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The Boss's Marriage Arrangement
by

Penny Jordan

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CHAPTER ONE

AS ALWAYS when she had to walk past her boss's open office door, Harriet felt her body tense and she forced herself to look straight ahead and not into the room.

She should never have agreed to work for Matthew Cole, she admitted, reflecting darkly as she did so that if it hadn't been for her best

friend then she wouldn't have done. That was the trouble with best friends; sometimes—too many times, in her experience—they tended to

believe that they knew what was best! Her particular best friend certainly

did, which was why he had coaxed, cajoled and generally used

every trick in the book to get her to submit her CV for Matthew Cole's personal appraisal.

Yes, that was right, her best friend was male! She and Ben had been friends since their junior school days, and that friendship had

strengthened when they had both chosen to go to the same university.

Now, four years after they'd left university, their friendship was as strong as ever—which was why she had taken Ben's advice and applied

for the job at the firm of architects and design consultants, which he had insisted would be perfect for her.

And, to be fair to him, in all probability it would have been. If the job hadn't come with strings. Strings that were firmly held in the

uncompromising grip of the company's owner, Matthew Cole. And strings which Matthew Cole had absolutely no compunction about pulling extremely hard when he felt like it. Take the way he had dictatorially announced that her desk was to be on the opposite side of the room from

Ben's, even though they were collaborating on the same office design project.

She should have listened to her own inner feelings right from the start,

Harriet admitted, her green eyes shadowing as sunlight spilled

through the window, burnishing her conker-coloured shoulder length hair. The thickness of her long black eyelashes gave her eyes a certain

smouldering sensuality, which was echoed by the warmth of her mouth.

As she passed Mathew Cole's office she let out a sigh of relief. She knew without looking in that he wasn't there. For some reason she

had developed a very sensitive early-warning system that told her very explicitly whenever Matt was about.

If she had had any sense she would have paid far more attention to that stab

of shocked awareness and its ricocheting
fal out when he

had first interviewed her. She
should have done, but when Ben had
asked her jovial y if she had been, as he
put it, ‘knocked out by Matt’s

sexiness, like every other woman
who sets eyes on him,’ she had of course
denied being so much as remotely aware
of any such thing,

never mind affected by it!

Ben had been hugely amused by her
reaction, shaking his head and laughing
as he told her how women normal y
reacted to his boss.

And that had been her downfall .
Because of course when she had been

offered the job her own pride had not allowed her to refuse to accept it.

Despite the shock that Matthew Coles's potent air of sexuality and masculine power had given her, she was totally immune to it—and to

him, Harriet assured herself, with blatant disregard for the truth, as she walked into the open plan office she shared with Ben and other members of their team.

'Nice weekend?' Ben asked as she sat down.

'Fine,' Harriet assured him. 'Everyone at home sends their love, and your mother has sent some of her damson jam for you.'

Ben groaned. ‘I’ve got a shelf full of the stuff already. You’d think that after twenty-six years she’d know I don’t like damson jam.’

‘Perhaps she’s trying to convert you. Which reminds me—she wants to know when she and your dad are going to get to meet Cindi!’

Harriet laughed, but her laughter died on her lips as she studied Ben’s haggard face.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked, her concern intensifying as he shook his head. ‘Come on, Ben,’ she cajoled, ‘this is me—remember!’

She hadn’t forgotten, even if Ben had, how he had helped and comforted

her through the break up of her own first big romance during

their first year at university.

‘It’s Cindi,’ Ben admitted unhappily. ‘We had a bit of row over the weekend. And it isn’t the first one either. Harry, I just don’t understand

her,’ he said vehemently as he swung around in his chair to look at her. ‘I mean, one minute she’s “let’s move in together and start planning a

future” and then the next she’s saying, “I’m out with my friends and I don’t want to know you.” And all because...’

‘Because what?’ she pressed, but Ben shook his head. Harriet sighed. Cindi, the girl Ben was dating, had

recently joined the company

too, although since they were working on different projects, and she herself had been away on holiday, Harriet hadn't had any opportunity to

get to know her as yet. She knew that Cindi and Ben had been dating, and that they had fallen head over heels in love with one another.

'Everyone has lovers' tiffs, Ben.' She tried to comfort him. 'Perhaps give yourselves a chance to talk the problem through together...?'

'This isn't a tiff. She's being totally unreasonable and she knows it. And as for talking it through—!' His normally easygoing expression

hardened. ‘No way I am going to be given ultimatums about the way I live my life!’

Harriet could see that he genuinely believed he had a grievance, but she still tried to lighten his mood by teasing, ‘What has she done?’

Told you al your old sports stuff has to go?’

When he didn’t respond she looked worriedly at him and said quietly, ‘Okay, so it’s something serious and I’m out of order trying to joke

about it, but you can be a stubborn so-and-so at times, and if it’s a matter of giving a bit or losing someone special to you then—’

‘It isn’t as simple as that, Harry, and if she genuinely loved me she wouldn’t need to make such bloody ridiculous conditions because she’d know...’

‘She’d know what?’ Harriet demanded, mystified.

For a minute she thought that Ben wasn’t going to answer, and then, as though he couldn’t help himself, he burst out furiously, ‘She’d know

that you’re the closest thing I’ve got to a sister, as well as my best friend, and that no way do you feel any differently about me than I do about

you. Hell, just because she’s never had any close friends of the opposite sex

doesn't mean that— And as for saying that you might secretly be
in love with me—well, that's just plain ridiculous!

It took Harriet several seconds to assimilate what Ben was telling her, but once she had, she protested immediately, 'She can't possibly
think that! You must have misunderstood.'

'I wish!' Ben responded darkly.

'Look, Ben, let me have a word with her,' Harriet offered.

'No. No! It's no use. She won't believe you, Harry. And that's what's really getting to me. I've given her my word that I've been totally up
front with her about us, but

apparently my word isn't good enough.' His voice hardened. 'What she wants—what she says her friends have

told her she should demand—is for me to prove to her that there's nothing going on between you and me by cutting you out of my life

completely. She says if I loved her then I'd agree. She says she wil not accept me having another woman in my life who means more to me

than she does. And she says that if I don't accept her terms then it means that you *do* mean more! I've tried to make her understand—to see

...to admit that she's being sexist and stupid, and that if she loved me she

would accept my word that she's got it all wrong. After all, I know

you a damn sight better than she does. You aren't secretly in love with me, are you?'

Harriet burst out laughing. 'No, I am not!' she assured him truthfully.

From where she stood it was easy for her to see how and why the argument had escalated out of control, even if she did feel affronted by

Cindi's assumption that she was the sort of person who would try to break up someone else's romance. Take two people who had fallen

passionately in love but who did not know one another all that well, add a generous helping of female jealousy, a

pinch of insecurity and a

good measure of male pride, and what you had were all the ingredients for a very destructive explosion.

Right now Ben might have an angrily stubborn look in his eyes, but Harriet could see the pain he was trying to hide. Automatically she

leaned forward and took hold of his hand, giving it a comforting squeeze.

On his way past the large room which housed his creative design team, Matt Cole came to an abrupt halt as he surveyed the intimacy of the

way Harriet was leaning towards Ben and reaching for his hand, her eyes liquid with tender emotion.

Matt was thirty-six years old, the head of his own highly innovative and profitable company, and supposed to be possessed of a sharply

astute brain—so why the hell had he not recognised what was happening to him the minute he had set eyes on Harriet and taken immediate

and evasive action then?

Because he had believed then, in his arrogance, that he had more than enough power and control over his emotions to keep them in

check, that was why. He had felt the immediate fierce surge of emotional and physical reaction to her and dismissed its importance,

shrugging it and his own feelings aside, telling himself that it hardly mattered that he happened to find her attractive since he had a rule that

he never mixed business with pleasure. And, since he had never previously had any problems in sticking to that rule, he hadn't thought it

would pose any problems now.

But he had misjudged the strength of his own feelings. Big time. Very big time.

He was the only child of older parents. His mother had died shortly after his birth, while his father had died when he was in his first year at

university, and so all along Matt had

focused on his work as a means of providing him with the only kind of security he had told himself he needed.

Marriage and children were on his agenda—eventual y. But falling passionately, mindlessly and helplessly in love, and having his whole world turned upside down were not!

But that was exactly what had happened. And, what was more, with every day that passed it was growing harder and harder for him to deal with his feelings.

He had tried to distance himself from Harriet, to cut himself off from what he felt by putting up a façade of

cold indifference, but he might
as wel have tried to breathe without
oxygen he acknowledged grimly.

Every day, several times a day, he
found himself making some kind of
excuse to be in the vicinity of her desk.
Every day he watched with

a jealousy that made him appal ed
at himself as she lavished on Ben the
attention he longed to have her lavish on
him!

He had tried everything, from tel
ing himself he was behaving
unprofessional y to tel ing himself he
was behaving ridiculously, but nothing
made the slightest difference to
what he felt. What he felt right now was

that he wanted to stride over to Harriet and take her in his arms and

kiss her—if not senseless then at least into a state where she wanted him to the same extent that he wanted her, and to hel with the

consequences! But even stronger than his desire to make love to her was his desire to shield and to protect her. To shield her from some of

her col eagues' contemptuous and critical comments about her and to protect her from the consequences of her own behaviour. It made no

difference how often he told himself that as one of his employees she had no more right to his protection than any of the others, or that he had

no right to want to protect her. He loved her, and he couldn't bear to hear what was being said about her. He found it hard to stand to one side

and allow the inevitable to happen. Because everyone, it seemed, believed that sooner or later someone, if not Ben himself, was going to tel

her to stop making a fool of herself by displaying so plainly her feelings for a man who obviously did not return them.

If an adult human being had to suffer unrequited love, then better by far that they suffer it in secret—as he was doing.

But what right did he have to

interfere? Either as her employer or as the man who loved her?

Moral y perhaps none! But emotional y... Matt exhaled sharply.

Helplessly he watched Harriet move even closer to Ben. It was a physical effort to stop himself from going over and separating them.

Didn't she know what a fool she was making of herself? Didn't she care? Didn't she realise that people were discussing her and her

obvious love for Ben—a man who saw her only as a friend—behind her back?

Because if she didn't she damned wel ought to!

It would take a much braver man

than Ben himself to tell her though, Matt recognised, and her female colleagues seemed to prefer to

gossip about the situation rather than do anything about it. He had happened to be standing out of sight but well within earshot the previous

week, when Cindi had been despairingly confiding in an older woman employee about a row she had had with Ben over his friendship with Harriet.

‘He swears that she is nothing more to him than a friend,’ Matt had heard her saying tearfully.

‘Well, he may see their relationship that way, but it’s obvious that she

doesn't,' her companion had retorted darkly. 'Look at the way she's

followed him here! Don't make the same mistake I did, Cindi,' she had warned her. 'My ex swore to me that his secretary meant nothing to

him, but, as the little tart told me the day he left me for her, she wanted him and nothing was going to stop her having him. Some women are

like that! And if you want my opinion Harriet is one of them! I mean, you've only got to see her with Ben. It's obvious how she feels about him.

She spends every spare minute she can with him. Take it from me, she wants him—no matter what he might say or think!'

‘Don’t, please,’ Cindi had protested. ‘Ben says he loves me, but...’

‘Then tel him to prove it! Tel him that you want her out of his life!’

But Harriet very plainly was *not* out of Ben’s life, and had no intention of getting out of it.

Didn’t she realise what people were saying? Didn’t she care that Ben was actual y seeing something else? Had she no pride, no sense

of self-respect or self-worth? Hadn’t it occurred to her to stop obsessing about Ben and find a man who loved and wanted her? Matt wondered angrily.

A man?

His mouth compressing, he wondered helplessly for the thousandth time why this had had to happen to him! It wasn't what he wanted, and

it sure as hell wasn't what he needed! It felt as if his jealousy was burning a hole in his gut.

Cynical y he reflected that a sitcom writer would have a field-day, if not a whole carnival with the situation!

Matt loves Harriet, who loves Ben, who loves Cindi, who loves Ben, who does not love Harriet, who does not love Matt, who does love her

—with the kind of savage, self-destructive, all-consuming hunger that set all his inner emotional buttons on

overdrive and meltdown every

damned time he saw her. And it didn't help that every damned time he *did* see her she was draping herself on or around Ben!

And what in some ways was even worse was the fact that Matt knew that if he were Ben, business ethics and self-imposed rules or not,

he'd have had her in his arms, his mouth on hers, faster than she could blink. He drew in a deep, shuddering breath and fought for selfcontrol.

Ignobly and impossibly he had even at one stage contemplated firing her. But, even if the law hadn't prevented him from doing any such

thing without a watertight reason,

she was far too much of an asset to the business for it to lose her.

And that was just one of the more minor reasons why he loved her. Unlike Ben, who was a good, solid and cheerful worker, Harriet had

brought a passion and flair to her role in the team that had infused the project she was working on with a new dynamism.

It wasn't that he hadn't tried to overcome his feelings for her; he had! In the past few months he had dated more women than he had done

in the past few years. But none of them had so much as dragged his thoughts away from Harriet for as long

as five seconds.

Her Matt-aware antennae for once not working efficiently, Harriet was oblivious to the fact that Matt could overhear her as she shook her head

and told Ben firmly, ‘We can’t talk about this here.’ Giving his hand another squeeze, she suggested, ‘Why don’t we have dinner together

tonight? I’ve got loads to tel you about what’s going on at home.’

Watching her, Matt felt as though someone was ripping his heart, muscle from muscle. He wanted to stride over to them, to take hold of

Harriet and ask her if she realised what she was doing. And then what? Force her to back off and al ow Ben and

Cindi to get on with their
lives—and their love?

He had no right to interfere, he warned himself harshly. But if he didn't then who would? And besides, a dangerously reasonable little voice

inside him argued, didn't he have the right as an employer to want a workplace free of any emotional entanglements and dramas that would

take his employees' attention away from their work?

Oblivious to what Matt was thinking, Harriet watched Ben. He looked so dejected that she felt desperately sorry for him, and wanted to do

whatever she could to help. Cindi obviously loved Ben, and Harriet knew that Ben loved Cindi. She was amazed that Ben had even needed

to ask her if she was secretly in love with him! How could she be when...? When what? When she was desperately afraid that she had fallen in love with Matt?

Matt! Automatically she lifted her head and looked towards the corridor which led to his office, her body stiffening and hot colour staining

her skin as she saw him standing watching them.

Ben was a good looking young man, but he was just that—a young man. In no

way did he compare in sheer male presence to Matthew

Cole, who was pure lethal adult, and so fully charged with testosterone that no woman living could fail to be aware of him. Not that she didn't

do her bit for her own sex by fiercely pretending that she was not. She *was* aware of him. All the time! But some days, sometimes—like right

now—something went wrong and her protective shield failed to work properly. Sometimes just the sight of Matt was enough to set up a chain

of reaction inside her body that resulted in butterflies in her tummy and a weakness in her legs. But that weakness was nowhere near as

dangerous as the weakness in her emotions.

Because the truth was that Matt epitomised everything Harriet had ever dreamed about in a man. He was her childhood prince come to

life; her knight in shining armour. He was her darkly disturbing, secret sensual-fan-tasymade man. He made her ache with feverish longing

—and, far more dangerously, he made her dream impossible daydreams about love and happy ever afters, and at least four little Matts or

Matildas calling her Mummy!

And no way was that ever going to happen! Matt didn't even like her, never

mind love her. In fact sometimes when he was looking at her

the way he was right now, his slate-grey eyes iced with permafrost and freezing her with the most intimidating glare of fury she had ever seen,

she felt that he actively disliked her.

Her heart might be sinking, Harriet acknowledged, but her chin wasn't going to. Bravely she tilted it, and met his slicing scrutiny.

What was it about the thickness of his close-cropped dark hair that made her want to slide her fingers into it, to mould them against the

curve of his well-shaped head, whilst one of his strong hands cupped

her own, and that hard mouth softened with desire and...?

‘Harriet, I’d like to see you in my office.’

The cold, clinical words brought her back to earth.

‘You mean now?’ she queried. She needed to keep her distance from him right now, not get even closer to him. Harriet had her pride—the

same pride that had led to her refusing to give in to her first love’s demand that she go to bed with him—and she was not going to join the ranks of Matt’s lovelorn adorers.

‘I mean now!’ he agreed, in a clipped voice that made Ben give her a

small shove.

‘See you tonight, then,’ he said.

Matt had already disappeared down the corridor, and as she followed him Harriet wondered feverishly what he wanted.

There had never been any open clashes between them. How could there be when he was not just her immediate boss but the owner of

the company as well? But there had been plenty of subtle indirect ones.

It wasn't so much Matt's antagonism towards her that sparked off the fiery pride that led to her spirited defiance but her own shocked

stark inner awareness of just how vulnerable to him she was.

Apart from the brief catastrophe of her first foray into love Harriet had remained heart-whole, and that was the way she had intended to

remain until she was well into her thirties and ready to settle down. And then she had seen Matt and her sensible plans had self-ignited after

one incredulous look at him. Nor had it made any difference telling herself that no sensible and right-thinking woman would be so idiotic as to

fall crazily in love with a man who obviously was never going to feel the same way about her.

Abruptly Harriet realised that she had reached Matt's office.

An inimical biting grey glance impaled her where she stood, leaving her feeling as though her every thought had been dissected and then rejected.

‘Come in and close the door.’

Her heart was going crazy inside her chest. But it wasn't her erratic heartbeat that bothered her as she mentally cursed herself for leaving her jacket on her chair.

The state-of-the-art office had a climatological temperature control that made it totally unnecessary for her nipples to do some

temperature-awareness testing of their own. But that was exactly what they

were doing—pressing themselves against her clothes for the

entire world to see, as though she was standing in an arctic wind.

