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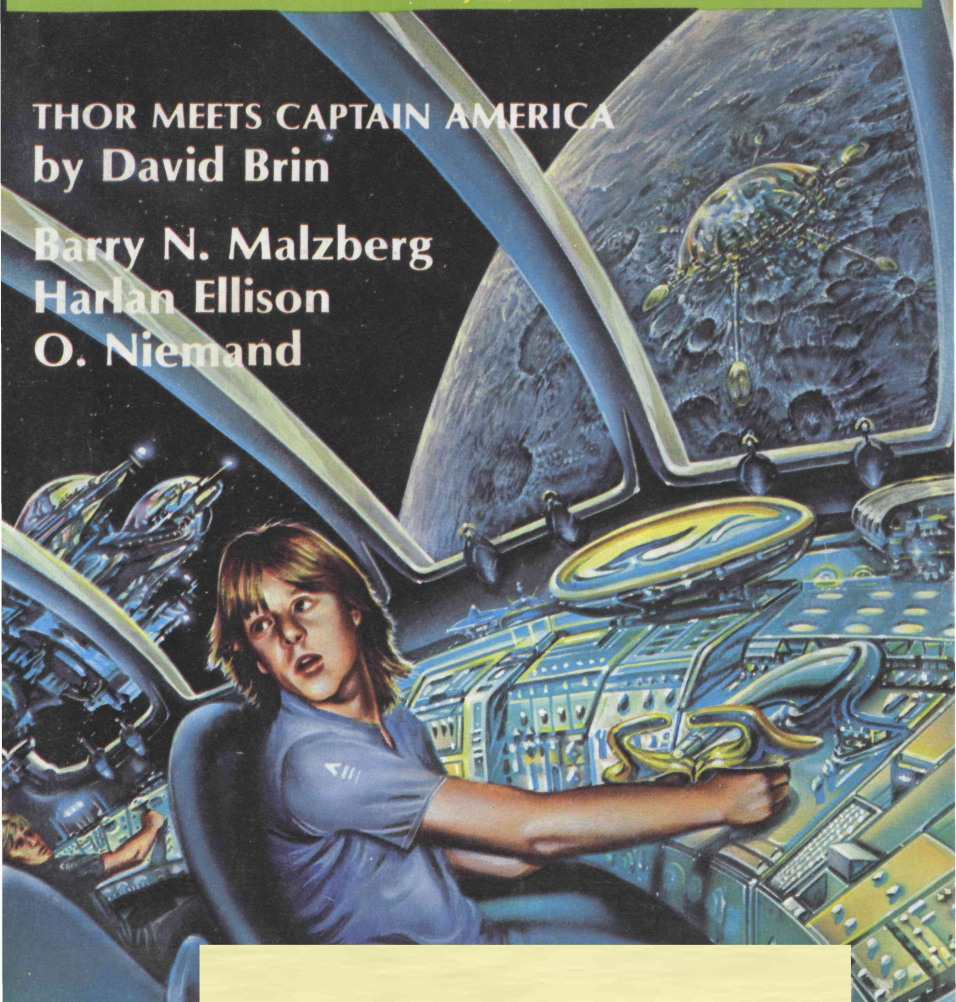
THOR MEETS CAPTAIN AMERICA

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*Here is a story of a man in love with refinement and sensibility who finds that, in this world, these qualities are far too fleeting.*

# A Knight of Antiquity

BY

ROBERT CHARLES WILSON

It seemed increasingly to Morgan that he had been born out of his time and that the passage of time, like an ocean current far from shore, had merely carried him a greater distance from what was good, noble, and true. In middle life, becalmed after a stormy divorce, he moved his antique and curio business to a location up the coastal highway, where he owned a beach house overlooking an eroded shale bed where herring gulls roosted. Weekdays and Saturdays he sold delicate bone china and authentic scrimshaw to stupidly dressed tourists; Sundays he combed the windy shore adjacent to his property. Certain shells had a modest value, and he was soothed by the rondeau of sun, cloud, water, rock.

