

A romantic couple in a city at sunset. The woman, with dark hair in a ponytail, is wearing a black sleeveless top and looking down. The man, in a suit and tie, is looking at her. They are standing close together. The background shows a city skyline at sunset.

MODERN™



SUSAN STEPHENS

Ruthless Boss, Dream Baby



Susan Stephens

Ruthless Boss, Dream Baby

«HarperCollins»

Stephens S.

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Wanted in the bedroom... not the boardroom! Magenta knows having a new employer might be tricky. But she isn't expecting the old-fashioned ruthlessness of Gray Quinn! However, plucky Magenta is up for the challenge, and tries to play the distractingly gorgeous Quinn at his own game...Quinn is no New Man: he wants temptingly innocent Magenta in his bedroom, not the boardroom. But he can make her no promises. He'll give her the night of her life, but he might not be there when she wakes up... And he definitely doesn't want her taking maternity leave!MEN WITHOUT MERCY Arrogant and proud, unashamedly male!

Содержание

About the Author	6
RUTHLESS BOSS,	7
CHAPTER ONE	8
CHAPTER TWO	13
CHAPTER THREE	17
CHAPTER FOUR	21
CHAPTER FIVE	26
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	29



‘Shall we get down to business?’ she suggested, putting her glass down.

Quinn’s lips pressed down with amusement as he put his own glass down next to hers. ‘I’m ready if you are.’

This was business?

Quinn had dragged her into his arms, and his kisses were a brushing, teasing, honeyed reminder. ‘I shouldn’t...’

‘You should. You must.’

Quinn’s dark eyes glinted with humour, and then he deepened the kiss. The chance to experience everything she had ever dreamed about with Quinn—a man who exuded power, raw and unrepentant—was now a very real possibility. She had always been awkward with men before—concerned she’d get it wrong—but the way Quinn was kissing her, binding every part of her to him, left very little to chance.

Best of all, Magenta reasoned, nothing could go wrong in a dream—there were no consequences. She was free of inhibition and of embarrassment. Her twenty-first-century world of metro-males and smooth-cheeked mummy’s boys had never seemed further away as Quinn persuaded her this was one experience she shouldn’t miss out on.

Modern™Romance are pleased to present
this new and exciting mini-series!

MEN WITHOUT MERCY

Arrogant and proud, unashamedly male!

Modern Romance with a retro twist...

Step back in time to when men were men—
and women knew just how to tame them!

About the Author

SUSAN STEPHENS was a professional singer before meeting her husband on the tiny Mediterranean island of Malta. In true Modern™ Romance style they met on Monday, became engaged on Friday, and were married three months after that. Almost thirty years and three children later, they are still in love. (Susan does not advise her children to return home one day with a similar story, as she may not take the news with the same fortitude as her own mother!)

Susan had written several non-fiction books when fate took a hand. At a charity costume ball there was an after-dinner auction. One of the lots, 'Spend a Day with an Author', had been donated by Mills & Boon® author Penny Jordan. Susan's husband bought this lot, and Penny was to become not just a great friend but a wonderful mentor, who encouraged Susan to write romance.

Susan loves her family, her pets, her friends, and her writing. She enjoys entertaining, travel, and going to the theatre. She reads, cooks, and plays the piano to relax, and can occasionally be found throwing herself off mountains on a pair of skis or galloping through the countryside. Visit Susan's website: www.susanstephens.net —she loves to hear from her readers all around the world!

RUTHLESS BOSS, DREAM BABY

SUSAN STEPHENS



www.millsandboon.co.uk

CHAPTER ONE

MAGENTA yelled with alarm as a scuffed biker's boot slammed onto the ground within inches of her feet. 'What the hell do you think you're doing?' she exploded, frantically clutching the armful of documents threatening to spill from her arms.

Taking off his helmet, the man shook out a mop of inky-black hair. He was exactly the type of man you didn't want to see when you'd had the day from hell and looked like you'd been dragged through a hedge backwards: gorgeous, cool, and commanding. He had 'danger' flashing round him like neon lights.

'Well?' Magenta demanded furiously. 'Do you always ride a motorcycle like a maniac?'

'Always,' he drawled.

'I should report you.'

Eyes the colour of a storm-tossed ocean laughed back at her.

And she would report him, Magenta determined, just as soon as she sorted out the flat on her car, along with a million and one other things.

Such as her father deciding to retire and sell his shares to some stranger without a word to her. Such as saving her colleagues' jobs from this unknown predator. Such as wanting to get back to her team and their fast-moving, retro ad campaign set in Magenta's favourite era, the sixties.

'Do you mind?' she said, trying to skirt around the man's monstrous, throbbing machine. 'Some of us have work to do.'

'Is that why you're leaving the office early?'

'Since when are my working hours your concern?'

The biker shrugged.

Magenta's glance swept the car park. Where was the security guard when you needed him? She had been loading up the car with things she intended to finish over the weekend in her own time—not that she was about to explain that to this guy, who looked like he spent his weekends in bed. And not alone.

'You're leaving me?' he demanded as she made a move to continue on her way.

'Somehow I'm managing to drag myself away.'

What was he doing in the car park of Steele Design anyway? Was he a courier? 'Do you have a package?'

His grin made her cheeks blaze red. She had to watch her words in future, Magenta concluded. They were about the same age—maybe he was a year or two older—but his eyes held infinitely more experience. 'If you don't have anything to deliver, this is private property and you should leave.'

He raised an eyebrow.

Oh, good. He was really impressed by her command of the situation.

The biker's self-confidence was making her edgy—that and his manner, which was cool, when she was fuming. Some men were just comfortable in every situation and this man was clearly one of them.

A sharp flurry of snow kept her hurrying along but the man's laugh was warm and sexy on her back. 'What's so urgent you can't spare a moment to chat?' he called.

She stopped and turned to confront him. 'Not that it's any business of yours, but I am going inside to put on the clothes I wear in the gym so I can change the tyre on my car.'

'Can I help you?'

'No.'

Perhaps she should at least have thanked him for the offer.

Now she felt guilty?

Settling the helmet on his head again, he revved the engine. 'You're going?' she said, perversely wanting him to stay.

Powerful shoulders eased in a careless shrug.

Why exactly was she driving him away, when he was the most interesting thing to have happened in a long time? Because she had more sense than to prolong the encounter, Magenta reasoned, crunching snow underfoot as she started on her way again. But, instead of riding off, the man kept pace with her, scuffing his boots on the surface of the road as he kept the engine purring along in neutral. 'Haven't you gone yet?' she demanded.

'I'm waiting to see you in gym clothes.' He grinned.

She huffed at this, all the time trying to work him out. He was dressed too casually to be a businessman and his voice was low and husky with an accent she didn't recognise. Perhaps he was a mature student; there was a college across the road.

'I could give you a lift.'

I bet you could. A face and body like his could give any woman a lift. But something about him warned her that this was a man who could switch in the blink of an eye from humorous and warm to the modern-day equivalent of Genghis Khan—and she'd had all the aggravation she could take for one day.

'You are one stressed-out lady. Don't you ever relax?'

Was he kidding? Who had time to relax? Plus, she shouldn't even think about relaxing while this guy was around. He looked too fit, too dangerous. 'My car is shot. Bust. Broken. What part of that should entice me to relax?'

'Like I said, I'd be happy to give you a lift.'

