MILLS & BOON

90s MODERN™

To Be A Bridegroom

CAROLE MORTIMER

Carole Mortimer

To Be A Bridegroom

«HarperCollins»

Mortimer C.

To Be A Bridegroom / C. Mortimer — «HarperCollins»,

Jarrett, Jonathan and Jordan are Bachelor Brothers Jordan. The youngest Hunter brother, he's dark and devilishly attractive, and he's been content to play the field… until Stazy takes a lease on the apartment next door. Stazy. At first Jordan finds her teasing, infuriating, because she treats him as casually as the other male admirers who seem constantly to knock at her door.But then Jordan catches glimpses of the warmth and vulnerability that lie beneath Stazy's beautiful exterior, and he realizes there's only one way to get to the head of her lineup: be her bridegroom!

© Mortimer C.
© HarperCollins

“Stop now, Jordan!” Title Page CHAPTER ONE CHAPTER TWO CHAPTER THREE CHAPTER FOUR CHAPTER FIVE CHAPTER SIX CHAPTER SEVEN CHAPTER EIGHT CHAPTER NINE CHAPTER TEN CHAPTER ELEVEN CHAPTER TWELVE CHAPTER THIRTEEN CHAPTER FOURTEEN CHAPTER FIFTEEN Copyright

“Stop now, Jordan!”

Stazy pulled away, her cheeks flushed, her breathing erratic. “I’m sure one of your brothers—or possibly both of them!—has told you never to mix business with pleasure!”

He didn’t move, only the slight tensing of his jaw showing he wasn’t as unmoved by the kisses they had just shared as he would like to appear. “Probably,” he acknowledged dismissively. “Prince or frog, Stazy?”

“Is that the reason you kissed me? To see if you could change my mind about that?”

Jarrett, Jonathan and Jordan

are

Some men are meant to marry!

Meet three brothers: Jarrett is the eldest, Hunter by name, hunter by nature. Jonathan’s in the middle and a real charmer; there’s never been a woman he wanted and couldn’t have.

Jordan is the youngest and he’s devilishly attractive, but he’s determined never to succumb to emotional commitment.

These bachelor brothers appear to have it all—looks, wealth, power.... But what about love? That’s where Abbie, Gaye and Stazy come in.

As Jarrett, Jonathan and Jordan are about to discover—wanting a woman is one thing, winning her heart is quite another!

To Be a Bridegroom

Carole Mortimer

www.millsandboon.co.uk

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT on earth was she doing here?

Stazy looked around the room, shaking her head in self-disgust. She realised she didn’t know a single person here, save for the man at her side—and then she barely knew him, even though he was responsible for bringing her along!

They had spoken for the first time only yesterday—previous polite good mornings or good evenings, if they had happened to meet in the lift or corridor, did not count as speaking in Stazy's book!—and yet here she was, at a family wedding with him.

Boredom had a lot to answer for, she decided, and loneliness. And, for some reason, yesterday she had been feeling both rather acutely.

She had been aware that the man who occupied the neighbouring apartment to her own was called Jordan Hunter, had seen his name over a security button downstairs. But apart from that she knew absolutely nothing more about him. Or he her. But yesterday, for some unknown reason, she had been feeling vulnerable and in need of company...

She couldn't have been more surprised when they had arrived here together this evening and she'd discovered she was a guest at the wedding reception of Jordan's brother Jonathan! Getting through the meal had been awful enough, Jordan silent at her side, but at least she'd had someone seated on her other side to talk to, a man who'd identified himself as Jordan's uncle. Except he hadn't stopped talking, totally monopolising her attention through every course, so that she'd hardly had a chance to eat her food, let alone look at the other guests! But now the meal was over, and everyone had moved into an adjoining room, where a band at one end played music the wedding invitees could dance to.

That was the real problem now; Jordan was just as silent and taciturn as he had, been at the table. How quickly could she escape? Stazy wondered impatiently.

She wished she had never responded to his attempt at conversation yesterday!

'How do you like your apartment?'

Since only the two of them stood in the lift, Stazy had known Jordan Hunter had been talking to her! And, considering she had occupied the apartment next door to his for the last three months, the question seemed a little late in coming. Neighbours tended to be a little more friendly back home...

'I like it just fine,' she answered dismissively, grateful when the lift doors opened at their floor and they could step out into the corridor.

'You're American.' It was a statement, and a slightly surprised one at that.

Stazy had been about to walk away, having already taken her keys from her bag, a confused look on her face as she looked up at Jordan Hunter. She had expected him to leave too, but he hadn't moved after he'd stepped out of the lift.

He was, she acknowledged, by any woman's standards, extremely good-looking. Tall, several inches taller than her own five feet nine inches, with curly hair that seemed, she recalled, to have a permanently tousled look, almost as if he were constantly running his fingers through its dark length.

Aged probably in his mid-thirties, more than ten years older than her own twenty-one years, he had the assurance and sophistication to match his maturity; in fact, Stazy had never seen him dressed in anything other than one of the numerous tailored suits he seemed to possess, with pristine shirts and matching silk ties. By contrast, he had probably never seen her wearing anything but jeans or leggings, matched with loose tops, her copperred hair usually flowing loosely down her spine.

Jordan's face was like a ruggedly hewn sculpture, with a square jaw, firm, unsmiling mouth—although the laughter lines visible beside his eyes and lips said he didn't always look this grim!—and a long, slightly arrogant nose. His eyes she had been saving until last—because they were the most unusual colour Stazy had ever seen! Too light in colour to be called brown, they were actually gold, and surrounded by the thickest, darkest lashes imaginable.

