

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# All The Trimmings

Tesni Morgan

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MASQUE OF PASSION

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THE TIES THAT BIND

EARTHY DELIGHTS

# All the Trimmings

TESNI MORGAN

BLACK  
LACE

## *All the Trimmings*

'I know what I would do if this place were mine,' said Felan.

'Well, it's not yours, so butt out,' said Cheryl, her voice quavering.

His face hardened and his eyes were as cold as the Arctic Ocean. He reached for a rope dangling from the pulley fastened to the vaulted ceiling, then snarled, 'Give me your hands.'

She obeyed him, too astonished to speak. He snapped a metal cuff round one wrist, spun her round then unzipped her dress.

'You can't deny what you feel, Cheryl,' he said. 'You need me.'

'You think?' she said, and spat at him.

'That wasn't a very nice thing to do,' he chided softly. 'Time you were taught a few manners!'

## *Chapter One*

THE YOUNG MAN in the filling station is definitely worth a second glance, she thought, making a totally unnecessary check on tyre pressure. She could see him through the kiosk window. He was standing behind the counter, just like when she went in to pay for petrol. Normally she was too preoccupied with domestic trivia to notice men, old or young. Maybe it was because she'd spent the weekend in the company of nineteen-year-olds. Mostly male. Tim's house-share mates.

For the first time in ages she had felt young. A bit self-conscious when she went to the pub with them, hoping she didn't look like mutton dressed as lamb, but Tim had been reassuring. 'You look great, Ma. All the guys say so.'

Their girlfriends had been nice, too. No one seemed to bother that she was the same age as their mothers, give or take a year or two. It had made her realise just how much she missed Tim, and Daisy as well, scatty, gorgeous, talented Daisy, who was taking a fashion design course in London.

But now it was back to boring routine, though nothing could stop that upsurge of desire as she surreptitiously scrutinised the young man's neat, denim-covered buttocks. He had come outside, arranging the bunches of flowers on sale, but he looked directly at her and smiled. Had he made the flowers an excuse, hoping to see her again before she drove off?

Don't be an idiot, Cheryl, she told herself sternly, then she got in the car, adjusted her sunglasses and switched on the ignition. He stood there, hands on hips, grinning as he watched her.

Cheeky little sod, she thought. I've a good mind to tell him off! Who the hell does he think he is?

But, catching a glimpse of herself in the driving mirror, she could see that she was smiling in response, a pleased, cat-that's-been-at-the-cream smile. How daft! Just because some lad had taken the trouble to pay her attention. Get a grip, she told herself, but she could feel a sudden ache in her groin and, as she pressed her bottom into the squashy leather seat, she became aware of a dampness in her knickers unnoticed till then.

'Bugger me!' she exclaimed, and wriggled slightly as she slipped into gear and drove the sleek, black BMW across the forecourt. 'I must be on the change, or something. Getting wet because of a boy. You should be ashamed of yourself.'

But she wasn't, turning into the road with that smile still plastered on her face.

Cheryl had plenty of time. Ashley wasn't expecting her back till the evening, but she'd left earlier than planned, Tim busy on a project that would occupy him for hours. She reached Westcombe and drove through the streets thronged with holidaymakers, then along the promenade, wide and straight, flanked by solid Edwardian hotels on one side and the wide curve of golden sand and blue, white-crested sea on the other.

She drew in a deep breath. The air was like wine. After stuffy Bristol in a heatwave, she was glad to be back. I'm spoiled, she decided. Living by the sea, maintaining a healthy tan, able to dabble my toes in the briny any time I feel so inclined. Which isn't often these days. I'm afraid I've lost my spark. The sunshine seemed to dim suddenly, and

she noticed the elderly people in wheelchairs, and others hobbling along with the aid of walking sticks.

WESTCOMBE BY THE SEA. YOUR BRIGHTEST AND BEST HOLIDAY RESORT, declared a hoarding.

I don't want to get old, Cheryl thought with a shudder. I don't feel I've lived yet, let alone settling down to await the Grim Reaper. Stuff that!

Ruffled, the good feeling engendered by the garage assistant faded and gone, she turned into a side street and along a tree-lined avenue. The house stood just as she'd left it: solid, mock Tudor frontage, detached and surrounded by a secluded garden. A double garage, a swimming pool and a conservatory. They had lived there for years. It was in the best area of Westcombe, naturally, away from the guest houses and B&B establishments, even far removed from the Atlantic Hotel, the Fisherman's Inn, the King George's Arms, all five-star and fiercely expensive.

