

# *Online Wildfire*

*by Crystal Humphries*



BROWN SKIN  
BOOKS



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B O O K S

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'How?' Grace's stare was intense, but there was a half smile on her lips.

'You know Sheldon doesn't play games. He just asked me, straight up: "Do you want to sleep with me?" I said "No." We got that out of the way and we've been friends ever since.'

'Was that before you got together with Louie?'

Romaine hesitated for a moment too long.

Grace laughed. 'So he tried to steal his best friend's girl? Wow! I didn't know he had it in him.'

'You know it wasn't like that. Just something that had to be dealt with before—'

'Honestly, Rome, you don't have to protect him. I kinda like that horny streak in my man! And at least he has good taste.'

'I guess all I was trying to say was that after all those guys, I should have been old enough, wise enough, experienced enough to have seen what was coming, but this was different...'

Grace watched as Romaine twisted the gold band around her finger, her knuckles almost white with the tension. She couldn't understand why Romaine was torturing herself. In her position, she would just have kept quiet and taken the opportunity to have a good time. But she should try to understand what was bugging her friend.

'Well, I suppose the two of you had settled into a strong friendship. There was a bond. Why would you have expected it? Don't beat yourself up. These things happen. The question is: what are you going to do about it now?' Grace touched Romaine's shoulder, a brief gesture of solidarity. 'You can't go on like this, Romaine.' She brushed the hair back from Romaine's cheek.

'I know.'

Grace busied herself with the percolator, using the coffee-making ritual as a firebreak, giving Romaine time and space to calm her thoughts, to retreat from the place where she obviously didn't want to

go right now. She poured two cups and placed one before her friend, a neutral smile plastered to her face.

‘So how was yesterday evening? Sheldon was home late. What exciting things did you guys get up to?’

‘Oh, the usual weekly orgy.’ Romaine joked, trying to lighten the mood. ‘Sheldon was particularly skilful.’

‘I taught him everything he knows!’

‘Grace!’

‘Well that’s the whole point of younger men. You can mould them before they get into bad habits. You know, though, joking apart, I still think it’s peculiar the way your husband holds these weekly male bonding sessions and insists you should be there. I know he wants to keep an eye on you, but I still think it’s weird.’

‘I like the guys. I enjoy their company,’ Romaine hedged.

‘I wasn’t asking about you. What does Louie get out of it?’



Romaine didn’t spend as much time as she’d planned with Grace. Too many uncomfortable questions that she didn’t want to deal with today. Her head was too fuzzy. When she got back, Colin was waiting in his car, engine switched off, just about to dial a number on his mobile.

‘Hey. I was just about to call you. Wondering if I left my wallet in your place last night. I’ve been looking everywhere.’

This was the last thing she needed. She didn’t want to have to entertain Colin. Romaine could deal with him in company, but there was something about him that still made her uncomfortable. Besides, she’d left Grace because she needed to be alone. But what could she say? She couldn’t refuse to let him into the house.

‘Come in and have a look, Colin. I didn’t see it when we were clearing up.’

Colin followed her into the house, unusually quiet now that he was without an audience. This was ridiculous. Normally, a joke would have sprung to his lips by now, but they were unexpectedly dry and he licked them surreptitiously. He’d spent so much time with her over the years, so what was the problem now?

As Romaine walked into the kitchen, he headed straight for the

sitting room, to where he knew the wallet would be. He cursorily swept his hand under the sofa cushions in case she was watching and then delved into the sides of the battered armchair, lifting the black leather wallet with a flourish.

'I've been turning my flat upside down. I knew it had to be here somewhere.' He joined her in the kitchen.

'Well, thank God you found it. Do you want a drink, Colin?' Romaine silently prayed that he'd say no.

He massaged his temple. 'Never again!'

'I meant tea or coffee.'

'Sure. Why not? Where's Louie?'

'Working.'

As if he hadn't known. He'd predicted as much; that's why he was here.

Colin perched on a stool, feeling a little like a lapdog, his eyes following her every movement.

'So, how are things, Rome?'

'What? You mean since you last saw me, oh...' she studied her watch melodramatically, 'all of thirteen hours ago?'

He was silent for a while, dredging his mind for something light, frothy, insubstantial to say. 'You seemed... well... on edge. I wondered if everything was okay.' *Call that lightening the tone, Colin?*

Romaine laughed. 'I was perfectly fine until you guys made me lose all my matchsticks. That was the only thing wrong with me. But you know I'll win them all back next week.' She handed him a mug of coffee.

He hesitated, uncertain whether or not to speak. But he had to keep the conversation going, there was so much that he needed to find out.

'Why do you put up with it, Romaine? The Friday night sessions?'

'Because I enjoy your company so much.' She was obviously determined not to give away anything much.

'I'm serious. Why do you let him force you?'

Romaine looked up at him. His bulk in the room was becoming oppressive even though he wasn't a big man. His dark, slanted eyes were intense and, once again, she felt as if his look was attempting to strip her naked, not just physically, but mentally too.

'I don't believe this. First Grace. Now you. It's like we're holding a witches' coven. Why are our Friday nights so significant?'

'I thinking Louie makes you come.'

'He does not.'

'Or makes it so that you don't have any choice.'

Romaine forced herself to laugh. 'You're joking.'

'No, but—'

'Colin, what are you suggesting? That he uses physical force or something? Or blackmails me? Or shackles me to the table leg? Come on, it's Louie we're talking about here.'

'I've known Louie for a hell of a long time. I know what he's like when things don't go exactly his way. The way he retreats into himself, even when he thinks the rest of us don't know. What did you say to him, Rome? Did you finally tell him that you're not happy with him? Is that it? I can imagine how he'd take that.'

Romaine looked at Colin, a hint of anger flashing in her eyes before she lowered them. She calmly drained the remains of her coffee cup, making time for her anger to dissipate. She made herself look straight into Colin's eyes.

'I don't think you have the right to say things like that to me.' Her eyes flashed. 'Colin, I thought I made myself clear. Everything's fine.'

There was steel in her voice, but he couldn't stop himself. He'd gone too far now to back away. 'I don't believe you, Rome, but you're pushing me away. I know that. But I think you're going to need me some day soon. You know where I am.'

Colin patted his jacket pocket, checking for the wallet. He pulled it out and glanced at it. 'I left it here on purpose.'

'I know.'

'I worry about you, Rome.'

'Don't.'

He watched her for a moment, curious, needing something from her that he didn't find. Her eyes were shuttered. He kissed her on the cheek and left, closing the door softly behind him.



'She likes to pretend that she's so strong,' Colin told himself as he

got into the car, 'but, underneath it, she's vulnerable.' He smiled to himself as he thought of the poker game. She had tried so hard not to look at any of them. Didn't dare to raise her head. Not sure that she'd be able to conceal what she was thinking. That was one of the things he found fascinating about her. The fact that you could see the truth of her soul in her eyes. Romaine actually believed that she could hide her thoughts. But if you knew her well enough, and if she let you look into those incredible eyes, there was nothing more that you needed to know. There was nothing that she could hide from him.

