

'A decadent blast'

Heat

MEMBERS
ONLY

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Members Only
by
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One

Amber Solomon settled into the soft leather armchair and set her Balenciaga handbag on the floor. Her expression as she surveyed her cosmetic surgeon was inscrutable (not that Amber's face had much choice in the matter these days).

Dr Peter Lawrence, perching on a corner of his desk, as was his habit during consultations, smiled pleasantly. 'So, what brings you here today, Mrs Solomon? I do hope there aren't any problems with the chin implant.' He dipped his head, inspecting his recent handiwork. 'It's certainly healing well. The scar's practically invisible already.'

Amber raised a languid hand and stroked her new chin with her fingertips. 'It's perfect,' she said. 'Just how I imagined it.'

'Excellent,' said Dr Lawrence, beaming delightedly.

'It's my nose that's the problem.'

'Oh?' The surgeon's intelligent grey eyes clouded over.

'I think I'd like it to be smaller still, and just a touch more retroussé.'

Dr Lawrence folded his arms across his chest and studied the forty-eight-year-old former actress dispassionately. Amber had been an attractive woman when she'd first walked into his surgery, fifteen months earlier. Her forehead had been a little lined and her eyelids a little

saggy, but that was only to be expected in a woman of her age. Now, however, eleven surgical procedures later, the face that looked back at him seemed barely human. A series of facelifts had left her skin so taut she could barely crack a smile, while silicon injections and liposuction had bestowed her with obscenely swollen lips and cheekbones sharp as steak knives. Most dramatic of all were the slanted, cat-like eyes, which gave her a perpetually haunted look, like an animal caught in a trap.

‘Mrs Solomon,’ he began in a gentle tone, ‘we’ve already performed two previous rhinoplasties. Your nose is perfectly delightful as it is; a further reduction would make your face look quite —’ The word on the tip of Dr Lawrence’s tongue was ‘freakish’, but he managed to check himself just in time — ‘*unbalanced*, in my professional opinion.’

Amber sighed in annoyance. ‘Let’s remind ourselves what we’re working towards, shall we?’ She reached into her handbag and removed a manila envelope. ‘Here,’ she said, handing it to Dr Lawrence. ‘As I said to you when we started out on this journey together, I won’t be happy until I look like that.’

The surgeon opened the envelope and withdrew a laminated clipping from *National Geographic*. It bore a large colour photograph of one of the most recognizable sculptures in the world: the bust of Queen Nefertiti, discovered in 1912 and now housed in Berlin’s famous Egyptian museum. Although he was already familiar with the face in the picture, Dr Lawrence studied it again for politeness’ sake, taking in the perfect nose, full lips and wide-set, feline eyes. He could understand Amber

wanting to recapture her youth, but not why she insisted on making herself a grotesque parody of an ancient queen. ‘Are you sure this is what you want?’ he asked her.

Amber rolled her eyes impatiently. ‘Quite sure. And if *you* won’t help me, I shall have to find a surgeon who will.’

At this, Dr Lawrence – who was forking out a hefty four-figure sum in alimony every month and paying to put three children through private school – leapt from the desk and placed a hand on Amber’s shoulder. ‘That won’t be necessary, Mrs Solomon,’ he said smoothly. ‘Why don’t we book you in at the end of the month?’

Outside Dr Lawrence’s city-centre clinic, a sleek black Mercedes waited on double yellow lines. The minute Amber appeared on the surgery doorstep, its uniformed driver sprang into action.

‘Where to now, Mrs Solomon?’ the driver asked as he opened the door for his employer. ‘Harvey Nichols?’

Amber smiled weakly. ‘No, Stephen, I’ve changed my mind about that shopping trip. I can feel one of my headaches coming on; I’d like to go straight home, please.’

The driver gave a deferential nod. ‘Right you are, Mrs Solomon.’

Half an hour later, the Mercedes was driving through the picturesque village of Kirkhulme, which boasted more millionaires per square mile than anywhere else in the country. As soon as Amber caught her first glimpse of the Old Manor through a gap in the trees, the corners of her mouth curled upwards. Even now, eighteen years after she’d first stepped over the threshold as a new bride,

the house still had the power to take her breath away. Nestling in a tranquil woodland setting, the sprawling mansion was built of rich, plum-coloured Cheshire brick, and came complete with tennis court, swimming pool, extensive garaging and assorted outbuildings. The four-acre plot occupied a prime position next to St Benedict's Country Club & Spa, and a private gate in the secluded gardens offered direct access to the club's famous golf course. No wonder the Old Manor was widely regarded as one of the most desirable pieces of real estate in Kirkhulme. But when the Solomons took it on it was a wreck.

Built by a wealthy clothing merchant in 1582, the house stayed in private ownership for centuries until it was bought by a conglomerate in the late fifties and converted into a boys' boarding school. Much patronized by families in the Armed Forces, the school was eventually forced to close after a series of unsavoury incidents involving the matron and a number of sixth-form boys. Afterwards, it languished on the open market for the best part of two years before the Solomons snapped it up at a knockdown price. They didn't see what other prospective buyers had seen: a shabby white elephant, ravaged by three decades of rough treatment at the hands of a horde of unruly army brats. What *they* saw was a beautiful and important piece of history, desperately in need of a loving touch – and, back then, the Solomons had love in spades. For the next three years, the couple dedicated themselves to bringing the Old Manor back to its former glory and once the restoration was complete both agreed they could never imagine leaving it.