If she and Ashley went away, it was usually somewhere abroad, the Canary Islands or Malta. But in reality he preferred to take breaks alone, entering his boat in regattas up and down the country, open seas, lakes, reservoirs, anywhere the sailing fraternity could meet, talk jaunty nautical talk and spend hours carousing in the clubhouse.

Cheryl had stopped going with him long ago. It wasn't easy when the children were small, far too much hassle, and unnecessary when they had the sand and sea on their doorstep.

This was probably the beginning of the split. Now we hardly speak to one another, she thought, leaving the car in the drive and walking round to the back. She liked going in through the kitchen. Ashley couldn't understand it. The front entrance was rather grand and he was always first to answer the doorbell if any visitors arrived. He liked impressing people. Cheryl was finding him increasingly boring. Now she kept seeing the jeans-clad youth in his

clinging white T-shirt. His pectorals were well developed, arm muscles too, and she had made a note of the fullness behind his fly buttons. He'd be bursting with testosterone. Probably go on all night, orgasm after orgasm. But would he know how to give one to her?

A cup of tea, she thought, and switched on the kettle. It was lovely to be back, though it had only been three days. She embraced the atmosphere, shrugging it round her like a warm blanket. Her house, her home - the nest she had built for rearing her young. Once she had had a promising career as a lawyer, but she had given it all up when she met and fell in love with Ashley. They married and she became pregnant right away. His doing, for he didn't want her to go on working. No pill for her, and a year after Tim, Daisy arrived on the scene.

Cheryl hadn't resented them, but they had been a lot of hard work. 'Two children are enough,' Ashley had decided when, after Daisy had started infant school, Cheryl had got all broody and wanted another.

'I'd like to get a job,' she had suggested, the house empty daily; too tidy, too quiet.

'There's no need, darling. The business is doing really well. I've jumped on the computer wagon just in time. Everyone will have one soon. We'll be rich. I'd prefer you to be here. You never know when one of the kids is going to go down with something. I don't think mothers should work.'

End of conversation and very nearly the end of story. Certainly the end of romance. Cheryl went through the motions, but sex for her became dull and meaningless. He never had been much of a lover and she no longer cared, having given up trying to indicate what she needed to bring her to orgasm, and masturbating when she was alone. She couldn't be bothered with him any more and if he chose to stick his cock in her and seek his own selfish pleasure then she would while away the time till he finished by taking a

mental shopping tour round Sainsbury's. With any luck, by the time she reached the checkout, he would have come. Then she knew she'd be left in peace and could turn over and go to sleep.

She peered in the mirror and pushed up her nondescript hair. Her face was what she called 'experienced', though others might have unkindly dubbed it 'weathered'. Her bone structure was striking. She had greenish-grey eyes and a wide, generous mouth. Having reached the age when the double chin tends to take over, she was glad to see that her jawline was taut. Going lower, she was critical about her body; the neck wasn't bad, the breasts could have been better. I really must buy a new bra, she thought. Her waist was slim, her hips too, and her legs were long, hairless and suntanned. She wore shorts and vest tops most of the time.

'God, can't you find any suitable dresses? What is all this? A nudist colony?' Ashley would comment cuttingly whenever he saw her casually clad, or caught her naked in the pool.

She tried to avoid this, because seeing her nude gave him a hard-on, and there were many things she'd much rather do than have sex with him. The kettle boiled and she poured the scalding water over a tea bag in her horoscope mug, a deep, heavenly blue, with LIBRA written in gold lettering.

'It's a lot of tosh. You don't believe in all that rubbish, do you, Cheryl?' Ashley scoffed.

She wasn't sure, but at least kept an open mind on the subject, which was more than he was prepared to do. Daisy was into it - astrology, the Runes, the Tarot cards, communicating with the spirit world. She's like my mother, Cheryl ruminated, stirring sugar into her tea. Mummy's a pagan and believes in everything from flying saucers to fairies at the bottom of the garden. It seems natural to call her Mummy, though she agitates for me to address her as Joanna. I keep her away from Ashley. He's always rude to

her. I sometimes think the only reason I married him was as a kind of revolt against her artistic, bohemian lifestyle.

