

# *Body and Soul*

*by Jade Williams*



BROWN SKIN  
BOOKS



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I made an appointment to see Darryl. Needless to say, he's fully booked for weeks but as a special favour, I'm being squeezed in late Friday evening. I know what that means: no woman with anything resembling a social life would accept a five-thirty appointment on a Friday since you know you won't be out before nine earliest, so I'll be there with all the pensioner types who have nothing better to do than eavesdrop on the insults that will be heading in my direction, or saddoes who need to get a life. I'm not a valued customer anymore. Darryl even had the nerve to pass on a message via the receptionist: *Don't expect miracles, Carol.*

I had lunch with Gabby today. She's my best female friend, but that doesn't stop me being more than slightly jealous of her. You'll understand why. If you're a true friend, that is. Gabby was dressed entirely in white. Now, how can you wear white in London? White is not a colour for grey, grimy, polluted cities. White is a colour for hot countries, more precisely, countries where washerwomen scrub clothes in the river and leave them to bleach on rocks in the sunlight. You can only wear white if you're rich enough to have someone else to do the washing for you. Or collect your clothes from the dry cleaners. Which Gabby is. Rich enough, I mean.

Her head was wrapped. Gabby is one of those women who wasn't even born in Africa or the Caribbean and yet they always say, with a sneer in their voice: 'How you mean you can't tie a wrap? Is easy!' You ever notice how they never offer to show you? Every time I try to tie a wrap, it either falls off or looks like a crumpled paper bag that got wet in a storm and the wind blew it on top of my head. So I was wearing a hat. And I sure as hell didn't look as good as Gabby in her wrap. She even wears it in that head-high, confident, elegant way that African women do. You beginning to see why I'm jealous?

Yesterday, as I said, I'd been thinking about going to Darryl. Before you go to the hairdresser though, you have to do something to hide whatever you haven't, but should have been doing with your hair. It's like scrubbing your house from top to bottom before a cleaner comes so they don't find out what a slob you are. I also wanted to displace thoughts of Max—I've

heard that song about washing men out of your hair—so I got out some of those half-empty bottles of conditioner that have been languishing in the bathroom cupboard for years. When I mixed them together, there was enough for one good session. The instructions said to leave it on for fifteen to twenty minutes, so I thought an hour would be about right. I didn't have a heated cap, so I managed to find a big enough freezer bag once I'd emptied out the curried turkey that mum gave me at Christmas. I did, at least, wash it. Once the bag was safely tied on my head, I microwaved the turkey and ate it with some hard-dough bread. I'd run out of rice. I could have had some salad, but the cucumber had turned to jelly and the lettuce was swimming in a slimy green pool. So before I could eat, I had to clean out the fridge too. You see why I don't bother to take care of my hair too often.

Anyway, by the time I'd eaten, about an hour and twenty minutes had passed. I rinsed out the conditioner very thoroughly, since I know that bit's important. I sprayed it with leave-in conditioner, wondering why I'd bothered to rinse out the other conditioner, and searched in my bedroom drawers for the rollers I know I'd bought when my hair was going through another incarnation. I eventually found them: spiky blue ones. I've never understood that thing that hairdressers do where they use the roller to tug the hair from the roots up, over and over before rolling it up with a neat spin. I tried, honestly, and gave up, just doing the logical thing and twisting from the top, then sticking in a few million hairpins to keep the rollers in place. I wrapped a few yards of Sellotape around the whole lot for luck.

I slept pretty fitfully with a rolled-up towel under my neck. I'd started out with a pillow, but it was like sleeping on a live porcupine. At about, oh, four-eighteen and thirty-nine seconds in the morning I took out the rollers at the very back and managed to close my eyes for an hour or so. I woke before the alarm since a couple of the spiky rollers had slipped down the bed and I dreamed I was being attacked by supersonic, mutant hedgehogs.

I had a couple of cups of coffee and a cigarette with my multivitamin and mineral tablets and a coenzyme Q10 for good measure before I was ready to tackle my hair. Difficult as it had been to get the rollers in, it was even harder to get them out and most came away with a good chunk of hair still attached. Gabby's hair always looks so... well, *groomed* that I knew I

couldn't let her see me like this. The only solution was to get the hot tongs out. I'd learned, over the years, to use them like an expert, twisting dextrously, knowing how long I dared leave them before they fried my hair. It's been a long time since I used them though and I managed to burn the tip of one ear, but I could cover the developing black scar with the remaining hair. I found my dryer and tried to blow dry my hair into something resembling a style but I had to give up the fight when the smell of burning hair induced a coughing fit. There was no way I could rescue what I'd done. I'd have to leave it to Darryl who was, after all, the expert.