Stazy had noticed all this about him a couple of days after she moved in. But only abstractly. Men, she had decided, were a treacherous bunch of rogues. A totally different species. Probably from a different planet, too, totally incompatible with women. And so Jordan Hunter's good looks had been noted—and then dismissed.

'Yes, I'm American,' she confirmed dryly. She knew all about English reserve, but by practically ignoring her existence for the last three months she felt Jordan Hunter had been taking it too far. For

all the notice he had taken of her, she could have been lying dead in the apartment next door to his for that length of time, and he would never have known about it!

He seemed to be taking in her appearance for the first time as he slowly looked her up and down. So much for his only ever having seen her in leggings and loose tops—this man hadn't actually registered her at all until this moment!

She was wearing neat brown ankle boots, fitted denims, a light blue sweatshirt, her hair, as usual, flowing riotously down the length of her back. Her eyes were blue, her nose small and snub, with a peppering of freckles across its bridge, her mouth wide and smiling, her chin pointed. Determined even, she hoped!

'Are you busy tomorrow evening?'

Stazy wasn't quite sure what she had expected his next comment to be—if there was one!—but she certainly hadn't anticipated that. Which was probably the reason why she blurted out, 'No,' before she had given herself the time to think!

Which was how she now found herself standing at his side in the middle of this crowded room!

She had hastily tried to retract that bald statement yesterday, but Jordan had chosen to talk over it, telling her of a party he had to attend, and to which he would like to invite her as his guest. She would have fun, he had assured her as she'd looked unimpressed, meet lots of new people.

What he had omitted to tell her was that the 'party' was, in fact, his older brother Jonathan's wedding reception—and so far the only person she had 'met' had been their garrulous uncle, whose name she couldn't even remember!

The wedding itself had taken place late that afternoon, but now it was all turning into a party. Not that Stazy felt in the least underdressed for the evening, wearing a midnight-blue dress that showed off the perfection of her slender figure, and the tanned length of her long legs. No, it wasn't the way she looked that made her feel so uncomfortable; she just knew, as partner of the groom's brother, that she was attracting more than her own fair share of attention.

She would have fun, Jordan had told her. Being stared at like the specimen in a jar was not her idea of fun! And as for meeting lots of new people, apart from his uncle, Jordan's scowls seemed to be keeping everyone away from them. At least, no one had yet attempted to talk to them...

Stazy wondered again why Jordan had invited her at all. She had given up trying to answer why she had accepted! But Jordan was a good-looking man, could have had his pick of partners for this evening—so why her? The glaringly obvious answer to that was that she didn't know anyone here, and so, in consequence, none of these people knew her either. They might feel curious about her for tonight, but when she didn't appear again they would as quickly forget about her...

But why had Jordan needed to bring a partner with him this evening? What possible reason could he have—?

He was looking darkly across the room at the newly married couple as they danced together, just the sight of his new sister-in-law in her wedding dress seeming to make his expression deepen. Was it possible he was in love with her? Gaye was certainly beautiful enough—tall and blonde, delicately lovely. But if Jordan was in love with his brother's new wife, it was obvious from the way Gaye only had eyes for Jonathan that she didn't return those feelings!

Could it be a love triangle?

Jordan certainly gave every impression of wishing himself a hundred miles away from here, of wanting to be anywhere else but at this family wedding!

Stazy couldn't say she exactly liked being used as a smoke-screen, but if she really was here for that purpose Jordan was doing a lousy job of playing her partner! Several people were now giving them more than enquiring looks, and although she had tried to ignore it for the last five minutes a rather attractive couple standing several feet away now seemed as if their curiosity had got the better of them, and they were going to come over and talk to them!

She turned impulsively to Jordan. 'Would you like to dance?' she prompted quickly; several other couples besides the bride and groom were on the dance floor.

Jordan looked at her blankly for several seconds—almost as if he had forgotten who she was! The man was doing wonders for her self-esteem. And to think she was trying to help him!

'Dance, Jordan?' she repeated. 'The music plays fast or slow—' She paused to listen to the band. 'In this case slow,' she continued mockingly. 'And we human beings—strange creatures that we are! —move in time to it. It really is quite easy—'

'I know what dancing is, Stazy,' he snapped irritably.

Oh, he knew what it was—he obviously just had no intention of doing it!

Ah, well, she had tried, she told herself as she saw the attractive couple fast approaching them...

'Enjoying yourself, Jordan?' It was the man who spoke, tall and dark, arrogantly assured, his glance resting curiously on Stazy as he spoke. A golden-eyed gaze!

Another Hunter, Stazy realised, which meant this had to be the oldest brother, Jarrett. Jordan had at least briefly filled her in on family relations before they came. Good of him! The beautiful dark-haired woman at Jarrett's side had to be his wife, Abbie, a former model. They had two children around somewhere too, Stazy recalled vaguely—a little girl called Charlie, and a baby boy called Conor.

'Not particularly.' Jordan answered his brother curtly, still scowling.

Jarrett smiled, instantly dispelling that air of arrogance. 'No, I forgot—weddings aren't your favourite things, are they?' he drawled before turning to smile warmly at Stazy. 'I hope you'll forgive my little brother for not introducing us—he seems to have left his manners at home this evening.' It was a teasing rebuke, but nevertheless there was a steely edge to it. 'I'm Jarrett Hunter. And this is my wife, Abbie.' He put his arm affectionately about his wife's slender waist.

'Stazy Walker,' she returned lightly, allowing herself a smile at Jarrett's description of Jordan being his 'little brother'; there was nothing 'little' about Jordan, and the two men were of similar height. And, although she knew Jordan was the youngest of the three brothers, at the moment, grimly unsmiling as he was, he looked every one of the thirty-plus years she guessed him to be.

'Would you care to dance, Stazy Walker?' Jarrett invited smoothly.

