# Whips Ŀ Whispers Maria Isabel Pita

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Published by eXtasy Books, a division of Zumaya Publications, 2005 Look for us online at: www.zumayapublications.com www.extasybooks.com

## *EEDIEATION*

For my Master, Stinger

#### FROLOGIÆ

It was November in Boston, which meant it was more than cold enough for the rabbit-fur coat Kathy Hampton had dug up for herself out of a mountain of polyester dresses at Dollar-a-Pound. She felt a little guilty about wearing a fur, but it was obviously too late for these particular rabbits, and she was very glad they were helping protect her body now from the potentially fatal elements.

The charcoal-gray clouds were swollen with snow as she left work that Friday afternoon, her golden-red head lowered against the freezing wind, her purse clutched at her side. She walked as quickly as she could in high-heeled, ankle-high boots towards the trolley that would took her to the Redline train at Ashmont Station. The hip-length white coat kept her upper body warm, but her legs were going painfully numb in the short black skirt she wore over black tights.

The last block to the trolley took her past a large old cemetery. That day, however, she didn't even glance at the handsome stone angel wielding his cosmically powerful sword. The tomb-littered grass was separated from the sidewalk by a black wroughtiron fence, and suddenly a crow landed on one of the spear-like ends to her left, as on her right she heard the mechanical purr of a car slowing down.

"Would you like a ride?" a deep male voice asked.

She glanced towards the street, and her pulse seemed to trip over the stranger's perfect features. "No, thank you," she replied automatically, though she was tempted.

"Where do you live?" he inquired, cruising slowly along beside her as she kept walking.

She glanced at him again. His short hair was strikingly blonde above a black leather jacket. "The North End," she told him.

"That's a long way. Get in, I'll take you."

She paused at the curb, unable to look away from his seriously striking face.

The crow flew off the fence with a sharp cry.

He stopped the car. "Get in, baby."

Shivering in her rabbit skins, Kathy hesitated.

"Don't be afraid," he urged quietly.

She walked around the shining black hood of the car and slipped in beside him.

### CHAPTER ONE

iz opened yet another tin of cat food. "Just because something makes a great fantasy doesn't mean it would actually be fun in real life," she remarked.

"Oh, believe me, I know." Morgan frowned as she watched her friend dishing out meat into a rainbow of bowls on the floor. "Jesus, how many cats do you have?"

"Six." Smiling, Liz rinsed the cans clean and tossed them into a recycling bin beneath the sink.

Morgan crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back against the wall. "I guess I'm just at that point in life..." She stared at the row of felines neatly attacking their food. "You know, that wonderful point where you're forced to realize you're getting older and it's time to think about being realistic and settling down, instead of stubbornly holding on to fantasies that couldn't ever actually come true because real life doesn't work that way."

"Relax, okay, you're only twenty-eight. You've got time for everything." Liz pulled dinner placidly out of her well-stocked freezer. "Lobster tails?" Morgan exclaimed, perfectly happy for a moment. "You're too good to me, Liz. Can I help with anything?"

"No, I've got it under control, but you could pour us some wine. There's a jug of Merlot in the cabinet."

"My pleasure."

"So, what you're saying is that sometimes you feel like two different people?" Liz prompted once they both had a glass in hand.

Morgan sighed and planted a black boot against the wall behind her. "Well, you know I've always had a dark side, Liz." She sipped her wine. "And yet I've always believed in true love. Watching you and Mark together gives me hope; you communicate with each other so well."

"We have to," Liz said shortly, and did not elaborate.

One by one the cats finished eating and slid away, contentedly licking their whiskers.

"When you say you have a dark side," Liz picked up the conversation as she began melting butter on the stove while the lobster tails defrosted beneath running water. "What do you mean, exactly?"

"Well, I certainly don't mean the seriously twisted shit I've seen on the Internet; breast torture and piercing and bestiality and baseball bats stuck up a girl's ass. God!" She took a long swallow of wine as if to get the bad taste of these images off her emotional palate. "I mean, have you seen some of those pictures? Clothespins sticking out like porcupine needles from girl's breasts and vulvas?" "I even saw a pussy covered with mousetraps." "Mousetraps?"

They glanced at each other, and laughed.

"I mean, I think a *little* pain might be stimulating," Morgan went on tentatively. "You know, *sophisticated* bondage."

"I think I get the picture. You need to be dominated in bed because you've never met a man as strong as you are, mentally and emotionally. But there's someone out there for you, Morgan, you'll see."

"I don't know, Liz, I'm seriously beginning to wonder about that. You met my last three boyfriends. They were all handsome and intelligent, financially well-off, and even creative in their spare time, yet they were nothing but big, selfish babies deep down. The only reason I put up with that last loser for so long was because..."

"He had a great dick?"

They laughed together again. "A dick from hell," Morgan admitted, taking another sip of wine, relishing its warm and relaxing effect on both her physical and emotional muscles. "I've never seen a dick get so hard and stay that way, but I know now it's because he was acting the whole time. I'm not sure he ever felt anything except satisfaction at his own porn-star performance."

"Hey, at least you enjoyed yourself. Live and learn, as they say."

"Are there any *real* men out there, Liz? I mean, besides Mark, or are they just a myth? Um... I'm

thinking of putting a profile up on one of those Internet dating sites," she confessed, and experienced a stab of misery. If she did that, it would essentially mean she had lost her faith in Destiny and undermine all her deepest beliefs. On the other hand, maybe it was her responsibility to give Fate something to work with, and that reasoning cheered her up enough to pursue the possibility. "Or maybe I should place a personal ad in the *Phoenix*... What the hell would I say, though?"

"I'm sure you'll come up with something creative if that's what you decide to do," Liz replied tranquilly.

Morgan fell into a brooding silence, wondering how she could condense herself into a few revealing, yet also respectable, lines.

"Just be careful," Liz cautioned, "you don't want to attract the wrong kind of guy." She opened a door leading out into the backyard and an ecstatic Doberman immediately propelled his large black body into the kitchen. "Here you go, boy!" She quickly set a bowl of food down in front of him.

"Do you think you could help me come up with a way to describe what I want, Liz?"

"Or what you *think* you want, Morgan." She rinsed her hands clean. "Okay, run some ideas by me."

"But what are the chances the kind of man I'm looking for even reads personal ads? *I* never do." Draining her glass, she promptly poured herself another one.

"You shouldn't worry about that now. Just do

what you feel you have to."

"Okay, how about this...straight white female, beautiful, intelligent, loves books and wine, seeks straight white male to share...creative pleasures?"

"The first part was all right, but the rest wasn't specific enough. What do you mean by that? What dressing do you want on your salad? Light Italian, oil and vinegar, or fat free Caesar?"

"Light Italian...no, make that oil and vinegar. Then how about... straight white female, into wine, books and bondage, seeks straight white male to love and dominate her."

Liz smiled as all the animals suddenly began converging on the front door. "Mark's home," she announced. "Maybe he could help you with your ad."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I hate to do this to you," Debra apologized in her restrained voice.

Morgan flung her long dark-brown hair away from her face and tossed yet another crumpled sheet of paper into the wastebasket. She was still attempting to condense herself into five perfect lines. "Do what?" she asked indifferently.

"We have a monster on our hands."

She sensed something interesting. "I'm listening, Debra."

Her supervisor carefully smoothed her skirt beneath her as she seated herself in the chair beside Morgan's desk. "Well, it's miles from nowhere and, to put it simply, a complete nightmare. It's ancient, literally centuries old. It'll cost a fortune to renovate before we can even think of putting it on the market."

"Don't touch it," Morgan said firmly. "People love truly old, potentially haunted houses, and the richer they are, the more they need to spend their money, just like kids run around and play all day to use up all their excess energy. And if we throw in a ghost story..."

Debra started taking a deep breath.

"I can sell it," Morgan stated, "as is."

"I'm warning you, it's an albatross. An American millionaire bought it from a bankrupt noble family in England and then had it hauled across the ocean piece by piece. I suppose he thought he could buy himself real class that way."

Morgan pictured heavy blocks of stone and marble fireplace mantels riding the waves in a ship's fragile hull. "It's the real thing," she murmured, strangely excited by the prospect of handling the place, as difficult as it would be.

Debra was not a romantic. "Oh, it's real all right, and so full of real mice and spiders it could be a Disney cartoon. But in the real world it's money that talks, and as you well know, we can only spend so much fixing it up if we're going to make a profit." She tugged her skirt down to a proper length as she rose, as usual ending the conversation on a sobering financial note. "I'll give you the address if you really want it."

"I couldn't possibly resist."

"Then would you drive out there tomorrow for a walk-through?"

"Sure." Morgan always enjoyed getting out of the office. "Is it far?"

"It's at least three hours away, maybe more. You might want to spend the night in the area. The nightmare is called Brighton Manor. The place has been empty for years, so be careful."

\* \* \* \*

According to Debra's directions, Brighton Manor was located approximately three hours due west of Boston. Morgan was so excited the property was hers to bring to life that she didn't even bother asking what happened to the owners or how it came into the hands of her brokerage.

The following morning a freezing rain darkened her golden-brown coat as she hurried towards her car carrying a small black overnight bag.

Traffic was relatively light leaving the city, so she could afford to feel sorry for all the poor souls crawling into work on the other side of the expressway. With their headlights fighting the downpour, the gleaming wet shells of their cars evoked depressingly anonymous links in a vast suit of armor.

Two-and-a-half hours and four compact discs later, she found herself driving alone down a narrow country road enjoying fantasies as positive as the day was wretched. In her emotional landscape, Brighton Manor had become much more than just a problematic piece of real estate. She was surrounded on all sides by trees; the only sign of civilization was the black asphalt flowing swiftly and smoothly beneath her tires. She sensed mountains looming ahead of her but she couldn't see them yet through the sheet of mist merging the sky's powerful storm clouds with the earth's softly curving hills.

She passed through a small town, where she stopped at an unbelievably clean gas station to use the bathroom and to inquire about a hotel. She was glad of that little island of civilization, because if something should happen to her car in what felt like the middle of nowhere, she would be completely helpless and vulnerable.

Morgan had been following the same narrow road for what felt like forever when a desperate impulse made her turn onto a narrow dirt path that appeared abruptly on her right. It felt like a driveway, yet it twisted and turned through the bare winter wood for so long she had begun to despair when the trees abruptly gave way and a few yards before her loomed a massive structure the dark grey of storm clouds turned to stone.

There was nothing ornate about Brighton Manor; it was a simple rectangle flanked on all sides by chessboard towers, its crushing facade relieved only by a multitude of windows. Bare branches were reflected in the dark panes, and for a haunting instant they evoked naked bodies still passionately embracing inside the empty rooms. Morgan shut off her engine and stepped quickly out into a profound silence. She fished a set of keys out of her purse, and the soft, high ring of metal was echoed by a low rumble of thunder.

The house loomed over her as she approached it, completely filling her vision.

Six gray stone steps led up to a large black wooden door closely guarded by oak trees planted on either side of it, and only the fact that they had lost their leaves enabled her to see the stone lintel roughly carved in the shape of vines and grapes.

Smiling in approval at the pagan touch, she singled out the largest key on the chain and thrust it into the curving darkness of the lock.

It surprised her when the forbidding door opened easily, without any rusty shrieks or rotten groans. She stepped into the musty darkness and immediately a floorboard sagged beneath her boots, but her sixth sense told her Brighton Manor was structurally sound.

She tossed the keys back into her purse, exchanging them for a small pad and pen.

Leaving the front door wide open behind her for the little light the bleak atmosphere outside provided, she walked slowly around the large open space. A broad central staircase ascended straight up into darkness and the entrance hall curved around it in a crescent. One by one, she examined the rooms opening off it. The breathless silence combining with the gray light filtering in through the grainy old windowpanes made the dust carpeting the floor appear luminous as the moon's surface.

To the left of the staircase, archways framed by thick black marble columns divided one large space into three rooms, and there was crown molding everywhere, like icing on a wedding cake. The absolute silence was in itself a presence and made her nervous in an enjoyable sort of way by addressing the subtle sense of her imagination; she was almost tempted to retrace the footprints she left across the floor so the ghosts couldn't follow her.

Finally, Morgan carefully ascended the grand staircase. Some of the steps protested beneath her light tread, groaning slightly as she kept her hand poised over the banister on her left, not touching it to avoid possible splinters but wanting to be able to grab hold of it should she come upon a rotten board. She made it up to the second floor without incident, and there she forced herself to stop daydreaming and take some notes.

She counted the number of fireplaces and radiators—the quantity of oil required to feed the coiling metal serpents didn't bear thinking of—as electrical sockets peered at her from dark corners.

In the four tower rooms the walls curved like the inside of an egg. She lingered in one at the back of the house, gazing down at the grounds, and the eerie quality of the light told her the world would soon be covered by a clean white sheet.

Walking briskly around the large house had warmed her up, so she set her pad and pen down on a windowsill, unbuttoned her coat, and on impulse shrugged it carelessly off onto the dusty floor.

Trees stretched before her for as far as the eye could see, untouched woodland rising into a formless distance. And as she stood there, her body let her know that all those hard branches mysteriously excited her.

Deliberately not looking behind her at the open door, Morgan slowly raised her dress and slipped a hand into her black tights and from there into her cotton panties. Aroused by the sense that she was being watched, she pulled her black cashmere dress all the way up to her neck, and snapped open her matching black bra in front.

Then she leaned toward the window and touched the icy glass with her breasts. She gasped and closed her eyes from the painful pleasure, as her nipples seemed to crystallize her excitement, sending sparkling shafts of desire along her nerve-ends. Holding her dress up with one hand, with the other she began gently massaging her clitoris with her fingertips. Taking her time, she imagined a man standing in the doorway behind her, watching her...

A gust of wind rattled the loose windowpane, startling her into pulling her hand out of her panties. The movement that caught her eye was distinct from the languid swaying of branches. A solid shadow was making its way beneath the trees, moving away from the house—a man in a black jacket. The arrow-like course of his stride told her he knew where he was going and enabled her to make out his broad shoulders above the long line of his back. But what was more important was where he had just come from... he must have been in the house with her.

Morgan quickly snapped her bra closed and smoothed her dress down over her hips. She picked her coat up off the floor without losing sight of the man, and she had just finished nervously buttoning it when he abruptly turned around and looked straight up at her through the skeletal ribs of the trees.

His awareness of her affected her like a blow. She started, knocking her pen off the windowsill, and its loud clatter to the floor eloquently described the penetrating silence.

His hair made her think of the sun setting on the coldest day of the year, and she made out a dark-red scarf like a wound across his chest. Then he turned his back on her again and continued on into the woods.

Thought and feeling suddenly, hopelessly, confused inside her like sand flowing through an hourglass, she watched him go and suffered an irrational stab of despair when she lost sight of him. She reasoned that he was a local resident out for a long walk, yet there hadn't seemed to be another house for miles around.

With the excuse that he might be a prospective buyer, Morgan decided to stay for a while and see if he returned.

She slipped the pad and pen back into her purse, exchanging them for a small flashlight, and headed back downstairs. But on the way she couldn't resist looking in again on the master bedroom. It was so easy to visualize a red-satin canopy bed gleaming like freshly shed blood in the firelight. The fireplace mantle was carved from a beautiful bone-colored marble faintly traced with violet veins, but fortunately its remoteness had so far saved Brighton Manor from antique scavengers. The cold hearth was pitch black in the dim light, like the entrance to a tunnel leading out of the empty room into another dimension...into a haunting space where the souls who once slept here still burned with passions.

Morgan closed the door on the room reluctantly, more consciously than not, giving the stranger time to return.

She had to switch on her flashlight to make it back down the stairs. It was only a few minutes after one o'clock, yet it was nearly dark outside. Caution urged her to leave now before it started snowing, but she was too strangely thrilled by the possibility that the man had seen what she was doing up in the tower. She felt embarrassed and excited all at once so that her heart seemed to be beating faster than normal. She had left the front door wide open behind her; he could easily have gotten into the house.

The only area she hadn't explored as yet was a narrow corridor beneath the staircase, and just as she suspected, it led her to what could only be the door to the cellar.

Envisioning rows of forgotten wine bottles, Morgan was attempting to pull open the moistureswollen wood when she suddenly heard quiet footsteps coming from the hall behind her. Holding the beam of the flashlight in front of her like a sword, she turned. "Hello," she said breathlessly, "I'm with the agency handling the house." The silence around them was so deep she felt as though she was trying foolishly to talk underwater. "Are you interested in it?"

He didn't answer, and her flashlight's circle of light condensed into a setting sun on his black leather jacket as he approached her. "Let's get rid of this," he spoke at last in a quiet, pleasantly pitched voice. She felt strangely frozen in place as he caressed the leather strap off her shoulder, and her purse hit the floor with a thud. "Now unbutton your coat," he said, and wrested the flashlight gently but firmly out of her hand before she could react. The light pooled around his black boots and she lost sight of his eyes.

"What were you doing?" she gasped, and as though released from a spell, her body attempted to slip past his. But the corridor was so narrow, his broad shoulders easily trapped her.

"Don't be afraid," he urged, "just unbutton your coat."

Somehow it was impossible for her not to obey him, with awkwardly languid fingers. It was the way her hands felt in dreams when she was struggling to perform a mechanical task.

"Now take it off," he ordered gently.

Once more she let the heavy wool slide down her arms and onto the floor.

As if it was the most natural thing in the world for him to do, he weighed her breasts in his black-gloved palms, then lightly followed the curves of her body down to her hips. He took a step back, grabbed one of her arms to pull her away from the door as he effortlessly kicked it open. "After you," he said, handing her back the flashlight.

Her hand was amazingly steady as she turned and illuminated a narrow stairwell descending into absolute darkness. She refused to let herself think about what was happening as she started down the steps ahead of him. But when she reached the stone floor at the bottom, she whirled around with the idea of slipping past him and running up the stairs. Yet instead she simply let him take the flashlight from her again and rest it on one of the steps facing them, so that its light ran her through like a divine sword as she crossed her arms over her chest, shivering.

He unwound the red scarf from around his neck. Then he grasped one of her wrists and with an expert twist of her arm, turned her around and began tying her hands behind her back. "What's your name?" he asked in that same quiet, reassuringly deep voice.

"Morgan," she answered numbly from somewhere slightly above herself.

"Morgan le Fay," he murmured into her hair. "Let's work some magic together, Morgan. You're beautiful. Don't be afraid, Morgan..."

The way he kept repeating her name assuaged her fear in a hypnotic way and her head fell weakly back against his shoulder. "Please don't hurt me!" she breathed.

"Don't be afraid, Morgan..." He repeated, and still

standing behind her he thrust one of his hands into her tights and panties exactly as she had before while his other cold leather palm rested against her chest, his thumb and finger forming a threatening V-shape just below her throat. "I'll stop if you tell me to," he whispered. "If at any point you want me to stop what I'm doing," he went on so softly she might almost have been imagining his voice, "just say the word *Red* and I'll stop. Do you understand?"

She had no choice but to say, "Yes..." very faintly.

The spotlight in which they stood like actors on a stage helped detach her from the danger of what was happening, and gradually the light brightened into a sinister halo as his fingers began distracting her from her fear with a sharp, utterly debilitating pleasure.

She closed her eyes, suddenly sure she was dreaming, because only moments ago her own fingertips had been circling her clitoris like this, swiftly and firmly, feeling it swell and mysteriously bloom beneath them. Yet it hadn't felt anything like this, and the intensity of her body's response to a total stranger's inescapable touch pulled the world as she conceived of it, completely out from under her.

The exquisite, hauntingly luminous roots of a climax forced on her by a man whose name she didn't even know had taken impossible but irresistible root in her pussy, and from there pleasure was branching up into her womb and taking her breath away as ecstasy managed to flower in the dark, cold plot of her anxiety.

"Don't fight it, Morgan," his warm whisper

caressed her temple, "just let yourself go..."

She opened her eyes again needing to brace herself on something...a pile of crates in the corner, their sharp edges reflecting the physical joy cutting dangerously through her rational impulse to fight him, to not give into him. But his thumb continued relentlessly orbiting her clit's profoundly sensitive little button, opening her up so that two of his cool, gloved fingers slid easily between her labia's slick lips and into her tight, resistant, yet also welcoming wet slit. His fingers and thumb dipped and stroked, dipped and stroked, until all her senses felt at once trapped and intensely alive caught inside the net of his black-leather hands.

"Don't fight me, Morgan, it's no good, you're going to come...you *want* to come..." His whisper had an electrical effect on her blood, as if a sinister spirit suddenly brushed past her in the shadows. At the same time, his body was warm and hard and very real behind her; the bulge of his erection pressing into her lower back as alive as she was. He was neither a dream nor a nightmare; he was only a man, a man deliberately wearing the darkness to turn her on, and succeeding...

"Come for me, Morgan." He slipped his fingers out of her pussy, crushed her clit with the heel of his hand and rubbed it hard and fast. "Come now..."

She was stunned when her body obeyed him with a climax so intense it felt like a knife slicing slowly and excruciatingly up through her flesh. \* \* \* \* \*

"Liz?" She clutched the receiver like a piece of floating debris after a shipwreck.

"Morgan? What's wrong, honey? You sound terrible."

She slumped down on the edge of the bed in her motel room. "Oh, God, Liz..."

"Morgan, where were you? Are you all right? *It's nothing, Mark.* Hold on, Morgan..." A moment later she said, "Okay, we can talk now. I took the cordless out on the porch where Mark can't hear me. What happened?"

"I was at that old empty house today, Liz, you know, the one I told you I was driving out to see, and right now I'm in a motel over three hours away from you, so don't even think about coming to get me. Anyway, I'm fine." She closed her eyes. "I just have to see him again. I have to!"

"See *who*, Morgan? What happened to you? You're not making sense."

She got up and began pacing the room as far as the tangled telephone cord would let her. "I was scared," she admitted, "but I've never been so excited either... I fucked a total stranger, Liz. He was there, at the house, and... and it all happened down in the cellar..."

Liz asked very calmly, "Morgan, were you raped?"

"No! Listen to me. That's not what happened at all. Look, I don't mean to worry you. I'll call you when I get home tomorrow." "You're going to leave me hanging like this?"

"Oh, God, it was just so intense, Liz, I don't know how to describe it. I have to try and make sense of it myself before I can talk about it. I'm sorry I called you; it was selfish of me. I shouldn't worry you like this."

"Don't even *think* that, Morgan. I'm your friend. Remember? You can always talk to me."

"I know." Her eyes watered. "Just promise you won't worry about me. I'm fine, and I'll call you the minute I get home, I swear. I'm going to take a hot shower now, then go downstairs and get some dinner. I'm starving."

"Don't drive anywhere, Morgan, you're in no condition---"

"I'm staying right here, Liz. There's a restaurant down in the lobby."

"Good. And get a good night's sleep. Drive carefully tomorrow, and call me the *second* you get home."

"I will. I love you." Morgan dropped the receiver languidly back in its cradle, then fell back across the bed and covered her face with her hands.

It was a long time before she could bring herself to get up and take her clothes off trying not to remember the last time she did that in a cold, dark cellar...

She hurried into the bathroom and turned the water on in the tub, and the rusty screech of the pipes was an oddly comforting sound, making her feel as though she had loving pets whining to be let back inside. She rummaged dreamily through her makeup bag for bobby pins to put up her tangled hair. It didn't matter that her body ached in places. The only thing that truly hurt was the fact that he hadn't asked to see her again. Afterwards he watched her put her dress back on and led her outside in silence, a steadying hand on her arm, pausing briefly at the top of the cellar steps to help her slip her coat back on. Then he kissed her lightly on the lips and she stood where he left her, the first snowflakes glistening in her hair, as she watched his black sports car disappear between the trees.

Now she stood beneath the shower's hot waterfall for nearly as long, until hunger forced her to shut off the water and dry herself with one of the hotel's rough white towels.

She shook her hair loose and strolled back out into the bedroom.

At least he knew she was with the brokerage handling the house. If he wanted to, he could get in touch with her. The gloves he had worn had kept his fingerprints off her; she knew absolutely nothing about him, yet her body had absorbed vital clues to his personality and a profoundly confident part of her couldn't possibly doubt that she would see him again.

#### CHAPTER TWO

 $\overline{W}$ hat had happened to her felt very different in the morning; her self-esteem felt like road-kill.

Getting miserably out of bed a little after seven o'clock, Morgan took small comfort from her favorite old white sweater as she hugged her image in the mirror. At least it didn't show that he had completely unraveled her inside.

Tentatively, she sipped the memory of everything he had done to her in that cold, dark cellar and a weakening rush of warmth flowed through her like cognac drunk on an empty stomach.

She finished dressing, threw her things into her overnight bag, and escaped the room's dull little space.

\* \* \* \*

Her pride kept its foot on her emotional break as she drove back to Brighton Manor. She hated herself for her weakness, but it was impossible not to hope he might be there again, even though she was absolutely sure he wouldn't be.

A light snow had fallen during the night, but now the sun was out and the clear sky was blue as the Virgin Mary"s veil, depressing her by making her feel guilty about the dark nature of her sensuality.

She held her breath as she pulled out in front of the house.

His black car was not there, of course.

She turned around quickly, anxious to get back to the city where he could reach her.

\* \* \* \*

The road unwinding beneath her like a black ribbon, what happened to her in Brighton Manor haunted Morgan like an impossible gift. But the experience was like an uncut gemstone no conventional setting was made to hold.

She knew it was extremely foolish to hope that he had already called her office, gotten her home number, and left a message on her answering machine; therefore, as she entered the narrow streets of the North End, she braced herself for despair.

Her telephone's mechanical butler was visible the moment she walked into her apartment, its luminous heart pulsing with messages.

She dropped her bag, shed her coat in the middle of the living room, and her heart seemed to stop as she pressed "Play".

The first message was a confused "Hello?" followed by a clattering hang-up as her

grandmother's unsteady hand lost its grip on the phone and let it fall back in its cradle somewhere down in Florida.

Morgan seated herself on her forest green loveseat and stared at the brick building across the street the color of dried blood.

The second caller was Liz, who was terribly worried about her.

In the third message Debra requested that she get in touch with the office as soon as possible.

The tape had just finished rewinding when the phone rang in real-time.

She snatched up the receiver hopefully. "Hello?"

"Hello, how was your drive back?" Debra inquired pleasantly.

\* \* \* \*

That evening Morgan was behind the wheel again, driving more cautiously now that she was back in the city and discouraged by the negative turn her thoughts were taking.

How could what she had experienced with that nameless man be part of a normal, healthy life? Her mind kept asking this question even as excitement made her intestines feel like restless snakes. The sensation didn't do much for her appetite, which was unfortunate since she was on her way to Liz's house for another gourmet meal. Her friend insisted she come over, and at least that way she wouldn't be chained to the phone all night waiting for a call that would almost certainly never come.

Once safe in Liz's spacious, plant-filled home, she sat listlessly down at the kitchen table. Mark had just gotten home from work and was taking a shower as his wife put the finishing touches on dinner. Their affectionate domesticity proved a sobering contrast to sadistic sex with a stranger in a dark cellar.

Liz stirred the sauce at the stove. "We'll talk after dinner," she promised, smiling uncertainly at her brooding friend.

"Good evening, ladies." Mark appeared looking refreshed and elegant in a black sweatshirt and jeans, his long brown hair tied back in a ponytail. Ten years ago Liz traveled to England and brought him home with her, a priceless souvenir all her own. "You definitely look like you need some wine, love." He handed Morgan a glass, and produced a magnum of Cabernet Sauvignon.

She didn't even remember to thank him, and during dinner she wound creamy ribbons of pasta around her fork, and then unwound them again in unconsciously rude silence.

"Do you like my low-fat white sauce?" Liz asked gently. "I made it with fat-free milk and only one tablespoon of butter."

"You could never tell, it's delicious," she replied dutifully, smiling vaguely, possessed by a disturbing sense of unreality. It almost seemed possible she had only imagined what happened to her in Brighton Manor.

"Is something wrong, Morgan?" Mark demanded

abruptly. "Are you still upset about losing your purse?"

"Oh, no." She managed to laugh at the story Liz had invented to explain her urgent call last night. "I didn't have much in it, just some old makeup and stuff."

"Really? What about your driver's license and your credit cards? Wasn't your wallet in your purse as well?"

"Never mind," Liz interrupted, "she doesn't want to talk about it right now."

"I see." He studied his wife's face for a moment. "Well then," he pushed his chair back, "I think I'll go surf the Net. That was delicious, love." He rose, deposited his plate in the sink, quickly refilled his wineglass, and left them alone in the kitchen.

Liz reached for a cookie jar containing a bag of *Drum* tobacco and some papers, and began rolling herself a cigarette.

Avoiding her eyes, Morgan set her wineglass down and stood up. "That really was wonderful, but I should go now..."

"No, wait." Liz followed her out of the kitchen. "You can't go yet. You haven't told me what happened to you yesterday and I'm worried about you."

The living room was soothingly dark. Morgan fell onto the futon couch, stretching her legs out before her in their black tights and boots. Liz was sensitive enough not to turn on an interrogative light as she sat down beside her, still patiently rolling her cigarette. After a while Morgan said, "I realize that, technically, I don't know anything about him, Liz, yet I feel that I know some of the most important things."

*"I'll* say. I'm sorry. Go on, please." Liz found a lighter on the coffee table and lit her cigarette. "Tell me what happened," she exhaled a wraith of smoke, "now!"

"Let me get my wine."

When she returned, Morgan sat down again and casually began by describing what she had been doing up in the tower bedroom. There was no point in feeling embarrassed about that when there was so much worse to come. "Of course I stopped when I saw a man walking away from the house into the woods, and I had just put my coat back on when he turned around and looked straight up at me."

"Which meant he knew what room you were in... he must have been watching you just like you imagined."

"Maybe, but then he just turned around and kept walking. All I could think was that he lived around there." She fortified herself with some more wine before confessing, "So I stayed to see if he'd come back."

"I guess that wasn't very smart," her friend scolded gently.

"I thought he might be interested in buying the place," Morgan ignored this remark, "and... and I wanted to get a look at the cellar," she added lamely.

Liz coughed. "The cellar? After you saw some strange man lurking around the house you decided to

explore the cellar?" She shook her head in disbelief.

"You're going to think I'm imagining all of this in retrospect, Liz, but I'm not. I got the overwhelming feeling that I knew him from somewhere, or that I really needed to know him. I didn't want him to go... the real reason I stayed in the house was because I hoped he would come back."

"Was he that good-looking?" Liz asked cynically.

"Yes," she admitted, "but I couldn't really tell yet, he was too far away for me to see him clearly."

"All right, so you stayed. Go on."

"The cellar door was behind the central staircase. I was trying to get it open when I heard footsteps behind me in the hall."

"But hadn't he been walking away from the house?"

"Yes."

"Then he only pretended to be leaving? He tricked you, Morgan."

"Or maybe he was just getting a look at the property."

"Yeah, right."

"Anyway, the point is, I was glad he came back. But he didn't say anything, he just kept walking towards me. I had a flashlight so I could see him. His eyes were intensely blue and he was staring at me... I can't describe the way he was looking at me, but somehow I knew I didn't have to be afraid of him. I don't know, but it's as if part of me could read the lines of his face like sentences telling me I could trust him..." "Features as a kind of script," Liz murmured. "I like that," she added grudgingly.

Encouraged, Morgan went on quickly, "He said, "Let's get rid of this" and pushed my purse off my shoulder. Then he told me to unbutton my coat."

"And you just obeyed him?"

"No, I seem to recall trying to push past him ... "

"Jesus!"

"But he told me not to be afraid."

"Well at least you know he has a sense of humor."

"Liz, what I'm trying to tell you is that part of me was afraid and yet part of me *wanted* to obey him. I slipped my coat off," she took a deep breath, "and he caressed me," she cupped one of her breasts in her free hand and ran it slowly down her body, "like this..." She felt weak just remembering the way he had touched her. "Then he kicked the cellar door open and made me walked down ahead of him."

"How did he *make* you? Did he push you? Did he threaten you?"

"Um, no…"

"He didn't threaten to hurt you if you didn't obey him?"

"No, he didn't." It dawned on Morgan that she had seriously underestimated the depth of her submissive nature. "I guess I *let* him force me."

"You can't *let* anyone *force* you."

"You can pretend to."

"Okay," Liz blew smoke over her head impatiently, "just go on."

Morgan finished her wine before continuing, but

kept hold of the empty glass to stare into it. "Down in the cellar he took the flashlight away from me again and set it down on one of the steps." Her matter-offact tone helped dull the dangerous edge of what had happened to her. "Then he tied my hands behind my back with the red scarf he was wearing and asked me my name."

"Finally," Liz said dryly.

"He called me Morgan le Fey and whispered my name over and over again in this hypnotic way." She paused before briefly describing what he did to her next.

"You had an orgasm?" Liz passionately killed what was left of her cigarette.

"Not just an orgasm, an incredibly intense one. Did I tell you he was wearing black-leather gloves the whole time?"

"Sounds like quite an interesting chat you ladies are having," Mark commented.

"Go away," Liz commanded affectionately.

"I was just on my way to the kitchen to do the dishes. Don't let me interrupt."

Liz said after a moment, "Okay, go on, he can't hear you with the water running."

Morgan kept staring down into her empty glass. "After I came," she went on soberly, "he told me to lie down on the floor. I couldn't bring myself to do it, but he just put his hands on my shoulders and made me do it. Then... then he pulled out a knife."

"My God!" Liz whispered. "How could you possibly have enjoyed that?"

"I was scared, don't think I wasn't, yet my body wasn't, not anymore. It's hard to explain, but my body wanted what was happening now, if that makes any sense at all. He kept whispering, "Don't be afraid" like a Mantra, and stroking me here," she caressed the inside of her thighs, "with the flat part of the blade. The flashlight made his blonde hair shine like a halo and I swear, Liz, part of me started seeing him as a dark angel kneeling over me... I felt as though he was skinning me alive when he slowly started cutting off my tights, like he was stripping off my frightened mortal skin...it was such a strangely powerful experience, being terrified with my mind while my body trusted him because of the pleasure he had just given it... Anyway, he must be rich if he's interested in buying that place." She was suddenly reluctant to continue exposing her unorthodox soul. "And maybe I should go now."

"But you haven't finished yet. Look, Morgan, just because I'm not into that sort of thing doesn't mean it's wrong, you know. Please don't feel that way. If it helps you to talk about it, I'm more than happy to listen, but maybe you're just not ready to tell me everything yet."

"Maybe not." Morgan set her glass down on the coffee table and raised her arms over her head, stretching the stiff muscles in her back. "Anyway, I should get going, it's late." She stood up.

"Mark has some rather dark fantasies himself," Liz confessed abruptly.

Morgan glanced towards the kitchen with interest

as she slipped into her coat. "I'll call you tomorrow, Liz." She kissed her friend's soft cheek. "Thanks for listening."

"You don't have to thank me." Liz hugged her back warmly. "I love you."

It was a clear night and a few determined stars were visible through the light pollution. Morgan focused on one of these impossibly distant suns while warming up her engine. Wondering if she would ever see him again made the sharp point of light feel like the cold tip of a knife poised directly over her heart. It also hurt that she couldn't share her deepest thoughts and emotions with her best friend. Apparently, she could share her most profound feelings only with a sadistic man.

Twenty minutes later when she let herself into her cold and dark little apartment, the light on her answering machine was a frozen drop of blood.

She made an effort to stop thinking about Brighton Manor and what she had experienced there as she brushed her teeth, and then washed her face with a cool, fruit-based cleanser she wiped off with a moist towel. She applied generous amounts of moisturizer to her cheeks, painfully dry in winter, and dabbed another cream around her eyes. She even forced herself to floss and then file her nails, relaxed inside the cocoon of her tiny bathroom.

The light from the hallway flowed over her Queen-Size bed as she entered the room pulling off her sweater.

The phone rang on her nightstand.

"I just wanted to make sure you got home okay," Liz's voice traveled effortlessly across miles of dark roads.

\* \* \* \*

She had a bad night. Dreams tugged at her blood while her mind floated just below the surface of consciousness, aware of her body turning restlessly from side to side...

