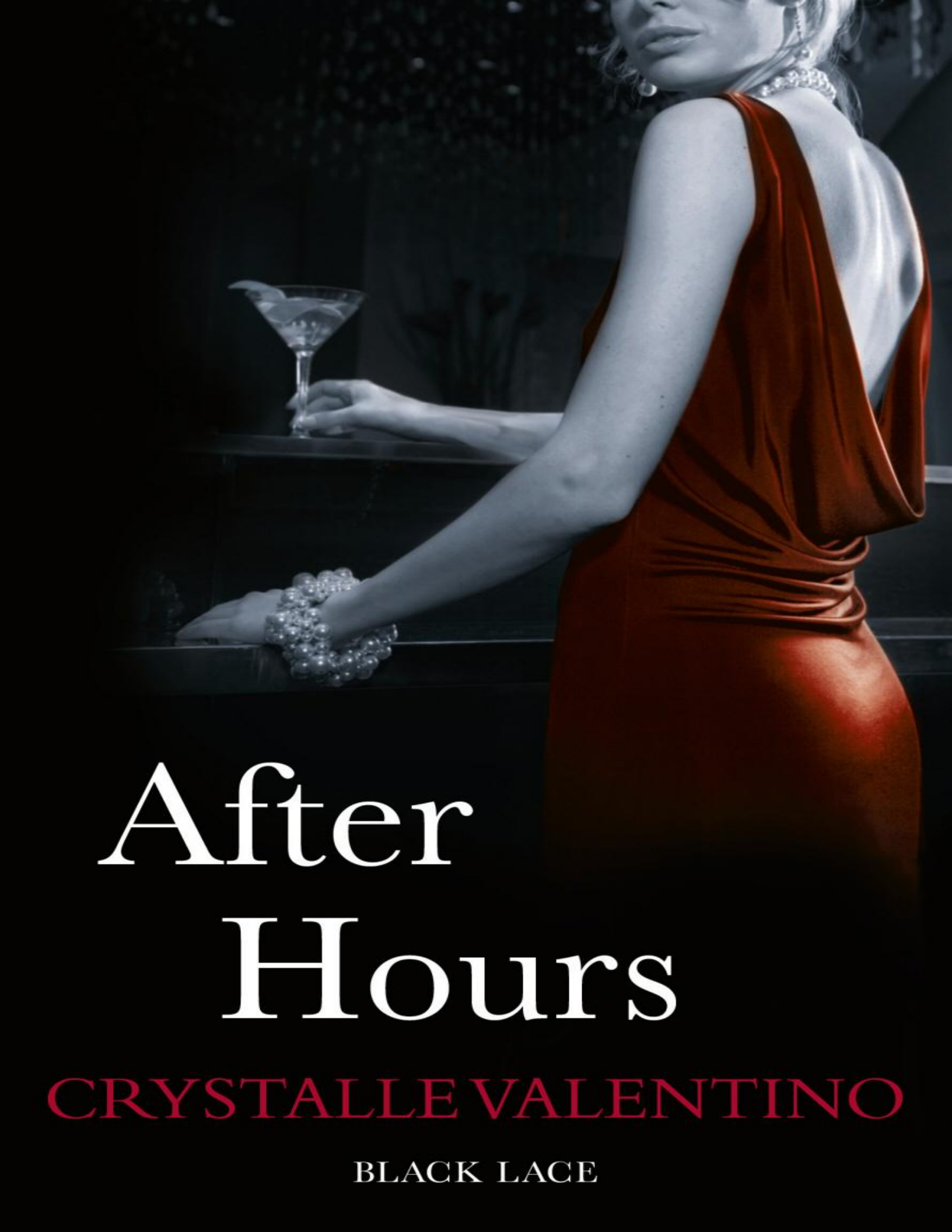




After Hours

CRYSTALLE VALENTINO

BLACK LACE

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About the Book

It's getting steamy in the kitchen...

Venetia Halliday, a go-getting entrepreneur, is trying to make it in London's fiercely competitive restaurant scene. And her new chef - East End bad-boy Mickey Quinn - has tricked his way into her business, and her bed.

Cheeky, well-built and confident, Quinn embodies everything she loves in a man, but with wild sexual abandon on the menu, can Venetia keep her mind on the job?

Black Lace Classics - our best erotic fiction ever from our leading authors.

About the Author

Crystalle Valentino writes erotic fiction. She is the author of *After Hours*, *Personal Services* and *A Private View*, all coming soon from Black Lace.

