fluttering silks.

I struggled every morning to get into the creations he commanded I wear, and get as comfortable as it was humanly possible to be inside such instruments of sensual, sexual denial

and torture. But Gardner's hands were swift in their movements. They were sure, absolutely certain, in their results.

Gardner peeled the restrictive satin and lace away from me with an ease that both astounded and angered. Very, very slightly angered.

He set me *free*, and still I lay. My breath came in shorter and more shallow gasps, my flesh still reddened and creased from its recently released confinement. So I lay blissfully naked, delightfully naked...what Mother would no doubt call shamelessly and sinfully naked.

Waiting.

For Gardner's next touch.

For the inevitable titillation of that touch.

But he was busy. Grappling with his own jeans and shirt which, inexplicably, seemed in their simplicity and ease of fit to resist his best, most determined efforts to remove them.

Finally, he pulled impatiently.

The fine fabric of his pale shirt split with a shattering sound. Buttons, fine and delicate, shimmered with the luster of the best and most costly pearls as they scattered through the dusky light of the single, wisteria-shaded Tiffany lamp. They seemed actually to hang unaided for a startled instant, suspended as if caught by the substance of the light itself. And then they dropped. Fell. Vanished and disappeared, maybe

forever, into dusk-hued shadows upon which the bed seemed to float.

I had never accustomed myself to his attitude toward clothing.

Gardner bought only the best...permitted me to buy only the best. When he permitted me to choose and buy anything for myself.

There wasn't a discount store or off-brand item in either of our extensive wardrobes. And while he always took the greatest amount of care, exercised the utmost in patience, when removing my things, quite the reverse was true when it came to his own.

He frequently ripped his expensive shirts away in fits of passion like the present one. Leaving me with softly crisp and high-priced rags to use when polishing the lovely things I kept in my shop. Or exquisitely muted patches for the quilt I'd begun to stitch together from the remnants in a fit of outraged frugality, and guilt at the terrible and unconscionable waste.

And then he was undressed. Then the latest fine shirt became a new addition to my collection while his jeans, sturdier and not as easily torn, were cast aside in a forgotten but still wearable heap. Then he stood by me, over me, for another of those fractions of a startled second that seemed to last all the way into forever, before he came to me. Before he joined me, lay down beside me on

sheets the color of dark wine, sheets made of shimmering satin revealed when he cast his half of the overlying covers quite rudely aside.

If he could be and often was, brutality itself in the course of giving his sexual instruction, if he could inspire full and unmitigated agonies of suffering and need and impatience with his slightest touch, Gardner could just as easily be exactly the opposite. As he was in this circumstance, he could just as readily be the soul of tender and gentle masculine kindness.

Lying beside me, the midnight curling of his hair a delicious counterpoint to the rich ruby of the pillowcase across which it spread in uninhibited abandon, he smiled lazily. At me. And his eyes were lazy as well, sultry in smoke-hazed darkness. His eyes were dreamy. Misted with the essence of faraway they were simply...breathhtaking.

Very slowly, he reached for me.

There was no reason for me to flinch. Not with the look of soft and restful adoration I saw in his gaze now...not with no signal at all of the other gleam, the wickedly calculating one I knew all too well. The sparking, sparkling gleam of playfulness that usually...*always*...preceded one of our more active and adventurous sessions.

There was no reason to flinch. And I did not.

I simply smiled my welcome. Smiled my

invitation. And in response, moving a bit like a man in a star-riddled trance not unlike the strangely potent spell he'd been known to cast over me with his irresistible liquors and his mere presence, Gardner touched me. Not in his usual confident, determined way, this time.

Now he was tentative.

Almost.

His outstretched hand hovered in mid-air above me and close to me, undecided in and of itself.

His hand faded to an indistinct shade of reality as my vision blurred and swam, just one more stricken victim of the passion of hunger and need that kept rising and rising inside me. Hunger that would not stop rising and could not be convinced to stop.

I quivered.

Convulsive passion had built to enormous proportions inside me already. And it was not finished, was not even really begun.

Then Gardner's hand fell. This was no rushed hurry, no panic of need and urgency. This was more a drifting. Downward. Through air grown so languid and torrid that the heat of it threatened to liquefy it to molten, sparkling motes of pure luminescence. And to liquefy the both of us as well, through the simple act of contact.

He sighed, too, in a way not at all like his usual

self. He sighed when his fingertips finally met the mounded quiver of my breast. Closing his eyes, he cupped that mound with his hand and leaned toward it, his lips already formed into the delectable shape of an incipient kiss.

I swore I saw the rainbow flash of stricken sparks at the first instant of connection between us...the exact instant when his seeking, eager yet hesitant fingertips found my flesh at last. Or maybe it was just one more deleterious effect of the implosion as everything I was or ever had been began to cave in quietly upon itself.

He kissed me first. Then he opened his mouth. He licked slowly, very deliberately, in much the way he'd licked other savagely aroused portions of my body earlier in the day.

The effect this time was not the same. It was awesomely, intensely different...awesomely and intensely more inflammatory.

Flinging my arms wide, gasping as the sudden heat of fresh arousal scorched my lungs, scorched everything inside me to a glowing residue of scattered ash, I formed my lips into the beginning of a word.

Please.

Gardner.

Don't stop.

I didn't know which my unformed word tried to be. It might have been, could have been, any of

them. All of them. None of them. Any of about a hundred-thousand others.

Anything was possible.

Already, with my mind and thoughts spiraling irrevocably out of control, actual words no longer mattered.

Gardner's mouth closed atop my rigidly erect nipple, and he clung for a moment. Moving his head ever so gently back and forth, as if in last-ditch denial of what had long since been predestined, he stroked every bit as gently with his tongue. He laved with deceptively gentle strokes that in reality carried not a trace of gentility, or compassion in their lashing, disturbing caresses.

He clung. But only for a moment. Hardly for long enough.

"No!" My wail when he left me, when the tormenting, heated delight of his mouth left me, was a long and low one. A heartfelt groan of absolute despair.

"I have other things for you, Jean-Agnes."

I felt the tension in his body when he returned to me. When he returned in the other way, the one I really wanted.

He was stiff. In his back, his shoulders. And he was harder than I expected, painfully rigid in the swollen male flesh he pressed, brushed, brandished against my softest, most seething and

traumatized center.

At first the brandishing was as tender and non-aggressive as any of the other things he'd done since we'd dropped together into the secure comfort of our bed. At first he moved smoothly against me, the heated tip of his shaft finding with its usual remarkable skill the anxious flesh he did not for the moment disturb in any way other than by brushing. Stroking. Promising more, and more, always and incredibly more.

"Please." My voice was barely audible.

Not that it needed to be.

Gardner understood what I meant. What I begged for. Of course he understood, because it was the same thing he'd been promising for so long with every tensed and anxious line of his body. It was exactly the same yearning I could feel even in that moment, pulsing inside him. Emanating from him.

He understood. And he acted.

Moving atop me, moving not exactly slowly, but not in any kind of exaggerated or heated rush, either, he pressed more firmly against what I offered with no semblance of resistance.

He moved not lazily. Not languidly. There was too much tension in the arms with which he supported himself above me, too much desperate control in the way he still teased me with the solid nearness of him, for either lazy or languid. There

was a nearly explosive, entirely transparent need inherent in every line of him, and every move he made. He struggled to control himself. I felt it. Struggled for the last few precious seconds when any kind of control might still be possible. Seeming to very quickly bring himself to some sort of fine-honed edge, he then lingered there. Almost deliberately. Almost *painfully*.

This time the deliberately calculated, intentionally ignited suffering was mutual...was far more than something I felt merely sympathetically.

Now the gently insistent pressure that really took us nowhere and accomplished nothing was more than a dim and relatively removed sensation I felt only because the echoes of it transmitted themselves from Gardner's body into mine.

No.

This time it was so much more.

So infinitely, indescribably much.

Shivering, I licked my lips. Shuddering, I worked their parched surfaces, trying in full desperation to make a sound. *Any* sound. It didn't matter what, as long as the result was fairly intelligible, even if only to myself. If only it was, could be, faintly and remotely human. Just enough to prove to myself that I was still alive, and still retained some fragile and fading modicum of sanity.

If only to myself.

Shuddering more and then more, I tried with as much strength as I could summon to make that one single sound. And failed.

Throat, breath, lungs...all were locked brutally tight as Gardner began to sway atop me, seeming to all but instantly devolve into an all-absorbing, mesmeric trance of his own making. He swayed almost negligibly at first, the motion consisting of little more than a wildly varied series of ever-changing pressures against the outer, inflamed and terribly thirsting folds he did nothing to actually separate or penetrate. Folds he seemed to seek only to inflame and outrage more.

Wildly varied, his touches and caresses, and every so slightly deeper exploratory pressure, were indeed ever-changing.

The teasing continued for barely a moment before gravity, or desire, or his well-demonstrated lack of ability to truly resist for very long at a time such as this, got the better of him.

Groaning deep, at the bottom of his throat, he allowed himself to thrust forward at last. Only a little. But enough.

My quaking, moist and terribly aggravated folds parted.

And he slipped in. The very tiniest bit.

A shriek rose up in me. Outward it traveled. But only as far as the jagged, ragged blockage in

my throat. And there it died, had to die. There it came to its untoward and untimely end. There it continued to ache and gnaw, even long after it finished dying.

CHAPTER TEN

I couldn't scream.

Couldn't make a sound.

Couldn't *breathe* as Gardner lingered provocatively at my entrance, barely far enough into me to separate lush, over-excited and over-taxed folds that had waited long enough. That had waited far too long for ease and release. I could scarcely even think as he hovered not in and not out, waiting for something...some sort of mystical, magical sign, perhaps.

As if to provide it for him, my body misted again. Heavily. Emitting its most effervescent fog, the kind he'd never in the past been able to resist.

It proved the same this time.

"Jesus, Jean-Agnes!" His voice shook. Its tone and its sick desperation mirrored very closely the new tremor in his supporting arms that had previously been rock-steady, and unshakable.

In response, I smiled. And almost deliberately, if such an involuntary thing could ever truly be called deliberate, I began the slowly agonizing process of misting again. Misting more completely. More, infinitely, enticingly.

Groaning anew, Gardner eased himself forward. Just a little.

The soft, resulting separation resounded in and through every single fiber of me.

It was a ripple effect...a stone dropped barely noticed into the largest of ponds. An entering and an immediate absorption that went unnoticed in and of itself, only to be followed by a long series of expanding circles of disturbance. Of sensation. Circles that in and of themselves were far broader, far more ecstatic and excited in nature than the penetration that set them into motion in the first place.

The room, dimly lit by the single wisteria-shaded Tiffany lamp, fell into utter hush. It grew utterly, expectantly silent as Gardner began his first, long glide to full depth.

Closing my eyes on the violet-mysterious fall of lamplight, I concentrated everything I had and was upon the sensation of that glide...the myriad suggestions of secondary sensation that immediately, inexorably built upon it.

Ripples in a pond.

Dust motes seemed to flick and flutter against

the backs of my eyelids as I lay motionless. I had to focus now, had to focus entirely upon the widening parting of my flesh as Gardner ever and ever, forever, continued an advance that at times...most of the time...seemed not to be advance at all, as much as my own deluded, fevered *wish* for an advance.

I felt sure they were not dust motes.

How could they be?

I felt sure enough to have sworn by everything I'd once held holy and sacred that those darting specks of brilliant, illuminated gold were in reality flashing sparks from the mounting fire Gardner ignited within me by the very act of slowly, intolerably slowly, taking me while seeming to take nothing at all.

Burning, branding unmistakably with their fever, those sparks of fire began at the outer edges of closed eyelids. Then they moved toward the center and lodged there, seeping through until they found their final, tantalizing place against the inner surfaces. I felt the sparks swirl. Felt them struggle, only to swirl again and then course outward rapidly in any and every way they could, warming as they went. *Scalding* as they brushed.

Drawing an unsteady, harsh and rasping breath, I thought I might be readying myself to say something. Again. To try to plead, perhaps, for whatever small scintilla of mercy Gardner might

be inclined to grant.

The words died unspoken. Unformed, and as completely unknown as any of the words that had died before.

My recently inhaled breath escaped again almost before I finished the process of inhalation. It escaped as a swiftly silent shimmer of breath eased, not forced, from lungs that knew the same irresistible compulsion to relax as all...*most*...of the rest of me. Though not quite all of me had received the message that it was time to relax.

My stomach had not, for sure.

It was clenched tight, clenched hard. Into a ball of worried, exhilarated anticipation.

And as for my other regions, my greedy, grasping private flesh...nothing was terribly relaxed there as of yet. That part of me persisted in dragging itself with desperate determination along Gardner's heated shaft as it continued, undeterred, its long and no longer lazy glide toward, into, the bottom of me.

I tried to aid him. Tried to pull him deeper, faster, than he wanted to go. I tried to retain every inch of him, knowing before I tried that the effort was doomed to complete, ignominious failure.

I clutched him. Tightened every aspect of myself around him. Felt the careful tightness dissolve and be defeated in very nearly the instant I achieved it...just one more victim of Gardner's

hard and hot, undeniably expert penetration.

"Relax," he grated, bending close to my ear. "All that tightness isn't going to help anything, Jean-Agnes."

He was right.

The contracting of my flesh, the deep quiver of hard rasping that resulted as he made no effort to stop what he was doing had grown painful. It had become the kind of harsh and hot scoring I could scarcely resist, even when it stabbed icy-hot tremors of sheer, unadulterated pain all the way through me. All the way into my soul.

But hadn't Gardner himself taught that pain and pleasure very often went hand in hand? That the two were not mutually exclusive and in fact were inseparable parts of the same sensation? That they very often could be, were, one and the same?

Hadn't he made that delicious and irrefutable point on more occasions than I could count? And more importantly, most importantly, hadn't I *believed* him when he'd worked to make those points? Hadn't I believed implicitly?

I shuddered. Shook, and trembled.

It was over.

Gardner found what he had sought.

Deep within, he touched some part of me that he'd touched so many, many times before. A part of me that was always surprised to find itself touched. A part that carried, to my never-ending

joy and wonderment, an infinite capacity to be touched, and to be surprised in all sorts of unexpected ways by the touching.

The warmth of him slipped effortlessly through me. Making me quiver again, though not at all in the same way, when Gardner held ruthlessly all the ground he'd gained.

He pressed himself against me.

Shoved hard into the depths of me.

The size of him, incredible size, exceptional size, was surely no larger than it had ever been before. And yet it seemed so. Incredibly so. It seemed to have grown proportionately, exponentially, to meet the growing size of the terrible desire I felt. The growing need I had to be filled to capacity. And beyond.

Gardner pinned me mercilessly, perfectly, against the silken-satin crispness of our wide bed. He pinned me exactly as he liked to do, exactly as I liked for him to do.

Lifting my hands to my shoulders, to the shimmering sheets next to my shoulders, I curled them into soft and non-resistant paws. My eyes closed, and I worked to urge them to open. Even when they protested they did not *want* to open.

"I love you, Gardner." An exhilarated, small smile fled across my lips. *I said it so easily now.* So increasingly easily, when I'd been conditioned into such tongue-tied silence by my loveless and

barren past that at first I'd been utterly unable to convince myself it would ever be acceptable or right to say such things to another human being.

Gardner regarded me in silence for a long moment. His eyes shone intense, mesmeric intense, in the discomfiting way that had without a doubt led to some of the wilder, more incredible accusations leveled at him by supposedly sane and rational neighbors. His eyes were dark and hypnotic pools, barely readable even by me. Barely readable even now, when I'd long since begun to intuit his moods, his thoughts, his every feeling.

His face was dramatic in the dim and shadowed light. Immobile and strong, it did not appear harsh. Not exactly. Rather, it...the expression he wore upon it...appeared strong. Unyielding. Inscrutable.

Yes.

That was it.

He appeared firmly inscrutable.

Uncontrollably, I shivered beneath the weight of his gaze.

I shivered, *waiting*. For what I didn't know.

"I know you love me," Gardner said at last, slowly and solemnly. "For the life of me, I've never been able to figure out why. I've never been able to understand why."

"Oh, Gardner. You..."

"No." He began to rotate his hips. Very slowly he moved within me, changing the sometimes subtle and other times outright inflammatory pressures he exerted. He changed them constantly, unpredictably, so that my stunned body and hammering heart never had the slightest chance to adjust and compensate. He just continued, and continued, the intense near-ferocity of the gaze he never moved away from my face. "You need to hear me out, Jean-Agnes."

Hear him?

I wanted to cry. Scream. Rant.

Grasping his shoulders with sweat-sodden hands, I almost did. All three.

How could it be possible for me to hear anything, recognize anything as sensible and with meaning even if I did, when Gardner was making his first moves to leave me?

Still rocking gently, still moving his hips in their maddeningly inciteful rhythm, he began the thoroughly regrettable process of pulling back. Of exiting.

"N...nooooo!" In my distress, the word lengthened to at least two syllables. Even, possibly, three. It grew, swelled, grew some more. And became a heartfelt supplication conveying every bit of my suffering. Every bit of my need for Gardner to remain as he was, where he was. Until the end of natural time, should that prove

possible.

Still retreating, he paid no attention.

"I'm not much of a catch," he murmured, his words slurring a little, slurring noticeably, as a new and almost undetectably slight tremor overtook him. "I know I'm not."

Not a catch?

Instinctively, I shook my head.

How could he think such a thing?

With his innate kindness and the never-failing gentility that both overrode and underscored even his unquestioned taste for the dramatic and the exciting, how could he truly believe that?

He knew how to treat a woman.

Even I, in my relative inexperience with matters of the world or of men, knew that...knew how desperately rare and precious such qualities were in a man.

And his looks...

Staring up at him, besotted and fascinated, I found myself quivering internally and externally at the mere sight of what fate had so unexpectedly, so fortuitously if inexplicably made mine.

Gardner was pale, of course. That was an unavoidable given of the direction his life had been forced to take, both by the constrictions his own abnormalities had placed upon him, and by the intolerances and ignorance of unthinking

neighbors who saw fit to make those very abnormalities and intolerances their business...the subject of their unfounded wrath...without any effort to understand.

His skin was alabaster. Nearly translucent. The fine network of veins just beneath its surface shone clearly visible at throat, at temples, at wrists and, when exposed, the inner bends of his elbows. His skin burned with gemstone pearlescence, touched here and there with the brilliance of rose brought on and fostered by current activity. By the seething heat of internal agitation that just naturally went along with it.

The planes of his face gleamed, sharply offset and highlighted by the night-darkness of deep-wine shadows that swept in to fill its hollows and concavities, and underscore the smooth perfection of its lines and curves.

He was a stunning man.

Stunningly spectacular, darkly spectacular.

My brow wrinkled in concentration. In anticipation as at last, almost too late for my sanity or my survival, he reached the end of his blistering, demolishing retreat. As at last, barely pausing to allow me to mumble my heartfelt gratitude, he began the descent again.

"You're a lovely man," I murmured, my words slurred. Slipping and sliding, they did some of the more impossible audible gymnastics I'd ever

heard, all the way up and then back down the scale.

Gardner made no reply. No *direct* one.

Somehow he managed to transfer all his weight to one trembling, strained arm. Somehow managed to support himself with that arm even when it looked like, seemed a near-certainty, it would never manage to hold him. Moving his newly freed hand, he changed its position up and away from the ruby-satin sheets against which it had braced itself. He moved that hand straight to the place where we'd been joined, and with it encircled the base of his shaft. He wrapped their searing length against the infinitesimally small part of his shaft that remained outside of me, using a finger and thumb to steady it. To guide it into more and ever, increasingly interesting changes in the direction and the pressures his shaft never stopped exerting. And the rest of his fingers...

He used them to torture me.

Far more, in so many indescribable and incalculable ways, than he'd ever tortured me before. With *anything*.

This was all new.

Terribly instructive.

This was something I knew immediately I would enjoy.

Breath sighed from my lungs. It slurried across

my lips, quivering in increasingly heated air that hung silent and shrouded between us. Around us. And then it reversed itself, seeming to create a new, torrid yet soft and strangely soothing breeze that washed over us and around us, that added its own furies of heat and unanswered desire to what had long since taken up residence in the hovering air.

I'd wanted to remain firm. Strong. Had made up my mind I would do those things, be those things. And so many more. Had told myself repeatedly, as often as I could, that I would not capitulate and would not allow myself to be goaded into anything even remotely resembling capitulation until *I* decided it was time.

But the new thing Gardner did to me...this splaying of his unoccupied fingers and using them to stroke tight-stretched flesh that had pulled itself to its most tissue thin and vulnerable state in the process of opening itself fully to accommodate him...

I couldn't stop myself.

Somewhere deep inside, triggered by the deadly combinations of pressure, and motion, and ethereally light stroking, another small part of me softened. Ominously.

It was a very small part at the beginning, but the softening was deadly. It was unstoppable, gaining both speed and ground. Moving almost

slowly at first, in the same widening ripples-upon-water effect I'd felt a while before, it gained ultimate speed and spread dangerously fast. Out-of-control fast.

I did my best, worked my hardest, to tighten the grasping, clasping flesh he'd already tricked into letting go.

Oh, how I tried.

But it was an effort pre-destined to failure. Because there was of course nothing I could do. Because once started, the softening and the new and more desperate misting that came as a direct result of the softening swiftly overcame me.

Very swiftly pulled me *down*.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Down, down, down.
I sank so quickly.

There was literally no chance for me to save myself. No chance to salvage even the smallest modicum of the enjoyment I so desperately needed and wanted to savor.

Once I sank into encroaching dark oblivion, I simply *existed*. In a strongly blissful state of in-between that was not entirely the present or connected any longer to the present, but was certainly, most definitively, not disconnected from anything that was happening in me or around me, either.

Gardner's movements changed subtly at almost exactly the instant I began my fall. Remaining smooth, remaining deliberate, remaining almost calculated, in that regard they gave no sign he might himself be drifting downward and downward into his own masculine version of my bottomless abyss.

And how I envied him that!

How I almost, fleetingly, resented his ability to maintain the self-control required to achieve such absolute enjoyment!

The resentment lasted only a second. Then almost immediately it was swept away. Completely lost, because I couldn't focus for more than a second or two upon anything outside myself. Resentment, or otherwise.

It was enough for me to simply drift. Enough to simply allow Gardner to continue his series of ins and outs, to simply allow my body to take its own course, well plotted and launched irreversibly, as the speed and frequency of his advances and retreats crept steadily upward.