Amber thanked Stephen as he dropped her off at the front door. 'I won't be going out again today,' she told him. 'So you can put the car in the garage.'

'And *Mr* Solomon?' the driver enquired.

'He's at the office all day. He said he was going to get a taxi home. Oh, and, Stephen ...'

'Yes, Mrs Solomon?'

'The cushions in the back seat need plumping.'

The driver smiled. 'I'll see to it right away.'

Unusually, there was no one to greet Amber when she pushed open the Old Manor's studded oak door. It was the housekeeper's day off and Calum, Amber's teenage son, was at college, studying for the A levels he seemed certain to fail. She stepped into the imposing entrance hall and slung her handbag on a Louis XV chair, where it would remain until the housekeeper came to tidy it away. Behind her, the front door slammed shut with a dull thud. Shuddering, Amber massaged her temples. The two aspirin she'd taken in the car didn't seem to be having much effect. In a minute, she would go upstairs for a lie down, but first there was someone she must see. She went to the drawing room, which gave out on to a spectacular orangery, modelled on the one at Kensington Palace. Kept at a constant temperature all year round and filled with an abundance of exotic palms and cacti, it was home to the third dearest creature in Amber's life, after her husband and her hairdresser.

'Couscous,' she said in a sing-song voice as she made her way towards a large metal cage in the corner of the room. 'Mummy's home.' At the sound of her voice, a high-pitched chattering struck up. Amber smiled as she

flipped the bolt and opened the door. Immediately, the cage's inhabitant flew from the branch of a leafy fig and landed on her shoulder.

'Hello, little man,' Amber cooed as she nuzzled her face against his soft fur. 'Has Mummy been gone a long time? Have you missed her terribly?'

Couscous was an eight-year-old capuchin, more commonly known as an organ-grinder monkey. Bred in captivity, he'd been a gift from Amber's husband Daniel on their tenth wedding anniversary. The pair had been inseparable ever since. To Amber's mind, Couscous made the perfect companion. He was loving, fiercely loyal and, most importantly, never answered back.

'Let's go upstairs for a lie down,' she told the monkey as they made their way back into the drawing room. 'Mummy's head's *throbbing*.'

Suddenly, Couscous spotted a tempting dish of jellied fruits lying on an occasional table. Leaping from Amber's shoulder, he bounded over to the dish and snatched up one of the crystalline candies.

'Bad Couscous!' said Amber, wagging her finger. 'You know you're not supposed to eat sugar.' She bent down and held out her palm. 'Give it to Mummy.' The capuchin looked at her quizzically for a moment before stuffing the jellied fruit into his cheek for safekeeping and scampering towards the door.

Amber shook her head, more in amusement than anger, and followed Couscous into the entrance hall, just in time to see his long tail disappearing down the winding corridor that led to Daniel's study.

'Don't you dare,' Amber threatened. There was a stern

note in her voice now. Daniel wouldn't be at all pleased if he discovered that the pampered pet had violated his inner sanctum. Amber hurried down the corridor, tutting as she saw Couscous spring into the air and grab the study's door handle with his prehensile fingers, using his weight to draw it down, then bracing his feet on the door frame to give him the leverage he needed to push it open. Knowing that her husband's office contained a number of valuable artefacts, Amber broke into a jog.

Daniel Solomon had been fascinated by ancient Egypt ever since a boyhood trip to the British Museum. An art enthusiast and avid collector, he now owned one of the largest private collections of Egyptian antiquities in the north-west of England. Most of the items – all of which were carefully catalogued and generously insured – were kept in secure storage under strict conditions of temperature and humidity. But some of his favourite pieces were on permanent display at the Old Manor, housed in custom-made glass exhibit cases and mounted on the walls of his study.

When Amber entered the room, she found Couscous squatting on one of the cases that was home to a twenty-fourth dynasty lapis lazuli scarab. The monkey had the jellied fruit between his paws and was gnawing on it with gusto.

Smiling indulgently, Amber scooped him up and set him on her hip. 'Mummy will be very cross if you won't eat your dinner later,' she told him, planting a kiss on top of his tiny head. She glanced at Daniel's desk to check that nothing had been disturbed. Her husband was anal about his office and would notice if anything was a

millimetre out of place. His Lalique crystal paperweight sat in its usual place beside the Rolodex and the crocodile leather blotter was lined up precisely with the desk's tulipwood inlay. Next to it, a finger's width away, lay a limited edition Mont Blanc. Satisfied that everything was in order, Amber began walking towards the door with Couscous. Then suddenly she stopped, turned round and walked slowly to another one of the dozen or so exhibit cases, this one mounted on the opposite wall to the scarab. Bending her knees slightly, she surveyed the limestone funerary sculpture inside. The face that stared back at her was cool and aloof, its expression as impenetrable as the Mona Lisa's. On Amber's hip, Couscous squeaked impatiently. Having devoured his sugary prize, he was now growing bored.

'Shhh, baby,' Amber murmured. Leaning forward, she studied the sculpture even more intently, remembering how thrilled Daniel had been when he had secured the fifteen-inch likeness of Queen Nefertiti at auction. Unpainted and not as finely worked as the famous Berlin tribute, it was an arresting piece all the same.

