

A woman is shown from the chest down, wearing a light-colored, possibly gold or silver, corset with vertical ribbing and a white garter belt. She is also wearing white stockings. Her hands are resting on her thighs, and she appears to be holding a whip. The background is a solid, deep blue. The title 'Slave Wife' is written in a large, white, cursive font across the upper part of the image.

Slave Wife

By
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Gaines
Bennett

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Prologue

Ten years in the past...

Mei felt their eyes as she passed the old Chinese Telephone Exchange's three tiered black and red pagoda, firmly propelled by her diminutive grandmother. The tiny old woman, clothed head to toe in black, moved remarkably quickly and determinedly on exaggeratedly bowed bound feet. Normally she provided the girl with protection just short of claustrophobic. At this moment, though, a jolt of unaccountable fear rippled through Mei's delicate body, spurring her deep under her grandmother's formidable aura.

The Caucasian man towered above Chinatown's residents as he slowly strolled along the crowded street, so tall, handsome and authoritative. A small, exquisite woman of perhaps 40 years old, clad in a narrow black silk cheongsam dress, the flat raised collar and fitted skirt accentuating her shapely body and long white throat, took many rapid yet graceful steps at his side.

It was a gesture so brief Mei wasn't certain she saw it. For a shameful if unwitting instant her eyes met his. In that instant he gave an almost imperceptible nod and the beautiful woman's black eyes were upon her, searing her flesh.

She'd never actually met the woman but she'd overheard her parents' and grandmother's circumspect whispers. Though she hadn't fully understood, clearly the woman was a force to be avoided ... and feared.

The last thing Mei remembered before waking to an elegant voice was pushing through the densely milling crowd toward a huge bucket of pink and yellow stargazer lilies sitting near one of the Walter U. Lum marketplace's many shop entrances. Her brow furrowed with effort to remember and the sensation – rubbing? – startled her. Flowers, the overpowering floral scent, that was her last memory.

The female voice spoke Mandarin from an older, more courtly age, rich, florid and meticulously formal. Only the words penetrated the strange black haze. And they filled her with fear so intense she thought her heart would explode. “Be still and silent – and obey – and you will live.”

At once painful awareness shook her to her tender core. Something hard yet peculiarly yielding filled her wide-open mouth almost to bursting and bit sharply into her cheeks, making her jaw ache and head hurt. Panicked confusion threatened to again sink her into unconsciousness. Black unconsciousness like the incomprehensible blackness that covered her face, clinging impenetrably over eyes, nose and mouth. She struggled to breathe through the obstruction and the strange, clinging material. A racking lightning bolt of fear shot above her swirling mental sea. She thought she’d suffocate and almost cried out ... until she remembered the woman’s words and also, thankfully, realized she could breathe, if with difficulty.

The girl so wanted to see, to know what was happening to her, and yet the knowledge terrified her. Marshalling her courage, opening eyes wide, she struggled to see the voice’s owner but could make out only dark shapes. She tried to rub away the encroaching fabric and with a wrenching start realized she couldn’t move her hand. Horribly her mind cleared but not the blackness.

Where was she? How had she gotten here? And more frightening, what did they want from her and would they really let her live?

She lay on her belly – a hot flush suffused her face – naked on soft, cool fabric. Her legs and arms were spread in a tightly stretched, intensely humiliating X exposing – silent tears rose into her eyes – everything! She gave a tiny twist to her wrist then winced. Metal chains! Though her terror was almost beyond sensibility, she was certain of them when the large, rough links bit harshly into her skin. At the realization her body seemed to collapse in on itself, all dynamism, all will, drained away leaving her utterly limp. And wet! A chill

gripped her at awareness of the soaking cold clinging to her face.

Or perhaps it was her fear. She didn't know. Tears gushed into her eyes and were sucked up by the black fabric. She didn't know anything! Not even if she'd live.

The soft click of a latch, once, then again, jerked her to rigid attention. Fear, tangible as a vice, squeezed her heart. A large presence walked quietly toward her, footfalls shushing slightly against carpeting. She felt it circle, circle interminably all the way around her. Unsuccessfully she struggled to see through the thick black.

Its first real sound was incomprehensible. Breathing, snuffling, a strange combination of both, like a live boar she'd once seen in the market. Something touched her spine and her body jerked involuntarily, almost wrenching arms and legs from their sockets and cracking slim joints against metal.

With insane relief she recognized fingertips – warm, smooth fingertips. Gently they touched her, not stroking but lifting off and returning to some other spot, her spine, upper arm, waist, back of knee. As the fingers moved its agitation seemed to build, she could feel and also hear it. With a snort it touched her behind ...

... and it was on her, it's hot breath, thick as treacle, on her back. Then wetness soused her back and moved lower, accompanied by the hideous sniffing noise. Its tongue! With unbearable shame and revulsion she recognized what it was doing. It was licking down the crease between her legs! Everything, even the unclean parts, covering them with warm gooey – vile – saliva.

Its breathing had become so laboured it beat against her ears. Even her chest seemed to vibrate with it, punctuated by its moaning slobbering. The pitch intensified to fever. Suddenly something pressed high up on her inner thigh and there was excruciating pain. Her scream, muffled and thin, froze her into manic attention through which the pain vibrated. Would they kill her because of her noise? In dumb terror she waited.

And then, to her shocked relief, it lifted off her. The next moment, though, the unimaginable happened. A force, like a fist, pushed against a part she didn't dare contemplate. It pushed, harder and harder. Abruptly she – and her world – tore apart.

Nine and a half years in the past.

She'd forgotten so many things. She no longer remembered when she'd last left "her" room – that's what he called it – nor really when she'd had a "proper" meal, as her mother would have said. A tear started in her eye when she thought of her mother, but she hurriedly repressed it. Had he seen? The thought rose disjointedly into her mind accompanied by an only partially connected surge of anxiety.

"Are you feeling well, my dear?" The small table between them, a precious Chippendale piecrust tea table, was clothed with two heavy linen runners crossed perpendicularly at the centre and draped protectively over the fluted edges. Exquisitely detailed chintz china breakfast dishes and delicate silver flatware – so beautiful and refined, like everything in the room – were set before them on the creamy cloth. The tiny bite of egg in her fork's sculpted tines quivered as she looked across at him. When she tried to steady it, she felt the tight seams of the dress he'd told her to wear pull against her breasts and underarms, even against the skin-like waist cinch's constrictive ribs.

His tone and facial expression were so gentle, so considerate. She could see that his continual assertion of love and concern for her must certainly be the truth. He was only striving to help her fulfil her potential, to attain the perfection of which he said she was capable. For an instant, she felt profoundly grateful to him.

His brow furrowed. Her body uncontrollably tensed and her breath stopped in her chest. But the next minute he smiled pleasantly and she breathed again. "I do believe your appearance is improving. Our regimen seems to be working

well.” He reached across and tenderly squeezed the hand holding the fork. Her hand seemed to her to have no substance, to be in danger of disappearing all together if he pressed his fingers together. He spoke as if to a child. “Now eat before the delicious food gets cold.”

She brought her shaking fingers toward the silver metal bands swathing her mouth and throat and running over her head, now unlocked in front and folded back on steel hinges to leave an inch wide opening across her lips. Where was his other hand? She wanted to look at the dials on the metal box at his side but didn’t dare.

She gave an imperceptible sigh. Really, it didn’t matter. She had no choice. As the fork touched her lips, her nerves seemed to turn off – or maybe it was on, she didn’t know – in the corners of her jaw and the sides of her neck and head. From outside herself – or so it seemed – she watched her head loll uselessly forward and felt pain stab through her tongue.

His face, smiling benignly over at her, fluoresced neon in the blackness that filled her vision.

Chapter One

Ten years in the past.

Karen and her friend, Delia, giggled together near, but not quite under, the mistletoe.

They liked to think of themselves as identical twins. They were both on the cheerleading squad. Their pale brown hair was streaked by the same hairdresser on the same days with blond the yellow of early corn. They even had almost the same birthday – both very excited about turning eighteen in the spring.

Actually, Delia was a little shorter than Karen's 5'8" and about a stone thinner. Karen was healthy, robust and rosy cheeked, like the farm girl she would have been if her father had not been forced to sell off most of the family's farm and go to work in their tiny rural town's only factory. And though Delia was pretty, Karen's facial features were classically regular, beautiful under a slight padding of baby fat – indeed, perfect.

Karen's Dad had said Delia could come with the family to the company Christmas party, this Christmas an extra fancy affair to introduce the company's new owner to his employees.

Now the girls stood holding plates only partially emptied of masses of Christmas sweets more fabulous than anything they'd ever tasted. They stared at the boss when they didn't think he was looking, telling each other stories about how he would walk over and kiss them under the mistletoe. They couldn't believe how young he was. 30? Well, much younger than Karen's father anyway ... and how handsome.

Delia thought he looked like Jude Law, with his elegant wavy hair and smouldering eyes. Suddenly Delia gasped and poked her elbow into Karen's ribs.

Karen spun around to see the new owner coming toward them, toward her she realized, an expression on his face that

made her breath stop in her throat. He smiled down on her and extended his hand. She quickly tried to shift her plate to her left hand so she could shake his.

Instead he took her plate and handed it to a passing waiter. "Let me help you," he said. He looked deep into her eyes. "You have a very beautiful face."

His eyes flickered discreetly lower before lighting back on her face. An anxious tremor passed through her. Did he think something was wrong with her? She was too inexperienced to know for certain and didn't have a clue how to react. Instead she waited hopelessly for his approval, looking enthralled, almost hypnotized, into his face like a small house pet.

He turned and walked away.

Karen heard her parents arguing when they thought she was asleep. She heard her mother weeping and her father's deep, agitated voice. "I don't know what else to do. I could go to jail."

She heard her mother's voice and knew she was clenching her hands as she did when she was extremely upset. "Why? Why did this happen?"

"I swear. I didn't do it." In her mind's eye, she could see her father's hulking form bent intently over her diminutive mother. His voice became uncharacteristically plaintive. "You know that, don't you?"

Karen anxiously strained to hear but for awhile there was nothing except silence. What was happening?

Her father's loud exclamation caused her to start. "You believe me, don't you?"

Finally, she heard her mother's strangled, quavering voice. "Yes, of course I do ... but I don't understand what he wants us to do."

Karen's father voice was hesitant, thoughtful. "I guess he wants us to make sure she goes out with him." His tone changed, sounding optimistic. "It won't be so bad, will it?"

He's handsome and rich. She'll probably think it's a fairy tale."

With every appearance of casualness Michael surveyed the girls, but only girls with traditional miens engaged in traditional activities. His smoky gaze fixed on girls walking with heads demurely bowed beside chaperones or quietly assisting their parents in the small shops, and then moved on.

The superb Madame Lee minced along at his side, her femininity bewitching in its adeptness. With incomparable sensitivity, she assimilated his every movement, every intention. Though too old and experienced for his tastes, Michael thoroughly admired the woman. Not only her precisely engineered beauty and sensuality, which was remarkable. He thought her brilliant and, perhaps more useful, shrewd. She was, he believed, one of his few equals, able to fulfil his requirements unequivocally and with utmost discretion.

In the first month of their acquaintance, Madame had offered him an array of young girls tendered for sale by their families. As with all his needs, she quickly learned, however. Only special girls, girls exceptionally pure, cherished and protected, suited him. These girls were never for sale.

As they approached the historic black and red pagoda he saw her. Underneath his unwavering exterior, excitement billowed into his chest like a piercing wind. She was perfect! He'd never been certain why but height was always an issue for him. Like every other female aspect, height must be modest, not short but no more than 5'6". He estimated hers at 5'5". Her fragile body was nubile, in its first full bloom, her features as delicate and harmonious as a rare, pale orchid. Celestial! His blood pulsed in intoxicating accord with each beat of his heart.

As her grandmother turned her into the bustling marketplace, she looked up and their eyes met. That one look gushed like a waterspout into his groin. Hurriedly, demurely, her eyes dropped to the ground. Yes! He had to have her!

His nod was almost imperceptible but Madame Lee was, as always, ahead of him. Her red-lacquered fingertips touched his forearm. “Michael, would you care for tea?”

Happily he smiled down on her. “Why don’t we watch first?” With cloud-like effortlessnes, she guided him into the market, through crowds who miraculously parted before them in, he was certain, awful respect.

The grandmother moved between booths and shop-fronts, examining, haggling and buying with the girl in her wake. Madame again touched his arm as the girl walked intently toward a bucket of pink and yellow lilies at a storefront. As she approached, a Chinese workman, one of the identically dressed hundreds populating Chinatown, stepped forward and offered a long golden stem. Carefully, so as not to cover her face with the flower’s profuse yellow pollen, she sniffed. Appearing from nowhere a second workman joined in their admiration. The two men helped her hold the flower as they gently ushered her away. Michael and Madame had already retired to her house for tea when the girl’s grandmother rushed through the marketplace shrieking hysterically.

The tea was, of course, exceptional. Until he’d met Madame Lee he’d not realized tea’s vast differences in quality. She served a quality suitable for the Emperor, a different variety each visit. Today it was jasmine, and the contradiction of exotic flowers with superbly acid tannin blossomed sublimely on his tongue. With it were delicate, pale yellow almond cookies decoratively nestled in a fine Song Dynasty rimmed celadon dish. “For good fortune and virility,” she invariably told him.

Leisurely they partook. When they’d finished Madame raised one long finger and excused herself. Without moving, he waited for her return. But within his breast his heart beat like a hammer.

She slipped silently into the sitting room, graciously holding the door ajar, while she bowed him through. He ascended a lushly carpeted staircase to a familiar lacquered door. Each step made his eagerness more palpable and the insistent voice louder within him.

With infinite gentleness he turned the gilded handle and eased open the solid – soundproofed Madame told him on his first visit – door. His breath ceased and he lurched awkwardly as he stepped inside. Yes, perfect!

Centred in the ornately decorated chamber on a black lacquered bed, no really a platform, the slight body stretched, wrists and ankles chained to U-shaped attachments at each corner. The girl's alabaster skin against blood-red silk coverlets highlighted her perfect form. With almost unbearable anticipation, Michael stood still, examining the spine's fragile curve and the swell of young twin bottoms.

Slowly, quietly, he approached, pleurably noting his feet's immersion into the thick scalloped Chinese rug. He circled, all the way around the platform, touching this part and that with flattened fingertips, sucking in her quivers of life. For several moments he stood at her head, enjoying the contrast of the small black undifferentiated roundness, which appeared even smaller in the stretchy hood that clung fast to every contour, to the body's lean pallid detail. He bent and examined the gag's rounded bulge, only slight due to tight straps pulling the ball far back into her mouth.

All the while the voice was speaking to him – first whispering then raising its voice louder and louder until now it almost screamed. Michael heard his own disturbed breathing, the voice's breathing. His hands pressed over his ears but he knew it was hopeless. The beast within him would very soon have its way. Even now the pressure was growing unbearable. With excruciating determination, he struggled against it, still walking, still touching.

“Just let go,” it told him. “Give her to me. You know it's really what you want.” The voice pressed him but it also lulled, seduced.

Yes, he knew, it was what he wanted. With a sigh that exploded outward he succumbed. Then the beast was on her, feasting on this exceptional delicacy. Michael's consciousness reeled in ecstasy as the beast tasted her, licking the wondrously fine tissues. It chose her lower back first, taunting him and

itself with the delights no more than an inch away. Slowly, then faster, faster, his tongue moved into the long crease.

Michael watched, distant yet simultaneously deep in the carnality, then reeled as the bestial tongue's tip touched the delicate anal puckers and pressed deeper. "So sweet!" the beast exclaimed and he concurred. Her every millimetre tasted so deliciously sweet. With sincere regret, Michael understood that the beast would have that hole, that he would no doubt rip the tight, untrammelled little orifice to shreds.

But now the tongue continued lower. It licked between her diminutive labia, first the outer then the inner. The long licks grew in frenzy as it drank her juices. It wanted to consume every bit of her and it did, burying its – his – teeth into her inner thigh's splendid tautness. Michael heard the remnants of a scream, thin and airy around the gag and through the black fabric, and felt the beast revel in the sound, its organ engorging to rock-like hardness.

Somehow, Michael didn't remember the actions, the organ was uncovered. It rose tall and straight between the open white thighs. He saw its round cap press against the puckers, harder, harder, harder. Michael was breathless with anticipation. With one final frenzied push it was inside. Again the girl shrieked and now she writhed uncontrollably against the chains' restraint, cutting her wrists. Michael could see she strained to be still but her pain was too great.

And the organ was inside with sensations too exquisite to control, even if he'd been able. The hole was so warm, so comforting, as it engulfed him in a secure caress. Innumerable indefinable sensations swirled through him as the beast took her, withdrawing almost entirely out of the tight hole and then ravenously re-entering. Michael watched the slender body's contortions, indeed felt them telegraphed from the beast's penetration, and bliss rolled from his centre into every cell.

He gave himself up to the sensation, to the heat, joining in his beast's celebration. His hands held the narrow behind still against the great force moving inside it. The speed, the frenzy, grew to levels so rapturous as to approach pain ... and madness. Together they screamed for release. Vaguely he

heard the girl scream with them as the universe convulsed into a point then exploded into delirium.

When consciousness returned he found his lengthy bulk collapsed completely covering the small, still frame, his cock buried inside her to his balls. Quickly he pressed long arms against the red silk, lifting his torso's weight off her but not yet extracting his penis. Was she dead? He hoped not. She was not yet too sullied to discard and he so wanted to use her again.

He pressed two fingers into her armpit and searched for a pulse. Yes! Weak but apparent. He lifted the hood to her nose and unbuckled the ball gag, in passing observing the deep scores beside the pink lips and the black hair's upward twists above the sylphlike neck. Not off entirely. She would wear the black covering till she left this place.

Her anus was wonderfully warm and wet around his detumescing penis. Ever-so-slightly he moved, still enjoying the sensations and not yet ready to extract himself. Particularly enjoyable was the heated fluid seeping against his balls. For perhaps ten minutes, perhaps longer, he was too engaged to be certain, he made microscopic movements, this way and that. Each fractional movement shot through him with a vibrant, electric twitch.

She woke with a start, struggled for only an instant before full awareness returned and she sank into horrified stillness. Really, it was icing on the cake. He didn't think of himself as cruel yet he couldn't help himself. His penis still lodged deep within the orifice that was now his, he again pressed his weight downward onto the slim spine, listening attentively, lovingly, to her renewed labours to breath. His lips touched her cheek and he sensed her straining stillness. Then he whispered into her ear, "I would not have taken you if you weren't so pure, so exquisite."

Remorse, or a parody of it that inextricably merged with sensuality, filled his voice, "I'm sorry I must destroy such perfection but I'm afraid it has to be. Think of it as your fate and do know that you are cherished beyond all other girls." Thereupon he explained in the most gratifying detail what he would glory in doing to her. Really, it was a love story and he

told it with luxurious solicitude. As he whispered, his penis once again grew long and unrelenting inside her anus.

Karen thought her parents should be ecstatic at their only child attracting the attention of a rich, handsome man. For days, she'd watched them trying to be enthusiastic about her impending date.

Her mother had spent one entire Saturday walking the many miles of the massive Mall of America with her and Delia trying to find just the right dress. They'd finally chosen black velvet with a wide skirt and a beaded bodice. Though from Donna Karan's lower priced line, it was still far more than they could easily afford. Delia could not stop talking about how beautiful the dress looked on Karen and with each comment even more colour climbed into Karen's usually rosy cheeks. She felt so elegant and adult in the dress – too grown up, too revealing, her mother had complained before she acquiesced.

Karen sat primly on the flowered sofa's dented surface, her ankles crossed, her hands clasped in her lap, her parents hovering nearby, everyone waiting for him – Michael, he'd said to call him – to arrive. She peered from one face to the other. Yes, something strange was definitely below the surface. But she was way too excited to think about it now.

The loud bell her father had installed to ring throughout the house and in the barn almost made her jump to the ceiling. Her father motioned her to remain seated and went to the door. She heard his voice rumble, "Hello Mr. ... ermmm, Michael. Please come in." She had a fleeting awareness of her father's tension before he ushered Michael into the small, dark, old-fashioned living room – suddenly so dowdy and insignificant – and she could think of nothing else.

Frenzied butterflies flew through her stomach as she tried to muster the nerve to look at him. He was so handsome! Even with no experience, she could tell his dark suit was perfectly cut for his tall, masculine frame. An unruly lock of hair fell into his velvety eyes and he abstractedly pushed it away with one large, perfectly manicured hand as he regarded –

examined? – her. Suddenly she felt awkward and unsure of her appearance, even of her new dress.

“Shall we go?” He extended his hand and lifted her to her feet. She thought she saw a line form and as quickly disappear between his brows. His fingers moved, circling her elbow. She winced and jerked, inadvertently struggling to escape his metallic grip but he held her fast. She stopped still, surprised, and though his fingers remained on her elbow he immediately relaxed his grip.

Now he smiled down at her and she felt something entirely new, something hitherto outside her reality. She paused to put on her pink down jacket – her only coat and winter was cold in Minnesota. With his help, she slipped into the bulky sleeves and pulled the soft fluffy garment around her. The coat seemed somehow symbolic. She felt bathed in warmth and security far greater than ever before, far greater than her parents had ever given her. The very air formed an intoxicating fog around her, sparkling with silvery, sultry succour as Michael firmly propelled her to his long black limousine waiting on the farmhouse’s gravel drive.

Michael’s chauffeur – who wasn’t uniformed but looked like the pictures she’d seen of secret service agents in sleek dark suits and plastic earpieces – held the car door. Karen tried to climb daintily into the back seat. But despite her cheerleader’s agility she’d not been educated to finesse. The coat’s inflexible fabric pulled at her limbs from every direction and the dress bunched over her thighs. For many miserable seconds she strained to make her movements graceful, until she landed on the soft leather with an ungainly thump. She hoped he hadn’t seen but knew he had. Her eyes fixed on the floor and her cheeks flamed red.

Silence settled around her. She couldn’t bring herself to speak, felt far too self-conscious, but strangely didn’t think she needed to. Instead her senses seemed transfigured, tingling with enchantment. The seat’s dark leather was lush under her open palm. Its rich fragrance mixed with the illusive notes of Michael’s shadowy cologne, drenching her being. She realized

she couldn't hear, or even feel, the gravel crunch beneath the car wheels. Hushed and tranquil luxury became all there was.

After several minutes she realized he was looking at her. Timidly she raised her eyes. His next words sounded kind but they filled her with shame. "I'm sorry, my dear, but I'm afraid I can't take you to the restaurant in that dress," he fingered the pink microfiber and shook his head disapprovingly, "or that coat. We'll have to find you something else to wear." He pushed a button on a nearby, faintly lit panel. "George, please call Emeline and tell her we're on our way."

Humiliation overwhelmed her. Now she saw herself as she must look in his eyes – a poor, unsophisticated and no doubt coarse schoolgirl. Her happy fairytale fantasies dissolved. Her cheeks flamed crimson and hot. Jangled nerves surged from their hiding place just beneath her surface. Her heart thumped in her ears. Her stomach knotted and she was afraid she'd be sick. What was happening? Where were they going? Who was Emeline? And most important, what could he possibly want from her?

Michael seemed so capable – so able to take care of her. She'd been glad of his control but underneath, in places she hadn't wanted to see, it also worried her. Now, though, something new, something incomprehensible, was happening. Her life no longer seemed her own and she had no idea where events were taking her. She was afraid to question or complain. But when through the tinted glass she saw the apparition of Minneapolis, no she realized, St. Paul's scintillating skyline rise out of the night sky, she dared ask, "Are we going downtown?" Her own voice sounded insubstantial and as timid as a tiny grey field mouse.

Michael simply patted her hand. In the city light, faint through the tinted windows, she thought she saw his lips curl upward.

A silent half hour later the long limo pulled around an illuminated pool, surrounded with greenery even in mid-winter, to a stop under the covered entrance of the splendid old Saint Paul Hotel. A doorman, resplendent in the hotel's elaborate, arcane uniform, stepped smartly forward to open the

door. Michael stretched his long legs and slid dexterously from the car. He extended his hand to Karen. Shyly but gratefully she laid her hand in his and he helped her out.

Despite spending her entire seventeen and a half years within forty miles of the twin cities, Karen had never been this close to the Saint Paul. And her family would never have dared step inside. She was dying to look at everything, beginning with the dense ivy, sparkling under a light dusting of snow, which climbed far up the venerable yellow brick walls and to which Michael seemed utterly oblivious. Again, his strong fingers gripped her elbow – she felt their pressure even through the thick down – as he shepherded her through the glass doors into the lobby.

The warm, flower-scented air struck her face. She abruptly halted, staring at the heavy golden marble columns and the massive old-fashioned chandeliers, their hundreds of tiny, cascading pieces of cut crystal held together by gilded tendrils ... for the instant he allowed before he again drove her forward to the bank of elevators.

The scrolled letters engraved into the bronze plaque on the wide penthouse doorway said “The Ordway Suite.” Karen could not believe what was on the door’s other side. Never in her life had she been in a place this grand – except some of the period rooms on the third floor of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts that she’d visited with her class. She had no idea the style of the suite’s furniture and decorations in polished wood, crystal and gold, only that they looked wonderful and unbelievably expensive.

But it was the woman she found most astonishing ... and disturbing. Karen guessed she was 25 though worldly in a way Karen didn’t understand. She was model thin with flawless white skin and a smooth helmet of brown hair so dark it was almost black, cut to her upright shoulders and groomed with geometric precision. She wore a black dress that startled Karen with its impeccable, immaculate simplicity – how could anyone be so wrinkle free? Karen wondered – and shining black pumps with impossibly tall stiletto heels. Her lipstick and fingernails were the colour of red wine.

She glided toward Michael with long yet exquisitely feminine strides. “Bonjour, Michael.” Her voice was just slightly throaty and she pronounced the name almost but not quite like “Michel”. Michael released Karen’s elbow to press the woman’s slim arms between his hands. She kissed him full on the mouth and Karen first felt a hot, irrational surge of jealousy, then a little anger that she immediately squelched.

Finally, it was fear that stayed with her. Michael must have planned this in advance. Who was this woman and what did they want with her? Did they want her to participate in kinky sex? She acknowledged the fear but pushed it away. No one really did those things, did they?

At long last, or so it seemed to Karen, the woman disengaged. She and Michael smiled intimately at each other as if at some private, exclusionary joke. She turned toward Karen. “Hello, I am Emeline.” She pulled Karen toward her and kissed each cheek, letting her fingers linger on Karen’s shoulder. Back to Michael, “I see what you mean.” She lifted a long lock of Karen’s hair and rubbed it between her fingers. “We can fix this.”

Karen nervously accepted Emeline’s help to remove the pink jacket. To Karen’s great chagrin, Emeline’s beautiful dark eyes widened at the sight of her new dress. “Oh la la.” She shook her head. “Michael, I cannot possibly completely make her over tonight.”

Relief and renewed excitement washed over Karen. Now she understood what was happening – and it could be really fun. Would Michael buy her new clothes? Momentarily she thought ashamedly of her dress. But then her mind whirled enthusiastically on, until the next moment when Emeline said, “Karen, please remove your clothing.”

Karen’s face flushed and her eyes jumped frantically to Michael, who smiled complaisantly back at her, and then back to Emeline. “I ... I ...” she stammered.

Emeline smiled at Michael then took Karen’s hand. Karen became uncomfortably conscious of the rough calluses on her

palm rubbing against the French woman's soft, silken skin. "We'll go into the bedroom."

Karen could sense Michael's eyes on her back as she accompanied Emeline. Her muscles ached with the tension of his scrutiny. She was afraid he would follow but he didn't. Emeline led her through the glass doors and released the window coverings, obscuring the bedroom from Michael's view.

"Now please ..." Emeline stopped, her regard caught at Karen's feet. "Oh Cherie! Where did you find those shoes?" Karen was relieved that Emeline clearly didn't need an answer. She did not want to tell her she'd bought the shiny black "evening" pumps on sale for fifteen dollars at a discount shoe store in the Mall. "Please, take them off quickly and then the dress." When Karen stepped out of her shoes, Emeline gingerly picked each up between two fingers and rapidly deposited it in a small leather-covered trash bin.

Shyly, Karen reached behind and unzipped her dress, then, under Emeline's intent and disconcerting gaze, slowly lowered it and stepped out. At once the bits of padding at her waist, her behind, her thighs, overwhelmed her awareness.

But the so slim woman didn't comment. Instead she said, "Oh my dear, where did you get those awful stockings and that underwear?"

Once again – so many times now – colour rushed into Karen's cheeks. That her lacy pink polyester underwear was inadequate had never occurred to her. In fact, she didn't understand why it was. She'd thought it was pretty when she'd bought it at Wal-Mart, the giant store that supplied everything from food to hunting supplies to small towns throughout the U.S. And stockings, pantyhose actually, were stockings, weren't they?

Emeline sadly shook her head. Her hair swung like a heavy velvet curtain as she plied her long legs to a lovely arched armoire adjacent to the four poster bed. "Fortunately I came prepared." When she returned to Karen, she held several

gauzy cream items in her fingers. “I think you’ll find these much more pleasurable.”

Karen saw that Emeline expected her to strip right then and there. The woman’s aggressive intention exerted tremendous pressure on Karen to do so. Karen began to unhook her bra, still facing Emeline. She paused. No. She just couldn’t do it. She turned her back, removed the pink bra and replaced it with soft cream lace. It was a little tight. Her small C-cup breasts bulged over the low cups and she could feel the band cutting into the flesh at back and shoulders.

With excruciating self-consciousness she pulled off the pantyhose – which Emeline immediately removed from her view, into the trash Karen was certain – and lowered her panties. The cream lace panties were definitely too small, she discovered when she pulled them up. She could wear them but they cut into her behind and her belly bulged over the top. Far worse, her pubic hair escaped their high cut leg openings. She tried to push it in but it wouldn’t stay.

When Karen lifted the stockings, she realized with dismay that they were real stockings and that a garter belt was with them. She’d never worn a garter belt and had no idea how one worked. What should she do? She stared at them in her hands for an interminable period. Finally she didn’t think she could wait longer. She looked over her shoulder. “I don’t know how to put these on,” she said, feeling totally uncultured and ashamed.

Thankfully, Emeline was kind. “Let me help you.” Karen had previously been too nervous to notice Emeline’s perfume. Now its subtle fragrance struck and captivated her as the woman came close behind. What was different about it? She tried unsuccessfully to define its distinction from the scents her mother and her friends bought – only knew she’d never smelled perfume so gently intoxicating.

Then Emeline’s fingers reached around and took the garter belt. Karen was disoriented, uncomfortably yet at the same time enticingly aware of the warm, dazzling femininity encircling her body like the stretchy lace.

The garment pulled tightly at her waist as Emeline hooked it around her. The woman smoothed the lace, giving the bulges at her waist a little pinch in the process. Karen felt the long nails delicately graze her skin as they tugged the panties over her round bottom.