He found the castaway woman on a Sunday. She lay on a bar of sand amidst the rocks like a sea-thing, pale

and boneless. The salt water had leached all color from her clothing and her skin. Her lips were white; her eyelids were two slips of rice paper. When he perceived the faint spasmodic motion of her breasts, Morgan wrapped her in his alpaca jacket and carried her to the beach house. Morgan was not muscular, but the woman was light, almost evanescent; strong sunlight, he thought dazedly, might pass through her entirely.

He had begun dialing for an ambulance when she opened her eyes and sat up, dripping sand and brine into the sofa.

Her name was Elizabeth Llewellyn, she said — a faint voice but firm, like the chiming of faraway bells — and she was off H.M.S. *Courier*, and she was very grateful for his help and didn't want to trouble him any further, but was it possible she might

have something to eat?

Months later he would drive to the city library many miles away, not to challenge her simple assertion but to confirm it. Mute with wonder, he found the entry in an old Lloyd's registry. H.M.S. *Courier*, out of Liverpool, for Boston: lost at sea with all hands, sometime in the late autumn of 1887.

But that was later.

In the beginning he simply took her word for it, and fed her brimming bowlfuls of Campbell's Pea Soup and Hearty Beef Broth until she had acquired some color and was able to stand up unassisted. His business fell into neglect, and often during this time he would open the shop for only an hour or two in the afternoon, that mostly to care for the merchandise. It was the off season in any case, and there was seldom a customer to disturb the shadowy privacy or tread dirt over the pinewood floors. One week the only sale Morgan made was from the postcard rack.

She wouldn't talk about herself, except to say that she was a Welsh girl by birth, and that she had spent most of her life in London, and that she had been bound for America when the *Courier* went down in a storm. Morgan supposed it was some salt-water phenomenon that had preserved her, her body white and pulseless in the deep canyons of the sea, until she was cast ashore and revived by the wintry sunlight. He sensed her

frailty and tried not to be the occasion of any profound shock: though she knew already from the wall calendar that nearly a century had passed since she was set adrift, and seemed not unduly disturbed by it. She would not speak of her past in any detail and was guarded in her curiosity about the present. Morgan was shocked when he came home and found her sorting through a box of Emily's uncollected clothing, the flotsam of his recent divorce.

"Morgan?" She held up one of Emily's old brassieres by its frayed right strap. "What *is* this?"

"An item of underclothing," Morgan said carefully.

"Female underclothing?"

He nodded.

She held it against herself in a motion that was at once innocent and arousing. "Worn — like so?"

"Yes."

"Your wife's?"

"Yes."

"You're married."

"No." Beyond the window the sun had set and the light was draining from the sky. Her face and hands were almost supernaturally pale in the near darkness. "We were divorced."

"I see." She studied the tiny hooks and eyes. "May I try it?"

Her face was lovely, heart-shaped and china white; and instead of answering, Morgan knelt on the bed and touched her cheek and for the first

time they kissed.

**H**e slept with her through the night and into the morning. The telephone woke him.

"Morgan!"

He held the receiver in his hand, startled into immobility.

"Morgan, are you there?"

"I'm here." It was Emily. He felt a stuporous surge of guilt. Beside him, Beth turned languidly in the bed.

"It's been so long since we talked," Emily said. Her voice was throaty over the telephone, and Morgan thought she might have been drinking. "I talked to Ed Gleick the other day. He was up by your shop. He said you were closed. The beach house was locked up, too, but he said he saw you walking down along the beach. I just wanted to find out if everything is O.K."

"Everything is fine," Morgan said.

"You never come into town anymore. People keep asking about you. I don't know what to say. I don't want to think I've turned you into a hermit."

"How's Chavez?" Morgan said.

She was briefly silent. "Chavez is history," she said. "He took off a few months back with a girl from the community college. Zoology major. They're in Oregon, studying wildlife. Jake, I presume, is still stalking the wild pussy." She laughed, not happily. "He sent me a postcard. He's a real thoughtful guy."

"I'm sorry," Morgan said.

"Don't be. It was doomed. I guess you probably knew that, even Back When."

"That didn't make it any easier."

"No. I suppose not." She added, "Are you seeing anybody?"

"Not . . . exactly."

"I'll be brutally honest. Ed Gleick said he saw you with a woman."

"Ed is very observant."

"Ed is snoopy as hell. He made sure I was the first to know. But what the heck. It was an excuse to call."

"She's just somebody I met," Morgan said.