My flesh rasped against his in those rare moments when my silken inner misting paused. It wasn't an uncomfortable feeling, wasn't at all unpleasant. It was merely a different sort of titillation, a slightly rougher one, before...always...the shimmer of my moistening resumed. And with it the swift gliding of male against female, male into female, that carried us constantly closer to the moment of complete and, I increasingly feared, permanent eclipse.

"There are so many things, Jean-Agnes. So many things..."

That Gardner would speak then, just when the moment seemed to be progressing so swiftly

beyond the point of no return, surprised me a little.

He wasn't one to speak impulsively at such moments. At any moment. He wasn't one to speak at all unless to issue some instruction or command he expected me to obey.

This, too, was something new.

And like those other, previous somethings new, this one excited as much as it intrigued and mystified. This one made me shiver anew, shake so much harder inside, with the anticipation of learning where this was likely to go...how it was apt to conclude.

"Wh...what..." Breathed hard, breathed only with the most enormous difficulty, the unfinished question whistled in the process of escaping.

"There are still so many things you have to learn about me." Only the quality of Gardner's voice, only the luminous quivering of anxiety deep and low in every word he spoke, revealed that his state very closely approximated my own. Contrary to his deliberately composed demeanor, his voice revealed an increasing inner turmoil. Increasing even during the short length of that one sentence.

Slowly, I smiled. I fixed my gaze upon Gardner's face and allowed the not at all subtle curving of it to drift across my lips.

This was indeed new.

Deliriously new.

"What don't I know?" I inquired only a little less shakily, figuring I was even at that instant learning things I hadn't known before. Like all of these new details about the softer, more subdued side of his sensual appetites.

"I don't..." Returning my smile in a way he never had before, brilliantly, his eyes sparkling and glittering with a freshly intense light of longing and yearning in their depths, he completed the latest in his series of deep-driving penetrations. And then he paused. He held his position buried at the terribly aching center of me.

He held me down.

In theory, held me his submissive prisoner.

Except that unlike most prisoners, unlike even myself when I'd endured my own intolerable immurement at Divine Serenity, I was not trying to escape. I had no desire to escape.

My body began its essential quickening again. It started to moisten in earnest...in its final, gripping stages of anticipation.

For the longest time, as our gazes locked each onto the other and held each other, Gardner didn't move.

Stalemate.

The notion flitted through my mind.

It lodged there, particularly persistent, right away becoming a softly humming throb at the

very inside of my head.

Disappointing as the pause...stalemate...was, it was nonetheless entirely incendiary.

"Gardner?"

His smile returned, a quick flicker of its former self. And with it came the first translucent beading of sweat upon the broad perfection of his forehead...the first, gleaming harbinger of what would soon follow. What would inevitably and certainly follow.

"Why do you think I don't know you now, Gardner?"

Slowly, he advanced again. "Maybe I mis...s...spoke."

"You must have meant something." My voice steadied. At least it steadied in contrast to the sudden hoarse unreliability of his. My voice rang out soft but strong and firm in the dusky-dim Tiffany light, touched not quite with a quaver of amusement and not quite with one of impatience, either.

Now I could wait.

Now that I knew I had outmatched and outlasted him in this first round, I could well afford to bide my time and let the coming paroxysm claim him first. Let his multiple shudderings, and shakings, and soon-to-be stumblings, in both voice and body, drive my own. *Fuel* my own.

"I guess I m...meant..." He exhaled a sharp,

tortured rush of breath too long held. "Can we talk about this later, Jean-Agnes? Because I..."

"Well, you started it."

I knew we wouldn't talk later.

Like so many...most...impassioned exchanges begun in the clutches of a sultry and delusional moment, this would be forgotten. It would inevitably be relegated to the heart, to be remembered and finished only there, countless times in imagination that could take it anywhere. Would take it anywhere. It would remain enshrined forever in the silent sanctity of the genuine love that resided there, alongside it.

We would not talk later.

But I didn't care.

With the increasingly frenetic, no longer slow glides of entry and exit Gardner visited upon me came a fresh rush of scalding, incinerating sensation. A fresh one, though most decidedly not a new one.

Strangely, soft as it was and far more subtle than the usual wild rush of consuming abandon, this awakening was every bit as vital, every bit as adrenaline-laden and viscerally energizing as the more uninhibited twin delights of rapture and suffering I experienced when in the throes of all that Gardner generated with his sessions of 'instruction'.

I murmured gently. Wordlessly.

I lifted my hands to twine aching fingers deep into the exceptional silk of his hair. And satisfied at once their desperate emptiness. With the grip I achieved, I tugged him close. Forced the arm he'd kept rigidly locked in order to support himself and suspend himself above me, to relax at last. To release and bend so the full wonder of his taut male body could meet the entire length of mine. So that it could proceed at once and without delay to begin to smother and subdue me.

Heat, generated between us, sprang to new levels.

Friction, resulting from the same interaction, became a dominant and overriding aspect of the connection he'd made and I'd encouraged.

I raised my legs. I lifted them up high, still spread wide and still penetrated in the rushing maddened area between, and surrounded the lean circumference of his waist. Encapsulating him within their quaking circle, I used all of their considerable strength to hold him and lock him far more tightly to me. *Into* me.

"Jean-Agnes..."

"Why do you never say you love me?"

"Didn't I just?"

Had he?

The question left me stumped. Reeling, and for the moment more unable to think than I had ever expected to be unable to do anything.

I couldn't remember.

And did it matter?

I knew he loved me. I saw the shine of it often enough in the midnight depths of his eyes...the same look of absolute and devoted adoration I had in fact seen from the first instant we'd met face to face, on that long-ago night in the deepest darkness that then had been his only safe refuge.

I knew he loved me.

So did the verbal of expression of it matter all that much?

The answer to that was a quick and resounding 'no!' as deep within me, deep beneath the secret territories awakened and enlivened by the ever-plunging touch of Gardner's throbbing shaft, a new loosening took place. As with it began the extremely urgent moistening that always came with the heightening of sensation, the mounting of eager need.

I cried out. I thought perhaps I did, though the world had turned to a mad and variegated swirl all around me. And in the confused madness of that swirling there was no way I could be sure.

My throat ached with the need to cry out, if I hadn't already.

All of me vibrated suddenly, resonant and in time with some hidden symphony I could feel but could not hear. Because of course all of that shimmering music came from inside me. It had its

genesis inside me, and as such automatically became an entirely private, entirely seductive entity whose full presence was denied even to me.

Gardner seemed to reach the limit of his endurance.

Within me, he shuddered to a stop. He halted completely, his entire golden-pale body sheened with a thin filming of sweat, his muscles and tendons trembling obviously with the new strain of the building, building, building inside, that for the moment rendered him utterly unable to do anything but hold the position he had taken. That left him capable of only holding himself as he was, buried to full extent within the welcoming, warming innermost reaches of me.

His breath rasped. Harsh and hoarse, it scored deep, burnt-crisp furrows where he pressed his mouth atop and adjacent to my ear. The sound of it grated just slightly, not an irritant but just one more added incitement to a new freshening of my own body...a new softening, and release of essence.

Tension quivered around us.

Above us.

For the longest of waiting, torrid moments the tension we ourselves generated threatened to consume us.

Then it broke.

In another of those swirling rushes that had

turned the entire universe so topsy-turvy before, tension released with a shuddering 'whoosh' I thought I literally *heard*.

In the same instant, Gardner backed away from me. He retreated from me with a terrible ripping of flesh from melded flesh, making me cry out again in utmost agony, believing myself about to be killed. Or at the very least to be left completely barren, mercilessly bereft, forever.

He plunged.

Violently plunged, reclaiming every bit of me that he'd only just reduced to waste with his departure. His body slammed onto mine and into mine, seeming ready to pulverize me.

Sweat dripped, a gleaming and glistening intermittent rain of heavy droplets, from his face to mine, his arms and chest to mine. And steam appeared now to rise, in vagrant and vaguely violet-tinted whorls and clouds, suffusing the turbulent air around us with the scent, raw and elemental, of sex. At its absolute, most utterly basic and insatiable.

"Gardner..."

He jerked. Suddenly. Spasmodically.

"Gardner?"

He jerked again. Withdrew one final time, at near-lightning speed, then made his final and most magnificent entry with just as much runaway speed.

"Gardner!"

He wasn't listening. Wasn't hearing, because he'd gone to some place far, far beyond either hearing or listening.

His jerking grew uncontrolled, perhaps even dangerous, as he lost himself and I lost myself.

Warmth flooded me...shimmering warmth, murmuring warmth, fulfilling warmth...the warmth that came from the spill of his essence into me.

Our sheets had lost their satin-cool luster and smoothness. Damp with the results of our combined straining, our sweat and our mutual exertions, the lower one had reduced itself into a tight and crumpled wad. The top one had disappeared entirely, and I hardly missed it. The temperature in our violet and lavender-lit bedroom, steamy and sultry even at the very start of this latest escapade, soared dramatically. It turned the room startlingly tropical.

With the added warmth Gardner offered, my body made its own contribution. With what flowed so magnificently from his body as he continued the thrusting and pumping motions of his hips, growing increasingly erratic as the pressure to let go completely and finish quickly warred with desire to prolong the moment, my body neared its own peak.

Like Gardner's and that of the room, my

temperature soared. Plunged by the nature of my own body, by the overwhelming needs and desires I had never been able to eradicate even in the forced isolation of my narrow past, I slipped deeper and deeper into the chasm of passions that opened beneath me. I took the ultimate plunge, searching for the bottom of the abyss from which there would never...*could* never...be return. Or recovery.

Gardner's warmth filled me. In every way, not just in the copious quantities of what he gave...*always* gave...so freely for my benefit. His warmth filled me in a myriad of other, more subtle and sensationally secret ways as well.

Gardner filled my *mind*. He filled it with a hundred-thousand memories of scintillating winter firelight radiating special crimson warmth over and through bared flesh. He filled it with memories of starlit evenings when the cold glitter of deep-winter filled skies and snow-littered grounds...when the frosts and gusts of it nipped and scorched in their own uniquely burning way. And of course he filled my mind just as succinctly with memories of fond and lovely dreams, some of them lived and realized while others waited eagerly in the wings, somewhere in a distant and barely discernable future, for their chance to soar and live.

Gardner filled me, and I reached out to him, the

meetings and smooth flowings of and in my body now reduced to sweet memory as well. The sweetest of memories. Replaced in a single heartbeat by the surging urgency of inner torrents that, even as I lay beneath him and trembled with the effort of my impending release, intensified to raging and surging oceans. Made up mostly of unleashed tidal waves.

I groaned.

"Jean-Agnes?" Gardner did not stop. Buried deeper, buried ultimately deep, he lifted his head. He lifted it up and back, and pressed the convulsing length of his shaft as hard and as far into me as was possible. Teeth gritted, heavy-corded muscles standing out in tight ridges at either side of his throat, he closed his eyes so that he could see what dear and sweet heaven only knew lay inside his mind.

I could not speak. Could only groan again. And I did so.

Gardner... his body... gave a last, mighty shudder.

A last burst of searing warmth erupted from him into me, simultaneously with a matching and very highly incendiary rushing from me into him.

The two warmths mixed.

They blended and combined, into wonderful and sensual, never-to-be-matched-or-duplicated mixtures that instantly, magically canceled out all

other needs. All other agonies except those of the new emptiness that came with releasing so incredibly much of myself, and the matching agonies of loneliness and singular oneness.

Now I sighed. I shuddered one last time, as the sensual softening of earlier became extreme with my final outpouring of moisture. And then I went limp. My body turned toneless, fundamentally useless as at last I reached the bottom of the chasm over which I'd hovered so precipitously. And found there my long-sought resting place.

I sighed as Gardner fell away from me.

Rolling to his face upon the sweat-streaked, ruby-colored sheets directly beside me, he left me to the chill of pheromone-laden air that felt raw and brisk, almost wintry cold and biting despite the heavy burden of heat common sense told me it still retained.

For a very long time the only sound in the bedroom was of breathing. Harshly expelled breathing, tortured breathing, mutual breathing. And for that same length of time there was no motion.

I was too weak to move. I was too drained, too exhausted by what had come over me and swept through me. As, I supposed, Gardner felt the same.

It took every amount of strength I had never dreamed I possessed, but finally I managed to

turn my head. Just enough that I could see him. Just enough that I could fasten my blurred and dazzled gaze upon him.

He lay face down with his hands curled into loose and ineffective fists. His shoulders gleamed softly, dewy now rather than glistening as the mounded beads of sweat sank away to nothing, then dried. And they heaved less and less rapidly as the rasp of his breathing gradually subsided.

"Gardner?"

I wanted to touch him. I wanted to brush his shoulder or catch his hair between my fingers. But of course I couldn't. I had nothing more to give to *any* effort. No more hidden strength upon which I could draw.

He didn't reply. Not with words, but with a heart-felt groan that exactly matched and perfectly complemented, my own.

"I love you, Gardner."

"I know." His voice had begun to calm. As rapidly as it always calmed following passion-wrought situations from which it seemed there could never be any possible calming. And then came the words. The ones I'd longed to hear, despite all my denials and attempted denials to the contrary. "I love you too, Jean-Agnes."

My heart twitched. It danced, skipped a few leaping and soaring beats, and in general refused to be calmed at all.

I'd known he did. But hearing him say it was something else entirely. Hearing the words was incredibly satisfying. Incredibly perfect. Hearing him say it right out loud like that made me feel...

Complete.

Yes.

For another moment the silence returned. It was as potent as before, but scarcely half as heavy. This time around it was an easier silence...a somehow brighter one that bore in its depths much more of hope, and happiness, and expectation of hope and happiness. Until Gardner spoke again, and his words brought the tension back to us a hundredfold. In an all different but no less encompassing way.

"We have to talk," he said harmlessly enough, speaking into the sheets against which he kept his face pressed.

"You know I'm willing to talk. Any time. About anything."

"We have to talk about what the hell we're going to do about this latest mess...this whole, disturbing Muriel business."

That was a letdown.

I tried not to show it, but it was. Because I'd hoped he meant we would need to talk about us...about the love we'd just declared and the new depth the declaration signified. I'd thought...

I didn't know what I'd thought. What I'd

hoped.

I knew only that I'd believed we were reaching a new level of our relationship, a more open and equal, more demonstratively tender one. Because the moments we'd just shared, the steam of passion and connection with which we'd filled them, had been different from any such moments before. In so many ways I could never count them and could not hope to name them.

I could only look back upon them with a new and torrid quivering inside my heart. Because Gardner had touched, had awakened, an all new depth inside me.

We had done it together. And we had done it all without a single drop of the mind-altering interference of the dubious liquor he kept stored in his locked, jewel-bright bottles.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Wake up, Jean-Agnes."
Gardner's voice was soft and insistent, yet urgent.

Instantly I jerked awake, up and out of a fretful and uneasy doze in which I'd been tormented by the disappointment of the question Gardner had asked in the last few seconds before he left me to slide down and down, into that unsettled state.

What were we going to do about Muriel?

Alarmed, I sat up, automatically straightening the crumpled sheets.

Dizzied by the sudden movement in my first instants of unwelcome, unwilling wakefulness, shocked by the too-abrupt shift in position that drained the blood from my head and left it light and unreliable, I shoved back the gray and writhing mistiness in which I'd been sunk.

I glanced around the room.

Nothing appeared out of the ordinary.

Nothing that would justify and explain the

sudden jolting of terror that set my body to trembling.

The Tiffany lamp burned again. It burned violet-dusky as before, but with a newer kind of shimmering light. A golden-kissed brilliance that seemed oddly unnatural, and out of keeping with the darkness of night lingering and lurking in every corner. Brilliance that seemed oddly wrong, and...very suddenly I found myself in a new place. It was a much more uncertain one, whose chief and only feature seemed to be a living and lurid, consuming crimson radiance. A radiance that burned on and on, furious at heart, filled with malice, filled with the threat of...

"My God!" My head lightened again. It spun precariously when I leaped from my bed, dragging the ruby-red top sheet along to cover my quivering nakedness. "Gardner, is that..."

He donned his jeans in the time it took me to pull myself together even that little bit. Then, tugging on a fine white linen shirt he grabbed from the ancient, antique wardrobe in the corner as he passed it by, he headed for the door. Not at a run. Not exactly. But at a quickened pace that let me know my dawning suspicion was correct. That everything was not as it should be.

"Get dressed," he said tersely. "It would appear the neighborhood mob has struck again."

"What?"

Try as I might, I couldn't find my clothing. Skirt and blouse had vanished, and I couldn't remember where they had been discarded. Or how. Or even, exactly, when. So I reached into my half of the wardrobe and seized the first thing that came to hand. It was a flowing robe. A heavy, dark-gold velour thing more suited to the frozen midst of January than to this balmy-warm June night.

"Our garage is on fire, Jean-Agnes."

"My God!" Shrugging awkwardly into the robe, I ran after him when he left the room. He was not hurrying, still, but even so I had to run at near-full speed just to keep up with him, just to follow him down the stairs. And even then I had to take them two, sometimes even three at a time.

Muriel!

Guilt assailed me.

This was all on my head, for getting too involved in her affairs. I had invited her to stay in the little apartment above that very, burning garage before I'd ever taken time to think about what I was doing. Or about the possible long-term consequences of what I was doing. And in all the excitement of being involved, I had failed to do the very most important thing of all. I had failed to consider her safety, or to do anything to rectify my error once the mob first appeared and I had realized the situation might be about to zoom out

of control again.

I should have removed her in some way.

I should have gently but firmly insisted she leave once I had the first hint that I'd made a very grave miscalculation in arranging for her to stay there. And if she died now, if she was injured in any way as a result of my naiveté and thoughtless stupidity...

But she wasn't dead.

Far from it.

She was standing in our driveway when I burst from the house still at a run behind Gardner. She stood a dozen yards outside our side door, her nightgown a white and fluttering, peculiarly old-fashioned blur around her ankles, her arms folded tightly across her chest against the chill of a night that wasn't in any way chill at all.

"I heard something," she said as soon as she saw us.

With her hair uncombed and standing out straight in every direction around her tense face, with her feet bare of their customary sensible oxfords, she looked not at all like a sturdy, nearly middle-aged farm wife. She looked more like the terrified young girl she had been when all of this first started with Doris' death way back when.

"I was reading and I heard something," she explained, nodding toward the garage.

The back of it was ablaze. The side that faced

the tree-clotted back regions of the property that had been Gardner's before marriage made it *ours*. The side that faced the vast, dark emptiness of the tree-filled park beyond the line of trees that marked our property's end.

"Thank God I heard a noise." Muriel moved closer to me at the same time that Gardner moved away. "If I hadn't, I might have...might have..."

"Gardner!" I brushed Muriel aside a little roughly, and made a move to follow him again. "Gardner, where are you going?"

Muriel caught my arm. "You can't go in there, Jean-Agnes." She held me back. It's too..."

"Gardner!"

But he'd already jerked open the small door at one side and, incredibly, gone inside. He'd vanished as if without a trace into a place where darkness still held supreme and flames... *smoke*... had not yet found their way. *Yet*.

"Gardner!" My scream was horrible. Even to my own ears it resembled nothing as much as the scream of a dying woman...dying in her heart. Or a madwoman, pushed beyond all limits of endurance into a black and featureless hole of her own, a hole of a very, very different kind.

Tears coursed down my cheeks, Momentarily they blinded me, momentarily made the lurid dance of gold and crimson and scarlet at the garage's far side seem to multiply by a million.

They made the gnawing glare of leaping flames seem to leap even higher...to flare so terribly much brighter.

"What was he *thinking*?" I tugged against Muriel's grip. I tugged harder, and this time almost managed to break free.

"Don't." Catching me with every bit of her strength, she clung so tightly to me that it hurt. Physically.

"You don't understand. Muriel, I have to..."

"It's not worth the risk. I won't let you take that kind of risk."

"I love him!" Struggling harder, struggling almost with the strength commonly associated with the madwoman I had very nearly become, I could not pull my tear-streaked gaze away from the garage. I could not look away from the horror of the leaping glare at its back, or the gaping open doorway that seemed even more horrific, even more endlessly deep and menacing as it grew darker in contrast to the soaring of hellish light from the garage's back.

"I know you do." Muriel did not relax the pinching punishment of her grip. "But there's no way I'm ever going to let you..."

The garage door opened. Not the small one through which Gardner had entered. This was the big door, the main door at the front, and it seemed to take forever to rattle upward noisily on ancient

chains.

"Gardner!" My shriek rose above even the moaning roar of escalating flames as they leaped suddenly into the night, suddenly onto the garage roof, suddenly and unstopably into full, consuming and greedy life as they began their inexorable creep through a million or more unseen chinks in the old wooden structure. The sudden acquisition of new fuel, dried and ancient fuel set the fire to dancing, a whirling dervish of ravenous color, and crackle, and unholy, roaring radiance.

This time I screamed genuinely. Fully.

From inside the garage came a roar. Not of flames or their escalation.

"Gardner?" Wide-eyed, still under Muriel's stringent control though I had gone too limp with shock and terror to struggle, I looked around at her face. I looked around to question, to seek answers I already knew she would never be able to supply "Why would he risk everything..."

Low and black, a shape materialized from the widening gap of the opening garage door. Menacing, it rushed straight at us with a low and snarling roar, not unlike the consuming roar of the flames. It rushed straight at us for a heart-stopping second or two or three, swooshing past with terrifyingly little room to spare, in the exact second when Muriel, just that smallest amount more responsive than I, pulled me farther back

and out of harm's way.

"Why the hell would he *do* that!" I shrieked in new frenzy as Gardner's black Jaguar turned sharply, still rocketing backward with its usual low and ever so vaguely terrifying snarl. "Why the *hell* would he...are you insane, you bastard?" I tried to shake free of Muriel's grip as the car backed precipitously onto pristine grass of the side lawn, well out of harm's way.

Muriel never released her grip upon me. "...called 911," she screamed into my ear.

"My God!" Momentarily distracted, I turned on her. "Are you crazy? Are all of you people just damned, criminally crazy! How could you...why would you...damn it all to hell, Muriel..." Far off in the distance and growing ever closer, steadily closer, sirens wailed in the night.

I barely gave them my attention.

"How the hell could you just stay inside a Goddamned burning building, just to...and *Gardner*! How the hell could he forget about everything just to save a car? A *car*, of all the things on God's green earth!"

Wordlessly, Muriel held up the object she held in the hand that didn't clutch me.

A cell phone. "What are those *people* doing?" She leaned close to my ear in order to be heard above the mounting roar of flames consuming everything in their path. And above the warble of

sirens arriving a moment and a half too late, arriving after the possibility of anything being saved had been reduced to nothing and the certainty of destruction rendered absolute.