So there I was with Gabby in one of those restaurants that have stiff, pink, damask tablecloths and napkins folded to look like origami peacocks. The place smelled of camellias and the waiters seemed to be on rollerblades as they shimmered across the cavernous room. And I'm wearing a hat. Gabby in a wrap and me in an old hat, feeling inferior and her with her lying self saying, 'Girl, you looking good. For someone who just have she birthday. You lost weight? Your skin looking so clear. Must be inner peace. You been meditating?'

Now Gabby knows full well that I'm not the type to meditate. I've spent good money on all the books, the tapes, the CDs and every time they tell me to lie down and relax and imagine myself walking along a beach with palm trees swaying in the cool breeze, I just start thinking back to the time I was in Trinidad with Max, or Jamaica with Max, or even Minorca with Max or Max in Guadeloupe, Max in Bermuda, Max in London, Max anywhere at all. And you know where that kind of thinking leads. It just leads to trouble. Nowhere else. So these days I don't even try any of that meditation shit.

'What happen to your ear, girl?'

'You looking fine yourself, Gabby. You been shopping? I haven't seen that white outfit before.'

'Peter's been feeling guilty. I don't know why yet, but it must be something big. He treated me to a weekend shopping in Paris.'

'You and Pete had a weekend in Paris?'

Gabby kissed her teeth. 'Don't be silly. Where would Peter find the time to go shopping? No, I had a whole heap of fun. Them shops on the Champs Elysée didn't know what hit them.'

I could believe it. I've been shopping with Gabby before. Now, I love spending money as much as the next one, but till you've been flashing the credit cards with Gabby, you don't know what the meaning of indulgence is. It helps when it's not her own money, but the girl don't know when to stop. She isn't just buying for herself either. If she runs out of things she wants for herself, then she moves on to buying for you. I'm not the kind to turn her down, either. If she gets pleasure from spending Pete's money, then who am I to deny her? It would be like taking away an addict's methadone. So I've got a few decent items in my wardrobe, courtesy of an ignorant Pete, one of which I was wearing today: a blue Azagury trouser suit that I trot out for important occasions and meeting Gabby in whatever fancy restaurant she chooses. I don't feel guilty because Pete is one of those guys who deserves to have his money spent.

I suppose you can guess that Pete's white. His name is actually Peter, but I call him Pete out of spite. My revenge for the way he treats my friend. Actually, Gabby doesn't do too badly. She lives in Bayswater, in an apartment that's palatial by my standards—you couldn't actually call it a 'flat' since you could fit the whole of mine in her marble-floored hallway. I usually head for the kitchen since it's the place where I can do the least damage. I don't think I'd have enough apologies to make up for a smashed antique or red wine spilled on the knee-deep, cream carpets. Gabby actually trusted me enough to let me stay one night after we'd been clubbing. Of course, Pete was away. The next morning, as I was leaving, Gabby's neighbour stopped me and asked, ever so politely, if I thought I could spare her a few hours a week. And I'm standing there figuring out how much a cleaner can earn in that part of town!

Anyway, I digress. I've seen photos of Gabby and Pete together in the apartment and I don't think I've ever seen anyone who looks less like a 'Pete'. He's got thick chestnut hair that, I hope, might be receding under a boyish fringe, a Grecian nose, tanned skin and, the only redeeming feature, full lips that suggest a hint of miscegenation somewhere in his family history. In one photograph, I'm not joking, he's actually wearing green wellies, a waxed jacket and carrying a shotgun. A black guy with a shotgun in south London would be surrounded by a tactical support unit in a flash.

Gabby and I both suspect that Pete has at least one mistress. There's not a lot of evidence, but he's always away (on business), gets home late (from the office), and he has his credit card bills sent to work. Besides, it's what rich guys like him do. Why else would he want to spend more time than necessary away from Gabby? And that's why I loathe him.

Gabby's one of those tall, willowy, incredibly beautiful, sexy, model types. Reminds me a bit of my mother, actually. She's over six feet tall. Statuesque. Guys are always stopping her, saying that they've seen her in some film or in a magazine and I guess if I didn't know her, I'd think she must be an actress or model too. That's what having wealth does for you. You walk as if you don't give a toss what anyone else might think of you. If you've got lots and lots of money, I guess you don't.

You can see why Pete would want Gabby around. She'd impress anyone and certainly liven up those endless business dos that they're always going to. She's funny, smart, and confident, and there's a hint of aloofness about her that makes people want to dig deeper. I don't think Gabby even realises, because under the surface, she's not stand-offish at all. In fact, she's warm, interesting and *interested* but she gives the impression of being untouchable, as if she's surrounded by an invisible force field. I've seen the field become tougher, more impenetrable the longer I've known her.

