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Modern Love

Editor: Sharp

MODERN LOVE

An anthology of
erotic fiction by women



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In real life, make sure you practise safe sex.

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Introduction



Black Lace is the first series of books to recognise women's erotic fiction as a genre. Before the series was launched in the UK in summer 1993, there was very little material of this nature which was designed with a female audience in mind. Nancy Friday, author of *My Secret Garden*, was one of the first people to recognise female sexual fantasy as a valid and exciting area for exploration and study. Her work was non-judgmental and legitimised no-holds-barred writing about sex from women's viewpoints. Despite this, erotic *fiction* remained the preserve of men. Friday's book was categorised as non-fiction/sexology and was first published in the early 1970s. Much writing about women and sex in the following two decades took a journalistic path; it was where women felt comfortable.

Of course, women writing explicit stories is nothing new; Anais Nin was working in this area 50 years ago and her work continues to sell long after her death. It has taken a long while for publishers to realise that women want to read erotic stories which aren't deliberately obscured by metaphorical or circumspect writing and which only hint at sex. We have been told that women 'aren't interested in reading about such things' and 'prefer romantic novels'. The female erotic imagination is a storehouse of secret treasures whose diversity constitutes a genre in its own right. Men have always been able to access sexually explicit material and have controlled its production and distribution for centuries. At Black Lace, we think women have as much right as men to read blatantly arousing fiction which is their

own. Our readers like the fact that Black Lace books guarantee female authorship.

Modern Love brings together extracts from some of the most popular and best-selling Black Lace titles which have contemporary settings. Whether set in the corridors of academia or a haunted mansion; on a river trip in New Orleans or in an opera house in London, each story is imbued with a rich and unashamed sense of erotic escapism. Some of our authors are fond of exploring the darker facets of the female imagination; places where 'sex and shopping' novels have feared to tread. It is important to remember that the free-flowing imagination is not censored by notions of political correctness; any imprint which gives a free rein to explore sexual fantasy is going to encounter writing in which characters challenge notions of 'acceptable' behaviour. Erotic fantasy is an exciting and endlessly fascinating subject. We've no shortage of manuscripts from women of all ages and walks of life, and we are confident that Black Lace books will continue to reflect the infinite diversity of the female erotic imagination.

Kerri Sharp October 1996

Aria Appassionata

Juliet Hastings

Tess Challoner is due to play Carmen in a new production of the opera which promises to be as passionate and explicit as it is intelligent. But Tess is inexperienced. To play Carmen convincingly she needs to know a lot more about physical desire than she does.

In the following extract from *Aria Appassionata*, Tess is reflecting on her life, her lovers and her future – and taking positive action to get herself into the role of opera’s greatest femme fatale.

The second piece is from Juliet’s first Black Lace story, *Crash Course*. Kate is a successful management consultant whose skill at teaching assertiveness and interpersonal dynamics to business employees is well respected. When she has to run a course at short notice, she is pleased to find that three of the four participants are attractive, powerful men and Kate takes the opportunity to bring out the best in them. In the chosen extract, Sophie, the only woman on the course, confronts Kate about her methodology but soon finds herself succumbing to her persuasive charm.

Juliet Hastings has written six books for Black Lace. Although comfortable with contemporary settings, her knowledge of history has provided the series with a wealth of meticulously researched and beautifully eroticised historical detail. Julia’s other Black Lace novels are: *White Rose Ensnared* (15th-century England), *Forbidden Crusade* (set in the Holy Land in 1160) and *The Hand of Amun* (Ancient Egypt).

Aria Appassionata



Tess returned home alone and lowered her bag slowly to the floor inside the door, sighing heavily. Although it was late, the June light was still bright outside the flat, and green leaves stirred at the tops of the trees, level with her windows.

'I'm tired,' Tess told the flat. And she was, very tired. For a week she had worked hard at rehearsals, gone to movement and body workshops run by Adam, visited her teacher for technical coaching through the hardest parts of the score, worked with Julian at solos and ensembles so that she understood what the conductor wanted, and each night she had gone to Tony's flat and allowed herself to be drawn into his sexual world, which each night had become more and more strange, exotic and peculiarly satisfying. There were blue bruises on the white skin of her haunches where Tony's strong fingers had gripped her tightly and pulled her violently back onto his throbbing phallus, and her wrists and ankles were red and raw where he had tied her up. She knew that he behaved as if he owned her, but she could hardly decide whether he was in love with her and eager for her to experience the whole gamut of lust, or whether he hated her and simply wanted to degrade and humiliate her. Either way, he was opening her eyes to an entirely new sensual world. But sexual discovery was time and energy consuming. Tess had hardly been in her own flat all week, and now she was so exhausted that she could hardly see it.

