

CUL-DE-SAC

HUGH O. SMITH

Nick Kowalski's wife Brooke is an alcoholic and a drug addict. Her behavior is increasingly erratic and Nick knows it's only a matter of time before her addiction take her to the point of no return.

Anna has worked hard and sacrificed to get where she is. Her law firm just made her partner and she would be the happiest woman in the world if only her out of work husband, Hector would stop taking out his anger on her.

Nick and Anna have been neighbors for over ten years but come together for one passionate night that they both try hard to put behind them. Forgetting that night proves impossible, especially when one of their spouses turns up dead.

Chapter 1

“God, what have I done?”

Anna stared at her reflection in disbelief. She'd stepped from the shower and caught a look at her reflection in the mirror, shocked to find that the ugly bruises on her breasts, stomach, and thighs had transformed from a muted discoloration to deep purplish yellow that showed up like a beacon against her chocolate brown skin.

Instinctively, she looked toward the bathroom door to make sure it was locked. It was. It wouldn't do to have Hector see the evidence of her...mistake. I have to cover these up, she thought, cursing herself for a fool for the thousandth time. And tonight of all nights! The firm's newest partner couldn't show up at her own black-tie dinner with ugly passion marks all over her breasts. It was tough enough being a partner at Diamond, Horovitz, and Yauch. Being the only female one, the scrutiny was doubled. No, the bruises, and how she got them, were her secret.

Hers and his.

She was still dripping wet so she hurriedly grabbed a towel and began to dry herself off, grimacing as the towel passed over the bruises. They were as painful as they were ugly and she proceeded more carefully, tentatively patting them dry.

I'm a partner in a law firm, not some high school girl showing off hickeys, she thought as she reached for the Bobbi Brown concealer and gingerly brushed it onto the bruises on her breasts. The bristles were soft but the bruises were painful enough that even they made her wince.

"Think about that the next time you decide to do something so stupid," she said to her reflection.

She surveyed her handiwork in the mirror then brushed more of the cream on gently. The Carmen Marc Valvo dress she'd thought was perfect for the firm's dinner tonight was a dark red, off the shoulder number that revealed just enough cleavage to be sexy but not enough to cause tongues to wag. That is, if she wasn't sporting the ugly bruises. It was low-cut enough that the bruises would be plain for anyone who had eyes to see.

The cream covered the ugly bruises beautifully and she examined herself again in the mirror once again, touching up here and there until she was satisfied.

This is the most important night of my life; the only things I should be concerned about are wearing a ridiculously expensive dress and not screwing up my speech. She sighed and stared at her reflection. She was tired and looked it. Sleep was impossible last night, but even as she tossed and turned she'd told herself that her insomnia was because of the upcoming banquet the next night and not that she'd so recently cheating on her husband. Exhausted, she'd finally managed to doze for a couple of hours before her alarm woke her at 4:30am. She crawled out of bed, showered and dressed in a daze, had a cup of coffee to wake herself up then left home at

5:15am arriving at the firm by 6:00am as she always did. She went about her day as usual, or she tried to anyway. Meetings, conference calls, reports, Nick. Emails, documents, clients, Nick. He was always there, just on the edges of her mind.

At the thought of him, she used two fingers to press on the bruise on her stomach and bit her lip at the delicious stab of pain. Was it the pain she liked so much, she asked herself, or the memory of how she'd received the bruises? Her hand gravitated to her leg where another set of ugly purple bruises adorned her inner thigh. She pressed hard on them, sighing in pleasure as fresh sensation traveled through her body. She closed her eyes and was there again, in Nick's truck, feeling his strong, calloused hands grabbing her gently yet firmly. She felt his slaps as their passion escalated, and his teeth nipping, gently at first, then harder at her sensitive skin, leaving it bruised and tender. She felt the warm summer breeze blowing on her nakedness and she saw his pale skin contrasted against her dark. She'd been unprepared when he flipped her over roughly and knelt between her legs. She'd marveled at the blanket of stars above and the fact that she was naked under them, then they were obscured by his face, his lips, moving to meet hers as he entered her again. She'd screamed like a banshee and raked her fingernails along the length his back, drawing blood. He'd smiled, she remembered. Just smiled, as he removed her hands and held her down by the wrists. She struggled but he was much too strong. Still, she tried, fighting against his strong hands as his hips worked and he thrust himself into her time and again. Just when she was certain that the sensations were too much and that one more orgasm would surely break her exhausted body, he pulled himself out of her and lay on top of her, spent. His weight on her seemed strangely intimate, more so even than the sex and she'd put her hand on his head, stroked his curly blond hair, struggling against the tears.