I turned away from the mesmerizing sight of Gardner stepping out of the Jaguar. I turned to look where Muriel pointed, with a white-knuckled hand that still clutched her phone.

I turned toward the street. And saw a milling clot of neighbors. Our *nearest* neighbors, always the first of the contingent to arrive at the scene of anything even remotely interesting.

My heart shriveled

They had gathered and were still gathering, with more speed than usual. Speed enough to alarm. They hadn't come close yet. They still hovered at the opposite side of the street, clustered in a growing tight knot beneath ancient trees that shaded the street and the property of our nearest neighbors on that side...the intrusive and always inquisitive Crimmins.

They were staring. Watching. As intently as they'd ever stared or watched, thinking heaven only knew what and planning heaven didn't want to know what as they talked together behind raised hands, all the while doing their best to look like they weren't whispering at all.

In the process they, all of them, managed only to look glaringly, obviously, like they were doing

nothing *but* talking. And staring. I stifled a groan.

There was going to be trouble. A certainty that was only accentuated by the pointing of several fingers and intensifying of many of the glares as Gardner advanced toward Muriel and I across the stretch of grass that separated us.

Despite bare feet and a broadly, magnificently bare chest that made me catch my breath and feel like a little of the leaping fire had found its way into me and flared to vivid life, he looked coolly dapper. As nonchalant and unconcerned as if he wore his best tuxedo and had just stepped out of a limousine prepared for a sedate night at the opera.

On the surface, not counting the wild excitement I saw in his eyes when he moved closer, he looked like he hadn't noticed the flames or the clot of neighbors. Striding briskly, he looked straight ahead, Looked at Muriel and I, and no one else.

"What are those people *doing*?" Muriel hissed again close to my ear, her attention now riveted as fully as mine on Gardner.

"Welcome to the neighborhood," I replied, infuriated me all over again by the look on his face. More than simply the look of a man who had not a care in the world, this was a new glint. A new glimmer in his eyes. A deeply penetrating shard of never-before-seen brilliant illumination radiating from some deep-within place I'd never

suspected.

He was *excited* by this!

I wanted to spit.

How could he be excited by the growing activity that boded nothing good, nothing constructive? How could he ignore the terrible significance of the shouts of running firefighters and the crackle of radios from almost every one of the responding vehicles? How could he possibly fail to be alarmed by the not-so-distant skulking crowd of robe- and slipper-clad neighbors who'd turned out full force at last for their favorite, peculiar kind of enjoyment. *Gloating* enjoyment. Though even for them, this marked a new low.

This interest seemed more focused than at any time before. It seemed...*was*...oddly intent.

They'd had something to do with this.

I knew they had. The increased, increasingly noxious, quivering in my stomach told me they had. Just like they'd been responsible for any number of smaller and less destructive but by no means less upsetting episodes during the months since I'd first arrived in the neighborhood.

I thought I was going to strike Gardner as soon as he came within range.

But the urge died a quick and barely noticed death as soon as he *did* come within striking range. Because what I'd missed in my initial fascination with and focus upon the insane new radiance

surrounding him, was another look he had about him.

His jaw was set, his chin jutted forward the way it did every time, on the somewhat rare occasions when, he made up his mind about something so completely that no amount of persuasive argument would ever change it.

Gardner looked as grim and unyielding as I'd ever known Gardner to look grim *or* unyielding. About anything.

"Are you all right?" he asked Muriel, directing all of his attention and concern straight at her.

"Just peachy," she replied

"Oh, Muriel," I mourned. "You've lost all your things."

Smiling a little, she looked quite a bit less strained and like a wild woman than when I'd first encountered her in the flame-lit driveway. "I have all my important things," she said, and held up her oversized valise of a purse. "As for the rest..." She actually laughed, a little bit shakily. "That was one more reason I came to Denver. I wanted to fix myself up. Get myself into something a little more...stylish." Here she paused to slant me one of her inquiring looks. "Maybe you can help me with that, Jean-Agnes."

I hesitated. Looked at Gardner, pleading with my gaze for help.

He bought all my things. The largest percentage

of them, anyway.

He claimed, perhaps correctly, that I had too little taste and imagination, and too much conservative brainwashing working against me.

"Jean-Agnes will be glad to help," he said, and smiled at Muriel.

I wanted to scowl at him. I *did* scowl.

And he simply turned his smile to me.

"How the devil am I supposed to know anything about..."

His smile only turned more brilliantly wide. "I have faith in you, Jean-Agnes. You'll figure it out."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"I couldn't believe what happened."

Near despair, I looked at Muriel when she said it. Searching for some meaning in the words, only to find, on the surface, anyway, none at all. And I didn't pursue the matter. For the moment, it was enough that the shopping trip was finished. And so, for all useful purposes, were my aching feet.

For someone I'd mistaken for a dowdy and down on her luck ranch wife in the big city for the first time in years, Muriel had proved exceptionally finicky and particular in matters involving clothing. She'd tried on exorbitantly priced suit after exorbitantly priced suit and impossibly expensive dress after impossibly expensive dress, only to reject them, one after the other. She'd driven me and a few dozen sales clerks to the brink of utter madness with her contentions that this suit was 'frumpy' and the next lovely dress 'too daring'.

I'd despaired of her ever finding anything

acceptable. But of course she had. She'd found acceptable things in abundance, and spent sums I never would have imagined that day...*yesterday*?...when she'd stood on my front walk and said something about finding 'a cheap, clean hotel'. She'd spent sums that even I, growing marginally used to Gardner's fortune and the ease with which he expected me to spend it, found astonishing.

I'd been just about to resort to tears of exhausted frustration when, laden with so many packages and parcels that we could scarcely carry them all between us, she had suggested stopping at one of the open-air cafes along the Sixteenth Street mall for drinks.

I didn't drink, of course.

I'd never learned how.

Never had the ambition or the desire to drink, other than communion wine. And of course the intriguing green liquor Gardner only halfway forced upon me from time to time. Just those two, and only on the very different occasions when each was strictly called for

So when Muriel once again proved herself a creature of infinite surprises...when she flagged down a hurried waiter and ordered a pair of extra-large martinis served-extra dry in one of the most imperious tones I'd ever heard, including Mother when she was in an ordering mood...I didn't

know what to say. Nor did I know exactly what to do when the drink was placed before me, huge and impossibly sleek in its paleness, fresh from the bar and still dripping moisture.

"What do you mean," I asked nervously, afraid she might actually give me an answer and that it would be one I would most decidedly *not* want to hear, "you didn't believe? What didn't you believe?"

"Drink up!" she urged cheerily, lifting her glass toward me.

I lifted mine though I wasn't quite certain of the ritual implied, and met hers as seemed to be expected, with a ringing clink of crystal touching crystal.

I took a sip. And choked, blinking sudden hot and suffering tears from my eyes as I set the unappetizing thing back down. Quickly.

"I was talking about those crazy people last night. Of course. What was the deal with them, anyway?" Along with her dowdy and downtrodden appearance, Muriel seemed to have shed a lot...*most*...of what I'd previously viewed as her meek and subservient attitude.

She was a new woman.

And how I envied her that!

There were times, *lots* of times, when I'd wished I could achieve a transformation like it myself.

"You have to understand a few things about life

in our neighborhood, Muriel."

"Not that old poppycock about vampires roaming the streets of Denver again?"

My eyebrows went up. They practically shot off the top of my head. "So," I said, instantly amazed that I could sound so perfectly normal when what was going on inside me was anything *but* normal. "You've heard about that?"

Muriel took another large sip of her martini, made a face, then decided, apparently, that she didn't much like the taste of it either. Setting it on the table nearly at arm's length, she made another face, directed at me this time, across its extra-wide rim. "As I recall, the neighbors were up in arms years ago, when Doris and I were girls. There were several different bits of idiocy making the rounds. My father tried to keep the sordid details from the two of us, of course. I remember him telling Mother there was no need for little girls to be hearing that kind of stuff." Briefly, pausing, she smiled. Almost to herself. "How Doris and I chafed at that part about 'little girls'! We thought we were *so* sophisticated and grown up." She grew serious again. "And of course there was no way Daddy could keep the details from us. Not with the neighbors and that crazy Prof so bound and determined we were *going* to hear, and *going* to join them in their vendettas. The whole ridiculous business about drove Daddy wild. As I

recall, he spent most of his days in complete opposition to everything the rest of them said. Very *loud* opposition at times."

I sat forward. I sat up and folded my arms together at the edge of the tabletop in a way I was only barely beginning to feel comfortable and relaxed enough to do. "I didn't know anyone ever went against the rule of the mob."

Pressing her lips tight together into a thin and furious line, Muriel nodded. She nodded very emphatically. "Oh, yes, Ma'am, they did. My daddy knew it was ignorant nonsense. And he had the sense to refuse to take part in it. Any of it. He always said he figured people had a right to be whoever they were, and whatever went on inside their own houses was nobody else's business."

I nodded.

Those were my sentiments exactly. After a lifetime of repressed existence, of stringent rules and people demanding I obey implicitly even in the rare moments of my own privacy, hearing her say it straight out, I decided I liked this woman. I liked her tremendously. And I vowed then and there to do anything...*everything*...in my power to help her solve the dark, enduring riddle of her sister's murder.

"The neighbors did their share of coming after us, of course," Muriel continued, seeming unaware that I had left her there for a moment or

two. "I figure they were just about as spiteful and ignorant back then as they are now."

I nodded again.

That made quite a lot of sense.

"They set about making life pretty miserable at times. I remember one woman shoved my mother in the supermarket and almost knocked her down. And there was Prof."

"Yes," I said thoughtfully. "Prof. You've mentioned him before. A teacher at your...at Doris' school, right?"

"And one hell of an ignorant fool, too." Muriel agreed. "I still find it hard to believe a man who was a teacher could do such things..." Stopping, she rolled her eyes and didn't go on.

She didn't need to. Because I could believe.

Or could I?

I couldn't be sure any more. Something seemed to click in my memory. Deep in my subconscious that had prodigious capacity to store sometimes endless quantities of small and seemingly irrelevant items, I thought two somethings clicked together. Two very, very small somethings I knew I should be able to see and identify, but which continued to elude me. For the moment, anyway.

I knew I had a stupefied look on my face...knew it for certain when Muriel gave me a thoroughly puzzled look.

"Where on earth have you spent your life, Jean-

Agnes?" she demanded tartly. "In some kind of *convent*, somewhere?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. I did." I tried not to let offense ring too loudly in my voice.

Muriel looked only mildly shocked.

"And I have to admit, it probably wasn't the best decision I've ever made. Not that it was mine to make in the first place, you understand." Shuddering, I thought of my own father.

He'd been intolerant. Set in his ways. Overbearing, and completely ruthless about putting away from himself anything he thought might complicate his life."

"I was one of my father's worst inconveniences," I murmured.

"Inconveniences?" Muriel looked like she understood completely. And didn't want to understand anything.

Now it was I who nodded. "Like an unwelcome daughter. Who was in the way from the instant of her conception. Who had to be put out of sight as soon as it was humanly possible to put her out of sight. Forever." Hoping with all my heart to avoid the explanations I feared Muriel was about to demand, I grabbed up my discarded drink and, having decided even foul-tasting fortification was better than no fortification at all, took an enormous and eye-searing gulp.

"I guess that explains a lot," Muriel mused,

toying with the stem of her glass. "A former nun married to a reputed vampire. With the body of a long missing, murdered girl turning up in her garden..."

"You forgot my great-uncle Thaddeus."

Maybe the harsh tasting substance in my glass wasn't so terrible after all.

It certainly did ignite a warmth at the pit of my stomach. A more than welcome warmth. So I took another swig. A marginally more cautious one.

"Your great-uncle was gay," Muriel pointed out. "Was he not?"

I inclined my head. In agreement, and no longer from any need to pray the way Mother had intolerantly demanded at the simple mention of such things, for salvation of hell-bound souls like Thaddeus who participated in what she disapproved as completely unacceptable behaviors.

"I can hardly imagine a gay man doing the things that were supposed to have been done to my sister. I hardly imagine *Thaddeus*, gay or otherwise, doing such things."

Something else clicked into place inside my head. Something else added itself to the picture that was putting itself together there.

"I thought you said you didn't know Thaddeus? I thought you said your parents..."

Muriel hid a smile. She hid it badly. "Thaddeus

Teagarden was a kind and compassionate man. Whenever things got too bad for me at home, whenever things centered a little too much on Doris and her exceptional talents, I used to sneak into his rose garden. It was a good place to hide. And have a cry. And then one day Thaddeus came across me doing just that." She smiled again. "We had some long conversations out there among the roses. So if he'd had any kind of evil designs on young girls..."

Nodding, I understood this, too.

I'd been a child myself the one brief time when I'd known my great-uncle's kindness. And it was genuine kindness. The kind that couldn't be faked, because it was kindness of the heart, the kindness of compassion and caring.

"I really had only one problem once Thaddeus learned my secret." Muriel frowned. "He kept insisting he should talk to my parents. He kept wanting to tell them they were treating me terribly and needed to mind their ways. It was all I could do to talk him out of it."

"You should have let him."

She shrugged. "I was a kid. And I was scared. I was doing something I'd been forbidden to do, and my parents were *not* going to react kindly." Shrugging she did not allow her gaze to connect with mine. "I couldn't have dealt with the fallout."

I was silent. Accepting the validity of

everything she said, even while I couldn't identify with it. Having never had anything approaching a 'normal' childhood.

"I was already fragile," Muriel added, as if that explained everything.

"So you do understand what's going on with the neighbors, then." I reached for my glass.

My martini was gone.

It had vanished.

My head spun, and I wished thirstily for another. Yet did not quite dare to ask for it.

"*Understand?*" Muriel picked up her empty glass and stared morosely into its olive-littered depth, looking like she too felt a burning need for more. And had no more courage than I to ask. "I will never understand any of *that*, Jean-Agnes."

I nodded again. "So I guess my next question should be what are we going to do about it?"

Muriel looked thoughtful. "Find the killer?"

"If the police couldn't do that 'way back when the evidence was fresh..."

She shook her head. "There were things the police never knew. Things they..."

"Things?" My heart stammered a little inside my chest. "What things?"

"...refused to hear, or to consider." Sighing heavily, Muriel signaled our waiter.

With a sense of most sweet and blessed relief, I saw that she'd extended two fingers. For more of

the martinis that, once consumed and settled comfortably into my belly, weren't really half bad at all.

"What things?" I asked, gratified for the interruption and yet resenting it at the same time.

"Our crazy neighbors had opinions about everything. They were so certain a serial rapist had grabbed her. Strangled her."

"Well, the reports I've read said there *were* a number of girls."

All the reports. Lots of reports.

I'd made it one of my special projects of the previous long winter to study events that had long ago led to the body of a girl being buried in my rose garden. I'd devoted no small amount of time to those yellowed accounts. And if I'd been confused by some of it, a *lot* of it, I'd gleaned one very important, one immutable and inescapable fact.

Seven girls had been raped and strangled within a period of just a little over eleven months. And Doris Burton's disappearance had come right in the middle of the spree.

But Muriel was shaking her head. "Doris didn't fit. She never fit. Daddy saw that, and so did Mother. Even I could see it. But the police?" She shook her head more vehemently. "They couldn't see it. *Wouldn't* see it."

"I don't understand." Frowning, I leaned

forward a little. "I read all those reports from back then, and they all said..."

"Well, for one thing, the serial rapist had a habit of leaving his work on display. Under bridges and along pathways, places where he could be sure they'd be found quickly. None of his victims just up and permanently disappeared the way Doris did."

"I see." And I did. That was one of the things that had nagged at me when I'd undertaken my study of those reports. Nothing had ever stated it as succinctly as Muriel had just now. But the information had been there. I'd had it right in front of my eyes and hadn't seen it...hadn't had the wits to put it all together. *As, apparently, neither had the police.*

My second martini was half-consumed. I had no idea how that could be, and a softly sibilant shudder raced the length of my spine. Up and down, and up and down. "Doris didn't fit," I agreed.

"Daddy was certain somebody from right around here had grabbed Doris." Muriel looked triumphant. As triumphant as anyone could ever look upon winning a convert. "Daddy always said someone we knew was responsible, because Doris would never have gone along with someone she didn't know. She was always suspicious of strangers. Always."

"But the police didn't believe that."

Muriel looked annoyed. "They looked and looked. Trying to prove it was Thaddeus who'd done it, even though there was never a stick of proof. And then when they couldn't prove it, they just gave up. Called it a cold case, and that was the end of it. As far as they were concerned. And then they caught the serial rapist." She paused to give me a questioning look.

I nodded. "He died a few years ago in prison. Stabbed by another inmate."

"Well, good for him." Muriel looked pleased. Very, very grimly pleased. "That's one less piece of scum to trouble this earth. But it doesn't change the fact that he *didn't* kill Doris, and whoever did is still out there."

"If he's not dead too."

"He's not." Once again Muriel looked grim. And determined enough to chill my blood and make me feel guilty even if I'd never done anything to her sister, or to anyone else.

"So what are you going to do now?"

"Find a hotel," came her immediate reply.

And I relaxed.

I liked her. All she'd said, all she'd told me, had made me like her and admire her. But I'd felt obligated to her, and I didn't like that. I didn't want to feel I should be expected to offer a place to stay inside the private sanctuary of our house after

she'd suffered such a fright and had all of her things destroyed while a guest on our property.

I felt even guilty for my relief when she spoke again.

"I don't want to intrude on your hospitality any more than I already have. So I'm going to find a hotel. A *nice* one. The kind of place I'd never have imagined staying before. And then as soon as I'm settled in, I mean to check up on my sister's grave."

Relieved still, smiling in a way instinct warned might be too bright and sunny, I lifted my hand and signaled the waiter for myself.

I wanted another martini.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*F*reedom.

It was such a sweet release. And it was a new beginning. Almost of a kind neither of us had known before. Ever.

Muriel hadn't been any sort of real trouble. Most of the time she'd been in our vicinity, she'd stayed pretty much to herself.

Still, she'd been there.

I'd known she was there, and the simple idea had put a serious kink in my willingness to participate in any of Gardner's more outrageously creative forms of sexual activity. Even in the private sanctuary of our own well-sealed and private quarters. Because my screams and trills of delight, frustration, and sometimes impassioned anger during such episodes might carry too clearly.

Because I was, not probably but surely, still just slightly repressed. And embarrassed by my own enjoyment of sex and all that went with it.

And of course I missed those very special visits to our secret midnight garden...to the place where once, eons ago as it now seemed, I had lost my prized virginity, and where I felt with every subsequent visit that I was losing it all over again.

As Gardner and I slipped out the back door onto the small porch that directly faced the corresponding porch of what had been my great-uncle Thaddeus Teagarden's house, the feeling of freedom intensified. To all but unbearable levels. And it increased again, a million-fold, when we left the confines of the porch behind...when we slipped noiselessly down the old wooden steps into cool and dewy nighttime just beyond, nighttime that still bore faint and acrid traces of the destruction some unknown person had wreaked upon our garage.

Trying not to shudder at the faint memory of that bitter-dark odor, I clung tightly to Gardner's hand.

"Are you nervous, Jean-Agnes?"

"I..." It was no use trying to hide anything from him. I had no idea why I'd ever thought I could, when the excitement swelled within me until it had to be visible even under cover of darkness. And the resulting ripples of shudders that went along with it...

How could I have been so innocently naïve?

"You haven't been nervous before," he

murmured, breathless in his hurry.

Inside, I quaked with laughter.

If only he knew.

I quaked harder.

"You *are* nervous!" Pulling lightly, firmly, at my arm, he coaxed me to a stop in the shadow of the tall and concealing hedge that marked the very perimeter of our most private sanctum of sanctums.

This time my laugh *did* escape. This time it hung between us, an unsteady rift in air that a fraction of a second ago had been placid. Serene all around us. All above us. "What else would you expect?" I inquired, my voice also a tremor of breathless anticipation as I leaned toward him in sudden urgency, instantly impatient to proceed.

His responding laughter carried none of the qualities of mine.

Running his hands along the thrill-prickled skin of upper arms left bare by the strapless top of my whitely virginal evening gown, he murmured soft approval.

He preferred me to wear white during our moonlit sorties...preferred long and floating things softly agleam with lace and the smallest of most subtle crystals. Things made of deep and lustrous fabrics that would catch the moon's blue gleam and amplify it...lovely things that could make him as well as me believe virginity was once

again an issue. Once again a sacrifice to be endured by me and claimed in full victory by him.

Tonight's gown was a crystalline affair, more tulle than satin, more floating wisp of dream than gleaming, moon-cold glimmer against the black-velvet darkness of concealing night. And I was bare beneath it. Bare, with thrilled skin and quivering flesh. Bare, with gossamer skirts floating around my ankles, swishing and swaying with memory of recent movement as I pulled up short next to Gardner, no more than a few feet from the downward sweep of wide and white marble stairs.

Like my gown and the deliriously energized flesh it exposed around and beneath it, the steps seemed disembodied in the depth of pure night. They seemed no more substantial or palpable than the quivering drift of the moon's thin light.

I shivered again. Not caring if he noticed now, or commented.

His hands continued to stroke. They continued to run silken paths along the length of arms that seemed almost to steam beneath the fury of their warmth. They ran up and up, to shoulders that felt like they began to *glow* in response to his touches.

"What do you have to be nervous about?" Gardner laughed softly. Enticingly.

And then it was my turn to laugh. More nervously than ever. "How about everything?"

"What?" More laughter. "You don't trust me?"

"Tr...trust..." Shivering again, harder than before, I stammered too. "Trust has nothing to do with it."

"I beg to differ with you." Gardner pulled me close. Closer.

He pulled me tight and flat against the full length of him. Making me feel like some silly, frail, fainting heroine in some impossible late-night romance movie.

Which might not be so far from the truth.

I definitely felt quivery with my back arched splendidly backward, my head lolling back upon a neck that seemed unwilling or unable to support it, with my throat exposed and my feet no longer completely connected to the short stubble of green-scented grass beneath them.

Definitely quivery.

Verging upon old-fashioned swoon.

"Trust is entirely the issue," he persisted before lowering his face to my throat.

His breath burned against the throbbing pulse point at its side. I felt the soft scrape of his teeth, altered perfectly so that they lay in both shape and length somewhere between the normal teeth they had once been and the full-blown fangs of the vampire so many still believed him to be. His lips made a softly unnerving rippling against that throbbing pulse, as if he was about to speak again. In some outrageously intolerable, inflammatory

way, no doubt. Or maybe was about to...

Shiver met shimmering shiver inside of me and out at that first light rasp of his teeth against the offered column of my throat.