'I was just about to ask her myself,' Jordan muttered—evoking a disbelieving look from Stazy as he did so.

He had been about to do no such thing; he'd already ignored her suggestion a few minutes ago that they dance! But he obviously wasn't happy with the thought of her dancing with his oldest brother —so unhappy about it he was even willing to escort her onto the floor himself in order to prevent it!

'Too late,' Jarrett replied lightly. 'Maybe next time,' he added tauntingly, a light but firm hand in the middle of Stazy's back as he guided her towards the other dancers. 'Why don't you invite my wife to dance?' he paused long enough to suggest to Jordan, before whirling Stazy away in time to the music.

Stazy loved to dance, and Jarrett Hunter was a more than capable partner, moving effortlessly in time to the music. But then, she had a feeling this man did most things well; his wife certainly looked contented enough as she and Jordan began to dance together a short distance away, the married couple sharing a glance of humour over Jordan's shoulder as he still scowled darkly.

Jordan was his own worst enemy, Stazy decided ruefully. He had obviously brought her here for a purpose, as a female partner for the evening, but one he could totally forget about once tonight was over. Behaving in the way that he was, Jordan was leaving himself open to the sort of mockery she was sure his brother Jarrett could dish out by the barrel-load. Not that she thought Jordan would appreciate her telling him as much; he was too immersed in himself—for whatever reason!—to listen to anyone, least of all her!

'Have you and Jordan known each other very long?'

Ouch. Stazy inwardly grimaced at Jarrett's casual question. It was obvious—to her, at least; Jordan didn't seem to have done too much thinking at all!—that Jordan's family were going to be very curious about the woman he had brought with him to this family wedding. And the Hunter family, from the little she had observed of them, did not appear to be backwards in coming forwards; Jarrett certainly hadn't been!

She wished she had realised earlier the curiosity her presence here was going to arouse. As early as yesterday, when Jordan had first invited her. Because if she had she wouldn't have accepted!

'A couple of months.' Stazy answered Jarrett evasively. She couldn't really tell Jordan's older brother that until yesterday Jordan had barely been aware of her existence! That didn't do her any favours, let alone Jordan. But, to be fair to herself, if she had realised she would be going to his brother's wedding reception, she would have made sure she had told him she was busy!

'Jordan is a little uptight at the moment,' Jarrett told her.

Stazy looked at him with raised brows. 'Only at the moment?'

Uptight was not the word she would have used to describe Jordan, but as she didn't intend meeting any of these people again—including Jordan himself, next-door neighbour or not!—she felt it would be as well if she kept her opinions to herself. Good-looking though he was, Jordan was still one of the rudest, most arrogant men she had ever met. And she had met more than her fair share of them!

'Weddings have this effect on him,' Jarrett explained laughingly. 'Especially family ones,' he added pointedly.

But his point was lost on Stazy. Unless her earlier guess about a love triangle was correct...?

'They can be—traumatic,' she said noncommittally.

'Are you Canadian or American?' Jarrett prompted interestedly at her obvious reluctance to respond to his questions.

Trying a different tack, Stazy realised, knowing she had been correct in her assessment of Jarrett being an astute and clever man. As the founder of Hunter's, a company dealing in hotels and property all over the world, and a director, along with his two brothers, he was unlikely to be anything else! Oh, well, she would play along with this game for a while—until it didn't suit her to do so any longer.

She smiled at Jarrett, blue eyes glowing with mischief. 'And until yesterday I had always thought my English education had obliterated most of my American accent!'

He raised dark brows. 'What happened yesterday to tell you otherwise?'

Jordan had spoken to her—really spoken to her, rather than offering the odd terse greeting—for the first time!

But she wouldn't tell Jarrett that. After the way he had behaved so far this evening, she certainly didn't owe Jordan any loyalty, and she was still more than a little annoyed with him for dropping her into this awkward situation with his brother in the first place, but her mother had always taught her that two wrongs did not make a right! She could cheerfully have kicked Jordan in the shin for abandoning her to his brother's mercy, and she would much prefer the physical satisfaction of administering that kick than getting back at him any other way!

'When I'm in England people tend to know I'm American,' she replied, effectively ignoring the probing in his question. 'But when I'm at home everyone assumes I'm English.' She gave a rueful shake of her head.

'Can't win, hmm?' Jarrett acknowledged understandingly. 'Might one ask why, when America has some damned fine schools of its own, you were educated in England?'

One might ask—but one wasn't about to get an answer! Not in any great detail, anyway. This man missed nothing, she realised, separating the waffle from what was really important. She had made a throw-away comment about her English education—but it was this fact Jarrett had latched onto. Because he knew by asking it he could learn much more about her background—and, hopefully, about her along with it.

She shrugged. ‘Parents tend to make these decisions for their children, don’t they?’ she responded, looking curiously around the crowded room. ‘Talking of parents—which lucky pair are your own parents?’

Jarrett’s mouth twisted as the tables were turned on him. ‘Our parents are divorced,’ he rasped. ‘But my father and stepmother are about somewhere,’ he went on more lightly.

But not his mother... Interesting. Although Stazy could see by the slightly puzzled expression on Jarrett’s face that he thought, if she and Jordan had been seeing each other for a couple of months, she would have known their parents were divorced...

Another oversight on Jordan’s part. Again not her fault. She hadn’t even known Jordan had one brother until this evening, let alone two.

‘It happens.’ She shrugged off the divorce. It did happen, as statistics showed all too often, and the fact that Jordan’s mother wasn’t present at her own son’s wedding hinted at the fact that this one had been acrimonious. ‘Personally, I think it’s much better for people to part if they are unhappy, rather than try and make it work for the children. From what I’ve observed,’ she continued, ‘the kids usually end up more scarred than the parents! ’

Jarrett’s brow cleared. ‘I hadn’t thought of it in quite that way before...’

