

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Coming Up Roses

Crystalle Valentino

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‘You may have a superb set of tits, but frankly you’re starting to get on my nerves,’ said the rogue gardener.

Rosie was beyond reason, so furious that all she could do was lash out at her tormentor.

‘What do you know about my tits? You’re too busy playing Mellors and Lady Constance with *my* female clients.’

All she could remember afterwards was the speed with which he then pulled up her T-shirt so her breasts were exposed, naked, pale and vulnerable.

‘Oh wow,’ he said quietly, and there was something in his voice, something genuinely admiring, that kept her still and prevented her from struggling away. It maddened her how aroused she was – how totally liquid she felt while this stranger held her still and looked her over. She noticed a delicious waft of fresh male sweat, leather and oak moss. He was nearly a foot taller than her and, despite the fact he was poaching her business, she had to admit he was just stunning.

Other books by the author:

A PRIVATE VIEW

THE NAKED FLAME

COMING UP ROSES

Crystalle Valentino



Chapter One

Rosie Cooper's bad day started like this: her dilapidated van broke down, again, so she transferred her little hand mower, her trimmer, all her vital bits and pieces, into her car instead. She tried to be upbeat about it, though, picking a sunflower from the pocket handkerchief that passed for her front garden and inhaling the fresh, fruity fragrance as she left her ground-floor Richmond flat.

She got into her prized and beloved brand new Beetle, with its peach metallic finish and the dinky little flower holder on the dash, and noticed that a small circular dent had appeared overnight on its formerly pristine bonnet. She also found that the sunflower she had brought with her from her pathetic little city garden had too thick a stem to fit into the holder, and the petals started dropping, and all at once her mobile was ringing, and it was a cancellation. *Another* one.

'What do you mean, it's a cancellation?' Rosie asked angrily, stuffing bright yellow petals into the ashtray. More dropped off the sunflower head. Did sunflower pollen stain? she wondered, gazing worriedly down between her tatty jeaned legs at her dark-peach carpet.

'Hey, girlfriend, don't shoot the messenger,' said Lulu on the other end of the phone. 'The woman said cancel, so here I am calling you, cancelling one lawn-mow and edge-cut and nerine-bulb planting, all scheduled for this a.m., and she did apologise, short notice and all, but there you go, that's life.'

Rosie unthinkingly put a long curly strand of her untidy bright ginger hair between her teeth and started gnawing on it. Since the age of two, in moments of extreme angst, she had gnawed her hair. Why change the habits of a

lifetime? She could speak and gnaw at the same time, no problem.

‘Look, was she saying cancelled just for this once, or for all time? I mean, I’m calling on her again next week, right?’

‘Wrong,’ Lulu said succinctly. ‘She don’t want your sorry ass on the premises again, ever, amen. She didn’t say that in so many words, but I think I know a kiss-off when I hear one.’

Rosie spat out the hank of hair and viciously threw a sunflower petal at the steering-wheel. ‘Lulu, that’s the sixth one in three weeks. We’re losing clients at a rate of two a week.’

‘Hey, have Mensa heard about you? Quick as a flash, that mental arithmetic. Don’t know how you do it, girl.’

‘Fuck off, Lulu,’ said Rosie. ‘What am I going to do about this? It can’t go on, this rate of loss.’

‘Think you’ll find it can,’ Lulu said placidly. Rosie could hear her rustling sweet wrappers as she spoke. ‘Not only can it go on, but it now looks as if it *will* go on, probably until you go belly-up.’

‘You’re such a comfort,’ Rosie said irritably.

