



THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF
BEST NEW

Erotica¹²

*Over 40 outstanding pieces of
short erotic fiction*

EMMA BECKER, MICHAEL HEMMINGSON,
VICTORIA JANSSEN, ASHLEY LISTER, KRISTINA LLOYD
and many more

Edited by
MAXIM JAKUBOWSKI

Maxim Jakubowski is a London-based novelist and editor. He was born in the UK and educated in France. Following a career in book publishing, he opened the world-famous ~~Murder One~~ bookshop in London. He now writes full-time. He has edited over thirty bestselling erotic anthologies and books of erotic photography, as well as many acclaimed crime collections. His novels include *It's You That I Want to Kiss*, *Because She Thought She Loved Me*, and *On Tenderness Express*, all three recently collected and reprinted in the USA as *Skin in Darkness*. Other books include *Life in the World of Women*, *The State of Montana*, *Kiss Me Sadly*, *Confessions of a Romantic Pornographer*, *I Was Waiting For You*, and *Ekaterina and the Night*. In 2006 he published *American Casanova*, a major erotic novel which he edited and on which fifteen of the top erotic writers in the world collaborated and his collected erotic short stories as *Fools For Lust*. He compiles two annual acclaimed series for the Mammoth list: *Best New Erotica* and *Best British Crime*. He is a winner of the Anthony and the Karel Awards, a frequent TV and radio broadcaster, a past crime columnist for the *Guardian* newspaper, and Literary Director of London's Crime Scene Festival.

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Best New Erotica

Volume 12

Edited by Maxim Jakubowski



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Introduction

2012 was the year the erotica and romance literary map changed forever.

The *Fifty Shades of Grey* phenomenon, notwithstanding the intrinsic faults of the bestselling trilogy, has proven there is a strong appetite for erotic stories and tales explicitly depicting what I would term non-vanilla sexual activities and tastes. To the extent that we even hear sales of sex aids and toys have increased spectacularly worldwide as a result! And, of course, erotic books have also much benefited from the *FSOG* tsunami, with authors like Vina Jackson, Indigo Bloome, L. M. Adeline, Sylvia Day, Sasha Grey and Portia Da Costa following in E. L. James's footsteps onto the bestseller lists, while many of the contributors to our Mammoth series have also seen a significant increase in their sales and noted with a wry smile that publishers now looked upon them somewhat more favourably than before when the erotic field was still something of a popular fiction ghetto.

This is a well-deserved vindication of my convictions about the artistic and entertainment merit of erotica. After editing this series for now eighteen years I can only applaud this new-found recognition and hope that it is at least partly sustained after the wave of bad imitations and exploitative material that any new phenomenon generates abates and the quality authors rise to the top without being drowned in the sea of "me too" books that are currently flooding us.

Since I launched this series in 1995 (we featured five unnumbered collections prior to our now twelve annual volumes), I have been proud to introduce hundreds of talented authors, some of whom were and are still active outside erotica too, who have ably demonstrated that writing can arouse, fascinate and enchant. And year after year, they continue to amaze me with the breadth of their sometimes wonderfully twisted imaginations and the way they renew a subject – sex – that many wrongly think of as repetitive and not worthy of description, analysis and emotion. But if you've been reading our collections for years now, I know I'm preaching to the convinced.

Yet again, this year's volume features new names and talents as well as returning favourites. Never has so much erotica been published than during the past twelve months; not just novels with the obligatory BDSM background but also a record number of anthologies both in print and digital form and, as a result, I had an embarrassment of choices when it came to selecting this year's stories and was obliged to neglect many that could well have merited inclusion in a previous volume.

I am particularly pleased to be able to introduce for the first time writers I've long admired such as Peggy Munson, whose novel *Origami Striptease* I heartily recommend, Elissa Wald (author of *Meeting the Master*, which I was also delighted to include as a reprint in my digital list of *Modern Erotica Classics* from this collection's UK publishers) as well as French author Emma Becker, whose splendid (and realistically steamy) novel *Monsieur* I was privileged to be able to recently translate and which is now available in the UK and USA (and many other countries too). In addition, award-winning SF author Kij Johnson joins us as do Pat McStone (behind whom hides a rather acclaimed crime author), famed San Francisco photographer Charles Gatewood (who has featured in several of our *Mammoth Books of Erotic Photography* and some decades ago wrote the wonderful 1993 cult classic novel *Hellfire* as Charles G. Wood), and I. J. Miller (new to this series but a contributor to my *Sex in the City* quartet of anthologies).

With the increased visibility of literary erotica and romance on the bookshelves, I am hoping to welcome many new readers to our collections and can only repeat something I've said many times before: if you enjoy the voices, ideas, plots and characters you come upon within these pages, don't be shy and do continue your exploration by searching for other books and stories by the writers you discover here. You will find them not only rewarding but also liberating – even if it doesn't point you

in the direction of the nearest sex shop for technical assistance!

~~And I can promise you that none of our writers have a need for handsome millionaires with helipads~~ and naive, virginal students to be introduced to some of the manifold realities of sex. They are not only more subtle in their approach but so much more exciting, and as a matter of fact, closer to real life!

Until another year of brilliant sex on the page comes round, enjoy this one. Awaken your senses.

Maxim Jakubowski

Grounded

Nikki Magennis

Erin arrived first. Her red-eye flight landed hard and ground to a slow halt. She stepped out onto a flat grey desert of tarmac. The air was twelve degrees colder and everything was quiet, the airport still half asleep. Inside the terminal, Erin stashed her case in a locker and then walked circuits round empty lounges and past shuttered shops, trying to work the stiffness out of her legs. It was like wandering in Limbo. A space between destinations, a no man's land. Airports seemed to exist outside of any particular place, but she loved them, felt at ease in their anonymous spaces, unknown and free. Foreign voices echoed around her, as hushed as pigeons' wings.

