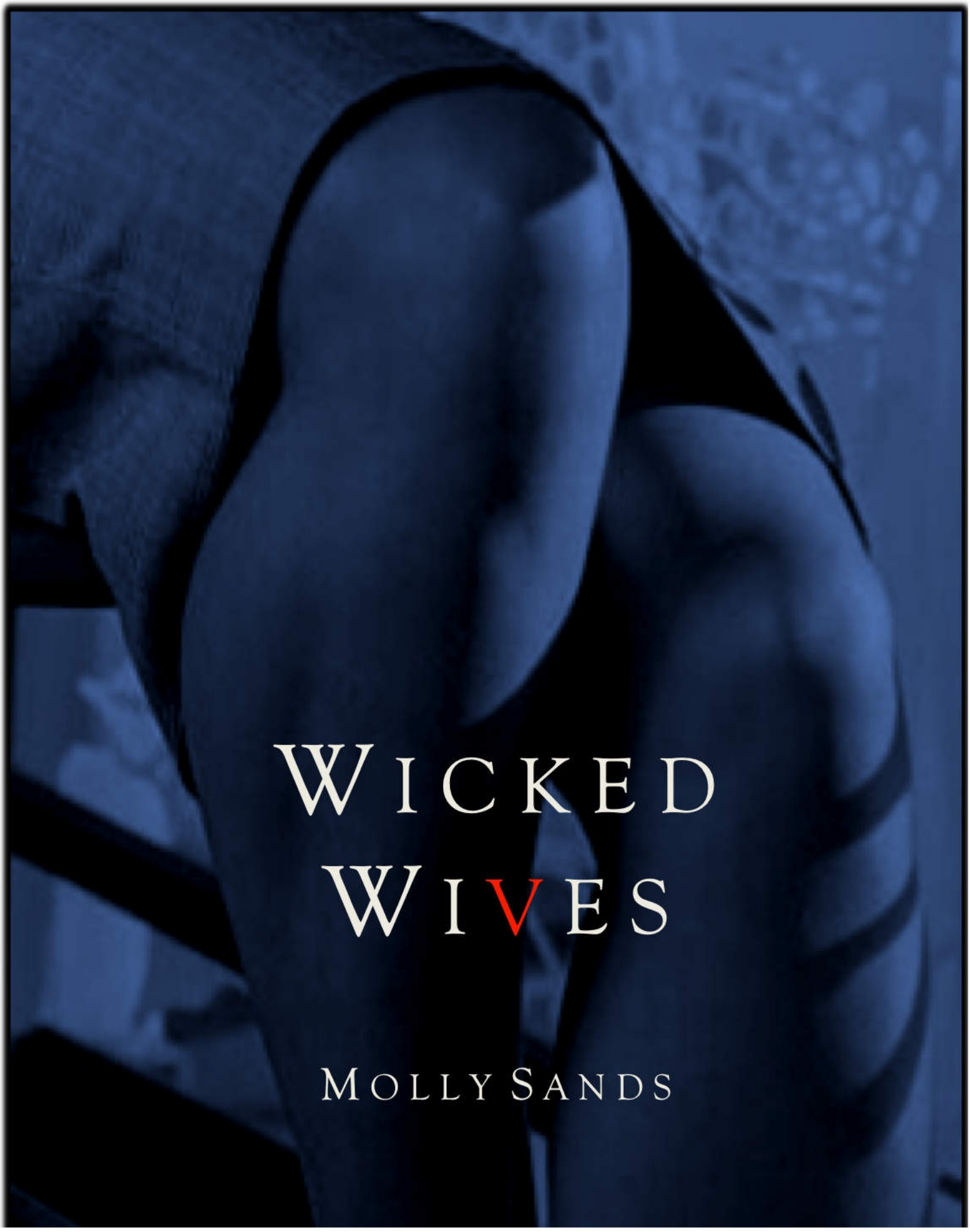
WICKED
WIVES
MOLLY SANDS

WICKED WIVES

Tales of Pleasure & Pain

Three erotic novels by Molly Sands —

Cruel Heaven

The Devlin Woman

A New Devotion

‘To my own sweet Severin with love and laughter.’

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Also by Molly Sands – An Obedient Husband, Magda, Slave Song, Contessa, Sacred Days, Serving Sarah, The Adoration of Adele Adams, Lady Catherine

‘Being your slave, what should I do but tend
Upon the hours and times of your desire?
(William Shakespeare, Sonnet 57)

Cruel Heaven

The Evolution of a Femdom Marriage

Molly Sands

Revised and re-edited October 2017

‘To fall at the feet of a proud and haughty woman, to obey her rules, and implore her pardon, were for me the most exquisite delights, and the more my lively imagination inflamed my blood the more I took on the demeanor of her helpless and adoring slave.’

(Jean-Jacques Rousseau - ‘The Confessions’ 1782)

CRUEL HEAVEN

ONE

AVA'S RETURN from work was always the high point of Stephen's day but this was a special day and he had prepared a fitting welcome.

The builders had left early in the afternoon and Stephen spent the rest of the day cooking one of Ava's favourite meals, and filling the new cupboards with glasses and dishes and pots, many of them wedding presents they'd never used. He went out and bought flowers and put them in a vase on the table beside a bottle of Barolo wine from the region in Italy where Ava had been born. The aroma of simmering herbs drove away the smell of paint and builder's dust.

Hearing Ava's key in the door, Stephen hurried to welcome her home. He hugged and kissed her, disappointed to smell cigarettes on her hair, but he didn't say anything that might spoil her surprise. Putting a hand over her eyes, he guided her into the kitchen, and when he took his hand away she smiled at the sight of the shining gas hob fitting neatly between the new worktops.

'At last,' said Ava, her weary smile not the smile Stephen had been hoping for.

'Don't you like it?'

'Of course I like it, and you're cooking already,' Ava replied, kissing him on the cheek. 'What a lovely smell, and there are flowers. They're lovely too, Stephen, thank-you.'

Ava felt more relief than pleasure now that the work in the house had been completed. Her long, hard day had left her too tired to care about kitchens and builders. The renovation had taken far longer than promised and

for weeks she'd been irritated with Stephen for not pushing the builders harder. She knew she wasn't being fair. He'd sold his flat to help buy their new home, and she'd barely lifted a finger in the house since their move to London.

'You're too hard on him,' she told herself, 'just like a lawyer,' but Ava felt her irritation turn unjustly to anger. Too tired to resist, she just gave in and let it happen.

To her surprise, it was an oddly pleasurable feeling.

She took off her overcoat and handed it to Stephen. He held it draped over his arm as he poured her a glass of wine.

'Hang up my coat,' she said, tasting the wine, 'and then come and sit by me.'

Ava watched him take her overcoat out to the hall where she knew he would hang it up by her other coats and jackets. She loved her work and hadn't the slightest desire to be a housewife, but part of her envied his worn jeans and loose t-shirt, and his easygoing life at home.

She was one of four young interns working a year's probation in competition for the prize of a permanent post at the prestigious legal firm of Mason Locke and Associates. Ava was at her desk before eight every morning, determined to win the race, and it was often a full ten hours before she returned home, pale and lost looking in her smart lawyer's overcoat, and with more work in her briefcase. Stephen had been happy to follow her to the city, giving up his job as a school-teacher and devoting all his time to supporting his lovely, young wife in her difficult first months at work.

Ava sat in the armchair by the stove admiring the new kitchen and breakfast bar. It had been her idea to knock down the dividing wall and turn the small kitchen and living-room into one long room. She had chosen the furniture and rugs, the gas stove in the fireplace, the long white drapes which

made the room so light and airy. She would talk to Stephen about such matters, but the final say was always hers.

He would need to look for a new teaching job now the work in the house was finished, and Ava thought how much she would miss having him at home for her like this, her doting and attentive house-husband.

When Stephen returned, Ava smiled at him, patting her knee, and he sat companionably at her feet, leaning his head against her thigh.

‘Light the stove,’ she told him.

‘It’s not cold.’

‘Light it,’ she said, ‘l like to see it burning.’

He lit the gas and when Ava closed her eyes and said, ‘Oh yes, this is what I want,’ Stephen felt a deep contentment. He loved having Ava home and safe, the two of them alone against the world.

‘I know what you like,’ he told her, turning and kneeling up to face her.

He slipped off one of her black court shoes and began to knead her foot, spreading her toes gently apart one by one before rubbing his thumbs over the warm, slippery nylon sheathing her sole.

Ava gave a groan of pleasure. ‘They’re smelly,’ she told him drowsily without opening her eyes. ‘I’ve been on my feet all day.’

‘I like the smell,’ said Stephen who really did like the tangy scent of shoe leather and nylon.

‘You’re a dirty Englishman, and I should never have married you,’ said Ava, her wide mouth curving in a smile. Stephen’s strong, gentle fingers were already improving her mood.

‘I am, and you shouldn’t have,’ replied Stephen, smiling up at her.

Ava opened one eye and peered down at her handsome husband.

‘I should have listened to my father. He always said you were never good enough for me.’

Stephen laughed and continued to massage her foot, leaving Ava free to think about the truth in her remark.

Her father, Marco Carafano, had come to England when Ava was three years old to work as a waiter in Northampton. Ten years later he owned his own restaurant, La Bella Arianna, but Arianna, Ava's mother, died of cancer when Ava was fourteen, leaving Ava to take her place in the restaurant, working at nights and week-ends all through her last years in school. Her father was a hard, solemn man who believed in fighting for what you want in life. He'd never said anything to Ava about Stephen, but she knew he didn't think much of him. Marco was proud of his daughter's success but she was a woman, her place was in the home and Ava needed a man strong enough to keep her there. Stephen was too pretty, too polite, too 'English' to meet with her father's approval.

'Come on,' said Stephen, preparing to stand, 'time to eat.'

'No, not yet,' said Ava, pressing her foot on his shoulder to keep him down, and thinking as she did so that no woman would ever have done that to her father.

Ava waited for her husband to rebel against such an indignity and get to his feet, but she wasn't surprised when he stayed where he was. Stephen was thirty-six and Ava only twenty-four, and they had been married only a year, but Ava had no doubt who was the senior partner in their marriage. Lately, Stephen had shown a remarkable willingness to give in to her wishes no matter how selfishly she expressed them and Ava had begun to take his compliance for granted.

She felt both pleased and disappointed by his obedience – pleased because it gave her a pleasurable feeling when he obeyed her, and disappointed because she didn't want a weak husband. Or perhaps it was simply that society told her a weak husband was not what she ought to want.

Stephen was strong and capable in his everyday life, so why should she worry? His obedience intrigued her, that was the truth of the matter. More than that, it gratified her in ways she couldn't explain. But how real was it? Was it merely the polite deference Englishmen often show to their wives? Or was there something darker and more mysterious taking shape in their marriage?

Ava made up her mind she was going to enjoy finding out.

She shucked off her other shoe, and gave him her left foot. He took it in both hands, once more spreading her toes apart and caressing her instep and sole so tenderly she gave a sigh of pleasure and settled back more deeply into the armchair.

'That's lovely, Stephen,' she murmured, 'don't stop.'

Closing her eyes again, she thought how more and more over the past weeks she'd fallen into the habit of speaking to Stephen as if he was little more than a servant. Where this attitude had come from she had no idea, but it was a habit she already knew would be hard to break.

She hadn't taken a conscious decision to treat him in this way. It had started without her giving it the slightest thought, as if it was only right and natural; little commands about little things such as 'pick up my dress from the cleaners,' or 'wash these out by hand' or 'hang up my coat' and, by some instinct, Ava had learned to give her commands in a casual, matter-of-fact manner, making it clear she expected him to obey without question.

More recently she had adopted an even haughtier manner, curious to see how far she could go before Stephen stopped her. It was a role that came so easily to her she had welcomed it into her life as a friend.

She told herself it was harmless, just a game in her head that brought fun and mischief to her busy life, and yet she felt a powerful undertow tugging at her senses, a tingling in her blood telling her it was more than a game. She

gave a long sigh of pleasure. To her relief, the tiredness that had dogged her all day had lifted and been replaced by an easy sensuality. She could see no reason why treating Stephen so unfairly made her feel better.

Maybe it really was in her blood, and that's all there was to it.

The thought made Ava smile the warm, sleepy smile her husband loved so much.

Stephen glanced up at his wife's lovely smile as he massaged her little foot and he couldn't help but think of how her manner had changed towards him since their move to London, of the way she would now often tell him to do something without asking him first. Her bossiness upset him more than he knew how to show. He was by nature generous and slow to anger, and he hadn't said anything to her, putting her rudeness down to tiredness and the demands of her work but he knew, for the sake of his self-respect, he ought to talk to her before it went any further.

And yet he kept putting off talking to her, as if some hidden part of him didn't want her to stop.

Haughtiness sat well on her proud Italian features and her casual commands, so hurtful to his pride, perplexed and aroused him. He hardly dared admit it – how could he when he barely understood it? – but he had come to find a strange pleasure in their bitter-sweet sting and he thought how, only a moment ago, when she'd said 'no' to him and held him down with her foot, he'd felt himself stir and harden, not with the hungry desire he usually felt for her, but with a different kind of desire, a heavy, feverish yearning that did not know how it could ever find release.

Over the past weeks and months he'd grown to welcome this strange yearning even as it weakened and confounded him, making him feel the way he had as a boy before he'd been driven to masturbate for the first time. What this told him about himself now, and his marriage to Ava, he couldn't say.

All he knew was that kneeling at her feet in this way gave him a new and secret kind of pleasure.

He shifted as the growing heat from the stove began to burn his arm. The movement parted Ava's legs allowing him to see up her skirt. He looked away instantly, ashamed of himself and feeling even more like a schoolboy. He recalled Ava drinking coffee at breakfast that morning, so smart and pretty with her make-up done and her lovely black hair pulled back in a pony-tail, and fully dressed except for her suit skirt which she didn't want to crease before leaving for work, and he already knew she was wearing red panties under her hose, but glimpsing them again like this cast a new and darker spell over his senses.

'Are you enjoying yourself down there?'

Stephen gave a guilty start, but Ava just yawned and stretched her arms above her head, reaching out her leg to stroke his cheek with her toes before placing the sole of her foot over his mouth.

'Go on, you know you want to,' Ava said, her voice friendly yet goading.

Stephen stopped breathing. He did want to kiss her foot, but he'd never done such a thing, and Ava had never spoken so openly.

It was fear that prevented him, the fear of giving in to her and looking weak. More than anything he wanted Ava to love and respect him. The man Stephen showed to the world was steadfast and reliable, and that was the kind of man he strove to be, but underneath he knew himself to be intensely proud and competitive.

Giving in did not come easily, and he feared where it might lead.

'Come on, Stephen, don't be such a scaredy-cat. What are you waiting for?'

The amusement in her voice irked him and he made a private vow never

to kiss her bossy little foot, and yet, compelled by a force greater than his own volition, he felt himself lean forward and place his lips adoringly against the sheer nylon.

Breathing in her scent, he heard her giggle as if she found his touch ticklish but when he took his mouth away she followed him with her foot, pressing it over his mouth, and wiggling her toes playfully, her painted toenails glistening through the silky gauze.

She laughed again as if she knew how much the sound tormented and aroused him.

‘You can do better than that,’ she said.

Stephen’s cheeks burned with embarrassment, and yet he took her little foot in both hands and covered it with kisses.

‘That’s more like it,’ Ava said approvingly. ‘Don’t forget the other one.’

She dangled her other foot tantalisingly close to his face. He hesitated for a moment, hating how weak and foolish he must look, but when she urged him on by pressing her toes against his mouth, he gave in with a sigh, planting little kisses on her sole and instep.

Ava giggled again, and pulled her foot away to make him want it more.

‘Ask nicely,’ she teased him.

‘Ava …’

‘You heard.’

‘Please, Ava.’

‘Please, Ava, what?’ she enquired.

‘Please …’ the words stuck in his throat, and when he heard his voice it was as if someone else was speaking.

‘Please, Ava, may I kiss your foot?’

He heard the tremble in his voice and wondered if she had heard it too. His deference to her, and the way she had teased it from him excited him in a

way he had never known.

‘Since you asked so nicely, you may,’ she told him, giving him her foot as if it was a gift.

Ava had never pushed him this far before, and she watched with interest as Stephen made each kiss longer, deeper, rubbing his cheek, flushed and tender with shame, against her ankle.

‘I like that, Stephen, I really do,’ said Ava, her voice lazy and contented.

Knowing he was giving her pleasure made him less ashamed of his own, but his reprieve was short-lived.

‘Are you looking up my skirt?’ she asked in a tone of mild outrage.

‘N-no,’ stammered Stephen.

‘Come on, you can tell me the truth,’ she said, a smile in her voice, ‘you know I can’t abide liars.’

Stephen tried to speak but no words would come.

‘I couldn’t care less, you know,’ she told him, ‘not if it makes you love me.’

‘I do love you. I’ll always love you,’ said Stephen, his voice catching in his throat.

‘I know you do,’ she said, hearing the catch in his voice and relishing this new proof of her power over him, ‘that’s why you need to be careful.’

‘Careful?’

‘Oh, yes, very careful.’

‘What about?’

‘About getting to like this too much,’ she told him in her serious voice, her lawyer’s voice.

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ he said, trying to hang on to his pride.

‘Oh, come on, Stephen, you know perfectly well what I mean,’ she said, trampling his pride. ‘Running after me hand and foot, doing what I tell you to

do, doing my bidding.'

She slid her foot between his legs, pleased to feel how hard he was inside his jeans.

'I like you this way,' she said in a voice so quiet it was almost a whisper, 'so well-behaved, so obedient.'

'Ava, please don't,' Stephen mumbled, feeling exposed and utterly at her mercy.

But she only pushed her foot harder against him, noting with interest how he didn't pull away.

'I can't remember the last time I washed my clothes or did any housework,' she told him. 'I don't even remember what the laundry-room looks like. I'm warning you, this could be a quicksand, be careful it doesn't pull you down and down.'

She lifted her foot lazily to his face and watched in fascination as he nuzzled her ankle.

This time his neediness irritated her.

Did he not understand how weak it made him look? How could he expect her to respect him when he gave in to her so easily? Could he really not see how it only made her want to push him deeper into the quicksand? Couldn't he see that he might drown if he didn't stand up to her?

'What if I get to like this so much I never want it to stop?' she asked him. 'Where would you be then, tell me that?'

He gazed up at her with a look almost of wonder in his eyes.

'And what if I didn't stop even if you asked me to?' she said. 'That's frightening, isn't it, but it's sexy too, more than sexy. Do you know what I was thinking about a moment ago?'

'No …'

'I was thinking how much I'm going to miss this when you go back to

work – having you at my beck and call, knowing I can drop my clothes wherever I like and you'll pick them up after me, finding my skirt and blouse pressed and ready for me in the morning, my shoes cleaned and polished, never having to think about cooking or shopping or cleaning.'

Ava stroked his cheek with her foot before pressing her toes over his mouth as if to prevent him from interrupting.

'You can't imagine what that's like for a woman,' she went on, the thoughts coming clear for the first time, 'to be free from drudgery, from the housework she's expected to do without complaint, to have a man willingly do it for her and love her as he does it. Not just love her, adore her. It's a strange and lovely feeling. It could go to a girl's head, believe me it could, and that's why you need to be careful, Stephen. Very, very careful. It makes me feel strong and free, able to stand up for myself at work, give as good as I get when I have to. I'm quite sure I couldn't do that half so well if I had to be your sweet little housewife at home.'

'I'm glad, Ava, I want you to do well.'

'I know you do, but what if I take advantage of you, what if I'm selfish and cruel, and don't let you have your old life back? This has been growing, Stephen, for months and months. More and more I tell you what to do and you just do it. Can't you feel it? There are powers at work here far stronger than you know.'

Stephen could feel it, and a sensation close to fear tingled in his spine.

'If I was you, I'd put a stop to this right now,' Ava warned him gravely. 'You need to stand up to me, or there's no telling what I might do.'

Stephen laughed uneasily, trying to make light of her warning.

'I'm quite serious, Stephen,' she continued, knowing suddenly that the danger he faced was real. 'You can laugh all you like, but it's no laughing matter, believe me. I could get used to this. What's to stop me? I could keep

you all to myself, make you into my obedient little housewife. Can't you see how tempting that is? God, the fun I could have at your expense. I'm only human. I may not have the strength to resist.'

'Stop it, Ava, I'm your husband.'

'Are you?' she said, her quick mind noting how the scorn in her voice made him wince. 'Does a husband kneel at his wife's feet? Does he wash her underwear, and cook her meals while she lazes in the bath or talks on her phone?'

A hard amusement glittered in her eyes as she waited for his reply. 'You can't answer, can you?'

She was right, he had no answer.

'What would your friends and family say if they could see you now?' she went on, 'kneeling on the floor looking up my skirt.'

Stephen started to deny he was doing any such thing, but Ava talked over him.

'You wouldn't want them to see us like this, would you?'

'No.'

'And why not?'

'They might …' he stammered, 'they might think ...'

'What might they think?' she said, 'that you weren't my husband any more, that you'd become some kind of a servant? Honestly, Stephen, do you really think this is how a husband should behave, the man of the house?'

Stephen felt winded, delirious. He could hardly think let alone answer.

'Well, do you?'

Still unable to speak, Stephen just shook his head.

'No, of course it's not how a man should behave,' Ava taunted him, caressing him again with her foot, happy to let him see up her skirt.

It felt wonderful to be 'bad' after having to be 'good' all day, after

having to be so clever and cheerful and hard-working.

‘So, Stephen, are you going to put a stop to this?’ she asked him, ‘are you going to stand up to me?’

‘Ava, please …’

‘Come on, it’s a simple enough question.’

‘You’re lovely, Ava … Lovely.’

‘What kind of answer is that? I’ll ask you again. For your own sake, are you going to put a stop to this, are you going to stand up to me? Well, Stephen, are you?’

He leant his cheek against her knee, and gave no answer.

‘Come on, Stephen, this is your last chance, I won’t ask again.’

He looked up at her imploringly, but looked down again, lost in her imperious beauty, and slowly shook his head.

‘Very well, then,’ she said solemnly, ‘but don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

Pressing her foot hard against him, she told him how it was going to be.

‘You’re my husband, it’s true, and I’m very fond of you, but from now on you’ll be my husband *and* my servant, won’t you?’ she enquired. ‘Well, won’t you?’

‘That wouldn’t be fair,’ he protested.

‘I don’t think fairness has anything to do with it,’ Ava replied. ‘In fact I think the opposite applies here, don’t you?’

Mesmerised by her assurance, he could only listen in silence.

‘Oh no, I don’t think this would be half so much fun if it was fair,’ Ava continued, underlining her point by moving her foot slowly up and down the front of his jeans. ‘Perhaps I should draw up a contract, a contract of employment. I am a lawyer after all. It would be easy enough to do,’ she said, entertaining herself by proclaiming the terms in a grave sounding voice.

‘I, Stephen Mercer, being of sound mind and body, do hereby cede all

rights and property to my wife Ava Carafano, and agree to live as her bounden slave and vassal, and live the rest of my life in devoted service to her comfort and pleasure to the exclusion of my own.'

Ava laughed, enjoying her foolish invention.

She knew full well such a contract was impossible in law, and she half-expected to hear Stephen laugh along with her, but he wasn't laughing. Lost in desire, he was kissing her knees, pushing at the hem of her skirt which had ridden up her thighs and, in that moment, Ava understood that such a contract, while it was impossible in law, could be privately sealed and ratified within a marriage if the contractor only had the will to enforce it.

'You would sign the contract, wouldn't you?' Ava said with growing understanding, 'if I asked you, if I told you to.'

Stephen didn't seem to hear. He was kissing the insides of her thighs now, pushing her skirt higher with his head, like a dog, she thought. Ava took hold of his thick, brown hair and gave a sharp tug. She'd never been rough with him before, and taking control of him like this gave her an exhilarating sense of power.

'You're not listening,' she scolded, looking into his eyes.

'God, Ava, please,' he said, unable to hold her gaze.

'I asked you a question,' she said, tugging his hair again, feeling a wildness between her legs. 'Will you be my servant, Stephen?'

'I want to kiss you.'

'What you want or don't want doesn't matter in the least. What matters is that you answer me. Will you be my slave?'

'Your slave?' he said, shaken by the severity of the word, 'is that what I would be to you?'

'One day perhaps. Who knows?'

'My God, you're serious, aren't you?'

‘Yes, I believe I am,’ she replied, startled to discover that she was entirely serious.

‘Would you still love me?’ The words were out before he could stop them.

‘I really don’t know,’ she laughed, surprised by his question, but pleased at the way it gave her the upper hand, ‘I’ve never had a slave before.’

‘I couldn’t bear it if you didn’t love me.’

‘Well, now, that’s a risk you might have to take,’ she said, the mischief in her smile enslaving his senses.

‘God, Ava, if it makes you happy.’

‘Oh no, Stephen. I’m not letting you away with that. I want to hear you say it. I want to hear how happy it makes you. I want to hear it loud and clear so there can be no mistake, or are you too afraid to admit the truth? I hope you’re not a coward. Are you a coward, Stephen?’

‘No, I’m not.’

Stephen had spoken proudly, and yet he feared he might cry, something he hadn’t done since he was a little boy.

‘I’m very pleased to hear it. And so, since you’re not a coward, I’m going to ask you again. Will you be my slave?’

‘Please stop, Ava, I can’t do this. It’s too much, it makes me ashamed.’

‘Of course it makes you ashamed,’ she told him, her voice suddenly hard and impatient. ‘What do you expect, kneeling at my feet, giving in to my rule? What kind of man lets that happen?’

He groaned, and pressed his forehead against her thigh, but she was enjoying herself too much to relent.

‘Shame is part of the pleasure, isn’t it, Stephen, perhaps the sweetest part?’ She ran her fingers through his hair. ‘You’re not saying anything. That’s because it’s the truth, isn’t it? Oh yes, I think I understand now. I think

I see how this is going to work.'

His heart hammering, Stephen could only bow his head lower in acceptance of her rule.

'So, Stephen, it's time,' she said, speaking gently now, lovingly, careful not to frighten him off, 'it's time for you to give me your answer. Will you be my slave?'

'Yes,' he said quietly, not looking at her.

'You want this?'

'Yes.'

'You agree to be my slave?'

'Yes, Ava, I will, you know I will.'

'Thank-you, Stephen,' she said, hiding her surprise behind an everyday formality. Caught out by his agreement, Ava felt a strong sense of shock and surprise, a feeling akin to vertigo. The dynamic between them had shifted so far and so quickly that she was unable to think of what to do or say next, and so she surrendered to her instincts, enjoying a thrill of elation when she lifted herself up from the chair and slid her tight suit skirt over her hips, brazenly displaying her pretty red panties beneath the smoky nylon of her hose.

Stephen, mad for her now, pushed forward to kiss the heavenly valley between her thighs, but she tugged him again by his hair, making him cry out in pain.

She liked the sound, and gave another tug for good measure.

'If you kiss me there it will be when I say so and not before, do you hear me?'

Ava was surprised at the authority in her voice, and Stephen heard it too, looking up at her pleadingly before dropping his head, unable to look her in the eye.

'I'm going to let go of your hair,' Ava continued, adopting the superior

tone used in meetings by the senior partners, ‘but I’ll be angry if you try to kiss me without permission. Very angry. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Yes, Ava,’ Stephen mumbled, pressing his burning cheek against her leg. She let go of his hair, and took hold of an ear instead, pinching it between her fingernails.

‘Ava?’ she said in a puzzled voice as if she didn’t recognise her own name. ‘Oh, I don’t know about Ava. Since when does a servant call his superior by her first name? That would hardly be right or proper now, would it? It’s just not how it’s done. Only an equal would call me by my christian name, someone I like and respect, someone I’ve welcomed into my home as a friend and equal. A servant or a housemaid on the other hand would have to call me something else altogether, I’m afraid I’m going to have to insist upon it.’

Ava would have laughed out loud at her ridiculous performance if it hadn’t made her feel so strong and alive. And she knew the wrong kind of laughter risked breaking the potent spell they had fallen under, the spell that made her long for his devoted tongue, but she also knew her pleasure would be all the greater if she could only make herself wait a little longer.

‘So what will you call me?’ she asked him. ‘Ava won’t do, will it, not from a servant, a lowly slave? That would be altogether too familiar. There must be a better name, something more appropriate, don’t you think? What would you suggest? I’d like to hear.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Oh, don’t be a slowcoach, Stephen. You’re the English teacher, you’re the one who’s always so good with words. You, of all people, should know what to call me.’

‘I’ve told you, I don’t know,’ he insisted with a show of impatience.

‘Oh, I think you do know,’ she said, irritated by his slowness and

tapping her dainty instep, tap-tap-tap between his legs. ‘Show me again what a big, brave boy you are, prove to me you’re not afraid.’

‘Please, Ava, don’t.’

‘Hurry up, I’m waiting.’

‘Mistress,’ said Stephen.

‘What did you say, I didn’t hear?’ Ava lied, her sharpening instinct for her role telling her that by making him repeat the fearful word she could fan the flames of his submissive desire along with her own deepening arousal.

‘Mistress,’ Stephen said again with tears glistening in his eyes as he gave in to shame and relief in equal measure. He’d never called her this before, but saying the word now as he knelt with his head in her lap took away what pride he had left, leaving him cowed and breathless. Yet, hiding his eyes against her legs, he felt most of all a deep and abiding gratitude for her female authority, and this first truly open demonstration of its power over him.

‘Very good, Stephen,’ Ava said, feeling a doorway finally open to a dark and secret world. ‘That wasn’t so bad, was it? There now, you’ll feel better for saying it, it will help you know your place, and come to accept it more easily. Don’t you feel better already?’

‘Yes.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘It’s the obvious word, I suppose, but it sounds right, doesn’t it, and it feels right, wouldn’t you agree?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘That’s good, Stephen, very good,’ she praised him, ‘and so there we have it. You’re my husband and slave just as I’m your wife and Mistress. I’m so glad we’ve got that settled.’

Once again she nearly burst out laughing, but the need in his eyes made her shift in her chair as she thought again how good it would feel to let him kiss her the way he wanted to.

It made her want to hurry things along a little.

‘So, tell me, Stephen, do you want to kiss your Mistress?’

‘Oh God, yes.’

‘Yes, what?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Mistress Carafano,’ she corrected him.

‘Mistress Carafano,’ Stephen repeated, longing to kiss her yet thrilled by the correction.

He’d always loved the sound of her Italian name, and he hadn’t put up a fight when she kept her maiden name after they married. To call her Ava Mercer would have been to destroy a piece of lovely music. She was Ava Carafano, always would be, for ever and ever. A wife takes her husband’s name, a free woman keeps her own and so, by making him call her by her maiden name, Ava branded her power and independence into Stephen’s soul, deepening his newfound subordination to his wife and Mistress, his bella donna and his padrona, his bella domina, the lovely Ava Carafano.

‘And where do you want to kiss your Mistress?’ Ava enquired, as if it was a matter of only the slightest interest.

‘I want to kiss your panties,’ said Stephen, experiencing a fresh rush of shame in speaking aloud the foolish-sounding word. He pressed himself against her as he made his confession, trying to earth his desperate longing.

Seeing how much just saying the word demeaned him, Ava immediately wanted to make him say it again.

‘My panties?’ said Ava, feigning surprise. ‘Oh well, perhaps all slaves dream of kissing their Mistress’s panties, but if you want my permission you

have to learn to ask politely or not at all.'

Stephen looked up at her, fearful of seeing contempt in her eyes.

Ava knew to keep from smiling, and she wore an expression of the coldest indifference as if she was dealing with a serious matter such as a last will and testament, or a disputed contract of ownership.

She looked so proud and beautiful Stephen's heart missed a beat.

What was this strange hunger that made him long for her contempt, and was that really contempt he saw in her eyes, or was it all just a silly game? Stephen couldn't tell and he looked away in confusion.

'Look at me when I'm speaking to you,' Ava commanded.

When he did as he was told Ava felt a thrill of voluptuous arousal. She smiled and said, 'That's more like it.'

She had been a talented actress at university, a skill that served her well in court, and, like all good actors, she was losing herself in her role, finding a reality that went beyond pretence.

'Now then, Stephen,' she said, 'now that you're looking at me in a suitably respectful and attentive way, you may ask me politely for what you want. Hurry now. I haven't got all day.'

'Please, Mistress Carafano …' His pride reared up and the words stuck in his throat.

'Come on, then. Please what?'

His pride melted in the heat of his desire.

'Please, Mistress Carafano, may I kiss your panties?'

'Very well, Stephen, you may, but only if you kiss them gently, gently.'

The coils of her spell tight around him, Stephen leaned forward and kissed her as he longed to kiss her, smelling the detergent he used to wash her underwear and, beneath that, her alluring woman's scent. Hard against her leg as he kissed her, he felt himself swell and pulse and, for one terrible

moment, he feared he would shame himself completely but, with a huge effort of will, he pulled back just in time.

His kiss was firm yet gentle, respectful and never greedy.

‘That’s good, very good,’ praised Ava, pleased by his devotion and hurrying to take down her hose, freeing only one leg from their flimsy entanglement. ‘Here, now, here,’ she told him eagerly, touching herself through her panties and pulling him to her again, ‘but gently, so gently.’

Obeying her, he kissed her through the lace, her scent stronger now, his tongue pushing the thin lace into the tangle of dark curls so he caught a taste of her at last.

With a sigh of pleasure, she moved her panties aside to let him kiss her nakedness, quickly pulling them back to deny him again. All the time she touched herself around the edge of her panties, pulling his mouth against her only to push it away. Finally, she let his mouth have her, finding a pleasure so strong it was painful, making her want to push him away again, but she hadn’t the will to resist any longer and she abandoned herself to him.

Closing her eyes, she let her head fall back, allowing the pleasure to rise up inside her, and looking forward to a slow and luxurious journey but then, caught out by his impassioned tongue, her senses caught fire and she was coming in his mouth, coming and coming, crying out in joy and surprise, twisting his hair and pulling his mouth against her with all her strength.

‘Enough, now … Enough!’ Ava instructed him breathlessly, getting up from the chair and standing above him on trembling legs. She thought about letting him have her there and then on the rug in front of the stove, but when he put his hand on her thigh she pushed it away and became his stern Mistress again.

‘When I say enough, I mean enough,’ she said imperiously, stepping out of her panties and hose, learning the new joy of denying him after she’d taken

her pleasure.

Stephen reached for her once more, but she stepped back so that he fell forward, his hands coming to rest on the warm, gauzy softness of her discarded underwear.

She continued to undress, unzipping her suit skirt, and letting it slide to the floor. She took off her suit jacket, and then her blouse, adding them to the pile of clothes on the rug before reaching behind her back and unclipping her bra. She smiled down at her kneeling husband, dangling her bra in front of him before draping it over his shoulder.

‘Turn off the stove and get all this tidied up,’ she told him. ‘The skirt needs to be ironed, and wash out my tights by hand, you’ll ladder them if you put them through the machine.’

She knew he always washed her nylons by hand, but it felt good to stand above him and issue instructions so bossily to her slave.

She watched as he obeyed, gathering up her clothes like a sleepwalker, smelling her perfume in them, she was sure, and feeling their warmth from her body.

It excited her to know he must still have her taste in his mouth, and it was strikingly clear just from looking at the front of his jeans how much he still wanted her, but Ava turned and walked away, telling him as she went upstairs, ‘I’m going for a shower. When I come down I’ll expect my meal to be ready. Hurry up, I won’t be long.’

IN A daze, Stephen turned off the stove, and took her clothes to the laundry room, shaken anew by how much it aroused him to obey her.

Ava’s clothes hanging from the pulley brushed against his head as he dropped her red panties and bra into the wash basket, putting her silk blouse

in the delicates pile, and draping her hose over the edge of the sink ready to be hand-washed.

Her little suit jacket he put on a wooden hanger which he hung from the pulley above his head, and he laid its matching skirt over the ironing-board where he would iron it later as instructed, not by his wife and equal, but by his Mistress, Ava Carafano.

Looking up at her pretty clothes on the pulley, he understood that what Ava had said was true. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen her in the laundry room. Somehow, without him really noticing, the laundry and ironing, as well as all the other housework, had become his sole responsibility.

He felt overwhelmed by what had happened in the short time since her return home that evening, by how quickly she had taken her control of him to this new and unimagined level.

To be her house-husband for a few months was one thing, but to become her slave, and to agree to such a shameful demotion, was something else altogether. It was a fearful occurrence yet tendrils of arousal reached to every part of him.

He shook his head as if to clear his brain. It hardly seemed possible that so much could have happened so quickly, and yet he knew a profound sea-change had taken place in his marriage that evening. Many months of slowly mounting pressure had finally breached his defences, sweeping away his resistance. What had lain hidden in the shadows now stood in the sunlight where it could be denied no longer. Ava had openly shown the sensual dominance he'd always sensed in her, and he felt both fear and excitement at what the future may hold. All his instincts told him he was at Ava's mercy now, and the knowledge awoke in him a twisted and deeply pleasurable dread for he knew in his heart he longed for Ava to show him no mercy.

None at all.

His cock had softened and now hung full and heavy against his thigh, and yet it felt more deeply awake and aroused than it ever did when erect. Perhaps it too, he reflected, was bowing to her grace and beauty.

He shivered in apprehension as a dream he'd had several nights before suddenly filled his head.

He and Ava were passing through an airport in a foreign country. He was carrying a heavy suitcase in each hand while Ava strode ahead, a proud marchesa in a long overcoat and high-heeled shoes. She passed quickly through customs but when it came to his turn there was a problem with his passport. The customs officers spoke angrily to him in a language he couldn't understand. Ava turned back and spoke impatiently in Italian to the officers. He felt a warm glow of trust and love, sure that his lovely wife would solve the problem, and he'd be allowed to pass, but when Ava turned and smiled at him he saw the knowing sparkle in her eyes, and he knew she wasn't going to help him.

As he was led away, he heard her talking and laughing with the handsome young officers.

Later in his dream, he found himself naked in a cell, utterly lost and bereft without Ava. He heard his voice calling out her name, as if his heart was calling to her.

He heard first the sound of her laughter amidst deep male voices and then the sensual click-clack of her heels against the hard stone floor. When at last he saw her walking towards him, her grace and beauty took his breath away.

She came slowly to the bars of his cell. 'I'm going now, Stephen,' she told him in a bored voice.

'No!' he replied, angered yet thrilled by her indifference.

‘Yes, I’m going to the hotel.’

Smiling at him, she opened her long overcoat and began to pull up her elegant dress, revealing the lacy hem of a cream underskirt just above her knees. The sight of it made him feel faint and he fell to his knees by the bars, gazing yearningly as she slid her dress and slip higher and higher until they slithered above her hips.

She was naked beneath her slip, and he pressed his face against the bars in his attempts to reach her, but she remained just out of reach.

‘Please, Ava,’ he pleaded, ‘you can’t leave me here.’

‘I can.’

‘No.’

‘Yes.’

‘You can’t!’

‘I’m going now, Stephen.’

‘No, Ava, please.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ she replied, ’you can’t expect me to wait in a place like this. Of course you can’t.’

‘Please, Ava, you have to help me.’

‘I’m going, Stephen, I’m leaving.’

He started to protest but she moved a step closer so that he could kiss her through the bars.

‘Schiavo,’ he heard her say under her breath, ‘schiavo di Ava.’

The cell bars hurt his face as he pushed against them, worshipping her nakedness, glorying in the taste and scent of her.

‘I’m feeling sleepy after our flight,’ she said, swaying her hips slowly from side to side, the soft lace of her slip brushing against his forehead. ‘When I get to the hotel I’ll take off my dress and have a little lie-down. When I wake I’ll take a bath, and get dressed and go down to dinner. I’ll

wear the pretty underwear you bought for me. And then I'll go out to a party. Which one, I'm not sure, I have so many invitations.'

He wanted to shout at her, give vent to his fury, but he couldn't take his mouth from her, and he worshipped adoringly as she ran her fingers through his hair, and made her farewells.

'Ciao, Stephano,' she said, a smile in her voice. 'I'm going now.'

Tears stung his eyes and grief swelled in his throat, but he licked harder and deeper, longing to make her stay. He felt a shiver of pleasure pass through her, and then she stepped back and slid her dress and slip down over her hips, tugging them impatiently into place.

'Don't go, Ava,' he begged. 'Don't leave me.'

But she was already walking away, giving a lazy little wave over her shoulder as she went.

He called after her, clutching the bars of his prison as he called her name, but she kept walking, never once looking back at his helpless, kneeling form.

Just as she was about to vanish from view she began to whistle a slow tune that tugged at his memory, and once more he heard the sound of deep male voices.

It was then that he'd woken from his dream to find Ava sleeping softly by his side. He lay beside her, listening to her breathing. Tormented by desire, he couldn't get back to sleep. He rose from their bed, careful not to wake Ava, and went into the adjoining shower-room.

Dawn's first light was breaking and outside the birds had begun to sing. Everything in the room inflamed his desire – her little dress and slip hanging from the hook on the door, her pretty shoes lying beneath the sink, even her hairbrush and bottles of make-up and scent on the ledge under the window. And then his eyes fell on her balled-up panties and hose draped over the edge

of the laundry basket. Unable to stop himself, he took up the soft bundle and held it to his nose. The smell of her sent a shockwave through his senses. It was a heavenly scent, the same glorious scent he remembered from kissing her through the bars in his dream. He closed his eyes and began to pleasure himself. As images from his dream flashed through his brain, he came in her panties and hose with a ferocity that shook him and left him weak at the knees.

Standing in the laundry-room beneath her dangling clothes and underwear, the memory of his dream, and the way Ava had taken charge of him earlier that evening, prompted an anxious anticipation in the pit of his stomach as if he was about to run a race against a powerful enemy, a race he knew he was bound to lose no matter how hard and fast he ran. He couldn’t stop himself from reaching out and touching her hose, lifting them, wondering at their softness, their miraculous, airy weightlessness.

He longed to wash them for her there and then, lean over the sink and gently soap the delicate nylon but, mindful of her warning to be quick, he forced himself back to the kitchen where he could serve her more pressing needs as her chef.

TWO

‘Why should I stay with a man who has no pride,’ she asked, a devil’s glint in her eyes, ‘where’s the fun in that?’

AS HE prepared their meal Stephen thought how Ava had never shown much interest in food. She’d worked too many long days and nights in her father’s restaurant, Stephen imagined, but in recent months he’d begun to take a keener than usual interest in what she ate.

He’d noticed she’d lost weight since starting her new job. Her dress size had fallen from a medium to a small, in some instances to an extra small. She always looked elegant and healthy, coltish rather than thin, but he worried when she took nothing for breakfast except coffee and when she spoke about having no time at work to take lunch, and so he did what he could by cooking her favourite meals in the evenings.

He enjoyed cooking for her. He loved her and wanted her to be strong and healthy.

He set the table for two, placing a baguette beside the flowers and the open bottle of wine, and then quickly preparing a salad and a vinaigrette dressing from Dijon mustard and freshly chopped garlic, olive oil and balsamic vinegar with a pinch or two of sugar. It was the way Ava liked it, and he wondered at how even preparing food for her could put him under her spell.

Stirring the gently braising lamb, Stephen had a sudden, vivid memory of standing in a different kitchen beside another young woman who had

captivated him, body and soul.

JULIE BUCHAN had come into his life in his first term studying English Literature at York University. They were in the same tutorial group for Modern British and Irish Drama. At first, painfully shy and dressed in an old-fashioned tweed skirt with a blouse and cardigan, she had seemed like one more poor little rich girl. Yet, whenever the tutor asked her a direct question, she would answer with unusual sharpness and intelligence.

She was by some distance the cleverest student in the group, and the only one of them to get straight A grades for her essays on Beckett, O'Casey and Pinter. Stephen's grades were almost as good, and they formed a bond as the clever ones in the group.

They went to the cinema on three occasions, as friends only, without either of them under any illusions they were on a date. And then, one night after a party, Julie took Stephen back to her room and slept with him.

They did everything except make love, and Stephen remembered how happy he felt waking up in the morning with his arms around her. He felt sure they would become lovers when the time was right and, although he remained a virgin, he was happy to wait.

It was the last week of term, and Stephen had accepted Julie's invitation to visit her parents' home in Perth during the holidays when, without any warning, she ended their relationship.

She took the coward's way out, slipping a note under his door.

'Dear Stephen,' the note read, 'you know how fond I am of you, but I can't see you any more. I should have told you – there is someone else in my life. I know I've been cruel and selfish, and I hate to hurt you, but it's kinder to end things now. Please try to forgive me, and think of me kindly if you

can. Your friend, Julie.’

He went straight to her hall of residence. She wasn’t in her room and he waited outside for over an hour until he saw her approach the hall arm-in-arm with a tall, dark-haired young man.

They stopped to kiss before going into the halls.

Watching his unknown rival wrap his arms so possessively around Julie caused Stephen to experience a peculiar drowning sensation that left him weak and breathless. Fearing he might faint, he leaned against the cold brickwork of the residence wall. Tormented by jealousy, he gave up his plan to confront her. He went back to his room instead, and drank a six-pack of beer. In the morning after a drunken, sleepless night, he packed up his rucksack and took the early train home to Norwich.

SHE PHONED him in the week after Christmas.

Full of hurt pride, Stephen was short with her, but his heart opened at the sound of her voice and, when she asked him to travel up to Scotland for New Year, he accepted her invitation, keeping his manner cool as if it made little difference to him whether he saw her again or not.

In the morning his mother drove him to Peterborough to catch the train North. She seemed happy and proud that Stephen was going to visit a girl, smiling knowingly when he described Julie as ‘only a friend’.

The train was packed and running late, and Stephen spent the endless journey sitting on the floor between carriages. Heavy snow began to fall as the train passed Berwick and at Edinburgh the connecting train to Perth was delayed for two hours due to the weather.

When the train pulled into Perth station it was well after eight o’clock and Stephen’s heart skipped a beat when he saw Julie waiting for him on the

platform, stamping her feet against the cold.

She was wearing her old sheepskin jacket with one of her tight tweed skirts and a pair of knee-high boots, like a girl from the 1960s. As soon as he stepped down from the train she threw her arms around him. Her kiss was warm and eager, and her hair smelled of snow and cold, clear air.

‘It’s so good to see you,’ she said, kissing him again and taking him by the hand. ‘I’m glad you’ve come,’ she told him, squeezing his hand. ‘I’ve missed you and missed you.’

She led him out to an old estate car waiting in the snowbound car park. As he got into the car a friendly retriever in the back seat called Lucky licked his ear in welcome and Stephen felt instantly at home. Julie drove skilfully in the snow, overtaking stranded vehicles and gunning the heavy car up any icy inclines, taking care not to come to a halt on the treacherous slopes. She kept looking over at him as she drove and, even in the dim light, Stephen could see the shy sparkle in her eyes. She was as lovely as he remembered and he felt a mounting sexual excitement.

After negotiating the town centre and crossing the bridge over the Tay river, Julie turned into a street of detached Georgian town-houses, and drove through a gate and parked in front of an imposing mansion-house. She turned off the engine and immediately leaned across to kiss him, putting her hand on the front of his jeans and smiling as she felt him harden under her touch.

‘I love it when you do that,’ she said before kissing him again.

Stephen had never known her be this forward. She took his hand and put it on her knee beneath her skirt and the lacy hem of a slip. Impatient with his shyness, she guided his hand over her smooth hose to the tops of her thighs and placed it on her panties, holding it there, pressing his fingers against her so that he could feel her warmth through her underwear.

‘This is for you,’ she whispered, parting her legs a little and pushing

down against his hand, ‘it’s all for you.’

And then, with a mischievous smile, she broke away and got out of the car, letting out the dog from the back seat, and hoisting out Stephen’s rucksack.

AS THEY stood in the porch shaking the snow from their hair and clothes, Julie’s parents came to welcome Stephen.

Her mother, a smiling, sleepy-eyed woman, took his coat and made small talk about the weather and his journey. Her father, tall and gaunt with white hair and jazzy beard and a cigarette in his hand, was surprisingly old, well over sixty. Stephen remembered Julie telling him he was a successful and well-known architect. He shook Stephen by the hand and muttered in a warm voice, ‘Look out for ghosts and falling masonry.’ Or at least that’s what Stephen thought he heard for, before he could say anything in reply, Julie pulled him across the hall towards the staircase with what felt like indecent haste. He heard her mother shout something after Julie about making sure Stephen got a hot meal and about her and her father going out that evening to visit friends, the Kirkpatricks.

‘Enjoy yourselves,’ Julie called back from the stairs, ‘I’m just going to show him his room.’

Laughing like children, they ran up the long stairway to a cavernous hallway where Julie pushed him through one of the many doors into a huge, untidy bedroom strewn with books and clothes.

They never made it to the bed.

Unzipping and kicking off her boots, Julie reached under her skirt and peeled off her underwear. Then, kissing him hungrily and undoing his shirt and tugging it from his jeans, she unfastened the buckle of his belt and pulled

down his jeans and underpants. Still kissing him, she pushed him onto a small sofa, and sat astride him, her skirt and slip riding up around her waist.

‘I want this,’ she said, reaching up to pull her soft jumper over her head. She wasn’t wearing a bra and the lacy top of her white slip couldn’t hold her full breasts. She smiled down at him as the thin straps fell from her shoulders. Sweet-smelling locks of her auburn hair trailed over her breasts and he took stray strands, quickly dampened with his saliva, into his mouth along with her heavenly breasts.

‘Now,’ she urged him, ‘please, now.’

She bore down on him, dying to take him inside her but he was too hard, his cock rearing up flat against his stomach. He felt her sweet wetness search for him and for one glorious moment he was sure he was about to slide inside her, but he slipped free, and slapped back against his stomach. Julie moaned in frustration and pressed down on him again, trapping him exquisitely beneath her, and kissing him as if she would never let him go. He pulsed against her, and he knew with a terrible certainty that his quickening pleasure would overwhelm him. He tried to lift her but she clung to him remorselessly, and when she moved to find him again he looked down only to glimpse her cunt framed by her slender thighs and the lacy hem of her underskirt. The sight inflamed him beyond endurance and, when once more he slipped free and she pressed down on him, he began to pulse helplessly against her, surrendering to a shattering, shaming climax.

His pleasure was exquisite, but it came with a deep feeling of anguish and even before his crisis had passed he was whispering, ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ into her ear. But she didn’t seem to hear. Still in the throes of her own desire, she ground against him, reaching down to finger herself as she kissed him, moaning into his mouth. Stephen felt her body tense, and for a few moments he thought she would find the release she craved, but then she

stopped kissing him, and collapsed on top of him with an animal groan of distress.

Stephen felt miserable but Julie quickly recovered, lifting her head from his shoulder and saying, ‘Look at the state of you.’ She pointed to his chest where pearls of semen had jetted onto his pale skin. ‘How much of it there is,‘ she said, following the trail down to the sticky pool that had gathered above his belly button. Stephen felt moved by her kindness. He knew she had praised his virility to make him forget his lack of manly control.

‘I’m sorry, Julie,’ he said again.

‘Don’t be silly,’ she said, getting to her feet. ‘There’s nothing to be sorry for. It’s lovely to have that effect on a man. I hope you always feel that way about me.’

She stepped out of her skirt and, shrugging off her underskirt, used it as a silky cloth to wipe his chest and stomach before tossing it onto an overflowing laundry basket. She knelt and untied his boots and tugged off his jeans and underpants and then pulled him to his feet and took off his shirt. ‘This way,’ she said, leading him by the hand towards the door and out into the hallway.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Stephen anxiously, fearful of going naked in a strange house. ‘Don’t worry,’ Julie told him, ‘my parents haven’t come upstairs since I was twelve. They wouldn’t dare. Up here’s a foreign country to them.’

IN THE dark hallway, silhouetted against the hall window and the swirling snow outside the glass, she seemed spectral, more than human. Stephen shivered as Julie laughed and ran her fingers down the goosebumps on his arm.

‘Come on,’ she said, ‘before you freeze to death.’

She let go of his hand and took hold of his dangling cock, her touch warm and oddly comforting as she led him across the hallway.

‘All the time I was growing up, I dreamed of having a boy up here with me like this,’ she whispered, ‘and now you’re here at last, my dream-boy, my ghost-boy.’

She kissed him, and led him into a bathroom where an ancient bathtub stood on a set of carved lion’s paws. Julie apologised for the freezing temperature, explaining that there was no central heating in the upstairs part of the house, only gas fires in each bedroom, most of them deathtraps, but when she ran the bath the room quickly grew warmer as it filled with steam from the roaring taps. She sat on the wooden toilet seat and had a pee, leaning her chin on her hands and laughing when he looked away in embarrassment. ‘In you get,’ she told him, standing and wrapping a towel under her arms, ‘I’ll be back in a minute.’

She left Stephen to inch his way into the scalding bath water. He lay back while the taps still roared and, when the bath was almost full, he let the cold tap run on its own for a few moments until the water became almost bearable. He closed his eyes, suddenly weary to his bones after his long journey and Julie’s advances. The bath felt wonderful, but a lingering sense of regret and disappointment settled on his shoulder like a black crow. If only he’d found a way to control himself, if only he’d been able to make love to her completely, the way they’d both wanted, then how lovely the bath would feel now, a celebration of his loss of virginity, and his love for Julie.

Stephen lay alone with his dark thoughts until Julie returned with two long glasses. ‘Welcome to Scotland,’ she told him, ice cubes clinking in the glass as she handed him his drink.

‘What is it?’ he asked, peering at the clear liquid, ‘it’s not whisky.’

‘Of course it’s not, it’s gin and tonic, you idiot,’ she said, stepping into the bath beside him, ‘made to my mother’s recipe with a fresh lime rubbed round the rim, a slice of lemon and plenty of gin and ice.’

‘This is what my parents drink when they go to the theatre,’ said Stephen suspiciously. He drank mainly beer and had never liked the idea of gin.

‘Oh shut up, and get it down you,’ said Julie.

He took a drink and his eyes widened in surprise.

‘My God, that’s lovely,’ he said, finding the sharp flavour delicious.

‘Of course it is. Just you listen to your Auntie Julie and you won’t go wrong,’ she said, adopting an exaggerated Scottish accent that wasn’t her own. Stephen laughed, thinking the voice friendly and likeable.

They lay back with their legs entwined, sipping their drinks and talking about how bored they’d been in their holidays, and about the films they’d seen and the books they’d read. Julie was reading ‘The Good Soldier’ by Ford Maddox Ford which Stephen had never heard of. ‘It’s only the best book ever written,’ Julie informed him, ‘even better than Faulkner because it’s clearer and not so difficult to follow.’

Stephen hadn’t read Faulkner either, but at least he’d heard his books were difficult which allowed him to nod in wise agreement. Suddenly, and without warning, Julie put down her drink and ducked under the water, and then knelt up and began shampooing her hair. She leant in close to him, saying, ‘You can help if you want.’

He joined his hands with hers in the soapy tangles, helping her work up a creamy lather, and trying not to stare at her lovely breasts. She ducked back under the water, rinsing away the shampoo and, when she surfaced, she kissed him through the streaming water and said, ‘Now, there’s something we have to talk about, isn’t there?’

‘Is there?’ said Stephen, feigning ignorance.

‘Oh well, if you’re going to be like that,’ she said, making him gasp as she reached under the water and took hold of his cock which had grown hard again.

‘His name’s Robbie Gilchrist,’ she told him with a serious look, and with her hand still caressing him under the soapy water.

‘Who’s Robbie Gilchrist?’ Stephen asked, not wanting to hear.

‘You know perfectly well who he is,’ she replied, letting go of him, ‘so keep quiet and listen.’

She’d made it clear a serious intent lay beneath her playful manner, and Stephen did as he was told.

‘He was my first boyfriend,’ she told him, ‘my first love, but what he is now, I’ve no idea. I don’t think there’s a word for it. He’s from Perth too, his family’s house is only a few streets away. We’ve known each other since our first day at primary school. We kissed by the swings in the park when we were twelve, had our first date in the Station Café a year later and became lovers when we were fifteen. We’ve been lovers ever since. When we were sent away to boarding schools we could only see each other in the holidays which just made the fires burn all the brighter. God, the letters we wrote.’

She stroked his cheek tenderly. ‘I never meant to hurt you, Stephen, please believe me,’ she told him. ‘We ended it this summer when we went to different universities. He’s in love with a girl he met at Cambridge, and I’ve met you, but somehow we can’t leave each other alone.’

‘Somehow?’

‘I don’t know how to explain it.’

‘You’re still seeing him.’

‘Officially, no.’

‘And unofficially?’

‘Sometimes, unofficially, yes.’

‘Is he here now? In Perth?’

‘Yes, he is. He’s asked me to go to the Hogmanay party in Edinburgh tomorrow night.

‘What about his girlfriend?’

‘She’s with her family in England. But don’t worry, he’s going to Edinburgh with friends, and I’m going to a party here in Perth – with you.’

‘It’s over, then,’ he said, a gratifying sense of relief flooding through him.

‘It’s been over since summer, it’s just that we don’t always seem to know it,’ she said, looking at him with a wary look in her eyes. ‘First tries at sex are supposed to be clumsy and unsatisfying but ours never were. It felt good right from the start, the way it’s supposed to in silly romantic books. And now, well, we can tell ourselves it’s over as much as we like but sometimes our bodies do what they want without asking our opinion in the matter. I know it sounds crazy, but that’s the only way I can explain it.’

‘So, it’s all Darwin’s fault.’

‘Something like that, yes,’ she said, grateful for his intelligence and wit.

‘I saw him, you know. After I got your letter, I came over to find you, and I saw you kissing him.’

‘I didn’t know,’ she said, her eyes gentle with sorrow. ‘I’m so sorry, Stephen. That must have been horrible. Did it hurt very much?’

Stephen tried to speak but to his horror tears came into his eyes and he could only nod his head.

‘Oh, don’t cry, my little honey-bee,’ she told him. ‘I’m here now, I’m here,’ she said, pulling his head into her breasts and kissing the top of his head. ‘You’re the one I really want,’ she whispered, pushing his head back and rubbing his face with a soapy sponge to tease away his pain.

‘Promise me, no more tears,’ she said as if he was a child. ‘Let me hear you.’

‘No more tears,’ he said, ashamed of how comforted he felt by her mothering.

‘Promise me.’

‘I promise.’

‘That’s the way, you be a brave soldier for your Auntie Julie.’

Stephen couldn’t help but laugh through his foolish tears.

‘But look at you,’ she said, gazing at him tenderly. ‘You’re the sweetest boy I’ve ever known, crying for your girl. And look at your hair, it’s like an angel’s.’

Stephen‘s thick, curly hair darkened as he grew older but as a young man it was the colour of straw.

‘And look at your mouth, the way it curves,’ she said, kissing the corner of his mouth and rubbing her nose against his nose in an eskimo’s kiss, ‘and your eye-lashes and your lovely eyes and smooth skin. You’re lovely, Stephen, as pretty as any girl, except for this big thing sticking up down here.’

A look of mischief came back into her eyes as she reached under the water to grip him again. ‘But I suppose it’s pretty enough in its own way.’

‘I don’t want to be pretty,’ Stephen protested.

Girls had called him pretty before and it wasn’t something he was proud of.

‘Well, what do you want to be?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘Handsome, I suppose, anything but pretty.’

‘Well, that just shows you can’t always have what you want,’ she laughed, her tongue flickering in his mouth as she kissed him, and her fingers giving a welcoming squeeze as she felt him swell in her hand. Stephen pulled

her close so she had to put her arms around his neck, her knees fitting easily on either side of him in the wide tub, and her cunt brushing silkily against his cock.

‘Oh, God,’ he whispered, ’please, Julie.’

‘Like this?’ she asked, grinning as she pushed down on him before pulling away to make him crazy for her.

‘Come back,’ he begged, thrusting up to find her.

She pressed down on him again, holding him flat against his stomach before sliding slowly up his length until the tip of his cock pushed delightfully against her.

Stephen groaned and closed his eyes in anticipation of the heaven to come.

And then she was gone, standing in a cascade of water and stepping nimbly out of the bath.

‘Julie, what are you doing?’

‘What does it look like I’m doing?’ she said, mischief dancing in her eyes as she dried herself with a big, blue bath towel.

‘You can’t leave me like this.’

‘I can’t think of a better way to leave you.’

‘Julie, for God’s sake,’ he pleaded.

‘Maybe when you’re older,’ she teased him, wrapping the towel around her head like a turban.

‘Don’t be stupid,’ he said, ‘I’m six months older than you.’

‘Ah, yes,’ she replied, ‘but I’m an old soul.’

‘This is crazy,’ Stephen complained, smiling in spite of himself.

‘It’s not crazy,’ she said, kneeling by the side of the bath and regarding him warmly with her lovely, steady eyes. ‘I’m not sure angels should be allowed to make love like ordinary men. Maybe they should stay boys

forever. Maybe that's what makes them angels.'

'I'll go mad, Julie, I will.'

'That's all right, I'll come and visit you in the asylum,' she whispered conspiringly, 'I'll wear the shortest little skirt I can find, and I'll walk out into the gardens with you, find a place where the nurses can't see us.' She pointed to a garment hanging from a hook on the door. 'You can borrow my dressing-gown if you want,' she told him as she left the bathroom, letting in a gust of freezing cold air, 'and then come downstairs and I'll cook you something to eat.'

He got out of the bath to discover she'd taken the only bath towel with her. Cursing, he dried himself as well as he could with a rough little hand-towel not much bigger than a face-cloth, and when he took her dressing-gown from the door-hook he discovered it was a silk kimono, short and flimsy, decorated with a pattern of pink and red flowers.

He wasn't going to wear that, not in a million years, and he strode naked into the hallway. The freezing air against his damp skin made him gasp, and he ran across the hall to Julie's room where he stood in front of the gas fire, shivering and drying off the wet patches the little towel hadn't reached.

Still shivering, he looked round the room for his clothes but they were nowhere to be seen. He searched under the bed, down the back of the sofa, even in Julie's laundry basket where her underskirt lay curled on top of the pile, a reminder of her elegance and grace as well as his failure as a lover.

It wasn't possible but his clothes and boots had vanished. He went to the doorway and called out, 'Julie, where are my clothes? I can't find them,' but his voice didn't carry in the huge house and, when there was no reply, he felt the helplessness a ghost must feel. It was a strangely arousing feeling, as if his old existence had come to an end and his new life taken on the shape and substance of a dream. He went back into the bathroom and put on her little

kimono which felt soft against his skin and came only a little way down his thighs.

As he descended the stairs he tried to remember what he'd done with his rucksack. He recalled Julie taking it in from the car, but he was sure she hadn't brought it upstairs. She must have put it down in the porch when they arrived, and he walked past the kitchen doorway to search the porch, but there was no sign of his rucksack or his overcoat among the jumble of umbrellas and hiking-boots.

Stephen was shocked to discover that some part of him was happy not to find them.

JULIE COULDN'T help but laugh when Stephen came into the kitchen. He looked so lost and vulnerable in her pretty wide-sleeved kimono, clutching it tightly to preserve his modesty, and looking round in fear that other people might be present.

'It's all right,' Julie assured him, 'Mum and Dad have gone out. They usually stay the night, and my sister's in Dublin with her new boyfriend, so it's just you and me.'

The kitchen was gloriously warm with the heat from the range. Julie, wearing only a short black slip, stood barefoot at the cooker, her head still turbanned in the blue bath-towel. She was frying potatoes, and the delicious aroma cut through Stephen's anxiety and woke his appetite.

'Come on, make yourself useful,' she said, indicating a chopping-board on the counter beside her. He stood by her side and began chopping mushrooms and rashers of bacon while she whisked eggs in a bowl.

'Julie?' he said in a measured voice.

'Yes, dear?' she answered, his wife of many years.

‘Where are my clothes?’

‘Your clothes? Why, dear, can’t you find them?’

‘No, Julie, I can’t find them.’

‘How very strange. What can possibly have happened to them?’

‘This has gone far enough. Where are they?’

‘I refuse to answer on the grounds that anything I say might incriminate me.’

‘For God’s sake … Then where’s my rucksack?’

‘Your rucksack?’

‘Yes, my rucksack. You brought it in from the car.’

‘Did I?’ she said, smiling as she took his chopping-board and tipped the bacon and mushrooms into another frying-pan where they began to sizzle loudly.

‘You’ve put it somewhere, haven’t you? You’ve hidden it?’

‘Honestly, Stephen, you must think I’m a very strange kind of girl. Why would I do a thing like that?’

‘How would I know? Because you think it’s funny, because you like to make me look like a fool.’

‘You don’t look like a fool at all. I think you look very sweet,’ she said, putting her hand on the curve of his hip and rubbing the soft material against his skin. ‘And it’s such a lovely feeling to have you as my prisoner.’

The twinkle in her eyes thrilled him, but he pretended to be above such nonsense.

‘My rucksack, Julie. Tell me where you’ve hidden it?’

‘I will, Stephen, of course I will,’ she said, leaning in close, her breath caressing his face, ‘but not until I’ve spoken to my lawyer.’

‘Come on,’ he said in his firmest voice, ‘I really have had enough.’

‘Well, someone seems to be liking it,’ she said, glancing down at his

erection jutting lewdly from the folds of his gown. Hot oil spat from the frying food and Julie tucked him safely back inside the silky material, saying, ‘Careful now, unless you want to end up in the burns unit at the infirmary.’

Struggling to keep her face straight, she kissed him on the tip of his nose, and then added the whisked eggs to the bacon and mushrooms.

What she’d said was true, Stephen reflected, he was liking this. He felt deeply vulnerable without his clothes and possessions, but it felt undeniably sexy to be so exposed and in her power. A dream of flying.

‘Don’t look so worried,’ she told him, tipping the huge omelette onto a plate and matching it with a heaped mound of crispy fried potatoes.

‘Come on then, if you’re hungry,’ she said, carrying the plate to the table.

‘Aren’t you having any?’ Stephen asked, giving in for now and sitting hungrily to his meal.

‘I’ve already eaten. We couldn’t wait when your train was late, I hope you don’t mind.’

‘No, not at all,’ said Stephen, surprised to be holding a normal conversation under such strange circumstances.

As he wolfed the delicious food, Julie brought him a bottle of lager from the fridge and put it down by his plate. She pulled up a chair and sat companionably by his side, taking the towel from her head and rubbing her long hair with it. Every now and then she stole a fried potato from his plate, and took a sip of his beer, and Stephen stole a glance at the pretty lace hem of her slip stretched across her thighs.

To his amazement, Stephen couldn’t remember ever feeling happier. Julie may have played the fool and stolen his clothes but her warmth and mischief had created a sensual bond between them. It felt good to be with her, and he was glad he’d made the long trip to Scotland.

And then the telephone rang.

As soon as she answered it the warmth and humour vanished from her eyes.

‘Why?’ he heard her ask frostily, followed by ‘that’s not what we agreed,’ and ‘I just don’t think it’s a good idea, that’s why.’

Stephen knew immediately who it must be but when he put down his fork and frowned at her she waved him away impatiently, and took the phone out into the hall.

He felt a sharp stab of jealousy but he made himself finish his meal, and then he sat drinking beer, struggling to compose himself and decide what to do.

When ten minutes went by and she still hadn’t returned he wandered out into the hallway, catching sight of himself in a tall mirror. He looked so sensual and wanton in her pretty kimono he barely recognised himself.

There was no sign of Julie, but he heard her voice from one of the living-rooms. He thought about listening at the door but he wouldn’t stoop to spying, and he went back into the kitchen where he knelt by old Lucky who was dozing peacefully in front of the range. Stephen scratched Lucky’s ears and was rewarded with a sleepy tail-wag. Still scratching the dog’s ears, he asked Lucky if he knew the whereabouts of his rucksack, or if he could explain why being human was such a strange and difficult business.

Lucky rolled over and let Stephen rub his tummy. His simple companionship eased Stephen’s anxiety, but when Julie came back into the kitchen her manner was brisk, and she wouldn’t look him in the eye.

‘It was him, of course it was him,’ she said in an aggrieved voice. ‘The savage is lonely, he’s upset, he needs to talk.’

‘Did you tell him I’m here?’

‘I didn’t have to tell him. He knows you’re here.’

‘Then why’s he phoning you?’

‘Why do you think? To hurt me, to make things difficult. He can’t believe I’m actually seeing someone else. It’s perfectly all right for him to see other women but if I so much as look at someone else he becomes angry and jealous. God, sometimes I’d like to …’

She made a fist and shook it to show just what she’d like to do.

‘So what did he want?’

‘To tell me I’m going to Edinburgh with him tomorrow.’

‘Tell you?’

‘Yes. When asking doesn’t work, he gives orders like he’s my lord and master.’

‘And what am I supposed to do?’

‘He couldn’t care less about you. He only cares about himself.’

‘You’re not going, I hope you told him that.’

‘Of course I did, don’t be stupid. I’m not going anywhere with him. I’m staying here with you, but I said I’d go over tonight, talk to him before he leaves.’

‘For God’s sake, Julie,’ said Stephen, suddenly feeling weak and helpless.

‘It was either that or he’d come here. I wouldn’t have been able to stop him.’

‘He can come if he likes. I’m not scared of him.’

‘I know you’re not,’ she said, placing her hand soothingly on his arm, ‘but we get angry and shout the place down. You’re my guest. You shouldn’t have to put up with that.’

‘Then I’ll come with you.’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘It would only cause trouble.’

‘I don’t care, I’m coming with you.’

‘You can’t.’

‘Why not?’ he asked again.

‘You don’t have any clothes,’ she said, giggling as she ran from the kitchen, calling as she went, ‘but as a special prize, you can help me choose mine.’

WHEN STEPHEN caught up with her in her bedroom she was already sitting at the dressing-table blow-drying her hair. She looked at him in the mirror and, clicking off the drier, said, ‘Go on, then, find me something to wear,’ clicking the drier back on before he had time to reply.

Suddenly very angry, Stephen switched the drier off at the wall and spoke sharply.

‘You can’t expect me to put up with this. What’s going on here, Julie?’

‘Nothing’s going on,’ she said, not looking at him as she brushed her long, shining hair.

‘I need to know.’

‘There’s nothing to know.’

‘This isn’t right. You’re staying here with me,’ Stephen insisted.

‘Oh, come on, Stephen, don’t be difficult,’ she said, finding his eyes in the mirror as she forced her brush through a tangle in her hair. ‘I’m only going to talk to him, and the quicker I get there, the quicker I’ll get back.’

She rose to her feet and walked towards him.

Her grace and beauty were magnificent, and Stephen felt a tightness in his chest as if the air had been sucked from the room. She kissed him, then undid the tie of his kimono, pulling it open and pushing it over his shoulders

so that it slipped silently to the floor. Smiling at his arousal, she grazed her body against his nakedness. He felt her heat through the thin material of her slip.

‘You’re lovely,’ he whispered, burned by her beauty.

‘And these,’ she said, shrugging the thin straps of her slip from her shoulders to uncover her breasts, ‘You can kiss them if you like.’

Stephen’s brain swam as he bent to kiss her lovely breasts.

‘And here, Stephen,’ she said, lifting the lacy hem of her slip and putting her hand between her legs, ‘you can kiss me here too, if you like, just a little kiss before I go. A kiss to remember me by.’

Naked before her, and powerless to resist, Stephen sank to his knees and pressed his mouth to her glistening sex. Her womanly scent invaded his senses, and he closed his eyes and pushed his tongue inside her. She shivered and gave a sigh of pleasure and for a few moments Stephen was possessed by a bliss such as he had never known, but then she stepped away, leaving him lost in the memory of her, as was her way.

‘That’s lovely, Stephen,’ she said, going back to her dressing-table, ‘but don’t send me to Robbie Gilchrist with sex on my mind.’

Stephen knelt where he was, drowning, unable to move.

‘Come on then, hop to it,’ she laughed, ‘and find me some clothes, unless you want me to wear nothing under my coat like Venus in Furs.’

Entranced, Stephen got slowly to his feet and looked around her bedroom. There were clothes lying everywhere – on the floor, the bed, on chairs as well as hanging in an open wardrobe. He picked up a dress from the end of the bed to discover that it wasn’t a dress at all but a flimsy lace night-dress. He dropped it back onto the bed and looked into the open wardrobe. He ran his hands along the dangling dresses and skirts but the pretty feminine clothes and their smell of perfumes and make-up made him dizzy and

confused. The small part of his brain still capable of thought decided it was a good idea to cover her up as much as possible, and he selected a black pullover lying across the arm of a chair. It felt surprisingly soft and light in his hand.

‘Will this do?’

‘Perfectly,’ she said, glancing in the mirror, ‘it’s one of my favourite dresses.’

‘It’s a pullover,’ he said, fearing she had somehow tricked him. ‘I thought you could wear it with jeans.’

‘It’s a cashmere dress,’ she said, putting on eye make-up. ‘I’ll wear it with tights and the boots I had on earlier.’ Her eyes flicked over to a chest-of-drawers. ‘You’ll find some tights over there.’

Stephen crossed to the chest-of-drawers and pulled open a drawer to find a jumble of panties in all styles and colours. Feeling himself blush, he opened another drawer only to find a baffling heap of bras and slips. The next drawer, to his relief, contained socks and hose, some of them new in glossy packets, the rest coiled together like snakes. He chose the simplest option, and took out a new packet.

‘No,’ she said, watching him in the mirror. ‘It’s not worth wasting a new pair.’

Stephen put the packet back, and untangled a pair of skin-toned hose from the nest of vipers.

‘No,’ said Julie again. ‘It’s a black dress and it’ll look much nicer with black tights. I have to think of my public, you know.’

Stephen, blushing a deeper shade of red, dug around in the flimsy nylons until he succeeded in freeing a pair of sheer black hose.

‘They’ll do,’ she said, peering at her reflection as she applied mascara.

Stephen stood by her side, holding the dress and nylons over his arm

like her lady's maid.

Julie didn't say anything, but she watched him in the mirror, letting the mischief in her eyes speak for her. Stephen, shamed and aroused in equal measure, was the first to break the silence.

'All these clothes, they seem, I don't know … strange.'

'Strange? In what way strange?'

'They're different, old … They even smell old.'

'That's because they are old. They're second-hand, and I like the way they smell … Of secret lives and hidden loves. Sometimes I don't wash them so they keep their smell.'

'Don't you have any new clothes?'

'Some, jeans mostly, and underwear. I don't buy second-hand underwear if that's what you're thinking, except for slips if they're pretty enough, like this one,' she said, indicating the elegant chemise she was wearing which made her look like a film star from the 1940s.

'What's wrong with new clothes?'

'They're boring, that's what's wrong with them. Even when I was a little girl I hated wearing what everyone else was wearing. It used to make me cry. My mother couldn't understand what was wrong with me. I didn't understand either, but now I think even then I knew that obeying fashion turns us into slaves. I don't want to wear what other people want me to wear. I like to make my own choices, have fun, invent myself. You can do that with old clothes, and second-hand shops are full of lovely old clothes, if you look hard enough.'

In that moment Stephen understood that Julie wasn't a poor little rich girl who wore outdated clothes because she didn't know better. He saw her now for what she was – a strong-minded young woman with an independent and distinctive sense of style.

Twisting open a lipstick, Julie smiled at him in the mirror. ‘I could wear tights on their own, but I usually wear panties underneath. It’s more comfortable.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Stephen mumbled, ‘I didn’t think.’

‘That’s all right, why would you? You’re a boy, all this must be a mystery to you, but you can choose me some knickers if you like, unless you’d rather I went without.’

‘No,’ Stephen hurried to say. He didn’t want her going to her lover in such a state of undress.

Returning to the chest-of-drawers, he reached blindly into the drawer and pulled out a pair of flimsy little white panties decorated with a pattern of pink flowers.

‘Will these do?’ he asked, holding the panties out to her.

‘They’ll do very well,’ Julie replied, not even bothering to look, and rolling her lips together as she finished applying lipstick. ‘Well, then, what are you waiting for?’ she asked, getting to her feet, ‘aren’t you going to help me put them on?’

‘If you like,’ Stephen mumbled as he bent down and held out her knickers.

Placing a hand on his shoulder, Julie put one foot then the other into the panties, and smiled as Stephen pulled them up her long, shapely legs.

‘Thank-you, Stephen, you have gentle hands,’ she told him fondly, ruffling his hair and taking the tights from his arm, ‘but I don’t think you’ll manage these. I think it’s better I put these on myself.’

