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The Venus Fix

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Published by Mira Books

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Venus—*Mythol.* The ancient Roman goddess of beauty and love, especially sensual love.

Fix—*slang* (orig. U.S.). A dose of a narcotic drug. Also short for fixation—*Psychol.* In Freudian theory, the arresting of the development of a libidinal component at a pregenital stage, so that psychosexual emotions are "fixed" at that point. Also, loosely, an obsession, an *idée fixe.*

Mine Enemy is growing old—
I have at last Revenge
The Palate of the Hate departs
If any would avenge—
Let him be quick—the Viand flits
It is a faded Meat
Anger as soon as fed is dead
'Tis starving makes it fat
—Emily Dickinson

One



Dearest,

After all these months, I'm willing to concede. Nothing will make me miss you less. Nothing will ease the razor-sharp pain that wakes me up every morning and keeps me from falling asleep at night. Not while those women roam—no, not quite women, but witch women who go haunting, casting spells and capturing souls without anyone realizing just how dangerous they are or noticing the evil running in their veins. Evil that glows secret bright in the night and feeds the junkies who drool, eyes glued to their bare breasts and wet lips, ears attuned to low moans and dirty chatter while they stroke, massage, and manipulate themselves to orgasm and then languish in some fugue state until they crash back, back, back to earth.

There are twenty-three days left until your birthday, and to show you how much I love you, I promise, by then all five of these women will have been punished.

What I'm going to do won't bring back my appetite or my curiosity or my energy. It won't do a damn thing for me. That doesn't matter. Because this I do for you.

Thursday
Twenty-two days remaining

Two



Damn, it was freezing. He'd opened the window to chase away the smell of beer and grass and sex, but then he'd fallen asleep, and now it was so cold he didn't even want to stick his head out from under the covers to see if she was still there. But Timothy wanted to come again more than he wanted anything else, so he did it, he pushed the blanket down just enough to peek out.

In his darkened bedroom she was the only thing that he could see. Still there. Still naked. Her lovely breasts with their pink-tipped nipples pointing up.

His erection stirred.

Timothy was awake now, the dreams replaced with a fresh fantasy of what the next minutes would bring. She was golden. That was the best way to describe her: the tawny color of her skin, the long blond curls, and the feeling inside of him that burned like a sun when he was in her glow. And all he had to do was lie back and let her magic work on him.

None of the girls at school were this experienced.

Or this gorgeous.

Or this willing.

Penny was sitting in the big red armchair where he'd left her—her legs spread, playing with a dildo, smiling at him. But it was one weird smile. He leaned forward. Nope, she didn't look right. She was shaking a little and her mouth was sort of contorted into a sick clown's grimace. Then her head fell forward, her back heaved, and she vomited.

Timothy had fooled around with a lot of different crap, but this was weird. What kind of pervert would think this was hot?

Usually Penny was coy and sweet and sexy. Sure, she was a little kinky sometimes with the crazy-shaped dildos she used, but she wasn't moving any of those magic wands in and out of her now.

"Penny," he whispered. "What are you doing?"

Her answer was an agonized groan. Low and feeble. Like the sound a wounded animal might make. Nothing like the exciting sounds she'd made when she was riding the lubricated pink plastic dildo and coming right along with him.

Maybe she wasn't acting. Maybe she really was sick. Food poisoning made you sick like that. He'd had food poisoning once. She looked sick, didn't she? Her skin was slicked with sweat, her hair was flattened to the sides of her face, and her eyes looked glassy and feverish.

She looked like she needed help. Now. Fast. But what could he do?

Grabbing the blanket off the bed, he wrapped it around his naked waist and started for his bedroom door. Then he stopped—there was no one home. His parents were out. Jeez, what was he thinking? Thank God they were out because Penny, sick or not, was way off limits.

He looked back at her to make sure. Yes, she was still moving in that slow-motion, sick way, her moan now a low constant sound that made him want to put his hands up to his ears and block it out.

He grabbed the phone.

He'd call for help. But who? The police? An ambulance? Amanda? Would she know what to do? No, she might tell her mother. He couldn't risk that. Besides, what if he was wrong? What if this was a game? What if Penny was acting out some perversion by request? He knew she did that sometimes.