She might have given his well-packed leathers a thorough inspection and found them more than to her liking, but she didn't know him from Adam. 'I never accept lifts from strangers,' she informed him, tilting her chin at what she hoped would pass for an unapproachable angle.

'Very wise,' he said, calmly wheeling along at her side.

'Don't you ever give up?'

'Never.'

Her heart was thundering. Why?

She was heading off towards the side entrance and the employee lockers where her gym clothes were stowed, and was looking forward to closing the door on his arrogant face... right up to the moment when he gunned the engine and rode away.

She stared after the streak of black lightning until it disappeared at the end of the road, feeling... wistful.

Well, she'd blown it, so it was no use crying over lost opportunities now.

Had there been something special about him—an instant connection between them? Or was that the wanderings of an exhausted mind?

Far more likely, Magenta decided. The biker could have insisted on fixing her tyre if he'd really wanted to.

Whatever happened to chivalry? Women like her, Magenta concluded, women who accepted equality as their right and who scowled if a man so much as offered to open a door for them.

Having retrieved her gym clothes from her locker, she threw them on, together with a warm jacket and a scarf. Returning to her car, she lifted the cover concealing the spare.

No spare!

She stared in disbelief at the empty space, and then remembered her father saying something about a puncture a few months back. They had matching cars, which at one time Magenta had thought cute. Not today; her father must have told the mechanics to help themselves to her spare and had forgotten to ask them to replace it.

It was her own fault for not checking.

The business was falling down around her ears, she might not even have a job after Christmas and she was crying over a flat tyre. Pressing back against the car, she shut her eyes, waiting for the tears to stop threatening. Finally, having convinced herself it was no use worrying about something she couldn't change, she decided to go inside, get warm and call a cab. Or she could always catch the underground; there was a tube station near her house.

And here came the security guard. Hurrying over to him, Magenta explained she would call someone to come and rescue her car.

When she returned to the office her father was ready to leave, to sign the deal to sell his shares.

'I thought you'd gone,' Clifford Steele complained, checking the angle of his silk tie. 'No family members muddying the water until this new man has settled in and I have his money in the bank—those are the rules.'

'And I was obeying them. I was just loading up the car when I discovered I had a flat. And guess what?' Magenta added dryly. 'I don't have a spare.'

'Call a cab,' her father advised without a flicker of remorse. 'Can't stay,' he added, wrapping a cashmere muffler around his neck. 'I'm off to sign the final papers. Just make sure you're out of here in case Quinn decides to come and take a look at his latest acquisition.'

She heard the note of resentment in her father's voice and kissed his cheek. It couldn't be easy selling out to a younger, more successful man. Clifford Steele might be high-handed, and his extravagance might have brought the company to its knees, but he was her father and she loved him and would do nothing to risk his comfortable retirement. It was up to her to sort the mess out now in an attempt to try and save her colleagues' jobs.

If the new owner allowed her to.

Gray Quinn might not keep her on, Magenta realised anxiously. Thanks to her father's outdated belief that men ran businesses while bricks and mortar provided better security for a woman, she owned the building but not a single voting-share.

'As you're still here, make yourself useful,' her father instructed. 'I'm sure the men would like a cup of coffee before you go. So you're a senior account exec,' he added with impatience when he saw her face. 'But no one makes a cup of coffee like—'

'A well-trained woman?' Magenta suggested, tongue-in-cheek.

'Like you, I was about to say. You work too hard, Magenta, and you take yourself far too seriously. Stress isn't good for a woman your age,' her father commented in his usual tactful manner. 'If you're not careful it will give you wrinkles. You should take a break—get a decent night's sleep.'

'Yes, Dad.' Her father might have stepped straight out of their sixties campaign, when men had a high opinion of themselves and women were still working out how to let them down lightly, Magenta mused wryly. 'That's just the way it is', her father was fond of telling her whenever she complained he was a dinosaur. 'That's just the way *you* are', she always amended fondly.

He had some parting words for her. 'If you'll take my advice, Magenta—which I doubt—you'll make yourself scarce until the new owner is settled in. Quinn will soon lose interest and leave the running of the company to the old guard.'

'Goodbye, Dad.'

Lose interest? That didn't sound like the Gray Quinn Magenta had read about. 'Dynamic and cool under pressure' was how the financial papers described him—not to mention ruthless and tough. Oh yes, and practically invisible. If there was a good photograph of Gray Quinn in existence, he had managed to keep it out of the public eye. Life under her father's autocratic rule had been bad enough, but Quinn was an unknown quantity, and Magenta's major concern was for her colleagues. Of course, if Quinn wanted a clean sweep, he might fire them all—and if he squashed the zing out of the ad agency's creative personnel it would go down anyway.

If Quinn booted her, she would just have to keep an eye on things from the sidelines, Magenta concluded, going to the window to stare out. If she had to remortgage her house and start a new company to keep everyone in work, then she would.

And what exactly was she looking for now? The biker? She should know better.

She did know better, and pulled away.

Turning her back to the window, she huffed wryly. Business might come easily to her, but where men were concerned she had a long history of failure. She didn't have the right chat, the right look—and the guy on the bike would almost certainly know that she hadn't had a date in ages. He looked like some sort of expert where women were concerned. Magenta smiled as she perched on the edge of the desk to call a cab. The famous orgasm was probably a fiction dreamed up by ad men, anyway.

There were no cabs, at least not for an hour or more. Snow and Christmas shoppers were held to account for the shortage of vehicles.

So, the underground it was.

Having checked she had everything she would need to work at home, Magenta called the garage to come and sort out the car and then brought her team into the office for one last discussion. The holidays were almost on them and she wanted everyone to feel confident about launching the campaign in the New Year before she left.

Would she even be coming back? Magenta wondered as her friends filed into the room. She couldn't afford to think like that. She owed it to the team to be positive. She couldn't let them see how worried she was. This wasn't the end of Steele Design, it was a new beginning, she told herself firmly as she announced, 'I'm going to be working at home for the time being.'

'You can't leave the week before Christmas,' Magenta's right arm, Tess, stated flatly.

'I'll be in touch with you the whole time.'

'It's not the same,' Tess argued. 'What about the Christmas party?'

'There are more important things than that—like keeping our jobs?' Magenta suggested when Tess protested. 'And why can't you organise it?' Magenta prodded gently.

'Because you have the magic,' Tess argued.

'I'll be in touch every day, I just won't be physically sitting at my desk—where, apparently,' Magenta added mischievously, 'I might present a threat to Quinn. Yes, I know I'm scary,' she said when the team began to laugh.

While she had them in a good mood she turned the conversation to business. 'You're a fantastic team, and it's crucial that Quinn sees the best of you guys, so I want you to forget about me and concentrate on making a good first impression.'

'Forget about you?' Tess scoffed. 'How are we going to do that when you haven't even given us a theme for the party yet?'

'Glad to hear I've got some uses,' Magenta said dryly, glancing at her wristwatch. She was starting to feel edgy. She had made a promise to her father to keep out of the way, so there wasn't much time for dreaming up ideas for the party. 'Keep it simple,' she instructed herself out loud. 'What about a sixties theme?'

'Brilliant,' Tess agreed. 'We've got half the props already, and you'd look great in a paper dress.'

'Ah...I won't be at the party this year.'

'Well, that's nonsense. What will it be like without you?'