She sat on the bed where she gathered up each leg of her hose with quick movements of her fingers before sliding the dark nylon over her legs with such lovely, feminine grace that Stephen’s young heart ached with tenderness for her.

‘And now my dress, Stephen, if you’d be so kind,’ she said, standing from the bed and coming towards him. He held the dress out awkwardly, not sure what she meant him to do. ‘Not like that’, she said. ‘Hold it open and above my head.’ He did as he was told and she pushed her arms and head through it, pecking him on the cheek as her head emerged from the soft wool before turning away and frowning at her image in the mirror, flicking out her hair and tugging the dress impatiently into place. Its delicate cashmere, oiled by the slip beneath, flowed over her lovely figure and Stephen was dismayed at how short and tight the dress was, at the way it showed off her narrow waist and full breasts, and made the most of her naturally good legs.

‘A little perfume, I think,’ she said, picking up a bottle from the dresser and spraying a sweet-smelling scent onto her neck.

‘My boots, Stephen, hurry up,’ she said, smiling as he gathered up her black boots and brought them to her. Without being told, he knelt and helped her into them, pulling up the zips on the insides of her calves. The boots, sleek and tight-fitting, came all the way to her knee, making her dress look shorter and her long legs even longer.

‘So, then?’ she asked, looking into the mirror again, ‘will I do?’

‘You’re lovely,’ he told her. ‘More than lovely.’

‘Thank-you, Stephen, you really are very sweet.’

‘Don’t go, Julie. Stay here with me.’

‘I’d love to, Stephen, you know I would, but I’ve made up my mind. Oh, don’t worry, angel,’ she said when she saw the pain in his eyes. ‘I’ll be as quick as I can, and think how pleased you’ll be when I get back.’

She kissed him then, laughing when he shivered at the touch of her lips. ‘But what are you going to wear?’ she asked, ‘I can’t leave you like this.’

‘If you’re going, go,’ he said moodily.

‘Oh, don’t be a spoilsport. You got to choose what I’m wearing, it’s

only fair I get to do the same for you.'

She strode to the chest-of-drawers and rummaged through her underwear, finally holding up a pair of panties identical to the pair she was wearing.

'Look,' she said, pleased with herself, 'the very same as mine. We can be twins. They're a little big on me, they'll be perfect on you.'

'Put them away,' Stephen said. 'I'm not wearing those.'

'Don't be silly,' she told him. 'Of course you'll wear them. They're only a pair of panties, for heaven's sake, there's nothing to be afraid of.'

'I'm not afraid.'

'Then prove it,' she said, bending and holding them out for him.

'Julie …'

'Oh, come on, don't make a fuss.'

Bewitched beyond resistance, Stephen stepped into the panties, watching helplessly as she pulled them up his legs like a young mother dressing her child at the beach.

They may have been loose on her but they were tight on him, barely containing his balls while his hard cock jutted beyond the waistband. Julie made a tutting sound at the sight, and flicked the flimsy waistband against his cock.

It was done playfully, and it didn't hurt, but Stephen felt a stinging blow lash his soul.

'And we can't have you catching cold,' she said, taking a pair of black woollen hose from the drawer and handing them to him.

'Put these on,' she told him in her lovely Scots voice, 'they're cosy warm.'

Stephen sat obediently on the bed and clumsily copied the movements he'd watched her perform only moments before, gathering up each leg of the

tights before pulling on the soft material.

‘And here,’ Julie said, emerging from the wardrobe holding what looked like a long black jumper. She pulled it over his head. It wasn’t a jumper. It was another woollen sheath dress, longer than the one she was wearing, that came almost to his knees. Turning him to face the mirror so he could admire his reflection, she tugged the dress into place and praised his appearance, telling him how pretty he looked.

He blushed with shame at what he saw. The dress, in particular its quarter length sleeves, made him look weak and foolish and yet, in some strange way, that was how he wanted to look.

The pretty clothes drained him of strength, leaving his muscles as weak as water, and yet he found himself wishing she’d given him a slip like hers to wear under his dress.

‘There, now, we really are twins,’ she said, spraying him with her scent. ‘You even smell like me.’ She took a long black overcoat from the wardrobe and gave it to him to hold for her as she put it on.

Standing behind her in his soft black dress, he felt even more like a lady’s maid helping his Mistress get ready to go out. To his alarm, the thought aroused him and he felt his cock stir and harden in the pretty underwear beneath his dress.

‘I’ll be as quick as I can,’ she said, doing up the buttons of her coat. ‘If you’re bored you can watch this,’ she told him, picking up a film and throwing it onto the bed. ‘It’s wonderful, I can’t stop watching it.’

‘Don’t go … Please, Julie, you’re beautiful … I can’t bear it if you go.’

‘It’s lovely the way you talk to me,’ she said, placing her hand on his bare arm. He could feel every finger.

‘Please, Julie, don’t go.‘

‘Are you begging me, Stephen?’

‘No, of course not,’ Stephen replied.

‘That’s a pity, no-one’s ever begged me before,’ she said with a smile.

‘I’ll beg if you like, if it makes you stay.’

‘You wouldn’t.’

‘I would … I will.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘I will.’

‘Come on, then, let’s be hearing you.’

Amusement shone in her eyes, urging him on. Stephen looked at the floor and took a deep breath.

‘Stay, Julie, please, I beg you.’

‘You’re really doing it, aren’t you? You’re begging me.’

‘Yes, I am.’

‘Oh, come on, Stephen, where’s your pride?’ she teased him, her smile inviting a deeper surrender.

‘I’ve no pride,’ he confessed, ‘you’ve taken it all.’

‘Why should I stay with a man who has no pride?’ she asked, a devil’s glint in her eyes. ‘Where’s the fun in that?’

‘I don’t know, I don’t care, just stay, Julie, please.’

‘Why should I?’

‘Please, I’m begging you.’

‘I’ve already told you, it’s been decided.’

‘You can’t leave me like this.’

‘Oh, I can, Stephen, of course I can.’

‘Please.’

‘No.’

‘Please, Julie.’

‘Here I go.’

‘You can’t.’

‘I’m going, Stephen. He’s expecting me.’

‘I’m begging you.’

‘Begging me? You’re not even on your knees.’

‘Would you stay if I was?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said, a darker mischief in her eyes. ‘I might, I suppose.’

‘God, Julie ...’

‘Well, then, I’m waiting.’

Fearing he might faint, Stephen sank slowly to his knees and threw his arms around her legs, burrowing his head through the opening of her coat, and pressing his cheek against her nylons and the soft hem of her dress.

‘That’s more like it,’ she said, running her fingers through his hair.

‘Stay, Julie, I’m begging you.’

‘I don’t know, Stephen.’

‘Don’t go, please.’

‘It’s so difficult to decide.’

‘Stay, you have to.’

‘I don’t know, I’m thinking about it.’

‘Please, Julie …’

‘I’ve made up my mind.

‘Stay, please.’

‘I’m going, Stephen.’

‘No,’ he exclaimed, desperate now.

‘Yes, Stephen. You’ve begged very nicely, but it makes no difference.’

‘You can’t go!’

‘You heard me, Stephen. Yes.’

‘Why?’ he demanded to know, hating the petulance in his voice.

‘Because I say so. Because it’s been decided.’

‘I’ll do anything.’

‘I’m going, Stephen.’

‘Please, you can’t.’

‘Soon I’ll be gone.’

‘No!’

‘Any moment now.’

‘Please, Julie!’

‘I’ll be walking out the door.’

‘No …’

‘The clock is ticking.’

‘Please God …’

‘Here I go.’

‘No.’

‘Goodbye, Stephen.’

‘No,’ he cried, his arms clasped tight around her, his face pressed against her legs.

‘Let go of me.’

He made a sobbing sound which shamed him to the core of his being.

‘Let go, Stephen.’

‘I won’t.’

‘Do what you’re told, I won’t tell you again.’

A hardness had come into her voice. It carried more than the hint of a threat, and he knew there was nothing he could do.

Stephen let go of her, his arms hanging limply at his side as if they belonged to another man.

‘Julie …’ he pleaded.

But she was gone.

He ran to the door and called after her, but she vanished down the stairs without replying. Not knowing what to do with himself, he went back into the bedroom where he paced up and down, helplessly girlish and light-footed in his dress and stocking soles. Suddenly frantic, he rushed from the room and ran down the stairs, hoping to catch her before she left the house but, halfway down the stairs, he heard the heavy front door slam shut. He ran to the door and struggled to open it, but he couldn't work the ancient lock.

Weak and helpless, he watched her through a narrow pane in the door as she strode down the driveway, a dark and elegant figure in the drifting snow.

He kept watching until she vanished through the gate, wondering at how freedom seemed so natural to her, while for him it now felt utterly beyond his reach.

STEPHEN CROSSED the hall and slowly climbed the stairs. Anxiety fuelled his unwanted arousal as he found his way back to her bedroom where he sat on the wide bed, haunted by her perfume and the memory of how he'd begged like a fool.

He looked at the bedside clock. It was a few minutes past eleven. He thought of Julie with her lover. The memory of the tall dark-haired young man kissing her outside her halls of residence filled him with a jealous yearning.

He tried to imagine carrying her to bed and making love to her but, when he looked down and saw the hem of his soft woollen dress stretched daintily across his knees, his dream of manly conquest vanished like smoke.

He went to the bathroom where he found their half-full glasses of gin and tonic. He emptied his into Julie's glass – for some reason he wanted to drink from her glass – and took the drink back to the bedroom. The ice had

long melted and the drink had lost its fresh flavour, but he needed alcohol and he felt the better for it.

Calmed by the gin, he told himself all he had to do was wait for Julie to come back. He'd survive her absence if he could only stop thinking about her with the dark-haired boy. His gaze fell on the film she'd thrown onto the bed. He picked it up and read the credits on the cover. It was called L'Avventura by the director Michelangelo Antonioni.

Like so many of the films Julie spoke about, he'd never seen it or heard of it, but she was passionate about books and films, and in the short time he'd known her he'd learned to trust her judgement. He slipped the film into the player, took a pillow from the bed, and lay down in front of the fire to watch it.

THE FILM opened slowly, and Stephen found his thoughts straying painfully to Julie and her lover, but soon he became lost in the film's dreamy sensuality.

Set in the early 1960s, it told a sad and beautiful story about a spoiled young woman who disappears on a volcanic island. Her best friend, Claudia, played by a lovely actress called Monica Vitti, refuses to believe the young woman is dead, and searches for her on the mainland, all the time being pulled into an affair with her vanished friend's handsome lover.

Stephen had never seen a film like it. The strange, drifting story evoked a yearning for true, romantic love even as it denied the possibility of true love's existence. He found the film powerfully erotic, and not only because Claudia spent long scenes lounging in elegant slips – he could imagine Julie taking note of the actress's sultry style – but also because of the pervasive sense of loss and loneliness among the idle rich. Everyone in the story

seemed on the verge of disappearing like the young woman on the island and, when the film finished, Stephen felt he'd become one of them, a fading ghost alone in a rich man's empty house.

He looked at the clock. It was half past one. Julie had been gone for two and a half hours. Jealousy and anxiety came rushing back with cramping intensity.

'Julie,' he heard himself whisper. 'Where are you?'

He needed to go to the bathroom and once more he crossed the vast, shadowy hallway. He shivered at the cold and at the thought of the ghosts of past inhabitants watching him and laughing at his foolish appearance.

In the bathroom he hoisted up his woollen dress and tugged down his panties and hose and stood there trying to pee like a man, but he was prevented by his fierce erection. He stood waiting for it to subside but it stubbornly refused. He pulled his tights and panties down to his knees and sat on the toilet like a girl, holding the hem of his dress under his chin and trying to push his erect cock down into the bowl. Finally he began to pee and he sat there looking down at his pretty little panties nestling in his soft black tights. He'd never had much hair on his legs and his thighs looked slim and feminine. Not wanting to stain her little panties he tore off a piece of toilet tissue and wiped himself like a girl. When he stood and got dressed he was already hard again.

Back in Julie's bedroom jealousy and anxiety overcame him once more. Yet, even in his anxious state, his eyes fell on the many pairs of pretty shoes that littered the room. He picked up a pair of strappy sandals and felt a deliciously guilty thrill as he sat on the bed to try them on. They were far too small, a size four to his size eight, but he didn't give up. He searched the room until he found a pair of black suede high-heels in a size five. They were agonisingly tight but somehow he managed to squeeze his feet into them.

When he stood and walked over to the mirror he forgot his discomfort and felt as if he was floating on air.

He admired himself in the long mirror, first from the front and then from the side, amazed at how pretty and feminine he looked. The high-heeled shoes completely changed his figure. To his astonishment, he looked like an elegant and willowy young woman and, greatly to his shame, he loved the way the dress moved and flowed around his knees.

He walked over to the chest-of-drawers, surprised at how well he was managing in heels, and searched guiltily through Julie's underwear. He pulled out two pretty underskirts trimmed with lace. He loved how soft and light they felt in his hand. Holding one of them by its narrow little shoulder straps, he thought about taking off his dress and putting on the slip to see what it would feel like beneath his dress. He blushed at the thought, aroused by the memory of how lovely Julie had looked in her black slip, and by how sensuously her dress had moved with the slip beneath.

He began to take off his dress, but lost his nerve. He thought of Julie returning and discovering the slip under his dress. He imagined her stroking his thigh as she kissed him, slipping her hand under his dress, and the way she would laugh when her hand encountered the lacy hem of the underskirt. She'd tease him mercilessly, he had no doubt. The thought aroused him deeply, but his dread of Julie's mockery was too strong and he put the delicate slips back where he'd found them, and turned his back on temptation.

He went over to her dressing-table and picked up a string of pearls from an open jewellery-box. He examined the little clip and then fastened them around his neck, pleased by how pretty they looked against the black wool of his dress. He had never dreamed he could look or feel so girlish. He picked up a soft liberty print scarf and tried it around his neck, but suddenly he

experienced a violent attack of shame and self-disgust.

He felt worse than a fool prancing around in Julie's clothes and shoes while she was out with her lover. He tore off the scarf and pearls, throwing the string of pearls down on the dressing-table as if it was a venomous snake. Cursing his weakness and stupidity, he tugged off the high-heeled shoes and flung them into a far corner of the bedroom.

Where was Julie? Where was she? If she didn't come back soon he was sure he would die.

Emptied of hope, he wandered into the vast hallway and began to explore the other upstairs rooms. His woollen dress, tight around his knees, made him take small steps, and he took refuge in the way his feminine clothes turned him into a creature he didn't know, a creature to be pitied.

What was it she'd said? 'Why should I stay with a man who has no pride?' Yes, that was it, and he could think of no good reason why she should have stayed. He felt small and useless, and it seemed only right that his beautiful young girlfriend had abandoned him. Beginning to shiver, he found a twisted solace in the thought.

The huge bedrooms were ghostly and freezing cold. Old clothes hung in ancient wardrobes and lay forgotten in chests-of-drawers. Brass handles rattled against dark oak as he looked in cupboards and tallboys. The beds and curtains smelled musty and damp, the wind whistled in the chimneys but, a ghost himself, he felt no fear, and he welcomed the cold as he stood at the high windows, watching the thick flakes of snow drift slowly past the glass.

When the cold finally got the better of him, he crept shivering into the nearest bed. He couldn't go back to Julie's room. She'd betrayed and abandoned him, and he needed a bed of his own to hide in. He lay under the musty blankets, his teeth chattering, trying to think of how he could make his escape in the morning.

He despaired of ever finding sleep and yet the next thing he knew a hand was shaking him awake, and a voice was speaking softly in his ear.

‘Here you are, I thought I’d lost you.’

‘Julie,’ he said, sitting up with a start, not sure if he was awake or still sleeping. ‘Where have you been?’

‘Sssh, I’m here,’ she told him, kissing his forehead.

Her hair smelled as it had at the station, of snow, and cold, clear air.

‘What time is it?’ he said.

‘It’s well after three. I’m sorry, Stephen, I didn’t mean to be so long.’

‘My God,’ he said, ‘are you trying to kill me?’

‘It’s all right, I’m here now,’ she said, taking off her boots and dress, and sliding into bed beside him. ‘Warm me up,’ she said, shivering against him, ‘I’m freezing to death.’

He wanted to turn away from her, but he found himself hugging her with all his strength.

‘I forgot you’re wearing my clothes,’ she said, burrowing snugly into his arms, ‘my pretty angel, my honey-bee.’

‘I’ve missed you,’ he confessed from a blessed place beyond pride.

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ she said in her playful way. ‘Now, keep quiet and let me kiss you.’

She stroked his cheek, and rubbed her nose sweetly against his before recapturing him with a kiss so deep and warming it dragged his soul to her lips.

The taste of her lipstick was faint now, and he could smell whisky on her breath.

She put his mouth to his ear and whispered, ‘It’s over, I want you to know that. He’s going to Edinburgh tomorrow, and driving down to England the next day … To be with her … It’s over and done with.’

He heard the sadness she was trying to hide.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked, his need to console her stronger than his hurt.

‘Just love me,’ she said in a tearful voice.’

He kissed her mouth and then her throat before moving down to kiss her breasts through the lace of her slip.

‘Gently,’ she told him. ‘They’re still sore.’

He knew what she was telling him, that she was tender from another man’s kisses, but jealousy did not lessen his ardour. On the contrary, it heightened his arousal so that he wanted only to ease her sorrow with a passion sharpened by his own pain.

She flinched when he kissed her breasts, but his lips were warm and gentle, and soon she was groaning softly, and leading his mouth from one breast to the other and back again.

‘Dear Stephen,’ she whispered, ‘you’re my angel, truly you are.’

He pushed up her slip and slid down lower in the bed, leaving a trail of little kisses on her stomach, before sliding his mouth even lower.

‘No, Stephen,’ she warned, ‘you shouldn’t.’

‘I want to,’ he said, kissing her through her panties, causing a soft trembling to pass through her. ‘I love you,’ he said, enticing her with kisses.

His passion awoke a need in Julie so strong it left her incredulous. She reached under the bedclothes and quickly took down her underwear. She was tender after her lovemaking with Robbie, so tender she felt herself flush with embarrassment, but Stephen’s kisses electrified her, his tongue moving sweetly inside her until she began to fear the power of the pleasure to come.

‘God, Stephen,’ she pleaded, ‘I can’t, it’s too much,’ but she sighed with pleasure even as she pleaded.

Glad for once to be the one in charge, Stephen made his kisses longer

and deeper, taking her ever closer to the edge. Her pleasure grew so urgent she feared release might elude her, but he licked higher and slower and with such an ardent, easy rhythm that she was swept over the cliff for the second time that night, crying out with joy as she fell.

Aroused by her cries, Stephen slid up her body and kissed her mouth, sharing her taste with her. Pulling down his own pretty underwear, his erection pressed against her warm, slick cunt but, still a novice, he pushed shyly, whispering her name as he felt the tip of his cock slip inside her.

'No, Stephen, I can't,' she said, sliding out from under him and pushing him onto his back, her woman's instinct telling her this final gift was only for the man she'd just been with. 'This way,' she said, taking hold of his hard cock.

'Let me, Julie,' he begged, longing to be inside her. 'Please, you have to.'

'I know,' she said gently, moving her hand up and down with a steady, relentless rhythm, rubbing her thumb over his swollen tip, 'but I like you this way, really I do. I've had enough of men who want to own me with their cocks. Be my angel for me. Come for me, now, like this, it's what I want.'

She found the silky bundle of her panties and hose and pressed them around his cock, rubbing him through the soft prison so that Stephen began to say her name over and over again, and push helplessly against her hand.

'That's the way, that's my angel,' Julie whispered in his ear, knowing she had him now. She took her hand away and laid her leg over him instead, trapping him beneath her warm thigh and her soft underwear. 'Come for me,' she urged, 'I want it all, all that sweet honey. Give me it, Stephen. Give it to your queen. I want it, I want it now.'

She gave him her mouth when she felt him lose control, held him tight in her arms as he bucked against her thigh, calling out her name into her

mouth like a prayer.

THEY SLEPT till late the next day, not waking until after mid-day when they lay cuddling and dozing for over an hour before Julie roused herself and led Stephen across the hall to a separate shower room which her sister had christened ‘Niagara’.

They luxuriated under the scouring torrent, soaping each other and laughing at the pleasure they found in their intimacy. They ran back to the warmth of Julie’s bedroom where the gas fire had been left on all night, and dried each other in front of its heat.

Julie dressed quickly in black underwear and a flippy little skirt with a short cashmere jersey. She teased Stephen, who had no clothes of his own to put on, by twirling and pirhouetting like a dancer so that her skirt fanned out around her, and by threatening to make him wear a dress to meet her parents who had returned late that morning from their night away.

She even took out a pretty party-dress from her wardrobe, and held it up against him. He pushed it away and told her not to be so stupid, but his swelling cock gave away his excitement.

‘I don’t know what you’re frightened of,’ she said. ‘Remember how you looked last night. You look lovely as a girl.’

‘I don’t think your parents would agree.’

‘They’re very broad-minded,’ she said with a smile.

‘Stop it, Julie.’

‘I’ll tell them you’ve decided to give up being a boy. I’ll tell them you’ve decided not to be my boy-friend anymore, and become my girl-friend instead. I’m sure they’ll understand.’

‘Give me my clothes, Julie.’

‘You should listen to what your cock’s telling you,’ she said, cupping his balls with her soft hand.

‘It’s telling me I want to fuck you.’

‘Stephen!’ she exclaimed, ‘I’m very disappointed in you. Angels shouldn’t talk like that.’

‘I just want to be your boyfriend,’ he said but Julie only laughed and kissed him, saying, ‘I’ve just thought of a lovely tea-dress I could give you to wear. It belongs to my sister. I could get it from her room. I’d love to see you in it, Stephen, I really would. You’d look so pretty. It needs a petticoat, but I’m sure you wouldn’t mind. Think how a petticoat would feel flowing around your pretty knees. Every boy should try it at least once. It should be a compulsory part of their education. The dress has a lovely bow that ties at the back, and I’ll tie your hair with a matching ribbon, and do your make-up for you. My mother has bigger feet than me. I’ll find you a pair of her shoes. High heels but not too high. You’ll look lovely, really you will.’

‘Julie, stop it.’

‘I’ll steal one of her girdles,’ she said, very amused to think of dressing him such an old-fashioned garment. ‘I know the drawer where she keeps them. They’re very severe and fierce-looking with a panel at the front to hold in your tummy, except with you it won’t be your tummy, will it?’ she said, laughing as she stroked his hard cock with her bossy little hand. ‘She has one that’s really quite pretty with little flowers on it and lace around the leg. It has suspenders attached so you would have to wear stockings. Think how soft and silky they’ll feel against your legs. But don’t be fooled by all the prettiness. It will still hold your cock down, keep it trapped and hidden so there’ll be no bump to ruin the line of your lovely dress. Nothing will give you away. You’ll look a picture, Stephen, you will, I promise, and everyone will think you’re really a girl. It might be enough to turn me into a lesbian,’

she whispered, kissing him with smiling lips and squeezing his cock in encouragement.

‘Stop it, Julie, I mean it,’ he said, pulling away and covering his erection with his hands.

‘Come on, Stephen, you’ll like it, I know you will.’

‘No.’

‘You don’t really want your boring boy’s clothes.’

‘I do,’ he insisted, too afraid to admit what he really wanted.

‘All right,’ she said sadly, ‘but on one condition.’

‘And what’s that?’ he asked warily.

‘You let me choose your underwear.’

‘Come on, Julie, enough’s enough.’

‘It’s up to you, it makes no difference to me,’ she said, turning and walking towards the door, her skirt swaying enticingly around her lovely knees.

‘All right, I give in,’ he called after her, ‘but I want my clothes back in return.’

‘It’s a deal,’ she said, laughing as she ran to the chest of drawers. ‘Now, let me see,’ she said, searching through her knicker drawer. ‘I know where they are,’ she said, turning and running to her laundry basket. She rummaged through her dirty clothes before giving a cry of triumph and holding up a pair of very pretty and very pink lace panties. ‘Oh yes, she said with a smile, ‘these are perfect.’

‘That’s just cruel,’ Stephen protested.

‘Nonsense. They’re my prettiest pair,’ she said, ‘and I can tell you like them. And anyway, from what I’ve read, men like women to be cruel.’

‘You read too much.’

‘And you don’t read enough.’

She held up the panties, dangling them from a finger.

‘They’re tiny,’ he said. ‘They’ll be far too tight.’

‘The tighter the better, and that way you won’t forget you’re wearing them. And I’ve worn them, Stephen, I want you to think about that.’

She held the panties to his face so that he caught a scent of her, and then she kissed him, flicking her tongue against his teeth. ‘Put them on, Stephen. My worn panties, my dirty knickers. That way you’ll always be my angel.’

‘I don’t want to wear them,’ he said, hoping she wouldn’t see his arousal.

‘What you want doesn’t matter. It’s what I want that counts, and I want you to wear them.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s sexy, that’s why. It makes me feel good.’

‘Do I have to?’

‘Yes, Stephen, you do,’ she said, kissing him again and wrapping the silken panties around his erection.

‘Please, Julie.’

‘Begging won’t do any good. You should know that by now.’

He took the panties from her.

They had no weight to them, and may as well have been made of nothing but air.

‘Good girl, and I expect you to be wearing them when I get back. Hurry now, don’t be slow,’ she said gaily as she left the room to fetch his boots and clothes from where she’d hidden them.

Stephen’s pride bristled, and he made up his mind not to put on her silly little panties. After what had happened the night before, he couldn’t let himself look so foolish. When she returned he’d take his jeans from her, and wear them without underwear.

Anything would be better than giving in again and doing what she wanted.

‘I’ve had enough of that,’ he told himself. ‘It’s time I stood up to her,’ but when Julie came back with his clothes and boots she was greeted by the sight of Stephen standing by the bed wearing her prettiest panties.

She smiled when he looked away in shame, his long hair only partially obscuring his burning cheeks.

‘Don’t be shy,’ she said tenderly. ‘You’re my sweetest angel, and I love you for it, truly I do.’

She kissed him, and ran her fingers over the front of his panties which were stretched tight across his semi-erect cock. ‘Harder, grow harder for me,’ she instructed him, laughing to feel his cock push obediently beyond the flimsy waistband. ‘Dear Stephen, I’m never going to let you go, you know that, don’t you? Why would a girl ever want to let you go? It’s too much fun, and you’re far too pretty. No, I’m going to keep you like this forever. I am, I promise, for ever and ever.’

And then she kissed him again, lifting her flirty little skirt to press her panties against his, and saying with a smile, ‘Now put on your boring boy clothes, and we’ll go down and have lunch with my parents.’

THE BUCHANS were kind hosts and good company. Julie’s father was hungover, mumbling gruffly about ‘a hair of the dog’ as he took his first drink of the day, but he was friendly enough in a dour, Scottish kind of way, and the thick broth and home-baked bread Julie’s mother served up were delicious.

Mrs Buchan asked about Stephen’s family, and told amusing stories about Julie’s willfulness, particularly when she was a child, and teased

Stephen gently about how foolish he was to even think about getting involved with her daughter.

Stephen found her stories funny and charming and, if he hadn't been so aware of what he was wearing beneath his jeans, and of Julie's twinkling eyes across the table, he would have enjoyed a pleasantly relaxed family meal.

After lunch Julie and Stephen took Lucky for a walk.

Bright winter sunlight sparkled on the snow-covered streets and, when he took her hand, Stephen felt like the luckiest boy alive.

They came to a park where children played on sledges, and made snowmen with the help of their tireless parents. For a while old Lucky stirred into life, and became the main attraction, offering an unmissable target for snowballs as he strained every sinew to catch them in his mouth.

The park was bordered by grand family homes, little palaces hidden behind high walls.

'I didn't know Scotland was so rich,' Stephen said.

'This part of it is,' Julie said.

'I've never seen so many big houses.'

'Oh, they're big all right, but you should see inside them. They're mausoleums, every one of them. If you knew what it was like growing up here. It's brutal, believe me. Nothing matters except money, the size of your house, and what school you went to. Robbie hates it even more than I do. The worst thing is we're clever, good at everything. Robbie even plays for Cambridge at rugby, and so we're held up as living proof that all's well in this rotten little world. We hate that more than anything.'

Stephen would have preferred not to hear about Robbie's rebellious spirit and sporting prowess.

'He doesn't have to.'

‘What?’

‘He doesn’t have to play rugby if he doesn’t want to. He could always refuse.’

‘His uncle Alex played for Scotland, and Robbie wants to do the same. Follow in his footsteps.’

They walked in silence for a few moments.

‘Private property converts clever usurpation into inalienable right,’ she went on,’ or so Robbie says.’

‘That’s Karl Marx, isn’t it?’ said Stephen.

Robbie may be at Cambridge, Stephen reflected, but he couldn’t be clever enough to have come up with that himself.

‘No, it was Rousseau,’ Julie replied.

‘Good old Jean-Jacques,’ said Stephen, irritated once more by his clever rival.

‘Yes, good old Jean-Jacques,’ said Julie, letting go of Stephen’s hand, and putting her hand in her pocket. Stephen thought he could see tears in her eyes.

WHEN THEY returned to the house Julie disappeared for over an hour, and Stephen sat in a drawing-room watching an Indiana Jones film on television while Mr Buchan slept in an armchair. Unable to concentrate on the film, Stephen stood and silently left the room, finding refuge in a downstairs bathroom. As he stood peeing he became acutely aware of the pretty panties Julie had seduced him into wearing. While the toilet was still flushing he tore off his boots and jeans and took off the panties, putting his jeans back on without any underwear.

His cock hung free and heavy against his leg, and he felt a huge sense of

relief, as if he'd taken back his manhood, but the lace knickers felt tormentingly soft and weightless in his hand. He looked down at them and saw how their little cotton crotch was lightly stained from when Julie had worn them, and yet this only aroused him all the more, and made them seem sweetly and infinitely precious.

Yes, he was losing his mind, there could be no doubt.

He caught sight of himself in the bathroom mirror and for a split second he saw himself wearing the pretty tea-dress Julie had described. He imagined its bow tied at his back and its petticoat flowing around his nylon-clad knees. He even thought he could see how her mother's girdle had narrowed his waist and imprisoned his cock. He could feel his cock trapped helplessly in its fierce, feminine grip.

Confused and aroused, he stuffed the panties into a pocket of his jeans and fled to the drawing-room where Mr Buchan was still dozing in his armchair.

He sat watching the film, trying to make himself care about an army truck chase he'd seen a hundred times before, but soon he was driven back to the bathroom where he quickly took off his boots and jeans, and once more slid Julie's panties up his legs. Fastening his jeans over them, he felt calmed and comforted. By taking them off he imagined he'd somehow betrayed Julie, broken some deep, unspoken pledge he'd made to her. But wearing her pretty worn panties made him feel connected to her again and, in a way that thrilled him, he felt as if she somehow owned and controlled him from afar.

Julie re-appeared soon after he'd gone back to the drawing-room, signalling to him silently from the doorway.

He could tell she'd been crying.

'Are you all right?' he asked as they went upstairs.

'I'm fine, thank-you,' she said with a weak smile. 'I just felt a little

down, that's all.'

'Is there anything I can do to help?'

He knew she was aching for her lost love.

'Just having you here is a help,' she said. 'I wouldn't know what to do without you. I'd be lost, completely lost.'

JULIE OFTEN sought refuge from worry in books and films, and she led him to her bedroom where she lay down with him by the fire to watch what she described as 'one of the best films ever made.' She told him the film's title, 'That Obscure Object Of Desire,' and that it had been directed in French by the famous Spanish director Luis Bunuel. 'It's based on the book 'The Woman and The Puppet' by Pierre Louys,' she said. 'I've got it somewhere. You can read it if you want.'

Stephen started to watch the film, but soon fell fast asleep with his head in her lap. He woke to the sound of murmuring French voices from the screen, and the glorious sight of Julie's knee protruding sleekly from the folds of her skirt. He felt himself come erect and push against the lace of her worn panties.

He heard her laugh at something in the film. Happy that she'd recovered her spirits, he found himself wondering if she needed the subtitles. She was so clever it wouldn't have surprised him if she spoke perfect French.

He lay gazing in wonder at her knee while her fingers played fondly in his hair, winding it into tight, little curls. When he kissed her knee she stroked his head in welcome but, when he kissed her a few inches above her knee, he was rewarded with a slap on the head.

'Behave yourself,' she told him, 'and watch the film.'

He watched obediently for a few minutes, but was soon drawn back to

her lovely knee so delightfully framed by the drape of her skirt. This time she let him kiss his way almost to the top of her thigh before slapping him, and re-arranging her skirt primly with a brisk shake. This happened four or five times, his slow advance and rapid retreat the sweetest dalliance Stephen had ever known.

Finally, as a reward for his lightest, stealthiest kisses, she let him climb all the way to her panties where he kissed her through the lace until he felt her breath quicken, and then, sensing she was ready, he pushed his tongue gently under the loose silk to her most secret place. Giving in, she pulled his mouth against her, opening her legs wider and reaching down to move her panties aside.

'I'm your dream,' she said between little gasps, 'like the film, I'm the object of your desire you'll never have … I'll come in your mouth like rain but you'll never have me … Never … Never …'

She came in his mouth, crying out and pulling him roughly against her. When she'd finished, she held him there and pulled her skirt over his head, telling him to stay where he was and not to move. He tried to free himself but she held his head, saying firmly, 'No, Stephen, you'll stay where you are, I mean it now. Behave!'

She went back to watching the film, leaving Stephen under the soothing mantle of her skirt, smelling her and wanting her, with her taste in his mouth and his eager cock pressing against the panties she'd made him wear.

Her gentle hands stroked his head softly through the thin material of her skirt.

Stephen lay unmoving under her spell, as content and blissfully at peace as an unborn child.

AT NIGHT, when it came time to get ready for the Hogmanay party at her friend Annie's house, Julie modelled a number of dresses for him.

It was a delight for Stephen to lie on the bed and watch her change from one dress to another, trying her hair up, and then down, and then up again. She finally settled on a black 1950s low-necked cocktail dress decorated with blood red roses.

She pinned her hair up, and fastened a string of pearls around her neck.

Stephen swore to her there had never been a more beautiful woman in the entire history of the world.

'I should think not,' she said with a smile that melted his heart.

Dionne Warwick's 'Walk On By' played softly as Julie stood in front of the mirror applying her make-up. She leaned forward, peering at her reflection and moving slowly in time to the music.

Stephen couldn't take his eyes from her lovely, swaying figure. He'd watched her put on the black stay-up stockings she was wearing under her dress, and he longed to catch another glimpse of the pale skin above her nylons.

'What's the matter?' she asked, 'can't you see?'

Stephen tried to speak but no words would come.

'Is this better?' Julie asked, smiling at him in the mirror as she leaned forward a little more and slid her dress up over its short net petticoat with a soft rustling sound to let him see her stocking tops and panties, and her lovely bottom swaying sweetly in time to the music.

'Come on, then, let's be having you,' she said.

'She's stolen away what's left of my brains,' Stephen thought as he sprang from the bed and went to her, kneeling to kiss the soft white skin above her nylons.

'There, now, that's what you want, isn't it?' said Julie in her lovely

Scots voice.

His adoring kisses were his only answer.

‘It’s far simpler than Lysistrata knew,’ Julie mused as she fussed over her hair. ‘Women don’t need to withhold sex to put an end to war. All they have to do is say, “I’ll wear stockings for you every night. I’ll lift up my dress and let you look at them, touch them, kiss them, I’ll keep them on in bed for you, but you have to promise me – no more war!” And there you would have it – universal peace on Earth!’

Stephen was barely listening. He was kissing her panties, pushing them with his tongue into the cleft of her buttocks. She gave a gasp of surprise, and he felt a shiver run through her. She leaned further over the dressing-table, and pushed her bottom against his mouth, wanting more.

‘You can take them down if you want,’ she said, her bottom still swaying to the music. ‘On you go, I won’t mind.’

He ran his hands up her stockings and pushed her dress and petticoat over her hips before hooking his thumbs into the waistband of her panties and sliding them slowly down to her knees. He nuzzled the cleft of her bottom, kissing and licking her sweetly curving cheeks. His tongue found its way between her buttocks, but he hesitated, afraid to go any further.

She stopped swaying and held her breath, waiting to see if he would really kiss her there.

‘You don’t have to if you don’t want to,’ she said, but she pushed her perfect curves enticingly against his mouth, letting him know what she wanted. One of her hands reached back, holding him against her. He slid his tongue nervously a little way inside, and she gave another gasp and leant forward, opening herself to him, knocking over bottles of perfume in her abandon.

‘Do it,’ she said, impatient with desire.

His hands wandered over the tops of her stockings as his tongue slipped further between her smooth cheeks.

‘I’ve washed, I’m clean,’ she said. ‘Come on, do it.’

He put his hands on her buttocks and pulled them gently apart to help his tongue slide deeper inside.

‘Don’t stop,’ she said, ‘don’t you dare.’

His tongue flicked down to the familiar oasis of her cunt, carrying some of her wetness back to her bottom where he licked again, still timid about going deeper.

‘Do it,’ she urged, pushing back against his mouth, and pulling him closer with her hand, ‘all the way, do it!’

Longing to please her, he pushed his tongue deep inside her.

She gave a long sigh of pleasure, and the sound inflamed him. No longer timid, he pleasured her with long, slow strokes of his tongue that reached to her very core. He felt her convulse and heard her cry out, angry with need.

Stephen worshipped her, this new place every bit as delectable as her sweet, lovely cunt. A deep, thrilling pleasure rose up in Julie, and she came, and came again in his faithful, adoring mouth.

THE INTIMACY of this most private of kisses stayed with them as they walked arm-in-arm across the snowy park to the party at Annie’s house.

‘I can’t believe it,’ Stephen said.

‘What can’t you believe, dear?’

‘I’m wearing your underwear, and I’ve kissed your arse, but you’ve never let me fuck you.’

‘Dear me, Stephen,’ said Julie primly, ‘sometimes your language really does leave a great deal to be desired.’

‘But it’s the truth.’

‘It may be the truth, but you need to remember that anyone can fuck. Take Robbie and I, for example, we must have fucked a million times but he’s never worn my underwear or kissed my arse.’

‘So I’m the lucky one?’ Stephen enquired, peering at her out of the corner of his eye.

‘Yes,’ she said, peering back at him, ‘I think you probably are.’

And then the laughter broke, great gales of mirth that shook them and made them cling to each other for fear hysteria might sweep them away.

‘I like you, Julie Buchan,’ Stephen said, once he had recovered.

‘And I like you, Stephen Mercer,’ Julie replied, ‘I like you more than I can say.’

IT WAS just after ten when they got to Annie’s house. They could hear loud music from inside and Julie went in without ringing the door-bell. Annie found Julie sitting on the stairs while Stephen knelt at her feet taking off her winter boots and helping her put on the high-heeled shoes he’d carried for her in his overcoat pocket.

‘This is Stephen,’ Julie said. ‘Stephen, this is Annie.’

Stephen looked up, embarrassed to be caught at such a task.

‘My God, he’s gorgeous,’ Annie exclaimed.

Julie just smiled. ‘I told you,’ she said.

‘And he’s so well-trained,’ Annie said as Stephen went back to helping Julie put on her shoes.

‘He has his uses,’ Julie said with her dry Scots humour.

When Stephen stood, Annie saw he was blushing, and she embraced him in welcome. ‘Never you mind us wicked Scots women, Stephen,’ she said,

‘just do what you’re told, and you’ll get along fine.’

Stephen couldn’t help but laugh, and he took an immediate liking to Annie.

She was small and slim with sharp features framed by a bob of short black hair. Intelligence and humour shone in her eyes. Her voice was warm and kindly, so similar to Julie’s he wondered if he’d be able to tell them apart, and her face was so pretty he hesitated to look at her for fear of being unable to look away.

‘Yes, I think you’ve found a good one here,’ Annie said, sitting on the stair beside Julie to hug and kiss her, and show her how glad she was to see her.

On the way to the kitchen to get them drinks, Annie took Stephen by the arm and leaned in close, telling him secretively, ‘I’m so happy she’s found someone else. She’s told me how sweet you are, and how fond she is of you. She’s going through a very hard time and she needs all the help she can get, and you and I, we’re going to make sure she gets it.’

Stephen liked to take his time making friends, but Annie was one of those rare people who could invade another’s space and leave the invaded happy at the invasion. Her warm breath on his face and the smell of her perfume were strangely calming and, in a few short moments, he felt he’d known and liked her for years. And, if he’d been recruited to a cause he didn’t fully understand, he really didn’t mind as Julie’s happiness was a cause he was happy to serve.

THERE WERE sixty or seventy people at the party, most of them students the same age as Julie and Stephen, and some younger, in their mid-teens, glad to have the chance to play at being older. Annie’s parents had

gone away to spend New Year with relatives, and Annie had made them the time-honoured promise that she would never, on any account, hold a party in their absence.

The house was as big as Julie's, although much more expensively furnished and decorated. The rooms were so big all the guests could fit easily into the huge kitchen and front room across the hallway where a happy crowd danced to the deafening music. Outside the back door from the kitchen a garden brazier was burning, surrounded by a circle of smokers talking and laughing and every now and then throwing a log onto the fire.

Stephen didn't usually enjoy dancing but after a few beers he overcame his inhibitions and danced happily, not only with Julie but also with Annie and a number of the other young women, his enjoyment marred only by the dark looks he received from the young men choosing the music. He assumed they were friends of Robbie Gilchrist, unhappy to see Julie with a strange boy from another tribe, but nothing was said and he put them out of his mind.

When midnight struck, Stephen was in the kitchen refilling Julie's glass and he had to kiss every girl, including Annie, and shake every boy by the hand on his way back to Julie, a knot of anticipation growing tighter in his chest the closer he got to her. As he made his way through the crowd she smiled over at him in between kissing and hugging her friends. When he finally reached her she touched his face gently, saying simply, 'Happy New Year, Stephen,' and kissed him so warmly and deeply he lost track of time and place. As they kissed, one of her hands strayed down to his buttocks as if to remind him of what he was wearing for her under his jeans, and she whispered in his ear, 'Let's go home soon.'

STEPHEN CHERISHED the promise in her words for the next hour and

more. The party was in full swing but Stephen could think only of going home with Julie, and taking her to bed as his lover at last.

He was about to suggest they find their coats and go when the room was filled with loud shouts and cheers of welcome as four young men strode through the crowd like conquering heroes, kissing and embracing everyone they met.

One of them, a tall, dark-haired young man, made straight for Julie, ignoring everyone in his way. When he reached Julie he swept her up in his arms and kissed her as if he would never let her go.

Stephen knew at once who the young man must be, and he was seized by a sensation of deja-vu. It wasn't the fact that he'd seen this before which gave the moment its unsettling power – his memory of them kissing outside her halls of residence was burned into his brain – it was the fact that this moment seemed so inevitable, inescapable, as if it was his destiny to stand and watch helplessly as they kissed and embraced with such passion.

Once more Stephen felt as weak and lost as a ghost. His life-force drained from him even as hot, jealous anger drove him to put up a fight. He couldn't let Julie be kissed like that in front of everyone. He had to do something.

He pushed through the crowd towards her, but he'd only taken a few steps before strong hands gripped him and pushed him back against the wall. Two of Robbie's friends held him roughly by his arms. One of them leaned into his face and said coldly, 'Stay out of their way and you won't get hurt.'

The soul song 'Try A Little Tenderness' began to play and Stephen knew Robbie's friends had chosen the sensual ballad to celebrate Julie and Robbie's reunion. A loud cheer went up as Julie began to slow-dance with Robbie. Stephen peered through the crowd, and saw them swaying together in an intimate embrace. The sight enraged him and he struggled to break free,

but his captors only held him tighter.

This time it was the most muscular of them who threatened him. ‘If you want trouble you can have it,’ he said in a deep accentless growl. ‘Leave them be, I’m warning you.’

Stephen let his body relax as if he’d given up any hope of resistance but, as soon as he felt their grip loosen, he broke free and darted forward only for another of Robbie’s friends to block his way. Before he knew it, he was being dragged out to the hallway. Someone punched him in the stomach. He doubled up in pain, gasping for air. He looked up, hoping Julie had seen what was happening and come to his rescue, but all he could see were leering faces. He heard a voice say, ‘Take him outside and teach him a lesson.’ He felt hands take hold of him, tearing his shirt, but then he heard Annie’s voice.

‘Leave him alone.’

‘He’s asking for it, Annie. The English prick.’

‘Don’t be so bloody stupid. Leave him be!’ Stephen felt her small hand on his arm. ‘I’ll take care of him.’

‘Make sure you do,’ said one of his attackers.

‘Piss off,’ Annie replied. ‘On you go, piss off.’

‘If he starts anything, we’ll finish it,’ said the biggest of his captors, letting go of Stephen, and walking away with his cohorts, their laughter a final warning to Stephen.

‘I’m so sorry, Stephen,’ Annie said gently, ‘that wasn’t fair.’

‘What’s happening?’ Stephen asked, his head spinning. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Nothing’s going on. They’re only dancing.’

Stephen stood in the doorway and saw them through the crowd of dancers at the far side of the room. Julie couldn’t have seen the attack on him for her head was pressed against Robbie’s chest as they swayed together.

This allowed Stephen a clear view of his features. To his dismay, he saw that Robbie was one of the most manly and good-looking young men he'd ever seen. His broad, strong face still had something tender about it, and his powerful athletic frame looked all the more impressive in the kilt he was wearing. It wasn't a formal dress-kilt. He wore it casually with an old woollen jersey and a pair of hiking-boots which gave him the appearance of a carefree young adventurer.

Suddenly Stephen saw that Julie was looking over at him with an enigmatic smile on her face. Was that regret he saw in her eyes? Apology? Or was there something else in the imperious arch of her eyebrows? Something dark and knowing?

He tried to smile back, but he could only swallow and stare at her like a fool.

He felt Annie's grip tighten on his arm.

'You see,' she said, 'it's all right.'

Stephen felt a moment of hope.

They were only dancing. Soon, Julie would come back to him, and they could leave the party together, but then he saw that it wasn't all right.

It was nowhere near all right.

Stephen watched as Julie lifted her head to gaze up at Robbie, and he saw the look of radiance come into her face, the look a woman only gives to a man she loves and desires above all others. And he saw Robbie clasp her tightly, a muscular thigh pushing between her legs as he kissed her, his mouth forcing her lips apart.

Stephen prayed for Julie to resist, but instead she fell into his embrace, returning his kiss, allowing him to possess her entirely.

Stephen spoke her name, and took a step towards them, but he faltered and stood like a man lost in a desert.

‘Come with me,’ Annie told him, leading him across the hall, and quickly through the kitchen so that no-one there noticed his distress, and out into the snow where the brazier was still burning.

LUCKILY NO-ONE else was outside, and they stood together by the fire. Annie held him tight, making soothing sounds and rubbing his arm the way women do when they want to give comfort to the stricken.

‘I don’t … I can’t …’ Stephen said in a trembling voice, not knowing what he was trying to say.

‘I know,’ Annie said tenderly, giving him her glass. He took a drink. He didn’t know what it was, but it tasted strong and he took another drink, draining the glass.

‘There,’ she said, ‘that’s better.’

Hurt and anger burned in him like fire.

‘What they’re doing … I can’t let them.’

‘Yes, you can,’ she said. ‘It’s just the way they are. It’s not your fault, I promise you, it’s not.’

‘I can’t …’

‘Listen to me, ‘Annie said, gazing up at him with her lovely eyes. ‘I know how much she likes you. She’s told me. She talks about you all the time, and you like her too, don’t you?’

‘Like? God, yes …’

‘You like her very much.’

‘Yes …’

‘Well, then, there you are.’

‘What do you mean, there you are?’ he said, almost shouting in his distress. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Ssssh ...’

‘It hurts … God, it hurts,’ said Stephen, doubling up with his hands on his knees, making himself take deep breaths, sure he would be sick.

‘Of course it hurts, but you’re a big boy, you don’t mind a little pain.’

He understood that she was trying to tease away his pain but that only deepened his anger.

‘It’s not a bloody joke.’

‘I know that.’

‘I want her … I want her to be …’

‘Yours?’

‘What’s wrong with that?’

‘I didn’t say anything was wrong, it’s just that nothing’s ever simple with Julie.’

‘She can go to hell.’

‘Don’t say that.’

‘I thought we were together, but who cares what I thought, it’s all just one big bloody lie anyway.’

‘It’s not a lie.’

‘You saw them in there. Why did she do that? Why?’

‘It’s just the way they are, the way they’ve always been.’

‘I couldn’t care less.’

‘They can’t help themselves, she’s told you that, hasn’t she?’

‘Nothing gives anyone the right to behave like that.’

‘But she did talk to you about it?’

‘Oh yes,’ he said bitterly, ‘she talked about it.’

‘Then you mustn’t blame her. She’s been honest with you, and you should respect her for that. Julie’s a very special person, brave and clever, and she’s loved him so much and for so long … You have to forgive her,

Stephen, and think kindly of her if you can.

‘This is insane.’

‘You can, I know you can.’

‘That’s just fucking stupid,’ he said, mad with anger and hurt pride.

‘We’re her friends, and we’ve promised to help her. All you have to do is say the words, “I forgive her and I won’t make any trouble.” Come on now, let me hear you. For Julie, come on, for Julie’s sake.’

‘Stop it.’

‘I won’t stop, and I won’t take no for an answer,’ she said, smiling to ease his pain. ‘Come on, now, let me hear you.’

She leant her pretty face against his, and kissed his cheek in encouragement. Her sweet scent bullied and soothed him.

Stephen started to speak but his voice became choked by a filthy tide of rage.

‘Nearly, so nearly,’ said Annie, coaxing him softly. ‘One more try, come on, deep breath and you can do it. For me, for me and for Julie.’

‘I forgive … ’ Stephen said with a sob, ‘I forgive her, and I won’t make trouble.’

‘That’s wonderful!’ Annie said joyfully, throwing her arms around him and kissing him sweetly on the mouth. ‘Congratulations, Stephen. As soon as I saw you, I knew she’d found a good one. I call this a victory, a victory for friendship and reason over jealousy and the forces of darkness.’

STEPHEN’S WORDS of forgiveness, and Annie’s praise, eased his frantic heart only for Robbie’s friends to come spilling from the house, laughing and talking loudly over each other. He couldn’t make out what they were saying, but he knew they’d come tor him.

‘Where’s your girlfriend?’ one of them asked, provoking laughter from his companions. ‘Where’s Julie?’

‘Oh, stop it,’ Annie told them, but they weren’t going to stop, not even for her.

‘Why don’t you go in and find her?’ said a red-haired boy, throwing a snowball at Stephen which missed him and hit the brazier where it hissed briefly before melting in an instant.

‘Fuck off,’ Stephen said, provoking a chorus of delighted whoops and jeers. A snowball hit him on the shoulder and then another on the back of his head.

‘Come inside,’ Annie told him, taking him by the arm and leading him away from his tormentors towards the house.

‘She’s really missing you, go and see,’ Stephen heard one of them call as Annie pushed him through the back door. Annie slammed the door behind her, cutting off the sound of their laughter. The crowd in the kitchen fell silent as they stopped to watch what Stephen would do next. Feeling exposed, and humiliated by their attention, he fled into the hall.

He could not have chosen a worse moment.

He was just in time to see Julie leading Robbie upstairs by the hand, her lovely, slim legs trotting nimbly up the stairs while Robbie’s long, sturdy legs, clearly visible beneath his kilt, followed close behind, taking two steps at a time.

Stephen opened his mouth to call out to them, but he made no sound.

He could only stare in helpless silence as they reached the top of the stairs, and vanished from view. Suddenly nauseous, the hallway began to spin around him. His skin cold and clammy, he forced himself to cross the wide hall, and start to climb the stairs.

Even if he couldn’t stop her, he’d have it out with them, do or say

something to preserve what remained of his pride.

He'd only climbed a few stairs when he felt a hand grip his leg.

'No, Stephen,' Annie said.

He turned and looked down at her. The pity in her eyes only made him pity himself.

'I have to,' he said.

'No,' she said again.

'But they've gone … They've gone upstairs.'

'Yes.'

'Oh, God, they have.'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Why do you think?'

'How could she? In front of everyone.'

'Don't be silly. We've been through all this.'

Another wave of dizziness swept over him so that he held onto the banister for support.

'I have to speak to her.'

'No.'

'I can't just … I have to …'

'I've told you, Stephen – no.'

She'd spoken sharply and, when he didn't move, she tugged his arm, dragging him down the stairs to the hallway. He pulled away from her but stumbled and nearly fell. Heads turned to look at him, thinking him the first real drunk of the night.

'There's an easier way,' she said, leading him away from the stairs. 'Come with me, and you'll see, I promise.'

'Where are we going?'

‘Somewhere else, somewhere safe and private.’

TOO WEAK to resist, he let her lead him down a corridor past a snow-covered conservatory but, when she opened a door and tried to pull him inside, he broke free and began to walk back towards the party.

‘Come back,’ she called after him.

‘I can’t let her do this,’ he replied angrily. ‘I have to stop them.’

‘I’ve told you, there’s nothing you can do,’ she said, catching up with him and taking hold of his arm again, ‘except make it worse.’

‘Oh God,’ he gasped, suddenly weak again. ‘I can’t just let them.’

He stopped walking and hung his head in shame, afraid he might begin to cry.

‘Sssh, now, it’s alright,’ Annie said gently, stroking his golden curls. ‘I’ll look after you, I promise I will. This way, now. Come on, this way.’

She led him slowly along the corridor, keeping a firm hold of his arm and whispering kind words in his ear, and this time she succeeded in taking him through the door into a small room with a writing-desk and large bookcase. There was a leather sofa against one wall beneath a painting of a ship from Nelson’s navy, its guns blazing at an unseen enemy. It must be her father’s study, Stephen thought as Annie pulled the heavy blue curtains and clicked on a desk lamp before switching off the main light.

The dim light turned the room into a warm den and when Annie closed the door, the party became a quiet sound in the distance.

‘You’re safe here,’ Annie said.

‘Just leave me alone.’

‘I will, but not till I know you’re all right. You’re my guest and it’s my duty to look after you.’

He looked at her and saw the warmth in her eyes.

‘Thank-you,’ he said quietly, grateful for her kindness and the shelter she had provided.

‘You need a drink,’ she said, going to a cabinet and pouring whisky into two glasses.

‘Slàinte,’ she said, giving him his drink and clinking glasses with him. ‘Good health,’ she translated, seeing his look of confusion.

‘Happy bloody New Year,’ he said, taking a drink.

‘Happy bloody New Year,’ she said, smiling at his dry humour.

But his bravado vanished and once more anger and shame threatened to overwhelm him. What a coward he was, hiding like this while Julie was upstairs in bed with another man. The thought made him groan in anguish, and sink to the ground with his head in his hands.

‘I can’t believe this is happening. I should have done something.’

‘There’s nothing you could have done, Stephen, I’ve told you.’

‘Something … Anything.’

‘I know this is hard,’ she said, ‘but you mustn’t blame yourself. I’ve known them for years. It’s always been like that with them.’

‘God, I’m so ashamed.’

‘There’s nothing to be ashamed of.’

‘I can’t help it.’

‘Well, you can feel ashamed if you like. It’s up to you,’ Annie said, kneeling by him and speaking softly, playfully in his ear.

‘You’re not much of a man, are you, Stephen, letting your girlfriend go upstairs with another man, and not lifting a finger to stop her? You haven’t done very well, have you?’

‘What … What are you …’ Stephen stammered in amazement at her sudden cruelty.

‘Is that shame enough for you, or would you like more?’ she whispered mischievously.

‘What are …’

But Annie talked over him.

‘Standing there like a fool watching them kiss, and in front of everyone too. I felt embarrassed for you, if you want the truth. I didn’t know where to look. No wonder everyone was laughing at you. You couldn’t blame them, could you? I mean, what did you expect? They’ve never seen anything so weak and sad in all their lives. They were just glad it wasn’t happening to them.’

He stared at her in horror, finding a dark and twisted pleasure in her words.

‘I was only being kind to you out of pity, but now that I think about it, you have every right to feel ashamed. Why shouldn’t you just give in to it? What else can you do? There’s no going back. After all, they’re probably in bed already.’

She stroked his cheek, and laughed to show she wasn’t serious and was only making fun of him, trying to show him the pointless vanity of shame.

‘There, now, is that better?’ she asked, but when he hid his head against her shoulder, she understood.

‘My God, it is better,‘ she said with an incredulous laugh. ‘I was only joking, but you really do like it, don’t you? You like to feel ashamed. What a funny boy you are, Stephen. There was me thinking you were a big strong man,’ she said, giving him more of what she thought he wanted, ‘but now I see what you really are – an imposter, a weak and stupid little boy. No wonder Julie’s gone to bed with Robbie. He’s a real man who knows what a woman wants. Poor Stephen, but it’s the truth, isn’t it?’

She felt a shiver run through him, and she gave an answering shiver of

her own. The pleasure she felt surprised her. She may have pitied him, but a part of her enjoyed his distress, and the power she held over him.

‘Say it,’ she insisted, thinking what a pretty mouth he had.

He remained silent.

‘On you go, I won’t mind.’

‘It’s true,’ he mumbled against her arm.

‘What’s true? Tell me.’

‘Please, stop this.’

‘But I want to hear you say it,’ she said, curious to see how far she could push him.

‘I am weak and stupid, and he’s … He’s a …’

‘Don’t be shy. I’ve told you, I want to hear,’ Annie insisted, strangely aroused. ‘Hurry up, I’m waiting.’

‘He’s … He’s a real man …’

‘Yes, that’s right, he is, and what else?’ she said, fascinated by his strange delirium.

‘Who knows … Who knows what a woman wants.’

Stephen feared he would die of shame, and a dark erotic terror chilled his blood. Inside him a demon had broken its chains, and was playing with him for sport.

‘There you are, you’ll feel better now,’ Annie said gently, kissing him on the forehead and stroking his hair. ‘It’s been said, and you don’t have to worry anymore.’

‘Thank-you,’ he whispered helplessly, but his politeness only made her laugh.

‘Well, you may not be much of a man, but you certainly have good manners. Maybe that’s what Julie sees in you.’

Once more she felt him shiver. ‘You like it when I talk like this, don’t

you? You like it when I tease you and say cruel things.'

He closed his eyes and covered his face with his hands.

'You don't have to lie to me,' she said, taking one of his hands so that he had to look at her.

'Yes,' he said tremulously. 'I like it.'

'Poor Stephen,' she said warmly, stroking his hair. 'Well, in that case, I'll see what I can do.'

He leaned his head trustingly against her shoulder, and Annie felt a wave of tenderness for him.

'Don't worry, I like it too. It's wicked of me, I know, but you enjoy that, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'When I'm wicked and cruel.'

'Yes.'

'Would you like to talk some more?'

'I don't know ...'

'Just for a little while?' she asked, wanting to take things further. 'Until you feel better.'

'If you want.'

'Oh, I do want, Stephen, really I do.'

'All right, then,' he said, looking at her with wide, trusting eyes.

'Come on, then,' she said. 'This way, over to the sofa, and we'll get you comfortable.'

Stephen started to get to his feet.

'No,' she said firmly, putting her hand on his neck, wondering where the idea had come from. 'Stay where you are, stay down.'

He looked up at her in confusion, and she gave him a little push so that he fell forward onto his hands and knees.

‘It’s better this way, Stephen. You’ll see.’

‘Annie …’

‘On you come, this way.’

She led him across the carpet, making him crawl by her side on his hands and knees.

‘That’s it,’ she said, keeping her hand on his neck as if he was a dog. ‘Good boy.’

Annie felt a smile spread across her face. Rather to her surprise, she took delight in having a handsome young man crawl at her feet. It gave her a delicious feeling, and she’d never experienced anything like it.

As he crawled by her side, Stephen felt the swaying hem of her dress brush against his face and her nylon-clad leg graze his cheek. He felt the warmth from her body, and once more he inhaled her sweet, heavy scent. It made him feel giddy and lost.

‘So easy this way,’ he heard her say from somewhere high above. ‘It suits you like this, Stephen. Really it does, it suits you very well.’

Her words, and the casual way she’d said them, inflamed his blood, and he felt a narcotic rush of arousal.

He wondered if he was dreaming, or if he’d died and ascended to a cruel heaven.

‘This can’t be happening,’ he told himself, and yet it felt both true and right, as if at long last he’d found his rightful place in the world.

‘Nearly there,’ Annie said, her swaying hem once more brushing against his face.

He remembered Julie calling him her angel, and he wondered if this was where angels went after they’d fallen.

‘Come on, Stephen,’ Annie said happily, as if nothing was out of the ordinary. ‘Up you get.’

He climbed up onto the sofa. It felt lovely to lie down on the cool leather. Suddenly he felt very sleepy.

‘That’s the way,’ he heard Annie say. ‘You get comfy and have a little snooze.’

He was dimly aware of her undoing his laces and pulling off his boots. It was warm in the room, but he started to shiver and he couldn’t understand why.

‘You’ve had a shock, that’s all,’ Annie said, leaving his side for a few moments before coming back with a tartan rug which she tucked tightly around him. ‘You need to sleep, sweet boy. I’ll come back and see you in a little while.’

‘Don’t go,’ he said drowsily.

‘You may have forgotten, I have a party to go to.’

‘Stay,’ he said, feeling like a child. She seemed to have the same thought for she immediately began to speak in a motherly tone.

‘Is my little boy frightened to be left on his own?’

‘Yes,’ he said, glad to play her game.

‘Would Annie’s little boy like a story, a bed-time story?’

‘Yes,’ he replied with a shiver of delight, happy she was going to stay a while longer.

‘Before he goes down for his nap?’

‘Yes.’

‘Before he goes bye-byes?’

‘Yes.’

‘Does he promise to be a good boy?’

‘Yes.’

He knew it was a game, a cruel game, but nonetheless he felt loved, and safe beneath his blanket.

‘All right, then, but one story and no more. Promise me.’

‘I promise.’

‘One and only one,’ she said firmly. ‘Annie can’t stay here all night. She needs to be with the grown-ups, with the big boys and girls. Annie’s little boy knows that, doesn’t he?’

‘Yes.’

She knelt by the sofa with her head very close to his. Her knee made a little cracking sound as she knelt and, for some reason, the sound filled him with happiness.

He gazed at her in wonder. Her eyes were kindly and her face lovely in the soft light. Her dress was low-cut and, when he dropped his gaze, he saw the sweet swell of her breasts and the lace of her pretty bra.

Stephen felt his soul yearn to leave his body, and live forever in that heavenly place.

‘Stop looking down my dress.’

‘I’m not,’ he protested.

‘Bad boy, I saw you.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said weakly.

‘That’s for big boys,’ she said, adjusting her dress, ‘not for silly little boys who have to be sent to bed early.’

Her tone was stern, but the playfulness in her eyes eased his shame.

‘So, then, Stephen, what kind of story would you like?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Then Annie will have to decide, won’t she?’

‘Yes.’

‘In that case, I’m going to tell you a story about a very bad little boy who made such a fool of himself at a party he lost his girlfriend, and had to be sent to bed as a punishment. And you know who the little boy is, don’t

you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Tell me his name.’

‘Stephen,’ he said, deeply ashamed, and yet with a strange pride at being in her story.

‘That’s right, and will I tell you what he did that was so bad?’

Stephen gave a nod, wanting to hear and not wanting to hear in equal measure.

It was an exquisite torment.

‘He pretended,’ Annie said, as if pretending was the greatest crime imaginable.

Stephen stared at her, not sure what she meant.

‘He pretended to be a grown-up man when all the time he was just a silly little boy. Now, that doesn’t sound like such a bad thing, does it?’ she asked.

‘No,’ he said uncertainly.

‘But it was a bad thing, a very bad thing, and do you want to know why it was so bad?’

‘Yes,’ he whispered, steeling himself.

‘It was so bad because of the person he was doing all the pretending to, and you know who that was, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘It was his girlfriend, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

‘His funny, clever, beautiful girlfriend.’

‘Yes.’

‘Tell me her name?’

Stephen stared at her with wide eyes.

‘Don’t be frightened, you can tell me.’

Stephen shook his head.

He didn’t want to say Julie’s name. He didn’t understand why but he knew that saying her name would be far more humiliating than saying his own, and he also knew that, if he said it, his strange surrender would be final and inescapable.

‘Come on, don’t be shy?’

Once again he shook his head.

‘Hurry up and be a good boy. Annie’s waiting.’

‘No.’

‘If Annie leans in very close, will her little boy whisper the name in her ear? Mmm, will he?’ she said, leaning in close and kissing him on the nose before placing her ear by his mouth so that her sweet-smelling hair fell onto his face.

‘Come on, Annie’s listening.’

Still he shook his head.

‘Hurry up,’ she said, her voice suddenly impatient, ‘or Annie will get angry.’

‘Julie,’ Stephen said faintly, the room spinning around him.

‘That’s right, Julie,’ said Annie, sounding very pleased with him, ‘but Julie was a very clever girl, and she soon saw through the boy she was with, the little boy pretending to be a big boy, the silly little boy called …’

She paused and waited for Stephen to say his name again.

‘Stephen,’ he said obediently, learning to swim in the depths of his shame.

‘That’s right,’ said Annie, ‘and Julie soon saw that Stephen wasn’t the big, grown-up man she thought he was.’

While one hand stroked his hair, her other hand crept under the blanket.

‘But don’t worry, Stephen,’ she said, ‘our story has a happy ending. Would you like to hear it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good boy,’ she said, her hand coming to rest on the front of his jeans. Stephen shivered at her touch, and said her name in protest, but Annie only laughed, and kissed his cheek, saying, ‘Don’t worry, it’s only to make you feel better. I know it’s Julie you love.’

‘I do love her,’ Stephen confessed, dreading that Annie would discover what he was wearing beneath his jeans.

‘But Stephen wasn’t the only boy who loved Julie,’ said Annie, going back to her story. ‘Of course he wasn’t. A girl as clever and beautiful as Julie was bound to have many admirers. And so it was that another boy loved Julie, a big, strong, handsome boy, and when he came to the party, driving all the way from the city through the snow and ice, Julie saw that he was the man for her. There was nothing poor little Stephen could do. He wasn’t strong enough to keep her for his own, and he was sent to bed so that Julie could enjoy herself with a real man, a man she knew could give her what she wanted. And there you are, Stephen, Julie and her lover find a lovely big bed upstairs at the party, and live happily ever after.’

Stephen groaned in an ecstacy of shame, but Annie only laughed and patted him through his jeans, saying, ‘What’s the matter, didn’t you like my story?’

He gave a sob and once more a look of hurt came into his eyes.

‘But you love Julie, don’t you?’ she asked him.

‘Y-yes.’

‘You love her very much.’

‘Yes.’

‘And she’s getting what she wants, isn’t she?’

‘Yes.’

‘What makes her happy?’

‘Yes?’

‘Well, then, you should be happy too, happy for her.’

‘I can’t …’

‘Shouldn’t you?’ she repeated, a harder edge coming into her voice, ‘if you love her.’

‘Yes,’ he said meekly, ‘yes.’

‘I knew you’d be a good boy,’ she said, removing her hand and tucking the rug under him again. ‘Now, I’m going to join the grown-ups while my little boy has a nice, long nap. And before you go to sleep you can lie awake for a while and think about what a lovely time Julie is having at the party. You’ll do that, won’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘They’ll be kissing and cuddling in their big wide bed. Isn’t that a lovely thought?’

‘Yes,’ said Stephen, pleasure mixing with pain as he recalled the sight of Julie’s slim legs trotting upstairs with Robbie’s sturdy legs following close behind, taking two steps at a time.

‘Lucky Julie. Say it.’

‘Lucky J-julie.’

‘Very good, and lucky Robbie. Let me hear you say that too.’

‘L-ucky Robbie.’

‘Good boy.’

This strange call and response awoke in Stephen a rush of conflicting emotions, among them anger, gratitude, jealousy, shame and joy, and yet chief among them was joy, a dark and twisted joy that brought an unlikely peace to his troubled heart.

‘What a good boy you are,’ Annie said with a smile. ‘I’m very pleased with you, really I am. If I see Julie, I’ll tell her where you are, and how good you’ve been. I’m going to lock the door. Then I’ll know you’re safe. I’ll come back and check on you in a little while. Now, you have a nice, long nap. Night-night, Stephen. Sweet dreams.’

She kissed him on his cheek, and left the room, closing the door softly behind her. He heard a key turn quietly in the lock, but he wasn’t in the least concerned at being locked in. On the contrary, he welcomed his captivity.

He wasn’t important any more, Annie had taught him that, and Julie too, by what she’d done, and it was only right that he be locked away and forgotten.

Alone in the soft light, a transcendental peace and serenity settled over Stephen, and he marvelled at Annie’s magical powers. It hurt him deeply to think of Julie with another man, but now, by some miracle, the hurt brought pleasure as well as pain. Annie’s mischievous play-acting had transformed his shame into a form of delight and, lying under his blanket, Stephen experienced the transforming rapture of submission.

He must have slept. Once, he thought he saw a figure bending over him, and kissing him on the forehead, but when he opened his eyes there was no-one there. He felt blessed, as if a lovely shadow had leaned across his soul, and he’d fallen back into a blissful sleep.

SOME TIME later, he had no idea how long, he was woken by the sound of the key turning in the lock and Annie coming into the room. She knelt by his head, her knee once more making its lovely cracking sound. She kissed him sweetly on the lips. Her breath smelled more strongly of alcohol, and she spoke in her warmly teasing tone again.

‘How’s my little boy? Has he had a nice, long nap?’

He nodded sleepily.

‘You have been sleeping, haven’t you? Julie came in to see you, but you were far away in the land of nod.’

He sat up, suddenly angry with himself. How could he have missed her? How could he have slept through such an important visit?

‘Julie? Where is she?’

‘Sssh,’ she calmed him. ‘She went back upstairs once she saw you were asleep,’ Annie said with a twinkle in her eye.

‘I want to see her.’

‘Ssssh.’

‘I have to speak to her.’

‘No, Stephen, that’s not your decision.’

God …’

‘Sssh, it’s all right,’ she said, kissing him again, her warm lips lingering on his mouth, her hand slipping under the rug.

‘Poor Stephen,’ she said with her knowing smile. ‘Julie’s far too busy to waste time on a sleepy, little boy. Who knows how long she’ll be? But she can take as long as she likes, can’t she? It’s got nothing to do with poor, little Stephen.’

She kissed him, pulling down his zip and opening his jeans.

‘No …’ he said in alarm, trying to sit up, but his arms were trapped under the blanket and he could do nothing to stop her.

‘I’ve told you, it’s all right,’ she said, sliding her hand inside his jeans. ‘Just to make you feel better, just to … but what’s this?’

Stephen closed his eyes in the deepest shame. There was to be no escape, and he must suffer for being such a fool.

‘What are you wearing?’ Annie said in amazement, pulling back the

blanket and seeing his pretty knickers.

‘They’re not mine,’ he said weakly.

‘I should think not,’ said Julie.

‘They’re Julie’s.’

‘Julie’s?’

‘Yes.’

‘Does Julie know you’re wearing her knickers?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why are you wearing them? Do you like wearing women’s underwear?’

‘No, it’s not …’

‘Why, then?’

‘She asked me to.’

‘Who did? Julie?’

‘Yes.’

‘She asked you to wear her knickers?’

‘Yes.’

Stephen experienced a few moments of pleasurable anticipation, sure that Annie would express her anger at Julie for being so cruel and unreasonable, but he couldn’t have been more mistaken.

‘Do you always do what Julie asks?’ Annie said, wide-eyed in astonishment, as if unable to imagine such a surrender.

‘I don’t know …’

‘Wearing women’s clothes because you want to is one thing – I could understand that – but wearing them because you’ve been told to! Really, Stephen, that’s the most hopeless thing I’ve ever heard. But, I have to say, they’re very pretty panties,’ she said, caressing him through the soft lace. ‘They even quite suit you. Maybe Julie knew all along. You know how clever

she is. Maybe she knew all the time you're just a sweet little boy who wants to wear her panties.'

She laughed as she caressed him through his panties.

'Please, Annie, don't.'

'But you like it, I can feel how much.'

'It's not that … Please, don't tell anyone.'

'Oh, so that's what's bothering you?' said Annie, delighted to have found something else to torment him with.

'Please, don't,' he pleaded.

'Honestly, Stephen, you're such a spoilsport.'

'Please … Say you won't.'

'But it's such a good story. Think of the fun I'll have telling everyone the little English boy is wearing Julie's panties.'

'God, Annie, please …'

'And not any old panties. Oh, no, he's wearing the prettiest pair of knickers you've ever seen.'

She ran her fingers slowly up and down his erection, making Stephen gasp in pleasure even as his anxiety deepened.

'I'll have to tell everyone, Stephen, I'm sorry'

'No.'

'I'm going to.'

'Please, you can't.'

'I'm sorry, Stephen, it's too good a chance to miss. Unless Julie's told everyone already. I wonder if she has, I'll have to ask her.'

'Annie …'

'Well, it serves you right,' she said, caressing him so sweetly he groaned and pushed against her hand. 'Wearing girl's panties, what do you expect? But if you do something for me, then maybe I'll keep your secret.'

‘Please … I’ll do anything.’

‘Anything, Stephen, really?’

‘Yes.’

‘Very well, this is what I want you to do,’ she said, still caressing him with her clever little hand. ‘When Julie comes to take you home, I want you to kneel and tell her how beautiful she is. You can do that, can’t you?’

He remained silent, and she gave a little squeeze to encourage him.

‘Did you say something Stephen, I didn’t hear?’

‘Yes,’ he whispered.

‘Yes, what?’

‘Yes, I’ll tell her she’s beautiful,’ he said, a bitter tone in his voice she didn’t like.

‘I hope you’re not going to speak to her in that angry way. I’ll tell everyone unless you speak kindly, unless you say it as if you mean it, and you will mean it, won’t you, Stephen?’

‘Yes,’ he said, more meekly this time.

‘And you’ll be on your knees when you tell her? I know how much you like being on your knees.’

‘Yes,’ he said, closing his eyes in shame, ‘I’ll be on my knees.’

‘But I don’t just want you to tell her she’s beautiful, I want you to tell her you understand why she took Robbie to bed, and that you forgive her, and that you’ll never hold it against her. Tell me you’ll do that.’

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘You’ll do it?’

‘I will,’ he agreed helplessly.

‘Promise me.’

‘I promise.’

‘I’m going to hold you to it, Stephen, believe me. You do believe me,

don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good,’ she said, caressing him one last time before withdrawing her hand, and covering him again with the blanket. ‘Now, you’re going to lie here and be a good boy until Julie comes to fetch you. While you’re waiting, you can think about what you’re going to say to her, and how nicely you’re going to say it. You’ll do that, won’t you?’

‘Yes, Annie.’

Smiling her lovely smile, she kissed him before standing and leaving the room.

THIS TIME she didn’t lock the door, and Stephen found the prospect of freedom troubling. He feared he wouldn’t be able to rejoin the normal world beyond the door. He’d enjoyed his captivity, and had no desire to leave the safety of his prison. He lay under the blanket in a daze of submissive arousal, letting Annie’s demands, and the way she’d made him agree to them, run over and over again in his head.

Could he kneel before Julie and tell her she was beautiful? Could he swallow his pride and tell her he understood why she’d taken Robbie to bed? Could he really forgive her, and tell her he would never hold her betrayal against her?

A core of angry pride hardened at the idea, and yet the prospect of countermanding his pride was strangely appealing. A newly awakened longing urged him to transgress against the male instincts which drove him to strive and compete, and he found himself rehearsing the words he would say to Julie.

He pictured himself on his knees before her, and he imagined Annie

witnessing his surrender with her sweet, knowing smile. The thought both appalled and thrilled him, and he understood that he no longer knew what kind of man he was, or how he should conduct himself in life and love.

He lay on the sofa until he thought Julie would never come. When at last he heard voices outside the door, he was seized by a terrible panic. At war with himself, he didn't know if he would rise up in anger, or kneel and declare his undying devotion.

Torn in two, he took the only option open to him. He quickly fastened his jeans and turned his head into the corner of the sofa, pretending he was asleep.

He heard the door open and soft footsteps on the carpet. A figure leant over him. He kept his eyes closed, and made himself breath evenly as if he was sleeping.

'He's asleep,' he heard Annie say in a half-whisper so as not to wake him.

'What am I going to do?'