She walked wearily into the kitchen, thinking with pleasant anticipation of a mug of hot chocolate, and opened the fridge. An unmistakably cheesy smell told her that the milk had gone off. 'Bugger,' she said.

There wasn't much point in thinking about hot chocolate without milk, and Tess simply didn't feel up to going back into Hampstead to find some. So she slammed the fridge door, picked up an apple from the fruit bowl and stalked through to the bathroom, moodily munching.

She looked at herself in the bathroom mirror. There were rings under her eyes and her skin looked pasty. 'Early night for you,' she said to her reflection. 'Nice hot bath and an early night.'

Moving slowly, she turned on the taps and then pulled off her clothes and dumped them into the laundry basket. It was almost full, because she hadn't even had a chance to do the washing for about a week. I'll run out of clean knickers soon, she thought, and then where will I be? And then she reflected that Tony would probably approve heartily of her going without knickers, and the thought made her laugh.

Presently she was naked and the bath was almost full. Tess poured a little body oil into the water and added a few drops of tea tree oil, because her voice felt furry and she wanted to inhale the sharp, soothing steam while she soaked. She got into the bath and lay back, looking up at the ceiling.

After a while the clean, antiseptic smell of the oil cleared her head and made her feel able to sing a little. She closed her eyes and began to murmur to herself, very soft and low:

*There's somebody here who's waiting
for me,
I hope that he turns out to be
Someone who'll watch over me . . .*

Then she stopped and lay still, breathing deeply and frowning to herself. Why sing that song? What did it mean?

Every man Tess had known had been, in the physical sense, someone to watch over her. Leo had taught her how her body could give her pleasure and how she could give pleasure to a man. Dan had used her, but his extraordinary beauty had made her actively desire him. And Tony – Tony was possessive, physically affectionate, kinky, masterful. Certainly someone to watch over her. So why sing that song now, and why sing it in that tone of soft, aching longing?

Carmen wouldn't have wanted someone to watch over her. Tess shifted a little in the bath, letting the warm, silky water play over her floating breasts and between her legs. She thought of Carmen, her character, as she would like to portray her. Strong, beautiful, callous, doomed. Doomed because she insisted upon her passionate independence, her freedom to love whom she chose, and a man's jealousy could not bear it.

Tess caught the chain with her toe and let a little of the water run out of the bath. Then, hardly knowing what she was doing, she picked up the shower head and turned on the shower. Hot water pulsed out on to her warm wet body. She let her head tilt back so that her hair floated around her and gently, slowly guided the spray between her legs.

She let out a long, blissful sigh as the tingling stream of water caressed her thighs, her labia, the entrance to her sex. The bobbing orbs of her breasts tensed and tautened with sudden arousal and her nipples erected, stiff symbols of desire. The beat of the water on her sensitive flesh was almost too much, and for a moment she drew the shower head away, letting the weight of the flow fall onto the furred mound of her pubis. But it wasn't enough, and after a moment she moved the spray infinitesimally, until one glittering thread of water sprang through the air and struck the swelling bud of her clitoris.

‘Ah,’ Tess breathed slowly. Her diaphragm rose and fell, drawing air deep into her lungs, and as she breathed her hips also lifted and fell, surging up towards the insistent touch of the spray.

She felt her body floating in the warm water as if she were the only living creature in the world, as if she were isolated and alone, seeking her solitary pleasure without compunction or shame. The ripples lapped across her breasts, stroking her tight nipples, and between her pale, parted thighs the shower beat down on to her quivering sex, pummelling the sensitive flesh with unbearable pleasure.

For a moment Tess thought of Tony, his smooth, olive skin and his dark eyes and hair; the way that when he prepared to take her his lips would curl with lustful anger as if he were the toreador and she the bull, run down, exhausted, helpless, waiting for him to plunge his spear into her shuddering body. But although she did not consciously know it, her body had had enough of being Tony’s slave. She wanted variety, and of itself her brain provided the image that would accompany her pleasure.