'Much more fun, I should think.' Magenta was remembering how she'd pulled the plug the previous year when she had thought the men in the office were getting a little out of hand. 'I'm only on the end of the phone.'

'I give you twenty-four hours and you'll be back here,' Tess predicted. 'There's too much going on for you to stay away. And there's another thing,' she murmured, drawing Magenta aside. 'I've noticed something different about you this morning. Can't put my finger on it yet, but I will.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

‘Ha!’ Tess exclaimed. ‘You’re on the defensive already. You look wary. No,’ she argued with herself, ‘not wary. You look alert—excited, alive. Yes, that’s it. Have you met someone, Magenta?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous! I’m only worried about the future here.’

‘No...’ Tess gave a confident shake of her head. ‘There’s something else—something you’re not telling me.’

Maybe her red cheeks had given her away, Magenta thought wryly as the biker flashed into her mind.

‘It’s nothing to be ashamed of if you’ve met someone you like,’ Tess insisted.

‘But I haven’t,’ Magenta argued—too heatedly, she realised now.

CHAPTER TWO

TESS hurried to reassure her. 'I know you're worried about the company, and what's going to happen under the new owner, but you're entitled to a private life, Magenta. In fact, as your friend I'm going to be blunt about this—you *need* a private life.'

Magenta paused before continuing. 'All right. This is going to sound ridiculous...'

'Try me.'

Tess was waiting but, though she worked with words for a living, Magenta was suddenly struck dumb. How could she explain the trembling inside her, or the excitement, the awareness, even the outlandish suspicion that she had met her soul mate this morning? The biker had caught her at the worst possible moment and yet with his arrival it was as if everything had brightened. As if the world had suddenly come into sharp focus—and in a freezing-cold car park, of all places. How romantic!

The fact remained, it was as if the sun had shone down just on her, as if her life had opened up to a multi-coloured carousel of opportunity.

If she'd had the courage to seize it, which she clearly she hadn't. 'There was a guy this morning in the car park.'

'I knew it.'

'Shh.' Magenta glanced round, but no one was listening; they were too busy fighting over the choice of music for the party. 'It was nothing—just a good-looking guy. Not my type at all, and he wasn't remotely interested. So now you know.'

'But he excited you?'

'He certainly did something.'

'He made you tingle. He made you feel alive.'

'You're a romantic, Tess. He made me angry.'

'You shouted at him?' Tess frowned.

'I gave him a piece of my mind, yes.'

'And how did he react?'

'He laughed at me.'

'But that's wonderful!' Tess exclaimed. 'What a start.'

'There is no start, it was just an episode.'

'And episodes have sequels.'

'Not this one, Tess.'

'You never know, he may come back. He's seen you now—how could he resist? And when a man laughs with you, well, that's the start of intimacy, in my book.'

'It is?'

'Don't you know anything?'

'Not much,' Magenta confessed. 'After the rush of gold-diggers when I was in my first flush of youth, all the likely contenders lost interest.'

'Only because you frightened them away, dragon lady.'

'They weren't worth keeping.'

'And this guy's a keeper?'

'For someone, definitely, but not me.'

'Why not? What's wrong with you?'

'It's not even worth discussing,' Magenta said wryly. 'He's not going to ask me out on a date. I don't expect I'll ever see him again. It was just a chance encounter that made some sort of ridiculous impression on me because I was feeling tired and vulnerable, and—'

'Lacking in confidence where the mating game is concerned,' Tess supplied. 'Just promise me one thing, Magenta—if you do see him again, don't shout at him. Try a smile next time.'

They both laughed as Tess demonstrated how to do it.

‘Come on,’ Magenta said, turning back to the room. ‘I need to call this meeting to order or the Mighty Quinn will be here and my father will never speak to me again. So, are we good?’ she asked her team. ‘Does everyone like the theme for the party?’

‘Can we share out the sixties samples for costumes and accessories?’ one of the girls asked her.

‘Of course. Just help yourselves.’

Magenta was relieved her idea had gone down so well. Everyone needed a boost. They were all on edge wondering what changes the new owner would bring, and the sixties theme allowed them to indulge their fantasies and forget about work for a while. Her team had really been infected by the sixties bug, with quite a few of them trialling the fashions of the time. The sixties styling really suited Tess, Magenta noticed now, with her smoky eyes, long, curving fringe and high ponytail, Tess looked fabulous.

‘I still can’t believe you’re not going to be here when the new boss arrives,’ Tess said, seeing she had Magenta’s attention.

‘I’ll leave that pleasure to you. All right, go on,’ Magenta said, seeing Tess was bursting to tell her something. ‘You’ve heard some gossip about him,’ she guessed. ‘What is it?’

‘Girls!’ Tess exclaimed dramatically as she turned to face the room. ‘Will you enlighten this poor innocent about our new owner, or shall I?’

No one was going to deny Tess that pleasure, Magenta suspected.

She was right. Raising a carefully drawn eyebrow, Tess explained, ‘They call him the Mighty Quinn because according to the gossip mags—’ and here she paused ‘—Gray Quinn isn’t just a giant in business, if you take my meaning.’

Magenta pretended to be shocked. ‘But no one knows him, no one’s seen him. How do they know?’

‘Oh, come on,’ Tess protested. ‘Don’t tell me you don’t like a little mystery in your life? And if he’s built—’

‘Tess, this is a professional environment.’ But Magenta had started to laugh. ‘Okay, so maybe we have to get him into some tight-fitting flares to find out.’

‘There, I knew you wouldn’t leave us,’ Tess declared. ‘You have to stay and see him now. You can’t resist.’

Magenta felt a frisson of alarm. She wasn’t an experienced girl-about-town like Tess. Business was her comfort zone; it would be far better if she wasn’t here if Quinn was some sort of lady-killer. She felt confident behind a desk—writing, dreaming, imagining how other people might react to an advertisement, to life—but when it came to herself.

‘Look at this,’ Tess said, pushing a magazine across the table. ‘And then tell me you’re going to stay away from the office while Quinn settles in.’

‘There’s not much to see,’ Magenta complained, though her body reacted strangely to what was little more than a shot of a man’s back. What was so arousing about that? For some weird reason, her body disagreed.

Quinn was obviously in a hurry to get wherever he’d been going, Magenta registered, studying the grainy print to try and fathom out her reaction to it. And then she got a bolt of something totally inappropriate for a woman who by her own admission was hardly sexually experienced. Quinn’s height, the imposing width of his shoulders, the way he held himself—everything appealed to her. Quinn was different from most men in that he was taut, powerful and exuded confidence, as if he were ready for anything. He looked like the type of man who inspired confidence in others, too.

He wouldn’t even look at her, Magenta reassured herself, releasing a long, shivering breath. There were so many pretty girls in the world, quite a few of whom worked here at Steele Design. Why would a man like Quinn look at an old maid like her?

Theirs would be a match made in hell, she convinced herself, pushing the magazine back to Tess. Imagine adding a man like that to her workload!

‘What do you know about Quinn, Magenta?’ one of the younger girls asked her. ‘We know you did lots of research on him when you started to prepare this project to entice him to invest in Steele Design.’

‘I did,’ Magenta admitted. ‘But I was never able to find any proper photographs. I’m surprised Tess found this.’ She glanced again at the magazine. ‘I gather Quinn’s celebrity-averse. And no wonder, judging by the gossip you’ve heard about him. A man like that must prize his privacy above everything else. I do know he was orphaned at an early age, and that he dragged himself up by his bootstraps, but that’s about it. Oh, and he doesn’t suffer fools gladly.’