It was Julie. He could tell their voices apart after all. Julie's was slower and warmer, and his heart fluttered at the sound of it.

'He won't give you any trouble,' Annie assured her.

'I like him, I really do,' Julie said. 'I must be mad. He's so sweet and kind and I'm so bloody selfish.'

'I don't think he minds.'

'What do you mean?'

'I've had a little talk with him,' Annie said. 'You didn't tell me he's wearing your panties.' Stephen heard the amusement in her voice.

'How do you know?' Julie asked quickly.

'How do you think?'

'Don't make me jealous, Annie,' said Julie, a sharp anger in her voice.

‘You get jealous? That’s a laugh.’

‘I’m not laughing.’

‘For God’s sake, Julie. Nothing happened, at least nothing you need to worry about. It’s you he likes, he made that very clear.’

‘I like him too, just not the way I like Robbie.’

‘Are you two back together?’

‘God knows.’

‘Where is he?’

‘Gone … Driving to England … To her.’

Stephen felt enormous relief. He’d dreaded the thought of meeting Robbie, of having to confront his triumphant rival, but he’d heard the sorrow in Julie’s voice and, to his surprise, took no pleasure in it.

‘Do you still love him?’ Annie asked.

‘Love? What’s love? I don’t know any more. Perhaps I’ve never known.’

Julie sounded exhausted. ‘He told me that when he heard the bells in Edinburgh he couldn’t be with anyone except me. He drove straight here, and then, when I saw him … ’

‘You felt the same.’

‘Yes.’

‘And it was good?’

‘Good? God, Annie, when it’s like that it’s worth everything, life, death … Everything.’

‘Now you’re making me jealous.’

Stephen heard them laugh, and he wished he was their friend, laughing along with them.

‘You’re tired,’ Annie said kindly. ‘Come on, it’s after five, time you were home in your bed.’

‘Yes, you’re right.’

He heard a soft shucking sound as Julie pulled on her boots before zipping them up in readiness for the snow. ‘I don’t want to wake him. Look at him, he’s like an angel.’

‘He is.’

‘Maybe we should let him sleep.’

‘No, he’ll be fine,’ Annie said.

Stephen felt a hand on his shoulder.

‘Come on, sleepy-head,’ Annie said, shaking him gently. ‘Up you get. Julie’s here.’

Stephen couldn’t hide any more, but he went through the whole rigmarole of rubbing his eyes, and looking around in confusion as if he’d just woken.

Annie slid his legs off the sofa.

‘Boots on,’ she told him, ‘and then you can go home.’

Stephen sat slouched on the sofa while Annie knelt by him putting on his boots. He watched her for a while until he found the courage to lift his head and look at Julie.

She was sitting opposite him in a leather armchair, a queen on her throne.

‘Hullo, Stephen,’ she said quietly with the same enigmatic smile she’d given him as she’d danced with Robbie.

‘Julie,’ was all he could say.

‘Oh, come on, Stephen, you can do better than that,’ Annie said, doing up his laces.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Julie.

‘Stephen and I had a little talk. He’s got something he wants to say to you, haven’t you Stephen?’ said Annie, looking up at him expectantly.

Stephen swallowed, and watched her tie the laces on his other boot.

‘Come on, Stephen, she’s waiting,’ said Annie.

‘I … I just want to say …’ Stephen muttered awkwardly.

‘Not like that,’ Annie said, getting to her feet. ‘Remember what we agreed.’

She placed her hand on his neck and pushed until he slid from the couch onto his hands and knees.

‘So easy this way,’ Annie said softly.

She kept her hand on his neck as he crawled over to Julie. He couldn’t bring himself to look up at her. All he saw was her long black boots, and her lovely knees under the pretty hem of her dress.

‘Now you can tell her,’ Annie said, letting go of his neck and stepping back.

‘You’re b-beautiful, Julie …’

‘Look at her when you’re speaking,’ Annie commanded.

Obeying, he looked up at Julie.

She’d unpinned her hair, or perhaps it had come loose during lovemaking, and she looked unbearably lovely in the lamplight, but the expression in her eyes was unreadable.

He thought he saw sorrow there, regret, and something else, something dangerously close to pity.

‘I forgive you, Julie … I understand, I really do … ‘

‘You don’t have to do this,’ Julie said sharply.

‘Let him say it,’ Annie said.

‘I don’t want to hear it.’

‘He needs to say it,’ Annie insisted. ‘For his sake more than yours. Go on, Stephen.’

‘I won’t be angry with you, Julie,’ said Stephen in a trembling voice,

‘I’ll never be angry with you … I love … I love you …’

And then the tears came, hot, bitter tears of loneliness and loss.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said between sobs, ‘I’m sorry …’

‘Oh Stephen, it’s me who should be sorry,’ said Julie through tears of her own. ‘I didn’t mean to do this to you, I really didn’t.’

She pulled his head onto her lap, and cradled him there, kissing the back of his head.

Annie knelt by them and embraced him too, telling him he was a good boy and that everything would be all right, and that he should have known better than get mixed up with such crazy Scots girls. He laughed, and slowly regained control of himself, soothed by their kindness and warm caresses. Annie searched for a handkerchief to wipe his face but she couldn’t find one, and instead Julie wiped away his tears with the hem of her dress.

Annie helped him to his feet and Julie held his coat for him. He put his arms through the sleeves and Annie did up his buttons for him. He saw the mischievous look in her eyes and he feared she would mother him in front of Julie, but she didn’t, and he was grateful for her mercy.

Following them along the corridor to the front hall, he heard Annie tell Julie in a whisper he wasn’t supposed to hear, ‘I’m sorry if I went too far. I was only trying to help.’

‘I know,’ Julie replied, ‘I’m not easy to help.’

‘You’re my best friend, and I love you,’ said Annie, embracing Julie and holding her tight.

STEPHEN AND Julie walked home in silence. When they reached Julie’s room they collapsed into bed without undressing. Stephen started to speak but Julie interrupted him. ‘We’ll talk about it in the morning,’ she told

him before falling into an exhausted sleep.

But they never did talk about it. When Stephen woke he was alone in the bed, and his rucksack was on the sofa. He dressed gratefully in his own clothes.

Julie was polite, but aloof and distant. They did their best to forget what had happened at the party, but they couldn't forget. An uncomfortable shyness had grown between them as if they were strangers.

They knew they'd gone too far, broken too many of the fundamental rules of love and romance, and Stephen sensed that, in some profound way, Julie was disappointed in him.

New Year's day was a Monday, and Stephen was due to stay until the end of the week, but he was on the train home to England on Tuesday morning after spending the night in a separate bedroom.

THE NEXT year at university they hardly met, and when they did they behaved as if they didn't know each other. Stephen made himself forget his time in Scotland as if it had been a dream.

He had a number of safer, more conventional girl-friends, and Julie threw all her energy into her studies. Her brilliant essays won several academic prizes and she wrote a screenplay for a fifteen minute film which received an award from the Arts Council, and praise from a famous director.

On three occasions during the year he saw her in the company of a tall, dark-haired young Scotsman. Each time he saw him he felt as if he was drowning.

But there was one more time when they became close again.

Late one night, towards the end of their third year, Julie turned up out of the blue at Stephen's flat. She'd received a call from home. Her father had

died suddenly, and there were no trains to Scotland until the morning.

Stephen didn't have a girlfriend at the time, and he sat with her late into the night. He'd hardly known her father, but he remembered him fondly all the same, and he did what he could to comfort her.

They drank too much wine and Stephen listened to her stories of her father, of his kindness, his talent and his eccentricity. He repeated her father's unforgettable welcome, 'Look out for ghosts and falling masonry,' and Julie laughed and cried at the memory, saying that was exactly the kind of thing her father always used to say.

He gave her his bed and he slept on the couch in the front-room. In the morning he saw her onto the early train. She thanked him, and kissed him in a way that reminded him of other kisses.

He felt sure they would get together again, but their time at university passed like lightning, and they stayed apart, moving in different circles.

Ten years after they graduated he started seeing Julie on television, and hearing her on radio. She'd become a successful journalist and writer. Her wit and honesty, along with her lovely voice and striking looks made her an increasingly popular figure on television.

AVA WAS an admirer of Julie's and, when she heard that Stephen had gone out with the great Julie Buchan, she was more than intrigued, but he refused to give her any details until one night in bed after they'd been drinking in a bar.

Ava never gave up when she wanted something, and that night she brought all her charms to bear, sitting astride him and teasing his eager cock with her slick cunt. She leaned over him, but wouldn't let him kiss her lovely breasts until he told her all about Julie. When he still refused, she took the tip

of his cock inside her only to pull away. She did this again and again until he could hold out no longer but, even in the throes of his desire, he was careful not to tell her everything.

He didn't tell her about wearing Julie's clothes and underwear, or how he'd been locked in the study at Annie's party, but he did tell her they'd never become lovers, and about Julie's handsome first love.

He also told her about Julie dancing with Robbie at the Hogmanay party, and about how crushed and heartbroken he'd felt when he saw them going upstairs to find a bed.

Ava, immediately sympathetic, let him inside her and made love to him sweetly as if to make up for Julie's cruelty.

Yet Stephen sensed a disappointment in Ava that he hadn't made love to Julie, and claimed such a strong and beautiful woman for his own.

And now, every time Ava saw Julie on TV or read one of her articles, she would tease him, referring to Julie as 'that beautiful woman who wouldn't let you fuck her.'

It was meant as fun, and Stephen would laugh along with her, but he feared that Ava's opinion of him had diminished and she'd lost respect for him as a man, and he wished he'd never told her about his trip to Scotland, and his strange affair with the famous Julie Buchan.

THREE

‘Oh, I’m going to, Stephen, make no mistake about that,’ she said with an imperious calm that delighted his quivering heart.

‘THAT SMELLS wonderful.’

Stephen jumped at the sound of Ava’s voice which made her laugh as she kissed him.

‘If you don’t feed me soon, I’ll faint.’

Ava stood barefoot and smiling in a pair of old jeans and t-shirt, and with her long black hair wet and shining from the shower. She kissed him again, nuzzling into his neck and asking him, ‘Are you alright?’

‘I’m not sure,’ he answered. ‘Are you?’

‘I feel … Different. What was that? Where did it come from? I feel like I’ve been swept out to sea. A deep, dark sea.’

‘You’re lovely,’ he said as if her beauty explained everything.

‘In the shower I couldn’t stop thinking about it, being so bossy with you, telling you what to do.’

‘You did more than think about it,’ Ava thought, recalling how lovely it had felt to soap herself between her legs.

‘Come here,’ she said, capturing him anew with a sweet, slow kiss, pressing her hands into the hollow of his back before letting them slide down to his buttocks to pull him against her, making him kiss her more deeply only to turn her head away, letting him kiss her neck as she whispered in his ear.

‘I’m thinking about it now, how good it felt treating you like that.

Making you my slave, making you call me Mistress. I liked it, Stephen, I really did. I wasn't playing, or if I was it didn't feel like a game. It felt real to me, as if being your Mistress is the real me, and everything else is the game.'

'I love you, Ava.'

'Ava? Already?' she enquired, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

'I'm sorry,' he said with an awkward laugh. 'Mistress Carafano.'

'It's no laughing-matter,' she said, smacking his arm playfully but looking intently into his eyes.

Stephen knew she was right. He'd tried to laugh it off, but a familiar knot was forming in his stomach. He knew what she meant by a deep, dark sea.

'I'm not saying I understand what this is, but I know it makes everything feel new and alive.' Still looking into his eyes, her voice grew serious. 'I don't want you to worry, but there's something I want to tell you.'

'What is it?' he asked, instantly worried.

'You have to promise not to be angry.'

'I'll try.'

'You have to promise.'

'All right, I promise.'

'It's crazy, only a feeling really, so I'm just going to say it, okay?'

'Okay.'

She took his hand, squeezed it, and spoke quietly.

'I don't want to think of you as my husband anymore,' she said, giving voice to her crazy thoughts, 'and I don't want you to think of me as your wife.'

Seeing the hurt in his eyes, Ava hurried to console him.

'It doesn't mean I don't love you. It doesn't mean that at all. I want to think of myself as a free woman, that's all. Husband and wife, what does that

really mean?' she said, taking hold of his arm and rubbing it gently in a way that reminded him of Annie at the brazier. 'Don't you ever think marriage is a prison they lock us up in to keep our lives dull and safe? The rules we live by, we didn't make them. I want to break out, make my own rules, sail out to sea and leave our little harbour far behind. Don't you want that too?'

'I'm not sure I do,' Stephen said, struggling to keep up with her.

'I can't go sailing out to sea on my own.'

'God, I'd miss you,' he said, anxiety deepening in his eyes.

'Then come with me.'

'People drown at sea.'

'I'm not afraid, and why should I drown? I'm a strong swimmer.'

'I'm not as brave as you.'

'You don't have to be brave, just honest. And you trust me, don't you?'

'Of course I do.'

'Well, then, there you are, there's nothing to be afraid of,' she said, taking his hand and kissing his fingertips one by one.

'How would I think of you if not as my wife?'

'As your Mistress, maybe. Your owner, your superior. After all, I liked how it felt to take charge of you, and I think you liked it too.'

Stephen looked for humour in her eyes, some sign that she was playing a joke on him, but he saw no such sign.

'You'd be my Mistress?' he said.

'Yes, why not?'

'How would you think of me?' he asked.

'As my servant,' she said with a shrug as if it was obvious, 'my slave.'

'Could you really think of me as that, as your slave?'

'Yes, I think I could, in some ways I already do.'

'My God, Ava,' said Stephen, trying to sound carefree, 'the things you

say.‘

‘I’m only being honest, Stephen. It’s only in stupid books and films where women have to be punished for enjoying sex. It’s a conspiracy to keep women in their place. And besides, you’re so kind and loving and you want me so much, I can’t help but take advantage of you. I can tell you want me to, and it feels so good when I do, like it has to happen and it would be wrong to stop it. Does this make any sense to you?’

‘It’s madness,’ Stephen said, his senses reeling. ‘How would we be together? How would we live?’

‘How will we know until we try?’ she suddenly snapped at him. ‘I’ll be your Mistress, you’ll be my slave. I’ll tell you what to do and you’ll do what I tell you. What could be simpler than that?’

For reasons he couldn’t comprehend her irritation sent a shiver of delight through him, and he spoke quietly, fearful of where this path might lead them.

‘I don’t know, maybe just for a night.’

‘Don’t be a coward.’

‘I’m not a coward.’

‘Then why put a limit on it?’ she said. ‘Why not just run with it for a while and see where it goes?’

‘That’s easy for you to say.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘If you’re a free woman, I won’t be a free man, will I?’ he asked, knowing with a sweet yet heavy dread how she would answer.

‘No,’ she quickly replied, ‘you won’t be a free man. Not at all. At least not in the same way. You’ll be at liberty to explore your own nature. Perhaps there’s a freedom to be found in serving the woman you love, a different kind of freedom, but that’s exciting, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ he admitted, the knot in his stomach growing tighter as he began to crave her authority again.

‘Maybe you’ll find a whole new world to explore. Who knows? This is as new to me as it is to you.’

Stephen said nothing. He felt light-headed, dazzled by her beauty and assurance.

‘God knows why I want this, but I do,’ she said. ‘I don’t think I could want it so much if you didn’t want it too, and if I can admit the truth, then so can you.’

She kissed him, grazing her lips against his and looking into his eyes, challenging him to tell the truth.

‘Come on, Stephen, tell me what you really want. Tell me you want to be my slave and do whatever I tell you. Tell me you want to give yourself to me, body and soul.’

He took a deep breath and answered her as honestly as he could.

‘I don’t have the strength to resist you, Ava, that’s the truth. I would fight it if I could, I’ve tried, believe me. I hate the thought of giving in to you, and I hate the way you speak to me sometimes, as if I’m your servant or housemaid. It hurts my pride, makes me angry and ashamed, but hating it only makes me want it more. God knows, I must be mad, crazy in the head, but I like the way it hurts and you know that, don’t you? Deep down you know, that’s why you can talk to me the way you do. I’m helpless, Ava, really I am. Do what you want with me. You own me, body and soul.’

Feeling both pity and affection for him, she ran her finger down the line of his chin. ‘I like that, Stephen,’ she said, ‘that I make you helpless. I like that very much.’

‘I love you, Ava, I love you more than I can say.’

‘You’re allowed to love me,’ she said with a smile, ‘I give you my

permission.’

‘God, Ava, that’s sexy.’

‘What is?’ she said as if she didn’t know.

‘The way you talk down to me, with that look in your eyes.’

‘What look?’

‘You know perfectly well what look. The look that says I know I’m beautiful and you can’t resist me. The look that says you’re mine, and I can do what I like with you.’

He looked so serious Ava couldn’t help but laugh. ‘It is sexy, isn’t it?’ she said, kissing him, ‘far sexier than anything else.’

‘Yes, but it’s frightening.’

‘I’ve told you, you don’t have to be frightened.’

‘That’s fine for you. What does a Mistress have to be frightened of compared to her slave? Think how I must feel. Try to imagine the fear I have of losing your love and respect, of appearing less of a man in your eyes, and in the eyes of the world. If our friends were to discover you were my Mistress they’d be impressed with you, and think more of you for it. They’d laugh with you about it, and admire your power and strength, but if they found out I was your slave they’d laugh at me, not with me, and think less of me as a man and as a friend.’

‘Yes, I can see how that might be true.’

‘Of course it’s true. It’s the way people are, but the crazy thing is none of that makes any difference.’

He shook his head in amazement at what he was saying. ‘I want you to make me your slave. It frightens me to death, but I want you to think less of me. God help me, I want to kneel at your feet, I want you to rule over me as my Mistress and my wife.’

‘Is that really what you want, Stephen?’

‘I never thought I’d find the courage to say it, but yes, it is.’

‘Then we should do it.’

‘God, Ava …’

‘Why not? It would be fun, and what’s to stop us?’

‘There’s wickedness in your eyes, truly there is. It’s shining out of them.’

‘Poor Stephen,’ she said with a smile so sweetly mocking it made him weak at the knees.

‘Why “poor”?’ he said.

‘Because of the way I’m going to treat you, because of the things I’m going to do to you. Poor, poor Stephen.’

‘God, Ava, you’re beautiful.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘On the surface, perhaps, but what about under here?’ she said, putting her hand to her heart, ‘where you can’t see. Not even I know what’s hiding in here. For all you know I might be cruel, horribly mean and selfish.’

‘I don’t care.’

‘Well, you should,’ she said, suddenly afraid of the power she felt rising inside her. ‘You need to listen to me, Stephen, really listen. I will be cruel to you. Don’t ask me how I know, I just know. I’m not going to lie to you, and what’s more I intend to enjoy it.’

‘I’ve told you, I don’t care. Be as cruel as you like.’

‘Oh, you’ll care, Stephen, don’t you worry about that.’

‘Please, Ava, just do it.’

‘This is not a game. Believe me, Stephen, I mean it.’

‘I know you do,’ he said, half-crazy with desire, ‘I want you to be cruel. Please, Ava, I’m asking you, I’m begging you. Take everything, everything I

have, make me your slave.’

‘Everything?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes!’

‘Very well, Stephen, I will,’ she vowed, thrilled beyond reason by his submission, and finding a sensuality in her words she’d never found in her wedding vows.

‘I love and adore you, Ava, and I couldn’t stop you if I tried. Do what you want with me.’

‘Oh, I’m going to, Stephen, make no mistake about that,’ she said with an imperious calm that delighted his quivering heart. ‘You’ll feel the full weight of my woman’s power. You’ll feel it bearing down on you every minute of every day. I’ll rule you with my mouth, with my legs, my clothes, my shoes, my underwear, my voice, the way I smell, the way I walk, the way I speak to you as if you’re of no importance. You won’t be my husband any more, and I won’t be your wife. From this moment on you’ll be a servant, a slave who lives only for his Mistress’ pleasure.’

AVA FELT neither doubt nor fear.

On the contrary, she felt a strong and settled conviction that what she’d said was not only true but somehow only to be expected. It didn’t matter to her in the slightest that she was breaking every rule of marriage and romance – the little woman behind the great man. Her daring transgression thrilled her, making her feel like an adventurer in a new world. It was a glorious feeling to take charge so completely of her husband, and it gave her a profoundly sensual pleasure to speak her will aloud and so freely without the slightest

fear of contradiction.

It was a pleasure that made her want to drive home her newfound supremacy.

‘It won’t be a game, Stephen, you need to be clear about that. This is real, I promise you, utterly real. I don’t know where it’s come from, perhaps it’s been there all the time. Maybe it’s what brought us together. I don’t suppose we’ll ever know, but I do know you’ll have to serve me for as long as I say. You’ll come to know your true place in life. There’s no going back, Stephen. From this moment on our life as equal partners will be over and done with. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Yes,’ he said, shivering as if he’d caught a fever, ‘but please, there’s something I have to ask you.’

‘What is it?’ she replied sharply, angry with him for having more to say.

‘Please, Ava, I need to ask.’

‘Well, be quick about it.’

‘If you’re … If you’re a free woman,’ he stammered, ‘does that mean … does that mean …’

‘Does that mean what? If you’ve got something to say, say it.’

‘Does that mean …’ he continued, tormented by a shameful anxiety, ‘please, I have to know. Does that mean you’ll take other … Other …’

‘What, other men? Other lovers?’ she asked. ‘Is that what you’re afraid of?’

It was his greatest fear and he couldn’t trust himself to speak. He just nodded his head.

‘Oh, Stephen, for heaven’s sake, I haven’t thought that far ahead,’ she told him truthfully, laughing as she said, ‘I certainly don’t have anyone in mind if that’s what you’re worried about,’ but a devil was in her now and she couldn’t pass up the chance to exert this new authority over him.

‘Of course,’ she went on, ‘I’d be free to take other lovers if I wanted. Why wouldn’t I be? It would only be my right and prerogative as your Mistress, I’m sure you understand that.’

It was a cruel thing to say, but saying it brought her the sweetest pleasure.

‘I couldn’t bear that, Ava,’ Stephen said with a lost look in his eyes as memories of Julie and Robbie stirred painfully. ‘Please tell me you won’t.’

His pleading irked her, but it aroused her too, and Ava was surprised to find she was already thinking about a man she liked, David Ralston, the older brother of Ellen, one of her closest childhood friends.

She’d known him as a boy and over the years had watched him grow into a successful and good-looking man. Ava wasn’t sure if he was arrogant or shy, but she’d always liked the way his eyes glanced quickly away whenever she caught him looking at her. She remembered how much fun she’d had dancing with him at his sister’s party only a few weeks ago, and then going outside afterwards to have a cigarette together. He’d told her about starting his own business importing ornate tiles from Mexico and South America and she enjoyed listening to him talk of his travels, and of his hopes and plans for the future.

Up until that night she’d always found him remote and aloof, and she’d been pleasantly surprised at how easy he was to talk to, how warm and pleasant his voice was, and how much she liked the way he smelled when they’d danced. She’d never thought of David in a sexual way before, but here she was imagining him kissing her, and putting his hand on her leg under her dress.

Power must have released a demon in her for she saw herself undoing his trousers, holding and stroking him until he moaned in her mouth as she kissed him.

‘Don’t worry,’ she managed to tell Stephen. ‘Learn to be a good slave, and everything will be all right. There, now, that’s better, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ he replied, only partly reassured.

‘But remember, Stephen, slaves don’t set the rules. That’s not how this is going to work. From now on I won’t be questioned by you. I simply won’t stand for it. You’ve given up your right to set rules or conditions. I’m serious about this, do you understand?’

‘Yes, Ava, I understand,’ he said, in a kind of heaven.

Suddenly ashamed of her faithless thoughts, she kissed him on the corner of his mouth, and said, ‘You’re the sweetest slave any girl could wish for.’

‘What now?’ he said with a nervous smile.

‘I suppose that’s up to me.’

‘Yes, I suppose it is.’

‘Come on, then, I need to eat.’

She went over to the table, but stopped suddenly by her chair and didn’t sit down.

‘What’s this?’ Ava asked, experiencing a spasm of arousal and knowing at once what she must do. ‘Clear your place away,’ she instructed. ‘This minute.’

The thought of making Stephen wait at table while she ate alone not only excited her, it made perfect sense. After all, it was only right and proper given his new station in life. Luxuriating in her power, she couldn’t remember feeling the life inside her so intensely. It was a delightful feeling, as if she was wading into a warm sea, her skirt spreading out around her on the swell, tiny fishes swimming against her thighs. She smiled as he hurried to clear away his place-setting, scolding him, ‘What were you thinking? A slave serves his Mistress, he does not eat with her at table.’

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t think,’ he mumbled.

‘A good slave must always put the needs of his Mistress before his own, and never think of himself as her equal.’

‘Yes, Mistress Carafano,’ he said, delighting in her rule.

‘Then serve me. Wait on me. I don’t want you to eat tonight. I want you to go hungry while I eat the food you’ve cooked. Suffer that for me.’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said, a delectable weakness infecting his blood.

He pulled out her chair for her, seating her at table like an honoured guest. A humble waiter now, he poured wine into her glass, and hurried to bring her food.

He served a large portion of braised lamb onto one of the dinner-plates he’d unpacked and washed that afternoon. The dish came from a set given to them for a wedding present by his mother and father. As he placed it before Ava he thought how all his life he’d wanted his parents to be proud of him. They wouldn’t be proud of him now, he reflected, not if they could see him fetching and carrying for Ava like her servant, and yet the thought of their disappointment in him only deepened the strange delight he took in his servitude.

Ava ate hungrily, dipping the crusty bread into the delicious stew.

‘A little mustard, please,’ she said in between mouthfuls.

‘Will there be anything else?’ he enquired as he set the mustard before her.

‘No, thank-you, this is very good,’ she replied. ‘My compliments to the chef.’

Lifted by her praise, Stephen stood in a daze by her side, not knowing what else to do.

‘Don’t stand so close,’ Ava instructed him.

The years working in her father’s restaurant had made her a skilled and

attentive waitress, and she knew the skills of the trade. ‘Stand behind me, that way you won’t be a nuisance. A good waiter should be invisible until he’s needed. Pay attention and you’ll know when I need you.’

Taking three steps backwards, Stephen stood obediently behind her, waiting on his lovely Mistress, the pleasure he took from watching her eat only exceeded by the sweetly transgressive delight it gave him to stand so invisible and silent behind her chair, awaiting her instruction.

It was as if time stood still, and his servitude become sacred and eternal, a form of bliss.

‘I’d like some more, please, that was delicious,’ Ava said, wiping her plate clean with bread.

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said, flushing with pride at her praise for his efforts.

‘I think madame’s best from a waiter,’ she corrected him, refining his role just for the fun of it. ‘When you’re serving at table, call me madame, but in the French not the English pronounciation. The rest of the time you may call me Ava unless I instruct you differently.’

‘Yes, madame,’ Stephen obeyed, her casual assumption of authority setting a new swarm of butterflies loose in his stomach.

He served her another portion, and once more took up his position behind her, admiring her grace and beauty, finding bliss again.

Ava was surprised by how quickly at ease she felt as his proud and haughty Mistress. It was as if she’d been born to it, and had grown at long last into her true woman’s power. It really wasn’t an act, she was intrigued to discover. She’d happily denied him food and enjoyed his delicious meal without a trace of guilt or embarrassment, barely even aware of his presence, which was only how it should be, she told herself.

It’s what they both wanted, she was sure of that now. It had been in the air between them for some time. Perhaps it was why they’d married in the

first place, although they hadn’t known it at the time, and what had grown between them so quickly that evening struck her as nothing more than a natural, evolutionary change in their marriage, a change which only had to be accepted and welcomed to become a full and unquestioned part of their lives.

As she ate, Ava thought of the bookshops currently so crowded with best-selling books about powerful men taking charge of women. Out of curiosity she’d bought and read a number of these books.

She’d neither liked nor disliked them, but they’d left her unsatisfied, and now she knew why. She wanted to read a book about a woman taking charge of a man, if such a book even existed.

She knew of ‘Venus in Furs’ from an old Velvet Underground CD that had belonged to her mother, but she’d never read the book which had inspired the song. But she remembered reading a short story at university about sex and lonely desire, ‘The Star Above The Trees’ by Stefan Zweig.

The story had stayed in her mind. In its few pages an ordinary waiter becomes enslaved by a rich and elegant woman staying in the hotel where he works, finally throwing himself under the wheels of her departing train rather than live a pointless existence without her.

Ava recalled how the woman had never once acknowledged the waiter’s presence, never known of the love and devotion her imperious beauty had inspired in him. The story had aroused and disturbed her in ways she couldn’t understand, and now she decided she would like to read it again to see if she could discover how the dark little tale had known such secrets about her, secrets that had remained hidden until this night.

Stephen knew about books, she remembered. She would ask him to find it for her. After all, she thought happily, he would hardly be likely to refuse.

She pictured Stephen standing so meekly behind her, just like the waiter in the story, and she felt a mixture of excitement and pride. She’d made him

her slave, she'd just gone ahead and done it, and she would soon teach him what that truly meant. She would use him as she wished, and get on with the business of leading her life without having to concern herself with his.

She expected she might have to train him not to plague her with his needy devotion, and if that meant she had to be cruel to him, crueller perhaps than either of them expected, then so be it. If her instincts were right she knew he would come to enjoy her cruelty as much as she would enjoy inflicting it on him.

'I'm sure you're happy to see what an appetite being your Mistress has given me,' she said, pushing away her empty plate. 'Perhaps now you'll stop spying on what I eat all the time.'

'Yes, madame,' Stephen replied, thrilled to have no choice but to agree with her.

'This is how it's going to be from now on, Stephen, so you'd better get used to it. Now then, what's for dessert?' she asked, taking a sip of wine.

'Cheese with grapes and apple,' said Stephen, nervous of displeasing her.

'What kind of cheese?'

'Stilton, I bought it this morning.'

He knew it was a favourite of hers.

'Lovely, Stephen. I'll have it with more bread and the rest of the salad, but with a clean plate.'

'Would you like another glass of wine, madame?'

'No, thank-you. I have to do some work before I go to bed.'

'Yes, madame,' said Stephen, clearing away her plate.

He set the cheese and apple and grapes before her with a clean side-plate and knife, and asked, 'Would you like coffee, madame?'

'Yes, thank-you, but not too strong or I won't sleep.'

‘Of course, madame.’

‘There’s one more thing I would like.’

‘Yes, madame.’

‘Come closer.’

Stephen took a step closer.

‘Undo your belt.’

He stood still, too shocked to obey.

‘You heard me, do what you’re told.’

‘Yes, madame.’

He unbuckled his belt.

‘Take down your trousers.’

He undid his zip. The weight of his belt pulled his jeans to his knees.

‘Don’t be silly, your underpants too.’

Stephen hesitated, feeling foolish and exposed.

‘You’re shy, Stephen,’ she said, lightly caressing the insides of his thighs with the backs of her fingers, ‘but shyness is a luxury not permitted to slaves. I’ll forgive you this time, but the next time I tell you to do something I expect to be obeyed without question. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Yes, madame.’

‘So then, what have we here, I wonder?’ she mused, playing idly with the waistband of his shorts before slowly pulling them down to the tops of his thighs.

She couldn’t help but smile at the sight of his naked arousal.

‘That’s good, Stephen, very good,’ she praised, running her fingers up and down his erection, then tapping it gently, making it sway from side to side. ‘That’s what I like to see. A servant should always stand to attention for his Mistress.’

‘Yes, madame,’ he gasped.

Then, suddenly, she leaned forward and took him in her mouth, engulfing him voluptuously.

She heard his groan of pleasure and, sensing his urgency, took her mouth away and gripped him tightly with her fingers.

‘No, Stephen. You’ll come when I tell you to, and not before,’ she said in her coolest manner. ‘I kissed you like that to mark the end of our old life together. I hope you enjoyed it for it may never happen again. Now, run along and make me some coffee, then go out and buy me a packet of cigarettes.’

Before he could stop himself, Stephen let his displeasure show on his face and Ava, who had been looking for it, saw it immediately.

She knew he didn’t like her smoking, and she had agreed never to smoke at home, but the rules had changed along with the rule-maker, and this was the time to prove it.

‘I saw that look on your face, and I don’t want to see it ever again. Is that understood?’

‘Yes, madame,’ he said, but he’d spoken sullenly and with an accusing look in his eyes. He began to pull up his undershorts and jeans but Ava, angered by his disrespectful tone, immediately pulled them down again.

‘Very well,’ she said briskly, if that’s the way you want it. Lean forward and put your hands on the table. Hurry up. When I tell you to do something, you do it!’

Ava stood as Stephen leaned forward in a daze and placed his hands obediently on the table. She pulled his underpants down to his knees again, and pushed his t-shirt up to the middle of his back, exposing his lean buttocks. She stroked them gently, saying calmly, ‘Take this from me, Stephen, accept it,’ and then she smacked him hard with her bare hand.

The noise was startlingly loud causing Stephen to gasp in shock, but

Ava wasn't put off by his distress. On the contrary, it only served to spur her on. She didn't count how many times she struck him, eight or nine times perhaps, in rapid succession and with blows hard and painful enough to redden his skin and sting her hand.

'Stand up straight,' she told him when she had finished.

When he stood up from the table she saw how his face burned as red as his buttocks, and she knew she'd wounded his pride far more than his flesh, which was what she had intended. Her sudden anger had been genuine, and taking it out on him had given her a deep and primitive pleasure. If his surrender was to mean anything it had to be real, and she was determined to make sure he understood that it was.

Stephen reached down to pull up his underpants and jeans.

'Leave them,' she snapped. 'I'll tell you when you can get dressed.'

She sat back down in her chair, and took a sip of wine.

'Look at me, Stephen.'

Obediently he raised his head to look at her, dreading she would see the shameful mist of tears that had gathered in his eyes. She took care to look at him for several long moments so that he knew she must see his shame. Watching him suffer under her gaze, she examined her feelings and discovered she felt no sympathy for him. None at all. On the contrary she felt only a kind of delicious contempt, and she let a look of amusement come into her eyes which she knew would torment him all the more.

'Well, Stephen, I trust you now understand that my decision is final.'

'Yes, madame,' he replied meekly, knowing how ridiculous he must look with his jeans and underpants around his knees.

'I hope you're not going to cry,' she taunted him. 'Are you, Stephen, are you going to cry?'

'No, madame,' he replied, his voice trembling at the sweetness of her

scorn.

‘Well, you sound as if you’re going to cry, and I’m sure those are tears I see in your eyes. Perhaps you’re a cry-baby. Oh dear, I think I might have married a cry-baby. Are you a cry-baby, Stephen?’

‘No, I’m not,’ he said, his childish denial almost enough to release his tears.

‘That’s just as well for you,’ she said, resisting the temptation to make him cry there and then. She would save that pleasure for another time. ‘Now get dressed and do what you’ve been told,’ she commanded, starting on her dessert as if nothing had happened, ‘and let that be a lesson, or I’ll really give you something to cry about.’

Stephen pulled up his underpants and jeans, and went to make coffee.

His hands were shaking so badly he spilled the coffee grounds. His skin had grown hot and painful to the touch as if he’d caught flu, and every nerve-ending felt raw and exposed. He didn’t know who he was anymore. If someone had asked him his name he might have said Stephen Mercer but he would have felt no connection with the name, no sense of his previous identity.

As the coffee-maker began its work he experienced the dizzying sensation of looking down on his body as if through the eyes of his departing soul. Picking up his jacket and passing Ava on the way to the hall, he heard her say, ‘You know the kind I like. A packet of ten will do. Don’t be long.’

‘Yes, madame,’ he said, fleeing to the hall, and out into the world beyond.

Glad of the chance to gather her thoughts, Ava laughed out loud at her preposterous behaviour and poured herself more wine, only a half-glass as she really did have work to do before bed. A little to her shame, it was David Ralston and not her husband who came into her mind. As a Mistress, she

mused, would she really have the right to take a lover? Maybe it was the lies that so often accompanied extra-marital sex rather than the sex itself that caused the damage. Maybe, if she didn't lie, didn't go behind Stephen's back, then it would be all right. And wouldn't Stephen have to accept her taking a lover as part of being her slave? It would hurt him very much, she knew that, but perhaps it would be a hurt he'd have to bear, a hurt she'd command him to suffer.

Maybe she'd just have to be strong.

'Stop it,' she told herself, 'power's gone to your head and you'll wreck your marriage,' but she smiled at the memory of dancing with David Ralston and wondered what it would be like to truly live beyond the accepted rules of love and marriage.

CROSSING THE narrow avenue where they lived, Stephen turned the corner by the church, and walked the short distance to the nearest shops.

It had been raining but the sun had come out again, and the air smelled of wet asphalt. He walked quickly, taking in great lungfuls of air to try and clear his head and find his old self in the familiar journey, but the street remained unreal and dream-like, and he hardly noticed the other pedestrians, or heard the roar of traffic. How could so much change in just one day? He tried saying his name to himself over and over again, but it did no good. His head was full of thoughts and images of Ava; the amused look in her eyes, the proud set of her chin, the scorn in her voice, the memory of how easily she'd taken charge of him.

He went into the newsagent's shop and waited impatiently in a short queue. The owner knew Stephen and began their customary conversation about football, but Stephen felt awkward and unmanly after what had

happened with Ava, and he quickly bought the cigarettes and left. As he walked home he remembered once more how meekly he'd surrendered to her. Had he really bent over the table and let her pull down his shorts without making the slightest effort to stop her? It wasn't possible, and yet he felt himself blush at the memory. He told himself to slow down and give himself the chance to put his feelings into some kind of order, but he only walked faster, almost breaking into a run in his haste to get back to Ava. With startling clarity he understood he was being driven by a force far deeper and stronger than his own will, and with that clarity came the fearful knowledge that he was utterly powerless to do anything about it. He truly was a slave he understood with a thrill of fear.

When he came into the hall the smell of freshly made coffee deepened the hollow pit in his stomach. It reminded him just how much he longed to serve Ava, but she wasn't sitting at the table where he'd left her.

She was nowhere to be seen.

He spoke her name under his breath, suddenly afraid that by surrendering to her he'd failed some test she'd set him, a test of his manliness and suitability to be her husband. He stood utterly still, unable to think or act, convinced that she'd left him, certain that he'd lost her, and when he heard her call his name from the garden he rushed to find her with an eagerness born of relief and joy.

Garden was too grand a name for the tiny back-yard with its cracked paving-stones, neglected rockery and broken washing-line. It was a sun-trap though, and it was secluded, the only overlooking window apart from their own the boarded-up window of an adjoining garage.

Ava was sitting in a chair she must have brought out from the kitchen. She sat with her head back, and her eyes closed against the late evening sun. Her hair, nearly dry now, shone in the sunlight. Stephen had never seen her

look so lovely.

No wonder she'd made him her slave, he thought. How could she do anything else? Her beauty and power were irresistible, forces of nature.

Ava opened her eyes and smiled when she saw him gazing at her. He handed her the packet of cigarettes.

'Thank-you, Stephen. You didn't take long, did you?'

She unwrapped the cellophane from the packet and handed it to him to dispose of. He crushed it in his hand and put it in the pocket of his jeans. 'Did you enjoy running your errand for me?'

'Yes, Mistress Carafano.'

'I'm pleased to hear it,' she said, liking the sound of her ridiculous name. 'There's a lighter in my overcoat pocket.'

Needing no further instruction, Stephen hurried inside to fetch her lighter and when he returned Ava was waiting with a cigarette between her fingers. As he bent at her side to light her cigarette, cupping his hands around the lighter's flame, he felt as if he was bowing to her. The idea pleased him, and deepened his submission.

Ava inhaled, blew out some smoke, and then inhaled again, saying, 'It's nice out here. Private. You could be naked and no-one could see you.'

Stephen half-expected her to order him to take off his clothes. He liked the thought of being naked while she was dressed, and he felt disappointment when she said, 'I'll take my coffee out here, thank-you, Stephen.' But he was compensated by the way she'd spoken his name in a remote and indifferent way, as if speaking to a servant or a maid in a hotel.

Stephen went inside to fetch her coffee. He tasted it to see if he'd made it too strong. He had, and he diluted it with hot water from the kettle, and took it out to her in a little coffee cup and saucer decorated with a pattern of roses.

‘I’m glad you didn’t pour yourself a cup. I would have been angry if you had.’

Her eyes were half closed against the sun, and he couldn’t tell if she was serious or not.

‘There’s such a lot you’ll have to get used to. You can have coffee later if you like. In the kitchen when you’re on your own.’

‘Thank-you, Ava.’

‘I beg your pardon.’

‘I’m sorry, Mistress.’

‘Better. You’ll call me Mistress until I tell you otherwise.’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he replied, thrilled by her correction.

‘Just right,’ she told him, sipping her coffee. ‘You usually make it too strong because that’s the way you like it, but from now on you’ll make it this way, the way I like it.’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Very good, Stephen, see how easy it is. All you have to do is agree with everything I say. You can do that, can’t you?’

‘I hope so, Mistress.’

‘I hope so too, for your sake. Now come and sit by me,’ she said, patting the low wall of the rockery near to her chair.

Stephen sat where he was told, his heart hammering.

‘Don’t look so nervous,’ she said, putting her hand on his knee, the smoke from her cigarette curling slowly into the air. ‘It’s going to be fine, you’ll see. All you have to do is listen and obey. Put everything else out of your mind, I’m sure you can do that.’

‘I’ll try.’

‘No, Stephen, you won’t try, you’ll do as I tell you.’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘That’s better. Now, I’m going to give you some instructions, and I want you to listen carefully.’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Take care that you do,’ she said, amusement mixing with arousal. ‘Heaven help you if I have to repeat myself.’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said, her haughty manner sending needles of delight coursing through his veins.

Enjoying herself immensely, Ava shifted in her chair. She had important case-work to prepare before going to bed but, if she wasn’t careful, she’d have to take him upstairs now.

‘I have a busy week ahead of me,’ she said, making herself concentrate on more practical matters. ‘Today’s only Tuesday, and I won’t have time for a proper talk until the week-end. I’ll decide then whether to send you back out to work or not. I’ll look at the money situation and make up my mind if I can afford to keep you at home as a full-time housekeeper, or if you’ll have to look for a teaching post. Given teachers’ hours, if I do send you back to work, you would leave after me in the morning and be back before me in plenty of time to carry out your household duties. Or you could find temporary work as a supply teacher, perhaps two or three days a week. That would leave you more than enough time to take care of everything at home.’

Ava discovered once more how much she enjoyed having sole control of the airwaves. It gave her a delicious feeling to be able to say what she wanted, when she wanted, and know that he was powerless to interrupt.

‘Whether you go back to work or not,’ she continued, ‘I’ll expect you to perform all household duties as a matter of course. I’ll let you know my decision at the week-end, but don’t let that stop you finding out what posts are available. Have I made myself clear?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Very good,’ said Ava, who had always wanted to know what it felt like to issue instructions like the Mistress of a household, one of those formidable matriarchs who ruled the roost in nineteenth century novels. ‘For the rest of this week you’ll carry on as normal, doing all the laundry and housework as required. Think of yourself as my maid or housekeeper and you won’t go far wrong. That’s really all you’ve been for the last little while, so it shouldn’t be hard for you.’

‘No, Mistress,’ said Stephen, once more having no choice but to agree with her. Everything was happening so quickly that he felt overwhelmed, and he sensed an addiction take root in him, and he feared the day when he’d crave a far stronger measure of her cruelty and indifference. He feared it almost as much as he wanted it.

‘And as for me, well, there will really only be one difference,’ Ava told him, basking in her authority. ‘I won’t have to keep up the silly pretence of asking your opinion, or treating you as my equal. From now on, Stephen, you won’t have any say in matters, none at all. You simply won’t be consulted, you need to understand that.’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ said Stephen, thrilled to his core.

‘Good,’ she said, shifting in her chair again and putting out her cigarette against the wall, dropping the butt for Stephen to pick up later. ‘So, here are your priorities for the week. The spare bedroom’s a mess. Clear out all the junk and turn it into my study. It needs a bed so friends can stay over, but the room’s too small for a double bed. Find a three-quarter sized bed, or a sofa-bed. Put shelves up, and I’ll need a writing-desk. Your old one will do nicely. It’s still in storage, isn’t it? Hire a van and fetch it yourself, or arrange for it to be picked up by a removal company. I want my own study by the middle of next week at the latest, a clean, tidy room where I can think.’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said, pained by the thought of giving up his writing-

desk to her. His grandfather had left it to him, and it held an important place in his life.

‘And get a camp-bed while you’re at it,’ she said, a sweetly wicked thought coming into her head. ‘I’m sure there will be times when I get bored with you, and I’ll send you to sleep in the laundry-room. Yes, get a camp-bed, my study’s too good for a slave.’

She enjoyed his look of astonishment, and decided to take things further.’

‘And then there will be the times when my lover comes to visit. I’ll need somewhere to put you then, won’t I, and the laundry-room’s the best place for you, don’t you think?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said before he could stop himself.’

‘Good,’ she said, thrilled by his agreement. ‘I’m glad you understand.’

‘And then there’s out here,’ she continued as if nothing was out of the ordinary. ‘With some work it could be a very pleasant little courtyard. Take down the old clothes line. I don’t want to sit out here looking at drying clothes and underwear. That might be your idea of fun, but it’s certainly not mine,’ she said with a twinkle in her eye. ‘Plant flowers in the rockery. Go to a garden centre and ask advice, and buy some big outdoor plants too, perhaps some small trees in tubs. They won’t fit in the car so arrange for them to be delivered. Imagine one of those lovely little courtyards in Florence, and think of me out here with a glass of wine enjoying the sun while you’re inside getting on with the housework. And buy a garden chair too, a sun-lounger. You’ll only need one. It will be your Mistress’s chair, strictly out of bounds to her servant.’

He nodded in obedience, the mischief in her eyes adding spice to her beauty.

‘What else?’ she mused happily, relishing the new horizons opening up

before her. ‘Ah yes, our bedroom. It may be big but there’s no room to move. A Mistress shouldn’t be tripping over her slave’s belongings all the time, should she?’

‘No, Mistress.’

‘Well then, when I get home tomorrow evening I’ll expect to see all your clothes on the floor in the front room, every last stitch – jackets, shirts, underwear, the boxes of shoes and trainers under the bed, and all the books as well, the ones I decide to keep can go on the shelves in my study, all the others to a charity shop. I’ll go through everything and decide what to keep and what to get rid of. I’ll throw out most of your clothes, maybe all of them.’

‘All of them?’

‘Probably, yes. I’ll see how I feel at the time, certainly those awful shirts and jackets you wore as a teacher.’

‘What if I have an interview?’

‘Then I’ll buy you new clothes, but I’ll choose them. You’re a good-looking man, you don’t have to wear dull and dowdy clothes just because you’re a school-teacher, or a housekeeper for that matter. Now, there’s an idea,’ she said with a delighted laugh. ‘Perhaps I’ll find you a housekeeper’s uniform as well. How would you like that?’

Blinded by her smile, he looked away.

‘Oh dear, something tells me you would like it,’ she said, amused by his alarm. ‘A uniform would remind you of your position, keep you in your place. Oh, yes, that is a good idea. Now I’ve thought of it I won’t be able to stop myself. One night soon, Stephen, when you’re serving at table, I’ll have you wear your uniform, but I’ll be dressed for dinner, with pearls and high heels, and the evening dress I wore to the office party last month.’

She remembered how he’d liked her in it, and how she’d kept it on in bed for him after she’d returned from the party.

‘Can you see me dressed like that, with you serving me in your uniform?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he replied, seeing himself in a butler’s uniform.

‘Poor Stephen,’ she laughed. ‘The fun I’m going to have with you. I’ll be such a cruel and selfish Mistress, you won’t believe it. Now, I have to go in and do some work. I’m assisting David Mason in court tomorrow. He’s a complete tyrant, believe me, everyone’s terrified of him. Heaven help me if I’m not on top of every detail. I take it you have your duties to get on with?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Tell me them quickly.’

Swallowing nervously, he made himself concentrate, and list his duties for her approval.

‘Tidy the kitchen, iron your clothes for tomorrow, put away the clean laundry.’

‘Very good. I’ll want the green silk blouse with my new charcoal suit, and the shoes I was wearing today, but make sure they’re properly cleaned and polished.’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Kneel for me. Quickly now. I want to see you on your knees before I go in.’

Stephen obeyed without thinking, kneeling before her on the hard paving-stones, welcoming the discomfort as his due.

‘I’m enjoying this, really I am,’ said Ava. ‘Giving you instructions, seeing you on your knees, it makes everything real. Are you enjoying it too?’

Stephen gave a nod.

‘Does it give you pleasure, knowing that it pleases me?’

He gave another nod.

‘Answer me when I ask you a question.’

‘Yes, Mistress Carafano,’ he said.

‘Then show me,’ she commanded, testing out her new authority. ‘Take down your trousers.’

Stephen looked at her in surprise, willing himself to make a stand against such an indignity.

‘Do what you’re told,’ she said, angered by his hesitation. ‘I’m warning you, I shouldn’t have to tell you twice!’

‘I’m sorry.’

For the second time that evening Stephen undid his belt and pulled down his jeans, this time remembering to take down his underpants too.

‘Good boy,’ said Ava, leaning forward with her chin in her hand, smiling as she gazed at his eager erection. ‘This is mine,’ she told him. ‘It’s not yours any more, it belongs to your Mistress. You do know that, don’t you?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Look at you, Stephen, so eager to please. What will I call it, I wonder, now that I own it? I don’t like any of the usual names. Prick is too self-important, penis and erection too forensic and medical. I suppose it will just have to be cock, won’t it?’

She couldn’t resist tapping his cock as she had earlier, laughing softly as it swayed from side to side. ‘My cock,’ she said, finding an adolescent thrill in saying the word out loud. ‘My hard cock, my hard little slave-cock.’

She saw how he flinched at the word little.

‘Oh, now, Stephen, don’t be such a baby. Even if you had the biggest cock in the world, it would only be little to me. Slaves can’t have big cocks. They’d only get big-headed, and we can’t have that, can we? Well, can we?’

‘No, Mistress.’

‘No, of course, we can’t. And these,’ she said, weighing his balls in her

hand, cupping and squeezing them, ‘these are mine too, my very own.’

Suddenly shy, Stephen tried to cover himself with his hands.

‘Hands away,’ Ava insisted, smacking his arm and taking hold of his cock again, rewarding him with a touch as light and tormenting as her smile.

‘And as for this,’ she said, putting her other hand between her legs, ‘I suppose we’ll have to call it cunt, won’t we? I don’t like any of the other words, they’re too soft and silly, and I’m not soft, am I, Stephen?’

‘No, Mistress.’

‘You wouldn’t want a soft Mistress, would you?’

‘No, Mistress,’ he answered, his obedient replies echoing in his head like a chorus.

‘Then that’s what we’ll call it, but I don’t ever want to hear you say it the way it’s often said, as an ugly word, a swear word. You must always say it beautifully and with respect. ‘You love my cunt, don’t you, Stephen?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Then, tell me.’

‘I love your cunt.’

‘Louder.’

‘I love your cunt,’ he said, his heart leaping as he spoke. ‘I love and adore it. I love to kiss your cunt, to lick and fuck your cunt, your sweet, lovely mistress-cunt.’

‘That’s good, Stephen, I like that, I really do. You’re thinking of it, now, aren’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘You think of it all the time, don’t you, under my jeans, under my skirts and dresses, when I’m walking, when I’m sitting still?’

‘I think of it always, Mistress. Always and always.’

‘That’s lovely, Stephen,’ said Ava, aroused by his fervour and leaning

forward to press her forehead gently against his. ‘Who would have thought all this could have happened in just one day?’ she whispered sweetly, ‘but it’s been coming, Stephen, coming and coming, and now the gates have opened.’

She kissed his forehead and caressed his hair. ‘I wonder if you really understand what’s happened tonight. I expect you think it’s all just a game that will come to an end in a day or two, but it’s not a game, and it will never come to an end. I’m very sure of that, surer than I’ve ever been about anything. You will serve me, not for one day, but for every day for the rest of your life. For ever and ever,’ she said, taking hold of his cock and caressing him with a slow, silky touch that made him suck in air through his teeth. ‘I like the sound of those words, don’t you? Let me hear you say them for me, for your Mistress. For ever and ever.’

‘For ever and ever,’ Stephen repeated, his eyes closing in delight.

‘That’s good, Stephen, very good,’ she said warmly, milking him of his strength. ‘You’ll come to thank me for it. You won’t be an ordinary man any more with a dull, ordinary wife. Oh no, from now on you’ll be the slave to a cruel and demanding Mistress. You may not know it, but you’re a very lucky man.’

Taking her hand away, and blowing on him instead with her warm breath, Ava ran the backs of her fingers slowly up and down his length, laughing at the way his body trembled at her touch.

‘Yes, Stephen, this is how it’s going to be,’ she told him, ‘for ever and ever.’

‘For ever and ever,’ echoed Stephen in ecstacy.

‘I’m never going to let you go, you know that, don’t you?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘I’m strong,’ she told him, ‘much stronger than you think.’

‘I know you are, Mistress.’

‘And this is what you want, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Beg me.’

‘Please, Mistress, never let me go.’

‘Is that the best you can do? Perhaps I should find another man to serve me, a better slave?’

‘You’ll never find a better slave. Please, Mistress, I beg and beseech you, never set me free. Make me yours for all time.’

‘I will, Stephen, I give you my word. For all time.’

The muscles in his stomach began to quiver, and he gave a moan as if he was in pain.

‘Every day for the rest of your life you will be on your knees before me. Every day before I leave for work you will kneel and kiss the hem of my skirt, and every evening when I return you will show your respect in the same way. It will be a daily reminder of your place in my life. Do you hear, every morning and every evening, for ever and ever?’

‘Every morning and every evening, for ever and ever,’ said Stephen, falling deeper under her spell.

‘If you’re a good slave I might let you worship me the way you like to, but only on special occasions when you’ve been a very good slave. It would be a reward for good behaviour. Would you like that?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Are you thinking about it now?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Dreaming about it?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Does it make you want to touch yourself?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Then show me. I want to see how you touch yourself when you think of kneeling before me every day for the rest of your life.’

In thrall to her, Stephen began to pleasure himself with a steady, hungry rhythm.

Ava watched him, fascinated by his trance-like state. Welcoming her own growing arousal, Ava understood that she, too, had fallen into a kind of trance.

If he was her supplicant, she was his goddess.

‘Slower, much slower!’ the goddess commanded, knowing how much this would torment him. ‘We don’t want any accidents, not unless you want me to be angry with you, and you wouldn’t want that, would you?’

‘No, Mistress.’

‘Well, then?’

He did as he’d been told, slowing to a rhythm that could only deny him release.

‘Much better,’ said Ava, curious to see the way he touched himself. She’d never seen a man do this before. Normally a deeply private act, it shocked her more than a little to witness it at such close quarters, and for a moment she feared she might lose her nerve, but she knew she had to rise above such weakness if she wanted to become his true Mistress.

‘Tell me, Stephen, are you enjoying yourself?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘You eyes are closed. Don’t you want to see your Mistress?’

‘I can see you.’

‘In your dreams?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re dreaming of your Mistress?’

‘I always dream of her.’

‘Is she very beautiful?’

‘Yes.’

‘And tell me, Stephen, in your dream, are you kneeling on the floor kissing the hem of her skirt?’

‘Yes,’ he replied, his eyes closing tighter.

‘Which skirt, out of interest? I’m sure you have one in mind.’

‘Your pleated skirt,’ he answered without hesitation.

‘Ah yes, my black, pleated skirt,’ said Ava. ‘It’s very pretty, isn’t it, the way it sways around my knees?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘The way it moves and sways.’

‘Yes.’

‘A very good choice, Stephen, I’m impressed, and it feels lovely on. Perhaps I should let you try it on since you like it so much,’ she said, releasing a little demon that had been haunting her dreams. ‘After all, why should I have all the fun?’

Stephen moaned again. The sound aroused Ava, and made her want to lead him deeper into the wild forest.

‘Well, why not? I think it might suit you. It could be a part of your uniform. I’m sure it would look very smart with a little white apron like the one I used to wear when I was a waitress. Smart and attentive. I must see if I can find one the very same. I’m sure I still have one somewhere. I’ll tie it round your waist with a nice big bow at the back. I already know what a handsome waiter you can be, it would be fun to make you into a pretty waitress.’

She saw how shame prevented him from opening his eyes, but nothing could hide his desperate arousal from her gaze.

‘But you’re right, Stephen, I haven’t worn my pleated skirt for a while,

have I? I suppose I could wear it to work one day this week. Would you like that?'

'Yes, Mistress,' he said helplessly.

'Even when you know how hard it is to iron all those little pleats?'

'Yes, Mistress.'

'All those knife-pleats?'

'Yes, Mistress.'

'And even though it attracts so much attention from the men at work?'

'Yes, Mistress,' he said, but Ava noticed how this time he'd hesitated before giving his reply.

'In that case, I'll wear it on Thursday or Friday and, for an extra treat, I'll let you wear it when I get back from work, when it's still warm from my body and smells of my perfume.'

'Thank-you, Mistress,' he said in a trembling voice.

'I may even let you have my worn panties and tights,' Ava said to enslave him further.

'Th-thank-you, Mistress,' he stammered.

'Why, you're very welcome,' laughed Ava, thinking that Stephen, with his long legs and strong, slim physique, really might quite suit the elegant skirt. 'Poor little Stephen, it's just as well no-one can see us out here. You wouldn't like to be seen like this, would you?'

'No, Mistress.'

'Why not?'

Stephen mumbled so quietly Ava didn't hear what he'd said.

'Speak up, I can't hear you.'

'People would know,' he said, a quaver in his voice.

'People would know what?' she asked, curious to hear how he would answer.

‘Please, Mistress …’

‘No, Stephen, tell me. Don’t be shy. What would they know?’

‘That I’m not …’ he stammered, ‘that I’m not your husband any more.’

‘Oh dear, that would be terribly embarrassing for you, wouldn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

‘More than embarrassing. I imagine it would be unbearable.’

‘Yes,’ said Stephen, opening his eyes and then closing them again, her lovely, haughty face too much for him.

‘And if they knew you weren’t my husband any more, what would they think you were?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Yes, you do. Tell me.’

‘Your s-servant.’

‘My servant?’

‘Yes, your slave.’

‘My slave? But that would only be the truth, wouldn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

‘But the truth shouldn’t be hidden, should it?’

A shiver passed through Stephen. His mouth opened but he made no sound.

‘Well, should it?’ Ava pressed him.

‘No.’

‘You wouldn’t want me to tell lies, would you? You wouldn’t want to turn your Mistress into a liar?’

‘Please … I don’t know …’ he mumbled, suddenly very fearful of where this was leading.

‘Are you ashamed, Stephen? Are you ashamed of the truth?’

‘I … Please … I’m …’

‘Are you ashamed to be my slave?’

‘I love … I love you …’

‘I didn’t ask if you loved me. I asked if you’re ashamed to be my slave?’

‘Yes.’

‘And would it make you ashamed if people found out you were my slave?’

‘Yes.’

‘What people?’

‘Every … Everyone …’

‘Everyone? All our friends and family?’

‘Yes.’

‘Really, Stephen, I thought you would be proud to be my slave,’ she said, surprised to discover that some of the anger she was feigning was real. ‘But now I hear it makes you ashamed, and just when I thought you would want the whole world to know how lucky you are to have such a kind and lovely Mistress.’

‘ I am … I am lucky,’ he stuttered in confusion. ‘Please, Mistress …’

‘Oh, don’t try to get out of it, it’s too late for that,’ Ava said, enjoying her anger so much she manufactured more of it. ‘You’ve just told me you’re ashamed to be my slave. I feel very offended, Stephen, really I do, hurt and offended.’

‘I’m s-sorry.’

‘I’m sure you are, but I really can’t let this go.’

Ava smiled as a cruel fantasy took shape in her mind.

‘So this is what I’m going to do,’ she announced. ‘Since you’re so ashamed to be seen as my slave, I’ve decided to give a party to get it over and done with, get it all out into the open once and for all.’

‘No, you can’t.’

‘Oh, I can, Stephen, I assure you.’

‘Please, Ava, no.’

‘Don’t be silly, Stephen,’ she said as if it was he who was being unreasonable. ‘Why not have a party? You’ve only brought it on yourself, and besides we’ve never had a proper house-warming. I’m sure you’d like to show off the work you’ve done in the house, let everyone see how hard you’ve been working to make your Mistress comfortable. I’ll invite everyone we know, all our friends and family, and you can wear your uniform, and serve food and drink to our guests. That way everyone will know, Stephen, they’ll know you’re not my husband any more, and you won’t have to be frightened of them finding out.’

‘Ava, please …’

‘It’s really very kind of me, you know, to get it all out into the open. It’s for the best so you can take that look off your face. Think how relieved you’ll be not having to pretend any more. Well, aren’t you going to thank me?’

He tried to speak but only made a gasping sound as if he was struggling for air.

‘Well, aren’t you?

‘Th-thank-you, Mistress,’ he managed to say.

‘You’re welcome, Stephen, but what’s wrong? You’re shaking.’

‘Everyone will see.’

‘That’s the general idea.’

‘Everyone will laugh at me.’

‘Will they?’ said Ava, amused by his panic at the thought of such a party. ‘Oh, I suppose they might laugh at you a little to begin with, especially when they see you in your uniform.’

‘No.’

‘But you need a uniform, Stephen,’ she said, warming to her theme. ‘Of

course you do, so that everyone can see how things stand as soon as they walk in the door. I wouldn't want anyone to be unclear about our new arrangement. If I'm feeling kind, I might dress you as my butler in black trousers and a white shirt and bow-tie. You'd look very smart and handsome dressed like that, but I don't think I'll be feeling kind. No, it's much more likely I'll be feeling cruel, and have you dress as my housemaid.'

'No, Ava.'

'Oh, yes, now I think about it, I'm sure that's exactly I'll do. Dressing you as a maid will be much more fun, not just for me, but for everyone at the party. And I have to think of my guests, don't I? You'll be much more visible in your black dress and pretty white apron, much more of a talking-point, but you don't have to worry too much. It won't be one of those flouncy french maid's uniforms. No, that would be too silly. That would make it seem as if it was make-believe, as if I was playing a joke, and it won't be a joke, Stephen, you can be sure of that. Much better, I think to put you in a real working-maid's uniform. You'll be there to work, after all. I'll have you wear a plain black tunic dress, quite a modest length, I think, just above the knee, and with a neat white collar and matching white apron, and your hair tied back under a little maid's cap. And you'll wear panties and tights under your dress – not expensive ones, a pair of my old panties and cheap tights will do, and perhaps a little petticoat or slip if I can find one the right length. And maybe I'll buy you a panty-girdle and insist you wear it under your tights.'

Ava suddenly thought of her long dead grandmother, and the girdles that used to hang from the drying-line on the balcony of her tiny apartment in Italy. As a young girl they'd seemed ugly and incomprehensible, but now she thought of them fondly.

'A girdle will keep you under control,' she continued, 'you can be sure about that, and then nothing will ruin the line of your dress. We wouldn't

want that to happen, would we, Stephen?' she said, stroking his cheek, and smiling at the thought of imprisoning him beneath such a restrictive and feminine garment.

Stephen tried to speak but instead gave a little moan of distress. He remembered how many years ago Julie Buchan had threatened to make him wear one of her mother's girdles, and he wondered if he was dreaming, or if Ava was a witch who could read his darkest thoughts and memories.

'You know the kind of girdle I mean,' Ava went on, 'the slimming panties an older woman might wear to hold in her tummy and show off her figure. They won't be comfortable, I'm afraid, and they do look very plain and severe, but better safe than sorry, don't you think, to have your little cock tucked safely away where no-one will ever see it?'

Stephen grimaced in shame and looked away.

'Oh, don't make such a face, Stephen,' Ava laughed. 'I like to think of you trapped like that under your dress. I like it very much, particularly when I'll be wearing my loosest and prettiest silk panties beneath my dress. They'll feel so soft and sensual against my skin, while your girdle will feel so tight and uncomfortable, just as it should for a slave. And then there would be your shoes. Sensible black shoes, I think. A little like the shoes I wear to work but with a lower heel. Pretty but practical. You'll look very neat and tidy, and ready to get on with your duties but, yes, I suppose everyone will laugh at you all the same.'

'Please, Ava …'

'Well, it serves you right for feeling ashamed of being my slave, for thinking you're important. Really, Stephen, you have to remember you simply don't matter any more. Besides, it wouldn't last for long. I'm sure they'd soon get tired of laughing at you.'

'They wouldn't, I know they wouldn't.'

‘Well, what if they wouldn’t? You’ll just have to suffer it, it’s as simple as that. You’ll have no choice, standing there in your uniform. And I’ll have such fun, laughing and joking with everyone, telling you to take their coats and bring them drinks. Don’t you want me to have fun at my own party? Well, don’t you?’

‘Yes, Ava.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘I will have fun, Stephen, I promise you, not just at the party but before it too. I’ll have you help me get dressed before our guests arrive. You’ll dry me after my bath and help me into my underwear and dress just like a proper lady’s maid. I’ll wear my shortest, prettiest dress and all the men at the party will see I’m a free woman again, and I’ll like that, and so will they, they’ll really like that. And as I remember, you enjoy parties like that too, don’t you, Stephen? You’ve already been to one with the lovely Julie Buchan, haven’t you? You told me all about it, how she danced with her lover while you just stood by and watched. Did she smile at you as she danced with him? Did she catch your eye and smile? Did she kiss him after she’d caught your eye?’

Stephen made a sound as if he was choking, and Ava knew she’d struck gold.

‘She did, didn’t she?’ Ava said with her lovely laugh. ‘What a sweet kiss it must have been, I’m almost jealous.’

Stephen shook in distress. The crushing memory of Julie kissing Robbie Gilchrist and leading him upstairs to find a bed came back with vengeful force, his psyche seizing the chance to punish him for keeping it hidden all these years.

‘You could have said something,’ Ava went on, twisting the knife, ‘or stopped them and made a scene. Most boys would have, you know. Or you

could have got up and left, or danced with another girl, but you didn't do anything, did you? Even after they'd gone upstairs I bet you just waited for her. Waited and waited, like a good little slave. Oh yes, she knew what you were. She knew she had you exactly where she wanted. And it will be the same at my party, won't it?'

'Ava, please …'

'Won't it, Stephen?'

'Yes … Yes, it will,' he confessed, a tide of submissive delight flooding his senses and sweeping away his strength.

'You'll watch as I laugh and dance with all the men at the party until I find one I like more than the others,' said Ava, finally releasing the darkest of the demons she'd summoned that night.

'He'll be the tallest and most handsome man there, and the most fun. I'll talk and laugh with him. You'll bring us drinks, but I'll ignore you completely. I won't even look at you. Then he and I, we'll do a slow dance together. He'll put his strong arms around me, and I'll put my arms around him and let him pull me close. You'll have to watch as he kisses me in front of everyone. Oh, God, how he'll kiss me. A long, slow, deep kiss,' she told her husband, astonished at what a cruelly inventive mind she had, and how much she longed to explore it.

David Ralston's proud features and steady eyes came into her mind. She thought of his broad shoulders and strong hands, and she saw herself dancing with him, kissing him, feeling him grow hard against her.

Her insides melted at the thought.

'And then I'll take him upstairs,' she went on in a measured voice, enjoying the thought all the more now she knew who she was talking about. 'I'll take him by the hand, and lead him slowly upstairs to the bedroom, to our bedroom. They'll know then, Stephen, won't they?'

‘Yes,’ said Stephen, lost in her story.

‘Who will know?’

‘Everyone … Everyone will know.’

‘That’s right, everyone will know. They’ll know you’re not my husband any more, and I’m a free woman again. They’ll know you’re my slave. They’ll look at you with such pity in their eyes, such pity and amusement.’

‘I’ll die, Ava,’ he said quietly, his pride fading like an evening shadow from the wall.

‘You won’t die, Stephen, don’t be silly,’ she laughed. ‘You’re a slave, you won’t have that luxury. You’ll wipe away your tears, and get on with looking after my guests all the time I’m upstairs with my lover.’

‘I can’t, Ava… I can’t,’ said Stephen, starting to shiver again.

‘You most certainly can,’ Ava contradicted him sternly, ‘unless you want me to come downstairs and tell you off in front of everyone. I’ll give you such a row you’ll wish you’d never been born. Believe me, Stephen, I’ll really put you in your place, I promise, and you won’t like that, would you?’

‘No ...’

‘Or maybe you will like it?’

‘No, Ava!’

‘If I spanked you. Put you over my knee. Lifted up your skirt and little lacy slip and spanked you in front of everyone.’

‘No,’ he pleaded, suddenly afraid of the hardness in her eyes.

‘Then, you’d better behave yourself or that’s just exactly what I’ll do. You’d better be a good and obedient little maid taking care of my guests and, if they tease you or laugh at you, you’ll just have to put up with it, won’t you?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he mumbled, utterly defeated.

Ava had noticed he’d stopped touching himself when she’d first

mentioned the party, but she could see he was still partly erect. She reached out and caressed him idly with the tips of her fingers, moving her hand slowly up and down so that he quickly became hard again, his whole body trembling as if she'd laid hands on his soul.

'Good, Stephen,' she said. 'Now you're beginning to understand how it's going to be. You'll serve food and drinks, and see to everything until I call you upstairs.'

'Upstairs?' he said, a new note of panic in his voice.

'Yes, upstairs,' she repeated, as if it was only to be expected, and nothing out of the ordinary.

'Why?'

'Well, we might need something,' she told him in her most reasonable voice.

'Please … I can't … I c-can't go upstairs.'

'Why ever not, Stephen?'

'I … I won't have time,' he stuttered, struggling in vain against his fate. 'I'll be too busy taking coats and serving food.'

'You will be terribly busy, that's true,' Ava agreed. 'In fact you'll be run off your feet, but I'll take priority over everything else, and you'll come when I call. Of course you will. As your Mistress I'll take absolute priority. And so, when I call your name, you'll drop what you're doing, and come upstairs immediately.'

'Please, no.'

'I'm your Mistress, Stephen, you have no choice in the matter.'

'No, please.'

'Tell me, Stephen, tell me you'll come upstairs when I call you.'

'Please …'

'Tell me!' she snapped, her anger suddenly hot and real and wickedly

pleasurable.

‘I’ll come, Mistress … I’ll come upstairs when you call,’ he said, the last of his resistance falling in ruins around him.

‘I’ll want you to see us in bed together,’ said Ava, only partly appeased by his surrender, and wanting to put him deeper under her power. ‘That will be important, I think. It will help you to understand I have the freedom to take another man to bed whenever I want and seeing it with your own eyes will help you accept it, and come to terms with your new position. You can understand that, can’t you?’

‘Yes, M-mistress.’

‘With power comes certain freedoms and privileges, I’m sure you can see that. You may only be a slave but you’re not stupid, and it’s not as if I’m being unreasonable.’

‘N-no.’

‘Good, then. I’m glad that’s settled. And, of course, there will be other more practical matters to consider. We may need to send you down for some wine or cigarettes,’ she said, looking to add to his torment. ‘But I won’t be the one to ask you. No, I’ll leave that to him, I think. Yes, I’m sure that will be best. I’ll lie with my head on his chest, and watch as he tells you what to do. You’ll look so helpless and funny in your pretty maid’s uniform. I’ll enjoy watching him give you orders and seeing you do what you’re told. It will make me smile and laugh, and it will make me feel … Well, you know how it will make me feel. Poor little Stephen, but don’t look so frightened. We won’t mean to be cruel. We won’t laugh at you on purpose, we won’t be able to help ourselves, that’s all. You’ll be so nervous and clumsy, what else can we do but laugh? And as for him, I suppose he might be a little shy to begin with, telling another man what to do while he makes love to his wife, but he’ll soon get used to having you at his beck and call. He might even

come to like it. Oh yes, I think he might come to like it very much, and do you know how I'll be able to tell if he likes it?'

'No ...'

'Will I tell you?' she asked, still caressing him.

Stephen made a strange sobbing noise which Ava took to be yes.

'I'd be holding him under the sheet the way I'm holding you now. I'll feel how much he likes it,' she said, caressing Stephen with a taunting, feathery touch he feared might drive him mad. 'Oh Stephen, he'll like it very much, and so will I, I promise you. I can even hear his voice, can't you? A deep, strong voice telling you to go downstairs for wine and cigarettes,' she said, hearing David Ralston's manly voice in her head. 'Telling you, not asking you.'

'My cigarettes are in my jacket over the back of the chair in the kitchen, he'll say. Go downstairs and bring me up my jacket, and bring a bottle of wine while you're at it. And hurry up, I don't like to be kept waiting.'

A shudder passed through Stephen, but Ava only laughed and caressed him so that he shuddered again.

'And off you'll go, won't you?'

'Yes.'

'Just like he's told you to.'

'Yes.'

'You won't forget to curtsey, will you?'

'No,' he said, a new horror filling his mind.

'And off you'll go downstairs like a good, little maid, past all the people at the party. Everyone will see the little maid scurrying past in her little apron and dress. They'll see you go into the kitchen to fetch his jacket and a bottle of wine, and everyone will see you carry them back upstairs to where another man was in bed with your wife. And, of course, we'll be making love when

you came into the room.'

Ava saw him wince, but she felt his cock leap in her hand.

She marvelled at herself for there was no doubt that his shame, and her power to inflict it, added greatly to her pleasure.

'Well, of course we will be, Stephen,' she goaded. 'You could hardly blame us, could you?'

'N-no.'

'Of course not. We won't be able to keep our hands off each other. We won't pay any attention to you, but we'll know you're there. We'll know it the minute you come into the room. It will only add to our passion, knowing you're standing there in your neat little uniform watching us take our pleasure, and what sweet pleasure it will be. My God, how sweet, you've no idea! It wouldn't surprise me if they could hear us downstairs. And after we've finished, after we've had the most wonderful fuck, well, then we'll smoke our cigarettes, and drink our wine. He'll tell you to light our cigarettes and bring an ashtray, and you'll do that, won't you?'

'Yes.'

'You'll jump to it.'

'Yes.'

'He'll tell you to pour our wine, and you'll do that too, won't you?'

'Yes,' he said, utterly enthralled.

'Poor Stephen, not that I'll feel the slightest bit sorry for you,' she said with a laugh so sweetly derisive it thrilled him to the depths of his being.

'I can see it as clear as day,' she said. 'Your hand will be shaking like a leaf, but you'll only have to pour one glass for we'll drink from the same glass, as lovers should,' she told him, the part of her that knew her story wasn't real now wishing it was real, and true, and happening at that very moment.

The thought of lying in bed with David Ralston while Stephen served as her slave was darkly pleasurable, and Ava wondered if she would ever find the courage to make such a thing happen in her real life. ‘Why shouldn’t you?’ she thought. ‘What’s to stop you?’

She thought of the countless books she’d read and films she’d seen where any woman who enjoyed sex had to be killed of, or punished for daring to live and love freely.

The sheer stupidity of it made her angry, and she made a vow in her heart to free herself from the long years of imprisonment and indoctrination.

Why should she live a coward’s life? Giving free reign to her sexual power needn’t prevent her from being brave or kind or good. Couldn’t a woman explore her sexuality and still be a good woman? It was only sex, and she loved sex, and men had always found her desirable. She wouldn’t hide from that, she decided – she would embrace it.

A saying she’d once heard came into her head, ‘The best way to make your dreams come true is to wake up.’

Well, perhaps that’s just what she’d do. She’d wake up and learn to enjoy her woman’s power on her own terms. And maybe it wouldn’t be so selfish, she thought, observing the transcendent delight Stephen was taking in submitting to her female beauty and strength.

‘I suppose the time will come when we’ll have to go back down to my guests,’ Ava said regretfully, not wishing to end the fantasy in her head. ‘But before we go back down you’ll help me get dressed. I’ll expect that of you, as my servant and lady’s maid. You’ll kneel and help me into my pretty silk panties, then hand me my bra, and wait patiently while I put it on. You’ll fasten it for me, and help me into my dress. My lover will kiss me while you do up the zip in the back of my dress. They’ll only be little kisses to begin with, sweet and fond, but they’ll light the fire again, I know they will, and

then I'll have you kneel behind me while we kiss. He'll know what to do, you can be sure. He'll pull up my party-dress so I can push my bottom into your face as he kisses me. Your poor little cock won't be able to get hard in your girdle, but he'll take down my panties so you can kiss my bottom and lick my cunt, the cunt he's just fucked so beautifully. Think of it, Stephen. Think how helpless you'll feel, kneeling behind me, tasting another man in your wife for the first time. He'll let my dress fall down over your head, and you'll kneel in darkness, worshipping your Mistress. As he kisses me, he'll put his hand on your head and pull you against me. You'll feel how strong he is, much stronger than you, and you won't be able to pull away even if you wanted to. I'll come then, I'll come so hard with my tongue in his mouth, and your tongue in my cunt. And then, once I've recovered, you'll pull up my panties, and I'll fix my dress and hair and take him by the hand and go back downstairs with him. And do you know what the guests will do when they see us coming down the stairs hand-in-hand, all our friends and family? Oh come on, Stephen, you know what people are like. They'll cheer us, cheer and cheer as if we were returning heroes.'