To say that Daniel held the legendary royal consort in high regard was an understatement. He was, to put it bluntly, obsessed with her. 'Nefertiti is the ultimate vision of female beauty,' he told the friends who came to admire his artefacts. 'And she wasn't just a pretty face . . . all the evidence suggests Nefertiti had almost as much influence as her husband, the heretic king Akhenaten, and even served for a short time as ruler after his death,' at which point, most people tended to glaze over.

Amber had always been happy to indulge her hus-

band's unusual hobby. After all, it wasn't *she* who had to polish the exhibit cases on a daily basis with a mixture of one part vinegar and two parts water. That tedious duty, like so many others at the Old Manor, fell to the housekeeper. Over the past year or so, however, Daniel had become increasingly distant, and Amber had begun to resent anything that took his attention away from her. His business interests meant he was often away for days at a time, and when he *was* at home he spent hours holed up in his office, purportedly scouring websites and auction catalogues in search of obscure Egyptian treasures.

In an attempt to regain her husband's interest, Amber splashed out on a pair of handcuffs and a thousand pounds worth of designer lingerie – but to her horror Daniel fell asleep before she could seduce him, having explained that he was too old and too tired for such antics. And so, in desperation, she turned for help – not to her friends, who were few and far between and who, in any case, would take great delight in broadcasting her marital difficulties to anyone who cared to listen, but rather to a long-dead member of Egyptian royalty.

And so, supervised by one of the most eminent cosmetic surgeons in the county, Amber set about metamorphosing into her husband's ideal woman. It was, she reasoned with her peculiar twisted logic, the only way to ensure the survival of their marriage. Amber was no stranger to surgery – there had been liposuction in her early forties, followed by a discreet breast augmentation a few years later – but she'd never attempted anything on this scale. At first, she didn't reveal her long-term plan

to Daniel; she wanted to surprise him. And when she returned home after her second eye lift, surprise him she did. ‘You look scary,’ he’d said, as he gazed in horror at her curiously elongated eyes.

If Amber could have cried, she would have, but unfortunately her tear ducts still weren’t working properly after the operation. ‘I did it for you,’ she said. ‘I did it so I’d look like Nefertiti. What was it you called her – “the ultimate vision of female beauty”?’

At this, Daniel had held up his hands, palms turned towards her defensively. ‘Whoa there,’ he said. ‘If you want to mess with what God’s given you, fine – but don’t drag me into it.’

Following that unpleasant little scene, Daniel seemed uninterested in his wife’s quest for physical perfection and, after her subsequent surgical procedures, he made no comment beyond the occasional ‘very nice, dear’ platitude. For Amber, it was a crushing disappointment and now, as she caught sight of her reflection in the glass of the exhibit case, she found herself wondering if all the pain and money had been worth it. Feeling the invisible band round her head tighten, she winced.

‘Come on then,’ she said to Couscous. ‘Let’s go upstairs.’

Together, they ascended the cherrywood staircase, which was one of the Old Manor’s splendid late-Georgian additions. When they reached the first-floor landing, Amber pushed open the door to the master-bedroom suite. As she released her grip on Couscous, he jumped out of her arms and on to the balustrade, dancing along it like a tightrope walker. When he reached the end, he

stared hard at the upper staircase, which led to the second-floor guest bedrooms, head cocked inquisitively. Amber held out her arms. ‘Mummy’s not in the mood to play, darling. Come back here, please.’

Couscous flashed his mistress a mischievous look and darted up the staircase. With a weary sigh, Amber set off after him. She found him sitting on the carpet at the top of the stairs waiting patiently for her, but the minute she reached out her arms he set off again, scampering to the end of the hall, where the largest of the half a dozen guest bedrooms was located. The monkey waited until his mistress was an arm’s length away, then he jumped on to the door handle and braced his feet against the frame. A second later the door swung open to reveal the magnificent Jacobean-style mahogany half-tester bed, handmade by a local craftsman at vast expense. The silk eiderdown had been tossed carelessly on the floor and on top of the linen sheets, a pair of hairy buttocks, covered in a light sheen of sweat, could be seen pumping up and down furiously. Mesmerized, Amber took a step closer. Now she noticed a set of spread legs, their sturdy shins stippled with dark stubble. As she watched in stunned silence, two hands appeared and gripped the buttocks forcefully, kneading them like mounds of dough. Both participants seemed completely unaware of her presence. Suddenly, the woman let out a long, low moan. At this, Couscous, who had been watching proceedings from the top of the door, leapt soundlessly from his perch, ran over to the bed and began tugging at the sheets as if it were all part of some elaborate game.

Daniel Solomon stopped, mid-thrust, and turned his

head forty-five degrees to see Couscous performing a series of excited backflips. ‘You little shit,’ he said crossly. ‘Who let you out?’

‘I did.’ Amber’s tone would’ve frozen hot water.