After Hours
CRYSTALLE VALENTINO

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Chapter One

'Would you consider cybersex?' flashed up unexpectedly on Venetia Halliday's computer screen as she sat in her first-floor office over her restaurant.

Venny did a double-take. She had just been completing the accounts and was feeling tired after Saturday night's trade, even if the restaurant hadn't been particularly full. From outside came the noises of departing patrons getting into their cars, some still grumbling loudly over the food. She knew they were right to complain. She knew that she had made a mistake when she had hired Bill Thompson two months ago. She also knew that she was going to have to do something about him, or go under.

Venny stared at the screen.

Well, would she consider cybersex?

She had considered a lot of things in her lifetime – a whole clutch of impulses had in fact been grasped at with initial enthusiasm – but mostly she disliked risk and so abandoned those wild impulses untried.

Hair extensions? No. Too much trouble, and would it look like a wig after all that fusing-on and fussing?

Quitting London for a stress-free life in the sticks? Emphatically no.

Getting a bigger, sportier car? Again, no. Getting a smaller car and saving on petrol and insurance? Yes to that one.

Liposuction to save on gym time? Nope. Too big a coward. Body piercing? Here again cowardice played a part. She wasn't worried about shocking her parents – they lived in Spain, and were rarely in touch. What worried her

was the suspicion that having her navel or nipples pierced was going to hurt like hell. Added to that, she thought that tongue studs looked too gross for words, so she'd settled for having her ears done. Very daring.

If she was truthful, it was her inbred caution that had led her to this sorry pass. She had hired Bill because he had seemed like the safe option. The other applicants had seemed too go-ahead, too cocky, too likely to undermine her authority from day one.

But Bill Thompson had been different. Quiet. Chunky and dark-haired and brown-eyed. Sweet, she had thought. Attractive, but not overwhelmingly so. Not like that other one. A light frown crinkled her brow. The one with the impudent blue eyes and the shock of gelled hair and the tall angular body.

Venny sat back in her chair and considered. What was his name? Gin? Finney? Something like that. One look and she had known he was trouble. That he would be expensive, demanding, impossible, a sexual time-bomb ticking away in her kitchens, just waiting to explode.

So she had hired Bill. Steady, reliable Bill. Who had turned out to be without culinary flair and bull-headed and pedantic, so that any complaint about the unexciting food or slow service was greeted with massive bouts of sulking and a complete refusal to change a thing.

Obviously, Venny was going to have to make the changes.

She looked at the screen again.

Cybersex.

An ironic smile flickered over her lips. She had believed that hiring a chef would set her restaurant, Box of Delights, on the road to success, justifying all the angst she had suffered over refurbishments and bumpy cash flow. Cash flow was, in fact, still her biggest problem. She had to pay the staff, the suppliers, the overheads, the accountants – but she loved it. This place was her baby. She had dreamed of it winning her the prestigious Blue Ribbon award this

year. After that, publicity would follow, trade would rocket, and all her problems would be solved. Then she might sell. Or she might not. She'd see.

But there was Bill, who right now was a problem and a half. Bill was admittedly sexy in his heavy, blokish way, and the other staff tended to warm to his genial charm, even covering for him when he made mistakes.

Troubled, Venny – she hated her full name, Venetia, and never used it – leaned back in her leather chair and slipped both hands behind the sweat-sticky fluff of blonde curls at the base of her neck to ease the tension there. As she moved, her tightly cut caramel-coloured suit strained tight against her prominent breasts. She liked suits. Suits were an armour-plated uniform to Venny, making her feel businesslike and invulnerable. The summer storm rattled and rolled outside, making the close city air feel sticky. Her green eyes closed and she exhaled slowly, regaining calm. It wasn't raining yet, but soon it would pour and bring relief from the torpid August heat.

She stretched again, relishing the pressure on her nipples from the silky material of her suit. This was going to be difficult. This was the bit of the job she hated. Mostly, she loved what she did. She was an entrepreneur. She'd gone straight out of university and into a series of dull dusty jobs to raise cash for what she knew she wanted to do more than anything else – set up businesses, run them and then sell them on at a tidy profit.