He glanced back at her, at her small hands gripping the arms of the chair, at her feet, so fragile and inconsequential, at the worn carpet he'd never noticed before. Everything looked sort of pathetic now—the meager furniture, the really small television—except for the view out the window. He'd never noticed any of this before. He'd always been too busy, under her spell. But not now. Not anymore.

Pick your head up, Penny. Look at me. Tell me what's going on. What should I do?

She threw up again.

He dialed 911.

"State your emergency, please."

At the same time he heard the voice, the screen went black. He ran to the monitor and stared at it, seeing only his own ghostly image staring back.

Penny was gone.

What the hell?

He hit the back button to see if the problem was his computer or hers. The site he'd been to before hers popped up. He hit the forward key.

Her site was gone.

"Hello?" shouted the voice on the other end of the phone. "Hello?"

A dozen thoughts hit him all at once. They were going to ask him who he was, and he was going to have to tell them, and then his parents would find out he'd broken the rules again, and God only knew what they would do to him this

time. He had been going to all those stupid therapy sessions at school and his parents were finally easing up on him, but if they found out about this...what would happen then? Besides, maybe he was wrong. Maybe Penny had only been acting out some stupid game.

"Hello?"

"Hello," Timothy finally answered.

"Can you tell me what the emergency is?"

"It's not...I don't think. What if it's not an emergency?"

"We have a car on the way to your house. Are you hurt?"

"No. It was a mistake, it's not an emergency."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. It's not me. I thought someone...I thought someone was breaking in...but it wasn't... I was asleep."

"The police are on their way. They should be there in less than thirty seconds." The operator's voice eased and softened.

Timothy heard the intercom buzz in the kitchen, hung up, ran out of his room and down the hall, the panic rising like bile in his stomach.

He pressed the button.

"Yes?"

"Timothy, the police are here," the doorman announced. "They said it was an emergency. I'm sending them up."

"No," he shouted at the doorman. "No. Let me talk to them."

There was a pause. Then: "Timothy Marcus? This is Officer Keally. Is there something wrong up there?"

"No."

"Are you sure? You called 911."

"Yeah, but by mistake. I was asleep, dreaming, thought I saw...heard something, but it wasn't real."

"Are you sure you don't want us to come up and check things out?"

Timothy actually hesitated. Should he tell them and face

the consequences? Deal with whatever his parents would do to him? He had seen something weird on the computer, hadn't he? She was sick, wasn't she?

Or had some weird fucker convinced Penny to act out his perverted scenario?

"I'm sure," he said into the intercom.

Monday
Eighteen days remaining

Three



It was going to start to snow again, soon. I could smell it. Snow had always been magical to me. Something that, until I was ten, I thought I owned because my last name is Snow. Morgan Snow.

The sky was gray and the trees were dusted white and my breath came out in visible puffs. I had been mesmerized by that when I was a child, and like me, my daughter, Dulcie, had found it equally absorbing.

"Ghost breath," she'd say, then suck in a great gulp of air and blow it out again. "Do you believe in ghosts, Mommy?"

I did, but not in a way that my then eight-year-old would have understood. How could I have explained that the ghost of my mother lived inside of her? And that there were also the ghosts of the secrets that my patients told me that could, in the midst of a moment of my own pleasure, surface—interrupting and demanding acknowledgment. That it was in between all those moments that I hoped it would all be okay, that we'd all be okay.

At the corner of Sixty-sixth Street, I stopped for a red light. A woman in a black fur coat shifted impatiently from her right

foot to her left. "I hate this weather," she said. Not quite to me, but not to herself, either. I nodded, and then the light changed.

We crossed and went in opposite directions.

The Northeast was suffering a severe cold spell but I didn't mind. I liked to bundle up in layers of sweaters and fleece-lined boots, wrap a big scarf around my head, and walk the mile from my apartment on Eightieth Street and Madison to my office.

At Sixty-fifth, I turned the corner and trudged toward Park Avenue. Side streets don't get as much traffic as the major avenues so the snow never melts as quickly. The early twentieth-century limestone maisonette where I work was halfway down the block. The building's facade is elegant: Ionic columns support an overhang that shelters the patients while they wait to be buzzed through the wrought-iron door into the most progressive sex clinic in the nation—the Butterfield Institute.