For a moment, Emeline's palm lingered on the fleshy swell in an incipient semblance of a pat. Karen heard her sigh. "I'm afraid, Cherie, we're going to have to work hard to rid you of this fat." Her tone became reproofing, like Karen's father's when he thought she wasn't listening, "You will work with me on this, won't you? You know Michael will not tolerate any less."

The humiliation once again surging through Karen quickly turned to anxiety. Was Michael trying to control her life? What did he want from her? She felt like running – she looked down at her body – but she was almost naked and had very little money. Would they let her get her clothes? Another blush of chagrin rose up as she remembered her shoes in the trash. How would she get home? Shame filled her. She'd have to call her parents. What would they think of her?

Emeline seemed to sense her distress. "Don't worry, dear, we'll make it fun. Think how wonderful Michael's generosity is. You'll have beautiful new clothes," she touched Karen's hair, "a new hairstyle, everything new and tres elegantes, tres belles. Now, why don't you put on the stockings and we'll find you a dress and some exquisite shoes."

Karen knew she should be thrilled but instead felt utterly helpless. She yearned to escape and didn't know how ... or why for that matter. So she simply complied.

Emeline prodded her to sit on the bed. "The stockings are pulled on like pantyhose, only one at a time." She watched as Karen struggled not to tear the fragile mesh. "Very good. Now the other. Now we hook them like this." Emeline demonstrated how to slip one cloth covered dimple through its metal loop and slide it into place.

She took Karen's hands in hers, helped her to her feet and led her to a mirror. "Now let's look at you."

Karen looked at her skin, which she'd always thought so nice and smooth, bulging over the too-tight edges of the lingerie. Emeline's perfect slimness floated next to her bulk in her vision's periphery. Though Emeline made no comment, Karen could feel her disapproval. The girl yearned to protest, "I'm not fat! I'm just healthy! Everyone says so. Everyone says how pretty I am ... and I'm a cheerleader! I couldn't be a cheerleader if I was fat!"

At last, Emeline raised her slim shoulders and tossed her head in an elegant shrug that Karen knew represented defeat. "Well, let's find you a dress." The woman strode to the closet and began sorting through a dozen hanging garments all, even the few patterned outfits, in unobtrusive though lush colours. Again the shrug as she separated one padded hanger. "This will have to do."

Karen hesitantly touched the fabric. The insubstantial black wool was as soft as clouds under her fingertips. In an instant, her upset vanished under the dress' magic spell. Blissfully, eagerly, she looked into Emeline's face. "I can really put this on?"

Emeline smiled benevolently down from her heels' height. "Cherie, it's for you." She waved her arm in a ballerina's gesture. "These are all for you."

Karen stepped into the dress and Emeline helped – struggled – with the rear zipper. Karen's joy dissolved and then disappeared entirely. Her voice was almost inaudible. "Won't it go up?"

"Breathe in," was Emeline's reply. Karen sucked in her stomach and, at last, the zipper closed. The dress was so tight around her waist and back she was afraid to let her breath out for fear of bursting the zipper. Again she heard Emeline's sigh but her only comment was, "Now shoes."

Karen looked dubiously at the proffered black pumps. They were beautiful but the heels were so high she didn't know if she could walk in them. She also couldn't bend to put them on so Emeline had to help. She tottered to the mirror and

looked at herself. Despite the dress' tightness she thought she looked so ladylike.

She turned to find Emeline but the woman had slipped from the bedroom. Karen started toward the glass doors but stopped when she heard the accented voice. "I'm sorry, Michael. It's the best I can do in this little time. I think you should eat in the suite tonight."

Then Michael's curt reply. "I've already ordered."

Karen wanted to shed the beautiful clothes and run. Too late. Emeline opened wide the glass doors, Michael at her side.

He did not try to hide his dissatisfaction. She surprised herself by being angry, until he smiled warmly at her and she was overwhelmed by the desire to please him. He took her hand and she peered helplessly up at him. "Don't worry, my dear. By the time Emeline is finished you will be exquisite."

"Yes," she thought, "I want to be exquisite ... for him." She almost didn't mind his criticisms over dinner.

Chapter Two

The man's office was a windowless off-white box filled with grey metal, and that was how he liked it. His desk and the dozen steel filing cabinets lining two walls were covered with orderly clusters and piles of project descriptions, schematics and multitudinous manuals randomly weighted by odd configurations of gleaming stainless steel and plastic.

A thin tap barely penetrated the heavy steel door. "Come in."

The woman, one of the facility's few female engineers, was more than ten years his senior but her lowered head and hunched shoulders were obviously obsequious. With a dry but pleasant smile, he nodded her to one of the two armless straight-backed chairs facing his. Keeping his visage severely neutral he smiled inwardly, enjoying her expression – half supplication, half barely restrained eagerness.

She sat, her dark skirt pulled primly over her tightly coupled knees and a large binder covering her lap. "Could you please give me some help with the Adams arm? The interfaces seem to be off by several millimetres."

He smiled meaningfully, directly into her eyes, challenging her to tell him the truth. When she dropped her eyes after too long a silence, he stood and came around his desk. He positioned himself so close behind her that her clipped brown hair brushed his starched white shirt front and her extraordinary flush of heat radiated across his abdomen.

"Yes, I'll help you," he said, forcing her head back to his chest with one thick hand pressed flat against her throat. He looked down into her face, experiencing a pleasurable frisson at his control. Her closed eyelids, he noticed, were completely devoid of the makeup that would probably have transformed her drab plainness. Not even lipstick. With some makeup she could be quite attractive – he smiled complacently – even slutty. Well, he'd definitely fix that.

With the other hand, he reached inside her white lab coat underneath her traditional white silk Brooks Brother blouse and pulled one of her breasts into his sight. She moaned as he rolled her pretty pink nipple between his thumb and forefinger and his cock surged against his trousers. It was her submission to him he found arousing, he realized, not her body, despite its hapless virginity.

Inadvertently, her knees spread slightly and he caught the motion. He released her breast and throat, lifted the binder from her lap and placed it on his desktop. His voice was dispassionate. "That's right. Show me."

The woman blushed an unattractive mottled pink but she pulled her skirt to her hips and spread her legs. She was wearing only a lacy black garter belt and stockings – no panties. She peered at him from under long lashes, searching hungrily for a sign of his approval.

Instead he reached into his pants pocket and extracted two small coils of white rope. Her breathing laboured in his ear as he stooped and tied each ankle cruelly tight to a metal chair leg. Her eyes skittered anxiously toward the door. Of course he understood her thought. "What if someone comes in?" But that was part of it, wasn't it?

He returned to his seat. Before he focused on the binder's contents he gave her what he knew she wanted. For a moment he watched her fingers make their way to her exposed vagina, shiny with moisture in the industrial lighting, and begin to manipulate her clitoris. For only a moment. Not too much, he thought coldly. Like the others, she had to be trained. Though his eyes fixed on the diagrams open before him, he briefly considered what her next tasks would entail.

Then he plunged into the arm's mechanics in actuality. Some time later – he'd been absorbed and wasn't sure how long – he heard her restrained convulsive cries. He glanced up, his tone holding the barest trace of reward. "Good little whore. Now do it again."

It was only a short hop from Minneapolis to St. Louis, and almost effortless in his brand new, custom-fitted Gulfstream. He sat back against the contoured leather seat, lifted a porcelain coffee cup to his blissfully curled lips and examined, once again, the delicious reports on his lap.

Michael found his new little jewel of a corporate acquisition as enticing, at least, as his recently acquired fiancée. The company contained such remarkable talent! And even without his guidance, already had such promising contracts! He could have cum when he was told of the Top Secret CIA/FBI interagency project, cum as surely as he had when he assfucked Emeline the night before.

The image of her bent over the open toilet broke across the printed pages. He saw his own thick fingers dig into the delicate shoulders – hard enough to mark but, of course, she didn't complain – and force her head down above, not quite into, the urine-filled bowl. His urine and hers. The thought of his egalitarianism evinced a malevolent smile. Her spinal column flexed and the gently defined shoulder muscles swelled but she didn't resist.

Almost as an afterthought he'd turned her and brutally rammed his cock down her long throat, forcing her head closer to the yellow toilet water. He never allowed her to gag. She just had to take it. If she didn't – he smiled at the memory of her one restrained convulsion last night – with one hand he gripped the shining dark hair hard enough to rip out and viciously slapped her face with the other before he continued. He didn't worry about bruises. She was expert with makeup.

Really her narrow taut body was exceptional, even down to the breasts – he visualized the pendant forms compressed against the bowl's edge – full and perfectly shaped without artificial augmentation. Once, when she was younger, she'd been a rare prize. Then he'd ached to penetrate those exquisitely tight, baby-pink orifices, to touch the milk-white flesh. Now, though, he used her only for release. His real pleasure came from her degradation. As his cock slid between her small round buttocks, upward toward that elegant narrow spine, he'd pushed her under, watched her immaculately

groomed head submerge. Mercilessly, without thought to speed or force, he penetrated her. Her anus gripped his cock but the rest remained still. For awhile. He watched as her air gave out and her body contorted under the strain.

His cock hardened. This was his real joy. He didn't need to hold her under. He'd bought her body and soul. She'd remain till her lungs began to fill with urine, till he allowed her to rise. Only once had she emerged prematurely. He'd done nothing more than disinterestedly remind her of what she had to lose. His lips curled at the memory. One day he might test whether she'd die for him. His skin quivered with disgust. How he wanted to damage her, to destroy the filth! He imagined his long cock actually penetrating her back along her spinal column, violating flesh and bone. His hand moved unthinkingly over his hard shaft.

The whore! His sensual lips dropped downward into a frown. She was nothing more than a whore, though granted an exceedingly high priced one. What he needed was pure beauty and innocence.

His mind went to Karen's perfect face and he shook his head. Such splendid potential even amidst that mulish farm stock! He smiled again. No matter. He'd break down the coarseness and replace it with the sublime delicacy he'd seen the first night at the Christmas party. Her genes were no match for his determination ... and resources. His thoughts returned to the pages before him, eliminating Karen from his consciousness as thoroughly and casually as an errant lint particle.

It was really an ideal scenario. Mentally, he ticked off the pluses: Closely held by the company's founder and a few key employees. An engineering and IT brain trust hand-picked from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, perhaps the top engineering school in the US, by the founder, himself an alumnus. Robotics technologies, both brick and mortar utilitarian and far beyond the cutting edge. And last but certainly not least, snuggled quietly and accessibly on the Mississippi River just south of their largest client – at least prior to the U.S. Government – the beautiful and venerable red

brick Anheuser-Busch brewery, which provided a continual stream of stable, cash-producing mechanization contracts.

Michael couldn't restrain his outpouring of joy at the inventory. His attention returned to Doud, the 67 year old founder. Without doubt an intriguing old coot. Though Michael had no substantiating evidence, his instincts, which he never doubted, told him he'd find Doud a remarkably kindred spirit on closer examination. Michael saw Doud's acute pale eyes twinkling at him. Doud had given every indication he agreed. That's why he'd sold his cherished spawn to Michael.

Michael's lips twisted in satisfaction. He'd have plenty of time to find out for certain. The decision to ask Doud to stay on, at an exorbitant salary, to assist with the transition had been exactly correct.

The phone at his side buzzed softly. "Sir, please buckle your seatbelt. We're beginning our descent into Parks St. Louis." In the few weeks since Michael had taken delivery on the Gulfstream, he'd grown to appreciate his pilot's calm, efficient demeanour.

Michael's hired car dropped him at the unobtrusive entrance to the windowless, tan, three-story box of a building. He passed through two pneumatic glass doors to a strikingly high-tech security desk manned by a sleek, black-clad guard with piercing dark eyes and a large black gun butt protruding from a holster under his left arm.

Michael knew the guard was not just for show. The man not only had a Special Forces background but had earned a Ph.D. from Georgetown University with a thesis on industrial espionage.

"Good afternoon, Sir." The words were clipped with military precision. "Mr. Doud is expecting you." His lips tightened to a thin smile. "Do you know your way or shall I call his secretary to escort you?"

Their eyes united in mutual respect. "I'll find my way."

"Very good, Sir." The man handed Michael an electronic security badge and nodded toward another glass door to his

side. "Please enter the cubical and stand for sixty seconds until the light over the rear door turns green. Then pass through and put on a white lab coat over your clothes. The badge clips to the metal bracket on the pocket."

With almost an entire population of engineers, the building's orderly layout was no surprise. Michael also appreciated the placement of administrative offices on the ground floor with the labs on the two floors above and the classified labs, servers and document storage in a reinforced, fireproof bunker below ground. He could easily and quickly find his way. But he had no intention of passing quickly to Doud's office. He wanted to poke his head unexpectedly around corners and through doors, to stroll, to observe, to absorb and, most importantly, to feel.

After twenty five minutes of winding through spare, methodically transverse hallways, observing and occasionally stopping a passerby or opening a door to pleasantly converse with an office occupant, Michael was close to Doud's office and very ready to get there. He contemplated the fact that no one had questioned his authority and, though no one had given him classified information, they'd been willing to answer his questions. He'd have to discuss this with Doud.

He was striding swiftly, deep in thought, when a solid grey door opened and a tall woman rushed out, almost running him down. He gripped the arms of her white lab coat in time to prevent himself from being impaled on the hard corner of the large, plastic covered book she gripped tight to her bosom. She looked up at him, her flushed face not too far below his. She was obviously flustered and her dark eyes were oddly glazed.

"Whoa!" he said, smiling kindly down at her rather plain face. "Slow down so you don't kill someone."

Her eyes focused and her face mottled a deeper pink. "I'm so sorry! Did I hurt you?"

He scrutinized his white front and the immaculate dark lapels peeking from underneath for signs of her startling red lipstick and, thankfully, found none. "I'm fine." He paused, again smiling benevolently down at her. "May I ask whose

office this is?” Again she flushed – very unattractive, not to mention puzzling, he thought.

“Mr. Smith. Ward Smith. He’s one of our managers.”

“Thank you.” He tipped his head politely, dismissively, and knocked on the door. Steel. The thought was nudged aside by her low, stifled gasp and the tap of her footsteps rushing off down the hall like Alice’s white rabbit. More and more interesting.

“Come in.” The even voice was muffled by the thick door.

A pleasant man about Michael’s age or perhaps a little younger – 28, Michael estimated – flat and non-descript on first glance, looked up at him from an expensive high-tech desk chair. “May I help you, Mr. _____?”

Michael closed the door behind him, briefly surveying the remarkably functional and orderly office. “You know who I am?”

Smith smiled with the slightest raise of eyebrows. “Of course.” He seemed to become suddenly aware of Michael’s perplexity. He motioned to the metal chairs. “Please, have a seat.” Michael settled into the closest chair, which was unexpectedly warm under his thighs. Smith continued, “We’re a very small family here and,” he met Michael’s eyes and Michael had the distinct impression he himself was under evaluation, “Mr. Doud discussed the purchase with his team at each new step, just as he would any other project.”

“I see.” Something about the man pricked Michael’s exceedingly efficient subconscious. He made eye-contact while allowing his other faculties to examine the man. Smith relaxed back into his chair’s embracing cushion, clearly complaisantly offering himself to Michael’s evaluation. Smith’s hard planes and angles and the incisive grey eyes leapt into view like a hidden pattern in the midst of manifold dots. The familiar tingle of as yet undefined discovery raced up Michael’s spine. Here was something worthy of attention.

“Tell me,” Michael relaxed his appraisal, “what made the tall woman rush out of here in such tumult?”

He watched Smith's eyes quickly narrow then genially widen. Smith waved a hand. "She needed my help but was very ambivalent about asking for it and," his expression was sardonic, "even more ambivalent about getting it."

Michael looked at him with interest but before his questioning continued Smith's phone rang. He listened then extended the receiver to Michael. "Mr. Doud is wondering when you're going to make it to his office. No hurry. He'd just appreciate an ETA."

Michael made a decision. He held the phone to his ear. "I hope I haven't inconvenienced you. I'll be right down." He stood and extended his hand to Mr. Smith. "I'm sure we'll speak again quite soon ... and please call me Michael."

Two minutes later he was seated on the cordovan leather sofa in Mr. Doud's office gazing at the broad brown Mississippi flowing past the picture "windows". Though he'd been in Doud's office numerous times, he'd not yet gotten over the windows' fascination. They were actually part of the security system – high resolution exterior images projected with clarity akin to Nature's in real time onto screens in the wall. They were illusion but they looked precisely like windows.

Mr. Doud watched Michael with amusement. After several minutes he asked, "Did you find anything interesting on your excursion?"

Michael turned his attention to Doud. "Tell me about Smith."

Doud's face lit up like a bemused Christmas tree. "Oh ho! You met our Mr. Smith!" He paused, considering, Michael assumed, where to begin. "Do you remember a note to the Ownership section of the financial statements in which the minor shareholders were named?"

"Hmmm. Yes ..." Michael's wide forehead creased fractionally with contemplation. Recognition dawned and his perfect brow became smooth once again. "Yes, I do remember. Yes. Smith. I'd planned to ask you why you had this one shareholder – smaller than the rest and not a Director like the

other four minor shareholders. But since I purchased all the outstanding shares, other issues took precedence.”

Doud’s enjoyment remained visible while his expression shifted to seriousness. “Mr. Smith has proven to be uniquely useful. He embodies an unusual, one might say anomalous, profile, simultaneously very strongly unstructured and intuitive and very strongly methodical and analytical.” The omnipresent twinkle confronted Michael. “Your purchase made him a millionaire, you know.”

The older man cleared his throat. “He’s interested in, you might say, the intimate communication between man and machine – the neural interface between non-automated robotic systems and their operators.”

Michael worked to visualize the words, “Something like bionics?”

“I don’t think he’s interested in implanting robotic systems – though obviously his research has profound implications for the evolution of implant technologies. He just wants to know how many degrees of information refinement a human operator can utilize. His research consists of passing information through the robot to the operator and evaluating the effect. In other words,” Doud smirked at what Michael sensed was a company joke, “he wants to know how much the robot can manipulate the man.”

For some unrecognized reason, an image of Karen rose in Michael’s mind. He ignored it but it triggered an insistent series of ideas that he acknowledged and set aside for later evaluation.

“It’s his research that generated the government grant.”

Doud’s eyes twinkled again. He leaned conspiratorially toward Michael. “You might not think it to look at him but he has quite a way with the ladies. We don’t have too many here but next time we have a general meeting you need to watch them. They hover around him with uneasy fascination, close but not too close, always seeking his approval but not wanting to attract his attention. It’s almost like he has them hypnotized.”

Doud sounded puzzled but gratified. “They also seem to wear more makeup after being around him for awhile.”

Chapter Three

He could make her forget her discomfort with only a smile. At those times when he told her how beautiful she would be, she was redeemed, exalted, happier than she'd ever been. The next minute, though, his criticism would plunge her into anxiety and depression.

She'd blushed deep pink when he'd first told her he loved her. Then he'd led her to one of the suite's closets and shown her the most beautiful wedding gown she'd ever seen. It was white silk as fluid as a negligee, cut into deep Vs over the bust and back, narrow to the knees and full and round to the floor. He told her they'd be married as soon as she fit into it and she'd frowned. The dress seemed so small.

So she struggled to do everything he wanted. She'd had her hair cut and returned to its natural pale brown. She wore only clothes he provided – clothes that were all uncomfortably tight and much too expensive and sophisticated to ever wear with her friends. But then she no longer saw her friends, not even Delia. And she rarely saw her parents – only the few times when he'd invited them to join her for dinner. She'd left school and now spent her days in the suite at the Saint Paul with Emeline, a tutor and a trainer, studying his curriculum, following the diet and exercise he mandated.

Yet he frequently expressed his displeasure with her progress. One day after Emeline had weighed her and found she'd gained a half pound, Michael rebuked her particularly harshly. She looked into his corrosive countenance and burst into uncontrolled sobs. She sank to the luxurious carpet and curled into a ball, her knees pulled to her chest.

The too small dress constricted her ribcage, alarmingly repressing her breathing and even more alarmingly threatening to burst apart. She could not imagine what he'd do to her if that abomination happened, couldn't even contemplate it at this moment. "I want to go home," she wept. The words burst from her mouth in convulsive gasps.

“You can’t,” he said, “unless you want your father to go to jail.” He described to her in ignominious detail how her father had stolen from the company and sold the goods illegally. He concluded, “Your father has given you to me as payment.”

She was devastated. In horror, her head jerked involuntarily in his direction and she peeped up at him through her hair’s camouflage. He was smiling down at her. His smile had always assuaged her so, reflexively, her body relaxed. But her solace returned to despair, instantly, when the smile’s true nature fully struck her. She’d never before seen this expression. It was cold and inexorable as an ancient glacier, and hideously cruel.

His eyes locked onto hers and he gave a grand sweep of his long arm. “Please, my dear! Feel perfectly free to leave. I won’t stop you. Go back to your parents.”

Relief overwhelmed her absolutely, incontrovertibly. Until this moment, she hadn’t realized how much she wanted to leave. She shook the hair from her eyes and looked timidly up at him. “Really?”

His smile didn’t waver. “Certainly.” He shrugged. “Of course, don’t expect your father to be there to greet you. He’ll already be in prison.”

Wretchedness consumed her. Simultaneously her muscles became limp and convulsed. Her face dropped to the carpet then withdrew like a turtle into the tight ball of arms and legs.

His steely voice penetrated the dense carpet pile into which she’d sunk, “Do I need to remind you that you are a lady? Get up.”

With all-consuming lassitude she complied. He took her frigid fingers in his warm, strong hand and assisted her to her feet. He turned her to face him, peering into her eyes as he tenderly gripped each shoulder in a sedative hand. “Don’t worry, darling. I think you’d no longer be happy in your little farmhouse.”

Several weeks before her eighteenth birthday, he faced her across the breakfast table, his expression grim. “Despite my attention and efforts, you really have not made adequate progress.”

Her already pale face blanched but, as she knew he expected of her, she did not look away. Would he find some exceptional way to punish her?

“Although you are certainly not yet ready, I have decided to marry you.” It took her a moment to quell her shocked stare. She felt as if she was drowning in his dark, relentless gaze. “We will have a small civil ceremony,” a celestial smile transformed his face into that of a loving angel, “then, when you are ready, you shall wear your dress to stand up with me before our friends and relatives.”

Deep in her mind’s recesses the brittle, feeble thought that she no longer knew who her friends were prodded her. Except Delia. She so wanted to see Delia, particularly if she was to fall deeper into his honeyed sink of power. Suddenly she knew – and the realization almost made her weep with hopelessness – that he was marrying her to bind her to him more surely, in adamant threads of domestic legality.

She heard her own voice’s tinny vibration in the luxurious surroundings. “Please,” she knew she should say his name but couldn’t bring herself to do so, “may I invite Delia?”

The dark expression returned and she was certain he’d say no. Instead he smiled and, as always, she felt happier despite herself, “Certainly my dear. If that is your wish.”

Michael forced his penis deep into the girl’s tight vagina hard against her resilient uterine wall, pressing until the tissues stretched taut against the bulging head. Her fine breasts rippled with his motion but she lay still, making no sound and no move other than at his hand.

She was definitely losing her purity, the glorious dynamic tension, intangible, indefinable, that shrieked to him definitively even while the girl was silent. There was no

question about it. His beast told him so. Its clamorous voice was quieted though not entirely stilled. With one small mental corner, Michael mused. He wondered if some means of maintaining their purity existed. Perhaps if Madame Lee cosseted the girls, allowed them to keep the illusion of safety and nurturance while they waited? But of course Madame benefited from his rapid repudiation of his prizes. He paid her well for the new.

As he ripped himself out of the girl, fighting to force the uncontaminated purity of response he so badly needed, he lifted up and examined the slender, opalescent form. The twin swells of her firm breasts and rosy nipples, the tiny waist no bigger than his hands joined fingertip to fingertip, all so frail, so beautiful. He shook his head, allowing a sigh to escape into the still air. At the atypical sound the girl tensed, he felt it like a revitalizing current directly into his penis.

He heard the beast's voice, "Yes! I will take her, eat her!" and it was as if its hand grabbed his penis like a battering ram and cudgelled her with it. For several long minutes the beast mauled her, pounding until her small body shook, consuming the arduously restrained whimpers like spicy food. Her so-tight vagina clung to him as if to a lifeline, involuntarily hanging on as he tore out of her and re-entered.

When at last he ejaculated, Michael sighed again. He would not see her again. For no more than a second he contemplated what Madame did with his discards. He lifted out and off her, turned away and eliminated her existence from his consciousness.

The spring day was flawless. Pale sun hung golden in a sky bright crystalline blue with just a few feathery white clouds. It spread warm fingers through the crisp, invigorating Northern air. Tiny heads of purple, white and yellow crocuses clustered vibrantly together amid the greening hotel gardens.

Michael had arranged for the city employee who performed weddings to come, with the necessary documentation, to the hotel. Though really it was only a matter

of signing the forms, the employee – a short, round, affable man with neatly coiffed grey hair thinning to a round bald spot on top – had a small, pat ceremony he routinely performed. He stood before the small group looking remarkably urbane in a dubious camel hair topcoat and smiled benignly.

Karen's drifting attention repeatedly returned to the sunshine glinting on the man's bald pate. She stood beside Michael, magnificent as always in a dark suit and topcoat, holding a simple bouquet of six languorous white Christmas lilies tied with a wide cream ribbon that matched her suit. The suit was cream raw silk by Yves Saint Laurent, beautiful of course and of course uncomfortably small. The skirt's stiff waistband bit deep into the flesh at her waist and the perfectly cut, collarless jacket's narrow armholes pulled tight into the nerve clusters in her armpits causing her arms to ache and her fingers to tingle unpleasantly.

Over her shoulders was thrown a wide stole, indescribably thick and soft, of Russian sable. She'd never hoped to own any fur other than rabbit, had not even known anything as rare as sable existed. Once the garment would have delighted and amazed her. Now though, her clothing had become burdensome – gossamer prisons. Michael had further destroyed her joy by telling her he'd had to buy her a stole because she was still too large (only in moments of extreme displeasure did he use the word "fat") to warrant the outlay on an ill-fitting coat.

It was Emeline, not Delia, who stood at her side, encased in a column of black mink almost incandescently luminous and too impossibly narrow to contain a human body. She held two lilies tied in red that perfectly matched her brilliantly lipsticked pallor.

On the other side and slightly behind, Karen's parents hovered awkwardly in drab cloth coats and functional boots. Delia stood beside them, restless and tensely alert, encased in the pink down jacket that had once, long ago Karen thought vaguely, matched her own. Karen's gaze lighted on the hazy halo radiating around Delia's head off her bright blond streaks, then moved impassively lower. She was startled by the

dullness surrounding Delia, who stood out so vividly in Karen's memory.

Then, for a moment, Delia's eyes met hers. Was Delia trying to communicate something? Karen didn't seem to be able to focus, to be able to connect with her old friend, and soon her eyes moved on.

The ceremony was so short that Karen did not even realize it was over when Michael slipped a large, blue-white, emerald cut diamond on her finger and bent his beautiful face toward hers. He smiled warmly, so soothingly, down on her and his full soft lips brushed hers. She heard clapping, then Michael's deep voice. "Please, join us for a meal in our suite."

Delia was on her guard. Still she could not take her eyes from the suite's décor. She'd never been in a place like this.

Michael had seated her between Karen and Karen's father, who occupied the foot of the table across from him, their gracious host. Karen's mother sat next to Michael and Emeline sat on her other side, across from Delia and next to Karen's father. Delia's eyes darted from person to person – though toward Michael with wary circumspection – taking in every minute fluctuation in mood and action. At first she felt surprise at Karen's father's minimal discomfort at his proximity to Emeline. But she guessed he'd been there before and was at least a little used to it.

Delia really couldn't get over Emeline. Under other circumstances she would have devoted much attention to the elegant woman. It was now, however, Karen who absorbed her. She so wanted to gossip with her friend about the beautiful suite and clothes and that fabulous fur. Delia was both bemused and puzzled by Karen's listlessness. Karen looked slim and elegant but Delia had never seen her so lacking in energy – in life. Karen almost looked drugged.

A clear soup littered with a few vegetable pieces and topped with small stippled leaves of a strange-smelling, bright green herb was served. Delia glanced and then stared paralyzed at Karen. Her friend bent over the porcelain bowl,

an oddly piercing expression – like a starving wild dog, Karen thought – in her eyes.

Michael's eyes were also on Karen. As Delia watched he smiled solicitously and placed a hand over his new wife's. Karen's body jerked. Perplexingly, her back straightened yet simultaneously listlessness again overtook her. Slowly she took a sip then laid her spoon next to her bowl on the fine linen. Her bowl was removed.

Salmon with asparagus in hollandaise was served – except to Karen. On Karen's plate lay a piece of unsauced salmon half the size of the others accompanied by two stalks of plain asparagus. Delia gaped as Karen's shaking fork moved toward her mouth carrying a tiny flake of salmon.

Delia rearranged her face into a masque of untroubled blandness. Had Michael drugged her friend? Was he abusing her in some inexplicable manner? Karen seemed so strange. What had Michael done to her? And why were her parents going along with it so quietly? Her glance quickly swept Karen's father. She'd never seen him act so cowed. Something was going on and she was determined to find out what. She was also determined to help her friend.

Her attention was distracted by Michael. Throughout the meal, he and Emeline had done virtually all the talking. Now, however, he raised his glass. His deep voice resonated across the crystal glassware. "A toast to my dear wife." He swirled the flaxen liquid then tipped it between his sensual lips. His opaque eyes sparked as he lowered his glass. "We leave tomorrow morning for our house in Berkeley." He scanned the table, a paternal smile on his lips. Then he sighed, a sigh replete with weariness, "It's time to go home."

Delia heard Karen's small gasp and turned to see her friend's face finish its rapid transition from shock to ... nothing. Again Delia scanned the table. Karen's mother seemed crestfallen to the point of abjection. Her father looked like a felled beast. Certainly no one was prepared for this news – Delia turned her head to the alabaster face – except perhaps Emeline.

Karen's mother wept convulsively for forty miles, all the way to Delia's door. Delia hugged her and encouraged her to talk about it, but without success.

Sadness and, she saw it so palpably, hopelessness overwhelmed Karen as the door closed behind Delia and her parents. She felt a slim hand on her shoulder. When she turned both Michael and Emeline were smiling at her. "Why?" she wondered.

Emeline took her hand and led her toward the suite's bedroom. "Cherie, it's your wedding night." Her voice was warm with sultry sensuality.

She helped Karen remove her suit and then her undergarments. It had been many months since Karen had resisted nakedness in front of Emeline – or any of "her" staff.

Emeline lifted the lid of a satiny cardboard box that lay on the bed's coverlet and removed a long flesh-coloured garment unlike any Karen had ever seen. She spread a circlet of the odd fabric, helped Karen step through, then with tremendous effort pulled it to Karen's waist. Emeline released the fabric and it constricted into a stranglehold, forcing out Karen's breath in a loud snort and making her feel sick to her stomach.

The door opened and Karen's trainer, Steve, entered. Steve looked like a big brute, thick and muscular and ugly, like a boxer. He was actually, she'd learned, an EMT and had never shown any sign of intrinsic cruelty. In fact, Karen always found his adherence to Michael's instructions remarkable in its meticulous neutrality.