Because he was too close to the situation, Stazy guessed. Although it was odd that the three Hunter brothers had remained close to their father and not their mother. She wondered if—

No! She did not want to know anything about Jordan or his family. She did not want to get involved. Tonight had been a mistake, and the further—and quicker—she removed herself from it the better!

‘Are you—?’

‘My dance, I believe, Jarrett,’ Jordan told his older brother with satisfaction as he arrived at their side, Abbie Hunter giving Stazy a sympathetic smile as she accompanied him.

Stazy could imagine that while she and Jarrett had been chatting quite amiably Jordan had continued to be his taciturn self as he danced with Abbie. In fact, Jordan had probably spent the time wondering what she and Jarrett were finding to talk about!

‘Mind he doesn’t step on your toes, Stazy,’ Jarrett warned mockingly as he led his wife away.

‘Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit,’ Jordan muttered as he and Stazy began to dance.

That was only the case if you didn’t rise to it, Stazy thought ruefully. And in Jordan’s case he rose all too easily to his brother’s barbs.

‘You dance very well,’ Stazy told him, brightly, having no trouble at all following his steps, his hand light on her back.

Jordan looked down at her. ‘You and Jarrett seemed to be getting on well together...?’

Predictable, or what! ‘He was quite charming,’ she said casually.

Jordan gave a disbelieving snort. ‘Jarrett is the arrogant one in the family. And Jonathan is the charmer.’

Stazy raised auburn brows. ‘Where does that leave you?’ she returned quickly.

He frowned, seeming puzzled for a moment, and then he gave a smile. It transformed him, Stazy noted with dismay. It was a roguishly sexy smile, his eyes like molten gold, those laughter lines she had noted earlier beside his eyes and mouth were put to full use. Stazy felt a fluttering sensation in the pit of her stomach. Gone was the broodingly handsome man, and in his place was—

‘Devilish,’ Jordan told her, and Stazy was able to see the glittering humour in his eyes before he pulled her closer to him, both arms about her waist now as they danced to the seductively slow music. ‘I haven’t been very good company for you so far this evening, have I?’ he murmured close to her ear. ‘Let’s see if we can improve on that.’

She didn’t want him to improve on it! Taciturn would do her just fine. A devilish Jordan Hunter was not—

That face! She knew that man’s face in the crowd of people talking across the room!

She stiffened in Jordan's arms, straining to see past the other dancers to where she had found that face she'd recognised. All she could see now was the back of the man's head; his face was turned away from her. But it couldn't have been him! Not here. She must have been mistaken.

'Hey, I'm only trying to apologise because I was a little preoccupied earlier,' Jordan chided softly as he obviously felt her tension. 'I'm not suggesting ravishing you on the dance floor!'

That might have been preferable to the shock she had just received. At least she could have dealt with that.

She couldn't stay here now. She had to leave. She couldn't possibly have seen the man she had thought she had—that person was far removed from the Hunter family—but it was enough that she had thought she recognised him.

She should never have accepted Jordan's invitation in the first place!

'I have to go, Jordan.' She pulled abruptly out of his arms, already searching for the exit

Jordan looked stunned, frowning darkly once again. 'Stazy—'

'It's been lovely,' she told him distractedly—untruthfully! 'We must do this again some time,' she went on hurriedly, knowing she had no intention of seeing him again.

Escape! She had to get away!

Jordan's mouth twisted. 'I don't have any more brothers' weddings to invite you to!' he said sardonically, looking totally perplexed by her need to leave so soon.

Stazy barely glanced at him, having located the door now, and began threading her way through the people to reach it. If she could just—

'Stazy, what the hell are you doing?' Jordan caught up with her as she got out into the hallway, swinging her round to face him, his humour of a few minutes ago once again replaced by brooding intensity. 'I brought you here, I'll take you home again,' he stated harshly.

She understood his dilemma; his date walking out on him, quite so publicly, was the last thing he needed! But she couldn't help that; she simply couldn't stay here, felt too upset.

'You can't leave yet, Jordan.' She shook her head. 'But I—I have to go now!'

'I'll drive you home—'

'No!' she refused agitatedly. 'Now please let me go—'

'Having trouble, Jordan?' came a gently sarcastic female voice. 'And I always thought you had more luck with women than this.'

Jordan's hand left Stazy's arm as if she had stung him, his face a furiously cold mask as he turned to look at the other woman who now stood in the corridor.

Stazy looked at her too, intrigued by the effect she had had on Jordan. Tiny and blonde, she was absolutely beautiful, her face as small and perfect as a doll's, dominated by huge brown eyes. Eyes that met Jordan's accusing gaze unflinchingly...

'What the hell are you doing here, Stella?' he ground out insultingly, every inch of his body taut.

Stazy groaned inwardly; if he ever looked at her in that disgusted way, she would want to shrivel up and die! As it was, desperate as she was to leave, she felt frozen to the spot, caught in a frozen tableau with these two people, one furiously angry, the other seeming completely unconcerned. In fact, the woman looked positively gleeful at Jordan's fury!

The woman lifted her shoulders carelessly, the perfection of her dainty figure shown to advantage by the black dress she wore. 'Where else would I be on Jonathan's wedding day?' she returned.

So she knew Jonathan too. This was all becoming too complicated for Stazy. And complications were things she was anxious to avoid at this time in her life. 'I really do have to go, Jordan.' She touched his arm to attract his attention; she had the distinct impression he had once again forgotten her existence! 'I'll catch up with you later,' she said in parting.

'Try leaving a shoe on the stairs on your way out,' the woman told her disparagingly. 'I'm told that usually works!' Her gaze was openly challenging as she looked Stazy up and down.