'So what's Pete been up to now?'

'He had to "go away unexpectedly" a few weekends ago. On business. Didn't particularly bother me. I wouldn't even have thought about it twice until he suggested the weekend in Paris. Made me realise he was feeling more than usually guilty about something. Obviously, he's been putting it somewhere he shouldn't. Again. Anyway, I ended up having one hell of a good time—'

The waiter interrupted to take our order and by the time he brought her vodka and tonic and my white wine, Gabby was ready to confess all.

'Okay, tell me everything. I can see by the look in your eye what you been up to.'

She laughed. 'It's not what you think. I just took a friend with me to Paris.'

'You sure didn't have that good a time with no girlfriend. What friend you talking 'bout?'

'You remember the artist I was telling you about? The one I met at that exhibition in Shoreditch? From Guadeloupe?'

'Yeah, I remember. Beard, locks, eyes, accent, drop-your-knickers gorgeous. But I thought you only talked to him for a few minutes. How you end up taking him to Paris?'

'He gave me his card. He's a struggling artist. I was helping with his education; taking him to the Louvre was the least I could do for the cause.'

'And how much time you spend in the Louvre? About five minutes? You end up modelling for him?'

'Carol, what you take me for? The boy young enough to be my son. You think I'm a cradle snatcher?'

'I wouldn't put anything past you, Gabby. So, spill. What happened?'

That's the trouble with skinny, beautiful women. They almost have to fight the men off. It's like guys can smell when you're getting some and then they come running. I even noticed how the waiter looked at her in that appreciative way, his tongue almost hanging down to his knees while he barely noticed me. It's been so long since I got any that I ain't smelling of anything more than Chanel. If those men had any intelligence they would find it easier to go after the ones who will be gagging for it. Like me. But life's like that. Don't make no sense.

'They say you can't teach an old dog any new tricks,' Gabby said, trying to be enigmatic.

'What you been teaching that young boy, then? You been corrupting his morals?'

'As much as I could. And I haven't lost my touch.' She made a gesture of blowing on her nails and polishing them on her jacket.

I must have groaned aloud as I rolled my eyes up to the ceiling because Gabby laughed. 'When *was* the last time, Carol? You need to take care of business, girl. And here's a little something to help. Your birthday present.'

Gabby handed over a small, flat, pink box tied with loads of ribbons and a French name engraved in gold on it. When I opened it, I had to close it again damned quick as I felt a hot flush coming over me. When she'd said 'little', she really wasn't exaggerating. She'd got me the teeniest, tiniest, weeni-est g-string I ever did see. It was exquisite. A work of art: delicate brown

lace with a circle of tiny pearls in the top corners of the V. Gabby took one look at my reddened face and burst into peals of laughter, shattering the hushed murmurs of the restaurant. I looked around guiltily to make sure nobody had seen my present.

‘Girl, you look like one scared rabbit. You need a real birthday treat!’

Fat chance when just the sight of some skimpy underwear could bring a hot flush to my cheeks. Time was I’d be the one in Ann Summers buying sexy knickers—for Max’s benefit. It really has been too long!

When I got home, I took a serious look at myself. I need to find me a man. Nothing too serious. Not *lurve*. Just some good, old-fashioned, down-home sexual healing. I need a plan. First, I’ll lose some weight. I only just managed to squeeze into the Azagury this morning. And now Carol is expecting me to fit my ass into that minute g-string. This is what happens when you’re not getting enough of the right kind of exercise: you put on a little bit of weight. It wouldn’t take much to shift the few extra pounds around my waist—my doctor might even prescribe a few hot, steamy sessions with Samuel L.

I inspected the fridge and threw out the patties, bread and cakes. I’m going to buy some salady stuff tomorrow. I left the chocolate because, at my age, you don’t want to lose *too* much weight. After waiting so long to develop the curves I have, I don’t intend to get rid of them too soon. Guys like to have a little something to hold on to; they ain’t going to be staying around a stick insect they can barely catch hold of. Or that’s how I comfort myself—when I’ve run out of chocolate. Maybe I’ll join a gym for a couple of months. Or else, I need a more interesting form of exercise. Thinking about it, I didn’t put on any weight when I was with Max...