A mermaid on a rock, silver-green tail coiled over the slimy, cold stone. Her breasts are small and round and high and her body is white as a corpse’s, starred with her coral lips and her rosy nipples like bright shells upon a beach of white sand. Her eyes are the colour of her tail, the colour of the sea, and her hair is dark red, like dried blood. It is long and thick and shining and she sits very calmly on the rock amid the foaming sea and combs her long tresses with a comb of pearl. She is beautiful, but with an unearthly beauty, a deadly beauty, and her eyes are cold as the waves and quite pitiless.

She lifts her head, never once interrupting the rhythm of her combing, like the rhythm of the waves that beat against her limpet-studded rock. In the distance she has seen a ship. It is a warriors’ ship, brightly painted, and on its square sail is drawn the figure of a bull. She can see the men in it at

their oars, naked for their labour, rowing with all their strength against the surging might of the contrary sea.

Men are her prey, she needs them as a beast needs meat to live. Her cold eyes brighten and she flickers her tail against the rock like a cat that sees the mouse. She combs and combs her heavy hair, and as she combs she opens her soft, red lips and begins to sing.

Her voice is like wine, like dark, soft fur, like a coil of smoke that seeps from the hearth fire to draw the man home from the hunt. She does not sing loudly, and yet that sweet dark voice carries over the crash and roar of the waves and flies straight to the ears of the young warriors rowing their ship. They hear it and stop their work, helpless, enchanted, dumbstruck and frozen by the promise of delight in the mermaid's song.

Still she sings, and now the young men tremble. Her song is wordless, and each of them hears what he wishes, and each of them hears her singing of the zenith of sensual delight. Each one hears her telling him how she longs for him, how her small snowy breasts are taut with yearning, how her nipples are tight and hard as rose-hips, how her soft white flesh aches for him to come to her and take her in his arms and possess her with his strong, male body, thrusting himself into her, making her sweet voice cry out in pleasure for him alone. They see her beautiful whiteness, her breasts stirring as she combs her hair, and they forget that she is a sea creature, that where a woman has a sex she has nothing but a fish's tail, and they cannot tell that her song is no more than the web a spider spins to catch a fly. They drop their oars and begin to fight among themselves for the privilege of flinging themselves over the side into the heaving surf to swim to her.

The mermaid watches them and sings still, and now her song is more urgent. The young men fight furiously upon their shuddering ship, drawing blood, for they can hear her singing, *Draw me on to ecstasy! Make me yours! Take your*

pleasure in my body, spill your seed within me, ravish me, possess me!

At last one of them pushes another aside and leaps up on to the side of the ship, which is protected and bedecked with painted shields. For a moment he stands poised, splendidly naked, his beautiful body taut with eagerness, his face bright with anticipation as he hears the siren's song. He throws himself at last from the ship's gunwale and cleaves the foaming sea in a perfect dive, and the mermaid smiles and drops her pearly comb and slides from her rock to meet him in the tumbling waves.

Her song has ceased, and the other young men on the ship suddenly stop fighting and draw apart and look at each other with horror in their eyes. While she sang they were bewitched, and now they are freed they know their danger and run to their oars to try to save their foundering ship, unable to spare even a glance for their companion as he cuts through the surf towards the white body of the mermaid. But they are too late, they are doomed, the rocks are snapping their eager teeth at the ship's frail timbers and in moments they will be shivered into spars and flotsam.

In the sea the mermaid dives and circles once around the swimming youth. He is as strong and beautiful as her cold heart could wish. She swims up beside him and rubs her soft breasts against him. His body is muscular and warm and it pleases her to touch him, as it pleases a cat to rub itself against a stranger's hand. She laughs to see how his flesh reacts to her, his strange male sex stiffening despite the cold kiss of the fierce sea, and he laughs to see her laughing. She presses her chilly skin close to him and reaches up to kiss him with her mouth. Her tail locks around his thighs and her arms wrap around him, pinioning his hands to his sides, and with the tip of her tail she caresses that strange stiff rod of flesh, rubbing it, stroking the soft skin up and down until the young man groans into her open mouth and his body heaves against her and warm pearly

liquid bursts from the end of his male organ and floats like froth on the surface of the waves.

He is limp in her arms, as if he has spurted his strength into the sea with his seed, and she smiles at him again and puts her lips over his. She pulls him down beneath the waves. He does not struggle, and as he drowns in her cold grasp she puts her tongue into his warm mouth and tastes his fleeing soul.

