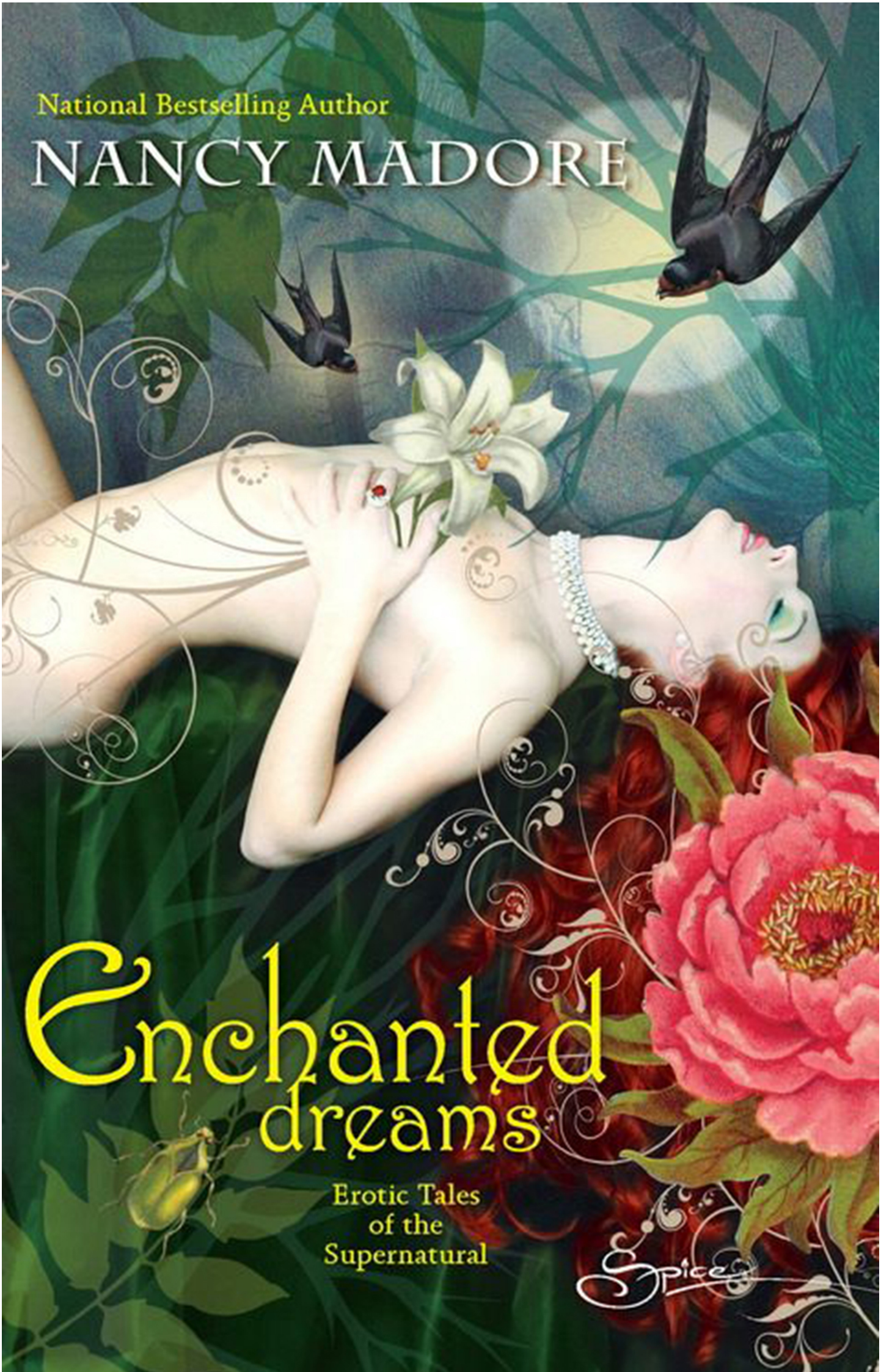
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Enchanted Dreams: Erotic Tales Of The Supernatural

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Содержание

ENCHANTED 6
The 7
Disenchantment 21
Dying For It 36
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For Michael Hulbert, with my utmost gratitude and love for all the encouragement and inspiration, for putting up with me, and for so many other things, like slipping into characters' heads for me and bringing them to life. I couldn't have written this without you.

The Enchanted Forest

Catherine stopped again to catch her breath. She couldn't believe how out of shape she had become. There was a time when she was always outdoors getting exercise, whether it was camping or playing volleyball or running. How long had it been since she'd entered a marathon? Lately, all of life's many demands kept her busy running an entirely different kind of race. She couldn't seem to find time for herself anymore. There was little enough time to sustain the barest existence. These musings caused a pang of anxiety to rise up in her. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, willing her worries away. How had matters of basic survival come to absorb her every waking moment?

But these were precisely the thoughts Catherine came here to forget. She had not suffered an anxiety attack in nearly twenty-four hours. She was determined to enjoy her brief escape from the rat race, if only for a few days. She tipped her head back and breathed in as much as she could of the crisp, cool air that surrounded her. It smelled of earth and life. She looked around then, suddenly aware of the strange silence. As her nostrils drank in the sweet and pungent aroma of the forest, her heartbeat could not help but slow down. The beauty and tranquility were having their effect. Why couldn't all of life be this simple?

Catherine picked up her overstuffed backpack and hefted it up onto her shoulder, resting it on the left side now because the right shoulder was beginning to ache. She felt another wave of annoyance at this reminder of how poorly things were constructed these days. The strap had broken within the first hour of her using it, unable to withstand the weight of her camping gear. She should have chosen a more practical pack, she thought, but she had been swayed by the colorful design—and the sale price—of this one. Besides, its bright orange-and-yellow pattern gave her a feeling of security, just in case there were hunters in the woods. Not that it was hunting season, but one never knew. But as it happened, she had not encountered anyone at all since setting out on her little excursion. There was a lonely, isolated feeling to the place that convinced her no one else was around. At first it was disconcerting, and she had been tempted to turn around. But it was not an overly exhausting hike to the campsite, and she was sure to find someone there.

With her racing heart calmed, Catherine resumed hiking, but at a slower, more manageable pace. She was nearing a high point in the mountain and veered closer to the steep edge so that she could observe the views below. The trees were thinning out now, perhaps because of the elevation, and this made the sight even more spectacular. Clumps of trees gave way to fields of green, spotted here and there with patches of wildflowers.

As Catherine gazed at the scene below her, she was once again struck by the curious silence surrounding her. Listening more intently, she noticed that there were actually sounds to be heard, such as the twitter of a bird or the rustle of a squirrel, but these seemed to blend into the background as seamlessly as the foliage. There were no conspicuous sounds, no noises that would indicate purposeful activity or any other synthetic clatter clashing with the natural progression of things. Catherine pondered this, marveling at the perfect harmony that seemed to exist among the plants and animals compared to the chaos associated with more intelligent beings.

Even as Catherine was thinking these thoughts—ironically, right in the very midst of them—a bird suddenly flew out at her from a nearby bush, startling her. She lost her footing and, unable to catch herself, stumbled over the edge of the mountain. There was a split second of absolute clarity where she realized she was not going to be able to stop her fall, and in the next instant she noticed the thick, solid branch peaking out from beneath the fallen leaves that was rushing up to meet her.

She only had time to perceive these things, not to react, or to move, or even to feel alarm. And then everything went black.

Catherine opened her eyes and looked dumbly around her in utter confusion. Where on earth was she? Something was not quite right, yet she felt remarkably calm. She sat up tentatively, remembering the fall and aware that she had sustained injuries.

The very first thing she noticed was that all of the forest—from the tiniest blade of grass to the tallest tree—appeared to be buzzing with life. She was suddenly struck with how curiously vibrant the colors were, and how pungent the aroma around her. It was almost as if the trees were speaking to her, even as the gentle wind rustled their leaves. Things seemed more distinct and noticeable than before. She wondered if she had suffered a concussion.

As she observed the forest around her, Catherine had the oddest sensation that she was no longer alone. She looked more carefully at the plants and trees, scanning them for signs of life. But aside from the foliage, she saw nothing.

She got up slowly, brushing off her shorts and checking for injuries. Her wounds appeared to be minor, as she was able to move about without suffering additional discomfort. Yet she couldn't shake the feeling that something had changed. She still had the impression that she was being watched. She called out, "Who's there?" but there was no response. She wondered vaguely why whatever it was didn't manifest itself. Yet for some reason, she still wasn't afraid. In the midst of such radiant harmony, it was hard to conceive of any real danger.

Her voice, when she had cried out, sounded foreign to her ears. Something about the valley she had fallen into called to mind the enchanted forests of her childhood fairy tales. She realized that she ought to make her way back up the mountain and find the trail, but she was captivated by the little forest nook and didn't want to leave. What would it hurt to look around for a few minutes? Just off in the distance, she spied a field of brilliant colors that begged to be explored. She spotted her backpack on the ground nearby, and had half a mind to set up camp right there. Why should she leave this enchanted spot to set out for a public campground? This would be *real* camping, where she could open the flap of her tent without nudging a tent right next to hers.

As Catherine considered this, she walked toward the field, surveying the area around her with a great deal of curiosity. A prettier campsite could not be imagined. There was a tranquility to the place that seemed to promise sanctuary. It had everything the public campground had except electricity and, perhaps, water. But even as this thought occurred to her, she suddenly perceived a very faint sound—so faint she could only just identify it as the sound of rushing water. As she followed the sound, she discovered with joy that it was, in fact, a waterfall.

Catherine stared at the waterfall in amazement. It was just like something from an exotic island. She could smell the water as it exploded over the cliff's edge. She approached it timidly, almost wary of its incredible magnificence. At any rate, she thought, she could wash the many scrapes that dotted her arms and legs in the sparkling spring. She removed her shoes and socks and tentatively dipped her toes in the little, churning stream at the bottom of the falls. It was cool but not cold, so she plunged her feet in. She bent down to scoop water over her bare legs. The flash of a silver trout caught her eye as it passed and she jumped, half expecting it to pause at the surface on its way by to speak to her, just as the one in the Brothers Grimm *Tale of the Fisherman* had. She laughed at the thought. Yet it would not have surprised her.

Catherine let the water, cool and soothing, trickle over her legs. She gathered several more handfuls and splashed them over the cuts and bruises on her arms. She realized that she was thirsty, too. Carefully, for the bottom of the stream was lined with sparkling rocks, she stepped closer to the falls, leaning forward to scoop some of the freshly falling water into her cupped hands. It tasted as sweet and refreshing as she imagined, and she swallowed several mouthfuls in large gulps. She was surprised how thirsty she was and drank until she had her fill. Then she simply stood there, admiring

the majestic beauty of the waterfall. It was truly enchanting. But if she was going to make camp, she knew that she would have to find her way back to the trail soon.

Catherine cautiously stepped from the stream and looked toward the forest from which she had come, when she suddenly noticed that the sun was unusually high in the sky. This seemed strange. Wasn't it later in the day? She tried to remember roughly what time it had been when she fell, but she couldn't. Yet she had already eaten lunch and was fairly certain that the better part of the day was behind her. By all counts, it should have been late afternoon. How, then, could it now be coming on midday? Surely she had not lain unconscious overnight! But just then it occurred to her that her stomach was empty. She once again had that strong sense of unreality and wondered if she had suffered more serious injuries in the fall than she originally thought. Perhaps she had a head injury. She vaguely remembered the large stump sticking up out of the ground. She felt around her head for bumps.

But at present it seemed more important that she eat something. Her backpack was stuffed with food, but just at that moment she spotted shimmering patches of red scattered about in some of the bushes nearby. Upon closer inspection, she saw that they were raspberries, and they were so plentiful they were practically falling off the branches. Looking around, she could see that the lush bushes were growing everywhere all along the little stream. Catherine tentatively picked one of the berries and touched it to her tongue. It was tart and sweet, just like a wild raspberry. And the bushes were overgrown with them. What a find! There were so many berries that, without ever taking a single step in either direction, she was able to eat her fill.

While Catherine was gorging herself on raspberries, a strange notion came into her head. She began to think that the berries had appeared as a result of her desire to eat. But after considering it, she rejected the idea as preposterous. The berries had been there all along; she had simply not noticed them before. The waterfall had absorbed all of her attention.

But there was no denying that there was something special about the place. Contented by berries, she returned to the stream and sat down on the bank. She watched the running water flash and sparkle as more gleaming trout passed by. The sight of them pleased her. She stretched out on the bank lazily, resting on her side so that she could gaze down into the gurgling stream. How pleasant it was to simply watch the water trickling over the glimmering rocks as it rushed along its merry way. How benevolent its cheerful sound, tinkling contentedly as it hurried off to—where? Catherine felt peaceful and serene as she pondered this. She suddenly couldn't remember what those things were that had bothered her before. After a while, she rolled over onto her back and looked up at the sky.