'She's not an artist; she's a nutter. The landing light's on but there's no one in. Have you seen her paintings? I wouldn't give them house room! I wouldn't hang them in the bog! People pay good money for them. Sometimes thousands. They must be as cracked as she is.'

Needless to say, Joanna Newman hated him too. 'I'll never see much of you, Cheryl, while you stay married to that pompous prick,' she said every time she phoned.

'I know, I know, but what can I do?' Cheryl would ask.

'Leave the bastard! You know there's always a bed for you at Fell Tor.'

'Thanks. That's kind, but I'm not ready to do it yet.'

'Why not? The kids are off your hands now.'

Cheryl always muttered an excuse. She wasn't willing to admit defeat. Besides, Fell Tor was run on the lines of a commune, and she didn't feel able to cope with so many different temperaments under one roof. The work was supposed to be divided among them, but there was always a nucleus who were put upon, performing all the chores. She knew it would scramble her head. She needed order in her life to function properly.

I've lived with Ashley too long, she thought wryly. His fussy Virgo perfection has rubbed off on me.

Bollocks! her other self retorted rudely. That's just a bloody excuse. You don't want to get up off your fat arse and do anything about it.

Cheryl started as she heard a thump overhead. She had been convinced the house was empty. There was no sign of Ashley's Mercedes. They had no animals, not even a cat - so who or what had made the noise? Had she disturbed a burglar? A quick vision of *Crime Watch* flashed across her brain: 'Housewife disturbs robbers in her house in Westcombe. An identikit has been compiled after her description of the men. The police have commended her for

her bravery. Please ring this number if you have any information.'

Would it be one or two, or maybe more? She didn't feel in the least brave. We should have got a dog, she thought. Ashley wanted one but I don't like them. I'm surprised he didn't put his foot down and insist that I took on puppy training and mopping up puddles and getting everything chewed, to say nothing of fleas and threadworms. Ugh! But just for now she wished she had something big, mean looking and hairy to protect her, and she wasn't thinking of a man.

She held her breath when another thud shook the kitchen. Quietly opening a drawer, she took out a carving knife and, holding it close to her chest, crept into the hall and up the stairs.

They curved gracefully. The banisters were railed. A floor-to-ceiling stained-glass window lit the upper landing. It depicted an Alphonse Mucha-type lady with a swanlike neck, a mass of dark hair and a seductive expression. Tulips and acanthus leaves twined round her, merging with her flowing, diaphanous robes. This window, above all else, had sold the house to Cheryl. She was a pushover for art nouveau. Couldn't get enough of interiors from that period; opulent, overblown, sensual - the kind of sexy decor used in late nineteenth-century high-class brothels. She would sometimes fantasise about being the madam of one of these establishments, seeing herself in a tight corset and a bustle, made up to the nines, the toast of Paris, perhaps, graciously welcoming her clients and introducing them to the bevy of beauties who graced her establishment.

She was so drawn into this scenario that she reached her bedroom without being really aware. The noises were issuing from behind the closed door and it was almost as if she was checking up on one of her whores, for they were definitely sexual in origin. Unmistakable, animal noises

straight from the jungle, or the barnyard. Moans, panting, grunts. Puzzled, she let herself in.

She halted, framed in the doorway, unable to believe the evidence of her own eyes.

The first thing she saw was the extraordinary spectacle of her husband, naked and spreadeagled on the bed, his wrists bound by silk scarves - *her* silk scarves - and attached to the pillars of the brass headboard. His ankles were tethered to those at the foot, and his cock pointed to the ceiling from which white lace drapes were suspended. Cheryl could not remember seeing it so thick and long. Had he ever sported such an impressive erection for her? Ashley into bondage? It was beyond belief.

He wasn't alone, of course. A woman was poised over him, about to lower herself on to that stiff appendage. She was wearing a black suspender belt and fishnet stockings. She had platinum blonde hair, ample breasts and wide hips. It was Yvonne Harper, wife of Allan, commodore of the Westcombe Sailing Club. The last time Cheryl had seen her, she was officiating at the regatta, dispensing sandwiches and cups of tea, congratulating the winners and presenting silver trophies.

For a fraction of a second Cheryl wondered if she should be dignified, back out and close the door behind her, then she screeched, 'You bitch!' and launched herself at Yvonne.