“Anna, come on let's go mija, we're going to be late!”

Anna jumped, startled. Her husband's voice came from right outside the bathroom door and, embarrassed, her hands flew from between her legs where'd they'd gravitated at her memory of last night. Embarrassed, she covered her naked breasts with her hands, although there was no way Hector could see her from behind the locked door.

“Anna, did you hear me? We're going to be late!”

Anna sighed, annoyed at the interruption. She opened her mouth to respond harshly but thought better of it.

“We have plenty of time, Hector, I'll be right out.”

“Just hurry up, damn it,” he said, and then added a “*Fuckin' pendaja*” under his breath for good measure before he walked angrily from the bedroom and slammed the door. Anna sighed. She knew her husband. He'd huff and puff and stomp down the stairs and into the living room where he'd turn the television to ESPN and light up one of the smelly Cuban cigars he knew she hated. When she arrived downstairs he would rise without a word and walk angrily into the garage and wait for her in the driver's seat of her Mercedes. He'd insist on driving, his machismo would never let him be driven by a woman, even though it was her car, bought and paid for out of her seven-figure earnings.

She sighed, then turned up the sound on the old Technics record player. She had the latest iPod and her Bose Soundwave radio sat on her night table but she loved to come into the bathroom and sink into the bath as she listened to 45's on the old record player. Nothing beat Tina or Millie singing their hearts out on vinyl. Besides bad memories and decades-old scars, the record player and a stack of records were the only things her mother left her when she died.

She sighed as she continued to dress wondering as she did whether or not to also cover the bruises on her thighs. Why should I, she thought, as Tina Turner's voice filled her bathroom.

Hector would never see them. They hadn't made love in months and on the rare occasion that they did he hurried through the act, only taking long enough to satisfy himself before he rolled off of her and went to sleep. He barely even looked her in the eye much less at any other part of her body. No, no need to cover the bruises up. They would be her guilty secret, she thought, emphasis on the guilt. Even though her one night stand was just that, a one night stand, she'd been feeling an overwhelming guilt in the twenty-four hours since it happened. Guilt not so much that it had happened, but that she wanted it to happen again and again and could not stop thinking about it no matter how hard she tried. She hadn't thought anything like this would happen to her in a million years and she was sure Nick would say the same thing if pressed for why. That it happened, and with an intensity and passion that neither of them had felt in years left them both stunned, out of breath, and shell shocked.

She glanced at the ugly purple bruises on her thighs one last time and zipped up her dress, then gave herself a once-over in the full-length mirror. The dress was obscenely expensive but worth every penny for the way it hugged and accentuated her every curve. The material flowed down her breasts, somehow achieving the time traveling feat of making her forty two-year old bust look like something from a hip-hop video. Then it slinked down, obscuring the slight stomach she loathed but accentuated her hips thighs and butt. Magic, she thought as she looked at herself, sheer magic. Magic not only for the way the dress made her look but for the way it made her feel. She felt sexy. Sexier than she had in years. Maybe it wasn't the dress, she reasoned. Maybe it was Nick. Maybe it was the way he'd looked at her. Maybe it was the way his hands appreciated every bit of her body, even the parts she hated. Maybe it was the way he'd given it to her in a way she didn't even know she wanted. She wished he could see her now. Even Hector couldn't help but to be impressed when he saw her. The man might be angry but he sure

wasn't blind. The one she really wanted to see her in the dress however, wouldn't. A part of her knew that was good and she should forget what had happened but another part wished he could see her and lust for her as she lusted for him.

"Ok girl, get your shit together," she said to herself. This evening was a coming out party of sorts for the newest partners and she couldn't afford to be preoccupied. With a mighty effort she put last night out of her head and gave herself one last glance. The dress was spectacular, her hair perfect, and makeup impeccable. She smiled and grabbed her Prada clutch from the bedroom, making sure her ever-present Blackberry was inside, and then went downstairs.

She was greeted by cigar smoke as she arrived in their media room and saw Hector angrily smoking a cigar the size of a baby's arm. For once she didn't care about the smell because she knew Hector would be blown away by the way she looked. Just as she thought, he paused in mid-puff when he saw her then waved away the hazy smoke to get a better look. He said nothing for a moment, just put out the cigar, then rose, keys in hand and stalked past her.

"I told you before," he said. "Red isn't your color."