She was in the cellar of Brighton Manor, again shining her flashlight over damp stone walls and wooden crates, but he was not there... then she was back up in the tower room watching him stride purposefully into the forest as she beat the glass with her fists, not caring if it broke and cut her, but he didn't hear her; all sound was muffled by the falling snow. She shone her flashlight's powerful beam between the trees, revealing a blizzard of white cells rushing around their branching veins, but he was gone...

Her alarm clock began chirping like a crazy bird and woke her.

She slapped the mechanical beast silent, and then lay in bed crying until the blood was pounding in her temples and the need to use the bathroom forced her to get up.

Work was not an option.

She snuggled beneath her down comforter again and stared up at the ceiling until it was late enough to phone the office. "I'm not coming in again today," she informed Debra bluntly. "I don't feel well."

"I'm sorry to hear that," her supervisor replied indifferently. "By the way, someone called about the albatross."

Morgan sat up. "What did you say?"

"I said someone's interested in your haunted house. He must have heard about it through the grapevine."

She felt as though she was swallowing her own heart for breakfast; she had a hard time getting her voice calmly around it to ask, "Did you get his name, Debra?"

"I'm afraid he hung up before I could. He'll call back if he's really interested. If he does, should I give him your number at home?"

"Oh, yes..." She cleared her throat. "Please!"

\* \* \* \*

Morgan shamelessly spent the entire day lounging on her couch, listening to music and waiting for the phone to ring. She read for a while in the afternoon, but she couldn't concentrate on the plot, and finally she gave up pretending to do anything except wait. It took all the willpower she possessed not to ring the office and ask Debra if he had called again and gotten her number. She sat watching the sky darken but refused to give up hope.

By evening a blizzard was falling around the golden buds of the streetlights.

She had moved listlessly into the kitchen and was heating a can of soup on the electric stove when the power died. Suddenly the only light in her apartment was coming from the burner's demonic red halo.

As if obeying some haunting cue, the phone rang out in the living room.

She quickly groped her way towards it by the spectral glow of the storm outside her blinds. "Hello?" she gasped.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm all right. So..." She had to clear the emotion out of her throat. "You're interested in the house?"

"Yes, and I especially liked the cellar. But I don't know, it might be too dark to live with. What do you think, Morgan?"

"I think... I think you could do anything you want with it," she whispered.

"You'd be willing to help me replace old foundations with new ones?" he asked quietly. "It won't be easy, you know."

"I know."

"You'd replace the old wiring for me with a new one that can take high voltages without shocking? Would you do that for me?"

"Yes!" she sighed.

"Are you always so accommodating with your clients?"

"No, I've never-"

"No need to explain, I understand. I understand you'll do whatever I ask."

Her eyes closed. "Yes."

"Then I'll be in touch."

She stood holding the receiver until the dial tone returned. She could sense the snow falling and could almost hear it—a rushing sound like a black velvet cape brushing across the windowpanes. She felt as though he had just been in the room with her, yet she still didn't know his name.

If the power didn't come back on soon she was in for a cold night.

Picturing Liz and Mark lounging in front of their fireplace draped in purring cat furs and drinking Irish whiskey, she switched the phone back on and dialed their number, possessed by the need to vent some of her nervous excitement.

Nothing happened.

He had called only seconds before the lines went dead, and it seemed a miracle he had reached her and that she was no longer alone in the darkness.

Her furniture had been transformed into shadowy rocks she had to navigate around, and her kitchen was black as a cave at the bottom of the sea. She felt her way along the counter to her "miscellaneous" drawer, in which her fingertips searched out the cool wax forms of two candles and a box of matches. She lit one of the candles and used it to locate two starshaped crystal holders. Then she left one candle burning in the kitchen, taking the other one out into the living room, along with a glass of red wine.

Settling comfortably down in her reading chair, she stared at the candle's reflected glimmer in the window. She wished she could see the snow falling like a universe of stars experienced at light speed, making the flame seem to flicker between energy and matter, not one and not the other and yet both at once...

Everything felt magical again because he had called her, because he cared... or because he wanted to use her again. It didn't matter; her feeling was a wick just waiting to feel again the intensity she had seen in his eyes, the same color as the flame's heart.

Staring at the pulsing light, she let herself remember again...

He sliced off her tights with a knife, and shock took her breath away as he yanked her panties off so swiftly her bare ass slapped against the cold floor. Her pleasure-soaked pussy had never felt so vulnerable and yet as wantonly alive as it did in that moment, like a mysteriously tenacious flower blooming in the darkness through a crack in the stone. He left her boots on, for which she was grateful when he grabbed both her hands and pulled her to her feet with the firm grace of a dancer leading an untrained partner.

So far he had only touched her, very skillfully, yet she felt as though he had been beating her, weakening her with the haunting fists of contrasting sensations that made it easy for him to bend her over a waisthigh pile of crates. The possibility of splinters made her glad of her long sleeves, when she braced herself on her elbows as he lifted her dress and flung it up across her back, exposing her.

"No," she moaned, yet all she did was hang her

head so her hair hid her face, and her shame at the fact that she had lost whatever will she originally possessed to resist him. The sound of his zipper coming down seemed to tear her in half as it told her quite clearly that this was her last chance to choose between the good girl and the bad girl inside her. Then he suddenly slipped two of his gloved fingers into her pussy and every part of her came together as she moaned with pleasure. Any lingering thought of fighting what was happening dissolved in his hand, becoming an intense need to surrender to him completely.

She arched her back, urging his fingers to sink even deeper into her clinging sex, warm and wet and glowing from the devastating orgasm he had just given her. And finally he wrested the cry from her lips, "Please, just take me!" as though he had been patiently digging for it all along. She closed her eyes when she felt his other hand grip her hip, and braced herself for the total fulfillment of his cock surging into her, but his fingers only planted themselves even more firmly in her vagina as he casually insinuated his thumb into her anus.

She felt violated and vindicated all in one breathless cry, and she was so desperate to feel the reception she could only imagine that her pride felt painfully pinned down by his thumb as it idly probed her sphincter, casually teasing her ring with the possibility of excruciatingly wonderful sensations. "Please!" she begged, yet she knew that wouldn't be enough, that he would keep digging for more until he got it, so she whispered shamelessly, "Oh, God, please fuck me... please..."

"But you don't even know my name, Morgan. Don't you want to ask me my name before I fuck you?"

"No!" she groaned, and was rewarded by his sexy laughter, and then by the undeniable evidence of his pleasure in her response as he thrust into her begging cunt...

A shattering noise woke her as the lamp on the table beside her bloomed back to life, half blinding her as light sparkled off the wineglass she had dropped, its crystal shards strewn across the hardwood floor like bloodstained ice.

## CHAPTER THREE

The night's storm succumbed to a freezing but beautifully sunny and utterly still morning. Despite cliffs of snow piled along the sidewalks and slick patches of ice everywhere, Morgan stubbornly walked to work just as she normally did when she wasn't driving out to a property. Once she left the North End and entered the wind tunnels created by all the tall buildings Downtown, in which the temperature dropped to well below zero on blustery days, almost every person she passed was cradling a hot cup of coffee in their gloved hands as though it was the elixir of life. As she had known it would, the exercise helped her feel a little more positive about another long day of waiting.

Her cubicle on the ninth floor remained a boring, virtuous white as if nothing had happened to her, like a calendar's blank white square.

"Good morning, Morgan." Debra's gray-clad figure appeared as silently as a ghost on the plush navy-blue carpet. "The boss wants to see you in his office right away," she intoned like a curse.

"Oh, thrills."

Debra seemed about to say something else, but she merely smiled and walked away.

Morgan deliberately took her time slipping off her scarf and gloves and hanging up her coat. Then, wearing knee-high black-leather boots beneath a short black skirt and a loose black turtleneck sweater, she strode defiantly to her employer's office and knocked briskly on the door.

"Come in."

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Yes, Morgan. Good morning."

The man seated in one of chairs facing the large mahogany desk looked up at her. He didn't smile, nor did he bother to get up, as she nearly collapsed into the chair beside his. She gripped the cool leather arms and crossed her legs in an effort to control the inner trembling that seized her.

"Are you feeling better this morning?" her boss inquired politely.

"Yes, thank you." She could barely focus on her little old employer with the other man's tall, broadshouldered form sitting so close to her. He was informally clad in black jeans and a black crewneck, and one of his black boots rested on one of his knees as he reclined with casual elegance in the burgundy leather chair.

"Well, I'm glad you were able to make it in today, Morgan. I'd like you to meet Mr. Simon Jones. He's expressed a serious interest in Brighton Manor. However, there are certain things he wants done before he'll consider making an offer, and I've assured him you'll do everything you can to accommodate him."

"Yes, of course."

Her boss went on and on about repairs, taxes and zoning laws until she couldn't bear it another second. She was infinitely relieved when Simon uncrossed his legs and rose with a lazy grace. Yet at the same time she panicked because he was leaving and immediately followed him up.

"Well, I'll give you a call, Morgan," he said, and there was no more recognition in his eyes when they met hers than in the sky. "Good day," he added, and brushed past her, leaving his cold politeness lodged in her womb like a knife as her stomach turned from the shock.

Her body lurched after him, and she nearly grabbed his arm before pride stopped her. "Wait," she said, "I'll see you down."

"If you like." He opened the door leading out of the president's shadowy office.

She walked numbly ahead of him into the bright, sterile space honeycombed with cubicles. In the reception area doubts froze her blood as she watched him slide into a long navy-blue coat, instead of the leather jacket she remembered. She opened the glass door leading out into the hallway herself, and pressed the button for the elevator. "So," she declared miserably, his impersonal stare an empty world she couldn't face.

"So?" he echoed.

"Is there anything you want to know?" she asked

desperately.

The doors opened slowly. "Not at the moment."

She stepped into the elevator beside him, feeling as though the shaft led straight down into hell.

He pressed the button for the third level of the parking garage beneath the building.

"Simon?"

"Yes?"

"Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what? Thinking of buying a drafty old mansion?" He smiled briefly.

"No," she lowered her voice, "why are you pretending we don't know each other?"

"Excuse me, but weren't we just introduced?"

His closed expression was like a fist hitting her in the stomach, making it hard for her to breathe.

"You must be confusing me with someone else, Morgan. How well do you know the man I seem to remind you of?"

This seemed like an opening, and she edged closer towards his dark warmth. "Very well and yet not at all." It hurt not to be able to touch him.

"Oh, I see." He arched a dark golden eyebrow and concentrated on the panel of numbers.

She gripped the rough material of his coat collar, forcing him to look at her. "Stop it, please!" she begged.

The doors opened again.

"Perhaps I should deal with someone else in your firm, Morgan, if you're going to find doing business with me uncomfortable." He stepped out of the small car, but then turned to face her again, his car keys in his hand. "Is that what you want?"

"No, Simon."

He held the doors open with his free hand. "Are you sure?" He looked straight into her eyes for the first time.

"Yes, Simon," she repeated, savoring his name on her tongue.

"Then behave." He let the doors begin to close. "I'll be in touch."

\* \* \* \*

Flushed with conflicting emotions, Morgan looked as though she had been drinking when she walked back into the office.

Debra was at the front desk going over some papers with the temporary receptionist. "Quite an attractive man," she commented without looking up.

"He's a bastard, a complete and total bastard!"

"But a rich one... oh, don't mind her," she addressed the wide-eyed temp, "Morgan is very passionate about her work."

She stalked to her cubicle and paced it like a caged wildcat caught by a cold-blooded hunter. She was handling over a dozen houses; her voicemail was probably about to explode with messages. Yet the emotions that man aroused in her were so intense they might as well have been tectonic plates right beneath her desk. What he had made her feel in that dank basement transformed her daily responsibilities into meaningless rubble.

It took her most of the morning to listen to and reroute all her messages, after requesting the vacation time she had saved up. All Debra said was, "If you feel you need time off, by all means, take it."

"I'm sorry, Debra, but I need time to think."

"It *is* a little sudden, but we'll deal with it. Except Brighton Manor, you say, and Mr. Jones?"

"That's right. Make sure you tell him to call me at home. I'll handle him from home."

"I thought he might have something to do with your recent ill health, but I won't ask."

"Please don't."

\* \* \* \*

The fact that he had given her an order – to behave – meant he was testing her to see if she really was willing to do whatever he said, or so Morgan told herself. She was shocked by the way he was treating her, and yet he had warned her that she would be. She convinced herself that he was gauging her reactions to see if she really *was* prepared to replace all her conventional wiring.

His command "Then behave" echoed inside her with every step she took on the way home as she tried to understand how she could go about obeying him. It wasn't possible that she was only imagining what was happening between them. The man who had called her last night was undoubtedly the man she had met this morning. He was the stranger who had tied her hands behind her back and told her what to do, and now his will was wrapping itself around her whole life.

The phone was ringing as she let herself into her apartment.

"Hey, I just called you at the office and they told me you're suddenly on vacation. Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine, Liz. I just couldn't possibly concentrate on work right now...he called me."

"Oh, really? Great."

"Don't sound so thrilled."

"What did he have to say for himself?"

"Not much, and yet quite a lot."

"Meaning you're going to see him again, Morgan?" "I think so. I *hope* so."

"You *think* you're going to see him again or you're not sure? You hope so?"

"I *want* to see him." She deliberately didn't mention the morning's frustrating encounter. "I want it so much I can't think about anything else, Liz."

"Meaning you're obsessed."

"Yes, I guess I am, and don't tell me it's not healthy, because I don't give a damn whether it is or not. Besides, there's nothing I can do about it. I've never felt like this before."

"So you've made plans for tonight?"

"No. This relationship isn't going to unfold in any conventional manner, that's all I'm sure of at the moment."

"Well then, if you're free tonight, why don't you

have dinner with Mark? I'm going over to my sister's, and it just so happens he's in your neighborhood right now meeting with our lawyer. Nothing bad, just paperwork on the business."

"Okay, Liz, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking you want me to compare my sadistic stranger with your charming, considerate husband so I'll come to my senses and realize that the kind of man I need to have a real, healthy relationship with, is not the kind of man that forces you to have sex with him in a dark cellar."

"Exactly. I couldn't have put it better myself."

"Well, it won't work."

"I know it won't, but Mark really likes you, and he didn't believe that story about your purse being stolen. He kept asking me what we were talking about the other night."

Morgan's pulse sped up in a curious, rather pleasurable way. "Did you tell him anything?"

"Well..."

"Oh, God, Liz, how much did you tell him?"

"Enough. I can't keep anything from him, Morgan, you know that, he just wears down my defenses with that polite British persistence of his."

"This is embarrassing!" she exclaimed, yet part of her was excited about seeing him now.

"I'm sorry. If you'd rather not..."

"No, I'd love to have some company. Thanks for sharing, Liz."

\* \* \* \*

Mark arrived shortly after three o'clock, looking as though he had just come from the dentist.

"I see you had fun with your lawyer," she teased.

He strode into the living room. "Where's your liquor?"

"In the kitchen, you know that. But don't you think it's just a tad early?"

"Like bloody hell it is."

He disappeared and she smiled to herself as cabinet doors banged open and again with a passionate rhythm that revealed Mark's hobby was drumming. "The cabinet over the plant," she yelled helpfully. "By all means, help yourself."

"What are you having?" he shouted.

"Nothing, it's too early!"

"What were you having, Morgan?"

She sighed and sank into her reading chair, a big antique with lion's paws and a faded design of vines and leaves. "I'll have some sherry."

He returned with a bottle of *Bushmills* and two shot glasses.

"I said sherry, Mark."

"You're having some whiskey with me."

Her smile deepened and she folded her legs beneath her. She had changed after she got back from work into comfortable black stretch pants and a long white sweater.

"Bloody piranhas," he muttered, and downed a quick shot before offering her one.

Morgan enjoyed the passionate way he threw his

head back and sent the whiskey down his throat, after which his dark eyes shone like live coals. His hair was pulled severely back into a ponytail and hidden inside his black-leather jacket. He leaned over the glass coffee table and handed her one of the deceptively small glasses. "Bottoms up."

"Thanks. I hope Liz isn't making you do this, Mark."

He downed a second shot and then slumped across the couch like an oil spill. "No one *made* me do anything," he said mildly.

"You dressed like that on purpose, didn't you, to make all those preppy lawyers nervous."

He shrugged, and it suddenly occurred to her that he was exaggerating his rebellion against society's legal order to cover up his embarrassment at knowing what had happened to her.

"Relax, Mark, okay. I don't know what Liz told you your mission was, but just forget it. I'm fine. What happened to me wasn't bad, even though I guess it might seem that way to an objective observer."

"Anyone who observed that wouldn't stay objective for long," he muttered, and sitting up again poured out a third shot. Then he took the empty glass from her hand and refilled it.

She accepted it, and forged another glowing path through her chest. "That's it for me." She set her glass down firmly.

He finally met her eyes. "Are you sure?"

She pulled her knees up against her chest and

hugged herself.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"For what?"

He fiddled nervously with his empty glass. "I'm not sure." He held her eyes.

"You know, I've changed my mind. What the hell? Hit me again."

He didn't smile as he poured her another shot and handed it to her.

She gasped, "Wow, that's some dangerously smooth stuff."

"Yeah." He seemed to brace himself for what he was about to say, concentrating on the bottle. "Morgan, I want you to know, and of course you do, that I love my wife very much, but we don't always feel the same way about everything. I really wish she hadn't asked me to come here, but I didn't argue with her because," he looked straight into her eyes again, "I wanted to come."

His expression wiped years of friendship with Liz clean out of her mind like a beam of laser light as a purely sensual part of her opened up to his confession, and let him fall.

He got up, walked around the coffee table, and bent over her.

She turned her face up to his.

His lips were cool and firm.

"I just thought how nice it would be to kiss you," he whispered, "so I did."

She smiled and let him kiss her again, even though she knew the pleasant sensation had poisonous roots incapable of surviving the moment. Yet his tongue felt like a soothing balm over the morning's humiliation, and tasted of sweet revenge.

"Jesus Christ," he said, moving away from her, "what am I doing?"

"It's all right, Mark. It doesn't mean anything." She unfurled her legs from beneath her, feeling the pull of gravity again, of responsibilities and consequences.

"I love my wife so much," he repeated in an astonished voice, standing close to the door as though thinking about leaving, his back to her.

"I know," she said, more impatient than reassuring now, "I'll never in my life tell her and you know it, Mark, so relax."

When he turned to face her again his eyes make her think of a medieval painting of Jesus.

"It's okay." She touched his arm gently.

Closing his eyes, he pulled her roughly to him.

She was vaguely surprised by how strong his slender body was and by how implacable his grip was on her arms, making it impossible for her to escape his kiss, which was very different from the first one. There was nothing friendly or tentative about it, and she found herself responding in kind. His tongue was fighting hers for dominance, but she kept slipping hers agilely around his, enjoying the sport. Then, as if sensing her detachment and insulted by it, he pushed her away from him. She was neither surprised nor distressed by the gesture, but it did prick her pride enough that dimples formed on both sides of her moistly pouting mouth as she smiled at him.

He took a deep breath and rolled his eyes up towards heaven. All they saw was a blank white ceiling and this seemed to fill him with despair because he closed his eyes and reached for her again like a blind man. This time he grabbed her by the hair, and slipping a vice-like arm around her waist, he bent her forcefully backwards as if barely resisting the urge to break her.

She threw her arms around his neck and lifted one of her legs up around him as she yielded gracefully to his pressure. Her tongue danced passionately with his now, following his lead as she relaxed her body in his arms to show him that she was putting herself in his hands and trusting him not to let her fall. Yet it began to hurt her the way he bent her farther and farther back like a bow. She wrenched her mouth free of his. "Mark!" she gasped.

He yanked her back up and sank to his knees before her.

She rested her hands gently on his head to brace herself as he reached up into her sweater, and tugged her leggings and panties down around her knees before she could protest. She was about to protest, she wanted to, yet she didn't, she merely lifted her sweater up out of his way and flung her head back with a small cry of pleasure as he pressed his lips directly against her clit. His thin, firm mouth felt like a tender blade cutting into her feelings, which refused to listen to her mind telling her she shouldn't be letting him do this, that it was wrong. But she had no desire to stop his lips from parting against her, or his tongue from reaching down and giving her pussy a hard, hungry lick.

"Mark, stop," she whispered, meaning exactly the opposite. The leggings around her knees forced her to keep her legs closed, and for some reason this made his tongue's determined probing felt even more exciting as he alternately thrust it up between her labia's slick lips and swiftly teased her clitoris. She parted her thighs as much as she could and pulled her sweater impatiently up over her head before tossing it away so she could hold on to his head. She enjoyed the feel of his soft, silky hair as she selfishly directed his tongue's deliciously energetic efforts. The juices streamed out of her and he lapped them up like a starving man, groaning with furious satisfaction, as if her lascivious response pleased him yet also made him angry.

"Oh, yes," she sighed, "yes..."

He thrust his right hand between her thighs and slipped two fingers into her cunt. He placed his mouth directly over her clitoris and sucked on it with vicious determination as he fucked her with his hand fast and hard. Her pleasure flowed down his wrist and forearm as she came quickly and tightly; the orgasm didn't bloom all the way up through her body but was contained in her belly as a hot little explosion of joy; a superficial ecstasy that seared her womb, made her nipples harden and burn for an instant, and then vanished without a trace, leaving behind only a mild sense of regret. Mark got to his feet, looking much more stunned than she was.

Morgan pulled her panties and her leggings back up, wondering what she could possibly say to him to make him feel a little less guilty than he looked.

The phone rang.

"If it's Liz, tell her I'm not here, Morgan. Tell her I never showed up. Don't tell her I'm here!"

"Relax, Mark. Hello?"

The only answer was a rhythmic clicking of circuits trying to make a connection, a sound like a branch tapping against a window.

"Hello?" she repeated urgently.

The clicks gave way to a rush of static-like wind blowing through a forest.

"Hello?" she cried a third time, refusing to give up.

"Morgan, can you hear me?"

"Yes, but it's a very bad connection!"

"Come to me, Morgan. I'm waiting..."

"Where...? Simon? Simon, are you there?"

A mechanical female voice replied, "If you'd like to make a call, please hang up and try again or please dial your operator. If you'd like to make a call, please hang up..."

She switched the phone off but kept it clutched against her heart.

"Was that him?"

She had almost forgotten Mark was there. "Yes, but it was a bad connection. I think he was calling from a cellular." She was desperately trying to convince herself that he would call back and clarify his command.

"Is he on his way over?"

"No. I think he wants me to meet him somewhere, but we were cut off before he could tell me where... Oh, no," she whispered, falling back into her chair, "he couldn't mean *there*."

"Like bloody hell you're going back to that house, Morgan." Mark came and stood behind the couch, putting as much as possible between them. "You're not actually considering it, are you?"

"Why not?" She held the phone tightly in her lap.

"I can think of a lot of reasons why not and so can you, I'm sure. Don't be stupid."

"Do I look stupid to you?" She met his eyes defiantly.

"You look great to me," he confessed, "but I'm sorry, I didn't mean... I hope I haven't upset you."

"Just a ripple in the sea, Mark, believe me, I'd hate to think you were feeling guilty about nothing."

"Nothing, was it?"

"Liz won't ever know, and don't you dare tell her, Mark. That would be more selfish than keeping it a secret. Promise me you won't tell her!"

"I can't promise anything. I find you terribly exciting, Morgan."

"Oh, God," she closed her eyes, "why doesn't he call back?"

She felt Mark move past her, and then heard him close the front door quietly behind him.

She opened her eyes and stared at the half empty bottle of *Bushmills*, refusing to think about what had

just happened as she continued pretending to wait for Simon to call back. She was sure he wouldn't.

She spent over half an hour sitting in her chair arguing with herself, feeling as though she was taking root there, her veins merging with the embroidered vines. She was afraid to move for fear of what else she might do wrong. But she was on vacation, with nothing in the world to do now. She couldn't even visit her friend's house for dinner and sympathy, and he had told her to come to him.

She got up to pack.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Morgan realized she would have too much time to question what she was doing on her way to Brighton Manor, so she brought along enough music to drown her thoughts in pounding bass lines. She enjoyed herself for the first leg of the journey, until her high-strung nerves began vying with the electric guitars for attention, at which point she turned off the CD player and gripped the wheel firmly in both hands. As the shadows lengthened, her suppressed fear began eating away at her excitement.

She told herself the worst thing that could happen was that he wouldn't be there, and she managed to believe this while the sky was suffused with violet radiance; a magically hopeful color to her vision. When the sunset faded away, she stopped at the same isolated gas station to use the bathroom and to check her phone messages.

It filled her with a perverse hope that he still hadn't called her back. It meant there was a chance she was right, and Brighton Manor was where he wanted her to go. She didn't let herself dwell on the fact that she was driving towards a lifeless house without electricity, heat, or anything else her body needed. Yet an almost primordially sensual level the discomforts awaiting her body excited her.

Night had fallen by the time she hurried out of the freezing phone booth towards her warm car. Faint stars were visible beyond the station's fluorescent island, and so far from the city the silence was profound enough for her to make out the subliminal hum of the electrical wires above her. What she was doing was dangerous, she knew that, yet the only thing she was really afraid of was that he wouldn't be there.

\* \* \* \*

She checked into the same boring little motel. The bed—with its cheap flower-print spread—was on the opposite side of the room, a switch that unsettled her by reflecting the fact that, this time, she was here of her own free will. If anything happened to her she would have only herself to blame.

She flung her overnight bag onto the bed, brushed out her hair and quickly refreshed her makeup.

A few minutes later she was back out in the car driving with reckless speed down narrow, pitch-black roads. There were no other cars in sight so she left her high beams on and the trees opened all their powerful arms for her as she flew past them.

She was beginning to seriously doubt her conviction that he was waiting for her. She accused

herself of being as stupid as the heroine in a horror film who feels compelled to explore evocative sounds coming from the attic or the cellar. Only in this case, it was the memory of her own gasps of pain and moans of pleasure that haunted her; the woman she had become in his black-gloved hands demanding to come alive again.

Even though she had been this way three times already, she was afraid of getting lost in the dark. Concentrating on not missing her turn onto the dirt road helped take her mind off her fear that he wouldn't be there and that there was really nothing waiting for her except an empty old house.

She caught sight of the turn at the last moment and her tires screeched like bats around her as she swung the blades of her headlights into the sinister woods. In less than a minute she would pull out in front of the house and she would know if she had driven all that way for nothing.

She hit the brakes and stared in disbelief at the fallen tree. There was no way she could drive around it; she would have to leave her car there and walk the rest of the way to the house.

"No, this is too much, I can't," she whispered, covering her face with her hands. She had her flashlight, and Brighton Manor couldn't be more than a quarter of a mile away, what was really upsetting her was that his car wasn't here. She could only hope there was another way to reach the house she didn't know about, and that his car was already parked on the lawn, so very close... "This wasn't fair. It's not fair!" She kept talking to herself as she fished the flashlight out of her purse. Then she shoved the bulky leather bag under her seat and holding her breath turned off the engine.

A hysterical beeping warned her lights were still on and gave her the incentive she needed to switch them off, plunging herself into absolute darkness.

Ignoring her anxiety, Morgan emerged from the car's warm shell into a silent night her flashlight abruptly populated with the slender, powerful forms of trees. The fallen branches were lying across her path like a huge nest; she would have to leave the road to get around them. Patches of snow reflected her light as she found an opening in the dense growth. The naked branches remained indifferent to her noisy passage across ice and twigs, but it was still a relief to make it back onto the smooth-packed dirt of the drive.

"My God, Morgan, what the hell were you doing out here?" Her voice kept her company while she walked as fast as she could in her long coat. In the car it would only have taken her another minute or so to reach the house, but on foot, and in the dark, the curving path began to feel endless.

Then it was as if all the trees took a reverent step back and a gust of wind flung her hair across her face as she finally reached the open space in front of the house.

Her light only stretched a few feet; there was no way she could tell if his black car was there or not.

Stars glimmered around the silhouettes of the

towers and the central pyramid of the roof, and the pulsing sky was so beautiful it was a moment before she noticed the light that had fallen to earth.

She switched off the flashlight and stared at the quivering drop of warmth that felt like a manifestation of all her hope...she wasn't imagining it; there was a candle burning inside the house. Either a homeless person had found majestic shelter from the elements or *he* was in there.

A wave of longing broke inside her and propelled her towards the flame flickering behind a window on the first floor. She ran all the way to the front steps and then paused to catch her breath, smooth down her hair, and to attempt to wrap a little dignity around her naked eagerness to see him. She didn't know him at all yet she had missed him more than she could express to herself. She couldn't explain it, but from the moment the beam of her flashlight rose like a sun against the black jacket she had mysteriously belonged to him. Her soul had accepted this fact, even though her mind couldn't understand it at all.

From the steps she was not able to see the candle flame but she knew it was there just as the glow spreading out from her heart into all her feelings told her she was in love.

The front door was unlocked. He was expecting her. Yet he could hardly have been sure she would come or that she had even understood his command.

She thought of Beauty entering the Beast's castle as she stepped into the hall and beheld two torches burning in sconces at the foot of the stairs. They cast more restless shadows than they gave off light, but she clearly saw the dress lying across the floor. For an instant it looked like a woman lying there, and then her heart slowed down again when she realized it was only a silk gown glimmering in the firelight.

The thought briefly crossed Morgan's mind that she was still sitting in her chair at home dreaming even as she closed the door behind her, set the flashlight down against the wall, and shrugged her coat off, impatient of its bulky weight. Only then did she slowly approach the dress. It was the same beautiful violet color of the twilight that had accompanied her part of the way here—her favorite color.

Her boot heels sounded uncannily like a healthy pulse in the lifeless house. "Simon?" She called softly, not expecting an answer. Shivering, she knelt beside the dress and touched it. She sensed at once that it was the genuine article; not a cheap costume. The stiff, bone-laced bodice was lined with a row of tiny onyx buttons flowing down from the deep cleavage all the way to the narrow waistline.

She straightened up again and pulled off her own simple black dress. She considered folding it so it wouldn't wrinkle, but this practical concern threatened the moment's magic, so she deliberately flung it away carelessly. It was so cold in the hall she could feel the warm caress of the torches. She wasn't wearing a bra, and her black garter belt and stockings would feel perfectly natural beneath the long satin skirt.

Morgan lifted the dress reverently off the floor and discovered that its voluminous folds were invisibly slit down the front and down the back, so that the skirt would both protect her and leave her completely vulnerable. The onyx buttons were undone; the bodice fell open in her hands like a dry butterfly. The only way to get into the creation was to slide it on over her head, and although the material was in excellent condition, it was stiff with age. She had to wriggle into it like a caterpillar returning to its cocoon. The tight bodice shoved her breasts up so she couldn't see past their milky swells, and by the time she finished buttoning the garment, she was wet with an impossible lust for her own body. Her body already belonged to her, and yet it didn't, not until he gave it to her. She needed him to chart the depths of what she was; his expression as he lost himself inside her was the only way she could map her own nature.

Shivering, she hugged herself and glanced around the hall. It was filled with shadows that all seemed to be reaching for her, her violet gown shimmering like the end of the visible spectrum. From what she remembered of the layout of the house, the candle was burning in the empty dining room. She regretted leaving the warm illumination of the torches behind, however slight, but the flashlight was out of place in her hand now as she caressed the satin at her hips. She stepped out of the hall into an impenetrably dark corridor, and through an open doorway at its end she made out the flame's dim aura, until a tall silhouette abruptly blocked the light.

She wanted to say his name but the cold black silence seemed to fill her mouth like earth.

"Come to me, Morgan," he said quietly.

She approached him slowly, both aroused and frightened by the way the darkness around her was broken up only by the outlines of his body.

"My lady," he whispered, finding her hand, "I was sure you'd come, but I needed to know just how far you would go for me." He drew her into the room behind him.

The candle she had seen flickering in the window was burning at the center of a beautifully appointed table covered by a dark-red cloth. The warm orange and yellow tones of the flame glistened off crystal decanters and glasses, making the bone-white china plates shine like full moons and giving the covered silver platters the aura of dragon's eggs about to magically hatch a feast from thin air.

"Welcome to Brighton Manor." He led her over to one head of the table and pulled the chair out for her. Folded on the burgundy cushion was a black cape. He shook it open and draped it over her bare shoulders. "To keep you warm," he whispered into her hair, and she gracefully swept cloak and skirt beneath her as she sat down.

He seated himself formally across from her at the other end of the table where she could barely see him, and the wine in his glass shone a deep red over his heart as he raised it in a silent toast.

Part of her was positive she was dreaming now as

she picked up her own glass and took a sip. The wine bloomed slowly and richly on her astonished tongue. "My God..." She took another appreciative sip. "This is unbelievable."

"Yes, it is." She could see his smile. "Bottled before you were born, Morgan."

"Then it was definitely ready to drink... It would have turned to cynical vinegar soon," she paused shyly, "if you hadn't opened it, Simon. But it's not just because of the things you did," she added quickly, "I've never--"

"Morgan," he rose abruptly and walked around the table to her again, "didn't you hear what I said?" He gripped the hair at the nape of her neck like a cat. "Get up. I'm going to have to put things differently." He yanked the cape off her, pulled her over to a window and made her face the glass. "You need to feel everything to understand it, don't you, Morgan?" He spoke in an undertone, standing behind her. "That's your nature." He slipped his hands into her skirt through the slit in the back.

Her mind went blank waiting for the one hard fact she had no desire to argue with as his large, warm hands caressed her naked ass. Then one of his hands cradled her pussy from behind while his other hand slipped around to her mound from the front, trapping her between them as he dipped two fingers slowly into her soft, clinging sex. "You're so wet," he murmured.

She gripped the window frame and stared up at the stars. She longed to feel his selfish force inside her

again.

"A normal woman would have the good sense to be frightened of me, Morgan." He withdrew his fingers slowly.

She closed her eyes. "Just take me," she begged.

"No." He slipped his hands out of her skirt. "Not yet."

Stunned, she turned around and watched him seat himself at the table again.

"It would be a shame to waste all this, don't you think?" he inquired pleasantly.

She walked shakily back to her own chair, warm enough now not to bother with the cloak. "I'm sure it's delicious," she said tightly, seating herself.

His smile was its own subtle radiance in the darkness. "You're quite a woman, my lady."

"You seem to find me easy enough to resist." She lifted the cover of the serving platter before her and the aroma of garlic and herbs immediately opened up her appetite. "It *does* look wonderful." Despite her physical frustration, this feast in an empty mansion was a haunting foreplay that pleased her. The Cornish hen's crisp, golden-brown skin glistened in the candlelight. "How did you manage to arrange all this," she smiled back at him, "magic or money?"

"They're not synonymous?"

"Not in my book," she answered fervently.

"I'm glad to hear it, but then I suspected as much. You seem to understand that real pleasure has much more to do with contrasts than with comfort."

"But how did you know I wasn't a vegetarian?"

she teased.

"Because if you were you wouldn't have enjoyed what I did to you with a knife. Now eat and don't speak."

Picking up her knife and fork, she willingly obeyed him.

After more wine from her own decanter she no longer felt the room's chill. There were two more courses—fresh mixed greens and rosemary roasted baby potatoes—and time began flowing in harmony with her blood the way it never seemed to do unless mixed with a fine vintage.

"I already know the most essential things about you, my lady," he spoke again finally, "but please fill me in on the charming details."

"I'm not very charming, I'm actually rather antisocial, except for my one good friend." She couldn't swallow for a moment remembering what had happened with Mark that afternoon. "I'm very selfish." She ripped a wing off the dead bird and sank her teeth into it.

"Good, I'm sick to death of politically correct bitches."

She laughed and poured herself some more wine.

"Do you believe in God, Morgan?"

The question both surprised and pleased her. "Yes and no. To make a long story short, and to use modern physics lingo, I believe my soul is an indestructible energy playing the game of form for the pleasure of feeling which is an end in itself even as it mysteriously develops." "That's very Eastern of you, actually."

She shrugged her white shoulders.