All her frustrations poured out through her clawing nails, flaying feet and the abuse that cannoned from between her lips. She used words she hardly knew she possessed, dirty, derogatory, insulting words. When Yvonne finally succeeded in escaping, she was bloodied and bruised and weeping.

'Cheryl! Stop it!' Ashley shouted from the bed, alarmed by the glinting kitchen knife.

She laughed in his face. He was helpless and she could do and say whatever she liked. Now she was the dominant one. 'You despicable worm,' she hissed. 'What would your

buddies at the sailing club say if they could see you now? And with Mrs Commodore too. Well, well. Who'd have thought it?'

She slapped him across the cheek, the chest, the cock. It didn't shrink under her blows. It became even stiffer. I should have done this years ago, she thought. He's a powerful man in business, always in control. He wants the reverse in sex. I didn't know. Why didn't he say?

'Untie me. Let me explain,' he begged, struggling to maintain a semblance of command.

'I don't want to hear it.' Her voice was steady, though she was breaking up inside. She used the knife to slice through his bonds. He looked frightened. Scared she was going to hack off his cock, maybe? He sat up, rubbing his wrists.

'Cheryl, be reasonable,' he began.

'Reasonable? You've got to be joking,' she snarled. 'Now dress and get out. You, too, Yvonne. You'll leave the house at once, Ashley. Do you hear? I shall be seeking advice from my solicitor.'

'He's mine too,' Ashley said, looking stupefied, as if this was the last thing he expected to happen.

'I shall change.'

'Can't we talk about this?'

'No,' Cheryl said, thinking, how ridiculous he looks in his socks and nothing else. How pathetic. I can't even summon the energy to hate him. Hate is akin to love, a strong emotion, and he rouses neither in me. I just want him gone, and his floosie as well. I always knew she was as common as muck. Blonde indeed. Her dark bush gives the game away. She's no more blonde than I am.

Yvonne turned watery blue eyes to Cheryl. Her mascara formed black runnels down her cheeks. 'You won't tell Allan, will you?' she pleaded, struggling into her skirt and blouse. 'It was only a bit of fun. You could have joined in. Allan's always fancied you, and I wouldn't have minded.'

'Get out of my sight,' Cheryl repeated wearily, running her hands up and down her cold arms.

Jesus Christ! Did she know any of these people? She'd been associated with them for years - sailing club dinners and dances, Christmas and New Year's Eve parties, even the millennium celebrations, events galore, but it had all been a sham. Behind that façade of bonhomie, of supporting charities and doing good works, they were as much into scheming, conniving, lying and fornicating as those whom they considered their inferiors. Ever so nicely, of course. What, us? We don't worry about class. Anybody can get membership of the club, as long as they are proposed by one of us.

And now the commodore's lady was on her knees, retrieving her panties from under a bed that certainly wasn't her marital one. Her large pink buttocks quivered as her skirt rode up. The black suspenders strained across her thighs, clipped to the tops of those tarty stockings. Her crack was visible from that angle. It glistened with moisture. Whatever she and Ashley had been doing, it had excited her, making those plump lips swell.

I wish I had a camera, Cheryl thought, or better still a camcorder.

Ashley, dressed now, came towards her, saying, 'Look here, Cheryl. Let's talk about this.'

'Out,' she repeated doggedly, flourishing the knife.

'But -'

'If you don't sod off, I'll go and see Allan. I'm sure he'll be interested in what I have to tell him. So will his workforce. You'd better believe that I'll shout it across his office.'

'You wouldn't.'

'Try me.'

He didn't put it to the test. One glance at her face and he hustled Yvonne from the bedroom. Cheryl stood there, as if turned to stone, listening to their hurried retreat. The

back door banged. He wasn't risking using the front way. He must have left the car further down the avenue. Unless they'd taken a taxi. How long had this been going on? she wondered. Anger had turned into a dull throb. She felt numb.

Then indignation swept up. She dropped the knife on the dressing table, then ran across and stripped off the valance sheet, duvet cover and pillowcases, bundling them up and rushing down to the utility room. It wasn't until the washing machine was pounding away at them that her disgust abated. How could Ashley have brought another woman to their bed?

She kept seeing him lying there like a landed fish, his cock dribbling pre-come. Strangely, another figure was superimposed over him. It was that of the youth who had served her in the garage. Her fingers itched to tie him up and subject him to her lust. There was no doubt about it, she had not felt so horny for a long while. The sight of Yvonne's big breasts, her broad thighs and naked crack had caused an ache in her clit that needed release.