In the country, the snow stays pristine and is so clean you can reach down, scoop some up in your hands and eat it. But in the city, the exhaust from the thousands of cars, buses and trucks turns it gray within hours.

Near the gutter, on the sidewalk in front of the institute, there were filthy mounds of snow smeared with black soot, but close to the building, where I was standing, it was still white, and would be for at least a few more hours.

Four



My ten o'clock had just left and I was about to make a phone call when the patient I knew only as "Bob" walked in, early and unannounced.

"I had an awful weekend," he said in a tense voice as he strode across the threshold.

Bob, who normally had ramrod-straight posture, looked weighed down. Behind him Allison, the receptionist, explained that she had tried to stop him from barging in but that he refused to wait once she'd told him that my last patient had already left.

I was sitting in the oversize chair that faces the couch where my patients either sit or lie down. I glanced at the clock to my right.

"Your appointment isn't until eleven o'clock," I said to Bob, and then told Allison she could go.

While I waited for him to sit down, I drank some tea from the mug I was holding. Jung at Heart, it read. Green letters on a white background. It was one of a set of six that Dulcie had made for me, each emblazoned with a psychoanalytic pun. It amazed me how many patients saw me using one of

those mugs week after week, and then one day suddenly said, *How funny—when did you get that?*

That was an important moment. It meant we were making progress, that my patient was noticing his or her surroundings, and was no longer absorbed just with the self. Bob had not reached that point.

He hadn't even progressed to the point where he would tell me his real name. I'd had patients who wanted to protect their privacy before, though never anyone as secretive as Bob, who was bright and charming, intense and secretive, and desperately in need of my help.

"These fifteen minutes between sessions are my only breaks. It's not okay to just barge in."

Bob wasn't at the point where he could think about anyone but himself. "I'm very upset about my wife. No matter what, I love her. I just can't stand this." Usually he folded his jacket carefully, but as he talked he dropped it on the edge of the couch, and when it fell to the floor he didn't notice.

"What happened over the weekend?"

Bob was in his early fifties, about six feet tall, and had the build of someone who worked out religiously. His suits were always pressed and his shoes were shined. Incongruously, a blue New York Yankees baseball cap always covered his head. His black owl-rimmed glasses had tinted lenses that hid his eyes.

I didn't know if his efforts to disguise himself were working or if he simply wasn't as well known as he thought he was, but I did know he was paranoid about being seen at the Butterfield Institute. Over and over, he reminded me how bad it would be for his career—and his wife's—if his "issue," as he referred to it, was to be discovered.

He didn't pay his bills by check or through his insurance company. Rather, twice a month, ten minutes before Bob arrived, he was preceded by a man named Terry Meziac, who

wore a business suit and carried a briefcase and gave me an envelope containing crisp hundred-dollar bills, and then swept my office for bugs.

He never found any. I never expected him to. But since his third visit, when I noticed the gun in his waistband, I had occasionally wondered if, as the receiver of Bob's confessions, there was a chance that my own life was in danger.

In ancient Egypt, the architects of the pyramids, the only men who knew the entrances and exits through the stone puzzles, were killed once the monuments were completed, so the secrets died with them.

I wasn't that disturbed by the gun. I dated a detective. I lived in Manhattan. A lot of powerful people had bodyguards. What did disturb me was that Bob was so paranoid about being in therapy. He even used our hidden entrance, which links to the basement of the building next to ours. We don't generally encourage our patients to take advantage of it because it causes logistical nightmares for Allison, who has to keep track of all the appointments and make sure no two people show up next door at the same time. In the previous six years, only one other patient had asked to use it.

We keep secrets at the Butterfield Institute. Hold them tight and protect them the way we protect our own children. That is what we promise our patients, what we swear to, what we stake our reputations on. Because our currency is secrets, nothing on the outside of the building proclaims its status as a prestigious sex therapy clinic. But still patients sometimes worry that they will be seen walking through the wrought-iron-and-milk-glass doors.