Lulu never seemed to get hyped over anything, and at times it just about drove Rosie crazy. Lulu was black, six feet tall, with a megawatt smile and a voice like the thickest maple syrup. She had been answering the phone for Rosie’s up-and-coming London-based horticultural business for six months now, and it felt like for ever. Lulu was terrific at soothing irate clients, charming contacts and cooling tempers – maybe because she didn’t seem to have a temper herself. Whereas Rosie was everyone’s idea of the archetypal redhead. A bit combustible, if not downright fiery. Red hair, white skin, gooseberry-green eyes. Medium height only, but strong with it and nicely proportioned. And with more than her fair share of pheromones. Oh, and a few freckles, like a saddle sitting over the bridge of her nose,

which incidentally she hated and scowled at in the mirror every morning.

‘At which point,’ Lulu went on smoothly, ‘I will have to get another job, which tees me off no small amount I can tell you. I *like* this job. It suits my schedule.’

‘So suggest something to me. Something to save your job and my business.’ Rosie’s voice was light but there was a sharp edge of deadly seriousness behind it. This *was* serious. She didn’t fancy being bankrupt in the least. The loan company would repossess her darling little car. She’d have to work for someone else.

Well, she *could* do that. If she absolutely had to. But the thought made her innards shrivel. After two years at Sharsholt College she’d applied for a job with the Hampshire parks department, and within weeks she’d had enough of that. Supercilious men had bossed her around and ordered her to use chemicals she considered unsafe for people and ruinous to the delicately balanced wildlife. She’d been very pleased to leave and, although they had given her a good enough reference, they had been equally pleased to see her go.

At a loss to know what to do next she had, on a whim, moved from her quiet country life on the family-run farm to London. The flat in Richmond had come up and she’d taken it, pleased because it was within easy walking distance of the Botanical Gardens at Kew, which constituted three hundred acres of easily accessible green space, and the river. She’d briefly tried office work and hated it, suffering it like a wild animal confined indoors. So, with no luck at job-hunting with other gardening firms in the city, she had decided to set up on her own, and for a while she had seemed to be doing pretty well at it too.

Until now.

Had she gone to horticultural college, got her qualifications, slogged over books and soil samples, double-

digging, endless tests and numerous hurdles, just to lose it all now that it was only just beginning for her?

‘No can do.’ Lulu finally answered her question through a mouthful of chocolate.

Perhaps that was how Lulu kept so calm, thought Rosie. Endless supplies of chocolate for maximum oral gratification. But that would mean always having to wear her ‘fat day’ jeans instead of the ones she had on at the moment, her sexy skin-hugging kick-ass ‘thin day’ ones, or schlepp to the gym which she knew she would hate. Gardening kept her fit enough, her metabolism ticking over fast enough, not to have to worry about what she did or did not eat. Ingesting vast quantities of chocolate wasn’t going to help her keep her balance on the tightrope.

She sat and thought a moment, chewing on her hair again, her green eyes distant.

‘You still there?’ Lulu asked anxiously. ‘You ain’t got no hose stuck in that car window, have you?’

‘Nope,’ said Rosie, straightening up and snapping on her seatbelt, not bothering about the debris from the shattered sunflower any more. Any more hanging around here, she thought, and her business would be in bits just like that flower, and she wasn’t standing still for that, no way. ‘Lulu, if anyone else phones to cancel, assure them they’ll be welcomed back at any time and with a discount thrown in.’

‘If you say so,’ chomped Lulu.

‘I do say so. Now let me check this morning’s cancellation with you. Mrs Squires, right? And the address, read that to me again.’

Lulu did, but with an air about her of humouring her boss. After all, when the rot set in with a business, in her experience it was nearly impossible to cut out the bad wood before the whole fucking tree fell down. Usually on your head.

Mrs Squires lived in a select square in Chelsea. Just like everywhere else in Chelsea, the roads all around were crammed with cars, so Rosie had to cruise around the area twice, grumbling profusely, before she found a parking slot. It was some distance from the house, but she was fit enough and certainly charged up with enough adrenalin to stomp all the way there in her unfashionable but workmanlike trainers, jeans, T-shirt and lumberjack shirt.