Emeline lifted the fabric and helped Karen slide her arms into the sleeves, pulling the skin-tight tubes up her arms like stockings. The fabric stretched, but only fractionally. It felt strange, synthetic yet silky. With her arms situated, the garment stretched across her ribcage to her sides, covering her chest but little more.

"Lie down on the bed, Cherie." Emeline eased Karen down onto her belly on the luxurious coverlet. The woman's

manicured fingers straightened the long fabric ends under Karen legs. Her long nails whispered like dry leaves down Karen's skin.

"Ready?" Karen wasn't certain whether the question was for her or Steve. "Breathe in, Cherie." Karen was accustomed to struggling to make herself as small as possible to fit into every article of clothing, so immediately did her best to comply. This time was different, though. She felt Steve's hands grab the peculiar fabric at her back.

Emeline never panted, not even during vigorous exercise. But now Karen heard both Emeline's and Steve's laborious breaths above her. Her body was pulled from side to side and constricted, like in a cylindrical vice. Over her own gasps, she heard Emeline's uncharacteristically gruff voice, "Almost." Then she could no longer breathe.

They stood above her, resting. "Now the legs." Steve's hands were on her left hip and the tugging began again. The zipper's motion down her leg was obvious this time ... and again, down her right leg.

Steve and Emeline stood. "Finis!" Relief flooded Emeline's voice.

The fabric tube held Karen in its implacable grasp, painfully, frighteningly crushing her internal organs. The blackness swimming into her vision was pierced by Emeline's cultured, ubiquitous tones, "Breathe calmly, Cherie, and as deeply as you can." Karen strove to settle her rushing breath and pounding heart, and the blackness receded.

She again heard Emeline, her voice brimming with satisfaction, "Karen, come and look. You are so svelte, so elegante!" Emeline helped Karen up from the bed. The girl could barely bend her limbs in their pitiless fabric restraints. She moved, stiff legged and with an unusual cumbersome sensation between her thighs, to the long mirror.

The garment was almost the identical colour to her skin, indeed looked like skin. It bound her from shoulders to ankles, leaving only her full teardrop shaped breasts bare. Karen goggled at her image. All the excess "baby fat" had vanished,

leaving only slim curves. For a reason she didn't entirely understand, tears welled into her eyes.

Then she noticed excess fabric bunching in her crotch behind what was clearly a hole in the fabric over her vagina. Karen noticed Emeline's glance follow her own. She thought she saw pity flash on the French woman's face before the usual felicity reasserted itself. Fear coursed through Karen. What was the fabric? She was too terrified to ask.

Emeline was again ebullient. "Look what I have for you, Cherie." She pulled a piece of fragile white silk jersey from the box and held it up in both hands. It was a negligee but shaped almost identically to the perpetually waiting wedding gown. Emeline slipped the silk over Karen's head. Karen heard its gentle rustle but felt nothing through her restrictive garment. Again she goggled. The ethereal garment clung voluptuously to her newly pared curves then fell to a circular pool at her feet.

While Karen stared at herself, Emeline turned back the bed. "Come, Cherie. Time to await your husband." She plumped a thick pile of pillows and helped Karen rest against them, the covers arranged decoratively at her hips.

Breathing was intensely difficult. A fresh burst of nerves made Karen's heart once again race and blackness return. Emeline smiled kindly down at her. "Relax, Cherie. It will be wonderful." Her dulcet voice washed over Karen as she slipped through the glass doors.

A moment later, Michael stood beside her, still dressed in his dark suit. His smile held something she hadn't seen before and it sent her blood surging into her head – and lower – as she looked up at him. He leaned down to her and his full lips pressed hers. "Let me look at you." His mien was warm and, she discerned despite her naiveté, intensely masculine as he lowered the covers. He looked into her face. "See how beautiful you can be! It is only because I love you that I want this for you – I want your perfection to come alive."

Her fears and distress dissolved and she was consumed by gratitude toward him ... and love?

He moved toward the armoire and undressed, carefully hanging jacket and pants and folding undergarments while continuing to examine her, adoration filling his countenance. From under lowered lashes she watched him. She'd never seen a man's body entirely naked before, and especially not one so beautiful. Her eyes went to the broad muscles of his chest, the hard angles of his pelvis and then, slowly, shyly to the protuberance rising at his centre.

She heard her pulse throbbing in her ears as he moved to her side. At first he sat, simply looking into her face and down the length of her body. He took her hands in his and kissed the fingers and each palm, then her lips. Hitherto unknown sensation surged deep inside her and, with ripples of worry joining these others, she felt moisture well in her vagina.

What was happening inside her? Could she stop the wetness from soiling her garments and the bed? A chill passed through her, quelling the other sensations, as she imagined how angry Michael would be. She tried to focus, to find some way to fix things. But before she had a chance to think, he was on top of her. She felt his hardness pressing into her belly.

Instead of proceeding, though, he lifted himself off of her. His face was stern and her omnipresent fear sluiced upwards. "First, we must consummate our marriage."

She saw his right hand reach lower then felt her negligee lift over her hips. She gasped as his fingers touched the hole over her vagina. But they withdrew. She was aware they wrapped around his hard penis ... and then his penis' fat end pushed inside her.

A small sound escaped her lips but he continued his progress inside her. The stretching hurt but she also found it curiously stimulating. She moaned and he paused momentarily and peered into her face. With one quick thrust he was inside so deep his pelvis pressed against hers.

Something had torn inside her. She almost fainted with anxiety – and something else, something pleasurable? – but as she'd learned so onerously, she restrained any outburst. Only one small scream escaped her blanched lips while a

hodgepodge of uncertainties raced through her tremulous mind. Had he injured her? Was it possible to be injured by sex?

But he didn't continue. Again he lifted off her, sliding out his long penis from her astonishingly wet vagina. Again the sensations threatened to distract, to unbalance her – and she couldn't be distracted. It was too dangerous.

“That's done,” he said, apparently satisfied, as he withdrew completely and peered down at the blood trickling in a thin stream over the garment's edge. He removed several tissues from a box on the bedside table and blotted up the trace of red.

His stern visage hung over her. She quailed at his next words, “I'm afraid, my dear, that I can't do more than what is necessary until you reach your objective. Until that time I must use other means.”

She looked up at him stupefied, with no idea whatsoever to his meaning. Again his hand went to his penis. This time though he sat back on his haunches and slid the shaft into the bunching of fabric behind her vagina, pointedly allowing her to look downward to observe his action. She watched the fabric form a stiff tube around him.

He smiled and she saw only partially disguised cruelty. “It's a prosthesis. Until you do not have to wear the garment to be slim it is the only hole I'll use.” He shook his head sadly, “and, my dear, until that time I really cannot touch your body unless it is encased in the garment.”

She was too flabbergasted to grasp her welling humiliation. Then, his body was on top of hers again. She lay like a sodden clay lump hearing his heavy breaths in her ear but feeling only rubbing against her pelvis and bumping against her thighs as he spent himself inside the prosthesis.

Chapter Four

The limousine crawled along the wild winding road through eerie floating grey fog curtains periodically pierced by rays of bright sunlight. It twisted and turned through rocky brown hills swamped with evergreen thickets, tall strange trees with ghostly streamers of grey-green leaves and hanging strips of mottled silver brown bark, all splashed irregularly with baby pink. From time to time, the thick green broke open to expose steep declinations painted by the sky's blue, dropping past tiny houses and the elaborate buildings of the University of California Berkeley campus to the uneven pool of San Francisco Bay. The fiery sinking sun burst through the haze in occasional glimmers of light on the dark water and the Golden Gate Bridge's orange tower tops.

Houses hidden on the hills' steep sides grew sparser and finally, when the car penetrated Charles Lee Tilden Park's undomesticated periphery, entirely ceased their residence. The limo slowed and manoeuvred onto a narrow drive heading straight uphill. Karen stared out through the tinted windows, transfixed by a wall of green pines densely interwoven with the massive, many-flowered pink balls of aged hydrangeas wreathed in fog ribbons.

After several minutes, the vehicle broke free of the vertical foliage onto a flat promontory scattered with large, astonishing rocks surrounded by a multiplicity of living green shapes, textures and shades sprinkled with the pink feathery projectiles of flowering cherries. Falling off the ridge into an artful wilderness were many levels of a pink stucco and glass house under a curved green Spanish tile roof.

Michael patted Karen's hand and her head snapped toward him. In the respite provided by the strange and beautiful landscape, she'd somehow forgotten him. "We're home, my dear."

It was Steve, now dressed in a white uniform, who strode down the curving stone path, opened the limo door and helped her out. Michael sounded relaxed and content, "Steve, please

take my wife to her room. She's had a tiring trip and needs to rest." Karen looked muddledly toward Michael as Steve led her away. She really had no idea what to expect and the lack of knowledge terrified her.

Steve's hold on her arm was firm, without any possibility of resistance, even when he opened one of the two heavy oak front doors. He guided her into an expansive space fronted by immense windows edged with lead casements surrounding small panes. The spectacular view down to the Bay stretched before her. However, she was given no time to look. Steve led her across the room and into a long hall.

At the hall's end, he opened another heavy Spanish style door and ushered her down a short flight of raw wooden stairs into an opulent masculine bedroom furnished in heavy but simple and square Mission-style furniture. This room provided a fabulous view of wild hills.

Steve did not stop. He propelled Karen into the hall traversing the dressing area and bath, past neat rows of built in cupboards and through a back door into another bedroom. The room did not fit the house.

A half-canopy in a floral pattern that matched the bed's low painted footboard hung protectively from the two tall carved head posts. Small pieces of 18th century furniture – tables, delicate armless chairs, a low scrolled back chaise lounge and an exquisite lady's desk holding a selection of leather and cloth bound books behind its glass front – were scattered in small decorative clusters throughout the large room. A ceiling high, painted armoire stood against one wall. And rather than the warm, bare plank floors she'd passed over in the house's other parts, this room was filled with the whorled medallion of a thick pink, gold and cream Aubusson carpet.

However, the most striking dissimilarity was the room's closed aspect, an air heightened by the one small window. After the rustic open spaces, Karen immediately felt claustrophobic.

Steve deposited her to sit primly on the bed and strode to a small door next to the armoire, which he opened. “This is your bath. Would you like me to run it for you?” He smiled gently – the first smile she’d ever seen from him. It humanized his blocky face, drawing her to him. “I will care for you now.” He motioned to the bedside phone and a small, tentative ray of hope hit her. “If you need anything, the phone reaches me directly.” Her spirits sank, the hope dashed.

He opened the door to the armoire and, with dismay, she saw the clothes from the Saint Paul suite inside. They seemed to her somehow different but she couldn’t define how.

“Here are your clothes.” He asked again, “Would you like a bath?” She hesitated and deep creases formed in his square brow. “You need to rest.”

Finally she nodded and he left her alone. She heard water running. She sighed and her eyes flitted around her new “home”, across the highly polished antique furniture, the luxuriously feminine fabrics and delicate knickknacks. As with everything Michael touched, the room was beautifully done ... and it made her paralyzingly miserable. She looked around and realized the only door to the outside was the one they’d entered, and it went through Michael’s bedroom.

Hideous lethargy consumed her. She now knew with certainty she would never escape whatever it was he planned for her.

Steve emerged wiping his hands on a small towel and helped her undress. He hung up the suit she’d worn to travel and put away her shoes. Then he again took her arm and led her into the bath.

When she crossed the threshold, she stopped in surprise. Facing her, a glass wall ran lengthwise behind the tub. The bath, she realized, was cut into the hillside. Rather than fitting flush, however, a wide shaft had been left to rise to the hilltop. She looked entranced at thickly twined tree roots over which grew masses of grass and plants climbing lankily up toward the sunlight.

Steve squeezed her arm and she turned her head. The room was not large but it was pleasant, efficient and most important, it was bright, not only from the light above. Every surface was plain cream ceramic tile, matching the cream toilet, sink and Jacuzzi tub.

Fragrant steam rose from the water. Suddenly Karen wanted nothing more than to surround herself in the warmth. She moved forward and Steve helped her step in. As she extended her torpid limbs into the gently swirling water she looked up to the blue grey sky above. With a jolt, she saw the metal grate over the shaft's opening. A large brass and steel lock hung prominently from the grate's edge. Tears moistened her eyes, then as quickly vanished. Why should she be surprised? She'd known she was a prisoner ... but now, at least, she had her patch of sky.

She had once again dressed, in another of the endless series of too-tight dresses and high heeled pumps, and carefully dressed her hair and applied her makeup. Now she silently awaited him, her hands clasped demurely in her lap, at the small round, linen-draped table, set for dinner with pale bone china plates and cut crystal glasses, all rimmed with thick, hand painted gilt bands.

She started at a heavy metallic clatter, then heard the key turn in the lock and looked tensely toward the massive wood door. Michael entered, immaculate as always in a dark suit. His examination of her as he approached dragged across her face and body like icy fingers. He sat down, shook the linen napkin onto his lap and nodded to Steve, who left the room using his own key.

With apparent satisfaction, Michael's eyes swept his surroundings. "I hope you're becoming rested in your lovely new room?" It was not quite a question – not one, she knew, that required a true answer. Michael peered appraisingly, looking at this and that part of her as if at the elements of fine statuary.

Steve had only just set the first course, a salad of spring greens, beets and tiny bits of goat cheese, before them when Michael's face grew dark and thunderous. Karen quailed,

profoundly wishing she could shrink to invisibility. “I thought I was safe dismissing Emeline but I see you are not yet capable of applying your own make-up.” In disgust, he indicated the salad to Steve. “Take this away.” Steve quickly lifted the plates and exited the room. Karen resisted the impulse to watch the food go away – more food disappearing just short of her lips, more food denied her.

Michael returned his glowering visage toward Karen. She tried to meet his gaze but her head spun. “Your eyeliner is unacceptably thick! I can’t bear to look at you.” Then he was silent. She struggled to calm her breathing, to hold herself upright, and waited for his brutal propulsion away from her. Despite his words, the dark holes of his eyes opened fixedly toward her, as terrifying as a lion’s maw.

At last Steve returned, empty handed, and Michael rose with vicious grace. “Make certain she stays at the mirror until she has it perfect. Put in a catheter,” her mind tried but couldn’t make sense of the word, “so she has no reason to disturb her practice. I will be back in two hours.”

Over the months, Karen had noticed Steve’s silent obeisance to Michael’s authority. Emeline’s chatter had overridden any heed she might once have paid. Now, though, it sucked the small remaining life from her.

After Michael left, Steve didn’t speak, simply mimed his compliance with Michael’s instructions. Silently, he removed her clothing, moving her pliant arms and legs like a porcelain doll. When she was naked he laid her out on the bed, spread her legs and placed a disposable sterile field underneath her hips.

He left her and entered the bathroom. She didn’t move – what was the point? – just lay unfeeling, staring blindly at the unblemished ceiling’s glossy eggshell surface. Not until she felt his latex gloved fingers spreading her labia did consciousness return ... and then fear caused her body to respond instinctively, to try to lurch away from his touch.

Still he didn’t speak, just held her against the bed with one huge hand until her struggles ceased, his face a stolid mask.

When she lay still, he slowly, tentatively lifted the hand, obviously ready for any resistance. Now, though, she wouldn't offer any.

Apathetically she watched him tear apart sterile packets and remove a long, narrow coil of plastic tubing and a plastic bag she recognized from medical TV shows. He slid the tubing into the bag's coupling then, the tubing's unconnected end between his fingers, once again spread her labia. The sensation was tiny, barely recognizable, until a curious stimulation invaded her bladder.

Holding the bag with one hand, he lifted her to her feet and nudged her into the bathroom in front of the dressing area mirror. Vaguely, she felt the tubing tugging gently at her inner thighs when she moved her legs. He set the bag on the ceramic counter and she saw, with a flush of humiliation, that it contained yellow fluid. He reached into a drawer and brought out something she'd never seen before – something new and horrifying.

Karen watched, frozen into immobility, as the iron ring moved toward her throat, then circled it and locked closed. Three thick chains hung from the lock, two connected to smaller rings that he locked around her wrists. The short chains required her to hold her arms bent in an L-shape.

She'd not previously noticed the small ring sunk into the tiles' surface close to the mirror. Not until Steve pulled her head down and locked the third chain to it. Then she understood that Michael had planned this new humiliation sometime long ago, before the bath's construction, and had given Steve instructions in its use. She knew it was true yet it made no sense to her. Had he really expected her to require restraint facing the mirror?

The chain disallowed her standing upright. She was held slightly bent over with her face close to the glass. Possibly she could sit ... if she had a chair. Steve placed makeup remover, cotton pads, and face and eye makeup on the counter within her reach. Still he didn't speak. He looked at his watch, clearly for his own information not hers, then left her alone.

Her lethargy was suddenly replaced with panic. She didn't have a watch. How much time did she have to get the eyeliner right? Hurriedly she applied remover to a cotton pad and wiped her eyes. She began again as Emeline had taught her – first moisturizer, second a sheer layer of creamy base, third pale concealer applied from a silver tube then blended evenly with her fingers, fourth the fine brown line to which Michael had so objected. The first eye, her left, seemed passable. The line across her right eye smeared into a thick wave. Her heart clenched hard as a rock in her chest. As she wiped off the makeup and began again, the hand holding the miniscule brush shook almost uncontrollably.

After several attempts and she didn't know how many precious minutes, she still hadn't gotten it right. Her arched back was weak with strain. She would surely faint if she couldn't stand upright. And the lines would be neither thin nor straight. Tears flooded her eyes, streaking brown messes – she could almost hear Michael's angry voice using the words – down her cheeks. Her eyes rolled upward and she slid to the floor, her face pulled sideways onto the cool tile countertop and her arms twisted upward.

When her eyelids fluttered open, her face was pressed against the yellow-filled bag. She jerked away, overcome with revulsion, and was yanked back by the chain. The vile bag cushioned her face's impact against the countertop.

Her aversion was so great it shocked her into rationality. Slowly she lifted her head, testing the chains' limits. She discovered that she could kneel and it was reasonably comfortable. Once again, she proceeded through the four steps ... and this time each line was straight and delicate.

When Steve stepped soundlessly through the door on crepe-soled nurse's shoes, she was staring at her reflection. He unlocked the shackles and helped her dress. When Michael returned she was seated at the table, her hands in her lap.

Before he sat, he loomed over her. She so wanted to escape, to jump to her feet and run, as his long, beautiful fingers moved toward her chin. Yet not a hair on her head wavered – at least she'd learned this lesson perfectly – when

his rigid fingers dug into her jaw, tilting her face upwards. Michael examined her face minutely and she held her breath, waiting for the sword to fall, slicing her open.

Instead, his eyes brightened and his lips curved upward into a celestial smile. “Excellent,” he intoned ... and she filled with warmth, her fears gone, replaced by adoration. He sat, without abandoning the radiant smile. “I’m pleased that you’ve made some,” the judgmental emphasis was clear, “progress.”

His face became serious, intense but not frightening. She looked up at him, controlling any trace of her growing curiosity. He reached across the table and lifted her hand. His heat poured through her limbs to her heart, soothing her fears, soothing her pain. Stunned, she watched him lift the hand to his lips, felt his full lips touch her palm. With love? Could it be?

He gazed into her eyes and spoke to her. His words were full and rich with sound and meaning, and with something she’d not heard before. Sorrow? Remorse? “Do you see that I’ve done this all for you? Do you understand how perfect you can be, how much I want you to fulfil your potential,” he paused, and the silence seemed to her interminable, “how much I love you?”

Unshed tears hung in her enraptured eyes. Her heart melted into a spreading pool of ardour. She loved him so much, so wanted to please him. She swore to herself she would try harder. Then he would be happy with her and her life would be wonderful.

He sat back and looked at his classical blue-faced watch. “Well, I guess it’s too late for dinner.”

One solitary tear dropped unheeded to the lace tablecloth. Unaccountably her gaze shifted toward the armoire, perhaps because its door had not been properly closed – an unusual and no doubt punishable offence. Through an opening of several inches her clothing was visible. Suddenly she realized what was different. The wedding gown was no longer there.

“It’s not that bad,” that’s what Mei continually told herself. Most of the time she simply lay curled in what she knew to be a small cage – she’d explored all around herself with her hands, which were bound together and loosely attached to the bottom bars – in a dank, darkened room. At first she’d been unable to get comfortable on the hard, uneven bars. But after many days without movement the aches and stiffness in her limbs had numbed to gruelling nothingness.

The elegant voice had warned her she would die if she removed the hood. Mei spent many hours thinking about it. But every time her fingers touched the fabric edge fear stopped her. What if someone came in while it was off? Or if she replaced it incorrectly? Did she want to die? And after awhile, she was no longer capable of caring.

Someone who did not speak extracted her to be cleaned immediately prior to the large man’s – she knew he was a man though he seemed like a hideous beast – visits. Few words were ever spoken to her. Once, when she was first taken, she could no longer remember how long ago, with her bladder full to bursting, she’d begged the elegant voice, “Please, may I go to the bathroom?”

The voice had replied only one word, “Go.”

Mei felt below her and realized the cage sat on a large drain. No water or paper was ever given her but at least she could make her waste drain away. Twice a day a metal plate of food and a water bottle were put into the cage. She had to lower her head to her hands to get the food into her mouth. She tried not to think about her smell, her filth. And most of all she tried not to recognize the thought always in the back of her mind, “What will happen to me?”

The heavy door opened and a ray of light cut through the blackness. Mei heard the bars slide up. “Out,” the voice said.

She recognized the room by its subtle exotic smell. This time, though, she was not chained to the bed. Her hands were unshackled and she was pushed through a door. To her amazement, and also apprehension, the voice said, “You may remove the hood. Wash yourself and return to the room. Seat

yourself on the bed and wait. If you do otherwise you will be killed.” The door closed and the voice was gone.

Mei twisted her arms and swung them limply side to side. Sensation returned in an intense pins and needles tingling so unpleasant tears filled her eyes. She was afraid to take the time to enjoy the unrestricted movement. With awful, anguished slowness, her hands lifted to the black fabric. The hood now seemed part of her. She’d become accustomed to the perpetual dim vagueness like someone newly blind. Truly she’d wondered if they’d ever allow her to see again. Her fingers slipped underneath the stretchy fabric and, weak from long restraint, she pulled.

At first even the muted light cut into her eyes like knives, blinding her. Gradually she was able to see. Joy rushed into her along with vision ... until frightful questions intermingled into the flood. Why the change? Mei could not imagine it was good. Dread filled her. Her shoulders slumped and once again horrible lassitude consumed her.

Quickly though, hopelessness was cut apart by terror. She’d been told to wash and she must obey. Her eyes widened at the opulent bath, every surface and wall of marble the colour of pale honey. A glass shower big enough for six people was fitted with gold edges and hardware and filled with many fancy bottles, containers and scented soaps. Hesitantly she stretched out her dirty hand – shamefully she avoided acknowledging the dark streaks of dirt, old food and ... well, she wouldn’t think of that – opened the glass-sheeted door and stepped in.

The beat of hot water against her hair and skin, the wonderful, fragrant, soapy washing away, was, she thought, as close to heaven as she’d ever been. As many times as she dared, all the while worrying about her instructions, she soaped her body and rinsed. Finally, reluctantly she stepped from the shower, dried herself with one of the thick, tawny towels and made her way to the bed.

Emotions overwhelmed her senses as she sat primly between the handles that had held her imprisoned and – she pushed away the painful, degrading memories – exposed. This

room, the room where she'd been repeatedly, hideously violated, was opulent as the bath. The walls were papered with Chinese scenes as richly coloured and patterned as tapestries. The furniture was black, ornately carved and gilded. Everything was draped with black and deep red silk. Incense and the perfume of magnificently arranged flowers drifted in subtle air currents. Against her will, images of her abuse played across her mind accompanied by irrevocable fear about what awaited her.

The door handle's quiet turn jolted her like an electric shock, tensing every muscle. She gasped. Into the room walked the most beautiful man she'd ever seen, a lovely enigmatic smile lifting his full lips. With amazing grace he approached and lifted her chin with courtly fingers. Meekly she stared up into his large luminous black eyes.

"Yes," he said, his angelic gaze sweeping her face and flicking lower to her naked breasts, "you are a pretty little thing." His voice was deep, lush and aristocratic, but at his next words her half-formed smile froze then shattered into a million pieces, taking with it her feeble hopes. "My European buyer should find you quite enjoyable." His rosy lips curved downward and the flawless eyes crystallized to gleaming obsidian. Effortlessly, with only a touch of fingertips, he pushed her backwards onto the bed. "Now let's look at you." His voice became steel in her ears. "Spread."

It was not even a second, she knew it. That was the length of her hesitation. In a dream, or so it seemed, she saw his finger move toward her thigh and then there was pain greater than she'd ever experienced. Her wail rose into the air before she could bite it back into silence. "Quiet. Spread." The razor-sharp voice was no louder, no more insistent but her legs jerked apart.

She couldn't help herself, despite her previous abuse she quivered when he touched her ... there. Again the terrible tone. "I do not want to hurt you but if do not obey me, if you do not stay perfectly still when I touch you, I will, unfortunately, be forced to do so."

Now she lay still. To do so was effortless because all hope, all will had deserted her. Thoroughly, exhaustively he examined her. First her front-side. With obvious absorption so focused it seemed to her clinical, or perhaps like a businessman pricing a commodity, he touched, probed, spread her vaginal tissues. By relentless, painful example she'd learned not to resist. Over the weeks her humiliation had been maimed almost to deadness. Her primary emotion was panic so intense she thought her ribcage would burst apart. She wanted to scream, "Why? What is going to happen to me?" but knew she couldn't possibly.

Finally he lifted. "Well," he said softly, clearly to himself, "some damage but acceptable." He bent again and rolled her like an inert log onto her belly, availing himself of her backside. She buried her face into the silk and, with anguish, prepared as best she could for his onslaught – but it didn't come. Again he probed, slipping first one then two fingers inside her anus and firmly spreading. After far too many minutes she heard the soft displeased click of his tongue and his almost plaintive sigh.

For a moment her rigid muscles relaxed. He rolled her onto her back, gripping her hair as if to rip it from her head and pulling her to a sitting position. "Now you will service me, little whore." The words – the name – struck her like hard slaps. He unzipped his trousers and pointed. Brilliant, shameful red rose into her cheeks.

She was too terrified to hesitate yet had no idea what he wanted her to do. Again his fingers moved toward her. She quailed, shrinking into herself. This time, though, he grabbed her hand and pressed it against his groin. The soft fabric of his black trousers and undergarment – silk, she realized – startled her. "Suck it," he said. "Let's see what you can do."

The bulge under her hand seemed to grow larger as she tried to remove it from its covering. After some interminable, excruciating seconds – or minutes? – his penis lay across her hand. She'd never seen one before. The thought that her horrible familiarity did not include vision dizzied her. "Suck it," he repeated, chilling her to the marrow.

Distaste that she tried desperately not to show surged through her as she awkwardly took his flesh into her mouth. It tasted mildly of sweet soap. “No teeth,” his tone was threatening. “In and out,” again he gripped her hair, “like this,” and forced her head backwards and forwards. His penis was instantly hard as a rock and so big it choked her. She gagged and might have vomited if her stomach hadn’t been empty. Tears streamed down her cheeks and onto her breasts. He laughed melodiously and pulled her head against him. Then the pounding she’d experienced elsewhere was in her mouth. She heard him moan and her mouth was filled with thick goo that coated her throat, suffocating her, before it ran out between her lips.

A soft knock sounded and the door opened. A man dressed in a grey suit with a headdress she’d seen in pictures of Arabs entered. He held a syringe. The beautiful man nodded toward her. As the other man approached, his face emotionless, fear rushed through her. She tried to curl into a ball, to hide herself from him but his steps never paused, never abated. Then the needle penetrated her thigh.

Chapter Five

Apprehension gripped her as Karen heard the drop bolt's heavy tumblers clack. For what seemed an eternity but, she realized, was probably only a few seconds, there was only silence. She sat perched on the bed's high edge with back forced rigidly straight and knees clamped primly together, dressed in the pale dress he'd told her to wear. Compelling herself to control the breaths conscripted by the choking corset, she stared at the door and willed it to stay shut.

With dismay, she heard the key make its inevitable progress in the lock. Another short pause and the door handle turned. Michael stepped into the room, cool appraisal on his handsome face, and her already chilled blood ran like ice in her veins.

She didn't understand why she he scared her so, like so much that was incomprehensible since he'd taken her to California. Aside from locking her in, he'd done nothing to hurt her physically. In fact, he'd been kind to her. She knew he had. She shook her head, striving to clear it of the bewildering cloud of confusion. Certainly her parents must be thankful to have found her such a suitable and generous husband.

Yet at this moment every one of her instincts – instincts she'd never previously needed in the bond of her parents' care – made her fear him. Her empty stomach churned with it, almost to the point of nausea.

He held the door open to allow a second man to enter then, as she now knew to be his custom, locked it behind him. Though average in build, the other man was dwarfed by Michael's dramatic height and persona. He was dressed entirely in mysterious black, in soft black trousers and dress shirt, but had a pleasant, unassuming face. He carried a small black leather satchel in one hand and a large, rounded case, like an extra large bowling bag, she thought, effortlessly in the other by its luggage-like handle. The unbearably sweet memory of hanging out with her friends in her town's small bowling alley cut through her like a cleaver.

Michael leaned tenderly over her. His authoritative voice swirled balefully in her brain. "It's time to make you well."

She peered up at him, stupefied, and at the softly smiling man beyond. Michael straightened to his full forbidding height and turned slightly. "This is Mr. Smith. He is going to make it easier for you to fulfil your objectives." Michael smiled and, as always, her emotions surged and she wanted to please him. Incomprehensibly, she heard his words, "I think you'll like him."

But then, as was inevitable, his beautiful mouth turned downward. "You are to do exactly," he repeated the word with autocratic emphasis, "exactly as he tells you." Michael cordially shook the man's hand, "I'll leave you to it," and strode toward the door. She heard the lock turn and turn again then the drop bolt's metallic clank as Mr. Smith moved quietly toward her.

Her impulse was to panic like a cornered animal. But as he closed the small distance she sensed her muscles and even her spirit relax. It was something about him. She seemed safer than any time since she'd left her parents' house.

He took her thin fingers in his large, strong hands and she felt their warmth move into her, penetrating even her bones. She looked up into the shimmering depths of his grey eyes and suddenly she realized how tired she was. All she wanted was to sit on his lap like a small child and go to sleep – forever.

His calm voice was soporific but his words, when they finally adhered to her attention, shocked her to her core. "Have you thought about what you've done to bring yourself here? What is it you desire?" His eyes were firm but kind. "If you understand yourself it will be easier for you."

His words plunged her into paroxysms of self-doubt. She remembered the Christmas party. Had her desire for wealth and refinement, for Michael, been so overpowering she'd influenced her fate and his actions? Her husband, reluctantly she thought the word, was doing this all for her. He'd told her so many times. Could all this be her fault and ... did she desire his torture?