Or sexually aroused. Well, she certainly knew which it was, and she could only hope that Matt did *not*!

Her nipples tightened so fiercely that she almost cried out in protest.

‘Sit down.’

Woodenly, Harriet did so.

For once Matt had no carefully thought out plan of action mentally organised. He only knew that for her own sake Harriet needed to

distance herself from Ben—both in her own emotions and in other people’s eyes.

The intensity of his grim expression as he battled with his own private devils increased Harriet's apprehension. What on earth had she done?

'It's come to my attention that your...feelings for Ben are the subject of a great deal of office criticism and gossip.'

Harriet could feel the tips of her ears starting to burn hotly in mortified shock. Matt had swung his chair around so that she could only see

his profile, but she was miserably and humiliating aware that he could still see how his words were affecting her.

Her whole face was burning now,

with both anger and humiliation, as the full ramifications of his accusatory and demeaning statement sank in.

Immediately she rushed to defend herself, and to reject what he was saying. ‘If you are referring to Cindi’s ridiculous suggestion that I am secretly in love with Ben—’

‘Secretly?’ Matt stopped her sharply, turning to face her. ‘There was nothing secret about the touching little scene I just witnessed.

Touching, that is, unless one happens to know the truth! And the entire company knows the truth, Harriet.’ The look Matt gave her made her want to disappear!

Through stiff, shock-numbed lips Harriet managed to demand, ‘And that truth is...?’

There was a look in her eyes that made Matt want to go to her and hold her, tel her that nothing and no one was going to be al owed to

hurt her whilst he was there to prevent it, but he knew that he couldn’t. He was doing this because he wanted to help her, not because he wanted to hurt her!

‘That you are refusing to see that your love for Ben is not returned, that it never wil be returned. The way you are pursuing him so

obsessively, fol owing him and

clinging to him, is not only coming between him and Cindi, it's making you the object of other people's contempt as well.'

The cold, brutal words hit her like physical blows, and as from physical blows Harriet recoiled from them, whispering painfully, 'No, that isn't true.'

'It *is* true. Have you no pride? No self-respect?'

The blood receded swiftly from Harriet's face, leaving it creamily pale as shock and outrage filled her.

Cindi's assumption and Cindi's ultimatum had obviously not been confined merely to Ben! It was bad enough discovering that her

colleagues shared Cindi's misinterpretation of her relationship with Ben, but to discover that Matt was not just privy to it but believed it as well filled her with blistering hot shame.

Valiantly she struggled to overcome her feelings and to explain. After all, no matter what her private feelings might be, Matt was her boss,

and at this stage in her career she couldn't afford to earn any kind of black mark, still less be written off as some kind of obsessive who was

trying to force herself on a man who didn't want her!

'I was just trying to tell Ben—'

'What?' Matt challenged her,

striding from behind his desk and coming over to her. ‘What were you trying to tel him? That he’d be better off with you? With your love?’

‘No!’

‘No? So what, then? Were you pleading with him to love *you*? ’

‘No! *No!* ’ Harriet denied fiercely, getting to her own feet to confront him and then wishing that she hadn’t as she realised how close to him she was.

She wasn’t a smal woman, at five feet nine inches tal , but she was smal - boned and slender, and Matt was wel over six feet, with a

physique which Ben had told her came from his days as captain of his

university's rugby team.

How on earth had this happened? How could she possibly be in this sickeningly humiliating situation?

Matt could see the pain in her eyes. Part of him felt bitterly angry with her for what she was doing, but most of him simply wanted to hold

her and comfort her. Her pain was his pain, and he hurt for her and with her.

It was simply to comfort her that he had put his hands on her and drawn her towards him. Nothing more!

Harriet stiffened as Matt's hands closed on her upper arms, knowing that right now she was far too emotional y

frail to withstand
something like this.

Ben was forgotten as though he had never existed. She tried to drag air into lungs compressed with shocked physical awareness.

Matt was touching her. Matt was looking down into her eyes with frowning bleakness.

She exhaled shakily.

He shouldn't have done this. He shouldn't have touched her, Matt recognised grimly. No matter how altruistic his original motivation and intention had been. Abruptly he released her.

As Matt thrust her away Harriet tensed, hating herself for the way she

wanted—no, not just wanted, but ached and needed—to cling to him.

‘Quite apart from anything else,’ she could hear Matt telling her grimly, ‘your behaviour is causing disruption and...and discord here in the

office. And that is something I will not tolerate. We work together here, in very tight-knit teams, and every single member of those teams has

been selected by me personally as a vital component of their particular unit. But if I thought it necessary for the greater good to replace one of

those components then I would have no compunction whatsoever in

doing so. Do you understand what I am saying?’

‘Yes, you’re threatening to sack me,’ Harriet answered him briefly. ‘But you’ve got it al wrong! And so has Cindi! I do love Ben, yes! But as a friend...as a brother, if you like. Not...not in the way that you are trying to imply!’

‘You mean there’s nothing sexual in your... your...?’

‘Nothing,’ Harriet emphasised fiercely, without letting him finish.

‘No?’ Matt gave her a cynical look that made her whole body burn with resentment. ‘Then prove it,’ he told her in a clipped voice.

Harriet exhaled noisily. ‘And how

exactly am I supposed to do that?’

‘Well , you could start by making it obvious and public that you’re very involved with.. dating someone else.’

‘Dating someone else?’ Harriet repeated blankly. ‘Who?’

‘Me!’

The colour came and went in Harriet’s mobile face—and if she had but known it her shock only echoed his own, Matt acknowledged.

What the hell did he think he was doing? Morally and in every other way there was he was totally out of order. He should make it clear

immediately that he hadn’t meant what he had said and that Harriet was to

ignore it. *Immediately!*

Matt was suggesting that she pretend to want him? No pretence was necessary!

‘You can’t mean... Are you saying...? Oh, no, I couldn’t do that. It’s impossible... No. No way!’ she told him a little breathlessly.

Her words didn’t just sting Matt’s pride raw, they blew a large hole in his good intentions as well as shattering them into nothing. A ruthless

determination swept over him, swamping everything else.

‘You’ve just said that you aren’t in love with Ben—I’m giving you an opportunity to prove it.’

There was a small suspenseful

pause.

‘If you don’t take it then I’ll know that you are lying,’ Matt finished coldly.

Harriet looked at him, wondering how on earth she had ever got into such a mess.

‘No one will ever believe that you and I are dating.’

‘Then it will be up to us to convince them, won’t it?’ Matt said smoothly.

‘The choice is yours!’

‘Some choice,’ Harriet muttered, adding fiercely, ‘Why are you doing this?’

Her throat felt raw, the backs of her eyes stung, and her chest hurt, as though she were about to come down with a

heavy cold. Her

physical reactions weren't caused by a physical virus, though, but an emotional one.

'I'm doing it to stop you causing disruption and discord in my business. Besides, I should have thought that if you genuinely don't love Ben,

as you claim, then you'd jump at the chance to prove it—and to give Ben and Cindi a chance to find happiness together,' Matt reiterated curtly.

No way could he tel her that he was doing it purely and simply because he wanted any excuse to be with her...

'What was al that about?'

Harriet gave a nervous look over

her shoulder as Ben came up to her at the water cooler.

‘What...what do you mean?’ she hedged.

‘What did Matt want? You were in there for ages, and when you came out you looked...’

For a moment she was tempted to tel him, but before she could say anything she heard Matt saying smoothly behind her, ‘Have you told

Ben about us yet, darling?’

Ben about us yet, darling?’

Harriet almost dropped the cup of water she was holding, but she suspected that the shock on her face was nothing to the stupefaction on

Ben's as Matt came between them.

'Harry?' Ben questioned incredulously.

'You're trembling. I hope that's because of me,' Matt was murmuring against her ear as he relieved her of the paper cup she had al but

crushed by sliding one hand around her waist to turn her towards him and removing the cup with the other.

Ben was positively goggling at them, his mouth half open and a look of total shock on his face.

'You mean, you two are...?' He shook his head.

'We certainly are,' Matt assured him calmly. 'In fact we very much are—

aren't we, Harriet?'

The look he was giving her was practically a physical caress in itself, Harriet recognised weakly, and her wretched body was certainly

responding to it as though it were.

Ben obviously hadn't missed the high octane sensuality of the smoky look Matt was giving her, because suddenly he started to frown—an

expression that Harriet recognised all too well.

Ben was her friend, but he was also male, and as such he had always taken a very brotherly and protective attitude towards Harriet where

other men were concerned. And right now he was looking at Matt as

though he was a suspicious father about to demand to know Matt's intentions!

'You never said anything to me!' he accused Harriet sternly.

'I asked her not to,' Matt answered promptly for her.

Somehow the hand which had relieved her of the paper cup was now holding her own, his fingers sliding between hers in a manner so

intimate that Harriet was having trouble breathing properly. Her skin tingled, and liquid pleasure shot up her arm like an injection of some kind

of sensual drug that locked into her heart.

She had the strongest need not just to move closer to Matt's body, but also to press herself against him with wanton abandonment.

Wicked images of the two of them alone together somewhere very private filled her head in a dangerously explicit slide show. Matt

perching on the edge of a desk, his legs open as he drew her to him to kiss her passionately, whilst her fingers explored the hard muscles of

his thigh, her touch making him growl in protest and take her hand and place it on the swollen bulge of his erection. Whilst he was kissing her

he would slowly unfasten her top

and remove it. His hands would cup her breasts and savour their shape and feel as her tight, erect nipples

flaunted their eager hunger for his touch... Abruptly Harriet cal ed her thoughts to order as she heard, ‘But now that things are serious

between us it’s different. I don’t care who knows how I feel about Harriet!’

‘Things are serious between you?’ Ben’s frown cleared, leaving him looking both relieved and happy.

CHAPTER TWO

‘HARRIET, I don’t understand you! There’s Matt telling me that things are serious between the two of you and you haven’t said a word! Why not?’

‘Er...well, until he called me into his office I didn’t know that things were serious,’ Harriet explained, mentally justifying her statement by

reminding herself that it was the truth after all —if not in the way that Ben would interpret it.

‘Well, once Cindi knows this she’s going to—’

‘Be very relieved,’ Harriet finished

firmly for him, adding, 'If you love her as much as I think you do, Ben, you won't make an issue of this

sil y mistake about me. After al , if she didn't love you she wouldn't care about my relationship with you, would she?'

'No... But...' He gave a smal sigh. 'She had a few days' holiday to use and she's gone to see her parents—cooling off time, she cal ed it.'

'Wel , if I were you I'd be waiting for her when she comes back with something very romantic planned.'

'Yes. I'l do that.' He paused, and then said worriedly, 'Harry, this thing between you and Matt... Don't rush

into...anything, wil you? I mean,
you haven't... He hasn't... And
Matt is...'

Oh, yes! Matt most certainly was,
Harriet agreed mental y as she told Ben
lightly, 'You worry about your own love
life, Ben, and leave me to
worry about mine.'

Smiling at him, she leaned forward
and kissed his cheek.

Within seconds the phone on her
desk rang, and when Harriet picked up
the receiver she heard Matt saying
coldly, 'I've booked a table

for us at the Riverside for nine p.m.
I'l pick you up. And by the way, I
thought I'd made it clear there's only one

man you kiss from now on and it isn't Ben!'

Harriet wanted to tel him that there was no way she intended to have dinner with him, but he had already ended the cal . Silently she

replaced the receiver. Her head was whirling and her heart was pounding at the thought of what had happened.

Matt had asked her if she wanted people to believe that she was secretly in love with Ben, and of course she didn't. But the cure he was

offering her was far, far more dangerous than the supposed disease!

And how ridiculous it was for him to go to the lengths of taking her out to

dinner just to stop her seeing Ben, as she had planned. Her heart

gave a funny little jerk as it threw itself against her ribcage. She acknowledged that there was a certain dangerous pleasure in the thought of

Matt having the kind of feelings about her that would cause him to feel jealous of her being with another man. Not that he was ever likely to!

The Riverside was the area's most exclusive hotel, and was run by an ex-TV chef and his model wife. What on earth was she going to

wear? And what on earth was she doing worrying about what she was going to wear when she had so much that

was far more important to
worry about?

Displacement therapy, that was
what it was! And nothing whatsoever to
do with any wild and total y idiotic
desire to have Matt take one

look at her and wish that he was
serious about her for real!

Matt stared out of the large window
of his penthouse suite above the office
block. He had bought the suite because it
saved time to live and

work in the same building, and he'd
hired a turnkey designer to sort out the
décor for him. The result was a state-of-
the-art modern living

space in which he constantly felt as
though he was somehow a jarring and

unnecessary presence, breaking up the place's austere and sterile

symmetry of grey on grey, chrome, glass and granite.

Harriet would, of course, be fiercely contemptuous of it—and no doubt of him for living in it. He just somehow knew that she was an Aga

and comfortable country house kind of woman. And somewhere deep down Matt suspected that a part of him was dangerously close to

being an Aga and country house kind of man, with four children, who chose to work at home so that he could be with them...

Because of Harriet? Matt started to

frown. Why the hel had he fal en in love with her? *How* the hel had he fal en in love with her? He'd only

had to look at her to know what that red hair and passionate energy were going to mean! And that was without the complication of her

blinkerred fixation on a man who didn't want her. If he had any sense he would... He would what? Turn his back and walk away from her?

So why the hel was he sitting here reliving the feel of that thick silky waterfal of hair running through his fingers and the effect of those

awesome green eyes looking up into his?

If he hadn't had the presence of

mind to push her away there was no knowing what might have happened. No knowing? Matt derided

himself savagely—he knew damn well what would have happened: what he had wanted to happen and where he had wanted to have it

happen!

It had stunned Matt when a male business associate had commented enviously on his ‘playboy’ reputation, remarking on the number of

women Matt was known to have dated. It had never occurred to him that the method he had chosen of trying to eliminate his feelings for

Harriet would result in him gaining

the reputation of a would-be stud! The truth about his supposed ‘reputation’ was that it was largely unfounded.

His recent succession of dinner dates had been just that—dinner dates! And by his choice! In fact he couldn’t remember the last time...

Restlessly he got up and walked over to the large window with its view of the city.

Liar, he goaded himself mentally. Of course he could damn well remember. And he could remember too that halfway through dinner he

had suddenly looked at his elegant blonde-haired companion and realised with a savage stab of anger that he was

both totally unaroused by
her and totally bored with her.

That had been the evening after he
had interviewed Harriet for the job. His
date had been none too pleased to be
returned home instead

of being taken to bed, and she had
let him know it!

Matt frowned as he heard his
intercom buzz.

Striding over to it, he flipped it on.

‘Matt, it’s Ben. I need to talk with
you.’

Matt hesitated briefly before
answering, ‘Fine—come up, Ben.’

As he opened the door to him Matt
could see the way Ben looked

admiringly around the apartment.

‘This is way cool, Matt,’ he enthused. ‘But Harry won’t like it—’ he began, then stopped, looking self-conscious.

‘It’s okay, Ben. I know this place isn’t to Harriet’s taste,’ Matt offered, intending to reassure him, but to his surprise Ben suddenly started to scowl fiercely.

‘Harriet’s been up here, then, has she?’ he demanded, looking pugnacious.

‘We *are* dating,’ Matt answered obliquely, an unfamiliar and unwanted sensation of having been wrong-footed suddenly hitting him.

Ben’s current attitude was not exactly that of a young man who resented

Harriet's emotional dependence on him
and wanted her taken off

his hands at any cost.

'It's about Harry that I came to see
you,' Ben told him determinedly, giving
Matt the kind of look he last remembered
receiving from the

very protective father of the girl he
had taken to his first school dance.

'I see. Would you like to sit down?
Or is it going to be a short
conversation?' Matt asked drily.

A tinge of colour darkened Ben's
face, but his jaw was still set stubbornly.
He had come up here for a purpose and
he wasn't going to

leave until he had a reassured

himself on Harriet's behalf. She was his best friend, after all, and, knowing what he did about his own sex, he

wanted to make sure she would be all right.

'Harry hasn't said much about how things got going between the two of you...' he began. 'In fact, I wouldn't have thought she was your

type. I've known her since we were kids, and she's my best friend.' Ben stopped, took a deep breath, then began again. 'You said you were

serious about Harriet and I hope that you mean that, Matt, because Harry just isn't the type of woman who would let a man into her life in a

personal sort of way if she didn't

care a hell of a lot about him. She was pretty badly hurt by a rat of a guy when we were at university. Luckily

she had the sense to listen to me when I warned her about him, so things never went too far, if you know what I mean. Of course I know it isn't

anyone's business but their own how many partners a person has had, and I don't suppose I'd be all that pleased myself if I found I'd got a

virgin on my hands...' Matt pressed on doggedly.

A virgin! Ben was trying to tell him that Harriet was a virgin?

Two vastly different emotions speared through Matt at the same time.

One was a savage protective fury with Harriet for loving Ben to the

extent that she did—ridiculously, in this day and age, she was saving herself for him—and the other was a fierce and disgraceful thril of hot

male hunting instinct. An assured and certain determination to ensure that he was the one who released Harriet from the sensual

imprisonment of her virginity.

‘So you see,’ Ben was continuing, ‘if your intentions towards her aren’t honourable, so to speak, then it would be better—’

‘Ben,’ Matt interrupted him firmly, ‘I can assure you that my intentions are very honourable.’

‘You mean...commitment...? Marriage?’ Ben questioned.

Matt’s mouth compressed.

‘Yes, I mean just that,’ he agreed. He meant it, al right, he recognized—after al , he couldn’t be any more emotional y committed to her

than he was. She already occupied his thoughts 24/7, and as for marriage...

As for marriage! His heart lurched against his ribs and pain tore into him. If circumstances had been different, if Harriet had felt about him

as he did about her, then of course he would be wanting marriage, Matt acknowledged grimly. And so, he damned wel hoped, after what Ben

had just told him, would she!