"As is your submissive nature, however, that it doesn't seem to threaten your sense of self proves how strong you are, Morgan, which you will need to be to deal with me." He drained his glass.

"Do you believe in God, Simon?"

"No." He pushed his chair back. "Let's go for a walk."

"You're an atheist?" she asked, deeply distressed.

"I didn't say that." He moved around the table to her. "You'll need this not to catch your death." He wrapped the cloak around her again and buttoned it at the throat.

She tensed slightly remembering their first 'walk' together, yet she felt so good after the incredible bottle of wine they had shared that the thought of a cold stone floor didn't dismay her. Until she remembered the wooden crates he used to his thrusting advantage, then she worried splinters would catch in the beautiful dress he had given her. "Walk *where*?" she demanded tipsily.

"Beneath the stars," he whispered, draping a heavy arm over her shoulders.

She closed her eyes and lost all sense of dimension beyond his firm warmth as she leaned against him. "I think I had too much wine," she murmured.

"I think you need some fresh air." Taking her arm like an old-fashioned gentleman, he guided her out of the dining room and through the dark umbilical corridor leading into the torch-lit hall. Her black dress was just another shadow on the floor, and next to the wall, her coat looked like a drift of golden sand. He opened the heavy front door and she hugged herself beneath the cloak as she stepped outside ahead of him.

The dry, clear cold was like a blade honed to such a fatal sharpness that at first she didn't feel it cutting into her. The wine helped protect her from it, and the multitude of stars overhead was such a stunning sight she skipped lightly down the steps onto the grass. "Living in the city, you forget what the night is really like," she remarked, and then turned to caress the starless space of his chest.

"I'll never let you forget what it's like again." He rested his hands on her shoulders and forced her down to her knees. "You trust me, don't you, Morgan?"

She stared up at the shadowy mask of his features. "Yes, Simon."

He thrust the fingers of one hand deep into her hair. "Then unbutton my pants." He tugged painfully on her roots. "Show me just how much you really trust me and suck me."

Everything he did was the sexual formula she had always been hungering for. It seemed to take forever to obey him, and he didn't help her. Her fingers stiff with cold, she had to struggle with all of his buttons herself, and his growing erection pressing up against them made the task even more difficult. But finally she was pulling his jeans down around his thighs, and the hard, smooth length of his penis rested in her hands for a triumphant moment before she slipped it in her mouth. She satisfied her desire for him at once, without thinking that it might have pleased him more if she had swallowed him slowly.

She closed her eyes and moaned with relief that he was inside her again. His skin was smooth as silk stretched over stone and he tasted profoundly familiar to her, yet like nothing else ever had, and there was no question about the fact that he was real. She would never let him slip away again, and she fervently used her lips and her tongue to tell him this, to try and make him understand how much he already meant to her.

"Easy, Morgan," he slipped the fingers of his other hand through her hair and took control of her head, "it's all yours. Savor it slowly, like this..."

She wasn't aware of the cold, only of his warm hands on her head as he forced her to take his entire erection into her mouth. The sensation of his head caressing her throat made her hold on to his thighs as her chest heaved from the struggle of replacing a natural urge to retch with the intoxicating satisfaction of not leaving any of him out in the cold. She made sure he could move safely and smoothly in and out of her mouth and that he felt only her tongue and her lips and the intensely vulnerable heart of her feeling for him in the dark passage of her throat, leading straight down to her heart. It wasn't easy; her jaw began to ache after a while, yet he didn't reward her efforts with any sign or sound of pleasure. He gave her absolutely no indication of how well she was doing, and his impersonal reaction as she tried fervently to show him how she felt about him upset her. Yet his black shirt draped around her face and caressed her cheeks in a mysteriously intimate way, like the cold darkness of the night thawing around her hot, loving mouth.

She was seriously beginning to despair that she didn't seem to be having any effect on his silent control when he abruptly pulled his cock out of her warm mouth into the frigid air, and his sperm streamed down onto her upturned face like a galaxy of falling stars as he came, making her breathless with triumph.

"Oh, Morgan..." He took a shaky breath, letting go of his erection and pulling her up into his arms. "You need to leave now," he said.

"What?" she gasped. "Why?"

"Because you'll do whatever I say. Or didn't you mean it?"

"You *know* I meant it..." Now her throat felt hot with tears.

"Then do it." He shoved her gently back towards the house and began buttoning his jeans closed. "Get your coat and leave."

She faced his silhouette again defiantly. "I'll do anything you say *except* leave you."

"Morgan, you've proven yourself to me beautifully, but now I want you to go. A relationship with me isn't going to be easy. I promise you, there will be moments when you'll doubt everything and come close to breaking, unless you remember what I'm telling you now." His voice dropped to a whisper as he walked up to her, "We were meant for each other, Morgan, I'm your lord and master. Now just remember that," he shoved her gently away from him again, "and go."

\* \* \* \*

He didn't follow her into the house. The door closed from its own weight behind her and left her in total darkness; the torches were gone. For some reason this hadn't surprised her, and she didn't waste time wondering about it as she used the cloak to wipe her face clean. Her cheeks and lips and eyelids were sticky with his spunk. It was just one more wonder to add to the evening that she had enjoyed the explosion of his climax across her features. She had never let a man do that to her before, much less wanted him to.

Feeling around with her foot she found the mound of her coat, and the flashlight beside it. She shone the beam around the hall. At least her dress was still there.

She draped her coat and dress over one arm inside the cloak, and stepped back outside. She scanned the dark expanse of lawn with the flashlight, but he was gone.

Bastard.

She felt the cold again and suddenly became aware of her body's exhaustion beneath sexual desire's drug-like energy. Yet there was a gratifying taste in her mouth left by good food and wine, and by his surrender.

She was feeling so relaxed and content that the long walk back to her car felt short; before she knew it, the flashlight picked out the motor vehicle's red clot between the veins of the fallen tree. But now she had to walk into the forest to get to it, and she was tired. She kept stumbling on the uneven ground and running into branches, unable to decide whether to focus the flashlight on the ground or ahead of her.

She cursed beneath her breath as one particularly tenacious branch grabbed her cloak and snatched it right off her. She gasped, yet not so much from the shocking cold that hit her bare shoulders and cleavage, but because deep down she knew the gesture that had yanked her cloak away was consciously violent, not a random act of nature. A human hand gripped the back of her neck and she dropped everything she was carrying as it inexorably forced her down onto her hands and knees.

She knew it was Simon. It had to be him, yet she didn't say his name. She was nearly paralyzed from the cold, she couldn't see anything and the ground was hard and rough beneath her, yet she wasn't afraid or even aware of her discomforts, really; all she was aware of was an overwhelmingly pleasurable submissiveness. Her emotions wanted him to say something reassuring even while this was the last thing her body desired. Her flesh longed to feel as if the forest itself was mysteriously possessing her; thrusting her into enter another dimension where she couldn't deny anything she felt and she would be truly herself as never before...

Her skirt fanned out on either side of her like soft wings as the silent force behind her flung them open. The winter night was a painful reminder of her mortality, but it did not stop her from feeling beautiful and confident as a fallen angel sensing the promise of divine sensations buried deep inside her, their warmth almost seeming to glow between her thighs in the darkness, aching to be discovered, to be proven real...

His thrust was everything she could have hoped for, but then his second penetration happened so slowly she felt his patience would kill her, even as she whimpered with gratitude that he was forcing her to savor the experience of his erection filling her and rescuing her pussy from the empty cold. Dead leaves bit into her palms, but they weren't the reason she was almost sobbing beneath her breath. Part of her couldn't admit that this was exactly how she wanted it – deep and hard and relentless – and that it thrilled her he didn't make a sound, not even when he climaxed deep inside her.

She was utterly bereft when his hard-on slipped out of her pussy. She waited to see if he planned on helping her up, but when it was obvious he was no longer there at all, she struggled stiffly to her feet.

She managed to find her flashlight and switch it on, thrusting its luminous shaft between the trees around her, but he had vanished, again.

She made it to her car and it proved an interesting sensation, driving in a long dress with her breasts

swelling half out of the bodice caressed by her coat's silk lining.

Back in the motel room, she peeled off the stiff old dress in a sleepy daze, barely conscious of brushing her teeth and washing her face before she at last slipped beneath the bed's soft white sheets...

The phone shocked her awake what felt like a second later.

"Madam, this was the front desk. Um, I'm sorry to disturb you, but there's a limousine waiting outside and the driver says it's for you."

"Excuse me?" Her pulse was racing as a result of surfacing so swiftly from a deep and dreamless sleep. "What time is it?"

"Six thirty, and there's a limousine here for you." The desk clerk sounded young and confused by this upheaval in his placid graveyard shift.

"Oh...yes." She sat up. "Tell the driver to wait, please. I'll be down in a minute."

She folded the violet gown and cape into her overnight bag, splashed icy water on her face and ran her fingers through her hair. She put on the same dress she had worn yesterday over black panties, and slipped on her boots without bothering with tights, afraid the limousine would vanish like Cinderella's carriage if she took too long.

The lobby was empty.

"The driver paid your bill," the young man informed her with suspicious awe. "He's waiting outside."

It was the gray, breathless time just before dawn.

Absorbed in the black limousine's whale-like gleam, she was startled by the figure that stepped up beside her and said, "Your car keys, please." All she could see of him was a dark hat and uniform as she fished her keys out of her purse. He took them from her along with everything else she was holding, opened one of the car's many doors for her, and she felt her body flow into the limousine as if obeying the inexorable pull of a wave's dangerous undertow.

## CHAPTER-FIVE

Morgan stared out the window at the leafless trees and at the dark comforter of storm clouds unfolding above them, afraid to look at him.

"Did you like me better as a shadow, Morgan?" he teased soberly.

Turning her head she let herself really see him for the first time, and the direct intensity of his cool blue eyes cast a nervous frost over her feelings. "You were amazingly hard for a shadow, Simon."

He laughed, affording her a glimpse of his large, even teeth.

"A shadow obviously not hurting for money," she added dryly. "You realize, of course, that we're destroying the environment as we speak."

"I thought you weren't politically correct." His smile lingered.

"That doesn't mean I don't care at all."

"Would you begrudge newlyweds the romantic luxury of a limousine?"

She focused on the trees again. "I suppose not."

"Then why deny yourself?"

She refused to take the bait.

"In any case, this environmental hazard belongs to my aunt. She's obscenely rich and I'm the apple of her eye, believe it or not. She doesn't know about my sadistic core. And, as I'm sure you're wondering, I'll tell you. I inherited most of my money. My late uncle owned factories that produced wooden planks. He killed trees for a living, I'm afraid, but he was very good at combining their raw pulp in durable, aesthetic, and highly profitable ways."

"That's nice." She took a shallow breath. "Are you married?"

"What do you think?" He leaned forward and pushed a button with his right hand.

"Please, just answer my question."

"No."

"No, you're not married?" She hated how she sounded, but it was like standing at the edge of a precipice waiting to see which way the wind of his breath would blow her.

"No, I'm not married. Coffee?"

"Please." She relaxed against the exquisitely comfortable seat. "So, where did you sleep last night? In here?"

"Does it matter? Cream and sugar?"

"Yes, thank you. I assume whoever it was that took my keys is following us in my car? And speaking of keys, did you break into Brighton Manor?"

He sipped his coffee, not bothering to answer.

"Where are we going?" she demanded.

"My place."

Butterflies hatched in her stomach and reminded her of the first day of school—his erotic discipline frightened a part of her, even as it excited her like nothing else ever had. "Where do you live?"

"Where I can see a sphinx and a castle from my bedroom."

"Across from Mt. Auburn cemetery? My best friend and I used to go there years ago to smoke and talk. You know how it is when you're young; you're obsessed with death. At least *I* was." She sipped her coffee. Like everything he had offered her so far it was delicious, and made her feel better almost at once. "I guess I still am," she finished thoughtfully.

"I know you are, that's one reason you're so much fun to play with, and I don't mean that lightly, so please don't take offense."

"Just about everything you do should make me take offense yet for some reason it just turns me on."

"I hope you never lose your faith in me, Morgan, but don't expect me not to test it. I understand you're taking time off work, which is good; nothing should interfere with your training and discipline."

She normally didn't drink coffee on an empty stomach, but she didn't think that was why it rebelled suddenly.

He took the cup from her. "Come." He patted the space between his legs. "Kneel."

"So breakfast is the same as dessert?" she said lightly, obeying him.

"It's a long drive back to the city. Amuse me."

Resting her hands on his thighs she met his

penetrating stare. "Amuse you?" She wanted to be offended but instead she found herself opening his pants even more hungrily than she had last night.

"That's right." He glanced at his watch. "I'll let you know when we're almost there."

She laughed.

He slapped her, and then gripped the hair at the back of her head so his erection reared up into her mouth. "I don't think you understand what you're getting yourself into, Morgan. I've tried to warn you, but you're under the impression it's all just talk. I won't be too hard on you at first, since you've never been a man's slave before and you still don't grasp what it means. I'll have to teach you. You're going to suck me nice and slow, and you won't actually try to make me come until I tell you to."

After a while of licking his silky rod lazily and contentedly, the sweet flavor of his milky pre-cum banishing the bitter aftertaste of the coffee from her tongue, she began to feel like a cat taking a bath. Until her legs started going numb from kneeling for so long without respite, and her jaw began to ache from holding her mouth open. She tried to look up into his eyes to let him know she was getting seriously uncomfortable, but he wouldn't let her...

Gradually the tide of her discomfort turned, flowing away as her head bobbed dreamily up and down his beautifully rigid cock, and the more time that passed, the more perfectly natural it felt to rest her cheek on his thigh with her eyes closed and her lips pouting open like a baby's as he fed her his deliciously creamy head.

"Shall I finish for you?" he whispered.

"Mm, yes..."

Entwining his fingers in her hair, he came deep in her mouth, forcing her to swallow every last drop of his cum, beginning with the first violent jets exploding from deep in his groin and ending with the trickling aftermath of his pleasure as his tight stomach muscles gradually relaxed again.

"Nice," he said. "Now get up."

He didn't help her as she pulled herself up onto the seat, dragging her legs stiffly behind her like a mermaid's tail. Tears of relief welled up into her eyes it felt so good to unbend her knees.

"Are you sure you're ready for this, Morgan?"

Leaning against him she caressed his chest slowly, possessively. He was wearing dark colors again, a black jacket over a gray turtleneck and black pants. "Didn't I please you?" She looked up at his face and his answering smile felt better than the sun coming out.

"You did very well, but maybe I should give you more time to think about this."

"I don't need time." She buried her face in the side of his neck and breathed him in. "Please don't go away again. What I need is to be with you." The feminist part of her brain indignantly refused to communicate with her vocal cords for a moment. "I *want* to be your slave, Simon."

"Don't use my name unless I give you permission. From now on you'll address me as Master. *Now* say it."

"I want to be your slave, Master. I feel as if I've always..."

"As if you've always known me?" he finished for her.

"Yes." It made her feel profoundly weak how reassuring yet relentless he was.

"Maybe we were lovers in a past life, Morgan."

Suddenly she was sure he was playing with her the way a cat toys with a squeaking little mouse. "Simon...?"

He peeled her arms from around him. "What did you call me?"

"Master," she whispered.

"Tell me you'll let me do whatever I please with you."

Even though they left a bitter aftertaste in her mind, no words had ever tasted sweeter to her soul as she said, "Yes, my lord."

\* \* \* \*

The limousine came to a slow stop in front of a large brick house with wooden accents, surrounded by big beautiful old trees except for the open space of the drive.

Simon let himself out of the car, which pleased her. "Come, my slave."

Following him out she looked around for her own car, but it was nowhere in sight. The limousine pulled away, disappearing around the house, and it frightened her just a little that she couldn't leave if the mysterious discipline he had planned proved too much for her.

He preceded her into a dark hallway, then took her hand and led her towards a stained-glass window at its end, the triangular panes a somber chiaroscuro in the bleak winter light. To their left an archway opened onto a spacious black-and-white kitchen. He flicked on the overhead light and shoved her into it. "Prepare me a meal, slave."

She froze.

Chuckling, he stepped past her. "Come and help." He opened the refrigerator.

Her blood still simmering with indignation, she went and stood beside him.

"How about some cheese," he said, "you must be hungry after all that sucking." He handed her three different kinds, and she carried them to a table of black-stained wood while he brought over some crackers, and then fished a wine bottle out of a small rack. He pulled their chairs so close together she felt the flow of his muscles against her as he uncorked the bottle. He poured her a glass, then scooped some cheese up with two fingers and slipped the smoky cream between her lips. "Eat," he commanded, and continued to feed her like this as she waited desperately for him to kiss her. But he seemed to be making it clear he was master of all her appetites.

"Good wine is like truth serum," she remarked, "and I've never had any *this* early in the day."

"It's just what you need for the afternoon I have

planned." He stood up. "Bring your glass upstairs."

\* \* \* \*

He led her into a bedroom with a hardwood floor and a queen-size bed covered by a forest-green comforter, the only things she had time to notice before he set her glass down on a night table and pulled her dress off over her head. Beneath it, all she was wearing were black lace panties. She bent over to pull her boots off.

"No, keep them on," he said, "you look great."

She closed her eyes and obeyed him, her skin a flawless ivory in the shadows.

"Now turn around and face the wall." He drew open the curtains over the bed, and a spectral light flooded the room, his silhouette clearly drawn for her by sudden flashes of lightning as he slipped off his belt.

With a snake-like hiss, the length of leather burned across her calves and she nearly lost her balance.

"Brace yourself against the wall," he commanded.

He whipped her across the back again, and then again and again, barely pausing long enough between strokes for her to catch her breath. Her nerve-ends flared up like torches while at the same time a strangely languid darkness fell over her mind.

"Now face me."

Vaguely wondering why she was letting him do this to her, she turned around slowly.

He whipped her just above her breasts.

She fell to her knees with a cry of agony and then curled protectively up like an embryo on the hardwood floor even as part of her somehow transformed the pain into a shuddering pleasure. When she felt him looming over her she let go of herself, and received the mysterious support she needed in the form of his black boot raising her chin. He bent over to grasp both her wrists, and then licked the red trail across her chest, his tongue passing coolly along it as he pulled her to her feet. The contrasting sensations dazed her, making it easy for him to shove her back across the bed and slip her panties down her legs as he knelt before her.

She had never taken as much pleasure in anything as she did in the first swift strokes of his tongue. The back of her body still in flames, she raised her head to look at him, seeing him as a Knight kneeling at her shrine while only moments ago he had behaved like a Viking. His tongue teased her clit as two of his fingers did some rougher digging deep inside her pussy for her climax.

"Oh, God, just fuck me," she moaned.

He suddenly rose and yanked her up off the bed. "That was just a small appetizer, Morgan. I'm not sure you could handle the full course."

The expression on his mouth stretched her soul across it like a torture rack. "I can," she insisted more out of stubbornness than conviction. "I want to."

"Then I won't doubt you again, but for now all I need you to do is take a hot bath." He genuflected before her, and let her brace herself on his broad shoulders as he pulled off her boots.

"A hot bath?" she echoed.

"Yes. You're going to enjoy it, sweetheart. You're going to make yourself at home." Straightening up again he lifted her up in his arms the way her father had when she was a little girl, and it felt even more wonderful now. "I'm leaving you for a while, Morgan." He carried her out of the bedroom and set her down in a luxurious black-and-gold bathroom.

"Where are you going?" She clung to him like a cat.

"It doesn't matter. What's important now is that you relax." He closed the door behind him.

Leaning towards the tall mirror over the golden sink, Morgan stared at her reflection.

Her cheeks were attractively flushed, but the angry welt across her chest would take hours to fade. Fortunately, it was easy to hide, as were the marks she glimpsed on her back. It was a relief to see he hadn't drawn blood.

Why had she let him do this to her? It was like trying to remember a dream. Yet throughout the experience the hiss of his belt through the air had whispered secrets her body understood...

Surrendering herself to a feline curiosity, she opened the medicine cabinet and discovered an assortment of expensive creams and lotions, powders for all parts of the body, and soaps in every color of the rainbow. But what really pleased her was that every item was unopened, virginal, all hers.

She pinned her hair up, and then turned on the hot

water in the tub before selecting a box of violet bath beads. She tossed them into the misting waterfall as the tub filled, and once it was almost full, she lowered herself into the water's hot embrace, letting her thoughts drift away on a profound undertow of contentment.

The water was tepid by the time she emerged from her bath. She wrapped herself in one of the luxurious golden towels at her disposal and shaking her hair loose, walked leisurely back into the bedroom.

He had closed the curtains for her and turned on a beautiful Oriental lamp on one of the nightstands.

Moving curiously around the room, it was a moment before she noticed the green robe lying camouflaged across the bed. She snuggled into it, smiling. It was much too big for her, but being his, and smelling of him, it made her feel as though he was holding her tenderly in his arms.

His antique dresser was carved up into intriguing compartments and drawers of all shapes and sizes, and it didn't surprise her when the first thing she saw when she opened one was a pair of black leather gloves.

The phone on one of the night tables rang quietly.

She hesitated, but the possibility he might be trying to reach her gave her the courage to pick up the receiver. "Hello?" she answered tentatively.

"Hello," a man's voice echoed pleasantly. "Simon, please."

"I'm sorry, he's not in."

"Is this his housekeeper?"

"No, his Real Estate agent," she replied tartly.

"Oh, yes... he mentioned he was looking at another house. Brighton Manor, is it? He's seen so many already, and none of them have been what he wants. I hope you have better luck than your predecessors, my dear."

"It would help if I knew what he plans to do with the place."

"Naturally it would," he sounded amused. "However, I'm sure he has his reasons for not telling you."

"Oh, naturally."

"I could give you a clue, but I don't think it would make your job any easier. It involves young women."

The white cordless receiver was suddenly as cold as a bone in her hand. "Young women?"

"A great many of them, but that's not surprising with a man like Simon, is it, dear?" The demon at the other end chuckled.

"I don't know what you mean." She glanced at her dress, folded neatly at the foot of the bed. When she hung up she would put it on and then try to find her car.

"May I ask your name, Miss Realtor?"

"Morgan Grant."

"Well, it was a pleasure speaking with you, Morgan. And when he returns, please tell Simon his attorney would like a word with him."

"I would." Feeling numb, she hung up and slipped reluctantly out of his robe. But before she could put her dress back on, the phone rang again. This time she didn't hesitate before answering it defiantly. "Hello?"

"Are you all right?"

His disembodied voice had a devastating effect on her. "Yes," she whispered.

"Did you enjoy your bath?"

"Yes, Simon."

"I'll have to punish you for using my name, Morgan."

"Forgive me...Master." Addressing him in this way turned her on so much she had to sit down on the edge of the bed.

"Are you wearing anything?"

"No."

"Then put something on. Carol will be there soon." "Carol?"

"My housekeeper."

"Oh. By the way, your lawyer called."

"I'm sorry you were disturbed. Turn the ringer off."

\* \* \* \*

Carol was an attractive woman who appeared to be in her late thirties. Morgan guessed her age by the imprints the years had left in the snowy skin around her green eyes in the form of crow's feet, which made her even more grateful for her mother's Latin genes blessing her with skin that would age much more slowly.

She seated herself at the table in the kitchen,

comfortably armored in Simon's green robe as she watched his pretty cook go about her business.

"He told me to buy some lobster tails," Carol informed her cheerfully, "but if you don't like seafood, there are some boneless chicken breasts in the freezer. Um, unless you're a vegetarian, of course," she added quickly, flustered by Morgan's penetrating regard.

"The lobster tails will be wonderful, Carol." She smiled to herself; it was as if some dark angel had answered the ad in her mind.

Carol tied on an apron with a colorful flower print over her gray sweatshirt and jeans. "What would you like to accompany the lobster?" She began washing the wineglass Morgan had placed in the sink.

"Just a salad, I guess." She wondered how much Carol knew about her employer.

"What would you like in it?"

"Well, any kind of lettuce except iceberg, and whatever you have of tomatoes, bell peppers, onions, black olives, and so on, plus some cheese. From what I've seen, Simon stocks every cheese on the planet."

Carol was patiently towel drying one of the glasses. "He *does* love cheese. Now what about the dressing? I keep some fat-free Italian here for my own lunches, but Simon likes the real thing."

"I'll have whatever the lord of the house prefers." She didn't sound as sarcastic as she meant to. "I don't believe in diets myself."

Carol opened the refrigerator. "He usually prefers a simple vinaigrette with fresh herbs. How do you stay so thin if you don't diet? Do you work out?"

"I run three times a week along the water. I live in the North End."

"Oh, that's nice. There's nowhere to run where I live. I work out at a gym. But for some reason, I still gain weight if I don't really watch what I eat."

"That's probably because your fat cells think you're starving and do their best to survive to keep you alive."

"Really?" She glanced back at Morgan, holding a head of fresh leaf lettuce like a bouquet.

"Really. The whole approach to food these days is very medieval. Fat has become the demon of our age, but it's not all bad. We need it to process nutrients and to keep the skin healthy. I read somewhere that, back in our good-old hunter gatherer days, the body used fat cells to survive famines, so when you diet all the time your body thinks you're about to starve, which makes your fat cells ten times harder to kill. They're just trying to protect you, especially if you're a woman who might be eating for two."

Carol glanced back at her again as she searched a bottom drawer. "Wow, that's interesting. I always do feel terribly sinful after I have pizza. I punish myself for days."

"The key is to indulge yourself regularly but moderately so your metabolism doesn't panic. Do you serve him his meal every night, Carol?"

"Oh, no, I just leave it ready for him. And he eats out a lot." She produced a beautiful red tomato. "When I first started working here I was seriously attracted to him," she confessed matter-of-factly.

"Well, of course." Morgan forced a smile.

"Until he told me what he's into." She continued placing colorfully fresh ingredients on the black granite counter. "He's perfectly nice to work for," she went on coolly, "but he won't let me down in the basement. He keeps the door locked." Her hands full again, she kicked the refrigerator closed. "I can't help wondering what's down there, even though I probably don't want to know."

Morgan smiled. "I don't know what's down there myself," she admitted, amused by the other woman's nervously sympathetic glance. Personally, she couldn't wait to find out.

\* \* \* \*

Apparently, it wasn't one of her cleaning days, so Carol left once dinner was ready to slide under the broiler.

Feeling smug, Morgan wandered back upstairs and opened the door nearest to the landing. The room was dark, and somehow she could sense that it was filled with books. She retreated and moved on to the room across the hall. Switching on the light she wasn't surprised to discover what appeared to be a guestroom. Like the rest of the house it was furnished with what even her untrained eye could tell were quality antiques. She suspected Simon's aunt had had something to do with decorating the guestroom. It was a feminine space, complete with a white canopy bed. She caressed the curtain surrounding it and couldn't resist pulling it open, then climbing in. The high mattress was incredibly soft; whole flocks of birds must have been killed to stuff it. Yet terrible as she found the thought, her body couldn't resist succumbing to the luxurious comfort.

Lying back across half-a-dozen lacy pillows, she stared up at the arching darkness of the canopy, wondering where he had gone even though she suspected she knew what he was doing. He was making her suffer a lonely purgatory before the divine hell that awaited her. He was giving her a chance to escape. Or maybe he had some real business to attend to. She closed her eyes, wondering how long she would have to wait for him...

And discovered glimmering multi-colored dresses hanging in the dark closet on hangers made of bones. They all seemed to be her size, so she lost no time in exchanging the heavy green robe for a sheer violet slip that clung to all her curves. She picked up the receiver of the white-and-gold French phone on one of the nightstands to call Liz and tell her how happy she was through the seashell mouthpiece, but there was no dial tone; all she heard was the wind moaning outside. Then a door slammed closed downstairs. She hurried out onto the landing and looked down the dark staircase.

"Simon?" She called softly, and saw his blonde head rising towards her. But then suddenly another silhouette in a long coat started up behind him, frightening her back into the room. He followed her in and stood in a dark corner while the other man paused in the doorway, his shoulder-length black hair artfully windblown around a cat's intensely indifferent green eyes.

"Do you like him?" Simon asked her.

The stranger stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

"I don't understand," she said anxiously. "What's going on, Simon?"

"You have a serious problem with obedience, Morgan," he replied. "I warned you what would happen if you used my name again. We'll have to punish you now."

"She wants it bad," the stranger remarked. "Thanks for asking me to lend a hand."

"Be hard on her. She needs to realize once and for all that this isn't a game."

"Get her on the bed."

Simon approached her. "Come here, Morgan." He clutched the slip over her breasts and shoved her back across the mattress...

"Sweet dreams?" he whispered in her ear.

She opened her eyes. Simon was sitting on the bed beside her, his black-leather jacket exuding the cold of empty space. They were alone. She must have fallen asleep while waiting for him and only dreamed that he returned with another man...

"Are you ready, my beauty?" he asked soberly.

"Yes." She opened the robe she was wearing, exposing herself to him. "Please be hard on me, Master," she whispered, "I want you to be." He held her eyes for a long moment, then said harshly, "Get up!"

The second she was on her feet, he yanked the robe off her and shoved her out of the room.

His cold silence frightened her like none of his threats had as once more she walked down the stairs ahead of him, and instinctively stopped before the narrow wooden door next to the stained-glass window. She kept her eyes lowered as he unlocked it, resisting the urge to slip her hands into his jacket and reassure herself of his warmth.

He turned on a light, but the bulb was of such low wattage she could barely discern steps descending into darkness, just as in Brighton Manor.

Yet again she preceded him down a steep flight of stairs, and when the soles of her bare feet made contact with the rough concrete at the bottom, she quickly turned and clung to him, burying her face in his chest. "I love you," she said fervently. "I trust you!"

"That's nice."

## CHAPTER SIX

For a per body heat helped warm the cold metal clamp around her neck and the manacles on her wrists. Simon had simply left her down in his basement on her knees. The choker around her throat made her conscious of every breath she took as she desperately wondered how long he planned to leave her down here like this.

He seemed to know that putting her in bondage so she was helpless to resist and then just leaving her alone was the worst thing he could possibly do. Yet she couldn't allow herself to cry, as it would seriously increase her discomfort. Like the grip of an angry spirit holding her up, the iron collar forced her to remain on her knees, while the chains pulled her arms down behind her, suspending her in a beseeching stance. She could only pray he wouldn't make her suffer for too long, because already her muscles were burning like flames licking up and down the haunting branch of her spine.

After what felt like a small eternity, she at last heard the door open at the top of the stairs. Her Master appeared carrying a silver tray, and she watched his silhouette descend towards her with a relief so intense it overwhelmed every other feeling inside her.

Once again he was a sinister portion of the darkness, taking form as he set the tray down on what looked like a tree stump a few feet away before approaching her. "Are you hungry, my pet?" He caressed the hair away from her face.

"Oh, Master, please," she whispered as his soft smile mysteriously lifted her above the chains.

"What's the matter?" He crouched down in front of her. "Are you tired of kneeling?" He thrust his right hand between her thighs. "Ah, but you're also enjoying yourself, aren't you, my slave?"

His touch literally blinded her with pleasure.

He straightened up and moved away from her.

"Oh, God, please don't leave me, my lord," she cried, and again relief weakened her like a climax when he returned with a steaming lobster tail dangling between his fingers. Its golden-white color and the divine smell of garlic-butter was devastating to her deprived senses when he touched her lips with it. She moaned as he fed her the whole tail, allowing her to savor it.

Then he gripped her face with one hand and pulling his erection out of his pants with the other insinuated himself slowly into her mouth. She was already addicted to the taste of him, and she sucked on his cool head eagerly, perfectly happy now because he was with her. But the harder he got the more difficult it was for her to breathe, especially when he gently forced his entire dick between her lips and down into her throat.

The selfish caress of his head combined with the pressure of the metal collar around her neck was an exquisite torture, yet she loved not being able to defend herself from him. Her breasts rose and fell as she struggled for air, yet her nipples were hard and her pussy was hot and deep with how much she relished having all of him in her mouth, and holding him there for as long as she could stand it.

He pleased himself like this for a long time, kindly letting her worship him, then walked back to the tray and returned with a bottle of white wine.

Assuming he would let her sip it, Morgan nearly choked when he thrust the slender neck between her lips and forced her to drink half of it all at once. She swallowed convulsively as her strained muscles seemed to dissolve in a glorious rush of warmth.

"Very good, my pet." He smiled down at her. "I think you're ready for a little walk." He withdrew a key from his pocket and clicked open the irons around her wrists. Then he grasped the chain attached to her throat and lifted it free of the wall.

"Please let me sit down for a moment, Master," she begged, because the relief of bending over was canceled out by the agony of remaining on her knees.

He put his boot on her ass and shoved her ahead of him. " *Crawl.*"

She obeyed him until they reached the tray, then she fell onto her backside, moaning with relief.

He dropped the cold heavy chain into her lap, set the bottle down on the tray and moved away into the shadows.

Taking full advantage of the respite he was giving her, she grabbed the wine bottle and took another numbing swallow of the fine vintage. She then snatched up the remaining lobster and devoured it as eagerly as a starving cat. Suddenly, the salad on the tray struck her as an insult. If he was going to feed her like an animal, the least he could do was bring her more juicy meat. She picked up the crystal bowl and flung it against the wall with a highly gratifying crash.

He strode back towards her out of the darkness. With an elegant bend of the knee, he retrieved the end of her chain and pulled her to her feet with a harsh tug. "If you know what's good for you, *slave*, you won't speak or even move until I tell you to." He removed her collar, letting it fall to the floor and grabbing one of her arms, hauled her over to a wooden table. He pushed her forward across it so her legs hung off the edge. He spread them open and bound her ankles to the table-legs, after which he pulled her arms open over her head and strapped her wrists down.

After being chained to the wall on her knees, Morgan found this position almost comfortable, until a searing pain branched through her body. It felt like a *real* whip this time. The thin leather strip sliced into the skin of her thighs a second time and the pain was so intense it took all her self-control not to scream. "Does it hurt?" he asked. "Are you suffering enough?"

She couldn't even begin to understand why she moaned, "No, Master..."

He whipped her thighs until her skin felt like molten gold pouring off the table, because there was something precious about the pain's blazing passage through all her thoughts and feelings as the deepening waves of agony exposed a part of her that rode them in fascination. She sobbed miserably beneath his strokes, yet at the same time this mysteriously perverse part of her identified with the pure power of the agony burning through her body.

"Had enough, slave?"

"No, my lord, I still haven't had *you*!"

He spanked her so hard he nearly knocked the breath out of her. "What a slave wants doesn't matter; only what her master wants is important." He punctuated this statement with another bone-jarring smack across her naked bottom cheeks. "And right now, he wants your ass."

"Oh, my God, no! No, *please*!" She had never let a man take her that way.

"Relax," he commanded.

She bit her lip, but she couldn't stop the tears from streaming down her face during the overwhelming torment of his penetration. There was nothing tender about his head as he thrust it into her tight little hole, ignoring her cries as he pushed through her sphincter and slipped her blindingly sensitive ring over the full length of his erection, forcing her flesh to marry his in this unnatural way.

There was nothing she could do to stop him, and how helpless she had allowed him to make her was as much of a shock to her system as his perverse invasion. It was her own fault this was happening, there was no reason he should respect her, and the sickening, burning impression made by his dick lodged deep in her bowels seemed a physical expression of his contempt for her feelings, because surely only a whore would let a man go so far. "Oh, God," she moaned, "you're hurting me!" "That's because you're fighting me, Morgan." Even

"That's because you're fighting me, Morgan." Even with his penis selfishly savoring the tense and excruciatingly difficult caress of her virgin ass, he managed to sound politely detached. "Stop fighting me..." he added with a bit more feeling as he slowly slid his entire cock in and out of her anus.

Suddenly he began a hard, rapid plunging, and it was impossible for her to believe how good his rhythm felt as she stopped trying to resist him; as she relaxed not just her body, but her entire being and accepted his driving force as if she wanted it...and miraculously she *did* want it, more than anything. The dark pleasure flooding her stunned her, especially as it only intensified the more certain she was that she couldn't endure his strokes another second...