*She thinks that she enjoys being with all of us. Or that's what she tells us. And probably him too. Every single Friday night for, what, two months now? But she must be doing it for him. No, I don't think that he'd actually use physical force to get her there; that's not Louie's style. But I know him well enough to understand that he'd play mind games that would be hard to resist. I've experienced them myself, many times in all the years I've known Louie. That's why my heart goes out to her now. Soft, achingly vulnerable and believing she's so strong, that's Romaine.*

Colin turned the key to start the ignition, but then he was still, not making any attempt to move on.

He could pinpoint the moment when things changed between her and Louie. The moment that brought her into those Friday night sessions. He didn't know what she'd said to him. But the irony was that, whatever Louie had intended, it brought her closer. Every week. Every damned week to torture him. Knowing that he couldn't get near to her when every fibre of his being wanted to be the knight in shining armour rescuing her from the ogre who had imprisoned her heart and soul. If she would let him. God Almighty, since when had he descended into fucking Fairy-La-La land?

It must have been around the time when she cut her hair. He wondered then if it was some kind of penance. And in spite of all that had happened between them, it was like the first time he had really seen her. There they all were, watching some match that was just a pretence for them to be together, getting drunk and they must have missed her key in the lock because, suddenly, she was there, tired lines around her eyes, but smiling broadly. Her hair long enough to just curl around her ears, to

frame those huge, wide, trusting eyes, but much shorter than it had been. He had felt a sense of shock. It hurt that she'd decided to sacrifice her hair. But it made her seem so fragile, so vulnerable and he wanted to reach out and take her in his arms. But he couldn't show how he was feeling. Not in front of Louie. She was wearing red, a warm dark red, the colour they call maroon. It was something that came down to her knees, something warm and soft and seductive that clung to her body and outlined the swell of her breasts and the curve of her behind. Something stirred, hardening his cock before he had time to check himself. What the hell was he doing? He knew he had no right to think of her that way.

Colin had just about gained a semblance of control when she turned to him, warmth and wariness both in her exhausted eyes. She walked towards him, the scent of her perfume getting stronger, heady, overpowering, until she kissed him on the cheek with a soft 'Hi!' He moved unexpectedly and the curve of her breast brushed against his arm. Like static electricity.

Colin stayed away from the next Friday session. Took care of business at home.

And then this week, he had watched as Louie took her in his arms, his fingers straying down to the curve of her buttocks and he wanted to challenge him, like a rutting deer, antlers at the ready. He had no right. None at all. But tell that to the marines. And then Sheldon had started the play fight with the chicken legs. Like he'd read what was going on in Colin's head. He wouldn't put that past him either. But Colin wasn't going to deny it. He wanted Romaine. Wanted to have her. To himself. Needed her in a way that spelled d-a-n-g-e-r. He had to stay away. He knew that he couldn't. He turned and looked at the house. She was closing the heavy wooden shutters. Had she been looking at him? The idea excited him. Maybe he should have gone back, tried again with her. As the second shutter closed, he could imagine her bolting it into place. He released the handbrake and pressed on the accelerator, steering away from the kerb.



Romaine closed the door behind Colin with a guilty sense of relief. She didn't know what she might have ended up saying to him if he

hadn't left just then. Why did he have to be so demanding? What on earth did he think she could give him? Surely they'd got all that sorted years ago. As she turned away from the door, the phone rang and she raced to answer it. Another hang-up. It must be Louie. She would ignore his games. She turned on the stereo and tuned in to a radio station that was playing blues. Suited her mood. She gently massaged her temples, hoping to stop the pounding. She glanced out of the window. Oh Lord, Colin was still there. What was he doing? Was he watching her? It was too dark for her to tell, but this wasn't funny. She closed both shutters, literally shutting him out. She was shattered and didn't want to think about Colin at all. There was too much else going on right now.

Louie hadn't left any message on the answering machine. She didn't know if he would be at home at all. And what if he did come back? These days, it probably wouldn't make much difference. She'd still feel so alone. If only she hadn't confessed everything! It wasn't as if he would ever have known. She had only told him because he asked where she had been and it hadn't occurred to her to lie. Unashamed, she'd naively told him everything in a rush of innocent wonder. That's how it had felt until she'd seen the expression on his face. Now she wondered if, subconsciously, she hadn't been trying to repair whatever it was that must have been wrong with their marriage for her to have done what she did. Louie, of course, was unaware that anything was wrong at all. And maybe he was right. It might be that, with hindsight, she was now rewriting history. Maybe they had been perfectly, blissfully happy. But if so, why would she have responded to someone else? Maybe just greed.

It worried her now to see the kind of games that Louie was playing. Had he always been like that? Maybe she'd been blind to it. She resented the way her husband could be so charming and attentive when they were in public, but so horribly insular and selfish and angry when they were alone together. She would never have imagined this of him. Or had she driven him to it? It would damn well serve him right if she took her pleasure somewhere else, even if that's how their problems had first started.

Romaine turned off the light in the sitting room and unbolted the shutter. She opened it a crack and peeped around the frame. She sighed with relief. No shiny black Mercedes parked opposite the window. At least Colin had gone. One thing off her mind. And still, it was curious that there was this lingering doubt about Colin. Surely he had proved himself to be a good friend.

It wasn't too difficult to go back to the afternoon of the knock on the door. It was still alive in her mind. Only three hours after the end of her mother's Sunday service. It had taken them that long to track her down. Her mother had neglected to update her address book. Next of kin. Romaine Webster. Absolute next of kin. Nobody else even came close. Her father had disappeared to Canada when she was only three, that country chosen because, for what might be a brief period, it seemed to actively welcome immigrants. She had no memory of him. Since then, there had been just Romaine and her mother.

Romaine opened the door to the dark uniform, silver buttons. That's all she could concentrate on. The woman, a female constable, stood in front of the other dark bulk. Looking for a Mrs Ro... Man... Webster. Why? Could they come in? The initial instinct not to let the law in without knowing why. What had Colin done with his stash of dope? Any roaches in the ashtrays? And then looking up to the plastered-on, concerned look tinged with suspicion as the two figures looked over her shoulder and viewed the group of men, palette shading from light to dark brown.

Sorry to say that... accident... mother hit... car waiting outside... hospital.

Romaine thought instantly of her father, needing someone. How would she track him down? It had been enough years for him to retreat from unwelcome memories, the burden of responsibilities.

The guys all insisted on accompanying her, whether from empathy or instinctive distrust of the police, she didn't know.

At the hospital, it was Colin who took charge, interrogating nurses, tracking down consultants while Louie, Sheldon and Matthew took turns to hold her close. And when she entered the room, it seemed Colin was already there, assuring her that she would be able to bear this latest

trauma. Her mother, white with bandages—why hadn't God made them brown? Her mother, eyes opening and flickering as if searching for something, perhaps her only child. Her mother, now a stranger, every breath of familiarity airbrushed away by the clinical atmosphere, the tubes, the beeping machinery, the subdued sirens of death in the air.

She knew that she should rush to the bedside, clasp her mother in her arms, but she was scared. Not petrified, not terrified, just scared. Not thinking of her mother, just worried about how she would deal with the death. Because it was obvious that her mother was dying.