Aroused beyond endurance, Stephen gave a low, desperate moan and began to thrust helplessly against her hand.

'No, Stephen,' she said, letting go of him before he could find release. She didn't want to let him escape from the cruel party she'd described for him, at least not yet. A new and cruel part of her wanted to keep him trapped there forever as her little serving-maid.

Ava didn't want to leave the party either, but she forced herself to remember the important case-work she had to do before bed. She may be queen and Mistress in her own home, but she knew it would be very different next morning in court.

But Ava felt such a pleasing and lazy contempt for her kneeling husband

that she made up her mind to play a little harder before she went inside.

‘Look at you, Stephen. You’re really quite handsome for a slave. I’m sure you could have women kneeling at your feet if all those books in the bookshops are to be believed, but here you are, on your knees before me. You haven’t done very well, have you?’

He looked up, and Ava saw a speck of defiance in his eyes.

‘Oh dear, is that pride I see?’ she teased him. ‘Have I made you angry? I wonder who’s really is charge here. Have you really surrendered, or are you only pretending for your own pleasure?’

Once more she saw his look of defiance.

‘Very well, Stephen, let’s find out.’

With a sudden movement, she slapped his erect cock, making him cry out in pain and shock, and double over, covering his nakedness with his hands.

‘Sit up straight!’

He did as he was told, a new fear and respect in his eyes.

‘Hands behind your back,’ she said, driven by a dark excitement and wondering how anything so wrong could feel so right.

‘Hurry up,’ she said. ‘I’m waiting.’

He stared at her coldly for a few moments, and she thought he might refuse to obey, but she held his gaze, and smiled when he put his hands behind his back.

‘And keep them there. You’ll take this from me, Stephen, suffer it for me.’

She slapped him again, and then three more times, until his erection subsided and there were tears in his eyes.

Then she slapped his face, lightly to begin with and then with two much harder blows that stung her hand.

‘That’s just to show I can do what I want with you. What I want, when I want. It’s important to make that clear.’

He told himself to stand and fight back but he stayed kneeling, his hands clasped obediently behind his back.

It had aroused Ava to strike him and she pressed her thighs together, experiencing a secret spasm of pleasure.

‘That’s good, Stephen, very good, but we mustn’t forget these, must we?’ she said, taking hold of his balls.

Unable to control himself, he gave another moan and unclasped his hands.

‘I said hands behind you back!’

He glared at her, but slowly, very slowly, he obeyed her command.

‘You’ll stay like that, and with your legs apart. Do you hear me?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

She smiled and let go of him. Still smiling, she kicked him between his legs, not hard enough to really hurt him, but hard enough to make him dread another blow.

She sat back in her chair and swung her foot lazily backwards and forwards, striking him again and again, saying, ‘You’ll take this too, Stephen, any time I say, any time I want. You’ll get down on your knees and suffer this for me. Let it be a lesson. I own you, Stephen, I own you, body and soul. Let me hear you say it.’

‘You own me, Mistress,’ he gasped, desperate for her blows to stop, and yet wanting more, much more. ‘You own me, you own me.’

‘Body and soul,’ she said.

‘Body and soul,’ he repeated.

At last, with a harder kick that made him twist in pain, she stopped.

‘I’m going inside now,’ she announced.

His eyes were tight shut and he was breathing in short gasps.

There would be no more looks of defiance, and Ava felt a dark satisfaction as she stood and looked down at her kneeling husband.

‘One more thing, Stephen,’ Ava said. ‘In the morning I want you to go to the saddlery shop, you know the one I mean, in the alleyway near the dry cleaners. I want you to buy a riding-crop. After all, a Mistress may have to discipline her slave. I’ll hang it on the bedroom door so it will always he handy when I need it. Maybe I’ll ask my lover to use it on you if I’m feeling lazy. Yes, I think I might like that, watching him put you in your place.’

She saw him wince in pain, but it was what she wanted to see. It went against everything she believed, but she wanted him to fear her.

’You will buy it for me, won’t you?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ Stephen replied.

‘A nice leather one,’ she instructed. ‘Brown leather, I think, although black would do.’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘You won’t forget?’

‘No, Mistress.’

‘You do know I can punish you whenever I want?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ said Stephen, a tremor passing through him as he hung his head in defeat.

In that moment Ava knew deep in her heart she had truly made him into her slave.

It was cruel and wrong yet it gave her a glorious feeling.

‘Look at the time,’ she said, glancing at her watch. ‘I should have gone in ages ago. I’ve more important things to do than sit out here wasting my time with a slave, but I want you to stay out here until I tell you otherwise. It’ll do you good to stay on your knees and think about what’s happened

tonight, about what's been said, and what's been decided. So Stephen, you are to stay exactly where you are. I'll let you know when you can come inside.'

HE HEARD her stand and go into the house.

Shame prevented him from watching her go but, when he opened his eyes and found her gone, he felt bereft and abandoned. It was ridiculous to stay kneeling on the ground after she'd gone inside, but he stayed where he was, in thrall to her beauty and power.

He tried not to think about the party she'd described to him so vividly, yet all he could see in his mind's eye was Ava dancing with another man, kissing him, letting his hands touch her through her dress, and the pitying looks of the guests as they witnessed his humiliation and shame. Her story of the party had captivated him beyond all reason. That it had been filthy and depraved, there could be no doubt, yet he'd found something loving in it, as if she'd told it more for his pleasure than her own.

He remained kneeling on the hard stone, wondering how long she would leave him like this.

He may have been naked but he could feel the girdle she'd described trapping him beneath his uniform, pressing his cock cruelly against his stomach. He's never worn tights or stockings yet he could feel their soft nylon gripping his thighs, and the smooth flowing movement of his dress and slip against his legs.

He looked down and saw he was hard again. He hadn't thought it possible, but now he knew a man could be in heaven and hell at the same time.

He didn't know how long he knelt there like a fool but his knees were

aflame when at last he heard her call to him from the house.

‘You can come in now, Stephen,’ she called.

He got slowly to his feet, and pulled up his underpants and jeans. He picked up her coffee cup and her chair and her cigarette butt and took them inside.

He found Ava working on her lap-top with her case-notes spread out around her on the table. He didn’t know how she could work after what had happened, but she seemed lost in concentration. She didn’t look up, or say anything to him, and Stephen got on with tidying the kitchen and washing the dishes, working as quietly as he could so as not to disturb her.

At one moment, when he put a plate a little noisily into the drying-rack, he saw her glance up and he waited for her to reprimand him, but she said nothing and turned back to her work. A part of him felt disappointed for he would have liked her to rebuke him.

He saw her light up a cigarette and, when he brought her a saucer for an ashtray, she didn’t thank him or take her eyes from the screen.

He picked up her pretty court shoes from where she’d left them by the stove. Seeing that they were scuffed and dirty, he put newspaper on the worktop by the sink and started to clean her shoes, but Ava looked up and said, ‘Do that somewhere else, you’re annoying me.’

‘Yes, Mistress Carafano,’ he said, and did as he was told, happy to be so summarily dismissed.

He went to the laundry room where he polished her shoes to a shine before filling the steam iron and setting it on the ironing board to heat. He found her green blouse in the ironing pile, and set it aside with two other blouses for Thursday and Friday, one white and one red, already wondering if they might go with her black pleated skirt she had promised to wear to work later that week. He wondered if she really would make him wear it after she

came back from work. He imagined it flipping and swaying around his knees as he ironed her suit skirt, and then her blouses, working slowly and carefully, finding the sleeves particularly troublesome.

He spent an age on each blouse, often having to iron out the creases he'd iron in by mistake.

When he was satisfied his work came up to Ava's high standards, he took the blouses and her suit, all on hangers, along with her shoes and a basket of her clean underwear up to their bedroom.

He placed her gleaming shoes on the floor by the end of the bed, and put her clothes away neatly in the wardrobe and chest-of-drawers.

Looking in the wardrobe for her new charcoal suit, he caught a glimpse of her pleated skirt swaying dreamily on its hangar. The sight of it once more brought to mind Ava's threat to make him wear it along with her worn panties and tights and with a little apron tied around his waist. The thought let fly an arrow so sharp it pierced his heart, the wound causing him, not pain, but a dark and twisted delight.

She wouldn't really make him wear it, Stephen told himself. It simply wasn't possible, but then he thought of her mischievous smile, and the way she had kicked and struck him, and suddenly he wasn't so sure.

Seeking refuge in work, he took her charcoal suit from the wardrobe, and hung it on the hook on the bedroom door, with her green blouse beside it ready for the morning.

Looking around, he saw how his clothes and possessions really did clutter the room. She was right, it would be much more comfortable for her when he cleared them out, and nothing was more important to Stephen at that moment than Ava's comfort and pleasure.

The prospect of carrying out her wishes in a way that could only diminish his status deepened the excitement that rose in his gut like a fever.

The pictures she'd painted in his mind of him serving at her party stalked his imagination, and her words, 'You won't have any say' and 'you simply won't be consulted,' went round and round in his head, haunting and enslaving him anew.

Searching for new ways to serve her, he smoothed out the wrinkles in the sheet and plumped up her pillow, then shook out the duvet and turned it down at her side to welcome her when she came to bed.

He couldn't help remember her telling him he'd have to watch as she made love to another man in this very bed. He knelt by the bed and pressed his face against the soft covers. The image had burned into his soul, and he knew he would never be rid of it.

But none of this satisfied his craving to be of service and, in a kind of frenzy, he stood and began to gather up all his clothes and shoes and books and carry them through to the spare room. He dumped armful after armful of his possessions on the floor beside all the other boxes and suitcases, knowing he would take them downstairs tomorrow evening for Ava to sort through.

She would decide what to keep and what to throw out.

He thought of her throwing out all his clothes, and how lost and vulnerable he'd feel without any clothes of his own. It was a deeply troubling thought, but he banished it from his mind. For now it was only important to clear and tidy the bedroom, and make it as comfortable as he could for Ava.

For Mistress Carafano.

He even took his shaving kit and toothbrush and hairbrush from the ensuite shower-room, planning to keep them in the downstairs bathroom so she could have the little shower room for her own exclusive use.

He wanted her to have it.

He thought of her in the mornings, leaning over the sink, peering into the mirror as she put on her make-up, singing along to a pop song playing on

the radio that sat on the shelf beneath the window.

He remembered too how he'd stood in this room at dawn, tormented by his dream of the airport and worshipping her through the bars of his cell, and he knew in his heart Ava had already claimed this room as her own.

Once he'd carried all his clothes and possessions to the spare room, he thought about re-arranging the bed and furniture in their bedroom, but he knew Ava would want to make those decisions for herself.

He took the vacuum cleaner from the upstairs cupboard and hoovered up the dust and debris left by his clear-out. The newly exposed expanse of carpet made the bedroom surprisingly spacious and, with all his clothes gone, Ava's skirts and dresses and blouses hung freely in the wardrobe, and her other clothes and underwear fitted easily into the large chest-of-drawers which, up until now, they had shared.

And with his shoes gone there was room for all of Ava's shoes and boots on the shoe-rack by the side of the wardrobe.

He'd removed every trace of himself from the room, and he thought of the bedroom as hers now, not his or theirs.

A strange and alarming certainty took hold of Stephen.

His longing to have a stern and lovely woman take charge of him had lain dormant in his soul all his life and, now that his secret was out, it would show him no mercy.

Leaving Ava's bedroom, Stephen felt the satisfaction he imagined a maid or butler might feel at a job well done.

COMING BACK downstairs, he found Ava still working on her case-notes.

He wanted to tell her about his work, about how their bedroom was

entirely hers now, but he didn't want to interrupt her, and he stood silently by the stove, awaiting further instruction.

Ava didn't seem to notice his presence until, after several minutes, she looked up in annoyance and said sharply, 'Haven't you got something to be getting on with?'

'Yes, of course,' he said, stung yet delighted to be spoken to so carelessly.

He went back to the laundry room, drawn to her hose hanging over the sink where he'd left them. He picked them up, the softly drifting nylon making him think of her graceful figure and the lovely sound she made when she crossed or uncrossed her legs.

He stirred liquid detergent into a basin of warm water and began to wash out her nylons.

'That's what I like to see,' said Ava, her sudden entrance making Stephen jump in surprise.

'It's so long since I've been in here, I've forgotten what it looks like,' she said, running a finger along the washing-machine and the ironing-board as if they were new to her, 'but this is no place for the Mistress of the house, is it, the laundry-room? Or maybe I should call it the servant's quarters? Do you remember when I was planning to knock down this wall too, to make the kitchen bigger? I wonder what changed my mind. Do you think I knew one day you'd need your own little maid's room? I sometimes wonder if we ever know ourselves at all,' she mused, drawing closer and embracing him from behind, slipping her hand down the front of his jeans.

He could smell her perfume and feel the heat from her body.

'Don't let me stop you,' she said, kissing his neck as he went back to soaping her hose, blushing with shame at performing such an unmanly task, and at the way he had hardened so submissively in her hand.

‘I’m very pleased with you, Stephen,’ she said warmly, ‘I want you to know that. You’ve made an excellent start. I liked the way you got on with your work tonight without getting in my way. I liked that very much, and I’ll be expecting much more of it in the future,’ she said, stifling a yawn. ‘It’s wonderful that you have your own little maid’s room where you can get on with your duties without disturbing me, and seeing you so happy in your work just convinces me I’m doing the right thing. This new arrangement of ours is going to make me very happy, I’m sure of it. Other women can have husbands if they want, but I have something much better than a husband – I have a slave, and I think I’m going to like having a slave. Oh yes, something tells me I’m going to like that very much.’

Letting go of him, she wandered sleepily back to the doorway.

‘I’m going to bed now,’ she said, stretching as if she hadn’t a care in the world. ‘I need an early night if I’m going to be at my best tomorrow. Finish what you’re doing and come up after me. Don’t be long, or I’ll be asleep.’

The promise in her command made Stephen hurry to finish his work. As he rinsed out her tights, he heard Ava call to him from the kitchen.

‘I’ve left something for you on the table. I want you to look at it before you come to bed.’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he called back to her.

By the time he’d wrung out her tights and hung them to dry on the pulley, Ava had already gone upstairs.

THERE WAS nothing on the table except a pen and a single sheet of note-paper covered in her elegantly flowing handwriting. He picked up the sheet of paper and began to read –

‘I, Stephen Mercer, being of sound mind and body, do hereby cede all

rights and property to my wife Ava Carafano, and agree to live as her bounden slave and vassal, and live the rest of my life in devoted service to her comfort and pleasure to the exclusion of my own.'

He recognised it as the contract she'd proposed earlier that evening. Had it really only been a few short hours ago? It couldn't have been. He closed his eyes and shook his head as if to wake himself from a dream, but when he looked down the sheet of paper was still lying on the table.

This was no dream, and he knew that his freedom, and his very identity, was at stake.

At the time Stephen hadn't taken it in but now, after all that had been said and decided, the contract carried a weight and authority made all the stronger by Ava's use of Mason Locke and Associates headed notepaper.

He understood that the contract held no legal status whatsoever, but he knew that made no difference, and that his signature would nonetheless be utterly binding, a signing-away of his soul.

Suddenly giddy, he sat down at the table and read it again, thrilling once more to the preposterous injustice of its terms. This time he noticed the little space she'd marked with an x at the bottom of the page for his signature.

He sat looking at it for several moments before he picked up the pen.

Slowly, and with a shaking hand, he signed his name.

WHEN HE came into the bedroom Ava was already in bed with her bedside light off.

Stephen undressed quietly and got into bed beside her. Barely awake, Ava didn't turn to face him but she pushed her back dreamily against him so that he embraced her from behind the way she liked, with his hands on her

breasts and his erection nestling against the warm, silky cleft of her bottom.

‘Did you see what was on the table?’ she asked in a sleepy voice, sliding up the bed a little to let him in between the tops of her thighs.

‘Yes.’

‘Did you read it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you sign it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good boy, I knew you would,’ she said, rocking her hips lazily and taking him inside her.

‘This is what I want,’ she murmured as she began to move, giving him such exquisite pleasure he locked his arms around her and whispered in her ear, ‘Don’t move. Let me get used to you, how beautiful you are, how lovely.’

But Ava just turned her head and kissed him, her mouth smiling and wanton, and began to move her hips insolently, making him crush her so tightly she gasped in surprise and delight.

Straightaway she rebelled against her imprisonment, clenching and unclenching her cunt so sweetly around him he couldn’t help but move to her rhythm.

With a little laugh of triumph, and then with a groan of pleasure, she began to move more insistently, urging him on, twisting her neck to kiss him harder, speaking dreamily between kisses.

‘What kind of Mistress am I? Taking my servant to bed. Treating him like dirt under my feet, tormenting him and then kissing him, using him, doing what I like with him, taking him to my bed when I should send him to his room.’

Stephen strove with all his strength to master his pleasure so he could

outlast her.

Yet every kiss, every breath and movement drew him nearer to the brink, but slowly, stroke by stroke, he grew accustomed to the sweetness of their dance and, when he felt her shiver, and heard that sweet groan she always made, he felt a surge of raw, masculine power.

He began to move more confidently, taking charge of her, planning to drive her beyond pleasure into wildness.

He felt her nipples harden against his palms and he played with them, flicking them with his thumbs, tugging them until her moans grew louder, and she pressed back helplessly against him.

He knew then that he had her, that he held her in his power and he could do what he wanted with her.

It was a glorious feeling.

He would have his revenge.

He would make her pay for her arrogance, for the power she'd held over him, and he slowed his rhythm just to hear her cries of distress.

'Please,' she cried, 'please, God,' but he tormented her cruelly, pulling back so that only the tip of his cock played against the lips of her cunt.

'Don't stop,' she cried, 'don't you dare,' but he held back until she called out in fury, savage with need. Only then did he enter her again, and take her the way she craved, with deep, remorseless strokes.

The new sounds she made were incoherent, a babble of cries and moans. She was helpless, and he would lead her to ecstacy, show her who was master in this house, in this bed, in this marriage, but then Ava spoke again between kisses and the little gasps she gave as if she was running.

'When I find a lover … A real lover … I won't need to take my servant to bed any more … My poor slave … This may be his last … His last time … My poor … Slave … Soon he'll be alone … All alone … In his little

servant's room while I'm in bed … With my lover … Poor … Little … Slave … He'll hear us through the wall … But there's nothing he can do … Nothing … Except wait and listen because I rule him … I rule him with my love.'

Stephen felt a rush of dark arousal.

Her sly words infected him once more with an image of himself as her scorned husband, an image so tormenting and powerful it swept away his control in a flood of submissive delight, lifting and carrying him far beyond the point of no return.

Once more Ava was the victor, his triumphant Mistress.

Driven by pleasure and instinct, they became wild animals, their cries of passion merging into a single cry until at last they lay still, barely conscious, murmuring silly, half-heard endearments.

'I have plans for you,' he though he heard her say. 'Such plans.'

She was asleep in moments, but Stephen lay awake beside her, cradling her, listening to her breathing, smelling her warm skin and soft hair.

He was astonished to find himself growing hard again, but he didn't wake her. She had a busy day ahead, an important day, and so did he – his first full day as her bounden, indentured slave.

He had no doubt that from this night on his life would be as Ava had decreed.

It was a startling prospect that brought with it a cloud of anxiety as well as an unexpected sense of peace and freedom.

A new happiness bloomed in his heart.

Whatever wild and savage part of the forest they'd wandered into, Stephen reflected as he fell into the arms of sleep, he had never felt so alive, or so hopelessly and so helplessly in love with his wife and Mistress, the glorious Ava Carafano.

The Devlin Woman

An erotic novel by Molly Sands

Revised and re-edited May 22nd 2017.

Sequels available – 'Slave Song' and 'Contessa.'

'Thou art to me a delicious torment.'

(Ralph Waldo Emerson)

THE DEVLIN WOMAN

As she drove away she felt the powerful engine reverberate inside her, an expression of her unyielding will.

SUSAN LOOKED at her watch and smiled. She was really going to do it. They were making good time and would be at Ann's house in less than thirty minutes.

She glanced at her husband in the passenger seat beside her. Tense and unhappy, he was staring straight ahead, his hands clasping his thighs.

Keeping her eyes on the road, she reached over and patted him on the knee.

'Poor baby,' she said as if she meant it.

David took in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

'Don't look so worried,' Susan told him, 'you're going to be fine.'

'That's easy for you to say.'

'It is easy for me to say, but that's the point, isn't it?' she said. 'This is supposed to be about what I want, not you.'

'I can't believe you're doing this.'

'Well, I am, and you'll just have to get used to it.'

'I don't know if I can, Susan. Look.'

He held up one of his hands to show her. It was shaking.

'Oh, for heaven's sake, David,' she said, laughing at his distress, 'it's only a little fun.'

'Is it?'

'Of course it is.'

'It doesn't feel like fun.'

‘Oh, really?’ Susan replied. ‘That’s not what you said last night. Last night I seem to remember you thanking me, making me promise to do it no matter how much you begged me not to in the morning.’

It was the truth, and he couldn’t deny it.

He remembered her kiss, and the warmth of her breath on his cheek as she’d whispered in his ear, telling him he’d be better off kneeling to hear her news.

And he remembered the mockery in her eyes as she’d watched him sink slowly to his knees.

She’d stood looking down on him for long moments before making her announcement.

She was giving him away for the week-end, it had been decided, and he had no say in the matter.

She’d delivered her shocking news in that special voice she used on him, a slightly bored, matter-of-fact voice that expected his complete obedience.

She’d taken charge of him before, but never like this.

He’d wanted to argue, and put up a fight, but he couldn’t summon the strength. Her assurance had overwhelmed him, sending a delightful weakness coursing through his blood.

He remembered too how she’d kept him on his knees by her side while she’d spoken to Ann on the telephone, making the arrangements.

He’d never felt so helpless.

Watching Susan drive, David felt the knot in his stomach pulled tighter by the memory of how she’d stood above him talking on the telephone, her face flushed at her daring, keeping him to heel by slowly lifting the hem of her skirt and swaying her hips from side to side, mesmerising him with her bare thighs and pretty underwear, and the heavenly breeze of her scent.

She’d spoken happily to Ann while he’d knelt at her feet. He’d heard the

sound of Ann's voice but hadn't been able to make out what she was saying. He recalled how for long moments Susan had listened in silence, occasionally saying 'yes' or 'if you're sure' before laughing as if she was embarrassed, but nonetheless committed to some secret plan.

The sound of her laughter had aroused him more than anything else, draining him of strength and pushing him deeper under her spell until he feared he would never be able to swim back to the surface.

After the call had ended she'd kept him on his knees and let him worship her with his tongue, taking her pleasure but denying him his, wanting him hungry in the morning so he would still be eager to do her bidding.

SUSAN BEGAN to sing as she drove, the wonderful Richard Thompson song 'She Never Could Resist A Winding Road.' David found her cheerfulness irritating and yet it aroused him even as it inflamed his anxiety.

He had agreed to do this, to please Susan and prove his worth, but the closer they got to Ann's house the more his courage failed him.

What Susan had planned for him was too much, more than his pride could bear. He turned to tell her he couldn't go through with it, but saw only the hem of her elegant dress which had ridden above her knees. Her lovely legs were clad in sheer, dark hose, and David felt a new wave of arousal weaken his resolve.

'You'll come and get me on Sunday, won't you?' he asked meekly. It was far from the refusal he'd intended, and he hoped she hadn't heard the tremor in his voice.

She flashed him a smile, pleased he was compliant again.

'Come and get you? Well, now, I might, I suppose, but then again …'

‘Don’t joke about it.’

‘Poor baby,’ she said, her lovely, nylon-sheathed leg moving smoothly as she changed gear and increased her speed.

‘I need to know, Susan,’ he said, troubled yet aroused by her acceleration.

‘Oh, don’t be such a grouch. Of course I’ll come.’

‘Promise me.’

‘How many times do I have to tell you?’ she said, driving even faster.

‘Damn it, Susan, I need to hear you say it,’ he insisted, ‘I need to hear you promise.’

‘Say please,’ she said, hoping to lighten his mood.

‘Please.’

‘Please, Mistress,’ Susan corrected him.

‘Please, Mistress,’ he repeated, experiencing a thrill of arousal.

‘All right, I promise I’ll come and get you on Sunday,’ she said, unable to keep the scorn from her voice. ‘For heaven’s sake, you’ll only be away for two nights. It’ll be over before you know it.’

It was late on Friday afternoon. Susan had picked David up straight after she’d finished her fourth week as the new Depute Head Teacher in their local High School.

She was on her way to deliver him to Ann’s house in the country where she’d volunteered his services as groundsman and housekeeper for the week-end.

She loved her promoted post, but hadn’t grown accustomed to its new responsibilities, and the thought of a week-end to herself was glorious. She badly needed time on her own to reflect on her career and marriage. Ann had offered her that chance, and Susan felt truly grateful for her kindness.

Since meeting at an art class five months ago, Ann Devlin had become

Susan's closest friend, and taking David 'under her wing' for the week-end had been her idea. Susan had laughed at first, thinking the offer a joke and unable to imagine such a thing but, when she realised Ann was serious, she'd slowly come round to the idea.

Recently widowed, Ann Devlin was twenty years older than Susan, but she was bold and unshockable and full of life despite her bereavement.

Lonely, and worried about her marriage, Susan had confided in Ann, speaking shyly at first and then with increasing openness about David's sexuality and her fears that his submissive desires, sparked first by redundancy and fuelled subsequently, she suspected, by her promotion, had turned into an addiction.

Ann had been more than understanding, listening quietly and attentively before confessing that for the last eight years of her marriage her husband had lived as her house-servant and slave, carrying out all domestic duties, and submitting entirely to her will.

Without shame or embarrassment, she'd told Susan how this unusual arrangement had brought them both the greatest happiness.

Ann's confession took Susan by surprise, yet Susan found comfort in sharing her worries, particularly with another woman as free-minded and unafraid of sex as Ann Devlin.

Talking made everything easier. Her sex-life with David no longer felt like a shameful secret and, while Susan admitted there were times when she enjoyed taking charge of her husband – it felt so contrary to her respectable upbringing – she also talked of feeling trapped and suffocated by the confines of the role.

Not that she was prudish about sex. Dominating her husband was a game she liked to play when she was in the mood but, for David, it was a game he now wanted all the time.

At thirty-four David had spent all his working life as an editor with the same publishing company. When the company was bought over, and he was considered surplus to requirements, sexual fantasy seemed to take over his life.

At first he'd applied for one job after another, but with no success – the publishing industry was suffering its own crisis of confidence – and Susan wondered if he was even bothering to apply any more.

In their five years of marriage they'd played at being Mistress and slave on a handful of occasions – Susan's humour and intelligence as much as her clear-eyed beauty had always made David weak at the knees – but in recent months his desires had grown darker and more insistent.

Submission to his wife had become his refuge from the world. He wanted her to berate and belittle him at every opportunity. He would beg her to make him kneel at her feet while she laughed at his inadequacies as a husband and as a man.

When she did as he asked David experienced a great and transcendent pleasure such as he had never known, a bliss beyond compare.

He was good in the kitchen, and he cooked delicious meals for her every evening when she returned from work. He liked to serve them to her in the dining-room or the newly built conservatory, with fresh flowers on the table, as was her due as the lady of the house, while he ate a plainer meal alone in the kitchen, a lowly servant.

Once, she made him kneel by her chair while she fed him scraps from her plate, telling him how disappointed she was to have such a weak and unmanly husband, and laughing wickedly at his arousal. It amused her for a while to pull his hair and pinch his nose and tug his ear as she told him of his shortcomings, and that he was fit only to be a woman's slave.

Quickly bored, she'd made him crawl under the table to kiss her ankles

and shoes while she ate dessert and finished her glass of wine before going through to watch television, leaving him to wash up the dishes and tidy the kitchen in a fever of submissive desire.

Soon a pattern became established and most evenings, after he'd finished his cleaning and come through to join her, she'd instruct him to kneel at her feet where she'd use him as her foot-stool while she watched the programmes of her choice, or made phone-calls to friends and family. He took a shameful delight in being used in this way, particularly as she was often strict with him, forbidding him to move or speak as he lay under her pretty feet. 'Keep quiet,' she'd tell him in a deliciously clipped and indifferent tone, pressing a nylon-covered foot over his mouth. 'Don't move unless I tell you, or you'll be sorry.'

Sometimes she'd keep him there for hours at a time as if she'd forgotten all about him, her indifference to his comfort casting a dark and powerful spell over his senses.

David had never much liked Susan's mother, and Susan knew her mother had never liked David, and one evening she discovered a strange new delight in kneeling astride him on the settee, tugging her skirt up around her hips, and making him kiss her through her tights and panties while she made her weekly telephone call to her mother who lived over two hundred miles away.

For reasons she couldn't explain, it thrilled Susan to hold him down in such a way, imprisoned beneath her with no option but to listen to her chatter about work and clothes and family, and she now insisted on this every time she called her mother, smiling as David took his place beneath her and she waited for her mother to answer.

Over time she discovered the position that brought her the greatest pleasure. A weekly ritual, she would sit atop him facing his feet with her legs

on his arms, holding them down so that he couldn't free himself even if he wanted to. There was a pleasant view of the countryside from the sitting-room window, and she would enjoy the view as she talked to her mother with her husband pinned helplessly beneath her.

As he lay beneath his wife in this way David felt a pleasure so powerful he lost all track of time and place. Listening to Susan talk to her mother, he became convinced that, for the duration of their call, he'd become the helpless slave to both women. The deepest shame mixed potently with the strangely pleasurable feeling of being trapped, and her lovely woman's scent which drugged his senses like a narcotic.

His pride screamed at him to break free and stand up for himself, and yet he did nothing. The pleasure he found in his subservience overwhelmed any remaining dignity or pride.

He didn't know if he was in heaven or hell.

After the calls were over Susan would hurry to take down her panties and hose, and settle over her husband's mouth like a queen. Lost in her imperious beauty, David worshipped her with all his heart.

While he adored her in this way Susan experienced a glorious feeling of freedom and power. She'd hurry to undo his trousers so that she could squeeze and slap his jutting cock. When he cried out in pain she'd press down on him all the harder, and tease and torment him about her mother.

'I'm going to give you to her, David,' she'd tell him. 'You don't believe me, but I'm going to do it. One day soon, I promise, I'll go on holiday and leave you at her house on my way to the airport. How will you like that?' she'd say, twisting his balls and bearing down on him so heavily he couldn't catch his breath.

The fear and panic he felt as he struggled for breath only increased his arousal and made him worship all the more devoutly.

‘You’ll be her servant when I’m away, her little maid and helper. She’ll make you wear the pretty apron that hangs by the cooker. You know the one I mean, the white one with a pattern of roses and a little lace frill around its edge. She won’t be surprised to see how much you like wearing it. She’s never had a good opinion of you, never thought you were much of a man. And as for me – well, I’ll be lazing in the sun, dancing and drinking with handsome men while you cook and clean for her, wash her clothes and underwear, polish her shoes and listen to her tell you what she really thinks of you. She won’t be kind, you know that, don’t you? Oh no,’ Susan would taunt him as her pleasure mounted, thrilled to feel him gasp and struggle beneath her, ‘I’ll tell her to be as cruel as she likes. I’ll tell her to punish you. I’ll tell her all the horrible things you’ve said about her,’ Susan liked to say as she crushed him beneath her, arousal making her voice soft and dreamy. ‘She’ll punish you then, David, she’ll hurt you for being such a weak and useless man. Oh, she’ll make you pay all right, just you wait, she’ll make you pay and pay.’

Often at these moments Susan closed her eyes in ecstasy and spoke of even darker cruelties.

‘I’ve decided, David, I have, I really have. I’ve made up my mind. I won’t be coming back for you after my holiday. After all, what good are you? I’ll leave you with her. You’ll be waiting for me. Waiting and waiting. Every car that goes by you’ll pray will be mine. Every ring of the doorbell will make your heart lift with hope. But I won’t come, David. I’ll be getting on with my life without you. I’ll be rid of you. I’ll be free. Free to find another man, a better man. Oh, God, yes. You’ll be her slave, and I’ll be free to do what I want … To live how I want … Oh, God, yes …’

Taunting him so cruelly sent waves of pleasure racing through her blood and she’d cry out in delight as she came, gripping David’s cock cruelly tight

to deny him release as he struggled for breath beneath her.

It added greatly to her pleasure, knowing she was denying him at the moment of her sweetest joy.

Afterwards, drained by pleasure, and surprised and faintly embarrassed by the strange role her mother had played in her fantasy, she'd speak no more about her mother or lovers or holidays – until the next week when it was time to make another call.

Most evenings David ran Susan a bath before bed, and in the mornings prepared breakfast for her while she put on her make-up and got dressed in the elegant skirts and dresses she wore to work. Then she'd come downstairs and sit in the conservatory reading The Guardian newspaper while he served her grilled bacon and poached eggs or porridge served with fruit and honey, always with freshly made coffee. She bought him a pretty apron like the one that hung in her mother's kitchen, and she insisted he wear it when he served her at table. The feminine garment shamed him deeply and his hands would often be trembling when he set her plate before her, but Susan would only smile and say, 'How smart you are in your apron, David. Just like a real waitress.'

It wasn't long before Susan took such service for granted. She began to look forward to it, and could be very stern with him if everything wasn't just the way she wanted.

She had never punished him physically, although she'd once smacked him with her bare hand for the serious crime of shrinking a favourite cashmere jumper in the wash, yet she'd recently begun to wonder what it would feel like to punish him with a cane or a whip.

She considered herself above such role-playing, and she didn't possess a strap or cane, but all the same she found herself aroused at the thought of wielding such absolute authority. She wondered what really went on in the

mind of a masochist. Would David stay hard as she beat him, or would the pain break him and put an end to his arousal? Would she take pleasure in her cruel ascendancy, or would she lose courage and comfort him, and ask for forgiveness? She felt sure such severity was beyond her, and she doubted she'd ever have the courage to punish her husband, and put him truly under her heel.

David, for his part, longed for her curt reprimands every bit as much as her gracious approval. Susans's stern scowl and approving smile both brought him a thrill of submissive delight.

Every morning, before she drove to work, Susan would insist on another of her little rituals. She'd wait until he'd helped her on with her overcoat before insisting he kneel on the hard tiles in the hallway to kiss the hem of her skirt and tell her how much he loved and adored her.

If she was in the mood she'd slowly raise her skirt and let him kiss the lacy hem of her slip if she was wearing one, and then her panties through the sheer nylon of her hose, warning him that his kisses must remain soft and respectful.

At such times David felt a dizzying arousal transport him to a higher world, a world where he had no significance except as a servant to his glorious wife and Mistress.

Susan often tired of him, feeling contempt for his weakness and unmanly servitude and yet, while he knelt at her feet, she found a dreamy pleasure in telling him his duties for the day. It was undeniably enjoyable to drive a man to his knees, and have him at her beck and call. It brought her a tantalising pleasure that always made her feel there was further to go, new cruelties to be explored.

While Susan was at work, he carried out her instructions diligently, haunted by memories of her haughty manner. He kept the house spotless and

every day he yearned for her homecoming when he'd hurry to take her coat, and serve her in any way she desired.

When his housework was done, he searched the internet for the styles of clothes she liked to wear, often items she had already selected, and bought them for her from his savings.

Very occasionally, as a treat, she'd permit him to buy her underwear. If she approved his choice she'd allow him to lay the pretty lingerie out for her in the morning with her shoes and the rest of her clothes.

When she left for work, he felt proud of her elegant appearance, as if he'd played some small part in the success of his beautiful wife and Mistress.

As the weeks rolled on he took over all the housework and laundry, the ironing too, blushing with shame and pleasure whenever she scolded him for a poorly ironed skirt, or took him to task for a shoe or boot that wasn't shined to perfection.

'If you're going to be my servant,' she'd tell him, 'then you'd better learn to be a good one. Otherwise I may have to dismiss you, and find a suitable replacement. You may not be much of a husband, but you can at least try to be a good and obedient housekeeper.'

For Susan, being waited on hand and foot, and never having to do any cooking or cleaning, was far from unpleasant, particularly when she came home exhausted after work, and there were days when she might have said she had an ideal marriage, but those days were outnumbered by days when she felt lonely and confused.

David lived in a daze of arousal, and in bed he often came as soon as he entered her, shamed yet oddly thrilled by his lack of manly control. He strove to make it up to her in other ways, and she came to enjoy his eager devotions, but Susan missed the joy of ordinary sex between man and wife, and she knew something was missing from her life.

Soon after her promotion, proud of her, yet belittled by her success, he begged her to be even stricter with him, pleading with her to treat him more harshly, and call him ever more cruel and hurtful names.

She'd oblige him to give herself peace, irritation and contempt bringing real sting to her admonishments. On one occasion, she lost patience and mocked him with such icy contempt that tears began to run down his cheeks, and yet, when she went to console him, she found to her astonishment that he was fully and helplessly aroused.

Susan despised cruelty in the world, and resented the way it made her feel even when she saw the bliss it brought her husband. At those times she'd try to talk to him, tell him she needed to take a break from their games, and live like an ordinary couple.

That was when he became moody and unhappy, sulky as a teenager, and unbearable to live with.

She feared she'd become his dealer, her scorn and derision his only fix. She worried that these games were taking over his life, and with it, her own.

And, at thirty-two, Susan felt it was time she started a family, and her instincts told her she needed a strong and loving provider to be the father of her children.

'WHAT TIME will you pick me up on Sunday?' David asked moodily as Susan slowed to negotiate a cattle-grid in the narrow country road.

Susan felt a fire catch in her heart, urging her to be cruel.

She knew he didn't want to go to Ann's, and must be afraid of being left alone with a woman he barely knew, but the truth was she wanted him to be afraid. It aroused her to hold such power over him.

For once they would play by her rules not his.

‘Oh, that’s for me to know and you to wonder,’ Susan replied, treating him to a mysterious smile.

‘Please, Susan, I need to know what time you’ll pick me up. I can’t do this unless I know.’

‘My God,’ thought Susan, feeling a flash of anger, ‘this is what he wants and he can’t even enjoy it.’

‘What time, Susan? I need to know what time.’

‘You can need all you like. I’m not telling you what time.’

‘Why not, for God’s sake?’

‘Because I’m your Mistress and I like to see you suffer, that’s why. Because I like to keep you in the dark.’

She gave another smile but the fire in her heart burned more fiercely.

This time she would take charge in a way that went beyond play-acting.

Maybe then she’d find out what real power felt like.

She hoped it might feel like freedom.

‘If you don’t tell me, I’m not going,’ said David.

‘Don’t take that tone with me. I’m your Mistress and you’ll do what I tell you.’

‘I’m not going, Susan. Stop the car. It’s over. I’m not doing this. I’m not staying with Ann bloody Devlin.’

‘You’ll do what you’re told, David, I’m warning you.’

She’d used her strictest tone, more clipped than usual as real anger lay just beneath her act. Such a tone usually brought him quickly to heel, but this time his rebellion deepened.

‘Stop the car,’ he shouted, reaching for the steering-wheel, ‘I’m not doing this.’

Seized by anger, Susan pulled over and braked to a halt by a line of beech trees, flinging them forward against their seat-belts, and then violently

back into their seats.

They sat in angry silence for a few moments. They were already on the quiet country roads that led to Ann's house, and no other traffic was visible except for a tractor, tiny on the slope of a distant field.

David was the first to speak.

'Blackbird,' he said.

It was their safe-word which either of them could use to stop any play that made them unhappy.

'My God,' said Susan, suddenly so weary she thought she might cry, 'you ask me to take control, you beg me, and you take fright at the first thing.'

'I'm sorry, Susan. I didn't think you'd really do this, that's all.'

'Oh, I see, so you think I'm weak. You think I'm stupid.'

'You know I don't,' he said contritely. 'It's my fault. I thought I could go through with it, but now I know I can't.'

'That's my decision, not yours.'

'I'm frightened and embarrassed, that's the truth, and I can't do it, Susie. I'm sorry, I really am.'

'I don't care if you're frightened or embarrassed. I expect you to suffer that for me.'

'I'm telling you honestly how I feel,' he said quietly, sure that she'd listen to reason. 'You have to listen to that.'

'You call me Mistress but you've always got to be the ring-master. Everything has to suit you. It's just a silly game to give you pleasure. Where I fit in, God only knows. I'm not a real person to you, I'm just a fantasy, a figment of your imagination. I'm sick and tired of it, and I'm sick and tired of you!'

'Please, Susan, I'll make it up to you, I promise. Just turn around and

drive home.'

'What am I going to tell Ann?'

'Tell her what you like. I hardly even know her, and what I do know I don't like. Sticking her nose into our lives.'

Ann felt another flash of anger.

'I won't have you talk about her like that. She's a good friend, and she couldn't have been kinder.'

'You shouldn't have told her about us.'

'I had to talk to someone.'

'Our marriage is private. Man and wife. It should have stayed that way.'

'I felt lonely and worried. My God, who wouldn't? It's not as if you ever talk about it. You never talk about anything.'

David made a dismissive sound as if she was over-reacting in a way that was typical of a woman.

Fighting to keep her temper, Susan made herself speak more slowly.

'Ann knows about these things. She understands this kind of sex far more than I do. I've told you, it's second-nature to her. Her husband lived as her slave for years, and she's not in the least bit judgemental. She doesn't think any the less of you because you like to be bossed around.'

The knowledge that Susan had told Ann Devlin about his submissive desires infuriated David, and caused him profound embarrassment. Deep down he had a fiercely competitive nature, and liked the world to think him strong and manly. He recalled the way Ann had behaved towards him the last time she'd visited Susan.

When he'd come into the room she'd barely let her eyes rest on him, and had continued talking with Susan as if he wasn't there, making him feel small and jealous. She was a sternly attractive, well-dressed woman with a natural air of confidence and authority. Her manner towards him hadn't been one of

dislike, but rather of complete indifference, which was somehow harder to bear, and he found it easy to imagine her enjoying the prospect of having him under her control.

He made up his mind once and for all – he would not, could not, give her that chance.

‘I’m not doing this, Susan, and that’s final.’

‘That’s the most pathetic thing I’ve ever heard,’ Susan replied. Her mouth, normally so full and sensual, had become a thin hard line. ‘You want me to be your Mistress, but the first time I act like one and use my own initiative, the first time I ask you to do something for my sake not yours, you run away like a stupid coward.’

‘I’m not a coward,’ David retorted, stung by the accusation.

‘Then prove it,’ she said, looking him straight in the eye.

He was tempted, he really was.

It would be a wonderful feeling to give in to her, to let his pride and dignity melt away, to let her do what she wanted with him and surrender body and soul to his lovely wife and her formidable friend, but he just couldn’t do it, and he was the first to look away.

‘I’m sorry, Susan, I can’t. It’s too much. I can’t let you leave me with that Devlin woman.’

‘That Devlin woman, as you call her, has gone out of her way for me, listened to me, talked to me and now she’s set aside her time for me. You should be grateful for her help.’

‘Well, I’m not bloody grateful, and I don’t need help.’

‘Oh, so you say,’ Susan said coldly, reaching for her bag and taking out her cigarettes and lighter.

‘You’re not going to smoke?’

‘I’ll do what I like.’

‘Not in my car.’

‘Your car!’ exclaimed Susan. ‘Since when? Who’s paying for it? Who’s paying it up every month since you lost your job? Tell me that.’

‘That’s not fair.’

‘Oh, get out, just get out!’

David stared at her in fury before getting out the car, and slamming the door behind him. Susan lit her cigarette and watched him in the driver’s mirror as he strode away. She inhaled deeply, but she didn’t enjoy it. In the last month she’d cut down to a packet a week, and she’d planned to get through the day without smoking. Instead of calming her, the cigarette only made her more upset.

‘My God,’ she said under her breath, ‘if I don’t get some time to myself, I’ll go mad.’

In the mirror she saw him pace angrily, muttering to himself, kicking out at something on the verge. At times like this she felt no love for him, and she wondered why she’d ever married him. She glanced up at the mirror again and saw him turn and march back purposefully towards the car.

On impulse, she operated the central locking system, and heard the car obey her with a heavy clunk.

It was an oddly satisfying sound that both calmed and aroused her.

David tried the door and, when it wouldn’t open, he knocked impatiently on the window.

Susan liked seeing the look of surprise on his face.

‘Susan, for God’s sake let me in,’ she heard him say, his voice pleasingly quiet outside the cocoon of the well-built car.

Susan pressed a button and lowered the passenger window an inch. She listened to his angry words for a few moments, then closed the window and sat smoking her cigarette like a film-star awaiting her call.

When he stopped shouting, she lowered the window again.

‘Are you going to stop being a baby and do what you’re told?’ she asked him.

‘Let me in, Susan,’ he said, his voice quieter, but still sharp with anger.

‘Only if you behave yourself,’ she said. ‘Well, will you or won’t you?’

‘Just let me in.’

‘Not until I hear your answer.’

‘For heaven’s sake.’

‘I’m waiting, David.’

‘All right, I’ll behave,’ he agreed in a long-suffering tone.

‘You’ll do what I tell you to do?’

‘Yes, yes.’

‘And you’ll stay with Ann.’

‘I’ve told you. No, I can’t do that.’

‘Are you quite sure?’

‘Yes, I’m sure, now let me …’

Susan savoured his look of surprise when she slipped the car into gear and drove away, feeling a thrill of elation as she sped off along the country road, watching him grow smaller and smaller in her driving-mirror.

Soon he was no bigger than her thumb, and then he wasn’t there at all.

SUSAN DROVE fast with a tight, angry feeling in the pit of her stomach, yet she enjoyed the quiet roar of the engine, the way it obeyed her without question.

After a few miles, when her heart stopped racing, she pulled in at a farm-gate, switched off the engine, and sat in silence, considering what to do next.

She took out her phone and thought about calling Ann, but she wanted to deal with this herself, prove to Ann she was strong enough to see their arrangement through without help.

She put her phone away and opened her window, enjoying the cool breeze on her face and bare arm. She gave a sudden laugh, thinking again of the look on David's face when she'd driven away and left him.

She'd shown him, she told herself, she'd shown him who was boss.

Her breathing had slowed but she still felt a tumult in the pit of her stomach, a strangely pleasurable anxiety warning her of the challenge ahead. She let her hand stray under her dress to the tops of her thighs. With a sigh, she lay her head back and closed her eyes, her fingers fluttering against her panties and hose.

The pleasure she gave herself brought a welcome sense of peace and purpose, and she made a vow as her pleasure mounted.

However it happened, this week-end would go the way she'd planned. She would have her way no matter what it took, and her troublesome husband would bow to her will whether he wanted to or not.

She would not be an ordinary woman any more.

She would be a Mistress, and take charge of her life and marriage in the way a Mistress should.

DAVID SAT against a tree by the side of the narrow lane. In the twenty minutes Susan had been gone only two cars had passed by. He would have phoned and asked her what on earth she was playing at, but his phone was in his jacket pocket along with his wallet, and his jacket was in the car boot.

He felt lost without them.

Unmanned.

When at last he saw her car approach, he fixed her with a steady gaze but didn't get to his feet. He wanted to look strong and composed, as if he'd always known she'd come back for him.

She stopped the car opposite him, but didn't turn her head to look in his direction. She'd put on sunglasses which she knew made her look haughty and stern. When he didn't get to his feet she revved the engine and drove away, making him fear she was abandoning him again, but she turned the car skilfully, and pulled up with the passenger door beside him, but with the car once more facing stubbornly in the direction of Ann's house.

Once more she revved the engine, and David knew she was in no mood to back down. Despite his anger, the thought excited him, but he did all he could to ignore his excitement.

This was no time to submit.

He had to be strong.

If he gave in to her now there was no knowing where it would end.

He got to his feet and walked towards the car, the hint of a swagger in his stride. He tried the door, and his temper flared when he found it was still locked.

He bent and peered through the window, rapping angrily on the glass.

The window slid down an inch.

'Open the door,' he commanded. 'This is ridiculous, Susan. Let me …'

With a quiet hum the window slid shut.

David stood and looked to the heavens. Taking a deep breath, he bent down and rapped on the window once more.

Nothing.

She didn't even turn to look at him.

Once again he rapped on the glass, glaring at Susan.

Her jaw was set firmly, her expression unreadable behind her

sunglasses. With a quick movement of her hand, she flicked a strand of her lovely dark hair behind her ear. David knew this was never a good sign.

He tapped the glass again, more quietly this time.

The window slid down an inch.

‘Now, listen, Susan …’ he began.

But Susan spoke over him, her voice clear and firm.

‘No, you’ll listen, David. If you don’t, I’ll drive away and leave you. I’ll do it, believe me, and I won’t come back.’

A car appeared on the road. Feeling suddenly exposed and foolish, David pretended to examine the nearest front tyre until the car had passed.

Susan watched him and gave a bitter laugh, understanding more clearly how important dignity was to him.

Perhaps, she reflected, that was why it gave him so much pleasure when she took it away.

‘All right,’ David said, his face at the window again, ‘I’m listening.’

‘Very well,’ said Susan, ‘then answer this question. Am I or am I not your Mistress?’

‘Look, Susan …’

‘Just answer the question.’

‘Yes,’ he admitted reluctantly, ‘you are.’

‘And what does that make you?’

He muttered something she couldn’t hear.

‘Speak up, David, I can’t hear you.’

‘Your slave,’ he said, angered yet aroused by the inquisition.

She turned off the engine and immediately all was calmer between them.

‘And what does a slave do?’

He wouldn’t answer.

‘Come on, I’m waiting. What does a slave do?’

‘He obeys,’ he said with a grimace.

‘That’s right, and who does he obey?’

‘You know the answer to that.’

‘Yes, I do, but I want to hear you say it. Who does he obey?’

‘His Mistress,’ he said, trying to sound bored. ‘He obeys his Mistress.’

‘Good,’ said Susan, ‘now we’re getting somewhere.’

‘Will you let me in now?’

‘No, David, I won’t, not until you’ve answered one more question.’

He turned away to conceal his irritation before turning back and speaking as calmly as he could manage.

‘All right, what is it?’

‘Did you or did you not agree that I could give you to another woman for the week-end, a woman I like and trust?’

‘Yes, I agreed.’

‘Did you not, in fact, give me your word?’

‘Yes, I gave you my word.’

‘Then it’s very simple, David. As your wife and Mistress, I’m holding you to your word.’

‘Listen, Susan …’

‘No, David, I’m not listening. Mistresses don’t have to listen to slaves. That’s not how this works. You should know that by now.’

‘I can’t say it any plainer. I thought I could do it, but I can’t.’

‘That’s not acceptable, David,’ she said with a clipped assurance that enthralled him. ‘You’ll take back your safe-word, get into the car, and come with me to Ann’s. I’m afraid I’m going to have to insist on it.’

‘All right, Susan, whatever you say,’ said David, saying what he had to say to get back into the car. ‘I take it back, now open the door.’

‘I have conditions,’ said Susan, taking off her sunglasses and looking

him in the eye.

She knew he was bluffing.

‘What conditions?’ he asked warily.

‘Take off your shoes.’

‘What?’

‘You heard me. Take them off.’

With a weary sigh, he bent and took off his shoes before standing and clapping them together like flippers. ‘Now what?’ he asked.

‘And your jeans.’

‘What?’

‘I mean it. Take them off.’

He looked up and down the road. No-one was coming. With a muttered curse, he quickly undid his belt and pulled off his jeans.

‘Now what?’ he asked impatiently.

‘Your socks too, unless you want to look really stupid.’

‘For God’s sake,’ he said, taking off his socks.

‘Now go to the back of the car.’

‘Why?’

‘Don’t argue.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Just do what you’re told, I won’t tell you again.’

Cowed by the steel in her voice, he walked to the back of the car, treading gingerly in his bare feet. Susan operated the control which unlocked the boot.

‘Put everything in the boot,’ she called to him through her window.

He didn’t move.

‘Hurry up, David, I’m warning you.’

She looked over her shoulder and saw him open the boot and throw his

jeans and shoes inside.

‘Close it,’ she called.

He hesitated for a moment, strongly tempted to snatch back his jeans and shoes along with the jacket which held his phone and wallet.

‘I said, close it,’ he heard her call.

David urged himself to take back his clothes and shoes while he had the chance, and yet, aroused by her stern commands, and the pleasurable feeling it always gave him to give in to her, he reached up and shut the car-boot as he had been instructed.

As soon as he shut the boot, Susan locked it again.

‘Now you really wouldn’t want me to drive off and leave you,’ Susan said as he came back to the passenger window.

She felt a strong temptation to drive off and leave him in his underwear by the side of the road. The thought of leaving him like that gave her a thrill of arousal. If he hadn’t been watching she would have reached under her dress again.

‘Come on,’ he said, ‘you’ve had your fun.’

‘Be quiet, David,’ she snapped as if scolding a child. ‘I’m going to unlock the door and let you into the car. I want you to sit quietly and listen while I tell you how it’s going to be. I won’t tolerate any display of bad temper, and I expect your complete obedience. Do you understand me?’

‘This has gone far enough,’ he said, prompted by a surge of angry pride.

‘Do you understand me?’ she said again in an even firmer voice.

‘No, Susan, quite frankly, I don’t.’

He gasped in surprise when Susan started the engine and drove away.

Feeling afraid now, and utterly exposed, he ran after her as fast as he could in his bare feet and underwear.

Susan stopped the car after about a hundred yards and watched him

draw close in her driver's mirror but then, when he'd almost reached her car, she drove away again, more slowly this time so he could almost keep up with her.

She stopped her car and started again to tease and torment him, and prove to him just who was in charge.

She did this a number of times, driving away just as he drew close, watching him in her driving-mirror all the time, feeling a sweet, tell-tale wetness between her legs as she played him like a fool.

It was a wickedly delightful feeling to have him at her mercy like this. He looked so ridiculous running after her, sometimes limping after stepping on a loose stone. As she watched him in the mirror, she slid her hand under her dress and touched herself through her underwear. Her insides trembled with desire. It was all she could do not to drive away and leave him.

Finally she stopped her cruel game, and let him come to the passenger window again. His eyes were wide with shock, and his face red with anger and exertion.

'Well, David, have you learned your lesson?' she asked him calmly. 'Are you going to be good?'

Before he could reply another car approached and Susan laughed out loud as David knelt to hide his state of undress from the passing driver.

'Well, David, are you?' she asked once the car had passed.

'Yes,' he said, a new respect and eagerness to please in his voice.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Yes, Mistress,' he said, his arousal growing despite his anger.

'You'll be a good boy?'

'Yes, Mistress, I'll be good, I promise.'

'So I have your word?'

'Yes, Mistress, you have my word.'

‘Very well, but I’m going to hold you to it.’

She unlocked the car, and David opened the door and got in.

He was aware of her looking at him but he sat in silence, unable to meet her gaze. Barefoot and out of breath, and wearing only his t-shirt and boxer shorts, it was impossible to keep up any pretense of dignity.

She leaned over close, admiring his long, well-muscled legs. She kissed him on the cheek and placed her hand on the inside of his thigh, and caressed him lightly.

‘What nice legs you have, David.’

‘I’m glad you like them,’ he said, trying to sound carefree.

‘You should show them off more often,’ she said, sliding her hand up to his undershorts.

‘Listen, Susan …’

’What have we here, I wonder?’ she said mischievously, reaching deftly into the opening in his shorts, and taking out his cock.

‘For God’s sake,’ David said in astonishment, ‘someone will see us.’

‘Don’t be a spoilsport. No-one will see. We’re in the middle of nowhere.’

His cock was full and heavy, and partly erect.

‘Come on, David, make it hard for me,’ she urged him. ‘You know how I like it when you do that.’

She knew he still planned to defy her, and she was going to take control by the most direct route.

Caressing him with feathery touches, she felt him come erect, filling her hand in the way she loved. She laughed at his eagerness, and rewarded him by taking a firmer hold, the little silver bracelets on her wrist making a hypnotic jingling sound as her hand moved up and down. The sweetly feminine sound goaded and tormented him, taking away his strength and

waking in him the lovely drowning feeling that always made him feel so helpless. He could smell her perfume, and glimpse the swell of her breasts down the front of her dress along with the pretty lace of her bra.

He groaned with pleasure, and grew yet harder in her hand.

‘That’s what I like,’ Susan said approvingly, a smile in her voice, ‘my slave standing up nice and hard for his wife, for his wife and Mistress.’

‘God, Susan,’ he gasped, ‘you’ll make me come.’

‘We wouldn’t want that,’ she said, loosening her hold and slowing her rhythm to a safer but more maddening pace. ‘You’ll want to look your best for Ann. I’m sure she’ll want you all big and hard, not soft and sleepy. I wonder if she’ll like it. What do you think?’

‘God …’

‘Do you think she’ll like your pretty little cock?’ she asked, a dark amusement in her eyes.

Susan knew his cock wasn’t little, but she’d learned over the past months that calling it so excited him, and greatly increased her control over him.

‘Ann’s going to be your Mistress for the week-end. Mistress Ann Devlin.’

‘No …’

‘Sssh, David, I’m speaking. You’ll only speak when I tell you to. Is that understood?’

‘Please …’

Suddenly, she leaned down and took him in her mouth, her tongue swirling around the tip of his cock.

Taken by surprise, David groaned in delight and ran his fingers through her hair, but she quickly sat up, taking hold of him again with her hand.

‘Is that understood?’

‘Yes,’ David replied, deeper under her spell.

‘Yes, who?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ said David, at her mercy.

‘Good boy,’ praised Susan. ‘You’re afraid of Ann, aren’t you? Mistress Ann Devlin. But that’s all right,’ she said when he didn’t answer. ‘A slave should be afraid of his Mistress. It’s only to be expected, and besides, it adds to the fun. She’s older and wiser, and she doesn’t suffer fools. You’ll discover that very soon, I’m sure, and she’s very good-looking for a woman of her age, wouldn’t you say?’

She felt him pulse in her hand, and she gave an answering squeeze.

‘Oh, yes, she is, isn’t she?’ she went on. ‘I’m sure you’ve noticed that, with those tight skirts she wears, and high heels. Oh, David,’ she whispered conspiringly, ‘it’s going to happen. It’s really going to happen. What a lucky man you are. You’re going to be the slave of a strong and clever woman while your cruel wife drives away and leaves you all alone with her.’

She let go of his cock and cupped his balls in her bossy little hand. David closed his eyes and gave a moan as if he was in pain, and she knew she had him where she wanted.

And now that she had him, she wasn’t going to let him escape.

‘I’m going to tell you a secret, David,’ she murmured seductively. ‘Would you like that?’

David could barely think let alone speak.

‘I asked you a question. Would you like to hear a secret?’

‘Yes,’ David groaned, his eyes closing tighter.

‘But are you ready, I wonder?’ she whispered. ‘Are you ready to hear the terrible secret of your cruel and heartless wife?’

‘Yes.’

‘I beg your pardon.’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Say please.’

‘Please, Mistress.’

‘Very well, David. Listen carefully for I’ll only tell you once.’

‘Yes … Yes, Mistress.’

‘Then here it is, here’s my secret,’ she whispered softly, leaning closer so he could feel her breath on his cheek, and tugging his balls to make him gasp. ‘I like to think of driving away and leaving you. I know that’s very cruel of me, but it’s lovely to think of being free to go where I want when I know you’re a prisoner who has to work and serve as another woman’s slave. It excites me, David, makes me smile, makes me wet, makes me want to touch myself the way I’m touching you now. That’s my secret.’

She gave him another squeeze, and kissed his throat, enjoying the way he tensed and began to breath through clenched teeth.

‘You wouldn’t want to deny me that pleasure, would you, David?’

‘No, Mistress.’

‘Of course you wouldn’t. You like to serve your Mistress, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘You like to make her smile, make her happy.’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s what you like best, isn’t it, doing what a woman tells you?’

‘Yes,’ he said helplessly, his eyes still closed.

‘Well, then, you should thank me for giving you to Ann, shouldn’t you?’ she said, smiling to see his cock pulse and leap.

He began to breath more rapidly, but didn’t answer.

‘Shouldn’t you?’ she insisted, a harder edge coming into her voice as she spurred him on with a tug on his balls.

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Well, then, let me hear you,’ she whispered eagerly, kissing the corner of his mouth and sliding her hand up to his cock again, caressing him with a lightness she knew would inflame him without letting him come. ‘Let me hear you say it, let me hear you say thank-you.’

He groaned and said, ‘Thank-you.’

‘And what are you thanking me for?’ she quickly asked, wanting him so deep under her spell he would drown.

‘For giving … For giving me away.’

‘That’s right, David, for giving you away to a strong and beautiful woman. And what else?’ she asked, her little bracelets making their jingling sound again.

‘For driving away … For driving away and leaving me.’

‘That is cruel of me, isn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

‘So cruel … Crueller than I’ve ever been before.’

‘Yes.’

‘But you like me to be cruel, don’t you?’

‘Yes … Oh, God, yes.’

‘Poor baby.’

‘Oh, God …’

‘Poor David.’

‘I love you,’ he moaned, thrusting against her hand.

She smiled, and loosened her grip to torment him all the more.

‘I love you too,’ she said, ‘now you’ve decided to be good. And you’ll be good for Ann too, won’t you?

‘Yes.’

‘How good?’

‘Very good.’

‘Promise me.’

‘I promise.’

‘I hope you won’t disappoint me. You won’t do that, will you. David?’

‘No, Mistress.’

‘I want to be proud of my slave. You will make me proud, won’t you, David?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘I’m very pleased to hear it. It wouldn’t do to disappoint your Mistress, it wouldn’t do at all. And I’ll expect you to call Ann Mistress too, to show her the respect she deserves. That will only be right, won’t it, right and proper?’

‘Yes.’

‘But it will be terribly embarrassing for you, won’t it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh, dear, think how embarrassing. You won’t know where to look, but I like that, David. That’s another of my secrets. I like to think of you feeling ashamed and embarrassed. I like to think of you suffering for me, doing things you don’t want to do, having to obey a woman you don’t even like, and all because I’ve made you do it. Oh, yes, I like that very much. Very, very much. Let me hear you say her name … Mistress Ann … Mistress Ann Devlin … Come on, now, don’t be shy, I want to hear you say it.’

‘Mistress …’ he gasped, some part of him still too proud to say Ann’s name.

‘Nearly, David, so nearly. Come on now, say it, say it for me. Say her name.’

‘Mistress Ann … Mistress Ann Devlin,’ he said finally, his mouth twisting in shame at his weakness.

‘There, now, it’s said,’ she whispered, feeling again the heavenly

dampness between her legs. ‘I wonder if Mistress Ann will be strict with you. We haven’t talked about it in any detail, but I’ll expect you to serve her as if you’re serving me. I’m going to give you over completely to her charge, I want you to know that. She’ll be free to do what she wants with you. You do understand that, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re only a slave after all, and you have no say in the matter, do you?’

‘No.’

‘None at all. You won’t be consulted. You simply don’t matter.’

‘No, Mistress.’

‘Say it.’

‘I w-won’t be consulted. I don’t matter.’

‘Now you understand,’ she said soothingly, pleased and aroused by his obedience, ‘but I wouldn’t worry too much. I’m sure she won’t be too cruel, not on your first visit.’

Truthfully, Susan wasn’t so sure.

Some of Ann’s stories about the way she’d treated her late husband had shocked her to the core.

Shocked and fascinated her.

‘Well, now, David, it’s time we were on our way,’ she said gaily, tormenting him with a final caress before letting go of his jutting cock.

‘Please, Susan,’ he said in a weak voice, ‘please don’t do this.’

‘Don’t be silly, David, of course I’m going to do it.’

‘Please …’

‘You may be afraid, but I’ll be brave enough for the two of us. Now, tell me you’ll be a good boy.’

‘God, Susan …’

‘Tell me!’

‘I’ll be … I’ll be good.’

‘That’s what I like to hear, and since you’re going to be a good boy, I’m going to make you a promise. Do you want to know what it is?’

This would be the final part of her spell.

She felt sure it would enchant and enslave him beyond all resistance.

David had a dazed look on his face as if he was lost in a dream. He looked at Susan and slowly nodded his head.

‘Here it is,’ she said, smiling as she slowly slid her dress up her thighs until her pretty little panties were showing through the sheer gauze of her hose. She let her fingers play over the smooth nylon. Her panties were white and silky, matching her bra, with a pretty lace frill around the edge.

‘Do you remember last night?’ she asked him, ‘when I let you kiss me here?’

David nodded, gazing helplessly at the lovely sight.

‘When I let you kiss my panties?’

‘Yes.’

‘Just after I’d been talking and laughing with Ann on the telephone?’ she asked, amused by the way he couldn’t stop looking at her panties.

Once again David nodded.

‘Making the arrangements,’ she goaded, parting her legs a little and touching herself where he longed to touch her. ‘Making the arrangement for this very special week-end.’

‘Yes.’

‘Well then, before I leave you with Ann, I’ll let you kiss me here again, just to show how pleased I am with you. It’ll be your reward for being a good boy. I’ll let you kneel and kiss my panties. Right here,’ she said, touching her sweetest place to show him exactly where he could kiss her. ‘You’d like that,

wouldn’t you?’

‘Yes,’ he said, a tremor in his voice.

‘Yes, Mistress,’ she corrected him.

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he echoed helplessly.

‘How much would you like it?’ she asked him, laughter shining in her eyes.

‘M-more than anything,’ he answered, lost in her beauty.

‘What a lucky boy you are,’ she said, kissing him on the cheek as she reached across him to pull down his seat-belt. ‘You’re getting everything you want today.’

‘Please, Susan,’ he begged weakly, ‘don’t do this,’ but there was no strength in his voice, nothing to challenge the terrible power she held over him.

‘Keep quiet, David,’ she said briskly, as if he was of no consequence, ‘keep quiet and be a good boy.’

David looked imploringly at his beautiful wife.

She was smiling, her eyes sparkling and her cheeks flushed, but it wasn’t the smile a woman gives to a man she desires. Rather, David thought helplessly, it was the smile a woman might give to her child as she straps him into a push-chair.

Still smiling, she gave him another peck on his cheek, and clicked his seat-belt into place.

The sound echoing in his head, David felt a terrifying thrill of helplessness as the last of his resistance melted away.

‘There, now,’ said Susan, reading his mind, ‘all safe for mummy.’

She sat up and started the engine, putting on her sunglasses and bunching her dress around her waist so the sight of her slim legs and pretty underwear would keep him sedated for the remainder of their journey.

As she drove away she felt the powerful engine reverberate inside her, an expression of her unyielding will.

ANN DEVLIN was surprised to see Susan's car driving up the long track to her house. She knew her friend to be a strong and determined young woman, but giving her husband to another woman was an unusually bold step into uncharted territory, and she'd been half-expecting a call to cancel their arrangement.

She felt her heart flutter with anxiety. At fifty-two, Ann was nearly twenty years older than David and she wondered if she'd be able to impose her sexual authority on a man in the way she had with her late husband. 'Well, you'll soon find out,' she told herself, smoothing her tight skirt over her hips before opening the front-door to watch Susan park her car by the old stables.

She waved and smiled, and Susan waved back at her through the windscreen, but she didn't get out of the car. Ann could see that David was speaking and gesticulating, arguing most likely, she imagined, pleading with Susan to call the whole thing off and drive him home.

The next few minutes would be crucial, and Ann reminded herself that confidence and attitude were everything when it came to taking charge of a man. She knew that Susan badly needed a break from her marriage, and she made up her mind there would be no escape for David Corrie.

Ann considered how embarrassing this must be for him. He would be feeling an apprehension close to terror, but she would do nothing to allay his fears. On the contrary, she would play on them, use them to increase her power over him. The thought excited her, and she felt a tingling in her blood she hadn't felt in a long time.

Ann watched as Susan got out of her car and walked to the boot. She opened it and took out a hold-all, then closed the boot and walked round to the passenger door where she dropped the hold-all onto the gravel, and waited impatiently with her hands on her hips.

She looked delightfully wilful, Ann thought, almost feeling sorry for David.

Finally the passenger door opened, and David slowly got out. He started to speak but Susan ignored him, pushing the door shut, and locking the car with a press of her key before turning and walking briskly towards the house, leaving David to pick up the hold-all and follow in her wake.

Ann saw that he was barefoot, and she thought he was wearing a t-shirt with summer shorts but when he got closer she saw he was wearing underwear. ‘Good for you, Susan,’ Ann thought admiringly as her friend strode towards the front-door, her husband hobbling awkwardly behind her on the gravel.

‘Well here you are,’ said Ann, smiling and hugging Susan warmly.

‘Here I am,’ said Susan, her lovely face lit by a shy smile. ‘Sorry I’m late.’

‘It’s good to see you,’ Ann said happily, not even looking at David. ‘Come in, I’ve opened a bottle of wine.’

‘I’d love some, but I have to drive back. Coffee would be lovely, if it’s no trouble.’

‘No trouble at all. In you come.’

Arm-in-arm, the two women passed companionably through the front-door into the hallway.

Alone and abandoned, and utterly ignored, David stood in a daze for a few moments before following them into the house.

He was just in time to see Ann and Susan go through a door at the far

end of the hall. He had no idea where to go, or what to do with himself. Susan had been to Ann's house several times before, but David had never come with her. He put his hold-all down and stood like a man in a trance. And then, feeling a curdling shame deep in his bones, he crossed the hall and pushed open the door to the kitchen, and looked inside.

The entire outside wall of the enormous room was made of glass, and the evening sun shone into his eyes, blinding him. He shielded his eyes against the glare but even then the two women were only shadows.

He heard a tap running, to fill the coffee maker for Susan, he imagined, and then he heard Ann's strong, clear voice.

'Oh no, David, we're not ready for you yet. Nowhere near. Susan and I are going to have a private talk first. Wait outside in the hall.'

David stood in the doorway, too stunned to respond.

'For goodness sake, don't just stand there,' Susan snapped at him. 'Do what Ann tells you. Wait in the hall. Out you go. We'll let you know when we're ready.'

David told himself to refuse and make a stand against his rude dismissal, and yet he turned meekly away and left the kitchen, tormented by the sound of their laughter as the door closed slowly behind him.

Feeling very alone, David caught sight of himself in the hall mirror. God, he looked a fool in only his underwear. Determined to recover some of his pride, he hurried to his hold-all.

He knelt and unzipped the bag. At least he could put on some clothes and stop feeling so foolish. He found a large white towel, his wash-bag, presumably with his toothbrush, hairbrush and razor and, wrapped in a plastic bag, the work-boots he wore for gardening. He rummaged frantically, but there was nothing else. None of his clothes were to be found in the bag.

With growing dread, he remembered that Susan had insisted on packing

his bag for him.

He recalled the knowing smile on her face as she'd put the hold-all into the car boot along with the jacket which held his phone and wallet.

She must have wanted him to feel like this, helpless and exposed beyond endurance.

He knelt by his bag, holding his head in his hands. The thought that she must have planned this moment infuriated him.

She had no right to humiliate him like this. It was too much, really it was.

But then he recalled all the times he'd knelt at her feet and begged her to be cruel, pleaded with her to treat him harshly and without mercy.

He was too upset to forgive her, but he understood she had every right to treat him in this way.

He had given her the right, and had only himself to blame.

He got to his feet and sat in a wooden chair between the coat-stand and an old grandfather clock with a worn face that must have seen many lives. He was breathing rapidly, and his body was trembling as if he was in shock. His mind searched frantically for a way of coming to terms with his ridiculous situation. He'd surrendered his free will, given himself up to Susan's power, and there was nothing he could do about it, except try to find a new kind of pride, the perverse and twisted pride that might lie in submitting without complaint to the will of the woman he loved.

Perhaps she could respect him for that.

Perhaps he could even respect himself.

He made himself sit up straight and take deep, slow breaths, trying all he could to forgive his own foolishness, and accept his fate.

‘IT’S SO beautiful here,’ said Susan, sipping her coffee and gazing though the high glass wall at the fields leading down to the woods.

‘We fell in love with it the moment we saw it, the view more than the house,’ said Ann, sitting down in the armchair opposite Susan. ‘The house was a ruin but we took on the challenge of doing it up the way we wanted.’

‘I like it more every time I see it. All this glass against the old stone. It’s lovely, the most beautiful house I’ve ever seen.’

‘It took us years and years.’

‘Well, it was worth it.’

‘Thank-you, you’re very kind.’

‘Where’s your nearest neighbour?’

‘Four miles in that direction,’ said Ann, taking a drink of wine and pointing vaguely at the fields outside the glass.

‘Don’t you get lonely out here on your own?’

‘Sometimes, yes. In the months after Joe died, I thought I’d have to sell up and leave. It was a very unhappy time. I missed him terribly. Everything reminded me of him, but I’ve grown used to it. I can enjoy the memories now.’

‘I wish I’d met him.’

‘I wish you had too.’

‘You must have sat with him here so many times.’

‘To begin with, yes, but after he stopped being my husband he wasn’t allowed to sit in comfortable armchairs and admire the view. I didn’t allow him many comforts, you know. I kept him far too busy for those.’

‘After you made him your servant?’ asked Susan, aware that they were getting down to business.

‘Yes. My servant and my slave,’ said Ann, emphasising the last word. ‘I was really very strict with him, you know.’

‘Was he really your slave, or was it just a game?’

‘It’s not always easy to tell the difference. I suppose it started as a game, but it soon became real enough.’

‘How real?’

‘More than real, if that makes sense, as if we were sharing a dream where he belonged to me, body and soul, and I could do what I liked with him. Anything I liked, no matter how selfish or cruel.’

‘Did you live like that all the time?’

Susan wanted to know. She had no idea what the future held for her and David, but she couldn’t help wondering if a Mistress-slave relationship could ever form a viable basis for a marriage.

‘Never when the children came to visit. We were always just Mum and Dad to them, but when we were on our own, yes, all the time,’ Ann replied, ‘without a single break for more than eight years until the day he died. Even on holiday he’d travel second-class while I went first-class. If I took a lover on holiday with me – something I did more and more as time went by – he’d travel as our driver and servant. I even bought him a chauffeur’s uniform, a dark suit with piping down the seams and a little matching cap. It was wonderful how anonymous and forgettable it made him look. My lover and I would sit kissing and laughing in the back seat while Joe drove us to dinner or the theatre. Sometimes I’d catch his eye in the driving-mirror and smile as if to say, “Look at all I’ve got, and all you’ve lost.” God, Susan, you’ve no idea how good that felt, and when we arrived at our destination, he’d get out and open the door for us. If it was raining he’d escort us inside with an umbrella. Of course, we made him call us sir and madam. We’d call him driver, as if he was a nobody, a creature with no proper name.’

Ann saw Susan blush and look away.

‘Am I embarrassing you?’ asked Ann. ‘I’ll stop if I am.’

‘No, don’t stop,’ said Susan, ‘I want to understand how you made it work.’

Susan really did want to understand, and she was enjoying hearing about Ann’s extraordinary dominance over her husband. It fascinated her, and she wanted to hear more.

‘I talk too much,‘ said Ann. ‘It comes from living on my own. If I go too far or say too much just tell me to shut up. I really won’t mind.’

‘Please go on,’ said Susan with a smile. ‘I’ll be fine.’

‘At night in the hotel,’ Ann continued, ‘we’d make Joe sleep in the adjoining room, a child’s room, while my lover and I took the master bedroom. Knowing he could hear us making love only added to our pleasure. That sounds monstrous, I know, but once the rules were established such cruelty came to seem inevitable, almost normal. Joe had made a success of his business, and was tired of the rat-race. He’d had enough of fighting and competing, of having to be top dog. He yearned to find an escape from it all. He’d been a wonderful provider, and I was happy to give him that escape.’

‘So it was as much your idea as his?’ Susan asked, sipping her coffee.

‘No, the real hunger came from him, but I quickly developed my own appetite.’