Three, four minutes had gone by and Bob remained quiet. Only his fingers, tapping a code on the leather of the sofa, broke the silence in the room. I judged his level of anxiety by

the tempo of the tapping. Today was one of the worst in the three months since he'd been seeing me.

"I don't know how to save my wife and myself, too. And I have to save her." His voice softened.

"Why is it up to you to save her? Can't she save herself?"

"Yes, yes, but I'm the one that put her in this hell."

"We've talked about you taking all the blame."

He frowned. Bob had never allowed me to even suggest anything disparaging about his wife. She was above reproach. She was an angel. She was innocent.

"She's not the one surfing the Internet, jerking off to pretty little girls who whisper dirty words to me in the middle of the afternoon. Maybe..." he said, and then stopped again. Outside my second-floor window a car horn honked.

"Yes?"

"Maybe I need to find another therapist."

This didn't come as a surprise. Often a frustrated patient imagines another doctor will be the solution.

"We can talk about that. But first, tell me what's going on at home."

"My wife is having...she's gone into some sort of new crisis. It's not just a depression anymore, it's a meltdown. And it's completely my fault. She's erratic. Volatile. Angry one minute, crying the next. I can't stand it. I'll do anything to stop it. To make her happy." He hesitated. "If I can. I'll do anything I can."

"I know you think it's your fault, but—"

"I don't *think* it is, Dr. Snow. I know it is."

"Explain that to me."

"Do I need to spell it out?"

Spelling it out was Bob's code that he'd broken his fast and gone online again. Since he'd been seeing me, the longest he'd been able to go without a fix was five days, and he'd done that

twice. The previous Wednesday, he said he was ready to try to quit again and had already abstained for two nights.

"No. You don't have to spell it out if you don't want to, but I'd like to hear what happened."

"Bad boy that I am, I went online. I tried not to. I hadn't for two days. Just like I told you last Wednesday morning. But Thursday...I don't know...I was home, by myself. I went online to read my e-mail and...I clicked over...no big deal...just for a few minutes. Anyway, I didn't hear her come home. I was so deep into the fantasy and the goddamn fucking pleasure that I didn't hear her, and she walked in on me. She fucking saw me at the computer. I hadn't heard her. I wasn't paying attention."

Bob stood up, walked to the window and put his hands against the glass, as if he might push it out and escape.

"Can anyone see in? Is this glass treated?"

"No, it's not."

Quickly, he turned around. For a second he looked as if he didn't know what he was supposed to do next. Stand? Sit? Leave?

"Bob, you need to come sit back down, or lie down."

He nodded and did as I'd asked.

Silently again on the couch, he clasped his hands in his lap and then stared at his white-gold wedding band.

"Bob, when you talk about going online, you refer to yourself as a bad boy. Tell me how it feels to be bad?"

"Horrible. Despicable. Out of control. How else would it feel?"

"Well, the expression on your face when you said it made me think being bad was exciting. Thrilling, maybe. Is that possible?"

He seemed startled. "No. That's crazy. Why would I like breaking rules? Rules, laws, are what separate us from savages."

He was disassociating. It wasn't the first time. His posture had become more rigid. His hands relaxed. He spoke as if he were addressing a group of people, rather than just me, somewhere other than here in my office. I had to bring him back.

"How do you feel about your wife finding out about you going online?"

"I didn't want her to know. I'm not a sadist. You know that, don't you?" He looked directly at me, imploring me. This was when he reached me, when his childlike need to be acknowledged broke through the professional veneer.

"No, you're not a sadist. But let's get back to the question. Is that the only reason you didn't want her to know?"

"Isn't it enough?"

"Yes. But I'm not sure it's the only reason. Think for a minute, Bob. Why didn't you want her to know?"

"Why can't you tell me? I don't understand what would be so detrimental to the therapy for you to make a suggestion here and there. Use an example about another patient—without names, of course—to illustrate a point?"

This was something Bob often did, interrupting the therapy to try to understand the theory behind it. Occasionally it was a deadly tactic, but often I knew it was a deep-seated need to understand the precepts of the process. He was highly intelligent, and I'd found that if I answered him, he became more responsive.

"In this case I don't have an answer. But something makes me think that even if you aren't conscious of it, there's another reason. I need you to find it."