Anna stopped in mid-stride and felt the tears rush to her eyes and color fill her cheeks. She was not a woman who cried easily, but the anger and humiliation were intense and as the tears came she felt the fury rising inside. Her hands balled into fists and she turned to follow her husband and release all her stress, all her anger in one long uninterrupted tirade, but stopped short at the sight of her teenaged son, Enrique, standing in the hallway.

Enrique, Rick to everyone else but his father, came to his mother and held her. He had his father's straight dark hair and eyes and strong Cuban features but he had the build of Anna's African American side of the family, muscular and sturdy. Anna put her head on her son's shoulders and the emotion she'd planned to vent on her husband poured forth in a flood of tears.

“He’s an asshole, ma,” Rick said.

“Don’t talk about your father like that,” she said, unconvincingly.

Rick held her at arm’s length and gave her a look. “He’s an asshole, and you know it.”

“He’s just angry Rick,” Anna said, “He’s…”

“Been out of work for two years, yea I know. That doesn’t give him any right to treat you like shit.”

“No it doesn’t,” she agreed. “And watch your mouth.”

“Don’t believe him, red is your color, you look hot,” Rick said. “Those boring ass lawyers are gonna be all over you tonight.”

“Hey, I’m one of those lawyers.”

“Like I said, boring ass lawyers.”

She laughed and hugged her son, silently thanking God for him as she did. No matter how hard things got between her and Hector, their son could always make her feel better.

A car horn sounded, causing them both to jump.

“There’s the assh… I mean dad,” Rick said. “I’ll walk you out.”

Anna took her son’s hand and they walked outside to where Hector had backed the car out of the garage and out to the curb. As they walked Rick pointed out a commotion at the other end of the cul-de-sac.

“Seems like Mrs. K is high again,” Rick said.

Brooke Kowalski’s new BMW sat partly in the Kowalski’s driveway and partly on their lawn. As they watched, Brooke emerged from the house on unsteady feet, headed toward her car. Just then a large Ford truck pulled up and Brooke’s husband Nick ran toward their house. They

were too far away to hear what was said but Brooke turned to her husband and began to talk to him. She was none too happy and her children stood by watching their mom berate their dad.

“Wow,” Rick said, “She needs help.”

Anna could only nod. She continued to walk toward her husband, waiting in the car but then Nick glanced over at her and stopped in his tracks. Anna saw him staring and her heart skipped a beat at his gaze. She wanted to stop and look at him, to take him in, to etch everything about him in her memory but she dared not with Hector waiting impatiently in the car. Rick held her door open and she got in and glanced at Nick as Hector sped past.

"What the fuck is he looking at? *Fucking pendejo!*" Hector said.

Anna said nothing, afraid to even try to speak over the bass beating of her heart. Her BlackBerry buzzed in her clutch and she pulled it out and read the three-word text message. ‘You look beautiful, it said. She didn’t respond, only smiled and read the message one more time as her angry husband sped toward the waiting city.

Chapter 2

“...so she said she was only going to stay for a few minutes, right, but once I started doing my thang well, you know... she didn't pick her panties up off the floor until the birds started to sing. You know how I do. She texted me this morning, she just can't wait to get some more of...”

Nick Kowalski listened with half an ear as his best friend Floyd regaled him with the tale of his latest hookup. Some things never change, he thought. Twenty years ago they were in the same position of him driving and Floyd driving shotgun. Only then Floyd's shotgun was an M16 and Nick drove an armored Humvee, battling insurgents during Desert Storm, instead of the rush hour traffic on the Garden State Parkway in his beat up Ford landscaping truck.

“Say man, you listenin'?” Floyd asked.

“Yeah, yeah, panties on the floor, coming back for more of your thang.” I'm with you.”

“Fuck you,” Floyd said, with a smile. “You're just jealous you ain't living the swinging bachelor life, you poor married bastard.”

Nick grinned at his best friend.

“What can I tell you Floyd, I wish I were as smooth as you.”

Floyd laughed. “Yea, well as my granddaddy used to say, you can shit in one hand and wish in another and see which one fills up first.”

“Really? Your Grandfather used to say that? The Reverend? He said that?”

“Maybe it was my uncle. Shit, someone said it.”

Nick laughed and Floyd’s grin turned into a belly laugh that had their fellow motorists turning their heads to stare at the two men.

Floyd’s phone rang and he glanced at the caller I.D. then held the phone up for Nick to see.

“See what I told you, she can’t get enough of that thang.”