Stazy paused long enough to give her a narrow-eyed glance. Whoever she was, and whatever she meant to Jordan, or the charming Jonathan, Stazy certainly didn't like this lady's implication that Stazy was Cinderella to Jordan's Prince Charming!

She coldly returned the older woman's gaze. 'I'm afraid I'm all out of glass slippers,' she responded smartly. 'And I haven't kissed a prince yet that hasn't turned into a frog! Have fun,' she told Jordan breezily before turning and walking unhurriedly away, her head held high.

CHAPTER TWO

JORDAN watched Stazy leave, really watched her, seeing her as more than just the beautiful redhead who lived next door to him, and whom he had only really noticed for the first time yesterday.

There was no doubt she was beautiful: those candid blue eyes, the sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of her tiny nose, her wide, smiling mouth. Or that she moved with the natural grace of her countrywomen, her legs long and shapely, her figure stunning in a fitted blue dress.

Those were the reasons he had chosen to invite Stazy Walker to accompany him here this evening. But he had just realised there was a lot more to her than surface beauty. A lot more...

'Don't tell me you're smitten, Jordan?' the woman at his side said disgustedly. 'The Hunter men are falling like flies!'

Jordan turned to Stella, his eyes as hard as the metal they resembled. 'And what does that have to do with you?' he said impatiently, all too aware of Stazy's comment 'I'll catch up with you later'; unfortunately, something much more immediate had his attention now. A pity he hadn't realised earlier that Stazy's temperament matched her long, fiery-red hair. Later, he promised himself.

'My darling boy—'

'I am not your "darling" anything,' he snarled, his expression contemptuous, completely unmoved by Stella's kittenish looks; in her case, they were only skindeep! Literally. As her favourite cosmetic surgeon knew only too well! Hell, she looked little older than he did, forty at the most, and yet of course she was much older than that... 'I suggest we get out of here.' He firmly grasped her arm as he closed the door behind him, turning her to leave. 'Before anyone else becomes aware of your presence.'

Stella stood her ground in the hallway. 'I'm not going anywhere, Jordan,' she resisted. 'I want to see Jonathan on his wedding day. And, of course, Jarrett—'

'Aren't you rather presuming that any of us want to see you?' Jarrett rasped harshly from behind them, having quietly left the reception room to join them. 'And in the circumstances that's presuming all too damned much! You're an uninvited guest, Stella,' he added coldly, looking down the length of his arrogant nose at her. 'I suggest you leave right now—before I have you thrown out!'

Jordan looked admiringly at his oldest brother. As usual, Jarrett wasn't pulling his punches. Stella now had an unattractive flush to her cheeks, her eyes glittering dangerously at Jarrett's insulting tone, meeting his gaze challengingly. But, nonetheless, Jordan was in no doubt who would win this particular battle of wills!

'You wouldn't do that, Jarrett.' Stella was finally the one to speak—and not as confidently as her words implied, either.

Jarrett's mouth thinned. 'Try me,' he returned softly, meeting her defiance unflinchingly.

'But I haven't even seen Jonathan yet,' Stella protested. 'Or met his bride—'

'And you aren't about to, either,' Jarrett bit back. 'In another couple of hours Jonathan and Gaye will leave the reception. So far they have had a perfect day; I don't intend letting you ruin it for them!'

'That's a very cruel thing to say to me, Jarrett. But then you always were unfeeling,' Stella told him emotionally.

As displays went, it was certainly a good one, Jordan acknowledged cynically; tears swam in those huge brown eyes, and her chin quivered ever so slightly in an effort to control herself. But Jordan knew as well as Jarrett did that it was all an act; Stella had never cared for anyone else in the whole of her life, and she was too damned old to change now—despite her cosmetic surgeon!

Jordan's mouth pursed contemptuously. 'Jarrett is right, Stella,' he said coldly. 'You aren't staying.'

He inwardly acknowledged he hadn't exactly been the life and soul of the party today himself —for which he probably owed Stazy an apology. No wonder she had decided to leave so abruptly; she had been as sick of his company as he was!

But he also knew that Stella's presence at the wedding reception was tantamount to introducing a cat amongst the pigeons. 'I'll take you wherever you want to go,' he offered. 'But you aren't staying here.'

'Oh, but I am,' Stella informed him confidently. 'Quite literally. I have a suite booked on the fourth floor!' she announced triumphantly.

Where she had no doubt waited out the first part of the evening before coming down here to make her entrance! For Jordan didn't doubt this whole thing had been premeditated, and he could see by Jarrett's narrowed eyes that he knew it too.

'What do you want, Stella?' Jarrett snapped impatiently.

Her head went back defensively. 'Why should you assume I want anything?'

Jarrett sighed. 'Because your sort always want something—'

'My sort!' she repeated in a voice rising with hysteria. 'How dare you? How dare you—?'

'Believe me, he dares,' Jordan told her dryly, still retaining that firm grasp of her arm; there was no way she was going to slip past both of them and make her entrance as planned. 'And so dare I. Let's go. Quietly,' he instructed firmly, aware that he and Jarrett couldn't remain out here for much longer before attracting attention to the fact they were both missing from the reception.

He didn't give Stella any more opportunity to argue with him, pulling her along beside him down the hallway and back into the main reception of the hotel.

She waited only that long before pulling her arm out of his grip, glaring up at him, her face set in an angry mask. 'You have no right, Jordan—'

'I have every right!' he returned icily. 'And so does Jarrett. Jonathan too, if he knew you were here.' He shook his head. 'I can't believe the nerve of you, just turning up here and expecting a welcome!'

'I am your mother!' she cried furiously.