She bought breakfast, a cinnamon wafer and hot, strong coffee, but her appetite dissolved, replaced by a swarm of butterflies in her stomach. Instead, she went to the newsstand and flicked through magazines on the carousel, looking at pictures until the colours blurred: a face painted blue; a crowd at a race; a map of Europe dotted with flags.

An hour later she watched from behind the plate glass windows as Mark's flight landed. It was like watching silent-movie footage on a vast, blue-tinted screen. He emerged from the plane into the Dutch morning light. The sight of him, six foot, tanned, lithe and weather-roughed, made her heart beat double-espresso fast. She got a glimpse of his two-day stubble and crumpled clothes before he disappeared into the walkway, swallowed by another passage, gone from her again.

She found herself finger-combing her hair and biting her lip, like a teenager.

"Erin." His smile was as wide as a sunrise. They crossed the last distance separating them as though drawn by gravity, and sank into an embrace so tight she could hardly breathe. She pressed her face into the coarse, air-cold folds of his jacket, inhaled all the smells that made her heart ache. Woodsmoke, cut grass, pine. He smelled like spring.

"God, I missed you," he said, talking into her hair, his words warm against her scalp. At the sound of his voice she felt her eyes prickle.

"Me too," she said.

"Oh babe. Where have you been?"

"All over the place," she said. There was so much to say, but then he held her chin and lifted her face to kiss her and it was clear they needed to touch more than they needed to speak. He tasted sweet. His body was hard and insistent against hers. His arms locked around her and held her tight.

She pulled away, looked around and saw where they were, on a polished floor, in the stream of airport traffic, taking up space. They'd hardly touched each other but she already felt like she was naked. She coughed.

"Got a bag?" she asked, her voice a breaking whisper. Did the question even make sense? She was fixed on his eyes, their blue gaze still shocking bright behind half-closed lids. He shrugged one shoulder.

"Just this."

"C'mon." Her mouth was thick from kissing him. The words bumped against one another. Now they laced their fingers together and walked over the squeaky, shined floors, past the fragmented groups of people wandering, dazed and sleep-scuffed, around the airport, weaving between knots

Japanese tourists, struggling families, scowling businessmen, cabin crew in their bright, tired uniforms, under signs and hanging curtains of LEDs and scrolling announcement boards and arrows pointing in so many different directions. His thumb brushed the pulse spot on her wrist, and it seemed to turn up the volume of her heartbeat. The ambient sounds faded, her pulse became as loud as the footsteps, louder than all the things she wanted to say but couldn't and didn't know how to phrase anyway, until it drummed in her head and all she could think of was his bare skin against hers.

They reached the doorway of the pod hotel where she'd booked a room. "Give me a minute," she said, pulling out her credit card and trying to find the right slot to swipe it in the check-in machine. Her hands were shaking. Behind her, Mark came up and rested his chin on her shoulder.

"Stop."

"Hm? I'm not doing anything," he said, scuffing her neck with the rough scrape of his stubble. Her knees almost buckled and she leaned against the machine with both hands flat on the screen. He laid a tiny, wet kiss on her hairline and she closed her eyes.

"I can't work the thing. Come on."

"I've waited six weeks," he said, his voice so low it sunk into the carpet. "OK. Do it. Get us in there. I need you in a room, naked, now." He backed away, holding his hands up, and she instantly missed the feel of him next to her.

"Don't go anywhere," she said. She typed in her number and got the key. They followed arrows counting cabin numbers along the corridors, trying not to paw at each other, almost succeeding.

"In here," she said, tugging him through a narrow doorway and pulling it shut behind them. The space was so small a few lungfuls of breath would fill it. Against the spotless white walls of the cabin he was so vivid. So real and so close. At last she could inhale him and touch him and feel the different textures of him – his soft hair, the heat of his skin, his wet, hungry mouth.

She looped her arms round his neck and sagged against him, but he pulled away, placed a hand on her chest.

"Wait."

"More?" She almost laughed, but it caught in her throat. "Fuck, Mark." He wasn't smiling.

"I've got something in mind." He slipped his rucksack off his back and pushed it into her hands. "Open it."

Erin frowned. She didn't want gifts. They'd agreed. She had to travel light. "What is this?"

Mark stayed silent. She shook her head and unzipped the bag. Reaching inside, her hand touched something cool and silk slippery. Rope. She pulled out a length of long black cord, wrapped around her hand like a waiting snake.

"Mark?" She looked inside the bag. At the bottom were a box of condoms and a small tube of lubricant. Nothing else.

She paused. She wanted to smile but her mouth wouldn't cooperate. Her hands swarmed with thoughts of need for him. "Drop it on the bed," Mark said, indicating the rope. She did as he asked.

"I'm going to undress you," he said, moving towards her and tugging at her buttons. Somehow, she was rooted to the spot. "Let me." He undid her steadily, tugging her arms free and throwing her jacket on the floor as if it was dirty laundry. "Good." He nodded, at her mute assent. Now he gripped her arms.

"If you want me to stop say so, OK?"

She opened her mouth but nothing came out. She nodded.

He continued to strip her: shirt, vest, chinos, roughly peeled off and discarded. Erin felt like her breath was too loud. She wanted to swallow but somehow felt embarrassed. "Mark," she said at last. "please kiss me."

He laughed.

“It’s been so long. This isn’t fair.”