At the sound of his wife’s voice, Daniel’s entire body seemed to go into spasm, and he rolled off his partner with such force that he ended up on the floor amid a tangle of damp sheets. While her husband wrestled to free himself, Amber marched up to the bed. Lying on the pillows, her mottled face frozen in embarrassment, was a woman Amber trusted, a woman she saw almost every day, a woman who knew her most intimate habits. Finding her in bed with Daniel was shocking enough, but what disturbed Amber even more was the fact that her rival wasn’t even attractive. Although she was roughly the same age as her employer, she had pendulous breasts and a crooked nose. *And* her roots were showing through a do-it-yourself blonde rinse.

‘Nancy,’ said Amber coolly. ‘I thought it was your day off.’

The housekeeper grabbed a pillow and clasped it over her chest. ‘It was – I mean, it *is*,’ she stammered.

By this juncture, Daniel had staggered to his feet. Noting the condom drooping ridiculously from the end of his flaccid penis. Amber raised a disdainful eyebrow. ‘I see you used protection,’ she snapped. ‘I suppose I should be grateful for small mercies.’ Then, without another word, she turned round and walked out of the room.

TWO

The shop at St Benedict's Country Club & Spa was unusually quiet for a Friday lunchtime. Outside, it was raining cats and dogs, and the club's famous golf course – which had played host to two Ryder Cups and ten British Opens in its illustrious 111-year history – was deserted. Ace Cox, who had been promoted to shop manager eight months earlier, stood patiently beside a changing cubicle while inside, one of his regular customers wrestled with the zip on a too-small tennis skirt.

'How are you doing in there, Mrs M?' Ace called out after a decent interval.

There was a loud tut. 'The damn zip's stuck. I'm doing my best to free it, but I don't want to tear the fabric.' Then a well-timed pause. 'Perhaps you could lend some assistance.'

Ace rolled his eyes. This turn of events wasn't entirely unexpected. 'Of course, Mrs M,' he said cheerily. 'Here I come.'

He pushed aside the curtain and stepped into the cubicle. Forty-five-year-old divorce lawyer Fiona Mortimer was wearing nothing but the tennis skirt and a sheer black bra that left little to the imagination.

'I knew I should've got the size sixteen,' she said with a coy smile. 'Only I've lost a bit of weight recently and I thought I might just be able to squeeze into the fourteen.'

She glanced down. 'I do hope I haven't broken that zip.'

Ace waved a hand. 'Don't worry about it. Let's just concentrate on trying to get you out of there.' The young manager dropped to his knees so he was eye level with the roll of fat that bulged unappetizingly over the skirt's waistband. Holding the fabric around the zip taut, he gave it a few sharp tugs, but it refused to budge. He leaned forward for a closer inspection. Above him, Fiona's bosoms loomed like two enormous boulders. 'Ah, I see what's happened,' he said. 'The zip's got caught in your underwear.' He looked up. 'Do you think you could breathe in for me?'

Fiona nodded, eager to please. She took a deep breath and the roll of fat receded, allowing Ace to slip two fingers of his right hand inside the waistband.

'Ooh, your hands are lovely and warm,' Fiona chuckled.

Ace smiled lazily. 'We aim to please.' He gripped the zip with his left hand and worked it up and down, while simultaneously easing out the silky stuff of Fiona's underwear with his left. A few moments later, the zip came unstuck. 'There we go; job done,' said Ace, rising to his feet.

'My, aren't you a clever boy?' Fiona took hold of the zip and pulled it up and down a few times. 'Yes, that's working fine now, isn't it?' Suddenly, she pulled the zip down as far as it would go and gave a little shimmy. The pleated tennis skirt went parachuting to her ankles, revealing a pair of black lace-trimmed cami-knickers. 'Oops, naughty me!' she exclaimed. Without looking down, she stepped out of the skirt. 'There, that's better.'

She stared at Ace provocatively, her thickly glossed lips slightly parted.

Ace rubbed his jaw. 'I guess I'll leave you to get dressed now, Mrs M.'

As he turned to go, Fiona stepped in front of the curtain, effectively blocking his escape route. Placing her hand in the centre of his muscular chest, she pushed him against the cubicle's flimsy rear wall. 'You know I find you very attractive, don't you?' she said breathily.

'Yeah, I kinda gathered that,' the manager admitted.

The lawyer pressed her semi-naked body against him. As she turned her face upwards, Ace caught a garlicky whiff – the remnant no doubt of a thrusting power lunch. He knew it would be an easy matter to escape Fiona's clutches but he hesitated, wanting her to enjoy the feel of the rock-hard pectorals beneath his polo shirt. The way Ace saw it, it was all part of the shop's unique service.

'I realize I'm quite a bit older than you, but I am at my sexual peak, you know,' Fiona said, pushing her breasts against his chest so that they spilled over the top of her bra.

'I don't doubt it, Mrs M,' said Ace, whose jaw ached with the effort of trying to keep a straight face.

Fiona batted her eyelashes at him. 'I bet I could show you a thing or two,' she murmured. Her hand moved to his crotch.

'I really am very flattered,' Ace lied, as he took Fiona by the shoulders and gently pushed her away from him. 'But, as you know, I already have a girlfriend.'

Fiona arched a disbelieving brow. 'You're still with the masseuse?'

‘Yep, it’s our year anniversary in a couple of weeks’ time.’

‘That shouldn’t be a problem,’ Fiona said, tracing the line of Ace’s cheek with her index finger. ‘I’ve no doubt that a fit young man like you would have no trouble keeping two women satisfied.’