And it was Colin who was the director, orchestrating her movements, giving the cues, prompting her. So that when it was over, Romaine felt as if the curtain had come down and she had played her part, curtsying, accepting the accolade of a well-disposed audience. It was Colin who gave her the strength, taking it for granted that she would do what she needed to do.

But it was Louie who, every night, long after the audience had departed, took her in his arms, rocking and murmuring, 'I'll miss her too, honey. She became part of our lives. She's joined the ancestors and is looking out for you. She's part of you, honey. That can never change. Don't cry, sweetheart. We're still a family. Always will be.'



She walked towards the kitchen, only distracted momentarily by the glow of the screen-saver in Louie's study. It was beckoning her. Tempting her.

She deliberately turned away and proceeded to the kitchen. Romaine poured herself a glass of red wine and returned to the front of the house, not turning on the main light, but instead, a small table lamp by the most comfortable armchair in the room.

She picked up the *Radio Times*, the only magazine in the place, and began to read, seeing it only as a distraction. She turned to today's date. Nothing she wanted to watch on television. It would be so easy to pick up the phone, just to talk. But she had promised herself that she would not do this and it would be like breaking an unspoken vow to Louie. She owed it to him. But Lord, he made it difficult. If he wasn't going to

make any effort himself, what was she supposed to do? Be a martyr for the rest of her life?



It was 3:00 before Sheldon arrived in the office. He looked fresh and carefree. And why wouldn't he? Louie had never been able to work out what made Grace tick, but he guessed she was good for his friend. Sheldon had never seemed so contented, so relaxed, so self-confident before he met her. Grace had been an executive in one of the record companies that they dealt with. In fact, it had been her decision to give them the contract. She'd made her interest in Sheldon perfectly clear, insisting that he should be the one to handle all the negotiations. Louie had called her the preying mantis, seeing her as a predatory female, with her long, tall body and thin, bony limbs; one of them ball-breaking types that would chew Sheldon up and spit him out, but only after she'd bitten off his head. But he'd had to keep the nickname to himself when Sheldon stopped laughing at the joke. Sheldon had never been one to chat too much 'bout the women in his life and, in idle moments, Louie had wondered if he was, in fact, still a virgin. But that was never the kind of thing you asked your mate. You could joke about it, tease him, but never just come out and ask! Anyway, the indication was that he managed to satisfy the woman's demands because, these days, Sheldon didn't seem to be frettin' 'bout nuttin'.

'Whassup, Lou? What you doing here? Don't tell me is some emergency.' His eyes behind the thick frames instinctively flickered towards the bank of servers and Louie almost imagined that he crossed the fingers of both hands behind his back. But that would have been childish superstition. In spite of endless backup systems, it was a constant fear that, one day, something would go drastically wrong. They sometimes still laughed uncontrollably when they looked at how far they'd come. The idea had first occurred to them when they'd been messing around in Sheldon's flat, playing with the new software he'd bought, his new toy. They'd been composing a tune, the one that was going to make their joint fortune and the program had suddenly frozen. They hadn't saved up to that point and lost all the material. They no longer knew and didn't ask who had actually thought of it. It didn't matter. Someone had

raised the question of the number of record companies that had huge archives that weren't backed up. And then what if the same thing that had just happened to them occurred during a recording session? Or equipment failed. Or a fire broke out? They could risk losing tens of thousands of pounds' worth of material. But what if someone, someone like them, could provide constant backup facilities at the end of a line?

The idea was so good that they found the finance with little trouble. They started small with the newly-formed independent companies. They built up good contacts, were recommended to individual artists recording material in their bedrooms, and then in turn came to the attention of executives from the majors, like Grace. On paper the company was worth millions and they employed technicians, sales, finance and admin people as well as a PR company, but they still, totally illogically, feared power cuts or a blown fuse.

'No. No emergency. Just trying to catch up.'

Sheldon gave him one of those looks that said 'You lying bastard,' but he kept his mouth shut. He simply opened a sash window, his protest at the stale nicotine in the air, and switched on the kettle.

He sat at his desk, adjacent to Louie's in the open-plan office and powered up his computer, scanning for e-mails that needed a fast response. Since they'd started expanding overseas, Sheldon made it his business to make sure that the time differences wouldn't present any obstacle to success. They might need to employ even more staff in future, work in shifts, if necessary, but he was currently monitoring the situation.

They worked in almost companionable silence for a couple of hours. And then Sheldon removed his glasses and ran a hand through his cropped hair. He rubbed his eyes, emphasising the dark rings around them. He stood and walked across to the makeshift bar. He lifted a bottle of dark rum in Louie's direction, a question in his gesture. Louie nodded and Sheldon wiped two dusty glasses on the edge of his T-shirt before pouring generous measures, which he topped up with flat ginger ale. They would have to do something about re-stocking the bar.

He passed a glass to Louie and returned to his seat. He rested both feet on his desk and took a sip of his drink, playing for time, not knowing how to start. Louie did the same, almost mirroring his every

action. Sheldon and Louie rarely had these types of man-to-man conversations. Left that kind of thing to the women. Sheldon coughed, scratching his head, trying to figure out what to say.

‘So...’

‘So.’

‘So Spurs look like they might be relegated.’ What kind of pathetic way was that to open a conversation about, well... personal matters? Especially when they lived on either side of the footballing divide, Louie in Tottenham Hotspurs territory, Sheldon, even today, wearing Arsenal colours.

Louie sat up in his chair.

‘You know say is just luck. The way Arsenal don’t even have two cents to rub together.’

‘Cents or no cents, we have Henry. What you have, bwoy?’

‘That’s just it, without Henry, what you goin’ do?’

‘Plenty of other fine players, but the thing is *with* Henry—’ Sheldon stopped, realising that he was being too easily diverted. Fun though it might be to enjoy the upper hand, this wasn’t taking them where they needed to be. Sheldon thought hard.

‘So...’ he said. He got up and poured them both another drink. Thank goodness he’d travelled by tube today and wouldn’t have to worry about driving home.

This was going to be even harder than he’d imagined and Louie didn’t seem to want to help out. He’d been surprised to find Louie in the office today, but last night, in spite of the alcohol, the jokes, the habitual laughter, he’d sensed that there was something wrong between Romaine and him. Her eyes had glittered as if she was on something and Louie had laughed loudly and over-long. There was something simmering under the surface. Sheldon had his suspicions about Colin, had seen the looks he exchanged with Romaine. He didn’t say anything to Louie, but had gone home grateful for the uncomplicated relationship he shared with his wife.

He knew well enough that the other guys had laughed at the idea of him and Grace together. When they’d first met, she’d been a big-shot somebody in a record company and he’d been a petitioner at her door.

There had been something in her that Louie had found daunting, but Sheldon had never seen it. She had been a kindred spirit that he recognised immediately. He was the one to ask her out, sending an e-mail message as soon as he got back to the office that first afternoon. He'd gone back to her apartment that very first night. That had been some freaky shit. All his fantasies come true.