"Well, that's good. That's great. It's better than moldering away in that damp old house. Morgan, listen, I have a plan."

He said with much foreboding, "Plan?"

"This coming Friday. It'll be great. I talked to some of the old gang. Andy and Claretta, Tommy, Joanne, you know. They all want to see you. So I said, well, we'll hop in the van and we'll drive up there and land on his doorstep. A couple of cartons of Bud, some mixed nuts — a traveling party. They wanted to do it impromptu, but I thought I'd call and fink on them. You might want to sweep the floors or something."

Her heartiness was false and it saddened him. He looked at Beth again. "I don't think —"

"You don't have to. It's settled. Friday. See you then."

He thought about calling back and canceling — would have, perhaps, if not for that lingering reluctance to hurt Emily's feelings. What worried him was the effect all this might have on Beth. Beth Llewellyn, he thought, was like a piece of fine china: she had survived the transit of time, like the things in his shop, miraculously preserved; and he was afraid the twentieth century might contaminate her the way industrial pollution erodes the delicate lines of ancient statuary. He was disturbed when he found her in the back bedroom watching television.

The volume was up. She sat poised in front of the box, smiling, her hands folded into her lap. She wore a pair of Morgan's denims and a plaid shirt. "I learned how to make it work," she said proudly. "Morgan, it's marvelous!"

She was watching a game show. The contestants were guessing the value of expensive consumer items. There was a BMW on stage next to a chromium dinette set.

She said, "Do people ordinarily dress like that?"

Morgan glanced at the screen. "Pretty much, yeah."

"So — I wouldn't be out of place as I am."

"Not particularly."

"There was a good story before this," she said. "About a forest ranger and a dog. The colors were unusual." Credits appeared over the game show;

the announcer shrieked out a list of sponsors. "That means it's over," Beth sighed.

"Maybe there's something on another channel," Morgan said.

She looked up quickly. "'Channel?'"

*It's beginning,* Morgan thought, chilled.

**T**hey arrived early Friday evening. Anita breezed in with Saran-wrapped bowls of resinous sour cream dip and saltless potato chips in glossy bags. Ed Gleick, who owned controlling interest in an escort agency, shouldered an enormous cassette player through the doorway and onto Morgan's mahogany sideboard. There were maybe twenty people in all, two cars and a van. He recognized most of the faces.

Emily came in last. Morgan was astonished to see how much she had aged. It had happened this way with others among his friends: they would look twenty years old until they were thirty-five, and then the years would tumble down all at once like the brickwork of a condemned house. Lines had sprung out from her eyelids; her mouth was framed by a deep V that suggested too much laughing or crying. Her hair was long and loose and a little bit frazzled. She was putting on weight. He was surprised how alien, how *other* she looked, as if they had not shared a decade of their lives.

He circled away toward the kitchen, where he could watch the party in relative privacy.

Beth came out from the bedroom then, looking bemused by the music but otherwise cheerful. She circulated, not stopping too long (as Morgan had instructed) in any one place, for fear of betraying her strange provenance, but learning names and smiling generously. Morgan had made up a cover story for her: she was a graduate student from an Eastern college touring for the summer. Her specialty, if the issue was forced, was Dickens. She had read most of Dickens. She glided by, Ed Gleick trailing her, and Morgan heard the words "industrial revolution . . . the plight of the poor."

She blended. At the same time, little things set her apart: her gait, her restraint, her delicacy of motion. She walked, but the effect was of an aristocratic glide.

Emily came and stood beside him, a paper cup in her hand. "She's lovely."

"Thank you."

"How'd you meet?"

"On the beach," Morgan said.

"We talked," Emily said. "She's very nice. Reserved. British?"

"By birth."

"Lovely accent. She's kind of naive, though." She looked at Morgan. "I guess she'd have to be."

He gazed at her. "That's one of those I've-been-drinking-too-much remarks."

"No, I didn't mean it that way . . . I mean, yes, I've probably been drinking too much, but — well, you know, when we were together I always had this image of the kind of person you thought I ought to be. Refined. Innocent. Incapable of sin, pure in word and deed. I consoled myself that nobody in the real world *could* be like that — I mean, it was just flat impossible. But there she is. Or appears to be."

"She's young," Morgan said.