First she'd purchased, with the help of a knee-tremblingly large bank loan, a small faltering manufacturing company. She'd initially had a partner – a fellow business graduate – for that one, and he'd legged it when the going got tough, nearly grossing her an ulcer instead of the profit she had foreseen. But she struggled on and somehow made sense of it. Later, when it was in the black for the first time in a decade, she sold it for double what she'd paid, and her ex-partner demanded half. She'd

paid him off and figured she'd learned a valuable business lesson so probably the louse had done her a favour. No partners, ever again. Then on to the second, a defunct hotel. The profit had been less overall on that one but, without an ex-partner to threaten lawsuits, she did just fine.

And now she was on her third.

A restaurant.

Venny sighed and drummed her fingers on the desk. She could have bought houses and tarted them up. She could have bought antiques and flogged them on. Why a restaurant? She wasn't even interested in food.

She opened her eyes and glanced down at her jutting breasts. Her nipples were erect, clearly visible through the thin material of her suit. That was why she did it. The buzz. The thrill.

Venny raised her hands and reflectively ran them down over the full curves. Her nipples tingled deliriously when she touched them. Fully clothed, Venny considered that she looked a bit too lush and curvy for the current fashion. But when she was naked, she looked extremely good. A real mug's eyeful. Her blonde, curly hair was long enough to just touch and conceal and tease her nipples. Her green eyes were almond-shaped, almost catlike in their appeal, and her heart-shaped face was centred by a neat, small nose. Her mouth was full, the lips flaring and pouty, promising an abandoned passion she doubted she could ever truly deliver. But God, she wished she was naked now, and receiving more enjoyable relief from her tensions from an able lover.

And there was one on offer.

She knew where the cybersex message must have come from, because this computer was linked to the one beside the till downstairs, and all the staff had departed for the night except Bill.

With her tongue trapped seductively between her teeth, she leaned forwards and tapped out on the keyboard: 'Why settle for cybersex when I can have the real thing?'

'Who says you can have the real thing?' flashed up instantly.

Venny typed: 'I do. I'm the boss, remember.'

'As if you would let me forget it,' came back – just a trifle waspishly, she thought.

Venny shut down the computer and stood up, stretching luxuriously. She crossed to the open window and lifted the thin blind to peer out. A gusty breeze scented with rain cooled her face and she inhaled deeply.

The quaint Camden side-street was quieter now as bars and restaurants closed and people began making their way home. She gazed at the half-timbered white-painted houses opposite Box of Delights, the packed rainbow-hued windowboxes dotted here and there, the heavy heads of marigolds and surfinias and geraniums dancing in the freshening breeze beneath the cold sodium glare of a stylish repro 'gaslight'. Even the shop signs were carefully vetted in this pretty, select little enclave, so that the ambience of the place was never spoiled. If you squinted a bit, she thought, you could almost be back in the nineteenth century. Except for the cars, and the fumes, and the ever-watchful traffic wardens, and the clampers. Oh, and the city noises, the shrieking of a car alarm, a police siren, an ambulance.

This city.

She loved it.

As she peered out at the encroaching night, fat drops of rain started to pelt the window. Lightning flared above the darkened rooftops and she let the blind drop with a clatter. She hated thunderstorms. They felt dangerous and uncontrolled, like an unruly passion.

Unruly passion, she thought, and turned away from the window.

When was the last time she'd felt anything even close to that?

She could imagine her friend and flatmate Dani's brisk reply to that one. Never. Because she never took risks, never took chances. Well, *almost* never. She did take the odd minimal, calculated risk in business; sometimes you had to, to make progress. But basically she was a control freak. And true passion, true stomach-churning desire, was a huge risk, one that Venny felt safer avoiding.

As she stood there in the slanting rainbow light from her fake Tiffany desk lamp, Venny found that man's face floating into her mind for the second time. The laughing blue eyes. The crackling energy he'd radiated. His mouth, curving upward in a smile full of sexual challenge.

Irritated with herself, she switched off the lamp and walked – teetering slightly on the skyscraper heels the male patrons found so alluring – out of the office and down the stairs. At the bottom was a quilted burgundy baize door. She opened it, and stepped into the kitchens.

And froze, her jaw dropping by a mile.

In the middle of the brightly lit room, which was dominated by the big stainless steel tables, ovens, cupboards and utensils of a professional kitchen, stood Bill.

He was about the same height as her when she wore her spiked heels. His body was robust and hairy as a hearthrug. The hair on his head was tidy and cut close into the nape of his neck, but if it were allowed to grow longer she just knew that it would be a mass of thick dark curls. Bill was facing away from her, idly stirring the contents of a saucepan.

He was wearing nothing except a white linen apron tied around his waist.