When he pulled out of her abruptly, the relief and loss she experienced were indistinguishable, and the subtle sensation of his hot seed writing across her back mysteriously helped her express exactly what she was feeling without words. \* \* \* \*

When she woke the next morning, sunlight streaming into the room told her it was a beautiful day even though Simon was no longer in bed with her.

She got up, slipped into his robe, and found him in his study. She paused on the threshold, feeling like a lady centuries ago come upon her lord at his desk. Two walls of the room were covered from floor to ceiling with books. He was elegantly clad in a black robe, a small fire burning in the stone grate behind him.

Sensing her silent presence, he looked up. "Good morning." He greeted her without a smile.

"Good morning, Master." She didn't smile either.

"I've decided to buy Brighton Manor," he informed her. "We'll discuss the terms later."

"But why...?" She stopped herself as she remembered what he had said about questioning him. "You can't mean to live there," she remarked instead.

He picked up his coffee mug and continued reading a sheet of paper covered with a fine print she couldn't make out.

"Your attorney said your plans for the house involve young women," she said casually.

"They do."

"In *what* way?" She was angry now.

"They're going to live there." He signed the bottom of the page with a flourish that felt like the EKG of her own furious heartbeat. "Why are you doing this to me?" she whispered helplessly.

He didn't even glance at her. "Doing what?"

"Torturing me."

"Because you like it, of course. Now get dressed, you're going home for a while."

She turned away in despair.

"You still don't trust me, do you, Morgan?" he asked mildly.

She faced him again.

He was still reading his paper and contentedly sipping his coffee.

"I don't want to leave, Master." She didn't care that she sounded like a little girl arguing with her father.

He glanced at her again. "I told you to get dressed."

Pride and desire battling each other in her racing pulse, she lingered in the doorway. "Please let me stay, Master."

"Morgan, misbehaving so I'll punish you is just an indirect way of telling me what to do."

"This doesn't feel like a game anymore, Simon."

He set his mug down and met her eyes. "It never was."

She retreated into his bedroom and slipped on the same black dress for the third day in a row.

\* \* \* \*

Her apartment looked the same and yet it felt completely different, as if the still life of her possessions had been rendered by a new artist who had sharpened every edge.

He drove her home in his black sports car, and the one side of his cool crescent smile she could see only deepened when she tried to get him to talk about himself. Apparently, it was his way of forcing her to remember the few significant things he had said and of forcing her to trust him.

Double-parking in front of her building, he quickly got out of the car and opened the door for her. He set her overnight bag down beside her and said simply, "I'll call you."

Two overweight Italian women watched them from the sidewalk where they were enjoying the sunshine in foldout chairs.

"When?" She was afraid to let him go.

He slapped her cheek gently. "Let's try that again...I'll call you."

"Yes, Master." She didn't care at all that they had an audience. "I just wish you would be more specific as to when."

Smiling, he laid her keys in her hand and saluted her before slipping back into his car and speeding away. He didn't kiss her goodbye or bother to return her car. Yet from the beginning her desires had made the decision to trust him, so unless she wanted to arrest her growing feelings for him with doubts and fears she had no choice but to continue trusting him. The most important command he had given her; it had also become the hardest one for her to obey without question. The back of her thighs were still smoldering, and a part of her found her body's dull aches and pains smugly satisfying as they kept reminding her of all the different ways he had stroked her.

She turned on the heat and then played the messages on her answering machine, even though she had no intention of calling anyone back until after she had taken a long hot shower.

"Hi, it's Liz. Give me a call when you get a chance. Bye."

It was the only message.

"Oh, God." She had managed to forget about the incident with Mark, but Liz's oddly constrained tone brought the foolish moments crashing back.

Someone knocked firmly on the front door three times.

Hating herself for hoping it was Simon, she hurried to open it.

A man of her lover's same fair coloring and handsome bone structure, but with fine lines around his eyes and his hard mouth was standing out on the landing, his hands hidden inside a long, unbuttoned black trench coat. "Morgan Grant?" he asked in a deep, firm voice.

"Yes?" She had a wild thought he had come to warn her away from his sadistic brother.

"Detective Michael O'Brien." He identified himself without bothering to produce his badge. "If you don't mind, I'd like to ask you a few questions. It won't take long."

"Detective O'Brien?" Then he couldn't be related to

Simon...

"That's right." He waited a few seconds before asking, a bit brusquely, "May I come in?"

"Oh, yes, of course." She stepped aside to let him pass. Clouds must have been passing over the sun, because it was suddenly very dark in her apartment. She turned on a floor lamp by the door, and then nervously bent over to switch on another light by the couch.

The bulb blew with a soft tinkling sound like dead fairy dust.

"Shit," she whispered.

"This isn't an interrogation, Morgan, you can leave a few shadows."

She was not entirely sure he was joking, which only made her nervous. "Can I offer you anything to drink, detective?"

"No, thank you."

"Well, at least sit down, please." She sank into her reading chair, crossing her hands in her lap like a little girl unexpectedly called into the principal's office.

He seated himself on the couch across from her. "I don't know if you've heard yet," he remarked cryptically, bending forward slightly and clasping his hands loosely between his knees. His legs looked slender but strong inside smooth black slacks.

"Heard what?" Simon was a gangster or a drug dealer...

"The girl who lived in the apartment below yours, Kathy Hampton, how well did you know her?" "Not very well...lived?"

"I'm afraid she's gone missing."

"Really?"

"Were you and Kathy friends?"

"No, I just ran into her every now and then on the stairs. She moved in about a year ago, but it's a very casual acquaintance." She shrugged. "We don't really seem to have much in common."

"Have you met John?"

"John?"

"Her boyfriend."

"I didn't even know she had a boyfriend... no, I haven't met him."

"When was the last time you saw Kathy?"

"I'm not sure." She focused on the halo of his wedding ring. "Excuse me, but I would like a drink, if you don't mind." This unexpected visit from a detective after all the shocking—and she supposed technically illegal—things that had happened to her lately was seriously unsettling her. She reached for the bottle of *Bushmills* that was still sitting on her coffee table with the two shot glasses. The sight of them made her feel guilty, and consequently even more nervous. It was evidence of her transgression she couldn't ignore.

"Let me," Detective O'Brien said abruptly.

She was surprised, but grateful, because her hands were trembling slightly.

He filled one of the shot glasses and handed it to her.

"Thank you," she said, and his direct, sober stare

had a steadying affect on her pulse. She quickly downed the shot and for a moment sat relishing the warmth flowing through her chest and taking luscious root in her womb. "How do you know Kathy's missing?" she asked curiously. "Maybe she just felt like getting away from her boyfriend." She couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that Simon was somehow the real reason this officer of the law was here looking at her in that silent, strangely discerning way. Her reason, however, told her she was just being paranoid.

"What made you say that, Morgan? I thought you'd never met her boyfriend."

"I haven't." Now his steady stare made her squirm as it shone a penetrating light on all the dark and dangerous feelings Simon was awakening inside her. She looked away. "It was just a thought."

"Maybe," he said mildly. "You can't remember the last time you saw Kathy?" he insisted.

"No, I'm sorry, I can't."

"John called us on Friday night when she didn't come home from work, and then again Saturday morning. He said they're very close and that she would never just go away without telling him."

"They're living together? I've never run into *him* on the stairs."

"Apparently he's only been here a few weeks." He stared at her face for what felt like a long time, and then rose abruptly. He was slightly taller than Simon. "Well, thank you for your time, Morgan."

She followed him to the door. "I'm sorry I couldn't

be of more assistance, detective."

"You never know." He opened the door and looked back at her. "I'll be in touch."

She closed the door behind him with a bad taste in her mouth from drinking before noon, and because the violent sensual memories she was savoring suddenly struck her as much more disturbing than exciting. Yet the fact that Detective O'Brien's visit had nothing to do with Simon filled her with a relief much more intense than the vague concern she felt for her missing neighbor.

She hadn't planned on going for a run today, but now she changed her mind. The sun hadn't reappeared; it would be freezing along to the water, but she knew the exercise would clear her head and help her feel better.

She stripped off the black dress that was beginning to feel like her own shadow, hid her body inside formless gray layers of sweatpants and sweatshirts, and headed out.

\* \* \* \*

The cold penetrated all of Morgan's protective clothing and caressed her warm sweat in a way that made her skin ache everywhere Simon had beaten her. She was covered in brutal hickeys, the muscles of her inner thighs were stiff, yet she couldn't remember a more enjoyable run.

Her lungs and cheeks burning from the Bay's frigid wind, she walked the last block home feeling physically cleansed and emotionally positive again.

When she reached the heavy glass door leading into her building, someone abruptly opened it for her—a strikingly handsome young man who made her wish her complexion didn't resemble that of a Maine lobster at the moment. His softly waving black hair was a romantic shoulder length, and his pale skin was stretched taut over a statue's ideal features. Despite the penetrating cold, all he was wearing were blue jeans and a threadbare gray sweatshirt.

"Thanks," she said, and found herself obliged to brush up against him as she entered the building.

He let the door slam closed behind them. "I've never seen you before." It almost sounded like an accusation. He thrust his hands in his pockets, drawing her gaze down to his lean hips. "Have you seen Kathy?" he demanded.

"No I haven't. Um, are you John?" She felt her positive mood threatened again, like a fragile egg she was determined to protect.

"Yeah. Who are you? I mean," he seemed to realize how rude he sounded, "what's your name?"

"Morgan Grant, I live on the top floor. A detective came by to ask me some questions, but I'm afraid I wasn't much help." She didn't know what more to say.

He shrugged. "I'm sure she'll be back." He started up the stairs. "She might even be up there now..."

Morgan caught his arm. "John, you must be freezing. Why don't you come up to my apartment for a hot cup of coffee?" She was as surprised by the invitation as he was.

He looked down at her, his gray eyes as wary and expressionless as a cat's, then shrugged again. "Okay."

\* \* \* \*

An intense frown made John look even more handsome as he contemplated his cappuccino's cloud-like foam in brooding silence.

Morgan sat across from him at her small kitchen table, longing for a hot shower.

"Thanks, I needed that," he said finally.

"There's more if you like."

"Do you realize how beautiful you are?" he snapped. "God, I'm sorry, I usually know how to behave myself. I'm just a little uptight right now... I should never have let Kathy take that job out in Dorchester!"

"John, I'm sure she's all right."

He stared at her suspiciously. "Do you know where she is?"

Morgan was beginning to regret her impulsive invitation. "I have no idea, John, but... well, you shouldn't think the worst."

"Not yet, you mean." To her amazement his eyes glittered like diamonds with coal-black hearts as they filled with tears. "God!" he exclaimed again, and pushing his chair back escaped into the living room.

She gave him time to wipe away his unmanly tears before following him.

He stood in front of a window with his back to her, which afforded her the opportunity to admire his broad shoulders and long legs.

After a moment, he turned to face her. "Would you have lunch with me, Morgan?"

The day had not gone as she had hoped from the beginning. She was increasingly afraid she would never see Simon again, and that even if he did call her his decadent wealth and perverse tastes would prove insurmountable barriers to a meaningful relationship. Her feelings were swinging from one extreme to another like drunken trapeze artists, and not really knowing anything about him meant her hopes were soaring dangerously without a net.

"Okay, John, but first let me shower and change."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

It was too cold to wander through the North End searching for just the right little Italian restaurant, and Morgan felt they were both too full of heavy thoughts to care where they ended up, so they walked straight to a place John said he had never been to with Kathy, which was obviously more important to him right now than how good the food was.

The busy waiter quickly took their orders. The small space was decorated with a painted view of the Mediterranean as seen from a hilltop café and filled to capacity with people whose bodies were invisible inside dark winter clothing.

John kept folding and unfolding his paper napkin, his wolfish stare fixed on an overweight statue of Venus standing in the open shell from which she was born, her blank plaster eyes blithely unconcerned by the fact that she no longer embodied the modern ideal of beauty. "I remember now, Kathy mentioned you a few times," John broke their mutually self-absorbed silence. "She admires your independence."

"That's nice, but it's not much fun, really. It's better

than being with the wrong person, but it's not what I want."

He abandoned the napkin. "Are you seeing anyone?"

"Yes, but it's a very strange relationship," she confessed.

He looked interested. "What do you mean?"

She shrugged, unconsciously imitating his body language.

His features sharpened beautifully when he was annoyed. "Don't you want to talk about it?"

"I wouldn't know how to begin."

His lasagna arrived in record time, along with her spinach salad.

She toyed guiltily with a crouton. "I think I'm really much more selfish than I've ever dared to admit to myself," she heard herself say out of the blue.

"There's nothing wrong with that, not if you're honest about it. I think Kathy said you were in Real Estate?"

"Yes." She suppressed a yawn.

"Don't you like what you do?"

"It's all right." She shrugged again.

"Well, personally, I *like* working. I intend to have my own business one day."

"Really?" She smiled at him absently, beginning to enjoy her salad. "What sort of business?"

"Right now I manage a liquor store across from the Common and the owner's a good friend of mine. I'm working out a deal to buy it from him eventually." "A liquor store? Does that mean you get everything at cost?"

"Yep."

"That's nice."

"Can I come over when I get off work tonight at around nine o'clock? I'll bring something, whatever you like."

"I might not be home, John."

"It doesn't matter. I'm staying in Kathy's place until the end of the month. I'll come up and knock, and if you're home, great. What would you like to drink? A sweet liquor, maybe?"

"No, I don't have much of a sweet tooth." It's more like a saber-tooth, she thought. "You decide." She fervently hoped Simon would come for her before then.

Their waiter dropped the bill in the center of the table with a harried smile.

John snatched it up at once. He carefully extracted some bills out from a tattered black wallet, and then got up to pull her chair out for her. "Would you like to walk with me? I'm heading back to the store now."

"Some other time, thank you, right now I just want to go home and take a nap."

"A catnap?"

She realized it was the first time he had smiled when his bone structure interfered with the synapses in her brain for a moment.

"I'll see you tonight, Morgan," he said confidently, and strode away from her down the sidewalk. \* \* \* \*

The narrow wooden door leading into Kathy's apartment was beginning to take on a sinister appearance. Morgan walked past it quickly, only to stop dead when she saw the flowers that had bloomed on her own landing—at least a dozen red and white rose buds rising out of a polished black vase.

She ran up the remaining steps and searched eagerly for a card amidst the thorns. She couldn't find one, but they had to be from Simon, the one conventional gesture of courtship he had indulged her with so far.

She set the vase on her coffee table, then removed the bottle of whiskey and the two sticky shot glasses. They reminded her that she had to phone Liz, and she dialed her friend's number, admiring the flesh-andblood flowers her lover had sent her. They were much more than she had expected from him today, and her mood was improving by the second, which was what gave her the strength to face this call. "Hi, Liz."

"Hey! Where've you been?" She sounded just a little too cheerful. "Out having fun?"

"I don't think most people would consider it fun, but I definitely enjoyed myself."

"So, things are going well with that man?"

"I guess."

"That's good... Okay," her tone changed completely, "tell me what happened when Mark went over there." "Nothing." Morgan realized, too late, this was the completely wrong answer. "What do you mean?"

"Something happened," Liz insisted.

"We had a few shots of *Bushmills* and we talked. I thought that's what you sent him over here for."

"Did he kiss you?"

She couldn't bring herself to lie to her best friend. "Yes, but only to make me feel better. It was perfectly innocent."

"On the lips?"

"Yes, but you should have seen how guilty he felt about it afterwards, Liz. He kept telling me how much he loved you. And then Simon called and asked me to meet him somewhere, so Mark left, and that was that."

"Really? That's all that happened."

"That's all that happened, Liz, I swear it on my soul."

"I guess it's my own fault for meddling, huh? Lead us not into temptation, and all that."

"There was no temptation at all. He adores you, Liz. I'll be damn lucky if I ever find a man who feels about me the way Mark feels about you."

"Thanks," she whispered fervently, "I needed to hear that. But seriously, Morgan, if you're happy, I'm happy, and you know it. Just promise me you'll be careful."

\* \* \* \*

She opened a bottle of Merlot to accompany her

linguini with mushrooms, and after dinner settled down in her reading chair with another full glass. But first she turned off all the lights, leaving only the lamp on the table beside her lit, and the contained glow felt like a cozy symbol of her own mysterious awareness.

Staring at the roses Simon had sent her, she wondered if he was conscious of the fact that in his black clothes and gloves he seemed to embody the cold force of the universe, which made her naked body life's vulnerable warmth full of faith in his good intentions no matter what he did to her. Because he hurt her, yet he also gave her intense pleasure.

She was wearing a long-sleeved, low cut and very short violet dress that looked lovely above black hose and knee-high black-leather boots, but it seemed he wasn't going to call, much less come over. Her opinion of him should have been degenerating, not improving. Apparently, the fragrance of the roses was having a subliminal effect on her psyche and filling her with a sense of well-being, even as his lack of urgency pricked her pride like a thorn. He wasn't the sort of man to get caught in the web spun by her insecurities, a fact that intensified her respect, and therefore her profound need, for him.

The abrupt knock on her door startled her into nearly bloodying her dress with wine. She set her glass down, shook her head to enhance the waving fullness of her hair around her face, and opened the door.

Her disappointment was too intense to conceal.

"My boss told me to get lost," John apologized for being early by quickly explaining. "It was dead tonight."

"Come in," she said, "you must be freezing."

He handed her a slender brown bag as he stepped inside.

A quick glance told her he had brought her a bottle of cheap brandy. "Thank you, John. I'll pour you some to help warm you up. Don't you own a coat?"

He didn't answer as he perched on the edge of her couch and looked up at her with an expression that struck her as both apologetic and defiant.

Morgan didn't bother to turn on the light in the kitchen as she poured a generous amount of the brandy into a snifter. The darkness felt full of promise tonight, she wasn't giving up hope, and now she had a beautiful young man sitting out in her living room to help her wait.

"Here, drink this, John."

"Did your boyfriend send you these?" His hard eyes staring at the roses evoked shards of glass in the soft light. "He must be trying to apologize for something. Or is he just being romantic?"

Instead of sitting in her favorite chair she perched on the couch beside him. "John, are you familiar with Bondage and Domination?"

He took a careless swallow of the potent liquor. "You mean S&M?" he asked dismissively. "Who isn't?" He took another hearty swig of brandy. "It's all over the Internet."

"They're not the same, not really. What I'm talking

about is – "

"Why are you asking me this, Morgan?"

"No reason," she reached for her wineglass. "I just felt like talking to someone." She drained it.

"Then I'm sorry I interrupted you. Please, go on. What was it you wanted to say?"

She could feel him looking at her as she stared at his sharp knee bones. "I don't know," she shrugged, "but it seems to me that there's something almost sacred about it. I experienced real B&D for the first time only a few days ago and it felt...it felt almost like a dark ritual that brought out my deepest feelings." She glanced at him to gauge his reaction.

He looked away, gripping the snifter in both hands like a crystal ball and staring down into the amber liquid. "So you like being hurt," he concluded.

"I wouldn't put it that way, exactly," she felt compelled to protest.

He took a quick sip. "Does he tie you up and beat you?"

"No...I mean, yes, but it's more subtle than that." Or was it?

"And you like it." It wasn't a question.

"No, I *don't* like it," she answered softly, looking deep inside herself, "I *love* it."

He set his glass down, got up abruptly, and walked over to a window. "Maybe you shouldn't be telling me this, Morgan." He snapped open the blinds and stared down at the sidewalk, as if watching for Kathy to come home.

Part of her felt curiously detached as she got up

and gravitated towards him again. "Why not, John?" She stepped up tightly behind him and slipped her hands boldly up into his sweatshirt. His leanness pleased her, as did the smoothness of his skin and how warm he was.

She felt his breath catch when she pressed herself up against him, and she didn't care if he was merely surprised or if he was also pleased, as long as he didn't stop her. His prominent ribs turned her on in a strange way; they made her realize he could be hurt, and the shocking realization that his vulnerability excited her found an outlet in her fingertips as she dared to pinch both his nipples. She squeezed them gently between her thumb and forefinger, and then more firmly, and hungrily.

The sensation of his body tensing against hers while on a deeper level growing submissively languid, was absolutely exquisite. She could feel his response to the small torture she inflicted on him surging like electricity through his wiry muscles. She released his nipples and raked her fingernails lightly down his chest.

He tried to turn around.

"No!" she whispered, and the way his head fell forward obediently thrilled her. His tight ass felt delicious against her womb, through which she mysteriously sensed the affect her caresses were having on him, especially when she slipped one of her fingernails into his fly and scraped it teasingly up and down his zipper.

Then she just couldn't resist, she had to let herself

savor the swelling in his jeans; to hold it in her hand and weigh it against all the reasons why she shouldn't let herself want it, much less allow herself to have it. She was so deep in her deliberation she barely heard the three quiet raps on her door. But when they registered, she immediately abandoned John and ran to open it again.

Casually slipping off his gloves, Simon walked into her apartment. When he saw she wasn't alone, anger flashed in his eyes like lighting in a clear sky. "Well, well, my lady," he said in the deep, quiet voice that instantly made her pussy wet.

"I didn't know if we were going to see each other tonight," she explained weakly, "you didn't call."

His tone was dangerously pleasant, "Am I interrupting?"

"No...um, John, this is Simon."

"I can't say I'm pleased to meet you," John declared rudely.

Simon remained excruciatingly civil. "Well, that's nice to know."

"John lives with his girlfriend in the apartment below mine." Morgan closed the door. Her lover was wearing black again and his solid shadow had its usual vertiginous effect on her emotions. "Her name is Kathy, and she seems to be missing."

"You just expect Morgan to drop everything for you?" John demanded.

Holding his limp gloves, Simon crossed his hands patiently over his crotch. "Not at all, please proceed with whatever it was you two were doing." She went and stood as close to him as she could without actually touching him. "We were just talking," she insisted calmly, praying he would believe her.

"Were you?"

"Yes, we were," John rose to her defense. "And from what I've heard, you don't treat her the way she deserves to be treated."

"Oh, yes, I do." Simon idly raised his hand and caressed her hair the same way he might pet a stray cat rubbing up against his leg.

"No, you don't, you scare her!"

"Did she say that?"

"No, but..."

Simon's tone was relaxed, "What exactly *did* she say?"

Being referred to in the third person made her feel slightly less than human, and with her blood purring beneath his caress, she couldn't think of anything to say for herself.

John thrust his hands into his pockets as though his clenched fists contained her words and he was trying to hide them because he couldn't handle their disturbing implications; he suddenly looked very young.

She found her voice, "Simon, he's really upset about Kathy."

"I understand. Where do you think she might be, John? Are the police involved yet?"

"None of your business!"

"I'm afraid it is." Simon's playfully daunting tone

hardened. "If Kathy is missing, she may have been kidnapped, and chances are her abductor is someone who's been stalking her, someone who quite possibly lives around here. He might even be someone she knew, which means that Morgan might know him, too, and also be in danger, and since I have no intention of letting anything happen to her, it is therefore very much my business."

"Look, all the police know is what I told them, that some guy drove her home from work last Friday. She told me he picked her up in front of a cemetery near where she works, and I told her how stupid she was for accepting rides from strangers. I just happened to be looking out the window, waiting for her to get home, and I saw her get out of a black Z-3. I guess she just couldn't resist going for a ride in a fucking fancy sports car. Maybe he picked her up again, only this time he didn't bring her home."

Simon stepped away from her abruptly. "I believe I interrupted something." He seated himself on the couch, resting one booted ankle on his knee and spreading his arms across the back. "Please, just pretend I'm not here."

"We were only talking..." The lie felt like a piece of glass she kept swallowing.

"Then keep on talking." Half his face was in shadow and his long black leather coat absorbed the soft lamplight like a deep body of water at night. "I'm interested to hear what you two have to say to each other."

"Nothing." John came to her rescue again. "I was

just leaving."

"No, you weren't."

"Okay, I wasn't, but now you're here and I think she wants me to go, so I'm going."

"You've got it wrong, John, she wants us both. I think that's fairly obvious. What's wrong, my love, cat got your tongue?"

No matter what she said or did he was going to punish her for it, and this prospect frightened her and yet also excited her so much she couldn't think straight.

"Morgan, your next lesson is that no other man touches you without my permission."

"But he didn't..."

"And *never* lie to me. All right, I've heard enough." He looked at John. "You may leave now."

John glanced at her.

"I'll see you later, John," she said gently.

He strode to the door, flung it open, and slammed it closed behind him.

Without a word, Simon rose. He switched off the lamp, plunging them into darkness, and the silver aura from the streetlight below her window showed her his silhouette slipping his gloves back on like a surgeon about to operate on her feelings. "Come here," he ordered in an undertone.

She could no more resist him than she could stop her blood from flowing.

He lifted one of the roses out of the vase and caressed her cheek with the cool petals. They were only slightly softer than her skin. "Now, tell me," he snapped the tender bud casually off its stem and let it fall to his feet, "who am I, Morgan?"

"My Master," she whispered.

He grasped her left hand in his. "But you forgot that, didn't you?"

Her body tensed. "No, Master."

"You forgot everything I said to you." He pricked her little finger with a thorn.

"No," she gasped, "I didn't forget."

"You're lying to me." He pricked another finger.

She closed her eyes and didn't resist the pain, which almost confused her nerve-ends into registering it as an intense pleasure.

"That isn't a game we're playing, Morgan. I won't tell you again." He used a fresh thorn each time. "You truly belong to me."

"Yes, Master!"

"It's not going to work between us unless you understand that. That's why I sent you home today, to teach you your bondage isn't limited to my basement. Even when you think you're alone at home, you're still mine." He gripped her thumb. "Do you get my point?"

"Yes, Master, please..."

He brought her hand up to his face. "Tell me what you've learned, Morgan." He slipped one of her wounded fingertips between his lips and sucked on it gently.

The sensation literally hit her behind the knees, it was so excitingly dangerous. "I've learned that you're my Master," she answered breathlessly, "and I'll never tell you what to do or question anything you say or let another man..." She stumbled over this exciting clause. "Or let another man touch me without your permission. And above all, I must never lie to you."

"Very good." He tossed the stem away and pulled her hard against him. "Have you fucked him?"

"No! Please, believe me!" She didn't dare try to kiss him; she had tasted his cock more than she had his tongue.

"I don't want you to be alone with John again. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Master."

"Do you have any idea where Kathy might be?"

"No. A detective came by to ask me some questions this morning. He wanted to know if I could remember the last time I saw her, but I couldn't."

"A detective... do you remember his name?"

"Yes, Michael O'Brien."

He said, a little more gently, "Keep trusting me, Morgan. I swear I'll never let anyone hurt you in any way you don't want to be hurt."

## CHAPTER ELCHT

Her eyes closed to block out the annoyingly bright.

"You have other more important duties, Morgan." Seating himself on the edge of the bed he draped one of her legs across his lap and began unlacing her boot. "You look great in these, but they're a pain in the ass to get off," he observed.

"What do *you* know about pains in the ass? Please spare me tonight, Master."

Without answering he removed her other boot, shoved her gently over onto her stomach, and unzipped her dress. "Strip," he commanded, and left the room.

Sighing again, she got up, slipped out of her dress and tights, and put on the black-leather garter belt and sheer black stockings he had laid out on the bed for her. Other than a pair of black, impossibly highheels, it was all he had given her to wear.

She collapsed across the soft mattress again and part of her began drifting languidly off even as she waited tensely for his return, excitement and exhaustion warring so deep inside her she felt herself floating strangely outside of time. From now on his will was the space she occupied, his commands the gravity her body and her feelings must obey. She would have loved to go to sleep, but she couldn't, and she was glad; the universe was finally making demands on her, thrusting her fully into the present and her living beauty through his intensely focused desire.

A timeless while later, she felt him lift her arm from where it rested over her eyes.

He quickly slipped a blindfold over them. "That way," he ordered, pulling her roughly to her feet.

She stretched her arms out before her as he shoved her ahead of him, afraid of running into something.

"You should know the way by now, slave."

His voice was so hard it elicited a moan from her.

"Careful." He grabbed her arm. "That's the first step."

She rested against his chest for a reassuring moment, noting that he was still fully clothed, and then reached blindly for the banister.

On the ground floor his gloved hands touched her briefly to get her moving in the right direction, and once down in the cellar he thrust a tightly wound piece of cloth between her lips. "This is going to hurt, my love." He stretched her arms up over her head and wrapped a leather strap around her wrists that hung with sinister convenience from the ceiling. "Feel this?"

She stiffened in response to the slender leather rod caressing her womb. Then she felt him move away and an instant later a searing current of agony was immediately followed by another one, and another one, each one literally taking her breath away in screams of disbelief. She turned desperately from side to side in a vain attempt to escape his strokes as they flooded her nerve-ends with an unredeemable torment and her mind with despair.

She couldn't beg him to stop, and the burning pain was too all-consuming for her thoughts to rise above; she couldn't use it as she had last night to identify with the invulnerable energy behind her flesh. It was impossible to imbue the horribly raw power of the experience with a metaphysical dimension in which her senses could take mysterious refuge. It was absolutely impossible to justify such intense anguish in order to make it more bearable.

His firm voice penetrated her misery, "Don't cry, Morgan. Can you hear me? I said don't cry...I love you."

In the black, pain-filled universe in which her blood cells burned hot as stars, his tenderness was all she had to hope on.

"Don't cry, sweetheart, you should be happy; it's written all over you now that you belong to someone."

Hanging from her wrists, her blindfold soaked

with tears, she was a blind and miserable life form adrift in a salty darkness.

He freed her hands abruptly, lifted her up in his arms, and laid her across a rough wooden surface. All she knew was relief as he forced her legs together, pulled a strap over her ankles, and tied her arms over her head. Another consolation was that he removed the blindfold. At some point in her ordeal he had taken off his shirt, but now he was wearing a black mask around his eyes.

With the skin of her back smoldering, the cool gloved hand he passed down her body felt much more soothing than threatening. He pressed a cool leather finger against her lips. "If you speak, I'll gag you again." He bent over and kissed her, tonguing her deeply. "The way you've given yourself to me is so beautiful, Morgan."

He straightened up, opened his pants, and filled her mouth with his hard cock. "You have willingly made your body my temple, and you won't regret it. With me you'll ascend to heights of pleasure in which you can no longer tell the difference between your mind and your body, your thoughts and your feelings, and you'll come like you never knew you could come." He kept talking and didn't force her to swallow his entire erection this time; it would have been impossible at that angle. He simply allowed her to suck passionately and gratefully on his head. "I was watching you up there in that tower bedroom, Morgan. Daddy knows what you want, and he's going to give it to you." \* \* \* \*

The black asphalt of the street was cooled lava and large beasts with gleaming shells roared past her as she ran across it. Naked and striped red from his beatings, she looked like a woman from a prehistoric era flung into a world where no one would comprehend her markings, or why she was outside on a freezing November night without any clothes, money, or identification. They wouldn't understand that his eyes had sunk like fangs into her soul while the things he said worked on her like venom, breaking down her emotional defenses and dissolving her will. She had been trapped in the bowels of his cellar all night, nourishing his perverse appetites, burning lashes and paralyzing manacles part of the painful process of being consumed like a mouse inside a snake....

Her bare toes easily hooked into the tall chain-link fence surrounding the graveyard. She was so cold she almost welcomed the hot pain of barbed wire slicing across her belly as she let herself fall to the ground on the other side, then stumbled across the frozen grass. But she was too weak to go on. She heaved herself up onto an altar-like tombstone. Above her, stars winked down at her tranquilly. Even now she couldn't accept the fact that he was heartless; she refused to believe she was only another body to him. When his silhouette appeared beside her, she began to cry she was so relieved he had followed her, and found her. He bent over to kiss her, and his breath thawed her cold lips back into soft, warm petals. "Wake up, Morgan," he whispered, "you're having a bad dream..."

The stars vanished beneath a uniform layer of

clouds...it took her a moment to realize what she was looking at was the ceiling of his bedroom, where all she had to hold onto was the glimmer of his eyes in the darkness as he took her gently in his arms.

\* \* \* \*

"Good morning, Carol." Feeling stiff, Morgan gingerly seated herself at the kitchen table.

"Good morning, Carol," Simon echoed, and poured himself some orange juice.

"Good morning." His pretty cook glanced back in their general direction with a shy smile.

He drank his juice, and then went and stood behind Morgan's chair, where he began giving her a neck-rub.

She had to bite her lip to keep from moaning. There was so much tension stored inside her muscles that the penetration of his thumbs was akin to ecstasy.

"Everything smells delicious, Carol," her employer remarked pleasantly.

"Well, your note said a hearty breakfast, so there's bacon, eggs over-easy, hash browns, English muffins with blueberry and strawberry preserves, and French Press coffee."

"That's my girl."

Morgan stiffened at the endearment, but then succumbed again to the dark bursts of joy flashing in her muscles beneath the relentless pressure of his thumbs. She crossed her legs to brace herself, and didn't notice when the robe she was wearing fell open, exposing one of her thighs.

Carol turned to set two plates on the table, and caught sight of the grill-like marks on the other woman's skin.

"We'll take care of the dishes, Carol," Simon said, "thank you."

"Yes, Sir. Enjoy." Still wearing her apron, she quickly left the kitchen.

"Did you happen to notice how surprised she was to see you again, Morgan?" Simon asked as he seated himself next to her at the table.

She broke the yolks on her eggs, feeling she had earned every calorie. "And *why* should she be so surprised?"

He kissed her cheek. "Never mind. Naturally you don't realize it's very special treatment you're getting."

"Special? Is *that* what you call it? Where's the coffee?"

"Right over there. Pour us some." He smiled at her expression before adding, "Please."

\* \* \* \*

"Here, Morgan, take this."

She stared down at the white pill resting on his palm like a full moon against the bare branches of his lifelines. It frightened her a little, the things she was doing with her body lately.

"It's only a painkiller," he assured her, "you don't have to be afraid of it." He slipped the pill between her lips and tilted a glass of water against them. "Drink... That's a good girl."

She knew better than to ask him what he had just given her. Whatever it was, it was part of her now and there was no escaping the effects. Her relationship with this man was very much like a drug: it was dangerous, often illegal, and he could seriously hurt her, yet she wanted him like nothing else.

"Now go upstairs," he commanded. "There's a fire burning in the study, where I want you to make yourself at home and think about all the things I've done to you. You're an intelligent woman, Morgan, it's one of the reasons playing with you is such a pleasure. Whipping a stupid bitch is no fun. Your reactions verge on the metaphysical, which makes it a lot more interesting for me; none of my creativity is wasted on you."

She wrapped her arms possessively around his chest and rested her cheek just below his shoulder. She could both hear and feel the deep, slow beat of his heart beneath her own swifter pulse. "I was hoping you would realize that."

"But you still don't really trust me completely, do you?"

"I trust you...it's just that...I can't help wondering what happened to Kathy. I hope she's all right."

"Do you realize I drive a black Z-3 Roadster, Morgan?"

She pulled away from him. "I don't know one car from another."

"Countless people in Boston drive black Z-3s, I just

mentioned it so you'd realize that you still don't trust me as much as you think you do. See how nervous this innocent fact made you? Now run upstairs. I want to picture you curled up in front of the fire like a good little pussy." He shoved her away from him. "Your master will see you later. Don't pick up the phone if it rings; you're not my answering service, you're my slave."

She started slowly up the stairs, lifting his long robe up around her thighs so she wouldn't trip, and to tempt him. They didn't smile at each other. On her part what she felt was too intense; separating herself from him was almost more painful than his company.

A cozy fire was indeed burning in the study and its tasteful masculine décor, imbued with the enigmatic sense of his presence, comforted her in his absence. It was a beautiful room. The walls were wood-paneled, and the ceiling-high shelves were filled with books, a divided mixture of leather-bound volumes, contemporary hardcovers and colorful paperbacks. She was sure he hadn't inherited his library.

Naturally, the desk was an antique, carved from a black wood she couldn't identify, which made her conscious of the fact that she didn't know much about a lot of subjects that potentially interested her. Like his dresser it was riddled with small drawers, and its surface was strewn with papers. She considered leafing through them for some clue as to what he planned to do with Brighton Manor, but that would be openly mistrusting him, so she refrained from touching anything. Her faith in him meant everything to her.

