

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Always The Bridegroom

Tesni Morgan

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## About the Book

Jody Hamilton is a landscape gardener who has returned from the States to attend her best friend's wedding. All is well until Jody finds out what a sex-crazed rotter her best friend is about to marry. With too many people involved in the preparations for the big day, bickering, back-stabbing and infidelities soon ensue. But in the middle of the mayhem, Jody thinks she may have found the man of her dreams.

Contemporary erotica as its sizzling best from the author of the bestselling *Heat of the Moment*.

## About the Author

Tesni Morgan is the author of *All The Trimmings*, *Always The Bridegroom*, *Country Matters*, *Earthy Delights*, *Heat Of The Moment*, *Masque Of Passion* and *The Ties That Bind*, all available from *Black Lace*.

Also by Tesni Morgan:

*Masque of Passion*

*Country Matters*

*The Ties that Bind*

*Earthy Delights*

*All the Trimmings*

*Heat of the Moment*

**Always the Bridegroom**  
Tesni Morgan

BLACK  
LACE

In memory of Hank, my husband,  
lover and soul-mate,  
31 May 1951-27 October 2002

# 1

EVERYTHING ALWAYS LOOKS smaller when I get back from a trip, thought Jody, as she dumped her travel bag in the hallway and headed for the kitchen. Her rambling Victorian house was an egg box in comparison to some of the homes she'd just visited in upstate New York; the palatial mansions of the Long Island set who had hired her to add zest to their gardens. 'Landscape architecture' they called it in their florid, overstated way. Her clients were fabulously wealthy, with the confidence that comes from being immensely privileged. They had encouraged her to sit by luxurious pools, soaking up the sun and sipping long cool drinks - including the eponymous Long Island Iced Tea, no less.

But one thing they didn't know in the good old US of A was how to make a halfway decent cup of tea. She had tried to explain to Paula, her American agent with whom she had stayed in Brooklyn, saying, 'You must have a rolling boil. Water from the hot tap just won't do.' But it didn't seem to sink in. Coffee they were OK with, but a long-standing Italian community had stood them in good stead for that, and these days most New York homes sported sophisticated coffee-making equipment. Foods from a multitude of different eating houses were only a phone call away and the city abounded with a variety of cultural cuisine. But still no good tea. Jody liked the New York lifestyle, but only in short bursts. I'm getting set in my ways, she mused, as she switched on the kettle - a bronze, old-fashioned looking thing that had replaced the sleek forest-green one with matching toaster. She found her

favourite mug - dark blue and Libra-oriented - it was all very reassuring.

The sentimental side of her remembered that it only needed Alec there to complete the feeling of all being right with the world. No one had met her at Heathrow this time around, and this was another reminder that she was now alone. Alec had moved out just before she went away. She reflected on why, ruefully reconstructing the scene that would have unfolded. He would have been overjoyed at first, unable to do too much for her. They would have had amazing sex, both starving after the separation. Then it would begin - the probing questions - his jealousy and insecurity.

Nah! she concluded and put him out of her mind. It's better like this. Sex? I do as well with my vibrator - faithful travelling companion that accompanies me abroad with no hassle, no peevishness, no pique and sulking, just ready to oblige whenever I switch on. But, all right, it's no use pretending. There is a part of me that wants to get laid. I'd like to feel a man's weight on me again.

She didn't mean to go down that road, and carried her cup into the hall, putting it down on the side table and letting her fingers idle over the phone. It would be so easy to ring Alec. Within half an hour, traffic permitting, they could be enjoying bed-rolling sex. Instead she sifted through the pile of mail Katrina had stacked up for her, mostly addressed to Jody Hamilton - not even Miss and certainly not Mrs.

Where was Katrina anyway - her live-in companion, confidante, friend of the bosom and keeper of the keys? Off on the town? Screwing some stunning bloke? Maybe even working, or called away on a project? She was a whiz kid at research, and had been head-hunted by various TV production companies. Jody missed her. She was easy on the eye and ear, charming, funny and understanding when

it came to relationships - beginning, ongoing or suffering the death throes.