As she walked, she ignored the roar and hoot of the nose-to-tail traffic, the young, beautiful and rich chattering loudly into tiny mobiles, the wind-driven litter, and she concentrated on admiring the greenery. She always did this. It was spring – not cold any more but not yet hot – and the lime trees were in budd, throwing out dusty catkins, unfurling leaves, sap rushing up from their roots, shooting through their trunks, and zapping through their branches. A natural miracle was happening and most of humankind was unaware of it.

When she reached the row of elegant terraced houses where the wealthy, fortyish Mrs Squires lived alone with two yapping, tedious Pekinese, Rosie slowed down. There was a large communal garden in the centre of the square, but that was not her concern; she tended the little garden behind Mrs Squires's house, often having to carry her tools and bags of peat and whatever else the garden required through the house to reach it, when Mrs Squires forgot to leave the back gate unlocked.

She was always very careful to lay down dust-sheets before she transported anything through the mini-palace that Mrs Squires called home. The place was stuffed full of valuable, fragile antiques and collectables. She was always *extremely* careful not to turn around too fast and knock anything over. Mrs Squires had litigation written all over her; she'd sue at the drop of a hat, and enjoy it. Rosie suspected that Mrs Squires's life was in fact so headachingly dull that even a courtroom scrap would have its charms.

And now look at it, Rosie thought angrily. After all that care and attention, the love she'd lavished on that barren little plot, the glorious way it was shaping up now she'd worked so long and so hard on it – all that had been snatched away from her. Someone else would reap the benefits of her hard landscaping, her painstaking choice of architectural 'framework' plants; someone else would fill in the gaps in the borders and take the credit for the overall look of the thing, which would be wonderful, because of the work *she* had done.

It wasn't fair.

But then, when was life ever fair for a self-employed and fairly impoverished gardener?

Rosie went around the back of the row of terraces, where there were garages and fire escapes and high walls shielding the privacy of the back gardens from statuary- and plant-thieves, or the passing and just plain nosy. There was another line of cars here, natch. She could hear the ill-tempered little Pokes yapping away, the sound muffled. They were indoors. Rosie could see the upper-floor windows with their curtains pulled closed. She listened carefully for sounds; nothing except a distant car alarm shrieking unheeded, a passing police car, the laughter of children somewhere nearby. Closer, she thought she could hear whispering, maybe a faint creaking.

But maybe not.

And anyway, what was she *doing* here? What was the point of coming over here in a temper? The woman had every right to cancel if she wanted to. What am I going to do now? wondered Rosie with a flash of humour. Bang on her back door and demand an explanation? Ridiculous. She'd make a fool of herself, and Mrs Squires might even call the cops, and that would certainly put a crimp in the rest of the day.

She was *sure* she could hear whispering over the frantic barking of the two Pokes. Maybe Mommy had gone to the shops and left Bubble and Squeak to fend for themselves for

an hour or so. Rosie liked dogs as a rule, but Bubble and Squeak possessed all the charm of a pair of rabid sewer rats as far as she was concerned, and she would not be sorry to see the back of them. Very often she had been nipped about the ankles by one or the other of them, and Mrs Squires had always laughed and said the little darlings were only playing. Rosie now wished that she had booted the miniature canine hooligans while she had the chance.

But this was plain silly. She might as well just give it up and go home. Well, maybe she would, but a quick look over the wall wouldn't hurt, would it? Rosie stuck her trainer-clad foot into a gap in the pointing on the wall, and heaved herself up, scrabbling at the curved top with her hands. She got a grip, and looked over. Well, she could *look*, couldn't she? After all, she was the one who'd done all the work.

Rosie caught her breath.

She was looking at the garden all right, but she found that she was also, quite unexpectedly, looking at a naked back. It was a male back, very broad and lightly tanned and quite nicely muscled. *Solid*. And, shockingly, this unknown man was kneeling very solidly between Mrs Squires's naked thighs. Mrs Squires – *Jesus!* – was sitting on the swing, the very same swing that Rosie herself had strung up some months ago in the branches of the ravishing red copper beech and Mrs Squires – the elegant, composed, overbred Mrs Squires – had her wrists tied to the ropes of the swing, for God's sake! She was trussed there like a Christmas turkey. Mrs Squires was stark naked and, Rosie noted incredulously, she was in amazingly good shape for her age.