She made herself comfortable on the Oriental rug spread out in front of the hearth, and rested her back against a large leather chair. She hoped the painkiller he had given her would kick in soon because the welts left by the riding crop made it slightly uncomfortable to sit down. She wasn't in any real pain, but she was unusually aware of her body and of the exciting fact that it belonged to him as much as to her now.

It was warm so close to the fire, so she untied the belt and let the robe fall open. She was glad her breasts and belly were still a creamy whole; so far he had concentrated his attacks on the back of her flesh. She hoped it would stay that way.

None of the many men she had been involved with before possessed even a fraction of Simon's imagination. Whatever sadistic qualities they had possessed invariably manifested on the emotional plane rather than in the bedroom where she could enjoy them. Paradoxically, he was the most generous lover she had ever known; he truly seemed to care about what she felt even when he was making her suffer.

She slipped the robe off completely and spread herself belly-down on the rug, resting her chin on her hands so she could stare directly into the flames. Her sensuality was like a long-lost Christmas present he was helping her open. She would never again underestimate the value of the flesh her soul had come wrapped in. He was teaching her just how meaningful it could be to truly play with her senses. Together, they assumed stark metaphysical roles during sex the way boys and girls play at being kings and queens.

Lost in thought, Morgan wasn't sure she hadn't just imagined the light caress on her hair. She turned her head, and a fur-lined blindfold fell softly over her eyes. She smiled. "You must not have gone very far, Master."

"Don't speak." His whisper was barely audible over the crackling fire, but she had no problem feeling his hands on her shoulders urging her to lie down again.

Her smile wilted nervously as she braced herself for more pain. Whatever he had given her was making her feel so relaxed she found herself wishing he had stayed away longer. Then she felt something wet and warm flow down between her shoulder blades, followed by his hands kneading the oil into her skin. She sighed happily, letting her cheek fall against the rug as she spread her arms languidly along her sides.

His strong fingers pressed deep into her flesh, pinning her sore muscles down as they slowly and remorselessly ground the tension out of them. She cried out softly, discovering that each one of her vertebrae was a latent mass of agony and ecstasy beneath his precise pressure. The drug was kicking in...vivid and astonishingly detailed images flashed in the darkness behind her eyelids almost as if he was squeezing them out of her flesh into her mind. Yet so many pictures surfaced so swiftly she couldn't hold on to them or even remember what she just seen with such breathtaking clarity.

She raised herself up on her elbows and hung her head, moaning as his penetrating caress came tantalizingly close to her warm, wet sex.

"Turn around," he instructed, again speaking so softly she might only have imagined his voice.

She rolled over, spreading her legs for him, but then she felt him get up and sit down again behind her. He lifted her head up onto his lap and she suffered an exquisite confusion as she felt his large hands kneading her breasts even as they caressed her thighs...

The blindfold came off abruptly.

Simon was kneeling between her legs. "Morgan, I'd like you to meet Robert, my chauffeur and personal trainer. He also studied massage."

"Hello, Morgan." Robert's hands slid slowly up from her breasts to caress her face.

She stopped breathing as she stared up into her lover's fathomless eyes, drowning in confusion as she searched for a clue as to how he wanted her to react, and feeling as though her heart would burst if he didn't give it to her. She took a deep breath just as Robert's hands slipped back down to her chest, which made her breasts seem to rise passionately up into his hands. Yet all she was aware of was Simon's smile.

And as if her spine was mysteriously related to his lips, the fact that he seemed pleased relaxed her. Her nipples firmed up between Robert's thumb and forefinger as he rubbed them gently, but with a persistence that ignited a small fire in her womb; a glowing warmth that began to intensify dangerously beneath the cool air of Simon's approval.

All the veins in her body blazed with shame, but also with another feeling that was much more consuming...an excitement that fed off the fact that all she could see of Robert were his strong arms, as anonymous as logs she was using to build the fire of her arousal, helplessly stoked by Simon's eyes staring down at her as he enjoyed her reaction almost as if warming himself with it.

"Thank you, Robert," he said mildly, "good work."

"My pleasure." Robert rested her head gently back down on the rug and stood up.

She wanted to know what he looked like, but she was afraid to let Simon see that, so she closed her eyes as the other man left the room.

"Come now, Morgan, you're not so much shocked as disappointed."

She opened her eyes and sat up. "I thought he was you!"

"Yet he wasn't, and it still felt good, didn't it?"

"I can't live like this, thinking I'm just another body to you, Simon. That's not the way I'm made and you know it."

"I understand how you feel, and I respect you for it, Morgan, believe me. You mean much more to me than you realize."

"You're not just saying that?"

"No, I mean it." He turned and gave the charred

logs a few expert stabs with the poker, rekindling the tired blaze. Then he slid the iron back into place with the practiced grace of a knight removing his sword in church, and relaxed into a cross-legged position before her.

"Meeting you is like a dream, Simon," she confessed quietly. The fair skin of his chest looked hard as marble as the room began breathing with shadows, the designs in the rug writhing like snakes in the flickering light. "I can easily believe you're Lucifer; you're so beautiful, Master." She dared to reach up and sift his luminous hair through her fingers. "And you put me through such divine hell!"

He caressed the hearthstones closest to the fire with one hand, and then rested his palm gently against her chest. "Ashes to ashes," he caressed her, slowly moving his hand down to her womb, "my love."

She felt as though the shadows had just licked her with a demonically warm tongue. "I think whatever you gave me is making me hallucinate, Master."

Leaning towards her, he whispered in her ear, "You're just seeing things as they truly were, Morgan, free of solid boundaries, alive and sensual, energy turning into matter and back into energy every fucking second!"

"Yes!" She caressed his smooth chest with both her hands. "I can feel it..."

"Didn't I tell you that you have to feel everything to believe it, sweetheart? Lie down."

She obeyed him, and watched with a thrill of

expectation as his golden head set like a sun between the rosy horizon of her fire-lit thighs.

For a moment she couldn't really appreciate what was happening; her body couldn't believe he was giving her straight pleasure, not mixed with any pain, and so found it impossible to relax. She kept waiting for that hot, burning flavor of discomfort she was growing accustomed to. Yet when all she continued to feel was the slow, deliciously soothing strokes of his tongue all up and down her vulva, and then its agile dives between her increasingly moist labia, she heaved a deep sigh of relief and her whole body went languid as she gave herself to the experience.

Her tension flowed straight down into his mouth and she felt him receive it with a groan of satisfaction that sent ripples of joy up through her pussy; subtle, luminous ripples that broke against his lips in warm waves he lapped up eagerly, making her ecstasy fuller and deeper by the second.

"Oh, Master," she gasped, "Master!"

He laughed softly against her cunt, sending deep, penetrating shockwaves of pleasure through her blood that mysteriously echoed in her womb as rainbow colors pulsed in the darkness behind her closed eyes. He shoved her thighs apart almost angrily, but he didn't need to bring any fingers into play to get what he wanted out of her – an orgasm so intense it felt like a knife stabbing her, a much sharper one than the one she had felt during her first climax with him in Brighton Manor. "Oh, my God, Simon! Simon!" she cried, completely forgetting she wasn't allowed to say his name, and he punished her for it by making her come again.

\* \* \* \*

Afterwards, she would have been content to lie beside the fire until it died, but he pulled her up into a sitting position and astonished her by saying, "Let's go shopping."

She laughed. "Are you kidding? I feel much too good to go out in public right now!"

Grasping her hands he yanked her to her feet in that dancer's way of his. "Would you rather I went out by myself," he led her into his bedroom, "and left you chained in the basement?"

She sat down on the edge of his bed without answering, and he contemplated her from the doorway. The sky outside the window was the same vivid blue as his eyes and it was suddenly clear to her that his will was the mysterious atmosphere sustaining her now. And like the atmosphere, only his civilized upbringing protected her from his darkest whims. Yet at the same time the burning trails he left across her body felt like the falling stars of her own deepest desires.

"You're constantly amazing me, Morgan; however, I'm not sure you can handle what you think you want."

"Probably not," she agreed.

He crossed his arms and leaned against the doorframe. "Yet now I fancy the idea of going out on

this beautiful afternoon with an image of you bound and gagged in my basement." He allowed her to worry for a moment. "But I suppose I'll take you with me, this time."

## CHAPTER NINE

The limousine pulled up in front of the house where she stood shivering in her coat and missing the cozy warmth of the study. Yet it was also invigorating to be out in the fresh air surrounded by the living wood of large old trees.

She was both relieved and disappointed that Robert didn't get out of the car to open the door for them. She would have been angry at the way he had teased her if his massage hadn't been so intensely pleasurable, and if Simon hadn't been so generous with her afterwards. It worried her, that moment in both their arms, as though it was a test she hadn't really passed. She wondered how Simon had read her reaction as she remained increasingly obsessed by the tantalizing memory of two men caressing her at the same time.

Robert dropped them off next to Park Street Station, and she self-consciously ignored the people who stared at them as they emerged from the limousine.

Simon reached for her hand as they crossed the

street. He was so powerfully attractive in his long black leather coat she couldn't believe he was hers, at least for the moment. The painkiller took the edge off everything, filling her with a weightless sense of wellbeing that made her grateful for his anchoring grip.

She glanced over her shoulder at the sweeping expanse of the Common, and the bare branches of trees rising up into the clear sky made her think of roots reflected in water. "Where are we going, Master?" She pressed up against him in order to walk along his straight line.

"Filene's, my lady."

"Where you'll buy me whatever I desire?"

"No, where I'll buy everything I desire to see you in." He held the glass doors open for an elderly woman leaving the store, and Morgan entered it in a triumphant daze that made the glass cosmetic counters shine like crystals and the chandeliers glisten as brightly as if the sun was trapped in their glass branches.

He took hold of her arm and guided her towards the escalators. "Steady there, you don't want people to think you're drunk."

"I'm much more than drunk." She leaned back against him as they began ascending.

"Plan on replacing most of your wardrobe soon, Morgan." He guided her up another flight to the Lingerie department.

While she lost herself in a silky dream of lovely colors and seductively soft textures, he seemed to know exactly what he wanted, a fact that both impressed and embarrassed the pretty young salesgirl who attended them. Morgan surprised herself by enjoying the way he played with her instead of feeling jealous; it was like watching a big, black, dangerous cat tossing a cute little mouse around as the girl kept saying, 'Yes, sir' in a prim voice and blushing furiously.

"Morgan, would you unbutton your coat for a moment, please?" he asked abruptly. "Inspire me." He made it perfectly clear that what *he* wanted was all that counted in that department.

Back outside he set a brisk pace, but she kept up with him effortlessly, and the exercise helped clear her head.

They walked all the way to the North End in companionable silence.

Up in her apartment, he headed straight for the bedroom.

She locked the door behind them, dropped her coat on the couch without even looking at her answering machine, and followed him.

He had emptied the *Filene's* bag across her bed and the moment she entered the room he shoved her back across sunset clouds of lingerie. He quickly pulled off her tights and her panties, lifted her legs up by the ankles, and pinned them grimly against his chest. Then he opened his pants, slipped his erection out of his black underwear, and penetrated her yielding pussy with an impatient thrust.

She gasped, arching her back beneath the intensely wonderful shock of his fast, hard strokes.

He bent over her, shoving her dress all the way up to her neck. "You like it like this," he ripped her bra open in front, "Don't you, Morgan?" He squeezed her breasts cruelly, sending a dark delight through her blood as he leaned into her. "You love being fucked. You don't want a man to make love to you; you want him to *fuck* you. Well, just imagine there are two other men in the room, Morgan, two other men waiting to fuck you just like I'm fucking you now. Before I'm finished with you, I'll let them both have their way with you for as long as they want to, and then we'll all fuck you together. You'll have a big dick in your ass, another one in your pussy, and I'll be shoving my cock all the way down your throat. Would you like that, sweetheart? Would you like to know what it feels like to have three men penetrating you at the same time, three men ramming their erections into all your holes so you're all filled up, so that there isn't an inch of you that isn't being stroked from the inside out? And would you like to know what it feels like to have three men all come inside you at once? Do you think you could handle that, Morgan? Do you think you could stand having three loads jammed into you at the same time?"

She tossed her head from side to side as if in fervent denial, but she knew her cries were telling him the truth. With her legs pinned against his chest and his hands crushing her breasts, she suffered the devastating impression that his hard-on was plunging deeper inside her than it had ever reached before, his head illuminating virginal recesses of her pussy with blinding flashes of pleasure so intense they were almost indistinguishable from pain. Her hands were free, yet she made no effort to try and push him away and gain some control over his penetrations. It wouldn't do any good anyway; he was very effectively pinning her down with his arms and with his cock as he drove into her faster and harder. Abruptly he straightened up, shoving her ankles off his shoulders.

He warned in a choked voice, "I'm going to come all over you," as he pulled his beautifully rigid penis out of her pussy and shot arching bridges of his sperm over her breasts, decorating her achingly firm nipples with hot, soothingly moist drops of his spunk. The sensation was so exquisite she gathered her tender mounds up in her hands so he could rub his erection between them and squeeze every last drop of pleasure out of it.

When he finally finished coming, he straightened up again, carefully sheathed his stiff organ back inside his underpants and zipped his jeans closed.

She smiled up at him languidly.

He smiled down where she lay in a foam of lingerie, black fishnet stockings caught in her hair, and then walked away.

She sat up, anxiously listening to the dark pulse of his boots retreating down the hallway. Only when she didn't hear them stride across the wooden boards of her living room did she relax; he had only gone to the kitchen.

She was still trying to pull herself together when he

returned with a bottle of wine and two glasses. He set them down on her nightstand and filled both glasses before seating himself comfortably against her pillows. "Come here." He grabbed her arm and pulled her up beside him.

"Ouch!"

He laughed. "You say 'ouch' now when I squeeze your arm a little, not while I'm fucking you to death?"

They smiled at each other again as he handed her a glass.

"I'm transplanting you, my flower," he informed her, "this pot's much too small for you." He sipped his wine. "You're hard work, Morgan." In the dark room his eyes were the midnight-blue of deep water as he looked down at her. "But I think I love you."

\* \* \* \*

She was hoping he would take her out to dinner, or at least stay and share whatever she prepared for them, but apparently he didn't feel inclined to do either one. He simply called a cab and left without bothering to mention when they would see each other again.

She sat despondently on her couch, watching the dreary winter sun set behind the building across the street until a gnawing hunger forced her to microwave a potato. She melted a sinful amount of Cheddar cheese over it, sliced a tomato and accompanied this humble repast with what was left of the bottle of wine he had opened.

The painkiller's euphoria had worn off, and after

all the feelings and sensations her body had experienced in less than twenty-four hours, she was exhausted enough to go straight to bed. On the other hand she was too exhilarated to surrender to the small death of sleep so soon. She washed up, slipped into her coat, donned her gloves and headed outside for a walk.

The Harbor was only three blocks away. It was much too cold for anyone to be sitting on the benches lining the sidewalk from which a weathered wooden platform shaped like an arm bent at the elbow stretched out across the water. She walked all the way to the end, and leaned against the railing. Directly across from her on the harbor side the black water of the Bay shimmered with lights brighter than the few faint stars visible overhead, and the illuminated masts of the U.S.S. Constitution sparkle in the frigid air like a jeweled web. She gazed down at the impenetrably dark water lapping against the wooden beams of the platform. She could make out the small moons of jellyfish floating just beneath the surface; there were whole constellations of them closer to the shore.

"Master," she whispered into the freezing wind, "I hope you're not just toying with me." Her intuition was certain he meant everything he said, but her reason couldn't help mistrusting his unconventional behavior and the magical speed at which their relationship was developing.

After a few minutes, the humid cold next to the water began penetrating into her bones. She clutched the collar of her coat more tightly around her and headed for home.

As she was passing the alley behind her building she was arrested by the vision of a black cat sitting regally on the lid of a garbage can. She paused to gaze at it, and with her mind still full of the Harbor's black waters, its reflective green eyes made her think of algae. The creature stared back at her for a long moment, and then flowed gracefully into the darkness.

Halfway up the stairs to her apartment, Morgan felt a cold rush of air hit her back as the door down in the lobby opened again. She stopped in front of Kathy's door to glance down the curving stairwell. A tall figure in a long black coat was ascending swiftly towards her. Gripped by a disturbing sense of déjà vu, she hurried up the last flight of steps to her landing, but her cold-stiffened fingers were still trying to find the right key on her chain as she felt the silhouette step up behind her and grab her arm. She screamed.

"Jesus, Morgan, it's only me!"

"Oh, God, John, I'm sorry, I didn't recognize you in that coat..."

"Yeah, well, I'm starting to feel things again, including the cold. Since Kathy disappeared I haven't noticed or cared about much." His tone changed as one of his hands slipped down her arm. "Except you... I hope *Simon* isn't dropping by again tonight. Is he?"

"No, he just left."

"Then can I come in?"

"I'm really tired, John."

"What the hell do you see in him, anyway?"

"Too much," she admitted.

"And it's none of my business? " He abruptly shoved her back against the wall.

His tongue was a selfish, violent whirlpool in which it was impossible for her to catch her breath. She slipped her hands between their bodies and made an effort to push him away as she jerked her face away from his. "Stop!" she gasped.

"Why?" He pinned her shoulders against the wall with both hands and rammed his knee into her open coat between her legs. "You like this kind of thing, don't you? It's how he treats you, isn't it? You're his slave, aren't you?"

"It's only a game," she lied.

"He seemed pretty fucking serious to me, Morgan." He tried to kiss her again.

She kept her face turned firmly away; his kiss was too wet and spastic for her to even try and enjoy. "He said he loves me, John."

"He might say so, but if he really loved you, he'd treat you right."

"John, let go of me," she said impatiently.

He stepped back, muttering, "I'm sorry..."

She quickly unlocked her apartment.

"I'm sorry, Morgan."

"Good night, John." She closed the door firmly behind her, and locked it. Then she turned on every light in the living room and concentrated on the solid feel of the wooden floor beneath her because she felt herself falling inside with no one to catch her, and she was suddenly afraid that, if she wasn't careful, not only her heart but also her spirit would be broken by the unorthodox relationship she suddenly found herself in.

She didn't have a clue what Simon planned to do with an old mansion in the middle of nowhere except that it involved young women. He was still in possession of her car. He had probably given her an illegal drug. He had allowed another man to intimately caress her naked body. She barely knew him yet she was willing to do whatever he said.

There was no stopping all the doubts her brain sprouted like worm-ridden fruit once she opened herself to them, yet at the same time her heart pushed them passionately away. She had always believed in true love. There *was* such a thing as a whirlwind romance, although in truth this relationship was more like a twister. She felt frighteningly adrift amidst the familiar shapes of her furniture, as though she was looking at the swiftly receding shoreline of a safe and normal life. But the truth was she was too deeply enamored of this man to turn back now.

## CHAPTER FEN

She woke to bars of sunlight streaming in through the open blinds. Her brain's sleepy secretary told her it was Tuesday, but that she didn't have to go into work...so far, so good. The wall across from her bed was striped with sunshine and shadow...like her back's pale skin and darkening bruises.

She felt a sudden rush of warmth between her thighs and got quickly out of bed, but it was too late; there was a dark red puddle of blood on the white sheet, which would never be clean again. Her period began with such abrupt force it soaked right through her panties. Somehow, she was not surprised, not after everything her new lover had put her through.

She slipped off the stained undergarments and tossed them into the bathroom wastebasket. She went through her usual morning ablutions, then put on some coffee on before slipping into a pair of black jeans and a form-fitting black shirt. She followed her morning routine like a track, refusing to let any negative thoughts derail her positive excitement. Only one thing was perfectly clear to her - she had to follow her intuition.

She sat down at the kitchen table with her coffee and two slices of toast, wishing she had one of her Master's mysterious pills to help her with the period cramps that were already setting in.

After her light breakfast, Morgan brushed her teeth. She was tying her hair back when she was surprised by a tentative knock on the door. She was even more surprised when she found herself half hoping it was Detective O'Brien come back to ask her some more questions, although that hardly seemed likely.

A disheveled and half-naked John was standing out on the landing. He looked as though he had just gotten out of bed and hadn't even bothered to put on a shirt before climbing the stairs up to her apartment. His jeans hung low enough on his hips to draw her eyes down to his flat stomach ribbed with muscles. Simon's shoulders were much broader and his chest was fuller, his muscles cushioned by years of good food and wine, and she realized now that she found this fleshy layer of life well lived more desirable than youth's effortless leanness.

"Good morning," she said politely, even as she wondered what the hell he wanted with her so early.

John's sleepy gaze was fixed on the ebony sculpture of her breasts in her tight black sweater. "Good morning," he answered automatically, looking lost.

He was so close she could feel the heat of his skin. On impulse, she reached up and rested the back of her hand on his forehead. "John, I think you have a fever, which is a small wonder considering the way you run around with hardly anything on in this weather."

"I should have told you before," he said, staring just over her shoulder, "but I didn't want to scare you."

She shoved both her hands into her pockets. "Told me what, John?"

"I'm sure it's him."

"You'll have to be more specific." She was getting impatient.

"It's the same car, Morgan." He finally met her eyes. "Of course I didn't get the license plate or anything, but I remember the small dent in back on the left side of the trunk."

His annoying vagueness coupled with her very real cramps made her snap, "What the hell are you talking about, John?"

"It's Simon's car! It was his car!"

"Yes, I know, he drives a black Z-3. He told me so himself. So what?"

"Morgan, he's the one who brought Kathy home that afternoon! Don't you get it? I saw him drop you off Sunday morning, okay. I was looking out the window, just like that day when I was waiting for her to come home from work, and I fucking couldn't believe it when I saw the same exact car pull up. It was like watching a movie I'd already seen; I swear I half expected to see Kathy get out again in her cheap little fur, but it was you. I should have told you before; it's the *same* black Z-3."

"What?" Her mind immediately spun into a whirlpool of denial. "What?" She repeated as if gasping for air.

John gripped her arms. "Morgan, Kathy's missing, and I suspect your sadistic boyfriend has something to do with it. I'm sure of it! And you're so beautiful, Morgan... I couldn't stand it if anything happened to you...so I went to the police."

She wrenched her hands out of her pockets and turned back into her apartment, where she almost literally dropped into her reading chair. "The police?" This *had* to be a nightmare; it couldn't be happening.

John followed her inside without bothering to close the front door. "I was just coming back from the station yesterday when I ran into you down in the lobby. I hadn't seen you until that morning when he dropped you off. I couldn't believe you let him slap you right there on the street in front of everyone!"

"Oh, God." She hid her face in her hands for a moment, and then straightened up. "Okay, let's say it was the same car and that Simon drove Kathy home that day. It doesn't mean he's responsible for her disappearance or that he knows where she is. There's no proof of that at all; you're just jumping to conclusions. What would Simon want with Kathy anyway?" She thought of his torture basement, of an empty old mansion full of young women..."Oh, God!" She hid her face in her hands again.

"Morgan, didn't you see his face the other night when I mentioned that I'd talked to the police? Why did he keep asking me all those questions? You can't keep seeing him!"

"John," she looked up at him, "I appreciate your concern, I really do, but I need time to think."

"Whatever. It's your life."

She surged to her feet. "Stop it!"

"Why should I? I care about what happens to you, Morgan, even if you don't seem to."

"That's a stupid thing to say. Obviously I care about what happens to me." Yet at the moment she honestly wasn't sure she did. If her lover was a kidnapper, then everything he had made her feel was a lie, and her faith in herself and in the mysterious sense of her intuition would suffer a fatal blow. If what John said was true, she and Kathy had something vital in common now. Simon.

It was terrible not being able to reach him. She didn't have his phone number, which she was sure was unlisted, or even a car in which to try and find his house without an actual street address. It was torture having to wait for him to show up before she could tell him John had gone to the police about him, and to give him a chance to explain. The man she had let into her body and soul couldn't possibly be a kidnapper. She would know. She would see it in his eyes. Or possibly Liz had a point. Maybe she *was* idealizing him, and everything that had happened between them in Brighton Manor, in order to protect her self-esteem. Maybe she needed help.

"Excuse me. Am I interrupting something?" Detective O'Brien echoed Simon's words from two nights ago from where he stood in the open doorway.

Morgan's hand rose to her heart as though in an effort to control how fast it was beating. "No, come in."

Michael stepped into the apartment and carefully closed the door behind him.

"Excuse me a minute," she said, and abandoned both men in her living room to go lock herself in the bathroom. She clung to the edge of the sink and stared into her eyes, attempting to drown her deepening panic in their calm, dark depths. Even if Simon was innocent, they could still arrest him. She was sure Detective O'Brien was here to ask her about him, yet everything she could say about her lover would only incriminate him. His basement was a torture chamber, and John, determined to protect her, would undoubtedly bring up Simon's sadistic behavior.

She turned on the faucet and splashed cold water over her face, wishing she could similarly cool her over-heated brain. "He's not a kidnapper," she whispered. "He's not! He's not!" Yet she had been afraid of him once down in that dark cellar. The intense pleasure she experienced would be thrown out of court.

Reluctantly, she emerged from her confessionalsized bathroom.

John was standing in front of a window with his back to the room, a favorite position of his, staring down at the street still watching for Kathy.

Detective O'Brien was perched on the edge of the

couch, his hands loosely clenched between his knees as on his first visit, his inscrutable stare fixed on John's back. He rose when she entered the room. "Are you feeling better?" The question came off sounding more like an accusation than concern for her wellbeing.

She shrugged.

John turned away from his morbid contemplation of the street but remained by the window, his hands in his pockets. She couldn't see him from her favorite chair, but she needed its familiar arms around her now.

Michael resumed his tense position on the edge of her couch. "John said you're aware of why I'm here, Morgan."

"I guess so." Her gaze fell irresistibly to the weapon hidden beneath his coat, which her chilly little apartment hadn't induced him to remove.

"I need to ask you a few more questions."

She clenched her hands in her lap and braced herself on his direct stare. "Shoot."

"Is it true you're seeing a man named Simon Jones?"

She decided to try and enjoy the humiliation she was about to suffer. "Yes, I am, Detective."

"How long have you known him?"

"Less then a week."

"Where did you meet him?"

"In an isolated old mansion I'm handling for my agency; I'm a realtor."

"You had an appointment with him there?"

"No, he must have heard about the property through the grapevine, because when I drove out to do the walk-through, he was there."

"Wasn't the house locked?"

"Yes, but I left the front door open behind me. Like I said, the place was out in the middle of nowhere. We ran into each other down in the main hall."

"And what happened then?"

"What do you mean? I introduced myself and told him I was with the agency handling the house. Look, Detective, I know Simon drives a black Z-3 like the man who dropped Kathy off before she disappeared. He was actually here the other night when John mentioned he'd gone to the police about it, and he even told me himself later that he drives the same kind of car. Why would he tell me that if...?"

"Relax, Morgan, and please just try to answer my questions." His expression was mild but his tone wasn't.

"Tell him everything, Morgan," John prompted, "it's for your own good."

"Stay out of this," Michael said shortly, and leaned forward slightly as he asked, "Are you in love with this man?"

There was no escape; he was going to get it all out of her. "Yes."

"What exactly do you know about him?"

"Well, I know that he's rich and that he enjoys good food and wine, and I suppose he works out since he has a personal trainer. I also know he's intelligent and attractive and that we seriously get along."

"You're aware of the fact that the car John said dropped Kathy off had a dent on the trunk." It was a statement.

"Yes, just like Simon's car."

"Which means there's a very real possibility he was the man who picked Kathy up that evening." Another firm statement.

"And dropped her off, safe and sound, Detective, John was a witness to that. But he's so desperate to find Kathy that he's just assuming Simon picked her up again and..." She couldn't finish the sentence.

"It's the same fucking car!" John insisted. "I saw him drop Kathy off, and I saw him drop you off Sunday, and you're going to end up disappearing too if you keep seeing him!"

"I said stay out of this, John. What is your relationship with this man like, Morgan?"

She suffered a flash of inspiration. "Like these roses."

"What do you mean?"

"It wouldn't be as beautiful without the thorns."

"She means he hurts her, Detective."

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave now, John. I'll take it from here."

"Okay." He strode to the door and closed it quietly behind him.

His quick retreat amazed Morgan, until she realized what it meant—that he was sure the detective was on his side.

"I think we both need a drink, Morgan." Michael

suddenly sounded more relaxed.

"I thought you weren't allowed to drink on duty."

"I could if you don't tell on me."

"You know I won't." She had to fight the exciting weight of his serious regard as she got up.

"Yes, I know you won't. Simon's a lucky man to have you behind him. You really believe in him?"

"He's guilty of a lot of things, Detective, but I have it on good faith from my soul," she managed a smile, "that he's a good man beneath it all. I assume Irish whiskeys will be alright?"

"Nothing better."

She brought out the bottle of *Bushmills* and two clean shot glasses. "We might as well kill the bottle," she declared lightly.

"Might as well."

She hesitated for an instant, but she couldn't resist sitting next to him on the couch as she poured for them.

"Thank you." He accepted the glass she handed him. "So, are you going to be open with me, Morgan, or do I have to take you downtown and interrogate you?" He downed the shot.

"Why not? I'd probably enjoy it." She closed her eyes and took her shot in two sips, grimacing slightly.

He set his glass down in front of the black vase. "You haven't answered me, Morgan." They were both staring at the roses.

"I'll be honest with you, Detective, but bear in mind that Simon and I are consenting adults."

"Does he tie you up?"

"Yes."

"Does he beat you?"

"Yes."

"Does he stop when you ask him to?"

"I'm sure he would, I've just never really wanted him to." That wasn't true, and yet it was.

"Are you sure he would stop, Morgan?"

"Yes," she answered firmly, "he's given me a safe word."

"After you ran into each other in that empty house," he slid his glass next to hers, "what happened?"

She poured them both another shot.

His voice was barely audible, "Tell me the truth, Morgan."

That time she downed her shot. "Detective, he saw what I was doing up in one of the bedrooms." She cleared her throat as the whisky helped relax her and embarrassment. "T dissolve her tense was masturbating, and he was watching me. He deliberately walked beneath the window where I was standing so I would see him and know I wasn't alone. He was giving me a chance to leave...but I didn't. Part of me wanted something to happen. If I hadn't wanted something to happen, I would have left the second I realized I was alone with a strange man in the middle of nowhere."

He drank his whiskey. "You fucked a total stranger?"

She didn't answer.

He met her eyes. "I think you should stay away

from this man, Morgan."

"I can't do that," she whispered.

"Even though he might be dangerous?"

"Michael... may I call you Michael?"

"Please."

"I have to trust my intuition, Michael; it's all I've got."

"And your *intuition*," he stressed the word without sounding sarcastic, "tells you that you can trust this man not to hurt you?"

"Yes. I trust him with my soul."

"It's not your soul that concerns me, Morgan, it's your body."

She glanced down at his wedding ring. "Well, what's a girl to do when all the good men are taken?" She tried to sound lighthearted.

"Just how badly does he treat you, Morgan? I need to know. I want details. Are you going to give them to me?"

She set her glass down on the table and stood up. "Yes, I'll cooperate." Facing away from him, she pulled her sweater off over her head. She wasn't wearing a bra. "They look worse than they feel," she assured him, draping her hair over one of her shoulders so he could get a good look at her back.

"You *let* him do this to you?" he asked quietly.

"Yes. I'm sure you've heard of Catholic saints who flagellated themselves." She was talking to hide her excitement as she felt him get up behind her. "Well, this is a lot more fun."

"And why is it more fun?"

She was about to try and answer him when his touch crushed all her thoughts as he lightly traced one of the marks on her back.

"I asked you a question, Morgan."

"I don't know, Detective..." Her voice revealed how breathless his caress made her. His trenchcoat brushed her bare arm and she clutched the sweater in her hands tightly against her breasts as he stepped around to face her.

"Let me see you," he said harshly.

"He's never beaten me – "

"Drop the sweater."

He could easily have pulled it out of her grasp, but the tone of his voice was equally effective and she let the black wool slide down her body to the floor. She kept her hands crossed over her breasts like an Egyptian effigy for a shy moment, but then she hung her head in submission to his will and let her arms fall to her sides.

"Beautiful," he remarked quietly.

The compliment pleased her, of course, and there was no denying the effect his silent scrutiny had on her; her nipples weren't hard because it was cold in her apartment.

"Does it excite you to show me what another man did to you? What you *let* him do to you?"

The approach he was taking made her as uncomfortable as a white-hot light shining directly into her soul. "Yes..."

"Why?" he asked relentlessly.

"I don't know..."

"What *do* you know, Morgan?"

"I'm not sure..."

"Well, that's an honest answer at least."

"I've been perfectly honest with you about everything, Michael."

"Have you?" He moved around her slowly, taking her in from every angle as if to make sure she wasn't hiding anything from him. "You think you're in love with this man, don't you? But are you entirely sure it's love you're feeling?"

"No, I'm not entirely sure about anything anymore, Detective," she confessed.

"Ah, but now you *are* lying to me." He was standing behind her again. "You *are* you sure of something. Tell me."

"I don't know what you mean..."

"You're disappointing me, Morgan. Tell me." He didn't touch her, just stood behind her, waiting.

Her body knew the answer all along; it was only her mind that was resisting. "I'm sure I'll do anything he says..."

"Good girl, now you're telling the truth. But do you realize how dangerous this truth is?"

"Yes."

"The threat of violence turns you on?"

"No, it's not that..." But she lost her train of thought when she heard the soft rustle of his coat, followed by another sound that seemed to stop her heart in response to a cold hard pressure against the small of her back.

"It's not hard to explain at all," he whispered in her

ear, "you'll do whatever I tell you to." He was threatening her with his gun to prove a point. "Won't you?"

"Yes!"

"Yes, what?"

"I'll do anything you say!" She closed her eyes, and then took a breath shaky with mingled relief and disappointment as she felt him slide his weapon back into its holster.

"Get dressed," he said shortly.

She obeyed him.

"You've barely known this man a week," his voice was less controlled now, a little angry, "yet you're honestly prepared to do anything he says?"

"Yes and yet, believe me," she smoothed her shirt down and turned to face him, "I've never felt..." his eyes arrested hers, "I've never felt this way before, Michael."

He pulled his stare out of her and squeezed her arm briefly but firmly as he moved past her. "I'll be around." Once again it sounded more like a threat than a promise.

\* \* \* \*

Morgan took all her clothes off again and went back to bed, vaguely resolving to stop drinking before noon; she was slipping into some seriously bad habits.

Propping two pillows comfortably up behind her against the headboard, she picked up the phone and

dialed Liz's number, but all she reached was the answering machine. There was no one else she could call. Her maternal grandmother down in Florida was, for all intents and purposes, out of her mind. She remembered her granddaughter as an innocent little girl, and only pretended to recognize the grown woman who phoned her occasionally, and whenever she herself called Morgan, it was actually her dead daughter she was trying to reach.

Whiskey and ibuprofen taken in tandem might have been straining her liver, but they had certainly defeated her cramps for the time being. They did not, however, assuage her restlessness.

The room was dark. The sun had found a break in the clouds just long enough to wake her, but now it was snowing again.

She had just drifted off when someone knocked on the front door so quietly she almost didn't hear them. Cursing beneath her breath, she flung the comforter off her, braved the cold floor in her bare feet, and walked naked into her living room. "I'm not dressed!" she cried, believing it was John come back to continue demoralizing her for her own good.

"All the better," a deep voice replied.

She ran to the door, quickly unlocked it, and opened it a crack.

Simon's black-leather jacket glistened with melted snowflakes as he stepped inside, kicked the door closed behind him, and promptly cupped her bare breasts in both hands. He smiled when she gasped at how shockingly cold his black leather gloves were, and then drew her whole warm body into his frigid arms. "Shall I take you like this?" he whispered.

Shivering, she stared up into his eyes trying to be afraid of him, but all that happened was that she wanted him more than ever. "I'm bleeding," she informed him reluctantly.

He slipped a hand between her thighs, found the string of her tampon, yanked it out and tossed it away carelessly. "Don't you want me?" Without waiting for her answer, he unzipped his pants and shoved her back against the wall.