She was aware how meticulously Mr. Smith observed her. In a trance, she saw his lips begin to move again. "I know this has all been uncomfortable," the words struck her like an ironic slap before they transformed in her mind, transformed to truth, "but you must understand – don't you?" She nodded dumbly, anticipating his words, "that he is doing this all for you. He sees perfect beauty in you and is doing everything in his power to make it real."

He gently squeezed her hands. "You want it to become real, don't you? You want to fulfil your wonderful potential?" His words carried a languorous, drug-like peace that continued from his warm hands through her limbs to her chest. She smiled timidly up at him. He gently released her fingers and straightened definitively, giving her right hand a paternal pat. "Good. We're ready to begin. Please remove your clothes."

She stared horrified at him, snapped instantly back from the warmth to her perpetual chill of anxiety. He simply waited, dispassionately observing her until slowly, with quivering fingers, she moved to comply.

His eyes never left her as she bent to remove her high heeled pumps, demurely lifted her skirt and unhooked her stockings front and back from the garters, then reached behind and struggled to lower the taut zipper. She looked at him plaintively, but when his gaze didn't waiver she rose slowly to her feet, dropped the dress to the floor and stepped out, laying the dress carefully on the bed.

What about the corset? Michael had mandated she remove it only to bathe. And each day Steve tugged it inexorably tighter. Her fingers strayed hesitantly to the difficult metal front hooks. Self-conscious confusion froze her in place with lowered eyes and blushing cheeks.

"Remove the corset." His cool voice acted on her like a cattle prod. With a clumsy jerk, she reached behind, fumbled with the doubled bow and loosened the laces. Inadvertently she sighed with relief as the hooks came apart in her fingers.

Her cheeks flushed a lovely pink as she stood naked before him, eyes dropped shyly to the floor. He stepped

forward and ... she stifled her gasp as his fingers touched one of the deep corset marks at her waist. His lips twitched and she knew he saw and understood his profane effect. Her cheeks' pink deepened to fuchsia – she felt the heat – and spread down her throat to her breasts' tops.

“I’m going to make some measurements,” he said. She realized he held a tape measure as he slipped it around her waist. He used the tape measure impartially as if she was inanimate, moving first upward around her ribcage.

When his fingers brushed the underside of her breast she flinched, she couldn’t help herself. His smile was pleasant, even kindly. But he took a nipple between his thick fingers. This time she was prepared and didn’t stir, even fractionally, just stared across into his eyes – he was not much taller than she – half wondering, half beseeching. Until, with no apparent effort whatsoever, he brought his fingers together.

Did she scream? She couldn’t remember. Her knees buckled beneath her yet she couldn’t fall, held upright only by unendurable pain. With that one nipple he jerked her upward until she balanced – almost – on her feet. One searing point was all there was.

Through it his voice penetrated, unwaveringly warm and calm, “I will touch you wherever I desire and you will not move.” She didn’t believe his grip could tighten but pain building almost to numbness again consumed her. “Do you understand?” Mutely she nodded and the agony diminished. The pleasant smile never wavered.

With dull compliance she stood still. The measurements began again, continuing upward to her throat and her head. At eye level, the tape wrapped her eyes, momentarily compressing her eyelids and blinding her with a fearful bolt of yellow lightening in the darkness. Next he moved downward to wrists, thighs, calves and ankles. Each measurement was noted in his PDA.

With hope she knew to be faint, she watched him return the tape to his satchel. With the same motion he retrieved

several shining steel objects. He turned her. "Please bend over. Spread your legs and place your hands on the bed."

She struggled, strained, to restrain her body's shivering. What would he do to her? A silent tear dropped to the coverlet, making, she noticed incongruously, a small stain. The images passing through her mind were almost beyond her conception. Her husband refused to have sex with her, well, with her body. Would he ask someone else to do it for him? Would it be rape if her husband gave permission?

She was terrified, weak with nausea, when she felt his fingers spread her bottom. Her fears were certainly going to be realized, she just knew it. Several more tears dropped to the coverlet. She was so rent with helplessness that her limbs felt dissociated. She tried to flex her fingers against the bed but they were numb and uncooperative.

Her teardrops sounded like drumbeats in her ears. His fingers spread her vagina and she used every bit of her strength to quiet her body's quivering. But she could not repress a small cry and lurch when something hard and cold went inside. He laid one hand flat on her spine above her lovely bottom's abyss. His palm's warmth seemed to counteract the coldness and even the device's uncomfortable movement as he did something with his other hand. Then her tissues tried to rip apart.

One shrill scream and she was silent. But her tears streamed onto the bedding. Michael never hurt her. Why did this man?

And then, thank God!, the pain subsided. Her attention riveted down ... there and she tried to understand. Nothing seemed to have changed. In fact, she felt air currents moving inside her opened vagina and also strange and, with chagrin she realized, pleasurable sensations.

His soft shirt and, she felt herself redden, his body's warmth rippled across her bare back as he leaned over her. His voice was quiet in her ear, "Don't worry. Michael has instructed me not to stretch you." In her mind, she saw his chilly smile. "He reserves that privilege for himself."

He lifted off her. Almost immediately she heard the click of metal on metal. Something poked her, this place and that, inside. Suddenly, without warning and with shocking intensity, something indescribable – like a giant tidal wave – happened inside her. Again she screamed. Now, though, the scream was rapturous. It felt so good! Her breaths burst out in huge gasps and her chest heaved for many almost unendurable minutes – or so it seemed to her. All her pent-up tension, every emotion she hadn't dared recognize, exploded out of her in giant convulsions.

Still, it was over far too soon. When her body calmed, she yearned to beg him, "Please Sir! Do it again!" but was too timid. But he did, without her pleas. And it happened again, shaking her uncontrollably almost to the shattering of both substance and consciousness.

This time, as her body heaved with aftershocks that surged all the way to her throat, he said, "Good girl!" His tone was that of a trainer to his well-trained dog. Her body had relaxed, become wonderfully languid when he slipped the now-warmed metal out of her vagina – as always, pleasure short-lived.

To her shame, his fingers were opening her rear and sliding cold metal into that hole. Worse, it ached and pinched. Once again her muscles constricted into anguished knots. "Never peace," she silently lamented, labouring not to writhe away from the awful device. But the metal didn't stop moving deeper. His hand tickled her bottom and there was stretching and pain, strange and also unbearable.

Then her face flamed hot and red when he pushed something inside her, even deeper between the metal jaws. The thing, whatever it was, probed deeper and deeper into that dark, dirty hole and, replete with shame and fear that quite literally grabbed at her entrails sickening her, she tensed against it. Endlessly it penetrated her, delving and poking, until she couldn't imagine it going further ... but still it did.

Without warning it stopped and withdrew. In scalding mortification, her imagination vividly painted the fouled instrument's withdrawal and his requisite cleansing or disposal

of it. She couldn't bear him seeing or God forbid! touching her filth. Yet, her dismay mingled with something else, with a strange, forbidden pleasure as the retracting thing sucked at her tissues. The pleasure moved deep inside her and her humiliation increased a thousand-fold.

"You may stand," he said when she emptied of metal. Shyly she stood, still facing away from him.

"Turn." She recognized his economy of speech as customary. With lowered head, she obeyed. Her downcast eyes snuck to the formidable silver metal items on the small table, nervously trying to discern what violated her ... and, she shivered with disgust, how dirty it was. But she couldn't tell.

He lifted something long and narrowly rectangular with a needle sharp end. It spread apart in his hands into two flat sides of a triangle. With head lowered she couldn't avoid seeing the points move downward. She was tense as a board when one point pricked one side of her clitoris. Quickly, fearfully, he rotated the device from side to side, to top and bottom taking what she assumed – and then realized to be correct when he scribbled them onto a piece of paper with one hand while holding the device still with the other – to be innumerable measurements. The needle points hurt but her fear that they would pierce her was far worse. Methodically he began to measure – every minute part of her, moving meticulously around her genitalia then upward to her breasts.

She watched, morbidly fascinated, as the point approached her right nipple's very centre then, though she was somehow certain it was simply a gratuitous enjoyment for him and not truly part of the process, penetrated. True to her dire expectation, the pain was sharp and cutting. From a distance she watched and felt and so wanted to scream, but didn't – at least didn't think she did. He simply continued his intricate measurements, dispassionately rotating the implement around the terrible notch of pain. Then he moved to her throat, hampering her breathing with her fear, and finally, upward to her head.

It was to her head he gave most attention, taking dozens of measurements from as many direction and angles. The

instrument's point poked her like a pincushion – her nostrils, her ear lobes, even her eye sockets, no spot was exempt. All the while she held herself still, ominously waiting for a mistake that maimed.

At last he closed the device and set it with the others. In relief, she sucked in breath she'd been holding tensed as severely as her muscles then dragged it in again when he opened the big bag and reached in.

When he turned, his smile was customarily bottomless. "It's not complete," his brow furrowed microscopically, "or perfect, but it'll have to do for now."

She resisted staring at the object in his hand. It looked like something from an old Frankenstein movie – three fragmented bands of shining steel held together horizontally by hinges and locking rings and vertically by long screws and turnbuckles, the whole threaded with plastic ended wires.

She stood meekly, eyes lowered, as he tugged it over her head. A band fit tight against her forehead. Another was far too thick, far too snug at her throat. The most puzzling was a band with a hinge and lock on either side of her mouth. He adjusted this screw and that.

Not until she heard a lock snap did panic strike. It was irrational, she told herself. But she suddenly choked with overpowering claustrophobia, with terror her breathing would be stopped. She yearned to grab something, hold tight and scream and then to weep when she knew unequivocally she had nothing, neither physical nor indeed psychic, to hold onto. She did none of these, simply struggled to remain upright.

Enshrouded in nauseating dread, she saw him reach deep into the big bag and lift out a bread loaf sized black box. Again the unfathomable smile as he hooked the headpiece wire's plastic ends into their complement from the box. Her eyes were still lowered and her head and stomach still swirled but she could not help but notice the box's dials and switches as his fingers went to them.

"Sit," he said and pressed her onto the bed with one hand. Again the cool smile, "so I don't have to pick you up from the

floor.”

Her stomach heaved ... and before she could vomit it became far worse. A strange burning jolt raced through her jaw and the experimentation began.

Over the months, Delia visited Karen’s mother often. They both missed Karen terribly.

Delia simply forged ahead, finishing her last year in high school and preparing for college at the University of Minnesota. Like many young rural Americans, she was intensely grateful to have state-subsidized access to a superb university.

Karen’s mother, though, seemed seriously diminished by her daughter’s absence. Her once pretty face and body, already desiccated by years of farm life, now appeared stripped of life, shrunken and aged. A hundred new lines carved the peripheries of eyes and mouth. She moved as if under some unbearable strain, head always lowered and shoulders increasingly stooped.

Through the late spring and greening summer Delia gently probed but received no answer. Always a few tears dropped from Mrs. Johansson’s eyes at the questions. Ultimately, though, she straightened her sagging shoulders, dried her eyes and said – reassuring herself, Delia invariably thought – “I’m sure it’s for the best. He’s such a good match.” Then she sipped her tea and shifted the subject to Delia.

One perfect summer day, Delia’s battered baby blue Ford Escort slid to a stop in a swirl of gravel and dust next to the many bloomed flower bed flanking the porch stairs. Karen’s mother sat in the whitewashed porch swing, a creamy page in her thin fingers. Delia paused on the centre stair, admiring the teeming stalks of fragrant blooming lavender, pink Echinacea, yellow and white daisies alongside pastel roses and imperious yellow sunflowers, until she noticed Mrs. Johansson’s devastated expression.

Her heart in her throat, she raced up the remaining stairs and crouched next to the swing, throwing her arm around the older woman's shoulders. "What's wrong?"

"She says she can't come to visit us until she finishes," the voice dripped with anguished sarcasm, "her training." It quavered with heavy, unshed tears. "She says maybe," now her voice shot up several decibels, "if *he* says it's all right, we can visit her at Christmas."

Mrs. Johansson's eyes raised to Delia's then dropped in a flood of tears. The letter fluttered to the porch floor from her stiff fingers. "Look at her handwriting." She choked on a slew of sobs as Delia retrieved the thick paper. "It looks like a spider wrote it! She ..." more sobs rose toward hysteria. "He's making her weak – sick!"

Delia lowered herself to the seat and gave Mrs. Johansson's hand a small, determined tug. The woman's liquid gaze was pulled toward the girl's. "Mrs. J," Delia's inflection was resolute, "it's time for you to tell me what's going on."

And Karen's mother at last told her.

When the woman finished, her face hidden in haggard hands, Delia sat silent, stupefied and helpless. After some indeterminate time, from somewhere deep within, her own thoughts at the awful wedding dinner replayed loudly in her mind. She'd sworn to herself she would help her friend – her back stiffened – and she would.

When the metal garment was finished Mr. Smith ran a battery of tests to verify functionality parameters.

Most physically uncomfortable and cumbersome, of course, was the headpiece. Light, yes, but still so, well, much more than embarrassing. Her husband trusted her so little he locked her head in obstructive metal – in a cage! It wasn't heavy weight pulling down her head. She was profoundly ashamed.

And then the waist cinch. It was beautiful, like exotic lingerie, but squeezed her brutally, reorganizing her insides she

was sure, and forcing out her breath.

The rest could, if allowed, be remarkably comfortable, even the flexible probes that penetrated places she couldn't bear to consider. Mr. Smith tested those too. Her mind lingered on the memories. Those strange contractions inside her. She'd been terrified and humiliated at once at her loss of control. Yet even out of control he made her body thrill in ways she'd never experienced.

Michael apparently had no use for that function. Though he repeatedly professed his desire, nay, need for her happiness, he'd given no indication of interest in her physical pleasure. But he did have use for the probes.

Every morning, at Michael's order, Steve weighed her on the medical scale in her bathroom. If she had not lost weight – and God forbid if she'd gained! – she had to sit on the toilet. Steve would turn a dial and she would lose control of her bowels. She'd thought she'd numbed to every disgrace. But her body's noxious and rude betrayal, as if an alien hand cracked her intestines like a long whip convulsively emptying them, was almost unendurable physically as well as emotionally. Like a wracking illness, she was devoid of control. The contractions ripped through her beyond tolerance, beyond sanity, until nausea overcame her entire digestive tract even into her throat.

That vileness was not the end. When nothing more was inside her, Steve's ham hand reached between her legs with a squeeze bottle filled with warm water. He squirted her to remove – she shuddered at the memory – foul effluvia then forced the long tip into her anus and squeezed, filling her empty cavity. Only at that point did he flush away her mess.

She, however, had to remain there until her bowels emptied once again – emptied of all but Mr. Smith's long metal trigger.

Chapter Six

The campaign was not going well. He'd begun to wonder if he'd made the right decision and his doubts, along with the problems assaulting him daily, were destroying not only his days but his sleep as well. Restlessly he manoeuvred his long, scraggy shanks to another position and plumped his pillow. Maybe he should have stayed with his soothingly insular law practice. He turned again and corkscrewed his bony knees foetally to his chest. Maybe he should have continued his effortless milking of his family's lavish two hundred year old Louisiana connections.

He'd had such confidence in his abilities. Without even a shred of equivocation he'd felt his impending success deep inside his body and, yes – he acknowledged the strange certainty he'd felt – in his soul. So, he gave in eagerly to the very important men's very flattering pleas for his help. As he sank into sleep's black hole, a thunderbolt of anxiety lit the back of his eye sockets. It all seemed to be going wrong.

Iridescent wings, gleaming with midnight blues and greens in their blackness, beat warm air like loving fingers against his face. In his dream he saw blue eyes as brilliant as his own. He saw a heartbreakingly beautiful heart-shaped face surrounded by lush hair black and lucent as obsidian. And though he couldn't remember the words when he woke, the voluptuous red lips spoke to him softly, comfortingly, revitalizingly, in the French Creole of his ancestors. Then, at the same dream time, the woman was a black bird and she flew away leaving him in peace for the first time in many nights.

Night after night the woman bird came to him. Each night her lilting voice became more audible. Soon he heard the words with perfect understanding as she beat her wings tenderly down into his face. "I've searched for someone strong enough – for you – for so many ages. Open yourself to me and I will give you your desires." In his dream he opened himself. His grief was almost unbearable when she flew away.

The next night she sat on his bedside. She slid out of her glistening plumage, allowing it to fall slowly, inch by inch, off her magnificent shoulders, off her slim, exquisitely well-formed arms, off her heavy, rounded breasts. Like a cloak, she lowered the feathers loosely to her waist, allowing him a glimpse of the darkness below. He watched, awed.

The bright eyes floated above him in aquamarine starlight until only they held his attention, even when she bent toward him. His eyes, identical in colour and vibrance, were locked with hers so that he was only remotely aware of her red lips' fullness pressing against his own narrow, pale reflections and her effulgent breasts compressed against his meagre chest.

She spoke in low tones, right against his lips, and her voice sounded musical, like small bells ringing. He remembered her words and she repeated them, "Open yourself to me and I will give you your desires."

Avidly he responded but she placed a long nail the colour of antique ivory against his lips. She raised her torso off his and spread her arms.

Suddenly he saw the dense, crackling, awful blackness surrounding her. He neither had time to flee nor even to flinch before it was on him, sucking his spirit. In frozen despair, he felt himself weaken, felt his life force flow out of his grasp and vanish into the formless black, never, he knew, to return unto his death. And far more horrific, as his consciousness slipped into the void, he espied thousands of faded wraiths screaming hell's agony at him ... and one of them was himself. Then he went out like a candle flame ...

... until an eternity later when he awoke to her touch on his loins. He watched from some other place as the darkness flowed through her elegant hand into his manhood, watched his penis become hard and potent as an iron lightning rod. He watched her ravishing form, encased not in feathers but in silken skin the same old ivory colour of her fingernails, straddle him.

His penis submerged in her intoxicating heat and then, before he could pull away – though God, or perhaps the Devil he mused, knew he did not want to pull away – the awful darkness rushed through her into his waiting totem. He understood and was shocked by his rank readiness for it, whatever it was.

It raced through her and she threw back her head. In paralytic fascination, he saw her throat, stretched long and sleek above her magnificent breasts, contort. A sound like a raven's shrill call reverberated on his eardrums.

Infinite blackness poured into him, filling him up to overflowing and beyond in a ceaseless torrent. He swirled in sensation, acutely aware of her primeval, orgiastic female hunger at the centre of the vortex. Then he felt his skin give way. Indeed he exploded in one terrifying, ear-splitting pop and in doing so he merged with the blackness.

Some indeterminate time later, he had become the blackness. It had its own consciousness also and that consciousness was beside him, even, he realized with fear that burst in his vision in vibrant manifestation, inside him ... and it was huge and horrible and terrifying. Whatever it was – at first he had no idea – it was old as time. Its ghastly laughter pealed in his ears as it played its gruesome history across his awareness. It showed him not only events but techniques – how it had done its awful deeds, how it had captured and held the spirits drifting hellishly in its wake, and so much more – and the experiences became his.

In an ecstasy of power and knowledge he spread out his arms and revelled in the sibilant current flowing from his fingertips, from his very being. He turned his head and observed the agonized entities swimming in his etheric wake, saw he could feed off their energy. He sucked and a burst of power flowed through his mouth to his genitalia. He looked upward and again saw the blue eyes but now they seemed more tame, more manageable.

He pulled her down against his chest, her lips and breasts and pelvis against his. His desire was to mate her and for some time he did, their heated juices intermixing like fluid curtains

of electricity. He'd never before experienced such sex – so gorged, so alive with rapture, power ... and dominance, his dominance.

Effortlessly, as if she was insubstantial as his dream, he flicked her off him onto her side and mounted her. One lush libertine leg nestled at his waist and the second was trapped between his thin thighs. He looked down on her from his awesome height and was caught by the site of his own penis. Current, like electricity, rippled through veins running along a fecund rod – he marvelled at the instrument's potent fertility – far longer, thicker and harder than he'd ever known. He watched the member spark with animus and knew he could now bring intense pleasure and – his cruel lips lifted – pain.

A sound turned his attention. Her gaze held more than exultation and triumph. The sparkling blue eyes held fear. He knew she recognized his power and that he could feed off her fear as surely as he could the wraiths. Now it was he who locked eyes with her. Now it was his visage stamped with mastery and ruthlessness. He smiled down into her eyes and with exquisite brutality impaled her to the womb.

Her scream rent the undulating ether and the blackness' bestial laugh harmonized with the sound. Together he and the blackness raped her accompanied all the while by her banshee wail. With each penetration, her power became his.

Amidst his thrusts grew a new desire, strange to him yet overpowering. He wanted, needed, to impregnate her. But did she exist in corporeal form? What would he impregnate? The blackness whispered in his ear, "You must seed her with your power and through her the world."

The desire grew overwhelming, building inside his testicles in a giant tide that lapped back into every microscopic aspect of his physical and psychic being. He was torn between that need and his pleasure in her violation. He looked down upon her, watched her vivid tortured blue pools become increasingly vacant, with gratification previously unimaginable. To the blackness he asked, "Can I do this again? Rape whenever, whoever I desire? Crush them beneath my feet?"

The hideous laugh rolled through him and, to his surprise, he gained strength and buoyancy on its abomination. “Of course,” it told him.

His testicles grew heavy with dark power. He thrust savagely, violently, and in one massive expulsion he shot his manifold seeds inside her. Then he watched the spurts of his power make their way into her womb and into every part of her.

He saw she absorbed his energy. Her eyes focused and she smiled a goddess smile. “My dearest nephew. The cycle has completed.” As before, her words chimed musically in his ears.

At first he was stunned – his aunt many times removed, Marie LaVeau, the infamous Voodoo Queen of New Orleans? – until he realized how logical, how perfect it all was. Gloriously, he leaned over her like a bird of prey and observed his softly pulsing penis’s withdrawal between her flaxen thighs.

And her womb opened and expelled his – their – cursed power into the world.

Chapter Seven

A horrible red beast was smothering her and disembowelling her simultaneously. It ripped at her insides with rapid relentless strokes. Crimson blood swirled in her eyes and her head pounded against its metal cage.

Somehow she fought her way into the air. Her eyelids seemed glued together, too heavy and sticky to open, but somehow she pried them apart. Blearily she remembered her last action before mental disconnection – the fork moving between her lips. She peered upward and was paralysed by a jolt of hell's sheer shock.

Her husband's distorted face loomed above hers. Gone – so thoroughly wiped away she could no longer believe its existence – was his genteel beauty. The face was raw with bestial carnality. The frightful sight gripped her attention, dissociating it from ... the rest ... for one moment that seemed ubiquitous.

Karen was first aware that he had chained the steel garment's thigh pieces tight to metal rings set in the bed-frame, spreading wide her knees and exposing her genitals. And his hard naked pelvis was between, pounding her mercilessly, rending her narrow, little-used vagina wide open with his unbearably long adamantine shaft.

The hurting, burning sensations swamped her ability to understand. Yet the one perception of her wet, goopy vagina separated from the rest. She didn't understand why. Certainly it wasn't her fluid. Despite herself, she often found his physical presence breathtaking, particularly – or, perhaps, even – the few disturbing times she'd seen him naked. Then she'd lubricated. The present, though, was far too horrifying.

His chest pressed against her ribcage, preventing adequate breath. When she tried to expand her lungs, desperately gasping with lack of oxygen and pain, she discovered he'd also chained the steel cage around her head at the throat. She couldn't lift any part of her head or chest from the bed. She

could only look up into the crazed, almost slavering face. His breath was laboured and hot. Truly she expected him to drip saliva from his gaping mouth to sear her flesh.

She tried to somehow protect herself from his onslaught – to find a way to make it less agonizing, less frightening. But she didn't know how. She fought to squelch the cries that would have surged from her lips. He smiled fiendishly down upon her and his lust, his fever, his breath, increased in intensity until he seemed a demon in man's flesh. In fear she watched his control utterly abandon him, felt his chest heave against hers ...

... and then he was out of her vagina and between her breasts. She couldn't feel the hardness against her, nor really see it. Her head's movement was utterly restricted not only by its silver cage but by the chains locking it to the bed frame. When she lowered her eyes she saw just the round head's single orifice, like a swollen eye amid purple flesh so engorged – the thought layered on her swirling overwhelm – it seemed to strain to explosion point.

The organ lay on the metal strip between her velvety breasts, at first. He jerked it upward, his big hands simultaneously kneading her breasts together like lumps of insensate bread dough, trapping his penis between. His long body was almost folded in half above her, back curved, knees crushing her arms, eyes absent – an animal spasmed by rutting need.

More horrible were his guttural grunts as his penis rubbed her skin raw, bruisingly thrust against her throat and chin, only stopped from causing real damage by the steel cage ... then the animal howls accompanied by terrifying, out-of-control convulsions above her. Hot sticky expulsions stung her chin, dribbling cloyingly into her mouth, nostrils and eyes. She gagged and her chest heaved in time to his own pitching, keening breaths.

Without warning came silence as abysmally ear-splitting as the chaos before. And then, more ghastly than anything before, was Michael's transformation. His beautiful face appeared to shatter apart, to collapse in on itself. Abruptly she

was drowning, in a deluge of tears pouring from his limpid eyes.

His hard pectorals concussed in distorted seizures and incomprehensible sounds escaped him. They were words, she realized. In tones so broken-hearted her own heart ruptured and opened to him, he repeated, over and over, “I didn’t mean to! I’m sorry! Please, please forgive me!”

At last, she was finally making discernable progress! Michael acknowledged a distinct zephyr of content, pleasure and, his brows and penis twitched simultaneously, arousal as the fingers of his left hand brushed the table’s rich linen drapes on their way to caress the dials of Smith’s radically customized electrostim unit.

Yes! With satisfaction so exquisite it was erotic, he smiled into her lovely fragile – and apprehensive – eyes then took a leisurely survey. He’d managed to almost completely destroy that gross shell to expose the delicate grace underneath. Thus, he could now look at her without revulsion.

His gaze made its way down her tender diminishing curves, enjoying the collar bones’ increasing definition, the narrowing of the beautifully shaped upper arms. The firm but pendant mammaries and the attenuated waist and thighs were almost visible under the dress’ softly embracing fabric. Almost there!

Michael’s eyes traced the intricate metal fabrications running from head to feet and once again lauded the phenomenal luck that seemed his perpetual birthright. Despite the unequivocal certainty regarding Doud’s company, he never postulated acquiring a resource of Smith’s multifaceted usefulness.

The headpiece proved constantly fascinating. Smith had explained that the volume of soft brain tissue generated operational uncertainty only ameliorated by direct experimentation on individual subjects. The pathway chosen by each electrical application was not predictable and, to add complication, unique between subjects. Even results from

impulses applied directly to one isolated neural locus were only predictable as to general functionality (i.e. vision, speech, muscular, etc.), not specific occurrences (e.g. which visual memory is triggered). In other words, you had to shock each “victim” repeatedly at each particular point on the skull to know with certainty each current’s path and precise effect. The obsessively meticulous Smith had spent a week mapping Karen’s cranial pathways.

Michael frowned ever so slightly. Smith had assured him he’d used the minimum current required. The wear and tear on his wife was unfortunate but necessary. The thought lingered for no more than thirty seconds.

Really Michael wanted her naked to better admire the elegantly flat, flexible steel bands, connectors and probes wrapping around and into her body to affect every critical function. To do so, however, was counter to her etiquette training program. So he contented himself by envisioning the remarkable low-profile components – ethereal contacts dispersed at key points on her feet’s pads, her ankle, knee and hip joints; the space-age filament wands inserted into vagina and anus; and for some undefined reason his favourite, the fiendish waist cinch constructed of gossamer steel “bones” set in a corset of silky NASA designed fabric simultaneously stretchy and unyielding.

“Now eat before the delicious food gets cold.” Austerely he observed the fear then apathy chasing each other across her face, and her fingers’ palsy when the fork moved upward. Truly he regretted this had all been so difficult – for both of them – but every objective had a price and this one – he knew she agreed with him – was worth it. His long fingers caressed a dial. One moment. Two. He smiled kindly, as at a child. Then his fingers moved, her wide-open eyes emptied and the fork fell from her hand.

For several moments he continued his passive appraisal ... until the desire to see the whole of the apparatus became too great. He moved to the back of her chair, bent her forward and lowered the dress’ long zipper. Gently, so gently, he lifted the weightless wool off her shoulders, tugging when the tight

sleeves snagged her arms, dropped it to her waist and returned her torso to the chair back. He too returned to his chair.

Appreciatively he examined the fine steel web and her opalescent skin between. Such beautiful breasts – like luscious teardrops charged with archetypal femaleness! Once again he thrilled to his good fortune, to his incontestable intuition. She was so close! Almost perfect.

His evaluation continued its sweep. Perhaps half a stone more. And she really was a little too tall but he'd live with it if he must.

His eyes went to the upper half of the cinch's fabric, visible over the lowered dress. Like a thunderbolt, his cock was rock, achingly hard, so hard his balls screamed their need from loins to chest. His need was agonizing, blinding, ripping away his control.

He lifted her insubstantial body from the chair, barely feeling its weight. Restraining himself from tossing her, he instead laid her onto the bed. He worked to pull her dress over her high heels. When it caught on itself, he tore it off her. The chains attached to D-rings affixed to the bed frame had never been used but were ready, hidden under the long luxurious coverlet. Frantically he stripped her of panties, leaving garter belt, stockings and heels, spread her knees and chained her there, at waist and at throat. Then he tore off his own clothes, needing to be naked against the metal.

That she was still unconscious and not ready gave him a moment's pause. With bulging eyes and saliva-filled mouth, he stared down at the inner thighs' thin, luminous skin, at the strands of metal penetrating pristine vagina and anus. Each new stimulus flailed against his cock, rendering it more stone-like, and against his spirit, decimating his disintegrating control.

A large, viscous glob of his saliva fell to the coverlet in a spreading stain. Like a ravenous dog, need drove him. He must lap at her delectable meat! Stripped of all reason he fell upon her. His dripping mouth buried itself in her sweet cunt, her sweet ass, licking, slobbering, even gnawing with perfect

straight white teeth. But his mind knew none of it. Only the animalistic id, his beast, tasted her sex, tasted her flesh and found them delicious.

Only when he sank his teeth into her thigh's white meat, tantalizingly exposed between the silver bands and cream garters, was the beast's hunger subdued ... but not sated.

He lifted up and once again fixed on the mucilaginous hole. His aching rod pulsed blue with blood and pent up jism, demanding satisfaction. Of its own volition, it forced its way inside her tight, almost virginal vagina, rubbing against the metal probe. Its exultation rang in his ears and throughout his being. "So good!" and then "Ours! No one else's!" It had an immediate impulse to cum but resisted, he felt its unaccustomed control. "Not enough! More!"

His own mouth's slime worked as lubricant, easing the passage. Still he felt the tissue tear. Yet the damage only served to further inflame the organ. It penetrated her vulnerable warmth, ramming its bulging head against the cervix' delicate mound, then withdrew almost completely into the cool air – interminable, ecstatic sensation. The kneading strokes, the impact, the temperature changes engendered profound, celestial bliss that they – id, ego and the Michael that was separate alike – wished would last forever ... until the beast began its screams for release.

Then the ego took charge and a thread of rationality emerged. "No birth control! Not ready for impregnation!"