‘Was that easy?’

‘Surprisingly easy, but then I’ve never been afraid of sex. Taking charge in the bedroom came quite naturally to me and, once you take charge in the bedroom, it’s not long before you take charge everywhere else. And it really was fun to try something new after so many years of conventional marriage. A part of me couldn’t wait to be his Mistress. Straightaway, I made him sign everything over to me. I remember sitting with the lawyer’s papers on my lap so he had to kneel at my feet to sign them. He was naked while I wore a tight skirt suit and heels, very much the elegant business-woman. I made him kiss

the hem of my skirt after each signature that gave me control of everything he owned. In the next few months, with his help and advice, I took over running the business. I loved that part of it most of all and, when I no longer needed his help, I demoted him, turned him into my housekeeper, my devoted little serving-maid. I didn't call him Joe any more. I called him Josie or Josephine just to torment him, and remind him of his new place in my life. It took a few months, but it was a remarkably smooth transition.'

'You took everything?'

'Oh yes, I insisted on that. All his savings and investments. This house, the business, his car. I made him transfer them all to my name. I could hardly be his all-powerful Mistress if he controlled the money or owned the house. I left him with nothing of his own. I didn't even allow him pocket money, or let him buy his own clothes. He was completely in my power, I made sure of that.'

'Was he happy living as your slave?'

'Giving up everything he'd worked for hit him very hard, but I think part of him craved the hurt. It brought him a kind of peace, and we both knew it was the next step in our marriage. It was just too sexy to resist, too tantalising, too much fun. Certainly, the rules changed very quickly after he'd signed everything over. It wasn't a game any more, it was real. He had nothing and I had everything. I really was his Mistress and he truly was my slave. There was no way back after that. He was Edward and I was Mrs Simpson.'

'What do you mean?'

'I read somewhere that Mrs Simpson made Edward into her slave after he'd abdicated to marry her. Apparently, in their travels round Europe he served as her maid while she flirted and went to bed with other men. At drinks parties she'd order him to his knees, use him as her foot-rest in front of

their guests. Imagine a king giving up his throne for a woman only to have her turn him into her slave. There's something delicious about that, don't you think? How must he have felt wearing his little maid's uniform while she got dressed to go out with another man, knowing that he'd have been king but for her? And as for Mrs Simpson, well, I wouldn't be surprised if she felt more like a queen when she danced and flirted with her lovers than she ever would have in Buckingham Palace.'

Susan looked shocked, but Ann only laughed and sipped her wine.

'Who knows if it's true,' she said, 'but when I see photographs of them together it certainly looks like she's the one in charge, always sitting above him with that stern and haughty expression on her face.'

'It's a strange way to live,' said Susan.

'Yes, it is,' agreed Ann, 'but it has many pleasures, even for the slave.'

'But didn't you, I don't know …' Susan asked, struggling to find the words. 'Didn't you lose respect for Joe?'

'Honestly?'

'Yes.'

'It may not be what you want to hear, but yes, I did lose respect for him. It was impossible not to. In fact, sometimes I felt nothing but contempt for him. Conventional notions of manhood and masculinity are as ingrained in women as they are in men, perhaps even more so. Read any book or watch any film. Strong and powerful men are extremely attractive, weak and submissive men are not, there's no point pretending otherwise. Once you think of your husband as your slave, it's almost impossible to think of him as your lover again, as a real man worthy of respect.'

'Yes, I think that might be true,' said Susan, recalling the disdain she felt for David whenever he knelt at her feet, or scurried to obey her in his little apron.

‘It’s just the way of the world. A woman can feel affection for a slave – friendship, even a love of sorts, or perhaps fondness would be a better word – but not respect. I’m warning you, Susan, taking control of a man can bring out a part of your personality you never knew existed. Power like that can go to your head, make you dizzy. Once you’ve tasted it you want more and more. I didn’t just play at looking down on Joe, I really did look down on him. I treated him very harshly, took everything from him, scorned and tormented him without mercy. And, since we’re telling the truth here, I came to enjoy it very much. Don’t ask me why, but I did.’

‘Did he never ask you to stop?’

‘I don’t believe he ever did. No, that’s not true. Once, I remember, he begged me not to go on a date with a new lover I’d met through work. He was an old business rival of Joe’s, an arrogant, good-looking man who would have done anything to get one over on my husband. I’m sure that’s the real reason he asked me out. He knew how much Joe disliked him, and how much he would hate the idea of me going out with him.’

‘So you didn’t go?’

‘What do you think?’ said Ann, a wicked gleam in her eye.

‘My God, you did go!’ Susan exclaimed with an incredulous laugh.

‘Of course I did,’ said Ann, laughing at her friend’s surprise. ‘I couldn’t pass up a chance like that. And not only did I go, I had Joe look out my prettiest underwear, and help me get dressed for my date.

‘Ann Devlin, you’re well named, truly you are.’

‘Oh, you haven’t heard the half of it,’ Ann said with a mischievous smile. ‘I had him kneel by my dressing-table as I sat in my slip, doing my hair and putting on make-up. I chatted away about this and that, as if nothing was out of the ordinary, but I felt a wicked excitement at holding such power over him. I put perfume on my wrists and behind my knees, and then I put

some on him too, so my scent would be with him all night when I was out with another man. He pleaded with me not to go, told me how much he hated my new lover, but that only strengthened my resolve, and added to my pleasure. And besides, I wanted him to beg and plead so I could enjoy being firm with him. “I’m your Mistress and I’ll do what I like,” I told him as I put on my lipstick, “and if it hurts you then so much the better. A slave should suffer for his Mistress.” I told him he had no say in the matter,’ Ann said with a shrug, ‘but he still begged me not to go, and so I took my worn panties from the laundry basket and stuffed them into his mouth. After that he was as good as gold.’

Susan took another drink of her coffee, trying to pretend she wasn’t shocked by what she was hearing.

‘When it was time to go,’ Ann continued, ‘he helped me on with my coat, and I gave him his chores for the evening which included washing out my underwear by hand, and putting fresh sheets on the bed. That sounds cruel enough, I know – power truly had gone to my head – but at the end of the evening,’ said Ann, leaning forward and speaking in a confiding whisper, ‘I brought my lover home with me. It was the wickedest thing I’d ever done, but I remember laughing as I rang the doorbell, and waited for Joe to answer the door like a butler or maid. You should have seen the look on his face when he opened the door.’

‘“Well, what are you staring at?” I asked him, “haven’t you seen a real man before? Take his coat and bring him a whisky, and be quick about it.” My lover gave such a cruel laugh to see Joe so demeaned. I thought it was the sweetest sound.’

‘Poor Joe,’ said Susan, gripped by the cruel tale.

‘Or lucky Joe,’ said Ann with a knowing look. ‘When he brought the whisky we were already kissing on the settee. We ignored him, just carried

on as if he wasn't there. Well, that's not quite true. Knowing he was standing there like a fool with his silly little tray added fire to our kisses, knowing he was watching while we kissed and embraced right in front of him. Such a sweet fire, you've no idea. I could feel my lover's hunger to lord it over Joe and take his wife in front of him. I shared his hunger, I admit it, and I loosened my dress and looked my husband in the eye while another man, a man he hated, kissed my breasts and slid his hand under my dress. It was a heavenly feeling, believe me.'

Despite the cruelty of her tale, Ann's voice was warm and captivating, with humour and mischief never far away.

Susan sat very still, picturing the scene in her head, mesmerised by Ann's story-telling.

'Joe looked back at me, so pale and helpless, his eyes so wide you'd think he'd seen a ghost, and I knew I'd flung him down into the deepest of dungeons, but I loved the way it made me feel. I hardly know how to describe it, but I remember it gave me such a wild feeling between my legs. That's the best I can do. Do you know what I mean?'

'Yes,' said Susan, 'I think I do.'

'But listen to me, I'm talking too much again,' said Ann. 'You really should tell me to be quiet.'

'I wouldn't dream of it,' said Susan. 'I love listening to you talk.'

'You're just being kind.'

'Believe me, I'm not,' said Susan. 'I've never heard anything like it. No-one else knows about this kind of sex. Or if they do, they never talk about it. Please don't stop.'

'Very well, but just a little more, and then I'll stop.'

She took a drink of wine, and resumed her story.

'When we finished our whiskies I took my lover upstairs. It was a

glorious feeling to fuck in a bed made up with clean sheets by my husband. It really was the cruellest I'd been to Joe, and yet I experienced a pleasure so fierce and primitive it took me to a place beyond guilt. From that day on, I never questioned if my marriage was right or wrong, fair or unfair, good or evil. It simply was what it was. A power had been unleashed into our lives far greater than conventional morality could hope to contain.'

'That wild feeling?' said Susan.

'Yes,' said Ann, 'that wild feeling.'

Ann looked at Susan, gauging her reaction. Her cheeks had reddened, but Ann was pleased to see that her gaze remained steady and untroubled. Ann took another drink of wine, and continued.

'When you've been cruel to a man, really cruel,' she said thoughtfully, 'it's best to keep your foot on his neck. Once you've put him under, it's kinder to keep him there, perhaps you already know that.'

'I'm beginning to think I do,' said Susan.'

'In the morning,' Ann continued, 'I had Joe serve us breakfast, naked except for a little apron I'd tied around his waist. A woman's apron, white, with a lace frill around its edge, and a big bow at the back. You've never seen a man so broken, and yet I watched happily as he suffered the mocking remarks of my lover who was a handsome but not a kind man. That's what I liked about him, I think, what made me want to go to bed with him in the first place. In some simple, animal way his cruelty matched my own, and like me he wasn't afraid to enjoy his sadistic nature. The way he talked down to my husband aroused and amused me. I could have put a stop to it if I'd wanted, but I just sat there drinking coffee, watching my husband suffer. Finally, I couldn't resist any more. I sat astride my lover and kissed him, opening my dressing-gown and letting him inside me while he took my breasts in his mouth. We made love there and then, right in front of my husband. I've never

known such pleasure or felt so free, and yet I believe there was love in my cruelty, a strange kind of love perhaps, but love all the same. Poor Joe was trembling, and he had tears in his eyes, but his soul was in heaven.'

'You really are a cruel woman,' Susan said lightly, struggling to keep up her pretense that the story hadn't shocked her. Ann had spoken before of her freedom to take lovers in her marriage, but never of having sex with her husband's rival, and never with her husband present.

It was a level of cruelty and dominance she could scarcely imagine.

'Yes, I was cruel,' Ann replied, 'but the crueller I became the more Joe loved it. That morning with the apron led to many more ordeals for my poor husband. I started giving him my old underclothes to wear. I threw all his out, made him stand and watch one night as I threw his boxer shorts one by one onto the fire. My worn panties came to hold a particular fascination for him, and I would give them to him as a special treat. Soon after that I bought him a number of maids' dresses and tunics, and not those silly fantasy uniforms. I bought him plain, practical working-maids' uniforms, black with white sleeves and collars, the kind real maids wear in hotels when they have real work to do. I made him wear a little white cap on his head, and taught him to perform a neat little curtsey whenever I came into the room. I even sewed tiny bells into the hem of one of his dresses so it made a silly jingling sound whenever he moved. The sound of those bells always made me smile. It was the sound of his utter subjugation to my will, and to my woman's power over him. It shamed him greatly and so, of course, I insisted he wear that dress more than any of the others, particularly when I was entertaining one of my lovers. I bought him several pairs of neat black shoes, pretty but practical with a one-inch heel. I wanted him to walk properly, not totter around on four inch heels. After all, I expected him to work hard, and carry out all household duties, and it was only right he was dressed for real work and not some silly

fantasy. A part of him understood that, even welcomed it, but another part of him burned in agony every time he put on his uniform. But it was the agony he craved, and which gave me such terrible power over him. It's true, Susan, believe me. That's the way this kind of sex works. You must have seen it with David. You must know what I'm talking about.'

'A little, perhaps,' Susan agreed.

She did know, even if she didn't always understand or approve.

'My cruelty seemed to unburden him,' Ann continued, 'and set him free from his anxieties about status and power. You have to remember Joe had been an exceptionally driven man and yet, in our last years together, I hardly spoke to him, barely even acknowledged his presence. I didn't have to. He was only a servant who occupied a position far beneath me. I'd become bored with him. He'd turned into a nobody in my eyes, a drudge, certainly not a man. He was a housemaid, no more, no less. I'd completely forgotten the man he used to be. You don't believe that's possible, but it's easier than you might imagine. I only ever spoke to him to give him instructions, and I barely needed to do that any more. He knew what his duties were, and I expected him to get on with them. If he didn't work to the standards I required, I'd punish him, simple as that.'

'Punish him?'

'Oh yes, and most severely, sometimes with a riding-crop but most often with a nasty little cane I keep in my study. There's no point in administering a punishment unless it leaves its mark.'

Susan blushed and looked away.

An image of Ann punishing David had come into her mind and, a little to her shame, the image excited her.

'Sometimes I'd punish him when he'd done nothing wrong,' Ann said, 'just because I could. I think he liked that best of all, when his punishment

was unjust, and he was powerless to stop me. I honestly believe those were the times when he found a pleasure in his helplessness so deep it came close to bliss.'

'And you?'

'I just took it all for granted, accepted it as my due. I was selfish and arrogant, but that's what Joe seemed to want, and it was thrilling to break all the rules about how a woman's expected to behave. That wild feeling again,' said Ann with a smile.

'Didn't you feel guilty?' said Susan, 'as if the real world would catch up with you.'

'To start with, I did,' said Ann. 'There were times when I felt sure I'd be punished for my crimes, but mostly I delighted in my power. And it wasn't just about sex. I loved running the business – the travel, chairing the meetings, making decisions. I turned out to be a very good businesswoman, although I take much less to do with it these days. The company performed better with me as managing director than Joe, something I never tired of telling him. But you're the breadwinner now too. You must recognise some of this from your relationship with David.'

'I suppose I do.'

'The way you brought him here, walking him barefoot from the car in his underwear. That was truly impressive.'

'Thank-you,' said Susan, enjoying the praise.

'To the manor born,' said Ann. 'You're much further ahead at this than I thought.'

'Maybe I am, but I don't see it as clearly as you,' said Susan, 'and I can't accept it so easily. Most of the time I feel guilty and confused. Is this really the kind of sex I want? Is he my husband, or is he my slave? If he's my slave, will I ever be able to think of him as my husband again? Can I respect

him? Is this the kind of man I might want to have children with? I don't know if it's coming from him, or if I want it too. Sometimes it makes me feel so free and I want it, really want it. David tells me I'm a natural Mistress, whatever that means, and he's only picking up the signals I'm giving out. He tells me to accept that part of me, and enjoy the power it brings.'

'Perhaps he's right. Just because he's your slave doesn't mean he's wrong.'

'Yes, but I think it suits him to see it that way. The real hunger comes from him, as you put it, not me. I would have been perfectly happy with ordinary sex. Yes, there are times when I enjoy taking charge of him, but more and more I feel trapped and unhappy, and angry with him. And, on top of everything else, my new job is so hard. Sometimes, when I come home, I'm so tired I can't think.'

'It's harder for you,' said Ann kindly. 'You're young, at the beginning of life. Joe and I had lived the most important part of our lives, brought up a family, built this house and a business. The dark joys of sadomasochism took us by surprise. We hadn't tried anything like it before, we hadn't the time, and we came to think of it as a blessing, our reward for long service.'

Susan laughed at Ann's humour, but she had a difficult question she needed to ask.

'What I'd like to know, Ann, I hope you don't mind me asking. Did you … Did you still love him?'

'Oh, now, Susan, that really is a question.'

'I'm sorry, I don't mean to pry.'

'You're not prying, and I understand why you want to know.'

Ann took another drink of wine, and tugged her skirt down over her knee, as if the ideal of love required a greater modesty.

'I missed Joe very much when he died. I still do, and I haven't been with

anyone since his death, but there were certainly times when I didn't love him, at least not in the way a woman likes to love a man.'

'As a lover?'

'Yes, as a lover, and as an equal partner. Once I'd made him my slave I stopped thinking of him in that way. I felt a certain fondness for him, and I enjoyed the power I held over him, but I no longer shared a bed with him. I no longer wished to. After all, he was my slave. Why should a Mistress sleep with her slave? No, he'd lost the right to sleep with me.'

'He can't have been happy about that.'

'I never asked him. By that stage I didn't consult his feelings any more, but I believe he came to enjoy being denied, wanting me but never being allowed to have me. I think that made a strange kind of sense to a man like Joe. And, as I said, he wasn't consulted. I held complete authority over him, and he knew better than to argue. That's another advantage of having a slave instead of a husband. No more arguments. What you say, goes.'

'So where did he sleep?' Susan asked through laughter.

'In the maid's room, where else?' Ann replied with a smile. 'At the back of the house there's a little bedroom next to the laundry-room. It was the maid's room when the house was first built. I could hardly resist that, could I? It was the perfect place for him. There's even an old servant's bell I had restored so I could ring for him whenever I wanted anything. I'll show it to you later. The servant's quarters. It's where I'll put David.'

'Yes,' said Susan, suddenly shy, 'speaking of David.'

'Speaking of David,' echoed Ann with a smile.

'Is this still all right,' Susan asked, 'leaving him here with you?'

'Of course it is. I wouldn't have offered if it wasn't. I'm quite looking forward to it, if you want the truth.'

'Are you sure?'

‘Quite sure, but how about you?’ Ann asked with a pointed look.

‘What do you mean?’

‘He’s your husband. Are you all right about leaving him with another woman?’

‘I think so.’

‘Please try to be sure. I’d hate anything to get in the way of our friendship.

‘Honestly, Ann, I’m worn out with him,. I just want some time to myself.’

‘You won’t be jealous?’

‘Of course not,’ said Susan, who hadn’t considered such a possibility. ‘You can do what you like with him, I really don’t care.’

‘I hope that’s true.’

Susan looked at her questioningly.

‘I know about this kind of sex,’ Ann explained. ‘I know how it works, and I’m very good at it even if I am a little out of practice. I hardly know David, and so I’ll have to take him in hand very quickly, and very firmly. To do that, I may have to be quite severe with him, more severe than you might expect.’

‘Well, perhaps that’s what he needs,’ Susan replied, feeling a guilty excitement at the thought of putting her husband at Ann’s mercy.

She really was angry with him, Susan discovered, angry at the way he’d lost his pride, and given up on his role as the man in her life. ‘Maybe you’ll shock him out of it,’ she said with a serious look, ‘bring him to his senses, and we can go back to living like an ordinary husband and wife again.’

Ann saw Susan’s look, and honoured her with a serious reply.

‘That might happen, it’s true, but listen to me, Susan. You need to understand that this might go another way altogether.’

‘What other way?’

‘In my experience, this kind of sex goes deep with a man. He becomes the slave to his desires, his own deepest nature. That’s how it went with Joe. His submissive desires never lessened. On the contrary, they grew stronger and stronger until they knew no bounds.’

‘Pandora’s Box?’

‘Very much so,’ said Ann. ‘David’s need to submit may be something he’ll never stop wanting. He may come to want it more and more. You need to consider that.’

‘I don’t know if I want to.’

‘I won’t lie to you. This may be a game he can stop playing, or it may be he sinks deeper and deeper into the quicksand. If that’s the way it goes, he won’t be able to love you like an ordinary man again.’

‘Is that true?’

‘Yes, I believe it is.’

‘That’s a sad thought,’ said Susan quietly.

‘It is,’ said Ann gently. ‘This kind of sex is not without its dangers. And then there are your feelings to consider. Now that you’ve seen him as a slave you may not be able to accept him as your husband.’

‘You mean I might leave him?’

‘Yes, or take a lover. If you truly become his Mistress you’ll be free to do whatever you want.’

‘That’s quite a thought.’

‘It’s the next step, believe me, at least it was for me, and it’s something I came to enjoy very much, and I think Joe did too, in his own way.’

‘That’s a little scary.’

‘Only to begin with, like everything else.’

Susan smiled, but Ann saw the worry behind her eyes.

‘I won’t mind, you know, if you want to call it off,’ Ann said kindly. ‘You can drive him home now if you want.’

‘Perhaps I should,’ said Susan.

‘There’s nothing stopping you. You must do as you see fit.’

But there was a challenge in Ann’s voice, and Susan didn’t want to disappoint her. She looked Ann in the eye, and spoke with a new resolve.

‘No, I want to go through with it,’ Susan said confidently. ‘It’s better I find out what I want than go through life without knowing.’

‘You won’t blame me if he sinks deeper into the quicksand?’ asked Ann, admiring her friend’s courage.

‘Of course I won’t,’ said Susan sincerely.

‘Or if you find yourself a handsome lover?‘ said Ann with a wicked smile.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Susan, her cheeks blushing. ‘This is our problem, mine and David’s, not yours. I’m just grateful for your help. And your honesty,’ Susan added.

‘You’re my friend, and you’re very welcome,’ said Ann, putting her wine-glass down and getting to her feet.

‘How do you want to do it?’ Susan asked, suffering a sudden attack of nerves as she got up from her chair. ‘Should I just go and leave you to it?’

‘Not yet, if you don’t mind. I’d like you to witness the hand-over, and give it your blessing. You’re his real Mistress, and having you there will make me much more powerful in his eyes.’

Susan couldn’t see how Ann needed any help to appear powerful, but she would do as she was asked. It was the least she could do.

‘What do you want me to do?’

‘Nothing, really. Just sit there looking bored and bossy, that usually does the trick.’

Susan laughed. As ever, Ann's humour made her feel better, and she began to look forward to seeing this formidable woman take charge of her husband.

'Leave the rest to me,' said Ann, 'but you have to agree with everything I say. Can you do that?'

'I think so.'

'Even if I take things a little further than you expect?'

'I don't see why not,' Susan replied, suddenly less sure.

'Promise me,' said Ann. 'This won't work if you lose your nerve.'

'I promise,' said Susan, telling herself to be bold.

'Good girl. I need to know you trust me.'

'I trust you,' said Susan.

'Then poor David,' said Ann with another of her wicked smiles.

'Poor David,' echoed Susan, returning the smile.

DAVID STARTED in alarm when the door to the kitchen opened and Ann and his wife strode into the hallway. He was still sitting on the chair by the coat-stand, one of Ann's raincoats brushing against his bare knee. Her coat smelled of rain and rubber, and faintly, of perfume.

'Your first lesson, David,' Ann announced in a very firm voice. 'You'll stand up whenever I or Susan or any other guest in my house comes into the room.'

David rose immediately to his feet, his face reddening with shame.

Susan looked at her husband in a new light. He was quite a tall, athletic man, an inch under six feet, but he looked shorter now standing red-faced in his underwear, shorter and smaller. After her long talk with Ann she saw him even more as her servant and slave, even as a potential cuckold. Ann's tale of

taking a lover, and flaunting her affair in front of Joe, had taken root in her mind and inflamed her imagination. The world seemed suddenly full of new, astonishing possibilities if only she had the courage to explore it.

‘Better,’ Ann told David briskly. ‘This way, now, don’t be slow. Obedience is all, you need to remember that.’

She strode into the corridor that led through the oldest part of the house, not waiting to see if David would obey. She hadn’t the slightest doubt that he would do as he was told.

David looked pleadingly at his wife, hoping she would come to his rescue, but Susan just looked at him sternly, and indicated with an impatient movement of her head that he should follow first. She kept her expression cold and aloof, but couldn’t help smiling when he looked down submissively and hurried to follow Ann.

She walked along the corridor behind her husband, trying to imagine how helpless he must feel as he followed Ann, barefoot and wearing nothing but a t-shirt and boxer shorts, watching Ann’s tight skirt hug her shapely hips, hearing the rhythmic whisper of her nylons under her skirt, and the purposeful click-clack of her high-heeled shoes on the tiled floor. She was sure Ann’s powerful sensuality would be casting its spell over his senses, rendering him helpless and compliant.

Ann had often complained to Susan of her struggle to keep her weight down as she’d grown older, but Susan dismissed her worries as the vanity of a woman who must have been blessed in her younger years with truly exceptional looks. She had a lovely, full figure, thick auburn hair – coloured, no doubt, but skilfully done – and naturally good legs which looked even better in her high heels and tight skirt. She had strong, proud features with eyes full of humour and intelligence.

She was one of those lucky women where the lines around her eyes and

mouth only added to her appearance. They brought depth and character to her face, and Susan often thought she would be less attractive without them. Ann didn't work too hard at looking good. She didn't have to. She wore the unremarkable dresses and skirts many women of her age wore, but they were invariably well-cut and elegant. She never looked plain or matronly, and she always looked at ease with herself.

In so many ways, Susan reflected, she was a submissive man's dream.

'In here,' said Ann sharply, stopping by a panelled door and pushing it open. David hesitated, unable to meet her gaze.

'After you, David,' said Ann, sharing an amused look with Susan as David passed obediently through the doorway, feeling her skirt brush against his leg as he inhaled the warm, heady scent of her perfume.

These days Ann used the ancient, low-ceilinged room as her study. It had been the living-room in the old farm-house, and some of the original beams were still visible above the mantle. In one corner there was a wide oak desk with a computer and telephone, its chair facing into the room. One entire wall was filled with bookcases, and a long brown leather settee stretched under the windows which were framed by dark green velvet curtains.

When Susan came into the room her attention was immediately taken by a painting on the wall behind Ann's desk.

The painting showed an elegant young woman dressed in the clothes of the late nineteenth century reclining in a rocking chair. She had her hands behind her head in an attitude of easy relaxation, and her face was lit by a self-satisfied smile. But what made the painting so striking was the man kneeling by her chair. He was well-dressed, most likely her husband or suitor. By contrast to her lazy sensuality he seemed tense and ill-at-ease as if in dread of what she might have in store for him. His subservience was made abundantly clear by the length of silk ribbon that tethered him to her chair

like a leash. There could be no doubt who was the Mistress and who was the slave.

David saw the painting too. It did nothing to lessen his apprehension.

‘It says it all, doesn’t it?’ said Ann.

‘It’s wonderful,’ said Susan, amused by the painting’s wit and style.

‘Joe gave it to me as a birthday present. He said she reminded him of me.’

‘Now that you mention it, I can see the resemblance.’

Ann laughed and indicated the settee.

‘Please sit down, Susan, make yourself comfortable. This shouldn’t take long.’

Susan did as she was asked, sinking luxuriously into the soft leather, and arranging her dress elegantly at the knee. David looked at his wife, and considered sitting beside her, but he saw her cold expression and thought better of it.

‘Very good, David,’ said Ann, folding her arms and leaning back against her desk, as confident and relaxed as the woman in the painting. ‘A slave should never sit in the presence of his Mistress unless he’s given permission to do so. I’m glad to see you understand that. It will make my job easier.’

David attempted to speak but could only make a strange, choking sound which made both women laugh as if he’d said something amusing.

He looked at Susan imploringly, but saw no help there. He looked at Ann, and then at his feet. To his dismay, one of his legs had begun to shake.

‘You’re trembling,’ Ann said, still laughing. ‘Is he always like this, Susan? Is he always so afraid?’

‘Oh yes,’ replied Susan, gazing scornfully at her husband. ‘He pretends he’s a big, strong man, but he’s a terrible cry-baby really.’

‘Is that true, David?’ Ann asked him, surprise in her voice. ‘Are you a

cry-baby?'

'No!' David replied indignantly, stung by his wife's betrayal and looking up quickly, anger burning in his eyes.

Ann saw his angry defiance, and felt an answering flash of anger that made her examine her feelings towards David. She hardly knew him and yet, while Susan spoke fondly enough of him, she felt instinctively that he didn't deserve such a lovely young wife. Quite simply, Ann felt he wasn't good enough for Susan. He was a handsome man with dark eyes and thick dark hair, and regular, almost pretty features, but there was something spoiled about him as if he expected to get what he wanted in life without having to work for it. Ann sensed that he didn't value Susan enough, or understand how lucky he was to have such a remarkable woman as his wife and companion.

Ann knew she was most likely being unfair, but nonetheless she decided there and then to take an unusually strict and uncompromising course of action with David.

She was going to punish him for his presumption in marrying Susan, and prove to Susan that he was not worthy to be her husband and equal.

A much lowlier position awaited him, she decided, thrilled by the prospect of taking charge of him, and by the knowledge that he had no idea what lay in store for him. After today, she felt certain, his life would never be the same.

'Well, if you're not a cry-baby,' said Ann in her most reasonable voice, 'you won't be afraid of a little punishment.'

'A punishment?' said David uncertainly, the defiance passing from his eyes. 'Why? What for? I haven't done anything wrong.'

'That's true, David, and you're quite right to point it out. But this is not about you, you need to understand that. We can punish you if we think that's best. As a matter of fact, we can do whatever we like with you. You're a

slave, and a slave's opinions don't matter in the slightest. This is about your wife and I. It's about what we decide.'

Ann slid up onto the desk and sat with her shapely nylon-clad legs crossed neatly at the ankle. Her tight skirt rode up a little, allowing David the faintest glimpse of the lacy hem of a cream-coloured slip just above her knee. Try as he might, he couldn't drag his gaze from the pretty lace hem.

Despite his strong feelings of alarm and apprehension, his brain swam with arousal.

The phrase 'It's snowing in Paris' came into his head from a time long ago in his childhood. It was a funny little euphemism his grand-mother had often used to draw attention to any slip or underskirt peeping out from beneath a dress or skirt. Even as a young boy he'd found the phrase alluring and magical, the secret password to a hidden land.

'As you're well aware, David,' Ann continued, 'I've agreed to take you under my wing for the week-end. I'm sure you've had all that explained to you. Now, Susan's had a very long and tiring week at work, and she's keen to be on her way, and so I'm going to take control of you very quickly, and in a way that makes it utterly clear to you that this is not a game, and that I expect your complete obedience at all times.'

David told himself to protest, to insist that he would be going home that evening with his wife, and yet he remained silent, in thrall to this proud and beautiful woman.

Ann fixed David with a stern gaze, pleased by the way his eyes kept flicking down to her exposed knees and the pretty hem of her slip.

'The best and quickest way I can do that,' Ann continued, 'is to administer a punishment so you're left in no doubt about your place in my house, and I want Susan to witness your punishment. That's very important. Susan's permission and approval are of paramount importance to me. Not

only is she your wife and Mistress, but I consider her to be one of my closest friends, and I wouldn't want anything to damage our friendship.'

David watched with growing dismay as Ann turned her gaze from him to speak more companionably to his wife. What did she mean, a punishment? He couldn't understand what was happening. And how could her friendship with Susan have anything like the importance of his marriage? It just wasn't possible.

'I think this way's best, Susan, really I do,' Ann said persuasively. 'It will stamp my authority on him, quite literally, and it will help if you stay to witness his punishment. It will be a kind of ceremony to mark our partnership, our friendship and trust. This way, there'll be no possibility of any misunderstandings between us. No stupid jealousy or worry. You'll witness his surrender to me first-hand, and everything will be out in the open.'

'This can't be happening,' David told himself. He held his breath as Susan looked at Ann for what seemed like an age before giving a slow nod of agreement.

'Susan!' David exclaimed in disbelief.

'Oh, keep quiet, David,' Susan said sternly. 'Ann's right, your opinion's of no importance whatsoever, and I've no interest in what you have to say. Keep quiet, and listen to what Ann is saying.'

David stared at her, astonished by her coldness, but Susan only looked back at him with icy indifference, savouring his dismay.

With a shiver of fear, David suddenly understood.

His dear, lovely wife was enjoying this. She was enjoying the spectacle of his shameful surrender. She was enjoying seeing him submit to The Devlin Woman.

And David was right.

Any remaining fears that she might feel protective towards her husband had faded entirely and, to her surprise, and a little to her relief, Susan found siding with Ann darkly arousing. She no longer felt alone, and it was a lovely feeling to have an intelligent and experienced accomplice take control of her husband. Feeling a great weight lift from her shoulders, she smiled at Ann, and crossed her legs, enjoying the secret pleasure it gave her.

‘It’s settled, then,’ Ann said happily, ‘a punishment it is.’

‘A punishment it is,’ agreed Susan.

‘I d-don’t understand,’ David stammered. ‘What kind of punishment?’

Ann slid down from the desk, and went over to the large leather footstool in front of the settee. She put her foot on it, pushing it into the centre of the room, before bending down and patting it with her hand.

‘It’s very simple, David. You’ll lie across this footstool and I’ll thrash you with a cane until you cry.’

She had spoken in such a calm, everyday tone of voice that David didn’t at first take in the enormity of what she’d said.

But Susan did, and she felt a frisson of shock at the brutality of Ann’s intentions towards her husband, yet she remained silent, mindful of her promise to agree with whatever Ann said.

‘I intend to beat him quite severely,’ said Ann, ‘unless, of course, you have any objections, Susan.’

David felt his fears fade.

He knew Susan would never agree to such a thing, and he looked over fondly at his beautiful wife, waiting confidently for his reprieve.

‘Oh, no, Ann,’ Susan said firmly.

David breathed a huge sigh of relief. He was safe.

This would teach The Devlin Woman. This would teach her to get so far above herself, and he felt a deeply pleasurable anticipation at the thought of

her imminent retreat.

‘No, Ann,’ Susan continued, ‘I can honestly say I haven’t the slightest objection. None at all. Do what you like with him.’

David stared at his wife in horror. He started to protest but stopped when he saw the hard amusement glittering in her eyes. The room began to spin around him. Suddenly fearing he might faint, he groaned and leaned forward with his hands on his knees.

‘The truth is, he deserves it,’ he heard Susan say. ‘He was very difficult on the way here. Rude and disobedient. It nearly drove me mad the way he moaned and whined. He almost refused to come. He needs to be taught a lesson he won’t forget. You have my complete approval, Ann. I mean it. Do what you like with him.’

Susan wondered at herself.

Was it really her saying these words?

She had always thought herself a gentle, intelligent woman. As a teacher she would never have countenanced the atrocity of beating a child the way they had so cruelly and frequently in days gone by, but here she was agreeing to the physical chastisement of her husband, and what’s more, looking forward greatly to witnessing it.

It was a strange and puzzling contradiction, but she put it out of her mind.

All she knew for certain was how wickedly pleasurable it felt to see David put so firmly in his place.

‘Come on, then, David, let’s be having you,’ said Ann, as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

David looked up in confusion. He hadn’t seen Ann move to the wall-cupboard behind her desk, but there she was, emerging from behind its dark panelled door with a thin bamboo cane in her hand.

She flicked the cane through the air. It made its deadly hissing sound, and David felt the first real tingle of fear down his spine.

She tapped the stool with the tip of her cane, giving David a look of unwavering authority. Her silk blouse was short-sleeved and he couldn't help noticing how strong her arms looked, and how full and lovely her breasts looked beneath the thin silk.

'Over you go,' said Ann. 'On your knees with your chest on the stool.'

David's mouth moved to protest but no words came out. He cleared his throat and tried again.

'No,' he said in a voice not much louder than a whisper.

'I beg your pardon,' said Ann.

'No,' said David again.

'Yes, over you go,' said Ann briskly, paying no attention to his refusal. 'And facing Susan, I think. That will be best for all concerned.'

'I've told you,' said David. 'I won't do it.'

'Of course you will,' said Ann, her certainty undimmed.

'I won't,' said David, trying to sound strong and manly.

'Oh, hurry up, David,' Susan said impatiently. 'Do what you're told.'

Her bossy tone irritated David beyond measure, and he made up his mind absolutely to refuse her ridiculous command.

It would be he who would teach them a lesson.

The whole situation was absurd. He was a man, fit and strong, much stronger than any woman. He didn't have to put up with this nonsense. He'd put an end to it that very moment. He'd show them they couldn't treat him like this. Oh yes, he'd put them in their place.

David saw himself laughing in their faces, and walking out the room, slamming the door on their arrogant conniving, and yet, driven by a longing infinitely greater than his pride or personal dignity, he felt himself sink

slowly to his knees, and lay his chest obediently, and with a terrible inevitability, across the leather stool.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ he thought dazedly. ‘What are you doing?’ He felt his top lip begin to tremble as if he might cry.

Susan exchanged a triumphant smile with Ann.

For a moment it seemed they might ruin it all by laughing out loud, but Susan hid her amusement behind her hand, and Ann succeeded, with some difficulty, in keeping her voice stern and serious.

‘That’s good, David, I’m very pleased with you,’ Ann praised him, running the tip of her cane from his shoulders slowly down to his undershorts and bare thighs, claiming him as her prey. ‘You’ll feel much better down there. On your knees. From what Susan’s told me, I think you’ll find it’s where you belong. Now, try to relax if you can. After all, there’s nothing you can do except suffer this, and you’ll do that, won’t you?’

David gave a muffled groan.

‘I beg your pardon, David,’ said Ann.

‘Yes,’ David managed to say.

‘You can do better than that,’ Susan reminded him sharply, wanting to play her part in his subjugation. ‘Yes, who?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ David said hoarsely, his blood once more turning to water in his veins.

‘Very good,’ said Ann. ‘When Susan is here you will address her as Mistress Susan, and myself as Mistress Ann. When Susan has gone, you will address me simply as Mistress. Is that clear, David?’

‘Yes, Mistress Ann,’ he said, dreading ever being left alone with this woman.

‘Quite clear, I hope?’ asked Susan with ice in her voice.

‘Yes, Mistress Susan,’ David replied, angered yet thrilled by her

coldness.

‘I’m very pleased to hear it,’ said Susan, the threat undiminished.

Ann was impressed with Susan.

It was clear she was enjoying herself, and she was much better at this than she’d led her to believe. David was right. She did have the natural air of a Mistress, her authority heightened by her proud features, elegant figure, and her clear, commanding voice.

‘Tell me, Susan, have you done this before?’

‘Punished him?’

‘Yes.’

‘Not really,’ Susan replied. ‘Not properly like this. Once, when he’d shrunk a cashmere jersey in the wash, I put him over my knee and spanked him with my bare hand.’

‘Did he like it?’

‘I think he must have,’ Susan answered, ‘he came all over my skirt.’

‘In that case,’ said Ann, ‘we’d better keep him off the furniture.’

The two women convulsed in laughter.

The sound of their laughter infuriated David, and he made to get to his feet, but Ann placed her cane on his neck to keep him down, and spoke calmly through her mirth.

‘Oh, don’t be silly, David,‘ she told him. ‘You’ll stay exactly where you are. We’ll laugh at you if we like. Of course we will, and you’ll just have to put up with it. You’re our slave, I’ve told you, we can do what we like with you.’

Sure of their authority, a new wave of laughter engulfed Ann and Susan as David lay back meekly across the foot-stool, his resistance vanishing like smoke as his erection pushed helplessly against the loose cotton of his shorts.

Why did it excite him so much to be treated like this?

He must have asked himself this question a thousand times, yet he was no closer to finding an answer.

Many times he'd tried to forbid himself the dark and lonely pleasures of submission, urging himself to love Susan in a more normal and manly way, but his desires always returned, all the hungrier for his forbidding.

He was not only a slave to his wife and her formidable friend, David thought helplessly, he was a slave to his own dark and ceaseless desires.

He was a slave to his own nature.

'Now, Susan, pay attention. I'm going to give you a lesson in how to properly chastise a man.'

Susan smiled and sat back to listen, relaxed now, relishing her alliance with Ann.

'The first time I tried this, I got it badly wrong, and I didn't enjoy myself in the slightest. I rushed everything. I was too scared to hit hard enough, then I hit too hard and broke his skin, and had to hunt everywhere for antiseptic cream. I felt foolish and miserable. I wore four inch heels and black stockings with seams. I could barely stand, and I hate suspenders. I don't normally wear them, and I didn't feel like myself in them. I'd turned myself into a cliché, a cartoon dominatrix, but it's attitude that's important, attitude and confidence, not clothes and shoes. It's always better to wear clothes you feel comfortable wearing. You'd be surprised how important that is. You have to remember, it's about you – your pleasure, not his – that really is the golden rule. If you remember that everything else falls into place.'

Ann began to walk around David, circling him with slow, sensual strides, trailing the tip of her cane slowly through his hair and then across his neck and down his back.

He gave a shiver and held his breath, feeling his cock leap and pulse beneath his shorts.

‘You have to learn to slow down and take your time,’ Ann continued, tapping his bottom lightly with her cane. ‘He’s not going anywhere and, when he’s on his knees like this, he’s at his most vulnerable and exposed. His senses are working overtime. He’s watching your feet and legs, smelling your perfume, listening to your clothes move against your body.’

Susan saw David glance up at Ann’s strong, shapely legs, a lost look in his eyes.

‘And he knows you’re going to beat him,’ Ann continued, ‘but he doesn’t know when, or how hard, or how many times. That’s entirely at your discretion. His nerves are stretched as tight as a wire, and you’ve got him exactly where you want him. You can do what you like with him, take as long as you like. When you understand that, you can begin to enjoy yourself.’

‘I imagine you could almost forget he’s there,’ said Susan.

‘Exactly,’ replied Ann, ‘you almost can. I used to leave Joe across the stool like this for ages while I sent e-mails, shopped for clothes, read a book or newspaper, drank coffee or wine, as if he wasn’t even in the room. Once, I even had a little doze on the couch, knowing he wouldn’t move without my permission. Sometimes, I’d ring friends, talking and laughing with them, and accepting invitations to parties Joe knew he wouldn’t be attending. After all, a slave doesn’t attend parties with his Mistress. She has other men to go out with, real men who can give her what she needs. Joe knew that, but it never does any harm to rub it in. If I was feeling particularly cruel, I’d ring my lover, sitting on the settee where you are now so Joe could see up my skirt. I’d talk to my lover for ages, making sweet talk, telling him how much I loved him, how much I desired him, describing all the things I wanted to do with him, and longed to let him do to me. Sometimes I’d touch myself as we talked, and I’d always make sure to tell him how happy I was to have a real man in my life, a man who could give me the pleasure my husband never

could.’

‘And all the time your husband knew you were going to cane him?’ Susan asked.

‘That’s right,’ said Ann, smiling at her skilled accomplice, ‘all the time.’

A shiver passed through David, and Ann smiled to see Susan uncross her legs and part her knees a little to let David glimpse the shadowy heaven at the tops of her thighs.

She really was a quick learner.

‘All men are adolescent boys at heart,’ Ann continued, ‘always trying to look up your skirt or down your dress or blouse. Often, I’d stand above Joe and lift my skirt, slowly, like this,’ said Ann, sliding her skirt to mid-thigh with a soft rustling sound, and placing the toe of her shoe on the foot-stool an inch from David’s mouth. ‘He would always know what to do.’

‘Well, David,’ said Susan, alert to her cue, ‘what are you waiting for?’

Like a man in a dream, David stretched forward and kissed the toe of Ann’s high-heeled shoe.

‘And again,’ said Susan, smiling up at Ann.

Unable to resist, David once more pressed his lips adoringly against Ann’s shoe, tasting leather and polish, and smelling her perfume, intensely aware of her exposed underskirt, a froth of pretty lace floating above his head like a cloud.

‘And what do you say, David?’ Susan prompted her husband.

‘Th-thank-you,’ David stuttered, barely able to breathe.

‘I beg your pardon?’ said Susan, aroused by his submission and her authority over him.

‘Thank-you, Mistress Ann,’ David said obediently, his stomach turning over with a dread that was both terrible and infinitely sweet.

‘Better,’ said Susan, barely appeased.

‘Well, then,’ Ann declared with a swish of her cane, ‘I think it’s time.’

David closed his eyes in alarm, and Susan felt a thrill of anticipation.

How hard would Ann strike him?

How many blows would she deliver?

Would David be able to bear the pain?

Would he cry out, and beg for mercy?

She couldn’t wait to find out.

‘There’s just one thing we have to do first,’ said Ann.

Susan gave her a questioning look, disappointed at the delay.

‘We have to take down his underpants,’ Ann said, smiling at Susan.

‘Of course we do,’ said Susan, joining in the cruel game.

‘To my way of thinking, there are three ways we could do it,’ Ann said casually.

‘And what ways are those?‘ Susan enquired with a lady-like innocence she knew would add to her husband’s torment.

‘Well,’ said Ann, ‘we know he’d do it himself if we told him to. I’m sure he wouldn’t refuse, not after he’s got down on his knees and kissed my shoe, and think how much it would embarrass him to bare his bottom to a woman he hardly knows.’

‘Oh yes, I think that should definitely remain an option,’ said Susan, smiling to see David squirm with shame.

‘I agree,’ said Ann, running the tip of her cane under the waistband of his boxer shorts and in between the cleft of his buttocks, ‘or I could take them down, or you could do it. What do you think, Susan?’

‘I can see merit in all three,’ Susan answered calmly, looking into David’s disbelieving eyes. ‘It would be highly amusing and entertaining to have him do it himself, bare himself for punishment, and it would be lovely to see you do it too, taking such absolute control of him, but really I think it

might be best if I do it myself,' she said, getting up from the settee. 'It will show him how much I agree with his punishment, and how obediently I expect him to serve you in my absence. What do you think, Ann?'

'I wholeheartedly agree,' said Ann, impressed by her friend's composure. 'It's the right decision, I'm sure of it. Thank-you, Susan. It's much better if you do it.'

'Well, then, David,' said Susan, standing over her prostrate husband, 'you've got yourself into a fine mess, haven't you? Playing at being my servant, running after me hand and foot, begging me to treat you as my slave. You never thought it would come to this, but here we are. It's really happening. It's not one of your silly little games any more, and you've only got yourself to blame, you know that, don't you? Well, don't you?'

'Yes,' he gasped.

'I beg your pardon.'

'Yes, Mistress Susan.'

'Think of all the times I asked you to stop your silly games, and love me like a normal man and a proper husband. But you wouldn't stop, would you?'

'N-no, Mistress Susan.'

'You kept on and on about it.'

'Yes, Mistress Susan.'

'You didn't think about me, you only thought about yourself.'

'I'm sorry, Mistress Susan.'

'You were selfish and lazy,'

'I'm sorry …'

'It's too late to be sorry, far too late.'

'Please, Mistress Susan, I'll be what you want, I promise.'

'No, David, you had your chance.'

'Oh, God, please.'

‘You had your chance, and you didn’t take it.’

‘I’m begging you, Susan, please.’

‘No, David.’

‘I’ll do anything.’

‘There’s nothing you can do.’

‘Please, don’t do this.’

‘I’ve told you, it’s too late.’

‘Oh, God …’

‘Are you ready to be brave, David? I hope you are.’

Beyond speech, David could only stare at his wife’s pretty feet and shoes only inches from his face.

In imitation of Ann, Susan lifted the soft hem of her dress, and placed her foot on the stool an inch from David’s mouth.

‘Well, then?’ said Susan.

In an ecstasy of shame, David leaned forward and kissed the toe of her pretty little shoe.

From high above, he heard the sound of their laughter, and then his wife’s voice.

‘I’m going to take your underpants down now, David, and Mistress Ann is going to beat you on your bare bottom.’

Scarcely able to believe what he was hearing, David gave a whimper, but Susan showed no pity.

‘Say please,’ she instructed him.

‘God, Susan,’ he spluttered.

‘You heard me,’ she said icily. ‘Say please.’

‘P-please,’ David stammered, appalled at his weakness.

‘Please what?’ Susan enquired relentlessly.

‘Please … Please take down my pants,’ David said in a trembling voice,

surrendering what little remained of his pride.

‘Very well, David, I will,’ said Susan, thrilled by his surrender. ‘Now, I’m sure your punishment will be very painful, but that’s only what you deserve, and you’ll be a brave boy and suffer it for me. And, when Ann’s finished beating you, you’ll thank her politely for her time and trouble. Is that understood?’

‘Yes, Mistress Susan,’ David said faintly, hating the tremor in his voice yet pressing his lips to her shoe again with feverish devotion.

‘Very good,’ Susan said, taking her foot from the stool, and moving behind him, ‘then it’s time to begin.’

David swallowed hard as he felt her take hold of his undershorts and tug them down to his knees. The waistband caught for a moment on his helpless erection, adding to his shame. Susan then pushed his t-shirt up to his neck, baring his back so that David felt utterly naked and exposed beneath the fully dressed women.

A dark excitement flared within him, as if he was awaiting execution at the hands of a goddess.

‘There you are, Ann. He’s all yours,’ said Susan, returning to the settee, and sitting down again opposite David, once more arranging the hem of her dress demurely around her pretty knees.

It was the best seat in the house.

She would be able to see every expression on her husband’s face. She sat back comfortably and pressed her thighs together in excitement, enjoying a secret and voluptuous thrill of power.

‘Very well, then,’ said Ann, feeling David shiver as she placed her cane across his buttocks, taking aim. ‘Shall we begin?’

She looked over at Susan who smiled, and gave a slow nod of her head.

‘Please do,’ said Susan.

The first blows were painful but not unbearably so, and David felt confident he could endure the pain but, as the blows rained down with remorseless intensity, and as the fiery cane began to strike already burning flesh, his confidence vanished altogether.

He clenched his teeth, and dug his fingers deep into the leather stool. He was in agony, but he vowed not to make a sound. In the midst of his degradation, he would find some pride in remaining bravely silent.

But soon even that solace was denied him, and he heard himself begin to moan and whimper like a lost soul.

At last the blows ceased. His cries of pain died to a low moan as he struggled with the sharp, lingering pain, and he could hear Ann behind him, breathing a little heavily from her exertions. He opened his eyes, blinking in confusion, and looked up at his wife.

Her face was flushed and her eyes were shining. Her knees were a little apart, and he could see under her dress to the distant white heaven of her panties. Despite his pain, he felt a stab of twisted arousal.

‘Now, David,’ he heard Ann say, ‘Susan tells me you have a safe-word. Is that true?’

‘Yes, oh God, yes,’ he whimpered, cursing himself for not thinking of it before now, ‘I do, I do.’

‘Then let me hear it,’ said Ann.

‘Blackbird,’ said David desperately, relishing the sound of the word, and the refuge it provided.

But a stinging blow immediately lashed him across his buttocks, harder than any he had yet endured, causing him to yelp in pain and surprise.

What was happening? Where was his refuge?

‘Let me hear it again,’ said Ann.

‘Blackb …’

This time she struck before he'd finished speaking, extending the word into a long howl of pain and indignation.

She didn't stop there.

As if incensed by his use of the safe-word, she laid into him with a volley of fiery cuts and blows that had him squirming and crying out in agony.

When at last her blows stopped, his tormented cry did not, filling the room with a slowly dying whine of pain and distress.

'I trust you will now have learned that I do not hold with safe-words,' said Ann imperiously. 'There are only two safe words in this house, and those are "Yes, Mistress." Let me hear you.'

'Yes, Mistress,' David whimpered, shaken to his core.

'Let that be a lesson,' said Ann. 'My word is the only law here. Do you understand me?'

'Yes, Mistress Ann.'

'Very good,' said Ann, looking over at Susan to re-assure her that all was well. 'Not long now, David,' she said, more for Susan's benefit than her husband's. 'I'll stop when I see your tears. Then I'll know you've truly surrendered to my authority. If it's any consolation, my husband was an exceptionally tough and stubborn man, and yet he always cried when I caned him. It's nothing to be ashamed of, and I think you'll find it's a happy place, the land beyond dignity and pride.'

She laid into him once more with fierce, flaying strokes that had him crying out even louder in shock and pain. And yet his pride struggled against the tears he knew would end his torment.

Summoning the last of his strength, David refused to cry.

He would not give them the satisfaction.

When his cries became a continuous keening sound, like those of an

animal in distress, Ann ceased her blows, and walked round to look at his face.

‘Is he crying yet?’ Ann asked calmly.

She’d expected to break him by now, and she was genuinely curious to know.

‘It’s hard to say,’ Susan replied, looking into her husband’s eyes.

His face was flushed deep red, his lips were trembling, and moisture had gathered in his eyes.

‘Very nearly, I would say,’ said Susan in a voice so indifferent to his suffering that David almost lost control there and then but, with a huge effort of will, he twisted his mouth into a kind of snarl, and held back his tears.

‘Yes, very nearly,’ said Ann. ‘Not long now.’

‘Not long,’ agreed Susan, the lack of concern in her voice once more adding to David’s distress.

‘I wonder,’ said Ann, smiling as she offered the cane to Susan, ‘would you like to finish it?’

Susan looked up at Ann, wondering how she’d known.

Of the many conflicting feelings she’d experienced watching David’s punishment, curiosity was uppermost among them, the desire to know what it would feel like to wield the cane, and to have her husband so abjectly at her mercy.

Until this moment she’d never dreamed she could ever do such a thing, and she told herself to refuse and leave it to Ann, but there was a wildness in her now, leading her into a deeper and darker part of the forest.

‘Thank-you,’ said Susan, smiling at Ann as she stood up and took the cane, ‘That’s very kind of you. I think I’d like that very much.’

She flicked the cane through the air. The hissing sound it made excited her, and both women laughed to hear David’s moan of fear.

‘Did you say something, David?’ Susan asked him impishly. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t hear.’

‘No more,’ he pleaded. ‘Please, no more.’

‘Don’t be such a spoilsport.’

‘Please, I beg you, no more.’

That’s not for you to say, David.’

‘Please …’

‘But I want to try it,’ said Susan. ‘I want to know what it feels like to really be your Mistress. And I want you to know what it feels like to really be my slave.’

‘All we need are your tears, David,’ added Ann. ‘Real tears. That’s not too much to ask, is it? And then we’ll know we’ve got rid of all that silly male pride, and you’ll truly know your place as a woman’s slave.’

‘How many should I give him?’ Susan asked, to David’s horror.

‘As many as it takes,’ Ann replied.

‘I wonder if six will be enough,’ said Susan, her excitement growing.

‘We’ll soon find out,’ Ann replied, smiling at Susan, and thinking how strong and beautiful she looked with the cane in her hand.

Moving behind David, Susan was mildly disappointed to see that Ann’s fierce blows hadn’t yet raised any weals, only marked his buttocks with a criss-crossing mass of angry red stripes.

She laid the cane across David’s buttocks to steady her aim. He shivered, and gave another moan, but made no move to resist.

Thrilled by his submission, and the delicious feeling of power it gave her, she lifted her arm and brought the cane down fiercely against his flesh.

He yelped in pain and Susan felt a dark, forbidden pleasure race through her blood. She knew that nothing would ever be the same between them after this.

She would never again play by his silly little rules.

These were her rules, and this was real power.

And it did feel like freedom.

David told himself he could endure six more blows, but the severity of Susan's strokes took him by surprise. Landing on already tender flesh, they were even more painful than Ann's.

Yet it wasn't the pain that broke him. It was the terrible self-pity that came from knowing it was his wife, the woman he loved and cherished above all others, who was treating him so cruelly.

On her fourth blow he broke and began to cry like a baby, his shoulders heaving as great tears rolled down his cheeks.

Lost in pleasure, Susan didn't notice his tears or, if she did, she paid no attention to them, and she had delivered many more than six strokes before Ann put a hand gently on her arm to stop her.

'It's done,' said Ann softly.

Only then did Susan step back from her broken slave, her eyes shining, and her whole body trembling with excitement. It had given her enormous pleasure to punish David. She felt as if she had pushed open the doorway to a secret world.

The two women stood in silence above the sobbing man, thrilled yet strangely moved by his surrender to their female power.

When his sobbing didn't stop, Ann sat by him on the foot-stool. Even in his deepest pain and humiliation, a part of him thrilled to the scent of her perfume, and the whisper of her silky hose under her skirt.

She put a hand on his head, stroking his hair.

She knew she had to be gentle now, reward him with praise.

'That's good, David,' she said softly, 'you've done very well, and been very brave. I'm very pleased with you, and I'm sure Mistress Susan is too.'

She took a tissue from a box on her desk and wiped his tears. ‘But there’s one last thing you have to do. Can you remember?’

‘Th-thank-you,’ he said through his sobs. ‘Thank-you, Mistress Ann.’

‘Excellent, David,’ said Ann, surprised and pleased that he’d remembered to thank her for his punishment. ‘That’s very good, but shouldn’t you thank Mistress Susan too?’

‘Thank-you,’ he said, looking up at Susan through tear-stained eyes. ‘Thank-you Mistress Susan.’

The deeper shame of thanking his wife brought forth a new flood of tears. Rather to Susan’s surprise the sight and sound of these fresh tears only deepened her arousal, and the scorn she felt for her husband.

‘It’s all right,’ said Ann soothingly, wiping his face again, ‘Let it all out. All that silly pride. Let it all get washed away. Far, far away. You don’t need it any more. You’ll be much happier without it, just you wait and see.’

David looked up at her with big, tearful eyes. He felt utterly subjugated by her and yet, despite her terrible cruelty, he felt a deep and heartfelt gratitude for her gentle words.

‘Come on, then, up onto your feet,’ said Ann.

Taking an arm each, Ann and Susan helped David stand up from his place of punishment. He was trembling all over, and still sniffling. To make matters worse, his undershorts fell down around his ankles as he stood. He bent to pull them up, but Ann spoke firmly, forbidding him.

‘No, David. Leave them where they are. You won’t be needing these any more,’ she said, giving him a gentle push so that he stepped out of his shorts. With a quick movement she bent and picked them up, dropping them into the waste-paper basket by her desk. ‘I’ll decide if and when you wear clothes. You’ll go naked unless I tell you differently.’

She decided to let him keep his t-shirt on. Without his undershorts, it

served only to emphasise his nakedness.

‘I know this has come as a shock to you, David,’ said Ann, ‘but you need to know this is not a game. I think of you quite genuinely as my slave, please be clear about that, and I expect obedience from you at all times and in all matters, and I’ll be looking for you to work hard in my service. Very hard. I won’t tolerate the slightest episode of insolence or laziness.’

David just gazed at her, a look of wonder in his tear-filled eyes.

‘You will work your hardest for Mistress Ann,’ Susan added, finding a cruel pleasure in commanding her husband, ‘and do all you can to please her. She has my permission to do whatever she wants with you, and you will serve her exactly as if you were serving me. You’ll obey her without question, and woe betide you if you step out of line. If I hear the slightest complaint about your work or your behaviour, I’ll expect Ann to take you straight to her study for another punishment. An even harder one. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Yes, Mistress Susan,’ David mumbled.

‘Louder,’ Susan insisted.

‘Yes, Mistress Susan,’ he said more loudly.

Susan’s proud, lovely eyes raked him with a scornful gaze.

Shamed anew, he tried to cover his nakedness with his hands. His cock was soft now, shrunken by shock and pain, which added greatly to his shame.

Susan almost laughed out loud at the sight. He really was a pitiful figure, she thought, but still she felt no pity for him.

Once more she wondered at herself.

Where had this cold and pitiless woman come from? Perhaps she’d suffered a bout of temporary madness and lost track of her true self, or perhaps she’d learned to be honest, and grown at last into her strength as a woman, a woman unafraid of her sexual power.

She suddenly longed to be alone in her own home where she'd have the peace and quiet to contemplate such matters.

'Well, Ann, it's time I was going,' said Susan, surprised to hear herself speak normally under such unusual circumstances. She noticed David look at her imploringly before quickly lowering his gaze, fearful of seeming insubordinate and earning a rebuke.

'Yes,' said Ann, 'but I'd like to show you his room first.'

'Of course,' Susan politely agreed, impatient to be gone.

'This way, David,' said Ann, leading the way. 'Come with me, and we'll get you settled in.'

ONCE MORE Susan followed Ann and David along the narrow corridor, admiring the angry stripes on David's buttocks, and reliving the pleasure she'd found in witnessing, and then delivering, his cruel punishment.

She made a mental note to ask Ann where she'd got her cane, thinking she might like one of her own at home. She thought she might hang it on a hook in the laundry room, just to keep David on his toes. Seeing it every day would act as a powerful reminder of her dominance.

'How will you like that, David?' she thought in amusement, beginning to imagine a much firmer form of control over her husband.

When they reached the hallway, Ann instructed David to pick up his hold-all, and they passed through the hall and the long, glass-walled kitchen into the utility rooms at the rear of the house.

As they went, Ann pointed out the scullery, and a large walk-in cupboard which held the hoover and cleaning equipment, and the spacious laundry-room with its washing-machine, pulley and tumble-drier, as well as its deep Belfast sink and ironing-board. She also showed them the narrow

stone steps that led down to the cellar where she stored her wine, referring to it mysteriously as her ‘oubliette.’

David didn’t know what the word meant, but Susan did, and she wondered if Ann really had used the cellar as a secret dungeon for her enslaved husband. If she had, she wondered if Ann would use it to imprison and punish David. Susan was no longer surprised to discover that she hoped Ann would. It aroused her to think of David imprisoned in darkness while Ann went about her life in the house above him

‘Susan tells me you’re already a very good housemaid,’ said Ann as they drew near to the end of the corridor, ‘so you’ll become very familiar with this part of the house. These are the maid’s quarters. You’ll spend a large part of your time here. It will be your domain.’

She indicated the doorway to a small toilet with an ancient high cistern and a chain-pull flush, a tiny sink, and a narrow shower with a drain in the stone floor.

‘That will be your toilet and wash-room, David. You’ll use none of the other toilets and bathrooms in the house. They will be for my use only, and any other guests who might be staying with me. You will keep them sparkling clean, but you will not use them, is that clear?’

‘Yes, Mistress Ann,’ David meekly replied.

‘You will use only the servant’s toilet and shower.’

‘Yes, Mistress Ann.’

‘There’s no heating in this part of the house, I’m afraid,’ Ann continued, ‘and it’s only a cold shower, but a slave doesn’t need hot water, and I’ll expect you to wash thoroughly in cold water after you’ve finished your work in the house and gardens. You will keep yourself clean and close-shaven at all times. Being naked doesn’t mean I won’t expect you to be well-groomed.’

Susan couldn’t help smiling at Ann’s lady-of-the-manor performance as

they stepped into a small bedroom by the back door to the garden grounds. It was a sparsely furnished room with a narrow metal-framed bed, a wooden chair and a small wardrobe locked with a padlock.

It was a sad and lonely little room, Susan thought, brightened only by a faded floral bedspread and matching curtains. Two prints on the wall of Degas' ballet dancers gave the room a feminine aspect. There was no radiator in the room, only a single-bar electric heater by the side of the bed.

The only window overlooked a drying-line, a row of dust-bins and a coal bunker – a housemaid's view of the world.

'Well, David,' Susan thought with grim satisfaction, 'be careful what you wish for.'

'This is one of the original parts of the house, built in 1823. It was built to be the maid's room,' said Ann, 'so it's entirely appropriate for you, David, since for much of the time you'll be working as my housemaid. Some of Joe's old clothes and uniforms are still in the wardrobe. That's private. I'll keep it locked for now, and you will remain naked to begin with. If, however, you work well, and to my satisfaction,' Ann decreed, smiling knowingly at Susan, 'I may allow you to wear a uniform suitable to your position, but that's a privilege you will have to earn.'

David put his hold-all down by the bed and looked around the room in dismay. He was still in great pain from his caning, and he felt excruciatingly embarrassed by his nakedness, and no less embarrassed at the prospect of a uniform. Suddenly feeling dizzy, he clutched onto the metal bedrail for support. The hard, cold metal caused him to experience a jolt of fear, as if he was sinking deeper and deeper into a quicksand from which there was no escape.

'And there's your servant's bell,' said Ann, smiling once more at Susan and pointing to a little clapper and bell attached to the wall above the door.

Susan saw the bell but also noticed a brown leather riding-crop hanging from a hook on the door. The sight of it pleased and aroused her. It would remind David of his place, and the consequences of any bad behaviour or shoddy housework.

His life in Ann's house would be one of complete servitude, of that she hadn't the slightest doubt, and she rejoiced at the thought of his subjugation.

'I'll ring the bell whenever I need anything,' Ann continued. 'I'll expect you to come running to attend me the instant you hear me ring.'

'Yes, Mistress Ann,' said David, feeling a terrifying thrill at the thought of being summoned in such a way into the presence of his Mistress.

'Oh, this is perfect,' said Susan, taking a dark delight in David's predicament, and wondering what Joe's old uniforms might look like. 'Suitable to your position,' Ann had said. Well, it was a maid's room, so the uniforms would presumably be suitable for a maid, Susan imagined, recalling Ann's stories of dressing Joe as her maid, and thinking how foolish David would look in a little maid's dress and apron.

An image of David blushing as he curtsied to Ann came into her head. The wickedness of the thought brought her a thrill of arousal, and made her smile with cruel amusement.

'Well, now, David, aren't you the lucky one?' she asked her husband mischievously.

He saw her cruel smile and gave her a look of such distress she thought he might burst into tears once more.

'Well,' Susan continued, half-hoping she could make him cry again, 'aren't you going to thank Mistress Ann for looking after you so well, and for giving you such a lovely room as your very own?'

'Thank-you, Mistress Ann,' David said obediently, swallowing back tears. 'Thank-you for looking after me s-so well, and for giving me such a

lovely room for my own.'

Too ashamed to look at either of his beautiful tormentors, he looked down instead at the faded pink carpet, and the hold-all that contained no clothes of his own.

'You're very welcome, David,' Ann replied, impressed once more by Susan's poise and authority, and by the depth of David's submission. 'Having your own maid's room at the back of the house will remind you of your place in my household. You must remember at all times that you are a slave and maidservant, nothing more and nothing less. From what I've seen, I'm sure you'll be very happy here. I know Joe was … for eight long years.'

David felt a shiver pass through him.

Such a length of time sounded like an eternity, and he gave thanks that this sad and feminine little room would be his prison for only two days and nights.

Any longer would be unbearable, a nightmare beyond his imagination.

'I'm sure he'll work hard and give satisfaction,' said Susan. 'Over the last year he's become an excellent cook and housemaid.'

'I'm pleased to hear it, and I'll let you know if he gives me the slightest trouble.'

'Please do, Ann. I expect his work to be of the highest standard. If it isn't, or if he shows you the slightest lack of respect or obedience, you have my permission to punish him in any way you like.'

'Thank-you,' said Ann, her eyes sparkling with humour at their ridiculous charade, 'I'll be sure to remember that.'

'I mean it,' said Susan. 'It was wonderful to see him put in his place. It really opened my eyes, and I'll be extremely grateful if you teach him his true place in a way he'll never forget.'

Susan felt a thrill of arousal at the fear in David's eyes.

‘It’ll be my pleasure,’ said Ann.

‘Thank-you, Ann,’ said Susan. ‘Thank-you for everything.’

‘Well, then, shall I see you to your car?’ Ann asked, noticing David shiver at the prospect of being abandoned by his wife.

‘It’s all right, David can see me out. And don’t worry,’ she added when the saw the surprise in her friend’s eyes, ‘I just want a moment alone with him.’

‘If you’re sure,’ said Ann.

‘I’m sure,’ Susan replied.

A tiny flame of hope flickered in David’s heart as the women embraced.

Perhaps Susan would take him home with her after all.

Perhaps this was all a hoax.

Please, God, it had to be.

‘Goodbye, Ann,’ said Susan, feeling genuine warmth and affection for her friend. ‘How can I ever thank you?’

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Ann fondly. ‘There’s nothing to thank me for. I’ll enjoy having him here. I’ll be able to sit with my feet up the way I used to, and have him run after me. I’ll find plenty for him to do in the gardens and the house. And don’t worry, I’ll be very firm with him, you can be sure of that. He’ll soon learn his true place in the world.’

‘I don’t doubt it for a moment,’ laughed Susan.

The two women made small talk on their way to the front door and then, with a final hug, Susan took her leave of Ann and walked quickly towards her car followed by David who once more hobbled behind her on the gravel in his bare feet.

‘Stop, Susan, please,’ he pleaded, a tight feeling of panic in his chest.

But Susan didn’t stop, or slow down, or turn her proud head in his direction.

‘Please, Susan, we need to talk.’

‘There’s nothing to talk about,’ said Susan, lengthening her stride.

‘You can’t leave me here,’ he said, scurrying to keep up with her.

“I’ll do what I like,’ said Susan, giving nothing away.

‘Please, Susan, tell me it’s a game, a joke.’

She said nothing, and kept walking towards the car.

‘It’s a game, I know it is,’ he said desperately. ‘You’re my wife. You’d never do this to me.’

Susan gave a bitter laugh, her arousal growing. The more he pleaded with her the more her heart hardened.

‘Please, Susan. You won’t leave me. Tell me you won’t.’

‘Things are different now,’ she said coldly. ‘After today our lives have changed. You can’t expect me to forget what just happened.’

‘Susan …’

‘Nothing can ever be the same again.’

‘You can’t do this. It’s too much, you know it is. Please, listen.’

‘You’re the one who needs to listen,’ she said as she reached her car. ‘You’re my slave, I can do what I like with you. Even you must see that by now.’

She unlocked the car with a press of her key, and opened the driver’s door, turning to face him with one foot resting in the car, and an arm leaning casually on the open door. A light breeze lifted the hem of her dress so that it fluttered enticingly around her lovely knees.

He’d never seen her look so beautiful or so free.

‘Please,’ he implored her, his voice rising in panic. ‘You can’t leave me here. You saw what she did to me.’

‘Oh, stop your silly lies. I can’t bear them any more.’

‘What lies?’ he said. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Of course I saw what she did,’ she said, her voice harsh with scorn. ‘I could hardly have had a better view, could I? And I saw what you’re like. For the first time I really saw,’ she said in contempt. ‘You just lay there and took it. I was waiting for you to do something, say something, put up a fight at least, but you did nothing. Nothing at all. You even kissed her shoe, and said thank-you. You could have stood up and walked out, there was nothing to stop you. But you didn’t, did you? Well, did you?’

David opened his mouth to speak, but made no sound.

He took a ragged breath, and tried again, saying in a trembling voice, ‘I wanted to, believe me, I did, but I … I couldn’t.’

‘Exactly,’ said Susan. ‘You couldn’t do anything, and you got what you deserved. I enjoyed beating you, believe me, I enjoyed it very much.’

‘God, Susan, this isn’t you. It can’t be.’

‘If it’s not me, then who is it? Tell me that.’

When he didn’t answer, Susan spoke plainly and honestly.

‘You don’t want to come home with me, David, I know that now. You say you do, but you don’t.’

He started to speak, but she interrupted him.

‘Don’t lie to me,’ she said with something like sorrow in her voice. ‘You want me to leave you here. You want Ann to order you around like her slave, it’s plain to see. Well, it’s time you learned to be true to your nature. And she’s going to make you wear a uniform, you know that, don’t you? She’s going to turn you into a real little housemaid.’

David looked up quickly, a new fear in his eyes.

Susan saw his fear, and the contempt she felt for him only made her speak more cruelly.

‘I’m right, David, you know I am. She’ll turn you into a pretty little maid with a frilly white apron around your waist, and neat little shoes on your

feet. You might even look quite pretty. It wouldn't surprise me if you did. She'll teach you to curtsey so you can show respect in the proper way. I'm sure you'll like that, curtseying to your Mistress. You won't have to pretend to be a man any more.'

'Please …'

'You'll suit a uniform,' she continued, speaking over him. 'Perhaps I'll ask Ann to send me a photograph of her new maid. I think I'm going to like you in a uniform. Once you're a proper little maid, I won't have to think of you as my husband any more. I'll be free to find a real man, a strong and manly man who knows what a woman wants.'

'Not that,' he exclaimed in terror. 'Please not that!'

'Oh, why not, for heaven's sake?' said Susan coldly. 'Do you honestly expect me to put up with you crawling on your hands and knees for the rest of my life? Oh yes, David, I'll take a lover if I want,' said Susan, recalling the darker threads in Ann's tales of her marriage, and spinning them into a silken yarn of her own.

'When he comes to the house, you'll answer the door in your uniform. You won't want to, you'll be trembling and sobbing. You'll beg me not to let him see you dressed like that, but I'll make you answer the door to him. I will, David, truly I will. It'll be the perfect time for you to show off your curtsey which I'll expect to be very neat and respectful, and when you curtsey to my lover he'll see your pretty petticoat peeping out from under your dress. He'll laugh at the sight, what man wouldn't? Oh, how he'll laugh, and I'll laugh too, and then I'll kiss him right in front of you, a long, deep, loving kiss. And later that evening, when we get back from our night out, I'll go upstairs with him, undressing as I go, dropping my panties and bra on the stairs for you to pick up, and we'll make love in what used to be our marriage bed while you lie alone in your little maid's room, or kneel outside our

bedroom door holding my underwear, smelling my scent in them, feeling their warmth from my body as you listen to our cries of pleasure. In the morning, I'll have you cook us breakfast, and you'll watch as we kiss and laugh, and plan our next date together … Our new life together.'

'No,' he gasped, terrified yet thrilled beyond his wildest dreams.

'Yes, David,' she insisted, lost in her cruel tale, and delighting in her new power over him. 'This is what happens when a husband stops being a man, when he begs his wife to make him her slave. She starts to use that power, and enjoy using it. Why wouldn't she? It's the way of the world, I see that now. You've only got yourself to blame. It's what you asked for, David, begged me for, day after day, week after week. Well, now you've got it.'

'No, please.'

His voice was trembling, and one of his legs had begun to shake.

'It's going to happen, David, there's nothing you can do.'

'I'll change, I promise I will.'

'You won't change,' she said scornfully. 'You can't change.'

'I'll be a proper husband. I'll make you happy.'

'It's too late for that.'

'Please, Susan.'

'Goodbye, David.'

'No!'

'Yes!'

'You can't do this.'

'I'm going now.'

'You can't.'

'That's not for you to say.'

'I'm begging you.'

'Are you, David?'

‘Yes,’ he said desperately, his head spinning.

‘I don’t think you are. You have to kneel if you want to beg. You have to get down on your knees.’

A sweetly mocking smile played around her lovely mouth, but her eyes were cold and hard.

‘Please, don’t do this,’ David pleaded, captivated by the hardness in her eyes.

‘Do what?’

‘Make me kneel.’

‘Make you?’ she said with a disbelieving laugh. ‘I won’t have to make you do anything. Look at you, standing there, barefoot and naked with the marks of her cane on your bottom. No, David, I won’t have to make you kneel. You’ll do it all by yourself. It’s your rightful place in the world – on your knees before a woman.’

‘God, Susan …’

‘Down you go.’

‘Please …’

‘What are you waiting for?’

‘God …’

‘You want to kneel. Go on, say it.’

‘No …’

‘Say it.’

‘I want … I …’ David stuttered, choking on the words.

‘You’re such a coward!’

‘I want … I want to kneel,’ said David, trying to prove her wrong.

‘Do it, then!’

With a whimper of defeat David sank slowly to his knees before his lovely wife and Mistress.

‘There,’ said Susan, smiling down at him with a look of triumph on her face. ‘You’re where you belong, and we don’t have to worry about who’s in charge any more. That’s clear for the whole world to see, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ said David, gazing adoringly at her pretty legs, feeling the soft hem of her dress brush against his mouth and cheek.

‘There’s no going back now, David. You know that, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘This isn’t a game any more. You know that too, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m your Mistress, David, not just for today, but for the rest of your life. For ever and ever. Let me hear you say it.’

‘For ever and ever,’ repeated David, the religious weight of the words putting him deeper under her spell.

‘Well, then, now you’re in your proper place, you can beg me for what you want.’

‘God, Susan …’

‘Hurry up, I’m waiting.’

‘Please, Mistress, please don’t leave me here. I love you. I want to come home with you, and live as your husband.’

But Susan only laughed, and shook her head in disbelief.

‘You’re lying again,’ she said. ‘If you’re going to beg, I expect you to beg for what you really want. The truth, now. You owe me that at least.’

He groaned, and pressed his head against her leg.

‘No,’ she said sternly, pushing him away with her knee. ‘I won’t let you touch me until you beg for what you really want.’

‘I love you.’

‘Of course you do,’ she said, ‘but I want to hear you beg for what you truly want.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Of course you can. Be brave for once in your life. Show a little courage. Be brave for your Mistress.’

‘God, Susan …’

‘Hurry up, I’m waiting.’

‘Please …’

‘Tell the truth, and you can have your reward. Don’t you remember the reward I promised you?’ she said, sliding her dress up her thighs until he could see her pretty panties through the silky gauze of her hose. ‘I said you could kiss my panties, I’m sure you remember, but only if you’re a good boy. Come on, then, be a good boy for me.’

David gazed up at her in wonder, longing to kiss her panties more than he wanted freedom or dignity or self-respect.

More than he wanted life itself.

‘This is your last chance, David.’

‘Please, Mistress … please, leave me,’ he beseeched her finally.

‘What did you say? I didn’t hear,’ Susan lied. ‘Say it again.’

‘Please leave me. Please drive away and leave me, I beg you.’