'You're a bastard, Ashley! A bastard!' she muttered, and phoned a solicitor; not the family one, but a friend from university days.

He had an office in Taunton, in partnership with two others, and he listened to her story in silence for a while, then said, 'My advice is stay put. Don't leave the house. Come and see me and file for a divorce. That is what you want, I take it?'

'Yes. As quickly as possible, Mark.'

She felt steadied by the sound of his cool, impartial voice and wondered if he had changed much since she last saw him when they graduated. They'd celebrated by getting drunk together and then fucking. He'd been handsome, a distinguished-looking man, an intellectual and philosopher. I should have married him, not Ashley, she

thought bitterly. Tears stung her eyes and she wanted to break down and cry.

'I can see you at eleven tomorrow morning,' he said, and his calmness brought hope.

'Thank you. I'll be there,' she said.

'We're in River Street. Bartlett, Bingley and Warfield.'

'That's you.'

'Dead right,' he answered, and she caught a hint of laughter. Memory flashed. He had been fun to be with, sharp-witted and sarcastic.

After she had replaced the receiver, she dialled her closest woman friend.

It had happened by chance when Laura was cruising the net. She hadn't intended to spy on Stuart, far from it. She had only recently mastered the computer and had been practising on the one at home. First she had found the search engine, then logged on to several websites - one that had a huge amount of books, records and videos, another dealing with history, a further that held information about gardening.

This was wonderful and she glowed with pride inside, having mastered technology to some extent. James had said she might use his PC, but she intended to buy one of her own. Now that Harry was backpacking in India and Vicky married, she ran her house like clockwork, which left her with time on her hands. She could have done voluntary work but had decided to fulfil a dream, that of becoming a writer.

She had dabbled before, using an ancient portable typewriter bequeathed to her by her father. But Stuart and the children had been demanding. Now there was only him, and he could be childish too, although heavily into the firm, which he had inherited. Tilford's Haulage was a byword in the area. Not that his education had been allowed to lapse. He had done his stint at college with the best of them.

Laura had fallen in love with computers. They were a gateway to her literary ambitions. She realised that they couldn't write the books for her, but she revelled in the joy of spell- and grammar-checking and the ease with which one could edit. No more Tipp-Ex and carbon paper. Now it was all down to her, stripped to the bone in search of talent.

She had set up a page and was dallying around, putting off opening a file she'd tentatively named Chapter One. She didn't know what to call the novel but had roughed out a plot, courtesy of several informative manuals with titles like *How to Write a Romance and Get it Published*.

It was romance that filled her creative vision - historical romance, and she'd already decided on the period and begun research. It was while she was idling on the net that she accidentally went into a chat room. A sexy one, by the look of it. But far from the nude and busty girls she expected to see, the photographs were of men in various stages of undress, and the messages were undoubtedly male oriented. She had stumbled across the Gay Chatline. She was trying to stumble out again when suddenly a name came up. It was Jimboy. And following in quick succession was a picture of her own, handsome, dark-haired and well-built husband.

She sat there with her hand poised on the mouse. She wanted to get out; she wanted to delve deeper. She was excited, her nipples crimping under her cotton sundress. What on earth was Stuart doing there? His message to an unknown, called Big Jock, soon made everything clear. It was a dirty e-mail, explicit in the extreme, as Stuart discussed in detail what he would like to do with Big Jock.

Laura felt physically sick and terribly aroused. Fascination kept her there, a peeping Tom kind of compulsion that forced her to read on, to click and review, to repeat and find other sites that offered Stuart a choice of partners. He had already met some and arranged to meet

others. Those with whom he had rendezvoused had kept in touch. Most of them he had ignored. But there was one name that came up repeatedly - Terry. She logged on to his photo. He was lithe and long-haired and girlish, a beautiful person indeed, and Laura could have fancied him herself, had he not been so blatantly gay. The correspondence between Terry and Stuart revealed that they had met several times and the relationship was becoming serious.

This is how a woman must feel when she finds out that her husband has a mistress, she thought bleakly. But this is far worse, for how can I compete with Terry? He can give Stuart something I never can. What shall I do?

Making a note of how she got into the chat room in the first place, she logged off.