‘You do? Oh, wel , that’s al right then!’

Beaming with delight, Ben got to his feet to shake Matt’s hand. ‘Great girl is Harry,’ he assured him enthusiasticall y. ‘Good sense of

humour, great legs. Must say I was worried... I thought you might just be... Wel , I thought I’d better warn you that Harriet isn’t that sort of woman.’

No, she wasn’t. And Matt decided grimly that he suspected he knew why!

‘Thank you, Ben,’ he said, dismissing his guest.

Half an hour later, when Harriet

opened her door to Matt's knock, the great legs were in evidence but the sense of humour was not.

Not that Matt was in the best of moods himself. The fierce sexual elation he had felt at being told that Harriet was a virgin had given way to

an equally fierce and savage fury that she should be idiotic enough to want to save herself for Ben. Ben who did not want her and who, quite

plainly, was not right for her! It was, Matt had decided, just the kind of ill-judged, crazy thing a stubborn woman like her would do—saving the

gift of herself as well as her love for just one man.

Of course if *he* had been the man...

Harriet took a step back in the hallway as she saw the way Matt was glaring at her. No doubt in his eyes she didn't come anywhere near

matching the sophisticated elegance of the women he normally took out to dinner. Her dress was four years old, a simple basic black crêpe

number which up until now she had always felt she looked quite good in. With it she was wearing her one pair of expensive shoes, highheeled

and, if she was honest, just a little bit uncomfortable.

'Do you live here alone?' Matt demanded, frowning as he looked up and down the narrow dark lane.

‘Yes, I do,’ Harriet confirmed. ‘I shared with Ben at university, but—’

‘Now he wants his own space?’ Matt broke in, without allowing her to finish.

Angrily Harriet tilted her chin and told him firmly, ‘Actually, I am the one who wanted my own space. And my own washing machine and my

own bed!’ she added pithily, remembering how much it had infuriated her to return from a visit somewhere, pre-Cindi, to find that one of Ben’s

mates had ‘borrowed’ her bed in her absence.

Matt’s mouth compressed. When was she going to see sense and accept

that Ben did not want her?

‘If you’re trying to convince me that you shared Ben’s bed you’re wasting your time,’ he told her angrily.

Immediately Harriet stepped back into the house, but as she reached for the door to turn and slam it Matt guessed what she was about to

do and grabbed hold of her wrist.

‘Look, why won’t you face up to the truth? What is it about you that makes it so hard for you to accept that Ben doesn’t want you?’ he

demande y.

If she real y had loved Ben the way Matt seemed to think she did his words would have been unbelievably hurtful and cruel, Harriet

decided. ‘What is it about *you* that makes you think you’ve got the right to tel me what to do?’ she countered, trying to get her wrist back.

‘I’ve told you what my motivation is,’ Matt answered, refusing to release her.

‘And I’m tel ing you that you are barking up the wrong tree. I do not love Ben other than as a friend!’

‘How can you say that when—’

‘When what?’ Harriet chal enged when Matt suddenly stopped speaking.

‘When you can’t string a sentence together without including his name in it,’ Matt said evasively.

What the hel was happening to him?

He had almost blurted out what Ben had told him.

‘We’d better make tracks, otherwise we’ll be late,’ he added curtly.

Harriet glared at him. ‘If you think I’m going to have dinner with you now —’

She gasped as Matt tugged on her wrist and closed the space between them.

‘If you think that you aren’t...’ he retorted softly.

It must be the fact that she was not wearing a coat, coupled with the evening air, that was making her tremble so much, Harriet decided

dizzily. But the truth was that it was the musky male scent of Matt’s skin

playing havoc with her senses, making her want to bury her face

against him and breathe it and him into her. She wanted to burrow against his warmth, she wanted...

A shudder ripped through her, causing Matt to curse under his breath and drag her into his arms, holding her hard against his body as he

lifted his hand to cup her face and take possession of her mouth.

Right now, more than anything else, he wanted to take her back into the house, carry her upstairs and remove every piece of clothing from

her body so that he could show her just what a fool she was for wasting her

time wanting Ben when she could have him. That scent she was

wearing was driving him crazy, making him feel so damned horny...

Harriet moaned excitedly beneath the hot, thrilling thrust of his tongue. Her fingers dug into the hardness of his shoulders as pleasure

exploded inside her like a firework, showering her with golden starbursts of erotic sensation. She could feel his hand in the thick softness of

her hair, his thumb massaging the delicate over-sensitive spot just behind her ear and sending a hot zigzag of female arousal jolting right through her.

Just his touch was enough to

activate the kind of ache inside her that she already knew would lead to a sleepless, wanting night.

She might, thanks to Ben's determined and sometimes unwanted protection, be the oldest virgin in the whole city, but that did not mean

that her body didn't already know how to respond to the sweet hotness of the pleasure that could possess and convulse it.

These last months working for Matt had shown her how easy it was for just the thought of him to activate that pleasure, and right now her

over-stimulated senses were clamouring hungrily for the real thing.

‘Why don’t we forget dinner?’

Harriet blinked. How had that happened? How had she said the very words she had just been thinking but in Matt’s voice?

Matt groaned inwardly as he realised how out of control he was getting. ‘Forget I said that!’ he told her tersely.

Forget *he* had said it?

‘I suppose you thought I was someone else?’ Harriet challenged him angrily.

‘Just as you wish that I was someone else?’ Matt demanded.

Whilst Harriet struggled to regain her composure Matt hurried them both

out of her front door and locked it, handing her the keys before

he guided her to his parked car.

Harriet was too engrossed in her own thoughts to object to his cavalier control of the situation, along with her door keys. She had wanted

Matt to take her to bed! No, Harriet corrected herself. She had wanted to drag Matt upstairs and take him to bed, and she had nearly told him

so!

‘Look, there’s no point in you giving me the silent disapproving treatment because I’m not Ben. Try facing up to reality!’

Harriet didn’t trust herself to reply. She just shook her head in silent

frustration.

‘Good evening, sir, madam. Would you care for a drink in the bar first? Or would you prefer to go straight to your table?’

Matt looked questioningly at Harriet.

‘Straight to the table, please,’ she answered, rueful y aware that despite everything she was extremely hungry. And she was also extremely

aware of the fact that they were being shown to what had to be one of the restaurant’s very best tables, with a little almost private area al to

itself. They could see out through the windows over the river and also

around the restaurant, if they wished, and yet at the same time retain their own privacy.

Grimly she wondered how many other women Matt had brought here. An awful lot if the way the head waiter had recognised him was anything to go by, surely?

She had barely completed her chain of thought when Matt suddenly announced, 'I'm surprised that Henri remembered me—it's ages since I last ate here.'

Harriet almost choked on the delicious walnut roll she was eating.

'There wasn't really any need for you to do this, you know,' she said later, when they had given their order and

been served with their food.

‘After all, Ben isn’t going to see us here!’

‘Do you wish he could? Do you think it would make him jealous?’

Harriet exhaled fiercely down her nose and put down the glass of wine she had just picked up.

‘For the last time, I am *not* in love with Ben. And having him around when I am out on a date is normally the last thing I would want.’ When

Matt frowned she told him fiercely, ‘This may come as a shock to you, but the only way I love Ben is as a brother, and it’s as a brother that he

behaves when I date anyone—a

very over-protective brother at times, and that isn't always what I want!' she added darkly.

She stopped as she realised how much the wine had loosened her tongue and just what she was in danger of saying and to whom!

'In answer to your question, I brought you here to save you from the temptation of going to see Ben,' Matt said curtly, before continuing, 'I

don't need to ask why you don't want Ben treating you like a brother. You obviously want him to think of you as a potential lover, not a sister, and because he doesn't, you—'

'You are just misinterpreting what I said to suit your own ends,' Harriet

objected angrily. ‘That is not what I meant at al .’

They were glaring at one another like two opponents, their argument only brought to an end by the waiter coming to remove their plates for the next course.

CHAPTER THREE

HARRIET stiffened as she saw the look of appreciation and invitation the pretty girl behind the reception desk gave Matt as they left the

restaurant. Yet another reason for keeping clear of him, she decided grimly. What woman in possession of all her senses wanted a man who

attracted and encouraged the interest of virtually every female he came into contact with?

Not that Matt had encouraged the girl's acquisitive hungry look, Harriet was forced to concede as Matt strode past her obliviously. But that

did not alter the fact that if he had done the girl would have leapt to seize the opportunity, Harriet acknowledged.

Courteously Matt placed his hand beneath her elbow to escort her across the car park, rather in the manner that her father adopted

towards elderly female members of the family, she reflected darkly.

Her attention was momentarily distracted by the sight of a couple several yards away, wrapped in each other's arms and exchanging the

most passionate of kisses as the woman fumbled to unlock the door of the car.

The pounding of Harriet's heart

inside her chest was followed by an ache of longing that seemed to seep into every bit of her.

What would it be like to be loved and wanted by Matt like that? Well, whatever it was like she wasn't going to be the one to find out, she told herself sharply.

Matt frowned as he glanced down towards Harriet. She hadn't spoken since before they had left the restaurant—which was, he

suspected, quite a record, since during the rest of the evening she had engaged in the kind of conversation that had left him reluctantly

impressed by its range and depth. Matt wasn't used to his dates having as

keen an interest in world affairs as he did himself, nor in them

being so comfortable and informed in debating them.

Just listening to Harriet gave the words 'verbal foreplay' a whole new meaning, he decided rueful y. Certainly he had never expected that

he would find anything erotic in a vigorous discussion about the merits of a home-based workforce. But then he found just about everything

about Harriet erotic. In fact, she fascinated him, infuriated him, and just about occupied every one of his waking hours as well as a large

percentage of his sleeping ones.

And that meant...

Harriet glowered at Matt as he suddenly and for no reason at all stood still right in the middle of the car park.

The couple by the car were still kissing.

Matt followed the direction of her gaze and tugged grimly on her arm so that she had to look away.

‘Stop thinking about it,’ he said curtly. ‘It’s not going to happen!’

Harriet could feel her face starting to burn with guilt and chagrin. Had he really guessed so easily how much she had wished that she were

the one being kissed so passionately, and by him?

‘What makes you think I want it

to?’ she demanded defensively.

They had reached his car, and as he unlocked it Matt gave her an oblique look. Her full lips were set in a constrained closed line and her

green eyes were a mutinous jade.

He opened the passenger door for her, but as she stepped past him he encircled her with the car door and his body.

‘Of course you want it to. You’re in love, or you think you are. But Ben is not in love with you.’

Ben! Harriet went limp with relief and sagged against the car. Of course—he thought she was in love with Ben!

‘But that doesn’t stop you wanting

to feel his mouth on yours, wanting to...’

The raw sound of Matt’s voice jerked her into defensive anger.

If she had been in love with Ben his last words would not have done her any good at all. As it was they were making her want to look at

Matt’s own mouth as though she were magnetised by it! And not just look at it, she admitted longingly.

‘Have you ever thought of writing sex scenes for films?’ she asked him, with what she had intended to be sarcasm but which instead

sounded more like breathless wonder, Harriet recognised in self-disgust as she scrambled into the car.

To her relief Matt refused to pick

up her gauntlet, and started the car instead.

Half an hour later, as they drove through the down-at-heel area where she lived, Harriet could well imagine what Matt must be thinking. But

she liked her small house, tucked in cosily with its neighbours, and she liked her long back garden even more.

As though he had read her mind Matt broke his silence to announce tersely, 'This is a pretty rough area. Not one I would have thought safe

for a woman living on her own.'

Yes, it was a bit of a rough area, and following an outbreak of violent incidents she felt increasingly worried

about the fact that gangs of

youths had begun to roam the local streets, and that if you possessed a car it was not considered wise to park it outside.

But the area stil had a certain artisan quaintness about it, and—even more important to Harriet—her little house was affordable and

within public transport distance of the office.

She also liked the fact that she had a local butcher and grocery shop, and that most of her elderly neighbours had been born and bred

there and so were ful of stories of how the area had once been. But now she was seeing it through Matt's eyes,

and what she was seeing
made her feel both angry and
uncomfortable.

Outside a local take away a gang of
youths were scuffling and exchanging
obscenities. Harriet could see the look
Matt was giving them.

She felt obliged to defend them.
‘They’re only young.’

‘And that gives them licence to be
foul mouthed?’ Matt challenged her.
‘Aren’t your family concerned about the
kind of area you’re living
in?’ he demanded.

Mutinously Harriet turned away
from him, pretending not to hear. The
truth was that her parents had been

dismayed when she had shown them her new home—but she had managed to talk them around.

One of the reasons she had returned home at the weekend had been to wave them off for her father's lecture tour of America. Since her

brother and his family lived in New York, Harriet knew how much her parents were looking forward to their visit, and being able to spend some time with their grandchildren.

'Harriet...' Matt began ominously, and then stopped as he turned into her narrow street and they both saw the police car and the

ambulance, lights flashing, outside her elderly neighbour's home.

Her own feelings forgotten, Harriet pressed her hand to her mouth in anxiety. Mrs Simmonds was in her late eighties, and had a fund of

interesting stories about the past, but Harriet was aware that she had a weak heart and had taken to surreptitiously checking on the elderly

lady every day in a way that meant that she did not hurt her pride.

‘Oh, no!’

‘What the—’

They both spoke at the same time, and Matt stopped his car.

‘It’s Mrs Simmonds,’ Harriet told him shakily as they watched two burly ambulancemen carrying the old lady into

the ambulance on a
stretcher.

A police officer was already
approaching the car.

‘What’s happened?’ Matt asked.

‘I’m Mrs Simmonds’s neighbour,’
Harriet told him, and got out to join Matt
and the policeman. ‘I know she has a
weak heart...’

‘Some young thugs broke into her
house,’ the policeman told them angrily.
‘Ransacked the place, they did, and
made so much noise that

someone across the street rang us.
We don’t know yet how bad the old
lady’s injuries are. She’s had a very
nasty shock, so they’re taking her
into hospital to keep an eye on her

for a couple of days.’

‘Why would anyone break into her house? She doesn’t have anything to steal,’ Harriet protested, pale with alarm. ‘She...’

The policeman gave her a pitying look. ‘It will be a drug-related crime, miss. They get that desperate for it they’d rob their own grandmother—and often do—’

Harriet shuddered.

The ambulance was already drawing away, and the policeman turned to return to his own car and waiting colleague.

‘Right—that’s it,’ Matt announced as soon as both vehicles had gone. ‘No

way are you staying here on your own!
I'm going to give you two

choices,' he told Harriet grimly.
'Either I stay here with you tonight or
you come back to my place with me. I
don't care which choice you make,

but let's put it this way. I only have
one bedroom!'

Harriet felt a jolt in her stomach as
though someone had kicked her. One
bedroom! Already her body was
reacting to the sensual mental

fantasy she was creating! What
would Matt say if she told him she
wanted the second option?

'I mean what I say, Harriet!' he
said sternly, oblivious to the erotic
meanderings of her wayward thoughts.

She wished! Oh, how she wished!

Her heart was bumping uncomfortably against her ribs—and not just because of the effect Matt was having on her.

Her own honesty compelled her to admit that the attack on her neighbour had shocked and frightened her. She was extremely

apprehensive at the thought of spending the night alone, worrying that the attackers might decide to come back!

‘I don’t have much of an option, do I?’ she asked Matt, saccharine-sweetly. ‘But I warn you my spare room is very small and has a single bed. A very small single bed.’

‘I’ll live,’ Matt answered laconical y. ‘Give me your keys.’

Idiotical y she handed them to him, her heart giving a funny little skip beat at the intimacy such an action suggested. And then it gave a

much stronger kick as Matt’s hard, warm fingers closed around her own. Inside her head she had a sudden mental image of him enfolding

her hand within his own and them sliding his fingers between hers, and inside her body she had an immediate and explicit surge of aching heat.

Hot-faced, she dragged away her hand and then berated herself mental y

for being so vulnerable and weak-willed as Matt let them both

into her small, cosy home.

And Harriet's home *was* cosy. As cosy as a small, neat and warm little nest. Her little front room was painted cream, to match the cream

rugs on the polished floorboards, and Harriet had made the curtains herself, in a natural woven fabric. Her log-burning stove was her pride

and joy, a bargain buy from a scrapyard, and the small terracotta linen-covered sofa had been cadged from her parents and reupholstered for

her as a moving-in present.

Harriet could see Matt staring around the small room before following

her into the kitchen, with its dining area in the conservatory addition.

Harriet had painted the cheap flat pack kitchen units herself, after bullying Ben to help her assemble them, while her dining room furniture

had been junk shop finds which she had patiently restored.

As he looked around the comfortable kitchen, with its cream painted units and earthy-toned décor, Matt acknowledged that it took far

more than an expensive designer to create a home—and, moreover, whatever it did take Harriet had it in spades.

To Harriet, though, his silent

inspection of her small home spoke of arrogance and even possibly contempt. After all, she had heard all

about Matt's state-of-the-art expensive penthouse from Ben.

'You don't have to stay here,' she told him fiercely. 'It was your choice. Not mine. My home may not compare with yours—'

'No, it doesn't.' Matt stopped her grimly.

His rudeness momentarily silenced her.

What would Harriet say if he told her how much he had grown to detest the sterile bleakness of a place that not even the most charitable

person could call a home?

Broodingly he roved around the kitchen whilst Harriet watched him resentful y. What was he doing? Trying to make the point that her smal

home made him feel confined?

‘Look, there’s real y no need for you to stay here,’ she said. ‘I can always ring Ben and ask him to come over.’

Immediately Matt swung around. ‘Oh, yes, you’d like to do that, wouldn’t you? Like hel you wil , though! Hasn’t anything I’ve said to you

sunk in? The whole purpose of this...this...’