The mail was mostly junk, but there was a card from her mother. 'When are you coming down? The weather is gorgeous. I'm riding a lot (got a stunning new groom) and swimming (remember Shaun?) and taking part in a show at the village hall. I miss you. We haven't had a good chat for yonks.'

Why not? Jody reflected. Get away from the rat race for a while. She was more weary than she realised. It was all very well being lionised, with hostesses falling all over themselves to invite her to their parties, and radio and television companies clamouring to have her on their programmes, but the price was exhaustion. All she wanted to do now was crawl into bed and sleep.

'Hi there! You're home!' carolled Katrina as she opened the front door and stalked into the hall, all long legs and slender elegance. 'How was America? Did you shag anyone? This is Bobby, by the way,' and she waved a hand towards the young man who had followed her.

He was a muscular piece of rough trade who owed much to working out. An inch or so taller than Katrina, as fair as she was dark - his bronzed skin was lightly furred, his bleached-blond locks gelled into spikes. His hands were the size of shovels and, from his stance, Jody could see he oozed casual confidence. He wore deliberately baggy, very low-slung jeans that skimmed his tempting backside and promised a package behind his zipper. His sinewy bare arms protruded from an acrylic mock-goatskin waistcoat with a fake fur lining and leather ties that almost, but not quite, pulled it together over his wide chest. It was one of those retro hippy garments that had been all the rage the previous winter. Goodness knows where he found that. It looked suspiciously like something of Katrina's.

'America was fine,' Jody answered, dragging her eyes from Bobby's crotch. 'But there was nothing remotely shag-

worthy.'

'You poor thing. Bobby's been staying here with me, helping guard your property,' Katrina said with a grin, as smug as a cat that's been at the cream. Jody had seen that look many times before. Katrina, not to put too fine a point on it, was a tart.

'Is my studio all right?'

'I've opened the windows a tad every day. It's been hot here. A freak April. We've been sunning ourselves in the garden, haven't we, Bobby? Had a flesh-fest. You should see me. I've got a tan, and a mark where my thong was.' She squirmed round, lifted her T-shirt, pushed her jogging pants down at the waist and stuck out her bottom.

'Show me later,' Jody said, then added casually, 'Seen anything of Alec?'

'Nope. Not a whisker. You two no longer a couple?'

'You've got it in one.'

'Thought I couldn't see any of his stuff about. What went wrong?'

'Have you got a year? Personally, I don't want to talk about it.'

'Oh, dear. Love sucks, doesn't it?'

'I'm not sure I was in love with him.'

'There there,' and Katrina put her arms round Jody from behind. She leaned back against her, inhaling her aromatic body spray. 'Shall we three go on the pull tonight? Well, not Bobby and me, we're an item, but you look as if you could do with some fun.'

'You'll take me to bars and expect a result? You know that's not my scene.'

'Give it a try,' Katrina urged. 'Maybe it's time you found yourself a new stud.'

'And maybe I need an early night,' Jody said dourly, catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror. 'Jesus! Will you look at those lines? I swear to God, I didn't have them when I left.'

‘Yes, you did, but were so keen to get to the Big Apple that you didn’t even notice. You look great, Jody, no more than twenty-one. How old are you?’

‘That’s a rude question,’ she retorted huffily, leaning closer to the glass and raking through her highlighted bob in search of grey hairs. She didn’t find a single one. ‘OK. I suppose you’ll have to know on my birthday, but that’s not till October. I shall be twenty-seven then. Isn’t that a bummer?’

‘You’re a mere baby,’ Katrina said consolingly, then turned to Bobby and ordered imperiously, ‘Go watch the telly, there’s a love. I’m doing reflexology on Jody. Away with you.’

‘There’s nothing nicer than one’s own bed,’ Jody said, stripping off when they reached her room. She pulled on her comfortable, faded, shabby towelling robe that she found hanging behind the door. ‘Are you sure you want to do this now?’

‘Lie down and relax. You know it makes sense.’