“Really? You ought to be used to going without. Told me to enjoy the anticipation, remember?”

Erin moaned. “You’re punishing me.”

“Not yet.” Now he unbuttoned the top of his jeans. His cock sprang from his fly, thick and stiff. Then he pulled his shirt over his head, and she got a faceful of his scent – shower gel spice tinged with fresh sweat. He was beautiful. She hadn’t forgotten, but the sight still left her reeling: his work-tan body, always restless, always in motion.

The drift of black hair that clung to his chest and crept down his stomach, spreading as it disappeared into his jeans. And his coolness, his ease in his own skin. Nothing ever seemed to faze him. As he came up hand’s reach close, only a twitch of his pretty red lips showed any reaction to her proximity, or her near nakedness.

He lifted the rope and wound it around his hands. “Now, let me fix you.”

He pulled her wrists behind her. The subtle pulse that beat between her legs intensified. Every muscle in her legs threatened to turn liquid, and she wondered how long she could hold herself up. The slight touch of his fingers as he secured her and checked the knots was like fine sandpaper. When the edge of his fingernail caught slightly against her hip it stung like she’d been lashed. Not painful, but bright, dizzying burn, as if her desire was concentrated and written into that one thin dash.

“I’m going to fuck you so hard,” he said, his mouth up close to her ear and so quiet she hardly heard it. But she did. Her body heard it. His words struck deep in her centre, and her spine curled.

“OK,” she said, “Mark, please.”

She held herself tensed and steady, trying not to rock back and forth. She’d wanted him for so long his voice and hands and mouth and cock. The memory of how good he felt and how tightly they fitted together had been reignited with every phone call, every text and blurry phone video. Standing in the shade of a tall plane tree in Tunis, she’d filled a phone with dull brassy coins and stood listening to the unfamiliar dial tone, each unanswered beep like a castigation, a lament for travelling so far, for being elsewhere; a way of noting the uncountable miles that separated her from her lover.

Now, in this antiseptic little cabin, with the anonymous sheets and the empty corridors, with the endless flow of millions of strangers around them and the thought of how many others had used this room, used this bed, her heart started to ache like it might burst.

“I want you,” she said at last, splaying her hands against each other, feeling the chill of the air-cooled roughen her skin with goose bumps, seeing the faint smudge of Mark’s reflection in the shower glass and thinking how she so rarely got more than a brief taste, a furious, hurried embrace.

“Yep,” Mark said, as if he was hardly listening. He looked her over, thoughtfully. Then he pulled the chair in close and turned it towards her.

“Sit,” he said, tipping his head at the seat. Startled, she obeyed without thinking, and landed with a jolt. Now, he took another length of cord from the rucksack and crouched down, patting Erin’s calves. “Shift your feet.” He wrapped first one ankle, then the other, fastening them to the cold metal of the chair legs. Erin sat with her legs spread, feeling more exposed as her ability to move was gradually restricted. Mark worked quietly, as calm as if he were fixing a tarp to trailer.

When he was finished, he dropped his hands to his thigh and looked her over. “Test them,” he said. Erin’s eyes widened. She wasn’t used to instructions from him – this was her warm, kind, laughing Mark, all business. There was flint in his gaze, an unsettling purposefulness in his movements. Her want reached her as a force, so strong that it couldn’t be deflected. Her hips had started to ache from being spread. Was he testing her? Trying to trick her into giving up control?

“OK,” she nodded. “I’ll play.”

She pulled against her ties to see how far she could move. Not far. The ropes were soft, twisted cotton, and the memory of where she’d felt them before came back to her. Lead ropes. For horses. Still

pictured Mark walking across the back fields, the rope running through his hands and the dew wetting his boots.

“What are you smiling at?” he asked, lifting his eyes to her face.

“Nothing,” she said, “it’s good to see you.”

“You like that, huh?”

She shrugged, or tried to. “Not what I was expecting.”

“Hm.” He leaned forward and nuzzled at the lace edge of her bra, finding her nipple and catching it in his teeth.

“Ah.”

He bit gently, until she cried out again, then nipped at the other one. His mouth left wet patches. “I could eat you up,” he said, the burr of his accent softened by a whisper but still slanted with the Islamic accent she used to tease him about.

He gripped her waist, now, with both hands. He worked at her, kneading her flesh, rubbing down her splayed thighs and pressing into the tender skin there. She could feel the heat of his breath against her belly and it made her want to twitch.

“Mark.”

His thumbs hooked under her knickers and tugged the elastic away from her body. She felt the air conditioned air on her, heard nothing but the motionless air in the tiny space, slowly heating up and growing closer. Usually she got claustrophobic pretty quickly. Right now she wanted the walls to close in further, to squeeze against her. The desire contained in her was turning almost violent, the immobility wildly frustrating. Waves inside her pulsed from her belly to her cunt and back again. She struggled in her seat. The tightness of her bonds was good. She fought against the rope, confident she would lose.

“You look good like that,” he said, sitting back and leaving her with her pants half pulled down her thighs, squirming in her seat. He wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. She stared at his mouth, mesmerized.

“Don’t make me beg you,” she said, her voice cut back to a whisper.

“I won’t make you do anything you don’t want to do, you know that, babe” he said, a familiar, lazy smile hovering over his mouth.

Erin tilted her hips, trying to twist and press herself against the seat.

“Poor girl. You’re in need,” he said, dropping his gaze to her lap. “How long’s it been?”

Erin shook her head. Her cheeks were flushed and her breath was ragged.

“Answer the question. How long?”

“We saw each other in . . . April? Six weeks.”

“Did you miss me?”

“You know I did.”