‘Farce?’ Harriet supplied bitterly for him.

‘This exercise,’ Matt continued,

ignoring her, ‘is to put a barrier between you and Ben, not give you the excuse to invite him to share your bed!’

‘He would not be sharing my bed!’ Harriet protested, rushing into impetuous denial. ‘When he stays here he always sleeps in his own room.’

‘His own room?’

Harriet could understand the hard edge to Matt’s voice, but not the white line of tightly reined in emotion around his mouth.

‘I suppose you even sleep in the damn bed after he has gone, do you? Dreaming virginal dreams of sharing it with him?’

Now it was Harriet's skin that blanched as fury and shock poured through her in a thunderous fal of ice-cold disbelief.

Turning on her heel, she headed for the door. But Matt got there before her, barring her way with the arm he stretched across it. He felt as

shocked by what he had said as Harriet looked, but it was impossible for him to recal the words now.

‘Harriet, I’m sorry,’ he apologised gruffly. ‘I...I was out of order. I shouldn’t have...’

Harriet wasn’t sure she could trust herself to speak, so instead she put both her hands on his arm and pushed hard

against it, to make

him remove it from the doorway and let her walk away.

Which was a mistake.

A big mistake. As she discovered when, instead of giving way, his arm pushed hers back and then snapped around her along with its

fel ow, so that she was tightly bound against Matt's chest.

‘Let go of me!’

Not only was her demand ineffectual, it was also muffled against Matt's body, Harriet recognised weakly.

‘Not until you've let me apologise!’

Was he serious? Did he realise just how many apologies he now owed her?

‘For what?’ she asked him pithily,

if somewhat breathlessly, and she tussled to put enough space between his flesh and her lips so that

her own breath didn't come bouncing back to her off his skin and, by some alchemic means, taste of him! 'Insulting me or imprisoning me?'

'I shouldn't have made that comment about your virginity.'

Harriet went completely still, and then took a deep, shuddering breath.

As though he knew she was going to try and lie to him, Matt added quietly, 'Ben told me.'

'Ben?'

'He thought it was something I should know... Just in case my

intentions towards you weren't serious.
He may not love you as you want

‘He thought it was something I
should know... Just in case my
intentions towards you weren't serious.
He may not love you as you want

him to, but it's obvious that he feels
a...a certain sense of...of responsibility
towards you.’

Matt discovered that he was having
to battle with himself to make that
admission. It would have suited his
purpose far better had he been

able to point out to Harriet that Ben
had no feelings for her of any kind.

But Harriet was barely aware of
the last part of his speech. Al her
concentration was focused on those three

appalling words— *Ben told me.*

Never had Harriet wished more that she were the fainting type. Deprived of the opportunity for such an escape, she contemplated the

effectiveness of a long, piercing scream—but abandoned it as pointless.

Instead she took a deep breath and said heavily, carefully spacing out each word, ‘Ben told you that I am a virgin?’

Did she realise how cute she looked, breathing heavily down her nose like that when she was angry? Matt wondered adoringly.

‘He was trying to protect you!’ Matt found himself defending Ben in a

gesture of male solidarity, but then he saw the smouldering volcano

of wrath that was burning in her furious gaze.

‘Oh, yes, I’m sure he was,’ Harriet burst out furiously. ‘After all, he’s been doing it ever since I hit puberty, when he told me that boys only

wanted one thing! What is it about you men?’ she demanded in a wearily aggrieved voice. ‘Ben would run a mile if he found out that a girl he

was dating was a virgin, but he expects me to...to feel grateful to him for preserving mine when... Oh, this is just too much!’ she exclaimed.

‘How could he do this to me? Doesn’t he realise that if you and I were

in lo— Er, I mean, if we were seeing one another you would have

discovered for yourself long before now that I hadn't slept with anyone before?'

Discovered for himself? Long before now? Matt found that he was suddenly having a great deal of trouble breathing. To calm himself

down he forced himself to play devil's advocate. 'Perhaps I'm so passionately in love with you that I'm prepared to wait?'

Harriet gave him a narrow-eyed look of open female contempt.

'Because I want to make our first time extra special for both of us...' he

elaborated.

Hel , what was he saying that for? Matt cursed as his own body reacted immediately and openly to the intimate images his words were conjuring up.

Harriet could feel herself starting to tremble. No, not tremble. It was a small , delicious, erotic shudder of anticipatory pleasure that was

galvanising her body, making her feel so sensuously boneless and weak that she couldn't move a single muscle to prise her eager flesh away

from the hardness of Matt's body.

The hardness! Matt had an erection, and her body was savouring that knowledge as her hips ground hungrily

against him.

A man could drown in the deep green pools of Harriet's gaze, Matt decided rawly, as his hands slid lower to lift her more tightly against

him. His own gaze lowered from her eyes to her mouth, and all hell broke loose inside him.

Inside him—and somewhere upstairs inside the house, where the crash of splintering glass shocked through the silence.

'Wait here,' Matt commanded as he released her, but Harriet ignored him, following him as he took her stairs two at a time and then

almost cannoning into him as he

threw open the door to the small bedroom which overlooked the street. Harriet paled as she saw the broken

window and the glass covering the bed and the floor.

Amongst the glass was a brick. Matt frowned and said, 'Ten to one this is the work of those louts who attacked your neighbour. There's no

point in ringing the police at this time of night—we'll do that in the morning. You'd better pack a case.'

'What?' Harriet shook her head vehemently. 'Nothing is going to make me leave here. They might come back, and if the house is

empty...'

'Nothing?' Matt queried meaningful

y.

Harriet frowned in confusion, not following his train of thought.

She could see the impatient rise and fall of his chest as he breathed in and then exhaled.

‘No way am I leaving you here on your own. The other bed is covered with shards of glass which means that if you opt to stay here then I

shall be sharing your bed!’

Harriet dropped her gaze hurriedly. Ben was always telling her that she had give-away eyes, and she did not want Matt to see the little

gleam in them that said her body was reacting to his threat more as though

it had been a promise!

Of course it would be impossible for him to sleep on her small sofa; it was too small even for her!

‘Don’t worry, you and your virginity will be perfectly safe.’ Matt deliberately injected an urbane, almost bored note into his voice.

Harriet swallowed hard on the small lump of disappointment clogging her throat. ‘But you said that if...’ Self-consciously she fell silent,

leaving Matt to agree laconically.

‘If I was passionately in love with you it would be different. Yes...’ As Harriet turned away from him, intending to go and get something to

clear up the mess, he added

sardonical y, ‘I suppose you have some crazy idea of saving yourself for Ben?’

Harriet was too outraged to be cautious.

Turning around, she told him explosively, ‘Absolutely not! I haven’t any intention of saving myself for anyone! There are two reasons why I

am stil a virgin. One of them is Ben’s wretched dogged persistence in behaving like a moralising big brother whenever any man gets near

me. And the other is—’

‘Yes?’ Matt prodded politely ‘The other is...?’

Unable to look at him, Harriet muttered, ‘The other is that as yet I

haven't found anyone I want...that is, someone who I... Oh, for goodness' sake,' she said in exasperation. 'None of this is any business of yours. Have I quizzed you about your virginity?'

Matt started to shake with laughter. For some reason her angry and grudging admission had made him feel extremely light-hearted. 'No,

but since you have now raised the subject I am quite happy to tel you that I lost it on my eighteenth birthday to an older woman—she was al

of twenty-one, and in the throes of a break up with her partner. Somehow I don't think I created a very good impression!' he added drily.

Not then, perhaps, Harriet reflected achingly, but since then she had no doubts whatsoever that there were any number of women who had

some very special sensual memories of what it was like to share Matt's bed.

As she walked away Matt had to give his libido a severe talking to.

'Wel , I think that's the worst of the glass cleared up, and that cardboard I've put over the window should hold up until the glazier gets here.'

Matt stretched and yawned whilst Harriet watched with a fixed, strained expression on her face.

It had taken Ben three months to

assemble her kitchen units and put them in place. Three months of spending hours on end in the

confinement of her kitchen with him, breathing in the air of his exertions, and yet not once, not one single time, had she felt as she did right

now with the scent of Matt's working male body filling the space around her and her body reacting it as though to some kind of nuclear sexual

turn-on. Bottle it and women would be aching with lust twenty-four hours a day. She certainly had been ever since she had met him!

‘A king-size bed?’

Matt had not added the words ‘for a virgin’ but he might as well have done,

Harriet thought as he came to an abrupt halt just inside the door of her bedroom.

‘It was a present from my brother and my sister-in-law,’ she told him coldly.

‘Mmm... Think they might have been trying to tel you something?’ Matt asked, quirking one eyebrow.

‘Look, there’s no need for you to keep harping on about my...about it. I don’t know why on earth Ben had to tel you anyway,’ Harriet seethed.

‘I’ve already explained. He wanted to make sure I had honourable intentions towards you,’ Matt answered her.

‘Honourable intentions!’

Harriet’s pretty white teeth snapped together in frustration.

Her bedroom echoed the natural colours and fabrics of the rest of the house, Matt recognised when he managed to drag his gaze away

from her long enough to glance around it. The room was dominated by the large bed, with its cream throw, and also held a faint but to him

very discernible echo of Harriet’s scent—her own scent, not the pretty floral perfume she wore for work.

He smothered a small groan! How the hell was he going to sleep, with her lying beside him and the scent of her all

around him, when his

body ached so damned much for the feel of her, the taste of her, the sweet, erotic moaning cry of her as he...?

He dragged himself from the dangerous scenario he was mentally creating to hear Harriet saying in a businesslike manner, 'I think I've got a spare robe you can use...'

'Spare? You mean Ben's?' Matt challenged her brutally.

Harriet paled, but stood her ground. 'No, I do not mean Ben's. Actually, I bought it for my father to use. He and my mother stayed here and

looked after the house for a few days whilst I was away on holiday last year.'

‘Ah...’

Matt was tempted to apologise, to tell her that he was only goading her for her own good, so that she would realise the folly of clinging to

an outworn fantasy of having a relationship with Ben and see for herself how much more she would enjoy having one with him!

But Harriet had her back to him and was pulling open a drawer to rummage inside it, muttering, ‘It’s in here somewhere...’

Matt held his breath as a small scrap of silk and lace fell on the floor. A cream silk thong? With ribbon ties? His imagination was running

riot and so was his arousal level. One tug of his teeth and those bows would be history! They would be history, but the soft female flesh they concealed would be his!

As she found the robe Harriet gave a sigh of relief and closed the drawer, only seeing the thong as she did so.

She was closer to it but Matt was faster, and to her outrage he dangled the small item of underwear from one finger in front of her.

‘A present?’ he said provocatively.

‘Certainly not,’ she told him primly. ‘I bought it myself!’

Too late she recognised the trap he had set for her.

‘Even virgins like pretty underwear,’ she said crossly, pink-cheeked.

‘This is not pretty underwear,’ Matt informed her immediately. ‘This, let me tel you, in every male lexicon there is, is classified as

provocative and sexy!’

‘Provocative and... Oh...!’

‘Bra to match?’ Matt questioned interestedly.

Harriet’s bosom heaved and jiggled distractingly, causing Matt to pay it more attention than her answer.

Out of nowhere a surge of hot, driving male possessiveness overwhelmed him and he had a primitive

urge to lock Harriet and her

underwear away where no other man could see them. Preferably in a bedroom... His bedroom...

‘Do you want to use the bathroom first?’ he heard Harriet asking him frostily.

‘First? You mean we aren’t going to be using it together?’ he joked. ‘It’s ages since someone scrubbed my back for me!’

Harriet was exhausted. Her hormones didn’t know where they were. They knew where they wanted her to be, though. Lying pinned to the

bed beneath the hot and aroused weight of Matt’s preferably naked body, whilst he...

It was just as well she still had those thermal pyjamas her great aunt had so kindly given her last Christmas. She could just imagine what

Matt would have to say about her normal habit of sleeping in the nude!

CHAPTER FOUR

HARRIET huffed as she rolled over and into the bank of spare pillows she had insisted on placing down the middle of the bed between Matt

and herself—after Matt had announced his intention of sleeping in the nude and had refused to change his mind.

‘It’s the way I always sleep,’ he had told her dismissively.

It was also the way she always slept—but not on this occasion.

‘Anyway, you’re wearing enough for both of us,’ he had added drily.

Harriet made a small sound of

irritation as she tried to pull the itchy fabric away from her skin. She was too hot...too wide awake...and

much, much too conscious of the man lying peacefully asleep in the bed beside her. Not that she could see him, with the pillows in between

them, but if she pushed one of them down a little bit...

Matt was lying with his back to her, his dark head a blur on the white pillow, his bare arm thrown over the duvet, the rest of his body

outlined beneath it.

Harriet made a small frustrated sound beneath her breath, released the pillow and rolled over onto her stomach.

But the damage was done and the

mental image stored inside her head would not go away.

The trouble was that she was used to having the whole of the large bed to herself to stretch out in, instead of being hedged in with pillows;

that was what was keeping her awake! But Matt was fast asleep, so there was really no harm in removing the pillow barrier now, was there?

Stealthily Harriet removed the pillows and dropped them onto the floor at her own side of the bed.

Cautiously opening one eye, Matt watched her, hastily feigning sleep when she turned back towards him.

Now that Harriet had removed the

barrier, nature could do the rest, he decided happily, and he rolled a little closer to the centre of the bed

and felt it depress beneath his weight.

Bemusedly Harriet felt her body start to move...as though she were lying on a slope, she decided vaguely. Not that it mattered. Not really.

Matt was fast asleep, after all, and she was wearing her pyjamas.

Matt wasn't wearing anything, though. And now he had turned around in his sleep. To Harriet's mortification, as she rolled into him he

threw one bare leg over her and pinned her against the bed.

She tried to move, discreetly and

silently, so as not to wake him, but for some reason the more she tried to ease herself away the heavier

and more imprisoning the weight of his leg became.

Despairingly, she contemplated physical y pushing him away, but just as she was about to touch him he muttered something in his sleep

and she froze, alarmed that he might wake up.

Instead he muttered again, then lifted his arm and wrapped it around her.

She was trapped in the bed, imprisoned against him and unable to do a single thing about it without waking him.

And she didn't want to do that!

So she might just as wel succumb,
then, mightn't she?

A fierce shudder of pleasure ran
through her at the mere thought of
sleeping wrapped in Matt's arms, her
body pressed against the hot
satin warmth of his skin.

If only she wasn't wearing Great-
Aunt Madge's wretched pyjamas!

If only she might have the courage
to reach out and make a leisurely
exploration of the sensual feast of naked
Matt now so temptingly
within her reach.

It would be a crime to waste such
an opportunity—especial y when she

had dreamed wantonly of it and of him
virtually from the first night
she had met him!

Unfortunately the fact that she
couldn't move her arms without risking
disturbing Matt meant that she had to be
inventive in the way she

indulged herself in her voyage of
exploration. But happily she soon
discovered that her lips and her tongue
were avid and acutely sensitive
sensory tools.

For the first time in his whole adult
life Matt truly and fully understood the
meaning of the phrase 'hoist with his
own petard.' His subtle

machinations had backfired—
explosively—on him! He didn't dare so

much as move a muscle. If he did...

A low male groan bubbled in his throat. Harriet wriggled uncomfortably in the itchy fabric of her pyjamas and yawned hugely. The events of

the day were catching up on her. She yawned again and nestled closer to Matt, making a soft almost purring noise in the back of her throat.

At some point in the night she half woke up. Bewildered to find she was wrapped in something irritatingly itchy and unwanted, she pulled off

her pyjamas and then curled back against Matt with a sigh of relief.

* * *

Matt woke up first, registered the

soft silkiness of bare skin next to his own, and cursed beneath his breath as his body immediately reacted

to it. His movement away from her woke Harriet, who pushed back the bedclothes sleepily.

Unable to stop himself, Matt let his hungry gaze drink in the sight of the soft full globes of her breasts. In the coolness of the morning air her

nipples were erect and tipped with rose brown against the paleness of her skin. His hands ached to cup and mould them. When she felt his

mouth on them would she arch back in eagerness, to give herself freely to him, her fingers locking in his hair as she urged him to take the

tight peaks deeper into his mouth and suckle pleasure from them? Would she part her legs and offer him the soft triangle of curls at the apex

of her thighs, urging him to stroke the mounded flesh they covered and then move lower, parting the neatly folded lips, sliding between them,

slipping between them as her body swelled and moistened for him?

What the hell was he trying to do to himself? His erection was already so damned hard he didn't dare move.

‘What have you done with my pyjamas?’ Harriet demanded wrathfully as she grabbed the duvet and hauled it up to her chin.

‘I haven’t done anything with them!’ Matt denied. ‘You were the one who removed them!’

‘What? No, I didn’t,’ Harriet protested hotly. ‘I would never—’ Abruptly she stopped suddenly as she had an unwanted flash of memory of itchy fabric and her desire to be rid of it.

‘Harry, is that Matt’s car outside —? Oh, whoops!’

They had both been so engrossed that neither of them had realised there had been a brief knock and the bedroom door had been

pushed open by Ben!

As she saw him Harriet gave a

small squeak and dived beneath the duvet, leaving Ben to go slightly red and look a little bit sheepish.

Matt said calmly, but with an unmistakable edge to his voice, 'Yes, it is my car, Ben. How did you get in, by the way?'

'I've got a key,' Ben told him easily, making a swift recovery as he responded to Matt's calmness, adding hopefully, 'I just thought I'd call

'round and see if I could use Harry's washing machine. Mine's broken, and I didn't fancy the laundrette.'

'Tell him he can use the machine, but I am not doing his ironing,' Harriet muttered from beneath the duvet.