The phone’s vivid screen showed a picture of a beautiful woman in a small top that showed off her enormous breasts to great advantage. Floyd smiled and put the phone to his ear.

“Yea right, she just found out the check you gave her bounced,” Nick said.

Floyd made a face as he spoke into the phone. “No, no baby, that’s just my business partner being jealous ‘cuz you so damn fine. Tonight? Well me and my partner have a meeting with a new client but as soon as we’re done I’m all yours. What's that? Lingerie? Red, huh? That’s my favorite color baby, how did you know?”

Floyd pumped his fist in triumph at Nick and grinned broadly.

Nick smiled back and tuned Floyd’s conversation out. Usually he hadn’t any stories to match Floyd’s but today was different. Very different. He’d awoken this morning thinking last night was only a dream but in short order the scratches on his back reminded him that what had happened was very real. He never wore anything to bed but a pair of boxers but last night he’d made sure to wear a t-shirt just in case Brooke happened to notice the deep abrasions running the

length of his back. He doubted she would notice, she'd long ceased to notice the many nicks and scratches he got almost daily in his landscaping business or anything else about him for that matter. She'd thought it quaint and rustic when the business consisted of only Nick and Floyd doing all the work themselves. She was into a Mother Earth phase then, so it was fashionable for her husband to come home dirty from a hard day working designing and installing ecologically conscious spaces. But, as the business grew to become one of the most successful landscape architecture firms in the state, and Brooke fell out of her earth phase and picked up more material pursuits, quaint and rustic soon became dirty and common.

“Say man, you're gonna miss the exit,” Floyd said.

“Shit,” Nick said, quickly flicking his turn signal on and swerving over two lanes amid honking horns. He merged onto the exit ramp, trying to ignore the angry looks from pissed off motorists.

“You okay, bro?” Floyd asked.

“Yeah, I'm good, I just forgot that was our exit,” he lied.

Floyd gave him a weird look then resumed his phone call.

The truth was Nick didn't forget the exit, he knew it all too well. He'd been here only last night, and he hadn't been alone.

Ten minutes later they turned off the road and onto a little used dirt track. Nick drove for about a mile until the dirt road ended in a clearing where another pickup truck was parked and their developer client sat with his foreman, looking impatient. Floyd got out of the truck and began walking to the client but Nick didn't move. He'd parked in this very same spot last night with Anna.

“Say man, you coming?” Floyd asked.

“Yea, sorry. I’m right behind you.”

Nick exited the truck and fell in step beside his friend and together they greeted the developer and spent the next thirty minutes going over the site. Nick listened with half an ear and let Floyd do all the talking, the memories of his night with Anna in this very spot too powerful to resist. He’d toured the site with her as they were doing right now, and that’s all he’d intended to do. Was it really all I intended to do, he asked himself, as they ascended a small rise and Floyd pointed out a stand of hundred year old trees. He couldn’t deny there was an attraction, there always had been, but it wasn’t one he had any intention of articulating, much less acting on. How they ended up in the back of his truck, kissing like high school kids he couldn’t tell. But somehow they did. Then somehow they ended up naked and then he was inside her, marveling at the way his light skin contrasted against her dark. Then, somehow, his hand was on her throat and it was then that he felt it. The thing that kept him up all night, the thing that made him unable to concentrate all day, the thing that he must, at all costs, have again. He felt her give herself to him. If asked, he couldn’t tell you how he knew. It was in the shifting of her body closer to his, it was in her gasp and the change in her breathing, it was in the look in her eye that said I am yours, I trust you, do whatever you want to me. He felt her body relax under him, and they both smiled as his grip tightened on her throat and they made love under the stars.

“Uh, Nick, don’t you agree?” Floyd’s question caught him by surprise.

“Don’t you agree the project would benefit if we managed to preserve those trees?” Floyd asked again.

“Absolutely,” Nick agreed. He put Anna out of his mind and spent the next few minutes on the developer as they walked back to their trucks.

“So, what’s up with you?” Floyd asked when they were back in the truck and making their way to the highway.

“What are you talking about?”

“Please man, don’t bullshit me. You’ve been in a cloud all day. You almost got us killed missing the exit on the way to the site, and you didn’t hear a damn word I was saying a few minutes ago? What’s going on?”

Nick said nothing. He’d considered telling Floyd about Anna but every time he opened his mouth to confide in his friend something stopped him. He knew he could trust Floyd, that wasn’t the problem, it just felt like he and Anna had something special that was just for them and he didn’t want to share it with anyone, even his best friend. Still, it would be good to confide in someone, he thought, and who better than Floyd.