“Answer the question.” He reached out and pulled at her knickers, tugging the elastic against the back of her thighs so it dug lines into her skin.

“Yes. I missed you.” Erin blushed harder.

“Did you fuck anyone else?”

“Mark. Of course not.”

“Did you want to?”

They looked at each other. “I don’t play jealous games, Mark.”

“Who said I was jealous? I just want to know.”

“I was working, for fuck’s sake. Sweating my way round the Sahara. Sleeping in trucks, sometimes. No, I didn’t want anyone else.”

She looked away, biting her lip.

“Good.” He slid one fingertip inside her, cool and gentle. Curled his hand against her, covering her pussy with his palm and a warm, maddeningly soft touch. She gasped. So slight. Her muscles tried to tighten around him.

“Not yet,” he said.

She pressed her mouth closed. Held still and took a deep breath.

“More.” She kept her voice steady. “Please. Give me more.”

“Funny. That’s just what I was going to ask next.” Mark leaned in close, so she could smell his hair. Mint and seaweed.

“See, I’ve been waiting, too. It’s taken me a long while to realize. I spoke to you last week. Do you remember?”

Erin nodded, trying to concentrate on his words instead of his fingers.

“And you were talking about the fixer and complaining about the coffee and the heat and it hit me.”

“What?”

He looked at her full in the face. “You’re never coming home, are you?”

Erin shook her head. “Don’t do this now.”

“We only have now, Erin.”

“And you want to know if I’m coming home? I don’t have an answer. I don’t even know what the word means any more. Probably not the same as it does to you. The valley. The farm. But you won’t leave, will you?”

“Leave my work? Let my parents struggle on without me? No. That’s not possible.”

Erin threw her head back and squeezed her eyes shut.

“Mark, we are not possible. We’re the impossible couple. We always come back to this. But here we are. Let’s talk about this later.” She sighed. “I just want to touch you. Kiss me. Please.”

“You know how much I want to,” he said. “But this time, not without a promise.”

“Don’t do it. Don’t you dare.”

“What, ask you to give it up? Oh, I’d love it. For you to turn up at the farm in the breaking dawn one morning and climb into my bed and tell me you’re never going to leave. We could just sink into each other.” He worked at her now, slowly, his fingers describing a delicate curve over her clit before pinching her, hard enough for her eyes to widen.

“Take our time. See where we got to.” He slid his fingers inside her again, worked at the sweet spot.

Erin closed her eyes. “There. There is good.”

“That’s what I thought. Here. Here is good. You know why?”

“Hmm.”

“Believe it or not, a shoebox hotel room buried on the outskirts of Amsterdam is not my dream destination.”

“It was the best we could do. Next time we’ll make it somewhere sexier.”

“Next time it’s harvest, Erin, next time it’s lambing. Next time I won’t have any weekends left. But it doesn’t matter.”

“Course it does. But so does kissing me.”

“Just stop for a minute.” He pulled away suddenly, and Erin gave a sharp intake of breath. “Listen. He turned and rifled in his jean pockets, pulled out a condom and tore it open. He kept talking as he unrolled the rubber onto his cock.

“Here is good because a six thirty flight from Tunis can get you to within touching distance of a two-hour flight from Aberdeen. Here is good because you are here and that’s the only place I really want to be.”

As he talked, he manoeuvred himself so that the tip of his cock was pointed directly at her crotch.

“With you.” He buried a hand in her hair. “In you.”

“Yes.” She spoke without thinking, and he entered her at the same time, sliding in in one movement, meeting the resistance and overcoming it until he was as deep as he could go. Erin opened her mouth but made no sound at all. She fought to inhale. As he started to pull back and fuck her rhythmically, slowly but decisively, the cabin filled with the sound of their scorched breath.

With one hand still holding a handful of her hair, he held her in position. Although she wanted to rub against him, to push all the burning points of her body at the taut, hard surfaces of his, Erin could only twist in her ropes. The plastic chair was slippery and her skin stuck to it.

“Please,” she said, willing him for more. They were fixed together on his terms, his tempo, and there was nothing she could do about it. The imbalance made her want to scream, but then she looked at his face, the curve of his cheekbone and his slightly open mouth, the taut muscle of his arm as he tensed in position. His eyes stuck on hers. For once, she held still.

“Yes,” she said, and gave in. At once her body brimmed with sensation. Pleasure flooded through her, sweet and hopeless. He fucked her faster and she could have cried with gratitude.

When his fingers slid between them and pinched at her clit, she ground her teeth together. Now they were tangled so thick and deep she felt the build-up start. It had the same force as a plane bowling down a runway. The sensation of irresistible pressure overtook her, and they were no longer just two bodies writhing together, no longer all clit and cock and cunt. He pressed hard against her, rough and desperate, fucking her with his teeth gritted, and then he was still. She called his name. Like a lucid dream, she sensed the ground fall away, and they were suddenly weightless.

The moment of lightness, then, as always, was shocking in its impossibility. It lifted her into another place, somewhere wordless and free. As Mark came inside her, she rested her cheek on his shoulder and felt the orgasm shake through her body and echo in his. He gave a low gasp. For a minute or two they stayed like that, drifting.

They laughed as they broke apart, Mark unfolding himself slowly, bumping against the furniture.

“What was the promise?” Erin asked. “I’d say yes to anything right now.”

“Thank God for that.”

Erin opened her eyes. Mark was kneeling in front of her, hunching his hands into his pockets. He held out his hand, palm up. A ring. A bright, glittering stone.

It was just a circle of metal and a piece of pretty rock. It couldn’t weigh more than a few grams. Maybe it was just the unexpectedness of it that made her want to cry. Erin felt all the swimming emotion go out of her, flow down her arms and legs and centre on this brilliant point of light.