'Is that you, Laura?' Cheryl said, when she put down the phone on Mark and rang her.

'Yes, it's me,' Laura answered, and Cheryl smiled, picturing her seated at the computer or scribbling in a notebook. But there was something in Laura's voice that arrested her attention - she sounded agitated.

'What's up?' Cheryl asked.

'Nothing. How are you?'

'Could be better. I came home this afternoon from Tim's and found Ashley in bed with Yvonne Harper, the commodore's wife.'

'Good grief! What did you do?'

'Told him to get out.'

'Has he gone?'

'Yes, and I've been in touch with Mark Warfield, a friend of mine from uni. He's a solicitor. I'm seeing him tomorrow.'

'You're going to divorce Ashley?'

'Yep!'

'Then maybe I should see him too, and divorce Stuart.'

Cheryl almost dropped the phone with shock. 'You what?' she exclaimed.

'Divorce Stuart,' Laura repeated.

'Why? What is it? Another woman?'

'Worse than that. Another man, maybe even other men.'

'You're having me on.'

'No. It's true.'

'How do you know?' Cheryl could not believe it. Stuart was so big and burly and macho, in charge of a fleet of long-distance lorries and their drivers.

'I've been taking this course ... Computers for the Terrified.'

'So you told me.'

'Well, I've just been on the PC at home ... and I came across this site where gay men can talk to one another and send photos and arrange meetings. Stuart was on it.'

'Jesus wept! Is this true? You weren't mistaken, were you? You're new to networking.'

'No mistake. It was him all right, and a guy called Terry. I should think they've known each other some time.'

Laura sounded calm, but with that dead calm that Cheryl was also feeling. Phrases sprang to mind, including 'the calm before the storm'. Poor, unworldly Laura, she thought. At least I'm a bit more sophisticated, whereas she always sees the good in everyone. They had met when their children were in the toddler group and had been friends ever since. They were neighbours. They shopped together and visited each other's houses. They had shared problems as the children grew up and consoled their loneliness when they were no longer living at home. Cheryl trusted her implicitly and hoped she felt the same.

'Have you tackled Stuart about it?'

'No. I've only just found out.'

'Are you going to?'

'I want out,' Laura said, a brittle edge to her voice unknown till then. 'I haven't been happy with him for ages,

not truly happy, and he must have been discontented with me. I never dreamed ... never thought for a moment that he was a ...'

'Closet gay.' Cheryl supplied the words. 'Well, neither did I. It's quite funny really. There are he and Ashley, friends of the bosom, as it were, and Ashley would have run a mile if he'd known. He's homophobic.'

'I don't find it funny. I feel soiled.'

'So do I, love. Man or woman, it's the deceit and betrayal that hurts. I'd come over but I don't want to leave the house. It will be bad enough driving off tomorrow, but I think I'll ring Mother and get her to hold the fort. What do you want to do? Come with me?'

'Yes. I need to know where I stand legally. Till then, I'll say nothing to Stuart. He won't think I'm computer literate enough to have called up the gayline.'

'Mind you download the material before he finds out. You'll need that as proof.'

'Don't worry. I've already done it. I'll bring it with me.'

What a team, Cheryl thought. We should go far once we're freed from these tiresome husbands. She was in an optimistic mood when she said goodbye to Laura and poured herself a glass of wine before tackling her mother.

Though far too hip to say it, Joanna was bound to think, I told you so.

She wouldn't tell Tim, not yet. He was fond of his father and even crewed for him occasionally. There was no need to disillusion him for the time being. That meant she'd have to keep it from Daisy too, who never could be trusted with a secret. Cheryl sipped her drink and reached for the phone, thinking, after I've done this, I'll move into the spare room. There I'll take a shower and possibly play with myself, thinking of a bright future filled with handsome men.

## *Chapter Two*

MARK WAS EVERYTHING a competent solicitor should be: thorough, efficient, firm but kind. He took on Laura's case as well as Cheryl's and, after not too long, had finalised their divorces and arranged settlements.

Cheryl went to see him to sign the last of the papers. Ashley had not put up much of a fight, too afraid that she might name Yvonne as co-respondent. Though Cheryl was sure this was nothing more than a casual affair, he didn't want to lose face with the sailing club. He had bought her silence by agreeing to her demands. Through the proceeds of the sale of the house and a share of his assets, she was coming out of it with a very large sum indeed.