Katrina placed Jody’s feet on a pillow, then settled at the end of the bed and started. Jody could feel herself drifting. Katrina’s skilful fingers rubbed in aromatherapy oils and massaged the sole of her left foot, kneading and stroking, working between her toes, finding pressure points that corresponded to parts of her body that were out of alignment. She had slipped a meditation tape into the player and the dreamy music added to Jody’s sense of well being. The feelings in her foot were amazing, each toe sensitive to her touch. She would have fancied her had she swung the other way. As it was her toes were responding as if being manipulated by a man, each one turning into an erogenous zone. Electric charges shot up to her clitoris and nipples.

Katrina moved to her other foot, carefully covering the treated one with a towel to keep it warm. By now, Jody was almost gone – the adrenaline buzz of New York – the totally

exhilarating stress level – the flight home, all combining to send her to sleep. She was vaguely aware of Katrina stopping the treatment and tucking the duvet round her, then she dropped into a well of deep, dreamless oblivion.

A phone was ringing. A landline, not a mobile. Jody groped for the receiver on the nightstand. ‘Hello,’ she croaked groggily, not sure where she was or how she had got there.

‘Welcome home,’ said an instantly recognisable voice, a mixture of county set, boarding school and her own particular brand of huskiness.

‘Miriam.’

‘That’s me. How you doing?’

‘Jet-lagged. I was asleep. Where are you?’

‘In Heronswood, the centre of the universe. You know, that hick town where you were born.’

More awake now, Jody fumbled for her bag and found her cigarettes and lighter. She was going to try patches, but had put it off till after the trip. ‘So, what’s new?’ she asked, dragging the pillows behind her and resting back, blue smoke coiling towards the lacy canopy of her brass four-poster.

‘Nicole’s getting married.’

‘She is? Who to?’

‘Name of Gregory Crawford. New kid on the block. Where have you been, kiddo? Didn’t you know this? I would have thought you’d have caught up with the goss at Christmas.’

‘I didn’t go home. Spent it with Alec’s parents in an attempt to make it work,’ Jody said, getting flashes of a suburban semi-detached with all the traditional Yuletide trimmings, and Alec’s mother, hot and flushed from so much cooking, falling all over herself in her eagerness to have them signed, sealed and delivered to the altar.

‘Did it?’ Miriam asked.

‘No. It was the final nail in the coffin.’

‘Sorry. He seemed a nice man.’ Miriam’s sympathy made Jody want to cry, till her friend added brightly, ‘That’s OK. We can be the Three Musketeers again, you and me and Nicole. Maybe not her. She’s gone overboard about Greg.’

‘Is he fit?’

‘Oh, yes, he’s fit all right. A tall, dark and handsome solicitor. Suave, too, into politics in a big way. Fancies himself as a Member of Parliament.’

‘Can you see Nicole at Number 10? I thought she was into horses and that surly, Heathcliff-lookalike farmer. What’s his name? Ben Templeton?’

‘All that changed as soon as she met Greg at a garden party. I’ve never seen a girl so lovestruck. It’s pathetic.’

‘I take it you don’t like him much.’

‘Not much. But that’s just me. You may find him as desirable as she does. Come on down and take a look. Unless you’ve got anything more exciting on offer. You can meet him and his friend; a rigger type called Piers. He has political ambitions, too, but I’ve got plans for him and he doesn’t even know it.’

Miriam’s voice took on a deeper note and Jody could picture her wearing a mischief-inspired smile and shaking back her tousled mane of auburn hair, hazel eyes sparkling wickedly. She always had been the most forthright of the three friends who had attended the same schools and been brought up in the same market town. Like Jody, she had migrated to London and pursued a flourishing career in publishing. She had a reputation for being ruthless – Miriam Bowater, Killer Queen, using her brains more than her well-developed mammaries to clinch deals, but she headed for Heronswood whenever possible.

‘You’ve not found a man yet, long term not one-nighters?’ Jody asked, wondering how it was that she and Miriam, supposed to be the best looking of the trio, had failed in their quest, while Nicole, quiet and shy, was about to walk down the aisle.

'Sod that for a lark,' Miriam retorted. 'I'm still the only single woman at dinner-parties given by this couple or that, where I'm bored rigid listening to smug fat husbands and their smug pregnant wives droning on about the new house, the new car, the new job and how well they're doing. They manage to be so patronising.'