"Looks like you've got a good quarter century on her. But listen, I don't mean to bitch. Your happiness is important. I know I haven't always acted that way. If this works out for you, fine . . ." She drank, somewhat convulsively, Morgan thought, from her paper cup.

"Thanks," he said, and was shocked again: the intimacy was gone between them, had utterly evaporated. They couldn't make conversation without kicking each other's ankles.

"Sometimes these things don't work out, you know, Morgan. I speak from experience. Some things are too good to be true. I just wanted to say —" She touched his arm. "If you need, well, somebody to talk to, a place to go —" And stopped, obviously embarrassed. "Anyway, she's a lovely girl. We had a nice talk. She wants me to lend her some books."

"Books?"

"I was talking up Simone de Beauvoir, that kind of thing. I don't think

she's even heard of the women's movement."

"Probably not," Morgan said.

"Weird."

It was what Emily, in the old days, would have called a good party: it went on too long and the music was too loud and everybody got tired and irritable. A John Fogerty cassette re-wound itself obsessively on the tape player. Morgan found himself trailing Beth, resenting her laughter and her easy conviviality, thickly angry that she was so obviously enjoying herself. It was like seeing some noble sentiment — love, he thought, or hate — distorted into a greeting card homily.

Ed Gleick retreated into the bathroom periodically, doing lines of cocaine off a hand mirror; Morgan declined the invitation. And he was drunkly outraged when he saw Gleick leading Beth in by the hand. "Leave her the fuck alone," Morgan said.

Gleick feigned astonishment. "Why, Morgan. It's not like you to deny a lady her pleasure."

"It's all right," Beth said hastily. "I was just —"

"It's *not* all right." Morgan looked at Gleick and suddenly despised him: despised the flashy fake-casual clothes, the tanning-studio tan, the pockets of fat he hadn't been able to jog away. It was as if Ed Gleick had become everything he wanted to protect Beth from, a walking catalog of self-indulgence and corruption. "I want you — to

leave her — alone."

Gleick pouted. "When did you get up on your high horse, Morgan? Jesus! I think the salt air's getting to you."

Morgan felt his fists clench . . . but then Emily slipped between them, took Gleick by the shoulders, and steered him away. "Come on, Ed. Party's over." And to Morgan: "Thanks. We all had a good time. Really."

The house was empty within minutes.

Beth wouldn't let him touch her when they went to bed.

"You're drunk," she said. "You stink of beer."

**H**e woke up in the dark, cotton-mouthed, and found her sitting naked in the curve of the bay window watching the moon across a ribbon of sea. Her eyes were wide, entranced. Morgan fixed her a tumbler of milk laced with brandy. She accepted it and shivered.

Morgan put a blanket over her shoulders.

"It was horrible," she said. Her voice was a whisper; her eyes were fixed and distant. "She broke up in the storm. The *Courier*, I mean. There were voices in the dark. The drowning people. And the roar of the sea, like a huge angry animal —"

He seemed to hear it now, in the rush and recession of the waves. His head ached. He felt old, ancient.

She leaned into his arms.

"I hated the woman then. The old Romany woman. I wanted to die like everyone else. Before the storm, you see, it all seemed so harmless. She looked at my palms. She discussed my business in America. She said the ship would sink, with all hands, but that I needn't fear the sea — the sea wouldn't harm me, she said, not if I floated in it forever — if only I would say a few words in her language, and prick my thumbs, and make a promise.

"Then I remember the ship breaking up, and a terrible time in the cold water . . . and then nothing . . . so *much* nothing . . ."

"Come back to bed," Morgan told her.

But her eyes were on the sea again.

"I have to leave this place," she said. "Soon."

She grew increasingly restless after the party. Television bored her. She was disconsolate for most of a month. Morgan drove her to the antique shop, two miles south on the highway. He thought she might be able to do some of the sales chores or take over the books.

She was fascinated by the car. A morning fog had come in from the sea and spilled over the highway in wisps. Pines rose up the steep hillside, cloistered and dark. Beth pressed her nose against the passenger window.

"So fast," she murmured.