I'm a woman of substance, she thought as she parked her car outside the eighteenth-century house in River Street, off Taunton's market square. The brass plaque on the door gleamed, so did the lion-headed knocker and letterbox. Cheryl pushed the door open and went in. I might shag Mark brainless today, she thought. It's brewing, I can tell. Throughout these months of solicitors' letters flying back and forth, of Ashley coming in to collect his clothes, of the inventories pertaining to the contents and wrangles about what belonged to whom, I've been aware of the chemistry bubbling away between Mark and me.

It was more than an exhilarating sense of freedom that had made her go on a diet, visit a beauty parlour, have her hair restyled and indulge in a shopping spree second to

none. Laura had been persuaded to do the same, transformed from dull brown to tawny blonde. There was no doubt about it, they had both concluded, having money helped cushion the blow, that insecure feeling of failure that haunted female divorcees and made them easy game for prowling wolves.

Not Mark, however. He was the perfect gentleman.

He stood when Cheryl came into the gracious, high-ceilinged room. He held out his hand and she took it. His palm, tight against hers, generated heat and tranquillity. There was peace in that gentle clasp. 'My word,' he said with a smile. 'You're looking fabulous.'

She blushed under her cover-all base. It was a glad-to-be-complimented blush, and she knew she deserved admiration. Mario at Corner Cutters had worked a miracle on her hair. No longer nondescript, she was now a deep chestnut, curled and backcombed and twirled into an amazing style, dashing, almost brazen, making her feel thirty again. A reckless thirty at that, a 'come on, boys, let's get to it' kind of thirty. She'd read somewhere that women came into their own as they got older, and it was ideal for them to have young lovers, seventeen-plus, for youths were at their peak, wanting to bang away all round the clock.

Mark wasn't particularly young, but she felt horny just thinking about him. He was so well groomed, whiplash lean, with wide shoulders and long legs. His hair was thick and dark, with only a sprinkling of grey at the temples. Best of all, he wasn't married. No one had snapped him up. He had said, the first day they'd met again, that he had been waiting for her. A joke, of course. Or was it? Laura seemed to think he was smitten, but then Laura was incurably romantic. She was trying to channel this into authorship, but not doing too well to date. She contemplated taking a course for would-be writers, but had not been able to concentrate on it yet. Cheryl agreed with

her that getting divorced was time-consuming and exhausting. She wasn't sure that she'd ever recover from it.

Mark kissed her hand with old-world gallantry before letting it go, then pulled out a chair for her opposite his. He sat down and steepled his fingers together, looking at her across them. Her heart skipped a beat. God, but he's a good-looking creature, she thought. I wouldn't mind those slim, strong hands on my body and his mouth between my legs. Spring is in the air again, when a mature woman's thoughts lightly turn to love. She had come here with another purpose than simply scrawling her name on stuffy, lawyer-speak documents. She was dressed to kill, in a mulberry silk dress and stack-heeled mules. Her perfume was French and had cost a bomb. Her underwear was nothing short of scandalous. It made her cream her panties just to feel them caressing her mound and bottom, so red, so brief, so naughty, and the underwired bra matched them.

After the startling revelation concerning Ashley's liking for being restrained, she had looked at Mark and other men in a different light. What secret desires did they hide behind their bland exteriors? Was she missing out on her vocation? Could she become a dominatrix?

'Here we are. The last batch of papers,' Mark said, pushing them towards her across the desk's green leather top. She signed and returned them, with hardly a glance at their contents.

'What a relief,' she said. 'I can't believe it's all over. I'm no longer Mrs Barden. It feels empty somehow and I'm as drained as a long-distance runner reaching the finishing post.'

'Others have said just the same,' he replied, and considered her with twinkling brown eyes. 'The break-up of a relationship is in the nature of a bereavement, no matter how much it was wanted. Old habits die hard, and you were married for a long while.'

She listened to him with half her attention. The other, livelier half was imagining him in a courtroom, defending a client. The black robe would suit him, so would the white wig. He'd seem even more authoritarian and, just for an instant, she wanted to be the prisoner in the dock. She thrilled as she thought of him grilling her, his cool, crisp voice causing mayhem in her body, sending shivers down her spine and making her nipples peak.

With an effort, she dragged herself back to the present, saying, 'That's right, Mark. I've heard this too, and I know Laura feels the same.'