She had suggested Granita, joking about the power play that had gone on there between the prime minister and the chancellor. He'd read the stories in the papers and had been curious about the place, wondering if she'd managed to book the same table. In the end, he'd been less impressed than he'd imagined, toying with the food, drinking more wine, watching the movement of her lips, her fingers, the directness of her gaze, and wanting to get out of the place as fast as he could. She must have felt the same way since she skipped dessert and coffee and, without any games or subterfuge, came out with it as soon as he asked for the bill.

'Coffee at my place?'

And the brush of her fingers against his crotch confirmed that she wasn't intending to grind any beans that night.

Her flat was within walking distance, across the road, down Cross Street and right towards the Angel and Tesco. A left into St Peters Street and she was soon unlocking the shiny black door of a Georgian terrace. As soon it was closed behind them, she walked halfway up the stairs, stopped and, holding his gaze, unbuttoned her coat, lifted her dress and removed her panties, holding them for a moment under her nose. He could only guess at the warmth, the musky odour and yet he squirmed uncomfortably in his trousers, his cock instantly rock-like.

He looked around. There must be at least four flats in the building and she was sitting on the step now, her legs wide apart, the fuzz of black hair unable to conceal the puffy pussy lips, the inviting, glistening dark red flesh calling to him. He shifted uncomfortably, trying to move his erection to a more bearable spot in his trousers.

She licked her lips and wet the middle finger of her right hand. It descended like an arrow into the bushy triangle of hair, stroking her clitoris slowly, gently and then down, further down, it disappeared up to the knuckle into the mysterious hollow between her thighs.

Sheldon could feel the pounding of his heart and wondered if it might not burst right out of his chest. Beads of sweat rose to his forehead, but he didn't dare to wipe them off. He was rooted to the spot, almost literally petrified.

'You scared?' There was a challenge in her voice, but her smile was tempting. She spread her legs wider so he could see her finger moving in and out, slick and wet with her juice. She pulled it out and used it to beckon to him. 'Kneel!'

He was like jelly, like a toddler unsure of how to control his limbs. His brain was trying to tell him that one foot simply went before the other but that thought was being blocked out by the thought of ready, waiting, hungry, freaky pussy.

Grace laughed; a confident, knowing sound that broke the spell. Like a bullet fired at point blank range, he was down on his knees, on the bottom step, his hands around her buttocks, lifting her to him like a luscious, ripe water-melon. And just like a man dying of hunger and thirst he supped and drank and licked and chewed and probed while she turned and writhed and grabbed his head, grinding her clitoris against his lips, bruising him until she pulled away and cried out for him to stop. She raised him up and slid the tongue of his belt from the buckle. She tugged at his zip, reaching inside to grasp him, to free him. He expected her to say something, but she stood, not for one second letting go of him, her thumb fondling him, the tip of her sharpened nail catching against his flesh and she proceeded up the stairs, pulling him as if leading a bull by the horns. He was sure that he heard a door clicking shut somewhere in the darkness up above. He felt his cock twitch at the sound.

He almost knew what to expect of her bedroom. The first time he'd walked into her office and their eyes met, he'd recognised a fellow traveller. Sheldon's sexual encounters had, as Louie suspected, been few. But each had been intense, because he'd selected every one with precise care and discrimination. Emotion hadn't come into it. He'd known what he wanted and had gone after it with the same efficiency that he applied to the business. Discreet ads in specialist magazines. Websites that didn't appear on the majority of search engines. Upmarket London clubs that

didn't advertise their services with neon lights or polished door plaques. That's how his babymother had come into his life; a petite redhead who, ultimately, hadn't understood the subtleties and had taken the game a little too far.

Grace turned on a couple of strategically placed lamps that barely illuminated the room, just lifted the darkness enough for him to see the four-poster bed, the dark red satin sheets. The room was almost masculine in its austerity, the only hint of luxury the bed.

She turned away from him and disappeared through a door. Sheldon looked around him. A full-length mirror. Dark panelled doors. No sign of feminine artifice: no creams, potions, lotions. No pictures on the walls. Simple blinds. No frills, bows, ribbons, cushions, furry toys. He silently nodded his approval, but found himself strangely intimidated, by the austerity of the room. He hardly dared to move, his heart was beating fast with anticipation.

Grace reappeared just as suddenly as she'd left. And the transformation made his breath catch in his throat. She was wearing more than before. Something that covered her from ankle to throat, from shoulder to wrist. A gleaming gold leather that caressed every inch of her body making her seem more than naked. Zips in every conceivable erotic position. High heels. Acute points to the toes. She'd done something to her eyes, something that made them more defined, more slanted, cat-like, something that made him shiver. Her lips were red, bright, scarlet red, the colour of blood. A colour that matched the red of her long, sharp nails.

'Scared?' She asked him again. The answer was 'Yes'. And no. He shook his head and took a few rapid steps, closing the distance between them.

He reached out just the one hand and caressed the viscous softness of the leather. He inhaled deeply, taking in the animal odour. He had to raise himself to his full height to kiss her. He wanted to impale her on his tongue, to delve as deep as he could into her body, to possess her, but instead, he brushed his lips against hers and then sucked gently on the fullness of her bottom lip. He took a step away and waited, hands folded against his genitals. He thought he knew the protocol. He'd wait for her command.

But Grace surprised him. She reached out and loosened his tie, pulling it from the collar. Then she unbuttoned his shirt, her nails tickling his chest, flicking against his nipples as they worked their way down towards his groin. She eased the shirt off his shoulders and stood looking at him, like a colonel-in-chief inspecting the ranks. She pushed his trousers down over his hips along with his boxer shorts. Almost stumbling, he rushed to step out of them along with his socks and shoes.

She moved behind him then, fingers smoothing over the muscles of his shoulder, thumbs probing the knots of tension under his shoulder-blades. Her hands were strong, unrelenting as they swooped down his sides and over the roundness of his buttocks, pressing firmly, expertly moulding, as her lips hovered along the trajectory, not touching his skin, but the hot breath letting him know. And then she was pressing her whole body against him, the leather clammy against his back, the zips scratching his flesh.

His hands still guarded his erection and he concentrated hard on trying to contain himself. More than anything, he wanted her strong fingers around his prick, moving slowly, tightly. Or even his own fingers, but he didn't dare. She might stop and what she was doing felt so good. Sooooo good.

And then she did stop.

'Lie down, Sheldon. On the bed.'

He could feel her eyes boring into him as he followed her command.

He lay on the bed feeling faintly ridiculous, his erection pointing skyward as he waited. Grace walked towards him and sat next to him. She opened a drawer by the side of the bed.

'I think I can guess what you want.'

His cock twitched again and Grace patted it gently, almost as if it was a favoured pet.

She extracted a series of velvet-covered boxes with silver clasps, laying each one carefully on the sheets. Without opening them, she discarded several, returning them to the drawer even though, to Sheldon, many of them looked identical. He wondered how she could differenti-

ate, but it was almost as if she could see straight through the velvet into the contents. Finally, she nodded, as if satisfied.

‘Open them.’

The first box held a long, dark feather. The second, four black velvet ropes. The third, what looked like a large silver bullet linked by a wire to a switch. The fourth, a short-handled whip. Sheldon gulped with fear, excitement and expectation.