This was a little game we played, Gardner and I. This feint and evade, tease and respond, advance and retreat with hammering pulse and mounting anticipation. It was one of the ways...the very chief and most effective way...we stoked the fires in each other. The fires that lay prematurely banked and in need of only the slightest addition of fuel or whispered air to ignite into raw and towering blaze not unlike that which had leveled our garage.

And it was a little private joke, too.

It was an acknowledgement of the lurid vampirism of which he'd been so long suspected and accused, as well as a tacit mutual admission that we, the both of us, found the entire concept of vampirism to be unutterably, arousingly sexy.

Scintillating warmth filmed my skin as he stroked tenderly, alternating between tongue and sensually disturbing teeth. Scintillating warmth that at once sent exploratory rays of itself prowling deeper into me. Warmth that set an entirely different and self-sustaining form of aroused fire to flickering between my bared, trembling and already fluid thighs.

I groaned. And soft as it was, more a suggestion

of sound than any actual sound itself, it was exactly the catalyst Gardner had awaited before setting the next phase of his plan in motion. Though I had no idea if it was indeed a plan...if he'd put some degree of conscious thought into what he would do to me and with me or, as was more often the case in such matters, if he'd simply decided to run with the passions of the moment. If he meant simply to allow his amazingly fertile imagination free reign so he could do whatever came to him. Whatever seemed right and appropriate to him.

Releasing me, he left me to the bitter chill of a night that was not actually bitter or cold in any way, not in the traditional meaning of bitter and cold. Taking my hand, surrounding it with one of his in his warmly encompassing way that made me *feel* as fragile and clingy as the old-time romance heroines, he tugged lightly. Gently.

He urged me with glances and touches, my enchanted feet scarcely skimming the dew-moist prickle of grass, to the wide dream of descending marble steps.

The air was different in our hidden garden. It was not fragrant, for this was a garden without flowers. Without blossoms of any kind, because they had been removed long before. In the time when Gardner's illness had rampaged unchecked and uncontrolled, when the lush perfume of the

roses that had once grown there had been a constant irritant...a constant source of aggravation and suffering. This new air, special air, was more moist than fragrant, more redolent of the vastness of greenery that grew around and below the garden's marble benches and heaven-seeking pale columns.

The air in the hidden garden hung heavy with promise. With the lingering vibrato of everything Gardner and I had done there....everything we had been there, and meant to each other there. Everything we had yet to be.

Marble steps fledted swiftly past beneath our feet. Their marble firmness seemed little more than the breath of a scarcely registered instant as I...we...swept down, and left them behind.

The avenue between soaring marble columns lay wide before us, and shadowed. Those slim and towering monoliths lining its length seemed actually to bow and waver, to recede coyly as we rushed headlong toward the still barely seen region at the farthest, darkest end of our garden...toward that which, always and ever, was our one and singular goal.

The altar.

Delight prickled across my skin. Mingled with the faintest dread of perpetual uncertainty.

The altar. Our altar. *My* altar.

This was the place where I'd lost my too-long-

held virginity. It was the place where Gardner had lost his as well, years before and under somewhat spectacularly different circumstances. It was where both of us had lost it again and again, on a hundred following occasions.

Heat rose within me, as did the electrification of anticipation as we ran forward, still connected one with the other, my virginally sparkling gown floating dreamlike around my ankles.

Ahead, the low bulk of white stone glimmered into view. It shone pale against a background of dark vegetation and the dark-stone wall that supported it, distinguishing itself from the less solid and more ethereal regions all around. And as the image of the altar gelled and firmed before us, so did the singing invitation it sent out soundlessly to me.

"Hurry."

Gardner didn't need to urge me twice.

Gathering the front of my starlit skirt up with my free hand, I lifted its cloudy folds away from my feet so I wouldn't trip in my haste. And I *hurried*, with drifts of tulle floating behind me in the wind of my own passage. My hair, worn longer now than in the first troubled days after I'd left Divine Serenity, drifted deliciously free against my shoulders. It brushed stinging-soft tendrils across my flesh, awakening it even more. Enticing it even more.

Still Gardner tugged.

Still, all but running, he urged without use of words or sounds.

So I lifted my skirt higher. I dragged in deep breaths of redolent night air, my lungs tight already and growing unresponsive to the demand to expand as excitement...anticipation and steaming greed for what was soon to happen...rose. I lifted it almost to my knees and plunged ahead, into waiting darkness. I plunged with Gardner by my side. The only man who had ever enticed me into such reckless flight.

Tall and slender, the marble columns of the long avenue's edge continued to seem to bow before us. Faintly aglitter in rays of trapped light from the still-rising full moon, they acknowledged the superiority of our right to possess this place. And then they seemed immediately to sway back and away from us. As if appalled by the seething *heat* of our need. And what they did behind us, what reaction they suffered as a result of our wake and our emotions, I did not know. Did not care.

I focused every bit of myself, every secret and hidden thought, upon the objective that loomed ahead, swimming with every forward step into clearer and even clearer view.

The altar beckoned.

In response my heart, always a sucker for exactly such infernal beckonings, gave a wild and

hot leap.

Such delights awaited me there.

I found myself tugged again, tugged harder. This time the tug came as much from somewhere inside myself as from the hand clutching mine...Gardner's hand and his radiating heat pulling me forward. Forward, and forward, and forward, until finally we pulled to a stop within arm's length of the white slab of marble. And when we did, as we did, he no longer contented himself with a mere holding of my hand. Nor did he settle for any mere silken stroking of hands along my upper arms and shoulders.

This time his hands were firm. And they were hot. Enough to sizzle to iridescent steam wherever and whenever they met my night-chilled, passion-deluged flesh. This time he held me in a way that made it clear he would tolerate no pulling away.

Gardner captured me, more than I'd ever before been captured.

When he pulled me close to the broad warmth of his chest, I tilted my head back. I wanted to see his face. His expression. But the most I could see was the *suggestion* of his expression. I could barely see the glimmer of dark amidst the still darker darkness of our garden.

Even so, imagination's eye painted a very clear picture for me, of the sparking and sparkling passion I felt more than saw through the pall of

night that now lay completely over us, closing us off from everything else in the world.

And then Gardner kissed me.

To put it that way was hopelessly simplistic. Because nothing was ever simple when Gardner kissed me.

He had a disturbing ability to send me reeling. An overwhelming capacity to weaken knees, resistance, self-control...anything and everything that could ever be weakened on or about me. And even more than that, he possessed terrifyingly intimate knowledge of how, exactly, to use those talents and abilities to full, devastating advantage. The way he did when, ducking his head, he moved his face close to mine and found my lips with his. He located, covered, and immediately began to exploit my aching vulnerability.

His kiss was a shock to my system. An electrical one, filled with the mingling of vital promise and vague uncertainty. His kiss was soft. I felt in it none of the earlier, tantalizing pressure of strong and hard teeth, none of the subtle implication of *danger* that he might actually use those teeth to puncture and wound. To show that I had been woefully wrong about him all along, and that was indeed his nature.

I shivered. Awaiting the delicious pain of the hinted destruction.

Fiery-soft, bright-soft, maddening in the way

they wandered and alternately lingered, then wandered and lingered some more across mine, his lips were in their own hot way far more painful than the imagined puncture of vampire's fangs. The touch of his mouth made my pulse leap. Made it pound, race, and demand to be set explosively free. To rampage at will.

*The brush of his mouth against mine was intolerable.
I wanted more.*

And then there was no more brushing.

Then there was the deeply dark, insistent thrusting of his tongue searching its way into me. Searching for some hidden and unknown secret I might have been keeping from him, buried in places even I did not fully know or understand.

One moment I was compliant inside the circle of his arms. I was content to be quietly docile, content to accept his pleasurable intrusion for as long as he chose to intrude. And then the next instant, with explosive burstings of red-and-gold inside my mind, I responded. In every way possible. In every way I or my confused and rattled body knew how.

My mouth opened wide. Greedily, hungrily, my mouth sought in him far more than he'd ever sought in me. Like his, my tongue thrust. A little viciously maybe, as it nestled with his and coiled around his. My knees weakened, my vision blurred, my hearing almost failed as heat rose up

to consume me. Mostly from the inside, though I felt increasingly certain as time slipped by that flames leaped to life on the outside of me as well. I could vividly imagine them clawing at my bare feet, scorching them and the frothing hem of my gown. And that heat rose higher. It rose faster with each succeeding thrust and counter-thrust of conjoined tongues.

I lost my way. I lost my balance, and in so many ways my very reason for remaining or desiring to remain separate and distinct from him.

I lost them all. Lost them very, very quickly.

As if he sensed my new readiness and vulnerability, relishing it and feeding upon it, drawing sustenance from it in true vampire fashion, Gardner made a new kind of movement.

He bent a little. Never releasing his scintillating captivation of my mouth, he twisted a little to the side and lifted. Me. He swept me without warning from my feet and only then, in the same instant when he finally and obviously reluctantly released my lips, he swung around. Toward the altar.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I had grown accustomed to the way Gardner liked to arrange things. Just as I had grown equally accustomed to his odd mixture of pre-planned seduction and top-of-his-head ingenuity. Especially when it came to visits to our garden.

This midnight was no exception.

Clearly, he'd been here earlier, while I'd been otherwise occupied.

Clearly, he'd put some planning into this latest seduction.

A wrought iron table, the lacy old garden-party variety, had been placed just to the side of the long slab of marble. It stood mostly concealed in the inky shadow of the slab, though not so concealed and swallowed by the darkness all around it that I could not see the articles arranged upon a pale flutter of white cloth. And then, atop that, flickering into and out of clear view in silvered moonlight filtered far above through the heavy-leaved branches of ancient and enormous trees,

rested several items. Two of them, perhaps three, remained indistinguishable to me. Only one was visible. Not clearly, but enough that I could recognize it. Enough that I could know precisely what it was.

Central to the seductive little arrangement on the table, silhouetted unmistakably against the pale background of the cloth sat a tall object...a round and infinitely, fluidly curvaceous one.

A decanter.

I licked my lips as a quick dart of desire slashed its way through me.

I could no more suppress that dart than I could control it.

Dark and sculpted, its color indistinguishable in the night, its shape was infinitely familiar and its contents, whatever the shade of the crystal that bound them in, were equally familiar. And not as mysterious by half.

Reaching out and past me, Gardner removed the little glass that covered the stopper. A glint of moonlight, penetrating unexpectedly through the thick interlacing of ancient branches overhead, caught fleetingly and tremulously upon a sliver of polished brilliance.

The tiny, slotted spoon.

Gardner had placed it there, on the table. Closing my eyes momentarily, I imagined the way he must have held it in the process, lifting it in his

long and slender, pale and seductively skilled fingers. And I breathed heavily suddenly. Almost strangled by an anxious tightness in my throat as I leaned closer.

No doubt the sugar cube already rested upon the spoon. No doubt he'd prepared that earlier, too, placing it precisely in readiness.

Then he held his hand out. It was a courtly and old-fashioned gesture of assistance offered that made me feel I should sweep low into a curtsy of due respect. And possibly even kiss the offered fingers.

Gardner waited for me next to the stepping stone.

That was a relatively new addition to our garden. A small chunk of white marble as pristine as that which formed the altar or the polished moonlight that glimmered down upon it, a chunk as purely pale as the columns, the benches, the fluid stairs of our sanctuary, it had been placed very recently. Within the preceding few weeks. Its express purpose was to allow easier mounting to the time-worn surface of the altar.

Trembling suddenly, trembling anew, I took his hand.

His fingers were warm. Alive and vital as they curved instantly around mine to capture and enchant. They were so unlike my own fingers, which cooled until they took on much of the

quality and consistency of white marble.

My fingers, yes. But not my body. Not the hammering and throbbing, aching heat of it.

That was still warm.

That was more *alive* than ever.

Quickly, Gardner handed me up.

Quickly I took my seat at the center and the edge of the chilled oblong.

Very soon it would become my bed. And then, pliant in my eagerness and greed for the intoxicating liquor he would soon feed me, I followed the pressured instruction of his hands as they arranged me.

First I slid back across the smooth stone. Not far. Just a few inches.

Then I lifted a leg. The right one. I turned it to the side and braced my foot firmly against the rim of my stone bed, waiting as I was expected to wait while Gardner retrieved the heavy metal cuff and fixed it snug around my ankle. Then I waited more as he fastened the chains, one and then two, from front and from back, ensuring I would not shift my leg's position. I waited again while he did the same with my left leg.

Very soon I sat with my legs spread almost impossibly wide. I sat with my knees tucked up high beneath my armpits, my shackles firmly secured and tightened.

I was exposed. Fully. Revealed to him in my

most private ways. Or I very soon would be, just as soon as he issued his next, inevitable command.

"Raise your skirt, Jean-Agnes."

With unsteady hands, I did.

I folded my floating layers of crystalline tulle back carefully and secured them tight and close to the waist of my gown, using the one specialized feature Gardner incorporated into each and every one of the moonlit white creations he had made for me. Using a trio of small tabs that folded around the formerly billowing layers and buttoned back upon themselves, I secured my skirt with fingers turned inexplicably stiff, and clumsy. And now I sat revealed completely. Pulsing in an anxious way I felt must be visible, even at a casual glance and even through the cover of most dense darkness.

Moving away from me, Gardner left me that way. Waiting. Though nowhere near patiently, now that the moment was finally at hand.

But was it this moment, the teasing interlude before sex that I anticipated with such mounting and explosive anxiety? Or was it the moment when the ritual would be finished and the mystical green liquor offered to my thirst-crazed lips?

I thought it might be *both*.

Below me, at the little table in the cover of darkness, Gardner began the ritual.

And ritual it very truly was.

Though I could not see from the place where I perched in my chains, I knew every step by heart. And I followed every step of it in my heart's imagination, as if he performed the steps directly in front of me, in the broadest gleam of formerly forbidden daylight.

First, the glass and the spoon. Arranged already. Previously.

Then the cube of sugar. Whether placed earlier as well, at the risk of attracting scavenging wildlife, or done at that moment, this would take no more than a second. And then, with the cube in its place on the spoon, the trickle of water over it and through it...the trickle that was necessary sweetening for the bitterness of green liquor yet to come.

The green stuff was unbearably bitter without this infusion of outside sweetening. I knew, because Gardner had once...thankfully *only* once...required me to taste upon the tip of his finger a single droplet of undiluted liquor, unaltered liquor.

I had never known anything as bitter-vile, and I prayed with all my heart I would never need to know it again.

Ahhh, but with the improvement of sugar water...

Impatient, fretful, I rustled my chains. As much

as the restrictive tightness of their fastening permitted me to rustle.

"Are you impatient, Jean-Agnes?"

"Yes." My answer rose thin and insubstantial into dark air.

"Do you *need* what I have here for you?"

"Yes!" Another jarring metallic rustle as my legs jerked involuntarily against their restraints.

Gardner laughed softly. Very softly and silkily, no doubt now measuring the frugally allotted portion of green liquor into the glass. "I knew you would," he murmured, his tone matching exactly and perfectly the tremor of his laughter. "It's been long enough. You should be in *need* of it by this time."

Something within me recoiled. Not enough to make a difference, and certainly not enough to make any change in the way my mouth watered or the way my trapped body ached for the awakening draught.

"Is that why you never take it yourself?" I whispered, the fullness of desperation ringing in every syllable. "Because it's a...a..."

Addictive.

I could not bring myself to think the word, much less utter it.

Gardner turned away from the table. He turned toward me, the tiny glass even further dwarfed by the size of the hand that held it. "You know I'm

intolerant of many things, Jean-Agnes. You know I have my...sensitivities...even now."

"But is this..."

Lifting his hand, he held the glass toward me.

Automatically, my hand came up. Both of them. Seeking. Searching.

A mere shade quicker, Gardner pulled what he had offered back, out of my reach. "I didn't hear you ask for permission to touch."

"I'm s...sorry." My vision blurred with sudden tears. Of longing. Of frustration. The flesh between my wide-spread legs, exposed to the cooling stroke of June-night air, nonetheless burned as if it had been set afire. Pulsing furiously, beating heavily, straining with closed folds already beginning to soften and open, my flesh struggled for what, everything, it wanted.

Sternly, he withheld the glass. "You may not," he growled. "As part of your punishment, you may not touch."

My eyes misted again.

More.

As part of my punishment?

And as another part, no doubt, he would remove the precious cup from my lips long before I had a chance to satisfy myself completely.

As, arguably, the most torturous part of the punishment I had earned, he would all but certainly refuse to allow me to lick the cup clean

the way abject craving would demand. He would without doubt refuse to allow me to scour it repeatedly with my tongue until every last dreg of delight was consumed. Until, savage in my greed, I could find no more remnant of liquor upon any of its surfaces.

“Please?”

I did not mind begging. I would do anything to have what he held so rigorously beyond my reach.

To that end, I adjusted my position. I allowed my legs, already bent sharply at the knees and turned outward toward the sides of my body, already locked tightly into a wide spread, to spread even more. I allowed them to relax so that any tiny part of me that hadn't been displayed entirely before would be enticingly, I hoped irresistibly, displayed now.

Gardner seemed not to notice. Or maybe he did, and maybe that was why he came to me again. Maybe that was why he took as much pity upon me as he ever did, lifting the glass all the way to my lips this time. And holding it there.

I tilted my head back the slightest bit, rejoicing in the farthest reaches of my heart when the glass followed, tipping so the contents flowed into my mouth.

I gulped quickly.

One small amount of green liquor, not captured along with the rest, dribbled across my chin.

For the moment, I ignored it.

With the paltry swallow of elixir now gone, now swallowed, it became imperative that I retrieve as much as I could of whatever was left in the tiny yet midnight-dark depths.

Cat-like, I flicked with my tongue. I flicked all the way to the bottom, to collect whatever remnant I could before, as I knew he very soon would, Gardner denied me the rest.

"You're a regular little glutton," he observed with another of his silken-taunting laughs.

Glutton that I indeed was, I didn't answer.

I was too busy using my tongue in more of that lithe and cat-like fashion. I was far too busy lapping in a long and sinuous stroke for the tiny bit that had escaped onto my chin.

It was only a droplet.

Not even a full drop.

But it was enough to tantalize...enough to make my very spirit cry out in protest that there would be no more. Not until the next time. Or maybe the time after that. Not until Gardner decided it was time for the next time.

Outwardly, though, I remained silent.

Instinct, rising up out of the pining anguish at the lowest part of me, anguish the elixir always awakened in my soul, warned it would do no good to let Gardner know how much I cherished the draught. How much I relished them and even,

if the terrible truth was to be admitted, depended upon them as a quintessentially necessary part of my existence. Instinct warned such admissions might very well do more harm than good.

The next move, as I waited in tense and hungering silence, was up to Gardner. And he made it quickly.

I had no idea what he did with the small, empty glass. It vanished as if by magic. I didn't hear the cold shatter of precious crystal, so I imagined, assumed, he set it aside somewhere as he laughed again. Laughed in a way that only escalated the drugging effect of what I had drunk...what I felt already slivering in hot emerald-peridot shards through every vein and artery in my body.

Mounting the marble block next to the larger slab where I'd already been chained, he leaned over me, leaned upon me, to finish the job.

An additional pair of shackles awaited. Fastened firmly back to back, they were attached to a short length of chain. And when fastened around my wrists, they pinioned them tightly together. Making it impossible for me to sit upright. With my arms folded behind me, my wrists bound securely and inescapably at the small of my back, I was unable to lie back, either. The best I could do, all I remained able to do, was press my newly conjoined hands flat against unyielding marble and support myself as best I

could. In any way I could.

I was helpless. Unable to straighten my legs, unable to press them together in any attempt to preserve or protect my own private modesty. Unable even to adjust my position in any way that would afford more than the most minimal comfort. Still, trapped and chained, I began to feel the loveliest fluttering inside.

I was familiar with that, too.

It was what Gardner liked.

Enslavement.

Domination.

It was what he had taught me and was still teaching me, by slow and very often torturous degrees, to enjoy in my own right.

Staring at him with eyes that strained against darkness, I felt an urgent pulse tick to life at the back of my throat as I watched Gardner begin with slow and deliberate hands the process of undressing himself. Releasing himself.

Already suffering the heady torment of expectant anxiety, I looked forward to hours upon delightful hours of the most devious tortures ever designed in the mind of a man. I anticipated the most demolishing delights it was possible for any man to inflict upon any woman. I expected I would survive this new, promised torture as I had survived all the others before. Because to die would be an easy way out. Death of the spirit, or

actual physical death, would be instant release. And I knew Gardner well enough by now to understand one other, immutable piece of truth as he leaned forward over my trapped and not at all entirely forcibly immobilized body. I knew one other, complete truth as he removed the swollen and viscerally glistening length of his shaft from elegant dark slacks that dropped into consuming darkness from which they might never be recovered.

Gardner would never allow easy escape.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Gardner stood over me, a living marble statue of a man.

He was waiting for the full effect of his elixir to take hold.

It wouldn't be long. Experience told me it wouldn't be. Or I thought it *shouldn't* take long. Because lately, worrisomely, I'd feared I was developing a tolerance. I'd worried the stuff was no longer working as effectively, as deliciously, as it had in the beginning. When even the small amount Gardner allotted had touched off genuine storms within me. Very real firestorms that had made the stuff wonderfully impossible to resist. That had made my own sexual impulses every bit as impossible to resist. Those early firestorms had terrified with their superb intensity of reaction. And at the same time they'd delighted. For much the same reasons.

But the effect was a little...less...now. The effect was taking longer and longer every time I sipped

the liquor. And that worried me.

While I was lost in worry, waiting spread-eagled in my chains and utterly at Gardner's mercy, he tossed his pale-striped shirt aside.

It floated lightly upon the breeze before sinking forever out of sight, in the same void of endless darkness that had swallowed the rest of his clothing.

I saw the floating of it, the fluttering. But I was too busy concentrating upon what Gardner took up with his hands to pay it more than the most passing notice. My vision, nearly all of it, had long since reserved itself for that long and heavy, moonlit-glimmering sculpted length of flesh he held pressed between the flat of his palms.

He didn't offer it to me.

That would be the easy way.

Slowly, his fingers moved. Curling lightly, they strummed across the rounded surfaces of his shaft. They moved slowly, lingering until I swore I felt the tingle of contact in my own fingertips that pressed harder than ever against cold marble in the futile effort to steady myself and contain myself. I felt the tingle, too, in other flesh. I felt it in more important flesh between my legs. It was a rising heat...a sizzling one I could scarcely ignore.

It was working.