‘I’ve got a better idea, Ben,’ Matt announced crisply. ‘Why don’t you go and buy yourself a new washing machine—you can send me the

bill. And I will change Harriet’s locks. In fact, if you give me a minute I’ll come down with you now, see you out and relieve you of your key.’

Pleasant though Matt’s voice was, Harriet could hear the steel in it.

The moment the two men had gone she escaped from the bed and grabbed her robe, pulling it on and making a dash for the bathroom.

When she had showered and dressed behind the safety of the locked door Matt still hadn’t returned. It

occurred to her that he might not be

going to, that he might simply have decided that it would be easier and more tactful for him to leave without saying a formal goodbye!

It was certainly a sensible means of bringing to an end an episode which she suspected neither of them would want to dwell on—although

for very different reasons.

Sensible or not, though, it was certainly having an irritatingly irrational and unwanted lowering effect on her spirits, Harriet admitted, as

she tugged a brush ruthlessly through her hair and reminded herself that she had far more important things to do than languish about aching

for a man who didn't want her.

There was the broken window to report, for a start, and then the glass to get fixed. A small shiver ran through her at the thought of her own vulnerability.

Taking a deep breath, she reminded herself that she was a modern, independent woman and that it was ridiculous of her to feel sorry for

herself just because Matt wasn't here to share such tedious practical chores with her.

Opening the bedroom door, she stepped through it and came to an abrupt halt, her eyes widening in disbelief as her gaze swivel ed to the

bed, where Matt was lying propped up against a bank of pillows—the same pillows she had thrown out last night. He was wearing the robe

she had bought for her father, and it was so loosely tied that it was gaping open to reveal an erotic baring of body hair. She ached to ruffle it

with her fingertips and...

Hastily Harriet grabbed hold of her rebellious and far too dangerous thoughts, focusing instead on the wrath-provoking fact that Matt was

not just lying back at ease on her bed but was also reading her paper, whilst next to him on the bed was a tray of tea and a plate of hot

buttered toast. As she sniffed its warm, mouthwatering aroma Matt looked up from *her* paper to look briefly at her before raising one eyebrow.

‘Why the rush to get dressed?’

‘Why?’ Harriet gave him an incredulous look. ‘In case you’ve forgotten, Ben just walked in here and found us in bed together!’

Matt started to frown and put down the paper. ‘So how is getting dressed now going to affect that? Ben knows that we’re a couple.’

Just hearing Matt say in that firm, total y male voice the word ‘couple’—as matter-of-factly as though it were the

truth—was having the

most disturbing effect on her. But it wasn't just Matt's voice that was making her yearn for his calm assertion to be the truth was it?

It *wasn't* the truth! And she needed to get a grip before she became total y lost in a fantasy that could only cause her heartache and

anguish, Harriet told herself fiercely.

‘What Ben knows is what you want him to know,’ she told Matt fiercely. ‘What I know is that this whole...mess has been created and

caused by you because you wil not accept that I have no romantic interest whatsoever in Ben.’

‘If I don’t believe it it’s because your own actions have made it obvious how you feel. And I’m not the only person to see that.’

‘If you’re talking about Cindi again —’ Harriet exploded.

‘Yes?’ Matt invited her in a dangerous voice. ‘What is it with you?’ he demanded harshly when Harriet made no response, throwing aside

the paper. ‘Have you no pride, no self-respect? What wil it take to make you recognise what you are doing to yourself?’

‘Not you!’ Harriet shot back at him furiously.

‘If that’s a chal enge then let me tel

you that I'm a man who never ever backs down from one,' Matt warned her softly.

There was a look in his eyes that was mesmerising her, Harriet decided. And a tightening spiral of mingled apprehension and female

curiosity exploded inside her at the hint of dark warning in his voice.

Changing tack, she told him recklessly, 'You had no right to make Ben give you his key!'

Matt's mouth tightened, giving Harriet an opportunity to be both bemused and caught off guard by her own immediate desire to find out

just how long it might take for someone to kiss the hardness out of his mouth and feel it soften to hungry

passion. A small shudder ran through her at the thought of conducting such an experiment herself.

The effect her own thoughts was having on her was distracting her so much that she only just managed to hear Matt's crisp reply.

'On the contrary, I have every right not to want another man to have access to your home, your bed, and most especially to you.'

A weakening female longing ran through her. If only those words were true! And thank heaven that she was not foolish enough to voice that wish!

'The only thing Ben wanted access

to was to my washing machine,' she pointed out waspishly, adding, when Matt remained unmoved,

'You do realise that he's now going to think we real y are lovers, and that we're...?'

'That we're what?'

'Ben knows I wouldn't go to bed with someone if I didn't...if I wasn't...'

Harriet compressed her lips. 'I think I should warn you that Ben has some pretty old-fashioned ideas about how...wel , certain things. And

now that he's seen us like this he's going to start asking al sorts of questions.'

'He already has,' Matt informed her nonchalantly. 'Which is why I've

told him that we're getting married!'

Getting married!

Harriet couldn't believe her ears!

'Try to look on the bright side,'

Matt encouraged her.

'What bright side?' Harriet croaked
acerbical y. 'How can there be a *bright
side?* '

'Wel , for one thing Ben isn't going
to find it necessary to protect your
virginity anymore, is he?'

'But I'm...' Harriet began, and then
stopped, colour flooding her face as
something in the way Matt was watching
her made her heart start

to race bumpily. 'This whole thing
is crazy. I'm going downstairs to ring the

police and a glazier,' she told him crossly.

'It wouldn't have worked, you know,' Matt said as she reached the door.

'What wouldn't have worked?' Harriet demanded.

'Saving yourself for Ben.'

Harriet had had enough. With her hand on the door she told him angrily, 'You are the one who came up with that scenario—not me! So far

as I'm concerned my virginity is just an...an unwanted encumbrance, and personally I'd be only too happy to be rid of it. But of course there's

no way you are going to believe that, is there? Because there's no way

you would ever admit you are in the wrong! You just aren't going to

believe it—whatever I say—or do! Not even if I went out and...and...and slept with the first man I could find!’

‘Why go *out* to find one?’

Harriet's eyes rounded and she stared at him, not sure if she had misheard or misinterpreted his soft question.

‘You mean, I should...you would...?’ She stopped and shook her head as her voice became a small, breathless squeak.

Matt gave her a mocking look. ‘See what happens when you make theatrical threats you can't carry through?’ he

taunted her.

‘It wasn’t a threat—’ Harriet started to defend herself, but to her relief Matt’s mobile phone started to ring, and as he reached out to

answer it she made a swift exit from the bedroom.

Downstairs in the kitchen, as she waited for the kettle to boil, she closed her eyes and leaned against one of the kitchen units.

What if she had taken Matt up on his challenge? What if she had boldly told him that she wanted him to relieve her of her burdensome

virginity? What if...?

But she knew that her feelings for Matt would never be satisfied by a

clinical cold sex session, no matter how proficiently executed on

Matt's part. And, worse than that, she knew that such an event could and would only leave her craving what she had been denied.

Instead of indulging herself in imagining them making love, what she really ought to be doing was worrying about the complications Matt

had caused by pretending to Ben that they were getting married.

Matt's telephone call was from Ben, who wanted to tell him how much his washing machine was going to cost.

'Have you and Harry set a date for the big day yet, then?' Ben asked, once

Matt had assured him that he meant what he had said about

paying for the washing machine.

‘We’re working on it,’ Matt answered, tongue in cheek.

After he had ended the call Matt started to frown. Did Harriet really think he had been deceived by her denial that she wasn’t saving

herself for Ben?

And as for that idiotic claim she had made—hadn’t it occurred to her that he could have chosen to take her words at face value and put

her in a position where...?

Where what? Where he would physically take her in his arms and then take her to bed and show her, share with

her, so much pleasure

that she would never want him to let her go? Where she would love him as he longed for her to do? As though he was the only man she ever

could or would love, now and forever!

Matt's frown deepened. The intensity of the feelings she aroused in him still had the power to shock him.

Pushing aside his pain, Matt got off the bed and headed for the bathroom. Did Harriet not realise the risk she had taken? Didn't it occur

to her how another man might react to the kind of challenge she had given him? He was beginning to think that for

her own protection, and his

sanity, he ought not to let her out of
his sight!

CHAPTER FIVE

HARRIET had just finished speaking to the hospital to check on her elderly neighbour when Matt walked into the kitchen, and her concern for

the old lady was in her eyes as she turned to him and said worriedly, ‘Mrs Simmonds’s injuries are more serious than they thought. She’s

fractured her hip and she’s stil in shock. The hospital says that it could be several weeks before she’s wel enough to come home. What kind

of people would do a thing like that, Matt?’ she demanded passionately. ‘To a helpless elderly woman...’

‘The kind who would do the same thing to a young woman who is equal y helpless, even though she might be too damned stubborn to

accept that!’ Matt warned her grimly.

Harriet gave a little shudder.

‘I’m going to ring the police to report the damage here last night, get someone ‘round here to instal a decent security system, and then—’

‘You’re going home?’ Harriet suggested eagerly.

‘And then we are going out shopping,’ Matt told her with an unkind smile.

‘Shopping?’ Harriet queried

uncertainly.

Matt leaned back against the wall and folded his arms across his chest ‘Shopping! As of now, until I deem it safe for you to be here on

your own, you and I will be sharing the same roof. That roof can be this one—although it could be damned uncomfortable with a team of

workmen installing a security system—or it can be mine. I don’t care. But what I do care about is that when, as it will do, our relationship

becomes public knowledge, you are wearing my engagement ring—here.’

As he finished speaking he took hold of her hand and tapped her ring finger meaningfully.

‘What on earth for?’ Harriet asked, once her body had stopped reacting to his touch and her emotions had stopped rioting at the thought

of what it would be like if he really meant it. ‘No one gets engaged these days just because they’ve spent a night together...’

‘No, but they do when they’re planning to get married.’

‘But we aren’t!’

‘Ben thinks we are,’ Matt reminded her. ‘And I intend him to go on thinking that! There’s no way out, Harriet,’ he informed her. ‘I’m not

letting you off the hook. You need to break out of this addiction you’ve

developed—for your own sake as much as Ben's and Cindi's.'

'I am not addicted to Ben and I am most certainly not letting you buy me an engagement ring!' Harriet protested. 'Wearing it would make a ...a travesty of...of...'

'What you mean is that you don't want Ben to see you wearing my ring. Why not? After all, he's already seen you in bed with me—'

'Exactly!' Harriet pounced triumphantly. 'He's seen me in bed with you, so why does he need to see me wearing an engagement ring?'

'*He* doesn't, but I think it would be better for you.. and me—if other people did,' Matt replied obliquely.

‘If I loved a man I wouldn’t care who knew I had spent the night with him,’ Harriet told him passionately, even though a small voice inside

her reminded her that Ben would certainly mind, and would be all too likely to assume his big brother role and tell Matt so!

‘Maybe not. But if he loved you with the same intensity, and if, like me, he was a certain old-fashioned type of male, who wanted to tell the

world how he felt about you and how committed he was to you, he might! In fact there’s no might about it! He would!’

Harriet opened her mouth and then

closed it again, for once lost for any kind of comeback.

If she refused to go along with what Matt was planning, and if Ben then thought that she and Matt had quarrel ed and their ‘relationship’

was over, he’d be fussing over her like a mother hen—just as he always did when he thought she was upset or in trouble. Harriet could wel

imagine what that would do to his own relationship with Cindi, especial y in view of the ultimatum Cindi had already given him.

Sometimes in life a person had to put another person’s feelings and needs before their own. This was her time to do that for Ben, Harriet

recognised. She had already come between him and Cindi unintentional y; she certainly wasn't going to risk doing so a second time.

And what was an engagement ring anyway? Nothing permanent or legal y binding! If by wearing it she could buy Ben and Cindi enough

time to patch up their differences and get their relationship on a sound enough footing for Cindi to have complete trust in Ben's love for her,

then that was what she was going to have to do! And besides, seeing her wearing Matt's ring should surely also go a long way to making

Cindi herself realise that Harriet

wasn't romantical y interested in Ben.

‘So that’s the ring sorted out,’ she heard Matt declaring. ‘Now, you’d better pack enough stuff to last you at least a week—I’ve decided it’ll be much safer for you to stay at my penthouse...’

‘Your penthouse! But that’s in our office block! I’m not staying there!’

‘Of course you are. What better way could there be to reinforce the fact that we are now a couple?’

Wearing Matt’s ring was one thing—moving into his apartment was quite definitely another.

Harriet put up the fiercest fight and the best argument she could against them ‘living together,’ but in the end Matt

wore her down by the

simple expedient of steamrolling over every single point she made, and she was forced to give in.

Her hands trembled as she packed her things, her nerves jangled by the situation which had gone way beyond her control.

Why on earth couldn't Matt have simply accepted her assurance that she had no romantic interest in Ben? Instead of involving them both

in this increasingly complicated and, for her at least, increasingly dangerous situation!

Miserably she acknowledged that his misjudgement of her was going to

expose her to far more emotional danger than she felt equipped

to handle—and if, as she feared, she felt even more deeply in love with him he would be the one to blame!

Yes, he would be the one to blame. But she would be the one to pay, in sleepless nights and in a heart and body that ached unbearably for him.

Matt broke his concentration on driving to turn his head and glance briefly at Harriet. She had not spoken a single word to him since they had

got into his car, but he could almost smell the hot, slow burn of her angry resentment.

‘This city is becoming too damned

overcrowded,' he commented grimly as the intersection in front of them became gridlocked.

'That's why so many firms are encouraging their staff to work from home,' Harriet replied without thinking, and angry flags of colour flew in

her cheeks when she realised that Matt had tricked her into breaking her mental vow to keep as much distance between them as she could

by not talking to him.

'Well, it's an excellent option for some businesses,' he agreed.

'Including yours?' Harriet asked him.

'Maybe in time. I can certainly see

that if I were to marry and have children then there would be a distinct appeal in it for me personally.

With modern technology I could work from home myself quite easily, and therefore no doubt so too could my employees.'

The very sound of the word 'children' on his lips made Harriet's whole body ache. For them—for him—for the feel of him within her whilst

his body and hers created the new life that would be their child.

The feeling that suddenly shook her was like nothing she had ever felt before—immediate, primitive, and possessive of her mate, of their

child...of their love.

Unable to bear the intensity of her own emotions, she looked out of the car window and then frowned.

‘Matt, where are we going? This isn’t the way to the office,’ she protested sharply.

‘We aren’t going to the office. We’re going shopping. The engagement ring—remember?’ Matt answered as he turned into a narrow

street that fed into the car park of an exclusive shopping mal built around the city’s most prestigious luxury hotel.

‘We’ll get the ring and then we’ll have dinner here later, to celebrate.’

‘Dinner here? We can’t!’ Harriet panicked. ‘I’m not wearing the right

clothes.'

Honesty almost compelled her to add that she did not even possess anything remotely suitable to wear at such an exclusive

establishment, but before she could do so Matt was shaking his head, telling her, 'Don't worry. I'd like to change, too. I'll book a room and we

can shower and change there before dinner.'

When he saw her expression he told her suavely, 'It will be expected. People are bound to ask questions. It would be a very unusual

couple who did not celebrate their engagement.'

'We are a very unusual couple,'

Harriet reminded him through gritted teeth. But Matt was already pulling into one of the exclusive spaces

reserved for hotel guests and the car door was being opened for her, making it impossible for her to continue her argument.

‘I’ve booked a table for dinner and a room,’ Matt told Harriet carelessly ten minutes later, when he returned to her side in the elegant reception area.

‘I can’t believe you’re making all this unnecessary fuss,’ Harriet protested.

‘If we were really getting engaged would you consider it an unnecessary fuss?’ Matt asked her evenly.

‘Of course not,’ Harriet denied promptly. ‘Every woman wants such a special occasion to be...special. Oh!’ She gave Matt a glare of

goaded anger in response to his infuriating expression. ‘If I was really making that kind of commitment, a public dinner in an expensive hotel

wouldn’t be the way I would want to celebrate it,’ she continued passionately.

‘No? Then where would you want to celebrate it?’ Matt asked her drily.

Looking away from him, Harriet said softly, ‘Somewhere private, romantic...and special...where we could be alone.’

‘Such as? A silken tent on desert sands?’ Matt mocked her, watching her face as she shook her head.

Her eyes were brilliant with emotion, and behind the anger she was showing him the wildly passionate side of her character. There was a

longing that softened her mouth and burned hotly in her eyes, and immediately his own body responded physically to it. So much so, in fact,

that he had to turn slightly away from her and try to distract her.

‘A remote cottage with open fires and soft rugs, perhaps?’ he suggested softly. ‘Where your lover could lay you down and cover your

nakedness with his own whilst he watched the pleasure he was feeling reflect back to him from your eyes?’

As he spoke Matt’s voice had deepened and developed a raw note to it that raised the tiny hairs on Harriet’s arms. Deep inside her she

felt a piercingly sharp ache.

‘Or perhaps you’d like to lie back in a bath scented with rose petals whilst he slowly...?’

Any one of them, Harriet wanted to beg him frantically. Any or all of them—and now, right now...

He was doing it again, Matt warned himself. He was building images, emotions, dreams for himself which had

no substance in reality.

But what if...?

What if nothing. He stopped himself sharply.

A little rueful y Harriet acknowledged that a pair of jeans, a tee shirt and a casual lightweight jacket, no matter how much the modern,

acceptable and go-anywhere uniform they normal y were, were hardly the kind of clothes she would have chosen to wear for an outing such as this one.

No! Had she and Matt real y been going to choose her engagement ring, and then going on to celebrate their engagement, she would have wanted to be wearing...

Unbidden, an image appeared inside her head of the bow-tied briefs she had last seen dangling from Matt's fingers. As it just so

happened the briefs were part of a matching set, and the bra that went with them tied provocatively at the front with satin ribbons...