She wanted to reach out then, but the ropes held her steady. Suddenly she needed to be out, to be free. She tensed against the bindings.

“Mark, let me go now.”

He looked up. “If that’s what you want.”

Erin’s belly flipped as if she’d just hit a pocket of turbulence. “I don’t mean us,” she said, throwing a nod behind her. “I mean this, these knots.”

“I do mean us,” Mark said softly. “If you want, I’ll let you go. Otherwise, take the ring. I don’t care where you are, Erin. If you’ll wear this, I’ll know you’ll come home again.”

She looked up. Her voice was soft. “I don’t know how we can make it work.”

“Are you saying no?”

Outside, a group of women made their way noisily along the corridor, tried the door handle. “Sorry,” someone shouted, and someone else laughed.

Erin shook her head.

“I’m saying I don’t know if I can give you what you want.”

Mark’s hand closed shut. Erin stared at his curled fingers. “I don’t want to lose you,” she said last. “But I know I can’t ask you to wait for me.”

She looked up. Mark's long, lazy smile was working its way onto his mouth. His eyes were sky blue, she thought, suddenly. How had she never noticed that before?

"Well, you know, I wouldn't be spending my whole time writing poetry on a lonely hillock in the rain. I might be able to function without you for – how long is the longest we've gone?"

"Twelve. Twelve weeks."

"Yeah. Given emails and a couple of naked video calls."

Erin bit back her own smile. "And what then?"

"Did I say I was psychic? I said I was in love with you."

"No you didn't. You said—"

"Don't split hairs, smart arse." He took her chin in his hand and held her face steady. "I don't know what next. I don't know where or how. I just know who. We'll work the rest out. Don't you think?"

Erin smiled.

"Is that a yes? A yes for the moment? A yes and we'll see?"

"It's a yes. A yes please. On one condition."

"Name it."

"Next time we're going to have a serious discussion, you're the one tied to a chair."

She darted forward and caught his mouth. He looped his arms around her back, loosed the knot on her wrists, and untied her while he kissed her. They both closed their eyes and for a while, forgot where they were altogether.

The Tennis Pro

I. J. Miller

He's such a beautiful man, she thinks as she sits on a cold metal bench by the net post of a tennis court in this dank, cavernous indoor club while the tennis pro gives her thirteen-year-old daughter a lesson. She is not thinking about the beauty of his spirit, the attractiveness of someone who is pleasant and funny. The tennis pro is just plain gorgeous, heavenly, hot, a hunk . . . beautiful.

To look at, of course.

That is why she sits on the bench in this drafty space wearing a winter coat. To look. That is why she is not in the warm, comfortable lobby, sipping coffee and chatting with the other mothers about forehands and backhands in front of the huge picture windows overlooking the courts. The view is too far away to truly appreciate the tennis pro.

So, under the guise of a concerned, invested tennis mom, she is at the side of her daughter watching, occasionally looking over at her, nodding indiscriminately, legs crossed, thighs pressed tightly together, lest someone suspect, lest he suspect, that she – like the worst peeping Tom in a trench coat outside a bedroom window, the hungriest voyeur telescoping into the apartment across the way – is simply here to watch.

She has never done this before. She *is* a concerned, invested tennis mom, schlepping her daughter to obscure parts of the state to tournaments she is required to play, arranging practices with the other tennis moms who have the same aspirations for their daughters. She is also a skating mom for her ten-year-old daughter and a music mom for her eight-year-old boy.

“Nice shot,” says the tennis pro as her daughter screams a forehand crosscourt. “If you take the ball a little earlier you’ll knock the cover off.” Her daughter nods, skips back to the center of the court with that bulldog look on her face, determined to show him that she can do just that.

Six feet, two inches tall, not an ounce of fat, early thirties, single. He is deeply tanned, as all pros are in the summer, but this is the middle of January. She imagines he went somewhere warm over Christmas and baked on a beach with nothing on his smooth body but a bulging, black, skimpy nylon Speedo, shiny and wet from a dip in the ocean. She uncrosses her legs, removes her winter coat. Her daughter hits her forehand crosscourt again and he does that volley move of his which is her favorite: racquet out in front, left leg stepping across the body, weight moving forward, and then, just at the contact point of strings to ball, all the weight falls on that front left leg and she can see the bulge and thick shape of his lower thigh, the quadricep, that’s what she thinks they call it. He has beautifully defined quadriceps integrated into a pair of long, sturdy legs, tanned as well, with many fine dark hairs streamlining down toward a perfect set of muscular calves. The face is not boyish, but manly, gentle with a strong chin, soft penetrating brown eyes, narrow cheekbones but not gaunt. On someone else maybe an average face, but on him – with the intensity of how he speaks, encourages, corrects, how he floats toward balls and returns them to his daughter with knifelike precision produced with perfect ease – beautiful.

But it’s the hands that make him, the hand that first enveloped hers. She felt the tennis calluses, but when the tips of her fingers touched the smooth, baby-soft top of his hand, his fingers so long they went up the inside of her wrist, as if she were a racquet handle, as if he were born to grip a tennis racquet.

Gosh, she does not believe she is remembering all this detail about him. She is not a detail person. She is a routine person, dedicated to the routines of being an at-home wife and mother.

Details were lost long ago in the swamp of diaper-changing and car-pooling.