The liquor I'd been fed was rousing in me a longed-for need to be touched, and filled...to feel

his alabaster-sleek flesh slide into me. Or barring that, to have freedom to use my hands to stroke myself. Even to plunge into myself in the admittedly futile hope that my own fingers, even two or three of them working in unison, could ever fulfill the savage yearning he'd opened inside me. With both his strange elixir, and the sight of him in dim and shifting night light.

The liquor was working. Just not as quickly as it had once. And not soaring me to quite the same fantastical heights. Not achieving anything near the incendiary heat and height of the beginning.

I wanted to cry in my fear and frustration.

"How are you feeling?" Gardner bent forward to whisper his question into my ear. His lips moved against its ridges and whorls, sending shock waves of blistering eagerness through me. The tip of his shaft, still gripped between long-fingered, stroking hands, brushed against me...against a part of me that was still distressingly clothed. If only in layers of most insubstantial layers of satin and lace.

He turned the heat up another notch or two. Or four.

Deep in my throat, I shuddered out a groan. It was more anguished suggestion of a groan than the actual sound itself, so slight and so murmured that I doubted Gardner would hear. And if he did hear, he made no comment. The way I felt certain

he would comment if he had even the smallest clue what I was feeling.

How I was feeling.

Then reaction kicked in. And delayed or not, now that Gardner's strange liquor had begun to take its effect, the slow and relentless burn of it was just about to drive me mad. Quite literally insane in my chained and restricted state, unable to help myself and tormented by the touch of his taunting lips against my ear.

Mewling, the combined light-headedness brought on by the liquor and the scoring spiral of ache inside rendering regular speech temporarily unavailable, I grew desperate when Gardner straightened even more. He leaned somewhat precariously on the thin verge of marble at the very edge of the altar. He wasn't on his knees. There wasn't room for that. But he had pressed his knees tight against my exposed and spread thighs, the better to balance himself in what at first glance seemed an unconscionably awkward and precarious position.

In the end, though, he seemed to handle it with no difficulty whatsoever.

Pausing partway through the act of straightening, he brushed the searing tip of his hardened, engorged shaft in a gentle yet thoroughly intolerable arc across bare and shrinking flesh above the strapless top of my

gown. Across the exposed rounds at the top of my quaking breasts, he stroked. And stroked, and stroked.

My heart hammered. Worse than ever before. My heart hammered badly enough to make me worry I might be preparing to have some sort of fatal attack.

Not a heart attack, surely.

Not at a time when I hadn't even begun to consider the ramifications of reaching the august and venerable age of thirty.

But I wondered about stroke.

Surely stroke was possible?

Even at my age, it had to be possible if the stress level was high enough. If the already intolerable pressure inside kept building and building in the deepest inner reaches of my reeling brain, it seemed entirely possible something could rupture there. Something could explode. With only the most dire and disastrous of results.

"P...please?" I cried, tilting my head a little more to peer desperately at the darkness-hidden face towering above me.

It seemed that was what Gardner had waited for.

Exactly what he'd waited for.

Laughing softly and very suggestively, laughing in a way that said he fully understood my predicament and enjoyed the titillation of

having been the cause of it, Gardner moved again. He straightened more on his strangely non-restricting perch...straightened fully. When he did, the ever-seeking tip of his shaft loomed in close...immediate...proximity to my parted lips. And when he laughed again, silkily this time and not quite tauntingly, he changed his position ever so slightly. Just enough to slip his tip into my mouth. Before I had any idea it was going to happen, he *filled* my mouth. Completely. Shoving all of himself...it *had* to be all...of his enormous and magnificent length as deep as he could go.

I could go nowhere. I could do nothing. Not with my legs spread so wide and my hands fastened behind me.

Gardner laughed again when I tried anyway. "You should know by now, that you're mine completely. You should know there is no escape for you."

I made a sound. I supposed in agreement with him. Of course my words, if that was what they were, were unintelligible.

"You have no choice but to do what I say. Whenever I say, and for as long as I say."

Another sound from me.

"Suck, Jean-Agnes."

Obediently, I compressed my lips around him. I wanted to do as he ordered. I *wanted* to. If I could only swallow. And maybe if I had room to

maneuver or time to think. If I just...

But the full and throbbing heaviness of his shaft seemed to sizzle inside my mouth. And catching me with his hands, catching the back of my head and refusing to permit any motion there, in one of the few places I retained any ability to move, he denied me any room at all. He remained firm in his determination to have his own, his absolute, way.

"Suck, I said!"

Somehow, I managed. Closing my eyes, I firmed my mouth tighter around the embedded length.

Gardner pulsed against my lips. Between my lips. And he never retreated, but only pushed harder. Seeming to want...*mean*...to send me sprawling backward. Responding to the pulsing, feeling a dull but sweet rise of passion in the agitated and freshly weeping flesh between my legs, I began to experiment. I varied the pressures I used.

Far above me, Gardner groaned. And around the firmly embedded intruder, I smiled.

It was a sound of need. Of abject and pleading hopelessness the equal, almost of my own.

So I flicked. I favored him with a long and not at all slow drag of tongue along the lightly ridged underside of his shaft. Experience, astonishing even yet and never at all expected, taught this was

the most incredibly, exquisitely sensitive part of what by its very nature was designed to be incredibly sensitive. I flicked. I fluttered. And the sound Gardner made in response lay just about midway between a groan of despair and a low-pitched, quavering wail of absolute and utter agony.

But he liked it.

Of course he did.

Once again I was reminded of my own power in such situations. Even confined as I was, locked in chains and unable to make more than the very slightest move, I could still...*did* still...bring him to his knees. Not literally, of course, for he'd already dropped to them. But figuratively, emotionally, psychologically?

Yes!

I could do that much. With very little more effort I could have him completely at my mercy.

I made that effort. Trailing another softly shattering streamer of tongue along the super-sensitive underside of him, I took the greatest care to add an extra stutter of motion against his thin-ridged, strained membrane.

He groaned, his voice rising until it grew very, dangerously, close to a wide-open animal howl.

If any of the neighbors were listening, if any of them had worked up sufficient courage to venture out at such a late and unhealthy hour, the sound

he made would provide perfect fuel for the vampire rumors.

Moving my head back and forth, tugging compressed lips first one way and then the other along as much of his distended length as I could manage, I smiled again.

Privately smiled.

As far as I was concerned those ungodly rumors had their use. In the first place, they kept the neighbors away from our property. Strictly away, especially at night, when activities in our midnight garden reached their most impassioned peak. Those continued rumors and suspicions did nothing but contribute to our privacy. And for all I knew they had the neighbors keeping their windows tight shut, and bolted against the perceived threat. Certainly howls like the one just released and the second louder howl that rippled from Gardner's throat had drawn no complaint. No comment.

Sighing, I varied the angle and rate at which I took him in. I strained forward ever so slightly, as far as my bonds would allow, pretending *he* had no freedom to get away from me. And I gulped greedily at the flesh he offered. Without need to pretend to want and *need* that flesh.

The weight of Gardner's elixir burned pleasantly in the lowest part of my stomach. The enervating effects of it slithered deeper still into

my veins, and took up permanent residence there.

I was now officially under the influence. No longer entirely responsible for myself and my own actions. And Gardner knew it. I could tell by the sound of his renewed laughter.

It was softer laughter, I thought, than any before. It was softer, about ten thousand times as inflammatory, and when the low thunder of it rumbled deep inside his chest I felt the corresponding, very little more subtle rumble of it in the hardened, rigid length of flesh I held within my mouth.

Warmth rose inside me. More warmth, nearly incapacitating warmth.

Plying my tongue in the most devilishly sultry way I could imagine against the part of him that was guaranteed in short order to drive him mad, I felt the new and more insidious warmth lodge tight within the swollen, pulsing area between my thighs. I felt the tormented ridges of my flesh distend even more...I felt a renewal of the desperately thundering pulse, felt it escalate to near-manic fury. And in that instant everything else, every single part of me except perhaps for the circumference and interior of my mouth ceased to matter. Ceased to feel, or even really to exist, at all.

"I'd say you *are* ready, Jean-Agnes." Gardner murmured when he tried to pull free of my sucking grip, and when I prevented any such

departure by bearing down lightly but ominously with my teeth.

I made it perfectly clear that *he* might be willing and more than ready to move on to the next stage, but I was not. Chiefly because I had no idea what the next stage might be for me. I had only the strongest suspicion that the unknown next stage would not involve nearly so much opportunity to find my own satisfaction. A suspicion which proved only too realistic in the next five seconds. Or so.

"Enough, Jean-Agnes!" Groaning again, not nearly in the same desperate or intentionally incendiary way, Gardner tapped once, very, very lightly at the side of my face. He urged me to give it up, to let him go before the consequences became something I might not anticipate.

Now it was my turn to groan. Softly.

Prepared to heed the implicit warning in his gentle and insistent tapping when it came again, I none the less seized one last instant. One last precious and entirely too fleeting one, in which I scraped delicately with carefully controlled teeth against my delicious prisoner. One in which I closed my lips tight for one last long drag.

Gardner jerked beneath the subtle force of it. He jerked hard, almost viciously. But his control was better than mine. His control was *superb*.

He made not a sound. No harsh or unsteady

rasp of the sigh he must surely, surely, feel right down to the innermost depth of his soul.

He was stoic, allowing me that last moment before he moved.

Lifting a hand, he wrapped his fingers, a *few* fingers, around the base of his shaft. Insinuating them between my seeking lips and his own root, he used insidious, prying pressure to separate us.

Now it was I who made a sound...a small and ravenously hungry one as he slipped away. Fingers and all, entirely.

"You've had enough, Jean-Agnes." He'd said that I couldn't remember how many times before. Thousands of times, or so it seemed right then. And I still could not convince myself it could be true.

I had not had enough.

Infatuated, besotted with the influence of his liquor or without it, I would never in this lifetime 'have enough'.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

He'd promised torture.

He'd promised in so many ways that what occurred here tonight, what he would do to me and make me endure, would be something I would remember for years and years to come. Maybe, probably, for *all* my years to come.

In the instants after Gardner left me...fleeting instants, inconsequential instants that nonetheless felt like the full lifetime of instants I'd imagined just seconds before...I stirred nervously. Or I *tried* to stir, though once again, bound as tightly as ever, the best I could manage was a futile and feeble rustling of the chains that held me fast.

I could not see Gardner.

Through engulfing darkness and around the intervening bulk of the slab of stone upon which he'd imprisoned me, I could not see the small iron table upon which he'd arranged his unknown implements of my destruction.

I was nervous.

That hadn't happened in a while. At any rate, having learned to always be prepared for surprises and things I'd never done or even necessarily heard of before, I hadn't been *this* nervous in quite a while. Maybe not since the very first time I'd found myself confined upon this self-same block of moonlit sacrificial stone, a true virgin of the mind and the imagination as well as the body.

My stomach tumbled. Anxious. Excited. *Eager*.

"G...Gardner?"

He didn't answer. Not immediately.

"Tilt your head back," he said after another intolerable, interminable moment of silence. "Let me see the moonlight touching your face."

Ever obedient, I did as I was told.

"Close your eyes."

I complied.

"And your lips."

Again, full and instant compliance.

One of his hands touched the back of my head. I felt the touch of it, felt him grip and hold, with a hint of brute strength ready and willing to be engaged should I try to resist. And then another touch, this one thick and wet, heavy and confining, against my face. *Covering* my face.

Though the presence of his hand at the back of my head hadn't wavered, I tried to flinch away.

"Hold still." Gardner's voice turned gruff. His

hands remained steady, both the one that gripped the back of my head and the other that relentlessly pressed that *thing* tight against my face.

What...

I tried to ask, but discovered to my horror that my lips would no longer move. Nor would my eyes, or any other part of my face.

Startled, I jerked. Afraid of suffocation.

"Easy, easy." Gardner took his hands away from me, but the thing remained firmly in its place. It remained immovable even when, desperate, I shook my head from side to side. Needing to be rid of it if I could not know what it was...what it meant.

"Take a deep breath, Jean-Agnes." Gardner's voice turned comforting. Reassuring.

I tried.

Expecting to fail, to my complete stupefaction and surprise, I was able to draw in a great and sustaining draught of chill, fragrant-green air.

My lungs expanded. My initial panic, while not coming even remotely close to dissipating, at least subsided a little. Enough to allow me to think. To try again to speak.

I could make only a muffled, moaning sound, my lips rendered thoroughly immobile beneath the layer of wet that had already thickened tremendously and totally, to the consistency of something horribly resembling cement.

"The mask isn't designed to suffocate," he said, and from the sound of his voice I knew he'd moved away again. He'd moved back to the table that in my newly imposed blindness I could not even try to see. "Of course I've heard suffocation *can* be quite erotic. But that's not the reason I decided you should wear it tonight." A pause, a rustle of movement, and Gardner's voice grew louder again as he moved closer. "I want you to wear it because I want you to be focused. Entirely. Upon what I'm about to do to you. *Everything* I'm about to do to you."

Frantic still to be rid of the terrifying burden, my panic rising anew with every word he spoke, I shook my head again. Harder. Almost violently.

"The glue is quite secure," he advised, very close now.

I tensed for a touch I could not anticipate. One that did not immediately come.

"The mask will remain until I remove it. Now, I want you to concentrate, Jean-Agnes."

In response, I shivered.

"I want you to listen. And obey. But I don't want you to speak. And more than anything, I want you to *feel*. I want you to know how intense feeling can be when there is no sight to distract you from what's more important."

I groaned again.

It was all I could do.

Then, the touch I'd tried to anticipate. The touch I'd dreaded because there had been no way on earth to anticipate it.

It was a very light touch. But I jumped, as if I'd been struck full-force. With a strength and a destructive energy I could not endure, could not withstand or even, necessarily, survive. And I tried to scream. I would gladly have screamed my lungs out at the sudden, intense unbearableness of that light brush of near nothingness, had I only been permitted to scream. As it was, I could make only another of those pathetic mewlings...a rising shriek that remained trapped and stillborn, relentlessly buried painfully inside with no hope ever that it could escape my sealed lips.

The touch!

Something brushed me. Between my spread legs, it faintly touched, icy and yet somehow also indescribably hot. It wasn't a human touch.

I knew that instantly. Instinctively.

This was the touch of something else. Of something almost airy in its ethereality. Almost stinging in its silkiness.

A feather?

No!

My mind rejected the notion. My mind identified the mystery object before I had the chance to draw in another breath through the opening in the mask I wore.

Not a feather. Not at all!

This was a brush. This was wiry and bristled, yet gently wielded. Superbly wielded, so that even the threat it posed to my most delicate and vulnerable exposed flesh, even the promise that it could inflict untold agonies of suffering, were mitigated. Even they failed to terrify in that moment, as they would all but certainly have terrified me to death in the moment or two before. For a crazy instant I thought it was one more slightly bizarre effect of the stuff I'd drunk. I wondered if Gardner didn't mean by surface application to instigate a burning hunger in my outer flesh similar to the scorch of need he'd long since set to steaming within.

I attempted another scream. And it was no louder, no more successful, than any of my others.

This was *not* the mysterious elixir.

This straightened my legs and arms...*tried* to straighten them, and in the process set them to straining helplessly against their bonds. This set my entire body to thrumming and screaming. This set every part of me to shrieking silently, with sudden bursts of skyrocketing heat awakening every last unawakened part of me to ravenous and raging hungers of the flesh. Hungers that would not be appeased and would not be satisfied. Hungers that did in fact make me realize I had never before been truly awakened, sensitized,

before.

Frantic, reduced to my most base and animal state by the unprecedented thundering of need between my legs that was spreading rapidly throughout me, I writhed. I twisted, and tugged with manic strength at shackles that gave not an inch. Shackles that did not budge by so much as the tiniest fraction of an inch.

Embedded deep in the stone, the sturdy bonds held fast.

Frustrated, I grunted. Snarled. Growled and moaned, emitting every kind of sound I could possibly emit, given the circumstances.

"You like this." Gardner sounded amused.

Deafened by an internal soaring of unrelenting sound as agony pulsed, continuing to wrack my flesh, I lifted my face. I made the only movement I was free to make. Blinded by the mask I wore, I could not see the starlit, moonlit sky I *longed* to see. I longed with more desperation than I'd ever known to witness its glittering depths and know the calming chill of its returned gaze. Unable to make any sound except those few hopeless, mewling protests my tightly sealed mask permitted, I wanted to howl aloud. I wanted to vent my rage, to scream at that same star-shot sky, shrieking out all the brute savagery Gardner had awakened in me.

I wanted to cry out my obsession. My most

primal and overwhelming need.

Another touch, then, and I raged anew. I strained harder against my bonds, screaming another of my doomed screams.

Gardner laughed. Softly. And slipped something inside me.

It was smooth.

Curved.

I knew it was by the effortless way it slipped into me...by the way it slipped very, very deep. Very, very quickly, though to my newly outraged outer layers of flesh, it might as well have been covered with layer upon thick layer of stinging barbs.

It hurt.

And I strained. Struggled to scream.

Another motion, slight but earthquake-shocking as Gardner slipped another something inside whatever kind of fiendish tube he'd already inserted. Another slight yet thoroughly intolerable aggravation of my tortured body.

Please!

I'd never ached so badly. Never needed so desperately to say any word in the hopes of saving myself.

"The applicator is specially designed." Gardner murmured the words almost absent-mindedly. And I barely heard.

Beginning with the region where torture was

being imposed, starting in the part of the flesh between my legs where suffering had already risen to its highest, most enraged and raging fury, I was beginning to lose consciousness. *Conscious* consciousness, though I suspected with all my heart that I would not be able to lose the purely physical and instinctive consciousness upon which the current form of torment seemed to prey. I would not be allowed to lose that part of consciousness.

"The applicator is guaranteed to deliver the aphrodisiac cream very efficiently to the deepest parts of you, Jean-Agnes. The most hidden parts of you."

No! I mewled another buried scream.

I would not survive this. Could not survive.

My body was already on fire.

Whatever kind of stuff Gardner was foaming into me, whatever strange new warmth of wetness I felt lubricating and engorging the innermost tissues of my body, it acted quickly. Instantaneously. Much more quickly, and much more virulently than the green elixir had ever worked. This new substance tore me apart virtually. From the inside out.

If the tube, applicator, whatever the devil it was, had been agony to over-sensitized flesh, the heat it was designed to deliver was absolutely rampant, and grew more and more so with every

slight motion of a body suddenly gone so super-sensitive that every part of it felt devastated.

I had to have it removed.

I could not tolerate even the slightest shift of movement with it still in its fiendish place. Not even the smallest, terribly necessary act of breathing.

Please? I...can't.

Reflexively I tried to speak with the most superhuman effort I'd ever expended. For any reason. But I could not. Could not now make even the small and limited movements of which I'd been capable before.

My legs and arms burned. They had grown heavy with my effort to lock them as motionless as possible in their horribly unnatural position.

My back ached. Bowed backward from my early, only marginally successful efforts to attain some small amount of comfort. my neck ached too. My masked and sightless face still searched for the smallest sight of a cruel and uncaring sky. Frozen, terrified to make even the slightest twitch of movement, dreading the increase of intolerable-even-at-rest sensitivity in the most private, most terribly invaded regions of my body.

If only I could stop the breeze.

It shimmered softly against me. It played with gently tormenting fingers at the tender place between my legs. It stroked with scourges of

barbed wire, flaying me instantly raw with the lightness of its presence.

I dared not move.

For any reason.

"So," Gardner said at length, still very near. "You believe you have found an answer to your...difficulty...do you?"

I dared not move.

He laughed again in a way that set every instinct I possessed sharply on edge...set every last alarm bell to clanging in a cacophony of warning.

"We can't have that," he murmured in his silkiest and most seductive voice. "Can we, Jean-Agnes?"

And with that, another touch. A diabolical one.

My arms and legs flailed against their bonds. My body convulsed mightily, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I convulsed on the inside, as well as the outside, driven in that instant absolutely mad by the rivers, torrents, tidal waves of scalding, ricocheting pain of pleasure that rippled and ripped through every muscle and part of me as Gardner described lazy patterns across my quivering, shrieking flesh with the tip of whatever instrument of torture he'd seen fit to devise.

I thought it was a feather.

With my mind's eye I recalled the tall vase of

pheasant feathers he kept in a corner of our bedroom. They were long. Slender and gentle-brown, veined heavily along their lengths by the thick spine that made them rigid. Unbendable. But the thing I remembered most about them was the way those long plumes tapered. To the very exact kind of fine and sharpened point I felt strumming at my swollen and distended private ridges.

Unable to control myself, I thrashed wildly at my chains. *In my chains.*

Dimly...very, very dimly...I heard the sound of fabric ripping as the tulle and lace of my gown separated from its stiff satin backing. And my trapped and helpless voice rose. It was still rising, in wordless pleas for mercy. Clemency.

My wrists ached. And so did my ankles. It was the terrible and stinging ache of flesh chafed raw and possibly bleeding as a result of my struggles.

I would bear the marks of this night's activities in the morning. And quite possibly for days to come.

I did not care.

Let tomorrow and the day after worry about themselves.

At that moment I wanted only to survive.

The torment of that fine-feathered tip continued to stroke and circle. At times it actually flexed my depraved folds. It parted them as much as it could, so the stroking and searing tip could reach

and outrage even more flesh. Inner flesh.

My body was reaching its maximum capacity to feel. I *prayed* it was reaching maximum capacity. So I would not have to endure more intolerable rippings. More shudderings of torment. And as my thrashings eased, as I seemed to approach the point where the suffering might possibly stop, I dragged in a sigh of relief. The first full and sustaining breath I'd taken in quite some time.

As if he knew what I felt, or what I was *ceasing* to feel, Gardner stopped.

Withdrawing the torment of the feathered tip, he left me alone. With only the maniac breeze to stroke and inflame. And as bad as the teasing of torture had been, that was somehow worse. Infinitely worse. Because I now had not a clue what might happen next. Or if indeed *anything* was going to happen.

I swung my blinded gaze helplessly from side to side.

Where was he? What was he plotting?

He made another sound. This time it was more of a quiet suggestion of laughter about to erupt than of laughter itself. And he made another movement. To remove whatever implement he'd placed inside me. Passing the tips of his fingers across my stung outer flesh as he prepared for the renewal.

With the renewal of that more definite and firm

touch, my body reawakened. Fully. It soared and seared, back to the exhaustive and violent thrashing that depleted every last reserve of strength I'd ever possessed.

I shrieked again. From the depth of my tortured heart, I tried to shriek.

Gardner toyed with me.

He didn't remove the hideous instrument of torture with one quick tug. Oh, no. But he certainly made me wish he would.