'Why don't I take you out to dinner tonight?' he said suddenly, leaning forward, his elbows on the desk.

'I really should get going,' she faltered, unsure of herself despite the hot scenarios played out in her head, thinking, when you've only ever slept with one man for years, shared his life and borne him children, the reality of having sex with a stranger is formidable. You need a lot of faith in yourself to take that leap into the void.

'You could always stay in my house,' he offered, and she read in his eyes the hope that she would agree. He wasn't pushing anything, content to let matters develop, or not, as the case might be.

'I haven't brought an overnight bag. I wasn't intending to be more than a few hours.'

'Then let's have lunch. I know a place on the outskirts of town that does a very decent meal.'

'All right,' she said, awash with uncertainty. She wanted him, lubricious at the thought of bedding him, yet what problems might this bring? Did she really want to hurtle into another relationship?

Hey! Don't project. Like you, he's probably out for a quick one, that's all. Long-term doesn't come into it, reminded the little demon who sat on her shoulder and whispered comments in her ear.

She followed Mark in her car, leaving the shopping centre, reaching the bypass and taking a meandering secondary road. They were soon in the country, the trees and hedgerows burgeoning, primroses studding the green banks like yellow stars, real warmth to the sun, and a blue sky dotted with fluffy white clouds. Cheryl tingled from toes to cortex. Spring was here and she, too, felt reborn. She had come out of the darkness of winter, the months of disruption, all the unpleasant aspects of divorce - breaking the news to Tim and Daisy and enduring the coldness of mutual acquaintances. The sailing club folk ostracised her. She had heard that they failed to understand how she could possibly kick out such a charming, helpful, wonderful man.

She could have retaliated and implicated Yvonne. But, as she said to her mother, 'I can't be bothered.'

'You're right. Let it go. He's an arsehole. But no, even arseholes have a use,' Joanna had replied acerbically.

And here I am, about to have lunch with a man who obviously thinks I'm the bee's knees. I'm living at Fell Tor, and I can endure its eccentric inhabitants short-term. Laura and I are going house-hunting this week. That can't be bad.

The houses became cottages. Some were thatched. No longer farmworkers' humble homes, these had been upgraded, modernised, extended - two into one, maybe three in a rank - now expensive, trendy, within-reach-of-the-motorway retreats for executives. The Yew Tree Inn echoed their ambience. Cheryl pulled up in the orchard-surrounded car park at the rear. AD 1400 was carved into the weathered stone above the inn's main entrance.

'The original building is from then,' Mark said, standing with her and looking up. His shoulder brushed hers. She lost interest in ancient monuments, a frisson coursing down her arm, through her body and into her sex. 'Recent restoration unearthed murals painted by itinerant artists who couldn't pay for bed and board and worked the bill out

that way,' he continued. 'There were also timbers which, when carbon dated, proved that the trees were felled at the start of the fifteenth century.'

'You're still keen on all this?' Cheryl asked, recalling an aspect of his personality from student days. They'd often trudged round ruins in the rain.

His hand cupped her elbow, and goose bumps raised the fine down on her limbs. 'Oh, yes. You really must let me show you my house.'

The Yew Tree had retained most of its early features. The stone-flagged floors sloped. There were arches and rooms leading off the reception area, up one step and down the next, worn in the middle by generations of innkeepers and clientele. It had that smell Cheryl associated with old buildings, a combination of must, dust and the essences left by hundreds of years of weary travellers seeking stabling for their horses, a pint of ale, a roast capon and a bed for the night. Even the necessary modernisation of kitchens and bathrooms had failed to mask it. She could almost see figures in costume occupying the taproom and lounge bar, the winding stairs and courtyards.

Lord! Hang on there! She chided herself. You're getting like Laura. Leave the historical imaginings to her.

But she couldn't help saying to Mark, 'Laura would go mad over this. I must bring her.'

'There's plenty of history in the area,' he said, drawing her down on a bench in a corner of the dining room and settling himself next to her. 'Much of it is to do with the Monmouth Rebellion of 1685, the Bridgwater Assizes and Judge Jeffreys, known as the Hanging Judge.'

Ferreting back in time, Cheryl vaguely recalled learning something about this at school. But she never had been much good at dates and kings and battles. The atmosphere was relaxing and Mark fitted into it perfectly, so charming that women at other tables were ignoring their escorts and