'I know. Been there. Done that. They probe, too, showing an unhealthy interest in one's love life.'

'The husbands do. Leery, and asking intimate, loaded questions. As if I'd tell them anyway, the dirty bastards.'

'What is it about young marrieds?' Jody mused. 'I guess I'll be on that treadmill again. As soon as word gets round that Alec and I are history, the invitations will start pouring in, with them very kindly and quite unnecessarily trying to fix me up with a date.'

'The thought makes me shudder,' Miriam agreed. 'They don't seem to realise that we might be glad to be free spirits, doing it from choice.'

'Independent and OK,' Jody replied. 'Who needs a man, anyway?'

'Who are you kidding? I do.'

'You can't be desperate. I thought you had loads of men queuing up to get into your knickers.'

'Don't exaggerate, darling,' Miriam drawled. 'I'll admit there's been a fair few, but no one new and interesting and challenging. I've been so bored I recently I put an advert in the Woman-seeking-Man column of a freebie holistic magazine that concentrates on Getting More Out Of life. All Health Revolution, and how to improve your body, mind and spirit. Full of self-help info, you know the kind of thing.'

'Miriam, you didn't?' Jody said, laughing. Trust her to come up with some crazy idea, but the Lonely Hearts column of an alternative publication was a new one.

'I did so, just for the crack. I wrote, "Who wants to come on a quest after truth with me? Mother's boys, alcoholics,

sleaze-bags, clueless idiots and other no-hopers need not reply.””

‘I’ll bet you didn’t have any answers.’

‘Wrong. I had half a dozen, rang up three, dated one and ignored the rest. It was a waste of time. I drove to Kendal as arranged over the phone, and met him in a bar. Would you believe, far from being poetic and dishy, like he said, he looked like my father and dressed like him, too. Lying toe-rag.’

‘It seems to get harder as one gets into one’s late twenties. But then, I’ve got out of the way of it, being with Alec for so long. Having said that, I could have got laid in New York – several times by different blokes.’

‘What, all at once? I’ve always fantasised about a gangbang.’

‘Don’t be daft. It didn’t happen,’ Jody assured her, visualising the smooth, clean-cut boyish faces of some of the men to whom she had been introduced, her American agent detailed to fulfil her every whim.

There had been older ones who had chanced their arm. Husbands of clients, or clients themselves intrigued by having a talented, artistic English woman in their midst. None of them had appealed, or maybe she was still too raw about Alec. She had opted for the non-adventurous route and had gone to bed with her vibrator.

‘Well, I suggest that you take a break and meet up with Nicole and me. She wants us to be bridesmaids.’

‘Oh, no,’ Jody groaned. ‘You mean in daffodil-yellow taffeta with sweetheart necklines and puff sleeves?’

‘Not quite. I think we’ll be given choices, but her grandmother is adamant about it being traditional.’

‘Not *her* mother?’

‘You know Deirdre. Wouldn’t say boo to a goose. Her husband’s a control freak and so is his mother, the manipulative Maggie. What they say goes with regard to anything that happens in and around the family.’

'And they approve of Greg?'

'One hundred and twenty per cent. Maggie's a snob who would adore to have her granddaughter a politician's wife. She's getting more unbearable daily. Your mother can't stand her, always sticking up for Deirdre, but no one takes any notice, Maggie sweeping all before her like a juggernaut.'

The more Jody listened, the more she felt drawn towards Heronswood and its inhabitants. Once, she couldn't get away from there fast enough, so strong was the lure of London. Now, she found that she needed the quiet backwater of the country town. She drew strength from it to fire her imagination. A stroll among the ancient standing stones on the remote, windy plain was enough to inspire her. She reproduced the feeling of majesty and mystery in her own work - those solid concrete pyramids and ziggurats that she fashioned, inlaid with pieces of glass, or tiles, or pebbles, anything that reflected colour and gave a sense of natural grandeur to her creations.

'I've some designs to complete for Aaron Abbotson.'

'*The Aaron Abbotson*, the film director?'

'That's right. I did one for his Manhattan home and he wants another for his mansion in Los Angeles.'