So if I’m going to find a substitute, I might have to let Darryl have his way with my hair. I can’t see myself inviting anyone back to my flat if I have to reveal what’s under the hat. I’m going to pluck that hair on my chin too. I examined Gabby over lunch when she wasn’t looking and she doesn’t have a single hair on her face and look where that’s got her. She doesn’t have any lines either, or the tiniest hint of a pimple. She had a Caesar salad for lunch while I tucked into peppered steak with French fries and caramelised carrots and I only had a dessert because Pete’s credit card was paying and I don’t

often get to eat in those kinds of fancy places and what's the sense in denying yourself unnecessarily when there's rich chocolate mousse with double cream? I firmly believe that it's your duty to enjoy all the benefits that God puts on your table. Okay, so I'm in denial. I guess I'll throw out the chocolate too. Tomorrow.

I had a pounding headache all day. Got to get this wrap-tying business sorted. It looked not quite right, but passable, when I left for work, but I must have tied it too tight and since it had taken more than half an hour, I wasn't going to risk untying it in the office and starting again. So I just had to put up with the throbbing pain. And with all the comments about 'going ethnic'. I was damned if I was going to take it off altogether.

I work with a weird bunch of people in a small company that produces a weekly music magazine. I'm the Art Director (designer, copy-editor, researcher, typist and office cleaner, rolled into one) and, even after all these years, I'm constantly amazed at the crazy variety of people you get around the music business. My boss, Oliver (Publisher and Editor) can't be more than twenty-six or seven (sore point) and is so wired you'd think he was on something, or several somethings. I don't think he *is* since I've never caught him doing any stuff, but he just gives that impression. Might be his way of blending in with the rest of the industry. I doubt that Oliver has ever looked directly at me since each eye seems to point in different directions and he never stands in one place long enough for either of them to catch mine. Oliver is excessively tall and gangly with a dark red Mohican and one earring that looks like a bull's eye—and that one does, occasionally, fix me with a penetrating stare. He's got his own idiosyncratic style because all this is set off by a long ginger beard that he's twisted, trained and waxed into a Chinese Fu Manchu style. I've never seen him in anything but a variety of velour tracksuits even before and after J-Lo made them briefly fashionable, and, my personal hate, sandals throughout the year.

I guess the reason he's the boss is that he's got an amazing, seemingly-endless supply of energy—artificially induced or not. That's how he raised the money to set up *The Cream* and how he persuades investors to continue backing it. I'd have an awful lot of respect for him if it wasn't for the fact that he knows fuck all about music and cares even less. To him, this is a business, pure and simple. Plus he enjoys the perks. He gets to go to all the awards ceremonies at home and abroad and his secretary of the moment usually goes to supply the... *shorthand*.

We've got a couple of full-time journalists along with freelancers, a photographer, and Georgina, the young receptionist-cum-telephonist-cum-secretary-cum-Oliver's-current-lay-cum-daddy's-spoiled-brat. I refuse to call her George. I don't need to get that familiar.

I'm not sure where Oliver found Georgina. She just turned up in the office one day, and he must be screwing her since, apart from low-cut sweaters and tiny skirtlings, she's got very little going for her. Well, actually, that's a downright lie. I think in Oliver's eyes, she's got an awful lot going for her. Big tits for a start, and that's probably enough qualification for him. In fact, Georgina's one of those women who has no need for a push-up bra. She'd need a haul-up-pull-up crane. I probably hold her background against her too. We overhear intentionally loud conversations about country weekends and Daddy (real, not Sugar, I assume) bought her a flat in Marylebone just so that she could taxi it to the office. No public transport for our Georgina. I'd feel guilty about my reverse snobbery if it weren't for the fact that she's also a complete airhead with a pretty, China-doll face and long, thick, blonde hair. Eddy (he's one of the journalists) and I avoid her as much as we can. You'll think we're infantile since we spend much of our lunch hours bitching about Oliver and Georgina, Eddy impersonating Oliver and me mimicking Georgina—without the hair, of course. Or the tits. Or the long legs, for that matter. We get along well, Eddy and me and, whatever they might think in the office, it's not just because we're both black.

Eddy knows all the gossip in the industry so I can always rely on him for the juiciest titbits, most of it unprintable. I really like Eddy too. Okay, I quite fancy him in a comfortable, homely, safe kind of way. We might even have slept together if it weren't for the fact that something has always got in the way. I suspect we're probably better as friends. It's not awkward or anything. In fact, we joke about it and we've agreed that, if there's no one else in my life, we'll definitely do it on the day before my fortieth birthday, just to make sure that my bits are still in good working order, none of them have shrivelled up, and they remember what they were made for.

It was Eddy who made me decide to put myself in Darryl's hands. 'Looking good, girl!' he greeted me loudly when I arrived in the morning.

But he had to spoil it by whispering as he walked past my desk, ‘Bad hair day?’