The shop was ordinary, a stucco building set back in a coppice of

pinus in what was not quite a town: a filling station, a highway patrol outpost, a general store. The sign was discreet. Most of what he sold was conventional Americana, but there were some genuinely valuable pieces among the stock he had transported up from the city. Inside, Morgan switched on a space heater and pointed out his prize pieces. An ebonized E. W. Godwin chair, inconspicuous in the corner . . . a Fabergé *samo-rodok* cigarette case in the counter next to the scrimshaw . . . a pair of Saunders and Shepherd silver and cut-glass claret jugs in the shape of blank-eyed geese . . .

"They're very nice," Beth said. "I suppose."

Her halfheartedness wounded him. He turned away, wanting to say, "*You ought to understand, you, of all people* . . . Emily had told him it was his saving grace, the love he languished on these fragile pieces. He loved them, he supposed, *because* they were fragile, and because they had escaped by some miracle the travail of the twentieth century. In their own way, he thought, they were the last of a noble line; a direct line of descent from the Bayeux Tapestry and the *Morte d'Arthur*, a dream of nobility that had been shattered by the rude and horrible noise of the modern world.

He took from a locked cabinet his most treasured piece, a pastel Royal Lancastrian dish with decoration on a



nautical theme . . . but Beth had turned her back, had gone to the window, and was peering into the parking lot with a strange intensity.

"I want to learn to drive," she said. "Please, Morgan, will you teach me?"

He did. He sat next to her daily as she turned the car in cautious circuits through the parking lot, her tongue between her teeth. He did as she asked, even though it seemed she was moving farther away from him with every inch they traversed.

She was a quick study. Within a month she was borrowing the car routinely (and illegally), though Morgan begged her not to. At first she asked for money. To pay for gas, she said. Then she stopped asking, and borrowed the car anyway, and was gone for days at a time.

It was harrowing. He felt as if some essential part of himself were being torn away. Alone, he couldn't sleep. She wouldn't say where she went, or why, or what she did there. More frustrating, in its way, was the physical change in her: she came back seeming healthier and would wake, after even a single night in the beach house, with her old pallor restored.

"You owe me something," Morgan said finally, although he couldn't bring himself to be angry with her any more than he could be angry with his Royal Lancastrian or his Edwardian escriptoire with the sycamore marquetry: "An explanation, at least."

"I owe you for rescuing me," she said gravely, her head tilted to one side, her slender neck pale and dazzling. "And I've thanked you for that. More than once."

"It's not that simple."

She gazed at him steadily. "You love your wife, don't you, Morgan?"

"Is it Emily that's bothering you? You know we're divorced —"

"You say that. But connections between people go very deep sometimes. They're not always," and she frowned, "not always easy to break."

And then one day she left and didn't come back at all.

It was raining when the telephone rang. Morgan had put himself to sleep on the sofa with a bottle of white wine the night before, and now — the light failing outside the window, another day past — he was caught between wakefulness and sleep. The radio in the bedroom droned a weather report. Tropical storm off the coast. Morgan imagined he could feel it rolling toward him across the water, a vast tumbril of a high-pressure cell.

He picked up the receiver, finally, and there was Emily's voice, stunningly familiar. "Morgan? I was worried about you."

He didn't say anything. He couldn't think of anything to say.

"I know Beth is gone," Emily said. "I just wanted to make sure you were O.K."

"You've seen her?"

"A couple of times. She dropped by the apartment." There was a pause. "Morgan, she told me about herself. I mean, how you found her, and where she came from."

"That's . . . probably a mistake."

"It was only me she told. She's smart enough to be circumspect."

"I hope so."

"She was worried about you, too. She's really very wise about men."

"You called to tell me that?"

"I'm not gloating." He heard the distant click of her cigarette lighter. "I'm hardly in a position to gloat, am I? The original middle-aged fool. I know what it's like."

"Beth isn't Chavez," Morgan said coldly.

"You mean she isn't a fraud? I'll grant you. But I imagine it feels the same." She drew in her breath. "Ah, Morgan, it's a shitty life sometimes."

"I'm hung over," he realized.

"You don't surprise me. Maybe I shouldn't have called." She added, "In some better world, you know, we could console each other. In some better world I could say, hey Morgan, come on over, we'll build a fire and tell each other how damn dumb we are. And maybe get warm. In some better world. But I guess we're stuck with this one."

"How recently did you see her?"