“Okay, you’re right, I haven’t been myself. Last night…” Nick’s cell phone rang before he could finish. The caller ID said HOME and he said a silent prayer before he answered the call.

“Dad, dad, you have to come home, it’s mom,” Alex’s voice was frantic.

“Calm down buddy, what’s the matter?”

“It’s mom, you have to come home, dad, hurry, she’s…”

Alex didn’t have to finish the sentence. Nick knew was all too well what was happening.

“Where’s your sister, pal? Put her on the phone.”

“Okay, hang on.”

Nick heard the sound of running feet, Brooke’s slurring voice and their daughter Amy’s cool, measured tones. Although the younger of the twins, Amy was by far the more mature and the most able to deal with Brooke’s episodes.

“Hi dad. I told Alex not to call you, we have it under control.”

Nick’s heart broke. A sixteen year old shouldn’t have to have her drunk and high mother
“under control.”

“It’s okay princess, I’m almost home. What’s going on?”

“Mom had a rough day, that’s all. She’s…”

“Is that your dad? Is that your dad on the phone? Give me the phone! Is that your dad?”

Brooke shouted. “Give me the God damn phone!”

“Mom calm down,” Amy said.

“No, give me the phone. Is he done digging in the dirt and hugging the damn trees? Are
you done playing in the dirt Nick?” She screamed.

“Mom! Calm. Down,” Amy said.

“Dad, she’s bad,” Amy said once she’d moved to another room, out of earshot of her
angry mother.

“What happened?” Nick asked.

“She was fine when we got home from school but she turned on the TV and Grandpa and
Uncle Steve were on CNN with the President and she just… lost it.”

Nick sighed.

“She left for a while, then came home a few minutes ago,” Amy continued.

She paused.

“Dad, are you coming home?” she asked, suddenly sounding scared. “She’s really bad.”

“I’m close. I’ll be there in a few minutes, okay. Hang in there.”

In the background Brooke’s voice sounded again, screaming for Amy.

“I gotta go dad. Hurry, okay.”

She clicked off the phone before Nick could respond.

“Brooke?” Floyd asked, but he already knew the answer. It wasn't the first time his friend had gotten a call about his volatile wife.

Nick only nodded as he gunned the truck's big V8 motor. The two men didn't speak and a few minutes later Nick screeched to a halt in front of his house and jumped from the truck. His heart sank when he saw Brooke's new BMW parked haphazardly on the lawn. As he ran up the driveway the front door opened and Brooke spilled out, lurching drunkenly toward her car, Amy and Alex close behind her. She stopped in her tracks when she saw Nick and Floyd running toward the house.

“There they are, the rainbow fucking coalition,” she said. “How many trees did you save today?”

“That's enough Brooke, let's go inside.”

Nick held her arm and tried to guide her toward the house but she shrugged him off.

“I'm going out,” she slurred.

“No. You're not. We're going inside.”

Nick held her arm again, tightening his grip when she again tried to shrug him off.

“I saw your dad and your brother on CNN today,” she said.

“That's great Brooke,” he said, walking her toward the house.

“That's great Brooke,” she mimicked.

She stopped walking and stared at him.

“Why aren't you on CNN, Nick? You're a war hero for Christ's sake. We should be in Washington and not in some fucking...suburb in some nowhere town in some nowhere state like

New Jersey. What the fuck are you doing digging in the dirt with...him?" she gestured toward Floyd.

"Calm. Down. Brooke," Nick said through gritted teeth. He felt his anger rising and he tightened his grip on Brooke's arm, and started to walk again, dragging her with him.

She grimaced at the pain and tried to get away but he held his grip and continued to walk them toward the house.

"I'm not calming down," she shouted, wrenching away from him. "Fuck you, Nick, I'm leaving." She took an unsteady step toward her car before Nick caught up with her and grabbed her arm.

Nick's anger had become rage and he grabbed his wife and turned her around, holding her tightly by her arms. He put his face close to hers and spoke to her through gritted teeth.

"You're not going anywhere but in this goddamned house."

Brooke's laugh was a drunken cackle.

"That's it," she said, looking at his hands gripping her arms. "Do it! I know you want to kick my ass. Do it! Be a man! Everyone thinks you're such a nice guy but I know what you really are, so go ahead. Kick my ass."