When Venny finally got over her shock, she admired the show. Bill had good broad shoulders, and his waist where the apron was tied was taut. Beneath the knotted ties was a pair of delectable buttocks. They were much paler than the

skin on his back or legs, and there was a suggestion of dark hair between and slightly beneath them, because he stood with one leg comfortably bent at the knee.

Despite her reservations about this, Venny felt her crotch moisten. It wasn't like Bill to be surprising, but he'd certainly surprised her tonight. And it was a pleasant surprise, she had to admit that. Bill had been flirting with her for weeks now, and he was handsome and appealing, if you ignored the fact that he was a liability in business.

Venny had found herself pushing it to one side. She liked Bill. All right, she fancied Bill too. And there was more to a person than how they did their job. Even if they did it badly.

A sigh slipped from between her lips as once again she pushed that unpalatable fact away. It was, in these circumstances, easy to do so. Her thighs clenched lightly. Suddenly lightning flared, dimming the lights for a moment. Venny shivered. Well, this was passion, wasn't it? Of course it was. She deserved this, and she wanted it too.

Venny walked forwards slowly, very aware of the movements of her own body, aware of that old itchy need. Underneath her suit she was wearing a very sensible black body, but now the thin garment seemed to chafe her nipples and it felt uncomfortably damp between her legs.

'Bill?'

Bill looked over his shoulder and his conker-brown eyes lit up with pleasure as they met her more cautious green ones. His lashes were black but a bit sparse, thought Venny. And then she thought that she was being over-critical, and she ought to let herself go more, just like Dani said. Loosen up, she told herself impatiently. You're supposed to be enjoying yourself.

'Venny,' Bill greeted her, and turned back to the pot, stirring it gently. Venny could see his balls hanging down between his legs, and she imagined that she could see the tip of his cock too.

But she probably couldn't.

In fact, the tip of his cock was probably up around his navel right now, at the head of a giant erection, because the thing they had been side-stepping around for the past few weeks was finally going to happen, and he wanted it even more than she did. For her, there was regret mingled with the excitement she felt. For him, there was just the excitement.

‘Feeling hot tonight?’ Venny joked lightly, and then wondered if she should joke at all. Bill was notoriously prickly, and men were endlessly sensitive about women who laughed during sex. Then the fact that she was having to censor her thoughts and her speech in her own damned restaurant caused a stab of impatience, even irritation, to dull her desire just a tad.

Must be the heat, she thought. Summer in London with its mild micro-climate was often oppressive. And summer in a restaurant kitchen was always hellishly hot, in the low hundreds, and now there was a storm coming in fast, stoking up the humidity to boiling point. They didn’t run to air conditioning. She wished they did, but for the moment she really could not afford it. But at least the venerable old building with its age-blackened beams and peculiarly sloping floors and walls was cooling now that the restaurant was empty.

A sudden thought occurred to her, a thought that was shocking but titillating too.

‘Bill, have you been like that all night?’ she asked, and her mouth was so dry with anticipation and nervousness of what was to come that she had to lick her lips before speaking.

‘Sure I have.’ He laughed softly, then shook his head. ‘Just joking. Of course I haven’t. Although it was tempting at times, if only to try and cool down. Little Jane was so hot that I told her to wait topless on the tables. She wouldn’t of course. Far too respectable. We were all a bit disappointed. She has such sexy little breasts, don’t you think? Small but

high. And you can always see her nipples through those sports bras she wears, like fat little buds.'

Venny declined to comment, feeling her desire slip down another notch. Yes, Jane had delightful little breasts. She would grant her that. But when a man was seducing you, did you really want to hear about another woman's nipples and how he and the rest of the male staff latched after them?

Hardly.

'Yes, it must be nice in this heat,' said Venny tersely. 'Being small-breasted.'

'Not a problem you have, though, is it?' said Bill, with an admiring leer at her front.

This wasn't going at all like Venny had planned. Every cloddish word he uttered seemed to shrivel her desire for him just a little more. In fact, every time he opened his mouth he was sticking his big foot straight in it. As a teenager, Venny had had a complex about her big tits. Hunch-shouldered and cross-armed on all public occasions, she had desperately tried to conceal them. Later, she began to see them as a bonus. And so did every man she had ever slept with. Not that there had been that many. She was cautious in love as well as business. All right, *too* cautious. But the habit of holding back, maintaining a distance, was so ingrained with her that it seemed she was never going to shake it off, even if she wanted to. And right now she wasn't sure she did.