She sighed. "Monday."

"She looked healthy?"

"She's doing O.K."

"Do you know where she's staying?"

"No."

"But she must still be in the city." He said, "She's got my car."

"Something tells me it's not the car you're worked up about."

"I would like her to . . . explain things."

"Are you sure?"

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing. But she did talk to me, Morgan. And I think it would probably be better if you just forgot about her for a while."

"Did she say that?"

"Not in so many words. But that was the gist of it, yeah."

Morgan sank back into the sofa. "She doesn't know what she's saying."

"The knight errant routine. Wow. It's kind of charming, actually. The trouble is, Morgan, that code of chivalry of yours has quite a kick in it. I mean, I know what it's like to fall from grace. I've been there."

"I want to find her," Morgan said.

"It's pointless. Anyway, you'd look silly waiting for a bus in this weather."

"You're sure you don't know where she is?"

"I'm tired of answering this question, Morgan! I've been getting it from you and Ed Gleick —"

"Ed Gleick is looking for her?"

"Oh, Christ. He said he saw her down on Merchant Street, all right? He wants to offer her a contract. No, I don't have her address. No, I don't

have her phone number. Morgan, listen . . .”

“What?”

“I just wanted to say — ” Static rang down the line. “If you do come into town, you need someplace to stay, come on by. I mean, what the hell. The storm and everything . . .”

He understood what she was offering. And for a moment he wanted it, too — the acceptance, the continuity. It *would* be reassuring.

He ran his fingers through his hair. “Emily, you have to understand. There are certain things I just can’t forgive.”

“Give it some consideration, Morgan. This is the last time I’ll ask.”

He rented a car at the Greyhound station the next morning and cruised up and down Merchant Street until twilight. It was a tawdry, low-rent neighborhood of Victorian walk-ups and failing businesses (shoe-repair shops, laundries, a boarded-up surplus outlet) deserted under the assault of the weather. The rain came down like artillery fire, and Morgan had resolved to find a hotel room somewhere when he saw Ed Gleick climb out of his silver Mercedes and pop up a glossy black umbrella.

Morgan parked on the next block and crossed against the light.

Gleick’s broad back moved through veils of rain, past the shoe shop with its Cat’s Paw sticker, under a halo of yellow streetlight, into a doughnut shop with grimy plate glass windows.

Morgan hesitated outside. The glass was thick with condensation. He saw Gleick’s silhouette quaver into a chair. He was alone for a moment, then a woman approached him.

He spoke to her, pointed at the chair opposite.

The woman hesitated, then nodded and sat down.

Her shape was familiar.

Morgan moved into the doorway then, water puddling around his shoes, angry and uncertain. They were there at the table, Ed Gleick and Beth, talking. She wore a black satin jacket with a Rolling Stones imprimatur stenciled on the back. Underneath, a T-shirt. Her hair was restrained by a jogger’s sweatband. Her health had improved, he thought; her complexion had lost the china pallor he associated with the beach house. His own reflection in the wall mirror behind the counter was unbearable: ravaged, old.

He approached the table.

Gleick looked up. “Christ, Morgan, what’d you do, follow me? You look like shit.”

Beth gazed at him.

“Sit down,” she said.

He pulled up a chair.

“I just got off work,” she said. “Elsie, could I have a coffee here?” Elsie was the girl tying on her apron back of the cash register. A pimply brunette of uncertain age. She filled a cup for Beth. Black, Morgan observed; no sugar. He felt detached. “I guess you want your car back,” she said. “I’m

sorry, Morgan. I didn't know about the bus." She fished the keys out of her purse. "Here. The car's in an alley a couple of blocks down."

He accepted the keys. "That's not why I came."

"No?" She seemed unsurprised. "Tell me why, then."

"My God, isn't it obvious? I want you to come home."

"That's not my home, Morgan."

"It could be." His hands were shaking — only partly from the cold — and he hid them in his lap. "We had an ad hoc relationship. That can be changed. We can have a formal ceremony if you want. Whatever you want. I should have known. I shouldn't have taken advantage of you, when you were stranded, nowhere to go —"

"You didn't, Morgan." She laid her palms flat on the table, gently but firmly. "I took advantage of you. And that would not change if we were married."

"I don't believe that."

She drew back, frowning.