Grace picked up the ropes and stared at his hard-on.

‘I think we’re going to need these.’



Sheldon realised that his fingers were tracing a line along his T-shirt, over and over. He almost winced as he pressed a little too hard on the welt covered by the cotton fabric. He smiled to himself for a moment remembering this morning... Grace... tall, naked but for the thigh-length leather boots. Grace, dominant. Grace and the severe look in her eyes... He looked up at his friend. Where was he? Oh yes, Louie needing to talk.

‘So...’ he repeated.

‘So.’

It was near enough midnight when Louie finally called Romaine. He probably wouldn’t be home. He and Sheldon might have to work through the night.



The phone rang at 2:30 am, waking her. Another hang-up. It was a while before Romaine could drift back to sleep.

The call at 7:30 am wasn’t from another anonymous caller. Romaine could only wish it was. Sunday morning. It would be Dolores, Louie’s mother. Every Sunday morning the same thing. As if they were likely to forget when they risked her wrath descending upon them. And Dolores’ anger was worse than any of the tribulations visited upon King Herod. Romaine picked up the phone. It was, indeed, Dolores reminding her that they were due for Sunday lunch.

‘No, I hadn’t forgotten, Dolores,’ she sighed. ‘But Louie’s not at home. He’s gone into the office today.’ Romaine prayed that would be reason enough for her to be excused. How she would love to pull the duvet up over her head and go back to sleep. For years.

‘That boy work too hard, especially on the Lord’s Sabbath. But no worries, child. I’ll get Matthew to pick you up on his way.’ And she put the phone down before Romaine could protest.

It was like she was being chaperoned. There was no way that she could get away from Louie’s circle. Maybe they all knew. Perhaps he’d told them that she couldn’t any longer be trusted to drive from Tottenham all the way to Hackney without stopping off for an illicit encounter. So Matthew would make a huge detour to pick her up. Battersea to Hackney via Tottenham didn’t make sense. This was beginning to feel more than a little claustrophobic.

The house felt even more empty and quiet than usual on a Sunday morning. Louie’s presence wasn’t exactly relaxing these days, but the familiarity of his sheer physical being banished the ghosts that hovered in the corners of a house that was too big for the two of them. Dolores’ constant litany was that they needed children to fill this enormous mansion of a home—only three bedrooms, but a mansion to her, nevertheless, a woman who had only recently graduated to a two-bedroom semi-detached in a modern complex, courtesy of her generous first-born son.

Romaine got out of bed and, yawning, walked down the stairs, intent on the day’s first fix of caffeine. On the way, though, the door to Louie’s study, slightly ajar, caught her attention. She shook her head and made her way to the kitchen. She turned on the radio and shook a generous amount of ground coffee into the cafetière. Her sleep had been restless, filled with the kind of dreams that she didn’t want to recall. She rubbed her eyes and as she did so, felt the sudden, sharp prickle of tears that sprang to her eyes for no apparent reason, apart from the dreams that she chose not to remember. She quickly poured a mug of thick, black coffee, sweetened it with a spoonful of honey, intending to take it back to bed.

On the way, though, she made a detour. The study beckoned and Romaine couldn’t see why she should deny herself. She hadn’t promised him anything about this. And what harm could it possibly do. She didn’t turn on the light, but edged her way to the desk, guided by the daylight seeping through the curtains and reflecting off the darkened screen. She

sat at the swivel chair and took a few sips of coffee before leaning forward to press the button. She was surprised by the glow of the blue light on the console. In the office, it was orange. Showed how long it was since she'd been in this room. Louie's domain. Damn well serve him right if she invaded his territory. As the welcome screen disappeared, leaving his personalised desktop, Romaine's eyes scanned the monitor, searching for the Internet Explorer icon. There. She wiped her hands against her nightdress and double-clicked.

Now, what the hell was the name of the site? Hell and damnation. She didn't know. It wasn't even that she couldn't remember. She honestly didn't know. She had been so preoccupied with that fantastic body that she hadn't even noticed the URL. Romaine looked away from the monitor, more disappointed than she would have expected. Everything was conspiring against her experiencing any pleasure. She leaned towards the computer, index finger outstretched to turn off the machine. And then it occurred to her: try the search again. What had she been searching for? Something to do with black men. That's all she needed to type in and then she would find the site.

Several clicks later and everything was definitely working against her. Romaine leaned back in the chair and massaged the nape of her aching neck. She rotated her head to ease the muscles and picked up the mug from beside the chair. She took a sip of unpleasantly cold coffee as she tried to take herself back to Friday evening in the office. What had been different? Concentrating on the screen in front of, trying to visualise what she'd done that day, it suddenly occurred to her that she must have been using a different search engine. That was it! Now, which one did they normally use in the office? She just couldn't remember. Romaine glanced at her watch. Too late now, anyway. She needed to get ready for lunch. As she reached to turn off the machine, the name flashed into her head and she typed in the address, lunch with her mother-in-law now the furthest thing from her mind.

Once again, she entered 'black+men' and waited. She clicked on the first result. There he was, her black magic man in all his glory. Romaine breathed out deeply, a sigh that seemed to release much of the tension that had been building for days now. She took her time to glory in the

spectacle before her, this time taking in more than the perfection of his physique; the hint of un-airbrushed razor bumps around his chin; the fine lines around his eyes that made her think he was older than he wanted her to believe; the hint of fullness around his waist that suggested a recent re-acquaintance with the gym. But Romaine still wasn't disappointed. She allowed her eyes to linger on his trim calves, the muscular thighs, the gorgeous, stately rod...

It took a while for her to notice the voluptuously naked woman standing behind him, the 'enter' button and the requisite warning. She glanced past the words—a long time since she had been eighteen—and, before she could change her mind, clicked on the button, not knowing, not daring to consider what she might find.

For a moment, she couldn't pretend to be other than disappointed. No more tantalising full-page photos, just a 'quick search' box, demanding to know what she was looking for. 'Couples looking for men.' 'Women looking for groups.' 'Men looking for lesbian couples.' 'Women looking for men.' 'Men looking for women.' No need to go any further down the list. That might be a sensible place to start. So she told the boxes: anywhere, yes she was between the ages of 18 and 99 and lived in England. She pressed on the search button and held her breath for the few seconds that the search took.

Just a list of names with tiny images beside them. Why did she feel let down? What had she wanted to find? Surely she hadn't expected more perfect specimens like the one on the home page? Well, if she was honest, that's just what she'd been hoping for. More bare flesh... like that gorgeous brown gleaming chest, well-defined muscles, the cute smile and okay, naked, erect, enormous, ready cocks. Those were the images that had been floating around at the back of her consciousness: cinnamon, chocolate, hazelnut, golden, ebony, velvety bare flesh, firm, rounded buttocks with that mysterious crease delving between carved, muscular thighs. And then, turning like a statue on a motorised pedestal, revealing penises of all shapes and sizes, but always erect, always turned on by her, the ripples of sensitive flesh, the smooth, dark red bulb at the head, hand reaching for it, lips reaching for it...