He turned the thing within me. He caused it to rasp in untold ways across flesh that felt increasingly, impossibly swollen in its approach to its own extremity.

Bleating piteously behind and into my mask, I had no strength even to *wish* to scream.

My flesh clung as Gardner turned the thing around and around and around, doing something that felt remarkably like *screwing* it out of my body. My flesh clung, as greedy to retain its torment as to be rid of it forever. My flesh clenched around it. In a reaction that only made the torment so much worse.

I sagged back against my pinioned arms. I wished, almost genuinely, that I could be dead when Gardner finally pulled the terrible thing from me. And murmured, in tones of reverence and awe, "and now, Jean-Agnes...now for the truly fun part..."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I slumped half-seated. Cramped and chained. Still masked, as I'd been for untold eons of hours.

The air around me was cold. It was biting, even, where it came into contact with flesh left raw and abraded in the wake of Gardner's activities. Flesh that felt parched and terribly depleted after the hours and hours of depleting sex, flesh that felt thin and anguished now that the effects of his infernal ointments and elixirs had worn off.

It was morning.

Though I still couldn't see, though I still wore the heavily uncomfortable mask he had used to seal my eyes and my lips so that I could not call for help or plead for mercy, I knew it was morning. The singular fresh and earthy smell of the breeze was a clue. As was the song of birds, multitudes of them, awakening to life in the enormous old trees that overhung and overlooked this part of our property. And the sunlight was a clue, too. The sunlight, stroking warming fingers

across the bare skin of my arms and shoulders.

Gardner had required me to do this form of penance here. He had required me to stay alone through the endless and grueling hours of the night. He had lowered the skirt of my gown, at least, so that I would have its thin covering to shield me from the view of anyone who might dare to venture into what so many firmly believed was the vampire's private killing lair.

Thin and insubstantial as the gossamer was, the layers of floating, bridal fabric did nothing at all to fend off the torturing breezes.

They lifted its folds with wanton, lazy fingers. They crept beneath, and did insidious, intolerable work.

He had covered me and left me there. Chained, silent, helpless.

As morning stirred and I began to stir with it from my painful and unrelaxed half-slumber, a low sob trembled inside my throat. Unvoiced because it was forever incapable of being voiced, it caught there. And remained.

Please.

I wanted release. Wanted my chance to speak again. To plead with someone, and convince them I had paid in full whatever debt I had incurred. I wanted more than anything else to straighten my cramped arms and legs, and flex the tight-bunched knots out of my muscles. I wanted to cry

out my pain, knowing that even an ineffectual cry would in some small way diminish my suffering for the moment or two it reverberated in the air.

Frustrated, I moved as much as I could.

Not nearly enough.

"You've been very good, Jean-Agnes."

The sound of Gardner's voice startled me. Badly. So badly that I would have jumped, had jumping been possible.

"You've been very patient."

I wanted to howl in frustration.

I hadn't had a choice, had I?

Immediately a tiny voice at the back of my mind responded. It said of course I'd had a choice. Because Gardner never forced. He coaxed or cajoled, charmed or convinced, and on occasion even employed his will a little roughly. But at all times, in all things, I'd always understood that in the end I did indeed have a choice.

All I'd ever needed to do was say a firm and resounding 'no!'

I groaned. Softly.

"Are you ready to be released, Jean-Agnes?"

I nodded, a bit jerkily since the muscles in my neck were cramped, as rusty as every other part of me from long disuse.

Gardner's hand fell upon one of my ankles. In my mounting distress I found it impossible even to decide which ankle. I knew only that his touch

was warm and soothing as he unlocked the shackle.

It opened, fell away. And I would have straightened my leg at once, had he not held it as firmly within the warmth of his encompassing hands as it had ever been imprisoned by unforgiving metal.

"Easy," he said quietly. "You need to do this slowly."

His hands guided my ankle into a slow, slow release of its too-long-held posture.

At first I thought he did it as another form of torture. But gradually I realized, as he gently massaged the muscles in calf and back of thigh, that he did it this time to *prevent* pain...real, intolerable physical pain.

I felt the pain anyway, as he slowly straightened my leg, returning it to normal position. Outraged muscles shrieked protest at being forced to abandon unnatural positions they had never wanted to assume in the first place.

Gardner repeated the action again with my other leg. And then with my arms, always massaging and always tender...always supremely gentle as he worked to restore the movement and function I'd lost during the long and incapacitating night.

At last I sat on the edge of the altar. At last my legs dangled free over its side, not exactly relaxed

or blissful, but at least free to dangle if they chose. My skirt was crumpled. Rumpled. And at last lowered as demurely as any skirt had ever been lowered, covering them and me and everything. And my hands...they were free too. They were still a little numb, still slightly atingle in the process of awakening from their own prolonged and unmet desires. Free to lift now, free to explore, they did. My fingers traced with curiosity and impending dread the thing that still covered my face.

Gardner was silent for a time.

Watching me, no doubt.

The mask I wore was smooth. It was featureless, not a grotesque caricature of humanity at all as part of me had feared. It felt like some kind of hardened leather, faintly grainy despite its smoothness, and with only one opening. The one that allowed me to breathe.

"You like it?"

I did not respond. I only continued to run my fingertips over the blank and impersonal surface, trying to divine a way to remove it. Wondering if it might be possible it could *never* be removed.

"I had it made especially for you."

Another long moment in which I gave not even the limited response the mask permitted.

"You want it removed." It wasn't a question. And yet, perversely, this time I found every

reason to answer.

Lowering my hands, I nodded. I turned my blinded and concealed face in the direction from which I'd heard the sound of his voice.

"All in due time, Jean-Agnes. There's something else that needs to happen first. Before anything else."

With that, I shivered. And with that, he touched me again. He guided me with all the gentleness of before, this time to swing my legs up and around. And once he did, he eased them every bit as tenderly and gently to prone position upon hard marble that felt in that last and final instant of surrender to complete relaxation as soft and lovely as the best feather bed.

And even then, even after he'd placed me so tenderly, allowing me to relax as I had longed for so long to relax, still he touched. With those same soothing hands, he brushed my skirt up. Aside. Out of the way.

I had forgotten I was naked. Growing so accustomed to that state of dress, I had scarcely registered that fact until he mounted me.

There had of course been no indication he was about to do it in his voice. There had been no clue, either, from any words he had spoken or any of the touches with which he'd so abundantly lavished me. There was only the part of him, the unmistakable length and strength of fully aroused

male hardness when he very suddenly straddled me. When he eased one of his knees down, between my tired thighs. When he spread them apart so that I was once again opened and revealed to him.

There was only the feel of his tip brushing lightly and silkily, brushing against exhausted flesh that after far too many hours of hopeless and irreconcilable arousal had not lost even the smallest scintilla of its supreme and taunting super-sensitivity.

If anything, stiffening in every muscle at his first light touch, I was more sensitive now than at any moment in the past ten hours. Or so.

Instantly I readied myself. Not knowing what to expect, unable to see and not expecting at all the sweet-smooth and effortless glide, I caught my breath and held it trapped deep inside my chest as his flesh slid into mine without hesitation. Without difficulty.

I encompassed him naturally. I closed around him, snugging myself tight around him as eagerly as if there had been no hours and hours before this...no intolerable times of suffering and unassuaged want. And in that act of closing, I felt a fresh and unexpected rippling...a shimmer of some all new, hard-earned satisfaction that warmed both my stomach *and* my newly quivering thighs.

Startled, I breathed a shaken sigh.

"You've worked hard, Jean-Agnes."

Murmuring softly, he continued his effortless entry.

I could not reply. I did not even try.

"You've earned your reward."

Blind, I reached. I searched with grappling fingers to find the delectably smooth skin of his shoulders, and when I did I gripped as hard as I could. I gripped almost not hard to hold onto enough those precious, elusive ridges that never stopped their motion...that never even paused as Gardner began his old and comfortingly familiar rhythm. His seductive rhythm that, incredibly, had already caused my body to begin its response.

I'd thought I was too tired to respond again. Ever. I'd thought I'd long since expended the last of myself in the mad frenzy induced by the terrible, lovely stuff he'd brushed upon me and into me...the same stuff with which he'd reduced me to a crazed madwoman, focused only and exclusively upon the savage *itching* of sexual desperation generated in its wake.

I'd thought I would never want this kind of intimate contact again.

As it turned out, happily, I had been absolutely and entirely wrong.

My entire body found its ease in less than a second. Found it beneath his touch.

Compared to the brutal futility of my earlier efforts to find release, there was a new and silvered, almost poignant sweetness to what Gardner did to me now. There was a new gentleness, like none I'd been aware of before. Or maybe I'd just never been aware. Having had anything remotely like it in my past to which I could compare it. Certainly I'd never been aware how scintillating...how unutterably *seductive*...this kind of caring, gentle smoothness and care could be.

Gardner did not pause in his taking of me. He entered in a long and sinuous swoop followed quickly, followed immediately, by an exit that was, and would be, everything his entrance so fervently promised. And as Gardner left me with the same kind of gleaming, gliding stroke, I dug in deeper. Previously weak and barely able to function, my fingers found new strength and new energy. Clenching tighter, they sought muscle and sinew beneath the smooth loveliness of his flesh. And upon finding the same new strength, miraculously revived strength, my legs became a part of the equation as well. I dug in with greedy, grappling heels. Or I tried to. I tried until I found purchase of a sort upon the silky smooth surface of white marble that was at last beginning to warm, now that the first felt but unseen daylight had risen to fall upon it.

My knees lifted weakly. They spread, a little tonelessly. Granting him all the entry it was possible to grant. And at that point, from that point, I could do no more. From that point it would have to be up to him.

Fortunately, he was a great deal more energized and capable than I.

He finished his exit. Began his next entry...his next, inexplicably *longer* entry.

He murmured something soft. Something urgent, too.

I didn't hear what. The true sound of it, the actual sense of the words, lost themselves in a rising, crazy feedback sort of hum that filled my head so completely that there was no room for other sound. No room for any kind of sense at all.

Already my body was busy achieving sensual overload.

Weakened, depleted, all its senses used up and no longer viable, my body began to do things I'd have sworn impossible a scant moment or two before.

I felt the first twining tendrils of welcome moisture begin deep inside. Then, before I had the chance to recognize much less marvel at them, before I had any chance at all to enjoy the spectacular release of warmth and hidden light they represented, the tendrils sprang into full and unabashed blossom. So powerful that it ripped all

breath from my lungs and for a terrible, terrifying moment made it seem I'd never be able to capture another.

With the spread of that powerfully awakened heat came a rushing river of the most intense moisture I'd produced in all my short but undeniably glorious sexual career.

If I'd thought myself weak before, debilitated to the point where I felt incapable of any kind of practical function or movement to help myself, it turned out I'd been wrong. Again.

Grievously wrong, horrifically wrong.

The weakness I'd felt before, of exhaustion and stiffness born of being held captive and immobile, metamorphosed into another form of weakness. This was a much more pleasurable weakness, an incipiently much more profitable weakness that swept me from the inside first. That wiped away all memory of the night just spent. A rush of sudden energy that reinvigorated me to fresh and abundant life, because the new weakness came entirely and exclusively from my own rising passion.

Gardner!

I wanted to whisper his name as he swept back into me...all the way this time. I wanted to cry it to the sunlit sky and towering trees as his body transmitted dozens of not-so-subtle signals that his release, and hopefully mine, was already

perilously close to hand. And I wanted to nuzzle his ear...wanted to feel the crisp burn of dark hair brushing my lips, my nose, my cheeks. I wanted to feel as well the cooling draught of breeze drying beadlets and streams of sweat to nothing upon my skin.

I wanted him.

More of him.

To that end I dug my fingertips in deeper. Just to reassure myself that I wasn't about to lose him. That I wasn't about to be denied by any means this chance to possess him, and to slake my greedy need for everything his tension and trembling said he might be about to offer.

Gardner groaned. Softly. Buried inside me, no longer showing any sign he might be willing or even necessarily *able* to retreat, he ground himself against me. He ground with hips that covered mine and dwarfed mine, ground with the full and pulsing rigidity that took to pulsing harder still as it sought, found, claimed the last deep reaches of me. He ground me down, into the timeless stone upon which I lay. He ground me to nothing but the most fragile and powder-fine, insubstantial remnant of all that I had ever been. And then he held me there.

Once again I found myself a prisoner, though this time I had a modicum more freedom. I had a tiny bit...or maybe a very *large* bit...more ability to

move, with my movement confined to a larger radius. A more centered radius around the taut, embedded shaft that pinned me to my deceptively virginal altar of marble.

Gardner! Oh, how I tried to shout his name! Tried to *scream* it, with warmth within me escalating suddenly to purely incendiary levels...to the very breaking point. It became vital in that moment of escalation that I shriek my love for him, my adoration for and devotion to all that he had come to represent in the new life he had given me. I needed to say it. All of it. Over and over and *over* again.

But I remained silent. *Forced* to be silent.

His entire body took on a thick and searing, deep and heavy throbbing. Jerking inside me, he made some small and hissing sound I couldn't interpret because it was a new kind of sound. It communicated a harsh urgency I seldom heard or felt from him...a near-panic state that rattled me with its unfamiliarity. And only added to my own still-escalating spiral toward release.

I tried to smile.

Wished I could smile.

I shuddered anew as the full weight and import of impending release made itself felt deep inside me, in a place where I could not reach it or force it...where I could only endure it. I shuddered inside, and felt my skin prickle sharply.

A rising and soaring rush blurred my vision. My *internal* vision. And all the world available to me, all the world and the entire searing, scalding universe inside me, lost its focus. Its reason.

Suddenly, with no warning and with unprecedented, explosive power, I reached the instant of climax.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

My return to normalcy was quick. It was also a little jarring, though far less rough and jarring than I'd found such returns in the recent past.

Obviously I was getting used to my state of affairs with Gardner.

My state of *sexual* affairs.

And now I had another problem, an ongoing and far more pressing one, to deal with. Now I had *Muriel*, a bouquet of flowers clutched in a visibly shaking hand, facing me across my desk in the dull-gold gleam of a single desk lamp I'd turned on not long before to darken a room from which late-afternoon light had for the most part already vanished.

"I need to see my sister's grave," she declared in tones of such absolute finality that I knew immediately she *was* going to see it. One way, or another. Just like I knew with a sinking sense of dread that I was going to be the one to show it to her.

One way, or another.

"Now?" I asked, glancing nervously over my shoulder at the small bay window at my back.

The day had been bright. Brilliant in a way only days in Denver could be, infused as they typically were with the clear and sparkling light of high altitude. But the daylight was nearly gone. Shadows sloped sharply across the lawn and distant rose garden, blue-black slashes across grass and walkways, shrubs and hedges, in an evening turned all dusky blue. As of yet, those shadows lay limned here and there in molten-bronze light that touched and illuminated with shimmering gilt every blade of grass and every dangling leaf and distant scarlet blossom. But even as I watched, the bronze-gilt faded and hardened. To the appearance more of cheap and grotesquely dirty brass.

"It's getting dark," I protested, facing her again. "It's..."

Muriel looked obdurate. Like she in no way intended to listen to even the most vigorous of my protests. And the bouquet of white carnations and baby's breath she held...she wasn't, for certain, even going to entertain protests. "I've decided," she announced in tones that only backed up that supposition and solidified it. "I've talked to my husband over the phone. We've decided we can work things out. And he wants me to come home

tomorrow."

"But..." I looked at the windows again.

Day was definitely finished.

Another half hour and those shadows would have widened completely. Thickened completely. They would have long since met each other in encroaching advance, and devoured every last trace of the day entirely in their advance.

I shiver-shuddered at the thought of venturing deep into the cemetery by night. Not because I was superstitious of death, or afraid of walking amongst the graves. My lifelong training and the firm belief system instilled by my years at Divine Serenity made such superstitions and fears inconceivable. Even, mildly, laughable.

No, this was a far more practical reluctance...one of the real world and the real people inhabiting it.

I experienced a sudden darting of alarm, almost a premonition, that told me this was not a good idea. Not a good idea at all. And it had nothing to do with the fact that the cemetery had closed, its gates bolted and sealed, hours before. This premonition was stronger than any warning of such physical fact. This was a creeping and crawling sensation, making clear to me that some unspecified danger lurked afoot in the gloom. And it was very real danger, something connected in some way directly with Muriel and her

proposed...*determined*...mission.

By the simple fact of association, I knew the danger applied to me as well.

"I want to go home tomorrow," she insisted. "In all the excitement of coming to the city again, I forgot how much I hate crowds, and people. *This* city and these people especially."

Shuddering again, harder, I folded my arms around myself and used flattened hands to shield my bare and frankly goose-fleshed upper arms. "The grave is in Riverside Cemetery," I ventured, hoping against hope that Muriel would take the hint and leave me strictly out of it.

Then it would all be on her head. Then I wouldn't have to accept responsibility in any way for whatever might happen.

I was lying to myself.

"They close at night." Bending over my lovely desk, I rustled through a sheaf of papers I'd retrieved from a distant file drawer soon after Muriel's initial appearance. "I have the plot number, and everything, but what good is it going to do right now? I really think we ought to..."

Muriel made an impatient sound. And a gesture. "I'm not familiar with that place."

Neither was I.

I wasn't *that* familiar, anyway.

"I need you to guide me."

My shoulders slumped.

"At the very least I need you to drive me, since I have no intention of taking a bus and having to wait afterward alone in some dark and desolate corner of nowhere just to get back."

In that instant I resented Gardner. I resented his dogged insistence that I learn to drive even when he'd known full well the black Jaguar terrified me...the traffic and teeming streets and highways terrified me.

How easy it would be to simply tell her I didn't drive, and abdicate all responsibility.

Except that I'd never been any good at lying. My convent-honed morality and belief in unquestioning honesty in all things at all times wouldn't let me be any good at it.

And then there was the grim specter of those city buses. That image of Brighton Boulevard, teeming by day but death-black and deserted in the hours after its industrial tenants had shut up business and left for the night.

The images held me in check as firmly as personal honesty ever could.

Muriel had made her point. If I refused to drive for any reason, the risk was genuine and real that she would board one of those buses. That she would ride, maybe with one or two other passengers but almost certainly no more to a place where she would indeed be discharged in one of the more dismal and remote areas of the city.

I feared allowing her to go alone into the night even more than I feared the low roar of the Jaguar's too-powerful engine.

For a moment Muriel and I faced each other in silent, tense stand-off. Gazes locked one onto the other, our stances mirroring strongly a mutual refusal to give in or back down, we stared at each other.

It was I who gave in first.

Sighing, I reached into my desk drawer. I retrieved the set of keys Gardner had insisted I take and keep for my own, even when I hadn't wanted any such thing. "Come on," I said, reaching for a dark and by no means thick shawl draped across the back of my chair. "I'm not going to tell Gardner we're doing this," I advised, leaving the light burning when we left the shop.

Because I knew he would advise against this lunacy.

Because I knew he would do anything and everything necessary to stop me?

At last Muriel looked uncertain. A little. "Will he mind you going out at such an hour?"

Without a doubt.

He would be surprised. If I knew him, he'd probably even feel a little bit of pride and approval that I'd finally gotten up a little gumption and started doing things on my own. For myself. But in the end, he would most

decidedly mind.

Fortunately, he would still be at his drawing board at the far side of the shuttered house next door. He had an important project due for an important client a few days hence, and he was all but guaranteed to remain there for several hours more. He would no doubt linger there, tinkering with a hundred small and almost-overlooked details until I came to remind him the hour was growing terribly late, and he had worked enough for one day.

I intended to be back from this fool's mission long, long before then.

It would be a quick fifteen minutes drive, I figured. Maybe twenty, if I had one of my moments of sheer terror behind the Jaguar's wheel. And then another fifteen or twenty to have a look at what was really only a patch of dusty ground surmounted by the surprisingly imposing, vaguely disturbing Celtic cross Gardner had insisted upon for Doris' gravestone. And a quick fifteen minutes coming back.

Barring any untimely panic attacks, we should easily be able to do the whole thing in an hour. An hour and a half at most.

Shivering, I bent and fumbled with the keys at the door of the car.

This was the dangerous part of the mission.

The first of many dangerous parts. That

Gardner might hear the car start. That if he wasn't immersed in the kind of work-induced hypnosis to which he so often succumbed when in the throes of an interesting project, he would without a doubt hear. Along with just about everyone else in the neighborhood.

The Jaguar crouched in a patch of its own private shadow just beneath his workroom windows. Automatically, I glanced up at those dim and shuttered and blank blotches of darkness against the side of the house. Half-hoping he would take that moment to open the shutters and look out.

"Nice wheels," Muriel clipped out as the lock finally snapped open.

Settling into my silvery leather seat, I shrugged.

Cars...material things...held far less charm and value for me than they did for other people.

"You're an unusual person." Muriel joined me in the Jaguar, then never moved her gaze away from me. "I hope you know that, Jean-Agnes."

"What do you plan to do once we get to the cemetery, Muriel?"

She was silent for a moment. "I'm not really sure. Find a way inside, I guess, and..." Lifting her bouquet of spicy carnations, she sniffed their scent. "I'm not entirely sure. It just seems like something is coming to a head, here. Don't you feel it?"

The car rumbled to life, and I seized the moment to delay my response. Backing carefully out of the driveway, backing away from those dim-lit windows that remained blessedly, distressingly shut and shuttered despite the noise, I waited until we reached the street and I'd slid the gear-shift to the 'drive' position before I slanted her a sideways look.

She wasn't looking at me, after all. At some point she'd redirected her gaze and her frowning attention to the dark street ahead of the car. Seeming not to really see it, she shook her head in an abstracted, half-aware way.

"I feel it," I admitted, hoping to snap her out of whatever trance she'd worked herself into.

It didn't work.

We proceeded in silence.

It wasn't a long drive to the cemetery. To the entry gates that, just as I'd known and warned Muriel, stood closed and locked.

Convent attitudes toward death or not, Riverside Cemetery was not the kind of place I would choose for a dark-of-night escapade.

It was exactly the kind of place a person would expect to see in a late-night movie. The horror-show-spooky kind, where otherworldly creatures cavorted and madmen roamed, waiting to do their dastardly deeds to anyone unfortunate to cross their paths. It was pleasant enough in the daytime,

with gravel drives winding between rows of wonderfully varied and oft times unique gravestones one didn't find in more sedate convent burial plots. Or in modern, planned cemeteries that I was forced to admit lacked any kind of real character or diversity at all.

"We can't get in," Muriel murmured sadly as I swept past.

"I hate to say it. But I told you so."

"There must be a way."

I turned a corner. Onto an even less-alive side street. "There is."