Venny reached the hob where Bill was stirring the pot. From the front, she had to admit, he looked even better. Naked to the waist as he was, she was able to admire his solid chest with its dark flat nipples. Black hair circled them in hypnotic swirls and then feathered down the centre of his chest. His stomach, considering the huge amount he could pack away while raiding the larder after the lunchtime session, was pretty flat. And then there was the apron, which obscured her view until it reached his knees.

Then his calves – thick and well-shaped and strong. He was built like a rugby player.

As she drew close she caught a tantalising whiff of his sweat, and an acidic waft from whatever he had in the pan. A blast of heat caught her, too, from the hob. She leaned a hand on the cool counter beside the hob and watched for a moment.

‘So what *is* cybersex?’ she said at last, wondering if he was one of those tedious closet computer nerds, and hoping the explanation was going to be brief.

Bill gave her a warm grin. He was completely unselfconscious about his near-nudity, Venny noted. She found herself wondering what his mouth would taste like.

‘Haven’t you been reading the articles in the press, Venny? Cybersex is hot, right now. The ultimate safe sex. Fantasy and flirtation. All in the head.’

Venny chewed that over. Anything involving computers sounded dull as hell to her. They were tools to do jobs with: nothing more, nothing less. ‘All good sex starts in the head,’ she pointed out. She’d read it somewhere and, what’s more, it was true.

‘Yeah, but it progresses to the body, doesn’t it? And how can it, when one person is in, for instance, Scotland, and the other’s in Tahiti or some Godforsaken hole?’ Bill tutted and stirred the pot a bit. ‘All these women getting hysterical about their partners getting involved with people online! That’s cybersex, Venny.’

Fascinating, thought Venny, not without irony. ‘They could meet,’ she suggested offhandedly.

‘And find each other repulsive?’

‘Well, it’s a possibility.’

‘God, it’s hot. Aren’t you hot?’

‘A bit, yes.’ Venny laughed. ‘You want me to go topless, too?’

‘I’d like that.’ Bill’s face was suddenly earnest. He switched off the hob and turned towards her. He glanced

down. 'You see how much I would like it?'

Venny's gooseberry-green eyes dipped down to the front of his apron. Below the tightness of the apron's waist-ties, his cock was forming a small tent. Her eyes flicked back up and met his.

'Well, why not?' Heartbeat accelerating, Venny unfastened the single button on her jacket and slipped the well-cut garment from her shoulders. She draped it over a nearby stool. The black body was still decorous, even demure. 'How about that?' she teased with a smile.

'More,' said Bill, his eyes taking on a glaze of lust.

Raising her eyebrows at him, Venny slipped her fingers under the body's spaghetti straps and eased them down over her arms. Shaking out her loosely curling blonde hair in a provocative movement, she pushed her thumbs into the top of the clingy fabric and in one smooth movement pushed the body down around her waist.

'Enough?' she asked, then flinched a little as thunder roared overhead and the storm edged closer.

'Nowhere near,' said Bill thickly. At least she had his full attention now.

'OK.' Venny tossed back one hank of hair, then the other; but, as she did so, she covered each breast with the palm of a hand. Now her hands covered them instead of her hair, and her eyes were teasing.

'God, Venny,' he growled, and touched a hand to his urgent, aching penis.

'Goodness, such impatience,' she purred, and let her hands fall to her sides.

Bill stared at her breasts like a man spotting a waterhole mirage in a desert. She had always suspected he was a breast man, and she didn't know what that said about him, but she suspected it meant he was a bit too macho for her taste, perhaps a tad less than super-intelligent.

Well, that was OK. It really was. Tonight, it was just fine, and she let him look, and felt pretty excited herself just by

doing that simple thing. But when it seemed he might stand there all night just looking, Venny felt that perhaps it was time to move things on. She stepped towards him, intending to kiss and caress him, when suddenly Bill moved, and they collided a bit hectically, Venny unable to stifle a giggle. Bill frowned sharply at her levity before clamping his big hands over her breasts with a grip like a Sumo.

Yep, a breast man, she thought, flinching with discomfort. And he was certainly a big man, looming over her, his cock prodding at her stomach. She felt moisture seeping through down there, just above the waistline of her skirt, a tiny hint of pre-come which stirred an answering excitement in her. But Bill was busy kneading her breasts like dough.

