

SCARLET WOMEN

PROLOGUE

Annie Carter opened her eyes slowly. Her first thought was *what the fuck?* Her head hurt; there was a sore spot behind her right ear. She saw semi-darkness and a dim, familiar interior.

She was in the car. Shit, they'd hit her *hard*. Her brain was spinning.

Her car, yeah that was it. Had to get a grip, think straight.

The black Mark X Jaguar.

She was lying across the back seat, which smelled of leather and cologne; familiar smells, comforting smells, but alarm bells were ringing in her addled mind. Her guts were clenched with unfocused anxiety.

Tony?

Where the fuck was Tony?

He was usually up behind the wheel. Weaving easily through the London traffic and asking where she wanted to go next, saying okay Boss, sure thing. But he wasn't there now, so where the hell was he? She was the big car's sole occupant.

And now it came back to her in a rush. Now she remembered what had happened to Tony. They'd coshed him too. Put him somewhere. But where? Was he okay? Was he dead?

How long have I been out of it? she wondered, sitting up, wincing as her head thumped sickeningly in protest at the movement.

Then she remembered Charlie Foster, and Redmond and Orla Delaney. She remembered it *all*. She'd been knocked out cold, Tony was fuck-knew-where, and now they were going to drive her off in her own damned car to some remote spot, where they would blow her brains out, what little brains she *had*, because who but a fool would push their luck as far as she had done?

She thought of Layla. Her little girl, her little star. Had to get out of here because she was all that Layla had; she couldn't afford to get herself wasted.

She was reaching for the door when the noise started – a high mechanical whine, deafening in its intensity. Her heart rate picked up to a gallop.

What the...?

Suddenly the car lurched,, knocking her back against the right-hand door. Then her horrified eyes watched as the left-hand door started to buckle inward. There was a ferocious shriek of tortured metal. With a noise like a gunshot, the glass in the door shattered, showering her with fragments. She ducked down, covering her head momentarily with an upraised arm, then staring with terror as the door just kept coming, buckling inward, metal tearing, screaming, ripping.

And now the door behind her was coming in too. The noise was beyond bearing, beyond anything she had ever known before. The window imploded and again she was covered in pieces of glass, felt her cheeks sting with the impact of it, felt warm blood start to ooze from cuts on her face.

'Jesus!' she screamed in panic, knowing where she was now, knowing what was going to happen to her.

Then the roof crashed in upon her, folding inward like cardboard. She felt the floor lift and she fell sideways, ending up in the well behind the front seats, nearly gibbering with fear. She was going to die, she knew that now.

Just make it fast, she thought desperately. *Please make it fast.* She lay there, powerless, and watched the roof coming down towards her. Closed her eyes, and waited to die.