‘My, my,’ said Susan, feigning surprise, ‘you really do want me to do it.’

‘Yes, Mistress, I do,’ he confessed, fearing he might faint at her feet.

‘Well, David, I don’t know if I can,’ she said, toying with him now just for the fun of it. ‘To really drive away and leave you? That would be terribly cruel and unkind of me, don’t you think?’

‘I beg you, please do it,’ he urged her, feeling some mechanism deep in his soul wind down and come at last to a halt.

‘Are you begging me, David, really begging?’ Susan asked, amusement mingling with contempt in her eyes.

‘Yes, I’m begging you. Do it, please. I don’t deserve you, never have deserved you. Drive away and leave me. Do it!’

It distressed him terribly to say these shameful words, yet it was the sweetest pain he’d ever known.

‘Very well, then, David, I will,’ she said, her face lit by a strange radiance. ‘Since you asked so nicely.’

David groaned in an ecstasy of defeat.

‘Poor David,’ she said as if she meant it.

‘God …’

‘Poor baby.’

‘I love you, Susan,’ he gasped.

‘It’s time I was on my way.’

‘I love you.’

‘Soon, David, I’ll be gone soon.’

‘God, Susan …

‘Driving away in my car.’

‘I love you.’

‘I know, but it makes no difference.’

‘Help me.’

‘There is no help. None at all.’

‘Please …’

‘It’s time I was gone.’

‘No.’

‘Yes.’

‘You can’t.’

‘Here I go.’

‘No.’

‘I’m on my way.’

‘No.’

‘Goodbye, David.’

‘Please, I’ll do anything.’

‘You can watch me go, you’ll like that. You can stay on your knees, and watch while I drive away.’

‘Please, Susan.’

‘Say thank you.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Say it!’

‘Th-thank you.’

‘Thank you for leaving me.’

‘Thank you for leaving me.’

‘You’re welcome, David. You can kiss me now. You can have your little reward. You’ll like that, won’t you?

‘Yes, yes, God, yes.’

‘Then ask nicely.’

‘Please, Mistress, please may I kiss you.’

‘Where would you like to kiss me?’ she asked him.

He tried to speak but couldn’t make a sound.

‘Where, David?’ she repeated. ‘Say it.’

‘Please, Mistress, please may I kiss your panties?’

‘You may,’ she said, amusement in her voice as she slid her dress higher, pulling her hose down to the tops of her thighs, and pushing her hips forward to receive his kiss. ‘But softly, now. Don’t be greedy. Just a little kiss to remember me by.’

Utterly enthralled, he leaned forward and placed his lips gently against the soft lace of her panties, breathing in her lovely woman’s scent.

‘That’s good, David, very good,’ said Susan, a wild feeling between her

legs as she touched herself through her panties, moving them aside to feel his tongue against her nakedness, letting him taste her at last.

‘That’s what you want, what you need,’ she said, pulling her panties completely aside, giving him all of her.

Her sweet forest of curls took possession of him body and soul.

He knelt there, glorying in her beauty and power, worshipping his cruel and beautiful Mistress.

Susan looked down at her kneeling husband and suddenly longed to break her promise to him.

She longed not to come back for him on Sunday.

She remembered Ann telling her she could leave David with her for as long as she liked, and perhaps that’s just what she’d do. The thought of betraying him so cruelly thrilled her deeply. With a shiver of arousal, she took hold of his hair and pulled his mouth harder against her.

In that moment, she came to a profound and shocking understanding – she’d never really intended to keep her promise to David, and she knew she’d leave him with Ann for far longer than he expected.

She remembered all the times she’d sat astride David on the settee at home, and threatened to leave him with her mother as her helpless slave and housemaid.

Maybe, Susan reflected, she’d always known she’d leave him with another woman, a strong and wilful older woman who would show him no mercy.

It was a delightful thought that thrilled her to the core, and yet his ardour began to irritate her.

‘Enough,’ she said, pushing his head away, but he only clung to her more tightly, his kisses deeper and more ardent.

She’d intended to torment him by permitting him only the briefest of

kisses, but she hadn’t allowed for her own pleasure.

His yearning tongue woke in her a deep and urgent passion. All the strange joys of the day seemed to gather in that moment to sweeten and inflame her desire until she no longer had the will to stop him. She closed her eyes in delight, thoughts flashing in her head as he worshipped her. She thought of how she could break the news to him that she wouldn’t be coming back for him on Sunday as she’d promised.

Perhaps she’d ring on Sunday evening and order him to kneel at Ann’s feet while she told him the terrible news in the matter-of-fact voice she knew he liked so much, or maybe she’d call Ann privately and ask her to tell him. She was sure Ann would find a sweetly cruel and mocking way of tormenting David with the dreadful news.

‘Why should she come for you?’ she imagined Ann telling him, ‘You’re not worth the trouble, and I’m sure she’ll find another man to keep her happy. A real man, and not a hopeless little cry-baby like you.’

David worshipped higher and harder, and Susan gasped in pleasure as her mind filled with delicious visions of wielding a new, and more severe authority over her husband.

What was to stop her leaving him at Ann’s for a week, or a month, or the whole Summer? Or maybe she’d leave him with Ann forever, and never come back for him. The thought brought her a new spasm of delight, making her moan and push down harder against his mouth. And then she thought how she might come to lunch one day after many months had passed, and David could serve at table in his pretty maid’s dress. Maybe she’d have found a lover by then. They could both come for lunch. Yes, she decided, that’s what they would do. She saw herself and her lover sitting with Ann at the table by the huge glass wall in the kitchen, laughing while David fussed around them in his uniform, serving food and wine with trembling hands.

Susan hoped Ann would make him wear the maid's dress with the little bells sewn into its hem.

She felt sure that she would.

The tinkling sound his dress made when he moved would haunt him forever.

He'd never recover from such shame. No man could.

David would never again be the man in her life.

She'd own him body and soul, and yet she'd be free of him, free to live her life in whatever way she wished.

And maybe at another time she'd visit Ann and not let David see her at all.

Ann could keep him locked away in the cellar, Susan thought as her pleasure mounted. Locked in darkness. David would know Susan was there, he'd long to see her with all his heart.

But he would not be permitted to see her.

That day she would be a goddess too bright for his servant's gaze.

Susan saw herself talking and laughing with Ann, and eating the delicious meal David had cooked for them, but he would be kept prisoner until she'd left. Only then would Ann set him free to clear away their dishes, and touch the plate Susan had eaten from, and the sacred glass that had held her wine, and been touched by her lips.

And then Ann would take him to her study and punish him just because it pleased her. She'd bend him over the leather stool, pull up his silly dress and petticoat, and cane him until he sobbed and cried for a mercy that would never come .

It seemed almost insane to imagine such cruelties and yet, after what she'd witnessed that evening, Susan knew that anything was possible once a woman truly took charge of her marriage.

The thought of wielding such power sent another shock-wave through her senses. Moaning in delight, she twisted her fingers in his hair, and pressed down against his mouth, closing her eyes as the lovely feeling swept through her, making her tremble and cry out in joy.

‘Stop,’ she gasped once she’d taken her pleasure.

When he wouldn’t stop, she pushed him hard with her knee, sending him sprawling on the gravel at her feet.

‘When I say stop, I mean stop,’ she said, a flash of triumph in her eyes.

He reached for her again, but she quickly pulled up her panties and hose and got into the driver’s seat, closing the car door behind her.

‘It’s time, David,’ she said.

He heard the car door lock with a heavy thud.

‘No!’ he cried out.

‘I’m going,’ she said through the open window, smiling to see his hard cock straining towards her.

‘Goodbye, David.’

‘Susan!’

She started the engine and drove away.

He was sure he heard her shout out in joy as she drove out of the yard.

Shocked and abandoned, David stayed on his knees, watching her car grow smaller and smaller on the narrow track until it vanished behind a copse of ancient oak trees.

The sound of her car engine grew fainter and fainter until he could hear it no more.

She’d done it.

She’d really done it.

She’d driven away and left him at the mercy of The Devlin Woman.

‘I love you, Susan,’ he called to her from the depths of his defeat.

‘I love you.’

A New Devotion

An erotic novel by Molly Sands

Revised and re-edited November 2019.

Sequels available — ‘An Obedient Husband,’ and ‘Lady Catherine.’

‘If you can’t be a good and faithful wife — then be The Devil!’
(Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, ‘Venus in Furs’ – 1870)

‘What you longed for has come to pass. Henceforth you are unmanned and mine in earnest, a thing under the yoke. Now for your punishment frock. You shall shed your male garments and don the short silk luxuriously rustling over head and shoulders and quickly too.’
(James Joyce, ‘Ulysses’ — 1922)

A NEW DEVOTION

‘The hardness in her eyes thrilled him, and he understood in that moment that he longed for her cruelty and scorn far more than he wanted her love or respect.’

‘I’LL DRY myself,’ Catherine informed her husband as she stepped from the shower. James handed her the towel and stood there like a fool. After twenty years of marriage he found Catherine more beautiful than ever. With her gently mocking smile and steady brown eyes he’d always thought of her as The Cinnamon Girl from Neil Young’s wonderful song.

They’d met when he was twenty-three and she was eighteen, but his Cinnamon Girl was forty-one now. She’d grown lovelier with age and, when she took charge of him like this, he found her irresistible.

‘What are you waiting for?’ she asked impatiently, rubbing her hair with the towel. ‘Have you looked out my clothes?’

‘No, Catherine,’ he mumbled.

‘For heaven’s sake, show some initiative.’

James felt a stab of anger. How could he have looked out her clothes? She hadn’t told him what she wanted to wear, but he quickly reminded himself that he’d given up any right to fair treatment.

For tonight at least, her word was law.

‘I’ll wear my pleated skirt with my cashmere top,’ Catherine told him. ‘Don’t forget clean panties and bra, and I’ll need tights and my black boots. Lay them out on the bed for me. And be quick about it. I’m being picked up in twenty minutes.’

He stood gazing at her like a man in a dream.

‘I’m warning you, James, when I tell you to do something I expect you to

do it.'

'Yes, Catherine,' he said, 'I'm sorry.'

Catherine smiled as he hurried from the shower-room. She'd learned in the past months how much he liked it when she spoke down to him as if he was her slave, but it still came as a surprise to see this side of her husband.

James was a good-looking as well as a clever and successful man. He'd recently sold the specialist software firm he'd started up fourteen years ago, and done well from the sale. He was considering other offers of work, but for now he was enjoying some time at home before making his decision. He knew how good he was, and he was waiting for an offer that matched his talents.

He was an exceptionally proud man who strived to be the best in his field. Status and dignity were of the utmost importance to him.

Perhaps, Catherine reflected with a smile, that was why he liked it so much when she took them away.

But it wasn't just James who liked their game. Catherine may have respected him as her devoted husband, and the father of their children Brendan and Kate, both away at university, but she'd discovered a surprising pleasure in treating him cruelly, with an indifference that bordered on contempt. Playing the role of his stern Mistress intrigued her, and awakened her sexuality.

A whole new world was opening up to her.

They only played their little game on Friday nights so where was the harm? There was a preposterous fun to be had in taking up the reins in her marriage, and it brought mischief to their well-ordered lives.

It brought a sense of freedom too.

Catherine had never been grateful for her good looks. Since her teenage years she'd found them more of a burden than a blessing. Women often

resented her while men viewed her as an object of desire and, first as a girl, and then as a schoolteacher and a wife and mother, she'd felt oppressed by her sexuality, keeping it hidden beneath a cloak of respectability.

She possessed something other people wanted, something she didn't know what to do with herself.

But tonight, as undisputed mistress of the household, she could flaunt her good looks, set her sexuality free to take its natural place in her life and marriage.

Catherine wiped the moisture from the mirror and looked at her reflection. She was still smiling and there was a gleam in her eyes. She looked younger. There was no doubt about it, these 'mistress-nights' as she'd come to think of them, were doing her good. She looked forward to them all week, a sweet sensuality building inside her as the week-end approached. At first she'd been nervous, guilty and ill-at-ease about speaking down to James in the way their game demanded, but she'd grown used to it, and now she enjoyed taking charge of him, watching the shame and wonder come into his eyes as she bent him to her will.

Taking charge of him made her feel daring and transgressive. Decent, respectable wives shouldn't treat their husbands this way, it went against everything they'd been taught, but that knowledge only heightened the pleasure she found in her female authority. It excited her, and a new strength and confidence bloomed within her.

HANDLING CATHERINE'S pretty underwear always made James anxious and ashamed. It wasn't manly to touch such flimsy garments, and find pleasure in the way they felt in his hand. Her soft panties and bras and her weightless hose and stockings took on a life of their own in his clumsy fingers, and he was blushing as he selected Catherine's underwear from her

dressing-table drawer.

He chose an elegant white silk bra with matching panties and a pair of sheer, dark tights and laid them carefully on Catherine's side of the bed. He wondered if she planned to wear a slip under her clothes. She often did, and he took an elegant white slip from the little drawer where she kept her slips and nightdresses, and placed it on the bed beside the other lingerie he'd chosen for her to wear on her night out.

She was going to a club with three of her women friends from work. It was the same club they'd go to on most Friday nights. Often a blues band would be playing, other times a jazz or reggae band. They'd drink wine and laugh and dance, mostly together as women often do, but sometimes with men who found the courage to ask them up onto the crowded dance-floor. Catherine was never short of offers and lately she'd taken to telling her husband about these men.

James hated it when she did this. A dark hollowness opened up inside him, and a searing jealousy tore at his heart, yet it aroused him in ways he'd never known to hear her talk of their advances, and the pleasure she took in their desire for her.

Catherine was a clever and perceptive woman. She'd seen how much her tales of going with other men confounded and aroused James. It was all just another of her acts, of course, another way of wounding his pride in the way she now knew he craved. She hadn't the slightest intention of having sex with these men, and had never done anything with them except dance, and tell them politely that she was married, and would be going home with her friends at the end of the evening, but it pleased her to pretend she was free to take a lover whenever she pleased.

After all, wasn't it her right and prerogative as the Mistress in their marriage?

Was a true Mistress not free to do as she pleased?

And she liked to torment James. She found a strange, dreamy pleasure in taunting him and stripping away his dignity and pride. She didn't know why, but it was the truth and she was too honest to deny it.

One Friday night, when she'd come home later than usual, she'd taunted James when they were making love, whispering in his ear that she'd been with a man after the club, a real man who knew what a woman wanted. James had cried out in loss and pain, yet his cry only inflamed their ardour so that she tugged his hair and bit his lip as she kissed him.

'Stronger than you,' she'd whispered as his thrusts grew frenzied, 'so much stronger and better … Oh, God, so much better …'

James had come inside her as she whispered her sweet lies, and Catherine had come too, thrilled by her imagined betrayal and her freedom to confess it. Afterwards, they'd fallen asleep, drugged by sex, and Catherine never made mention of such dark matters until Friday nights came round again.

This was the part of the game she didn't understand. She was a good and faithful wife who loved and respected her husband, and yet the thought of betraying him brought her intense pleasure. Often, in the depths of the night, she'd lie awake, touching herself at the thought of being with a stranger.

He was always a tall, shadowy figure in a dark suit who had no interest in her as a person, no desire to talk to her or listen to the little stories from her life. Hardly original, she knew, but fantasies seldom were. He was her dream lover, Catherine assumed, the midnight caller she shared with millions of other women.

Of course, she would put up a fight, a show of surprise and outrage, but it never did any good. He was too strong for her. Too hungry. She was helpless in his arms. He did what he liked with her, and it felt glorious to be overwhelmed in the way she craved.

These were the fancies she entertained in the middle of the night, all the more powerful because of the guilt that accompanied them. Catherine didn't approve of such submissive desires –- she was an independent, strong-willed woman — but her disapproval couldn't keep them out of her head. On the contrary, it only gave them greater welcome.

And he never fucked her in a bed.

He'd take her against a wall, or over a table or the bonnet of a car, sometimes in a parking lot at night while others watched from their cars, bright headlights exposing her abandon for all to see. He'd barely make a sound while she cried out in ecstacy. This wasn't lovemaking. Nothing like it. He'd pull up her little dress and take her from behind, a powerful animal using her for his pleasure, caring nothing for hers.

As James slept beside her, and her pleasure mounted, Catherine imagined James witnessing her wanton lust.

She'd imagine him inside the car they were fucking on, watching them through the windscreen, his eyes wide with hurt.

The hurt he craved. The hurt she longed to inflict.

'This is what I want,' she'd throw at him in her fantasy as she came with frightening power, fearful she'd wake her husband asleep by her side. 'See how good it is, see how good! Oh God, this is what I want!'

It was a wild, intoxicating pleasure, but she knew she could never do such a thing, at least never in the real world.

Such dark and dangerous passions were best kept as fantasy.

JAMES OPENED his wife's wardrobe and searched through the dangling dresses and skirts until he found her pleated skirt. It was dark blue, almost black in certain lights. He knew it came to just above knee length on Catherine, making the most of her naturally good legs. Surprisingly heavy as

he took it from the wardrobe, it swayed dreamily on its hanger and he couldn't help but imagine the way it would drape and sway around her lovely knees.

The men at the club wouldn't be able to take their eyes off her.

To his dismay, he felt his cock stir and harden at the thought.

He couldn't believe he was really doing this, running around after Catherine like her little maid. He felt a part of his being separate from himself and look down in amazement at the strange new creature he had become.

In their twenty years of marriage a part of him had always longed to be Catherine's slave, to bow to her will and accept her rule, but he'd never, until they'd watched that film together, had the courage to tell her. He'd been brought up to succeed in life and work, to be a strong husband and good provider. As a younger man, he'd been a talented rugby player, an admired warrior in a hard man's game.

He liked to win.

A real man would never submit to a woman, he knew that in his blood. It wasn't in the natural order of things. But now that his secret was out it carried all the force of a long-buried hunger. He lacked the strength to stand against it, and he found a dizzying pleasure in submitting to his wife.

'Don't forget my boots.'

James jumped in surprise as Catherine came into the room. He was standing by the bed holding her little cashmere cardigan. He placed it beside her skirt and slip and went to the shoe-rack to fetch her black knee-length boots.

Catherine switched on the hair-dryer and began drying her hair. James turned to see her standing naked by the dressing-table. She gazed at him with a knowing look in her eyes, her familiar mocking smile playing around the corners of her mouth. Unable to hold her gaze, he looked down at his feet like

a schoolboy.

Suddenly Catherine switched off the hair-dryer.

‘You’ve forgotten something,’ she told him.

He glanced at the clothes on the bed to see what he’d forgotten.

‘Not my clothes,’ she said. ‘Yours.’

He looked at her in confusion.

‘Last week you weren’t wearing any clothes when you helped me dress. I liked that, and I said I wanted you naked whenever you dress me. Don’t you remember?’

He nodded meekly, saying, ‘Yes, Catherine.’

He did remember, but he’d felt so weak and helpless without his clothes while Catherine’s power seemed to grow in front of his eyes as she’d put on her pretty underwear and elegant dress.

He didn’t want to feel that weak again.

Or so he told himself.

‘Well, what are you waiting for?’ she asked him. ‘Get a move on.’

She switched the dryer on and went back to drying her hair, watching with amusement as he did as he was told.

James put down her boots by the bed and slowly undressed, placing his clothes on the wicker chair by the wardrobe. Once he was naked Catherine clicked off the dryer, and commanded him in a clear voice.

‘Come here,’ she told him.

He hesitated, looking at her with something like fear in his eyes.

She liked seeing that look come into his eyes.

‘This minute,’ she said briskly.

He quickly obeyed and, smiling at his eagerness, Catherine took his cock in her hand.

‘I thought you’d be harder,’ she said, putting disappointment in her voice.

‘A slave should always be hard for his mistress.’

She pulled him closer and began to move her hand up and down his growing erection, the little bracelets she always wore making a jingling sound in time to her movements.

The feminine, tinkling sound taunted and enslaved him, making him moan as he grew hard, filling her hand in the way that always thrilled her.

‘That’s better,’ she said approvingly, ‘much better. You like that, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ he managed to say under his breath.

‘Well, then, what do you say?’

‘Thank-you, Catherine.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ she said, handling him with such casual indifference he feared he would come in her hand.

‘Mistress,’ he gasped, thrilled by her correction. ‘Thank-you, Mistress.’

‘That’s right, I’m your Mistress, and don’t forget it.’

Catherine had to stop herself from laughing out loud.

She knew it was ridiculous to make him call her Mistress, but she hadn’t been able to think of a better name, and insisting he call her by that name made him feel weak and foolish which increased her control over him.

Besides, it was enjoyable to be called Mistress by her proud and handsome husband, a man accustomed to being very much in charge of his day-to-day life. Ridiculous as it may be, hearing him call her Mistress aroused her and made her believe the power she held over him was real and far from imaginary. The authority bestowed by the silly title gave her permission to be as arrogant and selfish as she liked.

And so ‘Mistress’ it was.

Mistress Catherine Dempsey.

‘But there’s one other thing you’ve forgotten, isn’t there, James?’ said

Catherine, venturing deeper into the forest.

There was, but James had hoped she wouldn't remember.

'Well, isn't there?'

'Yes, Mistress,' he quickly answered, stung by her sharp tone.

'You weren't completely naked last week, were you?' Catherine reminded him.

'No, Mistress, ' he answered.

She felt him pulse and grow harder in her hand. It truly was a wonder to her how much cruelty and shame could arouse him.

'Or the week before that?'

'N-no, Mistress,' he stammered.

'What were you wearing? Tell me.'

He opened his mouth to speak but the words stuck in his throat.

'Come on, James,' she insisted, stroking him faster with deft little flicks of her wrist, 'it's a simple enough question. What were you wearing?'

The jingle-jangle of her bracelets echoed in his head.

'Your panties,' he muttered in a voice so quiet she barely heard him.

'That's right, but what kind of panties?' she goaded him, 'I'm sure you remember.'

'Your w-orn panties,' he answered, dying of shame yet so aroused he began to thrust against her hand.

Catherine let go of him to punish his presumption, and show him exactly who was in charge.

She watched with amusement as his cock leapt and pulsed of its own accord, beseeching her hand to take it back.

'That's right, James, my worn panties,' said Catherine, tapping a finger against his eager cock and smiling as it swayed from side to side. 'My dirty panties, and you looked very pretty in them, didn't you? So pretty I told you

to always ask for them when you're helping me get ready to go out. Isn't that right?'

'Yes, Mistress.'

'Didn't you like wearing my panties?' she asked, giving his cock a little smack before going over to the bed. 'Come on, now, the truth.'

'Yes, Mistress.'

'So why didn't you ask for them?'

His head was spinning. He couldn't think of an answer.

'Am I really so unreasonable you can't ask for what you want?' Catherine asked, staring at him with her hands on her hips in the bossy way that delighted his trembling heart.

Anger shone in her eyes.

Or was it contempt?

His brain swam with arousal and he felt weak at the knees. He longed to bow before her, and suffer the lash of her scorn.

'I asked you a question, James, and I expect an answer. Am I unreasonable?'

'N-no, mistress … You're beautiful.'

'I didn't ask if I was beautiful. I asked if I was unreasonable.'

'No, Mistress … I was shy, that's all, frightened …'

'Frightened?' she said incredulously, stepping into her clean panties and pulling them up her lovely legs. 'Of what? A pair of panties?'

Once again, he couldn't speak. To his horror, he felt one of his legs begin to tremble.

Catherine sat neatly on the edge of the bed, gathering up a leg of her tights in her agile fingers. James watched, bewitched by her quick, feminine movements.

'For heaven's sake, James, you're shaking.'

‘I’m s-sorry, Mistress.’

‘So you should be. It’s pathetic. A grown man frightened of a pair of panties.’

Catherine was enjoying herself.

Knowing she had the power to make him tremble like this delighted her, and made her want to torment him all the more. What did he expect? It served him right for being so foolish, she told herself, for not being man enough to stand up to her.

‘Honestly, James, you’re such a coward.’

He watched as she slid the sheer nylon over her leg, and began to gather up the other leg of her hose.

‘I’m not a coward,’ he protested.

‘Then prove it,’ she said, standing to pull her tights over her pretty white panties which showed beguilingly through the silky gauze of the hose. ‘Ask me for what you want. Come on, let me hear you.’

The more power she had, the more she wanted.

Last week she’d instructed him to put on her worn panties.

This week she’d make him ask for them himself.

She’d always been a quick learner, and she knew this would deepen his shame and tighten her hold over him. But how far would this go, she wondered idly? Where would it end?

She gazed at him coldly as she picked up her bra from the bed, quickly slipping her arms through its straps and fitting the lace cups over her full breasts before reaching behind her back to fasten its clasp. James had seen her do this countless times before, yet he couldn’t help but wonder at the astonishing speed and grace of the manoeuvre.

‘Come on, James, I’m waiting. Prove to me you’re not a coward.’

‘Please, Mistress … Please may I wear your panties.’

‘What kind of panties?’

‘Your w-worn panties,’ he replied, in an agony of shame.

‘My dirty panties?’

‘Yes … Your dirty panties … Please may I wear your dirty panties?’

‘Well, that really is quite a request, James,’ said Catherine, delighting in the mischievous pretence that his request had come as a complete surprise to her. ‘I’ll have to give it some thought. It’s not exactly something a real man would want, is it? A proper manly man?’

‘N-no, Mistress,’ he answered, drowning in ignominy.

‘No, I can’t imagine it is, but I imagine for a man like you it would be quite an honour, wearing my dirty panties.’

‘Y-yes, Mistress.’

‘Then beg me.’

James couldn’t speak. He gazed at her with a lost look in his eyes.

‘You heard me. Beg me if you want them so much. Beg for my dirty panties.’

A knot twisted tighter in his stomach as James lowered his gaze and begged.

‘Please, Mistress, I beg you, please may I …’

‘Not like that,’ she interrupted. ‘On your knees. It’s not real begging unless you’re on your knees.’

James looked at his wife pleadingly, searching for some sign of mercy. She’d never taken things this far before and he wondered how much further she would go.

Amusement glinted in her eyes, but it was a hard amusement that offered no hope of a reprieve.

Fearing he might die of shame, James sank down slowly to his knees.

‘Please, Mistress, I beg you,’ he pleaded. ‘Please may I wear your dirty

panties?'

'Of course you may,' Catherine answered lightly as if she couldn't see what all the fuss was about. 'See how easy it is. All you had to do was ask. Go and get them. Hurry up. They're on the floor in the shower-room.'

James got to his feet and went into the shower-room, his heart hammering and his legs trembling. He saw Catherine's clothes and shoes scattered on the floor where she'd left them for him to pick up.

He looked under her blouse but found nothing, then lifted her grey tweed pencil skirt to find her balled-up panties and tights beneath. Before he could stop himself, he held the soft bundle to his nose. The scent electrified his senses, and his cock gave a leap, touching against his flat belly. From her hose he could smell the tangy scent of sweat and shoe leather and, from her panties, perfume and detergent as well as her heavenly woman's scent.

Fearful he might be caught in such a shameful act, he quickly untangled the pretty panties from her tights, and carried them obediently back to the bedroom.

Catherine had put on her slip and was seated in front of the dressing-table, peering into the mirror, putting on make-up with quick strokes of a mascara brush. He loved seeing her in the slip. Its sleek nylon and pretty lace hem, and its delicate straps over her slim shoulders, made her look irresistibly feminine and desirable, yet as imperious and unobtainable as a film star.

Her eyes found his in the mirror.

'Well, then, what are you waiting for? Hurry up and put them on,' she commanded.

Bending to obey, he stepped clumsily into her worn panties which were white and silky with a little lace trim around their edge. As he pulled them up his legs he noticed they were lightly stained at the crotch, but this only made them all the more precious to his slavish heart.

They were small on him, and his jutting cock stretched beyond the flimsy waistband.

This time Catherine couldn't stop herself from laughing.

'Oh, James, to let yourself be bossed around like this. Honestly, if you could see yourself. What a sight you are.'

He could think of nothing to say. Blushing at the knowledge of how foolish he must look, he looked down at his feet.

Catherine had never seen him so defeated. He looked utterly lost and helpless in her little panties. To her they were just a pair of dirty knickers she'd taken off without a moment's thought, but for him she knew they held an almost magical power.

The fondness she normally felt for her husband was replaced by a sudden and very real contempt, a scorn that made her lose respect for him.

To her surprise, it was an intensely pleasurable feeling.

'I like seeing you in panties,' she told him. 'It makes it clear you're not a real man any more. But if you're not a real man,' she said idly, concentrating on her make-up, 'I wonder what you really are. What would you call yourself, James?'

'I don't know, Mistress.'

'Oh, come on. You must have some idea. What would you call a man wearing his wife's panties? I'd like to hear.'

'I don't know,' he said again, an edge of annoyance coming into his voice.

Catherine heard his annoyance, and decided to punish him for it.

'Well, if you won't tell me, I'll have to tell you, won't I?'

He didn't answer.

She glanced at him in the mirror and saw how his mouth had tightened in anger.

‘It’s perfectly clear what you are, James,’ said Catherine. ‘You’re a sissy.’

She saw the hurt come into his eyes. It was what she wanted to see. He deserved to be hurt for his show of anger and annoyance.

‘Don’t you think that’s what you are? A sissy?’

‘No,’ he insisted, hating the petulance in his voice.

‘No? Then tell me, James, if some of our friends were to see you standing here like this, wearing my panties and helping me get dressed to go out, what would they think you were?’

‘I’m not … I don’t …’

‘They’d think you were a sissy,’ she declared as if it was obvious, ‘of course they would. What else could they think? A man who wears his wife’s panties is a sissy, no more no less. Neither a man nor a woman but something in between. Sissy is the only word for it. Don’t you agree?’

‘Please, Catherine …’

‘I asked if you agreed,’ she said sternly.

‘Yes,’ said James, sinking deeper under her spell with a delightful drowning feeling, ‘I agree.’

‘Then let me hear you say it – I’m not a man any more, I’m a sissy who wears my wife’s panties.’

She looked at his reflection in her dressing-table mirror and saw him wince. Feeling the tell-tale dampness between her legs, she pressed the tops of her thighs together to catch the sweet wave of excitement.

‘Come on, James, I’m waiting.’

‘Please …’

‘I won’t tell you again.’

‘I’m not a man any more …’ he said, his voice trailing away into silence.

‘The rest of it,’ she insisted. ‘Hurry up.’

‘I’m a sissy who wears my wife’s panties,’ James said, feeling a shame so sickening he felt sure he must be dreaming. This wasn’t him. He couldn’t be saying such things. His dear, lovely wife couldn’t be making him say them. She’d never be so cruel.

‘Very good,’ said Catherine, ‘I’m glad that’s settled. Besides, my panties quite suit you,’ she added, turning to look at him, the scorn in her eyes making it quite clear what she really thought.

They didn’t suit him at all, at least not in the way he liked clothes to suit him. With his slim, boyish figure, they made him look weak and effeminate, and terribly ill-at-ease, but that was how she wanted him to look.

It was a simple equation, Catherine reflected.

The more foolish he looked the more powerful she felt.

‘They make you look very sweet and biddable, James,’ said Catherine, going back to her make-up, ‘just the way a slave ought to look. That’s what you are now. My sissy and my slave. Little sissy Jamie, that’s what I’ll call you? Would you like that?’

‘No,’ he said, real pain in his voice.

‘Why not? I think it suits you.’

‘Please don’t call me that,’ he beseeched her.

Catherine had heard the pain in his voice and she remembered him telling her how, when he was eight or nine years old, a gang of older boys at primary school had picked on him every day for a whole term. They’d called him ‘Little Jamie’ and since then he’d always hated the name. All the more reason to use it, Catherine reflected, surprised at how cruelly her mind worked. In her day-to-day life she utterly despised any form of cruelty, and did all she could to stamp out bullying at school but, as a Mistress, she took increasing delight in tormenting her slave.

‘I’m being very cruel, I know, but someone seems to like it,’ she goaded

him, touching the tip of his erection with her mascara brush. ‘Someone seems to like it very much.’

He tried to speak but could only make a foolish, coughing sound.

‘It’s all right, James,’ she said soothingly, ‘all you have to do is tell the truth. You’re my slave, aren’t you?’

‘Y-yes.’

‘And you’re my sissy?’

He hesitated for a moment, and when he spoke it felt as if someone else was speaking.

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Sissy Jamie?’

‘Yes,’ he said, hating the name, the way it sent a dark arousal rushing through his veins.

‘You can’t fight this, can you, Jamie?’

‘No.’

‘You’ll agree to anything I say like a good little sissy?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Then let me hear you say it. Let me hear you say your name.’

‘S-sissy Jamie,’ he said, feeling the room spin around him.

‘There, now, that’s better, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he replied, a tremor in his voice. He thought he was going to cry like he had all those years ago when his tormentors had thrown his school-bag from the bridge. And yet he wanted to thank his Mistress for her cruelty.

He wanted to kneel at her feet and tell her he would love and adore her until the end of time.

‘It’s important to tell the truth, isn’t it, Jamie?’ she asked him in her warm, hypnotic voice.

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘To know how things really are?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘You’d better get used to it.’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘No more pretending to be a man. You’re my little sissy, and you’ll be wearing my panties more and more from now on. My dirty panties. I’m going to insist on it.’

‘Thank-you, Mistress,’ he said before he could stop himself.

‘You’re welcome,’ said Catherine with a derisive laugh.

‘I love you, Catherine,’ James said helplessly with tears of love in his eyes.

Catherine saw his tears and felt another thrill of arousal. Once again she pressed the tops of her thighs together, savouring the secret pleasure it gave her, and wondering what kind of woman she’d become.

‘I know you love me,’ she said, ‘and I’m very glad that you do. That’s why I can do what I like with you.’

James feared he might faint of the love he felt for her.

‘You’re lovely. Mistress … Beautiful … I couldn’t live without you …’

‘Sweet James,’ she said gently. ‘Come and kneel beside me. Come on, now, don’t be shy. I know it’s what you want.’

He went to her and sank gratefully to his knees, leaning his head against the divine place where the lace hem of her slip stretched around her thighs.

He felt the sheer nylon against his cheek, the warmth of her flesh beneath.

‘You’ve longed for this,’ she said softly, placing her hand on his head and gently ruffling his hair, ‘dreamed about it — to kneel at my feet as my slave.’

He made a soft groaning sound as if he was in pain, and pressed his cheek harder against her thigh.

‘And now it’s come true,’ she whispered. ‘What a lucky man you are.’

In a frenzy he started to tell her how beautiful she was, and how much he loved and adored her.

‘Sssh,’ she said, ‘don’t speak.’

Immediately he fell silent.

‘You don’t have to speak, you don’t have to do anything at all except kneel at my feet and listen while I tell you your duties for the night.’

Her matter-of-fact tone, her absolute certainty that he would do as he was told, sent a heavenly lassitude through his senses and a comforting peace settled in his soul, making him feel as he had as a child when his mother told him stories at bed-time.

‘Pick up my clothes from the shower-room,’ she instructed him. ‘Take them downstairs with the rest of the laundry and put on a wash. Make sure you separate the whites and delicates from the colours. You should be getting the hang of that by now so I won’t expect any mistakes. Then tidy the kitchen, put on the dishwasher, and mop the floor like a good little maid.’

Not trusting himself to speak, he gave an obedient nod.

‘Are you listening?’ she asked, just to hear him answer.

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he replied meekly.

She felt his cheek nuzzle her knee through her slip. Smiling at this sign of devotion, she put down her make-up brush, and selected a lipstick, twisting it open.

Catherine wore very little make-up, just enough to bring colour and definition to her proud features.

‘When you’ve finished in the kitchen,’ she said, speaking while she applied her lipstick, ‘I want you to do something else for me. I’ve decided to apply for the Head Teacher’s post at Ashton High School.’

James was bewildered by this sudden intrusion of the real world. He

recalled her mentioning the post a few days ago but, with less than a year's experience as a Depute Principal in her current school, she'd felt she wasn't ready to take the next step up. Ashton High was a new build, only four years old, and the flagship school in the area. And she was a woman. There wasn't a single female Head Teacher in any of the other seventeen high schools in the region.

'I've completed a draft of the application form. I've left it open on the computer in my study.'

James heard how she'd referred to his study as 'my' study.

It stung his pride in just the way she intended.

'You know I've never been any good with forms,' Catherine said. 'As far as I can see they just ask for the same information over and over again. Boast in box 1, boast in box 2, boast some more in box 3, and now write a personal statement telling us how great you are and why we should choose you over all other members of the human race. I can't bear it. I get bored with myself, the whole thing. I need you to work your magic. I'm sure I only got my interview last year because of your help.'

Although it was Catherine who had a degree in English Literature, and James in Mathematics and Computing Technology, his use of English was wonderfully clear and precise. Running his own business had taught him a great deal about hiring and firing, about what impressed an employer, and made a candidate stand out from the pack. Catherine knew his help could make all the difference.

'The Inspectorate's Report is on the desk by the printer,' she continued. 'Don't read the whole thing, you'd lose the will to live, just have a look at the conclusions, and see if you can weave some kind of response to them into my application. You know the kind of thing — how I'll shake things up, but without frightening the horses.'

James had gone very still. Catherine looked down at him and laughed.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked, rolling her lips together to put the finishing touch to her lipstick. ‘Have I confused my little slave by talking about work when he wants to play?’

Turning to face him, she said, ‘I know what you like.’ She opened her legs a little so that the hem of her slip rode up her thighs. ‘There you are. You can look up my underskirt if you want. That’s what you like best, isn’t it, kneeling at my feet, looking up my skirt?’

James told himself to look away.

It was too much to be mocked like this, and yet she was right. It was what he wanted. Unable to resist, he lifted his gaze and saw what he longed to see — her smooth nylon-clad thighs leading to the sweet valley where her panties showed through her hose. It was a tormentingly arousing sight which made him feel as helpless as a schoolboy.

‘Are you looking at my panties?’ Catherine asked in a tone of mock outrage.

‘Y-yes.’

‘But they’re not for sissies to look at, are they?’

‘No, Mistress.’

‘They’re for real men to see, not sissies.’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Then this is a special privilege for you, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Well, what do you say?’

‘Thank-you, Mistress,’ he answered, his senses reeling.

‘Poor Jamie,’ she said, laughing as she got to her feet. ‘I think all slaves love to look up their mistress’ skirts. What do you think, Jamie? Do you think that’s true?’

He gazed up at her, silenced by her imperious beauty.

‘You do, don’t you?’ she said, looking down at him. ‘You love kneeling at my feet and looking up my skirt?’

‘Y-yes, Mistress,’ he stammered.

‘Good boy, I like it when you’re honest. It helps me understand you better, get to know how this really works. After all, knowledge is power,’ she said, smiling down at him as she slid the hem of her slip up to the tops of her thighs.

‘As a special reward, after you’ve worked on my application, you can go online and buy me some new underwear. A pretty bra with matching panties would be nice. I prefer white or black, perhaps blue if you feel like a change. Nothing too fancy but not plain either.’

James had bought underwear for Catherine before and he knew she liked elegant, well-made lingerie, sensual rather than overtly sexy, by such brands as Chantelle, Lejaby and Gossard. Even the names cast a spell over his senses.

‘You know my sizes,’ Catherine continued, ‘and buy me some new tights or stay-ups for my nights out.’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘You like buying underwear for me, don’t you?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Making me pretty for my dates.’

‘Y-yes, Mistress.’

‘Come on then, a quick kiss, since you’re being such a good boy,’ she said, touching the little panel of darker nylon where her hose stretched over her panties. ‘Would you like to kiss me here?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘How much would you like it?’

‘M-more … More than anything,’ he stammered.

‘Even though I’m going out?’ she asked, her fingers playing over her sweetest place.

‘Yes.’

‘Going out and leaving you all alone?’

‘Yes.’

‘All alone with work to do for me?’

‘Yes.’

‘While I’m out drinking and dancing?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you’re wearing my dirty panties?’

‘Yes.’

‘And I’ll be looking for other men?’

He hesitated, a cloud of anxiety crossing his face.

Catherine savoured a delicious moment of anticipation.

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said finally, his voice heavy with a new devotion.

Thrilled by his surrender, her fingers fluttering against her panties, Catherine experienced a spasm of the sweetest delight. After a quivering breath, she asked him, ‘Better men than you, stronger men, real men?’

‘Yes.’

‘I wonder if you knew I’d be so cruel,’ said Catherine, ‘but this is what you want, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said, looking up at her taunting smile

‘Then you may kiss me here,’ she said, touching herself to show him exactly where. ‘But just one kiss, and gently, so gently.’

James knelt up and kissed her adoringly, the smooth nylon covering her panties warm and silky against his lips.

The air in the room seemed to move.

He felt himself surrender to her, body and soul.

And then she was gone, striding over to the bed where she took up her little cashmere cardigan and put it on, tugging it into place, and nimbly doing up its row of tiny buttons.

‘Hand me my skirt,’ she told him briskly.

He got dazedly to his feet, and picked up her skirt from the bed. He wasn’t sure how she meant him to help her with it.

‘Kneel and hold it open for me.’

He did as he was told, and she stepped into the skirt. As he pulled it up her lovely legs it made a delightful rasping sound against her tights and slip. She took hold of her skirt impatiently, quickly fastening the zip at her waist.

‘My boots,’ she said, looking him in the eyes as if daring him to disobey.

He knelt once more and held her boots for her as she pushed her feet into the soft black leather. Each foot gave a soft whisper as it slipped into place. With a heavy ache of desire, he pulled up the zips on the insides of her calves.

Suddenly, on impulse, she kicked him between his legs, not hard enough to really hurt him, but hard enough to make him fear another kick. He gave a loud gasp of shock and pain.

Catherine had never struck him before, but recently she’d found herself daydreaming about how it might feel to cane or whip him, to wield her authority over him until he cried for mercy.

A mercy that might never come.

If only she had a cane or a whip.

‘Well, what do you expect?’ she said as he cowered before her. ‘A Mistress can punish her slave if she wants to, can’t she?’

He gave no answer and gazed up at her with a hurt, accusing look which irritated her.

‘I asked you a question, and I haven’t heard an answer.’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said fearfully, his hands protecting his nakedness from another blow.

‘Yes, Mistress, what?’ she demanded to know.

‘Yes, Mistress, you can punish me if you want to,’ he quickly answered.

‘Then move your hands away,’ she instructed him, ‘this instant.’

He hesitated but she glared at him until he obeyed, and then she kicked him, and kicked him again.

Catherine loved the feeling of power it gave her, not just to kick him so cruelly but also to be dressed while he was naked and, to her surprise, she didn’t feel she was being in any way harsh or cruel. On the contrary, she felt as if she was bestowing a gift or blessing upon him. Treating him so harshly felt perfectly natural. She felt he deserved to be punished for his weakness, for surrendering so abjectly to her feminine power, and she noted with interest how he didn’t retreat from her blows, and how his cock stayed partly erect.

‘You can expect to be punished from now on,’ she told him in the matter-of-fact voice she liked to use on him, ‘whenever the mood takes me. I’m not sure how I’ll punish you, but it will be painful, you can be sure of that. Perhaps I’ll buy a strap or a cane. There’s no point in a punishment unless it hurts, is there?’

‘No, Mistress,’ he replied, wondering again if he was dreaming.

‘Good, then, I’ll look forward to it. Now, bring me my pearls.’

James got to his feet and hurried to fetch the pearls he’d bought Catherine for a twentieth anniversary gift. He opened the little leather box and offered it to her. She smiled at him as she took the string of pearls and fastened them around her lovely neck. Elegant and stylish against her black cashmere top, they gave her a haughty, aristocratic air which made her seem all the more

powerful. James found her so beautiful it made his heart ache to look at her.

Catherine strode over to the mirror, pleasantly aware of James watching her pleated skirt swaying around her knees. She turned from front to side, frowning at her reflection as if she might pick a fight with herself.

‘Well, how do I look?’ she asked.

‘You’re beautiful, Mistress,’ he said, beginning to dread the moment when she would go out and leave him.

‘I want to look my best,’ she said, ‘I’m on the look-out, after all, and a Mistress can fuck whoever she likes.’

She looked at him, a darker cruelty in her eyes. She didn’t normally use such language, and her crude words stung him harder than any blow.

‘You do know that, don’t you?’ she said, driving home her advantage.

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said, utterly enthralled.

She gave another laugh, a flash of contempt in her eye. She knew she wouldn’t find a lover but, God, she wanted to.

James felt his aching heart miss a beat. It was ridiculous, a desire beyond understanding or explanation, but he craved her contempt. He craved it more than love or respect. At times like this he craved it more than life itself.

‘Just so long as you know how things stand,’ Catherine said, putting on perfume before spraying some on James. ‘There,’ she said, ‘you’ll be able to smell me on you when I’m out. Don’t say I’m not kind to you. Now, come downstairs and help me on with my coat.’

James reached for his jeans and shirt.

‘No. Stay like this until I’ve gone,’ she commanded. ‘You can get dressed once I’ve left, but keep your panties on under your jeans. I like to think of you wearing my pretty panties while I’m out enjoying myself.’

She held the door open for him.

‘After you.’

As he dreaded she would, she patted him on his pantied bottom as he passed through the door.

Even though he knew there was no-one else in the house, he felt horribly exposed walking in front of her down the stairs into the hallway. For a terrible moment he imagined the large hall full of friends and family gazing up at him in surprise and amusement as he descended in shame, the helpless slave of his sternly glamorous wife and Mistress.

Catherine, on the other hand, felt a heady and deeply pleasurable sense of power. With his trim, athletic physique James was nice to look at, and she was pleased to have such a good-looking slave. The panties really did suit him after all, she decided.

‘My black overcoat,’ she said in a bored voice when they reached the hall. ‘Hop to it.’

He went into the cloakroom by the front-door and found her long black overcoat. He brought it to her and held it open behind her. Catherine smiled graciously as she put her arms into the sleeves of her coat.

‘Thank-you, Jamie,’ she said, flicking her thick, dark hair over the collar of her coat before doing up the buttons. ‘You’re really getting quite good at this. With a little more training, I might decide to keep you on in a full-time capacity.’

‘Thank-you, Mistress,’ he said, winning another smile from his beautiful tormentress.

‘I mean it,’ she continued, ‘I like things this way. I like it so much I might want to come to a more permanent arrangement, and I see you like it too,’ she said, taking hold of his cock.

‘Oh dear,’ she said conspiringly. ‘What would all our friends say if they saw you like this? So pretty in your panties while I go out drinking and dancing with other men. But you’ve only got yourself to blame, haven’t you?

After all, what kind of man lets his wife dress him in her dirty panties. Not a real man, surely?'

'N-no,' he mumbled helplessly.

'No,' she repeated in a long-suffering tone, rubbing her thumb slowly around the tip of his erection, 'we've already agreed that, haven't we? But, who knows? Perhaps tonight I'll get lucky, perhaps I'll meet a man who'll take off my panties without wanting to wear them.'

James' face burned bright red as Catherine smiled and squeezed his cock through the silky material of his panties.

'I hope I do, James, and you hope so too, don't you?'

'God, Catherine,' he said, lashed by jealousy, yet longing to fall at her feet and kiss her shining boots.

'You do love me, don't you?'

'You know I do.'

'Always?'

'Always and always.'

'And you want me to be happy?'

'Yes.'

'You want me to have what I want?'

'Yes, oh God, yes.'

'You want me to find another man, a man who can give me what I want?'

'Yes.'

'Then, tell me,' Catherine commanded. 'I want to hear you say it. Tell me what you want.'

She'd teased him about other men before, but never spoken so brazenly about finding a lover, and she was curious to see how he'd respond. For a few moments she thought she'd gone too far, but then he sank to his knees and pushed his head through the opening of her coat, as if to hide his shame in the

perfumed darkness.

His voice when it came was quiet and softly trembling.

‘I want you to find another man … A man who’ll give you what you want.’

A shiver passed through his body as he spoke the shameful words, and Catherine shivered in response, feeling a wildness between her legs.

She looked down at the man hiding beneath her coat, her devoted husband and the father of her children, but she felt no pity for him, only a kind of lazy contempt which fed her blood with a desire as rich and strong as a nutrient.

She knew in that moment this could be much more than a game.

This was power, real power, a life-force strong enough to change their lives forever.

‘Say please,’ she commanded.

‘P-please,’ he said, shamed and aroused beyond endurance.

‘Please, Mistress, find another man.’

‘Please, Mistress, find another man,’ he repeated, fearful his heart might stop.

‘A better man.’

‘A better man.’

‘A real man.’

‘A real man,’ he repeated, feeling the last of his pride vanish like mist.

‘Very well, James, I’ll see what I can do,’ she declared.

She felt him cringe against her leg.

‘This is how it should be,’ Catherine told herself, luxuriating in her power over her slave. ‘This is how a mistress should conduct her affairs.’

Her gaze fell on a photograph on the wall of her daughter Kate on a pony. Kate was only nine or ten years old in the photograph, still mad about horses.

Catherine remembered fondly how she would drive to the stables every Saturday morning, and sit reading the newspaper in her car until Kate's lesson was over. Then she'd hire a horse of her own and go trekking with her daughter across the fields.

But the photograph prompted another less wholesome memory. She remembered having a brown leather riding-crop her aunt had passed down to her. She hadn't seen it in years but she felt sure she hadn't given it away, it was too much of an heirloom.

She remembered its strong leather smell, and the way it had felt in the hand. She decided she'd like to hold it in her hand once more.

'I've got another job for you while I'm out,' she told her kneeling husband. 'I used to have a riding-crop when I went trekking with Kate, do you remember? An old brown leather crop Aunt Eva gave me? I'm sure it's in the house somewhere. Have a look for it when I'm out. Try the garage first. If it's not there, have a look in the cellar.'

'Yes, Mistress.'

'If you find it, I won't have to buy a cane or a strap, will I?'

'No, Mistress.'

His servile compliance irritated her, as did the needy way he pressed his cheek against her knee. An image of making him bend over a chair or table came into her mind. She saw herself undoing his belt and pulling down his jeans and underpants, running the tongue of her crop slowly up his thighs and across his bare buttocks. She felt her arm lifting the crop high into the air. Once again she felt a delicious wildness between her legs.

Catherine very much hoped he'd find her crop. She hadn't the slightest doubt she'd put it to good use if he did. It would be the next step towards taking charge of her life and marriage, and she wondered if, once she'd beaten him, she'd ever be able to think of him as her husband again.

A car could be heard driving up the short driveway to their house.

‘That’s Amy, it’s her turn to drive,’ said Catherine.

James got quickly to his feet, seized by a sudden terror. Amy was a close friend of Catherine’s.

She never rang the doorbell.

She always walked in unannounced.

‘She’ll see me,’ he said, gripped by panic.

‘Ssssh,’ Catherine whispered. ‘Maybe it’s time people saw … Time people knew about little sissy Jamie.’

He heard a car door opening and closing, and footsteps on the gravel.

He tried to turn away, but Catherine gripped his arm and kissed him, drugging him with the taste of her lipstick, and the mockery sparkling in her eyes.

‘It’s all right, darling. I want her to see. I want her to know.’

‘Catherine, for God’s sake!’

‘I want her to see how you look in your panties.’

He could hear footsteps on the front steps.

‘No!’

As the front door opened, she pushed him into the cloakroom with only its open door between him and Amy.

Catherine smiled at him before turning to greet Amy. Exchanging pleasantries, and taking her handbag from the hall table, she left immediately with her friend, pulling the heavy front door closed behind them.

Overcome with fear and relief, James fell back into the cloakroom, the jackets and raincoats cold against his bare skin. His whole body was trembling. He’d been a split second away from being seen, from being exposed as his wife’s helpless slave.

‘I love you, Catherine,’ he said under his ragged breath. ‘I love you.’

NO SOONER was she in the car, listening to Amy's tales of her new grandson, than Catherine regretted her stunt in the hallway. Amy was a good friend and an old-fashioned wife and mother who would have been deeply embarrassed to discover James in such a state. Catherine gave herself a stern warning. She shouldn't have risked exposing her unusual sex-life to someone else, an innocent and valued friend. It had been careless and selfish of her, but she'd learned a valuable lesson. She understood that wielding such power over her husband was a potent and dangerous brew. It had gone to her head, and impaired her judgement. She had no intention of giving up her newfound authority over James, it brought her too much pleasure, but from now on she would be sure to keep her games safely private. She owed it to her friends and family.

James felt calmer once he'd put on his clothes. And then, as Catherine had instructed, he gathered up her discarded clothes and took them with the rest of the dirty washing down to the laundry-room where he sorted them into piles of whites and mixed colours, and started a wash.

Sorting through Catherine's clothes deepened his feelings of submission, as did the intoxicating scent of the perfume she'd sprayed on him. He was no longer erect but, trapped in the little panties he still wore beneath his jeans, his cock felt deeply aroused, weighed down by a heavy ache of yearning.

In the three months since he'd sold his business he'd taken over most of the cooking and cleaning. It seemed only fair with Catherine so busy at work. He even made a fresh salad for her every day so she had something to look forward to at lunch-times. He was a fastidious man who took the same pride in housework as he'd taken in running his business, and he felt genuine pleasure at how the kitchen looked once he'd loaded the dishwasher, wiped clean the cooker and work-tops, and mopped the floor.

He hoped Catherine would praise him for his work. But then he thought he might prefer it if she found fault with his labours, and scolded him for not meeting her standards. The thought aroused him and he immediately remembered her instruction to look for her riding-crop.

He knew it wouldn't be in the garage. He'd tidied it recently to make space for a delivery of logs and he'd have found the crop in the clear-out. So he went straight down to the cellar which was cluttered with old furniture, boxes of books and blankets, and old clothes and sports equipment. He searched for more than half an hour without any success, and then he found it in a little side-room in an old suitcase, lying on top of a pair of Catherine's jodhpurs.

With mingled feelings of dread and excitement he took it from the suitcase and flicked it through the air to hear its deadly whiplash sound. His cock hardened at the sound, and he wondered if Catherine would really use it on him.

He thought of her lovely arms. They were slim, but strong and shapely like her legs, and when Catherine did something she liked to do it well. He knew she could really hurt him if she put her mind to it. The knowledge, alarming as it was, frightened him less than his growing understanding that he wanted her to hurt him.

He remembered her saying that she planned to punish him, and he recalled the way she'd looked standing with her hands on her hips, with a look of contempt flashing in her eyes. He remembered too how she'd kicked him between his legs, and how he'd done nothing to stop her.

He'd just taken it from her without a word of complaint. God, he'd even moved his hands away when she'd told him to.

Only a few weeks ago the thought of surrendering to her in such a way would have been inconceivable, but she could do what she liked with him

now, it was clear, even punish him if she wanted, kick him like a dog.

He felt a tingle of fear run down his spine, and he told himself to put a stop to their games before they went any further, yet the tingling in his spine only brought to mind a vivid and disturbing dream he'd had a few nights before.

He and Catherine were walking in the country, crossing a stretch of open moorland at the end of a long hike. Stumbling, James had slipped from the narrow track and stepped into boggy ground. In seconds the clinging mud was up to his knees, and he couldn't pull himself free.

'Catherine,' he called out, feeling a little foolish to be so quickly in trouble, 'I need some help.'

'Trust you,' Catherine said companionably, turning back to help him but, instead of pulling him out, she sat by the edge of the path where she opened her flask and took a drink of water.

'Help me, Catherine,' he said, reaching an arm out to her. 'Take my hand.'

'Oh, there's plenty of time,' Catherine said, a smile in her eyes, her lovely hair moving in the warm breeze.

But he'd already sunk up to his thighs.

She was wearing a loose cotton walking-skirt and, when she adjusted it at her knees with a little shake of her hand, he caught a glimpse of her thighs and white panties.

'Catherine,' he said, his voice more urgent, 'please help me.'

'Honestly, James,' she said, her voice lazy and untroubled, 'why do you always have to be such a worrier?'

The mud clutched at him, and pulled him down. He could smell sheep droppings and hear the bleating of lambs in the distance. The sun was going down behind Catherine. He couldn't make out the expression on her face, but

she seemed to be smiling.

Once more she adjusted her skirt and once more he glimpsed her thighs and panties. Despite his growing fear, he felt a powerful jolt of arousal.

‘Please, Catherine,’ he said, the swamp rising above his waist, ‘You have to help me.’

‘I’ve told you, James,’ she said calmly, ‘there’s plenty of time.’

She put her head back to enjoy the evening sun, humming a pop song they’d heard on the car radio earlier that day, and he suddenly knew, with a terrifying stab of fear and arousal, that she wasn’t going to help him.

‘Hurry, Catherine, please,’ he cried.

‘Listen to you,’ she said, ‘always making a fuss.’

‘There’s no time,’ he pleaded, trying to grip the sparse, wet grass by the side of the path. ‘You’ve got to help me.’

The grass came loose in his hands.

Catherine watched him struggle for a few moments before saying, ‘Yes, you’re quite right, James, there’s no time. Even if I tried I wouldn’t be able to get you out.’

‘Please, Catherine,’ he called out in terror. ‘Help me.’

‘It’s too late,’ she said, getting to her feet, brushing dirt from her walking-skirt and screwing down the lid of her flask, ‘but it’s been a lovely day, and such a beautiful walk, really it has. Thank-you for arranging it.’

‘Help me,’ he cried, but she didn’t seem to hear him.

‘I can’t wait to get back to the inn,’ she said, stretching sleepily before bending to pick up her little blue rucksack. ‘I’m looking forward to a hot meal and a nice, warm bath.’

‘Catherine, please!’ he cried out in anguish as the swamp slowly closed over his head, but she was smiling down at him, the amusement in her eyes sweet yet scornful.

The breeze lifted her cotton skirt, allowing him one last glimpse of her lovely legs and pretty white panties.

‘It will be so good to start again,’ he heard her say as he sank into darkness. ‘So good.’

He’d woken from his dream at that moment, terror clutching his heart and his cock fiercely erect.

There was no doubt about it, James decided, looking down at the riding-crop in his hand, their games had already gone too far. They had even begun to haunt his dreams. He put the riding-crop back in the suitcase, and slid the suitcase behind an old bedstead.

He wished he’d never found it, and hoped Catherine would forget all about it.

As he climbed the stairs from the cellar, James made up his mind to speak to Catherine in the morning once they’d resumed their normal life as man and wife. He really did need to put a stop to their games. In the coming week, he’d follow up some of his contacts, find a job, and forget all about these dark and dangerous desires. This Mistress-slave nonsense had gone far enough and it was time he put an end to it.

He shook his head to clear his brain as he went into his study, or ‘my’ study as Catherine had called it earlier. He wasn’t looking forward to working on her application. He knew it would be a lengthy and onerous task, and he thought about pouring himself a whisky. He was reaching for his bottle of Jamesons when his mobile rang.

It was a text from Catherine.

She must be a witch, he decided, laughing as he read her text — ‘Have a whisky *after* you’ve done my form. Then buy me pretty panties like the ones you’re wearing. Having a great time. May be late. Mistress C xxx.’

BUT TRUTHFULLY Catherine wasn’t having such a great time.

A jazz band was playing, and the solos taken by the guitarist and sax player were loud and interminable. She wasn’t a serious jazz fan, but she knew and loved Miles Davis’ wonderful ‘A Kind of Blue’ and she listened to Nina Simone and Frank Sinatra, as well as Louis Armstrong in a wonderful album of duets with Ella Fitzgerald. James often played Charlie Mingus last thing at night before bed, and the wit and surging drive in his music had grown on her, particularly on an extraordinary album called ‘Ah Um.’

When it came to jazz she believed she could at least tell the good from the bad, and this wasn’t good. She looked around the table at the three friends she’d come with. Amy, Marion and Fran were all watching and listening with serious looks on their faces, and so Catherine took her glass of wine and her handbag containing her cigarettes, and went outside to the car park for a smoke.

Light rain was falling but the club had put up a shelter for smokers. Catherine was trying to stop and she lit up with mixed feelings of pleasure and guilt. She thought idly about sending James another text. Perhaps she’d instruct him to be waiting for her on his knees in the hall when she returned. Or perhaps she’d ask him if he’d found her riding-crop.

She was smiling at the thought when the shadowy figure of a man came into the shelter. The dim light in the roof cast only a faint glow and she couldn’t make out his features, but she could see that he was tall and slim with broad shoulders. He was wearing a dark suit with a white shirt open at the neck. She watched him out of the corner of her eye as he took a packet of tobacco from his pocket and rolled a cigarette. When he turned to look at her she recognised him as the good-looking man she’d seen at the club a number of times before, always in the company of pretty young women with long hair and short skirts. She wondered if he had such a young woman waiting

for him inside.

She felt a flutter of excitement when he spoke.

‘Can I trouble you for a light?’

A deep, warm voice with a trace of Irish in it.

‘Yes, of course.’

Suddenly clumsy, she couldn’t manage her wine-glass and hand-bag.

He took her glass as she reached into her bag and found her lighter. She held it up and clicked it twice but it wouldn’t light. He took it from her, lit his roll-up, and gave her back her lighter and her glass of wine.

Their fingers touched in the way they always do in silly romantic books.

‘Thank-you,’ he said, smiling at her. Then he looked out at the rain and stood contentedly by her side, enjoying his smoke.

‘Smokers,’ said Catherine, filling the silence, ‘what are we like?’

‘Better than being in there with those tossers.’

‘Don’t you like jazz?’

‘That’s the trouble, I do.’

Catherine laughed and, indicating the overflowing ash-bucket, said, ‘Isn’t that a lovely sight? Makes me want to stop all the more. I’m down to a packet a week.’

‘It’s easy to stop,’ he said in a slow Irish rhythm that reminded Catherine of her late father, ‘I’ve done it hundreds of times.’

‘Ah well,’ she said through laughter, ‘that must be down to the sheer force of your will.’

‘It surely must,’ he said.

He was smiling at her again, and she smiled back.

He had a broad, manly face with laughter lines at the sides of his eyes and mouth. His dark hair, even though it was cut short, was thick and unruly. He had an air of kindness and strength about him.

Catherine thought him a remarkably good-looking man.

‘I know you,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘You’re Catherine Dempsey.’

Catherine looked at him in surprise.

‘How do you know that?’

‘Ah, now, I have my sources.’

‘No, really, how do you know?’

‘I was at school with you.’

‘You can’t have been.’

‘Why not?’

‘You’re far too young.’

He gave a quiet laugh. Catherine found it such a pleasant sound she immediately wanted to hear it again.

‘I was in third year when you left,’ he told her.

Catherine was amazed.

‘That means you must be thirty-seven or thirty-eight.’

‘I’ll be thirty-eight next week.’

‘You don’t look a day over fifty,’ she said, a smile in her voice.

‘I could say the same about you.’

‘Oh, now, flattery will get you everywhere.’

‘I hope so.’

Suddenly he looked angry with himself.

‘I’m sorry, he said, ‘that was a stupid thing to say.’

‘You’re forgiven.’

‘Thank-you,’ he said, sounding genuinely grateful. ‘I’m Tom. Tom Shannon.’

‘I don’t remember you, I’m sorry.’

‘That’s all right. You always remember the kids above you at school, not below. I went about in a gang, all boys. You were all we talked about, you

and football. You were like a goddess to us.'

'Don't be silly.'

'It's true,' he said. 'We had a nickname for you – La Belle Dame.'

'You're making it up.'

'I'm not,' he said in a serious tone. 'You always seemed like a woman to us, far beyond our reach. We used to keep a record of your sightings.'

'You did not,' she exclaimed.

'Oh, we did, I promise you,' he insisted. 'Catherine Dempsey walking with friends. Catherine Dempsey walking alone. Catherine Dempsey running the relay. Catherine Dempsey eating lunch. Worst of all, Catherine Dempsey with a boy.'

'That's ridiculous,' Catherine said, flattered nonetheless.

'Maybe, but it's true all the same. We'd wait at the bus stop in the morning to follow you up the hill to school. And then do the same at the end of the day. Except on Thursdays.'

'I had choir practice after school on Thursdays.'

'You did. It ruined our day.'

'You could have joined the choir.'

'Believe it or not, it crossed my mind.'

She smiled at him, but he was looking at her with such a piercing gaze she looked away.

'When did you come over from Ireland?' she asked him.

'Is it that obvious?'

'If you're Irish it is. I was born here, but my father came over as a young man with my mother who was a nurse from Donegal. So I'm Irish through and through.'

'I never knew my father. My mother came to England when I was nine.'

'Do you think of yourself as English or Irish?'

‘Irish, every time.’

‘I’m the same, even though I was born here. It’s a strange thing.’

‘It’s not so strange,’ he said quietly. ‘The most beautiful women are always Irish.’

‘Well, then,’ said Catherine, putting out her cigarette and blushing like a schoolgirl, ‘I’d better be going in.’

‘I’m sorry, I’ve embarrassed you.’

‘Not at all. I’ve enjoyed talking to you.’

‘Please, Catherine, before you go, can I ask you something?’

He’d spoken in a very grave voice.

‘That sounds ominous.’

‘I suppose it is in a way. I wanted to ask …’ He stopped and looked away. ‘It’s stupid,’ he said.

‘I’m a schoolteacher,’ she replied, ‘I’m used to stupid questions.’

‘And you never make your pupil feel a fool for asking?’

‘Never.’

‘Promise.’

‘Cross my heart and hope to die.’

He gave his quiet laugh again, but she could tell he was nervous and she felt a wave of tenderness for him.

‘I wanted to ask why you’re still called Dempsey when you’re wearing a wedding ring on your finger.’

‘That’s easy,’ she replied, ‘I’m one of those modern women who kept my own name after I married.’

‘And you’re still married?’

‘Yes.’

‘Happily?’

When she didn’t answer he asked another question.

‘And are you one of those modern women who would come for a drink with a man you’d just met?’

‘Yes,’ she wanted to say, ‘yes, yes!’

‘It’s kind of you to ask,’ she said, losing her courage, ‘but I don’t think I am.’

‘I know a bar not far from here with good wine and a back room with a fire. We could sit and talk.’

Catherine knew that if she went with him they’d do more than talk.

She thought of her husband at home waiting for her. She’d told him she would find a lover, taunted him with it, seen how it had aroused him. She’d prepared the ground, hadn’t she? It may have been play-acting, but she knew the idea of her taking a lover cast a primitive spell over James, and a part of her longed to have sex with another man. Wasn’t it the next step to freedom and supremacy in her marriage? Wasn’t it her right as a dominant wife and Mistress? What was to stop her going with this warm and lovely man? Nothing, she told herself, nothing except cowardice and bourgeois timidity.

‘To hell with it,’ she told herself, ‘I’ll go with him.’

‘So here you are,’ said a woman’s voice from behind her.

It was her friend Marion.

Catherine felt a surge of anger at the interruption but it was replaced almost immediately by relief. She’d been on the point of making a terrible mistake, and Marion had given her a way out.

‘Marion, this is Tom,’ she said, taking refuge in formalities.

Catherine watched as they shook hands and said each other’s name, and then Marion lit a cigarette and gave Catherine a knowing smile as if to say, ‘where have you been hiding him?’

‘Tom and I went to school together,’ Catherine said quickly.

‘Yes, but she didn’t remember me,’ said Tom, smiling at Catherine.

‘Oh, I bet she did,’ Marion said mischievously.

‘He was only a boy when I left,’ said Catherine, annoyed at her friend’s silly game.

The door to the club opened and another smoker came out into the car-park. Catherine suddenly longed to be back inside, free of this dangerous man.

‘It was lovely to meet you, Tom,’ said Catherine.

‘You too, Catherine,’ he said, holding his hand out to her. ‘Good luck to you.’

She took his hand, feeling an ache in her chest at the gentle strength in his grip.

‘Perhaps I’ll see you here again,’ he said, gazing at her intently and not letting go of her hand.

‘Oh, you’re bound to,’ said Marion before Catherine could reply. ’We come here all the time.’

‘Goodbye, Tom,’ said Catherine.

‘Goodbye,’ he said, a troubled look in his eyes.

When he let go of her hand she felt a terrible sense of loss. She wanted to take back his hand and squeeze it to give him some kind of signal.

She felt his eyes on her back as she went into the club. She was glad to feel her skirt swaying around her legs. She hoped he liked what he saw.

Inside, the band were still playing as she found her way back to her table. Her friends smiled at her and she smiled back but she no longer felt part of their group. When Marion joined them Catherine felt a pang of regret when she saw Tom had not come back in with her. She‘d already persuaded herself that he couldn’t have been as good-looking as she remembered, and she wanted to see him again to make sure.

She thought of the bar he’d mentioned with the back-room and the fire,

and she wished she was there with him now. Angry with herself, she drank two more large glasses of Malbec and by the time they were walking to Amy's car she felt drunker than she'd been in a very long time.

'I'm sorry I interrupted,' said Marion, walking by Catherine's side.

'What do you mean?' said Catherine, feigning ignorance.

'Your date with Matthew McConaughey in the car park.'

'Don't be silly,' said Catherine. 'We were only talking, and besides he's much better looking than Matthew McConaughey.'

Marion laughed, and then leaned in close and whispered in Catherine's ear, 'I hope you don't mind, but I gave him your number.'

'You're kidding,' said Catherine, suddenly angry.

'I knew it was wrong as soon as I did it,' said Marion, 'I'm sorry.'

'Then why did you do it?' she asked, genuinely amazed that her friend had done such a thing.

'I don't know. That voice and those eyes, what was I supposed to do? He practically begged me.'

'Never mind,' said Catherine, pleased despite herself to hear of his eagerness. 'He'll never phone anyway. I'm far too old.'

'Oh, he'll phone,' said Marion with a mischievous look, 'unless I'm much mistaken.

CATHERINE DIDN'T say much in the car home. She managed a cheerful enough farewell when Amy dropped her off, but her feelings were in turmoil. Drunker than she'd been in years, she felt discontented yet aroused, and angry with a desire she didn't know how to satisfy. She didn't want to be home. She wanted to be anywhere other than home, so long as she was in the company of Tom Shannon.

She thought of his rangy frame and smiling eyes, and his warm, slow

voice. ‘Why didn’t you go with him, you silly fool?’ she asked herself, bitterly regretting her cowardice.

When James came to greet her in the hall he felt a wave of love for his beautiful Mistress. He’s just finished shopping online where he’d bought her some underwear and a pair of black calf length boots, high-heeled yet elegant, which laced up from toe to calf. As he’d bought them for her he’d imagined kneeling at her feet to do up the laces.

But Catherine wasn’t nearly so well-disposed towards her slave.

‘Where have you been?’ she said frostily.

‘In the study,’ James replied warily, seeing her mood, ‘working on your application, buying you some …’

‘When I get home I expect you to come running,’ she snapped. ‘Take my coat. Hurry up.’

It felt good to take her frustration out on her slave.

James did as he was told, taking off her coat and holding it over his arm like her butler.

‘I think you should kiss my boots now. Isn’t that what a slave usually does when he greets his Mistress?’

He deserved to be put in his place, Catherine decided, not only because he was a slave, but because he wasn’t Tom Shannon.

James was surprised to hear the slight slurring in Catherine’s speech. In all the years he’d known her he’d only seen her drunk on two or three occasions. It wasn’t like her, and he wondered if he should put a stop to their game, but she was clear-headed enough to read his thoughts.

‘Don’t give me that look,’ Catherine said witheringly. ‘I’ll get drunk if I damned well like. Now get on your knees and kiss my boots.’

Her crude dominance annoyed James. He found it vulgar and over-played. He thought how Catherine was always well-mannered and gracefully

assured, and how being drunk didn't suit her, and yet her crudeness aroused him in a way that easily trumped his annoyance. He told himself to refuse her instruction but, enthralled anew, he felt himself sink to his knees on the hard tiles, and press his mouth to the toe of one of her long black boots.

He tasted leather and dust and shoe polish.

It tasted like heaven.

'Don't just kiss,' Catherine commanded him, 'lick.'

He hesitated for a few moments and then did as he'd been told, worshipping her boots with adoring strokes of his tongue until the smooth black leather glistened with his saliva. He'd never done this before, but he'd dreamed of such a degradation, and he felt a deep gratitude to Catherine for making his dream come true.

'Harder,' said Catherine imperiously. 'Lick them clean, lick the dirt from my boots. It's all you're fit for, waiting at home for me like a little housemaid.'

Her cruel remark stung him and spurred him on to greater efforts so that Catherine laughed with contempt at his eager service before stepping back to deprive him of his pleasure.

'Did you look for my crop?' she asked.

'Y-yes, Mistress,' he replied.

'Then go and get it,' she commanded.

James almost obeyed, but fear of his wife prevented him.

'I couldn't find it,' he said. 'I'm sorry.'

'You'd better not be lying,' she said. 'Are you lying to me, James?'

'No, Mistress,' he lied, part of him longing to tell her the truth.

'If I find out you're lying,' she said sternly, 'you'll really be in trouble. Do you hear me?'

'Yes, Mistress,' he replied.

‘Oh, get up,’ she said, ‘get up onto your feet and try to look like a man.’

James got slowly to his feet, wondering where Catherine’s wild mood was leading.

‘Take off your clothes,’ she instructed. ‘I want you naked. I want to see what you’ve got to offer.’

James hesitated, held back by shame and modesty.

‘Hurry up,’ she said with venom in her voice, ‘or you’ll be sorry, I’m warning you.’

‘God, I wish he’d found my crop,’ Catherine thought as James undid his shirt, ‘then I’d really show him who’s in charge.’ Her blood was burning with anger and frustration, and she longed to take her anger out on her slave.

‘Do you know what I want, James?’ she asked as she watched him undress. ‘Do you know what I really want?’

‘No, Catherine.’

‘I want a man to fuck me, a real man. But I don’t have a real man, do I?’

’N-no, Mistress.’

‘If I had a real man I’d fuck him right here in front of you. I would, you know that, don’t you?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘God, it would be sexy to make you watch, but I’ve only got you. Will you be a man for me, James?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said, dropping his shirt on the floor by her coat.

‘I hope you will because I need a man,’ said Catherine, lifting her skirt and slip, and touching herself through her underwear. ‘A strong, lovely, sexy man. Can you be that for me?’

‘Yes,’ he said, gazing at her in fear and wonder as he took off his shoes and socks, and undid his belt.

He’d never heard her speak like this. For most of their marriage she’d

been shy about sex, but a devil was in her now, he could see it in her eyes.

A wild and hungry devil.

‘But I’d forgotten, you’re wearing my knickers,’ she said when he took down his jeans. ‘No, keep them on,’ she instructed him when he went to take them off, ‘I don’t care what you wear as long as you’re not a sissy in bed. That wouldn’t do. That wouldn’t do at all.’

Staggering a little, she unzipped her boots and kicked them off, then stepped close to him, putting a hand on his balls and squeezing them before running her fingers up his erection to where it protruded beyond the waistband of his knickers.

‘My, what pretty panties,’ she whispered, ‘but I don’t want a sissy in bed tonight, you know that, don’t you?’

‘Yes, Catherine,’ he replied, feeling a growing pressure to live up to her demands.

‘You won’t disappoint me, will you? You won’t be a sissy in my bed?’

‘No, Catherine.’

‘I need a man, a real man.’

‘Yes, Catherine.’

‘Oh God, believe me, I do,’ she said, closing her eyes as a shiver of desire passed through her. ‘You’ll be what I want, won’t you?’

‘Yes, Catherine, I promise.’

‘That’s good,’ she said, pulling him into a kiss so hard and hungry it drained him of strength and made him weak at the knees, a kiss that tasted of lipstick and wine and cigarettes, a kiss that promised wild, dirty, beautiful sex.

‘Well, what are we waiting for?’ she said, taking him by his cock and leading him across the hall to the stairs. ‘Up we go. Upstairs to bed.’

She let go of his cock to climb the stairs ahead of him, swaying her

bottom as she went, and undoing the buttons on her little cardigan. Giving up on the tricky buttons, she wrenched it over her head and threw it away. James caught it, savouring the feel of the soft wool still warm from her body, before dropping it on the stairs. He watched in a trance as she undid her pleated skirt and let it slither to the ground, releasing the lovely breeze of her perfume. James hurried to keep up with her, placing a hand on her thigh, thrilled by the feel of the smooth nylon, and the warmth beneath.

‘Do you like what you see?’ she asked him over her shoulder when she reached the top of the stairs.

‘You’re lovely, Catherine,’ he said, his voice trembling with desire.

‘You’ll like this, then,’ she said as she hitched up her slip and stuck out her bottom.

‘God, Catherine,’ he said, falling to his knees and pressing his lips to her sweetly curving buttocks.