I was going to plant the nerines by that swing, Rosie thought in a state of shock, and some red-hot pokers, so that in autumn the whole thing would be ablaze with colour: the purple of the beech, the bold pink thrust of the nerines, the shrieking orange of the pokers. It would have looked amazing. And now look, talking of pokers, talking of poking . . .

She really shouldn't watch.

She *knew* she shouldn't watch.

Still, she went on watching, almost mesmerised. Could those humungous tits be real? Other women's tits were a constant source of amazement to her. They looked all skinny and contained when they were clothed, but when they were whipped out of their fancy bras – and yes, Rosie was pretty sure that was a frighteningly expensive designer bra she could see abandoned on the lawn, tangled up with a checked work shirt and a pair of hastily discarded tights – and wham! Huge tit alert.

And wow, that was one very impressive back, she thought, clutching on harder to the wall as her fingers started to go numb with the effort. Maybe he worked out? Rosie stared hard at what she could see of the man. He was still facing away from her, whispering in Mrs Squires's ear, and he was wearing very worn stonewashed denim jeans that looked absolutely great clinging to his well-muscled butt. He had a close-cropped head of thick corn-blond hair into which all the timid spring sunshine seemed to be concentrated, like a star about to go supernova.

He also had a muscular neck, shoulders that looked as if they were used to hard work, shovel-like hands that would make a manicurist pass out. This was no office worker, and this was no fashion slave either. Going by gut instinct alone, Rosie reckoned that this bloke had never seen the inside of a gym and that, if he *did*, he would probably laugh out loud.

He was unbuckling his belt!

She found it hard to tear her eyes away. She was aware of a pulse beating away between her legs, of a spreading delectable dampness there. Mrs Squires was in a similar condition by the look of it. Actually Rosie thought that Mrs Squires had gone beyond dampness and was into soaking wet by now. Her pale but well-developed thighs were clamped around the man's waist and her eyes were directed downward as he worked his buckle loose.

God, I bet he's huge, thought Rosie, feeling a shockingly hard jolt in the region of her clit. He was talking to the enraptured Mrs Squires, whispering, making her blush and giggle. Mrs Squires was *giggling*. Oh wow. And now he was unzipping himself; Rosie could hear the zipper coming down. Mrs Squires's eyes opened wider and she said something. The man laughed, low and seductive. And then he pushed the jeans down, bunching them around his thighs.

Oh, nice ass. *Exceedingly* nice ass.

All the variations in men's buttocks were just as intriguing as those in women's breasts. Some were thin, some were flabby - oh yuk - but the best, the absolute best, were firm like these, full of muscle and implied strength, enough strength to drive a good-sized cock just as deep into a woman as she wanted. And Mrs Squires wanted it all right.

Even from where she watched, being careful to keep her head just below the level of the wall and only occasionally taking tiny surreptitious peeks, Rosie could see how desperately aroused the woman was - totally oblivious to the hysterical barking of her 'babies'. Her chestnut-brown nipples were taut with excitement, rising crisply from the fat white pads of her quivering breasts, her mouth was half-open, drawing in panting breaths as the man kneeling between her legs pulled her thighs open wider. Rosie got a glimpse of a damp pink slit lavishly fringed with ash-coloured curls as the man pulled Mrs Squires wide open to take his cock inside her.

Mrs Squires was clutching at the ropes of the swing with her fingers, not unduly hampered by her bound wrists, so that the seat swung up underneath her as the man pulled her in close. Avid with curiosity, Rosie leaned as far to the left as she could, but she still couldn't get a look at his cock. She could see silky blond fur dusting the cleft of his behind, darkening at his apex where she could see the merest suggestion of his balls, which were obviously up so high with arousal that she was being cheated of a better view.