But what madness was this? Suddenly the sun was sinking into the horizon!

Catherine jumped up and looked around. She was yet again assailed with a nagging sense of unreality. How could high noon so quickly have turned to dusk? How long had she been lying by the bank, staring down into the water? How was it possible that she, Catherine, a person who normally couldn't sit still for a moment, had wasted an entire afternoon looking at water?

She decided it was time to leave the strange little forest glen and quickly surveyed the area one last time, looking for the direction from which she had come. She wandered all around, searching for something familiar or for some evidence of her footsteps. But try as she might, she was unable to find a pathway out, and it was quickly getting dark. She would have to wait until morning. She was surprised to find that this did not disturb her overmuch, but she regretted not bringing her backpack with her when she had wandered off. At least then she would have had supplies. How would she manage to get through the night now? In a little while, it would be too dark to see and she would be left fully exposed to the elements.

Or would she? With a surreal sensation of awed disbelief, her eyes fell upon a little nook at the base of the foothill that rose up to one side of the waterfall. At first glance it appeared to be a shallow cave, just the right size for her. Catherine approached it with interest. It was indeed a small alcove that had formed out of the earth. Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be the result of erosion,

for there was a large tree sitting directly above it. All along its inner cavity could be seen smooth, wooden roots, jutting out here and again over the ceiling and walls like sturdy brown beams. The cave did not recede so far into the earth as to frighten or alarm, but was just enough to protect someone from the elements. The floor was covered with large, crisp leaves that had apparently fallen from the tree above. Finding the little alcove filled Catherine with a sense of well-being. She was beginning to believe that this forest really was enchanted. It was certainly the most enchanting place that she had ever been. She went to work immediately, gathering more leaves from the ground outside the cave and stuffing them into the corner where she planned to sleep. As she rushed to prepare her little nest before it became too dark, she suddenly caught, from the corner of her eye, the sparkle from a lightning bug. In that same moment, the last bit of the sun disappeared behind the mountain.

It was fully dark now, but look! More lightning bugs were—one after the other—coming alive, blinking so brightly (for her benefit alone, she now believed) and so frequently that her campsite was kept in a steady stream of soft light. Catherine stared, openmouthed, at the wondrous spectacle.

She began to think that somehow, in the course of her fall, she must have landed in some kind of enchanted world, perhaps even crossing over into an entirely different dimension.

Catherine snuggled comfortably into her cozy little bed inside the cave, but sleep was not quick to come. She was plagued by gently rising waves of restlessness, brought on, no doubt, by the extraordinary things that had occurred. Her mind drifted aimlessly, gliding through random memories of enchanted forests and fairies. As her thoughts meandered over the folklore, her exotic surroundings remained uppermost in her mind. She thought about the peculiar events of her day, unconsciously allowing her hand to trail over the length of her body and lazily letting it come to rest between her legs.

The fireflies continued to light up the sky around Catherine, and stars blinked at her from far off in the distance. She was mildly surprised to find that she was aroused. Her fingers had been absently —and very lightly—circling and caressing her body, and they were having an effect. She tried to recall the last time she felt aroused. It was not since she had started taking the antianxiety medication. That, too, was tucked away in her backpack, she suddenly remembered. She hadn't taken one since before the fall. But how long ago had that been? She had lost all track of time. She remembered how quickly the sun seemed to set from its midday position; she would have sworn that no more than a single hour had passed in that space of time. But was it time that had changed, or was it her perception that was skewed? Had she fallen into some kind of trance while gazing at the gleaming water?

These speculations passed through Catherine's consciousness offhandedly. She wondered that she could feel so calm and serene in the light of so many uncertainties. How did she know, for instance, that she wasn't actually suffering from some kind of head injury? That would certainly explain her peculiar perspective of the things that were happening around her. And without her medication, even for a day, she would normally have been so terrified of an anxiety attack that she would have brought one about. But at the moment, even this realization that her meds were out of reach did not rattle her. It simply felt too good to have her body responding like this again. She felt excited, and terribly alive.

Catherine's fingers kept encouraging her arousal, stirring it up and up as they circled and massaged her engorged little bud of pleasure. Soon, her desire was taking over all other thoughts. She suddenly, recklessly, wished that this enchanted forest would bring her some magic now!

By this time, Catherine's body was lightly swaying back and forth in time with the steady, circular motion of her fingers. The activity caused her hips to sink farther into her leafy bedding, settling deeper and deeper into its softness.

But what was this? Suddenly, Catherine was disrupted by something solid that was buried beneath the leaves of her bed. She tried to ignore it but that only seemed to make it more pronounced. With a sigh of frustration, she sat up and carefully pushed aside the bedding to find out what lay beneath it. When she saw what it was, she gasped. She blinked several times to make sure she wasn't imagining things.

Examining the object more closely, Catherine perceived that it was most likely one of the tree's roots, which had circled back around toward the direction it had come in order to be unearthed in this alcove. This, in and of itself, was not especially unusual perhaps, but the shape of the root was. It rose up out of the ground at an angle, thick and gnarly and long. That it happened to be there, coming up out of the ground in that particular place and jutting out at that particular angle, was certainly no coincidence. The longer she stared at it, the harder it was for Catherine to believe that she hadn't noticed it sooner. And then her last thought before she discovered it came to her and she blushed. She was now, more than ever, convinced that she was in a magical place where all her wishes would become a reality. But who was behind it? What was the presence she kept sensing?

Intrigued, Catherine could not resist reaching out and touching the lanky root. It seemed to tremble and pulse in her hand, startling her and causing her to instinctively jerk her hand away. As she gazed at it, she noticed that it was precisely the size, shape and texture she preferred. Although it was a bit rugged and rough, she thought ironically—playing the devil's advocate for the moment as she skeptically examined her most secret wish come true—and then smiled at her own ungraciousness. But the smile instantly froze on her face. There, and there again, all over the root in fact, there oozed a clear fluid—perhaps a sap of some kind, she immediately suggested to her disbelieving mind—seeping out from its many crevices. Was it possible that the fluid had been there all along? It was, and yet Catherine felt that it was not.

She suddenly thought of Eve in the Garden of Eden. Was the proverbial apple this impossible to ignore? Already, her body was trembling with desire and anticipation.

Catherine made her decision in an instant. There was still the disconcerting sense that someone —or something—was watching her. Yet she felt that, whoever or whatever it was, be it fairy or plant life, it watched with approval and meant her no harm. Maybe it was the source of all her good fortune, her benefactor in this enchanted place, granting her every wish like a kind of fairy godmother. All around her there appeared to be nothing but loving energy. In fact, all of the encumbrances of her normal life, which had always been at war with her instincts, were starting to fade, diminishing in importance by the hour. She kept forgetting that she needed to find her way out of the forest, and even what it was that she needed to get back to.

All of this was a mere fleeting thought in the back of her mind as she excitedly took off her clothes. Uppermost in her thoughts, overruling everything else, was her desire, pure and raw and true. She was unabashedly grateful that the root protruded so far out of the ground as she carefully moved herself over it. The angle, too, could not have been more suitable. All she had to do was ease herself back, little by little, opening herself to the object of her desire in small, slow increments as she inched backward onto it. The clear, sappy fluid that was released by the root not only made the entry smoother, but it seemed to heighten her pleasure as well, increasing the friction as she slid back and forth. It felt as if it seeped into each and every crevice of her silky folds, filling her completely and creating a delightful resistance with its sticky texture, which intensified her pleasure as she slid along the long, gnarly shaft. She struggled to take it deeper and deeper with each thrust backward.

The root, meanwhile, continued to throb and pulse as Catherine shamelessly used it. She trembled with pleasure, relishing the exquisite feel of it inside her body. Every part of her felt as though it were alive. She went back farther and farther on it as she picked up her pace, delighting in the loud, squishing sounds of her juices as they mingled with the thick sap from the root. And even the forest all around her seemed to stir, pulsing and throbbing right along with her. The fireflies lit up the sky, bringing even her shadow to life where it moved over the cave's wall in time with her thrashing body. Birds and other wildlife called out to her from the distance. When at last she cried out with intense pleasure, she could not say for sure whether it was her own scream or that of another creature of the forest.

Almost instantly afterward, Catherine fell into a deep sleep. It was a sleep filled with fleeting visions of strange, sensual places filled with curious and wonderful things. In these dreams, what

once was irregular was now ordinary and proper. Plants were living things in the truest sense, with thoughts and feelings of their own as they fulfilled their objective to please those whose lives they touched. All was perfect harmony, where desires were meant to be satisfied. Catherine sunk deeper into the spell of the forest as she dreamed, without the slightest thought for what she was leaving behind. She slept effortlessly in her leafy bed, content and satiated, yet always teetering on the edge of her newfound arousal.

When Catherine awoke the next morning, she was first conscious of how refreshed she felt. The next thing she noticed was that her injuries of only a day before seemed to have completely disappeared. She was still vaguely aware that there was something she ought to do, but the forest repeatedly distracted her from this awareness each time it threatened to emerge. These distractions took many forms, and in the process Catherine discovered a variety of interesting plants that she had never heard of before, some of which seemed to offer themselves up for practical use. She was drawn to one plant, for instance, for its extraordinary size and spectacular color, but upon closer inspection she found that its huge petals were actually similar in texture to silk. The thick, durable petals were abundant, too, with the ends curling up into themselves like large bolts of fabric. It was impossible to resist making use of these petals for this purpose. She found many unique plants with too many useful functions to mention. It soon became apparent that the highest purpose of the forest and its plant life was to please her. The flowers and plants not only served, but they did so in such an extraordinary and delightful way that they couldn't fail to please, and Catherine was completely charmed out of her former life.

In her enchanted forest, time quickly lost all authority over Catherine. She was no longer even aware of the passing days and weeks. Catherine busied herself with taking advantage of the many joys and opportunities the forest offered her. In time, she was able to fashion beautiful attire from flowers and leaves—stunning clothes that seemed to caress her skin while allowing her to move more freely. Everything she needed to sustain her life grew out of the enchanted soil, and they consisted of the most appealing and beneficial properties she had ever known. All of her senses were constantly awed and enchanted.

The only thing missing from this tiny paradise Catherine had stumbled into was a companion. In all of the time that she had been there, she had never seen another living soul. There was plenty of animal life that she encountered but never a trace of another person. Catherine had been talking to the plants almost from the beginning, and over time she started to believe that they could hear and understand her. There were moments when she doubted her own sanity, but she could swear that whenever she opened her mouth the plants seemed to, ever so slightly, lean in her direction and listen. And there was something else out there, too, it seemed to her—some other being that watched over her and listened. Sometimes it seemed so close that she thought she could actually feel its breath upon her neck. But when she turned her head to look, there would be nothing there. This was not overly frustrating for her, though, because she was perfectly willing now to believe in those things she couldn't see. She trusted that she was sensing something that was actually there. She began to think of them as fairies. Recalling everything that she had ever learned about fairies as a child, they seemed to offer the most likely explanation. She had read in Irish folklore that fairies were actually spirits, wandering the earth in between lives. They had a reputation for being kind and generous overall, although at times they were said to be impish and mischievous. This made sense to her, and it seemed to fit with what she felt about the invisible beings that filled the atmosphere all around her. In time, she was speaking to them as if these suppositions had been confirmed.

But whatever benevolent spirit or fairy or enchantment it was, one thing that Catherine came to know for certain was that no matter what she might wish for, it would inevitably appear. This was something she had not only learned to accept, but came to expect. If she, for example, craved something sweet, she would instantly catch the scent of nectar from some utterly delightful fruit. Or,

if erotic thoughts tempted her consciousness, the wind was apt to suddenly bring a stray flower to lightly caress the eager flesh between her legs.

All of her senses were heightened. Her hearing, in particular, seemed keener than ever. She was becoming more and more aware of sounds she had never even noticed before, whereas the noises she had heard all of her life—particularly those that crept in from outside of her enchanted forest—were suddenly strange and unfamiliar to her, and even a cause for fear. Any such noise would send her deeper into the woods to hide. Her existence before discovering her magical forest was no longer of interest to her. She had finally found peace in this place where she could exist in perfect harmony with the world around her. There was much of intrigue and humor and even romance in the life-forms she now communicated with. She began to equate all good fortune with the entities she had come to think of as fairies, and blame any misfortunes, such as storms or other mild discomforts, on "demons." She spoke to both as if they were right there beside her at all times, for she believed their existence was solely centered on hers. She adapted to her new life fully and seamlessly, even dressing like a woodland nymph, in the stunning shades produced by the wildflowers of the forest. She designed her clothing purely for amusement, and it always left her fully exposed to the elements and open to the whims of whatever chose to please her. She could not imagine hiding her breasts from the numerous plants and flowers that seemed to take pleasure in caressing and clinging to them, any more than she could close up her own grasping flower from the various woodland life-forms that would sample the nectar that flowed forth from there. She kept that part of herself always ready and exposed, her trembling, delicate petals always ready to unfold and open to new pleasures. Even the rain possessed the power to arouse her; she would lie in the soft grass and raise her hips up toward the sky, relishing every single droplet that fell.