Unsubtle technique, she thought, and then, with a conscious decision to stop thinking, she let herself get into it, absorbing the sensation of this man, these big capable hands pushing and pulling at the very sensitive flesh of her breasts. Now he was grabbing a nipple between finger and thumb, and his head was going down.

Oh! That was nice. Venny put her arms around his neck and leaned into his mouth as he suckled her. His mouth was very hot and very wet and her nipple seemed directly connected to her sex by sizzling nerve-endings. Unconsciously her head went back and her hips tilted forwards, and the urgent prod of his cock was as stiff as steel now, while her cunt seemed to liquefy in anticipation.

As Bill's mouth worked, so his hips began to move against hers. His lips sucked at her erect nipple, and his hips pushed. His whole mouth took the nipple in, and his hips retreated. Over to the other nipple now, and his teeth nipped her quite sharply so that she cried out in a crazy mingling of pain and pleasure. His hips pushed forwards. His tongue paddled over her nipple, crushing her with a weight of delight, making her legs go weak, and then his

hips went back, but she placed her hands on the silky skin of his big buttocks and drew them back again to her, urgently.

In a trance of passion, Venny was aware of Bill's hands working at the apron's ties. When he tossed the apron aside, his cock, suddenly unrestrained, sprang up between them as if spring-loaded. Almost shyly Bill placed his hands on his hips and looked down at his swelling penis, and now it was her turn to look.

And wow, it was impressive. Bill's cock was directly in proportion to the rest of him. It was big, red and thick. A rug of black pubic hair framed it like velvet flung beneath a prodigious coral carving. And his balls were heavy, hanging so temptingly between his furred thighs. Venny reached out a tentative hand and touched them, making them swing lightly. Bill groaned and grabbed her hand, keeping it there. She squeezed them obligingly, feeling them start to lift and harden.

'You like it?' gasped Bill. He was still pushing his hips forwards almost automatically, and Venny was treated to the sight of his glans rhythmically pushing out beyond his foreskin like a child playing peek-a-boo. He put a hand to his cock but quickly removed it. He was too aroused to take much more stimulation, she saw.

'It's ... gorgeous,' Venny murmured, and felt that mad desire to laugh surface again. She stifled it, knowing he'd be terribly hurt if she let the fast-building guffaw escape. 'Really, it's wonderful,' she affirmed, frowning with the effort of suppressing her mirth.

What was wrong with her? Here he was, a perfectly presentable man desperate to have sex with her, and she was finding it very hard to let go, to get into it. Dani's right, she thought miserably. I am a control freak, and I even want to control this, and the fact that I can't is making me nervous.

She just hoped Bill handled his bread dough a little more carefully than he handled a girl's tits, that was all. She also hoped that he didn't demand she admire his baguettes on Monday, because she'd crack up.

But then she remembered the other thing she had to do tonight, and realised that would not be a problem. Relax, she told herself. It feels good, doesn't it?

And it did. It felt a little treacherous too, which didn't please her or make her particularly proud of herself, but pleasure was pleasure and business was business.

And now Bill had pushed a hand up under her skirt, and with a gasp of surprise she felt him nudge her legs apart. She wasn't wearing tights: it was too hot for that. Her eyes stared into his as he gripped the fabric of the body at her crotch, and pulled. She felt the fasteners pop apart one by one.

Grinning triumphantly, Bill pushed her legs open further with a rough movement of his hand, moistening his fingers against her with a fumbling movement. But she didn't dislike his ham-fistedness now. Sticky with heat and desire, Venny found herself panting lightly as Bill quickly freed the fastenings on her skirt. He managed it pretty easily, too; well, this was a man who could shell eggs with one hand. Surely a skirt couldn't be beyond him.

Bill eagerly pushed both skirt and body down to the floor in one swift movement and suddenly Venny was standing there stark naked except for her shoes.

Maybe it was her surroundings that were putting her off, Venny thought as he looked her over like a dog with a new bone to chew on. A nice soft bed wouldn't come amiss right now. But this was what she should do more of. Acting on impulse. Taking risks. It was probably good for her karma or some damned thing.

Now she just wished he'd get on with it, but Bill was staring at her crotch in fascination. He put out a big trembling hand and brushed it up over her little pelt of

toffee-coloured pubic hair. Venny flinched and felt the sweet, hot surge of lust taking hold of her again. Her clit swelled within its silky wet folds, seeking caresses. Her stomach fluttered madly. Her nipples were outrageously hard.

‘Do you shave this?’ Bill asked hoarsely, having to lick his lips first so that he could speak.