Action! His head was dipped, his hair glistened in a shaft of spring sunshine, and his shoulders bunched powerfully as his hands worked at his groin. Oh God, he's putting it in! thought Rosie, and again there was that deep, deep tugging ache at her clit. Rosie felt her own nipples contract and harden, and her wet pussy opened like a flower – opened for nothing, because it was Mrs Squires who was getting the benefit of his fucking, not her. For a moment she almost felt as if his cock's head was pushing up between her own thighs, invading her own cunt, and she found herself pressing her thighs together like an overexcited wanking teenager as Mrs Squires let out a howl of pleasure.

It was pressing her thighs together that unbalanced her. She flung out a hand as she started to slip, but she couldn't grasp the wall. She only succeeded in snapping off a fingernail. She cried out involuntarily with the sudden pain and then cried out again when her ass hit the pavement with a great deal of force.

Damn! They must have heard her!

Rosie scrambled to her feet and, hobbling painfully and sucking her bleeding finger, she hurried off along the back of the mews. She shouldn't have watched. It was an intrusion for one thing, and for another she was now so horny that her pants were soaked. When she reached the end of the mews she turned and looked back, expecting retribution; but there was no one there.

Of course there wasn't.

Only the line of cars and vans, one of which she now noticed was a mid-sized red flatbed truck with gardening equipment stashed in the back. On the side of the van *Countryman Gardens* was written in gold Gothic letters, and beneath that were two telephone numbers, landline and mobile, plus a website and e-mail address. Without paper or pencil, Rosie memorised the web address and telephone numbers as best she could, and shambled off, aching, back to her car.

Chapter Two

‘**Y**ou limping?’ Lulu asked with mild concern, looking up from her latest sex toys catalogue as Rosie arrived back at base.

‘Base’ was a corner of Rosie’s Richmond flat, a corner stuffed with desk, files and computer gear, plus a big Harrods bag of assorted chocolate delights in case Lulu got peckish during the morning, which she frequently did. Lulu only ever worked in the mornings; Rosie had no idea what Lulu did with her afternoons, and she had never dared ask, but they seemed immutable and immovable, almost sacrosanct. It was understood between them that Lulu only *ever* worked mornings. So in the afternoons Rosie picked up what calls she could on the mobile if she had to be away from base. And she didn’t question Lulu about the afternoons, because Lulu was spectacularly good on the telephone during those hours that she consented to be on duty, so why upset the status quo?

‘I’m not limping,’ Rosie said irritably, dumping a bag of bulbs on the desk. Puffs of dirt and shreds of bulb skin billowed out of the netting. She looked tetchily at the sex catalogue Lulu clutched in her well-manicured hand. Here she was, trying to retrieve her business, her car, her entire way of life, and Lulu was slumped here enjoying perversions.

‘And what the hell is that?’ asked Rosie, her gaze suddenly riveted to a small blue bomb-shaped object in the catalogue.

‘You have led *such* a sheltered life,’ mourned Lulu. ‘It’s a love bullet, dumb ass. Used for all-over massage.’

Rosie snatched the catalogue. She turned it sideways, then upside-down. ‘And what about that?’ She pointed with her

bloodied finger.

Lulu looked at her friend and employer in disbelief. 'That's a vibrator, of course. Whatchoo think it is, a scary-looking ice lolly?'

Rosie pulled a face, but it was true that she was amazingly inexperienced in the wilder aspects of lovemaking, whereas Lulu seemed to be worryingly expert. Rosie wouldn't admit it to a soul, but she'd never tried a vibrator, not even one that didn't look as downright terrifying as the one in the catalogue.

'You *are* limping,' said Lulu, snatching the catalogue back. She pushed the bulbs fastidiously aside and unwrapped a fresh bar of chocolate.