‘At all,’ Tess amended, shooting a warning glance around the circle of suddenly concerned faces.

‘Which is why you have to be on your mettle whether I’m here or not,’ Magenta stressed. Smoothing back her long, dark hair, she wound it into the casual chignon she customarily wore at the office, securing it with a silver clip. ‘And don’t forget that, unless Quinn sacks me, I’ll be back in the New Year when we’ll make our final presentation to him as a team.’

‘Sacks you?’ Tess pulled a face. ‘I haven’t read that he’s crazy.’

‘But he may not want a member of the *old guard* working for him, as my father calls us. Here are some documents I drew up—where we are with each campaign et cetera. Make sure he gets them, will you, Tess?’

‘Of course I will...’ But Tess still looked worried. ‘Do you *have* to go?’

‘I can’t risk screwing up Dad’s deal.’

‘Well, at least you don’t have to worry about the documents. I’ll see Quinn gets them.’

‘Thank you.’ Magenta turned to go. But she should have known Tess hadn’t finished with her yet.

‘And if you change your mind about the party...’

‘I only wish I could.’ The end-of-year party was important, but nowhere near as important as keeping Magenta’s team in work. The last thing she wanted was to alienate Quinn, or have him think she was trying to split the team’s loyalty. She hoped she had made a persuasive case for keeping all her colleagues on in the documents she’d given Tess. To add a little weight to that hope, she had drafted an outline for the next campaign, centred on products she knew Quinn wanted to push and which she hoped would keep his interest in the company going forward.

‘You *can’t* leave us,’ Tess stressed discreetly as Magenta prepared to go. ‘You’re the heart of the team.’

‘You’ll do just fine without me—and, anyway, I haven’t gone yet. Let’s see how it goes. Quinn isn’t a fool. Just keep doing what you’re doing, and he won’t be able to let any of you go.’

But Magenta started fretting before she left the room. The promise to her father counted highly with her, but it went against the grain to walk out on her friends. Her father had his money now and wanted nothing more to do with the company, whereas her colleagues were all desperate to keep their jobs. Maybe Tess was right; maybe she wouldn’t be able to stay away.

When Magenta got down to the car park it was full of recovery vehicles with red lights flashing and men in high-vis jackets.

Why was nothing ever straightforward? Magenta wondered, urging herself to remain calm as the mechanics explained to her that, as hers was a vintage car, they couldn’t repair it now but would have to order a tyre. They were going to recover the vehicle and keep it in the garage over Christmas and she could collect it some time in the New Year. No, they couldn’t be more specific than that, the mechanic in charge told her, scratching his head.

Pulling up her collar against a sudden squall of icy wind, Magenta thanked the men for turning out in such diabolical weather and insisted on giving each of them a crisp new note. Why shouldn’t someone enjoy their day?

Wrapping her arms around her body to keep warm, she watched as her car was loaded onto the transporter. She was just bending down to retrieve her bag and briefcase when a familiar roar made her jump, and a familiar boot stamping down by her feet made her scowl.

‘Don’t tell me,’ she managed as the biker lifted off his helmet. ‘You didn’t get me the first time around, so you’ve come back to finish me off with a heart attack?’

‘Your heart’s safe from me.’

Oh...

Was she supposed to feel quite so disappointed? Magenta’s brain raced as the biker lifted one ebony eyebrow, sending a tidal wave of hot, feral lust rushing through her veins. Removing one protective leather glove, the man stretched out his hand for her to shake.

‘You surely don’t expect me to shake your hand after you’ve frightened me half to death, not once but twice?’

He grinned. ‘You’re not that feeble, I’m sure. But my apologies, if I frightened you.’

The mock bow made her heart thunder into action. But what exactly did he find so funny?

‘Something tells me we’re going to be seeing a lot of each other,’ the biker said, closing one warm, strong hand around Magenta’s frozen fingers.

Yeah, right. In your dreams, she thought.

CHAPTER THREE

AS THE biker dismounted his machine and straightened up, Magenta felt her cheeks fire red. He was a lot taller than she had expected and had the type of shoulders that blotted out the light. She had to fight the desire to give him a comprehensive twice-over. She already knew he was an amazing-looking man and that tight black leathers were no respecters of female sensibilities. She dropped her gaze as a dangerous stare levelled on her face.

‘Lost your voice?’ The voice was low and amused, husky and compelling.

And leather didn’t conceal or contain, it stretched and moulded shapes lovingly...

‘Well? Have you?’ he prompted.

No, but she had been struck by one too many thunderbolts in a single day, Magenta concluded, whipping her head up to stare the man in the eyes. He curved a smile in response that threw her totally, a smile that made his eyes crinkle attractively at the corners.

‘I’m glad you think this is funny,’ she said, covering her growing feeling of awkwardness with a scowl. ‘I don’t care who you are, what you just did was dangerous.’ Now she sounded like his headmistress and felt old enough to hold the post.

That grin spread from his mouth to his eyes, making her wonder if he’d read that thought.

‘You look to me like you badly need a ride.’

Where had that thought come from?

She wished she had the guts to throw him the same grin he had given her earlier. But no, this was how she was, clumsy with men, which made her grumpy and defensive. She might be heavily into studying the sixties for the ad campaign, but it would never occur to her to embrace the concept of free love. And from what she’d seen to date nothing about love was free, Magenta reflected as the biker continued to study her with amused interest.

‘I thought I might come back and see if you still needed rescuing.’

‘Not then and not now.’

‘A man is programmed to play the white knight—it’s built into the genes.’

The only thing that was built into his jeans was a warning that she was out of her depth. ‘I can look after myself, thank you.’

‘And so you prove this by standing out here, freezing your butt off?’

Just the mention of her butt caused her body to heat. ‘I haven’t been standing outside all this time. And, anyway, I’m going home now.’

‘And how do you intend to do that?’

‘On the underground, or in a cab.’

‘You’ll be lucky.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Delays on the line; buses bulging at the seams. And there’s not a taxi to found. Not a free one, at least.’

She tried not to notice how beautiful the biker’s eyes were. They were aquamarine with steely grey rims around the iris, the whites very white and his lashes completely wasted on a man. While his tongue was firmly lodged in his cheek, Magenta suspected. ‘What are you?’ she demanded. ‘Some sort of information clerk for the city of London?’

‘Just observant. Have you worked up the courage to take a ride with me yet?’

Unfortunately, he was right. She could stay here and freeze or she could take her chances with public transport. But hadn’t she been lectured on the dangers of taking life too seriously? Shouldn’t she at least consider the biker’s offer?

Absolutely not.

She turned her back, only to find herself checking the road for black ice. The mystery biker might be the most infuriating, the most arrogant, overbearing and impossible man she'd ever met, but the thought of finding him mashed up in a gutter made her heart race with fear for him. 'Take care—it's slippery,' she mumbled and, putting her head down, she marched towards the exit.

Wheeling his bike in front of her, he stopped dead.

'What are you doing?' Magenta demanded.

'I don't take no for an answer.' His eyes glinted with laughter.

'I can see that. Does everything amuse you?' she demanded, stepping round his bike.

'You make me smile.'