Instead, a stark list of names: ActionBoy, Adventurous, Adonis

(surely a joke!), AlwaysReady, Balladeer... with those tiny images. Most of them had just posted photographs of their own cocks, strangely unimpressive in their truncated state. Some had used just parts of their bodies, a muscular chest, a firm buttock, sexy eyes. Romaine found herself wondering which magazines they'd been taken from. This was just a downmarket online lonely hearts club. Not what she was looking for at all. She was just about to click on the X in the top right-hand corner of the screen when she noticed Adonis' blurb:

*I'll take you to places you've never imagined. I'll suck your tits till you moan, bite your nipples till you scream, nibble your clit and lick your pussy till you faint with pleasure. They don't call me Lizard Tongue for nothing. Satisfaction guaranteed.*

Beside it, a tiny photograph of a long, red tongue licking a hardened nipple. Romaine smiled. Much too good to be true. It wouldn't be the first time a guy had made promises he wasn't intending to keep.

She scrolled down the page, glancing at each entry, surprised by some, shocked by a few, amused by many, tantalised by one or two like Ram-Goat:

*I'll be your servant. Be my mistress. Use me. I'll sign on the dotted line. I'll do whatever you tell me. I'll bend my will to your desire. Your every wish is my command. My hardened prick awaits your pleasure. It will become erect for only you, or you will be free to punish me. Make me carry out your every desire. I'll fondle your breasts, tease your nipples until you order me to stop. Or lick your pussy for hours and hours until you force me to cease. I expect your punishment if I fail to make you come over and over. Beat me. Hurt me. I await your desire.*

Or Kommando:

*I can fuck you all night long, non-stop till you drop from exhaustion.*

In your dreams! Or Jazz:

*Baby, my room is draped in satin and silk. I have a velvet glove. To the sounds of Luther, I'll caress every centimetre of your voluptuous body, a mere glance of softness here, firmer pressure there until you writhe against the satin sheets, offering your breasts to my hungry lips. My gloved hand holds your waiting vulva, one finger melting into flesh, searching your depths. I've created a sable-covered dildo with which I'll*

*tease your clit until I can see the hot juices flowing from your pussy and then I'll plunge it into your clamouring hole, the contrasting hardness and softness driving you to desperation as you cry out for me—*

The doorbell rang. Romaine looked at her watch in disbelief. Shit! Matthew. Lunch. Waiting mother-in-law.

The bell again. More insistent this time. Maybe she could pretend that she was out. But Dolores had spoken. Dolores had virtually demanded her presence. She couldn't let herself get into even more trouble. Romaine rushed to open the door, reminded by Matthew's stunned glance that she was still in her dressing gown, which was gaping open. She noticed at the same time as him, that her nipples were erect, her chest flushed. Quickly, she tightened the belt.

'Romaine... I... er... Dolores called... I, um, thought you were expecting us?

'Yes, I was but... I got a little behind. Come in, Matthew. I won't be long.'

He looked a little awkward. 'Elaine's in the car.'

'Bring her in, Matthew. Just a few minutes, I promise.'

Romaine turned away leaving the door wide open. She rushed to turn off the computer in the study and then dashed up the stairs into the bathroom. In less than fifteen minutes, she'd showered, dressed conservatively, lipsticked her mouth and apologised to Elaine for keeping them waiting. Elaine's lips, she noticed, were tight with either irritation or anxiety. They all knew the penalty for being late for Sunday lunch at Dolores' house.



Matthew's girlfriend was just the type of woman that Romaine would instinctively avoid, given the choice. Unbearably arrogant outside the Hackney house, she was reduced to jelly in the presence of Dolores, her pale face turning almost ghostly with anxiety. Romaine wanted to laugh each time she sat across Dolores' lunch table facing Elaine, watching the wheels turn in her brain as she tried to work out how to avoid offending Dolores, more often than not irritating her by producing no response at all.

Yes, Dolores was a formidable matriarch—why else would Romaine

be here at all, attempting to explain her husband's absence? But it wasn't only fear that brought her here. There was genuine admiration for Dolores and a sneaking affection. Tough and uncompromising as she was, there was a deep-seated fairness in the woman and Romaine believed that the only reason that she showed no mercy to Elaine was that she knew how domineering and self-satisfied she became away from her presence. Romaine watched the small, dumpy, freckle-faced woman with warm honeyed skin as she brought the bowls of stewed chicken, jerk pork, yam, banana, rice and peas, green beans, carrots, roast potatoes and fried plantain to the extended table. That was the other reason that Romaine pitched up here every Sunday.

'So, Elaine, you find a job yet?' Dolores knew very well that Elaine worked as a dancer in a night-club, but she refused to consider that a proper job. Week after week, since Elaine's appearance on the scene, she regaled them all with stories of how hard she had worked to bring up she children dem, and the pride she took in not being one of dem lazy good-for-nothing woman dat bleed dey men dry.

'Well... I... I've got...'

'What you saying, chile? Speak up!'

'Dolores... Mrs Roberts...'

'Call me "mummy" nuh.'

Romaine almost choked on her food as Dolores surreptitiously winked at her.

'Yes, Mrs... I mean...Mu—'

'Matthew, I see you spoiling she. Unless you goin' marry she and give she children, make she get up off she backside and find some useful work. I could always find a little something for her to do at the community centre...'

By now Elaine was glaring at Matthew, silently ordering him to come to her rescue. Everyone turned to him expectantly, wondering what he was going to say.

A slow, shy, smile lifted the corners of his lips. 'Mum, you know that Elaine has the most important job in the world: looking after me.' Everyone laughed except Elaine. Her lips tightened into a stiff line. Romaine glanced at Matthew. He looked away from Elaine and as he turned

towards her, she noted an evil twinkle in his eyes. She wondered what it might mean, but thought it best to concentrate on the food Dolores was piling onto her plate. Probably just another one of their many arguments. Dolores patted her shoulder.

‘Glad to know that you’re looking after my boy, at least.’ She looked pointedly at Elaine.

They ate their way through the mountain of food in mostly contented silence, broken only by the meaningless commentary from Mr James, an elderly, bald-headed church member whose presence at these Sunday lunches was now taken for granted. No one remembered when he had first been invited or why. No one knew quite what he was to Dolores and why she tolerated his eccentric behaviour, but every Sunday, he continued to provide the light relief.

‘They found him in a night-club in Walthamstow, you know. Saw it on the news.’

‘Found who?’

‘That one from Afghanistan.’

‘Iraq?’

‘Whoever. The one with the beard.’

‘There are plenty of men like that in that part of the world.’

‘Yes, but he did kill all the baby boys under two.’

‘That was in the Bible.’

‘No, this was in Iraq.’

‘You talking about Saddam?’

‘That’s the one. You know they found him in a club in Walthamstow? Saw it on the news.’

It seemed best to ignore him, just as they normally did.

‘So, Romaine. What that boy of mine doin’ working on a Sunday? Seems like I haven’t seen him for weeks now. I hope he have a good excuse for missing lunch.’

‘I haven’t seen much of him either, Dolores. You know Louie. I guess he’s working hard.’ Romaine could feel Matthew’s eyes on her as she fielded Dolores’ interrogation.