The hour, unfortunately, comes to a close. He beckons his pupil to the net and begins to talk to her quietly, always holding his racquet against his chest, arms crossed. She wonders if her daughter, going a bit boy-crazy lately herself – has some sense of the aura of this man, his sexiness. But, intently as she listens, after he is done, she is off scampering around the court picking up stray balls. No, the tennis pro is not one of the stringy-haired bad boys in heavy-metal T-shirts who stop by the house, who seem to be the subjects of multi-houred phone conversations with best friends. Their hormones are definitely starting to kick in with her oldest, but the edges are still way too rough for her to appreciate such masculine fineness.

And what about her own hormones? She is sorry the lesson is over. She is already looking forward to the next lesson. She'd like to get on the phone and let her best friend know that at forty-one, just when she is sure an era of expectation, delight, intrigue – which began in adolescence – is officially dead, buried, gone, she has discovered that there may be a few out-of-control hormones remaining, leaving the pleasant thought inside her mind that she still has the potential to percolate.

On paper, of course. She had been bored enough during the sixteen years of her married life to contemplate an affair, but she was a little bit chicken and mostly too unmotivated by any of the prospects. Probably just around forty was when it occurred to her that in this crapshoot she had gotten what she settled for: a boring, hardworking husband who provided ample financial security and fathered three fantastic children. She can't complain. Friends are already experiencing drugs and unwanted pregnancies with their kids. Husbands have divorced for younger women, leaving behind single middle-aged mothers with few chances of improving their lots. Or they tolerate the affair, trying to hold on at least until the kids get to college. She wants to stay married. Her husband seems too busy at work for affairs. She should count her blessings. There was a time, somewhere between getting engaged and married, when she felt there was an outside chance she could have it all. She remembered the flowers he bought for no reason, how attentive he was on their first trip to Mexico, how sweet he seemed when they lay in bed after making love and he talked about his business plan, the house he wanted, the future he expected for their children. But even those moments were spotty. She could see how easily work could distract him from her, how vacations only happened because she wanted them, how satisfied he felt with his performance in bed without any sense that it was something that should grow and develop, along with their love. His desire is need-based, then thank you. As they age, the reduction of need within him is directly proportionate to the amount of time spent on foreplay.

At somewhere around her eldest's current age she had dreamt of a grand passion, began believing in the school-girl crush stories she read, graduating soon to unbridled romance novels. She believed it could happen. She believed there was a man out there willing to kiss her with uncontrollable passion while rolling on the beach as the surf washed between their legs. She believed in two people tearing away at each other's clothes because their need is so desperate, making love under moonlight without worrying about being caught, sleeping a whole night through in complete embrace. She believed in enough that she wanted to cancel the wedding with just a week to go, until her mother shook some sense into her. She played the dice and that's the way they fell. Be happy she didn't crap out.

She reaches for the racquet in her daughter's hand to put it away in the tennis bag. They walk toward the back of the court where a section of the large, heavy green curtain can be pulled back to the exit. She fights the urge to turn around for one last look, perhaps something to carry her over to next Wednesday's lesson. What if he is watching them leave and catches her look? What if another mother is watching from the lobby? Nevertheless she can't help herself. She pulls the curtain and motions for

her daughter to exit first, then glances back. He is moving toward the large shopping cart of tennis balls in the middle of the court. There is some sweat doing a lazy dribble from his forehead down his cheeks, and, perhaps feeling unwatched, he tugs his white tennis polo out of the front of his shorts and swings the bottom end up to mop his brow. The result is a half-dozen or so mental snapshots for her to savor of his rippling, flat, hairless, hard body abs, neat quadrants of muscles lined up as sturdy and as symmetrical as any washboard.

It frustrates her when that night in bed, the children asleep, she gives her husband the signal that she wants to make love (she puts her hand on the pajama area covering his penis) and he says, “Not tonight, sweetie.” It only took about a year of marriage to turn “sweetie” and “sugar” from terms of endearment to words tacked on when the other was trying to make a point, or a bit displeased. He had turned her down last Wednesday as well. She is not looking to use him as a surrogate. She had promised herself not even to think about the tennis pro if they do make love. She is merely interested in the positive results that would have to occur from some attention to a body and mind that has been juiced by more than its share of kilowatts. She jerks her hand away and turns the other way and must have let out a “hmpf” or something – which must have surprised and irked him because they usually share the same apathy about their occasional “well, oh all right” bouts in bed – because he comes up with, “You know I work pretty hard and come home pretty late and get up pretty early. I don’t have the leisure time to rest up for this sort of thing.” Her first urge is to come back with something snide like, “Why don’t you try running a kiddie cab service or cooking dinner?” But she holds back. He has a point. He always has a point, which on some level pisses her off. In the early years it was pretty hectic for her, but now the kids are in school full-time and a cleaning service comes twice a week. She has time for a daily aerobics class at the gym, though it has been ages since she’s gone. As her figure goes, she is genetically a bit more blessed than some of her friends but has never dropped the extra weight after the birth of the boy, unable to lose the bulge in her lower abdomen. Nevertheless her husband is free of most of the wear and tear from the emotional turmoil of three kids: their needs that always seem so immediate; their moods that can turn lethal; the demands on time that start right when the first one gets out of school. No, maybe her husband doesn’t have the time to feel sexy anymore, like he ever did, but he does have an occasional two-hour, two-martini business lunch, several wifeless trips every year to places that happen to offer golf, gambling, and strip clubs. Oh, she is becoming such a fussy. Comparing bullshit like this. When all that it’s really about right now is that she would like to get laid.