She kept on walking, but as she dragged her jacket a little closer it occurred to Magenta that she was perhaps being a little ungracious. 'If you're looking for someone...'

The biker's eyes glinted.

'I'm just trying to say, if I can help you in any way...'

'Get on the bike.'

No! Yes. What should she do? She had been fascinated by the beacon of freedom women lit in the sixties and talked a good battle when it came to championing the cause—but did she ever seize the moment and take action? Or did she always play it safe?

Too damn safe. 'Helmet?'

The biker produced a spare and then patted the seat behind him.

'You're very sure of yourself, aren't you?' she commented as she buckled it on.

'Sure of you. You can't resist a challenge, can you?'

'And how do you know that?'

He shrugged.

'The helmet seems like it might fit—'

'Then climb on board.'

The husky voice suggested a chastity belt might be a useful piece of kit too.

'Before I change my mind...'. He revved the engine.

'Are you always so forceful?'

'Yes.'

The master of the one word answer drowned out the demented timpanist in charge of her heart by taking the revs up to danger level. And now she took a proper look at his monster machine she wasn't even sure she could climb on board, as the biker put it. Did her legs even stretch that wide?

'Chicken?' The smile was masculine and mocking.

'I am not.' She played for time. 'That's a Royal Enfield, isn't it?'

'You know motorbikes?'

Her attention flew to a very sexy mouth. 'I know the brand, thanks to my research into the sixties,' she said primly. She might have known someone as cool as the biker wouldn't ride a pimped-up, over-hyped modern machine. The Enfield was a serious motorbike for serious riders. Big and black, it was vibrating insistently between his leather-clad thighs.

And would soon be vibrating between hers.

No way was she climbing on board.

And she was getting home...how?

Call a cab, the sensible side of her brain suggested. There had to be an empty cab somewhere in the whole of London.

'You are chicken,' the biker insisted, slanting an amused glance Magenta's way.

She laughed dismissively, longing for a way out. But she'd done 'sensible' all her life, and look where that had got her.

'Well?'

‘Forbidden fruit’ sprang to mind when she looked at him—fruit that was so close, so ripe and so dangerously delicious, she could practically taste it on her tongue. ‘How do I know I’ll be safe with you?’

‘You don’t.’

Her pulse raced. But then, she reasoned, it was only a lift home—why the fuss? ‘Shouldn’t you know my address before we set off?’

‘So, tell me.’

She found herself doing so even as she wondered how his strong white teeth would feel if he used them to lightly nip her skin.

‘It’s time to get on the bike,’ he prompted. ‘I’ve no intention of running out of fuel while I wait for you to make up your mind.’

‘Could you take my briefcase and stow it for me, please?’

‘My pleasure, ma’am.’ He held out his hand.

‘I suppose I should thank you,’ she added belatedly.

‘I suppose you should,’ he agreed.

‘If you’re sure it’s not out of your way?’

‘I’m sure.’

This man would be equally certain about every decision he made. He’d be just as decisive when he left her standing here freezing her butt off, as he’d so elegantly put it, on the basis of her extreme cowardice.

‘Would you like some help?’ he said, looking on in bemusement as she started hopping into position.

All she had to do was throw one leg across his seat. How hard could that be? ‘I’m fine, thank you.’

After one final heave and a lot of unladylike wriggling, she was finally in position—which meant close up to the biker. She tried to shuffle back a bit to maintain the proprieties, but the moment he kicked the stand away, released the brake and gunned the engine she launched herself at him, wrapping her arms as tightly as she could around his waist.

A waist without an ounce of fat on it, Magenta registered, but an awful lot of muscle, and if there was a way to ride pillion behind the biker without allowing her body to mould with his—thankfully, it had escaped her.

By the time they joined the heavy London traffic, she was pretty familiar with the biker’s back and the way his thick hair escaped the helmet to caress the collar on his jacket. She was so familiar she had even started shivering...with cold, Magenta told herself firmly. Having consigned her safety to the hands of a man she hardly knew, that was more than enough risk to take in one day.

He really knew how to handle a bike and wove in and out of the congested streets of London like a man who really knew what he was doing, while Magenta was increasingly conscious of the insistent vibrations beneath her. It was almost a disappointment when they rolled up outside her neatly manicured town house. Dismounting the bike shakily, she removed her helmet and shook out her long, black hair.

‘That’s quite a transformation, lady,’ the biker commented as he lifted off his helmet to stare at her.

‘You think so?’ Magenta laughed as she retrieved her clip as it fell to the ground. She couldn’t remember feeling so carefree in a long time. Her hair had been blown to blazes, like the rest of her—and it felt great. *She* felt great. ‘Thanks.’

‘My pleasure.’ His face creased in the now-familiar grin.

Did she imagine the curtains in nearby houses were twitching? For once she didn’t care what anyone thought. So she had ridden home on the bike of a tough-looking guy, ditching the power suit

and the high-heeled shoes along the way. Short of stripping naked and leaping on top of him in the middle of the street, she was committing no crime.

‘Coffee?’ she said, still in the throws of enthusiasm. It seemed only polite. And when would an opportunity like this come round again?

The man’s laser gaze was every bit as astonishing as she remembered; she was sure he was going to say, ‘why not?’ But what he actually said was, ‘I should get back.’

‘Of course...’ What was she thinking?

Where overtures towards good-looking guys were concerned, she was somewhat out of practice, Magenta conceded. But, as this wasn’t an overture—not even close—but merely a polite invitation to enjoy a hot drink before making a return journey in the cold, she had nothing to worry about, did she? ‘Genuine Blue Mountain coffee.’

‘You make it hard to refuse,’ he admitted, slanting a smoky grey-green stare her way.

Impossible, hopefully. Having tasted danger, she wanted more. ‘So?’ she pressed. Pulling out the house keys, she dangled them in front of him.

‘I have to get back.’

Of course he did. ‘Another time,’ she said brightly, swallowing down her disappointment. ‘You’ve done more than enough for me already. Goodness knows how far you’ve come out of your way.’

‘Not far.’

Tess would be furious with her; she didn’t even know his name. But she couldn’t hold him here while she cross-questioned him without inviting further humiliation. ‘It’s been good meeting you.’

‘And you.’ He grinned.

By the time she had lifted her hand to wave him off, he’d gone.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHY did her house seem so quiet and empty, when it never had before?

Because of the biker, Magenta concluded. With his larger than life personality, he didn't even need to speak to command attention; he just had to *be*.

Having changed her clothes, and kicked off her shoes with relief, she picked the mail up and headed for the kitchen. The phone stopped her dead. She picked it up.

'Magenta Steele?' The voice was crisp, deep and very masculine. 'Gray Quinn here.'

Magenta's heart rolled over. 'Gray...'

'Most people call me Quinn.' There was a hint of a smile in the voice, but not enough to reassure. 'I'm in the office tying up some loose ends. I'd like to see you for a discussion on your position going forward with the company first thing tomorrow morning.'

'But my father said—'

'Your father doesn't head up Steele Design now. I do. Nine o'clock okay with you?'

'Of course...'. A chill ran through her. Quinn might be a sexy charmer, according to office gossip, but she'd just encountered the Genghis Khan side of him.

'I'll see you tomorrow, Magenta—nine o'clock sharp.'

And it wasn't a suggestion but an order, Magenta gathered as the line cut.