Venny shook her head. ‘It’s called a Mohican,’ she said faintly. ‘The beautician waxes it so that it leaves just a strip of hair about an inch wide,’ she explained helpfully. It had been agony to have done, and she wasn’t going to bother having it done a second time. Pube-waxing could go in the same bin as extensions and body piercing, as far as she was concerned.

Her unexpected hairdo turned him on. Venny could see that. His breathing grew harsh just looking at it, and his cock twitched hungrily. Bill’s hand reached out and stroked down over her stomach, teasing the skin there into wild tremors of excitement.

‘Wow, that’s sexy,’ he murmured, and moved in close to her, one beefy hand reclaiming a breast with a wince-making grip while the other went lower to push his full, aching penis down and into the little runway the moist lips of her cunt provided for just that purpose.

‘Do you like that, Venny?’ Bill rubbed himself back and forth against her, each time slipping deeper, each time pushing harder.

God, I don’t think I’m ready for this, Venny thought in panic. Relax, she told herself sternly. Get into it. ‘Yes, I like it,’ she murmured, kissing the salty-tasting skin of his shoulder. His skin was smooth with heavy ill-defined muscles moving beneath it. Suddenly, she felt about as likeable as Lady Macbeth. She was using him.

Yes, but wasn’t he using her too?

And anyway it was too late to pull back. Far too late. Bill’s mad pushing was taking an upward turn, and she felt

the big stiff head of his cock nudging at her opening, felt his hands going under her buttocks, lifting her, while his legs pushed between her thighs, opening her up even wider.

Venny found herself sitting on the steel counter. She nearly yelped when her bottom struck the cold metal, and nearly yelped again when his thigh caught hers against the metal in a neat little crushing movement that caused her a brief but intense flash of pain. But there was pleasure too, and she fell back onto her elbows across the wide counter and gazed up at him, hearing her own panting breaths mingling with his.

Bill was staring fixedly at her heavy, lolling, naked breasts as he fumbled the head of his penis into her. Goodness, it was thick. But her own juices were flowing fast and hard now, and he slipped his big cock into her with remarkable ease, pushing it right up into her in one smooth movement that wrenched a cry from her.

'All right?' he panted hopefully. 'Not too big?' He was half-smiling, half-grimacing with the effort of not coming off in two seconds flat, she could see that. He was a nice man. Considerate.

Venny shook her head and lay back, idly toying with her clit. Maybe if she just closed her eyes he'd get on with it, get it over with. She closed her eyes. And oh, yes, it felt good. He was chugging away at her now, pushing, pushing, pushing, and every hard thrust he made took his cock deep into her, touching her where she was most sensitive, most responsive. She felt her orgasm begin to tweak at her as she relaxed into the feel of Bill's energetic fucking, and she thought, yes, this is great, and then he came.

He just came.

He came with a lot of noise too. He grunted and groaned and Venny opened her eyes in disbelief to see his face screwed up as if in pain. The bastard was coming already! Forced back onto both elbows, Venny desperately tried to

move against his emptying cock, tried to maintain her own stimulation, but she knew it was a losing battle. And why hadn't he touched her? Wasn't every modern man supposed to know that you were supposed to touch a woman to get her ready to orgasm, not just shove your cock in and hope for the best?

'Sorry,' Bill muttered, and leaned forwards with his shaft still buried up to the hilt in her and started lapping with his tongue at her nipple in a half-hearted sort of way. Venny felt anger building instead of desire. To think she had even felt guilty about doing this.

'We make good partners,' he slurred against her breast, interrupting her line of thought. 'Don't you think we do, Venny? We could be good partners both in and out of bed, what do you say?' And he gazed at her with puppyish appeal, while his cock wilted inside her.

Venny closed her eyes again. The anger was very strong now. Partners! Unwittingly, Bill had hit on the one thing guaranteed to enrage her. She pushed against his shoulders and he drew back in surprise, groping for a hank of kitchen roll as his penis came free. Venny hopped down from the counter, and while he was busy drying off she yanked her skirt on and, not bothering with the body, pulled on her jacket and buttoned it securely. Her body hummed like a strummed guitar, and her legs felt as secure beneath her as unset jelly.

'That was good, huh?' Bill asked, dropping the used tissue into the pedal bin. 'So what do you think, Venny?'

He turned to her, his cock at half-mast, and his eyes widened in surprise to find that she was already dressed.

'I'll tell you what I think, Bill,' said Venny icily. 'I think you're fired.'