'My, my, aren't we the namedropper? I suppose he made a pass at you?'

'He did, as a matter of fact,' Jody replied, aware that she had momentarily forgotten her woman-of-independence stance. She had honestly been flattered to have captured the attention of such a man, famous for his modern interpretation of classic tales such as *Romeo and Juliet*, and *La Bohème*. 'But I kept it together and turned him down.'

'What's got into you? Taken vows of chastity or something?'

'He's very much older and very much married, and I don't do married men. Too much respect for wives.'

'Me too. Anyhow, you can work in Heronswood, can't you?'

'With Mum wittering on?'

'Stay with me. I've moved into that cottage in Baker's Spinney.'

'Rented?'

'Buying.'

'Nice one. A love nest?'

'I should be so lucky.'

So it was arranged. After hanging up, Jody showered and dressed, but before doing so, she wandered into her studio, a wooden structure that had once been a summerhouse till she extended it. There she ran her hands over half-completed works, the stone smooth under her fingers, warming at her touch. She apologised to them as if they were children she had neglected. She had a couple of orders to complete for a high-flying footballer and his glamour model wife, who had chosen her over a TV garden designer who was all the rage. She had till the autumn to deliver. Home called her strongly. Or rather Heronswood. She needed to recharge her batteries.

'Tell her to get stuffed,' advised Nanette Hamilton, serving Deirdre with a cup of coffee. She then parked herself on a rush-seated stool, jodhpurs stretched round her backside, the heels of her riding boots hitched on the strut.

'I can't do that,' Deirdre answered from the other side of the kitchen table, appalled at the thought.

'Why not?' Nanette knew perfectly well why, but still hoped to inject a modicum of fighting spirit into her people-pleasing friend. 'Nicole's your daughter, isn't she? And you are the mother of the bride, not Maggie.'

Deirdre fluttered her hands helplessly, saying, 'You don't understand.'

'I do. Too bloody much, if you ask me. I know an interfering old harridan when I see one.'

'It's all right for you,' Deirdre said with a sigh, shoulders drooping, and Nanette fought the urge to shake her. 'Ronald does whatever she says.'

'Ronald is a wimp. I'm sorry, Deirdre. I know he's your husband and all, but he bullies you and everyone he contacts, be it in business or to do with the council, but he's under his mother's thumb. I wouldn't have it. Why d'you think I split up with Allan? It wasn't his adultery so much, or him thinking he had the God-given right to walk all over me. It was his way of comparing me to his mother and finding me wanting. No woman should be forced to stand that.'

She was surprised at how heated she became when Allan's name cropped up. They had been divorced for years and, fortunately, the Manor House belonged to her, inherited from her father, so he had had difficulty in laying any legal claim to it. He'd tried, of course. Didn't they always, despite their protestations to do the opposite? But when push came to shove and money was involved, all this went out of the window.

'I'm lucky to be comfortably off,' she said, thinking aloud. 'I haven't had to depend on him for a penny. The kids have been educated, flown the nest and done well for themselves, with no thanks to that dick-head. Jody's due back, by the way. See if you can grab her and talk over the vexed question of the bridesmaids' dresses without your mother-in-law being there.'

She refilled their cups and studied her friend across the table. Deirdre was one of those genteel women who had been taught that it wasn't the done thing to answer back or stand up for herself or enjoy sex. The feminist movement had passed her by and left her standing. Now she was fidgeting nervously, almost wringing her hands that were as slender as the rest of her. Long coltish legs were hidden by drab beige trousers, and her short nondescript-coloured hair with a natural wave, pale-blue eyes and a flawless

complexion made Nanette think of her as a typical English rose – but one that couldn't weather a storm. She was a pretty woman, but she hadn't a clue.

When Nanette recalled the female members of the Heronswood Operatic Society, to which she belonged, she wanted to spit. The wives of doctors, lawyers, farmers and schoolteachers, they jumped at the chance of showing off, talented or not. Some were sincere, supporting the twice-yearly productions (a Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera and the traditional pantomime), but the rest were scheming and manipulative, using it as a cover for intrigue and social climbing.