I hated to admit that, too. Hated the basic honesty that made me say it, even when I didn't want to.

It was an opening Gardner had showed me. A small one, a break in the fence through which a person larger than myself, larger even than him, could slip easily. It lay between banks of overgrown shrubs, unnoticed and unheeded, except by those who sought illicit admission. For whatever purpose.

"Couldn't you have found a more hospitable place for Doris?" Muriel inquired, folding her arms around herself as she climbed out of the car, in a classic and traditional gesture of self-protection.

"Well, it *is* a graveyard." I looked back at the car and hoped. It was well hidden, parked

deliberately in a patch of thickest shadow where its gleaming dark paint blended so perfectly into the night that even I couldn't see it after taking a few steps away.

"It's...grim." She peered from side to side. Like she was finally deciding she wasn't so certain after all.

Shrugging, I pushed aside the shrubs that concealed the break in the fence. *And* my own fears.

"I guess I'm just surprised in this day and age..." She let her words trail off. Didn't make even the smallest attempt to try to finish what she'd started to say.

But that was all right. I understood.

She would have preferred a more modern place for her sister to spend eternity. Something a little more sleek and up-to-date, no doubt. One of those places I'd just finished daydreaming about, with recessed markers that left the whole expanse of burying ground looking perfect and undisturbed. Like the rolling and lovingly tended lawn of some country estate. Or an exclusive country club. One of those places both Gardner and Mother had, in their separate times and their own individual ways deemed 'soulless', and 'inappropriate'.

Very suddenly I decided I agreed. With both of them.

Old, Riverside Cemetery might be. Old-

fashioned, and decidedly gothic in its entire approach to the matter of gravestones and their adornment. But in that instant it *was* perfect. It was the *only* place, with its towering monoliths, its leering gargoyles, its peculiar mix of famous and infamous mixed in with an overwhelming abundance of just plain regular folks. Its very *sad* and somehow disheartening mix of lovingly tended memorials standing cheek by jowl with some of the most forlorn and forgotten patches of dusty earth I'd seen in all my life.

Shivering, I glanced around just as Muriel had done. Corralling my long and dark-hued skirts with nervous hands, pulling them tight around my legs and lifting them so that they no longer swept the ground, I motioned to Muriel. Bidding her silently to follow me.

Far away, at the top of the small rise in ground where the side street diverged from the main boulevard, a car drifted past. A pale-colored one, moving very slowly.

Instantly I shrank back into the deepest shadow of the shrubbery, pulling Muriel with me.

It wasn't a police car.

It bore none of the markings or other trappings of a police car, and that was reassuring in a vague and dim way.

But it was moving too slowly. Too obviously slowly, and that in no way reassured or

comforted.

I didn't believe the occupants had spotted us.

It cruised on past.

Behind us an owl called softly. From one of the old, full-leaved trees that by daylight spread shade and relief over this open ground.

That sound *did* have the singular ability to spook me.

My skin prickled.

I had left the car unlocked, despite Gardner's explicit insistence that I never under any circumstances do such a thing.

It just seemed...safer...that way.

"Come on," I urged in a hoarse whisper, more eager than ever to be done with this and out of here...back to the safe sanctity of my home. And my husband. "We have a ways to walk."

Another quick look revealed the cruising car had moved on. Still slowly, to some unknown destination of its own. All I could see of it now were twin oblongs of glowing-red taillights that continued to dwindle.

Taking Muriel's arm, I gripped it. I gripped it *hard*.

"Gardner had Doris buried in his family plot," I declared a little too loudly, as much to reassure myself as to forestall what I imagined must be Muriel's next question...complaint? That we might have chosen a little less *remote* and more

accessible location in this grim and not very acceptable cemetery.

"That was kind of him." No matter what she said, she sounded like she was thinking of complaining, for sure.

"The McCords are a very old family in Denver," I explained.

"So of course their plot is one of the original ones. In one of the oldest sections."

"Which means farthest from the street, of course," Muriel replied in a dry and barely-amused tone.

I didn't answer.

Doris' gravestone loomed directly ahead. It was a rearing and decidedly unusual piece, even in this moonlit-bright land of the strange and the unusual. Her monument was peculiarly large alongside the small granite stones that marked the resting places of his father, his mother, his brother, and his other assorted relatives.

Muriel seemed awed by the sight of it.

Or was she taken aback by it?

Shaking free of the grip I'd maintained upon her arm, she advanced. Very slowly, with her hands clenched tight together around the bouquet of carnations she held in front of her, their fragrant heads pressed into the hollow at the base of her throat. "It's..."

The solitary owl made its mournful soft cry

again. It sounded explosively loud in the thundering silence that followed her single, exhaled word.

"I'm not sure why Gardner insisted upon that particular stone," I apologized, sounding anxious even to myself. "I would have thought something a little less..."

"I was trying to say it's *perfect*."

"It is?" Bemused, I frowned.

Except for the uncommonly brilliant moonlight, the darkness all around was complete. Unbroken.

Even so, I could see Muriel quite clearly as she took another step, several steps, forward. I could see clearly enough to cry out when suddenly, completely out of what I had come to consider her character, she fell to her knees on night-dewed grass before the monolith.

If Muriel heard, she ignored me.

She murmured softly. Things I could not hear. Things I very probably did not wish to hear. She still held her hands together and her carnations at her throat, in an attitude of prayer. Or maybe just as well of delight, or dismay, or astonishment.

Whatever the case, not wanting to intrude I hovered at some small distance with my released skirts and my hair billowing freely in the night breeze that rose in the very instant her knees met the ground.

Lifting my gaze from the grave and the

kneeling woman I scanned dark distance, grown suddenly uneasy. Suddenly watchful, and wary.

Muriel's murmurs lasted only a few seconds. Then the world went silent. No sound intruded, other than the soft stroking of the wind's fingers against grasses and high leaves, and the renewed call of our companion owl. In that moment I knew the world waited. In timeless enchantment, obviously content to wait as long as necessary. For her to decide it was time to rise. For her to decide that whatever she'd come here hoping to find, it had all been settled and finished.

She moved.

Thinking she meant to rise, thinking I might help her, I looked her way again.

But she wasn't. Rising.

As I watched, fascinated by the dreamlike deliberation of it, Muriel unclasped a hand from her bouquet. She reached out, and using a finger that appeared supremely unsteady traced the block letters carved on the gray granite stone. As carefully as if every bit of the information they imparted was completely new to her. As if every bit of it was completely unknown.

"Doris Burton," she murmured quietly.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The sound was unexpected, sharp and slapping, and so completely out of place in the midnight serenity of the cemetery that I froze. Unable to move a muscle, I was just as unable to corral my racing thoughts or urge them to focus upon what had just happened. Upon *deciphering* what had just happened.

Muriel gasped as some half metallic ping and half cracking thud, struck stone nearby.

“Wha...” That jagged intake of breath was the only sound when the world went quiet. Preternaturally quiet. *Supernaturally* quiet.

I stood.

At some point I’d raised a hand, just one. I found myself standing in my frozen position with it up, and resting upon Doris’ gravestone, gaping in every direction. Looking for the *source* of that unnerving sound and trying to shake off some unwelcome, persistent thing that tugged at me and would not stop. Would not let go.

"Jean-Agnes!"

Looking down, I saw with befuddled wonderment that Muriel had caught up a large handful of my voluminous skirt. It was she who yanked so determinedly. She who tugged upon it with such force and insistence that she threatened in a moment or two to pull me physically from my feet.

"What?" I still didn't move. And my voice sounded thick. Stupid.

Another sharp crack rang out. Another stinging report shattered the still air, and this time something did indeed strike one of the nearby monuments. It struck so close, and glanced off with such force that I saw...or did I simply *imagine* I saw?...chips dart up from the round stone ball at the very top.

In the moonlight, the ball was inexplicably suddenly no longer smooth and no longer entirely round.

My mouth opened in surprise.

"For the love of God, Jean-Agnes!" Muriel tugged harder, her words lost in a third of those peculiar sounds that seemed suddenly, ominously, to begin to make a terrible kind of sense. "*Get down, before...*"

Gunshot!

The word slammed into my brain. The word slammed through it, as if it had indeed been shot

from a gun. At very, extremely, close range.

Breathless, I dropped. Realizing in the same second when I joined her on the ground that Muriel had flattened herself face down in the darkest part of the shadow cast by her sister's gravestone.

"God in heaven," she whispered as I tucked myself in next to her. "This is as bad as the time that crazy man came after my dad. After Dad had the nerve to suggest somebody from Doris' school, or maybe even one of our own neighbors might be responsible for..."

"C...crazy man?" Lifting my head cautiously, I peered into night that lay serene again, and utterly quiet beyond the perimeter of our gravestone shadow.

What the devil was she talking about?

Someone was shooting at us, and she was babbling on and on about some kind of crazy man?

I shut out the sound of her voice. And peered harder, peered with full concentration into darkness that seemed to press in around us...seemed to grab at us and want to snatch us into oblivion.

Moonlight revealed nothing. Only placid gravestones and the peaceful emptiness of eternal slumber.

"C...crazy man," I repeated once I'd taken time enough to convince myself that we might...quite

possibly *might*...be all right.

"Why, that wild-eyed teacher, of course," she replied as matter-of-factly as if I was right there inside her thoughts, and should know in full detail what they were.

My surveillance continued. The sounds had stopped. All sounds had stopped, but I kept up the vigilance just in case. And still saw nothing. "*What* teacher?"

"That old fool Doris called Prof. From the neighborhood. Or at least I thought he was old at the time, though looking back I guess he probably wasn't very old at all. But he most certainly was crazy. Even a kid could see that." She stopped there, as if that answer satisfied everything.

"Prof?" Pinned down by gunfire that seemed specifically directed at me, or Muriel, or both of us, with my heart rocketing along at a rate at least three times normal, not knowing if the person who'd shot at us was still out there, waiting for one of us to make a move so he could finish us off for good, I was growing impatient. And cold with frozen fear that filtered at near-lightning speed through every one of my veins. "That man you called Prof came after your father with a gun?"

"Shhh!" Muriel's fingers dug deep into my arm, painfully deep, when she grabbed hold and shook it slightly. "What's that?"

"What's what?"

And then I heard it. Them. *Footsteps*.

Stealthy and cautious, cast by hard-soled shoes crossing gravel that rattled and then, alternately soft stretches that swallowed the sound completely, they crept along slowly. Toward us. As if the person making them knew exactly where we lay sprawled.

"Muriel!" Moving my mouth close to her ear, I barely whispered. "We have to get out of here."

"I ag...gree." Her teeth chattered so hard I could hear them. And worried the stalker would hear as well. "But which way? Where *is* he?"

"I'm not sure where he is. But let's go that way." Lifting a hand barely off the ground, I pointed and hoped she saw. I pointed in the general direction of the hidden Jaguar, hoping with all my heart that it remained there where I'd left it. Waiting to get us out of there.

She breathed heavily. "You go first."

I rose cautiously. As cautiously and silently as possible, I rose just enough to put me on my feet and no more. Crouched low, with the hindering folds of my long skirt gathered almost indecently high around my thighs, I darted for the next looming gravestone along our route to freedom.

Almost at once another shot rang out. And I tumbled. Into the blackest shadow of a stone removed several plots from the one where we'd originally hidden.

Where was Muriel?

I heard nothing in the first instant to indicate that she had followed me. I heard nothing at all to indicate she was even alive, and not at that moment already lying in some impenetrable shadow, staring up at the star-riddled sky with startled, dead eyes. Then she tumbled into my sheltering darkness almost on top of me. "Christ," she muttered. "The man's aim is no damned better now than Prof's when I was a girl."

"Some time you are going to have to tell me about this, Muriel."

"Not here."

And then she was gone.

Crouching as I'd done before, surprisingly *not* visible in her pale pants suit in the silvered moonlight, she broke for the next substantial hiding place...a sort of squashed obelisk that hulked in near-pyramidal splendor another dozen yards along our path. Another dozen yards closer to the Jaguar.

"What the hell?" Muriel breathed when I joined her in her latest shadow in the same moment another shot echoed way too close. "Doesn't this idiot ever run out of *bullets*?"

Where I lay trembling, demoralized by fear and wanting with all my heart to simply lie still and cry, she sounded excited. Almost exhilarated. As if people routinely took pot-shots at her. As if it was

something she *liked*.

I shivered.

She might like it. Might be thrilled by it. But I was a different story.

I most decidedly was not excited, *or* thrilled.

"Maybe he's reloading?" I had no experience with anything even remotely like this. So it was only a guess. Based on nothing, and probably meaning nothing.

The rising inflection of my voice made that all too clear.

And were those footsteps growing closer again? Were they guided by some kind of infallible, diabolical radar that had fastened upon us, and could not then be escaped?

Girding myself for the next leg of our sprint, I rose soundlessly. Expecting the hot and searing pain I imagined would come along with and be the result of a gunshot striking my back and sending me reeling to my death, I moved out of shadow into milky-pale moonlight. I crouched as low as before and ran frantically, ran with all the speed I could manage, frantic and hovering right on the edge of full-blown panic in my need to escape, I ran.

No shots split the silence. There were no sounds now from the night or in the night to indicate shots had ever been fired.

Maybe the pursuer had run out of ammo.

Or maybe he'd simply given up on Muriel and I, and moved on to other and more cooperative targets?

Gathering my skirts higher still, I put on an extra burst of speed, darting for the next bit of shelter along our escape route. In this case it was more than a *bit* of shelter. In this case it was a largish above-ground crypt constructed of what appeared to be pale-gray granite shot through with microscopic flecks of quartz. Or maybe mica.

Whatever it was, it made the squat structure appear to glitter in the cold and too-revealing moonlight. Expecting to hover low in the rock-hard shadow of this substantial way station, I slammed hard into the metal-grilled door at the front of the sanctuary.

To my surprise, the door stood ajar. It moved quite easily beneath the impact of my running weight, swinging open silently and completely, so that I burst into the small enclosed space before I knew what was happening.

Catching myself against the low stone bulk just inside, the vault covering the crypt's resident, no doubt, I looked back.

Muriel was running just as I'd run, crouching low and zig-zagging in a way I hadn't thought to do. As if she really *had* done something like this before, a million times. She was a quick-moving specter, a silent and strangely visible one in the

uncertain light. And behind her, too close for any kind of comfort, another form moved. A darker one, not crouched but standing upright, its exact size and height impossible to judge in the wild and surreal melee of gravestones that surrounded it.

I opened my mouth. Inhaled the deepest breath possible, and started to call out to her. To warn her.

Something glittered in the figure's hands. It was long and slender, held down at the figure's side and pointing harmlessly enough at the ground. For the time being.

It was a *deadly* glitter.

I shut my mouth. Quickly.

The Jaguar was closer. But we still had so terribly, terribly far to go.

I didn't dare reveal my position, Muriel's next shelter, by calling attention to it. All I could do was wait, my heart stuttering nervously, my mouth still anxious to open and call out my warning, while Muriel continued her course toward me.

The figure lifted the shape, clearly a rifle, to its shoulder. And assumed a firing stance.

"Mur..." I couldn't help myself. But my warning scream escaped as barely a whisper.

The rifle cracked.

Something flashed.

There. Around its muzzle.

In the same instant Muriel stumbled, staggered, fell. And my heart jolted terribly.

She went down with a cracking and splintering crash I swore I could actually hear in the moment of resounding silence once the echo of the...fatal?...shot faded away.

"Muriel!" Once again my voice had no sound. No substance. My hand clutched my throat, and I realized to my horror that my heart felt like it had stopped completely. A long, long time ago. And never resumed.

The first heat of tears filled my eyes as the first heavy realization that I had brought her here and in so doing I had caused her to be killed thundered into my heart.

Dear God.

Muriel had trusted me, and I had *killed* her.

My vision blurred. So badly that for a moment I saw nothing but swimming, featureless, disorienting darkness that threatened to swallow me up whole, and alive. For a moment my conscious mind missed completely what my subconscious registered with no problem. What in the very next instant sent my heart into a wild tailspin of joy and jubilation, followed just as quickly by the more sober thought that even though she was getting up from the place where she had dropped, Muriel was not out of the woods

yet.

Muriel might still be seriously injured.

But she *was* up.

She had resumed her strangely professional evasive crouch, and she was running again. As fast as I'd ever seen a person run, for any reason. In what I could only assume was a blind dash of pure and unadulterated terror in which she no longer tried to avoid the danger at her back, she seemed not to see my perfect hiding place inside the shadowy crypt.

She almost ran straight past. No doubt she would have, had I not reached out to snag the hem of her flapping jacket and tug her in close...*extremely* close...to me. "Here," I whispered urgently, tugging her through the open grillwork.

She shivered. Shaking all over, violently, she pawed insistently at my shoulder when I thrust her behind me in an effort to hide the revealing gleam of her pale outfit behind the dark and voluminous billows of my own.

"Wh...wh...what..." she stammered. "The h...h...h...h..." She clung to me. Would not let go of me.

Again I thought I heard the chatter of her teeth. "Shhhh."

Outside I could hear the crunch of gravel beneath pursuing feet.

He'd been much, much closer behind Muriel than I first supposed. And he was drawing closer...was drawing ever, perilously, closer with every ticking, chattering, trembling and tremulous second.

"This place is sc...sc...scary," Muriel clung even closer to my back as I shoved her into the deepest, shadowed corner to the side of the lacy grille. "I d...don't l...like this p...place at all."

"Shhhh!"

Our pursuer was right on top of us.

The crack and rattle of his footsteps on gravel just outside the midnight crypt sounded very nearly as loud...every bit as shocking and unsettling...as his gunshots had sounded before.

I realized suddenly, upon a sudden and crazed urge to cackle with laughter that would fatally reveal our position, that I had no real idea if the pursuer was actually a 'he'. As opposed to a truly deadly and determined 'she', bent upon an irreversible mission of complete and total annihilation.

Our annihilation. Mine and Muriel's.

I had merely assumed it was a man because all my experience until very recently had been with reserved and outwardly gentle-mannered women. The kind who had concealed their strength and power beneath their submissive exteriors and only exerted it in other, much less explosive ways.

Based upon that, fearing too much change in too short a stretch of time, I *wanted* it to be a man.

Shivering again, I grasped the metal latch of the crypt's door. Slipping my fingers carefully into the gap where the lock might and could, click shut and seal us in...a possibility that *did* make me shiver all the way to the marrow of my bones...I pulled the grille shut and held it that way. As invisibly as possible.

"I know you're here!" The man did not raise his voice. He cooed provocatively instead, his tone eerie and other-worldly. In a bizarre way that set my entire spine to creeping, he spoke so close to our hiding place that it was a wonder I didn't give up completely right then and there, and just scream my lungs raw.

Instead I bit my lower lip. So hard that I tasted the earthy rawness of my own disturbed blood.

Pressed tight against my back, Muriel whimpered. Her earlier, glossy bravado had vanished completely.

"I know where you are, Muriel Burton," he cooed, though he sounded no closer and certainly no farther away. Like he really didn't know, and expected us to fall into the trap and make some sound that would give ourselves away.

Neither of us did.

"And I know you're there too, Mrs. McCord. Mrs. Jean-Agnes Teagarden McCord, who should

have learned to mind her own business while she had the chance. I know where you are, and I know everything there is to know about you. Though my little Muriel isn't so little *or* so luscious anymore. Are you, Muriel?"

"He's mad," Muriel whispered next to my ear.

I found it hard to disagree. *Impossible* to disagree.

"I really would have preferred you, Muriel Burton, when you were young and tender. Young and free of distracting influences...preconceived notions, and your lifetime of bad habits."

"No, he's a perv."

I couldn't disagree with Muriel on that assessment, either.

This man was the very worst kind of pervert.

He was the kind who went after innocent little girls.

Our only answer was silence. Long and waiting silence, broken after what seemed a soundless eon by a shout. A shrill, aggravated one. "Where the hell *are* you?" he demanded, his voice rising into a near-shriek. "I demand that you come out of there at once! I demand it of both of you!"

"He demands." Muriel's audible terror hadn't subsided completely, not by a long shot. But it had diminished a little. Enough that she no longer sounded so close to the verge of panic.

Which I counted as a very, very good thing.

Because her agitation had been just about to drag me down, too. *And then where would we be?*

Now Muriel snorted. "He *demands*," she repeated scornfully. "As if anyone in the world is going to listen to a word he utters. Any more than anyone ever listened."

"Muriel, do you *know*..." The rest of my question was lost in an eruption of chaos very close by. Just outside the crypt where we maintained our tenuous refuge.

A new shout echoed hollow and wordless, in a different voice. A different man's voice. A deeper and far deadlier voice that stood all the hairs at the back of my neck straight up.

The pursuer answered with another wordless shout, followed by a new rattle of gunfire as he...or maybe the second man?... squeezed off several shots in quick succession.

Then a scuffle. Hand-to-hand combat.

A grunt.

The sound of a fist striking flesh.

A vile epithet from the pursuer.

A low snicker from Muriel.

More scuffling, and additional shots.

"What the hell is going on here?" the second man demanded, and this time I heard his words...his voice...very clearly.

Gardner!

Electrified, I moved. I made a sort of slight,

forward, *surging* motion.

And this time it was Muriel who held *me* back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The scuffle lasted another minute or two.

It wasn't easy to tell in the sequestered and near-total gloom, with an unadulterated frenzy of terror swirling fully and madly out of control inside my heart, who might be winning.

And then it all came to an abrupt end with a last, truly heart-shattering crack of the rifle. And then another.

Still Muriel held me back, with arms that encircled my waist and contained all forward elements of my struggle. She controlled me with hands she locked together at the front, inseparably at the place where they dug, sharp-knuckled, deep into my diaphragm.

She held me back. But nothing could hold back my scream.

Nothing known to God, or man, or even old Satan himself.

"Gardner!" My shriek rose on the night air. It filled the night air and instantly overflowed the

tight limitations of my hiding place.

My only answer was a soft shushing from Muriel, breathed directly next to my ear.

From outside came no sound.

It was too quiet. Without benefit of owl, or coyote, or any other night creature. Without benefit even of the distant moan and whistle of an approaching night train along the tracks that ran so close past the cemetery. Even the usual rush and rumble of the city did not reach us...did not counteract the terrible tension that hung thick and suffocating in the midst of all that ricocheting silence.

Everything stopped. Utterly. Dead-still in shock and horror.

And then there was sound. Then there was the return of outside sound, something other than the awesome beating of my heart in my ears and the corresponding rush-thump-bang of distressed blood determined to escape through my eardrums.

A low and ragged grunt sounded breathless. Strained.

I couldn't tell who it was.