Gleick gazed at them both, aghast, party to a drama he could not, Morgan thought, conceivably understand.

He said, "Wouldn't it be better than being here?"

"No. I'm independent here. I earn a little money. And I've been talking to Emily. Maybe, with night school, I can get something better. A *good* job."

"Is that all you want? A job?"

She said seriously, "I don't know.

It's a choice I never had. A choice I never thought I could have."

"Whatever you think you can buy — here — I can give you."

"I know. I *know*. And it wouldn't work." She looked into her cup. "This is partly my fault. You have to understand, Morgan, how utterly lost I was when you took me in. A strange and terrible thing had happened. You were my only contact with this world. And so I had to make myself welcome. I did that in the only way I knew how. Oh, it was obvious what you wanted. The delicate, demure girl. The china statuette. Castaway from a more refined era, when words like 'honor' and 'decency' meant something." She looked up. "Am I right?"

He thought again how perfect her face was, the fine bones, the pale skin, the graceful arch of her neck. Her eyes were calm and blue and deep. "Yes."

"Jesus," Gleick said softly. "You people are into some weird scene."

She said, "And maybe there's some truth in it, Morgan. Maybe this is a cruder age, on the whole, than the one I left. But at least the crudity is democratic." She said calmly, "I was a whore, Morgan."

"Jesus," Gleick said.

Morgan blinked. "Beth, I —"

"No. *Listen*. Is the word not explicit enough? I was a prostitute. A fairly elegant specimen of the breed, but that is the truth of it. 'Call girl,' I suppose you'd say now. A wealthy

timberman paid my passage to America. He wanted to own me. Exclusively." She smiled. "More than one man has fallen in love with me."

He was suddenly dizzy. "I don't know why you're saying this, but —"

"Believe it, Morgan. It's the truth. And what I regret is that I lied to you by implication — because you seem a very decent man. I shouldn't have taken advantage. But I was very lost."

Rain lashed up against the plate-glass windows. "Cold," the counter girl said to herself, and dialed the thermostat. Morgan felt drained, empty. He looked at Gleick — the limp opacity of the man. It's true, he thought. By God, it's true. "That's what *he* wants," Morgan said. "That fake escort agency. He's a pimp, right? And he wants you to work for him."

"You have a crude mouth, Morgan," Gleick said. He stood up. "This is too weird even for me." And he turned back a step later. "Don't come down too hard on your girlfriend, Morgan. Maybe I did offer her a job. Maybe she wasn't interested."

**H**e ordered a coffee and warmed his hands at it.

There might still be a way out of this, he thought. Even now. "Is that right? What he said?"

"That I turned down his offer?" She nodded. "It was very generous. But I couldn't accept."

A way out, he thought.

She shook her head. "Morgan, I know what you're thinking. Please, it was not a virtuous act on my part. I couldn't have worked for him even if I wanted to. That was the promise, you see. The promise I made the old Roman woman. If I survived, she said, I must abandon my occupation. Otherwise I would die . . . die as surely as all the other lost souls aboard that ship."

Morgan remembered. Prick her thumb and make a promise. Yes.

"Then come home with me." He was pleading now. He felt as if some connection had come loose inside him, that he had passed into some high, wild country in which anything was possible. It was true, everything she had said was true, but it didn't matter; it was her perfection he needed, the crystalline purity she wore about her like a cloak, and which was, he supposed, incorruptible. "I don't care what you might have done. I'll protect you. Anything you have here, I can give you —"

"You just don't understand!" Her eyes clouded. "You carry around that vision of yourself. The Good Man. The White Knight. It's like a cross!"

"Beth —"

"Morgan, I *want* to go home with you! Please, *please* understand! I want the attention! I want to be cherished, like the things in your shop! But —"

And she touched his wrist with her perfect white hand.

"But — don't you see? — I would  
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be in mortal danger.”

He found the car and began to drive north, but the storm was on top of him suddenly and he knew the route to the beach house would be hopelessly dark and dangerous. He found a phone booth in a motel lot

near the ocean and huddled inside for a time, watching as the black waves crashed like fists against the breakwater; and then he was dialing Emily's number with numbed fingers, dazed, and the words that circled like high white birds in his mind were *harbor, shelter, home.*