Knowing they were going out on such a romantic and emotional mission, wouldn't she have wanted to dress in something suitably

reflecting the day's mood and the reason for it?

But if Matt had been watching her dressing...watching whilst she tied those fragile bows... would they have got as

far as leaving their

bed, never mind their home?

The images that her over-excited mind were conjuring up brought a feverish flush to her face, and a shal ow race to her heartbeat.

As Matt headed for the main exit from the hotel, Harriett discovered that she couldn't resist continuing with her private fantasy. Mental y

she covered her breasts and the hard peaking of her nipples against the semi-transparent silk of her bra with a soft cashmere top. Cashmere

always felt so sensuous to touch, and, if it was fine enough, when he looked at her Matt would be able to imagine the shape of her breasts,

the way he had caressed them during their early-morning lovemaking.

Locked in a battle with her own recklessly wanton imaginings, Harriet froze as Matt suddenly reached out and took hold of her hand,

lacing his fingers through hers, and then locking his grip on her when she tried to pul away.

‘We’re madly in love,’ he told her when she gave him a mutinous look. ‘Remember?’

‘We’re in the middle of a shopping mal ,’ Harriet protested. ‘People don’t —’

‘No?’ Matt stopped her. ‘Look over there.’

Several yards away from them a couple were walking hand in hand together, obviously completely absorbed in one another. And not a

particularly young couple either, Harriet noticed rueful y, as they stopped walking and the man bent to whisper something in the woman's ear.

Immediately she turned a radiant face towards him and he moved closer, kissing her tenderly.

For some reason the smal intimate scene made Harriet's eyes sting with tears.

‘That's different,’ she said to Matt fiercely. ‘Anyone can see that they real y do love one another.’

‘You mean because he did this?’

Matt challenged softly. And as Harriet turned automatically towards him he reached out with his free hand

to cup her face, smoothing her skin with what had to be mock tender fingertips. Harriet could feel the warmth of his breath against her hair,

the hard, sure maleness of his hand on her skin. A pulse was jumping frantically at the base of her throat, and her heart was racing to try and

catch up with it.

No amount of will-power could stop her from turning her head towards him, green eyes clashing with molten grey. Harriet breathed in

sharply and then exhaled on a jagged breath that parted her lips. She could almost feel the molten burn of Matt's gaze on her mouth as he slowly bent his head.

Silently they looked at one another. Her mouth had gone dry, and try as she might she could not drag her gaze away. A sensuous shudder

shook her body, and as though it was the signal he had been waiting for Matt covered her mouth with his own.

Was she really making that small, almost incoherent sound of aching pleasure? Was she really turning into the curve of his arm, his body, virtually encouraging him to tighten

the intimacy of his hold on her? Shockingly, the mere touch of his lips suddenly became a hard and

demanding pressure, and the kiss of passion suddenly overtook convention as his feelings overwhelmed him. As hers were overwhelming

her, Harriett admitted dizzily as she returned the hungry pressure of his mouth and longed for the stabbing thrust of his tongue against her

own. She wanted to stay like this forever, to feel like this forever. She wanted...

Harriet moaned a small feline protest as Matt softened the kiss and released her mouth.

Reluctantly she opened her eyes

and realised where she was and what she was doing.

Wordlessly she looked away from Matt, fighting back over-emotional tears.

Starkly Matt looked at her averted face. Who had she been thinking of when she had returned his kiss with such fierce passion?

Did he really need to ask himself that question? he derided himself bitterly.

Grimly he tightened his grip on her hand, and then inclined his head in the direction of a small coffee-shop. 'Would you like a coffee?'

'What I'd like—' Harriet began through gritted teeth, and then stopped as

the outfit displayed in a nearby shop window caught her eye.

A pretty dress, soft and floaty, in delicately patterned silk, it was so beautiful it made her catch her breath. It shrieked that special brand of

expensive simplicity and it was just the exact shade of cream that suited her to perfection! In fact it embodied everything she had ever craved

in a dressy outfit, right down to the delicate shoes teamed with it. She knew without having to go anywhere near the window that it would

probably have the kind of price tag that ran into more than she spent on her wardrobe in a whole year. Even so a small yearning sigh

escaped her lips as she had a momentary vision of herself wearing it, with Matt looking adoringly and hungrily at her, and...

Matt frowned as he watched her. There was a rapt, dreamy expression on her face as she stared at the dress in a shop several yards

away. A fragile, almost flimsy sort of dress, which would float distractingly around those luscious legs of hers.

Matt's gaze became equally absorbed...

‘Excuse me—are you going to go into the coffee-shop? Only, if you aren’t...’

Harriet went pink as she realised

that she and Matt were blocking the entrance to the café.

‘I’ve just remembered there’s a good wine bar right ‘round the corner. It’s almost lunchtime—we’d be better going there and having something to eat.’

Harriet barely had time to blink before she was being whisked around the corner and down another marble floored walkway into a stylish

and very busy wine bar, where Matt somehow managed to get them a table.

They had just given their order when Matt suddenly frowned and stood up. ‘I forgot. I need to go back to the cash dispenser. You wait here.

I won't be a minute.'

The wine bar certainly had a very glitzy clientele, Harriet conceded as she sipped her drink and waited for their food and Matt's return.

She didn't normally come into this part of the city, preferring to spend her spare time in its parks and galleries.

Matt was taking rather longer than she had expected, but fortunately so was their food. Typically, as soon as the waiter appeared with their

order, she saw Matt shouldering his way through the crowd by the wine bar door.

'Sorry I was so long. There was a queue,' he informed her as he sat down.

CHAPTER SIX

‘WE CAN’T go in here!’

Harriet held back as Matt reached out to ring the discreetly placed doorbell.

‘Why not?’ he demanded. ‘It’s a jewelers, isn’t it?’

‘It isn’t just a jewel ers,’ Harriet hissed. ‘It’s *the* jewel ers...’ But it was too late; a smartly suited young woman was opening the door for

them and they were being ushered inside.

Even the quiet hum of the air-conditioning sounded expensive, Harriet reflected as she breathed in air scented

with just a hint of some
discreet perfume.

‘Good afternoon, sir, madam. How may we help you?’

‘We would like an engagement ring,’ Matt announced, squeezing Harriet’s hand in warning, as though he had anticipated that she might argue with him.

‘Ah... If you would care to come this way? We have a private room.’

The private room was bigger than her small living room, Harriet recognised as they were shown into their seats as carefully as though they were made of precious glass.

‘Do you have something special in mind?’ the assistant asked Harriet.

‘Er...no... Just something simple and small,’ Harriet replied uncomfortably.

Why on earth had Matt brought her in here? Even the teeniest chip of diamond they sold would cost the earth—she just knew it.

‘My fiancée prefers simple designs,’ she heard Matt saying suavely to the woman.

‘Perhaps a single stone ring, then? I’ll bring some to show you.’

When she came back and put down not a tray but a collection of boxes, each holding the kind of solitaire diamond ring that Harriet had

only previously seen on the fingers

of the mega-rich, she swallowed and blinked—and tried to keep her gaze averted from one particular ring,

which glowed and shimmered and whispered a whole host of tempting things to her.

‘I...I thought something small er...’ she said, her voice cracking. She looked down at the array in front of her and whispered, ‘Something much small er.’

The sales assistant’s smile had started to dim, and Harriet could feel the grimness Matt was exuding.

‘I like this one!’ he announced peremptorily, his hand moving and unbelievably picking up the very ring Harriet had looked at.

‘Ah.’ The sales assistant’s sigh was pure liquid approval.

Harriet couldn’t help but agree as she looked at the oblong stone in its plain setting, so pure and white that the light dancing on it almost

hurt her eyes.

‘An excellent choice, if I may say so. And a beautiful stone. Perhaps madam would like to try it on? The band is a little on the small side,

but naturally it can be sized to fit her.’

Harriet prayed with all her strength that the ring would be too tight, that Matt would be forced to pick something else more modest

—because she knew he wouldn't want to leave the shop without a ring. But, even though she herself would have sworn that the ring would be

too small for her, it slipped down her finger and settled there as snugly as though they had been made for one another.

‘Perfect.’ The sales assistant smiled.

‘We’ll have it,’ Matt announced.

Ten minutes later, after a celebratory glass of champagne, they were leaving the shop—with the ring.

Harriet barely waited for the door to be closed behind them before turning to Matt and bursting out, ‘I can’t wear

that ring!’

‘Why not? Because Ben isn’t the one who is giving it to you?’ Matt shot back brusquely.

‘No!’ Harriet denied fiercely. ‘It has nothing to do with that!’

‘Then what has it to do with?’ Matt enquired sharply.

‘It’s far too expensive.’

‘Engagement rings are supposed to be expensive.’

‘No!’ Harriet corrected him emotional y. ‘Engagement rings are supposed to be a token of love and commitment. If I ever do wear one,

those are the yardsticks I shal measure it by...not...not its financial value. But then it’s typical of men like

you, Matt, that you should insist on picking something so expensive—a status symbol ring so that everyone can see how rich and powerful you are!’

Harriet knew that part of her furious outburst was fuel ed by her own inner cocktail of volatile emotions. After al , she was in a false

engagement to the man she had fought so hard to pretend she did not love, only to recognise instead how very, very much she did love him. It

was an act which should have been fil ed with love and joy, but instead it had merely been a cold financial transaction, resulting in a physical

ache deep inside, that gnawed

unceasingly at her, and a growing resentment at being misjudged and condemned for a non-existent crime.

For some reason Matt's purchase of the ring symbolised for her the combined pain of all of those feelings.

Perilously close to tears, she started to walk away, gasping in protest as Matt's hand shot out, his fingers curling around her wrist as he

yanked her back towards him.

Her heart hit her ribs in one shocked beat when she saw how anger had turned his skin bone-white around the mouth, and frozen the grey of his eyes to silver.

'No, Harriet, what's typical of a man like me is that when I put my ring on

the finger of the woman I love, I want the world to see that love

reflected in it. And, more importantly, I want *her* to see that love, to know my love. To know that just as the ring is unique and beautiful, so to

me is she. The purity of the stone reflects my belief in the purity of the love we share, untainted and unmarked by any past loves. I want her to

see in its strength the strength of my love for her, and in its flashing fire the fierce heat of my passion for her. But more than anything else

Harriet, I want her to look at the ring and know that what truly binds us to one another are bonds we ourselves

have chosen—bonds that go
way above and beyond any mere
ring!’

Harriet couldn’t bear to speak. She
felt as though her emotions had been cut
to ribbons and were now so painful y
raw that she felt sick
with the agony of them.

Knowing that one day Matt would
love someone just as he had described to
her, and that that woman would not be
her, had opened a

door for her on a whole new world
of pain.

‘Change the ring if you wish to do
so,’ Matt said tersely. ‘It real y doesn’t
matter to me.’

But it did matter, he acknowledged

inwardly. He had seen how Harriet's gaze had been drawn to it, and crazily he had hoped...

'Let's get out of here,' he said curtly. 'I'l —' He started to frown as his mobile rang, and as she heard him talking Harriet recognised that

his caller was one of his main clients.

'I've got to go into the office,' Matt told Harriet crisply when he had finished. 'Jardines need the Mortlake site package we did for them retailored urgently.'

'I'l come with you,' Harriet offered immediately. He frowned again, so she added, 'I worked on the original with

Ben and Charlie.'

'Okay... We'll get a taxi—it will be quicker than getting the car,' Matt said, and he hurried her towards the exit.

'How much reworking do we have to do?' Harriet asked as he hailed a cab.

Jardines was a large accountancy firm and Matthew Cole Ltd was designing their new head office.

'Enough!' was Matt's unforthcoming reply as they got in the cab.

'Dammit, this isn't going to work!'

As she heard the frustration in Matt's voice Harriet got up from her own terminal and walked across to his office and peered over his shoulder at his computer screen.

‘Look at this,’ Matt told her grimly, drawing her attention to one particular detail. ‘Jardines need this aspect, because it’s one of their

trademark fixtures, but because of the extra meeting rooms they’ve asked to have included it just isn’t going to configure.’

Frowning, Harriet leaned closer, wholly absorbed in the complex problem on the screen. Her hair fell forward as she did so to brush

against Matt’s hand.

‘I can see what you mean,’ she agreed, every bit of her attention focused on the screen as she peered at it and then drew back slightly. ‘I

think—’ she began, and then stopped.

‘Yes?’ Matt encouraged her.

Harriet shook her head. ‘I don’t know if it wil work, but maybe if you moved the main block to here and streamlined the add-ons, then

perhaps you could turn the signature piece at an angle...’

‘Show me,’ Matt commanded, moving back so that she could get closer to the screen.

Matt had already suspected that she was one of the most proficient and innovative lateral thinkers on his team, and now she was proving it to him.

Quickly Harriet slid into the chair he had vacated. She had worked like this with other people a hundred thousand times—two heads close

together over the screen, two bodies sharing the same small space meant for one as they worked to resolve a problem—but that kind of

proximity had never affected her like this before. Now it breached her professionalism and distracted her from what she was doing, she

admitted, as a sharp frisson of hot awareness heightened the effect of the adrenaline already rushing through her veins and her brain worked

overtime to solve the problem in

front of them.

Working under pressure like this always excited and energised her, and she felt a surge of professional pleasure as she showed Matt

what she meant.

Tensely Matt watched her, quickly picking up on what she was trying to do and moving even closer to work with her.

‘Yes. Yes! That’s it! Harriet, you’ve done it!’ he exclaimed triumphantly. ‘And if we take this out of here, and add it on here...’

Harriet’s eyes widened appreciatively as Matt took up her thought process and ran with it, refining and honing it with skilled expertise.

‘We’ve got it. Got it!’ Matt exulted, standing up and drawing Harriet with him. ‘Good thinking, Harriet!’ he praised her, and then leaned

forward and brushed her cheek with his lips in relieved appreciation.

‘I’m glad I was able to help,’ Harriet answered, her voice fading away as somehow her gaze became focused on his mouth and her

heartbeat started to hammer.

She heard Matt mutter something under his breath, and in the next second she was in his arms, his mouth on hers.

Harriet heard herself moan as her lips parted and his tongue found hers. The high-voltage tension caused by the

intensity at which they

had been working must have caused Matt's sudden explosion of passion, Harriet decided dizzily, as his tongue plunged deeper and his

hands dropped to her hips, pulling her into his body.

Her own body's swift recognition of his erection sent messages to her brain that had her wanting to explore it more intimately, to run her

fingers over it, stroke it, savour it, feel the thick, full hardness of it naked beneath her touch.

A violent shudder racked her body and Matt groaned, his fingers kneading the rounded curves of her bottom, urging her even closer to

him. The desk was only just behind her, and inside her head feverish images were already forming.

Matt moved his hand, cupping her breast gently, plucking the pouting tightness of her nipple through her top and making her moan eagerly into his kiss.

He pulled her top out of the way, fiercely and urgently, as though he was as out of control as she felt, Harriet recognised weakly when he

pushed aside the fabric of her bra and then lowered his mouth to her breast.

A thril of primitive female pleasure engulfed her as Matt tugged passionately

on her nipple. Her hands reached to clasp his head against

her body whilst her body arched in immediate eager response.

The office's muted hum was being overwhelmed by the unsteady sound of their ragged breathing and the hard suckle of Matt's mouth on

her breast—an erotic overture that heightened Harriet's arousal and total y drowned any inner voice of caution as its siren cal dragged her

deeper and deeper into her need.

Outside, down below them, an ambulance siren suddenly wailed into clamouring life.

Immediately Matt released her and stepped back from her, his reactions far,

far faster than her own. Her body was aching tormentedly, still

clamouring for his touch whilst she struggled to make her trembling hands restore order to her clothes.

‘Harriet— Believe me, I never intended...’ She could hear Matt speaking grimly, his obvious and immediate rejection of what had

happened forcing her to follow his example—for the sake of her pride if nothing else.

‘I... I...it doesn’t matter. There’s no need to make an issue of it,’ she said quickly, mortified by the thought that he might start to question

just why she had responded to him

so immediately and so intensely. ‘It wasn’t important, Matt. Sometimes these things happen when you’re working at high pressure.’

To her relief Matt had turned his back to her, and therefore he couldn’t see just how much he had actually affected her.

‘Do they indeed?’ There was an odd inflection in his voice, but before Harriet could question it he was continuing almost brusquely, ‘Look,

it’s gone six o’clock. I’ll call you a cab and you can go back to the hotel and get ready for dinner. The table isn’t booked until eight. That will

give me time to send this stuff off to Jardines, then get changed here and meet

you at the hotel.'

'Do we have to have dinner?' Harriet asked him warily.

'It's a damned sight safer option than staying here and finishing what we just started,' Matt answered her brutally.

'And let me warn you that

right now, the way I'm feeling, it would be damnably easy to stand in for Ben and play out your little fantasy for you, if that's the way your mind is working.'

'No, it is not!' Harriet denied immediately, but her face was burning. Inside her a voice was urging her to give in to her real feelings and

take what he was offering without

questioning the reasons for his offer, no matter what the consequences!

For a moment she was almost tempted to tel him that the only man who ever featured in her sexual fantasies was him, but somehow she managed to stop herself.

‘I’l cal that taxi,’ Matt said flatly.

As he walked away from her he was cursing himself under his breath. If he didn’t get some space between them, and soon, he would be

taking her up to the penthouse with him—if he could last out that far—and the kind of sex they would be sharing would be hot and immediate

and dangerously soul-baring.

At least if he sent her straight to the

hotel he would be able to calm himself down. A cold shower might be a good idea as well , he derided

himself, as he felt the almost painful ache of his straining erection.

What the hell was happening to him? The thought of having sex here in the office would normally have been more of a turn-off for him than a turn on!