"Yes," she whispered, helping him pull his underwear down.

"Whore!" He flung her hands away from him, gripped her thighs from behind, and lifted her up, wrapping her legs around his hips.

Tying to take some of her weight off his arms she clung to his shoulders, moaning with effort and pleasure as his stiff dick surged up into her everwelcoming pussy. His thrusts slammed her shoulder blades against the wall, his freezing jacket seemed to burn her, and his zipper bit into the delicate skin of her inner thigh, yet the heart of this web of uncomfortable sensations was an overwhelmingly intense fulfillment as he jammed his erection into her harder and faster.

He came quickly, and setting her down again casually burying his bloodstained penis in his pants. "Get dressed," he said, "we're going."

Her knees were weak as she bent over to pick her tampon up off the floor. "Going where?"

"To lunch, then I'll bring you home and the limo will come for you this evening."

"Can't you just stay here with me tonight?"

"No, I don't care for mouse holes." He caressed her cheek. "My pussy deserves much better."

"There's something I need to tell you, Simon."

"Get dressed and tell me in the car. Or do you want to bleed all over the floor?"

\* \* \* \*

The wind flung blinding sheets of snow in their faces. He opened the door for her and she plunged into the small black vehicle where she sat rubbing her gloved hands together in the chilly leather cockpit until he joined her.

"So, what is it you need to tell me, Morgan?" He switched on the engine.

She couldn't look at him as she said, "You're a suspect in Kathy's alleged disappearance."

"Am I?"

His cool reaction opened an abyss inside her she immediately backed away from by asking, "Do you think it's safe to drive?"

"We'll be all right." He turned on the lights and the windshield wipers.

She still couldn't see past the blizzard, which made her think of white blood cells flowing swiftly down a vein as he pulled out into the street. "Simon, *did* you give Kathy a ride home that night?"

"I've given lots of girls rides home, Morgan, Kathy

was only one of many."

She couldn't speak.

"Are you jealous? You shouldn't be. I didn't sleep with her. I didn't even kiss her on the cheek. I simply gave her a ride home. It was unforgivably chivalrous of me, I know."

"Then you only saw her that one time?"

"Yes, Morgan, I give you my word. The truth is I'd forgotten all about her until the other night at your apartment. I didn't ask her name, and all the buildings in the North End look the same to me."

"I love you," she said desperately.

"But what did that mean?" he asked in the undertone that was so fatal to her willpower. "Does that mean you love me because you know I'm a good man or that you love me no matter what I've done?"

She felt there was no difference at all between the snowstorm buffeting the car and the blood racing through her heart. "Simon, please..." She closed her eyes, unable to see where they were going in any sense.

"So John saw my car, recognized it as the same one that brought Kathy home, and went to the police?"

"Yes. Detective O'Brien came by again this morning."

"To ask you about me?"

"Yes."

"And John made sure you told him everything, of course."

She nodded, still unable to look at him.

"Did you enjoy being interrogated?" He reached

over and stroked her hair. "Did you tell the detective that you like it when I hurt you?"

"He knows I don't believe you kidnapped Kathy or anybody else." She avoided the incriminating question.

"You didn't answer me, Morgan."

"Yes," she sighed. "And yes..."

He laughed softly. "Tell me what you told him."

"I told him the truth, that I'd never felt this way before." Desperation made her bold. "Then I took my shirt off and showed him the marks on my back." She couldn't admit how much it had excited her to do this because it opened up too many dangerous possibilities.

"That's my girl," he said warmly, and veered neatly into a parking space that appeared on the crowded street as if by magic. He switched off the engine and turned his body towards hers. "Morgan, I swear I have no idea where Kathy is."

"I love you!" she whispered.

He pulled her to him and kissed her as he never had before; a deeply passionate and lingering exploration that felt like a wordless yet undeniable confirmation of his good intentions.

The *New England Oyster House* was filled to capacity with the business lunch crowd. Simon whispered something in the hostess's ear, she smiled, and a moment later they were being escorted to a booth on the second floor away from the noisy bar.

Morgan seated herself as he hung her coat and his jacket up on a wooden rack by the stairs, and she filled her eyes with him as he walked back over to their booth. He was wearing a loose black turtleneck sweater tucked into black jeans and a small silver hoop earring that gave him the dashing air of a sailor perfectly at home in the restaurant's maritime decor.

A plump young waitress promptly appeared with two menus.

"We'll also need a wine list," he informed her.

"Of course, Sir."

"I give you permission to ask me questions today, Morgan. It will help you decide whether you're right to trust me or if I'm dangerous."

"I know you're dangerous."

"Here you are, Sir."

"Thank you." He quickly examined the list. "We'll have a bottle of the *Kendall Jackson* Sauvignon Blanc, please."

"Certainly. I'll be right back to take your orders."

"Both my parents drowned shortly after I was born in a boating accident, Morgan," he abruptly volunteered this information. "I was raised by my paternal Aunt."

"I'm sorry." She glanced up at the etching of a sailing ship on the wall beside her.

He shrugged. "Emily has always been my mother."

"Where did you grow up?"

"Wellsley."

"And I suppose you went to Harvard?"

"Where I studied Literature and Comparative Religions."

"Sounds like everything's been handed to you on a

silver platter."

"I've made investments of my own since then." His eyes narrowed. "What? Are you one of those people who believes hardship is required to build character?"

"I think it all depends on the individual," she replied. "It's very easy for a person in your shoes to turn out a superficial asshole. You almost have to be stronger than most people since you have every opportunity to become corrupt."

"It's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle and all that. But I ask you, why would a camel ever *want* to pass through the eye of a needle?"

"That's not the point."

"What *is* the point, then?"

Their waitress arrived with the wine. Simon watched her as she struggled with the cork, and then quickly approved the vintage.

"You might have offered to help her," Morgan commented when they were alone again.

"She has to learn to do her job, and it would only have embarrassed her."

"Is your Aunt Emily religious at all?"

"Not particularly, although she attends church every now and then when the spirit moves her. But let us please not discuss organized religion. You don't want to get me started."

"I think you already know I agree with you on that subject, Master. Don't I make my body your temple? I can't think of any existing religions in which kinky sex is considered sacred." He gave her one of his rare smiles. "Here's to our perverse paganism, my lady."

She took a sip. "Don't you feel guilty knowing that two-thirds of the globe is suffering and starving while we're sitting here living it up?" She took another appreciative sip.

"Actually, it turns me on."

"You're horrible!"

"And you love how horrible I am. In any case, all we can really do is try to make a difference as individuals. Consciousness, not politics, is the only thing that can truly change the world. It's the whole political perspective that creates the problem in the first place, and if politics are the devil, then economics are his pitchfork. In traditional economics what truly matters – each individual life, whether human, animal or plant – matters not at all; we're all just fuel for the wheels of the big profit machine, and it's taken such huge, greedy bites out of the planet there won't be much left soon. There's a chance the whole system will collapse and we'll have to start over, if we survive."

"Well, at least you're at the top of the food chain for now."

"And I love eating you, baby."

She laughed, but sobered up immediately. "Aren't you at all concerned about this thing with the police? I mean, Kathy's still missing and you're a suspect. If you're brought in for questioning...?"

"You're afraid they'll get a look at my basement. I'm pleased you're worried about me, Morgan, but don't be."

Their waitress returned. "Are you ready to order?" "No, give us a minute."

"You picked Kathy up out in Dorchester?"

He sat back smiling. "Yes."

She studied her wine. "Why?"

"Because she was wearing a white fur that made her look like prey, and she had great legs."

"It was a cheap rabbit fur from Dollar-a-Pound," she informed him cattily.

He lowered his voice, "Every girl knows not to accept rides from strangers. I enjoyed scaring her. But the fact is," he sipped his wine, "I didn't touch her; we simply talked as I drove her home."

"Do you remember what you talked about?"

"She told me about her boyfriend." He pushed a menu towards her. "Pick something."

Their waitress was back. "Are you ready to order now?"

"I'll have the Catch of the Day, grilled," Simon announced. "Morgan, my love?"

"I'll have the fried shrimp, please."

"Will that be all?"

"Yes," they answered in unison.

"Aren't you watching your weight, my lady?"

"Why, do you think I should?"

"Not at all, it's just that you're the first woman I've been out with in years who ordered fried food. I find it refreshing."

"Well, when you're bleeding to death, you need your nourishment."

"Now you tell me a little about yourself, Morgan." He poured them both some more wine. "What's made you the strong-willed yet wonderfully submissive woman you are?"

"Both my parents died in a traffic accident ten years ago when a truck ran them off the road. Their car exploded and they were gone, completely gone, just like that." She avoided his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said tenderly.

"One second they were here, the next they were just gone forever. I just couldn't believe it; part of me still can't. And maybe that's one of the reasons, I don't know, I am the way I am, because they died so violently I'm attracted to violence. Yet I also think it's partly to do with the way my grandmother spoiled me. She lived with us when I was growing up and she always gave me everything I wanted, and she never let my dad really punish me for anything. Not that I was a bad girl. Yet now I seem to crave the discipline I never got as a child. I mean, it really turns me on when you're firm with me and I know you won't let me get away with anything."

"I know, princess. I'll make you suffer, I promise." She smiled. "Thanks."

"That's better. You're absolutely beautiful when you smile."

She looked away shyly. "My grandmother's still alive, but she's out of her mind. She still hasn't been able to accept my mother's death; she leaves messages for her on my answering machine."

"Then you're alone in the world."

"Yes... I just remembered, Kathy's an orphan, too." "Yes, she told me."

"I really hope she's all right. What were you doing out in Dorchester, by the way? It doesn't strike me as your kind of neighborhood at all."

"I was there on business."

"So you just pulled up beside Kathy and offered her a ride?"

"Yes. I knew the graveyard would make her even more nervous about coming with me."

"And yet how could she possibly resist?"

"How could she, indeed."

"Do you remember what she said about John?"

"Too much. Next Monday we'll swing by your office," he abruptly changed the subject, "and settle the deal on the house."

"I should be terrified of you, Simon."

"Are you?"

"No, and I think that scares me more than anything."

A smile touched his lips again. "All will be revealed to you in good time, my lady. Be patient."

Their food arrived and they ate in a companionable silence that amazed her more than anything else that had passed between them, until finally she couldn't hold back any longer. "Are you seeing other women, Simon?" she demanded.

"No."

His immediate firm denial took the wind out of her indignation. "I don't know why I believe you, but I do."

"And you have no idea how much it turns me on that from the moment we met you put your life in my hands, Morgan. I looked into your eyes and you really *saw* me. You have no idea what it did to me to feel your soul reaching into mine and understanding I wouldn't hurt you. I didn't plan to fuck you right then and there, but I sensed you wanted me to, and how could I resist? Believe it or not, I've never done anything like that before. You could get me into serious trouble if you really wanted to, which means I've trusted you from the beginning as much as you've trusted me." He drained the bottle of wine evenly into both their glasses. "Doesn't it, Morgan?"

His perspective on the matter was a revelation. "Yes, I suppose it does," she said in wonder.

"Then stop worrying."

Their waitress appeared again. "How is everything?"

"We'll take the check now, please."

"Are you sure you wouldn't like some dessert? We've got—"

"We're sure." Morgan was impatient of her presence.

"Well, then, here you are. I hope you enjoyed everything. Please come again."

He carelessly laid a few bills on top of the check. "Robert should have dropped a box off for you by now."

She followed him out of the booth. "A box?"

"I've arranged a very special, very rare treat for you tonight. It won't happen often, so I want you to enjoy it." He helped her on with her coat. "I want to make you happy, Morgan, and I'm going to prove it to you."

"But I'm bleeding," she reminded him.

"I hadn't planned on that, but it's not a problem. Actually," he took her arm, "it'll be even more beautiful that way."

\* \* \* \*

When they pulled up in front of her building again, it was snowing as hard as before.

"The car will come for you at seven, Morgan. Wear only what's in the box, nothing else, and I mean *nothing*. Leave your coat and your purse at home."

"But I have to bring my house keys and –"

"No, you don't; just leave your apartment unlocked."

"Are you serious?"

"Utterly. You'll bring only your lovely self. If you disobey me, I'll be very angry. 'Yes, Master' is the proper response."

"Yes, Master. May I have a goodbye kiss?"

"No." He reached over and opened her door. "I'll see you tonight."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

There was a large white box sitting outside her apartment door. Morgan carried it inside, placed it on her bed, and then deliberately ignored it for a while, enjoying the suspense as she tried to imagine what her lover had planned for her tonight. It seemed reasonable to assume he was taking her somewhere special, yet she doubted it.

Inside the flimsy cardboard box she discovered what looked like a drift of snow in which each intricate flake was visible to the naked eye.

"Oh, my God," she said beneath her breath, because what she was looking at was a wedding dress.

She understood the need for bridesmaids as she struggled to reach all the little buttons in back, but finally the dress was on and hugging her curves as if made for her. She pinned up her hair so it fell in soft waves around her face and neck, then closed the bedroom door and studied herself in the full-length mirror behind it.

She looked beautiful when she smiled, as well as

when she frowned, because she did not feel at all like herself in a traditional white wedding dress. Her taste for abuse was hardly innocent, and her virginity was ancient history. She wondered if he was playing a cruel joke on her, until her beauty convinced her otherwise. For a few giddy moments she even let herself believe he planned to marry her that night, but she promptly sobered up. Obviously, nothing was going too far where his own pleasure was concerned. He was keeping her ignorant of his intentions because it heightened her reactions to whatever he did to her, thereby deepening his own enjoyment.

There were six more items in the box—two sheer white stockings, a lacy white garter belt, and a pair of white satin high heels.

\* \* \* \*

It was 6:59 according to the clock on her nightstand when she heard the expected knock on her door. She concealed the last bobby pin in her artfully disarrayed hair, and was looking around for her keys when she remembered he didn't want her to bring them. After hesitating a moment, she left them on her dresser and walked to the door, curious to see what Robert looked like. She felt at once radiantly beautiful and ridiculously easy to manipulate.

There was no one standing out on the landing.

She walked over to a window and looked down at the street. It was still snowing, and at first the long black body of the limousine was indistinguishable from the darkness. She was able to see it mainly because one of the doors was open and consuming a portion of the white sidewalk.

Without a clue as to what she would say to John if she ran into him on the stairs wearing a wedding gown, she left a light burning in her living room and closed the unlocked door behind her. Then she hesitated again, unable to stop herself from questioning the wisdom of what she was doing.

Her lover had ordered her to leave everything behind that could identify her. Detective O'Brien would think her unbelievably stupid. If he knew what she was doing he would definitely stop her; at gunpoint, if necessary. At that thought, fear and excitement clenched around her heart so it seemed to stop and lift her strangely outside of time. All she had to hold onto in that moment was her faith in the beneficent nature of the universe and in her lover, because they both feel like the exact same thing.

She started down the stairs as fast as she could in the treacherous high heels, and rushed out into the cold. For an enchanted instant she was one with the snow in her flowing white dress. Then she was inside the warm shell of the limousine and the door closed as if by magic behind her.

\* \* \* \*

During the drive into Cambridge, Robert didn't speak to her once as the thought that Simon might actually intend to marry her kept licking through her mind in a delicious way, even as she kept consciously rejecting it.

The uncorked neck of a bottle of Chardonnay rose out of a black bucket, in which a single glass embedded in ice was surrounded by half-a-dozen oysters on the half shell. It was a wonderful discovery. She was hungry, and very fond of good wine; it performed a divine alchemy on her blood, eliminating all impure doubts and anxieties from her feelings.

The oysters were moist and salty and perfectly complimented by the fine vintage that went down all too easily. She poured herself a second glass and its golden cascade seemed part of the lights flowing across the Charles River. A Red Line train was crossing the bridge. She couldn't hear it, surrounded as she was by the limousine's luxurious armor, but she could make out dark figures standing inside the luminous cars.

She shifted her focus and gazed at her own ghostly reflection in the glass. She felt like the Snow Queen, as though her unique beauty and passion were the night's living heart.

Looking past herself again, she gazed in mingled awe and sadness at the light-jeweled city rising beyond the flowing black snake of the river scaled with gold. The strong wind over the water was ripping the wedding skirt of the snow to lustful shreds and perfectly reflecting her excitement. So much had been given to her in the form of this man that she suddenly felt compelled to thank God even though she didn't believe in Him. The mysterious web of forces surrounding her life had finally decided to give her what she needed, and now she was just a little frightened; her own desires were transforming her in ways she could never have imagined.

Harvard Square was a blur of white and red brick except for the black street on which headlights coursed in luminous streams, and the curved heads of the lampposts revealed that it was snowing as hard as ever.

Finally the limousine started up the steep drive she remembered, and came to a stop before the front of the house. Two gas lamps were burning on either side of the black door, the flames rippling calmly in their glass cases indifferent to the storm.

The lock on the door beside her snapped up, making her jump. She waited for Robert to open her door for her, but no one appeared. She thought of Mina visiting Dracula for dinner and smiled, her apprehension warring with excited anticipation. She stepped out of the car wondering why more people didn't play sensual games with each other like this.

She lifted her long skirt and took careful, mincing steps across the snow-covered drive in her treacherous heels. There was a soft hissing sound behind her as the limousine drove away. She rang the bell and stood with her arms wrapped around herself as the chime echoed through the dark house.

She waited what felt like a very long time, yet she didn't hear anyone approaching to open the door. She clutched the freezing cold knob and it turned in her hand. She stepped inside and quickly locked the winter night out of the entrance hall. The only light inside the house was coming from the basement—a spear-like shaft emanating between the wall and the door that had been left open a crack. She walked toward it.

"Simon?" she whispered, and then was annoyed with herself for breaking character. "Master?"

There was no response; the silence in the house was absolute.

She reached the door and looked down the stairway, but all she could see was a half moon of concrete at the bottom. She hesitated for a heartbeat, and then started down the steps. She was forced to concentrate on her footing and didn't look up until she reached level ground.

"Welcome, my lady." Simon's voice came from somewhere behind her at the same time that two other men stepped out of the darkness before her. They were wearing black suit jackets over bare chests, black pants tucked into black boots, black gloves, and narrow black masks around their eyes.

Her pulse racing at the sight, she glanced back at her Master, who was similarly attired, and waited breathlessly for his direction.

"Do it," he said.

Before she knew what was happening, four arms had helped her fall and two men she did not know at all were dragging her across the floor. She was too stunned to struggle, and she couldn't hope to fight them, a fact she discovered her body languidly accepting. They let go of her just where the light over the stairs dissolved into darkness. One of the men knelt behind her and pillowed her head on his thighs. She thought she recognized him then; it had to be Robert. Then the other man straddled her thighs at the same time that a whip snaked across her womb as Simon loomed over her. Meeting his masked stare, she did not say his name or ask him to stop what was happening.

He took a step back.

The whip burned across her breasts, which were thankfully protected by the dress, and then with a sinister hiss licked her again and again and again, moving slowly down her body. She couldn't help crying out in the searing moment of contact, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of begging him to stop even when the material around her waist disintegrated like snow melting beneath the leather's hot strokes. When the whip reached her naked flesh, however, it was impossible not to scream.

The man kneeling behind her covered her mouth with one gloved hand while easily holding onto her wrists with the other. She was crying into his cold palm by the time her burning nipples showed through the dress' icy weave like flowers in bloom. The pain was so overwhelming she was barely aware of the third man lifting her skirt until she felt her blood flowing over two of his fingers as they pulled out her tampon and slid inside her. He began leading her body away from the pain into pleasure, skillfully pointing the way for her as a black-leather thumb dammed her sobs and forced her to suck on it breathlessly.

Simon bent over her. "That's my girl," he whispered in her ear. "Do you want all three of us at once?"

Her mouth was emptied so she could respond.

"I hate you!" she hissed, because her excitement hinged on believing she didn't have a choice and she was furious with him for giving her one.

The man's fingers slid out of her pussy and he stood up as Simon yanked her to her feet. But it was the other man who lifted her arms up over her head and slipped her wrists into metal clasps. She closed her eyes as she realized that these manacles were attached to a rod holding her firmly in place, unlike the leather strap, which had at least allowed her to twist her body from side to side. When she opened her eyes again, they were all holding riding crops.

"Oh, Master, please don't," she begged.

Her lover stepped behind her. She felt him grab her skirt with both hands, and glancing over her shoulder, she saw him genuflecting as he ripped it all the way down the back. Now only her arms and the front of her body were protected by the dress.

"Master, please don't do this," she whispered in earnest, "I can't bear it. I can't! Please don't do this!"

He stepped in front of her again and his determined expression was frighteningly masked by shadows as he thrust a white silk cloth between her lips, gagging her with it. Then he and the two other men disappeared behind her. She desperately tried to prepare herself for the pain, but from the first instant it was more than she could bear as they all struck a different part of her body in perfect excruciating unison. They fell into a relentless rhythm, and even though she couldn't see them, knowing their combined force was focused entirely on her body turned her on so much the torment was mysteriously justified.

At last Simon stepped in front of her again, but she could barely see him through her tears. This time he used a knife to cut her skirt open all the way down the front so it flowed off her molten skin in a cool avalanche, leaving only the sleeves covering her arms like gloves. Then he stepped behind her once more and the man she thought of as Robert took his place before her.

He pulled the gag down so it hung around her neck and began kissing her. She responded breathlessly, stunned by how arousing she found this totally intimate introduction to a man she scarcely knew. When Simon thrust his cock hard into her pussy from behind, Robert tasted her strangled cries hungrily with his firm tongue, and their combined assault felt better than she could believe. She loved it so much, in fact, that it was much too soon when they let go of her.

Robert quickly freed her wrists and he and her Master skinned the sleeves off her arms. She was naked now except for the white garter belt and stockings. They each took hold of one of her arms and led her over to an object that made her think of an elevated weight bench.

"Lie down," Simon commanded.

She fell willingly back across the cool leather and stared up at the dark ceiling as her legs were raised, spread, and suspended, her arms strapped down to her sides.

It was her Master who came to stand between her thighs, his erection pale as a shaft of moonlight rising out of his black pants except where it was stained with her blood. He let her savor the sight of it and the exquisite anticipation before he buried it slowly in her sex.

She moaned with a pleasure perversely intensified by how completely helpless she was to resist as gloved hands turned her head to one side and another rigid penis slipped between her lips, deep into her mouth. Then it slid back out and another pair of hands turned her head in the opposite direction.

With her eyes wide open she could see what she was doing even as she couldn't believe she was eagerly swallowing another stiff cock, blinking passionately from the effort of harboring its swollen head in her throat. The man held himself perfectly still inside her, groaning as the warm inner flesh of her neck caressed him every time Simon drove into her.

She gasped with relief when he pulled out of her mouth, yet she willingly turned her head the other way so another dick could plunge selfishly between her lips and subject her to the same exquisite torture, which was intensified by the subtle differences in taste and texture and shape, even while the remorseless hardness remained mysteriously the same; an inexorable force she longed to yield to. And that she could do so with her pussy and her tongue and her throat all at once seemed to thrust her into another dimension in which her body was utterly fulfilled by the experience of being used as it had always been meant to be used.

When both her orifices were emptied abruptly, she moaned in despair.

Simon yielded his choice place between her thighs to 'Robert', who used her with such energy that she wanted to die when he abandoned her. But the third man had removed his jacket and she liked what she could see of him so much that she started coming around him as his hard-on sank slowly into her cunt. Simon bent over to kiss her then, kindly letting her cling to him in a kiss as she climaxed around the other man's deep, hard strokes.

"I hope you enjoyed that," he whispered, kissing her forehead, "because now it's our turn."

They quickly freed her arms and legs and yanked her to her feet so Simon could take her place on the leather bench. "Come here." He grasped her hips and pulling her down quickly, wrapped her pussy around his erection. He held her down on it and she fell forward against his chest, gasping with pleasure and dread as another man gripped her from behind and slowly began packing his thick, long dick into her anus as her cries of mingled protest and ecstasy were gagged by a third cock stuffing her mouth again. A three-pronged plug of male energy suspended her body on it like an electric shock, and as they fell into a passionate, driving rhythm with each other, all the raw power surging into her body completely blew her mind.

\* \* \* \*

One of the men left without removing his mask or saying a single word to her, yet the way he caressed her hair and smiled down at her seemed to promise she would feel him again, and she was glad. Then the man she thought of as Robert said, "I'll take her upstairs," and Simon relinquished her.

Her body felt light as flotsam in his arms as he carried her all the way up to the second floor where the golden glow against her closed eyelids told her the house was no longer dark. She heard water running and vaguely wondered who had drawn the bath. When he set her down, she swayed on her feet and the bathroom's bright light was almost too much for her to bear.

Now that she could see his eyes, the black mask made him look even more dangerous. Staring at her, he raised the toilet lid. "Sit," he commanded.

She dropped onto the black seat.

He knelt in front of her and she reached up to caress his dark hair. It was wonderfully soft and cool, which soothed her desperate need to relieve herself.

"Go ahead," he urged. "It'll feel good."

"I can't..." she protested.

"Yes, you can." Resting his gloved hands on her thighs, he pressed his thumbs hard into their sensitive inner flesh. "Do it."

Even though she had never been so embarrassed in her life, the wine she had drunk in the limousine forced her to obey him.

He smiled when she finished and grasping one of her ankles, he pulled it up with him as he rose, forcing her to cling to the seat as she slipped forward on it. He kissed the sharp tip of her high-heel and slowly licked the arched sole. She couldn't feel his tongue through it, yet she moaned with a very real pleasure, watching him.

"What did I tell you," Simon said from the doorway.

"You were right." Robert savored the caress of her shoe's pearly satin against one of his cheeks. "She's incredible."

"She does have the perfect pussy. And look at her...she's not in the least bit upset by what just happened to her. Being gang-banged was a transcendent experience for her."

Pinning her down with his dangerous green stare, Robert slipped off her shoe and tossed it away.

"Do you realize she had never been whipped before I met her?" There was a proprietary pride in Simon's voice. "I don't think she was ever even blindfolded. Were you, Morgan? Yet it only took me a week to get her to this point."

Snapping it free of the garter belt, Robert caressed her white stocking off with both hands. "I want her again," he said.

"Then take her," Simon turned away.

"Master, please don't leave me!" she cried.

He turned to face her again. "What's wrong, Morgan, do you need Daddy to watch?"

"Yes!" She stared fervently up into his eyes. "I love you!"

Robert bent over to slip off her other shoe, after which he pulled her other stocking off unceremoniously, yanked her to her feet, and shoved her face forward over the cold marble counter.

She could see the hard shadows of his arms and shoulders looming over her in the mirror she whimpered, "Please, not there again..."

He found her demure plea amusing because he laughed even as he obliged her by sliding his renewed erection into her hot, slick pussy. He sank in deep and ground feelingly against her before he began thrusting. By the time he was finished with her, she was very glad the other man left and that Simon appeared satisfied. Exhausted from wrestling her reflection as Robert banged her with brutal gusto, occasionally smacking her ass with his painfully hard hand, she turned stiffly around to lean against the counter. His smile was deliciously sinister beneath the black mask as he zipped up his pants and then went to shut the water off in the bath, which was just about to overflow.

Simon stepped in front of her and cradled the back of her head in his hands. "How do you feel?" he asked tenderly. "Like I look."

"You look beautiful." He passed his gloved hands down the fresh red welts adorning her back, admiring in the mirror they way they were woven in with older, darker bruises. Two other men had mysteriously left their signatures on her flesh now.

Robert stepped past them and she somehow resisted the desire to look at him again as he left.

"I told you I wanted to make you happy, Morgan. Did you enjoy your special treat?"

"Yes, Master."

His smile was luminous beneath his sinister mask as he pulled it off. "Our bath is getting cold."

\* \* \* \*

It was still dark outside when she became aware of light lancing out of Simon's walk-in closet, but it was like a doorway in a dream as over and over again she imagined getting up to ask him why he was up so early and where he was going. She tried to speak when his lips brushed her forehead, but her body wouldn't let her consciousness fully surface from sleep's dark and healing depths.

When Morgan woke again, she sensed it was hours later even though the room was still dark, which meant it was probably still snowing. She switched on the little Oriental lamp and then rested on her side gazing at the luminous landscape depicted in the glass shade. She saw a vivid blue lake over which hovered a pyramid-shaped flock of tiny white birds, gnarled black trees, and a golden sun setting on a red line representing the horizon.

Her body told her that last night had actually happened.

She quickly got out of bed to avoid a flood of fear and wrapped herself up in his robe. In the bathroom, she held all memories of last night at bay in order to function. With her ravaged back hidden inside the robe's soft, leaf-green folds, everything seemed all right. There was even a lovely color in her cheeks this morning, and her dark honey-brown irises shone like polished tiger's eyes.

Fervently hoping Simon had left Carol instructions to prepare her a huge breakfast, she headed downstairs.

The kitchen was spotless, and disappointingly empty. She stood uncertainly in the doorway, annoyed at the thought of having to fend for herself, which made her realize how quickly she was growing accustomed to being waited on. She truly had been indifferent to Simon's wealth at first, but she was beginning to understand now how much his personality and lifestyle depended on never having to answer to anyone except himself.

Hunger was urging her to invade Carol's pristine territory when she suddenly heard voices coming from the living room.

Simon was in the house, and talking to another man.

Her bare feet made no sound on the cold wooden floorboards as she approached the sound and paused

just outside the open door to listen.

"I know she wanted me to," Simon was saying in that sexy undertone of his.

"Are you absolutely sure about that?" The other quiet voice sounded disturbingly familiar.

"Yes."

"You took a big risk. You crossed a dangerous line."

"I know."

"And I'm still not entirely satisfied ... "

"If you'd been here last night, you would be."

"What did you make her suffer last night?"

"She took it in every hole at once and loved it. She would have made room for you, too."

Her heart was beating so hard it pushed her into the room.

"Ah, good morning, Morgan," Simon smiled over at her, "I believe you know my good friend Detective Michael O'Brien."

"Your friend?" She clutched the robe tightly closed over her breasts.

"Well, more like a friend of the family; Aunt Emily has made generous donations to the Boston PD over the years. Michael is also helping me out with mountains of legal paperwork concerning Brighton Manor."

"That place is a bit grand, don't you think?" Michael asked. As usual he was sitting on the edge of a couch with his hands clasped between his knees as though his fingers were his emotions and he was always deliberately restraining them. He was wearing his black coat and dark clothes beneath it, and his air of always seeming about to get up and leave – because there was always some dark and frightening matter he needed to attend to – combined with his sharp gaze made Morgan think of a raven perched on a graveyard fence.

"Grand is just what these girls need, Mike," Simon answered pleasantly. He was sitting on the other side of the L-shaped sofa, his arms in a black sweater spread comfortably across the ivory back. He patted the cushion next to his. "Come here, Morgan." He looked back at his friend and added, "I want them to feel like little ladies."

"You have your work cut out for you there."

"I won't be doing the work, Mike, I'll just be reaping their gratitude." Simon smiled at her as she sat down next to him, making an effort to keep the oversized robe closed since she was wearing absolutely nothing beneath it.

"And how does Morgan feel about this?"

"Okay, what the hell are you two talking about?" She demanded.

"Aren't you dying to know what I'm planning to do with Brighton Manor, Morgan?"

She was distracted from answering when Michael surprised her by sitting back abruptly and pulling a pack of cigarettes out of one of his coat pockets. She shook her head when he extended it towards her, whereas Simon accepted. She frowned at him. "I didn't know you smoked."

He laughed.

"If you two are friends," she watched the detective light his cigarette, "then why did you come to my apartment that second time and ask me all those questions about Simon? You must have known he had nothing to do with Kathy's disappearance."

Michael tossed Simon his lighter. "I did, I just wasn't so sure he was telling the truth about what happened between you two at Brighton Manor. I suspected he might have gone too far that time." He held her eyes over a long drag. "I'm still not convinced he didn't." He blew the smoke away from her. "Do you realize he plans to fill that house with girls?"

"So I hear, and maybe," she glared at her lover, "he would care to explain that now."

"Brighton Manor," Simon blew his smoke over her head, "is going to be a shelter for homeless girls. You don't even want to know how many runaways there are out there, Morgan, young girls raped and beaten by their fathers, adopted girls escaping from abusive foster homes... most of them end up under the socalled protection of a pimp who addicts them to drugs, and they die young. Big as it is, Brighton Manor will only be able to care for handfuls of these girls at a time, but if we can help keep just a few souls from breaking in despair and help them get back on track somehow, I'll consider the effort worthwhile."

"Was this your Aunt Emily's idea?" She refused to let him see how relieved and how very impressed she was.

"It was her desire to invest in a worthy cause. The

particular cause was my idea. But you must be starving, you had quite a night." He glanced at Michael, his eyes narrowed against the smoke hovering around him in a gray cloud that was distinctly visible in the dark room; the rust-colored curtains were closed and none of the assorted antique lamps were lit.

The detective leaned forward and killed his cigarette in a crystal ashtray. His light eyes looked equally hard to Morgan, and much more arrestingly faceted with thoughts and emotions.

"Unfortunately," Simon deepened the thoughtful mist of smoke around his head, "it's Carol's day off."

She slid to the edge of the couch, still clutching the robe closed over her breasts with one hand and over her thighs with the other. "I'll fix us something," she said.

"I'm going," Michael announced.

"Ask him to stay, Morgan."

"Would you like to stay for breakfast, Detective?"

"No, thank you." He rose.

"Persuade him, Morgan."

She knew what he wanted her to do without even having to think about it; his will was becoming a part of her being like his cigarette smoke was permeating her lungs. But the faint traces of nicotine flowing through her blood now were nothing compared to the intoxicating sensation of complete submission to his desires. Her hands relaxed their tense grip on the robe as she stood up, effectively blocking Michael's path to the door unless he wanted to bother walking all the way around the long coffee table. She glanced uncertainly down at Simon for an instant, but the glint in his eyes was all she needed to activate the mysterious synapses in her brain communicating with her muscles as she untied the robe's sash, and shrugged it off.

The detective had already seen her breasts, now he had the rest of her sensual evidence at his disposal her modest but beautifully round breasts and a narrow waist made to hold onto above gently rounded hips, the petal-like lips of her labia crowning slender legs that looked good even when she wasn't wearing high-heels to show off their lines.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" Simon asked the other man without taking his eyes off her. "It's so refreshing to come upon real breasts these days, especially a pair as perky as these; she could be fifteen."

"She looks like Venus," Michael said quietly, and then reached brusquely into one of his coat pockets. "Like the statue in the *MFA*, I mean." He pulled out a pair of black gloves along with a perfunctory explanation for his profound compliment. "If they shaved about thirty pounds off it, that is."

Morgan glanced down at herself and realized that she had unconsciously adopted an ancient stance. One of her hands was resting between her breasts and the other was curled gently between her thighs in a shy but vain attempt to conceal herself.

"She really wants you, Mike."

"Does she?" The detective thrust the fingers of his left hand into a glove as if to make it clear he had no intention of touching her. His wedding ring was no longer visible, but Morgan knew it was there and she suffered a stab of guilt about tempting him. But it was a fleeting mental spasm that had no affect whatsoever on her hunger for him, which only deepened the more she resisted it.

"Can't you see she's dying to suck your cock, Detective?"

"I don't think my wife would appreciate that." But his coat was unbuttoned and stayed that way.

Simon laughed shortly. "Oh, come on, Mike, you and Gloria have been separated for over nine months now, so don't use that as an excuse; I'll cease to respect you. If you're not interested," he shrugged and abruptly put out his cigarette, "you're not interested."

Morgan started to bend over to pick her robe up off the floor.

"That's not what I said." He sounded as if he was in a courtroom setting the record straight in a case that didn't personally concern him.

She straightened up, glancing uncertainly at Simon again, and his slight nod affected her like a telepathic flash. Either that or she wanted this so much she was only imagining he could tell her what he desired her to do without words. She approached Michael.

"Please don't go." Her voice was soft, apologetic, because she was helping Simon put him on the spot and she felt bad about that. Yet her hunger to see his penis, to touch it and smell it and taste it, to feel it swelling in her hands and sliding onto her tongue, this hunger was stronger by far than any other feeling.