Catherine looked up at the sky, aware that a storm was approaching. Angry molecules crackled in the air all around her. Her skin prickled in response. She was decked out in a colorful outf it she had crafted that very day. The top consisted of dried strands of grass held together at the top, just above her breasts, by a band of stunningly bright flowers, and the bottom, which just barely fell to her thighs, was the same. Every now and then, a gust of wind would whip through the dried grass, exposing bits of pink flesh and causing the slightly roughened edges of the grass to scratch and tease her tender flesh. She shivered in anticipation as she rushed out toward the open field.

The sky was quickly turning darker from the approaching storm, but the golden field glowed brightly as she entered the clearing. The wind picked up considerably without the trees of the forest to block it, and her grass coverings whipped frantically over her skin. There was a tree in the midst of the flowers, and Catherine ran toward it eagerly. When she reached it, she embraced it. The rough edges of its bark were abrasive against her skin. She caught the sweet, familiar smell of honeysuckle from high above, and looked up to admire the willowy vine that had laced its way in and around the many branches throughout the entire length of the tree. But the tree did not mind, or at least Catherine felt this to be so.

She let her hand roam over one of the long, sinewy vines of the honeysuckle. It had clung to the trunk of the tree for so long that it seemed a part of it now, imbedded so deeply into the bark that it was hard to tell which was which. Her fingers trailed lightly over it, and she was not surprised when one of the younger, more malleable parts of the vine reached down from out of the tree and deliberately circled itself around her wrist. She ran her free hand over one of the vines on the other side and waited for it, too, to restrain her in the same manner. The rubbery appendages wrapped round and round her wrist, three times each, bending their leaves courteously to cushion her tender flesh from its unyielding hold. A few of the hon-eysuckle's tender white flowers dropped to the earth with a sigh. Their sweet scent filled Catherine's nostrils.

Before she had time to wonder what would happen next, a root came up from out of the earth beneath her feet and curled itself around one of Catherine's ankles. Another root popped out almost immediately after the first and captured her other leg. Catherine watched the scene in ecstatic

amazement. No matter how many nights she would spend in this enchanted little paradise, these events would always fill her with wonder and excitement, even as she waited in delicious anticipation.

The roots began gently spreading her legs apart, and the honeysuckle loosened its hold just a bit on her wrists. She allowed herself to be maneuvered so that she was sitting on a large mossy rock, situated just off to one side of the tree. She sat on the soft, cushiony moss with her legs spread and held wide apart by the deeply embedded roots that had been unearthed for this event. Her hands were allowed to rest on the rock behind her, but they remained lightly restrained by the honeysuckle vines.

In this position, Catherine sat leaning back at a slight angle, with her arms resting behind her, her breasts jutting outward and her legs spread apart. A gust of wind came sweeping through the valley and ravished her grass garments, causing them to fly in all directions. Two hardened nipples peeked out from the top portion of her dress and the bottom half was completely blown off to the sides, leaving her fully exposed.

Catherine struggled against her restraints, not trying to escape, but simply squirming in anticipation. She waited with excruciating impatience, wondering agitatedly what intensely pleasurable delights were in store for her this time. She did not have long to wait.

Here, already, moving in her direction in steady line, Catherine could see the fiercely colored heads of the tall wildflowers that littered the open field. They approached her in smooth, sweeping waves, seemingly brought about by the wind, but apparently being moved by some power underground, too, for their roots remained intact. With each new gust of wind the wave of flowers came nearer and nearer, until at last the blooms began to brush against her opened legs. Closer and closer they came with each new breeze, until they were being whipped across the sensitive flesh of her inner thighs, making them tingle and smart. And they kept advancing even more, causing her thighs to turn from a pale beige to a bright pink, and the little lips of her sex glands to part in surprise.

Catherine now writhed against her bonds, but not at all wishing for them to release her. If anything, she wished they would hold her more rigidly. She was terrified that they might come loose and bring this fantastic event to an end. There was a pleasing sting to the flowers' thrashing that clashed delightfully with her arousal and created a most intense ache. She was so preoccupied with the sensations brought about by the gentle whipping that she did not even at first realize that the flowers might be doing anything other than simply being swept against her for that pleasure alone. The wind, meanwhile, began to howl as her body strained and shuddered under the exquisitely relentless assault from the brightly colored blooms as they one right after the other slapped against her quickly heating flesh. She wondered at their remarkable strength, for not one of them appeared to lose so much as a petal.

But eventually a slow dawning came, even as Catherine felt the oppressive weight of something heavy and thick coating the little petals of flesh that surrounded her aching hole. She peered down between her legs and noticed that each and every bloom, while brushing across her trembling nether lips, cleverly turned its face toward them and thrust out its heavily coated stamens for a thoroughly intimate kiss that doused her with their nectar! She noticed, too, that each wave of flowers that passed her continued to move forward in the same direction, so that with each new burst of wind an entirely new group of flowers assailed her. In this way, each flower that struck her was fresh and full of more of the thick nectar to leave with her. But why? Her little lips trembled to be so laden.

Catherine's inner thighs were becoming more and more inflamed and even raw, and her labia was weighted down with the heavy nectar of literally thousands of flowers. She was trembling with an agonizing mixture of pleasure and need. She arched her back and thrust her hips up in an effort to escape the next wave of flowers, but each and every one caught her regardless, striking her pulsing flesh with even more vigor, and hampering her poor little petals with even more of their nectar. Although the nectar was administered one tiny bit at a time, it was astounding how much she had accumulated so quickly. The heavy discomfort was almost completely giving way to desire. Catherine

could feel her arousal welling up, strong and full. She whimpered helplessly, wishing suddenly that it would never end.

But already her bonds were tightening and the wind was dying down. The flowers at last receded. Catherine closed her eyes for a moment and tried to still her disappointment and quiet her trembling limbs. Her flesh stung and her legs quivered violently. Her nether lips struggled and quivered under the burden of the nectar.

Her attention was suddenly caught by a peculiar, highpitched sound, seemingly far off in the distance. She opened her eyes and saw that there was a dark but luminous mist of something moving in the sky in the direction of the sound. Whatever it was, it was quickly approaching. Catherine hardly had time to consider what it might be when the first of its arrivals landed.

The shrill whistling had actually been the fluttering of hundreds of tiny wings in flight; once the swarm arrived the noise immediately quieted. Butterflies touched gently down, elegantly and politely, and immediately began to dine on the nectar. There were so many of them, each smartly dressed in their own individual mixture of bright colors so that no two sets of wings were precisely the same. Catherine stared with wide, disbelieving eyes as they each, in turns, feasted on the banquet that had been so painstakingly spread out before them. Their activity tortured her in the most delightful way. The already oversensitive flesh had been made even more so by the extraordinary whipping she had received. She could now keenly feel each and every little butterfly that tapped relentlessly upon her flesh in an effort to capture the sweet taste of nectar through its sensors. Then, slowly, their tongues emerged, unfurling to nearly three times the length of their bodies to painstakingly begin lapping up the sticky nectar. Catherine was acutely aware of the butterflies' wings as they fluttered and moved, gently battering her with their sheer numbers.

Catherine moaned loudly, straining once again against her bonds, which seemed to tighten in response and draw her legs farther apart. The multitude of butterflies produced a rainbow of lush, colorful activity between her trembling thighs. But they were gracious and well-mannered; they did not battle over the sumptuous meal that was spread out before them. Rather, they each in turn feasted elegantly and leisurely, while the others fluttered their wings and tapped their little feet as they patiently waited. Seven or eight could partake in each sitting, and it tantalized Catherine's burdened labia when they supped on the sticky nectar. Those that finished moved graciously aside but still lingered, loitering so close as to be nearly on top of one another, but comfortably so, nevertheless.

Catherine's sensitivities were so acutely awakened by these events that she was keenly aware of every single touch, no matter how feathery light or minute. The butterflies dined enthusiastically but unhurriedly, cleaning their little appendages meticulously as they ate so as not to waste a single drop of the precious nectar. They each worked at her flesh mercilessly with their feet and tongues as they feasted, prodding and kneading her inflamed labia in an effort to remove the sticky nectar from her body. They roamed freely over every part of the feasting area, clinging agilely to her sticky slit and meandering restlessly over and around her clitoris.

Catherine's hips bobbed and jiggled as much as was possible under her restraints. She felt as if hundreds of tiny hands were actively massaging and stimulating her. But each time she came within a feather's breath of relief, either the intensity or the location of the stimulation would shift and change, taking her opportunity for release with it. Yet the relentless buildup of desire never stopped; it kept building and growing until she feared that she might burst.

In the course of all this activity, even with such refined diners as these, the nectar could not help but be spread even farther over the area. As this occurred it allowed more butterflies to partake. Catherine knew all of this without actually seeing it, for she could feel them feeding over every part of her, from her clitoris to her anus, and she could do little more than shudder violently as the sensations of pleasure their feeding gave her racked her body. Each little tap from the butterflies' feet felt like dull little pins pricking her flesh as they tapped and tasted and tapped again, until she had endured

thousands of the agonizing little touches. Her body was a living, quaking mass of frothing desire, churning inward from where the butterflies gathered.

It was late afternoon and the wind had died down for the feasting, but the sky was still darkish. Catherine's body was held at an impasse between desire and euphoria as she was obliged to await the pleasure of the butterflies, who remained maddeningly leisurely at their meal. In the end, it took them the better part of an hour to accomplish their goal, but they left her without a single trace of nectar left over from the incredible flower thrashing she had endured. The wind suddenly picked up again and the butterflies left Catherine in a fluttery explosion that was no less spectacular than when they had arrived.

Catherine's exposed flesh was now bright red and burning hot; the cool wind upon it caused her little lips to shiver uncontrollably. They were parted slightly from all the activity and a bit of her own nectar was squeezing out between them. Catherine waited eagerly, trusting that she would be given relief at the determined time—and no sooner—and knowing that that time would be designed for her optimum pleasure. It seemed that this forest was dedicated to giving her the very best delights that the world had to offer, and it simply would not allow for less.

The sky was coming alive once again, and now, in her present state, even a stray breeze was enough to give Catherine a tantalizing thrill. She arched her back and tried to thrust her hips upward, delighting in the cool air touching her overheated flesh, even as she caught sight of the next portion of her pleasure approaching.

A single bud was coming up out of the ground and growing, right before her eyes, into a broad stem with massive leaves. Within a blink of her eye, it sprouted and grew and now, at its tip, a large flower was blossoming. The plant was approximately four feet high in the end, having grown that entire length within a single moment.

The flower looked something like an oversized iris and was covered all around the outside edges in rich, purple fur. She saw that it was opening, and held her breath as she waited to see what was inside. The accelerated speed with which the flower was coming to maturity suddenly seemed terribly slow to Catherine.

From deep within the iris's center, perhaps coming out of its very stem, there sprung forth a thick shaft that Catherine immediately recognized as its stamen. This stamen was like any other in that it had a bulbous pollen sack at the end of its stalk. But aside from this, Catherine saw that it was not like other stamens at all. First and foremost was its exceptional size. As Catherine eagerly watched, it continued to grow and thicken to the incredible length of nearly a foot, and expand in diameter to the thickness of a ripe plum. Catherine's back arched reflexively. She had no uncertainty about what the stamen was for.

The flower had risen out of the ground from a spot that was centered directly between Catherine's legs. All it had to do was to lean toward her, bending slightly in the direction of her hips. Her labia was still quivering, and it seemed as if they suddenly parted in anticipation. The flower continued to lean and tip in her direction until the stamen touched her. The pollen sack at its tip was pliable to a point, but it was so large and protruding that this did not help much as it began to push its way into Catherine's body. She moaned loudly as it entered her, and her flesh continued to burn and pulse. Yet there was palpable relief just to have it inside her, pressing its way through her inner walls, filling her. She felt almost depraved in her desperation to have it. It inched its way in slowly, backing out a hairbreadth periodically before advancing farther. Catherine relished each and every advance, gasping and moaning in time with its movements forward or back.

Soon Catherine was taking more of the stamen inside her than anything she had ever taken before, and her body bucked slightly against the intrusion. But she could do little to escape in any direction so she remained rooted to the spot, with her hands still held firmly behind her and her feet held far apart and firmly attached to the ground. There was nowhere for her to go, but she wiggled and squirmed as best she could anyway. Her body arched and contorted, and she moaned and whined as

the flower continued to advance. Her hips were lifted off the protruding rock, for she was obliged to raise them in her frantic effort to accommodate the impossible stamen, and it held her there, impaled in midair.