Chapter Two

When Venny got home to her Camden flat it was raining heavily. Lucky she'd brought the car today. Not that the flat was very far from the restaurant, but she didn't really like schlepping around London at night, and particularly not in the middle of a summer storm.

And this was some summer storm. Lightning strobed and needle-sharp flashes speared the sky, then thunder rolled into the vacuum behind the lightning strikes and blasted her ears like exploding mortar shells. The pavements were black and slick as patent leather, rain pummelling against them so hard that the heavy droplets bounced back into the air. Really, the weather matched her mood.

She parked the car in her precious permit-holders-only space and went inside. The next-door flat in the converted Victorian warehouse where she lived was no longer tagged with its sold sign. Well, these were good flats; they sold fast. They had loads of historical ambience, with the lock being right beside them. Barge owners had stored their cargoes of timber, coal and wood in these buildings, and now after a long time rotting as derelict hulks they were in full use again and the property developers were having a ball. And the warehouses were not only being renovated as flats. There were shops too, and craft studios, and live jazz and rock nearby, and the market for bargains. The canal permeated the place, wafting freshets of soft moisture and strong diesel into the air all around it. Trees, their shadowy branches dancing in the breeze, crowded on its banks like suicides about to jump.

Now why had she thought of suicides? Venny wondered. Bill was tougher than that. People moved in and out of jobs all the time, in and out of short contracts, in and out of appointments that had seemed rock-solid secure, for that matter. Like Bill Thompson's before she fired him.

He hadn't taken it very well.

In fact he had taken it spectacularly badly, and inevitably there had been the painful post mortem. Was it something he'd said or done? No. Was it his cooking? Well, yes. He wanted to cook just Italian, nothing else, while she favoured serving a more broad-based fusion-food line. And he didn't even cook good Italian. And there was his attitude, of course, although she didn't want to get into that, and flinging accusations at this point was unlikely to prove helpful, didn't he think so?

Bill clearly didn't agree.

Bill had gone right ahead and flung a few accusations.

Like, he couldn't believe what a cold ball-breaking bitch she was.

Like, she had used him tonight and then given him the finger.

All true. Venny had to admit that. He had shouted and, even worse, he had stood there without a stitch on while carrying out his harangue, his deflated cock bobbing away in counterpoint to his angry words, which just made him look ridiculous. Venny was sure she had had more embarrassing encounters, but she was damned if she could remember when.

On Monday she would have to phone the employment agency and dig herself out of the shit. She wasn't a chef. Microwaving ready meals taxed her culinary expertise to the limit. Her ignorance of food production was total. She didn't know whether the Barnsley black sausage was superior to the French *boudin noir*. She didn't care about bento boxes or *nuoc mam*. Opening a cereal packet was, frankly, an effort. As for the rest of the staff, they were just

servers and choppers; none of them had the knowledge needed to command kitchens.

So this was the picture. She had bookings for covers she could not provide. She had an unbearable sexual itch. And she was going to have to crawl to her bank manager for a bigger loan.

But the only way was up, right?

Over the noise of the receding storm and Shania Twain blasting out on the stereo, Dani heard Venny come crashing into the flat. Dani was in the high-ceilinged kitchen. It had exposed brick walls and a big half-moon window underneath which cutting-edge fittings had been grafted on. She was working, but she was having fun too. Dani was dedicated to having fun. That, and country and western.

‘Hold on a minute,’ she said to the empty room, and turned Shania down.

She opened the door a crack and peered out at Venny through hanks of choppily cut dark hair. Where Venny had hung back from body piercing, Dani had embraced it with almost missionary zeal. There was a ring through her eyebrow, twin studs on her neat little nose, a row of silver skull-and-crossbone death’s-heads parading up the lobes of both dainty ears, and Venny knew that her nipples, her navel and even her labia, under their little coat of dark fur, had all been pierced. All this, and a penchant for cowgirl boots and fringed buckskin jackets, marked Dani down as eccentric in Venny’s eyes. But they suited each other, like the odd couple. The sober and the wild, thought Venny sourly. The daring and the dull.

‘Thought it was you,’ said Dani. ‘Either that or a very noisy burglar. Bad day at the office, dear?’

‘I fired the chef.’ Venny dumped her bag on the hall table.

‘Excuse me?’ Dani half-turned and giggled as if someone had goosed her from behind. Shania was turned up again. ‘Why?’ she shouted, turning back to Venny.