He looked at her dispassionately. Yes, this woman had given birth to him. To Jarrett and Jonathan too. But his mother...?

He didn't think so! He had been fourteen when she'd walked out on him, his two older brothers, and her newly bankrupt husband. The previous years of his life had been filled with a long line of his mother's lovers, and her verbally violent rows with their cuckolded father. As for the loving and caring part of motherhood—! Jarrett and Jonathan had more or less brought him up, looked out for him, even before their mother left; in fact, he couldn't remember a single occasion when she had been there for him...

'Mother is only a word, Stella,' he said frigidly. 'And in your case it isn't even correct.'

He looked at her critically, her beauty, the slender figure, the fashionable clothes. None of it impressed him. He had seen this woman only once in the last twenty years, very briefly, after her second marriage had fallen apart and before she'd found husband number three. She had come to London to seek out her 'little boys', though at twenty-five, twenty-seven and twenty-nine they had hardly been that any more. If, indeed, they ever had been...

'What's happened, Stella?' he asked dryly. 'Has husband number three grown tired of you too?'

The angry flush that coloured her cheeks told him he had guessed correctly. It hadn't been too difficult; they might have no contact with her, but Jarrett, in his wisdom, kept a weather eye on her life—in the hopes of ensuring it never interfered with theirs!

Stella looked at him accusingly. 'You're becoming as hard and unfeeling as Jarrett!'

'We both had a good teacher,' he returned hardly.

Stazy should be back at her apartment by now. If he could get away from Stella, return to the reception and make his excuses to Jonathan and Gaye, he might just be in time to call on Stazy before she went to bed...

Stazy in bed... That lithe, silken body naked, her only adornment her long flaming red hair...

Now there was something worth seeing. How ever could he not have noticed what a stirringly beautiful and desirable woman Stazy was?

He had been acting like a complete idiot all evening, scowling at everyone, barely speaking, and paying absolutely no attention to the woman he had brought with him. No wonder Stazy had walked out on him. What a fool he was! He might have sworn off marriage, but not women. There had been a beautiful female living next door to him for three months, and he hadn't even noticed. Get your act together, Jordan, he remonstrated with himself. Stazy must think he was—

'Why are you smiling?' the woman who had given birth to him thirty-five years ago demanded indignantly. 'This isn't in the least bit funny—'

'I couldn't agree more, Mother.' His mouth twisted derisively at the way she flinched at the name; a woman trying to look thirty-five did not want to be reminded she had a son of that age—and two more even older than that! 'This situation isn't funny, but you are hilarious. You want something, Stella, and we all know it, so I suggest you stop playing games and get to the point. But a word of advice: don't use Jonathan's wedding as a way to get what you want from Jarrett. You would regret it!'

'Don't threaten me, Jordan,' she warned, her face pale now, set in harsh lines.

He shook his head wearily. 'I said it was advice, and that's exactly what it was. Go ahead and gatecrash the wedding.' He waved invitingly towards the hallway leading to the reception room. 'You'll find yourself marched out of there again so fast you'll wonder what happened to you! You think I'm becoming hard and unfeeling? Push Jarrett some more and see what happens. And heaven help you —because no one else will!'

She met his gaze for several seconds, and then she wavered, before dropping her eyes away completely, as she obviously rethought her game-plan.

Because this was a game to her, Jordan knew. She had been playing one game or another with them all her life. Playing mother had lasted long enough for her to produce the three boys, and for their father's money to run out Then she had run off looking for another game to play. And, as Jordan had guessed earlier, this sudden urge to be 'Mother' again had something to do with her third marriage. Without a rich husband to support her she couldn't maintain her lavish lifestyle. She needed money for that, and in the last twenty years her three sons had managed to amass quite a lot of that!

With a mother like her was it any wonder he was a cynic where women were concerned?

'I really don't have any more time to waste standing here talking to you, Stella,' he told her hardly before turning away.

'Running after Cinderella?' she called after him tauntingly.

Jordan turned slowly back to face the woman he had once known as Mummy, feeling absolutely nothing towards her now. Not even hate, he realised. She was just a very sad woman, trying desperately to cling onto the things that mattered to her—her looks and the money to keep them. Outwardly she was beautiful, inwardly she was ugly. And there was nothing that plastic surgery could do to change that!

'I've never run after a woman in my life,' he replied before going back down the hallway to the reception.

He wasn't 'running after' Stazy; after he had made the appropriate excuses to Jonathan and Gaye, he was simply going home. Stazy just happened to live in the apartment next door to his!

And who knew? Maybe tonight would be the night Stazy would kiss a prince and he wouldn't turn into a frog...

She was a long time answering his ring on the doorbell. Probably she was surprised to hear the internal doorbell and not the entryphone. But she was certainly worth waiting for when she did

finally open the door, having changed out of the blue dress into a pair of figurehugging blue denims and a skimpy blue top, her hair—beautiful, gloriously red hair, like a Renaissance painting—falling the length of her spine like a moving flame. And the freckles on her nose seemed more pronounced —and more endearing.

'Jordan?' She looked taken aback to see him standing there.

'You didn't have any champagne earlier.' He smiled, holding up the cooled bottle of bubbly liquid and two glasses, that he had taken from the wedding reception on his way out. 'An oversight I felt needed rectifying,' he added huskily. It had been his own morose temper earlier that had created the 'oversight'; he hadn't even given her the common courtesy then of ensuring she was provided with a drink!

Her eyes widened, the deepest, clearest blue he had ever seen. 'Wouldn't you rather be sharing that with Stella?' she queried, making no effort to open the door wider and move aside so that he could enter her apartment.

Not that he could blame her for that, either; he hadn't exactly been attentive so far in their acquaintance. And from the cool way she was looking at him, he wasn't sure he was going to be given the chance to make amends!