Just when she thought she would be torn in half, the flower made its final advance. She was amazed to see that she had managed to take the full length of the iris's stamen inside of her, and now, suddenly, its stiff, leafy head was brushing against her throbbing clitoris. She cried out when she felt it. The rough surface of the petal, heavily coated as it was with the stunning purple fur, provided just the right intensity and motion to further inflame her passion and assist her in her climax. Each time the flower withdrew and advanced again, the thick petal stroked her. Yet it was not as repetitive as she would have liked for a quick release but, rather, it was of an intensity to bring her to her satisfaction slowly—easing her into it.

Catherine strained against her bonds and cried out loudly. Her hair was flying from side to side as she railed against the most intense and exquisite pleasure she had ever experienced before or, in truth, ever imagined she could endure. The thick stamen drove into her with an intensity and tirelessness that caused her insides to flutter, while the flower's furry head kept repeatedly teasing and titillating her from the outside. Wave upon dizzying wave of desire and pleasure combined to make her feverish. Her gyrations became one fluid movement, and her cries became one long moan. The wind picked up around her, cooling her overheated flesh, and causing her skin to tingle and her nipples to grow hard.

Up and up Catherine's desire circled and grew within her, like a whirlwind building up to a storm. The iris appeared to remain unaffected and determined, dutifully thrusting into her deeply while relentlessly brushing its stiff petals against her. Higher and stronger her feelings of lusty passion kept building until Catherine felt them spin into a crescendo of pleasure that exploded within her. The violent eruption released a tremendous flood of euphoric ecstasy trickling through her. The ecstasy quickly faded into a gently swelling bliss.

The stamen now stopped and withdrew somewhat, but it did not yet retreat from her body. It remained persistently inside her, hovering halfway in, without moving. Catherine did not wonder over this. She knew, by this time, that there was still more pleasure to come. In fact, she had learned that this strange and wonderful forest would continue to provide pleasure until there was simply no more pleasure to be had.

She waited delightedly for what would come next, and already she could feel fresh little tingles of awareness rising up within her all over again. Her body was swollen and drenched, and she could feel herself spasm lightly around the portion of the stamen that remained inside her. Her insides seemed to be grasping at it with each little tremor of pure delight.

In response to her newly awakening passion, the enchanted forest once again seemed to come alive. Catherine noticed that the roots that were holding her ankles were beginning to move, shifting slightly from within the earth below. The honeysuckle vines also began to loosen their grip on her wrists. Catherine sucked in her breath and yielded as Mother Nature carefully maneuvered her body to a position that better matched her newest innermost desires. But which of her fantasies was it playing out now? She felt the enchanted forest knew her better than she knew herself.

Smoothly, with only the slightest disturbance that had almost no effect on the stamen that was still firmly imbedded inside her, Catherine found herself suddenly facing the ground, hovering just above the rock she had previously been sitting upon, but this time she was held suspended in midair. During this maneuver, other honeysuckle vines had been busily weaving themselves into some kind of web that surrounded her, so that she was not obliged to simply hang there, struggling under her own weight, but was actually enveloped in a kind ofleafy hammock that cradled her in a delicious aroma that reignited her senses. It offered support where needed, while leaving her bare where it would provide the most pleasure to be exposed. When all of these machinations were accomplished —in the space of a mere moment or two—her body was situated so that it resembled an upside-down

V, with her hips at the peak and her torso and legs slanting slightly downward from there in both directions. Her legs were still held open wide and the stamen had not budged an inch from where it was lodged inside her simmering body.

Catherine felt the whirling desire building up inside her all over again. It was not achingly acute like before; now it was all just simple, unadulterated pleasure. The hammock allowed her just enough freedom of movement so that she could enhance her own pleasure as she wished, but no more. She noticed suddenly that there was a little knot in the flowered netting that protruded and rubbed against her swollen clitoris. All she had to do was jerk her hips in a little rocking motion to increase the friction between herself and the little honeysuckle knot. And already the stamen was steadily advancing again. She gasped in surprise as it once again filled her. It felt as if it was even larger in this position. Her body instinctively moved forward in an effort to escape the intrusiveness of the stamen's powdery appendage as it thrust itself against her insides. But when the hammock's constraints were reached, they recoiled, acting like a spring and forcing her back even farther onto the stamen. She cried out in exquisite agony, realizing that each and every reflexive attempt to escape would actually bring her back with double force!

Catherine struggled to remain motionless, but with every advance from the thick, sturdy stamen her body would instinctively jerk forward, causing the soft, pliant hammock to thrust her backward again and again. A momentum was building that she could not control. Her breasts popped out from between the web of flowers, and a stray honeysuckle vine that was whipping in the wind slapped at them mischievously. And neither the wind, nor the vines, nor the stamen—nor even Catherine's wayward body—could ease the delicious tension or slow its raging pace, so that it kept building and building, with all the elements working in perfect harmony to achieve a crashing crescendo. There was little more that could be done, other than to endure the torturous pleasure until that moment was reached.

This time, the iris's stiff petals tickled her nether hole mercilessly with each thrust home. And with faultless rhythm, the stamen's thrust forward always met her reflexive spring backward. She cried out with each explosive impact, and even the sound of her screams added to her exquisite desire that kept spiraling out of control. Her pleasure was so acutely intense that she felt oppressed by the knowledge that it would end, even though she knew there would be more pleasures to follow, perhaps even more intense than what she was experiencing now. She struggled to hold back her quickly approaching release, wanting to prolong the sweet agony for as long as possible. The elongated pleasure tore through her body, leaving her raw and inflamed, yet still crying out for more.

And it suddenly occurred to her that the entire universe was centered on her. Hadn't she known this, even when she was just a tiny babe, crying out for her mother? Then, she thought it out of ignorance, but now the thought appeared to be a result of a higher knowledge, and possibly all she had to do was acknowledge that it was so.

But none of this was important at the moment. All that mattered was that the forces around her kept giving her this pleasure. She could think of no more important endeavor than the one she struggled with now, and every part of her strained to keep her body from succumbing to the overwhelming sensations. But the pleasure assailed her from every angle—from the gently chiding whipping of the vines against her swollen breasts, to the excruciatingly deep penetration of the stamen that she was forced to not only endure but to meet head-on, to the little knot in her honeysuckle hammock that kept rubbing against her clitoris, to, finally, the coarse chafing of the iris's bristly bearded head as it teased and tickled her anus beyond what she could endure. All of these stimuli Catherine had to fight against in order to prolong her pleasure, and her efforts caused her desire to build with an intensity she had never felt before. The sky above her appeared to darken in response to the growing storm within her. It seemed to mirror her frustration in its angry countenance, and the wind also increased its energies as if to join in. Her nipples began to sting smartly from the whip of the punishing honeysuckle vines.

Like a clap of angry thunder, her satisfaction struck her, loud and deep and harsh. Her body shook with large, quaking tremors that startled her. She screamed in protest, but already the stark pleasure was waning into trickling waves that fluttered through her. But the force of it left her sated and content and subdued.

The wind died down, and Catherine now found herself resting unencumbered in her flowery hammock. She turned onto her back and allowed it to rock her gently to sleep.

And so it happened that Catherine took up residence in the enchanted forest, without ever sparing a single thought to the life she left behind. The forest kept her so captivated that she could no longer remember that there was anything to go back to. Had she kept a memory of her other life, it would have only pricked or irritated anyway. But even this much was spared her. She could no longer call to mind even the smallest detail.

This new life consisted only of pleasure. Like the fairies she imagined to be all around her, Catherine flitted from one end of her enchanted forest to the other. She had developed a sort of primitive communication with these beings she believed were fairies. They did not speak, yet they were there with her. She felt she understood them. She had come to respect their reserved silence, believing them to be timid and skittish because she, too, now preferred to be kept hidden from others. Yet she acknowledged their presence in a number of innocuous little ways, such as leaving them treats here and there—much as she believed they did for her from time to time—and in wishing them the goodwill that she felt they had likewise brought upon her.

Yet real communication, as she had formerly known it to be, did not seem possible. That there was intelligence and reason around her she could not, for a moment, doubt. But there was no one to speak her language to, no one to address her in her native tongue.

One day, perhaps it was months or possibly even years after she had first discovered the enchanted forest, Catherine stumbled upon something peculiar that captured her attention. She instantly recognized it as something coming from the other world outside the forest, although she didn't know what it was or how she knew this. It was a strange object, something not indigenous to her forest. There was something about it that caused it to stand out from the rest of the surroundings, like something alien. Its colors were what she noticed first, for they had an unnaturally dull tint, completely void of the brilliance she had become accustomed to seeing in the wildflowers of the forest. These colors seemed a poor imitation, and she wondered how they had got there.

Curious, Catherine reached down and picked up the foreign object. It was not terribly large but it was quite heavy. It was orange and yellow, with orange bands coming out the sides of it. One of the bands appeared to be broken. It seemed that beneath its outer casing, it held more objects inside. She noticed that there was a strange seam all along the edge of it, and an eerie sense of déjà vu crept over Catherine as she grasped hold of the little tab at the end and slid it backward along the seam, opening the outer casing. She fished through the many different objects that were inside but, try as she might, she couldn't figure out what they were. The peculiar feeling stayed with her as she stared at them uncomprehendingly. But eventually she lost interest and laid the objects back down where she found them. Yet there was undeniably something strange in all of this, if only for the unusual effect it was having on her. Catherine stood up and looked around. And then she noticed something else—something she did recognize—in the plush woods nearby. More curious than ever, she moved nearer. Upon closer inspection, she saw that it was, in fact, hair. But it was hard to tell if came from an animal or human because, whatever it was, was hidden in the bushes nearby. Something stirred in Catherine.

She moved carefully, not really out of fear as much as instinct to be cautious. She tentatively moved some of the branches aside to get a better view, but then abruptly jumped back. The hair was attached to a skull! Just as Catherine had instantly recognized the overabundance oflife stirring all around her in the forest, she now instantly perceived that life had gone from here. A haunting sadness welled up in her. She moved the branches away again and carefully brushed aside some of the fallen leaves and other debris. There was another brief moment of a kind of general, vague recognition, but

Catherine was far too detached from the faded thing disintegrating into the earth to actually own it. She shook off the discomfiting stirrings. But she could not help feeling a powerful compassion for the woman who had died there.

Looking up, Catherine noticed that dusk was coming. For the first time since that day when she had first discovered the enchanted forest, she was afraid to be wandering alone in the dark. Yet she was hesitant to leave the poor girl alone. Acting on instinct, she carefully replaced the leaves and brush over the body, mindful this time to cover the woman's hair, as well. Next she darted off to a nearby field to collect a handful of wildflowers. Uttering a small prayer for the woman's soul, Catherine placed the flowers on top of her leafy grave. With one last pause, she got up, brushing the leaves and the strange melancholy off her. Then, with the adroitness of a spirit, or a fairy, she flitted out over the flowery field, fluttering toward home and the pleasures that awaited her.

Disenchantment

Everything was going wrong and now, on top of everything else, she was late. Maryanne skittered over the wet cobblestones, rushing to get to the restaurant. She would be a mess by the time she arrived. But she'd had to drive four blocks away just to find parking!

Why was she even bothering? She tried to silence the pessimistic voice in her head but it would not relent. It reminded her that she had no reason to expect this guy to be different from any of the others. There was nothing special or noteworthy about him that made it worth the effort. Even by online-dating standards he had offered little intrigue, and with all the embellishing that takes place in preparing one's online profile, that was rather dismaying. She tried to recall what prompted her to go out with him, and then she remembered that he had caught her in a weak moment when, feeling unsettled and lonely, she suddenly longed for a normal life with an average guy. So here she was, on a Friday night, rushing around to meet this average or—more likely—less-than-average guy.

She took a deep breath and tried once again to assume a positive outlook. At least she was getting out of the house. It could be interesting. She might as well try to have a good time. There didn't have to be any entanglements. She couldn't hide forever.

And perhaps this one would work out differently. But she couldn't count on that and she knew it.

She dashed through the restaurant doors and found him waiting for her. Just as the little voice in her head had predicted, he looked nothing like his picture and yet she recognized him instantly. Something in his present look was more like what she would have expected anyway. Within their casual online correspondence, she had detected an inherent gentleness, a kind of considerateness in his demeanor that had initially captured and ultimately held her interest. While these qualities had not been evident in his picture, she recognized them in his face, and her reluctance eased up the tiniest bit. "I'm sorry I'm late," she murmured.

Dan stood up from the bench where he had been waiting and smiled warmly at Maryanne. Clearly he had embellished his height in his online profile, as well. She resented this; she could have at least worn lower heels to minimize the difference had she known. She tried to hide her annoyance. Yet he did not seem to mind so much; she noticed that his eyes were looking over her slender form with approval.