Not that Nanette was innocent. She admitted to being as white as the driven slush, but then she was free to do as she liked. Running a riding school gave her ample opportunity to sample young male talent, like her latest groom, Kevin Moore. And there was her faithful standby, the more mature handyman, Shaun Sullivan. He serviced her as well as her swimming pool. All in all, she didn't go without, tossed her head at snide remarks and went her merry way. She was promiscuous, but it did not mean she had to be a bitch.

'Ronald has invited your ex to the wedding,' Deirdre murmured apologetically.

'I don't doubt he has. Birds of a feather and all that,' Nanette rejoined acerbically. 'And I guess he'll bring *her*, too.'

'You mean his wife, Patricia?'

'I do. Jesus, but they're well suited. Haven't two brain-cells between them. Only a kind of low cunning.'

She spoke ironically, but Allan's recent venture into matrimony had annoyed her, and this was unreasonable. After all, she never hesitated to screw any man who roused her own interest. But it was the idea of Patricia becoming stepmother to Jody, Adam and Sinclair that riled her. Not that either of them thought much of her, going to their

father's wedding under protest, but Nanette was happier if there was no contact between them. Nothing had changed. Allan was still the same creep that she had divorced, except that there were now two of them.

'Is Jody staying here?' Deirdre asked, casting an eye round the rangy old-fashioned kitchen where Nanette had kept most of the original features, though updating it with the latest technology.

'I don't think so. Miriam's been in touch, and wants her to visit her holiday cottage in Baker's Spinney. Jody's very busy, of course, but is putting everything on hold.'

'I'll try to see her alone,' Deirdre promised, standing up and carrying her mug to the sink.

'Don't worry about that. Just bung it in the dishwasher,' Nanette said, almost impatiently. Deirdre seemed to be perpetually apologising for existing and trying to justify that existence by becoming everyone's personal slave. 'Look. You should get out more,' Nanette suddenly blurted out. 'Do something for yourself. Why don't you join the HOS?'

'I can't sing or act,' Deirdre exclaimed, horrified.

'No matter. We need people backstage.'

'I suppose I could make tea for the cast during rehearsals,' Deirdre said timorously. 'And I do play the flute a little. Although I'm very rusty.'

'That's better than nothing. We practise at the village hall on Monday nights. It'll get you away from Ronald and his dragon mother.'

'I don't think he'll approve.'

'Stuff him!' Nanette advised.

It was 1.30 when Deirdre left and Nanette went upstairs and changed into a minuscule bikini. Riding kept her in trim, but she did not deceive herself. Her hips were too wide, her buttocks too fleshy for such a brief garment, her naked breasts were large and, like everything else when one reached middle age, tended to slide downwards. She

couldn't really pin all the blame on gravity. She liked her food and refused to starve herself. She secured her mahogany-tinted hair on the top of her head, then wound an Indian cotton sarong round her, knotting it across her chest. She heard a van drive up, the tyres spewing gravel as the pool man braked round the back. She snatched up her towel and bottle of tanning lotion, a little tremor of lust in her lower belly.

Shaun was down there, fiddling with the filter system in the pump-house. He had left the radio on in the van. The theme tune from *The Archers* infiltrated the sunny scene. Two o'clock in the afternoon and all's well; so much more the National Anthem than *God Save the Queen*.

'Hi, Mrs Hamilton,' he said, in his beguiling Irish lilt. 'And it's a fine day.'

This was about the limit of their conversation: the weather and the annoyance of wasps that landed on the water's surface - he was constantly fishing them out with a net. It didn't matter. Nanette wasn't interested in the contents of his brain; only what lay in his trousers.

She angled the lounge so that it faced the sun, spread out her towel and removed her sarong.

Shaun materialised at her side, one large hand restraining her as she went to lie down. She read the signals, saw the sweat glistening on his craggy face and wetting his gypsy curls. With that raven-black hair, olive skin and peat-dark eyes, she liked to imagine he was descended from the Spaniards who had traded along the Galway coast for five hundred years.