With a laugh of triumph, Catherine leaned forward and took hold of the banister, pushing her lovely bottom against his mouth.

‘Can you taste me?’ she asked, ‘can you smell me?’

His lips roaming over the smooth nylon, he could smell her perfume and the detergent he used to wash her underwear, but he couldn’t smell what he longed to smell — her heavenly woman’s scent.

‘No, Mistress.’

‘Then what are you waiting for?’ she asked, swaying her hips enticingly and pushing the sweet curve of her bottom harder against his mouth. ‘Come on,’ she said impatiently in a voice that seemed to challenge his manliness, his right to be her lover. ‘Do it.’

He reached up and tugged down her tights and panties before burying his face in the lovely cleft at the top of her thighs. He heard her sigh, and felt her open for him.

‘Yes,’ she gasped, ‘that’s what I want.’

The glorious smell and taste of her invaded his senses so that he became the drunken one, his adoring tongue darting and delving into her bottom and then the folds of her lovely, slick cunt. He lost track of time and place. Nothing mattered except her taste, her smell, her pleasure. His soul in heaven, he found peace at last.

He felt her shiver, and tense, and heard her say, ‘Yes, God, yes,’ and then she stood upright, breaking his trance and saying in an urgent voice, ‘this way, hurry now, bed.’

He tried to stand but she placed her hand on his shoulder, keeping him on his knees. ‘No, James, stay down,’ she said, walking towards the bedroom. ‘Stay at my feet where you belong.’

He heard her giggle as he crawled by her side into the bedroom like a faithful dog. When he lagged behind she reached down and took a handful of his hair, tugging him towards the bed. ‘I like you like this,’ she said, ‘on your knees at my feet.’

He felt the hem of her slip brush against his face, and a rebellious fire grew inside him until he could resist it no more.

He stood and kissed her, pulling her against him with a hunger that made her cry out in surprise and delight. He unclipped her bra and pulled it free, then bent his head to kiss her full breasts through the lace of her slip. He felt her nipples grow hard in his mouth.

‘Looks like my little slave is standing up for himself’ she said in a sultry, mocking voice, pulling away from him and lying down lazily on the bed where she pulled off her panties and tights. Longing to taste her again, James lay his head between her legs, grazing once more in the sweet forest of curls, delighting in her sighs of pleasure. She covered him with the duvet, plunging him into darkness, and settled back to enjoy his eager devotions but, quickly

impatient, she twisted her fingers in his hair and pulled his mouth over her trembling stomach to her breasts.

‘That’s lovely,’ she said, welcoming the feel of his mouth on her breasts, ‘but I need you to fuck me. Oh God, I need you to fuck me.’

He slid upwards, kissing her neck and the string of pearls at her throat but, even as he prepared to enter her, he felt a terrible foreboding, and when he pushed against her he knew it had come true.

He wasn’t hard any more, he was losing his erection.

Some devilish switch had gone off in his head and he was useless to her. He felt her delicious wetness against his softening cock, but he could not enter her.

He pushed again but it was no good.

He could not give her what she wanted.

‘What’s this?’ Catherine demanded to know, a ferocity in her voice as she reached down and felt his shame.

‘I’m sorry, Catherine,’ he mumbled. ‘I love you, I want you …’

It was true. He wanted her desperately. His erection had wilted but his desire burned fiercer than ever. He longed to take her, to feel the glorious warmth of her cunt engulf his hard cock, but another part of him was perversely thrilled by his failure, a failure that confirmed his inadequacy as a husband and a man. The memory of pressing impotently against her lovely, open cunt brought with it a delightful wave of submissive arousal, but it did not make him hard.

‘You promised,’ she accused him, ‘you promised you’d be a man for me.’

She tugged roughly at his cock to bring it back to life, but it did no good, and she lay back with an animal groan of distress.

‘Well, we know the truth now, don’t we?’ she said, unable to conceal her disappointment. ‘You’re not a man, are you?’

‘I’m sorry …’

‘Well, are you?’ she asked, her voice cruel and savage in a way that gave him a twisted delight.

‘God, Catherine …’

‘I asked you a question. Are you a man?’

James answered in a daze, suffering exquisite pain and pleasure in equal measure.

‘No … I’m not a man … I’m so sorry …’

‘Then this is all you’re good for,’ she said impatiently, suddenly pulling herself up and sitting astride his head in a single flowing motion. ‘Use your mouth,’ she told him, ‘since you can’t fuck me like a man.’

Holding onto the headboard, she trapped his arms beneath her knees, and settled over his mouth like an empress.

His adoring mouth pleased her, but it wasn’t the pleasure she longed for. ‘Harder,’ she cried as she bore down on him, angered by his failure, and wanting to punish him for it.

‘Lick me,’ she said as she ground against him. ‘Love me … Love me like a slave … Soon I’ll find a man to give me what I want … And then I won’t need you … I won’t need you ...’

Trapped beneath her, James felt the same dark thrill he remembered from his dream of sinking beneath the quicksand.

As Catherine took her pleasure, Tom Shannon’s broad, handsome face came into her mind. Twisting the knife, she spoke between the little gasps of delight she gave as he worshipped beneath her.

‘I’m going to tell you something … It’s important so you’d better listen … I met a man tonight … Such a handsome man, you’ve no idea … A tall manly man … An Irish man … We stood outside … Talking and smoking … Watching the rain … He liked me, he really liked me … A woman can tell

these things … And I liked him … Oh, God, I liked him …'

James felt her tremble and push down harder against his mouth. Barely able to breathe, he struggled to free his arms until, overwhelmed by her, he stopped struggling and surrendered to his Mistress, body and soul.

'He asked me to go for a drink … Asked me to go with him …' Catherine told her helpless slave. 'I didn't go because I'm a coward and a fool … Because I'm a married woman … I came home to my husband like a good little wife … But my husband's not a man … He's no use to me … So I'm going to find that man again … Oh, God I am … I'm going to find him … And let him fuck me … It's not a story this time … It's not a game … It's true, I promise … Oh God, it's true …'

Driven by instinct and need, Catherine slid downwards, searching out his cock. To her delight she found he was hard again, and she slid her cunt over its sweet ridge, loving the feel of him against her before rocking her hips and taking him deep inside her.

With a cry of pleasure James reached for her lovely breasts, but she pushed his hands away and gripped them painfully tight, pushing down against them, and throwing her head back in savage joy. He'd never seen her so wild or free and, when she began to ride him with quick, greedy thrusts, he feared he would come there and then.

He begged her to stop, to give him time to get used to her but, lost in her own pleasure, she only rode him harder and faster, saying in little bursts of words, 'This doesn't save you … Not one bit … It's going to happen … I promise you … You can't stop it … He'll be my lover … Oh, God, he'll be my lover …'

Summoning every ounce of willpower, James stopped himself from coming until at last he grew accustomed to the joy of their coupling.

Catherine began to make the little sound at the back of her throat that told

him she was close to coming, and he felt a welcome surge of masculine power. He began to match her thrusts, sure now that he could outlast her, and take charge of her in the way she craved.

He would show her who was the man in her life.

He would show her who was in charge of their marriage.

He would lead her beyond pleasure into bliss.

But then Catherine began once more to speak between her gasps of pleasure.

‘You like this, don’t you? … Your Mistress on top … Holding you down … Keeping you down … Well, you’d better enjoy it … I’m warning you … Because when I find him … Oh God, when I find him … I won’t need you any more … This might be your last time … Do you hear me? The last time … Oh, God … The last time I ever let you fuck me.’

Her cruel words cut him like a knife, sweeping away his dream of manly conquest. Glorying in her ascendancy, he began to move with a passion so urgent he became a mindless animal.

Feeling the heat of his desire, Catherine matched his hunger, setting a rhythm that drove them far beyond the point of no return until they cried out in ecstacy, and at last lay beached and still, left senseless by pleasure.

James held her tenderly in his arms as their breathing slowed, loving the feel of her against him, the smell of her hair, the curve of her neck.

Catherine felt sleep come rushing to claim her but, before she slept, she offered up a silent prayer in her heart.

‘Let me see him again,’ she prayed. ‘Let me have him … Let me have Tom Shannon.’

CATHERINE’S FIRST thought when she woke was of Tom Shannon. She lay for a while wondering if she’d dreamed him, and then she recalled

with shocking clarity his strong, handsome face and the warmth in his eyes, and the gentle strength in his fingers when he'd shaken her by the hand.

She lifted her head to peer at the bedside clock. It was 7.43 and she had a hangover. She laid her head back on the pillow and looked at her husband sleeping peacefully beside her.

His presence made her feel safe and loved, and yet her thoughts were of another man as her hand strayed between her legs. It felt deliciously transgressive to lie beside her sleeping husband and arouse herself with thoughts of another man, not just a fantasy figure this time, but a real live man who she'd touched and spoken to.

It was Saturday and she had no need to get up early for work, but it had become her habit to rise first at the week-end. Ever since they'd begun their Friday night Mistress-games, Catherine had looked to redress the balance of power in their marriage by immediately resuming her role as the good and obedient wife. She did this by getting up first on Saturday mornings and cooking James a full English breakfast, and then making a fuss of him all day as if to assure him that her cruel authority of the night before had been no more than a dream, or a passing scene from a play that had run its course.

In the evening they'd go out for a meal, usually to a nearby Italian restaurant where they were welcomed as regular customers, or go to the cinema. She'd wear a pretty dress, and later surrender to him in bed to make James feel strong and manly again. She didn't want things to go too far, and she saw it as her duty as his wife.

'Look,' her behaviour told him, 'I'm not really a cruel and selfish woman, that was just a game, a fantasy — I'm your ever-loving and faithful wife, and I'll never really hurt you.'

But the memory of taking charge of him the night before remained fresh in her mind, and arousal dulled the ache of her hangover as she pushed the

hem of her slip deeper between her legs, touching herself through its lace hem.

‘God, you must have been drunk,’ she told herself, surprised to find she was still wearing her slip, and hadn’t taken off her string of pearls. Normally, before coming to bed, she’d unclip her pearls and put them away in their neat little box before changing into a nightdress and cleaning the make-up from her face with cotton wipes.

The good and respectable wife getting ready for bed.

But not last night.

Last night she’d kept her slip and pearls on in bed, drunk with wine and desire for another man.

As her pleasure mounted, Catherine recalled telling James of the handsome man she’d met at the club, the man she wanted so much to see again.

Had she merely been taunting him in the way she’d done before, she wondered, or was some dark and primal force rising to the surface in their marriage? Certainly, her vow to take a lover had aroused them both very much, the intensity of their lovemaking had made that very clear, and Catherine wondered for the first time if it might be possible to take a lover without losing the love of her husband.

Catherine would never lie to James by having an affair behind his back. She was an honest, deeply principled woman, and that kind of duplicity was not in her nature, but if she could enslave him with the truth, if she could openly take a lover according to her right and prerogative as his Mistress, and make him accept it as her slave, then she might be able to reconcile her conflicting desires without telling corrosive lies.

Catherine told herself not to be stupid.

It was a crazy notion, of course it was, yet her mind wouldn’t let go of the

idea. In recent months she'd seen how much James enjoyed submitting to her. Already she'd ruled him in ways she hadn't dreamed possible, and dominating him brought her a wild and ever-deepening pleasure such as she had never known. It was the thrill of the forbidden, she was sure, and the more of it she experienced, the more of it she wanted. She thought of him kneeling at her feet wearing her panties and the way, only the night before, he'd kissed her boots before lying meekly beneath her while she used him for her pleasure, and told him of her desire for another man.

And this man had a name, a beautiful name.

Tom Shannon.

The name echoed in Catherine's head as if she'd known it all her days, and somehow they'd grown up together in the same small Irish town.

This time her dream lover was made of flesh and blood, and she wished she'd kissed him while they'd stood together outside the club. Oh, God, she wished she'd kissed him, and felt his strong arms hold her tight, so tight she couldn't get free even if she'd wanted to.

Her growing arousal persuaded her a very different kind of marriage might be possible, and her crazy fancies woke in her a rush of raw female power. Why couldn't she use her dominant sexuality to instil a deeper devotion in her husband's heart, command him to put her pleasure before his dignity and pride? And why should his pride matter anyway? If he was truly her slave then what did his suffering matter compared to his Mistress' will and desire? Shouldn't he rejoice in his suffering if it brought her pleasure?

And yet, she told herself, taking a lover was beyond anything she'd done before, a step far outside the protecting walls of marriage and convention. It would hurt and shame James terribly, she knew that, but wasn't shame a powerful part of the pleasure he found in his servitude, perhaps even the sweetest part? She'd seen the lost expression in his eyes when she talked

down to him, or tormented him about taking a lover.

It was the look of a helpless, adoring slave, the look of a man who yearned for her cruel authority, and would give her anything she wanted.

It wasn't a look she could easily forget, the hurt and dreamy gaze so full of a longing to suffer in ways neither of them could yet imagine and, when he surrendered to her like that, Catherine felt as if she saw into his heart, and understood that his deepest fears and desires were one and the same.

He craved what he most feared.

He was terrified of losing her to another man, and so he longed for that most of all — for her to take a lover.

He needed her to respect him as a strong and manly husband, and so he yearned for her to treat him as a weak and submissive slave.

All she had to do was give him what he craved.

'It couldn't be that simple,' Catherine told herself. 'And it would be too much to ask of him, of any man. Far too much.'

But of one thing she was sure — she had no wish to return to her life as his good and faithful wife. She'd tasted freedom, and acquired an appetite for power, and she hadn't the slightest desire to resume her life as the respectable married woman in her handsome, detached home.

No, it was time to push things further, and let the wildness inside her have its head. Anything that made her feel this scared and excited must be worth exploring, she decided, and so she made up her mind to venture deeper into the forest.

Catherine would remain his stern and demanding Mistress for the entire week-end, longer if she so desired.

The Mistress of the house had made up her mind.

All she had to do was re-assert her authority over James and, if she was to do that, she'd have to place him once more under her potent woman's spell.

‘GOOD MORNING, sleepy-head,’ James heard as he woke. He smiled at the sound of his wife’s voice and moved to embrace her, but she held him tight in her strong, slim arms.

‘Stay where you are,’ she said, cuddling him from behind, ‘I like you like this.’

One of her hands slid under his neck and began to play with his nipple while her other hand slid down to his cock. She stroked him deftly, pleased to feel him harden so quickly, before letting go of his cock, and cupping his balls through the silky material of the panties he was wearing from the night before.

She was glad he was still wearing her panties. She knew how much they embarrassed him, and undermined his male pride. The phrase ‘putty in her hands’ came into her mind, and she smiled as she caressed him through the silky knickers.

‘Well, then, James,’ she whispered in his ear, ‘did you enjoy yourself last night?’

‘Mmmm,’ he groaned happily, twisting his head to kiss his beloved wife. But his beloved didn’t let him kiss her. Instead she nuzzled his neck, smelling the perfume she’d sprayed on him the night before.

‘You smell nice,’ she whispered. ‘Panties and perfume, what a lucky slave you are.’

James started fully awake, surprised and embarrassed to find he was still wearing his wife’s panties. He reached immediately to take them off but Catherine tugged his nipple, and gripped his balls hard, making him cry out in pain and surprise.

‘No, James, you’ll keep them on,’ she instructed him calmly. ‘They suit you, and I like the way they feel, so soft and pretty against your cock.’

Now she leaned over to kiss him, confident in her power, slowly stroking his cock as she pushed her tongue into his mouth. Once more he tried to turn to embrace her, and once more she tugged his nipple and balls, keeping him where he was, wrapped in her warm and wilful embrace.

‘Are you looking forward to lying in bed while I get up and cook you breakfast?’ Catherine enquired, her thumb slowly circling the tip of his cock.

‘I love you,’ James murmured, sure they would make love before Catherine got up to cook breakfast.

‘Perhaps I’ll wear a pretty dress for you,’ said Catherine, ‘that floral dress, I think, the one you like so much with the little net petticoat. And I’ll wear pretty panties and hold-up stockings, I know how much you like me in those. Think of it, James, all day long, you can kiss me and put your hand under my dress, feel my stockings, touch me through my panties, take them off if you like so that I’m naked under my dress. I won’t wear a bra. You can take down my dress, slide it over my shoulders and kiss my breasts. Any time you like. ’

‘You’re lovely, Catherine,’ he said, his voice heavy with desire.

‘You can do what you want with me,’ she murmured in his ear, drugging his senses, ‘with my hair, with my mouth, with my dress. If you want me to suck your cock all you’ll have to do is ask. What a lucky man you are. I’ll wear a little apron when I’m cooking for you. There’s one in the kitchen drawer. I’m sure you know the one I mean. A pretty little white apron like a maid might wear. I’ll tie it with a big bow at the back, and be your obedient little maid all day long. You’ll be the big, strong man of the house. My lord and master. You’ll like that won’t you?’

He gave a groan of arousal and pushed against her hand.

‘Yes, I thought so,’ said Catherine, stoking the fire of his hunger. ‘And at night-time I’ll keep my dress on in bed. My stockings too if you want. I’ll let

you touch them, slide your cock against them. So sheer and smooth, you'll feel them against your legs when you fuck me.'

'God, Catherine,' he said, his cock pulsing in her hand as he turned to kiss her, but once more she evaded his mouth, laughing mischievously as she nuzzled into his neck.

'You'd like that, wouldn't you?' she said, her breath warm against his ear.

'You know I would,' he said.

'Well, that's a pity,' said Catherine, her voice taking on a harder, slightly insolent tone as she let go of his cock and gripped his balls, 'because that's not what's going to happen.'

She couldn't help smiling when she felt his body stiffen in surprise.

'No, James, that's not how it's going to be,' she continued in a matter-of-fact voice. 'That's not how it's going to be at all. In fact, it's going to be completely the other way round, I'm afraid, not at all the way you expect. We're going to try something different, move things along a little. After all, we don't want to get stuck in a rut, do we?' she said, squeezing his balls through his panties. 'And so I'm the one who's going to stay in bed for a change, and you'll get up and cook me breakfast, and do what I tell you all day long like a good little slave.'

He started to object but she hissed in his ear, 'Quiet, James, I mean it. I didn't ask your opinion in the matter. Slaves are not consulted, and they shouldn't have opinions.'

'Come on, Cathy,' he said in an aggrieved voice, 'this has gone far enough.'

'Oh, has it?' she said, surprised and more than a little angered by his resistance, and his over-familiar use of 'Cathy.'

'And who says so?' she asked sharply.

‘I do,’ he said, remembering his dream of sinking under the quicksand, and his vow to put a stop to their silly game. ‘We need to take a break from this. I don’t want things to get out of control.’

‘Oh, don’t you?’ she queried, a steeliness in her voice.

‘No, I don’t,’ he said, sounding irritatingly sure of himself.

‘Why not? You like it, don’t you?’

‘I do,’ he said, ‘I like it too much, and that’s the trouble.’

‘Don’t be silly, it’s only a bit of fun.’

‘I’m not so sure.’

‘Oh, don’t be a scaredy-cat.’

‘That’s easy for you to say.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You’re not the one who ends up looking like a fool.’

‘You look very sweet in my panties,’ she said, a smile in her voice.

‘You know what I mean.’

‘Is that really how you feel? Like a fool?’

‘Yes, I feel stupid and ashamed.’

‘But that’s what you like best, isn’t it?’

‘God knows. It’s a twisted bloody thing.’

‘I like it too. Being your mistress, being the one in charge. Having you at my beck and call.’

‘I know you like it but, when it’s like last night, I feel like I’m drowning, and I’ll never make it back to shore. I feel as if I’ll be your slave forever.’

‘Forever?’ she said, her fingers circling his cock, making him hard again. ’What’s so bad about that?’

‘You know perfectly well.’

‘Do I?’

‘It’s too much, you know it is.’

‘Yes, but maybe I’d like it,’ she said with a soft laugh.

‘I’m sure you would,’ he said, striving to sound light-hearted.

‘Having you helpless and under my thumb,’ she said, her mocking tone casting its erotic spell. ‘For ever and ever.’

‘Don’t, Cathy. It’s no laughing-matter.’

‘I frighten you, is that it?’

‘Not you, but this thing between us, it frightens me.’

‘Does it, really, James?’ she said, both intrigued and aroused.

‘Yes, it does.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know … It’s too strong. I can’t control it.’

‘Poor James,’ she said with a giggle, rubbing her pretty nose against his ear.

‘I’m serious,’ said James, too much on his dignity to laugh along with her.

‘I’m serious too,’ Catherine said. ‘I like being your Mistress.’

‘Well, I think we should stop for a while. Maybe for a month or two, and then see how we feel.’

‘A month or two?’ said Catherine, dismayed at the thought, and wondering if Tom Shannon was lying in bed thinking about her.

God, she hoped he was.

‘Maybe longer,’ James continued. ‘I don’t know, maybe we should stop for good.’

‘Is that really what you want?’

‘Yes, I think it is.’

‘You think? That’s not exactly very decisive, is it, James? You’ll need to do better than that.’

‘All right,’ he said firmly. ‘I want to stop, and that’s what we’re going to

do.’

‘Oh, is it?’ she said, biting the lobe of his ear hard enough to make him gasp, and gripping his erection which, she noted with interest, was harder than ever.

She felt the tell-tale wetness at its tip.

All was not lost.

‘Stop it,’ he said, anger and impatience in his voice.

‘I think you do want to be my slave,’ she said. ‘My little maid and house-servant.’

‘This needs to stop, I mean it. I don’t want it any more.’

‘Oh, I think you do. I think you want it very much.’

‘I’ve told you, Catherine, I don’t.’

‘Well, I’ve got news for you,’ said Catherine, her fingers fluttering delightfully around his cock. ‘What you want is neither here nor there, it’s what I want that matters.’

‘Cathy …’

‘Keep quiet and listen!’ she commanded. ‘You’re being over-ruled, James, it’s as simple as that, and you’ll do as you’re told or face the consequences. Do you understand?’

He sighed wearily as if he was above such nonsense, and she tugged his nipple hard to punish his insolence.

‘Mind your manners,’ she said severely, adopting her sternest teacher’s tone. ‘You’ll speak to me respectfully or not at all. Do you hear me?’

‘Yes,’ he quickly replied, her ferocity surprising him, and sending a new wave of arousal surging through his defences.

‘Yes, who?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he gasped.

‘Better,’ she said, ‘much better. And don’t call me Cathy again. I don’t

like it. It's too familiar for a slave. You'll call me Mistress at all times unless there are other people present, in which case you will call me Catherine. Have I made myself clear?'

'Yes, Mistress.'

'Now we're getting somewhere. All you have to do is keep quiet and listen, do you understand?'

'Yes, Mistress.'

'Good. Remember that and we'll get along just fine. Now, James, here's what's going to happen. My mind's made up and there'll be no discussion. You'll be my slave for a while longer. I enjoy being the one in charge, and this time one night's not enough for me. I want more so you'll obey me and do exactly what I tell you, or you'll be in trouble. Is that clear?'

'Yes, but only for one more day,' he said, striving to have some say in his fate.

'So you're setting conditions now?'

'No …'

'It sounds like that to me.'

'I'm sorry.'

'So you should be. You're a slave, for heaven's sake, you're in no position to set conditions. I've never heard anything so ridiculous, and I won't put up with it,' she said sternly, tugging the duvet away from him so that he lay naked except for his panties. 'Get up, get up onto your feet.'

'What?' he asked, shocked to be so cruelly exposed.

'You heard,' she said with no hint of mercy. 'Get up. This minute!'

She raised her hand and brought it down hard on his bottom. It made a satisfyingly loud smacking sound that echoed in the room.

James lay utterly still and, for a moment, Catherine thought she'd gone too far and he'd refuse to obey, but then he got slowly to his feet and stood

dazedly by the bed.

The shock of his eviction, and her smacking him, had softened his cock, but Catherine liked the way it looked, trapped under his pretty cotton knickers, so meek and cowed. She'd always enjoyed the look and feel of his cock, but once more she found herself thinking about Tom Shannon, wondering if his cock would be bigger than her husband's.

She hoped it would be, if only for the reason that she couldn't help wanting her lover's cock to be bigger than her husband's. On some primitive, animal level, it would only be right and proper if it was.

'Stand up straight when I'm speaking to you,' she commanded, aroused anew by her thoughts of another man.

James straightened his back and shoulders, a soldier coming to attention for his queen.

He felt utterly foolish standing by the bed wearing nothing but his wife's panties, but the powerful feelings of shame and embarrassment aroused him in exactly the way he'd come to crave. He told himself to laugh in her face, and jump back into bed beside her — make a joke of the whole thing — but he couldn't summon the strength, and he stood before her as still as stone, awaiting her command.

'Hands by your side.'

'Yes, Mistress,' he mumbled, urging himself to refuse yet placing his arms obediently by his side

'Look at me when I'm speaking.'

James lowered his gaze and looked into his wife's eyes, feeling a delightful weakness infect his entire being. Catherine was smiling but her eyes were hard and cold. The hardness in her eyes thrilled him, and he understood in that moment that he longed for her cruelty and scorn far more than he wanted her love or respect.

‘Now, James,’ said Catherine, touching herself secretly beneath the duvet, ‘I was planning on only one more day as your Mistress but, since you were foolish enough to try and set conditions, your service will now extend for the entire week-end. Only on Monday morning may you consider yourself a free man, and only then if I decide to set you free. Is that understood?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Until that time you will remain under the yoke, and do exactly as I say without question or complaint.’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said, finding a sweet pleasure in the formal authority of her language.

‘So then, are you ready to listen to me as a good and obedient slave should?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘I hope for your sake you are,’ she said before going on to give her instructions.

‘I’m going to have a lie-in this morning. While I’m sleeping you’ll drive to the supermarket and do the week’s shopping. Then you’ll come straight back home, put away the shopping, and cook me a late breakfast. You won’t eat with me,’ she announced, relishing the new thought. ‘That wouldn’t be appropriate. You’ll serve breakfast to me as my servant. After all, a slave shouldn’t expect to eat at table with his Mistress, should he?’

‘No, Mistress,’ he agreed, thrilled by her superior manner.

‘I’m glad you understand,’ said Catherine, both amused and aroused by her performance, and struggling to keep her face straight.

She’d never fully understood before just how much fun play-acting could be, and she was going to play her role to the hilt.

‘And when I’ve had breakfast,’ she continued like some haughty aristocrat, ‘I’ll go to my study and read what you’ve come up with for my

application. I'll go through it with you and let you know if you need to do any more work on it for me.'

'Yes, Mistress.'

'The rest of the week-end, well, I'll play that by ear. I may stay in, or I may go out on a date. I haven't made up my mind. Either way, you won't be consulted, you do know that, don't you?'

'Yes, Mistress,' he said, feeling the room spin around him.

'After all, why should you be consulted? A slave has no say in the life of his Mistress.'

'N-no, Mistress.'

Her talk of going on a date frightened and worried him deeply, yet it enslaved him anew and, to his shame, his cock grew helplessly erect, pushing up beyond the flimsy waistband of his panties, and he blushed to stand so exposed in front of his Mistress' scornful gaze.

'So there you are, then, James. Two whole days and nights in service to your Mistress. You'll like that, won't you?'

'Yes, Mistress.'

'I can see that you will,' she said, glancing at his erection. 'Touch yourself,' she commanded, suddenly curious to see what she'd never seen before.

'What?' he exclaimed, shocked by her command.

'You heard. Hurry up. You've been given an instruction.'

When he took hold of his cock as she'd commanded, Catherine experienced a sweet spasm of arousal. She stretched lazily and continued to touch herself beneath the bed-covers as he began to pleasure himself.

'Harder,' she instructed. 'Do whatever you do when you're alone. I want to see.'

Closing his eyes in shame, James held his cock between his thumb and

fingers in the way he had since he'd been a boy. Dizzy with arousal, he increased the speed of his strokes until he feared he would come in full and shameful view of his Mistress.

Catherine had never seen him masturbate before, and she enjoyed watching him perform such a private act at her command. It aroused her, and made her feel strong and powerful. She felt as if she could make him do whatever she wanted. It was a delicious feeling which convinced her more than ever not to surrender the slightest portion of the power she now held over him.

'Are you my slave, James?' she asked casually.

'Yes, Mistress.'

'Promise me.'

'I promise.'

'Does it make you happy to serve me?'

'Yes, Mistress.'

'Does it make you feel embarrassed?'

'Yes, Mistress.'

'And ashamed'

'Yes, Mistress.'

'Very ashamed?'

'Yes, Mistress.'

'But you like that?'

'Yes, Mistress.'

'Then I'll have to embarrass you much more often, won't I?'

'Y-yes, Mistress.'

'And make you ashamed?'

'Yes, Mistress.'

'Terribly ashamed?'

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘You look very pretty in my panties.’

‘Thank-you, Mistress,’ he said before he could stop himself.

‘You’re welcome,’ she said, her derisive laughter thrilling him to the core, and driving him to increase the speed of his strokes.

‘Do you want to come, James? You certainly look as if you want to. Do you want to come in front of your Mistress?’

‘Y-yes, Mistress,’ he stammered helplessly.

‘Then you’d better ask my permission, don’t you think?’

His rhythm slowed as he opened his eyes and looked at her in confusion.

‘After all,’ she continued, ‘a slave can’t just come whenever he wants. He needs to have the blessing of his Mistress. So you’d better ask me, James. Hurry up, I’m waiting.’

The amusement in her eyes only pushed James closer to the edge.

‘Please, Mistress,’ he pleaded. ‘Please may I come?’

‘I’m thinking about it, James,’ she said lazily, touching herself under the duvet, ‘I’m giving it serious consideration.’

‘Please, Mistress. I need to come.’

‘I’ve never seen you do this before. I’m curious, I really am. Yes, I think I’d like to see you come.’

‘Thank-you, Mistress.’

‘Faster, then, rub yourself faster,’ she commanded.

With a groan of desire he closed his eyes as his hand became a blur.

‘Are you going to come, James?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Tell me when you’re close.’

‘I’m close, Mistress.’

‘Very close?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he gasped. ‘I’m going to … Oh, God, I’m going to come.’

‘Then, stop,’ she said in a very firm voice.

He opened his eyes in shock but his hand kept stroking.

‘I said, stop!’ she commanded in an even stricter tone, feeling a thrill of arousal when he obeyed, his eager cock leaping and pulsing like a newly caught fish.

James opened his eyes and gave such a pained and desperate look that she nearly relented, but it brought her a lovely feeling to deny him while her fingers were still so delightfully busy beneath the covers.

‘Don’t give me that look,’ she said. ‘I’d love to let you come, James, really I would, but you wouldn’t be so eager to please if I did, and a slave should always be eager to please his Mistress, don’t you think?’

‘Yes,’ he muttered, choking back his disappointment.

His voice was sullen, and she noticed that he hadn’t called her Mistress.

‘You do want to be a good and obedient slave, don’t you, James?’

‘Yes,’ he replied, his voice still sullen.

‘I beg your pardon.’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said. His cock, aroused by her correction, leapt again, touching against his stomach.

‘Well, then,’ she said with a smile, ‘it seems I’ve done you a favour, then, haven’t I? I’ve been cruel to be kind, wouldn’t you agree?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said, her teasing manner turning his despair to twisted arousal.

‘Then I think you should thank me,’ said Catherine, pressing home her advantage. ‘Come on, then, let me hear you.’

‘Thank-you, Mistress,’ he said, glorying now in his defeat.

‘Thank-you for not letting me come,’ she coached him.

’Thank-you for not letting me come,’ he repeated helplessly, deeper under her spell.

‘You’re very welcome, James,’ she said. ‘After all, it’s the least I could do. Now, it’s time you got on with your duties. Off you go, then.’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said, beginning to take down his panties.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked as if in outrage.

‘Getting dressed,’ he said.

‘Did I give you permission to take off your panties?’

‘No, Mistress.’

‘Then you’ll keep them on until I tell you otherwise.’

‘I need to wash … Take a shower.’

‘No,’ she pronounced. ‘Today I want you to smell of sex with your Mistress. Think of it as an honour that I even let you have sex with me. Soon I may bestow that honour on a more deserving man, I think you know that, don’t you?’

He looked at her with pain in his eyes but, despite his hurt, perhaps because of it, he felt an excitement so dark and powerful it enchanted him. It frightened him when she spoke of other men, made him fear he may lose her, and yet it aroused him more than he could understand or admit.

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said with a shiver of foreboding.

‘Good, and don’t forget it,’ Catherine said, experiencing a spasm of the sweetest delight. She couldn’t get Tom Shannon out of her mind, and the thought of openly cuckolding her submissive husband aroused her deeply. ’Wearing my dirty panties will remind you of your true position in this household, wouldn’t you agree?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Not a man any more, but a slave, a housemaid.’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Then thank me for letting you wear my dirty panties,’ said Catherine, continuing to enjoy the absurd melodrama of her dominance.

‘Thank-you, Mistress,’ James mumbled in exquisite shame. ‘Thank-you for letting me wear your dirty panties.’

‘Think of them as a gift,’ said Catherine. ‘The day will come when wearing them will be your greatest honour and privilege.’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘But one more thing before you go.’

He watched in a daze as she slid her shapely leg out from under the duvet.

‘You may kiss my foot.’

He stood transfixed, gazing at her slim, little foot.

‘That’s what slaves do, isn’t it, kiss their Mistress’ feet?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said, hating the tremor in his voice.

‘Just like you kissed my boots last night. Kissed and licked them like a good little slave. Do you remember?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said, remembering how she’d made him kneel at her feet and kiss her leather boots.

‘Well, what are you waiting for?’

Immediately he flung himself to his knees and took her little foot in both hands, covering it with adoring kisses. He heard her laugh at his devotion, but her laughter only fuelled his devout attentions. Wiggling her pretty toes, she stroked the side of his face with her foot before withdrawing her leg beneath the duvet, smiling at the sight of his straining cock trapped in her pretty knickers

Catherine also noticed that he was kneeling on her discarded panties and tights.

‘You may go now,’ she told him, ‘but take my dirty tights and panties with you.’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said, picking up her dirty underwear as he got to his feet.

‘You like tidying up after me, don’t you, James?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Picking up my worn tights and panties?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he repeated in a trance, sinking yet deeper into the quicksand.

‘The way they feel in your hand.’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘So soft and feminine.’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘They’re very pretty, aren’t they?’

He blushed as he looked at the pretty garments in his hand. He tried to speak but could only make a choking sound.

‘If you’re a good slave maybe I’ll let you wear them later, and perhaps this time I’ll let you wear my tights as well. I’m sure you’d like that since you like wearing my panties so much. Think how smooth they’ll feel against your legs. And why stop there? Perhaps I’ll find you a pretty frock or skirt, and some high-heeled shoes to match. You never know your luck.’

He glanced at her with fear in his eyes, but quickly looked away, unable to hold her imperious gaze.

‘I think you’d look very nice as a girl,’ said Catherine. ‘You have a slim figure, and very nice legs if I may say so. And it’s good that your hair’s quite long. I’d brush it back in a pony-tail to show off your neck and pretty ears. I even have some old clip-on ear-rings you could wear. You’ll be a proper maid for me then, won’t you, James? If you can’t be a man, perhaps you’ll be happier as a pretty little maid.’

Once more he made a foolish choking sound, but his cock pulsed and

stiffened in his panties.

‘What did you say, James, I didn’t hear?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he mumbled, engulfed by another wave of submissive arousal.

‘I’m glad you agree,’ said Catherine, ‘and I want you to think about being my little slave-girl all the time you’re doing the shopping. Off you go then. You’ll find your boring man’s clothes downstairs in the hall where you left them last night.’

James stood stock-still, bewitched by her dominance, and too stunned to move.

‘Off you go,’ she repeated impatiently. ‘Hurry along.’

She was sure he gave a little bow of his head before he turned and left the room.

EXHILARATED BY her success, Catherine laughed out loud and hugged herself. Enslaving James anew had been harder than expected but her perseverance had paid off handsomely — she had him exactly where she wanted — and she was looking forward to increasing her dominance over him in the days and weeks ahead. She felt a tingling in her blood at the prospect, and she knew with the certainty of instinct that she’d be very cruel and demanding with him, far crueller than she’d been before. And yet, despite the pleasure she found in enslaving her husband, her thoughts turned immediately to Tom Shannon.

She waited until she heard James’ car driving away before darting out of bed, and running down the stairs like a child on Christmas morning.

She searched the hallway for her hand-bag, but there was no sign of it. She saw her clothes from the night before on the chair by the hall table and her black leather boots placed neatly under the chair. James must have picked

them up and tidied them away before going out. What a neat and busy little slave he was, she thought, but still she couldn't see her hand-bag. And then she saw it, hanging from its strap over the banister at the foot of the stairs. Hurrying to open it, she rummaged through its clutter, cursing when she couldn't find what she was searching for.

'It must be in my coat,' she told herself, but there was no sign of her overcoat. She opened the cloak-room and immediately saw her coat, hanging where James must have put it. She reached into one of the pockets. Nothing. She tried the other pocket and felt a surge of excitement when her hand closed around the smooth shape of her phone.

She came back into the hallway and switched it on.

There were two text messages.

Both were from Tom Shannon.

Catherine ran upstairs and got back into bed, pulling the duvet up to her neck and holding her phone so close it almost touched her nose.

Her heart hammering, she opened the first text and read –

'Dear Catherine, lovely to meet and talk at long last.'

Hardly a declaration of undying love, Catherine thought with disappointment, but at least he'd got in touch, and she liked the tenderness of 'Dear Catherine.' And she also liked the sound of 'at long last.' It conveyed a sense of yearning, but perhaps the second text would be better.

She tapped the screen and read —

'Please don't be angry with your friend for giving me your number. I used all my secret powers to compel her. Forgive us both.'

This was much better.

She liked that he'd thought to protect Marion. It made him seem kind and gallant, but she liked even more his use of the words 'secret powers,' 'compel' and 'forgive.' They were strong, sensual words which evoked

passion and desire, and gave Catherine the welcome sense that he was the one who'd felt compelled to get in contact with her. And there was humour there too, which made her remember his warm and easy manner. Oh, yes, this was much better.

He hadn't asked to see her again, but he was a grown man, no longer the school-boy who'd worshipped her from afar, and she was a grown woman. He'd expect her to make up her own mind.

He'd got in touch, that was the important thing, and given her a way to get back in touch with him.

If she wanted to.

The thought of replying to his message made her shiver with excitement.

So much for being a grown woman.

She considered deleting his messages and forgetting all about him, but she knew she couldn't do that. He'd already made too strong an impression. She considered various replies, but dismissed them as too silly or needy. She didn't want to appear too eager, and she settled for the simple response — 'You're forgiven.'

Happy with her reply, she pressed send and, feeling a warm and lazy contentment, put down her phone and fell fast asleep.

JAMES HAD never enjoyed shopping in supermarkets, but this morning was different. Acutely aware of his Mistress' panties beneath his jeans, and still under her potent spell, he found a sweetly submissive delight in searching the aisles for Catherine's preferred foods, wines and toiletries. He loaded up his trolley with her favourite meats and cheeses, salads, fruits and wine, and he made sure to buy the soap and shampoo she liked best.

He found a particular pleasure in planning and choosing the ingredients for the delicious lunches he made for her to take to work every day. He

imagined her smiling as she opened her lunch box, pleased to see the evidence of his love and devotion.

And he experienced an even deeper arousal when choosing cleaning products for the house. As he put floor-cleaner and shoe-polish and detergent and fabric conditioner into his trolley he saw himself cleaning the house for his stern Mistress, scrubbing the floors, washing and hanging up her clothes and underwear, and polishing her boots and shoes. He really would be her slave and housemaid, he thought, with a thrill of dark excitement.

There was surely something alchemical about this kind of desire, James reflected, amazed by the the way it could transform the daily grind of housework into a rota of erotic delights.

He even found himself gazing at a special offer for a new steam iron. He already had a perfectly good iron at home, but nonetheless he was tempted by the thought of purchasing a new instrument of servitude. He put the iron into his trolley, lost in a dream of pressing Catherine's elegant blouses and skirts while she lazed in an armchair reading a book or speaking on her phone, but he quickly came to his senses and put the iron back on its shelf.

But then he found himself at the hosiery section, transfixed by the mysterious and feminine words 'sheer' and 'denier' and such brand names as Aristoc and Charnos. His mind filled with images of Catherine's sleek and lovely legs, and the way they moved so briskly beneath the smart skirts she wore to work and, even though he'd ordered online a pair of luxury Wolford tights and some Girardi Charmeuse hold-up stockings just the night before, he couldn't resist a pair of twenty denier sheer to waist tights in a shade alluringly described as 'Vaguely Black.'

The nylons looked lovely in their glossy packet, and he knew they'd look wonderful on Catherine's strong, slim legs, or tangled up with her pretty panties or one of her slips in the wicker laundry-basket in the shower-room.

‘My God,’ thought James, alarmed by his lurid, over-heated fantasies as he put the packet of tights into his shopping-trolley. ’What’s happening to you? Have you fallen ill? What kind of man have you become? Can you even call yourself a man anymore?’

He feared he already knew the answers to these question for, deep in his heart, he no longer saw himself as a man in any normal sense. He saw himself, not as Catherine’s husband and equal, but as her helpless slave and obedient maid. It was a ridiculous way to think of himself, and yet it brought him an exquisite, masochistic delight, and he felt a hunger grow inside that longed to experience even greater indignities at the hands of his stern and beautiful wife.

He wheeled the trolley out to the car-park, and loaded the shopping into the back of his dark blue X5 BMW jeep. Even his powerful car did little to restore his sense of manhood. He looked at his watch. It was only 9.50, too early to go home and wake Catherine. He decided to go for a coffee and something to eat since, he remembered anxiously, he would not be permitted to eat breakfast with Catherine.

He bought a newspaper and went into a nearby café where he tried to find a way back to the real world by reading the sports pages, and eating a croissant and drinking a cup of strong black coffee. But his stomach felt tense and nervous, and he couldn’t concentrate on the stories of transferred football players and sacked managers. And, to make matters worse, he was uncomfortably aware of how neat and pretty the waitress looked in her black skirt and white apron. Looking around the busy café he noticed how attractive he found many of the women as they drank their coffee and chatted to their friends.

He liked the sound of their lively voices and laughter. In that moment, James reflected, any one of them could have commanded him to come home

with her to serve as her slave, and he would have followed her out of the café like a faithful dog. Intoxicated by visions of Catherine waiting for him at home, he doubted he could have found the strength to resist their female power.

That morning, enslaved by his wife, he'd become the slave to every woman in the world.

Leaving the café, he crossed the road and went into a florist's shop where he bought Catherine a dozen red roses.

Women smiled approvingly at the handsome man as he carried the bouquet to his car.

The blood-red roses lay on the passenger seat beside him as he drove home, a reminder of his deep and abiding love for his Mistress.

WHEN HE arrived home he carried the bags of shopping into the kitchen and put everything away tidily, making sure to be quiet so he wouldn't wake Catherine.

It aroused him to think of her sleeping while he did her bidding, and once more he became acutely aware of the panties she'd made him wear beneath his jeans, a constant reminder of his submission.

He arranged the roses in a vase and put them on the table beside a copy of The Guardian newspaper which Catherine loved to read on Saturday mornings. Then he filled the coffee-maker with Catherine's favourite dark Italian blend, then whisked up eggs, laid bacon on the grill tray, sliced a tomato and some mushrooms, and put a loaf of freshly baked wholemeal bread by the toaster, remembering to take the butter out of the fridge so it would be easy to spread. He looked at his watch. It was 10.58. He didn't want to start cooking in case the breakfast was ready before Catherine came down, and so he went upstairs to see if his Mistress was awake.

Standing outside the bedroom door, James suffered a sudden attack of nerves. He knew the woman inside was his wife and partner of many years yet he no longer thought of her as an ordinary woman, but as a superior being who existed on a plain far above him.

He tapped gently on the door and waited until he heard Catherine say ‘Come in’ before he went inside.

She lay in bed smiling at him, her hair in tangles and her lovely face flushed from her slumbers.

‘What time is it?’ she asked sleepily.

‘Nearly eleven,’ James replied, his stomach fluttering with a crazy elation.

‘I’m a lazy woman,’ said Catherine, stretching sleepily, ‘but I like that you knocked, James. It was thoughtful of you. A servant should always knock before entering his Mistress’ bedroom. Yes, I liked that, and I’ll expect you to knock from now on.’

‘Yes, Mistress,‘ said James, feeling a narcotic rush of arousal.

‘Have you done the shopping already?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘And put it away?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘My, you have been busy.’

‘Breakfast will be ready as soon as you come down.’

Catherine smiled to herself, strangely pleased by the idea of ‘coming down’ for breakfast. It made her feel spoiled and powerful, very much the lady of the house.

Just as it should be, she reminded herself.

‘I’ll have a shower and get dressed. I’ll be down in ten minutes.’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ said James, turning to leave.

‘One more thing,’ said Catherine.

James turned to face her. She was so beautiful it hurt to look at her. And she had that smile on her face, the mocking smile that always made him feel weak at the knees.

‘Take off your shirt,’ she told him.

‘Mistress?’ he said as if he hadn’t heard her correctly.

‘You heard,’ said Catherine, enjoying the power she held over him.

James did as he was told, taking off his shirt and laying it on the chair by the wardrobe.

‘Your shoes and socks as well,’ said Catherine.

He knelt and took off his shoes and then his socks which he stuffed tidily inside his shoes. He stood up straight, trying to look manly and strong, yet both craving and dreading her next instruction.

Catherine looked at him for a few moments, the smile still dancing in her eyes.

‘Now your jeans,’ she said. ‘And hurry up, it’s not a striptease.’

Flushing with embarrassment, he took off his jeans and once more stood before her wearing nothing but her pretty little panties.

There was nothing on earth he could do now to look manly or strong.

‘There you are,’ she said approvingly, ‘I like to see you like that, my girly little slave all pretty in her panties.’

It was true. It did please her to see her clever husband so reduced and exposed. It gave her a delicious sense of power and freedom.

James felt his cock stir and harden, pushing against the silky material. He closed his eyes in shame but Catherine showed no mercy.

‘Go over to the dressing-table and open the middle drawer,’ Catherine said, taking note of his arousal.

James felt his anxiety deepen. The middle drawer was where she kept her

slips and nightdresses. He told himself to refuse, to tell her he was calling a halt to their silly game, but her hold over him was too strong, and he went to her dressing-table like a man in a dream, and opened the middle drawer with a trembling hand.

‘You’ll find a camisole in there, like a little vest,’ said Catherine.

James found a pretty full-length slip and a silk nightdress, and then a black camisole. He held it up to show his Mistress.

‘No, not that one. A white one. More creamy than white. Keep looking.’

James searched through the silky garments, intoxicated by the feel of the soft material, until he pulled out a pretty cream-coloured camisole.

‘That’s the one, James,’ said Catherine. ‘Now put it on.’

‘I c-can’t,’ said James but, even as he protested, he knew he longed for her to make him wear it.

‘Of course you can,’ said Catherine firmly. ‘Hurry up now, don’t be slow.’

‘It’s too small.’

‘Do as you’re told. I’ll decide if it’s too small or not.’

James pulled the pretty camisole over his head, fearful he might break the thin shoulder straps. It was tight around his chest which made him feel bound and imprisoned.

‘Perfect,’ said Catherine. ‘A little small, but that suits you, and it matches your panties.’

James caught sight of his reflection in the dressing-table mirror. He was a ridiculous sight. The camisole did match his panties, and not only in colour. Both were edged with the same pretty lace hem. There was a gap of several inches between the camisole and the waistband of his panties which made him feel all the more foolish and feminine.

And yet a part of him loved looking so foolish for the amusement of his

beautiful Mistress.

It was the truth and he couldn't deny it.

'Why do I like this so much?' he asked himself. 'Why am I so weak?'

Unable to answer his own questions, he waited like a condemned man for his next command.

'That's much better,' said Catherine, pulling back the duvet and getting out of bed.

As she walked towards him, James marvelled at her beauty and grace. Her thick, tangled hair hung down to her shoulders, and a strap of her slip had slipped onto her arm, uncovering one of her lovely breasts. She didn't bother to pull up the strap, and she smiled at her servant, and kissed him, her breath warm and sweet, before whispering in his ear, 'I'm going for a shower now. Go and make my breakfast like a good little maid. I'll be down in ten minutes.'

Not trusting himself to speak, James gave a little bow of his head, then turned and left the bedroom. As he went downstairs, he tried to think only of preparing breakfast for his Mistress, but all he could see was Catherine's knowing smile, and her lovely figure beneath her clinging slip.

Catherine forgot about her slave as soon as he left the room. Her thoughts turning in an instant to Tom Shannon, she dashed back to bed where she found her phone under a pillow. She gave a little cry of excitement when she saw there was another message from him.

Sitting on the bed to steady herself, she took a deep breath before opening the text to read –

'The Red Fox on Hill Street. Tonight at 8.'

She felt a flash of anger at the command, yet arousal flared inside her.

He hadn't asked her to come.

He'd told her.

It wasn’t an invitation, it was an instruction.

Catherine didn’t like being told what to do, but it excited her all the same. She could always refuse, of course, or just not go, but she was already reminding herself where The Red Fox pub was, at the top of Hill Street near to the town centre, and she was smiling like a fool as she took off her slip and pearls and stepped into the shower.

HIS HEART hammering, James worked in the kitchen like a new maid nervous of displeasing her Mistress.

The house had a large garden and was set well back from the road, and the kitchen was situated at the rear of the building, so there was no possibility of any passer-by looking in and seeing him in his pretty underwear. All the same, he felt fearful and apprehensive. As he switched on the coffee-maker and slid the bacon under the grill, he reminded himself that the mail had already been delivered that morning, the window-cleaners never came on a Saturday, they were expecting no visitors, and their children had made no arrangements to come home from university for the week-end.

Wearing women’s clothes was bad enough, but being seen in them would shame him beyond endurance.

He put butter on a small plate and set it on the table with a pot of marmalade. He set a place with a knife and fork, finding a dark pleasure in the thought of Catherine eating alone at table. They usually ate at table together, but she was right, he told himself. He was her slave now, and had no place at table with his Mistress.

He squeezed an orange and set the glass of juice by her place, ready for her when she came down. As the minutes ticked by, he adjusted the vase of roses and the newspaper with devout precision, every sense alert for the

sound of Catherine's footsteps on the stairs.

When at last he heard her, his whole body began to tremble. In an effort to earth his excitement, he put slices of bread on to toast, turned the bacon under the grill, adding a sliced tomato, and lit the flames under the small pan he used to make scrambled eggs, and under the frying-pan for the mushrooms.

'Oh, this is lovely,' said Catherine as she came into the kitchen. 'What lovely smells, and you've bought me roses. Thank-you, James, that's so sweet of you.'

Her beauty took his breath away. Her hair still slick and shining from the shower, she'd dressed casually in a soft woollen jumper with a loose skirt and dark hose. She was carrying the knee-length black boots she'd worn the night before, and she sat down and put them on with unhurried grace. When she zipped them up, and flicked her skirt over her knees, James felt his heart miss a beat.

'You've bought me tights,' said Catherine, seeing the glossy packet on the work-top by the table. 'And in a lovely shade too. What a thoughtful slave you are, buying nylons for your Mistress. I may be going out again tonight. If I do, I'll be sure to wear them. I'll enjoy wearing them all the more, knowing you've bought them for me.'

She smiled at him but he could think of nothing to say. He could only stare at her adoringly, just glad to be in her presence.

'I'm starving,' Catherine said, coming over to him as he fried the mushrooms and stirred the eggs before turning off the heat so they wouldn't stick to the pan. 'There's only one thing missing,' she said mysteriously, opening a drawer and rummaging inside. With a triumphant flourish, she produced a flimsy strip of white cloth. James thought it must be a napkin until she held it at her waist and bent one knee prettily in front of the other in

a dainty curtsey.

The white cloth was a delicate little apron edged with a lace hem. The sight of it alarmed and aroused James in equal measure.

‘Well, how do I look?’ Catherine asked, a mischievous gleam in her eyes.

‘You look lovely,’ said James.

And she truly was lovely. The little apron made her look gloriously sweet and feminine.

‘I’m glad you like it,’ she said, quickly placing the apron round his waist before pulling it tight, and tying it with a large bow behind his back.

‘What are you doing?’ James exclaimed in astonishment.

‘You really didn’t think I’d be the one wearing this,’ said Catherine, adjusting the bow so that it hung to her satisfaction. ‘This is for a maid, not a Mistress.’

‘Please, don’t,’ said James, but with no authority in his voice.

‘Don’t be silly. You’ll wear it if I tell you to,’ Catherine insisted, ‘and don’t pretend you don’t like it.’

‘I can’t wear this,’ James pleaded, wondering why he didn’t just take it off.

‘I’ll hear no more about it,’ said Catherine, enforcing her authority. ‘And you’d better not burn my bacon.’

James rushed to take out the grill. Luckily the bacon was cooked in just the way Catherine liked — crisp at the edges but not overdone in the middle. Taking quick, nervous breaths, he buttered a slice of toast, and covered it with the scrambled eggs, then dusted the eggs with freshly ground black pepper, and added the bacon and tomato and mushrooms, before carrying the plate to table.

Catherine was seated at table, enjoying her freshly squeezed orange-juice. ‘Don’t forget my coffee,’ she said as he set the plate before her.

As he fetched the coffee-pot, James was acutely aware of the apron's bow tickling the backs of his thighs while the lacy hem brushed the fronts of his legs above his knees. A part of him hated the feeling. It demeaned him utterly, made him feel weak and effeminate and yet, to his despair, another, deeper part of him was thrilled by the feeling, and the surge of submissive arousal it woke in him.

He hated to admit it, but he loved being treated like this. He longed for Catherine to tease and torment him, and show him no mercy.

None at all.

'Oh, I could get used to this,' said Catherine, eating her breakfast with a hearty appetite. 'Being run after hand and foot by an obedient maid. Who wouldn't like it? You'd better be careful, James, I'm warning you. This is an arrangement I may come to like. In fact, you'd better be very, very careful, or I may just decide to make it permanent.'

She smiled up at James as he poured her coffee, and saw that he was concentrating too hard on not spilling to notice her smile.

'My God, he really is my slave,' Catherine thought in amazement. 'I could do it, I really could. I could make him into my obedient little slave, and live how I like. There's nothing to stop me.' It was a preposterous thought but it gave her a lovely feeling of anticipation, as if she was about to set forth on a magical journey.

'What a perfect start to the day,' she said to her blushing slave. 'Well done.'

'You're w-welcome,' James stammered, blushing with pleasure at her praise.

'But don't stand over me,' Catherine, taking a drink of coffee. 'I want to read the newspaper now, and enjoy the rest of my breakfast. A good maid has to learn to be invisible.'

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Then go and stand where I can’t see you.’

James retreated obediently to the sink and stood in silence, awaiting further commands. Looking down at his pretty apron he began to shiver with excitement. He took deep, slow breaths, and made himself be still.

Catherine turned the pages of the newspaper, but she couldn’t take anything in. It wasn’t James’ appearance or submission that distracted her, it was the thought of going to Tom Shannon that evening.

A dark and secret excitement burned inside her like a fever.

And so she remained only dimly aware of her husband’s adoring presence as she ate her breakfast, and dreamed of another man.

Trapped in his panties and apron, James watched Catherine from his place by the sink, marvelling at her slim figure, and delighting in the pleasure she took in the food he’d cooked for her. He hated himself for being such a weakling, yet he yearned for her to mock and scold him, and crush what was left of his foolish pride.

‘Well, James,’ she said when her plate was empty, ‘that was delicious. You can cook me breakfast any time you like. Every morning if you want. I’d certainly like it if you did. Would you like to do that for me?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he answered truthfully.

He could think of nothing he’d like more.

‘Well, who knows?’ she said with a smile, ‘perhaps it can be arranged.’

She rose from the table and walked towards him. She liked the way he couldn’t hold her gaze, his eyes falling instead to her lovely legs framed enticingly by her swaying skirt.

Without any ado, she reached under his apron and took hold of his cock as if she owned it, making him gasp in pleasure and surprise.

‘It’s all right, little slave,’ she assured him. ‘I’m only rewarding you for

buying me flowers and cooking me such a lovely breakfast. I could make you come right now,' she said, caressing his jutting cock, 'make you come in your panties and apron. I'm sure you'd enjoy that.'

James couldn't think let alone speak.

'Yes, I'm sure you'd enjoy it very much,' Catherine said, playing the haughty Mistress to the full, and greatly enjoying her role. 'Or I suppose I could let you fuck me. Would you like that? If I bent over the table, and pulled up my skirt and let you fuck me right here and now?'

'God, yes,' James gasped, fearful he'd come in her hand.

'Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you,' she said cruelly, her eyes still smiling. 'I'm afraid I have someone else in mind for that.'

She saw him wince in pain, but his suffering only inflamed her arousal.

'A slave doesn't fuck his Mistress. Of course not. Why should he? She has real men to do that.'

Catherine felt him thrust against her hand. She knew he was about to come, and so she let go of him, giving his cock a firm smack that made it sway from side to side.

'No, slave, not yet,' she said in a clipped and bored voice. 'Perhaps later I'll let you kneel and look up my skirt. If you're a very good slave, I might even let you kiss my panties. Isn't that what you like best, kneeling at my feet looking up my skirt? Come on, now, tell the truth.'

He made a choking sound mid-way between a cough and a sob.

'I beg your pardon,' she said, amusement in her eyes, 'I didn't hear you.'

'Yes, Mistress,' he said, so far under her spell he feared he might drown.

'God help me,' James thought in a panic. 'It is what I like best. To kneel at her feet, peering and peeking like a fool. To glimpse her panties, and kiss her nylon-sheathed legs. She knows me better than I know myself. I've become a weak and foolish man unworthy of her love, and there's nothing I

can do about it.'

It was a terrifying revelation, yet it brought him an exquisite thrill of arousal.

'Well, you've got that to look forward to, then, haven't you?' said Catherine, ruffing his hair and patting his panty-clad bottom. 'Run along now, and tidy up in here, then bring me coffee in my study. I'm going to read over the work you've done on my application.'

And with that she was gone, her pretty cotton skirt swirling around her knees as she left the kitchen.

WHEN JAMES brought her coffee in the room that used to be his study, his panties and camisole, and the little apron tied around his waist, made him feel exactly like a lady's-maid. Catherine didn't even look up from the computer screen as he put the coffee cup down beside her, yet her hand slid onto his thigh, stroking him absent-mindedly while she looked over his work from the night before.

She made the occasional comment as she read, mostly complimentary, only moving her hand from his thigh a few times to type in some appropriate jargon or make a small correction. When she reached the end of the application her hand was rubbing his buttocks through his panties in a lazy, proprietorial fashion.

'Well, James, you've outdone yourself, you really have. I can only say thank-you, and well done.'

James felt himself blush at her praise. It gave him the greatest satisfaction to know she was pleased with his work.

And Catherine truly was pleased with him.

Before reading over the application she'd made up her mind not to submit an application — it was too big a step too soon — but his crisp, unfussy

presentation made her into a strong and progressive candidate for the head-teacher's post. She still didn't believe she had the slightest chance of getting the job, but she no longer feared she would embarrass herself by applying.

He had targeted the two principal areas of criticism in the inspector's report — the lack of adequate provision for the less able pupils, and the general lack of involvement and success in sports across all age-groups. He'd addressed the first criticism by suggesting that each of the six depute head-teachers should return to the classroom for five periods a week — he knew Catherine believed strongly in senior management continuing to teach, and this would free up money for another support teacher to help struggling pupils — and he'd addressed the second area of criticism by outlining how the school might forge strong relations with the professional rugby and football teams in the town.

Catherine couldn't argue with his ideas. In fact, she would be more than happy to implement them if given the chance.

She noticed a little asterisk in the further information section with the words 'general's baton' beside it. 'What's this?' she asked, pointing to the words on the screen with one hand while continuing to stroke his buttocks with the other.

'You don't need to mention it in your application,' James explained, forcing himself to concentrate, 'but if you get to interview, then the fact that you're a woman will be the elephant in the room. It might be best not to bring it up at all but, if you do, perhaps you could couch it in terms of Napoleon's saying, "In my army every soldier carries a general's baton in his knapsack."'

'I could start by saying I'd expect them to give the job to the strongest candidate regardless of sex,' Catherine reflected.

'Yes, that would be clever,' said James, 'and then perhaps go on to refer to the general's baton, making it clear that the appointment of a woman head-

teacher would be a timely decision likely to inspire all the other female teachers in the region, who I believe account for more than fifty per cent of their staff.'

'It's a good thought, James, and I'll certainly bear it in mind,' Catherine said, deleting the note from her form, and reminding him of his reduced status by patting him on the bottom.

She knew she should read it all through again, but she hated these forms, and besides, she had other things on her mind.

'To Hell with it,' she said, pressing send and submitting her application. 'Nothing ventured, nothing gained.'

She felt better now that she'd applied, but the rest of the day stretched ahead of her. What was she going to do with her eager slave? And what was she going to decide about Tom Shannon?

On impulse she typed 'Female Domination' into the search box on the screen and, to her amazement, was immediately offered links to many thousands of websites.

'Well, James,' said Catherine, who had never made this kind of search before, 'it seems we're not alone.'

She opened several of the websites to reveal images of cold-faced women wearing stockings and high-heels, and usually brandishing whips.

'Are you attracted to these kinds of women?' Catherine asked, genuinely curious to hear his answer.

'No, Mistress,' James replied truthfully. He had looked at such sites but had never found them appealing. He much preferred images of women in elegant, everyday clothes, although he found it arousing when they wore cold and haughty expressions on their faces. Then he could imagine serving them in the same way he longed to serve Catherine.

Fashion models often wore the haughty expressions that fitted so well

with his submissive desires, and he imagined them treating him coldly as if he wasn't worthy of their time or respect. And so, on the few occasions when he did search the web for erotic images, he didn't visit pornographic or fetish sites, he searched for online retailers of expensive ladies fashion and lingerie. Those were the sites where he found, not only images of the kind of elegant, imperious women that haunted his imagination, but where he might from time to time buy clothes and underwear for his lovely wife.

Becoming impatient, Catherine changed her search to 'Dominant Wives' only to be presented with sites very similar to those she'd already seen. She was on the point of shutting down the computer when she caught sight of a website called 'Maitresse' with the subtitle, 'for women who dare to take charge.'

She opened the site, expecting to find more high-heels and whips, but found instead a long list of carefully selected links to both online clothing and fetish stores. She liked the way the ordinary world of women's fashion co-existed guiltlessly alongside a darker world of fetish and eroticism. It was a union which seemed to mirror her own life.

The clothing sites included Catherine's favourites, Hobbs and Jigsaw, where she often bought clothes for work, and the online lingerie sites for Gossard and Wolford. Her curiosity piqued, Catherine clicked on 'Toys' and her eye fell on a link intriguingly titled 'Queening-Stool' with a sub-heading which read 'putting him under.'

Fascinated, if a little alarmed at what she might find, she clicked on the link and laughed in amazement when she saw the image of a wooden chair cut with a hole in its seat, and an adjustable head-sling beneath, so that the slave could be restrained beneath his Mistress where he would have no choice but to worship her with his mouth and tongue. She found the contraption shocking but oddly exciting in its purpose-built precision. No

slave trapped under his Mistress in such a way would ever again doubt who was in charge of their relationship.

She scrolled down and found two images of the wicked contraption in use. In the first, a woman sat fully clothed reading a magazine and drinking a glass of wine while her naked slave lay beneath her. In the second, she'd hitched up her skirt and taken down her panties and hose so that her trapped slave had no choice but to worship her nakedness. As she dominated him in this way, she was laughing and talking on her phone as if completely unaware of her worshipper. It was a detail that aroused Catherine, and she clenched the tops of her thighs together to make the most of her secret pleasure.

Who could the woman be talking to on her phone?

Her sister? A friend? Neither, Catherine felt sure.

She was talking to her lover, of course she was.

Catherine scrolled down to see that the queening-stool, despite its high price, had over thirty reviews by purchasers, most of them very favourable. This wasn't fantasy, she concluded in surprise. This was real.

'What do you think, James?' said Catherine, reaching between his legs and squeezing his balls through his panties. 'Would you like me to buy you one of these?'

James swallowed but didn't speak which made Catherine smile. She was taking pleasure in her search. She'd always considered such things beneath her, and it came as a real surprise to find so many shops and businesses dedicated to the idea of female supremacy.

She clicked on the heading 'Chastity and Restraint' and the screen immediately offered her a selection of chastity devices for men. 'God, I'm an ignorant woman,' Catherine said, more amused now than shocked. 'I didn't know such things existed except for the wives of crusaders in the thirteenth

century.’

James watched her search in fascinated horror. He sensed a new power and purpose in his wife, a power that could enslave him utterly.

He saw that many of the restraining cock-rings and cages were fashioned from silicone or plastic, but others were made in polished steel. Catherine much preferred the look of the steel devices. Not only were they more appealing to the eye but they also looked as if they truly meant business. There were various statements from Mistresses and wives testifying to the quality of their chosen devices, and their efficiency as a means of reinforcing the submission of their husbands and slaves.

‘Listen to this, James,’ Catherine said, before reading aloud one of the testimonies for the highest-rated device, still caressing James through his panties as she read.

‘From the moment I fitted my husband with The Jailbird, he became more than my slave. He became my property. He was unhappy at first, but that was only to be expected. He thought it was a game, and I was going to unlock him soon, but I already knew deep down I was never going to set him free. It was too much fun to have him in my power, and to tease and torment him whenever I wanted. For a while I had to scold him to stop him begging me to release him. On a few occasions I even gagged him with my panties, but after about ten days of wearing his cage something changed inside him, and he seemed to accept his fate. I think he understood I was never going to unlock him, or see him as my husband again, as a proper man. ‘This is how it is for you now, David,’ I told him. ‘You’d better get used to it because it’s never going to change.’ These days he doesn’t think about himself any more, he thinks only of me which is how I like it. I wear my sexiest clothes around the house or when I go out on a date. It’s lovely knowing he can’t get hard in his little cage. He’s become very good with his tongue which I really enjoy as

he’s never kissed me like that before, but recently I don’t even let him kiss me like that. Now that I know how much he wants to, it’s much more fun not to let him. He helps me get dressed for my nights out and sometimes he starts to cry when he sees how good I look in my tight dresses and pretty underwear, but I just laugh at him, and I get very angry if he tries to touch me. The funny thing is, the crueller I am, the more he loves me. He worships the ground I walk on, and does everything in the house. I never have to lift a finger. Think of that, girls. The cooking, the shopping, the laundry. Everything.’

‘Sounds like someone I know,’ said Catherine in a wicked aside, before reading on.

‘I only let him use the old bathroom at the back of the house where there’s no hot water. The bars of his cage allow him to wash and shower without finding any relief. He doesn’t sleep in my bed any more. Why should he? What use would he be? I make him sleep on a camp-bed in the laundry-room, and I have a little hand-bell for when I need anything. I love to see him come running when I ring it. He waits on me hand and foot, does anything I tell him. I know it’s wicked, but I love the feeling of power it gives me, and my lover likes it too. He’d always been jealous of my husband, but now David’s locked away for good, my lover knows I belong only to him, and he’s become the man in my life. We’ve taken to dressing poor David in my old underwear and dresses, and calling him names. He looks such a fool we can’t help being bad to him. We’ve talked of buying a whip or a cane. I think it’s only a matter of time before we do. Sometimes we let him watch us in bed. It’s lovely making him watch, knowing he can never have what he most wants. There’s no feeling like it. And so, ladies, I can honestly say The Jailbird has changed my life in ways I could never have imagined. Go on, girls. Treat yourself.’

‘Well, James, what do you think?’ said Catherine through laughter. ‘This can’t be real, can it? Surely not.’

When James didn’t answer, Catherine looked up from the screen and saw that his face was flushed, and he couldn’t look her in the eye. ‘What’s the matter?’ she asked. ‘Are you all right?’

James wasn’t all right.

His head was spinning and he didn’t know what to say. He knew perfectly well that what Catherine had just read out was the worst kind of nonsense, a preposterous, cooked-up fantasy of female authority and male submission, but nonetheless he’d found it horribly arousing, and he felt profoundly disappointed with himself. He’d always considered himself an intelligent man, strong and successful, but here he was, aroused by a badly written sales pitch for a sex toy.

It was ridiculous.

No, it was worse than ridiculous.

It was completely and utterly shameful.

Catherine slid her hand under his pretty apron to the erection jutting from his panties. ‘Ah,’ she said knowingly, ’here’s the trouble. Did my little slave like hearing about the cruel lady locking her husband away? Well, did he?’

‘I don’t … I’m not …’ James protested, not knowing what he was trying to say.

‘Tell the truth, James,’ Catherine said soothingly. ‘I won’t mind if you do. In fact, I’d prefer it if you did. It’s best not to have secrets from each other. Would you like it if I locked your cock away so you couldn’t come, so you couldn’t be a proper man any more? Just a slave. My little serving-slave.’

‘N-no …’ he managed to say.

‘Are you sure?’ Catherine asked, feeling the tell-tale pulsing of his erection. ‘I wouldn’t have any objections, if it’s what you’d like. And I might

like it too. It might be fun to try something new. Just think, I could lock you up and hide the key. Or I could give it to my lover for safekeeping. Then it would be up to him if you were ever set free. Or I could wear it on a little silver chain around my neck so you could see it, but never have it. People would ask me what the key was for, and you'd never know if I was going to tell them the truth or not. Perhaps,' she said with a smile, 'I'd tell them it was the key to my husband's heart.'

'I d-don't … I don't want that,' James insisted, terrified of what he really wanted, and the fearful power of his desire.

'But I think I might want it,' said Catherine.

She wasn't really being serious, but she was surprised at how much she'd relished the description of the wife's dominance and the husband's chastity, and the image of the wife and lover in bed while her husband looked on helplessly had struck a very deep chord with her, reminding her of her dream of making love with a handsome stranger in a car-park at night while James looked on.

And it made her think of Tom Shannon.

She'd never looked at web-sites like these before — had never thought she ever would — but she was finding a guilty pleasure in the experience. 'I tell you what, James, if you don't want to buy it for yourself, then buy it for me. I have a feeling I might enjoy locking you up.'

She laughed to see the fear come into his eyes.

'Oh, don't worry,' she reassured him, 'you don't have to buy it if you don't want to. It's not a direct instruction, but if you do buy it, think of it as a present for me. A gift for your Mistress.'

James nodded in response, hoping she'd change the subject.

'Very good,' said Catherine, turning back to the screen, but what I'm really looking for is … Ah, here we are.'

She'd seen a heading entitled 'Riding-crops.'

The web-site was in German, and it displayed a selection of hand-crafted leather riding-crops. It made no mention of sex or dominance, and seemed to be a site for genuine horse-riders. Somehow that made the items on view all the more erotic as if their true purpose was hidden behind a veil of respectability — until Catherine saw the prices. The brown leather crop she was admiring had a price of 250 Euros, and it was by no means the most expensive.

'Dear God,' said Catherine, 'look how much these cost? I could buy one in the riding-shop in town for a fraction of the price. If only you'd found my old crop.'

She felt James shift awkwardly.

'What is it?' she asked.

'I d-did find it,' he confessed, suddenly compelled to tell the truth.

'What?' Catherine asked in amazement.

James was a scrupulously honest man, and she'd never known him tell a lie.

'I found it last night when you were out,' he said. 'In an old suitcase in the cellar.'

'Then why on earth didn't you tell me?' Catherine said, curious to hear his answer.

'I don't know,' he said. 'I'm sorry.'

'And so you should be,' she said, exaggerating her disappointment in his behaviour. 'Were you frightened, was that it? Frightened I'd hurt you?'

'I might have been. You seemed so …' He stopped himself from saying any more.

'What, drunk?' she said.

'Maybe a little,' he said meekly, not wishing to say anything against his

Mistress.

‘Well, it’s true, I was drunk. More than a little, and you probably did the right thing. I’ve never beaten anyone before. The state I was in, I’d probably have put you in hospital. But all the same, I’m surprised you lied to me. It’s really not like you, James.’

‘I’m sorry, Mistress,’ he said with genuine contrition.

He loved and adored his beautiful Mistress, and wanted always to speak the truth to her.

‘I’m sure you are, James, but I really can’t let this go. You understand that, don’t you?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said, feeling faint with arousal.

‘Lying to your Mistress is a very serious offence.’

He swallowed, and nodded in agreement.

‘I know,’ he said.

‘If I let this go there’s no knowing where it might end. I’d never be sure if I could believe you or not. I’m afraid I’m going to have to punish you, James, and quite severely at that. You need to understand that you can never, under any circumstances, tell lies to your Mistress.’

‘I’m sorry, Mistress.’

‘I’m afraid being sorry’s not enough. Not nearly enough.’

As she stood from the desk, Catherine barely managed to keep her face straight. Her performance was so preposterous she felt sure they’d both dissolve into laughter and yet, when she saw the fear and devotion in James’ eyes, she understood that, for him at least, it was no performance.

And perhaps it was no performance for her either, for she’d enjoyed saying the word ‘severely,’ liked the way it had felt leaving her mouth, and she felt a growing excitement as she led the way out of the study, across the hall and down the narrow stairs to the cellar. Confessing to his lie had given

her an opportunity to really enforce her rule, and she wasn't going to waste it.

James followed obediently, feeling very foolish in his pretty underwear and apron, yet utterly enchanted by Catherine's lovely figure, and her slim legs in her black leather boots.

'Well, then, where did you find it?' she asked as she switched on the lights in the cellar.

'In here,' James muttered, going into the small side-room off the main cellar.

While he rummaged in the side-room, Catherine looked round at the chaotic stacks of old furniture and boxes containing so many reminders of her children, and her married life with James. She felt a nostalgic fondness for the bygone years. James had been a loyal, loving husband, and a good provider. It had been a happy marriage, and she'd loved raising her children, but a stronger feeling eclipsed her nostalgia — a longing to move on, to make a fresh start, and begin a new part of her life.

She'd had all this and it had been good.

Now she wanted something else. Something new. Something more.

One thought, one name, filled her mind so that a radiance came into her face.

Tom Shannon.

'It's in here,' said James, carrying a battered suitcase from the side-room. He put it down on an old high chair and snapped open its brass catches. Lifting out the brown leather riding-crop, he handed it to Catherine.

'What a lovely old thing it is,' said Catherine enjoying the feel of the crop in her hand as she whisked it through the air. 'And are those my jodhpurs too?' she said, taking them out of the suitcase and holding them against her. 'They'll never fit me now.'

'I'm sure they will,' said James, remembering how lovely she looked in

them.

‘Flattery will get you everywhere,’ said Catherine. ‘But I’m still going to punish you, there’s no getting out of it, but what was that little room?’ Catherine asked, curious about the side-room with its heavy door and large, rusty key.

‘The previous owner kept expensive wines,’ said James. ‘That’s where he stored them.’

‘Under lock and key?’ said Catherine, going into the side-room.

‘Yes,’ said James, suddenly uneasy.

‘I can think of something else I could keep under lock and key,’ said Catherine, a gleam in her eyes as she looked round the room with its bare stone walls. ‘Or perhaps I should say someone. Can you think of who it might be?’

‘N-no, Mistress,’ he lied.

‘Oh, well, I’m sure it will come to you?’ she said archly. ‘Later on today, I want you to clear everything out of here. It shouldn’t take you long.‘

She tugged at the heavy door. It was jammed open against the wall, and wouldn’t budge an inch.

‘And make sure the door works, and the lock too. Oil it if you have to.’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Very good. Now, follow me,’ she said, going back into the main cellar and climbing the stairs to the house. ‘I’m sure you’ll want to get this over with as soon as possible.’

She tapped the riding-crop against a booted calf as she climbed the stairs. She knew it was a corny thing to do but nonetheless it gave her a thrill of excitement. She was surprised not to feel any nerves at the prospect of beating a man for the first time. On the contrary, she was looking forward to having her husband so cruelly at her mercy.

Following her obediently up the stairs, his gaze never leaving her incomparable legs and the swaying hem of her skirt, James didn't know if he was in a wonderful dream or a terrifying nightmare.

'Come on, then, let's be having you,' Catherine said, leading the way into the sitting-room.

James came into the room and stood like a fool in his apron and pretty underwear. He couldn't believe this was happening. He told himself it must truly be a dream, just like his dream of going down in quicksand while Catherine looked on and left him to his fate.

Beginning to feel far more fearful than aroused, James hoped he would soon wake from his dream.