"Maryanne? You're so much more beautiful than your picture!" he said earnestly. Then he blushed slightly, as if embarrassed by this outburst. She had the impression that his comments, at least, were spontaneous and genuine. "Don't worry about being late," he said good-naturedly. "I figured you were having a tough time finding parking. I did get us a table, though."

He led her to their table and pulled out her chair for her. "Wow," he remarked as he sat down across from her, "those are some guns you're packing there!"

Maryanne drew back, startled, and Dan quickly gestured to her arms, once again embarrassed. "I mean, you must work out," he clarified.

"Oh…yes!" she said with a laugh, feeling the tension leave her. "I practice yoga," she explained.

"Yoga's quite the workout," he surprised her by saying. "I tried it myself a few times, but I found it difficult to hold many of the poses. I get distracted too easily. Let's see, what was that one? You stand sort of crouched with your hands high up in front like the bug…the locust, was it?" He put his hands up in front of him in an exaggerated simulation of the pose.

"The praying mantis," she corrected, laughing.

"Yeah," he agreed amiably. "That's it. Nearly snapped my hamstrings trying to do that one."

Maryanne tried to imagine this stocky, seemingly unsophisticated guy attempting yoga and suddenly burst into loud laughter at the thought of it. But when she recovered, she changed her tune, eyeing him sideways and saying, "Actually, you look like you could handle it." And it was true. Although he was a burly man, she could see at a glance that he was all muscle.

"Well, I might have exaggerated," he conceded. "I actually only strained them a little."

"That seems a bit more plausible…" she teased, surprised to find that she was flirting with him. The realization made her suddenly shy, and she tilted her head slightly downward in a reserved gesture she was in the habit of assuming to conceal her face. She could feel her cheeks growing warm and knew she was blushing. If Dan noticed her discomfort, he was considerate enough to pretend that he did not.

"I'm built mostly for hard work," he continued with a matter-of-fact shrug. "Like an ox. That's how I manage to keep in some kind of shape. But you look like you live at the gym."

"Not really," she said, tilting her head a little bit more. But she was pleased.

"I'm sorry," he told her. "I'm gushing here. I'm really not obsessed with appearances. It's just that you're so toned and in amazing shape. I have to admit I find that attractive. Even your cheekbones. Wow!" He gestured around her face without touching her. "It's like they're chiseled out of marble or something." It was an earnest compliment, and it wasn't the first time Maryanne had heard it. But whenever anyone mentioned her amazing bone structure, all she could think of was the way the boys in grade school used to tease her, calling her "alien" because of the way her large eyes and high cheekbones dominated her face. If only she could get those children's cruel voices out of her head.

Dan casually reached over and brushed aside the loose hair that had fallen down over her face. From anyone else, this would have been too forward a gesture for Maryanne, but Dan did it with such simple aplomb that she hardly noticed that he had done anything at all.

"So what are you hungry for?" he asked, turning his attention to his menu.

"I don't know," she said disinterestedly. She picked up her menu, trying to think of something clever to say.

"I chose this restaurant because their food is exceptional. You mentioned in your profile that you were a finicky eater."

"I did?" she asked.

"I think you did," he replied, considering. "I'm not sure exactly what you said. Something gave me that impression."

Maryanne wondered what it was. He certainly was intuitive. She realized that she felt considerably more relaxed with him than she usually was on first dates—particularly blind dates—but even so, she had the urge to rock gently back and forth in her chair, another nervous habit she had picked up. Most people didn't mind it once they got to know her, but she knew it would be disconcerting for a man to see her do it on a first date. Yet with Dan, she wondered. He seemed to be the sort of man who would make a person feel comfortable no matter how odd his or her behavior.

"Well, anyway," he continued, "the food here is first-rate. The chef grows a lot of the vegetables in his own organic garden nearby. You can really taste the freshness. I figured you were probably into health food."

"Well, sort of," she said noncommittally.

Maryanne ordered a salad and Dan ordered a steak. But she showed no interest in her food when it arrived. Having consumed her second drink by then, she was finally loosening up.

"So have you ever been married?" Dan asked. Maryanne had been wondering when the conversation would come around to that. People were so obsessed with past relationships. She disliked talking about them. Besides, whoever told the truth when it came to that? Had a man on a date ever said, for example, "Yeah, I just couldn't seem to stop sleeping with other women"? Or would a woman ever admit, "Everything he did just made me want to bite his head off "?

"No," she said without elaborating.

"Did you never want to?" he persisted.

Maryanne felt she was treading in dangerous territory. Yet the drinks had loosened her up considerably so it didn't seem to matter so much.

"Yes," she replied honestly. "I'll admit I have thought about it a time or two. But…"

Dan waited a long moment before responding. When he did, Maryanne was surprised that he was still waiting for her to finish her thought. “But…what?” he prompted. She looked at him, impressed. Most of the men she encountered had the attention span of a fly.

“It’s hard to explain,” she began. “I’ve never really put my thoughts about marriage into words before.” She thought about it for another minute. He was looking at her with keen interest, as if he really wanted to hear what she thought about it. His seeming interest encouraged her. “I believe marriage is impossible,” she said. Then she shook her head vigorously, causing her hair to shift back and forth over her face. “No, not impossible. That’s ridiculous. People get married every day. What I mean is, it’s hopeless…and destructive and doomed to fail.”

He seemed genuinely taken aback by her comment, although there was a little smile playing about his lips upon hearing it. He appeared to find her vehement passion over the matter charming. She was surprised, too. She had never admitted her true feelings about it to anyone before. “Hopeless and destructive and doomed to fail?” he repeated, following it with a low whistle. “I could maybe see hopeless and destructive, or destructive and doomed to fail, but all three together…” He shook his head as if to say she’d gone too far. She could see that he was trying to make her laugh—and perhaps he wanted to minimize the severity of what she’d just said in the process—but now that she had confided in him she felt like explaining what she meant.

“It’s hopeless and doomed to fail because it can’t possibly succeed, and I think it’s destructive to the people who have to learn that the hard way. The truth is that marriages don’t succeed, not in the truest sense of the word. People stay married sometimes, it’s true, but is it really what they thought it would be when they walked down the aisle together?” She said this without the slightest bitterness, which only seemed to give credence to her words.

Dan put down his fork (she had not yet picked hers up), giving Maryanne all of his attention. Both were now fully intrigued and absorbed by the topic. “But how could you possibly know this if you’ve never been married yourself ?”

“I don’t have to go through something myself if I am able to learn from watching others,” she replied. “Have you been married?” she asked suddenly.

“Yes,” he admitted.

“Well…”

“Yes, but even having failed, I still believe in the institution of marriage. And I liked being married, for the most part.”

“For the most part?” she said.

“There were moments…” He paused, at a loss for words to explain.

“Of disenchantment?” she asked with a smile. “A slow, ongoing letting go of expectations, like gradually sliding down a not-so-steep hill?”

Dan looked at her with curiosity. “So, if not marriage, what then? Living together? Dating?”

She was feeling strangely reckless. And Dan was somehow drawing her out in a way that other men were not usually able to do. Something in his demeanor put her at ease. “To be perfectly honest, I don’t think it’s possible for a man and a woman to stay together for any significant amount of time. Relationships seem to have a shelflife.”

He jerked back in surprise. “Isn’t that supposed to be the guy’s position?”

She laughed. She wondered what he was thinking about the things she was saying and was surprised to discover that she cared. In fact, she wanted to make him understand. She thought for a moment of how to illustrate her point.

“See that couple over there?” she began, exclaiming immediately afterwards, “Don’t make it so obvious!”

Dan nodded conspiratorially and tossed his napkin on the floor with an exaggerated flourish. Maryanne struggled to contain her laughter as Dan made a show of casually bending over to pick

up his dropped napkin while surreptitiously stealing a glance in the direction she had indicated. The straightforward, uncomplicated person that he was made the scene all the more comical.

"The woman who looks like she's been sucking on a sour ball?" he whispered after a long and lengthy ordeal just to get a glimpse.

Maryanne giggled. "That's her," she confirmed. She leaned in and lowered her voice, growing more serious. "Her husband has been staring openly at me all night."

Dan looked momentarily confused. "Well, you're a beautiful woman," he said in a matter-of-fact manner, as if to add, "What do you expect?"

"Right in front of her!" she added more adamantly.

Dan drew back and paused, but there was a light coming on in his eyes. "Oh, yeah, women hate that."

"Women hate that," she echoed, "because it's destructive. It causes them to deteriorate inside. Don't look at me like I'm being overly dramatic. And I realize that it's in a man's nature to constantly observe women. They can't help it, as they're so quick to point out, but that's exactly what I'm saying. That's why it's impossible for relationships to work."

"But it seems like a rather small thing, considering…"

"Well, of course, I'm not just talking about *looking* here. What I'm referring to is that *interest,* that overabundance of attentiveness and courtesy that men show to the women they have not yet been intimate with. In and of itself, even that might be tolerable if not for the utter *lack* of interest they show to the women they *have* been intimate with!"

"Do you really think it's as bad as that?"

"It's often worse."

"Well, if women know this about men, and it's the way men are, as you say, can't the women work around it?"

"They can and do work around it," Maryanne replied. She was completely relaxed now and spoke conversationally, explaining her philosophies without the slightest rancor. Her eyes were wide, and she even felt a bit excited. "But that doesn't mean they're not deteriorating while they're doing it."

"Forgive me if I seem a little callous here, but aren't you blowing this a little out of proportion? Most of the guys I know would never do any more than look."

"Whether or not he acts on his interest in other women is irrelevant." Maryanne was pleased that Dan wasn't simply patronizing her, or, worse yet, trying to steer her away from what some men might consider an uncomfortable topic. He was taking her seriously enough to disagree with her, and she appreciated that. "Because the damage will already be done. See, women also have instincts that appear to favor more short-term relationships."

"Okay, now you definitely have my attention."

"A woman's most fundamental need, at her core—and I'm not talking about human survival here but *female* survival, something she needs to keep her femaleness alive—is to be desirable." She paused for effect, noticing that he was hanging on her every word. She let this first idea sink in before completing her thought. "Almost every single natural behavior of a man—*after* he's had sex with a woman—is designed to diminish her belief that she is desirable. I think it is an unconscious effort to ultimately destroy her desirability to other men."

Dan sucked in his breath. "Wow!" He turned discreetly to look at the woman she had singled out before, this time observing her more carefully. Maryanne casually observed the woman as well. The couple had clearly been together a long time; the wife was even beginning to resemble the husband. She had little, if any, visible signs of femininity or sexuality left. There was a sadness behind her eyes that somehow softened the bitter twist of her lips. She was staring past her husband indifferently. Dan had caught the husband ogling Maryanne when he suddenly turned, and the man looked guiltily away. Dan turned back to Maryanne, his expression tragic. She smiled.

"You see?" she asked, knowing that he did.

"You make an interesting point," he conceded. "But I'm not ready to accept defeat just yet. Let me think about it a minute." He picked up his fork and knife and cut off a bit of steak. Maryanne watched him as he chewed on it thoughtfully. She couldn't help chuckling as she watched him, a bit too gleefully for the occasion perhaps, but she was so delighted to be able to have this kind of open discussion with a man. She had always known that her observations were different from those of other people, men and women alike; hers were much more cynical and pessimistic. She couldn't help seeing things for what they were, but she had learned to keep most of these observations to herself. She tried her best to acquiesce to the accepted viewpoint, seemingly agreeing with all that was politically correct in an effort to fit in with those around her. At times she felt like a chameleon, always changing her own brilliant colors to mimic the much less appealing ones of those around her. There were times when she even doubted herself, wondering if she really was viewing things correctly after all, but her efforts to change only gave more credence to her original viewpoint and she was obliged, however reluctantly, to keep it. So now, to actually share that viewpoint with another person —a man, no less—and actually have it cause him to stop and think was terribly exciting for her. Dan, for all of his optimistic thinking—she had spotted that in him immedi-ately—was not one to ignore a strong argument that had merit. She waited eagerly to see what he would do with the ideas she had shared with him, sipping on her drink in the interim.

Dan swallowed his steak and looked at her. Just as Maryanne expected, he was cleverly going to place the ball back in her court by pointing out some similar inconsistencies in women. "You know," he began tentatively and thoughtfully, clearly enjoying the conversation as well, "there are plenty of women out there who lose interest in men, too, after they've had their way with them…playing all kinds of cruel games and generally screwing with their heads."