He had booked a room, Matt had said, but this wasn't a mere 'room,' it was a palatial suite! Round-eyed, Harriet looked at the table the

waiter had just wheeled in and left: mouthwatering-looking canapés, strawberries dipped in chocolate,

champagne on ice—a truly romantic offering! Had someone told them they were about to celebrate their ‘engagement’?

Just thinking about it sent a surge of stomach churning mixed emotions racing through her. Her heart twisting, and on edge, Harriet

walked through the bedroom. The business clothes she had in her case were hardly going to suit the occasion, were they? She hadn’t

packed her black dress, and—

Abruptly she came to a halt as she stared at the huge bed, and the glossy designer carrier bag on it.

There was a card pinned to the bag with her name on it in Matt’s

handwriting. Uncertainly she took it off and read it: *Hope I've got the right size.*

Frowning, Harriet withdrew the tissue-wrapped package from the carrier bag and opened it, her heart somersaulting with a mixture of

disbelief, angry pride and a sharp pang of pure female delight, which she tried to subdue as she saw the dress she had admired earlier in the day.

What on earth—? How on earth—? It had to be mere chance, didn't it, that Matt had bought her this particular dress? His action had to have been motivated by his desire

not to be shown up by her, didn't it?

That knowledge alone should have had her wrapping the dress up immediately and refusing to even look at it, never mind thinking about

wearing it! And perhaps if it had been any other dress but this one she would have done just that. But as she shook it free of the tissue Harriet

caught her breath. It was so perfect for her, and the right size as well. In other circumstances she would have loved wearing such a dress for

her lover. Her lover... For Matt.

Emotion choked her.

She wasn't going to wear it, of course. She couldn't! Not the dress or the little strappy shoes that went with it

either.

And yet she was holding it up in front of her, and her heart gave a sharp pang as she recognised that she had been right. The dress was

perfect for her.

And perfect for the occasion.

She had never owned a dress like this. Matt had never seen her wearing anything that declared so emphatically that this was a dress a

woman wore for herself and for a man... Her man.

Wearing such a dress would be almost a declaration. An invitation. At least it would be for her.

And that would certainly be one

way of proving to Matt that he was total y wrong about her feelings for Ben, a smal inner voice told her

recklessly. There was stil a sharp sensual ache deep inside her body, and suddenly it became much fiercer, an ache that included longing

and excitement as wel as arousal.

She gave a smal , reckless toss of her head.

Tonight she and Matt would be celebrating their engagement, and if she chose to take the situation he had created a step further, if she

chose to take the fantasy a step further, and celebrate it in the most natural way of al for a woman in love to celebrate that love, then why

shouldn't she do so? She was an adult, and answerable only to herself.

And, as today had shown, Matt wasn't immune to her—even if it was only sexual desire that aroused him.

Why shouldn't she claim this night as her own? Why shouldn't she claim Matt as her own, even if it was only for a few hours?

The audacity of her own thoughts shocked and excited her, feeding the everlasting flame of her love. Was it really such a dreadful thing for

her to want to be with him in the most intimate way possible, the way nature had ordained for a woman to be with the man she loved? And

she did so love Matt!

Harriet drew in a deep sigh and touched the delicate fabric tentatively. She didn't have much time to make up her mind. Matt would be

here soon. She looked at the chilling champagne. Her heart was racing, her blood seething through her veins as though it was already filled

with champagne bubbles. Perhaps if she were to have one glass—just to calm her nerves a little! It was only champagne after all! Quickly

before she could change her mind she reached for one of the bottles and opened it neatly.

Pouring herself a glass, she took it

into the bathroom with her, appreciatively admiring the extensive and very expensive range of

toiletries. The hotel management were certainly thorough; there was even a sealed pack of condoms tucked discreetly into a basket of other personal requisites.

Half an hour later, she was just finishing her second glass of champagne and studying her reflection in the bedroom mirror, when the suite

door opened and Matt strode in.

Her heart rocked on its axis and a rush of love surged through her. He had changed his casual clothes for the formality of a dark suit and a

shirt and tie, and Harriet feasted

her hungry gaze on him for as long as she dared.

When he saw her, Matt came to an abrupt halt.

‘The dress was the right size, then?’ he demanded almost brusquely.

‘It fits perfectly,’ Harriet answered softly. ‘But you really shouldn’t have bought it for me.’

‘Think of it as a bonus,’ he answered tensely. ‘You deserve one after solving the Jardines problem for me.’

He didn’t sound like a man who had just had a problem solved, Harriet decided, her own mood altering to match his when she saw the

way he was frowning and felt the coldness emanating from him.

‘I opened the champagne,’ she said. ‘Do you want a glass?’

His frown seemed to deepen.

‘You were the one who said we had to behave as though we were genuinely celebrating our engagement,’ Harriet reminded him, sensing his disapproval.

‘In public,’ Matt said harshly, immediately flicking back his cuff to look pointedly at his watch. ‘Our table is booked for eight and it’s almost that now.’

His hostility was flattening the bubbles of her own earlier excitement

threatening to steamroll over the sharp
thrill of delicious and wanton

anticipation the champagne had
nurtured. And not just the champagne, if
she were honest. The intimacy they had
shared earlier had left her

sensually intoxicated and eager to
continue from where they had left off,
leading her into a dangerous world of
fantasy. But Matt, it was plain,

had totally dissociated himself from
what had happened. She couldn't let go
of her own dreams so easily, though. Her
love was a fierce

power, overwhelming her normal
caution.

A small spurt of rebellious
recklessness kicked dangerously to life

inside her.

Lowering her lashes, she tried to hide what she was feeling, unaware of just how unintentional y seductive she looked as she reminded

him, ‘We’re celebrating our engagement. Surely we’re al owed to be a little bit late? After al , it’s obvious from the champagne the hotel has

left that they expect us to have our own private celebration...’

Matt witnessed her unexpected transformation from virgin into seductive vamp with a feeling in his gut that made him want to take hold of

her and—

‘How many glasses of that stuff did

you say you've had?' he demanded, striding over and removing the bottle from the ice bucket.

'Only two,' Harriet told him defensively. 'Plus the one I poured for you!'

'Three glasses of champagne on an empty stomach?'

There was a look in his eyes that was irritated and then for a brief moment filled with something else—a hot, hungry maleness which he

quickly leashed.

'I ate some of the canapés and chocolate strawberries,' Harriet assured him virtuously. 'You should try one, Matt, they're delicious,' she

encouraged, picking one up and

offering it to him.

When he shook his head, she held the chocolate-coated fruit to her own lips, licking the chocolate coating off with happy and uncalculated sensuality.

Matt closed his eyes.

He had deliberately delayed getting here, knowing that in his present vulnerable emotional and physical state he just could not trust

himself to be alone with her. The last thing he was equipped to cope with was this. A Harriet transformed into the most unbelievably

irresistible virgin turned vamp, and having an effect on him that made him

want to strip that damnably erotic dress she was wearing from her

body, pour what was left of her glass of champagne over her skin and lick it from her whilst it cascaded over her breasts and pooled in the

hole over her belly before. And as for those strawberries...

He looked into her face and saw the soft, illuminated look in her eyes, the half-shy, half-bold way she was looking back at him. He took a

step towards her. If she thought he was going to let her get away with looking at him like that, tormenting him like that... Any minute now she

was going to end up on the bed, and he was—

Grimly he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, like a diver who'd just come up for air. She didn't know what she was doing—and she

certainly didn't know how he felt, he reminded himself.

Refusing to look at her, he removed the ring box from his pocket.

‘Look, get this damned thing on, and then we’re going down to dinner. And you are not having any more champagne.’

Harriet tilted her chin.

‘We are getting engaged. You have to put the ring on for me,’ she told him, wagging her ring finger.

Three glasses of champagne and

she was like this? He felt like a hormonal teenager, recognising for the very first time what the male

hunting instinct was all about, Matt recognised grimly.

He was sorely tempted to tell her that if he went near her now he wouldn't be putting the ring on her finger, but taking the dress she was wearing off her body.

If Matt came over to her now, she was going to put her arms around his neck and kiss his mouth as she had been longing to do for what

seemed like forever, Harriet decided dizzily, far more intoxicated by his presence than she would have been by any amount of champagne.

And then she was going to tel him that there was no way she was going to get engaged to him unless he took her to bed first. And then if that

didn't work she was going to—

Her gaze swivel ed to the suite door as it suddenly rattled and two waiters came in, plainly not expecting to find them there.

‘It’s al right—you can take the trol ey,’ Matt said. ‘We were just leaving...’

‘But please leave the champagne...’ Harriet cal ed out, as Matt took hold of her arm and practical y dragged her into the corridor.

Before they reached the lift he pushed the ring onto her finger, and al

she could do as he hustled her inside it to join the other silent

passengers was give him a reproachful glower.

‘Have you ever made love in a lift?’ she asked him conversationally, once it had stopped and they had got out.

Matt stared at her. Vintage champagne on an empty stomach was obviously a new experience for her.

‘No, I haven’t,’ he told her tersely.

‘Have you ever wished you had, though?’ Harriet persisted.

‘Not as much as I wish you had stopped at one glass of champagne,’ Matt said through gritted teeth, and he almost marched her into the

hotel’s exclusive restaurant area.

Harriet produced another pout, and then became distracted as she caught sight of herself in the bank of mirrors that decorated the corridor.

‘This dress is just so lovely,’ she sighed. ‘It makes me feel like a different person.’

‘It’s certainly making you behave like one,’ Matt allowed drily. If he was honest, Matt knew that if circumstances had been different her

unexpected transformation would have had him not just tenderly amused and protective, but more than ready to play the erotic game she had so innocently started.

The sight of Harriet with her inhibitions and her defences removed was proving to be a very dangerous and powerful aphrodisiac so far as he was concerned.

‘We’ve just become engaged,’ Harriet reminded him reprovingly. ‘I’m supposed to be in love with you, remember?’ She flashed her ring at

him. ‘And I just want you to know, Mr Cole,’ she said breathily, mimicking Marilyn Monroe, ‘that you are the sexiest man alive and I’d much

rather be upstairs alone in the suite with you than down here in the restaurant.’

‘Real y? Rather than being with

Ben?’

‘Who’s Ben?’ Harriet asked him sweetly.

‘I take it you won’t be drinking any wine with your meal?’ Matt asked Harriet drily as they studied their menus.

‘No...I think I’d better stick with the champagne,’ Harriet answered innocently, looking up enquiringly when she heard him make a muffled sound.

‘Why don’t you have another coffee?’

‘I’ve already had three cups,’ Harriet reminded Matt solemnly as the waiter lifted the coffee pot.

The restaurant was almost empty, and the bubbles of excitement singing in

her veins had become a giddy fluttering of butterflies in her

stomach as she contemplated what lay ahead.

In fact she was a little surprised that she hadn't had any second thoughts—or abandoned her reckless decision before she could put it

into practice.

The truth was, though, that if anything her determination to return to the suite and somehow, by hook or by crook, ensure that tonight Matt

became her lover had grown stronger during the evening rather than weaker.

The effects of the champagne she

had drunk earlier might have worn off, but the effects of her love for Matt and the intimacy they had shared had not!

‘I think they’re waiting for us to leave,’ she told Matt, rueful y indicating the hovering waiters.

‘Yes. If you’re sure you don’t want any more coffee I’ll take you up to the suite,’ Matt accepted curtly.

As he escorted her out of the room Harriet turned towards him and whispered mischievously, ‘Thank you for my beautiful ring, darling,’

and then reached up and pressed a brief kiss to his mouth.

The minute he had seen her safely inside the suite he was going to leave

her there alone, Matt decided grimly. She hadn't had any alcohol

to drink over dinner, and surely the effects of that damned champagne should have worn off by now, but she had spent the entire evening

openly flirting with him. As the lift doors opened and they stepped together into its empty intimacy he decided that he didn't know which he

wanted to do the most—strangle her, or...

When he saw that she was looking at him with liquid-eyed expectant hopefulness, he took a deep breath and told himself that he must be

imagining things. He made sure he

stood well away from her.

The lift took them to their floor and he waited for her to step out. Harriet turned to him and told him reproachfully, 'You might at least have

kissed me, Matt. Every woman has a right to be kissed in a lift once in her life—especially when she has just got engaged...'

Removing the suite key from his pocket, Matt unlocked the door and held it open.

Happily Harriet stepped inside, and turned to smile at him.

'Sleep well,' Matt told her dismissively. 'I'll give you a call in the morning.'

Harriet's eyes widened. 'You're

leaving me here on my own?’

Matt could hear the disbelief in her voice. ‘I might as wel go back to the penthouse.’

‘Matt!’ she protested, unable to conceal her distress. But it was too late—he was already closing the door.

This couldn’t be happening to her! He couldn’t have left her! But he had.

Harriet blinked hard, swal owing the taste of her disappointment.

So much for her plans!

Matt reached the lift and pressed the bel .

He had done the right thing. He knew that. If he had stayed he could count on one hand the seconds before he

would have had Harriet in

his arms, showing her just what effect her behaviour towards him over dinner had had on him, and how dangerous it was to flirt with a man as

much as she had flirted with him. Especial y when that man was already so damned hungry for her that—

The lift arrived and the doors opened.

Matt got in and pressed the button.

Have you ever made love in a lift?

What the hel kind of question was that? He closed his eyes and then opened then again as the lift

reached the car park floor.

Disconsolately Harriet removed her precious dress and wandered into

the bathroom. The whirlpool bath caught her attention and she heaved a small sigh.

She might as well enjoy some sinful self-indulgence, even if it was not the kind she had longed for.

Turning on the taps, she ran a bath and removed the rest of her clothes.

Matt reached into his pocket for his car keys, frowning as he realised that he had only both suite keys.

Now, why on earth had he done that? Or did he really need to ask himself?

Fate was a funny thing, he decided as he locked the car and started to retrace his steps.

* * *

Harriet didn't hear him enter the suite. In fact the first she knew of his presence was when he walked into the bathroom to find her lying back

in the whirlpool bath, with only her head above the mass of bubbles which had already spilled over the sides of the tub.

'Matt,' she whispered weakly. 'I don't know what I've done, but I think these bubbles are getting a bit out of control.'

'That's what happens when you play around with things you don't understand,' Matt heard himself answering thickly.

Did she have any idea what she was doing to him? As she tried to sit up foam clung to her skin and then slid from it, revealing the creamy

swel of her breasts. ‘I can’t switch the whirlpool jet thingy off.’

‘You’d better get out, then, and let me try.’

‘It would be much easier if you got in,’ Harriet told him softly. ‘And much more fun!’

Matt stared at her, but although she flushed slightly she didn’t look away from him.

‘You do know what you’re saying, don’t you?’ he demanded, before stressing, ‘What you’re inviting...?’

Mutely Harriet nodded her head, and then told him brightly, ‘The hotel is awful y wel -organised, Matt. They even provide condoms.’ She

stood up in the bath. ‘Help me out, please.’

‘I thought you wanted me to get in with you?’ he reminded her huskily.

Matt closed his eyes, exasperated with himself for his own lack of self-control. What the hel was he doing? But it was too late to back out

now. Harriet was looking at him, her eyes glowing and an expression of radiant expectancy on her face.

‘Oh, Matt!’ she whispered. ‘I do want you to make love to me so very,

very much. You wil , won't you?'

CHAPTER SEVEN

HARRIET gave a small gasp as Matt lifted her body out of the bath. ‘Your suit!’ she protested. ‘You’ll be soaked... Mmm.’

If *he* didn’t care about his suit, then she wasn’t going to worry about it! Not when he was kissing her like this.

He should not be doing this, Matt warned himself. But somewhere deep down inside himself he knew that there was no way he could not.

Some foolish, stubborn part of him refused to relinquish its passionate belief that if only he could show Harriet what real love—*his* love—was

like, then she would recognise how much she wanted it, and him, and how little she wanted Ben.

Harriet hardly dared allow herself to believe what was happening. To believe that it was Matt who was holding her and kissing her. But her

body had no time for such foolish hesitations. Her body was far, far too busy showing its appreciation of the sensual pleasure it was enjoying,

and what was more it was demanding that Harriet threw every bit of her emotional and cerebral energy and concentration into actively

participating!

And why should she not do so,

when it was so very, very much what she wanted?

Eagerly she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her naked body as close to him as she could, returning the hard, demanding

pressure of his mouth with a kiss of fevered longing. Delicately she ran the tip of her tongue along the line of his mouth, tracing it, probing its

defences. She lifted her breasts and the urgent thrust of her body brought a sensual y erotic friction to her nipples with each unchoreographed

and instinctive movement it made.

Matt had always prided himself on his self-control, but now he realised that it had never previously been truly tested,

that all other sensual

intimacies had barely touched the surface of what uncontrollable need actually felt like. The feel of Harriet's tongue tip innocently mimicked

and mirrored the most intimate kind of man-to-woman penetration; the hard points of her stiff nipples were hot stabs of pleasure burning

against his skin with every writhing movement of her body. These were all guided-missile assaults on a defence mechanism which in the past

had known little other than the equivalent of a mild attack with a handheld catapult.

Even the erection he could feel

straining against his clothes had an unfamiliar dimension to it—not so much in size, or even intensity, but

in something that went way beyond that. A sort of spiritual y physical homing need, Matt recognised to his own grim shock.

So this was physical love. This savage, untameable hunger that would break down every barrier between them until they were perfectly

united as one. This seeking, aching drive to complete himself within her.

What he felt was both primitive and spiritual. The most basic of man's desires and the most elevated, straining together to form an

emotional and physical hunger that

held him helpless in its grip.

Harriet could feel how aroused Matt was, and beneath the immediate kick of her sweetly pleasurable excitement she could feel the

rhythmic pulse of her body's answering response.

Impatiently she tugged at his shirt, her skin starting to flush with betraying heat.