‘Sorry, Mrs M, no can do. I love Astrid; I wouldn’t dream of cheating on her.’

Fiona sighed. ‘How incredibly unimaginative.’

Ace decided to throw the old girl a bone. ‘Of course, if I was single, things might be very different. You’re a good-looking woman, Mrs M – and obviously very intelligent too. I hear you string ex-husbands up by the balls in that law firm of yours.’

Fiona – who had already seen off three husbands and was, according to rumour, on the lookout for a fourth – smiled. ‘Well, I do pride myself on negotiating a healthy settlement for my clients.’ Having accepted defeat, she pulled a purple track top from a hook on the wall. ‘Can you wrap this for me while I get dressed?’

‘Good choice,’ said Ace, nodding his appreciation as he took the top. ‘That’s a great colour for you. It’ll go really well with that gorgeous Titian hair of yours.’

Fiona patted her dyed auburn pageboy. ‘Yes, I thought the same thing.’

Ace bent down to retrieve the tennis skirt. ‘Do you want to try this in a sixteen?’

‘No thanks, I’d better back to the office.’

‘Right you are, Mrs M. I’ll have that track top waiting for you at the till.’ The manager turned to go.

‘Oh, and, Ace?’

‘Yes, Mrs M.’

‘Can I get a little something for the weekend? I’m hosting a dinner party and I want to serve something special with the digestifs.’

Ace rubbed his hands together. ‘Of course. How much? Five grams?’

‘Better say ten. You know what healthy appetites we lawyers have.’

Ace was smiling as he made his way to the till. He played out the same charade with Fiona Mortimer every time she came into the shop. She’d lure him into the changing cubicle on some flimsy pretext and then proceed to give him the come-on. Quite frankly, he’d sooner shag his own grandmother, but the lawyer was a good customer so he had to indulge her a little.

Behind the counter, sales assistant Harry Hunter was polishing a new consignment of silver-plated golf-ball keyrings.

‘Hey, Harry,’ Ace said in a low voice. ‘Ten grams of coke for Mrs Mortimer, please.’

His colleague tossed down his jeweller’s cloth. ‘Sure thing, boss.’

‘Oh, and tell Dylan to get a move on with those Ralph Lauren sweaters. He’s been in the stockroom for ages.’

‘I think he’s having a sly kip. He was out last night with Sorrel. You know . . . that ashtanga yoga teacher he met on the staff away-day.’

‘Showing him her legs akimbo pose, was she?’

Harry grinned. ‘Something like that.’ He walked to the

rear of the shop and pushed open a door marked STAFF ONLY.

As he passed the stockroom, he stuck his head round the door. His fellow assistant Dylan was lying on the floor, his head resting on a makeshift pillow of bubble-wrap.

‘Oi, Dylan, wakey wakey,’ said Harry, banging the wall with his fist.

Dylan woke with a start. ‘Fuck,’ he said, rubbing his eyes. ‘You frightened the crap out of me. Where’s the fire?’

‘Come on, mate, look lively. The boss wants those Ralph Lauren sweaters out front, pronto.’

Dylan struggled to his feet. ‘Okay, okay.’

‘Good night last night, was it?’

‘Bloody amazing; Sorrel’s into that tantric sex malarky.’ He grinned lazily. ‘And she’s very flexible. Have you ever seen a naked woman with both legs behind her ears?’

‘Er no, mate. Can’t say I’ve ever had the pleasure,’ said Harry. ‘You can tell me all the gory details later. I’ve got to get some coke for a customer.’ He raised a hand in farewell and continued down the corridor to the office. This small, windowless box was where all the shop’s admin was done. It also served as a handy storeroom for a second, more lucrative merchandising business.

Harry made straight for the safe and punched in the combination, which was known to only two other people beside himself: Ace and Dylan. Reaching inside, he removed a pre-weighed package of high-grade cocaine. It wasn’t the only drug on the menu: cannabis, ecstasy, LSD, ketamine, Viagra . . . the boys in the shop could lay

their hands on just about anything – and club members were prepared to pay top dollar for a discreet, reliable service.

A former private investigator, Harry had been hired the previous summer by St Benedict's general manager, Anthony Lanchester. Masquerading as Lanchester's godson, Harry worked undercover in the shop for three months, charged with the task of collecting evidence to support his employer's suspicion that the shop was a front for drug dealing. He quickly discovered two things: one, that his colleagues were indeed up to no good; and two, that he was a natural-born salesman. Before long, he felt completely at home in the shop's louche atmosphere and quickly formed a close bond with Ace and Dylan. Unwilling to grass up his new-found friends, Harry – who'd never been cut out to be a private investigator – had brokered a deal with Lanchester. He agreed to forgo his fee, but only if the general manager allowed him to carry on working in the shop as a regular employee. What's more, he persuaded Lanchester that it was in the club's interests to allow the drug-dealing to continue unchecked. It was an arrangement that suited everybody.

A month or so later, as he shared an after-work beer with Ace and Dylan in the village pub, Harry finally plucked up the courage to come clean about his past as a PI. They'd been pissed off at first, which was understandable – but once they realized that his intervention had effectively protected their livelihood, they accepted him as one of their own. Soon afterwards, Ace offered to cut him in on the drugs deal. They were, after all, one

man short after the shop's previous manager had been sacked in the wake of a messy sex scandal. Harry hesitated – but not for very long. The financial rewards were considerable and, besides, he fancied living dangerously for a change.