But Maryanne had already thought of this. "If you think about it for a minute," she countered, "you will realize that that actually proves my original point. A woman who plays head games with a guy usually isn't all that interested in him to begin with. She either wants something from him or she's giving in to his persistent advances for some other reason. She doesn't have any genuine feelings for him. And this is the point—a woman's disinterest is the only thing that can hold a man's interest. He's still interested in her because *he really hasn't had her yet.* She allows him to hang on because it satisfies her need to feel desirable, but since she doesn't really love him, she'll just keep using and abusing him. And for as long as she doesn't care about him, she will keep his full attention. But if she falls in love with him, what happened to that woman over there will eventually happen to her. Even if a man tries to fight this instinct, his soul will be crying out for someone new. He might not have the guts to act on it, like you said—but *instinctually* he will become more aware and interested in almost every other woman, and she will *know*."

Dan was shaking his head, but his mouth was full of food so she continued. "Just think about it. It's true."

He forced his food down with a gulp. "So if you really believe this, you go out with a guy, what? Once? Twice? How long before it starts to go to shit?"

"I don't know," she replied thoughtfully. "I haven't figured that out yet." She dipped her head, suddenly shy, and tapped her long, glossy fingernails together in front of her nervously.

Dan gave her a funny look, but he was smiling. "Come on," he teased. "You must have an idea. How many dates does it take to get to the jerk inside the man?" he asked with the same rhythm and inflection as the cartoon owl who asked, "How many licks does it take to get to the center of a Tootsie Roll lollipop?"

Maryanne laughed. "Remarkably few, if I were to guess."

"So how am I doing?" he asked. "Will I even make it through the night?" Maryanne looked at him in surprise, and he cleared his throat. "I'm sorry…I didn't mean that like it sounded. Jeez!" He shook his head. "We *are* jerks!" But his eyes still sparkled with humor.

"I don't think of men as jerks," Maryanne told him. "I just think that relationships between men and women have a short life. Does it have to be somebody's fault? Women are just as responsible."

She once again had his full attention. "Go on," he said, narrowing his eyes dubiously.

"I'm a realist." She shrugged. "But most women aren't. They stubbornly deny what is happening and ignore their inner voice that is crying out for attention—attention that can only be found in a new relationship. Now both of them are ignoring her and she really starts to deteriorate. Perhaps women are too sensitive. Perhaps our feminine egos are too fragile. But there it is. Many women just go with it, like that woman over there seems to have done. But you can see by looking at her that something is missing, right? You can see that the life has gone out of her? Probably she's moderately healthy otherwise, and lives a fairly normal life. But her femininity and passion are utterly gone."

Dan snuck another glance at the woman and seemed dismayed to find her husband eyeing Maryanne yet again. "Why doesn't she leave that bastard?" he asked, perturbed.

Maryanne laughed. "When she married him, it had probably already started. That's why women are so hot on marriage. They think it will bring his interest back. When it doesn't, I'm sure these women are devastated at first. That's why *Cosmo* sells so many magazines with nine hundred different ways to get his attention. But, by then, who knows? Maybe there were kids on the way, or perhaps she depended on him financially. And if you push a part of yourself aside for long enough, it will eventually die." She looked at him. "You see, he couldn't help that her loving him took all the intrigue away, and she couldn't help that having no power to intrigue made her unappealing. Both were simply responding to what was."

"And you still date, believing this?"

She laughed. "Like most women, I am a hopeless romantic."

"Do you believe in love?"

"I do! That's just it. But I think that sometimes love means letting go."

Dan sat there for moment, thinking. "You know," he said, "what I'd like to do is prove you wrong. I really would. But in order to do that, I'm assuming I'd have to come up with some evidence. Maybe find some shmuck out there who's actually still enamored by the woman in his life. That's really what we're talking about here, right? She wants to feel special. She wants him to treat her like she's special, even though the instinct inside him is saying, 'Been there, done that, losing interest,' right?" He waited for her to nod her head. "I think there *are* men out there like that. Men who are more interested in the woman they're with than any other women."

"Well!" said Maryanne, impressed. She couldn't help finding his optimistic, I-would-like-to-fix-this attitude extremely attractive. "You thinking it and it being true are different things," she reminded him.

"Okay, but, come on now," he said in an extremely reasonable, almost reproving tone of voice. "*Your* thinking that you're right doesn't necessarily make it true, either."

And in that moment Maryanne knew that she was hooked. What she was going to do about it, she hadn't yet decided. But what she had discovered in him so far—his intelligence, his open-mindedness and now, his strength of character—made him suddenly seem irresistible. She knew that her instincts had already singled him out. And in that instant, in that sudden moment of realization, she felt joy—but only for that single instant. For in the next, she had already begun to mourn the inevitable loss.

"Touché," was all she said.

As if he already sensed his victory, Dan settled back in his chair and relaxed. Was it just her imagination, wondered Maryanne, or was he, too, already aware of it?

"Mmm," Dan murmured thoughtfully. "So now all I have to do is find a man who is smart enough to override this…instinct, as you call it, and continue to show an interest in the woman he's with. Is that it?"

"Well, that would definitely be a good start."

"Mmm," he said again. His lips twitched to hold back a slight smirk that was struggling to be set free on his features. "Where could I find such a man?" Encouraged by her growing smile, he continued on this theme, making a pretense of looking around the room curiously. "I wonder where," he murmured.

Maryanne decided to play along. She, too, began to look around the room, but more skeptically than he was doing. "I don't know," she said doubtfully. "It doesn't look promising."

"Well, then," he suddenly announced with conviction. "I guess I'll just have to prove it to you myself !"

Maryanne threw her head back and laughed. Game, set and match! she thought, admiring how he'd handled it. But when she recovered, she looked him over doubtfully, one eyebrow raised high. "You?" she asked. But she was only teasing him, and they both knew it.

"Sure, why not?" he replied with a casual air. "I always say, if you want something done right you have to do it yourself."

"So who's the lucky girl?" she now wanted to know.

"Ooh." He tried to look a little put out. But he recovered quickly. "You realize the only way you're ever going to know for sure whether or not I'm proving you wrong is if you're right there, seeing it for yourself."

"Mmm." Now it was Maryanne's turn to consider. "I guess that seems fair." But truthfully, aside from this bantering, which was engaging and fun in and of itself, she really had no idea if he was serious about it. Was this just a line to get her home for the night? Probably. But what did it matter? If it was just a line, it was certainly one of the more original ones she'd encountered.

Just then, the waiter came to offer them dessert.

"You've barely touched your food," Dan observed. "Was everything all right?"

"It was fine," Maryanne told him. "I just wasn't very hungry."

He looked at her suspiciously for a moment, but didn't say anything more. But she knew what he was thinking. People accused her all the time of being anorexic. But she loved her body the way it was.

As they left the restaurant together, she was suddenly filled with that jittery excitement that comes with a new romance.

"How about a little dancing?" Dan suggested. "Would you be into that?"

Maryanne smiled. "I would."

She was not, however, a confident dancer, and she was pleased when Dan seemed content to slow-dance. Being close to him and having all of his warm, undivided attention directed at her as he led her across the floor acted like a cathartic for her libido. She felt ready and even eager for a more intimate embrace. But he appeared to be in no hurry and she, too, felt remarkably at ease and relaxed. Before she even realized it, they had danced and talked and laughed the night away.

She was surprised when he drove her back to the restaurant.

"Where did you say you were parked?" he asked.

"Oh! Uh, let me see." She had fully expected him to want to take her home, or at least somewhere private. She was so taken aback by his casual manner that she momentarily forgot where her car was. She glanced at him, confused. She knew she had given him all the right signals. She was certain he was attracted to her. What on earth was going on? "It's that street over there. Yeah, that one. And it's the black car, a few blocks down." She was completely flummoxed, and not a little disappointed.

"I had a wonderful time," Dan told her, and she noticed that there was surprise in his voice. She wondered if he had felt some of the same misgivings about their date that she had.

"Me, too," she said, blushing when it came out sounding like an accusation.

Dan chuckled knowingly. "Believe me," he said with emphasis, "I would love nothing more…"

Maryanne stared at him, surprised that he had read her mind.

"Oh!" she said again. It was disconcerting—albeit refreshing—to be confronted with such honesty.

He parked behind her car and shut off his engine. "If I'm gonna get around this whole male instinct thing and prove you wrong, I'm going to need a strategy," he told her. "My plan is to let the anticipation build for a while, you know, kind of work my way up to sex. I actually believe in the old adage that the harder you work for something the more you appreciate it."

She stared at him, stunned. "Are you serious?" It was hard to tell because he was grinning at her.

"Sure. Kind of. Yes!" He opened his car door and got out. She didn't even reach for her handle, knowing him well enough already to realize he was coming around to open her door for her. He even took her hand and helped her out of his car. But once she was outside, he blocked her from going anywhere. "Of course there's another part to my strategy, too," he admitted.

"Oh? And what might that be?" she asked, a little breathless.

"Well, I figure if I kiss you—and I'm not talking about a tight-lipped little prim-and-proper good-night kiss here, but a full-fledged, no-holds-barred, French, Italian and Portuguese all in one, make-out kiss—it'll help build my anticipation and keep me on pins and needles until the next time I see you."

"Portuguese?"

"Don't question me," he said, gently cupping her face in his hands.

She was still laughing when his lips touched hers, brushing them ever so lightly at first, but the laughter suddenly died in her throat, because he really did kiss her then, just like he said, with a full-fledged, no-holds-barred, French, Italian and Portuguese all in one, granddaddy of a kiss. She clung to his shoulders for support. His strong arms held her up as his hands moved possessively over her back and hips. His lips and tongue seemed to be consuming her. When he finally pulled away, she stared up at him in surprise.

And later, as Maryanne tossed and turned in her bed into the next morning, she wondered if it was for himself or her that he was building anticipation.

Whatever Dan's intention, they were both eager to see each other again after that, and they made plans for the following night and then the night after that. It went on like this for several weeks. They spent more time together than Maryanne had ever spent with a man, and yet they had still not become intimate—at least not in the truest sense. Dan always refused to take her home. Sometimes he would even go so far as to please her right there in his car, when what started out as one of his good-night kisses ended with her trembling in absolute pleasure after he somehow managed to get beneath her clothing and find just the right places to touch her.

"But I want to please you, too," she'd say, really meaning it, and not just offering herself because she felt that she ought to because he'd pleased her.

"Not yet," he'd tell her. "I want you know how much I appreciate you. I want you to *believe* it."

And she did. By the time he finally took her home for their first real night together, she was utterly convinced that she had somehow breached the ordinary parameters of relationships as she had come to know them and discovered something truly different and exceptional.

Dan had shown the ultimate self-control up to this point, but when at last she presented herself to him in a little silk negligee she picked out especially for the occasion, he finally lost control. With a strangled groan of anguish he embraced her, moving his hands all over her, trying to touch her everywhere at once and, in his enthusiasm, tearing the delicate fabric.

Maryanne laughed delightedly. She was filled with feminine arousal. She had never in her life felt more desirable, and she knew that because she felt so lusty and desirable, she *was.*

"God, how I've wanted you," he moaned. He suddenly picked her up, holding her close in his warmth as he carried her to the bed. She could not wait to feel him inside her.

They made love their first time in a kind of frenzy, with Dan holding back for as long as he was able, trembling violently with his effort. He came to her in the ordinary missionary position, but

there was nothing ordinary in the way he held her, cradling her shoulders and head in his strong arms, and gazing down into her eyes in between bouts of passionate kisses. He had that wonderful feel and smell of a clean-shaven man, and Maryanne wrapped her limbs around him in eager delight. A kind of aggressive passion welled up in her, and she dug her fingernails into his back. This seemed to push Dan over the edge, and his thrusts began to quicken with his impending release. But suddenly he stopped short, holding himself very still to recover his control, and shaking violently with the effort. Maryanne looked up at him in wonder and he smiled into her eyes.

"Almost lost it there," he groaned. "You've got me in knots."

"Go ahead if you want!" she encouraged.

"No. You first."

And once again she was reminded of how much she meant to him, and her own arousal soared to be so valued and so desired. She kissed him with all the passion she felt. He moved with her, assisting her, maintaining control and using his hands and lips and everything else he could think of to please her. When she finally cried out with her release, he lost the last bit of his control, crying out with her.

Afterward he was not quick to release her, but held her quite close, remaining firmly embedded in her as he spoke in a low, intimate voice. "You're an amazing woman," he told her, and his eyes seemed to be trying to communicate something more to her as his gaze burned into her.

It was not long before they were both aroused all over again, and this time he had no difficulty prolonging their lovemaking, switching positions numerous times before Maryanne found herself being taken the way she liked best, on her hands and knees. With this she went wild, flinging her hips outward toward Dan in a most enticing erotic dance. Her sudden abandon roused him beyond what she had seen thus far, and she was once again struck with her own femininity and allure. She felt exceedingly sensual. All her inhibitions melted away, and she audaciously continued her dance until the pleasure finally became too much for her and a thousand little sensations exploded within her. Meanwhile, Dan paused to allow her to achieve the full spectrum of her release.