But the id's shrill continued. "Release! Release! Release!"

...

... until the ego could no longer bear it. It offered a solution, "Between the breasts!" and the id took it. The next instant his organ was enveloped in the two wonderfully pliable cushions and soft, milky warmth filled his hands.

It was then Michael saw she was conscious. All three consciousnesses looked down on her and observed her pain, her degradation and, amid it all, her struggle to submit to their will. All were enthralled and, yes, enflamed by the creature beneath them. The fury of their beats increased. Unrecognized

sounds rushed from them. And in one giant eruption of release that surged through every one of their cells they covered her head in semen.

Suddenly there was only Michael and the remaining “he” was alone, cruelly, loathsomely alone ... and so wretchedly empty. Blackness devoid of life loomed up around him. He tried to push it away but it moved inexorably closer in an apocalyptic tide. In desperation he implored it, pleaded with it, “I didn’t mean to! I’m sorry! Please, please forgive me!”

At his centre was one small bright life spark inscribed in his own steel, “This must never happen again!”

Chapter Eight

The plan had not taken long to formulate. She'd begun with the question "What will give me the most chance of saving Karen and beating," her nose wrinkled in distaste, "that man?" It seemed an impossible task. He was so rich and powerful. The best she could do, Delia thought, was to learn his game, wait for an opportunity ... and become strong.

Fortunately the University of Minnesota housed one of the top U.S. business schools. So into the venerable classical, columned Vincent Hall she went.

That taken care of she focused on "strong". Symbolically, she cut her gold streaked brown hair into spikes and dyed it black. She ran and pumped iron in the University's well-equipped gym. It made her hard and strong but, she soon realized, didn't help her fight.

She began to research – talking to people about locally available techniques and instructors and trying a few of the suggestions. At the end, the consensus said a small Shotokan dojo over an Indian restaurant on the seedier Western edge of the University had no equal in intensity and brutality.

The restaurant was a dingy hole in the wall with great, if not necessarily germ-free, food. A plain door recessed above a single concrete stair sat unobtrusively alongside the restaurant's gaudy painted glass. Taped to the door was a small laminated rectangle bearing the words "Karate, 2nd Floor". Her stomach growled at the spicy smells as she climbed the worn but clean stairs and knocked on the dojo door.

"Enter." The voice was deep and mellifluous.

The single large room was bright with clear fall sunlight. The light reflected from gleaming mirrored walls and immaculately polished hardwood floors. Something she guessed was a shrine, though she'd never before seen one, sat against the far wall – a two foot high golden Buddha surrounded by flowers, flags and bronze objects she didn't

recognize. To its left, six heavy punching bags were chained to the high exposed ceiling.

From behind an old, square, dark wood desk nestled in the opposite corner, a black man in bare feet, white pants and a white jacket held together by what was obviously a black belt came to meet her. Delia restrained a gasp. He moved his awesome height – probably 6’4” – and spectacular, sleek muscles, evident even under the thick cloth, toward her with fluid grace and silence so profound her senses had an instant of asynchronism.

She held out her hand to him. He hesitated but then gripped it firmly in a hand twice its size. And all the while he looked calmly but piercingly down on her out of a strikingly handsome face and deep, dark, disturbing brown eyes.

Delia had heard that humility was a Shotokan watchword. This man did not seem to her humble. Not that he seemed proud. What he really seemed was frightening with a recognizable dose of paternalism.

He smiled, showing gleaming white teeth with long canines. “Like a big cat,” she thought.

“How can I help you?”

His lush voice rippled her skin like a warm wind. She felt heat rise into her cheeks. She steeled her spine and hardened her eyes. “I hear your classes are the hardest in Minneapolis. I want to learn to fight.”

“Why?” His smile was infuriating, asserting his power and taunting her to react.

And she so wanted to – to punch him in the stomach, kick him in the nuts or, at the very least, scream at him. But she didn’t. She extinguished her anger and met his irritating, gorgeous gaze, smile for smile. She shrugged and unaccountably told him the truth. “I need to protect a friend from someone very strong,” her smile became as hard as his, “and I want to win.”

Almost but not quite imperceptibly, his demeanour changed. She peered into his eyes and wondered if she was

reading him correctly. He seemed way too pointedly, predatorily male and, this surprised her even more, not quite nice. Then the hypnotic voice. “My name is Jones but you will call me Sensei.” He lifted her hand and squeezed a little too hard. “You will be in my special class.”

Shit! It was cold! Even in the closed van the pre-dawn chill penetrated her bones, contracting muscles already tensed in preparation for the agonizing run. She pulled her sweatshirt hood tighter around her face and discreetly pressed closer to the hooded figure next to her.

Seven people huddled together on the stripped down van’s bare benches. One more, a slim blond girl – the only other female – with a rather plain face and a spectacular body honed by years as Sensei’s assistant (and some said lover) drove. Sensei sat in the front passenger seat, a stopwatch and clipboard in his lap.

Delia – and she was certain the six men agreed – wondered for the hundredth time why she put herself through this. She tried not to look at the dark trees whipping forbiddingly in what she knew was a freezing wind along the steep incline down 22nd into the Mississippi River gorge. Another minute and the van slowed and stopped in the long empty parking lot. She sighed. They were, of course, the first in the park.

“Time to go.” Sensei shoed them from the van’s meagre warmth onto the grey pavement.

A hundred feet away below the flat brownish bank, the big river grumbled and slapped at its opaque expanse, visible only as unbroken darkness in the spectral morn. As she’d done three times a week under darkness’ cloak, Delia bowed to the river, told “the old man” she loved him and asked his blessing. She didn’t completely understand why the river moved her so. When she looked at its vast strength and potency she saw the benevolent Father whose long arms nourished the country from the stark Canadian border to the fertile Mississippi delta, all-seeing and all-doing.

Everyone except Sensei stood stretching or stomping feet and waving arms against the cold. Sensei had slipped into the van's driver's seat. His dark skin shone in the faint overhead lamplight as he peered at his stopwatch. Delia saw his arm lower and heard the faint click. "Go!"

They all took off, racing out the parking lot entrance toward the 22nd Avenue hill. Delia was with the pack until they hit the incline. Then, gradually, she lagged further behind. Her heart buffeted her chest. The van moved slowly past. She glanced to the side and saw Sensei's white teeth – his sadistic smile at her struggle up the hard slope – but she paid no real attention. Her entire focus consisted of eating up as much ground as possible in the shortest time, as he'd ordered.

Over the hill's top the ground levelled significantly. Scattered early morning lights outlined Riverview Tower's tall, stark façade directly ahead. The concrete rectangle's ugly rows of black metal windows poked like a lone monument to warmth above the thick, looming trees. Only on her first run had she believed the big building's illusion of closeness. She knew the remaining three-quarter of a mile stretched before her through the dark alley of glowering trees. Her feet and heart pounded in her ears as she watched the luminescent glint of high tech heels grow distant in front of her. She told herself over and over, "It's only a mile, only eight minutes," but at this level of intense effort it seemed like a million.

When she finally stopped panting next to the van, everyone else was inside and Sensei was back in the front passenger seat waiting for her, his cruel smile gleaming bright. He gave the stopwatch a final click. "Eight minutes twenty two seconds. You're improving." He pulled the door closed with a bang. "Now sprints." They drove back down to the gorge.

After fifteen minutes of thirty second sprints up the onerous incline with sixty second rests in-between – she was again, of course, last to the top – they returned to the dojo.

Half an hour of squat kicks on the polished floor that made her quads and gluts scream in agony and they began the real workout. The others were all brown belts, except the girl

who wore a black belt – far along in their training. Initially, Delia'd found the movements awkward. She was still much slower than anyone else in the class. But she'd worked hard and was almost ready for testing on the first kata, an elaborate series of movements that defined the first level.

After half an hour of kata practice, Sensei ordered kumite – sparring with a partner. The others, who were fairly well matched, paired off. So if she was lucky, she sparred with the assistant. If she was unlucky she got Sensei ... a painful but excellent workout with probably a bruise or two. This morning Sensei stood before her.

Delia could not believe his speed. She could see him move but was never fast enough to touch him – not his hand nor any part of his body – unless he allowed it. If he attacked she would be on her back on the floor before she blinked. And he was merciless, coming on ceaselessly, pushing her relentlessly. She knew he took pleasure in standing triumphantly over her after he'd dumped her onto inflexible bones.

Only once, in fury and humiliation as she lay below him, had she tried street fighting techniques – to grab his balls, a manoeuvre she knew he'd sanction if, and it was a big if, she was successful. Her eyes had processed his movement even while her body hadn't been fast enough. He'd almost broken her wrist.

Chapter Nine

Karen hadn't had time to adequately consider the bite-shaped bruise on her inner thigh though she'd seen it when he'd finished with her. She'd fingered it surreptitiously, testing its size and tenderness, whenever Steve turned away during her clean up.

Really her whole body ached, even inside. Fear that something was wrong in her belly managed to penetrate the residue of shocked numbness. But she had no time to think even of that.

Steve laid her on the bed and replaced the metal suit. He slid a sterile field under her hips and set a metal tray filled with small implements beside her. She didn't bother to look and, as if in substantiation of her indifference, he spoke flatly, as usual. "I'm going to insert a catheter now."

She no longer flinched when he manipulated her genitals, was no longer even humiliated. Just more deadening indignity to add to the rest. She stared blankly at the ceiling and dully felt him spread her vaginal walls and slide the plastic tubing into her urethra. He turned away and did something on the metal tray.

When he turned back his voice held something different. A touch of remorse? The thought sent chills of terror racing through her. "This will be easier if you try to relax and breathe deeply. Okay?"

He waited until she whispered, "Okay." His big fingers pressed her outer labia together. She screamed at the deep sharp pain and her body involuntarily contorted.

He pressed her against the bed, stopping her motion. Still his tone was flat. "I have to make ten stitches. I'll try to be quick but," he paused, "I have to do it," another pause, "and I'm going to have to sew you up every day so you better get used to it. If you try to relax it won't be so bad."

Actually each stitch was not one but two distinct, painful, terrifying piercings as the needle was forced into and then passed through each labium. Each time, rather than ending there, the agony continued as the surgical thread slid like fire through her skin and was tugged tight. Silent tears poured from blank eyes but she no longer moved, lying limp and hopeless.

He was on the ninth stitch when she heard the lock clank and Michael enter the room. His gently smiling face leaned over her and her vacant gaze instantly snapped to attention.

His fingers softly caressed the stitches while Steve took the last. "Very neatly done." He straightened and wiped a small trace of blood from his fingers with a white, monogrammed handkerchief. Oddly she found his next words more harrowing than the needle's passage through her flesh. "Please dress her for lunch. I think something red." He left the room.

She was again seated at the piecrust table, her hands folded in her lap and eyes downcast inside the metal headpiece, when he returned followed by his chef pushing a steam table. Steve had dressed her in a sleeveless vermilion Armani sheath of Jackie Kennedy classicism. It was only a little snug. The awareness flitted across her mind's spiritless panorama but offered no real relief.

He pulled a fat key ring out of his perfectly cut trousers' pocket, selected a small silver key and unlocked her metal mouthpiece. Once face to face, his warm smile soothed her. "You look very nice, my dear."

The chef served some sort of broiled white fish with a simple lemon sauce and grilled vegetables. Karen waited for Michael to take a taste and nod approval to the chef before she lifted her fork. Its path to her mouth seemed interminable and as difficult as lifting heavy weight. She was simultaneously afraid to look and fascinated by his hand motions. But, to her great relief, the bite of fish made it uneventfully to her mouth. She chewed slowly, savouring the bite as if it would be alone – as it very well might.

Still he smiled congenially. “You are becoming so beautiful now that our program is having success ...”

Timidly the corners of her mouth lifted, grateful for the compliment and his approval. “Thank you, Michael,” was her mandated response.

“... I might not be able to control myself.” The comment was made lightly, as if in jest, but it sent a fearful jolt through her empty stomach. She raised her eyes to him, trying to determine if he was explaining what had happened. Was the awful sex her fault too?

Revelation momentarily deafened her. That’s why he had her stitched closed! So he wouldn’t hurt her again. Once again she was profoundly grateful to him. She vowed to be strong – for him – and accept the stitching willingly.

With a start she grasped that Michael had said something. His expression was kind but stern. “Did you understand me, my dear?” He didn’t wait for her reply. “Now that you’re so close to achieving our objectives I’ve arranged for the remaining alterations to be made surgically.” He patted her hand. “There’ll be some rehabilitation but,” his smile became radiant, “just a few inches shorter and you’ll be perfect. Just think how wonderful that will be!”

In her mind’s eye Karen goggled at him, dumb and senseless. In reality she’d been too well trained to goggle. She sat demurely but still mute and without one iota’s comprehension of his words except the knowledge that she would be subject to some other horrible abasement. Her head dropped inconspicuously lower. It didn’t really matter. Her life belonged to him.

Chapter Ten

The understanding had lodged so deep it seemed like race knowledge. And perhaps it was – the idea of his own racial superiority was wonderfully beguiling – but which race? In one horrible and ecstatic inflow, the blackness had given him centuries of arcane knowledge. Since, his aunt, Marie, had demonstrated its use with gloriously aphrodisiacal and blood-soaked precision.

In old Louisiana, where every structure was replete with ghosts and ghouls both living and dead, he'd not had to search for settings suitable to his activities. The family's elegant Creole townhouse with its rear carriage house and dank Civil War cellar hidey-hole was surrounded by the French Quarter's noise, bustle and indelible shadows. Grandpere Charles' remote mouldering old Mississippi River bank plantation likewise was wonderfully appropriate. But here in D.C. he clearly needed a place.

LaVeau glanced out the expanse of curved windows toward the glowing lights of the Kennedy Center and the darkly glistening river. His newly acquired apartment certainly wouldn't do it. The idea amused him. Though he didn't remember any mention of it during the infamous Nixon era break-in, he was willing to bet the Watergate's eminent walls had witnessed the flow of life's blood on many so-discretely obfuscated occasions.

He had a clear image of what was needed and an idea where to find it. Though it was approaching midnight he rang the estate agent he'd used to buy his apartment – the wife of one of his senatorial clients, who sold real estate to buy herself expensive trinkets – on her husband's private line. The Senator jerked wide awake at the sound of LaVeau's voice, no doubt thinking the worst, and was first surprised, then soothed and finally apathetic when LaVeau asked for his wife. Given the Senator's fondness for young blond interns, Carter was interested – and made a note to himself – that the Senator obviously shared his wife's bed.

“Good evening Elaine.” Carter didn’t bother to apologize. “I want to buy a farm ... tomorrow. Can you arrange it?”

The 150 year old four poster bed he’d brought from New Orleans was thigh high with a mattress three feet thick. He’d occasionally wondered why old beds were so high – not that it was inconvenient to his lanky frame. His mother said it was to gain the little additional warmth provided in unheated houses by being far above cold, damp floors. Perhaps he should ask his aunt. He smiled at the concept. The “lady” was far too concerned with other things. He nestled into the down pillows and fell instantly asleep. His aunt whispered approbations and omens into his dreams.

In accord with his new political calling – Washington was an early rising town – at 6:30 am sharp he sat at his dining table sipping blue black café au lait with chicory and eating brioche from the Watergate’s excellent bakery. When his mobile rang he was taking his last steaming sip. “Excellent! Thank God for early rising farmers! You have an SUV, correct? I’ll meet you in the parking lot at Rosecroft Raceway in forty five minutes.”

He rang the doorman. “George, please bring my car up as soon as possible.”

LaVeau loved his old car – a silver grey 1973 Jaguar XKE 2 + 2 model. One of his father’s friends, a crusty old Cajun patriarch, had bought it on a whim and driven it only once. “Too little and,” his lip had curled with a disdain Carter well remembered though he’d seen it almost fifteen years earlier, “Anglais.”

The car’s speedometer still read only 32,000 miles, the black leather seats were supple and unmarked, and the engine hummed silent and frictionless as a spectre. Indeed the low, moulded car slid through Louisiana bayou and now early morning Potomac River fog with ghostly kinship.

The fog was lifting and golden rays shot through the cracks in the grey sky illuminating the adjacent wilderness of bare winter trees when the Jaguar at last made its way up the long drive to the empty parking lot. Elaine’s champagne

coloured Landcruiser, an almost perfect match to her very au courant hair, was waiting for him by the stables – a choice he approved since, with jockeys and track personnel going in and out, it was the one spot at the closed racecourse he knew his car would be protected.

Back they went, out the drive onto Brinkley Road, this time turning right, the opposite direction from their arrival. Once past the racecourse's manicured grounds, the road narrowed and curved through forest and then the farmland that still comprised most of Fort Washington. Elaine glanced in his direction. "I won't ask why you want this – particularly since with DC's growth it's a great investment. But how do you know about it?"

"You've heard about Maryland's 5th District's colourful, controversial Congressman and his crazy businesswoman opponent?" Carter waited for Elaine's nod. Of course she'd heard. Everyone in DC, Maryland and probably Virginia had, since the businesswoman had inflamed the media with scandalous stories that were, for a change, lies. "He's asked me to give him a little help even though, really, there's not much chance he'll lose. We went to an event at the racecourse and afterwards he took me on a small district tour."

Elaine expertly manoeuvred the tall boat of a car to the right onto a dusty gravel drive running between thick trees and fallow farmland. A few minutes and they emerged in front of a sprawling farmhouse with an upper story and wings from diverse eras ranging, LaVeau judged, across two hundred years.

A slim weathered man wearing work boots, jeans and a heavy jacket, stepped out onto the porch, a suspicious, unfriendly grimace on his hard, dry countenance. "Come in." He turned and strode determinedly ahead of them through the old front hall and into a homey dining room with a beautiful polished oval mahogany table surrounded by eight different size but obviously matched Victorian chairs. Even from a distance, LaVeau could see that the delicate lace curtains on the leaded windows were fine handwork. The air was thick

with cooking smells, eggs, bacon, biscuits. Carter inhaled deeply and thought of his mother's kitchen.

The man sat in the tallest chair and motioned LaVeau to the second tallest at his right. Elaine ignored his disregard and sat next to Carter. "Mr. Evers, this is Mr. LaVeau." She smiled politely.

When Mr. Evers silently took his measure, Carter waited, returning the appraisal and feeling right at home. The old guy reminded him of his father's taciturn friends. "Why do you want to buy my farm?" Carter repressed a smile. Evers was familiarly direct.

Carter spread his fingers on the tabletop, letting Evers see his appreciation. "My family have been farmers for a hundred and fifty years," he looked around the room, "just like yours."

Evers eyes narrowed in surprise. "You want to farm?"

"No, I want the land."

Anger bloomed in Evers' wizened face. "You want to develop my land?"

"Maybe," he paused, letting Evers' anger grow in the face of his honesty, "I won't promise otherwise. But not for quite a few years, at least. Right now I just want to own the land." Carter saw Elaine's dismay at his answers.

Mr. Evers, on the other hand, seemed to find the answer perfectly reasonable. Some of his anger subsided.

Carter took a piece of paper from his shirt pocket and unfolded it on the table. He pushed it toward Evers. "I plan to pay you a lot of money for your farm. You can retire to somewhere warm. But if you want to continue farming the land, we can work something out."

Evers lifted the paper. His eyes widened then he dropped his chin and stared contemplatively at the small white rectangle. Carter waited and discreetly signalled Elaine to do the same.

It must have been half an hour. Beside him, Elaine was surreptitiously fidgeting and looking at her watch. Finally

Evers stirred. He pushed the paper back across the burnished surface. His gaze was sly when he raised it to Carter. “If I’m going to sell to a developer why should I sell to you? If I wait I’ll get much more.”

“What if I raise my offer?”

Leaving not a trace of doubt, Evers shook his head. “Nope.”

Carter knew the old man wouldn’t change his mind but he made another fifteen minutes effort to demonstrate respect and good faith. He paused at last, showing a touch of distress. Then his expression cleared. “Well ... how about selling me a piece – something on the edge, something hard to farm? How about some of your woods?”

He turned to Elaine. “Do you have the map?” She pulled a paper roll from her briefcase. Carter laid it flat and examined it closely. On the property’s edge, northwest of Evers’ farmhouse, were fifteen acres of woods enclosing about an acre of secluded fields. He grabbed a pen from Elaine’s briefcase and made a big circle. On the corner he wrote a new number. “How about this? And I won’t develop unless you say it’s okay.”

Evers looked up, clearly trying to hide his sly satisfaction. Silently, he held out his hand and silently Carter took it. Evers turned his head toward the kitchen, “Mother, bring us some coffee and cake.”

A plump woman pushed backward through the kitchen door carrying a big tray. She turned a lined but still remarkably pretty face toward them and set down the tray. Mr. Evers said, “This is our new neighbour, Mr. LaVeau.” He ended the name with an “O” almost Cajun in its length and roundness.

Carter’s mouth opened but before he could speak the door opened again and a girl came through, a big china coffee pot held carefully by handle and spout, and he was stopped cold. Fortunately, after a few stilled heartbeats his lawyering experience kicked in. He whipped his face into nonchalance and nudged Elaine, whose mouth gaped inelegantly, under the table.

The girl was remarkable. She was perhaps 13 years old, her body in the first blush of womanhood. In her flawless face Carter saw how beautiful the girl's mother must once have been. Her magnificent hair hung to her waist in a soft drape of carrot red. But most shocking and simultaneously pleasing to the sensibilities was her skin, as pale and translucent as blue veined marble.

In old Louisiana, even at his advanced age of 29, Carter could – if he'd desired – asked Evers for his daughter's hand in marriage with faultless propriety. But this was Maryland, not the South, and he had no inclination toward marriage, at least not yet. He was relieved when Mrs. Evers hustled the girl back into the kitchen. "Come along Teresa. Let's leave your Pa to finish his business."

Teresa slipped silently from the room, leaving behind the memory of a quick glance of purest blue. Evers' head twitched in her direction with casual pride. "My youngest."

Carter let Elaine respond, "She's lovely – just like your wife." Much safer.

"Mr. Evers." The man turned his attention back to Carter and business. "Do you have an attorney?" The man nodded.

"And one more thing." Carter appeared reflective. "I was thinking. Do any of your friends or neighbours have an old cottage on their land they might like to sell? I'll buy it and move it here. I'd rather find something old than build something new." He met Evers' gaze with perfect sympathy. "I don't like new."

The old man thought a moment then answered with rural economy, "Maybe."

When they were back in the Landcruiser Carter said, "Let's go look at my land." They headed up the rutted dirt track behind the farmhouse through the dense trees and out into the open patch of farmland.

Though occupied navigating the deep furrows, Elaine rakishly dared lay one hand on his arm. "Congratulations. You did a great job."

“I told you I’d manage him.”

“But you got exactly what you wanted.” Elaine shook her stiff blond coif in wonder. “I’m impressed.” Her surprised voice broke into his euphoria. “What’s that?”

In the distance across the clearing not quite hidden in the trees was a small, square, light wood building, once probably white, with a steepled roof. “It’s an abandoned church. The locals think it’s cursed.” A burst of euphoria returned. “It’s quite a story.” He smiled happily. “I’m sure the old man thinks he’s well rid of it.”

They passed through a narrow copse and turned north onto a wide band of bare earth bordered on both sides by forest that marked his property line and also, he guessed, formed a firebreak. Half a mile and they were on Brinkley Road heading back to the racecourse and the city.

Chapter Eleven

Delia gratefully looked around the empty space. The dojo was open on Saturday afternoons for anyone who cared to give up prime free time to practice. Surprisingly, a handful or two of students did so regularly, probably because they'd only just awakened after a very late Friday night and it gave them the opportunity to sweat out excess alcohol before Saturday night's resumed consumption. This afternoon, though, a very small handful had come and gone and now it was only her. No one to watch, thank heavens!

She bowed to Sensei, who sat cross legged on a mat, and began the kata. She tried not to think, simply to let one movement flow into another as she'd done a thousand times. Punch, block, turn, kick. Methodical combinations, one after the other. Let training dictate which movement. Only concentrate on making each motion perfect.

After a few interminable minutes, with one final turn, her right foot stomped the floor and it was over. She brought her feet into alignment and stood still, head slightly bowed, fists clenched at her sides in the formal attention position, waiting for his verdict.

"Do it again." Dismay, anxiety and also a streak of anger rushed through her. Was the bastard going to fail her? Silently she bowed and began again.

This time he deigned to nod endorsement. He stood, effortless as a cobra uncoiling. "Now kumite. I will attack." He assumed the ready position before her and – she knew he moved at quarter speed – attacked, hands first then feet. She concentrated on blocking punches and kicks, simple but from all directions. After fifteen minutes his breathing remained slow and calm while she panted and sweated. But she knew he'd truly tested her, not abused her. She'd not been on her ass even once.

He paused and she thought it was over. But he smiled broadly into her eyes. She'd learned to distrust that smile. It

portended something mean and a little too dangerously sexual for comfort – though she'd periodically contemplated seeing how far he'd go if she indicated willingness. He was hot as hell! The massive black dick lying, she was pretty certain, ever-ready underneath his gi was an image that leapt far too readily into her mind.

Again he began his attack. Now the punches and kicks were a little faster than she could handle. With harrowing concentration she strained to block him.

Was it her imagination? Were his attacks becoming faster, more purposeful? Though he was certainly pulling them (if he hadn't, she'd be unconscious), more punches and kicks were connecting. She was losing the ability to keep up. Now any attempt to remember countermoves vanished and good form was routed by the need for speed.

Finally she took action she knew was a mistake. But there was no choice. Caustic breaths exploded inside her. She felt bruises rising on every body part. In a callow act of helplessness she covered her face with upraised arms and screamed "Stop! I surrender!"

Just below consciousness, she'd known how he'd respond. He strove relentlessly to teach them the "real" skills required to survive danger. He paused. The evaluation was infinitesimal but painfully acute. "There's no surrender if you're being raped."

She'd expected the vicious smile. What she got was far more frightening. His expression flattened to total neutrality and his warm – hot – brown eyes became fixed and dead as, she imagined, a killer's would. She had no idea what was going to happen and she was terrified.

She only felt his fingertips touch her wrists. Then she was on her back, his crushing weight forcing her against the mat. He expected his students to fight to unconsciousness ... or death, and she marshalled her energy and tried to do so. In his grasp her arms were useless. Her mind and body worked frantically to think of options for her feet, knees, legs and to implement them. In a vivid instant, she remembered hearing –

from him? – that because of a man’s greater size only speed or guile could protect a female black belt from a comparable male. She was not even close to a black belt and he had her pinned tight.

Brightness sparked in the flat eyes. Unwittingly she gulped hard and began to choke, desperately fighting her own body’s lack of control. She felt his hard pole against her pelvis and knew she’d been right. He was huge! And now she knew something else. He was going to rape her!

Though she struggled in earnest he somehow managed to hold her immobile with only one arm while he stripped off her loose pants and lowered his own. The next sensation was her vagina burning, bruising and tearing.

Thankfully his penetration was slow at first. He seemed to enjoy watching the panoply of expressions racing across her face as his dick forced its way into her, all the way to her cervix – no, far beyond – then withdrew, only to inexorably return. It hurt – not only the stretching. He pressed into her to unbearable depths, farther than he could possibly go. The giant ramrod hit nerves in her hip joints that sent pain shooting down her legs.

She fought silently, all her energy focused on defence, until those electric jolts. One tortured scream poured out of her into his face. Again he paused, for one second before his arm slid threateningly against her throat, restricting but not quite cutting off all oxygen. And his speed – not a rapist’s frenzy but dead, calculated calm – increased. Her vision swirled with multicoloured shapes and in their centre hung those flat brown eyes.

Her strength and will had slid away leaving dull lassitude when with a soft grunt – graceful, she was incongruously aware, like everything else he did – he pulled out of her and forced the massive mushroom cap between her lips. Suddenly she was choking on something that felt and tasted like library paste.

Following events happened so fast she wasn’t certain of them. Her next awareness was of him standing above her, fully

clothed once again. “Congratulations. You passed.” With silent grace he moved to his desk, sat and began going through papers, ignoring her.

The beating and rape had not only stunned but confused her. She had no idea what to do so simply relied on habit. It took her several minutes to sit up. She crawled half naked to the small dressing room and toilet and used the single flat bench to pull herself standing. The toilet. She stared befuddledly at the half open door for an indeterminate time period. Hadn't she heard something about peeing after sex?

The toilet seat was cold but comforting, kind of like sitting on an icepack. Better, she could relax her sore muscles onto it. She was a little surprised when pee flowed effortlessly. That felt good too. She reached between her legs to wipe herself and discovered the stretch was much more difficult. She didn't do a great job but didn't care. Without thinking, she glanced at the toilet paper. Traces of red spotted it.

Her black jeans and sweater were on their customary wall hook. Gingerly she sat on the bench and pulled her pants on, blearily wondering about her underpants but again not really caring. Her sweater was harder. Certain arm positions seemed impossible. At last, she stretched the garment low enough to accommodate the entrance of lowered arms.

Cautiously she rose to her feet and tottered into and across the dojo. Sensei still sat occupied at his desk. Her coat had fallen behind the bench by the entrance. She winced when she bent to pick it up. Slowly and methodically she wrapped a long scarf around her neck and slid her aching arms into the coat sleeves, her feet into her short, soft boots. No socks. Too much trouble. Before she left, as was the custom, she bowed to the altar and to Sensei.

Mid-winter's early dark, overcast and starless, made the city depressingly gloomy and cold. She shivered and pulled her coat closer. Out on the street, passers-by looked oddly at her – or seemed to. Maybe they thought she was drunk or drugged or even mentally ill as she stumbled under the highway and back onto campus.

She was so tired, that was paramount. She had to make it down to her dorm, Middlebrook Hall, at the south end of the West Bank – a dozen blocks. Not that far, really. Doable, probably. Right foot, left foot, right foot, left foot, were her only focuses.

Underneath each footfall questions ... and guilt murmured insistently. She'd wanted him. Had she teased him? Why hadn't she told him to stop? Was this her fault? And what was she going to do about it?

She'd only just crossed 2nd Street to the big parking ramp across from the Law School – barely started her long walk – when she had to sit, immediately. The door to a stairwell was to her left and she lurched toward it. She was bent almost double against the stair rail, trying to lower herself onto a stair, when the door opened and a girl with pale, shoulder length brown hair came into the stairwell. Delia stared, trying to make sense of the muddled vision. “Karen?” Hope and also love surged inside her. “Is it really you?”

She heard the girl's urgency, “What's wrong? Are you okay?” A slim arm circled her shoulder and everything went black.

Sensei was attacking, pushing her, jarring her aching body. Delia couldn't stop him, couldn't even cry, just had to take it. A sweet concerned voice penetrated her hopelessness. “You need to open your eyes.”

She realized she was being gently shaken. Her eyelids were leaden but she managed to lift them. Very close – so close – was the beautiful face that motivated every one of her activities – her life – Karen.

Her vision cleared and hope died. It wasn't Karen. “You're not Karen,” the syllables were awkward in her mouth. “Who are you?”