Coffee was needed. The temptation to go straight back to the office to gauge the effect Quinn was having on everyone else was almost impossible to resist. She was worried about her colleagues and felt uncomfortable leaving them.

Plus she had work she could do better at the office, she persuaded herself, and if she got through enough of it her team could have more time off for Christmas shopping. She would get Tess to ring her when the coast was clear.

Now the decision was made, she was all fired up. Forget taking a subtle approach where Quinn was concerned; if she waited until he was bedded in, as her father had suggested, it might be too late to save her friends' jobs. Abandoning the idea of coffee, she ran upstairs to take a shower and freshen up.

Now new doubts set in. Even if Tess rung her when Quinn left the office, there was still the possibility he might return and find her there. The thought of meeting him filled Magenta with excitement, but it also filled her with the type of self-doubt that had always plagued her where men were concerned. She would need a lot more than a freshen-up before she ran into Quinn—a full-body overhaul was called for.

Guided by the horribly honest mirrors in her bathroom, it soon became apparent that she was up against the clock in more ways than one. She would just have to make whatever repairs she could in the short time available.

Collecting up the sixties products she had been hoarding to fuel her imagination for the campaign, she rested the plastic crate on top of the linen basket and started rummaging inside. A queen-sized razor; not a bad place to start.

And what was this? *Myriad sparkles of dewy fragrance will embrace your body in a haze of desire at just the touch of a button...*

A love potion? Well, she could certainly do with some of that.

But after her shower, she decided, stepping beneath the steaming spray.

She had a whole range of retro products in the shower too. She had definitely been infected by the sixties bug. Magenta smiled wryly as she soaped down and thought about Quinn. What would he be like?

That was the only excuse her imagination needed to go crazy. There was only one thing that could make this self-indulgent shower any better, and that was sharing it with Quinn—not that she would; not in the real world. She was better off sticking to work and researching the sixties.

‘Soap-on-a-rope, come here to me,’ Magenta crooned, capturing the hippopotamus-shaped soap currently swinging on a cord from her shower head.

She glanced through the open door towards her bed, realising how tired she was. The temptation was to just fall into bed after her shower and dream about Quinn, put a face to that grainy back-view in the magazine... Perhaps she’d wake up to discover she had a really big share-holding in the business—power and some cards to play.

But that wasn’t going to happen...

Turning her face up to the spray, Magenta knew she would have to take a more conventional route by producing some of her best work and by working her thermal socks off.

Turning the shower off, she grabbed a couple of towels and returned to the bedroom, where a spear of inspiration struck. Why not go the whole hog and dress in sixties clothes? Quite a few of her colleagues had already adopted the fashions and the look, so why not join them?

They always banded together at this time of year and had such fun—decorating the office, sneaking out for warm, full-fat mince pies with thick globs of cream on top—and this year the sixties vibe was adding a special frisson to the holiday celebrations.

She was drying her hair absent-mindedly with a towel as she started flicking through her wardrobe. Like everyone else in the creative team, she had been scouring the vintage shops for examples of sixties clothing, and had struck gold with a form-fitting cream wool dress. Sliding it off the hanger, she laid it on the bed.

Suppliers had rushed to offer samples of their retro products when Magenta had let it be known that she would be running a high-profile campaign, so she had plenty of accessories to choose from. Fortunately, it hadn’t been all mini-skirts and hot-pants in the sixties. There had been the hippies in their flowing, get-em-off-quick clothes, the shock-frock dolly-birds in mini-skirts, as well as a more elegant side to the era. This was where Magenta felt comfortable—though it was the underwear she was supposed to wear beneath these stylish clothes that made her laugh. *Break out of your little-girl body when you’re feeling in a big-girl mood*, ran the legend on one pack of matching bra and girdle.

Well, she wasn’t a little girl, but she was definitely in a biggirl mood, Magenta decided, conjuring up a vision of Quinn as she broke the seal on the packaging.

It was almost impossible not to think about the new owner of the business, Magenta realised, opening the towel she had wrapped around her body to give her twenty-eight-year-old figure a critical review. She was sitting on the bed facing the dressing-table mirror and she sat up straight immediately. Would he like real women with real bellies, or would his tastes run to something younger and slimmer? Not that she could do much about it in the short time at her disposal. And why worry when her naked body was in zero danger of becoming an issue between them?

She picked up another pack and studied it. *What do you wear under your action-wear? Action Underwear, of course...*

But there wasn’t going to be any action.

She put it down, picking up something called the *Concentrate* girdle.

Concentrate on what? Holding her stomach in the whole time?

I don’t think so.

And she certainly didn’t need the *Little Fibber* bra—one of the only benefits of getting a little older and a little rounder, Magenta thought dryly, tossing the formidable-looking steel-girder-style bra to one side. Strange to think the so-called liberated women of the twenty-first century made so little of her breasts. Breasts were never flaunted at the office in case you were thought of as brainless, as if having lactating glands in common with a cow meant you automatically shared the same IQ. Perhaps that was the reason she had never worn form-fitting clothes to the office before, though she doubted a man as focused on business as Quinn appeared to be would even notice.

She hunted for some sheer tights in her drawer, only to discard them in favour of stockings. Underpinnings were everything, an actress friend had told her—those and shoes. If you didn't get that right, you stood no chance of playing a period piece convincingly.

She picked up another box and quickly disposed of it with an unwelcome shiver of arousal. *Damsel in Undress* was a definite no-no. The slightest hint to a man like Quinn that she was adopting a compliant 'men rule' mindset to go along with her sixties outfit, and she'd be in big trouble. He'd already given her a flavour of his management style. Gray Quinn definitely didn't need any encouragement. He was shaping up to be the original alpha-male. No, this was one occasion when she would be sixties on the outside and bang up to date in her head. But she would consent to wear a provocative cone-shaped bra to achieve the authentic hourglass shape—not forgetting control pants for the belly problem.

And a suspender-belt and stockings were fun.

Having dressed, she slipped on her stiletto heels and immediately felt different. She walked differently too. She tried a few steps up and down the bedroom and found herself sashaying like a famous actress in a hot sixties television programme. She smiled, thinking her actress friend had been right. The shoes and the clothes were like a costume that put her right back in the era, and that was fun.

It was even more fun when she started on the make-up—pale foundation and big, smoky eyes outlined so that they appeared even larger. And some *Un-lipstick*, as it was called, in Shiver Shiver pink.

She certainly shivered as she tasted it. What would Quinn make of that?

Not that he would ever get a chance to find out, Magenta told herself firmly. This was all about dressing up and fantasy. Pressing her lips together, she blotted them in the manner prescribed on the pack and then applied a second coat.

Not bad.

She was ready.

Ready for pretty much anything, Magenta decided as she checked her appearance one last time in the mirror.

She waited for Tess's call and when it came she travelled to the office by taxi to find all the lights were out. Just as Tess had promised, there was no sign of Quinn—exactly what she wanted. Well, it would be, once she had stifled her disappointment. All that effort put into grooming for nothing.

At least she could concentrate on work, Magenta told herself firmly. This was a great opportunity to put the finishing touches to the campaign. Having set out her papers on the large desk in her office, she slipped the lock on the door, feeling safer that way in an empty building. She'd make some coffee later to keep herself awake.

She was halfway through drafting a strap line for a sixties hairpiece when she had to stop. She could hardly keep her eyes open and just couldn't get it right: *the hair fashion that goes on when you go out...*

And drops off when you least expect it to?