‘Business going well? I guess it must be if him have so much work to do. But seem to me like him should be taking care of business at home,

if you know what I mean. When you two goin' give me a grandchild? You had enough time to practice now. Five years seem like long enough to me, child. You sure nothing wrong, girl? I'll have to feed you some Mannish Water, Cowcod Soup and you must put some cloves in every thing you eat.'

'Dolores, when we decide to try, I don't think we goin' need any help from you.' Romaine smiled to herself, noticing Elaine's astonishment at her boldness. Her mouth opened as if she expected the sword of Damocles to fall.

Dolores laughed loudly and reached across the table to pat Romaine's hand. She was deliberately highlighting the warmth between her and Romaine.

'Child, you know where I am if you want me to talk to that son of mine for you. Seem like him neglecting you.'

'It's all right. I think I can handle Louie.' She crossed her fingers behind her back.

As soon as Matthew and Elaine were banished to the kitchen with the washing up and Mr James was ensconced in the comfortable arm-chair, fast asleep and snoring intermittently, Dolores took the opportunity to join Romaine on the sofa.

'So! My boy been leaving you alone at home?' She whispered it with such tender concern in her voice that Romaine wanted to bury her head in the woman's soft bosom and weep. Instead, she held back the tears and tried to avoid Dolores' gaze as she muttered, 'No, really. We've both been busy.'

Dolores lifted Romaine's chin and looked into her eyes for a moment before wrapping her arms around her.

'Child...' she stroked her hair, just like Romaine's mother had done when she was little and had nightmares. 'You know where I am if you need me.' And she held her in an affectionate embrace until the others entered the room.



Romaine sat in the back of the car listening to the strained silence between Matthew and Elaine. She couldn't fathom what had brought the two of them together in the first place and, more importantly, kept

them together now. Elaine's shoulders were raised high, neck muscles tight as she held her frame away from Matthew, looking anywhere but at him. Occasionally, Matthew lobbed a desultory comment in Romaine's direction, but really not expecting a response, just to cut through the tension. Romaine was in no mood to help them out. She was worn out, physically and emotionally. She wanted to get away from every single member of this family and be alone, truly alone, without any memories, without any regrets.

She stood on the corner, waving just to make sure that they were truly gone. Romaine felt her shoulders return to their more normal level as she sighed. She turned, pulling her keys from her coat pocket, almost running from the gate to her front door. She fumbled with the lock, finally opening the door and slamming it shut behind her as if to create a barrier between this moment and the whole afternoon that had left her so emotionally drained.

The house was empty. Romaine didn't stop to take off her coat. Instead she turned to her right, entered the study and switched on the computer, pacing backwards and forwards while it booted up. This time, there was no difficulty finding the site and she almost ignored the perfect, airbrushed stranger on the home page. She immediately clicked on the 'enter' button, knowing precisely where she was heading. HandyMan. Her mind had tried to tell her that she hadn't noticed him. But she had. Just before she'd switched off the computer earlier that morning. It was the silk rope that she'd tried to avoid noticing. Piano player's hands holding the silk ropes. She scrolled down the list. Had she just imagined it? No, she'd just momentarily forgotten her way around the alphabet. H came before J, not after, idiot. There he was. HandyMan:

*Come to me and I promise you the erotic journey of a lifetime. But you must make a commitment. Everything I ask, you will do. There are rules. You may not touch me. Consider this most seriously. You must not touch me. No other woman has been able to obey this command. Can you be the first? I will give you pleasure, but the silk rope will hold your wrists, bind your ankles, so that you will remain motionless as I worship your flesh with my every touch. Your body will quiver with desire, but you must not touch. You will writhe with delight. But you must not*

*touch. I will show my appreciation. I will worship. I will adore you. But you must not touch. I will lead you to ecstasy. But you will not touch.*

Romaine shrugged out of her coat and let it drop to the floor. She sat on the chair and scanned the screen until she noticed the link: 'Contact me'. She chewed her lip and looked around the room as if the walls might give her permission. It was surprisingly dark outside, the only light emanating from the screen, shadows cast all around as if the room was saying 'You're on your own with this one.'

Rather than allow herself the time to think, Romaine clicked on the link. There, in front of her was a form asking the kind of questions that were easy. This wasn't going to be as difficult as she'd imagined. 'Register Free' the banner proclaimed. Just fill in the following details. Password: She would have to think about this one. How about 'Greta,' her mother's middle name. No one knew that. Safe enough. Age: 28. Easy. No need to lie. Sex: Wasn't it obvious if she was looking for a man? Maybe not, she was being naive. She thought of writing 'If only. What do you think I'm doing here!' and then acknowledged that was too corny. Okay. Female. And then the question that stopped her: e-mail address. What could she give? She knew better than to give their address at home and she certainly couldn't reveal the one in the office. What to do? Reluctantly, Romaine closed down the site.

She thought for a moment. It couldn't be that difficult to create a new e-mail address, one that she would only access online. Back to the search engine and with a few enquiries, Romaine had managed to set up an address for Scarlet, her new online persona. She got back to the site as quickly as she could, filled in the details again, included her e-mail address and the box marked 'Screen name': 'Scarlet', just how she felt. She reached the grey button that seemed to almost fill the whole screen. 'Click here and enjoy yourself'. The point of no return. Romaine hesitated for only a second. She clicked.

Romaine leaned back, her fingers intertwined in her lap, suddenly paralysed. What on earth was she going to say to 'HandyMan'? What had brought her here? The answer was simple: Louie had brought her here. She had made one single mistake and as a result he'd almost shut her out of his life. It wasn't even as if he was willing to let her go either.

She knew that. No, the truth was that he wanted her there just to humiliate her, to manipulate her, to control her for the sake of his pride. She doubted very much that he felt any emotion towards her right now, apart from a simmering anger. He just didn't want anyone to know that she could possibly have desired someone other than him. She knew he must feel that he had failed her in some way. And no matter how desperately she tried, she couldn't make him understand that what happened had nothing to do with her love for him. Or maybe what *used to be* love. She wasn't certain any longer.

A blank page with just his name, HandyMan, and an empty box anticipating an e-mail message.

*What are the rules?* she typed. *Let me know what I must do. I'm intrigued. What happens next?*

Pathetic response, but she was new to all this. She pressed the 'send' button before she had time to think about what she was doing. Oh Lord, what the hell had she done? Was there any way that he, whoever he was, could trace her? Had she given any clues? Part of her felt nervous, but another part was excited. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest. Louie deserved this major act of rebellion. She had done everything he asked, had tried every means to make it up to him, but he'd accepted her sacrifices as his due, without walking any of the mile towards her. Well, here she was, alone on a Sunday night, her husband who knows where. She wasn't going to take abandonment lying down. Or rather, she giggled, that's exactly how she intended to take it.

Romaine went to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of white wine. She rarely drank alone, but since it looked as if that's how she was going to remain for a while, what the hell? She took the glass back to the study and sat in front of the desk, sipping. Her fingers tapped on the mouse and she knew that she wouldn't be able to wait for much longer. She was curious. How long did it take to get a response? Impatiently, she dialled up her e-mail. And there it was. Had he been sitting at his computer waiting for a response? Or had he been replying to hundreds of different women?