“How many times have I given you a blow job in the morning to calm you down before a business meeting?” she asks. His head jerks toward her, surprised at her out-of-character language. But she is zipped, estrogen mamboing somewhere inside her. “How many times have you been up all night worried about something and come to bed at three in the morning and wake me up asking for one? Can you fall asleep?” He coughs a little, choking on his search for a response. “How many times do you think I would like a little attention, but you’re too tired to get off your back and I know it’s not worth doing anything but finishing you off, rolling over, and saying goodnight?”

“Well . . . you know. It’s not like. A blow job? Is that what you’re asking me for?” Perhaps he feels that if he reduces it to the lowest common denominator he can shame her into backing off so he can get some sleep.

“Yeah. That’s right. A blow job.” Angry sex can be good, she thinks.

But who is she kidding? He lets out his own “hmpf,” makes a big production out of wading to the bottom of the bed through a tidal wave of sheets, comforter, extra blanket, hikes up her nightshirt and goes to work.

Who is she kidding? Even on his best days he is no good at oral sex and has little interest. He even fast forwards from the cunnilingus parts to the doggie-style scenes in the occasional porn movie.

they've watched on a night as rare as Halley's Comet when all the kids are either at camp or on sleepover.

He starts much too quickly and too rough and she tells him to slow down, which he does. There have been times he has gone all right for a while and she would start to get grooved, knowing she was at least heading up the mountain and there was a peak, maybe even a valley in sight, but then he would get tired and change the rhythm, or go from flicks to licks, or licks to circles, or sideways from up and down, or a stiff circular head motion as if compensating for cramped tongue muscles. The worst was when halfway up the mountain he simply stops for a second, to catch his breath, or because his nose is stuffed, or to remove a pubic hair from his teeth. It is supposed to be raunchy sometimes, sometimes sweet, sometimes simply intense, but it is never any of those things with him. God forbid she even stops in the middle of a blow job.

She brushes some thick strands of wavy black hair (not the original color) off her face, away from her eyes, as she shifts positions, tries to relax herself, tries to find the most comfortable position to make this work. The movement of her hand through her hair is involuntary and jolts her, as if she is receiving an erotic touch. Then suddenly it is all there, like a jailhouse break, a crack in a dam wall. She is on the tennis court, the entire club empty now except for her and the tennis pro. She is there for her own lesson, dressed in a white short pleated skirt with no underwear. He has stopped the lesson and is beside her to brush the hair out of her eyes, easily intuiting that it must be bothering her. But he continues brushing his hand through her hair – that long, sleek, gentle, strong hand. He runs his fingers right through the strands, the firm pull causing her scalp to send trillions of pulsating tingles down to her aching clitoris.

Then suddenly the tennis pro slides that left leg forward, as if he is about to volley, and her legs part and they are an exact match; the flexed leg is lined up perfectly so that his bulging quadriceps is meshed right between her legs in a fit that is all heat and pressure. She barely realizes that she has grabbed a hold of her husband's hand and jerked it right past his face, knocking his mouth out of the way and replacing it with the flatness of his open palm. She shoves it right up against herself and feels exactly like the pressure of the tennis pro's quadriceps. She barely hears her husband's protest; he even tries to adjust his hand, but her grip is so viselike it can't budge. All she hears is the tennis pro's deep smooth voice – as if he is beseeching her to take the ball earlier – telling her to hump his leg, that he is not going to do anything but keep his quad locked against her as his hand runs through her hair. All she feels is his hot breath bathing her lips, his perfect unchanging pressure against her pussy, the constant forward and back of her frenzied pelvic thrusts, the squirt of her juices that flow down his leg, the reassuring, electric touch of his hand through her hair. "Work it," he tells her. "Grind it," he says. "Give it to me . . ." She screams, perhaps waking her kids, certainly startling her husband, who tries to jerk his hand away, but she uses two hands to nail his palm down, to keep the pressure right where it is as she peaks and valleys, peaks and valleys, peaks and valleys the last three Wednesday nights right through her and out, like giant, arcing, billowing pipeline waves exploding onto some way cool Hawaiian surf beach.

Done, she casts off her husband's hand as if it is an errant piece of driftwood and settles into the pool of sweat and juice her passion has created. He is speechless, looking at her as if he has found himself in bed with someone unknown. She closes her eyes. "Thank you," she mumbles softly. He moves away somewhere amid the tumult of sheets and covers, then quiet, covered, settled, snoring. She is half uncovered but she doesn't care. She needs to cool down once again. She needs to rid herself of the beehive frenzy in her brain that is asking, *What the hell is going on?*

She knows she has been a little ditzy with her voyeuristic outings to the tennis court, but she had no idea it reached this deep, that it could be more than the cheapest of thrills for a settled, forty-one-year-old, married housewife/mother. It scares her, scares her that she has just hung ten on a stranger

surfboard and rode the wave all the way in . . . scares her that now she is beached and not sure where all could take her . . . scares her and thrills her all the same.

She is up before anyone the next morning, out of bed, showered, so much skip in her step she mops the kitchen floor even though it's cleaning-lady day. Her kids don't really notice. She makes her husband a hot breakfast. He tells her that's OK, he's fine with his usual bagel and coffee. But she plops down the eggs and sausages anyway, kisses him on the cheek. He eats. When he senses her watching him, he busies himself with some papers in the briefcase by his feet. He, seemingly, is ready to let last night pass, to accept it as something as aberrant as two moons in the sky.

When the family is gone, during the half-hour she has free before the cleaning lady arrives, she retires to her bed, and, for the first time in a very long while, masturbates. She starts with lingering caresses across her breasts, down her tummy, between her thighs, rehashing last night's fantasies, recalling the vibes. When she begins to finger herself with some real zest, she starts to remember every mental photo she has made of the tennis pro since she first met him, from the hands to the quad to the abs to the calves to the skimpy Speedo, finally to what's underneath the Speedo as she catches the last wave in just as the front doorbell rings. She quickly gets herself together and answers the door, feeling so transparent that as the cleaning lady enters all she can do is babble, "I've mopped the kitchen floor," before hurrying off to the bathroom to pee.