Tess arched in the warm water, her eyes tight shut, every muscle tense as the cascading liquid drew her into an orgasm that shuddered and rippled through her like the cold sea that was the mermaid's home. For an infinite second she hung there, not breathing, not thinking, a body of pure pleasure suspended in nothingness. Then she relaxed and lay back, her breath coming raggedly, her lips dry and aching.

As she made her way slowly to bed she thought about that strange fantasy. It was new to her. Where had it come from? Why should it arouse her to think of dragging a beautiful young man to his doom? That it had aroused her was clear: her climax had been tremendous. For a moment she was afraid that Tony's dominance was making her strange. Then she realised the meaning of it. The mermaid was another personification of the character she was trying to become; of Carmen, a callous, cold, beautiful creature, binding men to her with the powerful spell of her lovely voice, sucking the strength from them and then abandoning them, limp, lifeless husks.

Tess slid down below the duvet and shivered. Such power, such control, and all springing from that extraordinary gift – her own voice. For a moment she was almost afraid. But then, as sleep crept up on her, the sense of fear began to fade, and when she slipped into dreams they too were dreams of strength and erotic power.

She woke very late. Fuzzy with sleep she rolled over in bed and caught hold of her alarm clock. It was quarter to eleven, and she blinked and swayed as she sat up and pushed her hands through her hair.

A day to herself. She had nothing planned, and it felt quite odd to have time to do nothing if she wanted. She got up slowly, made herself tea, sorted out a wash, showered and then put her dressing gown back on and went and sat on the sofa, still half dozing. Outside the weather was gloomy, with heavy clouds threatening rain. Tess considered the dark sky for a few moments, then went to find warm clothes and her Wellington boots.

By the time she was ready to go out the rain was coming down in sheets. She pulled the hood of her Goretex jacket securely up round her ears, galumphed down the stairs and out into the rain. Within a few minutes she was on the Heath. There was nobody else about, even the most diligent dog walkers were waiting for the weather to improve, and she splashed across the soft leaf-mould under the great oaks, breathing in the fresh, wet air. There was something about the quality of the air when it was raining that she found irresistible, healing and soothing both to her vocal cords and to her mind. She stood in a little glade on a patch of new grass, pulled back her hood and tilted her face to the pouring rain. The cold drops stung her eyelids and her forehead, her cheeks and chin, and she stretched out her hands and breathed deeply.

She would remember how it had felt to be the mermaid. She would remember that sense of power and strength, of sexual desire and sexual desirability combined with absolute callousness. She would infuse her portrayal of Carmen with that feeling.

Jeannette had been right, she had needed time on her own. It was so easy to allow herself just to become an adjunct of Tony, someone who went along with whatever he wanted, acceding to all his demands. Not good enough.

As she turned for home another thought occurred to her. If research was what it took to play a part well, then perhaps she ought to do some research on the other point of Carmen's character that was giving her problems: her reliance on the cards.

Back at the flat Tess shed her soaking clothes and wrapped herself in a warm towel, then picked up the phone and dialled. She made a face when after three rings Emma's sweeter-than-honey voice said, 'Hello. You've reached the answering service of Emma Ridley, Catherine Gibbs and Jeannette Baldwin. Please leave a message after the beep. Thanks ever so much.' Awful woman, Tess thought. She even gushes at her answering machine.

'Jeannette,' she said after the beep, 'hi, it's Tess. It's Sunday morning and I -'

'Hi, Tess!' Jeannette's voice was breathless. Tess held the receiver away from her ear. Talking to Jeannette on the phone was like talking to a sawmill. 'What's up?'

'How are you?' Tess asked. 'Did you have a good time last night?'

'Wow, did we! You were right about Julian, Tess. He's got a tongue like a corkscrew. Though I think the two of us must more or less have worn it out last night. And we stripped his thread, too.'

'He's not still there, is he?'

'Oh no, he went home in the small hours. He didn't want Emma to see him here this morning. Don't blame him, either. She sniffed around a bit before she went out, you could almost hear her thinking *I'm sure I smell a man*, like the witch in *Hansel and Gretel*. But Cath and I have kept quiet, so Julian's secret is safe with us.'

'Listen,' Tess said hesitantly, 'I was thinking about what you said. About research. And I wondered if you would give me the number of your friend, the one who reads the Tarot? I'd like to call her.'

‘Why, sure!’ Jeannette sounded surprised and pleased. ‘Hang on while I get my organiser. Here you go. Her name’s Sarah, Sarah Carter.’