He sat. Thought. Seemed to accept my rationale.

"Okay. Now. Why didn't you want your wife to know?"

His brow furrowed and then relaxed. He'd thought of something.

"Tell me."

"Her knowing ruins everything."

I nodded but didn't speak. I waited. I knew there was more. After ten years of being a therapist you learn when the end of a sentence signals more to come, or when the patient has closed up again and you need to find another way in.

"It's not mine anymore. Even if it's hell, it's been my hell. Something that she wasn't part of. Now that she knows, she can lie in bed and imagine me watching my pathetic little Web-cam girls, with my dick in my hand and she can laugh at me and my dependency."

"Why do you think she'd laugh at you? Has she laughed at you before?"

"No." Sharp. Decisive.

"Then why now?"

He shook his head.

"Anything that comes to mind."

He shook his head again. We'd get back to that. Or I'd find another way in.

"What happened after she saw what you were doing?"

"She smiled at me." Now he shook his head as if he was trying to shake away the image. "It was crazy. A crazy smile. Like she'd really lost her mind for a second. She just kept smiling. It was horrible. But the worst part was that even though I wanted to get up and hold her and promise her that I'd never do it again, I didn't. I just sat there."

Something was happening to Bob. His eyes were not as intense. His muscles were relaxing into a professional mask again.

"It couldn't be more ironic," he said in a more imperious, less-emotional voice.

"What couldn't be?"

"Me. Going online—" He stopped midsentence.

I gave him a few seconds to continue. Then a few seconds

longer. We were at a critical juncture. I knew how careful I had to be to push but not too far.

"Did you say anything to her?"

"I tried to talk to her. I told her it was not a big deal. That I'd just stumbled on the Web site. I lied."

There it was. That odd elation in his voice when he said he'd lied. I felt a rush of adrenaline. It doesn't always happen that a set of circumstances occurs in your patient's life at exactly the right time in his or her therapy to create an opening like this.

"Bob, how did you feel when you were lying?"

"Terrible."

He didn't. I knew he was lying. I could hear it in his voice, see it in the way he clasped his hands suddenly, hiding the wedding ring with the fingers of the other hand.

"Really? Terrible?"

"Yes. Lying is horrible. To lie to your wife..."

"Yes, but just because it's horrible doesn't mean it has to feel terrible."

He was nodding. He knew. Was he going to tell me?

"It didn't feel terrible, did it?"

He shook his head.

I lowered my voice. "How did it feel, Bob?"

He shut his eyes. He couldn't do it. That didn't matter. I knew he had consciously thought it. We'd get there. He was so close to understanding that he'd felt real pleasure.

"Did she believe you?"

"No. And she told me she didn't. She asked me how often, and I lied again. I told her I mostly did it when she was out of town. I didn't want to hurt her. It was killing me to hurt her. I love her." It was a plea for me to stop, but I wouldn't. Quickly now, before he could think about it, I asked again. "How did you feel lying to her?"

"Elated." Once the word was out of his mouth he seemed confused by it.

I let out my breath. We'd just jumped a new hurdle.

"Why?"

"Why did it feel good?"

I nodded.

"I don't know. Can't you tell me? I tortured her and got pleasure from it? What kind of sick fuck does that make me? I broke every single rule and I didn't care. I don't understand."

He rarely used the work *fuck.* He was using it a lot today. "You don't have to understand everything now. You just need to be open to feeling it."

He couldn't tolerate his feelings, though. Even before he said a word, I knew he was stepping back. His expression and posture changed again.

"It is really very obscene." His sounded as if he were observing the scene from a great distance. "My wife was standing in front of my computer, staring at a woman who was thrusting a dildo in and out of herself in time to some stupid rock song. When I reached out to shut it off, she yelled at me to leave it. For some insane reason I did. She stood there like a soldier and took it. Like she was being sentenced. I couldn't stand it. Me. I was doing this to her. To my wife."

I ignored the non sequitur and tried to follow where he was leading. "What happened then?"

"She leaned in, over my shoulder, and in a very low voice, she said, *'Bob, you don't think you fooled me, do you? I've known about what you do in here for weeks. For weeks and weeks and weeks, and I'm going to kill you for this.'"*