*Hi Scarlet, Good to hear from you. You sound like someone I can do business with. Intrigued? Well, that's just what I hoped to hear. The rules:*

*You take everything I have to give.*

*You obey.*

*You abandon your body to accept all the delights in store.*

*You are strictly not allowed to touch.*

*Do you agree?*

*Do you have Instant Messenger? Talk to me.*

He gave his details. Romaine hesitated as her eyes remained fixed to the screen. What had she got herself into? She had asked and he had answered. Isn't that why she was here? The alternative was that she could be lying alone in a cold, unwelcoming bed. What was she going to do now? She minimised the page and looked at the list of programs on the screen. Yes, there it was, Instant Messenger. She launched the program. She needed a password. Now, what would Louie use. She tried his birth date. No luck. Then 'Dolores'. Nothing. She thought for a moment and then, hesitantly, entered 'Romaine'. Bingo. She was strangely touched but didn't want to think about it for now.

There were no contacts in his list. It didn't look like a facility that Louie ever used. That didn't surprise her. It wasn't like him to want to chat. She clicked on the 'information' button, worked out how to enter HandyMan's details and, within ten frustrating minutes, she could see his icon in red. He was online. She was breathing hard, the glass of wine discarded on the floor.

<l agree> she typed. He had been waiting for her.

<Dim the lights, Scarlet. Lock the door. Close the curtains. Concentrate on what I'm doing to you. I'm unbuttoning your shirt, slowly, allowing my little finger to graze the swell of your breasts, which rise towards me as you inhale deeply. I ease my fingertips under the lace of your bra, teasing the dark skin of your areola, almost blueberry black against the delicate cream lace. I reach behind to unhook your bra, allowing your heavy tits to fall from the cups. I stand back, admiring the wondrous sight in front of my eyes. I'm determined not to move towards you, just to watch the rise and fall of those gorgeous breasts as your breathing deepens. You're puzzled, wanting my touch. You move towards me, your hands reaching out. Your finger touches the back of my hand. I take a step back. I must punish you. Remember the

rules. Do you know what you have done wrong, Scarlet? Look at the rules.>

<I touched you.>

<You touched me. Do you know what must happen?>

Romaine felt a flutter of excitement. She was enjoying this.

<You'll punish me.>

<Right. I take a silk rope and tie your hands behind your back. You must not break the rules. You're new to the game so I'll forgive you this once. But you must not break the rules again. Tying your hands behind your back pushes those gorgeous breasts towards me, like they're challenging me, proud, disobedient. I take up the gauntlet and run my fingers over your breasts, thumbs rubbing against those hard, dark nipples, over and over, round and round until they pucker and harden and I take one between my lips, biting gently. But you've been a bad girl, and I bite harder, making you gasp and pull away. I can see the marks of my teeth against that tender skin. I nibble my way from your breasts down, past your ribs, my fingers preceding until they reach your panties. I smooth them down over your hips, my lips whispering past the mass of crinkly black hair. My fingers skim your feet, your calves, your thighs and embed themselves between your thighs, feeling the heat, the wetness. You are hot for me, aren't you?>

<Yes!> She didn't have to pretend.

<I ease two fingers inside your dripping folds, in, out, deeper, deeper forcing my hips between your thighs, holding your legs apart until one foot rises up, as if against your will and your toes graze my calves. I stop. You've broken the rules. Again. I warned you, Scarlet. I lift you and carry you to the table. I tie each ankle to a leg of the table. Tight. The fabric cuts into your flesh. You are spread-eagled. In my power. I'm getting hard thinking about what I'll do to you. My prick is bigger than it's ever been. All because I know you've learned your lesson now and you'll keep to the rules. I kneel between your imprisoned legs, my eyes level with your throbbing clit. I move closer so I can smell the salty, tangy scent of you. You're writhing, struggling to get nearer to my lips, but I catch your gaze. My look is stern, uncompromising. You must stay still. Will you obey?>

<Oh, yes!>

<I push your legs further apart, hold your pussy lips wide open as I bury my mouth in your opening, pushing my tongue into you, tasting the delicious honey that's flowing all for me. And then I'm licking upwards, my tongue broad, hard, unrelenting, up to flick against your clit and then down, pressing hard. Up again, flick, down, up, sucking, getting even harder as I hear your moan of pleasure. I stand up and clutch your breast as I unzip myself. Your eyes widen and you gasp at the size of my erection. You're lifting your hips. 'You trying to touch me with that pussy?' I ask. You shake your head from side to side...>

<No. I learned my lesson. Please don't punish me. Please don't stop.>

By now, Romaine's thighs were clasped around her own hand. She couldn't type any more.

<I'll forgive you this time. Don't let it happen again. I move my hips towards you. I can see the pleading in your eyes. The head of my cock touches your moist entrance. Just a glance, but enough to fill your opening. I watch as the swollen bulb rests there while my thumb rubs your clitoris, driving you into a frenzy and I'm pushing my cock slowly into your pussy and then—>

And then Romaine heard the key in the lock. She heard voices. Louie and Sheldon. Even though disoriented, she had enough sense to quickly shut down the program, turn the computer off and pull her skirt down. As quietly as she could, she closed the door of the study and slipped into the toilet. She splashed cold water onto her face and stood for a second, composing herself.

She stood outside the living room for a moment, trying to still the beating of her heart and subdue her fervid thoughts.

'Hi, honey,' she greeted her husband and accepted his cool embrace. 'Sheldon,' she nodded towards him. 'You guys are late. You want a coffee or a drink?'

'No thanks. I'm not staying. Just delivering your husband to you safely. I'll be off. See you soon, Romaine. See you in the morning, Louie.'

In a way, Romaine wished that Sheldon would stay. There was no

telling what would happen now that she was left alone with Louie. She sighed and turned towards the stairs. Bedtime.

She didn't need to think about her and Louie any more tonight. There would be the office in the morning. Another danger area. She didn't want to lie awake thinking about her dilemmas there or at home.



Monday mornings were difficult especially after two days out of the office. Two days away from the tension. Even though there was enough stress at home it was different stress. She had had two days free from having to arrange her working day so as not to stray into potential minefields while having to employ a detector at home.

Romaine wasn't overly concerned that Louie hadn't come up to their bedroom and had left before she awoke in the morning. She was too bleary-eyed. In the end, she had lain awake much of the night thinking, but not about Louie or the office. She had thought of HandyMan. Wondered why she had been drawn to the website. Why her body had been aroused by a complete stranger. Why she had allowed herself to respond. This didn't bode well for her relationship with her husband. It was clear that there was a hell of a lot missing and she would have to talk to Louie. They just couldn't go on like this without the whole situation coming to a head one day. And if she allowed that to happen, it could get very nasty, some of the flak would wound. She might say things that she would regret. He might say things that she would regret. She needed to start the conversation while she was still in control. And yet, now that she had made that decision, in a way there was no more urgency. The knot of tension began to subside in her stomach. The right time would come.