It’s about time that brothas understand that ain’t nobody’s business what’s going on under a sista’s wrap. I guess I can forgive Eddy though, since in that office he’s a life saver. It’s not that I’ve got anything against the others, well, except for Georgina and her legs and breasts and hair. And it’s not even her legs or breasts or hair that get me. It’s what she does with them. And who she does it with. After all, who in their right mind would look twice at Oliver? And doesn’t that beard get caught up? Not that I want to even think of where it might get caught. Or what they might do together. Yuck! I couldn’t stop my mind going there for a second. It’s just that Georgina seems to think that going to that place where any rational female would refrain from treading puts her in some kind of privileged position. I get the feeling that she looks down her tiny, white, pert nose at the rest of us.

Eddy and I have given up worrying about what the others say when we go off together. He’s not in the office every day, so when he is, we make a point of not inviting the others for lunch. We only go to the local burger bar or pizza restaurant, or, if he has his way, organic juice bar. It’s not that we’re being unfriendly or exclusive, but when I first started working there, you could see the way everyone watched us, fascinated by how we’d react to each other, not knowing that Eddy and I had known each other for years. So we avoided being seen leaving together for a few weeks, until we thought: what the hell, we like each other, we want to spend time together, so let’s not let them get in the way. They wouldn’t have thought anything if one or both of us had been white, would they? Or maybe they were just curious to see if we’d perform some sort of tribal initiation ceremony.

Strangely, I was glad that Eddy was in the office today. He was right. I was having a bad hair day. Bad outfit day. Bad mood day, really. I guess it must be the birthday and the lunch with Gabby yesterday. Made me realise what I’ve been missing.

‘Where have I been going wrong, Eddy?’ I asked him over pizza, chips and a cola for me and a side salad and mineral water for him.

‘Well, you could do something about that hair on your head to start.’

I glared at him long enough for him to hang his head in shame.

‘You black women can sure give the evil eye,’ I heard him mutter.

‘You better be careful I don’t turn you into a lizard.’

It was easy for him. Eddy’s head is completely, gorgeously bald. I know he has to shave it every so often, or maybe even every day, but that’s nothing to what I have to go through. Besides, his style looks sexy while mine just looks ragged. I forgot to say that I have a bit of a fetish about bald, brown heads. I just want to touch them. I want to rub them and then I get to thinking about where I could rub them and with what, and then that’s likely to get me quite hot and into trouble. You see how easily I can get side-tracked into thinking about sex. It really *has* been too long.

So, I was asking Eddy for his advice. He didn’t seem to think that I was doing anything too wrong.

‘But I’ve got to do something,’ I whined, looking for reassurance, ‘Gabby seems to be fighting guys off all the time, even though she’s married. It’s ’cos she’s so thin.’

‘You say she’s rich too. That could have something to do with it.’

‘To be fair,’—though I’m not sure why I feel I have to—‘she’s gorgeous too. She’s got this long hair. She’s always beautifully dressed. She bothers to put on make-up and the thin thing is just a bonus.’

‘Carol, there ain’t a thing wrong with you—apart from the hair. And you can get that fixed. I’ll prove it to you, any time you like.’

He looked at me with such a caricatured, suggestive, lecherous leer that I had to laugh. I’m sure that must be how Eddy gets a woman into bed. He laughs you into surrender. It’s a better technique than many I can think of. As I dipped my chips into ketchup, all kinds of lascivious thoughts came into my head and if I could have taken the afternoon off, I might have persuaded him to come back to my place—well, if I’d bothered to pick up the dirty clothes from the floor this morning.

When we got back to the office, all hell had broken loose. *The Cream* is one of those magazines that basically publishes puff pieces along with a lot of celebrity gossip. We’re not usually into anything *too* controversial, but if the journalists do their jobs, then we sometimes get real scoops. Like being the first to announce that Brodie Wilkins was going solo or that Commander had been done for possession. Eddy’s very good at his job. He’s been in

the business for so long that his nose for stories is acutely tuned and his contacts book is worth more than The Rock's weight in gold. I guess that's why they can't get rid of him in spite of the fact that he works to his own rules and doesn't take any shit from anyone, especially Oliver.

Anyway, someone had cocked up big time—I'm not naming names, but one of the journalists was looking shamefaced but surreptitiously glaring very pointedly at Georgina. Lawyers got involved and we had to pull an article. An emergency conference was under way and Eddy, superhero that he is, volunteered to find a substitute story. He made a few calls and went off with Patrick, the photographer. Eddy and I make a good team, so he called to tell me how much space he'd need and I set about re-jigging the front cover and centre spread.