Magenta...examined the yard-long ponytail made out of synthetic hair and tossed it aside. Some of the products being used to inject fun into the campaign were odd, but this was downright ugly. Surely no self-respecting woman would want to wear a hair-tugger on top of her head that weighed a ton, looked gross and at a guess took a whole card of hair grips to hold in place? If you weren't bald when you started your evening out, you certainly would be by the end of it.

And yet it was a genuine sixties product, Magenta mused, leaning her cheek against her folded arms as she stared at the unappealing hairpiece and waiting for inspiration to strike. She'd been so enthusiastic up to now, seeing only the good, the fun and the innovation of the sixties. But, realistically, how many other things about that time would have got right up her nose?

'Magenta...Magenta! Wake up!'

‘What’s wrong?’ Magenta started with alarm as someone grabbed hold of her arm and shook her awake. Well dressed in sixties style, the girl looked smart and bright—and totally unfamiliar. Magenta felt like she had the hangover from hell—and, not having had a drop to drink, that was a serious concern. ‘How long have I been asleep?’ Her neck suddenly didn’t seem strong enough to lift her ridiculously heavy head from the desk.

‘Magenta, you have to get out of here now.’

‘Why? Is there a fire?’

‘Worse—Quinn,’ the girl explained with what sounded like panic in her voice. ‘He mustn’t find you here.’

‘Why not?’ Magenta stared in bewilderment around her office, which seemed to have been cleared of all her creature comforts while she’d been asleep. But it wasn’t just the flowers, the coffee machine, the bottles of water or the family photographs that were missing. ‘Hey, where’s my laptop?’ she said, shooting up. ‘Has there been a robbery?’

‘Magenta, I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I do know you have to get out of here now.’

‘All right, all right!’ Magenta exclaimed as the girl took her by the arm and physically dragged her towards the door. ‘I’m sure I locked this door last night.’

‘I used my key.’ The girl shook a spare set in her face.

‘What’s the rush? I’ll need my mobile phone, and where’s my tote, my handbag, my briefcase?’ Magenta demanded, glancing back at the vastly changed room.

‘No more questions,’ her new friend hissed frantically, tugging at Magenta’s arm. ‘We don’t have time. Quinn will be here any minute.’

A multitude of thoughts and impressions were slowly percolating through Magenta’s sluggish brain. This was a new girl, possibly someone Quinn had brought in. She seemed nice, though, confusingly, she seemed to know Magenta when Magenta was certain they had never met before. ‘Did Quinn get my list?’ she said, clinging on to priorities while her brain sorted itself out.

‘What list? You didn’t give me a list.’

‘No, that’s right—I gave it to Tess.’

‘Tess?’

This girl didn’t know Tess? ‘Sorry, uh...’

‘Nancy,’ the girl supplied, looking at her with real concern. ‘Magenta, are you sure you’re okay?’

‘Yes, I’m fine.’ This was growing stranger by the minute; if she hadn’t felt so heavy-headed she would have been faster off the mark. ‘I gave a list of the list of things Quinn should implement immediately to one of the girls in the office.’

Nancy huffed. ‘If you had given me a list like that, I would have seriously lost it on purpose.’

‘Has Quinn been bullying you?’ She forgot her own confusion; bullying in the office was one thing she wouldn’t stand, and Magenta’s concerns soared when Nancy refused to answer almost as if she was frightened of being overheard. ‘Well, no one’s going to bully you while I’m around—especially not Quinn.’

Nancy hummed and started tugging on Magenta’s arm again. ‘I’m not joking, Magenta, we have to get out of here.’

‘But where do you want me to go?’ This had been Magenta’s office since—well, she could hardly remember; it had been hers for so long now.

‘You work in the typing pool, remember?’ Nancy told her urgently, poking her head out of the door to check the coast was clear.

‘The typing pool?’ Magenta laughed. ‘Is this some joke of Quinn’s to get us all in the right mood for the sixties campaign?’

Nancy gave her a funny look.

‘To be more accurate, you *used to* work in the typing pool,’ she finally replied, nudging Magenta towards the door. ‘The guy who ran the place before hotshot Quinn arrived from the States took his office manager with him, so Quinn promoted you.’

‘Why didn’t Quinn text me? And what’s this?’ Magenta demanded as Nancy bundled her towards a mean little desk set to one side of her office door—a door she now noticed with outrage that already bore the legend, ‘Gray Quinn’.

‘This is your desk now, Magenta,’ Nancy explained. ‘It’s a great improvement to the typing pool, don’t you think?’

‘Do you want to hear what I think? No. I didn’t think so,’ Magenta agreed as Nancy shook her head. ‘I don’t know what’s happening around here, but this isn’t my desk—and Quinn definitely can’t take over my office.’

‘But, Magenta, you used to work in the typing pool—you’ve never *had* your own office,’ Nancy insisted, looking increasingly concerned about Magenta’s state of mind. ‘Don’t you remember anything?’

Magenta swept a hand across her eyes as if hoping everything would change back again by the time she opened them again. But, to make things worse, people she didn’t even know were staring at her as if she was the one who was mad.

But how could this have happened? She gazed around and felt her anger rising. Quinn had to be some sort of monumental chauvinist; men occupied all the private offices while the women had been relegated to old-fashioned typewriters—either in the typing pool, where they sat in rows behind a partition as if they were at school, or at similar desks to this one outside the office doors. Ready to do their master’s bidding, Magenta presumed angrily. She remembered her father telling her how it used to be for the majority of female office workers in the sixties. ‘Why are all the girls typing?’ she asked Nancy in a heated whisper.

‘It’s their job!’ Nancy said, frowning.

‘But why aren’t they working on the campaign?’ Magenta noticed now that many of the women, some of whose faces were adorned with heavy-framed, upswept spectacles, were pretending not to look at her.

‘What campaign?’ Nancy queried, stepping back as a keen teen brushed passed her.

‘Wow, Magenta, you look really choice!’

‘I do?’ Magenta spun on her heels as the young man she had never seen before gave her a rather too comprehensive once-over. ‘Why, thank you...?’

‘Jackson,’ Nancy supplied, having cottoned on to the fact that Magenta needed all the help she could get.

‘Jackson.’ Magenta raised a brow. ‘Stop staring at your Auntie Magenta and go find yourself a girlfriend.’

Jackson laughed as if Magenta could always be relied upon to say something funny. ‘You’re a gas, baby.’

Had Quinn changed all the personnel? Of course, he was perfectly entitled to, Magenta reasoned. Quinn ran the show now. But what had happened to her friends? And what had happened to their working environment?

So many questions stacked up in her mind, with not a single answer to one of them that made sense.

CHAPTER FIVE

‘LOOK, Magenta, I don’t want to rush you,’ Nancy said in a way that clearly said that was exactly what she wanted to do. ‘But Quinn’s only slipped out for an eleven o’clock appointment.’

‘So what?’ Magenta said impatiently. ‘He’s got a damn nerve.’ She was still looking round, trying to take everything in. She could understand Quinn wanting to live the sixties in order to give the campaign that final fizz of authenticity—hadn’t she done the same thing herself? But didn’t he know there was such a thing as going too far? ‘Nancy, what’s been going on here?’

‘The usual?’ Following her glance, Nancy gazed around the office.