‘Very ordinary name,’ said Tess, surprised.

‘She’s just a friend of mine,’ said Jeannette. ‘We met at a party, years ago. She’s not a singer or anything, she works in an office. But she’s a good reader.’ She read out the number. ‘Lives in Bow. Give her a call, go and see her. Say I sent you.’

‘Is she expensive?’

‘She does it for fun. I doubt she’d charge you anything.’

Early in the afternoon Tess found herself at Bow station, looking at the map of the local area on the station wall and trying to find out where Sarah Carter lived.

She had sounded almost absurdly normal over the telephone. Maybe a little older than Tess, in her thirties perhaps, and quite straightforward and pragmatic. Tess had explained that she was only doing research for a role and she really just wanted to talk in principle and Sarah had said, ‘Well, why not? Why not come and have tea? I’ve got nothing particular to do this afternoon. I’d love to meet you.’

Tess found the house quite easily and stood in the street outside, looking at it. It was a very ordinary Victorian terraced house, nicely kept. There were roses in the front garden, bowed down almost to the ground with the weight of raindrops in their tumbled flowers, and the door and the window frames were painted dark blue and white.

The door opened and a woman stood there, a nice-looking fair-haired woman. Yes, early thirties, tall and rather stately, with strong bones and deep-set grey eyes. She was smiling. ‘You’ve found it,’ she said. ‘Come in. You must be Tess.’

Tess expected the house to be full of all sorts of arcane paraphernalia, but it wasn’t. It was a perfectly normal house, tidy rather than not, comfortably furnished, with real fireplaces and what estate agents call ‘original features’.

Some of the pictures on the walls were rather odd, and the books in the drawing room bookcase revealed a very eclectic interest in all sorts of things – whale songs, folklore, herbalism, holistic remedies, aromatherapy, astrology and the occult – but there was nothing frightening about it.

Sarah brought a tray of tea and Digestive biscuits. The tea was Earl Grey, which Tess took as a good sign, and served in astrological mugs, dark blue with little golden star signs on them. It was excellent tea. Sarah smiled over her mug at Tess and said, 'So from what you told me, you're a sceptic and you want enough information to be convincing as Carmen.' Her voice was very reassuring, soft and pleasantly modulated.

'Well –' Tess began to protest, but then she shrugged. 'No, you're right. That is right.'

'I would have thought', said Sarah, 'that the best way to proceed is for me to do a reading for you. Then you can see the style, and even if you aren't convinced you'll understand how it comes over.'

Tess shook her head. 'No,' she said, 'I don't think that would be a good idea.' She was filled with apprehension.

'Why not?' Sarah didn't seem offended, just interested.

'Because –' because it might be true. Tess realised that she must be looking as if she was frightened, and she was angry with herself. If it was all rubbish, why be afraid of it? 'Well,' she said, trying to look casual, 'well, what the hell? Why not?'

Sarah looked quietly at her as if she were not the least convinced by this bravado. She said simply, 'I'll get the cards.'

When Tess left the house in Bow more than two hours later she was shaken. She had expected to hear nothing but platitudes, obvious statements which anyone with any sense of the dramatic could have concocted from what they already knew about her. But Sarah, in her calm, serious

voice, had laid one pattern of cards, then another, and from them had drawn so much that she could not possibly have known.

She had said that Tess had worked hard to achieve her current position. Well, anyone who knew anything about singing could have said that. That she was now facing a challenge: fair guess. That in order to achieve what she now sought she would need to change herself, or at least to appear to others that she had changed herself.

By this stage Tess had felt uncomfortable. She had asked Sarah about her love life, making light of it, as if it were some sort of a joke, but Sarah had seemed equally serious on this question. She laid another pattern of cards and frowned, then said, 'You haven't had a great many lovers. Two or three, perhaps. And they have dominated you. The current man especially is jealous.' She looked up into Tess's eyes, perhaps seeking confirmation, but Tess looked hunted and unconvinced. Sarah could have learnt this from Jeannette. After a little pause Sarah laid an extra card and frowned again. 'Men dominate your work life as well as love. That's not surprising; men are in such a strong position. I suppose the person you are working for at present is male and you have to seek to please him. But the pattern is very strong for love, too. You allow your man to dominate you.' She looked concerned, and after a while she said, 'In the future perhaps - perhaps you will free yourself from this dominating influence and find your own way. If you are going to develop as much as you can, if you are going to achieve everything you want, then you have to do it. You have to free yourself. You can't go on relying on your lovers as you do. But, you should be careful.'