'Stella is something else that needs rectifying,' he drawled dismissively.

'You don't owe me any explanations, Jordan—'

'I know that,' he replied sharply. He didn't owe any woman anything! 'I just thought it would be nice if we shared some champagne together,' he continued less aggressively—so much for making a fresh start with Stazy!

'Okay,' she accepted without further argument, opening the door to let him in.

Jordan was a little taken aback at her sudden acquiescence, but he stepped inside before she changed her mind as quickly.

Her apartment had the same layout as his own; he knew that because he had looked at it first when he was thinking of moving in five years ago, but in the end had decided that the apartment he had now possessed the better view of the two.

But as soon as he stepped inside he could see the differences in their tastes. Stazy had chosen decor in creams and golds, with bright splashes of orange, giving a much lighter, airier feel, a warmth, that his own green, cream and brown furnishings didn't achieve.

The touches of orange in the rugs and scatter cushions somehow seemed to be the same shade of burnt copper as her hair, the furniture in the lounge she took him into consisting mainly of big, comfortable-looking armchairs and several huge bean-bags. Overall, Jordan felt a peace and restfulness amongst this casual comfort that he didn't feel in his own apartment.

'This is great,' he told Stazy admiringly, putting the bottle of champagne and glasses down on a very low table. 'You'll have to give me the name of your interior designer.'

'Stazy Walker,' she provided softly.

His brows rose. 'You decorated all of this yourself?'

Stazy nodded, smiling slightly at his obvious amazement. 'I'm an interior designer.'

He gave the sitting room another look. She was good. Very good. And his apartment hadn't been decorated since he'd moved in... Not that he spent a great deal of time there anyway, being either out at work, or just out. But if she could transform her own apartment in this way...

He picked up the bottle of champagne. 'I don't suppose you would be interested in a job?'

Stazy curled herself up on one of the bean-bags while he uncorked the champagne, and she eyed him warily across the room. 'Doing what?' she prompted guardedly.

Now that he had taken the trouble to notice her at all, Stazy Walker was fast becoming an enigma to him! She had seemed so open and friendly, but with each thing she revealed about herself she appeared to be holding something else back... In fact, he knew absolutely nothing of real relevance

about her, he realised with a start. Like what she was doing in England at all. Where were her family? If she had any family.

'Decorating my apartment,' he told her, pouring out the champagne before handing her one of the glasses. 'What did you think I meant?'

'You wouldn't believe some of the suggestions I've had over the last three months!' she told him disgustedly.

Jordan settled himself down in one of the comfortable armchairs, finding it as soft and bolstered as it looked; the bean-bags looked relaxing to sprawl in, but the last thing he wanted was to get down on one of those things and then struggle to get back up onto his feet when the time came! He had to be a good twelve, or maybe fourteen years older than the age he guessed Stazy to be, but he didn't have to end up on a bean-bag looking decrepit!

'Try me,' he invited, his curiosity piqued.

She shrugged. 'Maybe it has something to do with the language—we do speak a different language, no matter what anyone tries to say to the contrary. When I first moved here I got a job as a window-dresser in one of the large stores in town—I'd rather not say which one!' She grimaced. 'The manager's idea of working after the store was closed was to try and drag me off to the bed department, to see if there were any improvements I could make there!'

Jordan was having trouble holding back a smile at the graphic picture she portrayed—and he certainly didn't think it had anything to do with a language problem; Stazy was beautiful, whatever language she spoke!

'What happened?' he asked.

'I kneed him in the place I felt needed improving,' she told him directly. 'I also got fired,' she sighed. 'For being unsuitable for the job! Actually, I've always preferred working in people's homes, so after that I put a few cards in shop windows, hoping to get some business that way. I was offered a job decorating a little boy's bedroom.'

'Sounds safe enough,' Jordan drawled—because he had a feeling it hadn't been safe at all.

Stazy grimaced again. That "little boy" turned out to be about sixty-five—and he wanted me to do the decorating wearing a gym-slip!'

This was just too much for Jordan, unable to hold back his chuckles any longer. In fact, he more than chuckled; he couldn't help it. 'What sort of shop windows did you put your cards in?' he finally sobered enough to query.

'You're much quicker than me!' Stazy gave him a shy grin. 'I realised that had been my mistake when the next "client" who rang asked me my age, and told me to bring along a set of red underwear!'

'I prefer cream myself,' Jordan observed.

'I took all my cards back before I got any more calls like that!' She shook her head disgustedly. 'Do you suppose people actually enjoy that sort of thing? Telephoning a complete stranger for sex?' She grimaced her distaste at the idea.

Jordan looked at her. She couldn't be that innocent. Could she...? 'How old are you, Stazy?' he mused.

'Twenty-one, almost twenty-two,' she supplied promptly, her tone implying she didn't see what that had to do with anything.

She was young. Younger than any of the women he had been involved with in recent years—though he wasn't going to get involved with Stazy Walker; he was just curious, that was all.

'Don't you read the newspapers?' There was an edge of scorn to his voice, created by that residual anger towards himself.

She stood up in one gracefully fluid movement, her glass steady in her hand. 'Of course I read the newspapers,' she returned impatiently. 'But to find a bed-partner in such a way seems—What work do you want done on your apartment?' She abruptly changed the subject. 'Which room?'

'All of them,' he decided, relaxing back in his chair. 'Are you up to it, do you think?' he derided.

She looked ready to tell him what he could do with his offer of work. But something held her back, and she turned away, breathing deeply.

Jordan accepted she hadn't had a very good time of it since moving to London. And he wasn't helping to make it any better. Besides, this apartment, as he knew only too well, was expensive to rent. And with no visible means of income—He wasn't a charity, damn it!