The girl was shorter and slimmer than Delia's memory of her beloved friend. She leaned toward, almost over Delia, clearly worried. “My name is Anna. I think you fainted – well, almost, you kept drifting in and out. In the stairwell. I didn't know where else to take you.” Delia slowly turned her

pounding head to survey her surroundings. They were sitting in an unfamiliar car, the girl in the driver's seat and Delia in the front passenger's. "What happened to you?"

Delia thought about the question. How could she answer? Her silence was only from inner turmoil but Anna didn't press. So Delia let the subject drift into her mind's grey wasteland. "Where do you live?"

"In a dorm – Middlebrook Hall."

Anna was thoughtful. "You can't rest in a dorm. What if I take you to my house?" When Delia didn't answer, Anna put the car in gear and drove out of the ramp. Delia laid her head back and drifted off.

Her eyes flew open at the touch on her arm. Then she remembered.

Anna helped her out of the car then up a few red brick stairs onto a porch and into a living room. Delia was not thinking or, for that matter, seeing too clearly so she didn't really discern the house's features – only had an idea it was warm and cosy. Anna held her up with one hand and pulled off her coat with the other.

To the left, in the wall's midpoint, was the arched entrance to a hallway. Anna guided her through. The door to a bathroom, tiled in the small white and black hexagonal tile popular sixty years ago, stood ajar.

"Do you need to pee?"

Delia turned her attention to those damaged parts. Was that impulse there amid the other throbbing sensations? "Yes. I think so."

Anna guided her into the small bath. "Can you stand?" When Delia nodded assent, Anna slowly released her to unzip and lower the jeans. Delia heard Anna's rapid intake of breath and expected a comment. None came. Instead Anna helped Delia sit and then gently wiped her when she finished – a considerate gesture that Delia was too exhausted to reject. Delia was struck by the sweetness in Anna's tone. "Since your jeans are down already I'll take them off here." So gently, her

warm hands like caresses on Delia's aching legs, Anna slipped off each boot and pulled the stiff fabric over one foot then the other.

In a small bedroom, Anna tried to help Delia out of her sweater. When Delia cried out and tears streaked her cheeks, Anna said, "Don't worry. We'll leave the sweater for now," and eased her under a down comforter. She quickly stripped naked and slid in beside. Her warmth comforted Delia for her few remaining moments of consciousness.

Delia stared in desperation into those dark eyes. She was furious both at him and at her own helplessness. In blind rage she lashed out, not caring about the outcome ... and the punch connected. She felt the give of soft flesh and heard his cry.

No. It wasn't his cry. Suddenly she was awake. The girl – Karen? No, not Karen, she remembered – was clutching her abdomen, curled into a loose ball under the covers. Delia's mind cleared for the first time in ... how long? "I'm so sorry! Did I hurt you?"

What did she see in the girl's, Anna's, eyes? She endeavoured to define the strange emotions. A sort of yielding satisfaction or – Delia couldn't make sense of it – pleasure?

The girl looked up at her out of wide, pale brown fawn's eyes. "It's all right." Her rounded lips curved into a timid smile. "I like it." She fell silent, her gaze searching Delia's face. For approval? Or, Delia was dumbstruck, was she flirting?

Anna seemed to shift gears. "You were raped, weren't you?" She reached out a soft hand and touched Delia's pubic mound.

Delia restrained a flinch. This was all too strange and yet – her vagina tightened with simultaneous pain and pleasure – somehow compelling.

"Would it help if you raped me?"

The idea shocked and also bewildered Delia. "I can't!" Lamely she added. "I'm a girl."

The covers fell to Anna's naked hips when she sat up, turned and pulled something black and strangely shaped from the bedside table drawer. Delia found herself unable to look away from the delicate curve of waist and breasts and the pale skin. Anna held the "thing" out.

Delia hesitantly reached for it, managing only to grasp the leather straps. Though she knew – guessed – what it was, she'd never seen anything like it. Two black rubber penises, one larger than the other, connected end to end against a leather triangle from which the straps hung.

Anna's diffident voice penetrated her ferment. "Would you like me to help you put it on?"

For several minutes, Delia looked toward the object, seeing nothing. Ambivalence, anxious and exhilarating, swirled through her. She shouldn't, she told herself. Something unacknowledged made the decision. She handed the thing to Anna.

"Can you get up? Knees will work." Delia knelt on the bed facing Anna. "How are your arms? Can we take the sweater off?" Delia's arms were not as sore as the night before. She hurt but the sweater came slowly off. Anna's eyes widened. "Oh my God!" She touched Delia's skin and again Delia felt excitement's clutch. "You poor dear!"

Delia followed Anna's gaze to see purple bruises blotching her torso and limbs. Anna's fingers moved again, this time onto the breasts' swell. She bent her head and tenderly at first then sensually kissed the discolorations. Delia watched the bowed head and softly straying lips with astonished and quickly growing arousal. When Anna took an erect nipple between her lips, Delia lifted her up. "Put that thing on me."

Anna smiled and offered Delia the smaller penis. "Put this inside you please." When the rubber penis slipped easily into Delia's astonishingly lubricated vagina, Anna's eyebrow's arched but she didn't comment. She moved close, avoiding the protruding rubber, and buckled the straps around Delia's hip.

Delia felt the girl's lovely breasts press against her pelvic bone.

The straps bit into her cleft and hips, pulling the rubber phallus firmly inside her. Again, Delia was aware of the pressing combination of pleasure and pain. She peered downward, amazed at having a weapon giant and even blacker than Sensei's. Carefully she reached out her hand and touched then stroked it all along its great length. Her hand's exterior motion caressed, teased her own vagina to its bruised depths. It felt good. And it made her feel – what? Strong? Dominant? Male? Yes, she thought, all of those. And also Right.

She raised her eyes to see Anna watching her. The expression was odd. Eager?

Even stranger, Delia was struck with the desire to fuck Anna from behind, to breed her like an animal. Delia grabbed Anna's silken hair hard and tight, stretching it from the scalp and tilting her head far back. The lovely girl's narrow back bowed. Her buoyant young breasts and lithe pelvis curved to touch Delia's flank.

Anna made a noise, complaint but the no that really does mean yes. Delia kissed her roughly on the lips and forced her around.

Her hand went to the phallus like a man's would, wrapping it to guide it into its target. Like a man she felt for Anna's pussy, spread it and pushed several fingers inside. She pressed the rubber head inside the girl and with a hard thrust forced it deep using Anna's pale rounded hips for leverage. Anna screamed and Delia felt the rubber's resistance against the vaginal walls. "This," she understood in a burst of anguish and power that meshed with her forced withdrawal and re-entry and with the sensations in her own vagina, "is what it feels like to rape."

She beat the girl with her manhood as Sensei had beaten her, her hands gripping the girl's willowy white waist as Sensei had gripped her own arms. The girl screamed and cried and then the resistance lessened and she moaned and writhed in pleasure as Delia fucked her, fucked herself. Through the

penises she felt Anna's – and her own – arousal increase until the two of them became elemental beings, moving in violent rhythms as old and intoxicating as time.

It was all tumult. Delia experienced the bed heave underneath them with their motion and noise. The door flew open and a stocky young woman in only a big T-shirt came through. Giant pendulous breasts with nipples as big as saucers pressing through the shirt's thin fabric obtruded into Delia's awareness. Delia heard her voice above Anna's cries. "Very pretty. I'm next."

Monday morning Delia arrived early, before the others. She went straight up close to him and looked up into his eyes. "You are the best and I want to train with you. But if you rape me again, I'm finished."

She didn't know what she expected. Yet she was not surprised by Sensei's response. His even white teeth and the whites of his eyes gleamed in amused satisfaction through the half dark. His tone was neutral and at the same time completely comprehensible – both cool and warm. "Excellent."

Chapter Twelve

“It’s time to get you up, dear.” The woman was lean and wiry with defined muscles bulging in thin arms. She lowered the protective bedrail with a loud click.

Karen’s eyelids trembled and slowly, tentatively opened. Her throat was dry and her voice tiny and plaintive in her own ears. “But my back,” she whimpered, “and my arms and legs hurt.”

The woman was sympathetic. “I know, dear. But we need to get you moving so you heal quickly.” She put her arm behind Karen’s shoulder and helped her sit up. When the sharp pain she’d experienced on earlier attempts didn’t materialize – only a deep, dull ache – Karen relaxed a little and tried to cooperate. “Now swing your legs over the edge.”

Her body seemed unbearably unstable and vulnerable. She expected intense stabbing pain to strike at anytime, but it didn’t. Only the throbbing malaise she’d experienced incessantly, waking and sleeping, in stillness or with every small motion, for more than a month. She looked hopefully at the physical therapist. Maybe it was time to move again. She sincerely wanted to.

The woman lifted her to her feet. Again Karen expected intolerable pain and again it was deep but bearable. She took a tentative step, leaning heavily against the therapist. “Very good!” The woman observed her with intense solicitousness and, Karen was certain she saw it, well-disguised pity ... and disgust. “Today you only need to take a few steps – let’s see how many. Once you can walk down the hall we’ll start working on teaching your back to be flexible with one less vertebrae. Then, when the bones in your arms and legs have solidly re-knit we’ll do some strength training.”

She managed ten steps forward, turned, and was almost back to the bed when Michael entered the room. He strode quickly to her side and displaced the therapist, helping her to stand straight while his eyes travelled painstakingly up her

body barely camouflaged by a thin long sleeved pink gown. He looked into her face with an expression of unparalleled love. “My darling, you are exquisite! Perfect!” He helped her gently back into bed.

Tenderly he adjusted the pillows at her back and pressed his full lips to her pale ones. She fought to restrain a wince at the pressure on her still-fragile spine. He was too enthusiastic to notice or didn't see fit to. He took her chin between his fingers. “Aren't you pleased with the surgery?” He held her chin too firmly for her to nod or speak but no response seemed required. “Not only are you the perfect height now but you lost the rest of the weight.” His smile stretched unnaturally wide before her and with a hidden shiver she remembered the beast.

“I brought you a present in honour of our success.” He pulled a square blood red box from his inner jacket pocket and set it on her lap. Gingerly she lifted it and tried to snap it open. Even that small exertion was too much, so he opened it for her. She gasped then gave a small cry at the many stabs of pain. On a black satin pillow lay a narrow white diamond necklace with a huge, pendant, emerald-cut pink diamond at its centre.

He lifted the necklace and laid it above the gown's low neckline. He waved his fingers for the therapist to bring a mirror and held it in front of her. “For you. To wear when I take you dancing at the Rainbow Room.”

She stared at her thin pale face.

Ward watched Michael shepherd Karen between tables in the discreetly lit old restaurant, hard in the slight but remarkably formidable maitre d's wake.

The restaurant had never aspired to any fad nor, in this age, to even the semblance of modernity. It none-the-less remained one of the finest and most expensive restaurants in Washington DC. Through its gilded old-fashioned interior every DC decision-maker passed at some time during the various cycles of the Federal Government and the organizations servicing it.

Monsieur Paul's choice of a path through the dining room's congested centre rather than its sparsely populated periphery piqued Ward's interest. In the several minutes Le Grand Monsieur took to guide the couple across the human sea, Ward examined the ornate, dimly lit banquettes running along the walls. Many contained a sole occupant – each a man, each a pale, puffy antiquated candidate for gout (if gout still existed this close to the 21st century), each otherwise non-descript though clearly affluent, and each rigorously undisturbed.

His eye travelled to the more populous banquettes and stopped. Two men sat looking in his direction, heads inclined together. Ward recognized one, a long-faced man with glasses who he'd met briefly at the FBI. "One more of the city's invisible personages," he wryly ruminated. His brow lifted fractionally. "Not at all like his companion."

The second man could have been a dark angel in a Renaissance, or perhaps even more appropriately Goya, painting. He was beautiful and sublime, almost inhumanly so, with great, rapturous black eyes and black curls slightly longer than the convention. He, and his companion also, caught Ward's gaze and nodded congenially before again plunging into discussion. Ward nodded and turned his attention.

Michael looked exceptional, as always. He towered above the diners, his intense smoky eyes fixed solicitously on his wife from under an elegantly unruly mop of thick sandy hair as he guided her with a large, manicured hand placed gently on her fine neck's nape. Though no doubt richer than most of the room, in this realm he was just one of the crowd and, thus, ignored.

With a flash of realization Ward recognized the restaurant's unique standard of celebrity. Monsieur Paul applied an identical lofty standard to each diner. Again Ward glanced at the banquettes. Only Paul's regulars – the only distinction he required – received higher attention.

It was Karen, Ward knew, who caused the slightest turn of heads and the smallest exchange of quizzical looks when the couple passed – eye-popping scrutiny in this milieu. He was,

himself, astonished by the transformation Michael had effected.

Though still voluptuous, her body had become lithe and refined. Her features, her wide almond eyes, narrow patrician nose and full clear red lips, exhibited their perfect regularity in her newly narrowed face and her long pale brown hair shimmered like softest mink in the muted light. With an extraordinary but strangely burdensome grace she glided through the room, her simple Geoffrey Beene dress, coloured identically to her hair, flowing flawlessly over supple limbs. And with an engineer's discrimination, Ward examined her. Yes, she was certainly shorter.

In his vision's periphery Ward inventoried the diners' meticulously discreet but uneasy responses. He smiled cruelly.

As they approached, Ward stood, pleasantly noting the small tremor that ran through her when she saw him. "How are you, Karen, my dear?" He covered her cold delicate fingers with his warm strong ones, squeezing a little too hard, and kissed her cheek. Of its own volition his index finger found the point at the thumb's joint and pressed.

Her features compressed into a silent twitch of pain. She forced a smile, pallid and barely perceptible. "I am well, Sir."

Ward realized what he'd done. He examined his almost overwhelming impulse to hurt her. She was Michael's property not one of his "girls". Instantly he removed his hand and looked toward Michael. It was not the fear of an employee stepping out of line with his boss that motivated his quick withdrawal. Actually, Ward had no doubt of the security his utility – and friendship – entailed. He simply avoided rudeness at all cost.

Her husband's expression did not shift – still bore the stamp of loving (obsessed?) solicitude – yet Ward knew he'd seen. Michael helped her tenderly to her chair.

Unexpectedly Ward's regard was jerked across Michael's broad bent back to the dark man. The man observed him with complete comprehension and sympathy. Kinship inexplicably

welled in Ward's breast. Again he nodded. This person definitely bore further investigation ... later.

One of the multitude of fanatically trained straight backed waiters approached. "Would you care for wine?"

Michael glanced at Ward. "Non, merci. Seulement de l'eau minérale non gazeuse," to Ward, "No bubbles? ... S'il vous plaît. The gentleman and I will have Le Carre D'agneau au Poivre Vert." Authoritatively he closed the tall menu. "And please bring my wife a small Salade Niçoise with very little dressing." The waiter gave a modest bow. "Thank you."

Michael smiled at Ward. "They do a wonderful peppered rack of lamb but it's for two. I'm glad of the opportunity to order it." He patted Karen's hand and a spot of pink appeared on each cheek below her lowered lashes. "It's of course much too much food for Karen."

The waiter returned almost immediately with a large bottle of mineral water, filled glasses leaving a second full bottle near Michael and, once again, disappeared into the refined hubbub.

Ward allowed his consideration to linger abstractly on Karen, his subtle cognitive modes observing and accumulating information. "Michael," he exclaimed to cover his appraisal, "I'm astonished by the transformation!" As he said it, he wondered, "Is she truly submissive or has he broken her?"

Under her husband's concerned gaze, Karen carefully, intently raised her water glass to her lips. "Isn't she magnificent!" Michael glowed with achievement. "I knew she could be from the moment I first saw her." The flush spread across Karen's face and her head dipped lower.

"I've been contemplating where to go from here." A vertical crease formed in Michael's noble brow. "Is it possible to create an apparatus that operates remotely under water?"

Ward raised his glass and pensively examined the clear liquid. "Water is a poor conductor of electricity though other impulses can move through it unhindered." Ward paused

deliberately, “I could probably come up with something workable. What do you have in mind?”

“Karen began swimming as part of her post-surgical therapy. I’ve had her continue because it’s excellent exercise and I can keep,” Michael’s face was consumed with passionate devotion as he patted Karen’s hand, “my dearest wife close to me.”

His own burst of shock surprised Ward for the few seconds before it shifted to macabre respect for the breadth of Michael’s obsession. Of course! He’d had her surgically altered.

“I think it’s made a major contribution to her grace,” Michael smiled warmly, “and I’ve been enjoying watching her so much I’ve created a glass-walled office next to the pool. I’d like to be able to give her encouragement,” the statement was devoid of irony, “while she’s swimming. I was thinking of something more minimalist than your suit. I’m also finding her breasts a distraction.”

Michael noticed Ward’s quizzical glance. “Yes, she’s required to swim naked for maximum neurological effect.” He continued, “So, do you think you can create something both utilitarian and constrictive for her breasts?”

The image of Karen swimming laps – endless laps, Ward had no doubt – while Michael intermittently added to her torture with neural stimulation rendered Ward’s cock rock hard under the damask tablecloth. He glanced at Karen, whose pale face had reddened. “I’ll give it some thought.”

Monsieur Paul arrived, a small plate in his hand. Several waiters followed carrying a covered silver tray, serving table and implements. “Madame.” With a flourish he set the diminutive niçoise still-life in front of Karen. The waiters arranged the serving table then hovered while Monsieur separated the lamb’s ribcage into individual chops and served onto two of the restaurant’s golden lion embossed plates along with choux de Bruxelles sautés. “Bon appétits,” he intoned and shooed away his flock.

“So, I hear you’ve made the Feds very happy. Right?” Michael cut one of the delectably browned Brussels sprouts with a large chunk of dripping lamb and popped them enthusiastically between his sensual lips.

“It’s nice having access to a large country’s resources.” Ward smiled humorously across the table. “Not that you’ve deprived me,” he smiled again, this time including Karen with a slight nod, “particularly for your special projects.”

Ward decided to test the waters. “Give me a month. Shall I come and visit Karen or would you like to bring her here?”

Again Michael patted Karen’s hand. “Why don’t you come to Berkeley,” he beamed proudly, “then you can see first hand how well she’s doing.”

Karen stared fixedly at her plate but otherwise did not move.

Chapter Thirteen

He stood on the little church's small porch and watched the cranes lower the diminutive cottage onto the new block foundation. He'd really wanted stone but, aside from the outrageous expense, it was the rare stonemason who built foundations in this day and age.

Evers had definitely come through though. The fanciful early Victorian farmhouse was a wedding present to a neighbour's great great aunt by her father. After a few too-fecund generations it was abandoned to disrepair and decay.

LaVeau chose a top New York designer to restore it and she was eager to plunge in. It was odd, he mused, that financial New York, though much closer in miles, was so much farther outside the virulent DC political gossip mill (and his personal business) than, say, heavily Republican Dallas.

Off in the distance, at the spot the track from Evers' farm emerged from the thick trees, a small lone figure half in shadow caught LaVeau's attention, interrupting his musings. The sun was overhead and he shielded his eyes against its fresh spring brilliance. The person stood stone still like a piece of statuary or a woodland creature frozen in time the instant before taking flight.

With scripted precision, a cloud darkened the sun. Absent the glare, the figure stood out startling brilliant against the deep green. She wore a short dark skirt and a long sleeved white blouse whose edges blended with her skin's remarkable pallor. Her small white heart of a face was circumscribed by a living cascade that rippled and hovered in the wind in a fiery halo.

"No! No! No!" he inaudibly expostulated. A wave of anxiety and annoyance jostled his pleasure. The girl's unpredictable spying would create intolerable problems.

"C'est rien. It's nothing." His aunt's lilting seductive voice murmured in his ear. "Don't worry. She won't bother us. I'll take care of it." Her warm sweet breath caressed his

earlobe. "I promise." As if in verification, the girl disappeared back down the road.

Languorous calm damped his disquiet. LaVeau had no doubt she could do it. His attention returned to the cranes. Yes, the cottage was charming and he was going to enjoy it. He turned on his heel. But what he'd really wanted was the church.

As he'd told Elaine, it was quite a story. A young preacher, new to the town, had taken over when the old preacher died. The cleric gave impassioned sermons that roused his old-fashioned flock. During one such exhortation, the high ceiling directly above the pulpit gave way and crashed down on the preacher's head, breaking one arm and one leg and covering him with urine soaked plaster and an angry and bloody family of racoons. While the preacher recovered, it was discovered that the racoons had taken up residence in the enclosed loft, continuously performing all their natural functions to the detriment of the building's structure.

The preacher returned and once again gave an impassioned diatribe. After the service, the disturbed son of a parishioner, outraged by something never determined, broke into the preacher's home, stabbing the poor man repeatedly and his wife once while his three infants lay sleeping upstairs. The man ran off, leaving the preacher's kitchen drenched with blood and the preacher unwilling to ever return. He moved his family out of state the minute he was released from the hospital.

The church stood empty while the congregation searched, with great difficulty, for a replacement. During an unusually strong windstorm the cross was ripped off the steeple and blown into the top of a tall tree, later to be rescued by a local fireman. When the church was opened to reattach the cross, the carpenter and a prominent parishioner found the walls covered with hundreds of symmetrical blotches of blood.

Contentedly LaVeau's eyes swept the white wall's russet stigmata. Actually the marks were stains seeping from rusted nailheads. Why had they appeared when they did? No one had

bothered to find out, guilelessly assuming the church was cursed. And now no one ever would.

He'd finally found a local woman willing to enter the church to clean. "Never after dark," she admonished.

"Of course," he soothed her while silently applauding. He needn't make a bit of effort to keep the locals away at night.

Then she asked repeatedly if he didn't want the walls painted and was scandalized when he said he'd leave them as a piece of history – even more so when he told her he'd not even touch up the pale mark where Jesus on the Cross once hung.

LaVeau ran his hand along the warm backs of the few remaining pews as he strode toward the altar. The dark altar, pulpit and pews, obviously lovingly handcrafted by long dead woodworkers, shone deep into their harmonious grain with a glow only found in old oft-polished wood. He stood behind the communion table and looked out over the muted space. "Ready?" he asked his aunt.

"Certainment," she replied with a toss of her long raven tresses.

Blood. The white cloth draped diagonally across the communion table ran with syrupy blood.

Initially, he'd thought slitting the rabbits' throats would disturb him. In fact, the sensation was fabulous, even orgasmic of sorts. The effortless movement of the razor-sharp knife through the pink flesh. The clean edges of the gaping wound exposing large deep arteries, squirting sanguine with each throb. The splashes of blood onto his skin – even his erect phallus – left bare by the open monastic robe.

As life pulsed away from the creature and into his hands, into him, the dead rose up around him, called irresistibly by his power. A small cemetery had been on the property. He saw it clearly under the field's harrows.

The Evers' – or rather the wife's, whatever her surname was – ancestors were among them. He recognized the pale skin, the flaming hair and the delicate features. No blue eyes.

The blue was long gone, replaced by black death. He saw a face in their midst – the exquisite image of the girl but older, more fully womanly – and he called her to him. “Who are you?” he asked.

“My name is Catherine. I am the girl’s grandmother three times removed.” She lifted an ethereal arm draped in a faded sleeve toward his aunt. “As old as she.”

“Come to me,” he told her. Even in death she feared him and he inhaled the emotion like an intoxicating drug. But she could not resist.

His aunt, Marie, stood at his side, vibrant and engaged as always. The blackness was a cloak at their backs but uninterested. It wanted living fodder. The dead, though they had their uses, it nebulously opined, mostly took, not contributed, sustenance. Only Marie’s insistence managed to gain its acquiescence to this desire. LaVeau recognized that truth but didn’t understand how or why. At this moment he was too flush with power to worry.

With a thought he disrobed the woman, exposing the sensuously female shape. He commanded her onto the vividly coloured tabletop and she went, her translucent outlines quavering with the candles’ flames. Her fine body lay below him, a strange optical chimera. LaVeau could see through her thickness, white and fleeting as hoarfrost, to the lovely lines of her back and buttocks, which stood out pink and fully formed merely by contact with his gruesome labours. Indeed her backside had sucked the tabletop clean and become substantial as a result.

He stretched his arm and touched the radiant corona surrounding her from head to waist. The titian hair was fine-spun like its living counterpart, in fact became softer as his power fondled it. He touched her colourless nipples and they flared pink between his fingers. He observed detached but with great exhilaration as life flowed wherever his fingers touched. He knew it was a state of short duration. What would be the price to truly bring back the dead?

But her mound was warm and trembling with a fear and also loathing that ruffled his power as he laid his flattened hand upon it ... and he was going to use it. He wanted to feel hot life flood her cunt as he entered her. The monk's robe fell to the floor behind him and he stood tall and narrow, his soaring penis abounding with potentiality that surged into his every cell.

Small scratching and rustling sounded outside, stopping him and twisting him physically and mentally toward it. But he saw nothing and immediately his aunt's voice was in his ear, soothing. "C'est rien. Only the wind in the trees. Continue, please." Though his inner turbulence did not entirely still, he turned back to the woman.

LaVeau only had to stretch his long legs to be atop her. Her cold skin warmed as his connected to it, her breasts softening beneath him. And he entered her. The transition was spasmodic, a burst of life into her tissues far more thrilling than a normal orgasm. Vibrant power, male at once emitting and devouring her female, epicureously consuming her awful aversion. The sensations did not localize in his genitals, only thrillingly centred there as her vaginal walls stroked him. It was power and it was everywhere, swelling and subsiding, rolling through his body and beyond, sparking the very air around him.

He lifted off her and sat back, raising her insubstantial hips and pulling her pelvis tight against his. Her cervical dome came alive as he beat himself against it. His long arm extended toward her breast and he squeezed, her pain adding to his pleasure. Then he sank his hand deeper into her chest. The long skeletal hand wrapped around her heart, feeling it gain strength in his grasp. He smiled down into her terrified black eyes and squeezed again.

The seminal ejaculation was far more thrilling than anything ever before. His animus ignited her flesh with a jolt so instantaneously enervating to him as to simulate the ecstasy of death.

Chapter Fourteen

Five and a half years in the past.

The girl stood on the corner of Rues Bourbon and Bienville chatting with New Orleans' politicians as they made their pilgrimage into the mouldering and rather non-descript old two story building. She was not a stiffly sprayed blond of the 1980s or 90s, the cameraman mused as he peered at her through the video display, but one of the interchangeable pretty young naturals of the new millennium that NBC garnered from its local affiliates and groomed for the Today Show, exhibiting all-American good health and soft, shoulder length tawny brown or chestnut locks.

The live feed's location was carefully chosen not only for the historic background provided by the French Quarter. For eighty years, Arnaud's Restaurant and jazz club had provided the discreet petit dejeuner that greased the city's political machine. And what more enticing spot to discuss the effects of looming Y2K on one of the US's most colourful, jaded and insular cities?

As luck would have it, on this day the august body was joined by the state's tall, dark, handsome and very photogenic Democratic US Senator. The girl coyly engaged him in a fortuitous national photo op. The cameraman watched her not so subtle flirtation, noted how her fresh femininity quickened as the Senator engulfed her from above with his masculinity and luscious Louisiana accent.

Breathlessly – her titillation was conspicuous even via the camera – she stepped closer and placed a hand on the elegantly grey clad arm ... and suddenly she dropped screaming to the filthy, uneven sidewalk, her hands clutching the wispy chiffon skirt that seconds before had floated tantalizingly in the gentle breeze.

Like a spectator to a train wreck the cameraman let the video run, first catching the Senator's then the passers-by's

scandalized expressions. For twenty seconds the scene was suspended in human time. Except the cameraman. By mechanical rote born of long experience he zoomed in and he too froze.

The camera's non-judgemental eye clearly discerned the few seconds during which the girl's face transformed from agonized distortion to sly seduction, during which she raised her skirt and spread her legs.

Delia had learned more than she could possibly have imagined since coming to Minneapolis. And now she was leaving – moving to Berkeley in California, a state that had previously seemed like an alien planet with its weird people and activities and its warm winters.

But that, at least, was exactly as she'd planned. Perfect, in fact. Even the business school had cooperated, formalizing their entrepreneurship program in her third year and bringing in executive recruiters from the very cutting edge company she'd targeted for employment. And they had employed her because she'd busted her ass – in this as in so many other ways – and been in her class' top five percent. Pretty good for a corn-fed farm girl!

Her bare feet pressed against the smooth, cool wooden dojo floor as she bowed to Sensei, who sat customarily cross legged in the otherwise unpopulated space. Today was her last Saturday and also the day she would qualify for her black belt. She'd busted her ass for this also and it had more often than not hurt far worse than her studies. She began her final kata.

When she finished Sensei didn't comment, simply rose and glided silently to where she stood with her fists clenched and head bowed. "Kumite," he said, stone faced, and he too bowed. He attacked, pushing her but methodically, taking her through every defensive movement he'd taught her then requiring she attack and beginning again. Gradually he stepped up the pace until she struggled to keep up. But it was clear to her he was making certain she was adequately prepared to leave him and she was grateful.

Over and over he took her through. She was tiring when he abandoned method and came at her like a street villain. “Typical,” she thought as she intensified her focus.

Then she saw it – a gap in his defences. Or had she? It was gone before she acted. She saw another. Again she let the chance go. She couldn’t believe she was good enough to best him. Or was he giving them to her?

In that measly thought’s space he kicked her feet out from under her. She would have dropped hard to the floor except he held her in the air by a handful – a handful that filled his huge right hand – of her left breast. “Okay,” she thought, striving not to let the burning pain distract her, “anything goes.” She twisted the lower half of her torso and brought both knees up into his groin, or where his groin had been the instant before. He reached down with his left hand, grabbed her crotch, left exposed by her manoeuvre, and slammed her with head-spinning, bruising force to the floor. She slithered like an eel and managed to break free, again suspecting that he’d let her.

A quick sinuous flip upwards and she was on her feet. Now stone-faced Sensei had disappeared and a giant black street fighter faced her, pearly white teeth gleaming at her through his vicious smile. Now the Shotokan order and ritual was abandoned. And he was on her, his huge arms squeezing her against his chest’s dense muscles and against the adamantine pole that rose to his ribcage.

Instead of trying to break his hold, she softened, compressing her muscles, and dropped. As she slithered away like a crab, she saw he approved. But it didn’t stop him.

She also wondered if he’d want her to run if this was “real” life rather than her final test. Instead, though her head along with every joint ached and she’d begun to pant, she faced him. He came for her and she dropped to the floor and kicked. So inelegant but potentially lethal. She did manage to connect, not with knee or groin but with one iron thigh.

It was the first kick she’d dared attempt in this mode. He was so fast she’d worried about her vulnerability. Correctly. With a brilliant smile he reached down as effortlessly as

picking a bouquet and plucked up one ankle. A simple, excruciating twist and she was on her belly, fighting to protect her face and head from the solid surface.

His weight on her back was no surprise. She'd known how it was going to end. Her lips twitched into a wry smile. He'd still get a surprise or two.

"You've made excellent progress." His warm words kissed her ear. One forearm pressed against the base of her skull – so easy to snap her neck – while the other moved down her body in a long, slow caress that ended in the stripping away of her gi bottom.

Like the first time. She remembered the rape vividly and found herself feeling grateful for it. The aftermath had been worth it. In fact, she'd often wondered if it wasn't destined.