Of course, left to our own devices, we'd have got the job done pretty efficiently, but I had constant interruptions from Oliver panicking and Georgina asking brainless questions, so I was pretty ragged by the time Eddy got back to the office. He'd dictated the article onto a cassette as they drove back and all Georgina had to do was transcribe it into the computerised layout. She got so much wrong that we could have ended up getting sued anyway. According to her, she found Eddy's accent difficult. Poor love. I suppose if you're brought up in the Home Counties, then a London accent is pretty unfathomable. So I ended up doing the typing too. I should have learned years ago not to admit that I can type!

Gradually, everyone disappeared besides me, Eddy and Oliver, who wasn't being much use hovering over our shoulders. It was two-thirty in the morning—several shots from Oliver's emergency bottle of Scotch and a full ashtray later—before we finally got the magazine to bed and the disks couriered to the printer. Oliver was gracious enough to thank me and Eddy for our hard work. I noticed, though, that he was the one covered in sweat.

Eddy and I were starving, so he offered to whip up an omelette and we took a taxi back to his place. Eddy lives in Kilburn, in one of those solidly-built blocks that look as if they're private nursing homes. He's turned his flat into a pretty cool space. Eddy's incredibly organised too. No clothes thrown around the place like in my home and no dirty dishes in the sink. Vases of flowers. And a huge tortoiseshell cat that sits purring dutifully on a

cushion by the fireside, considerably attempting to blend in with the decor. Now, I've learned that in this life you have to prioritise and washing dishes, dusting and spring-cleaning are not at the top of my to-do list. Besides, Max used to have someone take care of all that and he let me slip into bad habits. That's my excuse and you can't prove any different.

The walls of Eddy's living room are covered with original photographs of most of the biggest names in black music and if there are any missing, it's only because they've been relegated to the bathroom. I'm always surprised that he's never bothered to get them signed, but then I guess Eddy's not that type of guy. I think he's got the photographs because he sees them as works of art, not because he's starstruck. And I suppose that's why he's got so many friends in the industry: precisely because he's not impressed by their money, or fame, but only their talent.

I've spent so much time in Eddy's flat that I feel really relaxed there, except that I don't dare to be as messy as I am in my home, but you can't have everything. It would take too long to teach Eddy the benefits of sloth. I made coffee while he started on supper, or breakfast or whatever it was at that time of the night or morning.

I'm always interested in what other people have in their fridge and I was impressed that Eddy's was home to vegetables, salads, sprouting beans, tofu, shitake mushrooms and live bio yoghurt. I spend a lot of time reading health magazines and am always meaning to buy all that crap but I'm never sure which you're meant to burn and which you're meant to eat, bath with or slap on your face. And here Eddy was, actually *cooking* with organic, free-range, GMO-free ingredients.

I was too hungry to examine what was actually in the omelette, and sometimes it's best not to know, so I just wolfed it down and, of course, left the best till last, but by then, I had lost my appetite and only played with the salad. That's the drawback with this healthy eating: you never seem to have enough room left for the really nourishing bits.

Eddy suggested that I make myself comfortable but I didn't dare have a cigarette in his flat, so I surreptitiously undid the button on my trousers and spread myself across his leather sofa with a glass of red wine. He sat opposite looking as tired as I felt, but it was a pleasant exhaustion, infused with

the satisfaction of knowing that we'd done a good job and had, not for the first time, saved Oliver's ass.

'Here's to a great team!' Eddy toasted, clinking his glass against mine.

'They don't deserve us. What would they do without us?'

'We could sure as hell do without cock-ups like today's.' Eddy sounded more frustrated than angry. 'I had to call in a few favours and you know I hate to do that unless it's for a good reason.'

'You'd rather have other people owing you?'

'Damned right! You never know when you gonna need all the help you can get and I hate to waste favours on fuckery like this.'

'So what kind of favours you been doing, Eddy?'

'Let's just say that I know how to keep my mouth shut.'

I choked at that, almost spitting out my wine. 'You're always telling me all kinds of stuff. You're one of the worst gossips I know. That's what I love about you.'

Eddy's warm, brown eyes narrowed fractionally. 'Carol, you know as well as I do that we all play several parts. The Eddy that performs in that office is not the same Eddy that's with you right this moment. Ain't that true?'

'Of course not.'

'So the kind of things I chat 'bout with you is unimportant trivia, the sort of rubbish you can read about in any of them magazines, the type of things I write 'bout for *The Cream*. There's a lot that I ain't going to talk about to anybody.'

'Not even me?' I looked at him with wide, would-be-innocent eyes.

He laughed. 'Not even you, babe.'