For the rest of the week, during the spotty free time she has home alone, she masturbates. There were times in her life, teen years, when she was single, when masturbation was part of her regular routine: hard water spray in the bathtub, pillow crammed up between her legs as she lay face down into the mattress. A brief period, in her early twenties, when, like Bob Dylan, she went electric. But after the kids started arriving she rarely felt motivated for a solo roll in the hay.

On the next Wednesday afternoon, at the end of her daughter's lesson, she pays the tennis pro \$10 and surprises even herself when she asks, "Do you think I could get a lesson from you sometime?"

"Uh, well." He drops the racquet from his chest to his side. "Sure."

"I'll call you." She turns to her daughter and nudges her toward the exit. She used to play once a week in a league, held her own, but has never been much more than a "B" player. She didn't even look at him when she asked and now she just wants to get out of there. Who cares if her daughter stares at her with that look she and the other kids have at bar mitzvahs and sweet sixteens when adults try to dance to hip hop.

In the car she finally catches her breath. Uncharacteristically, she lets her daughter fiddle with the radio, go back and forth between stations. He said yes. She knows for sure he doesn't teach adults. He has to know she's just a "B" player. Why would he say yes? Long ago, as a teenager, she allowed herself kooky perceptions of things: if she wrote just the right letter, Billy Idol would write her back; high school senior class president Dick Hanover would go out with her if she only had the nerve to call him and let him know who she was; her breasts really would get larger if she followed the daily exercises outlined in a teen magazine and when that happened she would find true love. As a young adult she dreamt of keeping her entry-level publishing job, even after having babies, and becoming an accomplished editor. But now she can barely remember when she hasn't been sensible. Old Mom says, "You're not leaving this house without an umbrella"; Practical Sweetie: "If we do the addition and get reasonable on the tiling and bathroom fixtures we can still get back what we're paying if we ever sell the house."

Can she even handle a lesson without making a silly, dribbling teeny-bopper out of herself?

She calls him. She sets up the lesson. It's three weeks before he can fit her in. She frets periodically during that time, feeling for sure she is making a mistake. Yet she still gets up early – her husband is now pleased – to make a hot breakfast. She gives in, finally, to her eldest's request to allow text messaging on her cellphone. She allows the younger daughter a credit-card clothes-shopping spree and

her son to forego not one but two piano practice sessions. She lets her husband's up toilet seat slide ~~the master bathroom and has not initiated sex since that fateful Wednesday night.~~

The result of her new leniency is that both girls are helping her more around the house. The boy has been easier to manage. Her husband brought home flowers. She feels a lot calmer. "Nicer," that's what the younger girl said. "You're being so much nicer." She also starts up at the gym again and drops more than a few pounds.

Then it's time and she's there, on his court, in the morning, no one she knows up in the lobby, her new leaner self. She has ironed her pleated skirt and taken extra care to make sure she has on both underwear and tennis panties.

He asks, "What stroke would you like to work on?"

"What?" she stammers.

"What's your weakest shot?"

"Oh. My serve."

"Let's work on that."

"Let's."

He has her serve a few and stands to the side and slightly behind her to watch as they weakly blow over the net. These skirts are stylishly short but she feels as if the back flies up as she hurls herself upwards for the ball. She wonders if he is getting a clear view of her tennis panties.

"Let's break it down," he says, all business.

He shows her how to position her feet with her shoulders sideways to the net. He shows her how to bring the racquet all the way back behind her head, as if she is scratching her back, then she must reach up with it and step forward with her back foot. She does all this and he explains that it will give her more power, because she is getting more body rotation through the ball. He makes her mime the motion a half-dozen times, pointing out little corrections here and there. He easily engages her when he speaks and seems genuinely excited when she gets something right. She comes to understand how that step forward into the court will empower her. For a second she becomes so intrigued with the prospect of having a harder serve that she almost forgets who she is with, forgets to steal a quick glance at his legs or hands.

Then he tells her she is finally ready to hit the ball, but when she tries to put everything together and focus on making a serve, the careful rhythm he got her into breaks down and the ball bounces meekly off the frame of the racquet before she even has time to step forward. She expects him to laugh. But he smiles kindly, says it takes practice, and if she's willing to practice, she will indeed improve her serve. He breaks it down for her again, has her rehearse each movement, and this time she does make contact but forgets to step.

"That was your old serve," he says. "It can take a lot to get rid of old habits. Let me show you."

With that he is directly behind her, so close she feels his breath on her neck, senses the tightness of his abs near her back. He is positioned exactly as she is, mirroring her. He grips her right hand and is able to go all the way around the hand and racquet handle with his fingers. His lips are close to her left ear as he repeats, "Let me show you." Only this time she feels his voice through her body, perhaps because he is so close, but also because of his change in tone. No longer businesslike, his voice is a whisper, cooing, beckoning. "You bring the racquet back like this and the weight will shift to the back foot." Her body is pliant and he moves everything for her. When her weight falls back, it is nearly nuclear as the pronounced arc of her butt cheeks presses against his crotch. She feels the outline of his penis and balls against her rear. It is such a pronounced feeling that she wonders if he might be the slightest bit aroused, or just extremely well endowed. He does not back off from her pressure, merely continues with the service motion as they step forward together. He extends the racquet, only now his weight falls against her, and she feels the pressure at her backside, his chest at her back, breath on her

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