The length of his naked penis pressed against her behind's firm flesh then pressed again, falling neatly into the long crevice between the rondelles. Arousal surged into her belly, engorging her vagina in preparation. As he drew off of her, she wondered if he'd allow her to fuck him back. Then the ramrod was forced into her anus.

She gasped and for a moment he stopped. She knew why. This was no longer a virgin hole. The big black dildo had preceded him, many times in the past four years. He chuckled softly then lifted her like a rag doll to hands and knees and pulled her deeper onto the thick, far-reaching shaft.

It hurt at first, hitting nerves and obstructions deep inside her. She let herself go – ended her fortitude and let herself scream and writhe.

He ran one hand into her short hair and gripped, only momentarily managing to gain a handhold that wrenched her neck backwards until his hand slipped to her shoulder. Fingers strong enough to break boards dug into the soft tissue and held her fast as the other hand explored her body. His much greater height gave him unlimited access even with the slightest forward inclination. Her pendant breasts were his first target, alternately brutal and erotic. He squeezed hard enough to

bruise and caressed with warm flat fingertips. Her nipples constricted into rigid, exquisitely painful points.

Sensations poured over her from uncountable directions. The flattened palm slid across her tensed belly and at last found her vagina. She'd yearned for those thick fingers to manipulate her while his broad cock probed her sensitive anus. Letting his shoulder grip support some of her weight, she lifted one hand from the floor and pressed his fingers against her clit and deeper. When two fingers passed through the receptive portal, every cell convulsed in a violent orgasm. She heard his guttural laugh.

This final time when she left the dojo, the black belt rolled tight in her backpack, she remembered the past. This time, though, her head was clear and held high and her body felt marvellous. "Time to party." She slid into her old car and headed for the house.

Anna, wearing a short, thin summer dress that showed off her lovely legs and pretty bouncing breasts, came running out to greet Delia when she pulled up in front of the brick bungalow. Delia fondly studied the girl and the old house. Both had meant so much to her. A stream of memories – it seemed a day for memories – passed through her mind's eye. She remembered the first time she'd actually seen the little square structure – when she'd finally emerged late the morning after her rape. She'd stepped onto the porch and seen gravestones and thought she was hallucinating.

In reality she'd looked out onto the nearly 100 green acres of Calvary Cemetery, the oldest St. Paul Archdiocese Catholic cemetery. The remains of Archbishop John Ireland, the Irish prelate who was the first archbishop in the raw St. Paul territory, several other bishops, several hundred clergy as well as the first Civil War Union Army volunteer sleep in the cemetery's 100,000 graves. The brick bungalow nestled in old trees right across bordering Chatsworth Street. But like many lesbians the house's occupants were neither faint-hearted nor superstitious.

Anna took Delia's backpack and trailed her up the porch stairs. As soon as they stepped through the front door, Anna

set the backpack on a small table and dropped to her knees, ankles crossed, hands behind her back, head bowed to the extent allowed by her high leather collar. Delia touched her rosy cheek. “Remove your dress.”

Carefully, leaving ankles crossed, Anna wiggled the dress from under her knees, lifted it over her head and resumed her position. Underneath she was naked.

“Present yourself.” Delia watched the girl’s cream and pink breasts drop softly beneath her pliant body as she leaned forward and gripped her pale moon posteriors. Delia circled as Anna spread herself open for inspection.

She touched Anna’s anus and the girl quivered. “Pretty little asshole.” Delia roughly spread the pink puckers, forced two fingers inside and squeezed. A small squeak popped out but the girl remained rigorously immobile.

Delia smiled. “Oh oh! Bad little doggy.” She pulled the girl’s head upward by the silky hair and pushed dirty fingers between the beguiling lips. Without being told Anna licked them clean. “I’m going to give you some special things to wear to the club.” She caressed the soft breasts with her fingertips then crushed a nipple between iron fingers. Anna winced but this time made no sound. “These need some pretty purple decorations. Go get two big chime balls and a big butt-plug. You may choose your own punishment.” Delia released the nipple. “Go on. Bring them to me.”

The girl crawled off. Delia watched the tender flesh cross the small, warm, comforting room with both pleasure and sadness. Too soon this would all be far away.

That first morning played across her mind followed by so many other mornings, afternoons and nights. On that morning she’d discovered her true nature ... and begun another dimension of her training.

Delia had been thunderstruck, carried away, by the revolutionary sensations pouring through her as she raped Anna. To her immense surprise, the other girl’s, M.A. was her name, presence didn’t stop her. Rather she added in ways Delia could never before have imagined.

M.A. faced Delia, her meaty thighs straddling Anna's face. She glanced down. "Lick, bitch." Anna obeyed, straining her mouth against M.A.'s clit. She noisily licked and sucked, bleating incomprehensibly at every thrust of the massive dildo.

M.A. lifted her t-shirt over her head and crushed her giant, billowing breasts against Delia's smaller and firmer ones, pressing her lips to Delia's and her tongue into Delia's mouth. With astonishment, Delia found her arousal increase. And she felt a powerful instinctive urge to squeeze M.A.'s breasts. So she did, leaning forward and kissing M.A. back while she kneaded voluptuous fistfuls. M.A. moaned lustily and Delia heard Anna gasp for breath under a sea of soft flesh.

The image was still vivid in Delia's mind. Three female figures merged into one primal, effluent organism surging and heaving with sound, action and feeling like a carnal rollercoaster ride. Up and down, back and forth, higher and lower, internal and external sensation rolled in an unceasing, congruous torrent through their fused bodies.

It was M.A. who came first in a wrenching spasm that almost – but clearly not entirely – smothered Anna. In quick succession, Anna screamed, her face buried against M.A.'s pelvis. Delia believed she was too disconcerted to cum but something about the group gestalt pushed her over the edge. The big black rubber dick started the orgasm deep inside her but before she knew it every cell seemed filled with tearing ecstasy. She'd had few orgasms and certainly never one like this.

The three collapsed together into a large, wet, panting pile. Anna wriggled up between the two other women and M.A. patted her head. "Good dog." Delia lurched forward in surprise.

"The pretty little dog's good with her tongue, isn't she?" M.A. smiled over at Delia who would have staggered with confusion if she hadn't been lying down. M.A. lightly reached across Anna and touched the bruises on Delia's breasts. "So how did a Dominant get such juicy bruises? Do you switch?"

“Dominant? Switch?” Delia had no idea what she was talking about.

“You’re Dominant,” M.A.’s expression was quizzical but her words weren’t really a question. She paused. “Right?”

Delia stuttered a little. “I dddon’t think I’m Dominant. I don’t really know what it is.”

M.A.’s smile was knowing. “Believe me. You’re Dominant.” Now she reached over and shook Delia’s hand. “Call me Mary Agnes at your own risk.” She smiled mockingly. “Agnes means chaste, by the way. So I’m doubly chaste.” Her laugh was throaty. “Well, you decide for yourself.” She reached out and grabbed haphazardly at Anna. “The bitch calls me Sir and from now on she’ll do the same to you. Won’t you, doggy?”

With interest Delia observed Anna’s happily tractable response. “Yes Sir.”

“Sir” explained to Delia that many lesbians and even some bisexual female Dominants deplore the titles “Mistress”, “Lady” and, heaven forbid, “Goddess”.

Over the next months and years M.A. emerged as a remarkable mentor, educating Delia philosophically as well as with all sorts of striking implements, with needles and with knives. She also proved an exceptional and exceptionally wild and lively friend. Together they’d left massive sexually charged mischief in their joint wakes.

Anna awkwardly returned, a heavy suede flogger’s handle held carefully between her lips like a well-trained bird dog and her right hand stuffed full. She crawled to Delia’s feet and lifted to her knees, silently offering first the flogger then the silver balls and black rubber plug.

Delia rolled the flogger in her hand, enjoying its weight and balance. She chuckled. “The doggy wants to play. She wants a long beating and bigger bruises to remember Sir by.” She took the other objects. “But first we need to insert doggie’s jewelry. Turn and spread.”

Delia rolled the two large metal balls in her palm listening to their soft music. One after the other she pushed them into Anna's anus then made to force in the black rubber. The rubber ripped at the tissues and the girl silently squirmed. Delia worked it this way and that, pushing and withdrawing, but it wouldn't budge. Finally she stuck it into Anna's mouth. "Lick." The girl sucked it into her mouth and covered it with saliva. And the fat rubber protuberance went in.

"First I think we'll make sure that plug stays. Tits on the floor, ass in the air."

The girl lowered her torso onto her breasts. "Such a lovely sight," Delia mused, allowing her eyes to follow the graceful back to the delicately lush derriere. She said, "Spread."

The girl reached awkwardly behind and opened the soft twin orbs exposing the plug's flat black end. Karate and lots of practice had perfected Delia's aim. After two graceful elliptical sweeps she struck, driving the rubber deeper with a heavy slap that terminated between the tender labia. Anna silently shuddered.

Several stinging whacks almost knocked the slim girl flat, bringing tears to her eyes and flaming feverish pink to her labia. "Release." Delia placed a hand over Anna's vagina, enjoying the heat. "Ready? You may hold yourself steady." For forty five minutes, until purple rose amidst the deep pink and Anna's body rippled with racking stimulation, Delia wielded the heavy flogger on back and buttocks.

"Up to your knees and face me." Unsteadily, the girl obeyed and Delia turned her attention. "Hold onto your ankles." Anna bent backwards and gripped an ankle in each hand, arching her spine and exposing her ductile breasts. Now, though, her chin dropped to her sternum and her eyes closed. And she was utterly silent. Subspace.

Afterwards, Delia helped the quavering girl into a low cut party dress. She painted the ugly purple blotches rising on the white skin with a glitter stick so they pulsed like holograms in all but bright light. The girl sat silently on their bed's edge, head bowed and eyes glassy, while Delia slipped into black

leather – sleeveless, front-buckled vest, matching side-buckled mini that barely covered her muscular thighs, and black, spike-heeled boots.

“Club time.” Delia hooked a leather lead onto Anna’s collar’s heavy D-ring and preceded her to the little blue car. Five minutes later they were walking under the flat, hotel-sized overhang into the giant grey geometric Club Metro complex and downstairs, past game room and leather store, to the huge Metro Underground dance floor.

Delia guessed the fog machine must have run about fifteen minutes before because the streaking, flashing multi-coloured light show cut through slowly dissolving smoky white whorls. As she strode across the dance floor pulling Anna behind, she strained to recognize the amorphous, undulating shapes, in t-shirts and jeans, leather, some sparkles and even a few business suits, emerging and disappearing into the white to the heavy bass beat.

“Delia!” A familiar voice floated to her from ... somewhere. She turned on her spike heels, several times until a strong fist attached to a naked arm locked onto her shoulder and pulled her to it. Here she didn’t bother to resist. She didn’t need to fight. These were all friends.

M.A. stood before her, huge tits bulging over a black bra under the customary white t-shirt and jeans. Beside her was a big dike who could have been her sister, except for the natural blond crew cut. The woman also wore a white t-shirt with short sleeves that just grazed pumped triceps, but with leathers – black pants, vest with club insignia and heavy boots. “Delia, let me introduce you to Lex. She rides a Harley with a girl group in San Jose.” M.A. smiled. “Near your new home. I’ve been telling her about you.”

Lex nodded cordially and shook Delia’s hand, at the same time giving her a discreet once over that Delia acknowledged with a friendly smile. “I wouldn’t mind having some friends out there. Would you believe it, I’ve never been out of Minnesota.”

“I’d be happy to show you the scene and introduce you to some people.” Lex’s attention strayed over Delia’s shoulder.

Now M.A. wrapped her arm around Anna throat and pulled her close. She stroked the fluorescent bruises appreciatively and smiled at Lex, who openly ogled the girl. “This is our doggy. Doggie, say hello.”

Anna’s eyes flicked briefly upward from below lowered lashes. “Hello Sir.”

Lex’s gaze locked onto the girl, moving from face to breasts to legs. M.A. squeezed Anna affectionately tighter then pushed her roughly toward the other woman. “Doggy, make Sir happy.”

Lex looked quizzically from M.A. to Delia then took Anna’s lead and led her to the dance floor. “So you don’t think we have a problem here?” Delia asked M.A. as they watched the lust with which Lex drenched Anna as she crushed the delicate girl against her hard body.

“Naaa, she’s okay. Besides, I bet the doggy enjoys the abuse.” M.A. reached for Delia’s arm. “Come and dance with me.” Sadness flashed across her square face. “We don’t have many left.”

Delia hugged her. “You’ll just have to come and visit. The Bay Area’s supposed to be heaven for queers.” The two women pressed against each other, mouths, arms and legs intertwined, dry humping to the metal music.

Chapter Fifteen

The women never remembered anything, except how much they wanted him. He could have used them again and again but the blackness wanted fresh meat. And LaVeau had discovered new, unaltered girls gave him a greater inflow of power.

He looked down on the delicate yet voluptuous naked body below him and marvelled at this standard of American beauty. How could such flawless full breasts above such a tiny waist and narrow, smooth thighs have been created? How could so many examples of fragile femininity exist? And yet they did. Washington was full of them. He shook his head. It was television's fault. TV added weight and even height, making perfectly constructed Barbie dolls barely larger than seven stone seem the norm.

His voice raised in a quavering song in a language he'd never learned. The blackness had given it to him fully formed along with so much else. He recognized its similar origins to Creole French – traces of tribal Africa and Native American bastardized by ruling colonists both French and Spanish – but it was only the transfer that allowed his understanding.

The razor-sharp blade, sparking across the blotched walls in long bright candlelit rainbows, rose with the irregular cadences until it hung gleaming above the provocative prone form like a diminutive sword of Damocles between his skeletal fingers. He felt the warmth of his aunt's insistent whisper and the blackness' power pushing him forward. "Kill her," was their message. "Then all this will be yours." They showed him – again – and the vision's power and pleasure far surpassed the fiercest orgasm.

He'd not been able to kill, despite the temptation. Even when he reminded himself that death might be kinder than what he gave the women. Once he opened them to the blackness it could feed on them. He tried not to wonder if a life of agony, or at best a slavery that only the evil and power-hungry could enjoy, might be worse. Perhaps killing the

women was a kindness, he rationalized. There was no doubt the far vaster power he'd gain almost unbearably seduced him.

Still his arms and the knife lowered slowly, as thick as moving through treacle and as cloyingly sweet. In a dream, he saw one hand detach from the blade and touch the smooth, hairless mound. He heard his aunt's disgusted voice, "This girl is une putain, a whore. Regard how she shaves herself! Why should you spare her?"

His head swirled with desire to kill. He touched the blade tip to her labia's creased pinnacle and brought it away, one crimson drop hanging for a moment suspended from the silver point before it dropped onto her flat belly, then moved it to her throat. The girl stared blindly toward him out of wide fawn's eyes turned inward in some ecstatic horror. Slowly – reluctantly? – he pressed the blade against the blue vein pulsing in her insubstantial throat. He felt the soft flesh give under his hand as his aunt and the blackness pressed forward, moving over and around him in dense dark energy.

But before the blade penetrated her thin skin he drew back and, as each time before, penetrated her inner thigh with the blade's end to an accompaniment of his aunt's disapproval. As a ruby stream ran to the white cloth, the girl's life force flowed into him in a rush of power that shot from his hands into his head and downward, at last surging upward into his phallus.

He watched the girl from a distance, not only through his own eyes. Her lithe body undulated, twisting and turning as if consumed by passion. Yes, consumed. He found the observation a little too disconcerting. His gaze lingered on her breasts' soft flow across her ribs, rising in rippled ridges under her sheer skin, on the sensual roll and compression of her round hips. They were consuming her and – in compliance he covered her with his long frame – now they would have her totally.

His aunt guided his penis inside the girl's wet, constricted orifice and he gasped despite himself. The multiple hands, multiple directives, amplified his experience manifold. Each fractional movement, each tiny involuntary response was clear in his awareness. He felt her vaginal walls press him, massage

him. He felt the impact of his bulging head against her cervix' impenetrable yet yielding resistance. It was a strange contradiction – the simultaneous taking and giving of energy.

And as he penetrated her, he sucked her life force out of her body and into his. It thrilled him, buoyed him up, filled him full to bursting until he did feel his corporeal shell rupture and he melded with the undifferentiated existence around him, with his aunt's incredible sensuality and the blackness' great power.

Hours later he awoke next to her on his high bed in the cottage's one room second floor. What had wakened him? He peered into the dark corners but saw nothing. Only pearly moonlight kept them company. He turned over and buried his head in the down pillow but sleep would not return.

At last, in disquieted frustration he left the girl's pale, unconscious form and stalked to the window. Small, fluffy clouds floated across the night bright sky, hiding the moon and the hills below in a patch of dark at his approach. He looked upward and, as if on cue, the moon emerged, not yet full but convex – “gibbous”, he remembered the correct term – and golden.

His gaze dropped to the church steeple then, suddenly, was jerked lower. Standing on the small porch was his luscious carrot-haired wraith in her so-familiar gauzy white dress, her hair and translucent skin shining like burnished crystal in the gilt and silver light. The wraith raised her head and peered up at him. With shock he recognized her substance. He wiped traces of insensibility from his eyes with quivering fingers. Was she real?

“Mon Coeur, my dearest heart,” his aunt appeared at his side. “She is special. Only for you. Elle est une vierge, a virgin.” Her laugh was throaty, erotic and, he heard it clearly, triumphant. “Consider the power!” She squeezed her voluptuous body between his and the windowsill, pressing her breasts – which loomed naked and real in his awareness despite their illusory mien and hundred year old costume – against his bare chest and gave him a small shove. “Go to her.”

Evers' daughter! He hadn't seen her in several years and suddenly she was waiting for him. And now as exquisite and mature as her great grandmother. How?

He glanced at his aunt's azure eyes, burning with hell's blue flames, far hotter than any red. Obviously it was her doing. An insubstantial whiff of anxiety floated across his senses. To what extent?

Marie's wanton blood red lips curled at the corners and his eyes widened with certain knowledge. She'd begun her machinations that morning years ago in Evers' kitchen – even before? – and had plotted and manipulated ever since with all, he smiled bitterly into her mocking blue pools, the patience of the dead. This was why she'd encouraged the blackness to let him have the girl's lovely dead ancestor.

Truly he didn't want to go. Yet he was drawn to the girl, drawn more powerfully than to her ancestor or, indeed, to any of the others. His aunt held his bloodied robes and he slipped into them.

His march to the church did not register, only when he stood in front of her. Then he couldn't resist. He lifted her ethereal body and carried her like a bride across the church's threshold, all the while aware of her silence and her aquamarine gaze on his face.

With meticulous care he arranged her delicate limbs on the communion table, electrified by the feel of her downy skin. Through the dress's worn and ivoried transparency, his narrow fingertips grazed the tender swell of her upper arms, her thighs, her breasts and even her pubis' gossamer orange curls. She was so beautiful! So enticing! He looked down into trusting sky blue eyes that never left his face and frowned with repugnance. She was so innocent! Could he possibly destroy such perfection?

Yet the urge to proceed was almost unbearable. This time he didn't need his aunt's visions. The awful power he'd reap from the act saturated his every cell. Here, he knew indisputably, was the path to his desires' absolute fulfilment. He strode to the altar and removed the old artefact from its

concealed niche. Awesome blackness gathered around him in a cloak of power as he lifted the knife above his head and began to chant. Power surged through him like a vibrant current, filling his upraised arms and his rising phallus simultaneously.

From a height he looked down upon the thing of beauty and he desired it, was almost overcome by yearning for it. Now his aunt's whispers reverberated in the tumult around him. "She is yours. Only for you. Take her. It is so simple. Tout simple. Then everything will be yours." He saw clear blue and many coloured fire as the blade plunged toward the wide, unsullied orbs.

She lay on the communion table in the old church, her clear blue eyes staring into his vibrant brilliants – blue into blue. Somewhere close by was horrible dark fear but she could only focus on the soft languorous pleasure in her body and on her desire.

The first time she'd seen him he'd had some weird almost magical affect on her. She'd secretly watched him ever since, watched him with the women he brought to the cottage and watched his mystifying activities here.

All the while, someone she couldn't see but knew was more beautiful than anyone she'd ever met seemed to stand at her shoulder, whispering encouragement in her ear then showing her how to hide. She touched the cobwebby white fabric draping over her fingers. It was the unseen woman who'd instructed her where to find the dress and when to put it on and come to him.

Now he soared above her, hard, princely and powerful. The jagged bones of his face flickered in and out of relief in the candlelight. She yearned to reach out and touch him, to touch the penis that stood up tall, entrancing and forbidding between his draping robes, so near her face. She'd never seen a man's naked penis this close before.

The majestic column resonated, even sparkled with life – or so it appeared to her euphoric vision. What would it feel like when it touched her as she knew it must? No matter. She

was ready for the glorious moment. The woman had assured her it was her destiny.

His reedy voice rose upward, chanting a language she didn't understand, and his cloth draped arms raised with it. She saw a shining light. No! It was the glint of steel. A knife!

Fear gripped her. For only a moment, though. Again, the euphoria descended on her like a blissful shroud, dampening and also glorifying her senses. Even as the blade dropped toward her throat she was unconcerned. Her breast swelled and the diaphanous fabric rubbed her nipples, startling her with never-before experienced sensations of arousal as they became erect. This, this was her wonderful destiny!

Ward loved driving at night and also in bad weather. He peered out the Rover's open driver's window. Tonight was warm and a little too pretty. Small clouds that looked fluffy even in the dark drifted across a sky brightened by lights of many cities, a few scattered stars and the intermittent presence of a tawny moon.

Nonetheless, he'd decided to take the remnants of winding country roads, disappearing too quickly under burgeoning, monotone estate developments, rather than Indian Head Highway. At least no other cars were on the road this late so he could enjoy his new playtoy.

His black-shod foot pressed the pedal and the sleek black Range Rover surged into a smooth curve, gripping the rolling arc with a panther's ease. Luxurious leather interior muffled the roar of the big engine's acceleration. The strong fingers of Ward's right hand lovingly caressed the stiff, new, sweet smelling black leather as he flew past the high dimmed lights flanking the entryway to Rosecroft Raceway. Almost immediately manicured grass gave way to thick, dark forest.

Streetlights appeared in the distance and Ward slowed slightly in anticipation. The next instant something white darted into the road directly in his path. With nowhere else to go he swerved toward the trees and then, with exhilarating relief, he saw it. A dirt track opened between the dense foliage

almost in front of him. He jerked to the right and the heavy car bounced onto the rutted pathway.

Ward straightened the wheel and braked, coming to a bone-jarring but secure stop under the treed canopy. Immediately he studied the rear view mirror. Centred behind the car, right where the track met the paved road, stood a ghostly girl with long flowing hair and a pale dress that rippled eerily in the warm breeze.

Giving ardent thanks, Ward jumped out of the car and ran toward the girl. “Are you all right?” The girl stared fixedly toward him but said nothing. He slowed, not wanting to frighten her.

As he drew closer, he made out her odd, tattered, old fashioned dress and her bare feet. “Do you live near here?” Still she didn’t respond. He faced her, maintaining what he hoped was a comfortable distance – though she gave no indication of discomfort, or of any other emotion – and stifled his surprise. Rigorously he kept his expression neutral as he discreetly examined her. She was exquisite.

Ward slowly, cautiously reached toward her hand. His smile was gentle. “I want to help you. Can you tell me who you are and where you live?” She stared up at him from huge, astonishingly innocent blue eyes.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his mobile. As he moved it to his ear she lurched forward and knocked it to the ground, violently shaking her head from side to side. “All right. I won’t call. Don’t worry.” He retrieved the phone and slipped it into his pocket. Again she lurched forward but now she clung to him, tensed in wretched silence, her face buried in his dark shirtfront.

He looked down at her lustrous copper hair. “Would you like to come with me?” She nodded up and down, vigorously, against his chest. He lifted her in his arms and carried her to his car.

LaVeau regained consciousness in an awkward crumpled pile on the church floor. His head felt as if it had blown apart. Slowly, painfully the pieces connected and the awful memory returned.

He remembered looking down on that wondrous form, remembered the shining blade hurtling toward her insubstantial throat. He remembered the vast power and then – again his head threatened to explode – the breathtaking swell of love that brought the world’s end.

Slowly, gently, he tried to shake off the throbbing pain. Tears filled his eyes and ran down his hard cheeks. He couldn’t kill her. He loved her. The knowledge had hit him like a cannonball as the knife descended in his hand. Blackness had risen, roared around him, rending mind and body and knocking him flat.

And her also. His last memory was of the dazzling face, an instant before radiant with tranquillity, crumple into a masque of horror and fear ... and of her silent bolt for the door. The image of her graceful, so vulnerable back outlined by candlelight through the thin dress as it vanished from his life would, he was certain, haunt him forever.

Desperately he turned his head and surveyed the scene. His heart ached unbearably. Now she was gone and somehow he knew she was not coming back. His aunt would see to that. Love was not an acceptable or useable emotion.

His hands gripped his robe’s front. He wanted to rip the cloth apart, to scream and tear his hair. What had they done with her? What had they done with his Teresa?

Chapter Sixteen

Ward stood on the broad veranda and admired the big black machine as it purred out of the trees and onto the landscaped circle fronting his house. Mercedes 500 series. Should he have gotten one of those? he momentarily wondered. But no, he liked his Range Rover.

The car's heavy door swung noiselessly open. A slim figure dressed in an elegant charcoal suit pivoted long legs to the gravel and stood with startling grace. His loose curls glowed obsidian in the clear sunlight. As he sauntered toward the house, he lifted a hand in greeting. Ward descended the short staircase to meet him.

“Reza! Welcome to my home.” Ward restrained his desire to examine the unusually handsome man more closely. He'd save that. He ushered Reza, who peered this way and that with great interest, into the heavily trimmed foyer with its grand staircase, bevelled panelling and inverted finials. “Can I offer you some tea or coffee, or perhaps some lemonade?” Among a great deal of other information, Ward had learned that Reza was Muslim and therefore didn't consume alcohol.

“Lemonade would be lovely.” Reza accent was virtually unidentifiable – Ward thought he heard both American and British English overlaying traces of more ornate dialects – only exceedingly refined.

Reza smiled with utmost charm into Ward's face. “But I do hope you'll give me a tour of the house.” He looked around appreciatively. “It appears quite remarkable.”

“Thank you. Certainly I'll give you a tour, though keep in mind I've only begun to renovate.” Ward smiled drolly. “I'm still getting to know the house.” His expression reflected his abashed perfectionism. “I have to think about things for awhile. It's taken me months to make decisions on three rooms and they were easy.” Ward slid back the high pocket doors to the front parlour, an old-fashioned, somewhat dark room with thick leaded windows, a scroll backed Victorian suite of

horsehair sofas and armchairs, overgrown plants and handmade antique lace curtains. He waved an arm into the room. "I'm not touching them. So. Tour first or lemonade?"

"Well," now Reza smiled wryly, "my family would no doubt disapprove – they'd think I'm far too westernized – but let's tour. Then we can sit and have a leisurely talk."

"Why don't we start upstairs. We can walk through the main floor on the way to the rear porch, which has a spectacular view of the Potomac." Ward started up the massive turned staircase, elegantly curving to the intricate leaded windows of the second floor landing. "Most of the upstairs rooms are empty bedrooms or sitting rooms. But the fireplaces and trim are worth seeing – at least a sampling of them."

With a theatrical flourish Ward turned the ornate brass doorknobs and threw open the double doors at stair top. "I can't seem to avoid calling this room the 'Crystal Ballroom.' You'll see why if we make it inside."

Reza was far too urbane to gasp but his full carmine lips widened into a broad smile and his luminous eyes twinkled. "My! My!"

Inside was chaos. The inlaid black, brown and white floor was covered end to end and up to the two huge unlit chandeliers suspended from the vaulted ceiling with iron cages and contraptions of all sizes and shapes. "I find it irresistible. The previous owners intended to empty the room but I," Ward parodied conciliation, "so kindly offered to do it for them." But, as usual in this, his favourite playroom, boyish enthusiasm quickly resurfaced, "I have to restrain myself from spending every minute in here exploring."

Ward's gaze swept the pile's length. "It must once have been some sort of treatment room. And then all the other rooms' equipment was dumped here to prepare the house for sale." He laughed happily. "High tech in its day."

Reza laughed also in a melodious tenor. "It reminds me of one of my aunts. When I was a boy she bought a big old house in Paris and filled it with antiques. A year later she got bored and replaced the first set of antiques with others. The next year

she did the same thing. The discarded furniture, most extremely valuable, was piled impenetrably to the ceiling in a large bedroom. I squeezed and scrambled through the labyrinth imagining myself a famous archaeologist sent to make reason from it all.”

Ward pointed to one end of the room with a museum docent’s earnestness. Above a massive carved fireplace, an intricate crystalline mosaic of perhaps a hundred pieces of bevelled and etched leaded glass making up a whimsical fractured looking glass peeked out through the room’s largest cage. “There’s a big window just like that on the far wall that would be a shame not to uncover. I haven’t decided what to leave in the room.”

As Ward ushered Reza out the doors and pulled them to, he smiled mischievously. “I think you’ll find the next room in the tour very interesting.” He led Reza past several identical doors partially opened into empty bedrooms to one slightly less majestic and also closed.

Ward pulled a large antique key from his trousers’ pocket. He held it upright by its ringed handle for Reza’s inspection. “Fortunately someone was wise enough to key each floor identically.” Ward glanced eloquently at Reza as the cumbersome metal turned effortlessly in his hand. “I lubricated the locks so I don’t break my wrist.”

He swung the door open to blinding white. Every inch of the enormous bath’s wall and floor as well as a rectangular plunge pool centred on the right wall was tiled in white glowing with an aged iridescent patina. The walls were fitted with what were undoubtedly state of the art fixtures in the sanatorium’s heyday, all intricately embossed.

Ward waved his hand toward a vertical metal construction on an embossed porcelain base wedged into the corner beyond the pool. “It’s called a “Ribcage” shower. You can see why. Each of the ribs provides a therapeutic needle shower spray.” He turned toward Reza, his eyes sparkling. “Fascinating, don’t you think?”

Reza walked toward the small white ceramic tile and scrolled iron fireplace sitting on a white marble surround at room's end but stopped before he reached it. "This is interesting."

Though not entirely certain whether Reza referred to the unusual porcelain tub opposite the pool, which resembled a chaise lounge with its high back and low front, or the heavy black chain attached to one claw foot, Ward chose sardonic neutrality. "Yes. It must have been used for hydrotherapy treatments."

When Reza turned bemusedly toward him, he said, feigning innocence, "Oh! You meant the chain! Yes," again his eyes sparked with enjoyment, "I have something I'm sure will interest you."

He motioned Reza along the chain through an open side doorway into a dark and somewhat musty room heavily draped with stiff, old and very elaborate oriental fabric into five "cooling" alcoves in which beds once sat. The chain stretched across the Chinese carpet and underneath a dressing table's skirts. Ward paused, enjoying Reza's avid anticipation. He called, "Teresa. Come to me."