Nick said nothing; he kept his grip on Brooke's arm and continued to guide her into the house. As he did he glanced down the street and saw his neighbor Anna, walking down her driveway to her waiting husband. His breath caught in his throat and his steps faltered. She was dressed in a red dress that caught and flaunted every curvy of her body. The memories of his hands on her body came to him in a rush and he looked away quickly and continued to guide his intoxicated wife back into their home.

THANK YOU so much for reading this excerpt of Cul-De-Sac!

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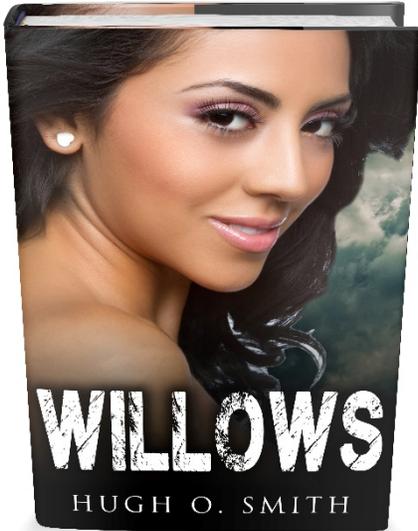
I truly hope you enjoyed this excerpt of *Pleasure Party*; I'm excited for you to read the entire book! But, until that's out, I hope you enjoy ***SOC CER MOM***.

Thanks again,

Hugh

Other Books by Hugh O. Smith

WILLOWS



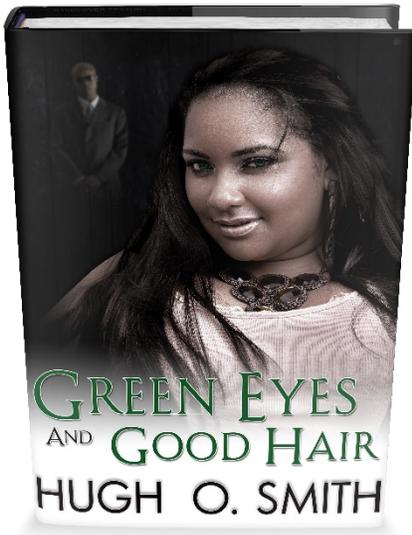
Marcus has found the love of his life. Tami is everything he could ask for and more and he can't wait to settle down and start a family in Willows, the small suburban town they were both raised in. Their plans are derailed by Tami's secrets. Secrets that turn their quiet suburban existence into a powder keg of lies, lust, and depravity. Marcus' plans for a perfect life is twisted into something unrecognizable and he learns that sometimes, even faith and love aren't enough to save you.

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GREEN EYES & GOOD HAIR



Tony is young good-looking and successful, the ultimate ladies' man. Everything about him, from his clothes to his apartment, to his uber-confident swagger is designed to be a trap for the women who catch his eye. Tony has no immediate plans except to advance his career and continue with his playboy ways. Then one day he meets Olivia, a beautiful plus-size executive, and he sees a way he can do both.

Olivia is new in town, but certainly not new to the ways of the player. She knows that no man can treat her the way she deserves so she doesn't even try to find one. As far as she's concerned, life is just fine without the encumbrance of a boyfriend or husband. When she meets Tony, she sees him for exactly what he is, a playboy looking for a good time. She's wise to his playboy ways but still, she wouldn't mind spending a little time with him.

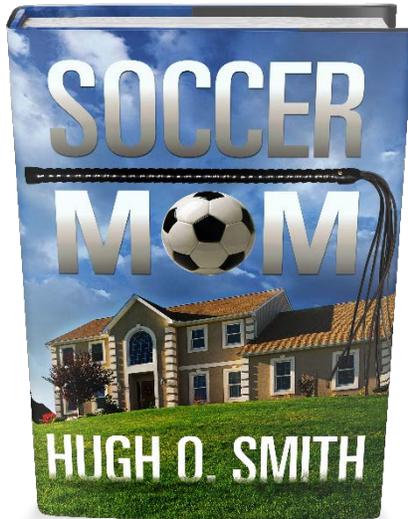
Tony and Olivia get together, each with their own agenda. Then, against all odds, something happens that changes them both...

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hugh O. Smith is the author of *WILLOWS*, *GREEN EYES AND GOOD HAIR* and the novella *SOCCKER MOM*. His short fiction story *SOUTH SOUTH BRONX* appeared in the Zane anthology *Caramel Flava II*. Hugh is a contributor to the writing site *TheWriteLife.com*. Originally from Jamaica, Hugh credits his Jamaican upbringing and its rich storytelling tradition for his writing inspiration. His website is www.hughosmith.com

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