'Careful? Why?'

'I don't quite understand this,' said Sarah. 'It's as if - as if you are two people at present. And for both of them there may be - danger, conflict, but for one it is real, for the other - potential, or imaginary, I can't tell. But if you are to

progress, if you are to succeed, you will have to face the conflict and brave the danger.'

Despite herself Tess was caught up. She leant forward, studying the cards Sarah held: the Chariot, the Knight of Swords. 'Will I succeed?' she asked in a low voice. 'In - in love, I mean?'

'Are you talking about love, or sex?' Sarah asked calmly.

'Sex,' said Tess, though she meant love.

Sarah turned another card. It was a Star. She said very slowly, 'If you come through the conflict, then there is great potential. But you must take control.' She looked up. 'I can't say yes or no. It depends on you.'

This was the sort of prevarication that Tess had expected. She refrained from curling her lip and asked in a cynical voice, 'Tell me, Sarah, can you ever see death in the cards? Can you tell if someone is going to die?'

Sarah's voice was very level. 'Sometimes, yes. But I would never tell them.'

Tess didn't want to go back to the flat with all of this rocketing around inside her head. At Tottenham Court Road she got off the Central line, intending to change to the Northern, and then on impulse left the station instead and walked down Charing Cross Road towards Trafalgar Square. Her head was buzzing with possibilities. It wasn't so much what she had been told as the way Sarah had spoken. It was clear not only that she believed what she said, but that in the past her observations and predictions had been confirmed as true. And Sarah seemed like an ordinary, sensible person, not a charlatan. She hadn't charged Tess anything, she didn't make her living from it, it was just something she did.

It's as if you are two people at present . . . Yes, two people. Herself, Tess Challoner, and Carmen, her character, the character she was trying to make her own. And unless she freed herself from the dominance of the men in her life, she would fail. It was horribly persuasive. Certainly she no

longer had trouble in understanding why Carmen might believe what she saw in her own cards.

A savoury, delicious smell came to Tess's nose. She lifted her head, realising suddenly that she was starving. She hadn't eaten since the morning, and now it was nearly seven o'clock. She thought of her empty fridge and the smelly milk and turned without a second thought towards Soho and a bowl of pasta cooked by someone else.

Sunday evening, and the pasta bar she settled on was fairly quiet. A waiter showed her to a table in a corner and put a menu in front of her. She looked through it absent-mindedly, still thinking hard about what Sarah had told her. If this meant that she should not continue her affair with Tony, what would she do? And what would Tony do? It was true that he was jealous and possessive. How would he react if she ended it? Could this be the danger, the conflict that Sarah had foreseen?

What should she do? With Tony in charge she never had to think for herself, never had to worry. He took care of everything, deciding where they should go out to eat, when they should stay in, where they should make love, exactly how he intended that Tess would achieve orgasm that night. It wasn't always exactly the way she might have chosen if she had been left to herself, but it happened. What was she supposed to do without him? Take Julian home to Hampstead and keep him as a pet?

'Hi, good evening,' said a male voice. 'I'm Dean. Can I take your order, or are you waiting for someone?'

Tess looked up, her mouth open to speak. But she said nothing. The young man standing in front of her met her eyes, then slowly raised his brows and smiled at her.

There it was again, that audible click of sexual attraction that James had asked her for. It was even stronger now, when she was faced with a man she didn't even know, had never seen before. It was there, undeniable. She looked at

the waiter for a long moment, committing the feeling to memory.

He was very handsome in a male model sort of way, fairly tall and broad shouldered, with very clean-cut features, bright blue eyes and light brown, thick hair which should have hung on his shoulders but was tied back for his work. Like all the staff he wore black trousers, a white, open-neck shirt and a long, white apron. His face was mischievous, with a deep dimple on one cheek. He looked into Tess's eyes and smiled slightly. The dimple deepened. His smile said, *You think I'm a hunk, and by God, you're right.*

Cocky sod, Tess thought. He was a hunk, but that wasn't the point. She shook back her hair and said coolly, 'I'm not waiting for anyone, and yes you may take my order.'