Maryanne smoldered in the aftermath for a few moments. But then, craving a more intimate embrace, she lifted her body up against him, so that she was on her knees and leaning back on Dan's chest. He immediately acclimated to this new position, wrapping his arms around her body to offer support while lunging upward into her body. He moved his hands over her, squeezing her nipples with one while gently stimulating her clitoris with the other. Filled to overflowing with tender affection, Maryanne reached her lithe arms behind her to reciprocate the embrace, gliding her long, manicured nails up and down along his firm backside. Every now and then she would dig her nails into his flesh—just hard enough to stimulate but not to hurt—egging him on as he tirelessly thrust up into her. The lust was consuming her yet again, and she nimbly turned her upper body toward him suddenly, clutching his face in her hands almost violently so that she could kiss him. A kind of euphoric aggression reared up in her with her sudden awareness of her feminine power, but the soft, warm contentment that she was blanketed in overruled all.

"Why do you never eat?" Dan asked her later.

"I eat!" she replied.

"I haven't ever seen you eat," he countered. "And you're so thin." She was quiet, so he carefully maneuvered himself to look at her face without disturbing her much. "I'm not trying to stick my nose where it doesn't belong, or fix you or anything like that," he said. "I just want to make sure you're okay. And to let you know that I understand if you ever need a friend."

"You understand?" she asked curiously. There were myriad things she normally said when someone brought the subject up, but at the moment she was too weakened by the intense lovemaking to get sufficiently worked up to a defensive status.

"My sister is anorexic," he told her. "She's a beautiful woman and I can't stand that she suffers so much simply because she doesn't know it."

Maryanne stared at him, speechless.

Dan kissed her lips tenderly, holding her face in his hands. “I would hate it just as much if you didn’t know how beautiful you are.”

She smiled. “You certainly know how to make a girl feel beautiful,” she admitted. And it was true. Maryanne suddenly felt like a goddess with a body as supple and sensual as a cat’s. In the days that followed, she basked in the glow of being one with another and having it mean everything to him. She raced to see Dan at the end of each day, longing once again for that intense pleasure of being accepted and adored and desired. Within a week, she was struck with the astounding realization that she was in love.

When it first occurred to her, Maryanne was alarmed. What about all her philosophies about love? What about the conclusions she had reached about relationships over her lifetime?

But she told herself that this time was different. She could clearly see, even in this incredibly short period of time in which she had known him, that Dan was different than any other man she had known before. He had already exceeded everyone else in her heart.

She had no choice but to try, she told herself. She must find the courage to see it through.

And already, she harbored secret little fantasies and dreams of their life together. They kept growing and building deep within her mind and heart. Her long, lonely past was behind her. A life with Dan was in front of her.

A month had passed since the night she first met Dan, discouraged and stressed and apathetic. She had hardly put her best foot forward that night, but he had looked past everything else and discovered something special in her. And unlike any other man she had ever known, he had proven himself to her. Tonight she would show him how much *she* appreciated *him.* Tonight she would prove herself to him.

Maryanne trembled with anticipation as she went about her day. She took the day off work so that she could accomplish all that she planned. She began with an arduous trip to the salon and, by the time she left, there was not so much as an inch of her body that had not been buffed, waxed, filed, exfoliated, styled or in some other way enhanced. She could hardly afford it, but all that she had to do was picture Dan’s face and suddenly she knew that it was money well spent. Besides, she could tell by the way she was tingling inwardly that she had to be positively glowing outwardly. She couldn’t wait to see Dan’s expression when he saw her.

But then, having gone to so much trouble and expense already, she felt that she ought to have something fabulous to wear, both in and out of the bedroom. After all, with this being the anniversary of their first month together, it was important that she show Dan that she was willing to make the effort to please him.

The day flew by in a haze of anticipation at the prospect of delighting aloved one. Everything was a success. Maryanne not only found the perfect dress to complement her slender figure but it just happened to be in Dan’s favorite color. Suddenly feeling a bit naughty and bold, she followed this purchase up with stockings and a garter belt. She would wear that—and nothing else—under her dress. She debated with herself over whether she should tell him what she was wearing ahead of time or let him discover it when he undressed her. She could imagine teasing him with it at the restaurant. But then again, the surprise when he discovered it himself would be memorable as well. She tried to make up her mind as she headed home to put on her makeup. Glancing at the clock, she realized with a start that she was actually running late.

They had agreed to meet at the same restaurant where they first met in person. Maryanne felt a strange sense of déjà vu as she rushed through the streets to get to the restaurant. Once again, parking had been impossible.

But none of that mattered when at last she reached the restaurant, cheeks flushed and a brilliant smile on her face. She felt such keen excitement that the mere sight of Dan, sitting in the same spot where she had seen him for the first time, caused her heart to flutter unnaturally and her breath to catch in her throat. But when he turned to face her, the smile died on her lips.

"What's wrong?" she whispered breathlessly.

"Not a thing, now that you're here," he replied with his usual, good-natured manner. But before Maryanne could even accept or reject this, he stood up and turned toward the hostess without having given her more than a cursory glance. "Here she is," he said to the woman apologetically. "I really appreciate you holding the table."

And with that Maryanne was suddenly being ushered along behind the hostess, with a little nudge from Dan to the small of her back. She felt trapped between the two of them and suddenly terribly claustrophobic. In the back of her mind, she had a premonition of something tragic about to occur but she ignored it, turning her mind angrily to the moment instead, and thinking that she didn't really care whether or not the hostess had to hold the table. That was what hostesses were paid to do, after all. Why must Maryanne be flung around like a rag doll, without even so much as the courtesy of a greeting just to make life easier for the restaurant staff ?

Maryanne kept walking but she turned her head toward Dan as she went, prepared to toss a flip remark along these lines in his direction. But the remark instantly died in her throat. She saw that his eyes were glued on someone else, and she knew without even following his gaze who it was that had captured his interest. It was a woman that she had barely noticed a moment before, except perhaps in that way women do tend to notice other women. She suddenly remembered her in vivid detail. She could almost visualize each and every feature at the same moment that Dan was seeing it, just by watching his eyes move up and down over the woman with keen interest.

And then Dan's eyes met Maryanne's.

They arrived at their table. The woman in question had passed by and was gone. Maryanne fumbled with her chair and clumsily seated herself. She felt awkward and ridiculous. She dug her nails into her palms and tried her best to appear nonchalant.

She noticed with another wave of humiliation that Dan's eyes were full of remorse.

"I'm sorry," he said solemnly. Maryanne merely looked at him with a confused expression, as if she had no idea what he could possibly be sorry for. Her lips were formed into a small, humorless smile. She wanted to brush the matter aside but she didn't trust herself to speak. "Look, I know that you're upset. You saw me looking at that woman, right? I'm sorry. It was like…I didn't even realize I was doing it until I saw your face."

"You have nothing to be sorry for," she told him, praying he would drop the subject. But she could hear that her voice held that tone; the tone was a dead giveaway that there *was* something to be sorry for. She tilted her head to hide her face and pretended to examine the menu. Above all, she desperately hoped that he wouldn't humiliate her further by patronizing her with some perfunctory compliment. She far preferred him to continue to not notice her at all. She tried to think of something to say to change the subject.

"You look beautiful tonight," he said, immobilizing her in horror. Every word he uttered drove her further away from him. "You're the most beautiful woman in the room."

"I worked late so I didn't even have time to change," she lied. "I almost didn't show up at all, so you see your compliments only make you appear less sincere." She definitely didn't want him thinking she had gone to any trouble.

"Well, what I mean is that you look beautiful without having to lift a finger."

She was in turmoil, but the smile remained stubbornly fixed on her lips. Inwardly she was comparing this night with their first date, when he had been indulgent over her tardiness and took note of every detail about her with keen interest. But this was really no surprise, she reminded herself. Hadn't she predicted this very outcome that first night?

"You're thinking that this is a sign that I am beginning to do the guy thing and lose interest in you."

"What I was thinking was that I wish you would change the subject."

"You see!" he exclaimed. "That's what I mean. If this didn't really upset you, your eyes would be flashing with excitement right now while you pointed out how right you were."

Maryanne was momentarily taken aback. He was perfectly right. And she was impressed with him all over again in spite of what had happened. She sighed. It was so disconcerting to know that as she grew more attracted to him, he would only grow less attracted to her. The waitress came and they ordered drinks.

Maryanne was becoming more composed.

"Okay," she conceded, pulling her thoughts together. "Although I am hardly upset, as you suggest, I will admit that I was thinking that the disenchantment has already begun. Just as I predicted that it would. Just as I knew it would. I never for an instant believed it would be otherwise. So why should I be surprised or upset?"

"All because I looked at another woman?"

She shrugged. "That and other things."

He looked at her sideways, confused. "Other things?"

She was careful to phrase her words so that she didn't give her true feelings away. She would discuss it with him—she found that she was intrigued by the prospect of doing so—but she would never let him see how much he had hurt her. She could never let him know that she'd been fooled by him, even for a single moment. That would be the worst thing she could do.

"When I met you here tonight, every detail of our meeting was precisely the same as it was the first time, right down to how late I was." *Except that I worked ten times harder to impress you tonight,* she added to herself. "I planned it that way so that I could compare how you behaved tonight with how you behaved back then. Suffice it to say, you were more considerate, attentive, and much more intrigued with me when I was a stranger. So yes, I would say that it's already starting."

He stared at her, momentarily speechless. In the meantime, their drinks arrived. He sipped his thoughtfully.

"Maybe this…thing that happens with guys isn't what you think. Maybe it *seems* one way to you, but that's not the way it really is. I know, for example, that I have been thinking about you nonstop all day. Every minute that I waited for you in the front of this restaurant tonight was pure agony. My feelings for you are stronger than a month ago, so the only thing I can think is that somehow my behavior is not showing you how I really feel."

"That may be true," she said. "But what does it matter? I'm not a mind reader, so your behavior, not what you're thinking, is what has an effect on me." She suddenly remembered the way his eyes had moved over the woman earlier. It was precisely how they had traveled over her the first time he saw her. And now, for all of her efforts that day, he had yet to really look at her.

"Well, I'll just have to be more aware of it and try harder," he said. He took another sip from his drink. But he was suddenly anxious. "Will you allow me that—the chance to become a better man?"

She felt a tug at her heartstrings in spite of her unhappiness. Yet she couldn't help wondering why men clung so tenaciously to women when their instincts were telling them to let go. And she couldn't help being irritated with him, either. Why was he so intent on selling her something he had no ability to deliver? This could have been so much more fun if he had just allowed her to remain indifferent. But he had to push her for more and now she had stupidly allowed herself to fall for him. She found his disenchantment utterly despicable. And the worst part was, *her* disenchantment was the one thing that had the power to intrigue him all over again!

She was once again struck by the utter hopelessness of relationships.

She couldn't bring herself to answer his question either way, but luckily the waitress came by at that moment to take their order. For dinner, she ordered another martini.

With Dan once again the attentive pursuer, his eyes seemed to open suddenly and he really looked at Maryanne for the first time that night.

"If this is how you dress for work," he observed thoughtfully, "I think you should switch to a career in modeling."

She downed the rest of her martini in a single gulp and shrugged. "What, you think I look good tonight?" She said this as if it were the most absurd thing she had ever heard.

Dan laughed. "Yeah, I think you look good. Too good." He picked up her hand and carefully examined her perfectly manicured pink fingernails. "Mmm," he remarked thoughtfully. "I don't think they're working you hard enough over there."

"Well, you know how it is," she countered nonchalantly. His playful mood was catching. "Some of us make it look easier than others."

"I guess so!" he agreed emphatically. He turned to her hair, picking up a lock and examining it as he twirled it between his fingers. "And I would say that the air-conditioning in that place is set to the perfect temperature and humidity for hair. Just look at the condition of this curl!"

She turned her eyes as if to examine it with him. "Humph," she said, pretending to ponder the matter as if she had no idea that there were at least four different hair products forcing it to perform in such an exceptional matter. "I never noticed that before."

"Yeah. Those are some great working conditions you've got over there." His attention now turned to her face. She watched his eyes as they took in everything from her delicately shaped eyebrows to her shimmering lips. "Great working conditions," he repeated thoughtfully.

While it delighted her to hear these things, every single word only served to prove that she had been right. But she only smiled.

"I think I fucked up more than I realized," he said quietly. And she could feel herself melting for him all over again in spite of everything. But the little voice inside her head cried, "Don't! You'll only make it end faster!"

And she suddenly realized that it was not his fault or hers. It simply was. And she no longer wanted to talk about it. Why rail against what is? To accept things as they were was to truly live and experience life. To fight against those things was to prevent it. She looked at Dan with appreciation. The least she could do was accept him, and in order to accept him she must forgive him. And for the first time in her life she was able to accept and forgive herself, as well.