'Give me some of that,' Rosie ordered.

'Oh, this is bad,' said Lulu, shaking her head so that the multicoloured beads woven into her hair extensions jangled and swung. Lulu snapped off a chunk of chocolate and Rosie grabbed it. She winced and stuffed it into her mouth. 'You've hurt your hand too. And you're comfort-eating. I know the signs, girlfriend. This is *bad*.'

'We've got a small problem,' admitted Rosie through a mouthful of chocolate.

God, was there anything in the world better than chocolate when you felt freaked? Only sex, she decided. And she'd had precious little of that lately, because she'd been so busy with her thriving business. But now all that was in danger. Her precious little car was in danger. Her flat could go. Hell, her very *ass* was in danger.

'How small a problem?' Lulu's spectacular almond-shaped eyes narrowed suspiciously.

'Well, smallish.' Rosie filched more chocolate. Lulu watched her in horror.

'Steady. I'd share my man with you and you know it, but ask me for my chocolate stash and I've got to say no.' Lulu carefully tucked the remains of the chocolate bar back into the Harrods carrier. Then she straightened up in her chair

and ran her hands down over her red T-shirted and exuberantly large breasts, steadying herself to receive Rosie's news. 'So give. What's this smallish problem we got, which looks like a pretty damned big problem from where I'm sitting, by the way.'

'Competition, that's the problem,' said Rosie, hiking one buttock on to Lulu's already overcrowded desk.

Rosie grabbed a spare piece of paper and a pen. She jotted down Countryman's telephone numbers and web address before she forgot them. She marvelled at the unkempt state of the desk – how could Lulu find a thing?

But Lulu seemed to manage very well. Lulu seemed to function best in an atmosphere of chaos, and was strictly an indoor girl. With Rosie, it was a measure of orderliness, and outdoors. She always felt faintly overheated when she was indoors, and was prone – much to Lulu's annoyance – to throwing open windows, even in the depths of winter.

Lulu snorted. 'Competition's a fact of life,' she said stoutly. 'What you gotta do is offer a better service, or a cheaper service, or some damned thing like that.'

'Yeah?' Rosie glared at her. 'And what if your competitor's offering something you can't offer?'

'Like what?'

'Sex.'

After a thoughtful moment Lulu gave a dismissive gesture. 'Ha! You can do sex, Rosie. It's like riding a bike – you never forget how to do that funky thing. Just get in there and grind away.'

Rosie gave her a calculating glance. 'Look, can you do something for me?'

'Is this about the sex?'

'This is about competition.'

'Oh.' Lulu looked briefly disappointed. 'Well, try me.'

Rosie nodded at the computer screen, which was currently given over to a slow-mo flower-opening screen saver. 'Call

up our database. Then match the clients that have cancelled our services with their details on the database.'

'That's simple,' said Lulu, frowning. 'I can do it right now.'

'Go on, then.'

Rosie stalked morosely around the room while Lulu's fingers flew over the keyboard. She opened the window wide. Lulu shot her a glare. Within minutes Lulu called her back, showing her two printouts – the cancellations, and the more detailed descriptions of those now ex-clients from the database. Rosie said nothing, just took the sheets and examined them.

'Well?' prompted Lulu after a few tense minutes.

'It's most of our female customers,' Rosie said, tossing the sheets on to the desk. 'This Countryman bloke's targeting the divorcees, the singles, the widows – all women and all under fifty. And he's giving them what I can't give them. Yes he's doing their gardening, but I also think he's offering them sexual services. The bastard.'

'What makes you think that?' asked Lulu, fascinated.

'I found him this morning with his cock up Mrs Squires.'

'Really?' Lulu looked more interested than scandalised, to Rosie's annoyance. She still felt uncomfortably wet between her legs from seeing the wretched man with his cock up Mrs Squires, and that made her feel even *more* irritated.