He kissed her neck and it connected with her loins. He cupped her breasts in his calloused hands and the nipples rose, hard as cherry stones. She could feel the sun's rays burning and wanted to apply lotion; this was only the second time she had been out, distrusting this freakish heatwave. This flashed through her mind and she weighed up the advantages. To have him now and oil up afterwards,

kind of get it over with and then concentrate on acquiring a decent tan, or to make him wait? His lips travelled from her ears to her breasts, his stubble accentuating the tingling sensation. His mouth softened when it closed over one nipple, sucking and nibbling, and she decided to go for it.

There was no one about, the pool and terrace concealed behind stone walls and burgeoning bushes, but, 'Into the pump-house,' he muttered, surfacing from her breasts.

Nanette was accustomed to giving orders and Shaun's brusqueness was just what she wanted. It made her feel giggly and girlish, no matter how absurd, and she broke from him and headed for the small structure close by. Screened by shrubs, it contained the electrical equipment needed to keep the water sparkingly clear. It was cool inside, bringing her out in goosebumps, and she rather wished she had stayed in the sunshine. Then Shaun followed her and closed the door, plunging them into dimness, with rays of light penetrating the gloom from small windows in the walls. The machinery hummed and water sloshed till he pressed a switch. Silence descended.

She reached for him in the same moment that he opened his arms. Her breasts chafed against his soiled white vest. She pushed it up from the waist and caressed the matt of black hair that circled the wine-red discs of his nipples and sprouted to his throat. His arms and back were equally hairy.

In fact, as she had said to Deirdre, shocking her by this disclosure of her intimacy with the handyman, 'It's like shagging the shag pile.'

He chuckled deep in his chest, and tugged at the thongs each side of her tiny black bikini bottom. She felt it fall to the stone floor, felt his bulge pressing into her from behind the worn buttonholed fastening of his jeans. She loved that feeling; the heat and tumescence before the actual disclosure of the cock, the anticipation of confronting that one-eyed serpent, the longing to see it, touch it, guide it

into her depths, but only after she had been satisfied. And here lay the flaw, the fly in the ointment, Nature's greatest disappointment - the fact that the clitoris rarely made contact with the cock-root during penetration.

Once, she had thought it was something to do with her physical make-up. Then she had read more and more outpourings from enlightened females who wanted to reveal the clitoral truth. She had experimented, shown her lovers what to do, and achieved orgasm by herself or with them by rousing her sensitive little organ in the right way. The first time she had sex with Shaun she had been delighted to find that he was that rarity - a man who already had a certificate in clitology.

He practised it now, his fingers parting her labia and caressing the sliver of flesh between. As she rose towards pleasure's peak, she thought she almost loved him. She trusted him; knew that he wouldn't suddenly stop and try to fuck her without seeing to her pleasure first. He'd never leave her frustrated and angry. He wasn't one of those men who imagined that she would climax when he did, and that penetration led to completion for her. Shaun waited, very obviously enjoying rousing her.

'That's it, *acushla*,' he murmured, his voice thickening. 'Come for me. I want to feel you do it.'

This did it. She came off like a rocket, moaning her pleasure into his mouth. Without taking his lips from hers, he clasped her round the bottom and lifted her till her thighs were round his waist. He reached down and unbuttoned, his cock springing out like an animal from its cage, nudging against her bare, wet and open delta. She flung her arms round his neck and leaned back so that the angle of her body encouraged his possession of her. He bent slightly at the knees and pushed. She groaned as she felt the bulbous head and the first few inches of cock sliding inside her, giving her muscles something to clench around.

Her spine was pressed against the cold metal of machinery. This gave him greater purchase. He lunged and she rode him, going faster. And he responded, chasing his climax, while her body shook with the force of his desire. He threw back his head and gasped, face contorted, eyes closed, mouth wide open. Then he came, and she relished the feel of hot pulsing cock spurting inside her. He paused and then lowered her slowly till her feet touched the concrete. She smoothed her hair and retrieved her bikini.

'Will you oil my back for me?' she asked, as they left the pump-house and strolled to the poolside.

Closing the door of her bedroom - with its Neo-Georgian features that followed the style of her father's Neo-Georgian, five-bedroomed, conservatory-boasting, double-garaged house on the outskirts of Heronswood - Nicole went to the computer desk and took out a leather-bound book. It unlocked with a small key. She studied her name on the cover: Nicole Carpenter - Her Journal.