By the time Harry returned with the ten grams, a fully dressed Fiona Mortimer was at the till with Ace, paying for her purchases. 'There you go, Mrs M,' Harry said, thrusting his balled-up fist into the burgundy-and-gold carrier bag lying on the counter. 'Any complaints, don't hesitate to return the goods for a full refund.'

Fiona smiled. 'I'm sure that won't be necessary.' She took the carrier bag from Harry's outstretched hand. 'Thanks, boys, it's been a pleasure, as always. Oh, and one more thing.' She took a business card out of her purse and slid it across the counter towards Ace. 'Just in case you change your mind.'

Ace picked up the card. 'Okey-doke, Mrs M,' he said with a wink. 'Enjoy your dinner party now.'

The minute the door had closed behind her, Harry leaned across the counter. 'What the fuck were you two *doing* in that cubicle?' he asked Ace. 'You were in there ages. Copping a feel, was she?'

Ace smiled. 'Something like that.'

'Aren't you even tempted? I've heard Fiona Mortimer's loaded.'

Ace looked at him aghast. 'Why would I make do with scrag end of mutton when I've got fillet steak at home?'

Harry frowned. 'Sorry, mate, you've lost me.'

Ace jerked his thumb towards the window. On the shop's front steps, an Amazonian blonde was shaking the

rain from her umbrella. ‘Is that the best-looking woman you’ve ever seen, or what?’

Harry nodded. ‘Ah . . . now I get you.’

Ace scooted round the counter and opened the door for the blonde. ‘Astrid baby, this is a nice surprise,’ he said as he kissed her on lips.

‘I’m on my break,’ Astrid replied, tossing her umbrella in the brass stand by the door. ‘I just thought I’d come and say hi.’

Ace glanced around the shop and, seeing that his sole customer was engrossed in a display of golf bags, gave his girlfriend’s arse cheek a surreptitious squeeze. ‘What time shall I pick you up tonight?’

‘Seven?’ Astrid lowered her voice. ‘I said we’d meet the other couple in the pub – and then if we like the look of them we can take them back to ours.’

‘Perfect.’

‘Hey, Astrid,’ Harry called out from behind the counter. ‘How’s it going?’

‘Good thanks.’ Astrid smiled, displaying a row of perfect white teeth. ‘Ace tells me you’ve got a new girlfriend.’

‘I’m seeing someone, yeah.’

Astrid smiled. ‘Nice, is she?’

‘Yeah, she is pretty hot, as a matter of fact. Spanish. He outlined a female form in the air. ‘Curves in all the right places. Bright too.’

‘Oh, Harry, that’s great. I’m so pleased for you.’

The man looking at the golf bags raised an arm in the air. ‘Any chance of some assistance over here?’ he called out.

‘Of course, sir,’ said Harry, walking over to him.

Astrid turned back to Ace. ‘Listen, sweetheart, I’d better get back to the spa.’ She lowered her voice. ‘I’ve got one of my special clients in half an hour and I have a little treat for him. It’s going to require a detour to the compost heap behind the greenhouse.’

Ace wrinkled his nose. ‘Blimey, what on earth are you planning to do to the poor guy?’

‘He’ll get exactly what he’s paid for, nothing more and nothing less.’

‘Is it anyone I know?’

Astrid gave her boyfriend a wry look. ‘You know better than to ask.’

‘Oh yeah, client confidentiality and all that.’ Ace snaked an arm round his girlfriend’s waist. ‘Just don’t be too hard on him, okay? You need to save your energy for tonight.’

Harry called out, ‘Ace, there’s a scuff mark on this Titleist bag. Can we offer this gentleman a discount?’

‘I’m sure we can. I’ll be with you in a minute,’ Ace replied. He smiled at Astrid. ‘See you at seven then.’ He gave her a wink. ‘I think it’s going to be fun.’

The rain was easing as Astrid began making her way across the sweeping lawn towards St Benedict’s vast greenhouse. Because of the weather, a significant number of grounds staff had been deployed to the 17,000-square-foot building, which provided the 180,000 flowers planted at the club every year. As she approached, Astrid could see them working, hunched over seedling trays and sacks of fertilizer. She used her umbrella to shield her face as she walked past the windows. Not that any of the greenhouse’s inhabitants would have cared less if they’d known

what she was up to. All kinds of strange and unusual things went on at St Benedict's and the staff – much like the management – were well practised in the art of turning a blind eye. No wonder the club's invitation-only memberships were as highly prized as bottles of 1961 Chateau Latour.

Behind the greenhouse lay a large compost heap, which kept the club's 200 acres of gardens and undulating parkland exceptionally well nourished. Astrid's interest lay not in the compost heap itself, but in the small patch of uncultivated land just beyond it, which was home to a dense patch of *Urtica dioica*, otherwise known as the common-or-garden stinging nettle. But before she could claim her prize, there were certain precautions to be taken. After folding her umbrella and tossing it on the ground, Astrid reached into the small canvas bag she wore slung across her chest and removed a length of kitchen towel, a pair of latex gloves and some scissors. She slipped on the gloves, squatted down and cut half a dozen nettle stems. These she wrapped in the kitchen towel, taking great care not to crush the soft green leaves, mindful that such an action would disable the tiny hollow stinging hairs. It was these hairs that contained the trio of chemicals – histamine, acetylcholine and serotonin – which were capable of triggering a temporary and painful skin rash. Her mission complete, Astrid hurried back to St Benedict's luxurious spa complex.