I know from my own personal experience that Eddy can keep his mouth shut, but I was intrigued by what he was keeping from me. That's a sure way to get me interested: just say that you're not going to tell me something and I'm like a hound set loose after a fox and when I catch hold of it, I won't let go. I pride myself on being able to extract confidential information. It's one of my more attractive qualities and I bow to no other woman on that score.

'What kind of things?'

‘That’s for me to know and for you not to even bother trying to find out.’

‘Eddy Stanton, you know you can trust me.’

Eddy laughed at that. Unnecessarily and over-long, I felt. ‘Carol, you got one of the biggest mouths. You couldn’t keep a secret if I zipped, padlocked and superglued your lips together. You’d still find a way to talk.’

I was hurt. Deeply. ‘That’s unfair, Eddy. Of course I can keep a secret,’ I protested. ‘There’s plenty of stuff I don’t tell you.’

‘Like what?’

To be honest, I couldn’t think of one single thing that I hadn’t told Eddy. In the years that we’ve known each other, he has become my closest male friend and when something is troubling me and I have to talk it through, Eddy is quite often the most available person. If he isn’t in the office, then I call him or, if it’s really urgent, I page him. He always calls me back. I treat Eddy a bit like a girlfriend, so whenever I get hold of a spicy bit of gossip, I talk to him first. Precisely because I know I can trust him. So it hurts that he doesn’t feel the same way about me—even if he is right. I don’t honestly see the sense in depriving other people. It’s almost an evangelical duty to spread gossip and it makes the world go round.

‘Like plenty of things I’m not going to tell you if you don’t even trust me.’

Eddy laughed his infectious laugh that would normally reduce me to giggles too, but I was aggrieved.

‘Eddy, I thought we were friends,’ I moaned.

He smiled gently. ‘Carol, you’re not going to get anything out of me that way.’

He stood up, refilled my glass and stretched.

‘I’m shattered, Carol. You staying?’

I had to think quickly. My first instinct was that he wasn’t going to get out of answering my question that easily. My second was that I was exhausted and didn’t feel like moving an inch. My third was that there was the wrap on my head. If I was going to stay, then I’d have to take it off and Eddy would get a glimpse of what was underneath. I must have hesitated a moment too long.

‘I’ll even turn my back while you take off that wrap!’

I threw a cushion at his head but he ducked, looked smug and headed towards the bathroom. I heard the sound of Eddy showering. I guess he took the thrown cushion for a 'yes'.

I followed him and sat on the loo seat while I finished my wine and tried to figure out how to get him to open up to me. I could only see Eddy's silhouette through the steamed-up glass. He's tall and broad-shouldered with those narrow hips and firm round buttocks that can reduce me to a pool of jelly. I know a lot of women say that they look at a man's eyes first, or his smile or even his teeth—like he's a horse or something—but I think they're too lying or just want to seem 'intellectual' when they're answering a survey. At least I'm honest. I like to see how a man fills out his jeans. It's a good thing that clothes were invented otherwise I'd be a quivering wreck most of the time; there are a lot of fine-looking brothas out there, even if they're not walking in my direction.

Through the rippled shower glass I could see Eddy's hands lathering his chest and then smoothing over the taut muscles in his arms. I started to think about how good it felt to be held in those arms. It was a while since I'd experienced the protection of a powerful, masculine embrace. Strong though he might be, however, I figured a man as exhausted as Eddy wouldn't be able to complete the job of showering on his own and, after all, the guy had cooked me supper; he deserved some pampering in return. Nobody can say I don't do my duty by my friends.

I was out of my clothes like an Eskimo suddenly transported to the Sahara, but I left the wrap on my head, hoping that I looked sexy and that Eddy wouldn't notice—I thought I knew how to distract him. I slid open the shower door and slipped in behind him.

'Need some help?'

'If you're offering, sugar.'

I took the soap and lathered my hands. I started with his shoulders, kneading, rubbing, easing away the tension. I pressed hard with my thumbs, moving in small circles, feeling the hard muscle underneath his smooth skin that looked and smelled of sandalwood.

'That feel good?'

'Mmm.'

I wrapped my arms around him so that I could soap his chest. I know he'd done it already, but cleanliness is definitely next to godliness when you get this kind of opportunity. Eddy's chest isn't bare, but not too hairy either. It's dotted with those little peppercorns that are so cute and feel so good to touch. He's a pretty sensitive guy, too: I could feel his nipples harden when I got near them, contrasting with the soft velvet of his skin. I ran my hands down, around, tracing the contours of his firm muscles. I don't know about Eddy, but I was getting carried away, especially as that position gave me the opportunity to press myself against his deliciously tight butt. The warmth I felt in my groin reminded me that I was neglecting my second favourite part of his body and I reluctantly pulled away so that I could caress his buttocks, rubbing, stroking, squeezing them and slipping my soapy finger down the crack and around the full moons over and over until he moaned with pleasure. I was working pretty hard, so I had to check that all this effort wasn't in vain. I reached round again, trailed my hands along his hairy legs, up and down, over and over, teasing the soft skin of his inner thighs until he could take no more and I reached down to cup my hands around his balls. I don't need too many hints, so I rolled them around in my slick, slippery fingers until I could feel them tighten. I desperately wanted to test how hard I'd gotten him, but I was evil enough to want to make him wait.