At that his expression changed. Now his eyes told her that he had enjoyed her little spark of temper and that he thought that she was very attractive too. He drew his order pad from the pocket of his apron and held his pen poised over it, looking attentive. 'What can I bring you?' he asked. He had a deep voice tinged with an East End accent, the voice of a bit of rough.

For one delicious moment Tess imagined herself saying, *Your cock on a plate, with a salad garnish.* She bit her lip and smiled to herself, then said, 'Spaghetti al pesto, please. And a bottle of sparkling mineral water.' She allowed herself to smile at him. Yes, her smile said, *I think you're a hunk.*

'Right away,' Dean said. He smiled back at her and then folded his pad and turned to go off to the kitchen. Tess watched him go. He had a really lovely bottom, high and taut, and it was framed by the ties of his white apron in a way that might have been designed to call attention to its pertness. Tess leant her chin on her folded hands and watched appreciatively as that athletic arse moved away from her, carried her order through the door and vanished into the kitchen.

A very good-looking young waiter indeed. And what, just what, did she propose to do about it?

Her mind shied away from the obvious suggestion. It made for a pleasant fantasy, but she couldn't make it reality. She moved her finger on the marble top of the small table, musing.

Somebody changed the background music from jazz to classical, the CD of the Three Tenors concert. The ringing voice of Pavarotti filled the restaurant, singing the most famous aria of all, the World Cup anthem from *Turandot*. *I shall conquer*, he sang, *I shall conquer*.

A movement by the table made Tess jump. She looked up and saw Dean looking down at her, smiling, a bottle of mineral water in his hand. He poured it into her glass and set down what was left on the table, then said, 'The pasta in just a few minutes.'

'Thank you,' Tess said. Their eyes met again. She thought, *He really is very good-looking indeed*, and she saw her attraction mirrored in his blue eyes. How old was he? 26, 27? He had an uncomplicated face and a splendid strong body under his waiter's uniform. She let her eyes follow him as he left the table, and before he went through into the kitchen he glanced over his shoulder at her.

She couldn't. She didn't dare. But as she sipped the cool water she imagined what she might do. She could lay her hand on top of his as he set her plate on the table or filled her glass. She could put her fingers on his thigh, on the back of his thigh where the apron did not cover him, where the skin was tender and sensitive below the fabric of his trousers. Any movement, one touch on her part would be enough. He would know what she meant – that she wanted him.

And then what? Ask him when he finished work, meet him outside, go for a drink, go back to his place or ask him back to hers? Oh come on, Tess, she thought. You're in a relationship, you don't want to start another. Why can't it

just be a simple question of sexual satisfaction? You fancy him, he fancies you, you do something about it, you scratch the itch, no more to be said.

Because life's not like that, she told herself. She took a deep draught of her water and shook her head. Then she saw him coming towards her, her plate of spaghetti in his hand.

'Spaghetti al pesto,' he said, putting it in front of her. 'Enjoy it. Would you like some extra parmesan?' She shook her head mutely. 'Black pepper?'

'Yes please,' said Tess. Dean smiled and fetched the pepper mill, which was as long, thick and phallic as all its kind. He held it up and raised his eyebrows at her. 'All over?' he enquired archly.

'Please,' Tess managed to say, though she wanted to laugh.

'There you go,' said Dean, obliging. 'A couple of good screws is enough for most people.'

Tess couldn't resist it. 'Really? Only two?'

They had been joking, but suddenly he met her eyes and there was something more there, something hot and earnest. The pepper mill dangled unnoticed from his hand. For a moment they didn't move, didn't speak, just looked into each other's eyes and breathed shallowly. Then Dean shook himself and said, 'Excuse me. *Buon appetito*,' and turned to leave the table.

Tess slowly addressed herself to the plate of pasta. It was delicious, but she barely tasted it. Her heart was beating fast and between her legs her sex was clenching in the way that always signified a sudden swelling of desire.

She wasn't just imagining things. She really did want to taste Dean's body. She didn't care what sort of a man he was, she just thought that he was handsome and she lusted after him. Her hand covered her mouth as if she were afraid that the other people in the restaurant would be able to read her thoughts.

Research. Take control. *I want you to be amoral*, James had told her. *Self-centred. Just going after kicks.*

Why not?

She ate a little more of the pasta, but her appetite was gone. Presently she set down her fork and leant back in her chair, turning her head to look for Dean.

There he was. She caught his eye. Her face was serious, and he came at once over to the table. 'Is something wrong?' he asked her.

'No.'