‘The usual,’ Magenta repeated grimly. ‘Is it usual to remove the computers?’

‘The what?’

‘Okay, so Quinn’s got you playing his game,’ Magenta said. ‘I can understand that you don’t want to lose your job—I’m just thinking of all the expense involved in putting this right again—’ She had already reasoned that the reorganisation of the office would have been fairly easy if Quinn had copied the layout from the old photographs on the wall, but there were other things she couldn’t account for. There was a different feel to the place, never mind the look, which was dated, a little drab and definitely not the right environment to encourage cutting-edge design work. She thought it boring, not to mention inhospitable. There were different phones too, but it was the ergonomically unhelpful furniture that really concerned her—and single glazing? Had Quinn gone mad? Never mind the expense, what about condensation? Cold? If people were uncomfortable at work, productivity would suffer. Didn’t Quinn know anything?

And there was a different smell too...

Cigarette smoke?

‘Nancy!’ Magenta exclaimed with increased urgency.

‘Are you all right, Magenta?’ Glancing round, Nancy grabbed a chair and tried to press Magenta into it.

‘I’m fine.’ She was anything but fine. What had happened here? Had Quinn got people in to dress the offices like a sixties stage-set? And how was it possible she had slept through those changes? But it wasn’t just the noise element that concerned her; these changes were too thorough, too perfect, too convincing.

Magenta’s throat dried. This wasn’t some office teambuilding exercise. This was reality. This was reality for Nancy and for all the people here. It was Magenta who was out of sync. She must have fallen down the rabbit hole, like Alice, while she’d been asleep and landed in the sixties. And now the shock of being trapped inside a dream was only exceeded by her dread of meeting Quinn. From what she’d gathered, he was just the sort of man who would slot right into the sixties, where men ruled. Quinn obviously thought they did.

Magenta took a few steadying breaths while Nancy looked on anxiously. Magenta’s heart was pounding uncontrollably, but whatever had happened she would have to manage it.

She looked as much a part of the sixties as everyone else in the office, Magenta reassured herself, with her carefully made-up face, perfect hair and vintage cream wool dress. Though you could have bounced bullets off her underwear, it did outline her shape to the point where her breasts were outrageously prominent. That, believe it or not, was the fashion. It could best be described as ‘sex in your face’. No wonder Jackson had commented; she should have known better than to dress like this, but had done so innocently. Back in the real world, it had made her feel sexy—and after the encounter with the biker she had wanted to prove to herself that she still could feel that way. Now she realised drawing attention to herself in a sixties office was asking for trouble.

But, on the plus side, she had been researching the era for quite some time, so even locked into this bizarre dream she wasn’t entirely out on a limb. She could even accept and be a little reassured

by the fact that the dream seemed to be influenced by her research; there was certainly plenty of raw material here. Although quite how the summer of love, the sexual revolution and the Whisky a Go Go, the first disco in America—which just happened to be Quinn’s homeland—would manifest themselves remained to be seen.

She would have to rely on what she knew if she was going to anticipate and avoid some of the problems, Magenta concluded. She would draw on that knowledge now—and her first action would be to open all the windows and let the smoke out.

Predictably everyone complained that it was too cold. ‘Well, you can’t smoke in here,’ Magenta insisted. ‘It’s against the law.’

‘Since when?’ one of the younger guys asked, swinging his arm around her waist to drag her close so she had no alternative but to inhale his foul-smelling breath.

‘And that is too,’ she informed him, removing his searching hand from her tightly sculpted rear end.

‘Ooh.’ He turned to his friends to pull a mocking face. ‘What got into your bed this morning, Miss Steele?’

‘No one?’ another man suggested, to raucous jeers.

‘We all know what’s wrong with you, ice maiden.’

‘Cut it out!’ Magenta said angrily. ‘I’m not in the mood.’

‘Apparently, you never are,’ one of the men murmured to his colleagues in a stage whisper.

As if that were the cue for the main player to enter the scene, the double doors at the far end of the office swung open and every head swivelled in that direction. Some of the women even stood at their desks as if royalty was about to enter the room. To say Magenta was stunned by this reaction wouldn’t even come close. ‘What the...?’

‘Quinn,’ Nancy told her tensely, hurrying away.

Magenta turned to say something to Nancy, but everyone including Nancy had returned to work the second Quinn arrived. And Quinn didn’t just arrive—he strode across the floor like a conquering hero. To make matters worse, all the women were giving him simpering glances when what he needed, in Magenta’s opinion, was a short, sharp, shock and someone to stand up to him. Whatever dream state they were both trapped in, this was getting out of hand.

But could this *really* be Quinn? Magenta’s head was reeling. Quinn in the sixties was none other than the gorgeous biker, in a jauntily angled Trilby hat and a dark overcoat that, instead of making him look silly, only succeeded in making him look like the master of the sexual universe.

‘Magenta,’ he said curtly, shrugging the coat off his shoulder and handing it to her along with his hat.

He knew her?

‘That’s a better look for you,’ he said, giving Magenta the most intrusive inspection yet. ‘I like to see a woman in a dress with some shape to it.’

What?

‘Keep it up,’ he said approvingly. ‘And remember, I expect the same high standards from my staff at all times—’

‘Yes, sir,’ she said smartly, playing along, which was all she could do—other than acknowledge Quinn was a beyond the pale chauvinist—as well as the best-looking man she had ever seen in her life. With his tough-guy body clothed in a sharply tailored dark suit and impeccably knotted tie, he looked amazing.

‘I’ll need you for a meeting later,’ he said, as though they had been working together for ever. There was not a shred of equality between them, Magenta registered with a spear of concern.

‘So no gossiping with the other girls in the kitchen when you’re supposed to be making my coffee,’ Quinn warned.

Would that be the coffee with the extra-strong laxative in it? Magenta wondered.

‘And absolutely no lunch break for any of you girls. You’ll have a lot of work to get through by the time I finish the meeting I’m going into now—understood?’

Actually, no, I’m a bit confused. Magenta thought Quinn had called a meeting to discuss her position with the company going forward, but perhaps that directive hadn’t made it through to the sixties. She decided to prompt him, if only to find out how much had travelled with her in the dream. ‘So, you’re having another meeting first?’

‘What are you talking about?’ Quinn demanded impatiently.

‘Another meeting before *our* meeting...?’

Quinn had no worries about touching Magenta. Taking hold of her shoulder in a firm grip, he steered her into an alcove out of sight of the rest of the office. ‘Not in front of everyone, Magenta...’ And then his eyes warmed in a way that made her heart stop. ‘Later, maybe—if I have the time.’

Magenta’s mouth formed a question, but she was so stunned by Quinn’s brazenly sexual behaviour her voice refused to function, and when she did speak it was only to ask Quinn what he wanted her to do with his hat and coat.

‘Why, hang it up, of course,’ he said as if she were one card short of a pack. ‘And when you’ve done that I’ll need plenty of coffee—hot, strong and black. Oh, and when you come into the meeting later, don’t forget your shorthand notebook.’

‘My—?’

‘You’re the office manager now, Magenta—that’s quite a promotion for you. You’ll have to sharpen up if you want to set the seal on this position.’

She’d set something in concrete—the deeds of the building, perhaps, before she dropped them from a great height on Quinn’s head.

But someone else owned the building now, she remembered, biting her lip. Steele Design had been called Style Design when her father had bought it. She had no stake at all here.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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