"What are you thinking?" Dan asked her.

"I was thinking that you look pretty good yourself."

"Well, unlike you, I actually had to work at getting presentable," he joked. "Shaved and everything, see?"

Maryanne laughed.

They were back on good terms again, and they flirted and talked and laughed just like always.

But even so, later that night, when it was time to go home, Maryanne felt like being alone.

"Can I just come over and tuck you in?" he asked.

"I don't know," she hedged. "I'm not sure I'm up for it."

"Listen," he told her. "I really want to be with you tonight—no, it's not about sex, I don't even want sex—but I want to be near you…to hold you. Come on. Can I, please, can I, huh?" He began to whimper like a puppy until she relented, laughing.

"Okay, maybe just for a little while."

And he was true to his word, simply wrapping her in a blanket of warmth as he snuggled up next to her in the spoon position.

"Shhh," he interrupted when she tried to move or speak. "I don't care how much you beg or plead, you are not getting sex!" She laughed, all the more amused because his raging erection was conspicuously poking into her back. "Now just settle down and go to sleep."

But all of a sudden Maryanne didn't want to go to sleep. She wanted Dan. And she was in a dangerously indulgent mood regarding wants; it was a mood to not only satisfy those wants but to surpass them.

She wiggled her backside into him enticingly and smiled when he groaned.

"Come on," he begged. "Play fair."

She moved against him again, more persistently this time. His hips automatically jutted forward in response. She continued to rub up against him rhythmically, slowly maneuvering herself until his erection found its way in between her legs. And still she kept undulating her hips back and forth over him, enjoying the exquisitely tantalizing foreplay.

She could feel his heartbeat pounding in time with hers, but neither of them was in a hurry to put an end to the delicious torment. They knew the moment would come when all of their movements and gyrations would at last cause his erection to find its own way into her. And when it finally did, only then did Dan clamp his arms and legs around her body to hold her firmly in place as he mindlessly drove himself into her. Their bodies, which were entwined together as one and still lying down sideways, were periodically propelled forward in time with his thrusts. Maryanne couldn't move so much as an inch, Dan held her so fully restrained. But she was content, for the moment, to simply bask in the pleasure of having him exactly where she wanted him. All of her instincts rose up within her, curling and mingling with her most intense desires. "Listen," her instincts seemed to be saying. "Listen to your heart and accept what is."

She passively allowed him to hold her during this exquisite assault for as long as she was able, relishing each and every deliciously agonizing moment of delayed gratification that it brought. The pleasure she would gain from prolonging and extending her own satisfaction would be immense. And in the meantime, she enjoyed every single thrust of his body into hers, delighting in the feel of him as he took her with reckless abandon. And she could tell that he was in no hurry, either, but, rather, he was in a mood to take his time and savor every stroke right along with her. She let her hands run over his strong, muscular arms, reveling in the way they so fully restrained her. She loved the feeling of being momentarily powerless and completely surrendering to the man that she loved.

Their bodies moved together in perfect harmony, with hers gracefully arching upward in time with his thrusts like a well-choreographed dance, and neither one wanted it to end. They remained entwined this way for the better part of an hour. But Maryanne's desire, which had merely been simmering so far, was suddenly about to erupt into a boil.

She began to struggle against him. Her hips were first to buck and thrash, and then her arms and legs followed. When he loosened his hold on her, she moved up onto her knees, clutching his hips to hers as she went so he would not leave her for a single instant. Her growing excitement as she now took control spurred him on even more. He glided his hands lovingly over her body, caressing her breasts and teasing her nipples. He let his fingers roam lower until they found her swollen clitoris and began prodding and teasing it mercilessly. She used her thighs to propel her body up and down on him in time with his thrusts. As his hands moved over her, so, too, did hers reach behind to caress him.

Maryanne moaned loudly with pleasure as she pumped her hips over Dan's rock-hard erection. She felt the giddying sensations of her impending orgasm rising up in her, causing her to become even more reckless in her utter abandon. She clutched his hips in her hands, pulling him into her even as she pushed backward, making his thrusts go deeper. Her nails dug into his flesh as she held him, but her aggressiveness only further inflamed Dan. He, too, became more impassioned, and his fingers on her clitoris became more forceful, coaxing and prodding the little swollen nub relentlessly. With his other hand, he pinched her nipples ruthlessly.

Maryanne's hips kept thrashing violently, even as the heady sensations of her orgasm began to erupt within her. In a sudden frenzy, she turned her face toward Dan's, and he immediately captured her lips in a passionate kiss. Her hands flew up around his neck and she clung to him so that she could kiss him more passionately. Her cry of pleasure was muffled by the kiss, but suddenly Dan's head flew back in ecstasy as his own release hit him. In that very instant, Maryanne's fingernails bore into the back of his neck, effectively paralyzing him. His body continued to ejaculate even more vigorously as she plunged her teeth into his neck and ripped out a large portion of his flesh. He could do little

more than stare in disbelief as she began to devour him. She ate with relish, suddenly oblivious to everything else but her incredible hunger. Dan could not move or speak. His final moments were spent in an unfathomable paradox between the ultimate pleasure and the most unthinkable horror.

When Maryanne's hunger finally waned, Dan's head had all but been severed. She moved away from him, strangely at peace. It was, she told herself, for the best. There was no more self-loathing or regret. She had finally learned to accept herself, and ironically she had Dan to thank for that.

Maryanne sat on the edge of the bed, slender and straight-backed, with her head tilted slightly forward in that timid way that she had, and her hands clasped in front of her as if in prayer. She allowed herself to rock lightly from side to side, now that she was alone. She thought about the future. Unfortunately, it meant that she would once again be obliged to change her appearance and move on. But even that did not worry her overmuch. A chameleon who could blend into any environment was also an integral part of who she was. She could suddenly see the wisdom and harmony in everything that occurred around her. She would never again struggle against her own instincts or pine for a different existence. This was how things were, and from now on she would accept her reality for what it was. To struggle against it was, to Maryanne's way of thinking, living in denial. She smiled humorlessly when she thought of the myriads of sad, empty females who allowed their inner selves to be depleted by this fallacy of holding one man's interest and affection forever.

But she would never share her insights with anyone again. Doing so had only accelerated the process and brought about a quicker end. At all costs, she must learn to enjoy love for as long as possible before it was inevitably lost to disenchantment.

Dying For It

For the most part, they're like you'd expect. Or at least I found this to be so. I followed one of them for weeks and, although I was often shocked, I was hardly ever genuinely surprised.

Vincent was friendly, agreeable and bright. I always observed him from a safe distance, it's true, but his magnetism could be felt from far off. And you could see it, too, from watching those around him. They were always perfectly at ease and utterly charmed. Men and women alike found him irresistible. He had a healthy glow in his cheeks that belied any pernicious habits, dietary or otherwise. He might have been taken for a vegetarian.

I started following Vincent the very first night I discovered him. Before I was even fully conscious of it, parts of me were already tracking him from across the room.

Over the years, I had become quite a recluse. Not that I was ever the sort of person to win a popularity contest, but lately I had become more withdrawn. It wasn't by choice, really, but more from a lack of social skills—in this field I had potential that never really got developed. I was too shy. And I was never any good at casual conversation. The trendy topics always seemed inane to me, and I could never think of anything to say when they came up. And even on those rare occasions when I did manage to think of something clever to contribute, I could never get it out successfully. My timing was usually off, so that my comments came too early or, more often, too late. Either that or I would suddenly become so timid, speaking so self-consciously and with so much anxiety, that the whole point would become lost in the utter awkwardness of my manner. In those moments, it was actually a relief to have my voice drowned out by someone louder and more confident. Eventually, I gave up. And my quietness, which might have made a more attractive woman appear demure or mysterious, rendered me all but invisible. I blended into the woodwork as inconspicuously as any ordinary knot or other imperfection. But although I am painfully shy and awkward around people, I still enjoy being around them. My need for human companionship is so strong that it doesn't even matter if no one notices me. I'm usually content to simply watch those around me.

This, and other more recent developments, had created a great restlessness in me by the time I found Vincent. I still remember the moment I first saw him with a vividness that has more clarity than the actual event, which took place in a kind of haze of orange lighting distorted by wispy vapors of cigarette smoke. I was sitting in a dim corner of a crowded bar. It was a noisy, run-down little hole-in-the-wall with low ceilings and outdated acoustics. On that particular evening, I was glad for the noise. Every now and then a waitress would stop and say something, which always surprised me because I had come to believe that I really was becoming invisible. I was halfheartedly sipping at a lukewarm hot toddy. The jukebox, which carried a wide variety of pop songs from every culture, was playing a tune that caught my attention. With each chorus refrain, it kept repeating the same unsettling idiom over and over again, and I felt my face grow warm with mortification as I waited fretfully for it to end. The strong, male voice, with its rich Southern twang, crooned out—rather insensitively, I thought—the words, *Lonely women make good lovers.*

As I listened to the song I couldn't help wondering how this popular country-music star, who no doubt had his choice of beautiful women, happened to know this. It was true, of course, which was why the song caused me so much discomfort. I knew firsthand how rare and extraordinary a thing a lover is to a lonely woman. All of her pent-up fantasies and cravings only grow stronger with the long periods of privation, building an enthusiasm in her that is difficult to contain. Naturally she's eager, as the country singer so aptly pointed out. She cannot help but feel appreciative. She is able to feast sumptuously on trifles scarcely capable of tempting more fortunate women. At least that was something, then. How could a woman who receives more than her fair share of attention comprehend the pleasure of, say, simply being noticed? Can the mere *thought* of a lover's touch cause her to

tremble when there are men reaching for her at every opportunity? I have seen women turn away from a lover's caress in contempt, and it is the men, in those cases, who know of the pleasure I speak.

The men in the bar that night, however, did not appear the least bit interested in the country singer's advice. As always, they clustered deferentially around the most desirable women. I recognized their yearning enough to sympathize. But the women were distracted, although they laughed and flirted mechanically. One man in particular had fully captured their attention. He had captured mine as well. The influence of his charm was inescapable. I had been watching him with interest throughout the night.

There wasn't any one thing that was especially unique or exceptional in Vincent's appearance or personality. He blended in with other men brilliantly, and even had a peculiar ambiguity about him that caused you to wonder, after the fact, what it was that impressed you so much. In his manner—and I came to know it well in the weeks that followed—there was something completely and utterly charming. As well, I found his character to be extremely well-rounded. He was in every way confident, yet often humble. He was kind but not susceptible. He was amusing but never foolish. Of his attributes I could go on and on. The closest thing to a flaw that I was ever able to detect in him was his penchant for shallow relationships. He had an untiring aptitude for developing new acquaintances, but he never allowed anyone to come close to seeing the full spectrum of his personality. I understood the necessity of this, mind you, but I wondered that he never seemed dissatisfied with these fleeting connections, realizing, as he must have, how easily someone like him could have developed a closer bond. That he could capture a woman's heart was certain. If he were ever known, he would most certainly be loved. Isn't that what every living thing desires?

From among the beauties that were eyeing Vincent that night, he selected a rather—I felt—shallow and insipid woman. She had little to offer of either charm or substance. Even worse, there was a meanness about her that should have offended a man like Vincent. She was rude to those around her and even cruel to the waitstaff. I didn't know Vincent at the time, of course, but even so, she seemed so opposite to him that I wondered how he could tolerate her.

This was what triggered my curiosity, and it held my interest throughout the night. Watching Vincent interact with the woman, I became more and more convinced that he felt little more than antipathy, if not outright dislike, for her. He was, of course, charming and courteous—Vincent would never be needlessly cruel—but his aversion was evident. I could see it in his expression and detect it in the ironic tone of his remarks.

When they finally left the bar, together, I found myself following at a leisurely pace. I had no particular plan, nor was I working very hard to keep them in my sight. I was not in the habit of following people. I just kind of hovered in the distance, drawn as if by some kind of invisible force. I think I sensed that something peculiar was about to happen. The two of them being together seemed to foretell it.

It was remarkably easy. The woman happened to live in a nearby apartment and, it being a balmy night in the densely populated city, it was not surprising that they walked. Many times since that night I've hailed cabs and actually uttered the words, "Follow that car," which illustrates the strength of the force that drew me to Vincent. But there were usually other people scattered about, livening up the dark streets. Just like at the bars, I blended in seamlessly on city streets, with hardly ever a soul noticing me.

I wish I could tell you something novel and exceptional about the way it happened, or to perhaps add some small nuance to the legends and folklore. But it *is* novel and exceptional to actually watch it happening in real life, right before your eyes! I can assure you that the event was abundantly exceptional and even shocking as it is. I suppose people will always need to embellish an event, no matter how extraordinary it is. To the folklore I have nothing to add. The most remarkable thing, from my point of view as I peered in through a small opening in a curtain, was the ease with which it was carried out.

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