'Yes, really. He had her tied to the swing that I put up, and he was giving it to her just like she wanted.'

Lulu's brow clouded. She pouted, thinking it over, then she grinned. 'Well, you could do that too. If Mrs Squires swings both ways.'

Rosie gave her a look of total disbelief. Then she shook her head. 'Look, thanks for your input, Lulu, but I don't want to boff Mrs Squires, I just want to dig her garden.'

'Oh yeah? While meanwhile that man there is providing a Profit Enhanced Product. Not only the garden, but also the fuck. He probably gives out loyalty cards.'

Rosie had the distinct impression that Lulu was finding this situation funny.

‘Look,’ she said tetchily, ‘can you do something else? Can you get into *his* computer, get at *his* database? It’s important.’

Lulu shook her head. ‘No, that’s not my line of country,’ she said regretfully. ‘You need a real pro for that, a hacker. It’s beyond me.’

‘So where do I find a hacker?’

Lulu grinned one of her huge piano-keyboard grins. ‘Hey, no sweat.’ She winked. ‘Sure, *I* can’t do it. But I sure as hell know a man who can.’

The ‘man who could’ opened the front door of his Shepherd’s Bush terraced house three hours later and found Rosie Cooper standing on his doorstep. He saw a tangle-maned redhead wearing no make-up and smelling sweetly of essence of rose, clothed in black pedal pushers, block-heeled black gator-effect mules, a white T-shirt and a pretty sexy black leather biker jacket.

‘Hi, I’m Davey Taylor,’ he said, and stuck out his hand.

‘Rosie Cooper. Lulu phoned you about what I wanted?’ Rosie took his hand and shook it briefly. Actually she was rather impressed. She had expected a geek, a sad, bifocaled loser, but this guy wasn’t even wearing specs. He was tall, with a fuzz of dark curls, a healthy tan and snappy brown eyes. He was slightly skinnier than Rosie’s ideal, but he had a good pair of shoulders and well-muscled arms. He wore a baggy khaki T-shirt, combat trousers and high-top trainers. And he smelled clean.

‘Yeah, she told me the details. Come in.’

Rosie went past him into a plain cream-painted hall. He opened a door, and there was a cream-painted lounge. There was nothing on the walls, and the polished wooden floors were bare too. There was a large-screen television, a huge burgundy-coloured leather sofa, and in the far corner

there was a desk sagging under enough computer equipment to launch a shuttle. Above the desk was the room's only window, draped with white muslin. Through the muslin Rosie got a misty view of a garden ravaged by weeds.

'She gave you his name, his telephone numbers, his website address?' Rosie asked anxiously. 'She told you what I want? *Exactly* what I want?'

'She told me.' Davey went over to the desk. 'Take a seat.'

Rosie sat on the edge of the gargantuan sofa. 'Can you do it?'

Davey shot her an affronted look. 'Sure I can do it,' he said. 'But it'll cost.'

Rosie nodded, relieved. 'Of course I'm more than happy to pay for the work you do.' She thought about her dwindling resources. There was the van to be fixed. There was that irritating dent on the Beetle's hood to be knocked out. 'Um, how much is it likely to be?'

Davey was bashing away at the keyboard; lines of incomprehensible figures were flickering on the screen as he scrolled up.

'Oh, pretty reasonable I'd say.' Davey turned in his seat and flashed her a fetching even-toothed grin. 'I want a fuck, that's all.'

'Excuse me?' Rosie was sure she must have misheard him.

'A fuck,' Davey repeated patiently. 'Well, not just a fuck, maybe. A strip first. I've always wanted to hump a redhead. It's been an ambition of mine since college. Can't resist a red pelt.'

Rosie stared at him in complete outrage. She sprang to her feet. 'For God's sake!' She burst out. 'I said I was willing to pay you.'

'I'd prefer payment in kind. Call it bartering, if you like.'

'I *don't* like.'

'Then you don't want me to go ahead and hack into Countryman's files?'