Although she was one of the club's top-earning practitioners of Swedish massage, Astrid's talents extended far beyond effleurage and petrissage. Before, after – and even, on occasion, *during* – her regular shifts, she administered

her own, unique brand of treatment to a select group of private clients. A monthly backhander to the spa's senior receptionist was all it took to ensure this *tukta* therapy (*tukta* being the Swedish word for discipline) remained a secret from the management. In the early stages of their romance, Astrid had also kept Ace in the dark about her little sideline, fearful of scaring him off. But then, as their relationship grew increasingly serious, she knew she had to come clean. She'd fallen in love with him and she didn't want there to be any secrets between them. At first, Ace had been shocked by her confession. And then turned on.

Back at the spa, Astrid went directly to the staff comfort suite, where she took a quick shower and changed into a fresh uniform and a pair of white leather regulation clogs. Afterwards, she spent some time in front of the mirror, scraping her hair back into a severe ponytail and applying black eyeliner, mascara and a slick of ruby lipstick. Satisfied with her appearance, she went to her locker and removed a small polycarbonate suitcase. She wheeled it back to her treatment room, which was situated at the end of a long corridor and separated from the other therapists' rooms by a heavy glass fire door, making it virtually soundproof. Once inside, she opened the suitcase and started to unpack. Her client had highly unusual requirements, but Astrid was nothing if not broad-minded. First came a yoga mat, filched from the club's fitness studio, which she placed on the floor beside her treatment couch. Then she produced a five-foot-square piece of sturdy plastic sheeting, of the sort used by painters and decorators, and positioned it close to the

mat. Next came several lengths of braided nylon cord, a bowl of assorted fruits, a squeeze tube of caramel dessert sauce, some black silk hold-ups and a pair of red patent leather court shoes with diamante ankle straps and four-and-a-half-inch heels. She placed the items on a stainless steel trolley, which had been emptied of its usual cargo of massage oils. These were joined by a single latex glove and the stinging nettles, arranged artistically on a glass dish (presentation was very important to Astrid). Now she was ready to receive her client.

William Farquharson was the manager of Clayborne & Co, one of Cheshire's leading private banks. A tall man with a lugubrious manner, he was well known in Kirkhulme, where he lived with his wife and their three children. As chairman of the Rotary Club and a leading light in the village history society, he was widely regarded as a pillar of the local community and a man whose morals were beyond reproach. But Astrid – or Mistress Valkyrie as she was also known – knew better than anyone that appearances could be deceptive.

After greeting her client in reception, Astrid led him to the treatment room, taking care to lock the door behind them. When she turned round, she saw William looking at her expectantly, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his impeccably cut suit trousers. All at once, Astrid's beautiful face twisted into a mask of disgust.

'You insolent worm,' she snarled. 'Take your hands out of your pockets this instant.'

William did as he was told and clasped the offending appendages together penitently in front of his crotch. 'I'm sorry, Mistress,' he said in a low voice that was far

removed from the booming tone he used to address his minions at the bank.

‘Take care that it doesn’t happen again, or the consequences will be very serious,’ Astrid hissed. She directed her client to a hospital screen in the corner of the room. ‘Strip down to your underpants – and be quick about it. Mistress Valkyrie does not like to be kept waiting.’

William walked briskly to the screen, eager for the session to begin.

As she waited for him to undress, Astrid made some preparations of her own, kicking off her clogs and lowering the treatment couch so that she when she sat on it, her bare feet rested on the tiled floor.

After a few moments, the bank manager emerged from behind the screen. He was wearing a pair of black Calvin Klein boxers that made his milky skin look even paler.

Astrid pointed to the yoga mat. ‘Lay on the floor,’ she commanded.

When William was prostrated, Astrid performed a slow circuit of the mat, eyes fixed on her client’s narrow ribcage. ‘What a pitiful specimen of manhood you are,’ she said witheringly.

‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘I think you need to be taught a lesson.’ She stopped pacing and sat down on the edge of the treatment couch. Extending a long leg, she began stroking William’s impressive mat of chest hair with the tips of her French-manicured toes. A small moan of pleasure escaped from the bank manager’s lips. The masseuse flashed a superior smile – then, quite without warning, she caught a curl of hair between her toes and tweaked it as hard as she could.

William's body jerked as if an electric current had passed through it. 'Oh, Mistress,' he murmured. 'You're most cruel.'

'Silence!' Astrid cried. 'You must speak only when spoken to.' Seizing another curl, she tweaked again. This time, William accepted his punishment without complaint. Astrid's foot moved northwards with practised ease and commenced roughly kneading the bank manager's bony shoulder. A minute or so later, she turned her attention to his face, smacking his cheek with the sole of her foot – lightly at first and then more roughly. Unable to stop himself, William reached out a hand to caress the instrument of torture.