His hands clenched into fists at his side as though he was literally fighting himself, and his stillness had all the taut power of imminent flight; she was afraid that any moment now he would stride around the table and leave. Every second he stayed where he was became a miracle before which she sank gratefully to her knees.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Morgan walked back into her apartment feeling totally worn out and fulfilled. Her door had been unlocked all night and half the day, but nothing had been stolen. Simon had given her a dark-red, kneelength dress, black tights, matching red-leather anklehigh boots, and a long, exquisitely elegant black wool coat with matching gloves to wear home. Everything looked new and fit so perfectly she was sure they couldn't possibly have been left at his house by another woman.

She studied her reflection in her full-length mirror to see if there was any physical evidence of the fact that last night had changed her forever. The virginal bride was long gone; her beauty seemed darker, and she had to admit, even more stunning.

She had driven her own car home today, a fact that worried her in some small, insecure part of her. She hadn't realized until then how much she had enjoyed having it in his possession. It had forced her to rely on him and acted as a mysterious form of security, because she knew he couldn't stop seeing her before he gave it back.

The truth was she would do it again; nevertheless, she was concerned what had happened last night was the beginning of the end. She didn't even want to think about what happened this morning. She couldn't. Not yet.

The phone next to her bed rang.

"Hello?"

"Oh, great, you're home!" It was Liz calling from some noisy public place. "We're downtown Christmas shopping! How about if we swing by for a drink and then take you out to dinner?"

"I have a lot on my mind right now, Liz. I'll probably be terrible company."

"That's precisely why we need to talk. Don't worry, I wouldn't judge you, I just want to know what's going on with you. We're friends, remember? We'll plop Mark in front of the television and lock ourselves in the bedroom."

"I'm afraid I'm out of Bushmills."

"Don't worry, we'll pick some up on the way."

\* \* \* \*

Only three of the roses chose to remain virgin buds; the rest were blooming with breathtaking speed and abandon.

"God, it's freezing out," Liz complained happily. "Mark will be up in a sec, he's looking for a parking spot, but let's not wait." She produced a bottle of *Bushmills* from a brown paper bag and asked soberly, "How are you, Morgan?"

"Well, either I've never been better or I'm in serious fucking trouble or both."

"Okay, stop it with the riddles." Liz followed her into the kitchen as she peeled off her winter layers. "How do you *feel*?"

Morgan set the bottle down on the counter. "Stunned." She opened a cupboard. "And scared. Would you like some ice?"

"No, I need to warm up, give it to me straight." She was obviously determined to be cheerfully nonjudgmental.

"I think you'd better sit down."

Liz killed her shot. "I also think I'd better get drunk. Hit me again."

\* \* \* \*

Morgan had just drifted off to sleep when church bells pealing loudly inside her skull make her cry out and sit up in bed. It was only the phone again.

"Oh, God," she said to herself, fumbling for the receiver. "Hello?" she asked hoarsely.

"How are you feeling?"

She lay down again. "I'm all right."

"Are you having second thoughts about what happened last night?"

"Yes, a little, it's only natural, I guess... but no, not really."

"You didn't do anything wrong, Morgan, you were beautiful."

"Thank you, Master."

"Call me Simon."

His tenderness made her feel weak with happiness. "Thank you, *Simon*."

"I'll never let anything bad happen to you. If things ever get out of hand, all you have to do is say your safe word. Are you still afraid of me?"

"A little," she whispered.

"You should be. I *want* you to be. What we do together can be dangerous."

"But you want me to do all these things..."

"It's up to you."

"You don't care one way or the other?"

"I care about you, Morgan."

"You've never made me do anything I didn't want to do, Simon, I just didn't have any idea how much I would like it, or how far I would go, until you showed me."

"Then be prepared tomorrow."

\* \* \* \*

In the morning she didn't feel ready for anything. Her sensual elation had cooled to a state of mental shock that made even the smallest chore seem difficult, especially when she wondered what he had planned for her next. She couldn't look forward to the future in any normal, pleasant sense, and she realized this was the root of her distress today. Marriage, children, a cozy old age, it seemed she was sacrificing all these things to be with this man. Yet being with him, giving all of herself to him body and soul, was all she really wanted.

She literally just puttered around the apartment all morning, cleaning a little and staring into space a lot, overcome by all the intense memories she had accumulated in such a short period of time.

When there was a knock at the door her heart echoed it against her ribs, wondering who was standing out on her landing now. As she opened the door, she knew she was hoping it was Detective O'Brien...Michael...

"Robert!" she exclaimed, shocked into recognition by his electric green eyes, striking even without a black mask around them. He looked perfectly handsome and respectable this morning in a knit black crew-neck sweater over loose black slacks. "Did Simon send for me?" she asked more calmly.

"No, I'm here on my own." He glanced over her shoulder into the apartment. "May I come in?"

She had to fight a blind desire to let him in. "Um, why?"

"You don't really need to ask me that, Morgan."

"No," she admitted softly.

"So are you going to let me in?"

"No," she repeated weakly.

"You're not the only woman Simon has shared with me," his matter-of-fact tone was cruel, "but you're the only one I've ever wanted to see again."

She hid her despair with a cynical, "I'm flattered. Does he know you're here?"

He glanced down at the keys he was holding and

thrust them into one of the deep pockets of his slacks. "Meaning do I have his permission?" He grasped the key to her resistance. "Does it matter?"

"You know it does."

"I won't tell him, Morgan." He cupped her face with both hands and kissed her the way he had after he and two other men beat her with riding crops.

She planted her hands against his thick chest and managed to push him away, but only because he let her. "Don't, Robert, please..." Mindless as a cat, her body saw no reason why she shouldn't enjoy his generous strokes again, but how she felt about Simon was her very soul, which made it impossible for her to give into the temptation purring through her blood. "Please," she begged, knowing perfectly well she wouldn't be able to fight him if he insisted.

"I'm sorry, Morgan." He grasped one of her hands, squeezing it reassuringly. "I'm sorry for coming here to test you."

The word *test* slipped like a cold blade between her heartbeats. "Test me?" She would *not* admit to being disappointed he hadn't really wanted her again.

"I would have enjoyed it very much if you had failed, believe me." He let go of her hand. "But I'm much happier you passed. My coming here wasn't Simon's idea, so please don't be angry with him. He and I are very close, so I know how much you already mean to him. I just wanted to make sure...well, that you wouldn't hurt him."

She laughed. "Hurt him? Are you serious?"

"That does sound funny," he admitted, staring

intently down at her, "considering..." Slipping his hand beneath her hair, he suddenly gripped the back of her neck with one hand and pulled her against him.

Her body had absolutely no desire to resist him, especially when he thrust his other hand between her thighs and roughly cradled her pussy. The passionate yet beautifully controlled way he kissed her made it even harder for her to fight him.

He let go of her just as abruptly. "Get inside," he said quietly.

She stepped back into her apartment and quickly closed the door on his fierce, cat-like eyes.

\* \* \* \*

It finally stopped snowing and the sun broke through the clouds, but roads that looked clear again were actually frozen over and even more treacherous. An invisible skin of ice had formed over everything, and at dusk it transformed the Common into an enchanted realm.

As Morgan walked carefully down the slushbordered sidewalk, a rainbow of colors from the Christmas lights strung up in the bare branches of trees shimmered off the ice like radiant buds in the deepening twilight. A purple and violet sunset was spreading across the Western sky like a bruise; it was so beautiful the sight made her feel as though angels were beating her through her own heart.

She was on her way back to the North End, but she had needed to get out of her apartment for a while. Taking long walks had always been one of her favorite things to do. She found the blood pumping energetically through her heart made it easier to think about things so they ended up making a mysterious sense she could feel good about. When she was out for a brisk walk, she felt that whatever was happening in her life was right somehow, and that she could not only deal with it but also benefit from the experience. It would make her emotional being healthier and stronger.

It was very different from thinking about her circumstances while sitting passively in a chair with her knees beneath her chin and her arms wrapped around her legs, all curled up inside herself as if she was the only person on earth suffering anything. It was good to get outside and see other people's faces and to make the passionate sky the limit of her thoughts rather than a boring white ceiling.

When she left the romantic splendor of the Common behind her, she started walking as fast as she could in the slick conditions. The shadows of old stone buildings not only made it painfully cold for her body, they also seemed to fall over her soul. Suddenly, all her positive burning desires seemed only like youthful illusions which must inevitably set behind a grim, dark horizon of resignation and despair...

She quickly crossed the street to distance herself from historic Boston's puritanical foundations.

Simon had said he would phone her this afternoon with 'details'. It was entirely possible she had missed

his call she had been out such a long time... Morgan was surprised when this thought did not upset her, or make her anxious to get home and play her messages. She was walking past a cemetery alive with the bodies of tourists enjoying an illusory sense of immortality amidst centuries-old tombstones.

There was no use burying the truth any longer. She was prolonging her walk, despite the fact that her hands and feet were numb with cold, because she was actively avoiding Simon's call.

She clutched her coat tightly against her throat and resisted listening to the doubts penetrating her stubborn defenses like the icy wind cut through her winter layers. It seemed to take her longer than ever to cross Government Center. Today the breathtaking view of buildings old and new only oppressed her as she made her way completely alone across the concrete wasteland.

"Damn him!" she said out loud, but it was not Simon she was thinking about. Once again she was remembering, even as she kept doing her best to forget, what Michael O'Brien had done when she sank to her knees before him and reached hungrily up to open his pants. She couldn't wait to get his dick between her lips, but all she got was a bad taste in her mouth from the cigarette smoke as he did what she had feared he would do all along and walked around the table, away from her.

And yet he hadn't left. As she picked her body and her pride up off the floor, she saw that he was not only still there, but was holding her robe open for her. Feeling mysteriously numb, she had slipped her arms back into it obediently, staring down at the floor, as the tender way he wrapped the heavy green cloth around her effectively extinguished Simon's electrifying willpower inside her. But then the detective had breathed life into her again by whispering in her ear, "I *do* want you" before he finally took his leave.

Morgan lost herself in the memory, finally allowing all the problematic thoughts and emotions it aroused to flow through her...and suddenly seem to wash her up in front of her building as she barely noticed the rest of the walk home. The glad door down in the lobby was sighing slowly closed before her, which meant someone just entered the lobby, and she hesitated, thinking it might be John and she was feeling too vulnerable to run into him right now. Yet she was just as eager to get home and warm, so she slipped inside the building before the door locked again. She was relieved to see a girl ascending the stairs ahead of her, and then shocked by the rabbit fur coat crowning the long, shapely legs. "Oh, my God!" she cried.

Kathy tripped on one of the steps and had to clutch the railing with both hands as she looked behind her. "Fuck, Morgan! You scared the shit out of me!"

"Kathy, where the hell have you been?"

"Look, I can't talk right now, okay?" She started climbing the stairs again.

Morgan caught up with her on the second landing, where Kathy was forced to stop to unlock her door. "Do you realize the police are looking all over Boston for you, Kathy? They think you're missing!"

"What?" Her blank, wide-eyed glance might have belonged to one of the dead rabbits on her back.

"Your boyfriend filed a Missing Persons Report when you didn't come home from work last Friday night."

"My boyfriend?"

"Yes, John, your boyfriend."

"Prick!" She turned the key.

"Did you two have a fight? Was that why you took off?"

Kathy stepped quickly into her apartment, leaving the door open behind her as if she didn't plan on staying long, and as if she realized it wouldn't hold up against her neighbor's curiosity. She didn't answer the question, however, as she hurried through the skeletally furnished living room and down the short hallway into the bedroom.

Morgan followed her slowly, feeling a little guilty about intruding on the girl's privacy, but the annoying memory of John's sloppy kiss and his hard knee thrust up between her legs made her feel she had a right to know what was going on here. There was also the exciting thought of how pleased Detective O'Brien would be if she helped him solve this little mystery, which would give her a perfectly innocent excuse to call him...

Kathy was literally shoving everything sitting on top of a childish white-wicker vanity into a gray duffle bag by the time Morgan caught up with her. There was the shell-like clatter of plastic hitting plastic, and then a loud crack like a gunshot as a stray tube of lipstick missed the bag's gaping maw and hit the wooden floor.

Her own heart racing in response to the sharp sound, Morgan suddenly understood what the other girl was feeling. "You're scared," she realized out loud. "What are you so scared of, Kathy?"

"I'm scared that prick will get back before I'm finished grabbing my stuff, that's what!" Her tone made it clear that was the stupidest question she had ever heard.

Morgan remembered the way John had shoved her back against the wall, and once again relived his profoundly selfish kiss.

"Don't leave!" Kathy glanced back at her as she emptied a dresser drawer of panties, bras and stockings. "I'm almost done!"

"But where are you going? Are you just going to disappear again?"

"That's the plan!"

"You're moving out? But this is your apartment, Kathy. What about your furniture and your security deposit and-?"

"I don't care about any of that!" She moved into the small walk-in closet. "He can keep this stinking hole, the fucking prick!" Her vocabulary at the moment was limited in eloquence.

Morgan slipped her gloved hands into the pockets of her coat as she reached tentatively for the truth, her intuition telling her it was one she would prefer not to grasp. "What did John do to you, Kathy?"

The girl's response was muffled as other sounds indicated she was tossing shoes around in an effort to determine which pair to pack and which to abandon. "You don't want to know."

Morgan remembered the gentle way Detective O'Brien had laid the robe over her shoulders. "Shouldn't you go to the police?"

Kathy reappeared, holding the bulging duffle bag in her arms. "They won't do anything." She threw it onto the bed and tried to zip it closed.

Morgan slipped her hands out of her pockets to help her.

"Thanks... Don't worry about me. I've got a place to stay for as long as I need it." She glanced around the starkly furnished room. "I don't want any of this old junk anyway. It's all just stuff I found next to dumpsters."

"Would you mind telling me where you'll be staying?" Morgan asked gently. "You know I won't tell John anything. I'll just tell Detective O'Brien so the police will stop looking for you."

"I can't tell you." She heaved the duffle bag off the bed and draped the gray strap over one furry white shoulder. "He made me promise."

"You're moving in with another man?"

"Oh, no, he's just helping me get a fresh start." The strap vanished into the dead fur from the weight of her possessions. "He's loaded!"

"Are you sure you can trust him?" Morgan asked as she trailed her back into the living room. "Why doesn't he want you to tell other people where you're going?"

"It's not that, he just doesn't want me to tell you."

Morgan stopped dead in her tracks.

Kathy reluctantly checked her headlong flight, glancing from her neighbor's face to the open door and back again. "Simon's helping me," she confessed. "He was planning on telling you himself, he just hasn't yet so you won't accidentally give anything away to John. Please, don't get the wrong idea."

"It's okay, Kathy, I believe you."

Morgan's placid reaction seemed to panic her. "He hasn't touched me, I swear!"

"I said I believe you, Kathy."

"I told him about John, and how he was, you know, that day he drove me home, and he said he'd help me get away from him. I don't know why, but I trusted him. I know it was stupid of me to believe a total stranger like that, but I just did...there was something about him."

"No need to explain, the same thing happened to me."

Kathy's lovely smile banished the frightenedanimal look from her eyes. "He's really great!"

"Yeah." Morgan didn't understand why her heart seemed to have sunk down to somewhere between her chest and her stomach; something didn't feel right. "Just watch out for him, Kathy," she heard herself say coolly. "Helping you like this with no strings attached might just be a way of trying to control you through your gratitude." "Wow, that's a really awful thing to say about your own lover." She headed for the door as if running from such a cynical perspective.

"Maybe," Morgan murmured to herself, and followed the ghost of several rabbits out of the cold and strangely lifeless space.

\* \* \* \*

Morgan was unable to reach Detective O'Brien. She ended up leaving three messages for him with three different departments and hanging up the phone in frustration. Only then did it occur to her that he must already know Kathy was safe and sound...in Simon's arms?

There were no messages waiting for her on her machine. She felt guilty the whole time she was walking through the city about avoiding her lover's call and he hadn't even tried to get in touch with her. It was humiliating and infuriating, never mind that it was also a relief. Because how could she see one man when she couldn't stop thinking about another?

At least she had one straightforward desire she could satisfy right now without any man's help or negative consequences -a hot shower.

Morgan headed for the bathroom, peeling off her winter layers along with a few comfortable delusions. So many things—so many men—had happened to her lately that her emotions were as out of her control as a landslide. All the intense feelings and sensations she had been subjected to in such a short period of time were sharpening her perceptions almost painfully; she was thinking things that would never have crossed her mind just a few weeks ago.

As she sat on the edge of her bed stripping off her tights, she realized that her simple desire for a hot shower was not innocent at all. She could enjoy this relaxing solitary pleasure only because of men, countless men through the centuries who conquered the earth and dominated her in order to build cities and generate electricity and create electrical grids enabling her to heat water effortlessly. She might be physically alone at the moment—Simon was not here, nor was Robert, or John or Michael—yet she was still surrounded by men and the decisions they had made and all the rules she had to obey in exchange for certain rewards like hot showers.

She walked naked into her little bathroom, turned on the water, and stood there shivering as she waited to enjoy one of the more pleasant fruits of man's violent exploitation of natural resources.

"Fuck!" she said out loud in an effort to block out these disturbing thoughts, but not even the sound of deliciously hot water hitting the cold tiles could drown out the new awareness developing inside her.

She stepped into the shower and sighed with pleasure as she threw her head back into the unnatural waterfall. The burning spears of water—she lived in an old building, but at least the water pressure left nothing to be desired—penetrated the tension in her muscles so that it all seemed to flow out of her beneath the invigorating caress.

Perhaps having all her orifices penetrated at once had mysteriously opened her up and was affecting her perceptions...

Why exactly had she enjoyed being beaten and then gang-banged? Her parents were probably turning in their grave.

She reached for her black plastic bottle of shampoo decorated with colorful flowers to indicate natural botanical sources belied by the list of ingredients, which began with *Sodium Laureth Sulfate*, known to cause cancer in laboratory rats. However, it also created a luscious lather, the sensual pleasure of which seemed to be worth the danger of a painful death. She couldn't understand why she still bought this brand, except that it hardly seemed worth the effort to spare herself this small threat to her health when the air she breathed and the water she drank every day could kill her.

She rinsed the cleansing chemicals out of her hair, wondering why pain, danger, and domination all seemed to add up to sensual fulfillment for her, then reached for the green plastic bottle containing her conditioner.

The compassionate way Michael draped the heavy robe over her bare shoulders had aroused all these strangely heavy thoughts inside her; his tenderness had totally unsettled her. Part of her found it stranger and harder to deal with than Simon's forcefulness. She couldn't stop hearing the detective's quiet voice saying, "I *do* want you..."

She bowed her head so the hot stream of water hit

the back of her neck and flowed soothingly down her spine.

Why hasn't that bastard called me? Did Simon sense her reaction to his friend and was now punishing her for it? Yet he had told her last night on the phone to be ready. Maybe something came up...something with long legs, big, vulnerable eyes and golden-red hair?

She angrily turned off the shower and wrung the excess water out of her long, dark hair. Her pale skin had a rosy glow to it now and her small bathroom was a warm, misty haven in her dark and chilly apartment. Even so, her electric bill was a nightmare she had to live with every month. The mirror over the sink was fogged over, but she didn't bother wiping it clean; seeing her face wouldn't help her understand who she was or what she really wanted anymore.

She couldn't help but be furious Simon hadn't told her about Kathy, that he hadn't trusted her enough not to say anything to John either deliberately or accidentally. Yet it seemed silly in the extreme to get herself worked up about this incident, considering the fact that Brighton Manor would soon be full of girls very much like Kathy.

The phone ringing out in the living room thankfully interrupted this train of thought.

She hesitated, tempted to let her machine pick up, but the possibility that it was Michael returning her call made it impossible for her to resist opening the bathroom door and running out to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Morgan."

"Detective O'Brien..."

"You've been trying to reach me."

"Yes..." His tone filled her with despair; obviously, she had only imagined he felt anything for her.

"Can you meet me at *Café Vesta* in half an hour?" he asked abruptly.

"I just stepped out of the shower...could you come here?"

"I'd rather not."

Her intuition told her this was a compliment and that pushing him wouldn't get her anywhere. "Give me forty-five minutes," she said.

"No problem." He hung up with a suddenness that left her breathless, and when she shivered, it wasn't from how cold it was in her dark little living room.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

By the time Morgan left her apartment again, Simon still hadn't called.

She was feeling very relaxed from her long walk; from Kathy's reappearance, which relieved one mysterious tension only to create another; from her hot shower; and from Michael's brief but intense phone call followed by a flurry of activity on her part. It wasn't just a question of drying her hair so she wouldn't catch pneumonia; she had to make herself beautiful fast.

As she slipped her left foot into a fresh pair of black tights, she felt elated by his desire to meet her somewhere, but her right foot brought her down-toearth as she worried that his reasons for wanting to see her again were not so much personal as altruistic. Perhaps his motives weren't sensually selfish, and all he wanted to do was convince her to stay away from his sadistic friend.

Even though she had to hurry to get ready, she still had too much time to consider Michael's motives, and her nerves interfered with the smooth application of her lip-liner, which her full lips made necessary before she could fill them in neatly with a striking dark-red color. She hated mascara and never used it, nor did she need to. A light dusting of powder, two quick brush strokes of an earthy blush, a little black eyeliner, and she was done with her face. Her naturally wavy hair was still a bit damp even after blow-drying it, so she slipped on a black-knit hat that gave her the slightly dangerous air of a Middle Eastern terrorist, especially worn over a burgundy turtleneck and black jeans and an old black leather jacket. Black ankle-high boots, a black-and-white checked scarf and black leather gloves completed the ensemble.

She emptied her wallet of her license and a couple of credit cards and slipped them into a back pocket before snatching up her keys. She had no intention of leaving her home vulnerable to intruders tonight; out on the landing, she carefully locked her door.

Outside, night had fallen and it was snowing again. On the bright side, she hadn't run into John on the stairs. She didn't even want to think about John, who played the nice, concerned, protective boyfriend so well when all the time he was really just angry that Kathy had escaped him.

For a few blocks the North End seemed deserted, but striding quickly down the sidewalk deep in thought she soon turned a corner onto a street alive with small bars and restaurants fleshing out the cold darkness with light and warmth and divine smells. She was all but running from the thought of how Simon might react, should she decide she didn't want to see him again. Yet it was a moot point, really, since she knew perfectly well she could no more resist seeing him again than she could keep from breathing.

She glanced up at the sky but not a single star was visible past the cloud cover and the light pollution. A snowflake landed on her mouth and instantly melted. She licked her lips, tasting its chilly, slightly acrid remains blending with the unknown ingredients of her lipstick, and then she saw him.

He was sitting inside at a table by the window. She paused just beyond the halo of a streetlight so she could study him for a moment in secret. He was looking out at the sidewalk—covered with a fine white veil of fresh snow as yet unbroken by footprints—watching for her while lighting a cigarette. The flame from his lighter flashed a hot blue as a gentler, orange-red flame flickered on the table before him.

He took a drag and then slowly, contemplatively, exhaled a surprising amount of smoke while the long fingers of his left hand played restlessly with the cheap black plastic lighter. It was not an expensive silver or gold lighter, and this apparently insignificant detail for her confirmed the myth that a real detective loves his work much more than money. And watching him, it ceased to be just a lighter he was holding...it was her heart caught between his thumb and forefinger; her heart he suddenly tossed up into the air without looking and caught again casually.

She could literally feel him thinking about her,

trying to solve the mystery of her complete submission to a man she scarcely knew, to a man who could be dangerous, to a man who shared her with other men. She both dreaded and hoped he was planning on interrogating her tonight, and that something she said would provide him with a vital clue to her being. Because the only thing that was clear to her suddenly was that she couldn't find the key to her inner workings all by herself; that always, one way or the other, knowledge of her own soul rested in a man's hands.

She stepped out of the shadows and he saw her. The hand holding his cigarette paused halfway to his mouth, which hardened slightly as he took her in. She smiled at him, his awareness of her making her so purely happy for a moment that she just stood there rooted to the spot. Only when the cigarette finally touched his lips did she find herself able to move as he took a drag and drew her into the restaurant.

\* \* \* \*

"You look hungry."

Morgan laughed. "You make that sound like a crime, *Detective*." She savored his profession on her tongue like a fine wine she had never tasted before.

"It was a simple statement of fact," he said mildly, killing his cigarette.

She stared down at the ashtray in which the dead cancer-stick looked like a slender, broken body. "I'm beginning to realize there aren't any simple facts in this world," she declared, meeting his eyes again. "Maybe there were once, but not anymore."

He motioned for a waiter. "I would have to agree." She smiled at him happily.

All through dinner, she did most of the talking in response to the few key questions he asked her quietly, almost indifferently, as if he didn't really care one way or the other. So, naturally, she waxed eloquent for him as the candle on the table burned down between them. His polite objectivity – delicate as the cool snow outside over what she sensed were bedrock convictions – was a light shining directly into her soul and enabling her to make out some of its mysterious terrain. Maybe, if she could talk with him like this again, and again, she would stop stumbling around her feelings and tripping dangerously over desires she never even knew were there inside her.

Morgan ended up telling Detective O'Brien the story of her life, and then, her courage fortified by a couple of glasses of red wine, she started talking freely about Simon. She hadn't planned on saying as much as she did or on going into such intimate detail, yet she couldn't help herself. It seemed pointless to tell him anything if she didn't tell him everything. She was gripped by the haunting sense that her old self – the Morgan who existed before she met Simon – might not be dead after all, only missing, and that the man sitting before her might be able to find her if she didn't leave out any clues or evidence no matter how embarrassing.

Yet she knew, of course, that this was only an

emotional illusion born of his profession, because she would never be the same person again, and it was this hard fact that finally caused her to fall silent. Finishing her wine, she stared out the window at the falling snow. "I'm sorry, Michael, I didn't mean to go on like that. You should have told me to shut-up."

"That's not my style," he replied shortly.

She looked at him.

"I can see why Simon is so taken with you... Do you mind?"

She shook her head and watched him light another cigarette holding her breath as she waited for him to finish his sentence.

He took his time, flicking some ashes into his empty coffee cup as he added casually, "You're amazing."

"I am?" She was both intensely pleased and surprised by his conclusion, which didn't help her understand herself any better. "Why?" she asked almost suspiciously, suddenly afraid he was being sarcastic.

His eyes narrowed as he took a long, hard drag. "Why?" He deliberately blew the smoke over her head. "Do you still think you love him?"

"No," she sighed. It was a terrible relief to face this and admit it at the same time. She looked down at the candle struggling for life in a small glass jar. It only had a thin layer of wax left to burn, in which the wick was swiftly drowning. "No, I don't," she reaffirmed calmly even as she suffered the impression of staring at her own struggling heart as she focused on the flame... Simon was the firm black wick around which she melted helplessly, but her response to him began mysteriously exhausting itself the moment she looked into Michael's clear eyes and felt herself surrounded and protected by his understanding. Now it was all she had left as the memory of her passion for Simon licked painfully at her heart...

A busboy stopped at their table, blew out the candle, planted a fresh one in the hot wax, carelessly burying the old wick beneath it, and walked away.

Morgan didn't know whether to be elated or dismayed by the symbolism; she didn't know what it meant. Suddenly, she remembered that the man sitting before her was married, and that Simon had a power over her she couldn't resist. One word from him, like the casual flick of a lighter, could ignite an irresistible submissive spark deep inside her that melted her from the inside out...

"Did you buy a new bottle of *Bushmills*?" Michael asked, this time not merely putting out his cigarette but thoroughly crushing it like a mortal enemy.

His eyes on her felt hot as the glass holding the flame. "Yes," she said softly.

"Then I'll walk you home."

"Okay..." Her knees felt weak as she stood up; not from the wine, nor was it the snow-slick sidewalk outside that caused her to slip and grab hold of his coat.

He steadied her, then took her arm like an old-fashioned gentleman.

They didn't say a word to each other during the

short walk to her apartment. The snow falling with silent urgency inhibited conversation as though throwing a cool veil over her brain, overheated by too many thoughts.

She slipped her arm out of his reluctantly to unlock the door to her building, and then walked up the stairs ahead of him.

Her home was cold and dark.

"I'll turn up the heat," she said, tossing her keys onto a small table by the door as he closed it behind him.

"Don't bother." He grabbed hold of her scarf and pulled her to him.

Kissing him felt like falling into another dimension where everything was as it should be, as it was meant to be. She was not conscious of making an effort to merge her breath and lips and tongue with his; it happened so naturally she was scarcely aware of the borders between them. It *was* like falling, in that their fleshly synchronicity picked up speed and urgency almost exponentially.

He surfaced to catch his breath with the quiet exclamation, "Oh, my God..."

"Mm," she said contentedly, "I do believe you stole all my lipstick, detective."

"I believe I did. Would you like me to give it back?"

"Mm, yes, please..."

He was so thorough about it she began sinking to her knees.

"No." He stopped her. "Let's go to your bedroom."

She took his gloved hand in hers and led him there.

"Do you have a soft light?" he asked. "I want to see you."

She walked over to her desk and switched on the brass lamp next to her computer, turning the switch twice so the dim bulb cast menacing shadows across the walls and just barely enabled them to make out each other's faces in the spectral glow as she turned back towards him.

"That's nice." He slipped off his gloves and tossed them onto her nightstand. "Now take off your clothes, please." He started unbuttoning his coat.

She unzipped her jacket before getting rid of her gloves, hat and scarf. It seemed to take forever to peel off all her layers, and she had to perch on the edge of her bed to pull of her boots, which were followed by her jeans. At last she was down to her black bra and panties.

"All the way," he urged, shrugging his coat off onto the floor behind him and stepping towards her.

She did as she was told; grateful for the firm, yet gentle way he had taken control of the situation.

"I believe we have some unfinished business." He unzipped his pants.

With a small, breathless moan of anticipation, she before him, gratefully fell her knees and to impatiently helping him pull his slacks and underwear down just far enough to be out of her way.

His penis was beautiful, which didn't surprise her in the least, and fully erect. She wrapped her right hand and her lips around it at the same time as the fingers of her left hand cradled his soft, cool balls. She sucked hungrily on his head for a moment, unable to believe it was finally in her mouth, grasping his shaft possessively while stroking it lightly, relishing the feel of him and moaning as she realized he wasn't completely hard after all. He just kept getting bigger and stiffer. It was too much for her. Letting go of him, she reached behind him and pushed his full length slowly into her mouth, slipping the tight ring of her lips all the way down his dick, and back up again. She knew her tongue had found the magic spot on his cock when he groaned and his hands gripped her hair as though he was tempted to control her motions.

But he refrained from doing so, which told her she was doing a good enough job of pleasing him already. She repeated the same firm stroke over and over again, gradually sliding her full lips up and down his rigid penis, pausing only for a heartbeat to suck fervently on his head. She didn't swallow the evidence of his pleasure, instead letting it flow back out of her mouth to lubricate him, making it even easier for her lips to glide smoothly and firmly up and down him.

His soft, almost helpless groans made his semenslick cock even more intoxicating to her, inspiring her to grab him again and pump him quickly with her hand while grazing him lightly with her teeth so every part of his erection was being stimulated by contrasting sensations.

"Oh, Morgan... I don't want to come yet..."

She had mercy on him and emptied her mouth of

his delicious fullness. He didn't need to ask her to help him undress. She untied his laces with the eagerness of a kitten, pulled each of his hard black shoes off in turn, and then reached up for his pants and underwear, efficiently tugging them down and off as well. He yanked his sweater up over his head while she relieved him of his socks, and she stood up as his white T-shirt floated away like a ghost.

"Let's get in bed," he said.

She folded back her comforter and slipped beneath the flannel sheets, shivering happily at how cold they were because tonight they would warm up fast. Michael joined her beneath the covers and took her comfortably in his arms. It felt perfectly natural to snuggle up against him, as if they had done it thousands of times before, and the sweet feeling of peace this filled her with made kissing him more relaxing than stimulating...until he insinuated his hand between her thighs. She spread her legs for him, bending one of her knees so she could arch her back and deliver her aching pussy into his hard palm.

"Relax," he whispered, gently exploring the full, wet lips of her labia with only the tips of his fingers.

She whimpered beneath the teasing caress, and then moaned with gratitude when he didn't make her wait any longer, roughly thrusting two fingers up inside her, pushing them in deep so she cried out with pleasure. He fucked her with his hand, and it felt so unbelievably good that all her thoughts slid away completely on how wet he was getting her. It was her turn to breathe, "Oh, God, I want you inside me!" "Not yet, Morgan." Tenting himself beneath the heavy feather bedspread, he replaced his hand with his face.

Morgan's breath caught as disbelief sharpened her excitement almost painfully. The mere thought of whose head was between her legs flooded her flesh with a joy that instantly started an orgasm swelling inside her. She reached down to hold on to his skull and discovered that his wavy hair was wonderfully soft. Her breaths quickened as the firm wave of his tongue washed over her clitoris, carrying her closer and closer to the intense pleasure's devastating edge...and yet she couldn't seem to catch the climax cresting inside her and ride it to fulfillment...

"I want you inside me!" she repeated desperately. She didn't want to come in his face; she wanted to dissolve around him and take him with her.

He tossed the comforter off them before spreading his warm body on top of hers. He was tall and heavy and every inch of his skin felt wonderful against hers, especially his hard-on pressing against her vulva. He lifted his hips enough for her to slip her right hand between their bodies and position him so when he lowered himself over her again, his head parted her labia and his full erection slipped into her welcoming pussy. She raised her legs around him, longing for him to penetrate her as deeply as possible, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Kiss me!" she whispered.

He obliged her, filling her with him at both ends. She had everything she could possibly desire; the only problem was she couldn't bottle the moments and hold on to them forever. Yet it only felt better and better as he thrust deeper and harder and faster.

"I want to come with you," she begged softly.

He was beyond words.

"Oh, yes...yes..." she gasped. "Yes!" as his erection pulsed in time with her innermost self contracting possessively around him, a thoughtless pleasure breaking against her flesh in rhythm with his hot cum surging into her drenched space, thrilling her to the core while gloriously short-circuiting her brain for a few timeless seconds.

He slipped out of her pussy and rolled off her, hiding his face in the crook of his arm while she covered them both with the comforter again. "That was unbelievable," he murmured, raising his other arm so she could slip beneath it.

"Yes." She caressed his chest and kissed the side of his neck. "I've never...I've never felt that way," she dared to confess.

"What way?" the detective in him demanded.

No words could possibly describe it, so she was glad when he lifted his arm off his face so she could reach up and kiss him. His mouth looked hard, but in reality it was tender and yielding.

"I should go," he said after a moment.

She literally felt her heart sink. "Why?"

It was his turn not to answer.

"Please, stay, Michael."

"All right," he answered quietly, "I'll stay."

The terrible thought crossed her mind that Simon might suddenly show up. Naturally, she had

forgotten to check her machine for messages when they came in, so he might have called.

"You're thinking Simon might drop by?"

She hadn't noticed the way her body tensed against his when the concern hit her. "No, he won't," she said firmly, trying to convince herself.

"Are you sure?"

Anxiously, she consulted her intuition, and was relieved by the certainty in her voice when she answered, "Yes. Besides, he doesn't have a key."

"So if there's a knock on the door, you simply won't answer it?"

"That's right."

"And if he kicks the door down, you'll ask me to arrest him for breaking and entering?"

She felt guilty about giggling, but she couldn't help it; she felt so relaxed and happy lying in his arms in her bed.

"Simon isn't the sort of man you just casually brush aside, Morgan," he warned quietly.

"I know that," she replied soberly, and then asked abruptly, "Why didn't you tell me about Kathy, Michael?"

"He requested I not do so, as he wanted to tell you himself... I *should* have told you. I'm sorry, but already I felt myself getting too involved with you as it was."

"It doesn't matter. What's important is that Kathy's safe."

He made a sound deep in his throat she didn't need for him to translate into words.

\* \* \* \*

Morgan opened her eyes, but she was still dreaming. She didn't move in order not to wake him, and to enjoy looking at him lying there in her bed.