Eddy was standing very still, almost leaning against me, his breathing loud and I could feel my nipples get hard as his back pressed into them. I'd got into the shower thinking that I knew what I was doing, that I could stay in control. Now, as Eddy started to move his butt in small circles, pressing himself against my crotch, making my stomach flutter with anticipation, I suspected that if he turned the tables, I'd tell him any state secrets he wanted to know.

'Babe, this is so good, but I can't take much more.'

'So, what you want, Eddy?'

'You know what I want. I want your fingers right here, round my prick. Come feel how hard I am.'

I didn't need a printed invitation. I grasped his thick cock that was now pointing skywards. Definitely my number one favourite part of his anatomy. I ran my thumb along the length, stroking the rippling flesh, tracing the

vein that stood out, moving just as far as the bulge at the head, making him hold his breath as he waited while I gently circled it. I tightened my fingers around him, feeling hotter and hotter as I imagined him inside my pussy. You think you can't get any wetter than standing in a shower? Well, you can't imagine the places where I was getting wet. I could tell that Eddy was as aroused as me 'cos he was silent and unmoving as if frightened of what I might *not* do next. I was enjoying the sense of power.

'Eddy?'

'Mmm?'

'Eddy?'

My thumb embroidered delicate lacework around the head of his dick.

'Yes Carol?' he moaned.

'You know what I want?'

'No. Tell me.'

'I want you to do something for me.'

My thumb had spiralled to the sensitive tip of his cock.

He groaned and turned round to face me and stared into my eyes for a moment. Then he pulled me close clutching my buttocks. His iron erection pressed against my belly and I had second thoughts about what I was planning to do. A flame shot through me as Eddy kissed me, the tip of his tongue searching my mouth. I gave him the right directions then pulled away. I held my breath needing to wait until the heat subsided a little. Eddy's eyes were transfixed by my breasts. He gently lifted them, cupping the weight, caressing the underside and tracing circles around them. He kissed each in turn, sucking my nipples into his mouth, gently nibbling, and then biting. These little shivers started to run through my body. As if he sensed what I needed, Eddy wrapped his arms around me, holding me tightly, fondling, rubbing, caressing every morsel of my flesh. His hand inched its way up my thigh. I would have held my breath even more if there were any more breath to hold. My ears were pulsing with the rhythm of my rapid heartbeat. I stopped hearing the drilling sound of the water from the shower. I was wrapped in cotton wool. Safe, secure, needing Eddy to break through the forest of thorns to rescue me.

Eddy nuzzled my ear, his hands inching closer to my clitoris and he

murmured, responding to whatever I had said—I'd forgotten—"This what you want, babe? Carol, I'll do anything. All you have to do is tell me."

'Anything?' I almost screamed as his finger hit the right spot.

'Anything, babe.'

'All right. Eddy...'

I tilted my pelvis, pushing myself closer to him.

'Yes?'

I rotated my hips, my pussy making circles against his erection.

'I want...'

'Uh-huh?'

I reached down, held his straining cock and guided it between my legs. I swayed back and forth.

'Eddy... I want to know what secrets you not telling me.'

His head snapped back and he looked at me in disbelief.

'What?'

'I want to know what kind of secrets you keeping.'

'I don't believe you, woman. How you could ask me at a time like this?'

The shocked expression softened and he smiled a smile that reminded me of a lion licking its lips. His eyes darkened and he lifted my chin with one finger, staring into my eyes.

'You want to know what kind of secrets?'

'Yeah. You can trust me.'

'You sure?'

'Yes.'

'Well...'

'Yes, Eddy?'

'The same kind of dark, funky, secrets you keeping under that wrap!'

Eddy whipped the cloth from my head and dashed out of the shower, laughing. I followed as fast as I could, but he's taller than me and he's got longer legs so we spent some time circling the sofa and getting the rug wet. I may be smaller, but I'm more cunning so I managed to tackle him to the ground by leaping over the sofa. We were both hysterical until Eddy suddenly looked at me, his eyes becoming dark, smouldering, deadly serious.

'That is some scary shit on top of your head, babe.'