How long was he going to make her wait?'

Somehow her love-hungry thoughts had become achingly impatient words, whispered against Matt's mouth as she tried to steal the

intimate kiss she was longing for.

And when he heard them Matt felt the last of his self-control being dragged away with them. He gripped her bare arms firmly and eased

her away from his body, ignoring her small moaned protest. When she tried to reach out to him he tugged her hands down and held them

carefully with one of his own, whilst he started to undress himself impatiently with the other.

‘Wait...just wait,’ he told her thickly, his molten grey gaze holding the dark liquid passion of jade.

When he tugged off his shirt he felt the shudder that jolted her through his own body, like an electric shock. Her

already prominent nipples

flared into irresistible dark-flushed temptation.

Harriet shuddered again when he looked at them, and somewhere inside his head the need to experience how she would react when he

gave in to the craving to have her breasts inside his mouth struck him with such force that he had dropped to one knee and begun lapping at

first one and then the other with fierce urgency before he could stop himself.

Her hands trapped behind her back, Matt's tongue laving her exquisitely aroused nipples, Harriet shuddered more under the liquid

surges of pleasure that ran through her.

Pulling her hands free of Matt's grip, she started to finish the task he had begun, tugging frantically at fabric and fastenings until she could

feel the heat of his flesh beneath her hands.

The tug of his mouth on her breast drew a sharp, wild cry from her lips and she raked his flesh with her nails, unable to stop herself from

reacting to the needs he was feeling.

She could feel it gathering swiftly inside her, like a fast-flooding river, channelled into the place where its

intensity would set in motion a
cataclysmical y powerful reaction.

Fear spiked and shook her; the
swift race might prove too fast to be
properly harnessed. As though he sensed
it too, Matt swept her up

into his arms, kicking aside the
tangle of his clothes, and carried her into
the bedroom.

In its shadows Harriet could almost
see the beat of his heart beneath the
golden sheen of his skin. Wonderingly
she raised her hand to it,

her fingertips measuring each
thudding, driving beat, knowing already
with the most intense emotion and
physical anticipation that soon that

driving power would be replicated

and intensified within her own body.

Matt could feel the strain on his own self-control as he placed Harriet on the bed. Things had gone too fast, and for him too far now, for the

slow, gentle voyage he had intended.

Harriet lay on the bed and looked up at him. She was shockingly close to her orgasm...too close.

In her mind's eye she could see the foil wrapper of the condom she had secreted away in her handbag, which was within reach beside the bed.

A surge of explicit heat tightened sharply inside her. Deliberately and

determinedly she opened her legs, and looked directly into Matt's face.

The dark tide of colour that surged through his face as his arousal strained towards her only heightened her own.

Boldly she touched her own body, biting down hard on her lip as she felt the immediate tense contraction, her gaze fixed fiercely on Matt's

as he shuddered violently in response.

'Now, Matt... Oh, please, now—now...' Her words were lost, crushed beneath his mouth as his hands shaped her. She could feel the

thick, hard throb of him against her thigh and her fingers reached blindly for

him, discarding as they did so the foil wrapper she had been clutching.

Somewhere, outside himself and the ferocity of his driving need, Matt registered and recognised it, automatically responding to his own inbuilt set of unbroken rules.

Harriet, clinging to the edge of a place she couldn't bear to let herself be swept from, heard the brief rustle and felt the chilling emptiness

of where he had been. But before she could think logically about what was happening Matt was holding her, kissing her, entering her as slowly

and carefully as he could whilst his

whole body shook under the unbearable burden of his own self-control. She exhaled a delicious moan of

joyous pleasure as she realised that her fantasies were going to be more than fulfilled.

The brief feeling of pressure, the sudden stilling of Matt's body, were unwanted interruptions and delays. Instinctively she showed him this,

moving fiercely and eagerly against him until he drove deeper and then more deeply still as she clung to him and urged him to take all that

she wanted to give him, her body glorying in each new thrust.

Dear heaven, but she felt so good, so perfect, with her flesh enfolding him,

holding him, gripping him. She moved deliberately against

him, inciting him to plunge deeper.

Harriet could already feel her orgasm overwhelming her—tight, fierce bursts of sensation that echoed the pulse of life itself. She heard

Matt shout out in exultation and the intensity increased to a frantic explosion of savagely powerful contractions that were a world away from

anything she had previously experienced.

Held fast in Matt's arms, still trembling between each jagged breath, Harriet felt herself fall from the euphoric haven she had been inhabiting

through doubt and shock into the cold, unwanted world of reality.

Matt was renowned for his astuteness. How long would it be before he guessed how she felt about him? And when he did what was going to happen?

Harriet suspected she already knew the answer to her own question.

She would suffer the misery and the humiliation of being told that Matt did not want her love—and, worse, she would probably be

banished from his life! She couldn't bear to let that happen!

She must not let him guess how she really felt!

His chin resting on the top of Harriet's head, Matt blinked fiercely. No one, nothing, had ever touched his emotions so intensely as what he

had just shared with Harriet. It was true that love gave the physical act of intimacy between two people an extra dimension that took it into

another world. He felt awed, humbled, fiercely and passionately completed, and equally fiercely and passionately determined that he was

never, ever going to let Harriet go.

Surely she must have shared some of those feelings?

All his adult life he had protected his own deepest emotions, but now he

knew that he had to tel Harriet how he felt, that he had to beg her

if necessary to let him wipe the slate clean so that they could begin again—two people who could together touch immortality through their shared love.

He took a deep breath and began, ‘Harriet, why—?’

Immediately Harriet froze. It was happening already, the very thing she had dreaded. Matt was going to ask her why she had responded to

him in the way she had, and then he was going to answer his own question by tel ing her that he knew she was in love with him.

She couldn’t let that happen.

‘I know what you’re going to say, Matt.’ She stopped him quickly. ‘But you’ve got it all wrong. The only reason I made... I did what I did was

because I couldn’t think of any other way of convincing you that, contrary to your constant accusations, I am not saving myself for Ben.’

Her sharp, careless words hit Matt like blows, like acid-tipped arrows to his heart. He went completely still, and then moved away from her

so brutally that Harriet felt as though he had physically pushed her away.

‘Thank goodness you were quick-thinking enough to remember the

condom,' she added chattily. 'It was a wonderful experience, Matt, and

I got so carried away that I would have forgotten.'

There! That should take care of any thoughts he had of questioning the intensity of her response, Harriet decided fiercely.

She waited for Matt to respond, but instead he simply got out of the bed and walked silently into the bathroom, firmly closing the door.

A pain like no other she had ever experienced filled her. It was so intense, so immense, that she couldn't contain it. It felt as though it was

weeping from her heart into her blood, seeping through her pores until

every bit of her was saturated with it.

There was no escape from it and there never would be, Harriet acknowledged in anguish.

CHAPTER EIGHT

NUMBLY Harriet opened her fist and stared at the ring in the palm of her hand. Unable to bear its brilliance in the face of her own pain, she

closed her hand again, so tightly that the stone dug into her skin.

She hadn't seen Matt for over a week. He had left the hotel after they had made love without saying a single word to her, and she had

discovered when she had arrived at work in the morning that he had been called away on some urgent business.

She had received a terse text message from him, demanding: 'Wear

the ring—I meant what I said’.

And of course she’d had to, for Ben’s sake! And now it seemed that everyone knew that she and Matt were supposed to be engaged.

Now at last it was Friday, and she had decided it was the last day of her working life with Matt. If she couldn’t endure the pain of her

unwanted love when he wasn’t there then how on earth was she going to bear it when he was?

The tears threatening to pour from her eyes were as sharply painful as the diamond cutting into her hand.

‘Harry—there you are!’

She forced a smile at Ben came bounding up to her. ‘How’s Cindi?’ she

asked him.

‘She’s fine. We’re both fine. In fact we’re over the moon,’ he confessed happily. ‘She’s finally accepted that she got it all wrong about you

and me, and she’s taking me home with her to meet her family at the end of the month. But first we’re going to have a couple of days away

together, so that I can follow Matt’s example and pop the question! I love her so much, Harry, but there’s no way I could have accepted her if

she hadn’t been understanding about you and our friendship.’

Harriet’s heart sank further with every word he uttered. Everything Ben

was saying confirmed what she herself had feared. She suspected

that if she and Matt ‘broke up’ now, it would do irreparable harm to Ben’s romance.

But of course the truth was that she and Matt had nothing together to break up. She meant nothing to him. Nothing at all !

Tears filled her eyes. Frantically she tried to blink them away.

‘Harry?’ Ben queried, bewildered. ‘What is it? What’s wrong? I thought you were happy.’

It was more than Harriet’s savaged emotions could stand. To her own humiliation and disbelief she discovered that she had started to cry.

‘Thank you, Ben. I wil deal with this,’ Matt announced from behind them.

Both of them swung around in shock, neither of them having heard him come into the room.

‘Oh, Matt. It’s you! Good.’ Ben looked relieved. ‘Wel , I’l take myself off and...’

‘That won’t be necessary,’ Matt told him grimly. ‘What Harriet and I have to say to one another is going to be said in the privacy of my

apartment, and not here in the office!’

So far he hadn’t so much as looked at her, never mind addressed her directly, Harriet recognised, torn

between a sweet, aching longing,
unbearable pain, and total and
absolute misery.

He was looking at her now, though,
pinning her with that ice-grey look of his
whilst he held open the office door and
said coldly, 'Harriet?'

Reluctantly she started to walk
towards him, preparing her verbal
defensive attack as she did so.

And she didn't wait to reach him to
launch it. 'There really isn't any point in
this Matt,' she began, but to her shock he
forestalled her,

manacled her wrist with a hard,
determined grip.

But it was still his touch, still his
flesh on hers, and she was still oh, so

achingly vulnerable to that.

Panic engulfed her like the cold, icy waters of a well she had fallen into and couldn't escape from.

‘No! Let me go. You know—’

Immediately Matt swung around to face her.

He must have been working hard, she decided, because there was a sharper edge to his jaw, a leanness to his face, and the shadow of

something in his eyes that suggested a hard, punishing week without proper meals or sleep.

‘I know what? How hot you are in bed?’ he taunted her savagely. ‘Do you want me to tell Ben that? What we have

to say to one another

needs to be said in private—unless you want me to go into explicit detail in public,’ he told her brutally.

Harriet felt herself sway as her body absorbed the shock of his open threat.

He hadn’t had a single second’s respite from thinking about her all week—which had defeated the whole purpose of setting up a rigorous

diary of appointments to keep him out of the office, Matt acknowledged bitterly.

This morning, knowing he would be seeing her, he had been forced to admit that his need to do so had outstripped his pride by about one

thousand to one.

He had even planned during his early-morning drive back how he could use the fake engagement he had created to build a very real

intimacy between them—the kind of intimacy which, whilst a form of purgatory for him, would at least give him the opportunity to find some way to win her love.

And then he had walked into the office—his office—to find her with Ben!

Matt didn't know how to contain the savagery of his own pain. He told himself that he wasn't going to say a word to her until they reached

the penthouse, but no sooner were

they outside the room than he found himself breaking his own rules.

‘I don’t care what you have to say about it, Harriet, or how much you argue,’ he told her harshly, ‘our engagement is stil very much on, and wil remain on.’

‘You don’t—’

‘And what is more,’ Matt continued thickly, ‘if necessary it wil be continued as far as marriage.’

‘If necessary? What do you mean, if necessary? How could it be necessary? I —’

‘We had sex,’ Matt told her. ‘You could be carrying my child.’

Matt’s child.

Harriet felt her heart beat a sharply

painful tattoo of longing.

‘No!’ she whispered, shaking her head. Her mouth had suddenly gone dry and she had to wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. ‘That’s not possible...you used a condom.’

Matt gave her a derisory look. ‘That’s no guarantee!’

What on earth had he started? The fierce mule kick his words had brought to his emotions had activated a response in his body that told

him how much it was now wanting to ensure that his unfounded threat became an absolute certainty. A child; Harriet’s body swelling with his child.

Harriet felt as though she was drowning in her own sickening panic.

‘No. *No*. You can’t make me. I *won’t* marry you, Matt. Not even if I am pregnant. I...I couldn’t bear it.’

Matt went perfectly stil as he heard the emotional agony in her voice. His own emotion carved twin deep grooves of biting loss along

either side of his mouth, but Harriet was too caught up in her feelings to notice. He marched towards the private lift that serviced his

apartment, aware that Harriet was fol owing him.

Savagely he pressed the button and the doors opened immediately.

Savagely he pressed the button and the doors opened immediately.

‘Don’t do this to me, Matt,’ she begged as she got in the lift with him and the doors shut behind them. ‘I couldn’t bear being married to you

when I love you so much and you don’t love me at al . In fact I think it would kil me.’

There was a sharp, tense silence, and then Matt asked very quietly, ‘Would you like to repeat what you just said?’

Harriet closed her eyes and gulped in air.

‘You heard me.’

‘You love me so much...?’ Matt

prompted her.

‘Yes,’ she whispered in defeat.

‘And I don’t love you at al ?’

Matt reached behind him for the ‘stop’ button and pressed it hard.

Harriet gasped in shock as the lift’s abrupt halt threw her against him. No, not against him, she recognised dizzily, but into him—into his

open arms, which wrapped tightly around her, whilst his mouth fastened hungrily on hers in a fierce claim of possession.

‘Wrong!’ Matt corrected her thickly against her mouth when he was final y able to release it. ‘I do love you. I have loved you and I shal love

you more deeply, more

passionately, than I ever thought it was possible for me to love anyone.'

'You love me?' The miracle of hope began to edge into her voice.

Matt groaned and took her back in his arms, releasing the lift button as he did so.

He was stil kissing her when the doors opened.

'Have we reached the penthouse?' Harriet asked dizzily.

Matt turned his head and glanced into the office behind them—to see his staff working very hard at not noticing their intimacy.

'Not exactly,' he answered.

Uncertainly Harriet turned her

head.

‘Matt, everyone can see us!’ she whispered, pink-cheeked.

‘Yes, they can,’ he agreed, still holding her in his arms. Obviously he’d pressed ‘stop’ before the lift had started moving, and now the doors

had opened automatically. ‘And what they can see is that you are mine.’

‘I never loved Ben the way you thought,’ Harriet told him truthfully. ‘I’ve never loved anyone the way I love you, Matt. It wasn’t true what I said

about...about going to bed with you to prove to you I wasn’t saving myself for Ben either,’ she added huskily. ‘I wanted you like that the

moment I saw you.’ Her body

shuddered in visible longing. ‘In fact I think I fel in love with you the moment I saw you, but you were so...so cold towards me...’

‘Was I? It must have been something to do with al those cold showers I kept on having to take,’ he teased her, changing tack to ask, ‘How do you feel about a June wedding?’

‘June?’ Dismay darkened her eyes. ‘But it’s already May, and that means waiting a whole year.

‘I mean *this* June,’ Matt corrected her softly, firmly closing the lift door.

‘Where are we going now?’ Harriet asked.

‘To heaven,’ he answered thickly,

‘via the penthouse. Unless you really want to know what it’s like to make love in a lift?’

‘Oh, Matt it’s the same suite!’

Harriet’s eyes shone with love and a longing that made Matt’s hands tremble slightly as he locked the suite door and turned to walk

towards her.

‘I wanted us to celebrate our true engagement here, where we both made our commitment to one another, even though then we didn’t

know we shared those feelings. Harriet, come here. I can’t bear not having you in my arms a second longer.’

‘What about the champagne?’ Harriet protested. ‘And the canapés and

the chocolate coated strawberries...?’

‘What’s that look for?’ she demanded, when Matt suddenly started to smile as he remembered what he had wanted to do that first night

she had so innocently tormented him.

When he told her she blushed and laughed, and then whispered to him that she’d like to reciprocate but that she loved the taste of him so

much she didn’t want to dilute it with champagne.

‘Harriet...’ he groaned unevenly.

‘I don’t know how I’m going to bear sleeping without you for three whole days when we go home for the

wedding,’ Harriet said, tugging at his shirt buttons and nuzzling her lips against his skin.

‘We’ll be able to make up for it once we’re on honeymoon,’ Matt promised.

‘Mmm...a whole month of just the two of us.’ Harriet shuddered with eager pleasure, and then sighed happily as she succeeded in

unfastening his shirt.

EPILOGUE

‘OH, LOOK at the bride— isn’t she beautiful?’ the little girl called out in excitement as she stood on the pavement

watching the bridal party
arrive.

Harriet could see her father's proud smile as she walked towards the church on his arm.

It was a perfect June day, and the ivory silk gown she and her mother had chosen together moved softly in the warm summer air.

Her brother and his wife and children had flown over from America for the occasion, and behind her she could hear Ben speaking sternly

to her small niece and nephew, reminding them of their important duties as flower girl and page boy.

A smile curled Harriet's mouth.

She knew it was unusual for her to

have a male supporter as part of the bridal party, but Ben was her best friend and Matt had total y

agreed with her wish to honour that friendship by asking Ben to be her supporter and Cindi to be her bridesmaid.

‘Of course you wil have to wear pink,’ Harriet had told Ben gravely.

‘Over my dead body.’ Ben had refused point-blank—until he had realised she had been teasing him.

The church doors opened and Harriet stepped from the sunlight into the porch. The organ music swel ed and Harriet walked as slowly as

she could down the aisle on her

father's arm—when in reality she wanted to run to Matt as fast as she could.

Around her the pews were filled with family and friends, but Harriet was oblivious to everyone but Matt. Matt was now her family, her friend, her al and her everything.

Unconventional y he was standing facing her, watching her draw closer to him, and when she reached him they looked at one another,

sharing an intimate moment of silent commitment and promise.

The familiar words of the marriage service began. 'Dearly beloved...'

Matt was hers; for now and forever.

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