'Have you finished?' he asked, gesturing at her half-eaten pasta.

Tess took a deep breath. She was excited and nervous, but her singing training allowed her to speak without a shake in her voice. 'Dean,' she said softly and clearly, 'where can we go?'

Dean's face changed at once. His attentive, well-trained waiter's expression changed, fading into a look of half suspicion, half shocked belief. 'Where can we go?' he repeated, speaking very quietly. He didn't have her control, and his voice was trembling.

Quickly Tess moistened her lips with her tongue and swallowed. 'Where can we go to make love?' she said. It wasn't as hard as she had feared. Startled lust flared in his eyes and she added quickly, 'Right now, Dean. Right now.'

His lips were parted and his chest rose and fell with his quick breathing. For a moment he didn't speak. Then he said, 'Are you joking?'

Tess shook her head. 'I'm serious. Try me.'

He was silent again. Then he said in a rush, 'The manager's office. At the bottom of the stairs, next to the Ladies' loo. It's open. You go first. I'll be there in a minute.'

Tess nodded quickly and got to her feet. He stepped back to let her go past him and as she did so she let her hand trail across the front of his apron, directly over his crotch. He

drew in his breath quickly and pulled away from her. She smiled to herself and went to the stairs.

As she descended she felt her heart pounding, thumping as if it would leap from her chest. Her nerves, her caution, her sense of propriety said, *Go into the Ladies, hide in there, don't do it, you're an idiot, what will Tony think of you?*

But, inside her mind, the character of Carmen said, *I want him. Tony doesn't need to know. I want him, and for once, tonight, I am going to have what I want. I am going to tell him what I want, and he's going to do it to me.*

Tess put her hand on the door of the manager's office and pushed it open. Inside it was dark. She didn't turn on the light, just closed the door and stood in the darkness, waiting.

Footsteps on the stairs. She tensed, but the footsteps turned aside and went into one of the toilets. She began to breathe faster and faster, her desire fighting her better judgement. More footsteps, and then the door opened.

It was Dean, eyes wide and dark in the faint light. He saw her standing just inside the room and his eyebrows drew down tight over his blue eyes. Tess realised with a shock that he was afraid too; afraid of her. The knowledge filled her with eagerness. She glanced around the room, saw a light on the desk and switched it on.

Dean closed the door and turned the key in the lock, then stood by it with his hands opening and closing by his sides. 'I can't stay long,' he said, his voice no more than a clotted whisper. 'I just asked for – for ten minutes.'

Tess wanted to say that that would be long enough, but she couldn't make herself speak. She drew in a long, deep breath and took a single step towards him.

It was enough. In two strides he crossed the room to her, stood in front of her, staring down into her face. There was a second of silent tension, and then at the same moment she reached her arms up to him and he took her face in his hands and his mouth was on hers.

His lips were softer than Tony's and his kisses were not so demanding. It seemed as natural that Tess should put her tongue into his mouth as that he should taste hers. They stood for long seconds, gasping as they kissed. Then Tess reached behind him for the ties of his apron and unfastened them.

'Christ,' he hissed into her lips, and then his arms were around her, catching her under her haunches and lifting her. He pushed her back and up until her bottom was resting on the edge of the manager's desk and he was pressing against her, pushing her legs apart, reaching up under her skirt. She gave an urgent gasp of lust and heaved her hips up towards him, inviting him to touch her. His hand was shaking and his fingers fumbled before he got hold of her panties and pulled them aside, feeling inside them. Tess knew she was wet, but even so it was a delicious shock to feel his strong thick fingers sink without hesitation into her, penetrating her so firmly that her sex clenched around them as if to keep him there.

'God, you're wet,' Dean hissed. He felt with his other hand for his fly, unbuttoned it and unfastened the zip, and in one swift motion pulled his erect penis from his underpants and advanced upon her.

'No,' Tess said, pushing against him. He looked up into her face, scowling with anger and frustration. He looked as if he thought that she was about to change her mind. She gritted her teeth and said, 'No, not yet. I want you to make me come first. Then - then you can fuck me.'

'What?' said Dean, as if she hadn't spoken English.

Tess's hand was on his arm, holding him away from her. 'Make me come,' she said. She remembered Julian falling to his knees before her. Yes, that would be good. That was what she wanted. 'Use your mouth on me,' she said. She saw refusal beginning in his eyes and went on quickly, 'You'll get what you want, won't you? You get to have me.'