Time hung heavy. Time hung endless, and intolerable. And then, with a rush of relief even sweeter than in the moment when I'd stepped outside Divine Serenity for the first time in years and understood though my heart had not yet been

ready to understand that I was free, I heard voices.
Words.

Gardner's voice and *Gardner's* words. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

I didn't hear the reply. It was garbled, mumbled in a voice that was definitely masculine, definitely pained, and most decidedly defensive.

"You. Of all people." *Gardner* growled that part of it, and along with the words came sounds of more gravel crunching. More scuffling and scrabbling.

So he knew the person who'd pursued and attacked us. That reminded me of something I'd completely forgotten in the outbreak of chaos.

"Muriel?" I spoke back over my shoulder, unable to turn anything more than my head since she kept her hold tight upon me. "Do you *know* this guy?"

"Your husband?"

It was all I could do to not kick her. *Hard.* "No. The one with the gun."

She snorted.

"And for heaven's sake, the danger's over. Will you let go of me?"

She relaxed her grip, but didn't release it entirely. "I'm afraid you're going to run out there and get yourself shot."

"I won't." It took a bit of work, but I did manage to pry her hands apart, working at an

awkward angle, and then finally to escape their continued clutches. "Who is he, Muriel?"

Taking a deep breath, she exhaled it on a sigh, then made an odd sort of pre-speech noise.

"Jean-Agnes!"

Well, I could always count on Gardner to have perfect timing, couldn't I?

Now I wanted to kick *him*.

"Muriel?"

We simply stood, Muriel and I, and if there had been enough light inside the crypt, I suspected we'd have found ourselves staring at each other.

"You can come out now."

Grimacing, I shook out my skirts, smoothing them to make myself at least marginally presentable. I was shaking all over. So badly that it was all I could do to take a long, deep breath and shove the crypt's grilled gate open.

I was shaking inside, too. Not knowing what to expect to find but most definitely expecting the worst when I stepped out into the living, silvered moonlight.

Gardner had caught the pursuer. Using the immense physical strength for which he had long been justly famous, he held that person...man...with an arm crooked securely around his neck in a way that, no matter how hard he twisted or pried, he could not break free.

The rifle was nowhere in sight.

Gardner had disarmed him as well.

And that gave my deflowered courage a much-needed boost...some much-needed time to rediscover itself and reclaim itself. That gave me enough to step out boldly, with Muriel right behind me, into the more open territory of the nearest wide, graveled walk.

"Are you two all right?" Gardner must have given his captive's trapped throat a little extra squeeze, for the man moaned, twisting even more and scrabbling even harder.

"Where are the police?" Muriel sounded anxious. "Have you called the police?"

"I've sort of had my hands full," Gardner muttered. "I haven't had a lot of time to call them."

"Still, with all the shots in the middle of a graveyard, in the middle of the night..."

Once again I found myself agreeing with her.

Surely someone must have heard. Some good citizen must have grown concerned enough to punch in 911 and report that ghosts and spirits weren't the only ones having a field day in Riverside Cemetery tonight.

But the night was quiet. It was very, unnaturally quiet, with all the night creatures obviously unconvinced it was safe to come out of burrows and dens where they'd taken refuge when the war started...safe to resume their

regular rounds and regular sounds. I heard only the soft thrum of the nearby sleeping city, a human-made thrum unmarred and uninterrupted by even the most distant night siren. Of any kind.

"It suits me just as well to have a few minutes alone with this jackass," Gardner growled, shoving his captive forward. "Before I turn his murdering ass in myself."

Which reminded me of yet another overlooked thing.

I still didn't know who the jackass... assailant... was.

"Gardner..."

"Prof," Muriel said sadly. "I don't understand how you could do this. I don't understand what you've been thinking."

"I've been thinking about all the things that never happened, Muriel." The man was crazy. His tone, his words and the way he uttered them in a jumbled and tumbling rush, confirmed it. "I've always thought about what might have been, if I'd just been given the chance I needed. I always thought about the things I might have taught..."

"You disgust me."

With a twisting of loose and sick horror deep inside my gut, I recognized the captive then. Though his voice sounded nothing like his own with the madness out in the open at last, it sounded enough the same that I recognized it with

no difficulty.

"Mr. Crimmins?" Shock resounded in every syllable I spoke.

"This is the one we used to call Prof." Muriel sounded like she wanted to spit. Maybe she *did* spit.

"I *thought* you recognized him."

"Of course I do. Did." She sounded like she *really* wanted to spit now. Preferably on him. "This jerk used to teach at Doris' nice little expensive, private school. He's the one who used to come around our house all the time, trying to suck up to..."

"Doris." Now Prof sounded like he wanted to spit. "That little twit." He'd ceased his struggles with Gardner's arm that still held him fast.

"You disgust me."

"Well, you never disgusted me, Muriel."

With that a few things...a *couple* of things...clicked together in my mind. Things I'd heard before and known before, though until that moment I'd never actually been aware I knew them. And had certainly never put them together in quite the way I was putting them together now.

I'd known he'd been a teacher. But at Doris Burton's school? And that last little bit, about Muriel...

"What did you do?" I demanded, so suddenly that Prof jumped, as if he'd forgotten me.

They all jumped as if they'd forgotten me.

"Stay away from me," he snarled. "You're a harpy. You're not my type at all. You most likely never were."

Well, thank God in His sweet heaven for that.

"Hey now." Gardner tightened his chokehold enough to jerk Prof a little more upright, enough to cause him to grapple fruitlessly with the arm at his throat again. "That's no kind of answer to a lady's question."

Prof gurgled helplessly.

"I'll bet Jean-Agnes isn't your type," Muriel shot back indignantly. "You like them just a little bit younger, don't you? Say about twelve or thirteen? Just like my sister, Doris."

"You can't be serious." Prof found his voice again. "That little piece of baggage was never on any list of mine. She was too full of herself Always trying to act like she belonged with all those sweet little rich girls who'd been brought up to turn a man's head with their class. Their real class, and their backgrounds. Your sister was nothing but a self-important pain in my ass, sashaying around like she thought she was going to turn out to be something someone would want." He paused long enough to snort derisively. "I had no more interest in Doris Burton than I have in a couple of washed-up old hags like the two of you."

"Hey..." I began indignantly, but Muriel cut me

off mercilessly.

"You are nothing but a *liar!*" she shouted. "I know you kept coming around our house because you wanted to get closer to Doris, and you thought..."

"You don't know beans, lady!"

I heard sirens. At last. In the far-distant distance.

I hoped they were coming here.

"I had no more interest in your damned sister than I had in the man in the moon...than I have in you now. She was nothing but a little witch who kept sticking her nose into things and places where she had no business sticking it. And she had a big mouth, too. A really big one that she didn't keep shut."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Shouting, outraged, Muriel stepped right up close to Prof, and jabbed at the exact center of his chest with a viciously prodding index finger. "She was a little *girl!* What the hell did she have to keep her mouth shut about, when..."

I knew. And the knowledge made me sick. Physically sick, mentally sick, *heart-sick.*

"She caught you," I accused, stepping up beside her. "Didn't she? She saw something, or heard something, and she caught on to what you were doing with all those other little girls at that school. Those...what did you call them? Those little rich

girls? Those *sweet* little rich girls?"

"She *knew*, dammit. She said she was going to report me. She was going to tell her father, and the headmistress, and then they would tell..."

"You were never after Doris at all, were you?"
In the moonlight-bright darkness I saw them looking at me. All of them...Gardner, and Muriel, and the degenerate who stood between them. In that moment silence, *deafening* silence filled the cemetery. And in the midst of it, in the background of it, the sirens drew close. Very, very close.

Someone had called for help, after all.

Silently, I blessed them.

This was interesting in its own sickening sort of way. But I'd much prefer to let the authorities handle it. I'd much prefer to let them sift through it, and have at least *one* of them be here to hear it and take note of it. I was anxious to spare myself...Gardner, and Muriel too...the necessity of hauling this filthy, unconscionable piece of human garbage off to a place where he could be suitably punished for the things he'd done. Where he could be arrested, and locked away for good. So girls...very *young* girls...would be that tiny bit safer to go about their lives.

"I'm no danger to anyone now," Prof whined petulantly, as if he read my thoughts.

Gardner tightened his choke hold again. He

made Prof jerk and gasp again. "Buddy, once a pervert, always a pervert."

"You don't *understand!*" Prof's voice rose into a squeal of pain and despair that remarkably, almost exactly, matched the madly warbling wail of approaching sirens. "I've had medical issues. Ask my wife. She'll tell you! I can't anymore...can't..."

"Save it for the judge." Gardner almost jerked him off his feet this time.

"You've got a boatload of other crimes to answer for," Muriel put in. "That doesn't explain any of them. It sure as hell doesn't *excuse* any of them. I loved my sister. I *loved* her! And you, you piece of shit..."

"My wife can't find out!" Prof was bleating now. *Piteously, but not pitifully.*

Not in *my* book.

"It would break my wife's heart if she found out."

"Maybe you should have thought of that before you went after little girls," Gardner snarled angrily.

Prof mewled again. He whined again. "There's no reason to dredge this up now, is there? No reason to break Eleanor's heart and hurt her feelings, when all that stuff is in the past and I'm an old man. When..."

"No *reason?*" Muriel put her face right up close

to his. "How the hell can you say a thing like that? When you *murdered* my sister?"

"She interfered," he whined as if that explained everything. "She was going to ruin everything! I had to do something. I had to get rid of her, shut her up, before she..."

"And that's supposed to just make everything okay?"

He mewled louder. "You should have paid attention to me. Like I wanted you to. None of it would have happened if you..."

"You're saying it was *my* fault?" Muriel sounded outraged. Like she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

I was having a difficult time with it myself.

"All you had to do was look at me. You were such a lovely little thing. So meek and unassuming. I'd have given you anything you wanted, Muriel. I'd have done anything to make you happy if you'd just done what I wanted. If you'd just let me..."

Muriel drew her hand back. Almost all the way to her shoulder.

I tried to catch it in mid-air, tried to stop her. But I wasn't quick enough.

The crack of her palm meeting Prof's cheek reminded me of the sounds of his rifle shots. It had that same deadly, final quality.

Prof wailed.

Then footsteps rushed. Gravel scrunched in the darkness, and I realized the night was asparkle with red lights and blue lights. Flashing, commanding lights.

"Nobody move," a man barked. "We've had reports of gunshots here."

"Rifle's right over there," Gardner said with a sideways jerk of his head. "Tombstone marked Pierloxi."

"You the shooter?" Even in darkness I could see the cop was big. And suspicious. *Glowering* in his suspicion.

"That would be this bag of filth," Gardner gave Prof another jerk.

"And you are?"

"Gardner McCord. You want to take over here?"

"What's your interest in this, Mr. McCord?" A second cop, unnoticed before, materialized out of the darkness.

"The bag of filth was taking pot-shots at my wife and her friend."

"And why would that be, sir?"

"Ask him." Stepping forward, Muriel planted herself firmly in front of the cop. "He's had plenty to say already. Like admitting he murdered my sister."

The officer turned out to be much younger than I'd first supposed. "M...murder?" Backing away

from her, he looked around nervously. Obviously looking for a little backup.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Couldn’t you have picked a better time?” Gardner demanded irritably. “It was all I could do to convince those cops not to run the two of you in for breaking and entering. And trespassing. And God only knows what else. What the devil were you thinking, anyway, Jean-Agnes?” He was looking at me. Glaring at me, and speaking directly to me. “I thought you had better sense. I thought...”

“Now, don’t yell at her,” Muriel said. “This was my idea, and Jean-Agnes didn’t want any part of it.”

“Then why the hell...”

“Because I practically roped her and dragged her here with me.”

A smile flitted across Gardner’s face. Barely a ghost of one, but a smile all the same. “Why do I find myself doubting that?”

“Doubt all you want, Mister. But I’m telling you the truth. And now...”

I glanced at Gardner.

He shrugged. Just a little, barely lifting his shoulders. "Now we are going home," he declared. "All of us. And we're going to stay there for the rest of the night. Until we have to go to the police station in the morning, and finish up the business I also convinced those cops didn't have to be finished here. Tonight."

Gathering my long skirts around me so that they wouldn't catch on the trailing branch of a prickly shrub or some other long-neglected plant, gathering them tight so I would leave no inadvertent trace of our passage as if it might still be exceedingly dangerous to leave such traces, I led the way. Along the narrow path, out of the cemetery.

The night had begun to wear on toward the very small hours of morning. No light of dawn infused the sky as of yet, but there was a difference to the darkness. Beyond and around the gilt-satin sheen of the moon, it had taken on a new and velveteen hue. And the moon had changed as well. It had enlarged to supernatural size...had grown into a white and floating orb a person might touch, should a person summon courage enough to try. Glancing up from time to time as we proceeded, with me in the lead once again and Muriel clinging close to my back, with Gardner bringing up the rear and backing us up as he was

so infinitely good at doing, I thought I could almost see...almost count...the craters on its mystically pocked surface.

Sea of Tranquility. The most famous.

Sea of Vapors.

Sea of Nectar.

Such fanciful names!

Incorrect as they stood, for science had long since proved there were no seas, no swirling vapors upon that dry and lifeless globe, they were nonetheless perfect names in all their evocative strength.

Ancient names.

As this plot of ground we followed, this dwindling pathway through a fantastical alter-city made up of monuments and spires and low, unprepossessing stones seemed equally ancient. Far more ancient than any place established in these modern and inconsequential times should ever feel ancient.

"I can't believe how *far* it was," Muriel breathed behind me, shattering the moon's icily magic spell. "Why did you have to bury poor Doris in another state?"

I didn't reply.

Mostly because we were *there*. Suddenly, unexpectedly even though I had been expecting it, the hole in the fence lay all but invisible in its shroud of dense-packed evergreen just ahead.

"Did you tell the police about this?" I asked. Though I made every effort to keep it as quiet as possible, my voice seemed much too loud, shockingly loud, in a quiet rush of breeze that arose almost simultaneously with my first step through the hole in the fence.

"I figured there were some things they didn't need to know," Gardner replied, holding the broken wire aside for us to ease through.

"And you were annoyed with us for going against the law," I remarked dryly.

Gardner held out his hand. "Keys, Jean-Agnes?"

I pressed them into his palm. "How did you get here, anyway?"

"Taxi. When I saw you rocket away from the house at three times the speed you normally drive, I knew something was up. And I knew it couldn't be good. The cabbie thought I was nuts. He didn't want to leave me out here by myself."

Standing close to me, Muriel shivered. "That cabbie was a smart man."

Great. I shot a dagger of a look at her as Gardner unlocked the car.

Now she decided to come to her senses.

"The old man was right about one thing, you know," she said.

"Oh?" I pulled the car's door open and slipped into the back seat. Leaving the front for Muriel.

"What's that?"

"Doris really did think of herself as a witch. Much to our parents' dismay. Of course she called herself an enchantress. Not a witch. And oh, my God. You don't suppose that's what made old Prof think..." Quickly, she shook her head. "Doesn't matter. And I don't want to know. But it did lead her straight to him. And then him to me."

Leaning forward, between the seats, I peered at her face. "How do you figure that?"

"To my parents it was all the same. Witch or enchantress, the strange symbols, the rituals and chants, the incantations. And the clothes!" Muriel laughed softly. "Those clothes were Daddy's outrage. Left to herself, Doris would have dressed in nothing but black. Strange robes, and make-up that made her look more like a corpse than a living human being. That was why Daddy pushed so hard to get her into Centennial Academy. And keep her there. They had standards...the uniform that *had* to be worn. The little red-plaid jumper and knee socks. And bare-scrubbed faces. No make-up allowed, not even powder. Doris hated it."

"And that was how Prof found the one victim he could never catch," I mused softly. "That was what brought Prof to you. And *that* was what got Doris killed."

Muriel sighed. "Everybody would have been so

much better off if Daddy had just left her alone. Let her grow out of that strange phase that bothered him so much." Another pause, then. A long one. "Doris would have loved that stone, you know."

There seemed no easy reply to that, so I didn't try. I just sat back in my seat, and listened to the low snarl of the car's engine as Gardner, also silent, steered it expertly through early-morning-empty streets.

"I had flowers," Muriel mourned after a moment.

Had she?

I couldn't remember.

"I had flowers for Doris. I thought she needed flowers. But I never got to leave them for her." Muriel looked around, a pale and searching wraith in moonlight that flicked and flickered through the Jaguar's tinted windows. She actually looked around, as if she expected to find the lost bouquet right there in the front seat. In the most elegant of crystal vases, perhaps.

"You can go back later," Gardner declared. "In the daytime. When the place is open, and you don't have to break in."

"This *was* a pretty stupid idea." Muriel wrapped her arms around herself. To hug herself. "Wasn't it?"

Ever the consummate diplomat, Gardner

laughed softly. Sympathetically. "It was ill-advised," he agreed.

"It really is the perfect place for Doris," she went on after yet another pause, her voice quaking the slightest bit. "I hope you don't mind keeping her there. Where she is now."

"It would be our privilege. It seems to me she's been shuttled around enough. It seems to me she should be allowed a little eternal peace for a change."

"My thoughts exactly." Muriel sniffled a little. "And I want to thank you. Both of you."

"It was nothing." I was glad then that complete darkness reigned, with that swollen moon beginning to wane and shrink at last, glad that shadow filled the car and hid the flush of uneasy pleasure I felt burning across my face. "Anyone would have done the same."

"No. *Anyone* would most certainly have not. That nasty old man, that Prof. *He* wouldn't have done it." She cast me a sideways glance...a *backward* one. "It seems the only one who cared enough to do anything was the neighborhood vampire." Then immediately, catching her breath, she laid a hand on Gardner's arm. "I am *so* sorry," she apologized, sounding like she might be about to cry. "I don't know why that just popped out."

"It's only what everyone's been thinking." Gardner sounded unperturbed. "And I'm not, you

know."

"Of course I do. There's no such thing as a vampire."

He chuckled. "Well, actually, there is."

Muriel turned her head. She looked at him. From my spot in the back seat, the middle of the back seat, I could see her only in profile. But I could see clearly the look of startled disbelief on her face.

"Porphyria," he said.

"Por...what?"

"Porphyria," I said, leaning forward again. "Gardner inherited it from his mother. Some people...the really *ignorant* ones..." I flashed Gardner an apologetic look. "...call it the vampire's disease."

Muriel turned her head enough now that I could see her face fully. I could see the look on it fully, and now it was a look of utter confusion.

"People with porphyria are sensitive to light. Some, like Gardner, are super-sensitive. Enough that when they step into the sunlight, their skin begins to blister."

She looked at him again. "You never go out into the *sunlight*?" She sounded shocked.

"I still make a habit of avoiding it." Gardner was being very affable about his problems tonight. Very talkative, where he usually became silent and withdrawn when strangers inquired about

his...strangenesses.

"Still? You don't..."

"Thanks to Jean-Agnes, the disease is under control for the first time since I was about your sister's age. I can go out, but I don't. Not often. It's just old habit, I guess."

Muriel looked back at me again.

"Thalidomide," I said. "They use it to treat porphyria. And get some astonishing results."

"Thalidomide?" Muriel's shock only increased. "Isn't that terribly dangerous?"

"Only if I decide to get pregnant," Gardner responded with a small laugh.

We had reached the first turn that would take us to our street. Our out-of-the-way side street. Gardner slowed the car. Getting ready to turn in.

"You're forgetting to take Muriel to her hotel," I said.

"I'm not forgetting anything. I figure it's safer having the two of you right there in the same place. Where I can keep an eye on you until I'm sure you're over this unearthly urge to visit cemeteries in the dead of night. *Closed* cemeteries in the dead of night."

"Oh, *I'm* over it," Muriel declared. "I think I've had all the cemeteries I can handle for the foreseeable future."

"You don't think some lawyer is going to convince the police to let Prof go, do you?" I

wasn't one for quavery voices. At least not quavery with fear. But it certainly did carry a quaver that time.

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

Muriel sighed again. More heavily than before. "I don't think I'm exactly flattered that the only time in my life I've ever managed to inspire undying devotion in a man, he turned out to be a murdering, deranged sex pervert."

"I thought you had a husband?" I inquired.

She made a motion that looked vaguely like a shrug.

"I thought you were planning to go back to him tomorrow?"

Another movement that might as well have been a shrug as not...that was just as indecipherable as the first. "I was going because a person had to be somewhere. And that seemed just as good a where as anywhere else. Now, though, it does seem like it might be a good idea to stay here, at least until..."

Her voice trailed off.

If she was looking for me to beg her to stay, to reassure her it would be the best idea for her to stay, she had come looking in the wrong place.

I knew it was uncharitable of me, decidedly un-Christian. But I wouldn't be exactly unhappy to see the last of her.

Our lives had been too complicated since her

unexpected arrival. Our lives had been *dangerously* complicated. And I found myself longing for the 'old days'... The days of just a few days before. I found myself aching for the long and lovely times when I'd whiled away peaceful hours in my shop, doing not much of anything among the lovely things I collected not because I wanted to keep them but because I wanted to share them with others...with my customers. I ached to go back to times when I'd had nothing to do but spend pleasant afternoons offering up some long-sought treasure or another to one of my customers...something I'd unearthed and then set aside especially for them, especially to delight them.

And I missed the nights. Especially the nights!

Oh, those nights.

My eyes drifted steadily, unstopably, toward sleep. My eyes misted with soft and half-awake tears. My eyes *filled* with tears at the memory of those wondrous, wonder-filled nights.

I misted at the memory of moonlight striking white marble.

I missed the green scent of our private and hidden garden as we dashed through, the grass sweet and fragrant beneath our feet. And I missed especially the dark pleasures of the altar at the garden's innermost depth.

I saw a blur of colors. Lights, as Gardner turned

the car right, then right again. Taking us home. I saw the illuminated towers and spires of downtown Denver flutter by in the haze of a waking dream. And realized that what I missed most were the delights of my husband.

All the delights.

So badly.

I wasn't truly aware when we stopped in the driveway of our own house. I wasn't more than barely aware when Gardner pressed the key to the back door into Muriel's hand. Dozing, fitful and morose in my dreams of all that I perceived lost, I was only marginally aware when she stepped out of the car and left us alone...was unaware at all of what words she uttered, and he in return. If they uttered any.

I wasn't really aware of anything until Gardner leaned into the back seat and touched my hand.

"Alone," he murmured promisingly.

My eyelids flickered open.

His hand covered mine, warm and solid. "I want you," he said, so quietly that I couldn't be certain I'd heard, and encompassed my hand with the gentlest of pressures.

"Tonight."

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.