'Bad boy!' Astrid cried as she jerked her foot away. 'No touching – not until Mistress Valkyrie says so.' She thrust her chin out haughtily. 'I think you should be punished for that transgression.' She stood up and went to the trolley. Picking up the bottle of dessert sauce, she carried it over to the plastic sheeting and proceeded to empty half the contents over the toes of her right foot. She glanced at William. A line of drool was leaking from the corner of his mouth. Tossing the bottle aside, Astrid stuck out her foot and began moving it in a circular motion above William's head. 'You're going to lick this clean. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Mistress.'

Astrid brought her foot to William's mouth. Without hesitation, he began licking it enthusiastically, pushing his tongue in the crevices between her toes like a chameleon foraging for locusts. The masseuse observed his activities approvingly. Sexually speaking, the act of foot worship

did nothing for her, but that wasn't to say she didn't enjoy it. 'You may touch me if you wish,' she said archly.

Cupping the sticky foot tenderly in his hands, William took Astrid's big toe in his mouth and began sucking it rhythmically. He repeated the same process for each toe until the foot was clean. Then he kissed Astrid's instep and placed her foot carefully on the floor as if it were a priceless piece of Fabergé.

'Excellent,' said Astrid, turning the foot from left to right as she inspected her client's handiwork. 'You are a most diligent Footboy.'

William's caramel-covered mouth broke into a grateful smile. 'Thank you, Mistress; it's a privilege to serve you.'

'And now,' said Astrid as she returned to the trolley. 'I have a special treat for you.' She picked up the latex glove, stretching it between her two hands before releasing it with a menacing snap. She pulled the glove on to her right hand and picked up a sprig of stinging nettles, before returning to William's prone form. 'See what a thoughtful mistress I am?' she said, presenting the sprig as if it were a wedding bouquet.

'Oh yes,' the bank manager whimpered.

Reaching down, Astrid brushed the nettles back and forth against her client's left nipple. William cringed as the leaves delivered their stinging payload. 'How does that feel?' said Astrid, as she stroked the nettles around the other nipple.

'Delicious,' the bank manager whispered as a livid rash began to spread across his chest.

Astrid returned the nettles to the glass dish, peeled off the glove and reached for one of the black silk hold-ups.

She pulled it over her toes then, resting her foot on the bottom tier of the trolley, she began to slowly roll the stocking upwards. William had lifted his head from the mat for a better view and his eyes followed her movements hungrily. The masseuse reached for the second hold-up and slipped her foot inside. ‘This silk feels *soooo* soft against my skin,’ she gasped as she drew it towards her thigh.

William stretched out an arm. ‘May I stroke it, Mistress?’

Astrid smiled benevolently. ‘In a moment.’ She pointed to the patent leather stilettos. ‘But first I think a little trampling’s in order, don’t you?’

Her client nodded his head vigorously. ‘Yes, Mistress.’

‘Excellent,’ said Astrid with a glacial smile. ‘Then roll on to your stomach, you vile creature.’

Fifteen minutes later, William’s entire back, from the base of his spine to the tip of his shoulders, was studded with indentations and red marks, some of which were already darkening into bruises. They were wounds that would sting gratifyingly for several days to come – and Astrid hadn’t finished with him yet.

‘I have a special treat for you today,’ she said, using the pointed toe of her stiletto to flip him over on to his back.

William winced as his livid back smacked against the yoga mat. ‘Oh, Mistress, you *are* spoiling me,’ he cooed in delight.

‘Get your scrawny arse on here,’ Astrid said, patting the treatment couch.

The bank manager rose to his feet and mounted the couch in one swift movement.

Astrid snapped her fingers impatiently. ‘On to your stomach . . . come on, come on – I haven’t got all day.’

‘What are you going to do to me, Mistress?’

‘Wait and see, you impertinent wretch,’ Astrid barked.

Once the bank manager was in position, the masseuse went to her trolley and selected several lengths of nylon cord. She held one up in front of William’s face, tugging on the ends as if she were wielding a garrotte.

‘Cross your ankles,’ she ordered.

William did as he was told, whereupon Astrid wrapped the cord round his ankles several times and tied it securely.

‘Now put your hands behind your back.’

With a second length of rope Astrid tied his hands, deliberately scraping her long nails against the tender undersides of his wrists as she did so.

‘And now for the fun part,’ she said, taking a third length of rope and using it to link the ties on his ankles and wrists together. She tied a loose slipknot then pulled the cord tight. William let out a cry as the manoeuvre caused his body to arch backwards.

Astrid looked at him enquiringly. ‘Is that too tight?’

‘If it’s not too much trouble, Mistress, may I have it a little tighter?’ the bank manager gasped.

Astrid obliged. Then she stepped back to admire her willing prisoner, who was now trussed up like a hog, ready for the spit. ‘You look wonderful,’ she told the bank manager. ‘But there’s something not quite right.’ She held a finger in the air. ‘I know.’ Returning to the trolley, she took a Cox’s orange pippin from the fruit bowl. ‘Now, which orifice shall I stuff this in?’ she said,

tossing the apple into the air and catching it in one hand.

‘Any orifice you like, Mistress,’ the bank manager replied without hesitation.

Astrid smiled as she eased the apple into his open mouth. ‘Why thank you, William. You really are a good and faithful servant.’

The bank manager fluttered his eyelashes. Given his current indisposition, it was the only way he could show his appreciation.