Rolling up her sleeve, Catherine flicked the crop through the air, enjoying the hissing sound it made. Impatient to get on with things, she looked round the room for a suitable place of punishment. She thought about ordering him to lie across the arm-rest of the settee or one of the armchairs, but she wanted him in a central position where she could walk around him, and have all parts of him entirely at her mercy.

She felt her sexual power rise and surge within her. Perhaps being dominant really was part of her nature, she thought. Why else would it feel so good to take charge of her husband like this? Just walking aroused her, made her wet between her legs. She'd never beaten James before, never beaten anyone, yet she felt utterly sure of herself, as if this moment had been coming for a very long time.

She placed her foot on a leather stool and pushed it into the middle of the room.

'Kneel down and lie across this,' Catherine said briskly, tapping the stool with the looped tongue of her crop.

James told himself to refuse. He mustn't give in to her like this. It was

ridiculous, impossible.

‘Hurry up,’ she said, ‘I haven’t got all day.’

James urged himself to laugh in her face, and yet he felt himself sink slowly to his knees, and lay his chest across the stool as he’d been told, presenting himself for punishment.

He heard her laugh, a haunting sound that cut his pride like a blade, yet thrilled him to the core. He hated being humbled in this way, but he longed for more of her cruelty.

Much more.

‘Well, well, James, what a sight you are,’ Catherine said, walking slowly around him, enjoying the feel of her skirt swaying at her knees. ‘If you could see yourself, with your bottom in the air in my pretty little panties. Not to mention your apron tied round your waist.’

She flicked the apron’s bow out of the way with her crop, giving her a clear view of his panty-clad buttocks, and walked in front of him so he could see her pretty feet and legs in her black boots.

‘So here we are, James,’ she said. ‘You on your knees, and me standing over you with a whip in my hand. I suppose it had to come to this one day. We’ve never done anything like it before, and yet it feels like the most natural thing in the world, wouldn’t you agree? All roads lead to Rome, as they say.’

She lifted her foot and placed the toe of her boot on the stool a few inches from his mouth.

‘I think we discovered last night how much you enjoy kissing my boots. You do remember kissing them, don’t you, James? On your knees in the hall at the foot of the stairs?’

James made a strange animal sound which she took to be ‘yes.’

‘Well, then,’ she said, ‘what are you waiting for?’

Catherine smiled to see him stretch forward and place his lips on the toe of her boot. It was a lovely feeling to have him so deeply in her power.

‘That’s good, James, but I’d like a longer kiss. Prove to me what a slave you are. Go on. Show me how much you love your Mistress?’

He opened his lips and pressed them hungrily against the black leather as if it was the smooth flesh of a beautiful woman.

‘That’s more like it,’ she said warmly, welcoming his submission, ‘but don’t just kiss my boot. Lick it. Show me what a slave you really are. Lick it with your tongue.’

Utterly enslaved, James worshipped her boot with his tongue, thrilled by the taste of dust and leather.

It was the taste of shame and degradation, and he adored it.

‘Now the other one,’ Catherine said calmly, replacing one object of devotion with another. ‘Make it shine, make it gleam.’

His mouth fell on her other boot with even greater hunger so that it soon glistened with his saliva.

‘That’s enough,’ she said, withdrawing her boot from his hungry mouth, ‘I think you’re ready now.’

She walked slowly to one side of him, pleased at the way his gaze followed her boots.

‘Are you ready, James?’ she asked. ‘Ready for your punishment?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said in a tremulous voice.

‘Louder,’ she said coldly.

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he almost shouted.

‘Very good,’ said Catherine, stroking his neck and shoulders with her crop. ‘But you’re still wearing your panties. That won’t do, will it? Should I take them down, or would you like to do that all by yourself?’

Once more he made a sound like a muffled sob.

‘I think you should take them down, James. Yes, I think that will be best. It will show me that you accept my discipline and authority, and you’re ready and willing to suffer for your Mistress. Don’t you agree, James?’

‘Y-yes, Mistress,’ he stammered, once more feeling the room spin around him.

‘Well, then,‘ she said, ‘don’t keep me waiting. Take down your panties.’

Completely entranced, it no longer entered his mind to disobey.

Reaching back, he hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his panties, and pulled them down to his knees. The flimsy knickers caught for a moment on his jutting cock, adding to his shame and arousal.

Catherine smiled at the sight of his erection, pleased to see how excited he was by his surrender. It added to her conviction that her cruelty was consensual, and that she was leading their marriage in the right direction.

She slipped the tip of her crop under his camisole and pushed its pretty hem up to his shoulder-blades, admiring his smooth skin, and his well-muscled back and firm buttocks.

‘I’m going to punish you now, James,’ she said, laying the crop across his bare buttocks to steady her aim, ‘and I’m not expecting any cries or tears. Be brave for your Mistress, do you hear me?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said in a trembling voice.

She lifted the crop and brought it down on her husband’s bare flesh. It made a disappointing sound, more like a slap than the ringing crack she hoped to hear. She delivered four more blows in rapid succession but James gave no reaction. He hardly seemed to feel any pain at all.

In truth, the blows did sting James, but the pain was far from unbearable, and he felt sure he’d be able to endure his punishment in a brave and manly fashion. If he could only do that, he told himself, then he could at least survive the ordeal with some dignity and pride intact.

Catherine took half a step backwards, and then another full step to the side, until she stood almost level with James' bare bottom. She made a few practise strokes through the air, swinging the crop harder, and adding a little flick of her wrist at the end of the stroke. As a girl she'd been in the English Schools' badminton team, and she tried to imagine her crop striking her husband the way her racket used to strike the shuttlecock for a winning slam.

As with many sports, she told herself, beating her husband would be more a matter of rhythm and timing than brute force.

She struck him again, and was rewarded not only with a sharp whiplash sound, but also with the pleasing sight of James jumping in pain and surprise.

This was more like it, she thought, a lovely wildness between her legs.

She lashed him five more times, taking her time over each blow. James did not cry out but his breathing became louder and more ragged, and Catherine saw his fingers dig into the cushioned stool.

Catherine delivered three more fiery cuts until James began to squirm in agony. At the next blow he lifted his head and looked over his shoulder in pain and alarm.

'Face the front,' she told him sternly.

When he obeyed, she struck him four more times until he cried out in pain, and started to lift himself from the stool.

'Did I tell you to move?' she asked him coldly.

'It really hurts,' he pleaded.

'Of course it hurts,' she said, the indifference in her voice adding to his distress. 'What did you expect? There's no point in a punishment unless it hurts.'

'Please, no more,' he begged, fearful the pain would cause him to weep. That would be an indignity more than he could bear.

'I'll decide when to stop,' said Catherine, losing herself in her role. 'Lie

back down,' she told him.

He didn't move, and Catherine placed the tip of her crop on his neck and spoke fiercely.

'Do what you're told, James, or you'll regret it, I promise.'

For a few moments he remained where he was, and then he bowed his head and bent his arms, and lowered his chest once more onto his punishment stool.

Thrilled by his submission, Catherine immediately lifted her arm and brought the crop down on his tender flesh. He cried out in pain, and Catherine felt a dark, forbidden pleasure race through her blood. Wanting more, she laid into him with fiery, flaying strokes that made him cry out like an animal in torment. Yet, lost in her new pleasure, she barely heard his cries, and she had no idea how many more times she'd struck him before she finally stepped away from her quivering slave.

Trembling with arousal, Catherine took great gulps of air to regain control of herself. On the brink of orgasm, she walked up and down for a few moments before looking down at her slave. She saw with some relief that she hadn't broken his skin, but his buttocks were criss-crossed with a mass of angry stripes, and his loud cries had died to a low, lingering moan of pain.

Savouring her woman's power, she stepped in front of him. Even in his deepest pain and degradation, James thrilled to the sight of her lovely legs and shining boots, and the smell of her scent, and the soft whisper of her skirt against her hose.

'It's over now,' she said gently, both moved and aroused by his suffering. 'You can get up now, James, up onto your feet.'

He stood slowly, his panties slipping from his knees to his feet where they lay in a puddle of lace. He could not lift his head, so great was his shame.

‘Look at me, James,’ Catherine said, wanting to add to his shame. ‘Look at your Mistress.’

He lifted his head and looked into her eyes.

They were smiling, and she was beautiful.

It must be a dream, James told himself again.

Such a lovely, kindly looking woman could never have delivered such a cruel beating.

It simply wasn’t possible.

Catherine studied her slave’s face. His top lip was trembling, and there were tears in his eyes, but he was not crying, and she decided to praise him a little.

‘I’m very pleased with you, James. You’ve been very brave, but you won’t lie to me again, will you?’

‘N-no, Mistress,’ he replied, thoroughly chastised.

‘Or disobey me?’

‘No, Mistress.’

‘In fact, from this moment on, you’ll do whatever I say?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘You will think only of my pleasure and comfort at the expense of your own.’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘I’ll expect that from now on, James, I really will. This may have been a game once, but it’s no game now, I promise you. It’s how we’re going to live from this moment on. You will be my slave and I will be your Mistress. Make no mistake about it.’

He looked at her with an expression almost of wonder in his eyes. His buttocks were still on fire, and his legs were trembling in shock and fear, yet he felt a deep love for her, and an even deeper gratitude for her cruel

dominance over him.

She lifted the hem of his apron with her crop, curious to see if he was still hard after his beating. His cock was very soft and small, almost shrunken, as if hiding from the pain of his beating. She was a little disappointed to see that pain hadn't aroused him. After all, weren't slaves and masochists supposed to enjoy pain, particularly when administered by their cruel mistress or master?

Overwhelmed with embarrassment, James pulled down his apron in an attempt to cover his nakedness.

'Hold your apron up,' Catherine commanded him sternly. When he obeyed, she tapped his shrunken cock lightly with the tip of her crop, and voiced her thoughts.

'How small you are,' she said, putting scorn in her voice. 'I thought you'd be harder. Didn't you enjoy your beating? I thought slaves were supposed to like being beaten by their Mistresses.'

'I'm not … I don't …' James stuttered, unable to find words for his reeling emotions.

'Well, it doesn't look as if you enjoyed it,' Catherine said, still tapping his cock with her crop. 'Maybe deep down you liked it, somewhere down under the pain. Somewhere in your heart and soul. Perhaps it's the feeling of surrender you love not the pain. Is that possible, I wonder? I've a feeling it is. Do you think I'm right, slave?'

James' cock answered for him. Despite his pain, James felt hugely aroused by his wife's violence and her dominant manner. The insolent tap-tap of her crop against his cock, the shameful feel of the apron's hem in his fingers, and the knowing, matter-of-fact tone in her voice, struck a chord deep in his senses, and once more his cock grew fully erect under her amused gaze.

'Well, well, James, it certainly looks as if I'm right,' said Catherine,

laughing at this unmistakable proof of her female authority, and running the loop of the crop up and down the side of his erection.

On a sudden impulse she tried to fit the loop over his cock-head, but the loop wasn't quite wide enough. Not to be denied, she took the loop between her thumbs and tugged with all her strength. The leather gave a creaking sound as it stretched a little, and she saw James' cock twitch with arousal at the sound. Catherine tried once more to fit the loop, and this time it slipped onto his erection. Giving the crop a quarter turn, the loop dug tightly into his cock which made James wince, and brought her a delicious feeling of power and control.

Now she had him so thoroughly under her yoke, Catherine couldn't resist a further demonstration of her power. 'Come on, then,' she said briskly, tugging on the crop, 'let's go for a little walk.'

He gasped in shock as she led him up and down the large living-room. He trotted after her, hunched and cowed, like a prisoner in a chain-gang. 'That's it, walk to heel. Good boy,' she said, walking faster and tugging on the crop, twisting the loop tighter as she led him around the room like a dog before taking him out into the hallway.

'It's just as well there's no-one here, isn't it, James?' said Catherine, finding the large hall pleasingly public and exposing. 'Imagine if we were having a party, and all our friends were standing out here. What would they think to see me leading you around like this?'

In a place beyond speech, James said nothing.

'They'd see the truth, wouldn't they? They'd see that you were my slave,' said Catherine, beginning to move the loop up and down on his straining cock. 'They'd know then, wouldn't they, James? They'd know that you're not a man any more. They'd know that you're no longer my husband or lover. The other men would like that, knowing I was free and available. I'd

see them smiling, looking at my legs and my breasts. Oh yes, they'd like that, and I'd like it too.'

James began to moan as Catherine moved the crop faster, discovering to her delight that she could move it up and down at lightning speed with a simple, flickering motion of her wrist.

The tormentingly quick strokes brought James to the brink of orgasm in a matter of seconds.

'Stop, please,' he gasped, his eyes wide with shock.

'What's wrong?' Catherine asked in a voice both innocent and goading.

'You'll m-make me come,' he stammered.

'Maybe I'd like you to come,' said Catherine, maintaining the speed of her flicks. 'It will be your reward for doing the shopping, and bringing me flowers, and cooking breakfast and wearing your panties and apron like a good little slave. Your reward for telling the truth, and taking your punishment like a brave soldier.'

To his astonishment, her false praise gave him a feeling close to pride, but the feeling didn't last long as the lightning fast flicks of the crop rushed him towards climax. He felt his knees tremble, and heard himself begin to moan as if his voice belonged to another man.

'Please, Mistress, stop,' he gasped.

'No, James,' she said, a smile in her voice, 'I'm not going to stop. I'm going to keep doing this until you come. Right here in front of me. It won't take very long, unless I'm much mistaken. Hold up your apron. I want to see.'

He closed his eyes tight shut, and did as he was told.

God, he looked a fool, Catherine thought, holding up his little apron as her flickering crop tormented his straining cock to the limits of his endurance.

'That's a good little slave,' she said, increasing the speed of the crop until

he could hold back no longer. ‘Come now. I want to see you. Come for your Mistress. Now, right now. I want to see you do it in front of me. This minute, do you hear me? This minute!’

Suddenly, howling with animal pleasure, James bucked and contorted and fell to his knees as an explosive climax struck his senses like a storm. ‘Oh God, oh God!’ he cried out in ecstasy as powerful jets of sperm flew from his cock, narrowly missing Catherine, followed by smaller but no less urgent spurts which landed on the polished tiles close to her feet. Yet Catherine did not slow the speed of her strokes. Some part of her wanting to make him pay for his pleasure, she kept stroking relentlessly even after he’d come, so that his cries of pleasure quickly became cries of pain and distress.

Only then did she relent, dropping the crop which hung like an abandoned leash from his softening cock.

‘Look at the mess you’ve made,’ said Catherine, lacing her voice with scorn.

As she stood above him, the disdain she felt for her husband gave her an oddly pleasurable sensation. How easy it had been to vanquish him, and bring him to his knees. At her feet, with his head bowed and gasping for breath, she felt he barely mattered any more, and was no longer of much consequence in her life. She felt bored with him, and besides, she had more important matters to consider.

‘I need some time on my own,’ she told him, ‘to think things through and decide how we go from here. I’m going into town. I’ll be back in a few hours. While I’m gone you can reflect on what’s just happened, and what it means for the future of our marriage.’

James was glad to hear her say the word ‘future.’

He felt so small and useless, he’d half-expected her to talk of divorce.

‘Hang the crop on the wall in the laundry-room,’ Catherine went on. ‘It

will act as a reminder of the consequences of any idleness or poor behaviour. I'm quite prepared to use it again if I have to, believe me, James, I am. And fold your apron and put it back in the kitchen drawer. I'll expect you to wear it from now on whenever you're cooking for me. I like how pretty and feminine it makes you look, how obedient.'

She waited for him to lift his head and look at her, but he was too ashamed to meet her gaze.

'Shower and change,' she instructed him. 'You can wear your own clothes for the rest of the day. Have something to eat, and then clear out the room in the cellar. I have plans for it. Is that clear?'

'Yes, Mistress,' he mumbled.

Now that he'd come, and he was no longer made crazy by desire, his recent surrender seemed absurd and impossible. Yet the evidence of his submissive passion streaked the shiny hall tiles and, if his desire had gone, his feelings of shame had increased tenfold.

'Light the fire in the living-room,' Catherine commanded as she took her coat from the cloak-room. 'When I come back we're going to sit down and have a talk. A serious talk.'

Taking a coat from the cloak-room, she opened the front-door and left the house, leaving her husband alone and spent on the hall floor.

CATHERINE DROVE into town, and went for a walk along the river-path between the bridges. Had she really just put her husband over a stool and thrashed his bare bottom with her old riding-crop? Had she truly become a Mistress and turned James into her slave? It didn't seem possible, and she walked quickly, amazed at what she'd done, but strangely sure of her purpose. Much as she'd enjoyed increasing her control over James, she knew she was really clearing the way to taking a lover.

She was finding a safe place to put James, a psychological dungeon where she could keep him prisoner while she enjoyed her freedom with another man. It was entirely selfish, she knew that, yet she didn't care. She had gone beyond judging herself, and the rewards were tantalising.

With James under her spell, she was free to do as she pleased.

If only she had the courage.

The thought of such freedom gave her a dizzying sense of vertigo, and she slowed her stride, and made herself take deep, calming breaths.

Catherine wasn't a stupid woman. She knew that this was most likely only a passing fever, a middle-aged woman's foolish dream. And she also knew that succumbing to this fever would put her marriage at risk no matter how well she played her hand, and yet her feelings of excitement persisted.

She sat on a bench where she lit a cigarette and watched the world go by. God, it was good to feel like this again. She loved her husband, but in a quiet, settled way. What possessed her now was passion, a passion to live and love, and break free of the rules that had kept her imprisoned for so long.

She took out her phone, but there were no more messages from him, and she read his last message again.

'The Red Fox on Hill Street. Tonight at 8.'

This time she felt no sudden flaring of arousal. She recalled how tall and handsome he was, and the pretty women she'd seen him with on previous nights at the club, so young and in such short dresses. He was a ladies-man, of course he was, a practised charmer. All his talk of worshipping her from afar as a schoolboy was nothing but Irish blarney, Catherine told herself, a way of making her into another of his conquests.

And who did she think she was, applying for a head-teacher's post, and dreaming of another man in her bed? She shook her head at her stupidity and arrogance, and made up her mind to have no more to do with Tom Shannon.

Why should she?

She had all she needed in life, and she should be grateful for it and not look for more.

She put away her phone, and walked back towards the shopping centre where she planned to buy some new clothes for work.

Was it a coincidence that she found herself walking past The Red Fox pub on Hill Street? There were certainly shorter and quicker routes to the town centre. And why was it she ended up buying, not the plain skirt and blouse she'd planned, but an expensive cashmere dress she knew she'd never wear for work?

She seldom wore high-heeled shoes but she found a pair of three-inch peep-toed heels that she liked the look of, and she bought them and went for a coffee in the mall where she bumped into Libby Jones, the principal teacher of English in Catherine's school. She'd always liked and respected Libby for the way she worked hard and took no prisoners. Their talk was warm and easy, and Catherine found herself telling Libby about applying for the head-teacher's post at Ashton High, laughing off her chances of even being interviewed, but Libby admonished her sternly, as was her way.

'Don't do yourself down,' said Libby. 'There are plenty of men out there who'll do that for you. It's about time we had a woman head-teacher in the region. It's a scandal there isn't one already. More than one, for God's sake. It's like we're living in the 1950s. For what it's worth, I think you're an excellent candidate, and I'm not the only one who'll think that. Go for it, Catherine, and good luck. The only downside would be losing you from our staff. You're the only human being in the whole bloody management team.'

Catherine felt lifted by Libby's encouragement — the formidable Miss Jones did not give praise easily — and, as she drove home, Catherine discovered that she'd changed her mind yet again.

She was going to wear her expensive new dress and shoes, and go to meet Tom Shannon that night in The Red Fox pub.

The only issue was how James would take the news. As she pulled up at her house, she decided on the simplest course of action — she would tell him her plans, and leave him no choice in the matter.

Oh, she might appear to ask his permission. He was her husband after all, and must be allowed some small say in such a momentous decision, but Catherine knew, given his current state of mind, he was in no position to stand against her

JAMES WELCOMED her home with an anxious, fearful look on his face which pleased Catherine. She noticed there were dust-marks on his jeans and t-shirt, and she surmised he must have been clearing out the cellar-room as she'd commanded. That pleased her too.

'Bring me a glass of water,' she said as she strode past him into the living-room.

'Yes, Mistress,' said James with a little bow of his head. She'd been gone for nearly three hours, more than enough time for his submissive desires to come alive again, and seize control of him once more.

In the living-room, Catherine put her packages on an armchair and sat on the large settee. The fire was burning in the grate and everything was spotlessly tidy. She couldn't remember the last time she'd done any housework. She didn't have to. James did it all.

'He's really been my slave since he stopped work,' Catherine reflected. 'All I have to do is make the position official.'

'And permanent,' she thought with a smile.

When James came in with her glass of water, Catherine noticed he was walking in an odd way, slightly hunched over and with small steps. She

thought at first he'd filled the glass too full, and was walking carefully to avoid spilling it, but the water was an inch short of the brim.

'What's the matter, James?' she enquired as she took the glass from him. 'Are you unwell?'

'I'm fine,' he replied defensively.

'Well, you don't look fine.'

She recalled how hard and how often she'd struck him with her riding-crop.

'Take down your jeans and show me,' she instructed him briskly.

'It's all right,' he said in a petulant tone of voice.

'Do what you're told, James, unless you want another beating. Hurry up, now.'

Blushing with shame, James undid his jeans and lowered them to his knees. He was wearing a pair of white cotton boxer shorts.

'Your underpants as well,' said Catherine curtly. 'For heaven's sake, do I have to tell you everything?'

He eased his shorts carefully over his buttocks and turned to show his wounds. Catherine winced and sucked in air when she saw the damage she'd inflicted on his pale flesh. The criss-crossing strokes had turned to angry bruises. Several of them had become raised welts, and the bruised skin was broken and seeping in two places.

'Dear me,' said Catherine, careful not to sound too sympathetic, 'that does look painful.'

She made a mental note to use more restraint next time, but she was amazed to discover she felt neither guilt nor remorse for her actions. On the contrary, she felt something akin to pride at the severity of the punishment she'd administered and, underneath that, a dark amusement.

She couldn't help thinking there was something ridiculous about a man

allowing himself to be beaten on his bare bottom, and that stopped her from viewing it as a serious crime. After all, she thought, any man weak enough to surrender to a woman in this way deserved a little pain and discomfort. What else could he expect?

‘You’re a cruel and wicked woman, Catherine Dempsey,’ she told herself, oddly happy at the description.

‘Go to the medicine box in the bathroom and bring me some antiseptic cream,’ she said, ‘and don’t be slow.’

James pulled up his pants and jeans and left the room. Catherine took another drink of water and closed her eyes. Late afternoon sunshine was streaming in through the window. The warm sunshine and the heat from the fire made her feel sleepy. She looked at her watch. It was only four o’clock. She still had four hours until she was due to meet him.

Tom Shannon.

What a lovely name for a lovely man.

She felt irritated with James for interrupting her reverie when he came back with the cream for his wounds. He handed her the little jar, and stood awkwardly by her side.

‘I’m not going to have to tell you again, am I?’ she asked impatiently.

Not looking at her, James took down his jeans and shorts.

‘I can’t reach,’ she said, unscrewing the lid of the jar. ‘Come closer.’

James did as he was told.

‘Turn round, for God’s sake, and bend over.’

He obeyed his stern wife, feeling an unwanted arousal as she spread the antiseptic cream over his flayed buttocks, paying particular attention to the broken skin.

Even though it was Catherine who’d inflicted his wounds, James felt moved almost to tears by her gentle, nursing hands. The cream stung sharply

on the broken skin, and yet James had to stop himself from falling to his knees and kissing her feet.

‘There, now,’ said Catherine, screwing down the lid and putting the jar on the little side-table by her glass of water. ‘That’ll stop any infection. Well, then, what do you say?’

‘Thank-you, Mistress,’ he muttered, thrilled by the injustice of his apology.

James went to pull up his underpants and jeans, but Catherine forbade him.

‘No, James, it’s best to let some air on those cuts. Take off your jeans and pants, and keep them off for the rest of the day.’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said dazedly, bending to take off his shoes and socks before removing his jeans and underpants.

Catherine couldn’t help smiling at the undignified figure he presented, bending over with his bare, beaten bottom in the air. She noticed his cock grow hard again. ‘My, my, James,’ she thought with amusement, ‘you really are a glutton for punishment, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he mumbled meekly.

‘Now, then, it’s time we had that talk I promised,’ she said, patting the settee beside her. ‘Come and sit by me.’

James moved to obey, but Catherine immediately shrieked in alarm.

‘No, no, don’t sit down! What am I thinking about? You’ll leave antiseptic cream all over the couch. You’d better kneel at my feet. It’s the best place for you, and it’ll be kinder on your poor bum.’

James sank obediently to his knees where he gazed at the glorious vision of his wife’s nylon-clad knees and black leather boots. When she adjusted the hem of her skirt with a deft flick of her wrist, he wondered if she’d done it deliberately to let him glimpse the white heaven of her panties.

‘You can look up my skirt if you like,’ Catherine said, ruffling his hair fondly. ‘I won’t mind.’

Weak with shame, James leaned his forehead against her lovely knees.

‘You don’t have to say anything,’ she said. ‘All you have to do is listen. You can do that, can’t you?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said dazedly.

‘If I want to hear from you, I’ll ask. Is that clear?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he replied, aroused beyond all sense.

‘It can’t have escaped your attention,’ Catherine began, ‘that certain very important changes to our marriage have taken place today. To put it simply, what was a game we played for fun has stopped being a game, and become something else altogether. What was a game has become real. What was fantasy has become reality. I now consider myself in all important aspects to be your Mistress, and you to be my slave. Really and truly I do. Do you understand that, James?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘I know it seems ridiculous, but it’s the truth all the same, and I believe the punishment you suffered under my crop has made your new status very clear to both of us.’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ James mumbled.

‘I want to make it clear to you that I’m happy with this new arrangement. I enjoy it very much, and I want it to continue.’

She tapped the dainty toe of her boot, tap-tap-tap, between his legs, making him shiver in delight as his erection bobbed up and down.

‘And it seems someone else is very happy too.’

James blushed, and pressed his cheek against her knee, but his cock grew even harder. He knew that the more he submitted to her in this way, the more difficult it would be to ever appear as a man in her eyes again, but that

knowledge only deepened his desire to bow to her female authority, and suffer the lash of her scorn.

‘If we’re honest about it,’ said Catherine, ‘you’ve really been my slave since you sold your business and stopped going out to work. You can call it being a house-husband if you like, but we both know what’s really been going on. And so I’ll expect you to continue in that way for as long as I think fit. You’ll do all shopping, cleaning, cooking and laundry, and perform any other tasks I set you such as chauffeuring or dealing with family — and please be aware that our children are never to know about this part of our marriage. To them we’ll always just be Mum and Dad — but from now on I won’t ask you when I want something done, I’ll tell you. I’ll instruct you as a Mistress instructs her slave. Is that clear?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ said James, ascending to a cruel heaven he’d only ever dreamed of finding.

‘If any of your work is below par, or if you disobey me, or display any bad temper, then I won’t hesitate to put you over the stool, and you wouldn’t want that again, would you, James?’

‘No, Mistress,’ he said, acutely aware of the pain he still felt from his beating.

‘This morning I told you this new arrangement would last only for the week-end. Well, I’ve changed my mind, and that’s no longer the case. The period of time is now indefinite. You’ll live and work as my slave until such time as I decide otherwise. In other words, this may be a permanent arrangement. I trust that’s understood.’

James couldn’t speak, and he felt a tingle of fear down his spine.

‘You’re not saying anything, James. Are you all right?’

‘I’m n-not sure,’ said James. ’Will I really be your slave?’

‘Yes,’ said Catherine, utterly sure of herself, ’that’s exactly what you’ll

be.’

‘You’re serious about this, aren’t you?’

‘I’m perfectly serious. I’ve told you, James, this is not a game any more, you have my word on that.’

Once more James felt a shiver run down his spine.

‘I take it you have no objections,’ said Catherine.

‘C-can’t we talk about it?’

‘We are talking about it.’

‘But if I’m your slave,’ he said, his brain reeling, ’will you still love me?’

‘I really don’t know,’ said Catherine, surprised into laughter by his question. ‘After all, I’ve never had a slave before. Not a real slave.’

‘I need you to love me,’ he said, suddenly afraid he might burst into tears.

‘I’m not sure slaves are allowed to have needs,’ said Catherine, ‘but don’t cry, James. I’m sure I won’t stop caring for you. Perhaps I’ll love you in a different way, as a friend and the father of my children, or as my life’s companion. There are many different kinds of love in the world, and I want to explore them all.’

‘B-but you won’t love me as a man?’ said James, choking on his words. ‘As a lover?’

‘No, James, I don’t expect I will,’ said Catherine gently, touched by the depth of his love for her, and by her memories of their long and happy marriage.

‘I don’t know what to say,’ said James, his eyes bright with fear.

‘Then answer this question,’ said Catherine. ‘Do you want to be my slave?’

‘God knows,’ said James.

‘Answer me honestly.’

‘I am being honest.’

‘Try thinking of it this way. If I told you I’d never be your Mistress again, never again take charge of you, and we’re going back to being an ordinary man and wife, would you be happy or disappointed?’

‘Honestly?’

‘Of course.’

‘I’d be disappointed.’

‘Well, there you are then,’ said Catherine. ‘And so I’ll ask you again. Do you want to be my slave?’

‘If … If it’s what you want.’

‘Oh, come on, James,’ said Catherine scornfully. ‘Don’t play that game with me. We’re not children, don’t blame me for the way you are. I asked what you wanted, and I expect an honest answer. Come on, now. Let me hear it loud and clear, unless you’re afraid to tell the truth.’

But James lowered his head and said nothing.

‘Are you, James, are you afraid to speak the truth?’

‘Yes,’ he said quietly. ‘I am.’

‘In that case, if you don’t answer, I’ll make the decision for you. I’m quite capable of over-ruling you, you found that out this morning. If fact, I rather like the idea of forcing you, of leaving you no choice in the matter. It’s a very sexy feeling taking charge of you like that, and I think you might like it too. If I forced you. If I made you do what I want.’

Once more she tapped her foot between his legs, smiling to see him wince but make no complaint.

‘But I think,’ she continued, ‘since this is going to be more of a long-term arrangement, I’d prefer to have your agreement. So, James, are you going to stop being a coward, and tell me what you want?’

‘I’m not a coward,’ he protested.

‘So you say,’ she said with a disbelieving laugh, ‘but I’m not so sure.’

‘You know I’m not,’ he said, his face reddening in anger.

‘Then prove it,’ said Catherine, smiling as she adjusted the hem of her skirt, allowing him another glimpse of her pretty white panties beneath the smoky gauze of her hose.

The sight of her panties aroused James deeply. He knew she’d displayed them deliberately to weaken and enslave him, and he should have been angry with her, but he only felt a delicious drowning sensation that pulled him down and down.

She knew where the power lay, and he was helpless against her.

‘I’m going to ask you for the last time. Do you or don’t you want to be my slave? Hurry up, I’m waiting.’

‘Please, don’t do this,’ he pleaded.

‘That’s not an answer,’ she said impatiently.

‘Stop, please, it makes me ashamed.’

‘Of course it makes you ashamed,’ she jibed. ‘That’s part of the pleasure. In fact, I sometimes think that’s what you like most of all.’

He groaned, and pressed his head against her thigh.

Catherine knew she almost had him, and she decided to speak more gently.

‘It’s time now,’ she said softly, running her fingers through his thick brown hair. ‘Sweet James, it’s time to give me your answer. Will you be my slave, yes or no?’

‘Yes,’ he said in a whisper so quiet she barely heard him.

‘Thank-you, James,’ said Catherine, feeling a delightful mix of fondness and triumph. ‘I couldn’t be happier, really I couldn’t. But I warn you, it won’t be easy for you. I have a feeling I’m going to be a very strict Mistress, I won’t lie to you.’

He looked at her with such trust and love she felt compelled to lean

forward and kiss him on his forehead.

James shivered, and sighed in pleasure, her sweet, tender kiss easing his troubled soul.

‘I’ll expect you to suffer for me, James,’ she said gently, ‘make no mistake. I’m afraid there’s nothing to be done about that. Your suffering gives me a very special kind of pleasure, I think you know that.’

‘I love you, Mistress,’ he said quietly.

‘I know,‘ said Catherine, ‘and that’s why I can be so cruel to you. Now, I’m going to ask something else of you. It will hurt you very much, and test you to the limit, but I’m going to ask it of you all the same. You’ll have to be strong. Very strong and brave. Can you do that for me?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said, dreading what was to come.

‘Promise me.’

‘I promise.’

‘Last night I told you I’d met a man, a very handsome man. A man I liked very much. Well, that man’s asked me to meet him tonight, and I’ve decided to go.’

James winced and gave a little cry of pain. Tears came into his eyes.

It was what he most dreaded in all the world but, to his despair, it was also what he most desired.

‘Poor baby,’ said Catherine as if she meant it. ‘There are tears in your eyes.’

‘I’m s-sorry,’ he said, ashamed of his weakness.

‘Don’t be sorry,’ she said, stroking his hair, ‘I know how much it hurts, and you’re very brave to suffer it for me. Cry if you like. I won’t mind, really I won’t. Let it all out.’

James felt hot tears roll down his cheeks. It was a strange and distressing feeling. He hadn’t cried since he’d been a small boy.

‘There, now,’ said Catherine, wiping away his tears. ‘You’ll feel all the better for a good cry.’

Once more Catherine felt astonished at herself. She’d had to force herself to speak kindly for she felt no pity for her weeping husband.

None at all.

She felt only a vague and pleasurable contempt which fuelled her arousal, and made her want to hurt him all the more.

Was this sadomasochism, or s&m, or whatever they called it?

She could only imagine that it must be, and she must be a sadistic woman. There was no other explanation.

‘But you must never be angry with me, James,’ she warned him. ‘Angry or jealous. I simply won’t tolerate it. When I go on my date tonight, I’m going to expect a whole new devotion from you. Do you understand?’

He nodded his head but didn’t speak.

‘Then let me hear you,’ she said.

‘I understand, Mistress,‘ he said through tears.

‘I’m not sure that you do,’ said Catherine, ‘so let me be very clear. As your Mistress, I’ll be free to take a lover whenever I wish while you’ll enjoy no such freedom. You’ll be my servant and slave, and live only for my pleasure. I’ve seen how much you like it when I tell you about other men, but it will be a very different matter when I really take a lover. It will hurt and shame you very much. You’ll feel terrible anger and jealousy, of course you will, but I expect you to suffer those for me just as you suffered under my crop today. Your suffering adds to my pleasure, James, I want you to know that, and take comfort in the thought. I want you to suffer for me. Can you do that?’

He nodded his head in surrender.

‘Show me a whole new devotion?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said in a whisper.

‘I knew you’d be brave,’ said Catherine, astonished yet exhilarated by her nerve.

Once more her praise brought James a strange kind of pride. He longed to win her respect by suffering in any way she desired of him.

‘It’s what I want, and I think it’s what you want too,’ Catherine said, gazing at him fondly in a way that made him feel he was still important to her. ‘This has been coming for a long time. It’s been in the air between us for months and months. If you’re honest with yourself, you know that’s true, don’t you?’

‘You’re beautiful,’ was all he could say, enchanted by her.

‘I will be cruel to you,’ said Catherine, ‘cruel and selfish. What do you have to say about that?’

‘It frightens me,’ said James.

‘It frightens me too, but I’ll be brave enough for the two of us,’ said Catherine, making him smile through his tears. ‘I punished you very harshly today,’ she confessed. ‘I got carried away, and was too hard on you. It’s a strange and lovely feeling having a man at your mercy. It went to my head, and I’m sorry if I hurt you more than I should have.’

‘It’s not that,’ said James, although the severity of her beating had badly shaken him. ‘I’m frightened I’ll lose you. I couldn’t bear that.’

‘You won’t lose me,’ said Catherine gently. ‘I’ll still be your Mistress. You’ll see me every day, cook and clean for me, keep in touch with our children, help me in my work, wash and iron my clothes, polish my shoes, keep the house and garden. You’ll be closer to me than ever, just in a different way, that’s all. We’ve had so much already, marriage and children, success at work, it’s time we tried something else. I think you’ll find there’s a whole new world to be explored as my slave. We can explore it together.

Don’t you want that?’

‘God, Cathy, I don’t know.’

He’d used her name, and her shortened name at that, but she chose not to rebuke him for it. He was in a very vulnerable state, and she had bigger battles to win.

Impatient to be done, she decided to risk all with a single throw.

‘All right, then, James,’ she said, suddenly adopting a no-nonsense tone, ‘seeing as you don’t know, I think we should put a stop to this right now.’

James looked up quickly, very surprised by this new direction.

‘Say the word and we’ll stop,‘ she said. ‘I mean it. I won’t be your Mistress any more, and you won’t be my slave. I won’t go out tonight, and we’ll go back to the way we were. Well, what do you say?’

James felt a surge of hope. He would be free. He could keep her for his own, never have to share her with another man. He waited to hear himself say, ‘Yes, yes, end this nonsense now. You’re my wife, the woman I love with all my heart, and I‘m your husband, not your slave.’

And yet … And yet …

His mouth, suddenly dry, moved as if to speak.

But he said nothing.

Nothing at all.

‘Well, James,’ Catherine said sharply. ‘Do you want this to end? Do you want to stop being my slave?’

He lifted his head and looked into her eyes. He’d never seen her look so beautiful and, for a moment, he wondered if she was a mortal woman at all. Such beauty could only belong to an angel or goddess come down to earth to claim him for her own.

‘You need to answer,’ she told him, ‘and you need to answer honestly. Do you want this to stop?’

‘No,’ he said, a current of fear tingling in his blood.

‘You want to be my slave?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ll stop if you want. All you have to do is say the word.’

‘I know.’

‘I’m not forcing you.’

‘I know you’re not.’

‘You don’t want it to stop.’

‘No, Mistress.’

‘There’ll be no going back.’

‘I know that.’

‘So this is your decision? You agree to be my slave?’

‘Yes, Mistress,‘ he said, laying his head on her soft lap, feeling again the exquisite drowning feeling he’d come to crave.

‘Even though you know what it will mean?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘You won’t be my husband any more. You’ll be my slave, and I’ll be free to do as I please. Do you understand that? Really and truly, do you?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said from a place beyond pride.

‘Then let me hear you ask for what you want.’

‘Please,’ he begged her, ‘please be my Mistress and make me your slave.’

‘Very well, James,’ she said in a grave voice, ‘I will.’

‘Thank-you,’ he said gratefully, kissing the hem of her skirt, and pressing his cheek against her knee. ‘Thank-you, thank-you.’

‘Will you be a good slave?’ she asked in a lighter tone.

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘How good?’

‘I’ll serve you in every way I can,’ he vowed so earnestly she nearly

ruined it all by laughing.

‘How will you serve me?’

‘I’ll cook and clean for you, wait on you, do all that you ask.’

‘No matter what?’

‘No matter what.’

‘My patient log-man?’ said Catherine, quoting from The Tempest, her favourite play.

‘Yes,’ said James, marooned on his own magical isle.

‘Then it’s settled,’ said Catherine, suddenly feeling very tired. ‘I’m going for a lie-down, and while I’m sleeping we’re going to try something new. Something we’ve never tried before.’

With a mysterious smile she rose from her chair and left the room calling out ‘follow me’ over her shoulder.

Feeling more than naked in just his t-shirt, James followed Catherine down to the cellar. He knew with a helpless ache of desire what she intended to do with him.

‘In you go,’ she said, pushing open the door to the little store-room.

He did as he was told without complaint.

As he walked past her, she saw again his bruised buttocks, but she saw also his erect cock bobbing and swaying as he entered his cell.

It was cold in the store-room, and Catherine took up a bundle of old blankets from a box in the cellar, and threw them down at his feet.

‘You’ll stay in here until I come to let you out,’ she told him.

Without another word, she closed and locked the heavy door.

The key turned easily in the oiled lock.

The light switch was on the wall outside the store-room.

She flicked the switch and climbed the cellar stairs, leaving him in darkness to reflect upon the power and glory of his cruel Mistress.

WHEN CATHERINE woke from her nap she lay for a few moments not knowing who or where she was, and then she sat up with a start, remembering all.

How long had she left James alone in his dark cell? She looked at the bedside clock. It was well after six. He'd been locked away for over two hours. She sprang out of bed and ran downstairs to free him.

How could she have been so thoughtless?

And yet, as she descended the stairs, a strange pleasure took possession of her, and she found herself smiling at the thought of James locked in his cell while she'd lain in the comfort of her warm bed. It was an intoxicating pleasure that made her stop at the foot of the stairs and touch herself between her legs.

He was only a slave after all. Shouldn't he be expected to suffer for his Mistress?

She told herself to let him out, but she wanted to prolong her arousal, and so she turned and slowly climbed back up the stairs, already looking forward to the joy she'd find in taking a long, hot bath knowing her husband lay imprisoned far below her.

As the taps roared, and she dropped her clothes and underwear on the bathroom floor, Catherine thought how James would be able to hear through the pipes the sound of her bath filling from two floors above. Would he be angry at her for enjoying such comfort while he remained her prisoner? Or would the thought of her selfishness arouse him, and enslave him further?

She was surprised to discover that she didn't much care what he thought, although thinking of him being angry aroused her in a strange and dreamy kind of way. She turned on the radio, and groaned with pleasure as she lay back in the hot, scented water. She listened to some classical music and then

to a well-written drama about a police officer in love with a prostitute. It was really a retelling of Carmen, but it held her attention, and she shed a tear when the police officer gave his life to save the woman he loved.

The seven o'clock news came and went, and still Catherine luxuriated in her bath. She didn't let herself think about Tom Shannon. Now that the time of their rendezvous was so close, she decided she'd left it too late to get ready in time to meet him at eight-o'clock. She took her time drying herself and, when she put on make-up, she told herself it was only to lift her spirits and, when she slid her new woollen dress over her prettiest underwear, and the sheer black tights James had bought for her that morning, she told herself it was only to remind herself how well the dress looked on her.

She slipped on her new high heeled shoes, liking their sexy, peep-toed style, and then turned from side to side in front of the wardrobe mirror, frowning as she always did when she examined her reflection. The heels lengthened her legs, and the heavy wool dress managed both to cling and flow, making the most of her slim figure, and naturally good legs.

Catherine was pleased with her appearance. Her hair was behaving unusually well, and the dress really did suit her, she decided, making her look slim and elegant.

She put on perfume and went downstairs to the kitchen where she wolfed a sandwich and drank a glass of milk. She glanced at her watch. It was nearly eight o'clock, but what did it matter as she wasn't going to meet him anyway.

She'd go for a drive instead, and listen to music as she drove. A wonderful Lucinda Williams CD was in her car-player. She liked to sing along with Williams' slow, sensual drawl in the privacy of her car. As she drove and sang, she'd try to make sense of her strange new life as a dominant woman.

She went into the hall and took her raincoat from the cloak-room. She put

it on and admired her reflection in the hall mirror. Once more, she was pleased with what she saw. Turning up the collar of her coat, she thought she looked like a woman of mystery, a woman with a secret in her life.

She'd left the house and was going down the front steps when she remembered her slave in the cellar. 'My God,' she said out loud, laughing in surprise, 'you've forgotten all about him.'

For a few moments she considered driving away and leaving him where he was. The thought of poor James listening to her drive away gave her a warm and pleasurable feeling but she relented, and went back inside and descended the stairs to the cellar.

She turned the key to his prison and pushed open the heavy door. Switching on the light, she saw him huddled under his blankets in a corner, shielding his eyes against the sudden brightness.

She had no interest in talking to him, or hearing what he had to say.

'Out you come,' she said in a brisk, no-nonsense voice.

He got to his feet, shivering with cold and covering his nakedness with the blankets.

'Leave the blankets and come upstairs. Hurry up, I'm going out.'

He did as he was told, and walked past her into the main cellar where he stood in a daze, waiting for his Mistress to climb the stairs before him.

'After you,' said Catherine impatiently.

As she climbed the stairs behind him she admired the welts and bruises on his buttocks. She really had laid into him, and she wondered how he must feel to climb the stairs ahead of her, so naked and defeated, and knowing she could see the marks of shame on his flesh.

But she no longer much cared what he felt. He'd made his choice. He had surrendered to her. She was his Mistress and he was her slave, and must suffer under her yoke. It was as simple as that.

Now that she'd asserted her authority with such primitive, sexual force, their Mistress-slave relationship seemed neither strange nor troubling. On the contrary, it seemed like the most natural thing in the world.

'I don't know when I'll be back,' she said when they reached the front-door. 'Don't put on any clothes while I'm gone. I like to think of you naked, and those cuts need to heal.'

'Yes, Mistress,' he said meekly.

She saw his cock begin to harden under her stern authority.

'While I'm gone, you can get on with any housework that needs doing. Pick up my clothes from the bathroom floor, put clean sheets on the bed. My skirts and blouses for next week need ironing. You can get on with that, it'll keep you out of trouble.'

'Yes, Mistress.'

Catherine marvelled at how easy it was to manage her slave.

'When you've done your chores, you can go on the internet and buy me a gift. Maybe you could buy that chastity belt we read about. The Jailbird, I think it was called. Will you buy that for me, James?'

'Yes, Mistress,' muttered James, terrified yet thrilled to the depths of his soul.

'Good, I think I'll like that,' said Catherine, pleased to see his cock come fully erect. 'And no playing with yourself when I'm out. I mean it, James. I know how much you like it when I go on a date, but I want you just as hard when I get back as you are now. Is that understood?'

'Yes, Mistress,' he said in a trembling voice.

'Well, it's time I was gone. Do you have anything to say before I leave?'

'I … l-love you,' he stammered, fearing his heart might stop beating.

'Of course you do,' Catherine said briskly as she did up the buttons on her coat. 'I'd expect nothing else.'

His cock leapt at this casual belittling of his deepest emotions.

‘There’s something you need to do before I go,’ she said, sliding one foot forward and arching it prettily. ‘Well then, what are you waiting for?’

Spellbound, James fell to his knees and pressed his lips adoringly against the nylon covered toes peeping from her open-toed shoe. Her arrogance thrilled him, as did her scent, and her red-painted toe-nails glistening through the silky gauze of her hose, a potent new addition to her witch’s spell.

‘And the other one,’ she said, presenting her other foot for his attentions. ‘You’ll be pleased to know these are the tights you bought for me this morning,’ she said as he worshipped her other foot. ‘Thank me for wearing them.’

‘Thank-you for wearing them, Mistress,’ he said obediently.

The thought that he’d helped her look so beautiful for another man only added to his passion. Strangely honoured by her wearing of his gift, he kissed and licked her shoes with even greater frenzy.

‘You may be male,’ Catherine said from a place far above his bowed head, ‘but you’ll never be a man again. A real man. You need to know that, and accept it.’

It was a cruel thing to say, but she enjoyed saying it.

Inflamed by her cruel remark, James began to kiss her lovely ankles and calves, but Catherine, laughing at his eagerness, stepped back, saying, ‘No, James, that’s not for you, you know it’s not. I’m going now.’

‘No,’ he gasped, gazing up at her desperately.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I’m late as it is.’

‘Stay,’ he begged. ‘Please.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ she said, opening the front-door.

‘Don’t go,’ he entreated. ‘Please, you can’t.’

But all he received in reply was the sound of the door closing, and her

heels tip-tapping prettily down the front steps.

When he heard the car door open and close, and her car start up and drive away from the house, James felt himself engulfed by a dark, transcendental pleasure stronger than he'd ever known. On his knees, in a limbo between heaven and hell, he bowed his head and kissed the cold tiles where only moments before his cruel and lovely Mistress had stood so proudly above him.

'I love you, Catherine,' he said to the empty hall. 'I love you.'

AS CATHERINE drove into town, she turned up the music and sang along to Lucinda Williams' moody and sensual 'Essence.'

It was fun to imitate the singer's slow Louisiana drawl, and the song was so catchy and erotic it made Catherine wonder if any other country singer had ever sung so well or so honestly about sex.

She crossed the river, passing the railway station and the concert hall before she turned into Hill Street. Why shouldn't she? It was as good as any other street to drive down.

There were plenty of parking places at this time of night, and she pulled in halfway down the steep hill. She sat for a while, then got out, locked her car, and walked back up the hill towards The Red Fox pub. Where was the harm? It was after 8.30.

He'd be long gone by now.

Bound to be.

She took a deep breath and went into the bar.

The bar was very old but carefully refurbished, and much bigger than it looked from the outside. It still had the charm of an old English inn without seeming quaint or touristy. Already busy, the horseshoe shaped bar was two deep all the way round. It was always difficult for a woman to come into a

pub alone, and Catherine was pleased to see there were almost as many women as men among the crowd. All the same, as she searched the room for him, she took care not to make eye-contact with any of the men whose gaze strayed in her direction.

Trying not to appear lost or alone, she looked in every corner, but there was no sign of him.

She was too late.

He'd given up on her. Either that or he hadn't come at all.

She was about to leave when a young barmaid carrying a tray came over to her, and said, 'You must be Catherine.'

'Yes, I am,' said Catherine, wondering how she'd known.

Seeing her confusion, the young woman smiled and said, 'He gave me your description.'

'My description?' said Catherine.

'Oh, yes,' the young woman said, her smile broadening. 'He told me that if a very beautiful woman comes into the bar her name will be Catherine Dempsey, and you must bring her to me right away.'

Pleased by the compliment, Catherine felt her face redden.

'This way,' the young woman said cheerfully, leading the way through a door marked 'Private' and along a corridor lined with beer barrels. Catherine followed her up a short flight of worn stone steps that led to an oak-panelled door.

The young woman knocked and went in.

And there he was, sitting behind a wide desk in a large low-ceilinged room that seemed part office and part living-room.

Tom Shannon.

Just seeing his broad, handsome face brought Catherine a rush of pleasure.

‘Your guest is here,’ the young woman said, smiling at Catherine as she turned and left the room, closing the door behind her.

‘Catherine,’ he said, surprise in his voice as he got to his feet. ‘I’m so pleased to see you. I wasn’t sure if you’d come.’

‘Neither was I,’ said Catherine.

His jacket over the back of his chair, he was wearing an open-necked white shirt and dark suit trousers. The low ceiling made him seem very tall, and the braces against his white shirt made his shoulders appear broader that she remembered.

He really was an exceptionally good-looking man, and Catherine felt herself shiver in excitement as he came towards her.

‘Can I take your coat?’ he said.

‘Yes, thank-you,’ said Catherine.

His fingers brushed her bare arms as he took her coat, and he found it hard not to stare at her. Her elegant woollen dress made the most of her lovely figure, and she filled his eye in a way that made him catch his breath.

‘I lit a fire,’ he said, bending to put a log on the fire that was burning in the grate, ‘and I’ve opened a bottle of wine. Would you like a glass?’

‘Please,’ Catherine managed to say.

The room was warm and welcoming with only the light from a desk-lamp and the fire.

He poured a glass and handed it to her. She smiled nervously and took a drink, finding it delicious.

The way the wine wetted her lips made him want to kiss her.

‘So, here I am,’ she said, feeling foolish as soon as she’d said it.

‘Here you are,’ he said, gazing at her and feeling just as foolish.

‘Are you the manager?’ Catherine asked, looking around the room.

‘No,’ he said, ‘Annie’s the manager.’

‘Annie?’ said Catherine.

‘The girl who found you.’

‘I see,’ said Catherine. ‘So who are you?’

‘I’m the owner,‘ he said, drinking his wine.

She looked at him, not sure whether to believe him or not, and wondering if he was some kind of gangster.

‘It’s true,’ he said, ‘I own this bar and another one by the station, and I’m part-owner of a bar up in Glasgow, and I’m thinking of buying a bar in Madrid, a bar even older than this one called La Fira.’

He’d spoken simply, without fuss or boastfulness.

‘Perhaps he is a gangster,’ Catherine thought, believing such men often migrated to Spain.

‘I worked in La Fira for two years when I was in my twenties,’ he said in his deep, warm voice. ‘I fell in love with it. The owners are old now, looking to sell. They’ve offered me a good price, but I’m still not sure I can afford it.’

‘You should go and see it again,’ said Catherine, ‘find out if you still feel the same.’

‘Yes, I should,’ he said, suddenly sure that he would do as she advised, and fighting the desire to ask her there and then to come with him.

He barely knew this woman, but he liked everything about her.

‘Well, what would you like to do?’ he asked clumsily.

He wasn’t used to feeling awkward with women but her beauty disarmed him, and he still felt a measure of the adoration he’d felt for her as a school-boy. ‘We could go downstairs to the bar. Or we could go out for a meal if you like.’

‘Or we could stay up here by the fire and drink the rest of the wine,’ Catherine said, hoping she hadn’t sounded too forward.

‘Is that what you’d like to do?’

‘Yes,’ she said, a radiance coming into her face, ’I think it is.’

Her composure suddenly unravelling, she astonished herself by leaning her head against his shoulder, and putting a hand on his broad chest. She felt the beating of his heart, inhaled his cologne.

He put a hand gently on her lovely hair, but she pulled away, saying, ‘I’m so sorry, I don’t know what I’m doing.’

‘Catherine,’ he said. ‘Catherine Dempsey, you really are the most beautiful woman in the world.’

And then he took her in his arms and kissed her.

He intended it to be a gentle first kiss, but desire swept through him like fire, and his mouth forced her lips apart as he thrust his thigh between her legs. He made himself pull his mouth from hers and look into her eyes, giving her the chance to stop him if she wanted, but she only kissed him again and put her arms around him, pulling him against her with all her strength.

Lost in the kiss, and her eager passion, his hand slid under her dress, loving the way the heavy wool moved over her nylon-clad legs. Before he could stop himself, his hand went between her legs, cupping her firmly, feeling the heat of her beneath her underwear. She groaned in delight, pushing against his hand, and then she turned from him and leant over his desk, glancing back at him over her shoulder with a look of such shy yet naked desire his heart filled with tenderness for her.

Yet he did not behave tenderly.

Bundling the hem of her dress in one hand, he pushed it up her back, running his other hand over the smooth curves of her buttocks. He heard her moan, and felt her push back against his hand, spurring him on. He told himself to slow down, and be gentle, but he loved the feel and scent of her, and the taste of her lipstick in his mouth, and he took hold of her panties and

hose and tugged them down to her knees.

Catherine gasped in shock at being so suddenly exposed. She knew this was wrong. It was too much, too soon, not the way a woman should behave with a man she barely knew.

But it was what she wanted.

Oh God, it truly was.

The hot shame Catherine felt at showing herself so lewdly only added to her desire. Unable to stop herself, she hid her face against the desk and swayed her hips to make him want her all the more and, when his fingers found her most private place, she bit her lip to stop from crying out in delight. She'd never felt this before, never known such hunger for a man, and she surrendered to the feeling like an animal in the wild.

Her body was in charge now.

She had no say in the matter.

'Love me,' she said helplessly. 'Love me.'

'Catherine,' he answered devoutly.

She arched her back in welcome but when the tip of his cock pushed inside her, she recoiled in alarm. She wanted him to be big, but this was too much, more than she could bear.

He heard her cry of distress, saw her eyes clench shut in pain. He knew he was hurting her, but he couldn't stop now. He wanted her too much, and he could feel the heat of her desire. He pushed in half of the way, but she cried out more loudly, and collapsed onto the desk.

A schoolgirl again, Catherine felt a sense of failure close to despair. How could something she wanted so much cause such pain? And it was a stinging, fiery pain that brought her close to tears; a pain much worse than her first time, but then a kind of miracle happened, and her insides seemed to liquefy as her body made room for him, and the fierce agony was overtaken by a

sweetly rising pleasure.

Feeling her accept him, he thrust inside her causing her body to stiffen as the pain returned but soon his steady rhythm brought her such delight she was moving with him, faster and faster, racing away from the pain, imploring him, cursing him, begging him not to stop. He reached under her dress, and pushed up her flimsy bra, taking hold of her lovely, full breasts, bringing her close to orgasm.

She had never felt so possessed by a man. It was an exquisite, heavenly feeling, a delirium she wanted to last forever.

As one wave of pleasure broke over her, she felt the rise and swell of the next wave and, when it had swept through her, she let herself relax, sure he must have come with her, but still he moved inside her, hard and relentless, driving her beyond pleasure to bliss.

Her legs trembled and she surrendered completely, losing all sense of herself, and she wondered if she'd lost consciousness for the next thing she knew he was carrying her in his arms, whispering her name softly, kissing her cheek and saying, 'It's all right, Catherine, it's all right.'

He laid her down gently on the settee by the fire, and then lay beside her, wrapping her in his arms so that she lay with her head on his chest.

She felt gloriously safe and cherished, surprised to feel so at ease with him. When at last he rose to fetch his glass of wine, she looked down to see she was missing both shoes, and her tights and panties were dangling from one leg while he was still fully dressed. She quickly took off her underwear, hiding it behind her back and adjusting her bra under her dress while he took cigarettes and a lighter from his jacket and lit up a cigarette. He gave her a drink from his glass, then lay back down beside her and shared his cigarette with her, flicking the ash onto the fireplace. He looked at her and saw laughter shining in her eyes.

‘What?’ he said, smiling back at her.

‘I’m a mess, look at me, but you seem to have managed the astonishing feat of having sex without taking off your trousers.’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘it is astonishing.’

They laughed until tears came into their eyes, amazed at how easy they felt with each other.

‘Years of practise, I imagine,’ she said.

‘Not at all,’ he said. ‘It’s merely one of the many advantages of wearing braces.’

Even as she laughed, her eyes were drawn to the front of his trousers. She could see the shape of him pressing up against the dark cloth. She put his hand on him, feeling his hardness under his clothes.

‘You didn’t come?’ she said, feeling a sudden sorrow that he hadn’t shared her pleasure.

‘You beat me to it,’ he said, but in a kind way.

‘Can I touch it?’ she asked shyly.

‘Of course,’ he said.

She undid his trousers and pulled down the zip of his fly. She reached timidly under the soft cotton of his boxer shorts and freed him so that his cock reared up almost to his belly button.

‘I should have worn a condom,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘It’s all right,’ she said.

‘Are you sure?’ he said, assuming she was taking a contraceptive pill.

‘I’m sure,’ she said.

This wasn’t the time to tell him about the complications after Kate’s birth that had left her unable to have more children.

‘I don’t have any diseases,’ he said, ‘except, of course, the very serious one of being Irish.’

‘Ah well,‘ she said through laughter, ‘I’ve already caught that one.’

She ran her fingers slowly up and down his erection, thrilling to its silken feel, gloriously hard and soft at the same time.

‘I’m sorry if I hurt you,’ he said gently, taking no credit for his size.

‘It only hurt at the beginning,’ she said, cupping his balls in her little hand.

He groaned, and kissed her head, but she gave a sudden yelp.

‘What’s wrong?’ he asked.

‘It’s just gone up a size,’ she said to make him laugh.

But he wasn’t laughing any more. A serious look had come into his eyes, and he kissed her, and lay on top of her, claiming her for his own again. She cried out as he entered her, but this time the pain turned quickly to pleasure.

He moved slowly to start with, wanting to make their joy last, but pleasure quickly overwhelmed him, and their bodies locked into a hungry rhythm that rushed them towards climax.

She came, and then came again, and still he wasn’t done. She wrapped her arms around him, and tugged his hair in a rage of desire.

‘Come,’ she cried in between ragged breaths. ‘Come for me!’

At last she felt something change within him.

He gasped, and arched his neck, sucking in air through his teeth, and then he kissed her fiercely, blindly, as if he’d passed into another world. His passion triggered her own, and she came with him, digging her nails into his back under his shirt as he called out her name like a prayer.

When at last they lay still by the light of the fire, whispering foolish, half-heard endearments, Catherine felt a peace and contentment such as she’d never know.

They drank wine, and shared cigarettes, talking about their work, and about his time in Spain, and then they agreed to get dressed and go down to

the bar, but he threw another log on the fire and they didn't move from the place made magical by their passion.

They didn't make love again, but from time to time he kissed her breasts and caressed her swollen cunt with his strong, gentle fingers as if to heal the hurt he'd done her, and she fondled his balls, which were as big as eggs, and stroked his long, thick cock.

When, finally, she asked him the time, he looked at his watch and told her it was nearly midnight.

'I'd better go,' she said regretfully, kissing him before rising from the couch and gathering up her underwear. She untangled her panties from her tights and quickly put them on. Suddenly shy to be dressing in front of him, she was glad of the cover provided by her dress, yet she was pleased to feel his eyes on her as she sat on a chair by the desk to put on her tights.

'I'm sorry for staring,' he said, rising from the settee and making himself decent. 'You're as pretty as a picture, as lovely dressing as undressing.'

He picked up her pretty little shoes and laid them at her feet, smiling fondly as she stood and nimbly slipped them on. He brought her coat and held it for her, kissing the top of her head as she fastened the buttons before taking her in his arms, and holding her tight.

'I can't believe this has happened,' he said. 'It's like a dream.'

'I'm sure you say that to all the girls,' she said, flicking her hair over the collar of her coat.

'I do,' he said, 'but I don't usually mean it.'

'And now you're going to tell me again how you worshipped me from afar when you were a schoolboy.'

'If I'd known you were a cynic.'

'But that's what you were going to tell me?'

'How could you know?'

‘I have the gift,’ she said.

‘Another Irish thing?’ he said.

‘It is,’ she said, kissing his smiling lips.

‘But it’s true,’ he said. ‘I did worship you. For years I couldn’t get to sleep for thinking about you.’

‘I hope you weren’t thinking dirty thoughts.’

‘At fifteen what other thoughts are there?’ he said, ‘but I didn’t think that way about you.’

‘Didn’t you?’ she said.

‘Truly, I didn’t,‘ he said. ‘Oh, I had plenty of dirty thoughts, but not about you.’

‘I’m not sure I believe you.’

‘You were Catherine Dempsey,’ he said. ‘You were different, special — La Belle Dame. I dreamed of rescuing you from burning buildings or saving you from kidnappers, driving you to freedom in a jeep or on a motorbike. I don’t know how many times I gave up my life for you, died in your grateful arms. All to earn your love and eternal devotion.’

‘And now?’ she said, smiling as she grazed against him.

‘Now,’ he said, looking into her eyes, ‘now I feel exactly the same.’

‘Oh, you’re good, ‘ she said. ‘You’re very good.’

‘I think so too,’ he said.

‘The best I’ve seen,’ she said.

‘Does that mean you’ll see me again?’

It was what she wanted to hear, but still she hid behind humour.

‘Knowing your reputation, I may have to bring a chaperone.’

‘Aunt Nora?’ he enquired.

‘Indeed,’ she agreed with a nod. ‘And Aunt Kathleen, her one-eyed sister.’

‘A fearsome pair, it’s true, but I’d knock them out cold to get at you,’ he said, brushing a strand of hair from her lovely face.

‘And I’d help you,’ she said, kissing him, and placing a hand fondly on his cheek.

‘So you’ll see me again?’ he said gently.

‘I will,’ she replied.

‘I do, of course, have a very busy schedule,’ he said. ‘How about tomorrow?’

‘Take my arm, Tom Shannon,’ she said through laughter. ‘Take my arm and walk me to my car.’

CATHERINE DROVE slowly on her way home, not because she’d been drinking — she’d barely consumed as much as a glass of wine — but because she could think only of Tom Shannon.

And she couldn’t get comfortable in her seat. The sex had been wonderful, but it had left her tender and sore. The tops of her thighs felt weak and shaky, as if she’d been for a long run, and she ached between her legs in a way that made her smile, and think of the wonderful reggae song ‘It Hurt So Good’ by Susan Cadogan.

When she reached home, she sat in her car, trying to make sense of the evening’s events, but she couldn’t make sense of them. She felt transported, lifted out of her old life.

She told herself to calm down and make herself think of her waiting husband who she knew would be in a state either of deep hurt and anger, or terrified arousal. But she couldn’t bring herself to care about his feelings. He was her slave now — she had to remember that — and she was his Mistress.

PALE-FACED and anxious, James came hurrying to meet her as soon as

she entered the hall. He'd heard her car pull up outside. When she hadn't come in straightaway, he'd imagined her kissing and embracing another man in her car, and he was relieved beyond measure to see her come into the house alone.

All evening, as he'd carried out his chores and bought her gifts online, he'd been haunted by the dread of her bringing her lover home with her, of having to meet his triumphant rival face to face.

'Well, James,' Catherine said when she saw him hurrying to greet her, still naked except for his t-shirt, 'what have you got to say for yourself?'

'Welcome home, Mistress,' he said, already in a fever of submissive arousal. 'I hope you had an enjoyable evening.'

'Oh, I did, James,' she said, glad he wasn't going to be difficult,.'Thank-you for asking.'

'C-can I get you anything?' he stammered, barely able to speak.

'You can hang up my coat,' she said, taking off her coat and handing it to him. 'And bring me a whisky.'

She didn't normally drink whisky, but she needed something strong to settle her nerves.

'Make it one of your special Jamesons,' she commanded, knowing how sparing he was with his precious malt. 'Half and half with water,' she added, recalling how much he disapproved of adding water, 'but don't pour one for yourself. Slaves don't drink whisky, do they?'

'No Mistress,' he replied, feeling a sting of loss and arousal.

'I'll have it in the sitting-room,' she informed him, already crossing the hall, leaving him to gaze after her adoringly.

Catherine was pleased to see the fire was still burning in the grate — it had been a day of fires — and she went over to the music player and set it to shuffle. Van Morrison's wonderful song 'Fair Play' began to play quietly, its

mellow beauty suiting her mood perfectly. With a sigh of pleasure she sat down in the armchair nearest the hearth where she closed her eyes and moved her head slowly in time to the lovely music. She still felt a heavy ache between her legs, yet she thought only with fondness of the man who'd caused it.

James came in, and gave her the glass of whisky, then stood by her chair, not knowing what to do with himself. Catherine sipped the whisky which was warming and deliciously smooth.

'Your whisky's lovely, James,' she said. 'It's just what I need. I look forward to drinking the rest of it over the next few weeks.'

'Yes, Mistress,' he said, the pang of loss he felt for his whisky both sharp and sweet.

'Perhaps I'll have it as a nightcap. They say it's good for the heart.'

'Yes, Mistress,' he said, longing to fall at her feet.

'Take off your t-shirt,' she commanded. 'I want you naked.'

He did as he was told without hesitation, and stood before her awaiting her next command.

'Now go and stand in the corner.'

He looked at her in horror.

'You heard,' she said sharply. 'Hurry up or I'll get angry.'

He went to the corner, and stood facing it, feeling like a small child being disciplined by his teacher.

'Nose touching the wall, and hands behind your back,' she said. 'And stay like that until I tell you otherwise.'

She relaxed now that he was in a subservient position where she didn't have to bother about him. She liked having him like this, and thought how she must put him in the corner more often.

She listened to the music and sipped her whisky, glancing over from time

to time at her naked slave. She looked at the marks she'd left on his buttocks. The bruises had darkened, and turned blue in places, but the cuts had closed over and begun to form scabs.

'The cuts are already beginning to heal, you'll be pleased to know,' she said lazily, 'but I think you should stay naked for another day at least, just to be on the safe side.'

When he turned to protest, she saw he was erect, but Catherine felt maternal towards him, as if he was a boy, not a man.

'Yes,' she said. 'You'll go naked tomorrow and perhaps the day after. I'm sure that's best.'

He tried to speak but the words wouldn't come, and he turned to the wall again to hide his arousal.

'If you're going to be shy,' she said scornfully, 'you can wear your pretty apron again, but this time without any panties, at least until the skin heals. That way I'll be spared the sight of your little cock waving in the air. That's by far the best solution, I think, don't you?'

A shiver ran though him as if someone had walked on his grave, and he made a foolish, choking sound.

'I beg your pardon,' Catherine said, sipping her whisky, 'I didn't hear you.'

'Yes, Mistress,' he said, fearing he might faint.

'Good, I'm glad that's settled,' she said, patting her knee. 'Now, come over here and sit by me.'

James left the corner and sank gratefully to his knees before his Mistress, placing his head helplessly in her lap. She ran her fingers gently through his hair, thinking how nice it was to have a man fall at her feet.

'Now, tell me James,' she said, 'have you been busy while I was out?'

'Yes, Mistress,' he answered quietly.

‘Have you been shopping?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Buying me a gift?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

She wondered if he’d really gone back to that website and bought her what she’d asked for? If he had, she’d use it on him, she hadn’t the slightest doubt, lock it on him when she went to her lover, but she decided to let the answer come as a surprise.

‘Well, I’ll look forward to receiving it,’ she said with an amused look.

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said, unable to hold her gaze.

‘And have you done the housework?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘All my ironing for next week?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘I hope you’ve done a good job.’

‘I hope so too, Mistress.’

‘Have you hung my clothes in the wardrobe?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

She was talking idly, dreamily, without really listening to his answers.

Her mind had drifted back to Tom Shannon, to his warm smile, and gentle fingers, and to how lovely it had felt lying with him by the fire.

She felt a growing arousal at the thought of seeing him again. They were going for lunch tomorrow, at a hotel he knew in the country.

‘And have you put clean sheets on the bed?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Very good,’ she said, feeling a sudden longing to be in bed between fresh, clean sheets. But then she thought that James would expect to sleep alongside her, and that wouldn’t do.

That wouldn’t do at all.

‘There’s something I have to say, James,’ she said, feeling a spasm of arousal at what she was about to tell him .

‘I’d like to sleep alone,’ she informed him.

She smiled to see the tears come into his eyes.

‘Not just tonight,’ she said, ‘but every night from now on. You do understand, don’t you?’

‘No, please, you c-can’t …‘ he stammered, his whole body beginning to tremble, but Catherine spoke over him.

‘Oh, I can do what I like, James. Don’t you remember this morning, when I told you a slave shouldn’t expect to eat at table with his Mistress?’

‘Y-yes.’

‘And you understood that, didn’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then surely you’ll understand the same must apply to our sleeping arrangements. If you’re no longer permitted to eat with me, you can hardly expect to sleep with me.’

He gazed at her, a lost, fearful look in his eyes, but he said nothing.

‘I take it you understand,’ she said, stroking his cheek. ‘A slave can’t sleep with his Mistress, can he?’

‘N-no,’ he answered in a whimper. ‘No, he can’t.’

‘It wouldn’t be right. You see that, don’t you, James?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘In that case we’ll have to find somewhere else for you to sleep, won’t we?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

Their house had four main bedrooms, and Catherine wondered which one would be the most suitable for James in his new position as her slave and

domestic servant.

‘Of course, there are Brendan and Kate’s bedrooms,’ said Catherine, sipping her whisky, and speaking her thoughts aloud, ‘but I still think of them as their rooms. I don’t want you to sleep in either of those rooms.’

Accepting his cruel eviction, James imagined he’d be sleeping in the guest-room, a spacious bedroom with its own television and ensuite bathroom. He’d recently redecorated it, and put in a new shower. He’d miss sleeping with Catherine terribly, but at least he would be comfortable.

‘And I don’t think the guest-room’s the right place either,’ said Catherine, reading his thoughts. ‘Not for a slave. It’s much too grand. No, I think you should sleep in the baby’s-room.’

James looked at her in disbelief.

The baby’s-room was their name for the tiny box-room off their master-bedroom. It had a connecting door to their room, and its own door to the upstairs hallway. It had been where the children had slept as babies and toddlers, until they’d grown old enough to have proper bedrooms of their own.

It was no place for a grown man to sleep.

But Catherine knew straightaway it would be the perfect place for James.

‘Yes, I think the baby’s-room will be best,’ said Catherine. ‘You’ll be out of the way, but able to come and go without disturbing me. And I can call you if I need anything. A glass of water or a back-rub.’

‘I can’t sleep there,’ James protested.

‘You’ll do what I say.’

‘I c-can’t.’

‘Are you disobeying me, James?’ she said, a hard edge coming into her voice. ‘I hope for your sake you’re not.’

‘There’s no bed in the baby’s-room,’ he tried to argue.

‘Of course there’s a bed,’ she answered sharply.

‘It’s not a bed,’ said James. ‘It’s a cot.’

‘That’s true,’ said Catherine, ‘but it’s a child’s cot, not a baby’s cot. It’s quite big really. You might have to curl your legs up a little, but I’m sure you’ll be fine.’

‘Please, not there.’

‘My mind’s made up. You’ll sleep in the baby’s-room from now on, and that’s final. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ said James, overwhelmed by her stern authority, and wondering how much further he could sink.

Catherine thought of the cot in the tiny box-room. Not wanting to forget their children as babies, they’d kept the room just as it was. The cot had originally been blue but, when Kate was born, James had painted it pink. Catherine hadn’t wanted him to — she didn’t believe in colour-coding children — but James had insisted.

And so tonight he’d be sleeping in a pink cot, she thought with some satisfaction. Well, why not? It served him right for disobeying her all those years ago.

Maybe she’d tuck him in. Oh yes, she liked the idea of that. She’d come into his room wearing her prettiest nightdress, the one he’d bought her for Christmas. She’d lean over him and give him a goodnight kiss, let him see what he couldn’t have, and then she’d pull up the bars of his cot, click it shut, and leave him in a prison of his submissive desires.

Catherine smiled in anticipation. She knew she’d enjoy inflicting this new humiliation on her husband, yet the nagging ache between her legs was still causing her discomfort.

Shifting in her chair, she looked down to catch James glancing guiltily at her thighs where her woollen dress had ridden up her thighs, and she knew

immediately what she must do.

It would be the perfect end to a perfect day.

She sipped her whisky and smiled.

‘Do you remember, James, earlier today when we talked of a new kind of slavery?’ she asked, tapping him idly between his legs with the toe of the pretty high-heeled shoe she’d bought to please her lover. ‘Well, do you remember or don’t you?’

‘I remember,’ he gasped.

‘And do you remember what we called it?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Then tell me.’

‘A n-new … A new devotion.’

‘Very good, James,’ said Catherine, pleased that he’d remembered. ‘Well, I need you to show it now. I need you to show a whole new devotion to your Mistress. Are you ready to do that?’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ he said, from the depths of his prison.

‘Then help me take these off,’ she said, lifting herself from the chair and taking down her tights and panties as far as her knees. ‘On you go, James, you can do the rest.’

With trembling hands, he obeyed, gently shucking off her shoes, and pulling the silken bundle of nylon and lace down her long legs. The soft bundle still warm in his hands, he gazed in wonder at the raised hem of her dress, and her lovely open thighs.

‘I have such an ache,’ said Catherine, slowly pulling up the hem of her cashmere dress. ‘The kind of ache only a woman gets when she’s been with a man, a real man.’

She slid the hem to her waist, smiling down at her kneeling slave. She could see the look of alarm in his eyes, but she could also see his hard cock

straining hungrily towards her.

She had no doubt he would do as she wished.

‘I need your new devotion, James,’ she said softly. ‘I need you to kiss away the pain, make it all better.’

James gazed at her nakedness, shocked yet enthralled by her shameless display.

Her lovely cunt, usually so neat and trim, was open and inflamed, ravaged in a way that appalled him.

He couldn’t believe she’d asked this of him.

He couldn’t do it.

Not like this.

Not after she’d been with another man.

‘He hurt me, James,’ Catherine said in a slow, sultry voice. ‘It was a lovely kind of hurt, and I need you to make it better all the same. You can do that, can’t you?’

He told himself to refuse this final humiliation, but he already knew he’d do as she wished. Her cruel and savage beauty ruled him with the power of an enchantment, and he leaned forward and pressed his lips adoringly to her hot, slick cunt.

‘That’s it,’ Catherine gasped, thrilled by his submission, ‘but gently, so gently.’

He worshipped his Mistress with infinite gentleness, his devotion easing away her pain, and bringing her in its place the sweetest delight.

Catherine groaned in pleasure, and let her head fall back as she thought of her lovely Irishman.

‘That’s good, James … Oh God, that’s good,’ she said, closing her eyes and tugging his hair to pull him closer. ‘Show me … Show me your new devotion.’

James worshipped harder and higher, lost in her beauty, driven on by her selfish joy.

‘This is only the beginning,’ Catherine gasped, the delightful feeling rising inside her like a tide.

‘I promise you … Oh God, I promise you … This is only the beginning.’

Also by Molly Sands – An Obedient Husband, Magda, Slave Song, Contessa, Sacred Days, Serving Sarah, The Adoration of Adele Adams, Mrs Shepherd’s Boy, Lady Catherine