Relaxed in sleep, his face was softer than when he was awake, and in her opinion more reflective of his deepest self than when his features were hardened by thoughts; most unpleasantly sharp, all things considered. Enough light filtered in between the blinds for her to see him, yet she still couldn't really believe he was here with her. He was lying on his side, one broad but tender shoulder exposed to the chilly air of her bedroom, and his mouth was curved slightly up at the edges.

At rest he afforded her a haunting glimpse of vanished centuries still alive in his genes; gazing at him, she was reminded of a Renaissance painting. His pale skin was touched by a hint of rose from the warm blood flowing beneath it. His chest was not modern, in that it wasn't hard with muscles sculpted by long boring hours at a gym. His hair curled gently against his neck; and his long, curving mouth made her think of Raphael and Bacchus amongst others, even as it spoke silently and eloquently of a timeless sensuality.

When he opened his eyes, for a blissful moment there was nothing but their smiling awareness of each other, and then circumstances surrounded them again like a stage set as he sat up reciting the inevitable line, "What time is it?"

"It's only seven," she sighed, suffering the impression of picking up a highly unsatisfactory script she would now have to keep reading from if she didn't want to lose her part. "You don't need to go *just* yet, do you?"

He lay back again and stared up at the ceiling. "No, I don't have to go just yet, but soon." He turned his head and looked at her. "What are we doing here, Morgan?"

"Lying in bed," she teased, because he sounded so sober she couldn't deal with it.

"You realize I'm married..."

Now it was her turn to stare up at the light fixture. "I thought you were separated."

"We are, and we'll probably file for divorce, but at the moment I'm still married."

"You enjoy torturing me, too," she accused him mildly.

"Excuse me?"

"Never mind."

"I'm just trying to be perfectly honest and straightforward with you, Morgan."

She turned towards him, and was as relieved and happy as a ship coming home after a long hard voyage when he raised the fleshly bridge of his arm so she could take refuge in the wonderful harbor formed by his neck and shoulder. "I know," she whispered, caressing his chest, "but what about being romantic? Isn't that being honest, too, in a deeper sense?" "Morgan, you're seeing a man who beats you, and then shares you with his friends. How romantic is that?"

"At least it's intense...when I say 'romantic', I'm not talking about a box of chocolates and a white wedding, I'm thinking of intense feelings passionately expressed. I appreciate your honesty, Michael, I do, more than I can say, but it's your intense desires I want...I feel I was made to fulfill them."

"If memory serves me correctly, you got those last night. That's as passionate as I get without dying of a heart attack."

She perched herself on his chest to smile down at him.

He stared very seriously up into her eyes. "Friendship is the most important thing in a relationship, don't you think?"

The vulnerable question mark at the end of his statement prompted her to kiss him. "I do now," she whispered.

"What do you mean?" His eyes hardened beautifully. "What's so special about now?"

She murmured against his mouth, "You are, silly."

"After all," he pushed her away gently, "passion fades with the flesh." He was intent on making his point.

But Morgan's wandering hand had discovered evidence to the contrary, expressed just as firmly and, in her opinion, much more convincingly, between his legs. "Mm," she sighed. "That's what they say, but I don't believe it." "You don't have to believe something for it to be true..." His voice was losing its conviction, however, and his eyes closed as she gently caressed his penis, enjoying the feel of it stiffening and growing in her hand. The skin of his male organ was cool and fine, but the blood rushing into it beneath her stroking fingers was warming it up, and this transformation from a vulnerable sack of skin to a relentless shaft with the power to impale her on him fascinated her. As a man, he made his point and then enforced his perspective, and it was his conviction her deepest feelings were drawn to; his drive and determination, which enabled her to fully express her soul's profound sensuality...

She flung the comforter off them and straddled him.

He groaned and opened his eyes, but quickly closed them again as if the sight of her combined with the feel of her warm pussy slowly hugging his erection was too much for him.

"Mm!" she moaned as his hard dick filled her up so perfectly it felt like the magical bone missing from her pelvis. How good it felt to sit on him amazed her and took her breath away as he kept expanding her inner dimensions in response to her passionate grasp of his desires. She leaned forward to brace herself on his chest, and then couldn't resist falling over him to kiss his neck and his lips. His mouth parted beneath hers almost helplessly before she pushed herself back up again. She was scarcely conscious of her cries as she rode him, totally forgetting she had never truly enjoyed being on top before. She arched her back to stab herself with him as deeply as possible, leaning on her left arm and bracing herself on his thigh while caressing herself with her right hand. She pressed two fingertips against her clit, which was astonishingly responsive to their fast, firm strokes. She had never been able to climax in this position, but with the thick base of his erection stretching her labia and pushing against her clitoris from behind, she came three times. After the first crashing wave of pleasure a second, and then a third, followed with scarcely any effort on her part; all it took was the feel of him holding her open around him to find the devastating fault-line of her flesh again and again.

Like a Gin granting her three wishes, he waited until the cries from her third orgasm died away before he came himself, silently and intensely, pulsing and expiring while shooting his hot, smoky fluids deep into her pussy, still vibrating with aftershocks of pleasure, hers and now his.

She waited a few moments, until she was sure his orgasm was completely spent before lifting herself off him and lying down on her back beside him.

After a few minutes, he said, "Not a bad way to start the day."

## CHAPTER-FOURTEEN

A fter Michael departed, Morgan was distressed by the fact that he left no physical evidence behind to prove she hadn't just imagined last night. Yet that wasn't exactly true; the warm, contented glow inside her was new. She cherished it all morning, afraid it would not last the day because it was so subtle and so special. It was like attempting to capture and hold onto a firefly trying to understand exactly what she was feeling, and why, and what it might mean. She decided she simply had to let it be and just let herself be happy the feeling was there. All she could be sure of was that Michael was truly her very good friend, and this was blessing enough for now.

And then there was Simon.

She was not in love with her Master–Detective O'Brien had proved that to her beyond a shadow of a doubt–but there was no denying the irresistible power he had over her.

Shortly before noon she called her other friend and filled her in on the latest developments. "I don't know what I'm going to do, Liz," she concluded.

"You're going to dump the bastard, that's what you're going to do. *Master*, my ass! He really makes you call him that?"

Morgan knew it was not a good sign that she couldn't even imagine never seeing Simon again. It was as impossible as never driving her car again or never watching television again. She *had* to see him. "Liz, it's not that simple…"

"What do you mean *it's not that simple*? You can't kept seeing both him and Michael; you have to make a choice, and there's no contest...in my opinion," she added reluctantly.

"It's not going to be easy."

"I know," Liz said more gently, "but I'll help you, and so will Michael, I'm sure. He sounds like a really nice guy."

"I have to help myself."

"Of course, I just want you to know you're not alone."

"Thanks, Liz...but you know what's really scary? If it weren't for Michael, we wouldn't be having this conversation...if it wasn't for another *man*. Do you see my point?"

"Yeah. I've been saying the same things as that handsome detective, and yet you didn't hear a word."

"Oh, I heard you all right, but that's about it."

"Nothing I said penetrated?"

Morgan giggled. "Nope!"

"Do you realize you've fucked more men in three days than I have in thirteen years?"

"You're married, Liz."

"You have to stop seeing Simon."

"But he's actually a very nice person, in a way. I told you what he's planning to do with Brighton Manor and how he's helped—"

"Maybe, or maybe it's a bit more sinister than that."

"No, Simon really does want to help these girls, Liz, he's not lying about that, I can assure you."

"Well, then maybe he's compensating *big* time. He enjoys hurting women, so to feel better about himself he helps some, too. It doesn't change his essential nature."

"He doesn't feel in the slightest bit guilty about his sadistic nature," Morgan said firmly. "He's proud of it...he's incredibly intelligent, I agree with him on a lot of things, and he appreciates the depth of my feelings..."

"What he does to you isn't natural," Liz insisted quietly.

"Neither is the world we live in."

"Don't change the subject on me!"

"That's just it, I'm not."

\* \* \* \*

Morgan slipped into a black cashmere dress, black thong panties, and her knee-high black leather boots. Every nerve in her body told her something was going to happen this afternoon; therefore, she should be dressed and ready.

Michael informed her that he would be on duty

until late, which she interpreted as meaning she would not be seeing him tonight. Unspoken between them was the fact that she had a problem she needed to take care of. He had already literally done everything in his power to help her despite the fact that Simon was his friend; the rest was up to her.

Yet how did she fight a battle she wasn't really sure she wanted to win? The only reason she even had a prayer was because of Michael and last night. She had never felt so close to a man before, so comfortable, so content, and yet the sex had been intense... because they hadn't just been fucking?

She knew it would be a good idea to call Debra at the office and see if there were any emergencies that needed dealing with, but she didn't do it. She had a much more urgent and vital crisis on her hands... all her life she had bought into perspectives that had landed her in this predicament. It seemed like a very long time ago that she was standing in Liz's kitchen sipping wine and watching cats dine while discussing her growing desire to be dominated in bed.

She was seriously beginning to suspect now that this perverse urge was born from, and intensified by, her profound frustration with men and life in general. Yet perhaps she would do well to distinguish between life and society, which were no more the same thing than her naked body was the dress she happened to be wearing today.

She lay back across her couch, one shapely leg halfarmored in black leather resting on the arm with the other planted firmly on the floor, and gazed out at the forbidding gray sky.

Her thought processes were becoming as relentless as Simon was with a whip...this image of her body as expression of life distinct pure from the а philosophical fashions of society was not entirely accurate, she realized. All she had to do was caress one of her breasts through her expensive dress to literally feel the flaw in the metaphor. Her firm and lovely bosom was the result of wearing a bra for years. If she had been born in a culture that did not believe in bras, or even knew what a bra was, she would have mammary glands of a different shape From depressingly realistic and feel. National Geographic pictures of sagging tribal teats to Playboy's perfect silicon dreams... at least, as Simon himself pointed out, her breasts were real. Civilization as a bra...she amused herself by playing with the thought. A bra controls to shape, restricts to preserve, denies to entice, and is more about an idea of desire and an image of fulfillment than about life as it really is and feels.

She smiled in anticipation of sharing these thoughts with Michael, suspecting he would appreciate them in more ways than one. But then she sat up restlessly and let her head fall into her hands for a moment. None of these thoughts were going to help her when she found herself face-to-face with Simon again. She thought of the sinful luxury of his limousine—where she had knelt for what felt like hours sucking him down like a true slave, the warm hole of her mouth working around his shaft for such an unnaturally long time – and her mind wandered to the problem of global warming and the hole in the ozone...

She surged to her feet, suddenly furious. Who did he think he was not getting in touch with her for days after everything he did to her and after everything he had said?

She was dying to go outside for a walk by the water, to enjoy some fresh air along with memories of last night and the sweetly invigorating possibility of seeing Michael again soon. He gave her no clue as to when that would be, but she was not concerned, not after how good it felt to have him inside her.

The last thing he said before he kissed her goodbye was, "Don't let John in here again. When he realizes Kathy came back for her stuff he's going to be mad, he'll feel like taking it out on someone, and you're very tempting."

"And then he'll just claim I'm lying about whatever he did to me and blame it all on Simon, my sadistic boyfriend."

His grim silence had expressed full agreement with her reasoning.

"I've got to get out of here!" she declared out loud. She grabbed her leather jacket, hat and gloves, and left the painfully confined space of her apartment.

It was a grey and dreary day made more oppressive by the complete absence of even the slightest breeze even this close to the water. But at least it was a few degrees warmer than the usual well below freezing. The breathless atmosphere did not help soothe her nerves, however, which felt distinctly related to all the charged negative ions in the air.

She decided to walk down some quiet back streets today, away from the more crowded areas of the North End where the restaurants and specialty food stores were... where she and Michael had been last night. Already it felt like days since she last saw him rather than just a few hours. She welcomed the exercise of walking up some extremely steep and narrow streets where only tourists who had become lost on their way back from Paul Revere's house ever wandered. She passed handfuls of small, dark stores that might be considered curiosity shops by visitors to the city, but all they aroused in her was incredulity. Plastic saints dressed in golden foil robes perched morbidly atop intestinal sausages surrounded by halos of cheese.

With her dark hair and eyes, Morgan might pass for Italian, but there was an aura about her that told the Ouarter's native residents she was not one of them. They watched her pass almost suspiciously, as if her independent beauty was some sort of mysterious threat. As she walked briskly up and down the cobbled streets amidst dark old buildings she felt intensely wicked in her black leather jacket and boots because she wasn't married and breeding, running contentedly to fat while and merely exercising her fingers over a rosary and a needle and thread. She was a modern woman, a professional who played by her rules, and her employer's, of course. She kept her figure, and her illusion of autonomy, and yet she too slaved away all day mainly to benefit someone else, someone with whom she shared no bonds of affection, and at night she had only herself to hold onto in the cold and the dark. If only she could hold on to last night, to those warm special moments outside of time's relentless flow...

Their magic slipped away when she started wondering when she would see Michael again, wondering what their future might be, if any. She started feelings hopelessly tangled up in circumstances and logistics, in his past and hers, which made the brief present they experienced together seem like even more of a miracle.

The long loop she was making took her past another historic cemetery occupying an entire block where four roads crossed. The tombstone-littered grass rose a few feet above the sidewalk, surrounded on all sides by a black wrought-iron fence, and the tapping of her heels seemed very loud in the still air. Then another sound broke the silence, startling her into looking up as a large blue-black crow landed on one of the gate's spear-like posts. She stopped walking and met its one sharply assessing eye.

"You're beautiful," she said.

The bird spread its wings for a second as if catching the admiration in her voice like a current in the air, and then looked past her.

A purring sound behind her told her a car was approaching. She glanced over her shoulder as she began walking, but stopped dead again when she saw the obscenely long black limousine pulling slowly up to the curb. She stared at the dark tinted windows, her heart racing, waiting for one of them to slide silently down, but they reflected her attention right back at her as enigmatically as the crow's eye. One black limousine looked just like any other; she couldn't be sure it was her lover's car. Wildly she thought that perhaps its wealthy occupant was here to visit a grave, but that didn't make sense as the bodies buried in the cemetery were centuries old.

Morgan turned away from the irresistibly phallic, environmentally evil vehicle and continued on her way. Her pace was aided by the fact that she was walking downhill now; nevertheless, the car easily kept up with her even as it barely seemed to move, its expensive engine scarcely making a sound.

She refused to look back at the windows hiding whoever was in the car enjoying a clear view of the world and of her. She also had to stifle an impulse to run from the slow and patient scrutiny of something so latently fast and powerful; her pulse was reacting like hunted prey and none of her mental reassurances were able to calm it down.

Finally, she heard a window glide down and a man ask, "Would you like a ride?"

Simon's deep, quiet voice seemed to thicken her blood so her legs felt heavier and made walking suddenly seem less effortless. She couldn't resist glancing at him, and all her resolves tripped over his hard, handsome features. But a deeper part of her held on to them and she quickly found her inner balance again. When she came to the curb, she ran across the street to the next block, leaving the graveyard behind. The blood rushing through her body made her feel hot, as though her feelings were melting wax mysteriously imprinted with the features of two men who had both made a profound impression on her, and each one was sending her soul a completely different message.

"Get in, Morgan."

The kind but firm command almost hooked her, yet she managed to get away by not looking back at him as she replied, "No, thanks. I feel like walking." Then she tripped on a crack in the concrete and her emotions tumbled all over each other uncertainly.

Running away was not going to solve anything; she had to confront him in order to free herself from him. Yet she was afraid of his power over her, afraid that once she let herself enter the orbit of his will she would not be strong enough to break free again. She was afraid her flesh wouldn't want to break away from him any more than the moon could stop absorbing the sun's penetrating light. Fortunately, she was not a mindless satellite; she could choose what stars helped sustain her personal universe with their unique vision of life.

The limo followed her all the way to the *Old North Church*. She did not look at it again, but she was intensely conscious of the motor purring potently along beside her. She was not at all sure what she was more afraid of – that it would give up on her and drive off, or that it would come to a stop. If she was confronted by Simon's magnetic physical presence,

running away would not be so easy. If he caught her and touched her and talked to her in that forceful way of his, something vital would short-circuit inside her. Part of her would not let her say what she was thinking and the mysterious drug of submitting to him would cloud other feelings, such as the ones Michael filled her with last night...

The car stopped and one of the back doors flew open. Seen out of the corner of her eye the sudden motion made her think of a black wing spreading and all her instincts told her to run. The primal impulse bypassed her brain and her reason; it communicated directly with her muscles, which took her swiftly up the steps and into the church. Of course, now she was trapped in there, and her boots made a hollow sound against the wooden floor as she walked up the aisle.

The church was empty. She was in a public place, but today it was a lifeless shell of white walls and high-backed pews that looked painfully uncomfortable. Clean. hard lines, the stark architecture unrelieved by colors or soft textures. All she saw were dead trees cut up into boards for the floor, into boxes for the seats and into beams to support the arched roof.

Morgan wondered where the hell all the tourists were as halfway up the central aisle she turned around slowly.

Simon's black slacks and sweater were darkness embodied inside the whitewashed space. His presence knocked the breath out of her like a metaphysical force, and the look in his eyes told her body she couldn't even dream of fighting it. Then she saw another tall, black-clad figure entering the church from a side entrance and knew there was no hope for her. Both ways out were blocked; the only way she could go now was towards the altar. Thousands of years ago, the turbulent power of her emotions in those moments would have made an excellent sacrifice, but the foundations of the empty shell surrounding her were control and denial.

She stayed right where she was as Simon and Robert approached her.

"You disappoint me, Morgan." Her lover's voice resonated through the church as if through her very bones.

"Why, because I felt like walking?"

He stopped an arm's-length away from her, but he didn't need to touch her; his penetrating stare effectively pinned her to the spot. She wanted to look away and yet she couldn't. She tried desperately not to think of Michael, but it was impossible. All she could think about was Michael. Simon's mouth hardened almost imperceptibly, but for her it was like seeing the flat-line of her exciting devotion to his will. She was still irresistibly drawn to him, there was no doubt about that...just as there was no denying her attraction to Robert, who was taking a short-cut down an aisle of pews towards her. They were both tall, well-built, handsome, intelligent men, and their black-clad self-confidence was staggering; it made her feel deliciously weak, as if their look and their attitude was a drug part of her couldn't resist even though another part of her wanted to.

Robert gave her a hard, accusing stare even as he asked, "What's gotten into you, Simon? Let her walk away if that's what she wants."

Morgan translated his tone of voice as, "You can have any woman you want. What's so special about her?"

"She doesn't know what she wants," her Master replied shortly. "She's confused."

"Excuse me," she said, "but I'm standing right here, so I would appreciate it if you two would stop talking about me in the third person."

Simon smiled, but his eyes were hard and darker than normal. They made her think of the middle of the ocean with no land in sight as storm clouds gathered overhead and the sun dipped below the horizon—her burning resolve never to see him again; to stand up for herself and defy him; to seek the more subtle depths of love in favor of the intense sexual pleasure of domination and submission. For the first time in her life, she understood that it was indeed possible to drown in someone's eyes.

Without saying another word, he held out a blackgloved hand.

She felt the floor shifting like sand beneath her as something broke and dissolved inside her. Then she was aware only of the cold caress of leather against her warm fingers and of his grip; strong, possessive and inexorable.

\* \* \* \*

Morgan knew perfectly well she had to be punished for her rebellious behavior, but she didn't care. If anything, she was almost looking forward to it, because perhaps in the throes of intense physical pain she would be able to forget Michael and her profound failure. She hadn't succeeded in standing up for herself and her budding feelings for Detective O'Brien. Simon was right; she didn't know what she wanted because she didn't really know who she was anymore.

She slipped into the limousine feeling like a cat entering her luxurious carrier—like a collection of senses and desires she couldn't make heads or tails of by herself. She needed her Master for that; she needed her Master to stroke her and appreciate her wild sensuality and feed her his milk...she was vaguely surprised when he didn't make her suck him down on the way to his house. He didn't speak to her at all until the river was flowing beneath them.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Kathy," he said.

She glanced at him in surprise. "I don't believe it."

"What don't you believe?" he asked patiently, his eyes still a deep, unfathomable blue.

"Did I just hear you apologize to me? I must be dreaming."

"Don't push your luck, Morgan."

"You said you were going to call me yesterday, but you didn't." She was not sure why she brought this up now when she would not trade last night for anything, and then she realized that the point was he had let her down. He had said he was going to do something, and he hadn't. That she was relieved he hadn't called her was beside the point.

"I did *not* say I was going to call you." He stared out at the city. "I told you to be prepared, and you obviously were."

For some reason her heart started hammering against her chest. "What do you mean?"

"You behaved exactly as I suspected you would." He looked at her again, and she suddenly noticed the shadow around his firm lips that told her he had neglected to shave that morning. "You let the detective take you out to dinner, where you poured your heart out to him, and then you fucked him. You obeyed my expectations very nicely. Am I right?"

"Yes, except for one thing. We didn't fuck, we made love."

"That would get very boring for you after a while, Morgan."

"No," she said firmly, "fucking is what gets boring after a while. Making love only gets richer and deeper and sweeter."

The limo purred smoothly off the bridge into Cambridge.

"Take off your panties, and don't make me wait."

She lifted her hips off the exquisitely comfortable seat to raise her dress up around her waist and slipped her black panties down her thighs and over boots.

"Not all the way," he said, "leave them around your ankles." He pulled off one of his gloves, shoved it in his pocket, and grabbed her arm. "Come here...face down... That's a good bad girl. You know where I want your hands. Put them behind you and keep them there."

Morgan couldn't believe she was bent over his knee like a little girl, her naked bottom anticipating the feel of his hand making her pussy warmer and wetter every second she waited for it.

She heard the click of a button being pushed. "Robert, would you say Morgan has been a bad girl?"

"Yes, Sir, I would."

"Then you agree she's earned herself a good spanking?"

"Definitely, Sir."

"A good hard spanking?"

"Very hard, Sir."

"Would you like to listen while I punish her?"

"I would love to."

Morgan wondered why she was not utterly humiliated by this little scenario; she was merely impatient to feel his palm burning against her bottom cheeks. The soft cashmere folds of her dress bunched up around her waist provided a slight cushion against his hard knees pressing into her belly. She couldn't relieve the pressure because her wrists were crossed in the small of her back, and already the blood was rushing to her head. Yet these uncomfortable sensations paled in comparison to how painfully hot her pussy was. A pure lust flashed in her body's moist depths like lightning hitting water and forcing her to hiss, "Please!" "Please *what*?" he asked as gently as her father might have.

She moaned, squeezing her eyes closed against the mere thought of Michael seeing her like this.

"Please *what*?" he insisted, deliberately not touching her so all she felt were the hard legs she was draped over like a spineless doll.

"Please, punish me," she begged miserably, and the sound of Robert's soft laughter flowing out of the intercom was drowned out by the sharp, loud smack of Simon's hand coming down hard on her ass.

It didn't seem possible that a man's hand could be so hard or that it didn't also hurt him as much as it did her to drive it into her with such force over and over again. He kept his palm so rigid it ceased to be flesh-and-blood and became an insensate weapon that hurt as much as a paddle covered with living skin instead of dead leather. He spanked her slowly but relentlessly, letting the stinging, burning sensation in her cheeks reach an excruciating peak before he slapped them again viciously so the pain never climaxed but just kept intensifying. It wasn't long before she was sobbing blindly, waiting for him – praying for him – to stop.

"Keep your hands behind your back!" he snapped as he smacked her again.

She was vaguely aware of the fact that Robert had stopped laughing.

"I don't hear you apologizing for your behavior today, Morgan."

"I'm sorry! Oh, my God, Master, please stop! I'm

sorry! I'm so sorry!"

"What do you think, Robert, does she mean it?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure, Sir."

She took a trembling breath and braced herself for another blow. When it did not come and instead she felt the firm balls of his fingers slide between her moist and swollen labia, her breath caught in her throat as a wave of pleasure crashed through her pussy, inexorably flooding her pelvis as he thrust his hand between her thighs. He gradually penetrated her with it, his fingers stretching her open around them, a stiff pyramid of flesh-and-bone wedging itself into her cleft. They slid easily inside her, she was so wet, but when his thumb also started pressing into her, she cried out in fear.

"Don't move," he said tightly. "Relax."

Her body immediately understood the wisdom of this command, and even though his knees pushing against her diaphragm made it hard for her to breathe, she went completely limp.

"I think what she needs, Robert, is a good fist-fuck."

The pleasure she experienced was so great it mysteriously possessed the soul of pain in that it didn't let up; it just kept getting deeper and hotter and more and more unbearably intense. Yet bear it she did as he thrust his entire hand into her cunt. She held her breath, feeling her pussy clinging and resisting, yet also expanding and submitting, and she let it out in a long, moaning cry of terrified ecstasy when his fist made it through the barriers of her innermost flesh and lodged inside her. His hard wrist caressed her labia, which spread open around it like petals flowering on a smooth trunk.

"Mm..." The sound of Robert's approval flowed caressingly over her. "Make her come, Sir."

"You wouldn't believe how wet that spanking got her, Rob. It's like sticking my hand in a hot, scented bath. She's so fucking wet my fingers are going to be all shriveled when I pull them out. Just a few minutes ago she was citing the virtues of sweet and gentle lovemaking, and now she has a fist thrust up inside her and she loves it so much she's dying to come. Only her mind is holding her body back. It's okay, I won't hurt you, Morgan, let yourself go."

He began sliding his wrist in and out of her slowly while gently turning his fist this way and that, his knuckles grazing her uterus. His arm was thicker and harder than any penis could ever be, and the way it stretched her open around it made her clitoris feel like a quivering drop of pure energy, and as he kept moving his arm, it dissolved like a tear and seemed to rip her flesh open with a joy so sharp all her ideas and concepts of pleasure felt excruciatingly gutted.

She screamed in the throes of an orgasm such as she could never have conceived possible; an orgasm that felt like a sun going novae in her womb and leaving her trembling violently afterwards with the sense that for a few moments her soul had shaken her skeleton like the bars of a prison from which it almost escaped.

"Oh, yes..." Robert said in a throaty voice.

"What do you think?" Simon's voice was also a little deeper, approvingly silky. "Do you think the good detective would ever fist you if you asked him to?"

The question helped distract her from the deep disappointment when he pulled his hand out of her pulsing pussy.

"Answer me," he demanded, and spanked her again.

"No!" she groaned.

"And why is that?" He punctuated his inquiry with another blow.

"Because!"

"Because?"

"Oh, my God, please stop, I can't take anymore!"

"Yes, you can." He proved it. "Because?"

"Because he's too kind!"

"You may sit up now."

He didn't help her, and she felt sick and dizzy, weak and sore, and utterly drained and fulfilled at the same time as she pushed herself up off his knees. She practically collapsed across the seat before she managed to sit up, tugging her dress down over her thighs. The cheeks on her face were nearly as red as the ones on her bottom from the blood rushing to her head.

"Don't you find her choice of words interesting, Robert?"

"Yes, I do, Sir."

"Maybe you could explain it to her."

"Certainly. You described Detective O'Brien as too

kind, Morgan. You did not say 'because he's kind', you said, 'because he's *too* kind'."

"Revealing, isn't it?"

"Very."

Morgan became aware of the outside world again just as they were passing the massive ornate gate leading into Mount Auburn Cemetery. Any future she might have had with Michael was dead and buried now for sure. There had never really been any hope for them; she was deluding herself.

"So, where's Kathy?" she asked listlessly. "Chained in your basement?"

"Kathy is safe at Auntie's house. You know how some old women collect stray cats? Well, Emily collects stray pussies...although I'm the one who brings them to her for safekeeping. She can't wait for me to close on Brighton Manor." He had switched off the intercom so Robert was no longer part of the conversation. They were leaning back in their seats like astronauts as the car made its way up the steep hill to the house.

"I'm in love with Michael," she said quietly.

"Maybe you're in love with us both, Morgan. I don't think so, though, not yet. I think the person you're in love with is yourself, and you believe you love whoever it is that gives you what you want and need at the moment. And please don't take that as a criticism, because it's not. It's actually a compliment of sorts. If more people loved themselves, it would be a much better world."

She said in a clipped tone like a schoolgirl reciting

a lesson, "Because how can you truly love someone else if you don't know how to love yourself."

"Precisely...fuck."

"What?" She looked at him in alarm.

"Now what do you suppose *he's* doing here?"

Morgan saw a car parked in the open space in front of the house and her pulse sped up even though she didn't recognize it. "Who?" she asked softly.

"Your knight in tarnished armor. He really should cut down on his smoking. Somehow I don't see you visiting a cancer ward everyday."

She scooted away from him on the seat and the second the car came to a stop, she tried to open her door.

"Robert," Simon said, "keep Morgan's door locked while I see what the detective wants."

"You can't keep me locked up in here!"

His response was to slip lithely out of the limousine and swiftly slam the door closed behind him.

"Robert, let me out of here!" she yelled.

Silence.

Michael stepped into her line of sight, his breath clearly visible in the cold and humid afternoon. She watched Simon walk up to him and say something, and judging from both men's expressions, it was not a polite greeting. Now Michael was speaking and it made her desperate that she couldn't hear him. Her heart and soul didn't seem to care that she had just climaxed with another man's fist in her pussy. It was Michael's face she couldn't take her eyes off. Then Simon smiled abruptly as he held up his right hand. For a moment it looked as if the detective asked him what time it was and he obliged by showing him his wristwatch, but what he was actually doing was letting the other man get a whiff of the delicious scent still clinging to his fingers.

Michael turned his head and seemed to look right at her through the tinted glass. She thanked God for the knowledge that she was not actually visible, but she could feel him sensing her presence as distinctly as he smelled her cunt's salty-sweet juices. His face had been buried in her streaming cleft last night; her body's unique perfume was still fresh in his mind.

Morgan suddenly understood why women faint as every detail visible through the glass became so sharp it seemed to cut into her brain and straight down into her lungs, forcing her to close her eyes as she struggled to breathe. Bastard! she thought wildly. Bastard!

Yet she had no one to blame but herself. How was it possible to have such deep feelings for one man and at the same time to let another man's fist deep into your body? Michael would never believe her now if she told him she loved him...and maybe her Master was right, and it wasn't true at all...maybe her Master understood her better than anyone and she was going against her soul by playing it safe with an officer of the law, of all the laws she and her dominant lover were metaphorically and literally breaking.

When Detective O'Brien abruptly approached the limousine she slumped down in the seat. As he

walked straight towards her door she wished the earth would open up and swallow her whole. She couldn't face him... she couldn't possibly face him now! Even through the thick glass she heard him bark an order. An instant later, the lock beside her snapped up. He opened the door and bent over to look inside.

Biting her lip, her hands clutching the edge of the seat, her pussy still pulsing like a second heart between her naked thighs, she met his eyes.

"Morgan," he said.

"Michael," she whispered.

"Why are you still sitting in here? Didn't you see me? Didn't you want to say hello? Are you hiding from me?"

"Oh, no," she gasped. "I wanted to get out, but..." He had shot the questions at her in a cool, interrogative tone that slipped straight between her heartbeats, and now his eyes seemed to reach inside her for the rest of her sentence. "But he wouldn't let me..."

"He locked you inside this car against your will?"

She couldn't possibly lie to him. "Yes."

"Get out, please." He straightened up and walked back to where Simon was standing, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his slacks, his face as utterly expressionless as a mask in which only his blazing blue eyes were alive.

She grabbed her jacket and slipped it on as she got out of the limousine. The temperature had dropped considerably since she began her walk, and the electricity in the air suggested another snowstorm was preparing to wed earth and sky. She didn't bother to retrieve her panties and was selfconsciously aware of her sticky vulva still tingling from the endorphin-filled foam of her powerful orgasm. She stopped a few feet away from the two men.

"You've gone too far this time." It was Detective O'Brien speaking, not Michael.

Simon made a dismissive gesture with his head and the limo started slowly around the house towards the garage.

"You keep crossing the line, and yet you expect the Department to sign on the dotted line when the time comes?"

Morgan stood rooted to the spot as Michael reached into the pocket over his heart and produced a battered pack of cigarettes. She recognized his lighter as he slipped it out of his pants pocket, flinging his open trenchcoat back in the process. He was an inch or so taller than Simon and his broad shoulders tapered down to narrow hips over his long legs. She kept remembering what he looked like naked, lying on his side in her bed, as he stood half-turned away from her. Yet despite his physical stance, she sensed the attention of his whole being concentrated on her, and suddenly she understood that he was very deliberately placing himself between her and her Master. Simon glanced at her as Michael lit his cigarette as if to say, "I told you so."

Michael took a quick drag, slipped his lighter back in his pocket, and exhaled as he asked, "How important is Brighton Manor to you?"

"Don't tell me," her Master said lightly, "I can guess the correct answer to that. Would it be, 'More important than Morgan'?"

"Is it?"

"You know how important it is to me, Mike."

Morgan winced; she had never heard Simon sound so angry and so vulnerable at the same time. She found herself walking towards them, though she had not been invited into the conversation.

"My, oh, my, Detective," Simon lightened his tone again, but there was not even the ghost of a smile playing around his hard mouth. "I do believe you're trying to blackmail me."

"Watch your language." Michael frowned through the dragonish amount of smoke his breath and a single cigarette were creating. "I'm merely suggesting a trade."

"I'm not property," she heard herself say. "No one owns me."

"Then stop behaving as though someone does," Detective O'Brien retorted mildly.

"You're a married man, Mike," Simons reminded him almost gently, his eyes on Morgan. "You're hardly in a position to bargain," he added firmly.

"I'm dead serious, Simon. Let her go."

Morgan suffered the disturbing impression that her Master's body had become mysteriously radioactive with fury.

"Let me get this straight, Detective. You're asking me to choose between Brighton Manor and Morgan?" "No, I'm not asking you to, I'm telling you to," Michael continued smoking placidly. "It's about time someone told *you* what to do for a change."

"You can't be serious?" Simon pulled his hands out of his pockets, but then didn't seem to know what to do with them.

Morgan stared at the slight bulge over both his thighs from where his gloves were shoved deep into his pockets, and the sight conveyed to her the full extent of his physical and emotional tension.

"Morgan, do you think I'm serious?" Michael asked her, letting his eyes touch hers for a hot instant through the smoke.

She suffered a debilitating flash of desire remembering how generously hard his dick was that morning as she rode him. "Yes, I do, but you're putting him on the spot, Michael. It's not fair."

"Thank you," Simon said shortly. "But perhaps we should take this discussion inside where it's warmer."

"There's nothing to take inside. Which is it going to be, Morgan or your mansion full of girls?"

Simon held her eyes, and her heart almost seemed to stop, his stare was so intensely sober. Then he shrugged. "There's no contest, Detective. I've already invested a great deal of time and money in this project, and the last thing I need is the Department making things difficult for me, but I love her. What I feel for her I haven't felt for any other woman, and that's priceless."

"Let's go," Michael commanded, grabbing her arm. "No man tells me what to do," she said quietly, staring into her Master's eyes. "You're deliberately hurting not only Simon, but all the girls he can help, by forcing him to choose between Brighton Manor and me, and that's not right. He's never hurt me like that. The pain he gives me is full of pleasure, not cruel. I'm sorry, but I know what I want now."

Michael dropped his cigarette and stepped on it. "How can you say no man tells you what to do and willingly stay here?"

She smiled and moved past the detective towards her Master. "No man tells me what to do, unless I want him to."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maria Isabel Pita is the author of seven erotic novels, *Thorsday Night, Eternal Bondage, To Her Master Born* (re-printed as an exclusive hard-cover edition by the Doubleday Venus Book Club) *Dreams of Anubis, Rite of Way, Recipe For Romance* and *The Fabric of Love.* She is also the author of the non-fiction book, *The Story of*  M - A Memoir, a vividly detailed account of her first year of training as a slave to her Master and soul mate. An excerpt from *The Story of* M appeared in *The Big Book of Hot Women's Erotica 2004.* Maria lives with her beloved Master, Stinger, and their dog, Merlin. Part two of her memoir, *Beauty and Submission*, will be published in January 2005.

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