Intrigued by diary keeping ever since she dipped into that kept by the seventeenth-century gossip, Samuel Pepys, she had made several forays into keeping a record herself, starting enthusiastically, then finding it gradually tailed off. This year, however, she had bought herself a journal that looked like one owned by a demure, Edwardian miss. Now, at last, she had something worth recording. Magic had entered her life in the breathtakingly handsome shape of Gregory Crawford.

I should be using a quill pen, she thought, then wrote, Monday 20 April. Here she paused and flipped back to the beginning of the year, re-reading what she had written.

'This has been the most wonderful Christmas of my whole life. And to start the New Year with Greg! I simply can't believe it. Why should such a gorgeous man want to marry me? I wish I'd been keeping this diary when I met him at a church fund raising garden party last August. I

suppose I didn't want to tempt fate. Couldn't credit that someone like him would be remotely interested in me.'

She stopped reading and went to the cheval mirror that topped her reproduction Chippendale dressing table. Her father didn't go in for antiques. As he was fond of saying, 'I like furniture that looks old but is new, if you know what I mean.'

That's Dad all over, she thought, for she was savvy enough to tell the difference between genuine and reproduction. But I can forgive him this, for it is him who has encouraged Greg and let us become engaged and is spending a fortune on the wedding. I've never been so happy.

But as she critically studied her reflection, she was again puzzled as to why Greg had proposed. He was older than her, thirty-four, well educated, well spoken and worldly, whereas she was small and timid. He even referred to her as 'Mousekin'. Her hair was fair and had a natural wave, like her mother's, but whatever she tried to do, it always reverted to falling to her shoulders from a central parting. Her face was kitten-shaped, her eyes blue, reflecting whatever colour she wore - sometimes turquoise - or greyish, even green. It's as well I don't go for purple or black, she thought.

Never satisfied with her appearance, she took any form of criticism to heart. She could be told a hundred times that she was attractive, yet one word concerning her tendency to put on weight or a pimple or a bad hair day and she was plunged into the depths of misery.

'This is why I love Greg so much,' she confided to her diary. 'He praises me to the skies and never, ever puts me down. Even Gran doesn't dare say a thing about me while he's there. He charms her anyway, just as he does everyone he meets. I've never met anyone so popular. To hear him talk makes me feel so feeble. He's an orator, a caring, concerned person and will make a fine MP. That's what Dad

says, too. But when we're alone and he kisses me, I get feelings I've never had before - well, only when looking at pictures of actors I fancy or playing with myself sometimes. I want to go to bed with him and find out what all the fuss is about. I wish I wasn't a virgin, for he'll probably find this boring. I expect he's had loads of beautiful women. OK, so I'm twenty-five and that oddity, a virgin. It's not for want of trying. I've had boyfriends and enjoyed going out with them and being part of a couple, but when they tried to stick their tongues in my mouth or touch my breasts or get a hand under my skirt, I've always sort of frozen. I had begun to wonder if I was a lesbian, but Greg has proved me otherwise. The frustrating thing is that he says we must wait till our wedding night. It's all very romantic and lovely of him, but I want to do it now!

She threw down the book and sprawled among the frilled pillows that matched the floral cotton curtains that draped the tester bed. The sun slanted through the diamond-paned windows, flashing off mirrors and gilt and all the other objects that decorated this bedroom. She had always lived at home, apart from a stint at college. Her father, though conceding that a smattering of education was advantageous for girls, had chosen to invest money in his son. But the wedding was another matter entirely, and he was prepared to spend lavishly to 'see her launched', as he jovially put it, making her feel like a battleship having a bottle of champagne smashed against its hull.

Although the date was some months off, the whole house had become a power station centred around the wedding arrangements. There was so much to do - the guest list, the wedding present list, the caterers, the florists, the cars (she wanted a white stretch limo while Grandma Maggie preferred a carriage and pair), the photographer, the journalists (Greg was an up-and-coming politician), the bridal gown and going-away outfit, the bridesmaids. So far there were two, Miriam and Jody, but Greg had unearthed a