For a moment, nothing. Then the stiff skirts stirred. They parted and, with the chain's slight metallic jingling, a head that even in the dim light was obviously bright carrot red poked through. Ward sensed Reza hold his breath as slowly, reluctantly, an exquisite lithe naked body, with skin as pale as the bath's blue-veined white marble and beautiful breasts with nipples the colour of pale pink peonies, emerged.

The girl crawled to Ward, head down, hair hanging like a curtain, and buried her face in the soft black wool covering his groin. He laid his hand on her titian fleece and, just for an instant, tenderly petted her before he slipped a hand through the silken strands and gripped.

No sound escaped her blushing lips as he pulled her head back and exposed her ethereal face and vivid, abjectly tranquil blue eyes. Over his shoulder he heard Reza's gasp. "My God! Where did you get her?"

Without taking his eyes from her, Ward said, “She ran in front of my car.”

“You’re joking.”

“Sit, Teresa.” The girl sat back on her heels, her hands clasped in her lap. Ward broke his gaze and turned to Reza. “Really.” He elaborated his voice redolent with the amazement he still couldn’t shake, ending, “I thought I was going to run my new car up a tree.”

Reza was still transfixed. “Do you know who she is?”

Ward gave a frustrated shrug. “Would you believe it, she seems to be invisible. I’ve tried everything I can think of – newspapers, accident reports, talking to the local police, even enlisting help of friends at the FBI. Nothing! It’s like she dropped from the sky or a witch materialized her.”

“She won’t tell you?”

“Actually she doesn’t talk at all or even, most of the time, make any sound,” Ward smiled sardonically, “even under stress.” He lifted a gold chain from under the narrow iron collar locked around her slender throat. “I only know her name because it’s written here.” He patted her head again and experienced an attachment he found intensely uncomfortable. “But look how calm she is,” he ran his thick fingers along the collar, “even shackled.”

“What have you done with her?” Ward heard the eagerness in Reza’s voice.

“Actually, I’d like to talk to you about that.” Reza nodded, intensely interested. “I’ve given her some minimal training but she seems to naturally fall into an animal’s role. She sleeps next to me in bed like my dog and I’ve trained her to use her hands and mouth. Quite well, I might add.”

“But I’ve been reluctant to stick my cock in her other holes. I suspect she’s a virgin.” Ward looked into Reza’s face, across which emotions tumbled over each other. “I’d appreciate your suggestions.”

“A moment.” Reza lifted his mobile to his ear and spoke in French for several minutes. “My corporate physician will be

here in half an hour.”

Reza’s expressions moved far too quickly for Ward to read but their intensity was loud and clear. Nonetheless, he spoke tentatively. “What do you plan to do with her?”

Disagreeable uncertainty filled Ward. “I don’t know.”

“Would you consider selling her?” Ward whipped himself into thoughtful neutrality, hiding his disquiet.

Reza became animated. “Do you realize what she’s worth? I bet one of my Saudi clients would pay half a million for her, maybe more.”

“Though I certainly wouldn’t shirk a big wad of cash, my primary concern is finding her the right home.” Ward’s pale brow furrowed regretfully. “I find I’m just not ready for the responsibility.” He caught Reza’s eye and laughed. “I don’t have a dog or even a cat.”

“And if I do keep a piece of girl flesh full time I think I’d want one who’s not quite so compliant.” Again Ward laughed. “Debasing a reluctant object is just too much fun.” Once more he affectionately caressed the red head – which had not budged a millimetre. “Clearly, though, she’s very special. And she responds well to all sorts of subjugation, including corporal.” He paused, peering intently into Reza’s liquid eyes. “So you think you have an appropriate home for her?”

Reza’s face, which Ward now realized was pliant as Silly Putty, filled with concern. “I believe I have just the client – one who will understand her value and use her in a fitting manner.” His face morphed again, radiating dark rapture. “And if she’s truly a virgin ... well, we’ll see what Monsieur le Docteur has to say.”

“Shall we go down and wait for him? We can quickly finish the tour on the way.” Reza nodded enthusiastically and Ward took a small key from his pocket and unlocked the chain, leaving the iron collar in place. “Teresa, put on your uniform.”

The girl crawled to the dressing table and looked back at Ward. “Yes, you may stand now.”

“She needn’t dress on my account.”

“Actually,” Ward’s tone held just a trace of discomfiture, “this is something else I’d like to discuss with you. The local woman who cooks and cleans for me is, as you might imagine, very narrow-minded. I really need a more appropriate servant.”

Reza began to respond but instead gave a small gasp as Teresa gracefully stood and bent forward to open a drawer. “My God! Look at that perfect rear! She just begs to be taken, doesn’t she!” He rolled his eyes. “It would almost be worth the loss of income to do it myself.” He smiled at Ward, who immediately recognized the consummate businessman under Reza’s glamorous packaging. “Almost.”

For several minutes both men watched in silent awe as the sylphine creature dressed. She lifted a white cotton brassiere from the drawer and, demurely turning to face the men, hooked it around her newly blossomed breasts. Only momentarily, only to lift the articles of clothing, did she turn away, clearly giving herself up for inspection.

She slipped her fair arms into a starched white blouse and slowly, meticulously buttoned it, obviously unaware of her own seductiveness. Then, in nothing but her sweet white schoolgirl’s blouse and undergarment, she stood still with bowed head while the men examined her.

“Such lovely fine pubic hair,” Reza remarked approvingly. “I, like many of my clients, enjoy this hair,” he grimaced, “but certainly not a thicket. This amount is perfect.”

“I’m glad you approve,” Ward said. “Would you like a little more time or should she continue?”

“Yes, have her continue.”

“Teresa, you may put on your skirt and shoes.” Now the girl turned away and stepped into a short, plaid pleated Catholic schoolgirl’s skirt, showing the men her long back and, again, the supple rounds of her behind.

Reza made small approving noises. Not taking his eyes off the girl as she stepped into black pumps he said, “I’m sure

I can help you with the servant problem. Give me a day or two.”

“That would be a great relief. The woman is very annoying. And I really do not want my neighbours to know my business.” Teresa stood facing them, head once again bowed and hands clasped behind her back. “Teresa, you may crawl to the staircase ahead of us.”

The girl dropped to all fours and crawled to the door, which Ward unlocked with the ringed key, and then out into the hall. As she moved, the taut alabaster skin of her young behind and thighs and the two tender openings between winked at them from under the short skirt. Reza leered meaningfully at Ward.

At the grand staircase’s upper landing, Ward said, “Teresa, you may stand now.” The girl stood and waited. With annoyance Ward turned to Reza. “Now I pretend she’s a relative. You can see the problem.”

The men descended the stair with the girl clomping her heels a little awkwardly along behind. On the way through Reza peered into the remaining ground floor rooms – the huge formal dining room, the very masculine panelled library. They stuck their heads into the door of the antiquated white kitchen and Ward spoke to the stocky, grey-haired woman who stood at the sink cleaning vegetables. “Mrs. Everard, could you please bring some lemonade and snacks to the porch? Thank you.”

At the back Ward opened a transomed door. “The original Victorian solarium. The old caretaker had a green thumb and so does Mrs. Everard.” His tone was ironic. “A very small compensation.”

The room was entirely glass, with a hundred small, clear bevelled panes, and filled with plants. Plants with long drooping leaves or pendant clusters of foliage piled one on top of the other on every surface. Giant ferns and small palms sat in huge Oriental pots on the tile floor clustered around white wicker furniture. In their centre, a tall fountain with scalloped tiers stood dry and silent.

“Wonderful!” Reza exclaimed. “When one lives in a desert,” he politely excused his outburst, “one grows to appreciate moist air.” He touched the fountain’s edge. “But you must make this work! One of my uncles breeds rare koi. You must let me give you a few.”

His gaze swept the room. “And you know what else this room needs?” Ward politely shook his head and Reza continued with childlike enthusiasm. “A bird cage! I have just the thing!”

Iron furniture in a venerable fern and blackberry design, many pieces spotted with dirt and rust, was scattered about the long rear veranda. “I’ve only managed to have a few of these cleaned,” Ward apologized as he ushered Reza to a round table and chairs. “There’s just so much to do for my beautiful old dame.” He sighed then brightened. “Sometimes I don’t know what to do first but then I realize how much I’m going to enjoy putting the house in order,” he winked jovially at Reza, “to my own specifications.”

Teresa stood still and silent beside Ward’s chair. When he and Reza were comfortable, Ward said, “You may sit in a chair, Teresa.” He turned to Reza. “She’d rather curl at my feet and I’d rather have her there but we’re constrained by Mrs. Everard. But enough about that.”

Ward swept his arm toward the expanse of overgrown lawn spattered with ancient willows’ lacy green drapery and the burgundy of flowering cherries several months past bloom that rolled down hill to the Potomac River. “Nice view, isn’t it?” The loud boom of an explosion echoed over the water. Ward began to explain, “Testing at the Naval Research Lab,” when a helicopter roared closer.

“That must be the doctor,” Reza shielded his eyes to look into the distance.

Mrs. Everard stepped onto the porch carrying a large silver tray. She glared disapprovingly at Teresa as she set down glasses, a large pitcher of lemonade and plates of small sandwiches and sweets. Her disapproval refocused upward as

a sleek British racing green helicopter with black markings landed in an open spot on the lawn.

“Thank you, Mrs. Everard.” Ward wanted her immediately gone. When she didn’t respond he yelled over the rotor noise. “Thank you, Mrs. Everard.”

Finally she turned her head toward him. “I’ll let you know if we need anything else.” Reluctantly – and grudgingly – she swivelled her sturdy frame and re-entered the house.

Teresa, also, stared at the helicopter. Ward smiled at her, evaluating her response to this new event. Once again her tranquillity amazed him. He put his mouth close to her translucent ear to be heard over the whining rotor. “Stay, Teresa. Drink and eat while Reza and I get our guest.”

By the time they reached the chopper the rotor had slowed to lazy circles and a tall elegant man lowered his long legs from the cabin. He bent his thick shock of grey streaked black hair to duck under the blade and strode to greet them, arms extended. “Reza!”

The two men threw finely clad arms around each other and embraced with a filial enthusiasm Americans can never muster. They separated and the doctor extended long dexterous fingers toward Ward. Reza made the introductions. “Ward Smith, let me introduce Doctor Abenamor Sinclair.”

As he shook hands, Ward surreptitiously examined the doctor. French hauteur obviously but also with a dark, exotic touch. Moroccan? “Welcome to my house. I’m pleased to meet an associate of Reza’s. We were about to have lemonade. Would you care for some? Or something else? Coffee? Tea? Wine?”

“Thank you. Lemonade would be lovely.” To Ward’s ear, the doctor’s accent sounded pure Paris. But then so did Reza’s when he spoke French.

Teresa was consuming a piece of shortbread, licking her fingers like a child, when they ascended the veranda’s wide steps. The doctor smiled kindly at her. “This is the young

lady?” He nodded to Reza. “Yes, I can see what you mean. She is exquisite!”

“I’ll go get another glass,” Ward glanced meaningfully at Reza, “so we don’t bother Mrs. Everard.” As he turned toward the kitchen door Teresa stirred nervously. “Teresa, Reza will take care of you. You are to obey him.” Teresa’s blue eyes widened but she quieted. Doctor Sinclair and Reza had launched into animated French, gazes fixed on the girl, when Ward passed through the door.

When he returned, the two men were still watching Teresa, who quietly sipped lemonade. Reza looked up. “The helicopter is actually a mobile clinic.” He smiled. “As you might imagine, taking my goods to hospital is not always the best idea. In any case, Abenamor thinks it best to examine her there.”

He paused, chagrined. “Please forgive my poor manners! I am sometimes far too passionate about my work. We must first drink and eat the wonderful treats our host has provided. Ward, tell Abenamor how you found the girl.”

After an interval of eating and conversing Reza’s traditional family would consider appropriate, the group again crossed the lawn. Ward, who loved all machines, was glad of the opportunity to examine the beautiful metal bird more closely. The sleek exterior housed a flying ambulance with two detachable cots fitted with thick webbed straps, one with a gynaecological assembly at its end, and a collection of efficiently stowed medical devices and equipment.

Ward motioned to Reza to help Teresa inside. She flinched when he touched her arm and looked over her shoulder at Ward. “Reza will take care of you, Teresa.” Again she quieted and Reza lifted her and followed after.

While Doctor Sinclair and Ward climbed aboard, Reza said, “Remove your clothes and lie on the bed, Teresa.” Again she looked at Ward but when he nodded she obeyed.

When she lay, naked and vulnerable, on the cot, Reza took her chin between his fingers and held her blue gaze with his beautiful dark one. “The doctor is going to examine you now.”

She quivered nervously and he said, voice gentle, “Don’t worry, he won’t hurt you.”

Now the doctor stepped forward, a stethoscope around his neck and his hands gloved in latex. He also smiled kindly down at the girl and, like Reza before, took her chin between his fingers. She winced slightly as he squeezed. “Open your mouth, dear.” He peered into her throat and did a survey of her teeth, nodding approvingly then examined each ear canal with an otoscope. When he slipped the speculum into her nostril she tried to pull away and tears streamed down her cheeks but she made no sound. Reza put a warm hand on her shoulder for comfort and also to hold her still.

Desperately she tried to turn her head toward Ward but he purposefully stood back, out of sight. When the doctor released her head and moved lower, she jerked her head toward Ward. “I told you, Teresa, Reza will take care of you.” He kept his demeanour stern but calm. She stilled but tears continued their paths onto her pale cheeks.

The doctor listened to her heart and lungs. He rolled her nipples between his fingers and palpated breasts and abdomen all the while nodding approvingly to himself. Reza resumed his place at her head. “The doctor is now going to look at your vagina.” He smiled. “I promise he won’t hurt you.”

Teresa trembled uncontrollably as Doctor Sinclair spread her knees and lifted her feet into the metal stirrups. She stared at Ward, who felt an unwanted pang of conscience. He said, “Teresa, show Reza what you’ve learned with your mouth. Then you won’t even feel the doctor.”

The girl tentatively stretched out a slim arm and unzipped Reza’s trousers. He stepped closer and she extricated his penis and sucked it into her mouth. Reza inhaled sharply. “Oh yes! Marvelous!” He turned his head toward Ward. “You’ve trained her well.”

While she sucked, Ward moved to the cot’s foot to watch over Sinclair’s shoulder. The doctor used only his fingers and

the light from the otoscope, no speculum. He glanced up at Ward. “We don’t want to risk accidentally deflowering her.”

With his thumb and forefinger he gently spread her tissues, slowly and cautiously opening each layer. The girl wriggled and he spoke urgently, “Reza, make certain she stays still.” Reza placed one hand on her shoulder and the other over a breast and pressed her against the cot’s soft surface. She began to struggle. Reza’s pressure increased and his voice became hard, “Lay still, my dear. We don’t want to hurt you.”

Though Ward wanted to wean her from him, he was more concerned about damaging her. “Teresa, Reza will take care of you. No one will hurt you now. Do your job and keep your body still. Only your mouth should be moving.” She instantly obeyed.

Sinclair’s fingers resumed their exploration – briefly. He turned his head to Ward. “Here. Look at this.” With utmost care, he inserted the tip of his little finger into the vaginal opening between labia minora and gently pressed to each side. “You can see how tight she is.” He shifted his hand until the tip of his index finger hovered above the ephemeral pink tissue around the tiny hole. “This tissue is the hymen. You can see it is not torn. Not even stretched.”

Sinclair spoke to Reza, who watched distractedly, sighing and moaning softly as his penis penetrated the girl’s small mouth. “She is définitivement une vierge.”

“Praise be!” Reza exclaimed. He smiled and Ward saw his native cruelty poke through. “How good is she at swallowing cum?” Ward smiled back and nodded despite a small surge of discomfiture.

Reza looked down, appearing, as he did so, to puff up with evil satisfaction. He held the girl’s head rigid between his hands and forced his thick member into her throat. Again she struggled, choking and coughing, and this time he let her, enjoying her distress.

Ward watched Reza’s performance – watched him hold Teresa’s head in a vice grip deeply impaled on his unforgiving tool while her young and seemingly fragile body contorted this

way and that in pain and terror, watched for so long her agony seemed to him eternal. Finally, he watched Reza fill her mouth with semen in one jolting ejaculation that made her eyes roll back into her head and thick white ooze pour out of her lovely lips. Despite Ward's best efforts, anxiety rose in his chest.

When Reza had withdrawn, leaving Teresa curled in a foetal position, Ward spoke, "Reza."

Reza looked over at him, concern marring his beauty. "Oh dear! Ward, forgive me if I've overstepped."

"Please, Reza. Think nothing of it. It's just that I'm new to this and I'm finding it a little harder than I expected. She just seems so vulnerable. I need to find her a suitable home." Ward shook his head, trying to shake off his peevish emotions. He smiled benignly. "Tell me about your client."

"He's a Saudi sheikh with houses in several Western countries including the U.S. He owns numerous slaves who he treats as valuable possessions." Reza smiled diffidently. "But he does punish them when they require it." His expression filled with sincerity. "I'm convinced he will cherish her." He glanced at Teresa, still curled tight on the cot, then back to Ward. "She's very special."

"Can you call him now and get some sort of commitment so she can go straight to her new home?"

"Well, it's the middle of the night over there," Reza's expression clouded then cleared, "but yes, I will." He extracted his mobile from his trousers pocket and dialled. He listened silently for a moment then spoke earnestly in Arabic. Ward intently followed Reza's changing expressions and tried to understand.

After several minutes, Reza clicked his phone closed. He beamed at Ward. "The Sheikh trusts my judgement and has sworn to take her." He looked down at Teresa. "Do you think I'll have to drug her?"

Ward pulled Doctor Sinclair's short stool next to Teresa's head and sat. Gently he touched the girl's cheek and she

looked at him, wide-eyed and innocent. “Teresa, Reza is going to take you on a long trip.”

Teresa vigorously shook her head no.

“Yes Teresa. I have found you a wonderful new home and Reza is taking you there.” She jerked toward him and buried her face in his black shirtfront. “He will not hurt you and you will go with him.” He laid his hand on her head. “You will obey me and go with him. Correct?”

For several minutes she lay still and Ward waited, her exuberant warmth against his chest. He was about to speak again when slowly, reluctantly, she nodded her head yes. He patted her head. “Good girl. Now you may stand and dress.”

Ward’s last vision of the girl – an image that would haunt his dreams for months afterward – was her small face peering sadly at him through the window of Reza’s big black car as it pulled away down the drive.

Chapter Seventeen

Ward leaned against a wall, a glass of David Nicholson 1843 in his hand. He appreciated that every bar at every one of Michael's events, both private and corporate, was stocked with the obscure, mellow caramel liquid simply because he knew it was Ward's favourite.

He sipped, letting the handcrafted Kentucky bourbon warm his throat before he swallowed, and observed the milling crowd.

As with everything else Michael touched, the corporate office's Christmas decorations were magnificent but tasteful. Ward glanced at the giant evergreen – real, just like the carved mahogany fireplace it sat beside, which Michael had cannibalised from an English manor house. Michael's decorator, Ward mused, must have used a hundred yards of rich green and burgundy ribbons to festoon the branches before adding alluring touches of gold. Most impressive was the yard-tall antique Victorian angel, wearing elaborate robes that matched the ribbons and holding a long gold horn, which graced the top.

It was the employees' high jinks, boosted by alcoholic Christmas cheer, that most intrigued him however. Ward noted, and filed away for possible future use, who chatted up who with what results.

One of Michael's Directors was getting a little too friendly with one of Ward's former co-workers, a female engineer who now wore considerably more makeup and considerably sexier clothing than during his tenure at Doud's company, when Ward's attention was distracted by the behaviour of a lone girl. The girl's appearance was striking – all hard angles from her unnaturally black hair above sharp cheekbones to her muscular legs swathed in supple black that enhanced rather than hid her defined contours. Yet she moved so softly, slipping silently through the human knots with an exceedingly self-contained acrobat's frictionless grace. More interesting to Ward was the discreet acuity of her observation – identical to his.

And by far the most interesting was her fascination with Karen, who stood meekly unaware with Michael beside the tree. From a distance she circled Karen like a predatory beast, camouflaged but poised to spring.

Delia was impressed but no longer overawed. She looked around the opulently decorated room and smiled to herself. Five years. Not that long really, yet everything had changed.

She smoothed her suit jacket's perfectly tailored front, pleurably caressing the fine fabric. The suit, a midnight-blue stylized tuxedo cut to one button in a deep front V and with a draping peplum rather than true tails, was from Donna Karan's collection of about six years before. Delia'd found it in her favourite San Francisco thrift shop and had it remodelled to the current, narrow fashion. The fluid wool stroked her skin with a feather's sensuality.

Again she smiled to herself as she flexed her shoulders and felt the straps crisscrossing her back. Her little secret and even more sensual. Underneath she wore nothing but a pleated white tuxedo shirtfront that covered her breasts but otherwise left her upper body bare of all but the narrow fabric bands holding it in place. Her gaze once again swung across the room while she wondered idly if any of these people might provide a good fuck ... or better.

Her contemplation ceased abruptly, frozen toward the majestic evergreen. Instantly – or almost so – she recovered. She felt like slapping the shock off her own face. Wasn't this the long planned-for moment?

Yet she'd not been prepared for what she saw. Michael, elegant in a dark suit and stark white dress shirt, had come through a door behind the tree, his hand proprietarily supporting the delicate arm of a woman Delia barely recognized. The woman seemed to lean on his towering frame. Delia's eyes strained through the muted, sparkling holiday light while her body purposefully relaxed into nonchalance. What the hell had he done to her?

Casually Delia sauntered to the bar and retrieved a flute of champagne. Real crystal, she noted absently as she began to circle with feigned unconcern, hooded eyes never leaving the woman.

She was stunning, with a refinement only acquired by meticulous upbringing or arduous and tremendously expensive education. Every detail of her was perfect, from her glistening umber dusk mink coloured hair to her perfectly cut – and perfectly fitted, Delia marvelled unpleasantly, remembering her last visit with Karen – burgundy couture dress to her beautiful, bizarrely high heeled shoes. And yet the woman was diminished, severely diminished in a way Delia couldn't immediately define but which seemed somehow familiar. Delia turned and retraced the circle's perimeter.

No longer did she wonder about possible playthings. Only her circular pathway mattered, only observation and evaluation. Several times men and once a woman approached her. She paid little attention and rebuffed them without thinking, ignoring possible corporate consequences. This was the long awaited moment and she had only one objective. She was now Sensei's trained predator.

An hour – longer? – passed and no plan had risen in her consciousness. Her muscles began to tense. Would she have another opportunity? And truly, for what? Now that the decision faced her she didn't know.

Suddenly her senses tingled. She pulled her gaze away from Karen and saw a strange man leaning against a wall beside the elaborately carved mantelpiece looking at her. Well, really, he didn't look strange. If she'd passed him on the street she'd have said he was unexceptional though pleasant and even handsome in a quiet way.

But her senses said otherwise. She felt his strength and – she stiffened – an unexpected thrill of understanding – her eyes widened in acknowledgement – and kinship.

He smiled and she was certain she saw his pale eyes twinkle, even from across the dim room. Then he pushed fluidly off the wall and approached Michael and Karen.

Someone jostled her and she momentarily turned away. When she looked back, all three were gone.

Distress rippled through her but quickly rationality prevailed. It was still early and she knew they'd be back. She'd put the time to good use and schmooze. Delia smiled at the word as she perused the crowd. Yes, times had changed.

She was deep in discussion with a Director, a big man who looked like a Kennedy and had the same privileged leer. He'd placed his hand on her arm and was looking flirtatiously down at her when her senses tingled familiarly. A minute later the Director smiled over her shoulder and extended the errant hand. "Good evening, Ward. It's great to see you again!"

She turned and found the quiet man at her back. He met her eyes and this time she was certain of his amusement ... and empathy. The Director's voice was at her ear, "Have you met Delia Swenson?" She gripped the man's – Ward's – hand and was struck by its thickness and dry warmth. Again she had the sense of his strength.

"Delia, this is Ward Smith. He's an engineer who used to work for the St. Louis operation but now consults on special projects. Ward, Delia's a hire for Michael's new Berkeley IT division. She came to us in September from the University of Minnesota's entrepreneurship program and is a specialist in IT ventures."

She tried to demur but Ward cordially interrupted. His understated voice sent little jolts up her spine. "I'm very pleased to meet you." Delia knew he spoke precisely and was glad.

The three chatted amiably until the Director realized Ward wasn't going to leave him to his prey and excused himself. Ward smiled pleasantly. "Would you mind coming with me? I'd like to show you something I know will interest you."

Delia had no idea what he wanted from her and didn't care. She walked through the crowd toward the door behind the Christmas tree in a pheromonal haze. Occasionally, when her arm brushed against Ward's in the crush, little electrical currents made vivid starbursts inside her belly.

In blissful oblivion, she walked beside him down the long quiet hall ... until she stood in front of a door she knew was Michael's office and Ward stretched out his hand to turn the knob. Then she recoiled and came back to the "real" world. She, a very junior employee, was definitely not supposed to be here.

"Don't worry." He smiled at her, pushed the door open, guided her through and solidly closed the door behind her. "I have permission." She heard the irony in his tone and the door's click but her attention was fixed elsewhere.

In the palatial room's centre a girl, naked except for strange silver underclothes, knelt, chained at the throat to a ring in the floor between two rare Persian rugs. It was Karen.

Karen neither lifted her head nor even looked up when they entered. Despite the dimmed lights, Delia realized Karen was on a chain so short her back bowed slightly. Her first impulse was to run to her friend but something stopped her.

Delia stood suspended in limbo, head tilted downward, hearing nothing and seeing only Karen. The sight shocked her. But it was a half-formed perception that held her like a beast scenting uncertainty in the wind.

Once again she circled, collecting data, evaluating, while the girl below her – Delia now visualized Karen as a girl, not a woman – never stirred. Karen's body was slim but not emaciated, despite her appearance of frailty. In fact, it seemed a perfect representation of modern femininity. Delia marked the lovely rounded yet muscular swells of arms, buttocks and legs, as if the girl took meticulous care of herself – or someone else did, Delia thought bitterly. She noted the refined bone structure, the sublime curve of the spine.

Delia bent. What was Karen wearing? Delia peered through the dimness and her eyes widened. A wide metal mesh band encased the girl's soft breasts, scoring them into a judiciously protuberant waffle pattern – enough to make innumerable tiny bulges but not to slice the flesh – as it flattened them, constricting her ribcage. Delia noted, startled,

how meticulously the girl regulated each breath, straining to pull adequate oxygen into her restricted lungs.

A meagre “bikini” bottom appeared to be made of silver wire strands terminating in contacts to sacrum and hip joints – and no doubt other loci hidden from Delia’s view – threaded through a few flesh-toned fabric bands that virtually disappeared against Karen’s skin. Delia leaned closer, toward a short pink horizontal line just visible through the fabric. Was that the pallid remnants of a scar over Karen’s lower vertebrae?

But what the hell was eluding her? Delia almost had it. Almost but not quite.

She heard a noise behind her and pivoted, instantly on the defence. It was a revelation that greeted her. Ward stood with both hands extended. In one he held a braided flogger, in the other a small key.

Only her five year old obsession of Karen as a victim requiring rescue had blinded her. In a split second epiphany that perspective shattered and another emerged, like an abstruse change in camera angle. Now she understood. It could have been Anna at her feet. The two girls looked remarkably alike but that wasn’t it either. Rather, Karen’s persona unmistakably screamed “submissive”.

Ward’s smile broadened and Delia knew he’d recognized her transformation. His outstretched arms extended further, offering, no goading her toward a choice.

Her mind raced. Silently she raised a hand, putting Ward off. She had to think! She resumed her circular survey. What if she’d been wrong from the beginning? What if Michael had recognized Karen’s submission and only given her what she needed?

She glanced up at Ward, who hadn’t taken his smiling eyes off her. Would they really let her release Karen if that was her decision? A devastating spasm of guilt took her. Suddenly she knew how intensely she wanted her job, wanted this career path and the new world it promised to a hapless Midwestern farm girl. If she did choose Karen’s freedom would it all end?

Delia needed more information and there was only one way to get it. She removed her jacket and laid it on a delicate antique chair, tangentially aware of Ward's very masculine interest in her skimpy covering. Under other circumstances she would have put his interest to good use. But not at this moment. Slowly, with ambivalence that felt bottomless, she lifted the flogger, ignominiously ignoring Ward's gaze. Head down, she mumbled into her breasts, "This is not a decision."

The implement drew her to it, entranced her, once it lay in her hand. It was actually a cat o' nine tails and beautifully crafted. Made by Heartwood, she was certain. She hefted the handle with its intricate weave in lustrous shades of brown. "Yes," she thought, while at the same time wondering how she knew, "Ward would prefer brown's deep tonalities."

Her arm swept the air once, twice, three times in graceful figure eights as she watched the supple movement of the nine braided tails tipped with tiny forked leather tongues. Inadvertently she smiled to herself in enjoyment, wishing, for a moment, that Anna was restrained before her. The thought jolted her back to the present and her smile vanished. She sighed, looking down at Karen's vulnerable bare back ... and with one integrated backhanded motion caused the vicious tongues to strike flesh.

The girl jerked and a tremor ran through her but she made no sound. Delia struck again ... and again. She couldn't deny it. The splendid cat connecting with the flawless skin felt rhapsodic. Even the slight metallic ping when a tail struck metal was enjoyable. She evaluated her own response. Her instincts, which she invariably trusted, were propelling her to hurt the girl – strong evidence of submission for a skilled Dominant. But not enough.

After half a dozen blows, which raised satisfying bright pink stripes on the white skin, small pathetic whimpers penetrated the luxurious stillness. Delia circled and looked into the parts of Karen's face left unobstructed by her long hair. The girl's face was wet with tears. Even in the dimness, even with Karen's lowered head and eyes, Delia could see resignation, perhaps acceptance, but none of Anna's sensual

pleasure. Indeed misery, evanescent but still, Delia sensed, real, seemed to rise from the girl.

Delia's uncertainty was so compelling she wanted to scream. She still didn't know! Or was it simply the remnants of her fanatical quest blocking her vision? Was the answer truly obvious?

She struck again and, as she felt the cat connect, caught motion in the deep shadows behind the massive gilded desk. She spun on her heel in time to see Michael step toward her. A silent scream rose within her as she looked into his beautiful opaque eyes.

He smiled and his smile was like looking into hell's blackness. But far worse, when he spoke, his voice astonishingly hard and droll simultaneously, she felt her world crash around her. "Hello, Delia."

Questions – questions she'd stupidly ignored in her ferment – exploded in white-hot shards into her brain. Had he been the initiator of this little interchange? How did he know who she was? And how long had he known of her plans? When his company had hired her? Or more shocking, had he somehow intuited or learned of them when he'd first taken Karen? All this time had he been watching and waiting?

Her perplexity was interrupted by turmoil at her feet. Karen had collapsed onto the floor and was straining her neck against the chain's resistance to look upwards. In a voice so weak, plaintive and overflowing with hopelessness it plunged a knife into Delia's heart, she moaned, "Delia? Delia?"

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