'Are you?' he pressed harshly at her continued silence.

She whipped quickly round to face him, two bright spots of angry colour in her cheeks. 'My work speaks for itself,' she bit out tautly.

Jordan had the distinct impression she wanted to tell him—and his offer of work—to go to hell. But she wasn't going to do so. Again, something held her back...

'It does.' He nodded in agreement. 'You'll need to see the apartment, of course—'

'Isn't it exactly the same as this one?' She sipped her champagne now, looking at him over the glass's rim.

Those eyes. So clear a blue. Like a Canadian mountain lake he had once seen. And this girl/woman was as fresh as that mountain lake...

Jordan shook his head to rid it of those thoughts. He was offering her work, for goodness' sake! 'Exactly like this one,' he confirmed tersely. 'When can you start?'

She raised her palms in a gesture of resistance. 'I'll need ideas from you before I start to put anything together—'

'I thought interior designers were the ones with the ideas,' he cut in. 'Isn't that the reason they're the interior designers? Don't you present me with ideas, we discuss them—and then you get on and do exactly what you want to do?'

Those blue eyes narrowed at what had been his deliberately derisive tone. 'Jordan, I have a feeling you're playing games with me—'

'I never play when it comes to business, Stazy,' he assured her softly. 'You—' He broke off as the security intercom buzzed; downstairs someone needed admittance. And then it sounded again. 'Hadn't you better answer that?' he prompted Stazy as she made no effort to do so.

She still did not move. 'Obviously someone has made a mistake; I don't know anyone in London.'

Then it was strange that she had come to live here, Jordan could have said. But didn't. It was part of the enigma that was Stazy Walker, he decided. Best not to get too involved.

'Perhaps it's the little boy with your gym-slip?' he suggested sardonically. 'I think you should answer it, Stazy,' he said as the intercom buzzed once more, putting down his empty champagne glass. This evening hadn't turned out quite as he would initially have liked it to, but maybe it was better this way. 'If only to tell the person to go away,' he said as the intercom buzzed again—and this time went on buzzing; the person was obviously keeping their finger on the button. 'They're very persistent for someone who has made a mistake,' he murmured interestedly.

Stazy claimed she knew no one in England, and so it followed that no one should know her either, but the names of the people occupying the apartments were clearly marked beside the entryphone buttons downstairs; it was very unlikely someone had got the wrong apartment. Yet Stazy still seemed reluctant to acknowledge that intercom...

'Would you like me to—?'

'No!' She hastily cut off his offer, putting down her glass and moving towards the entryphone—which all the occupants of the apartments had.

His entryphone had saved Jordan several times in the past, when he had a woman in his apartment with him and another one was downstairs calling to come up; it was much easier to make excuses to the woman he was with when she couldn't hear the other end of the conversation!

That Stazy didn't even want him to hear her replies in the conversation which followed was obvious as she looked at him pointedly, obviously wanting him to leave before she answered the call.

Jordan's answer was to stroll over to the window, his back turned towards her, but he was completely aware of what was happening in the room behind him, Stazy's reflection on the window in front of him. She was glaring at him, seemed deeply irritated with him. But she had piqued his interest now; he had no intention of leaving until she had answered that call. Besides, they hadn't yet finished discussing the work she was going to do for him...

'Yes?' Stazy spoke agitatedly behind him into the receiver. 'What are you doing here?' she demanded exasperatedly. 'No, you can't! Zak, I said no,' she added more firmly. 'I'm not even going to ask how you found me, I'm just telling you to forget it again—' There was a slight pause, while Zak obviously argued his case. 'Zak, I don't care if you have nowhere else to stay. You can sleep on the streets for all I care—but you aren't staying here!' She slammed down the receiver, her uneven breathing easily heard in the otherwise silent room.

Jordan kept his gaze focused out of the window, although he was looking at none of the beauty of London at night lit up by hundreds of lights; his attention was all inwards. Stazy had said she knew no one in London, and yet she obviously knew this man Zak. Well enough, from what Jordan had gathered from the conversation, for the other man to think he could stay here in her apartment with her!

Who—or what—was this Zak to Stazy?

CHAPTER THREE

STAZY glanced across the room to where Jordan stood so still and quiet in front of her window. What on earth must he be thinking? She had just finished telling him of some of the ridiculous situations she had found herself in since her move here, and now she had some man calling up from downstairs asking if he could stay in her apartment with her! And Jordan had just offered her a job, too...!

Damn Zak. He had no right to just turn up here uninvited like this. He—

She jumped nervously as her doorbell rang. It was too much of a coincidence, too soon after Zak's call from downstairs...

How had he got into the apartment building? Because she didn't doubt that it was him standing outside her front door. Or that he wouldn't go away again until she had answered it!

As Jordan turned around, dark brows raised questioningly, she knew he wasn't going to leave just yet, either. Men!

'Do you want me to answer it?' Jordan offered smoothly. 'I could always send him on his way for you,' he offered.

She didn't doubt that he would try. Or that Zak would resist. Wonderful, just what she needed—a fight on her doorstep! Somehow she didn't think so; she had come back to England in the first place to get away from all of that.

She shook her head. 'I'll go. But I definitely think the security here needs looking into,' she said before striding off to answer the door.

This hadn't been a good evening so far, and with Zak's arrival it was deteriorating rapidly. Still, she supposed she and Jordan were about even in the complication stakes; that woman Stella had turned up in his life earlier—although his arrival here a short time ago seemed to imply she had been rapidly despatched again!—then there had been the man she'd recognised at his brother's wedding, and now Zak had arrived! How had he found out where she was living...?

Zak grinned at her confidently when she opened the door; tall, blond, with laughing blue eyes, he looked completely unabashed by his intrusion. 'Stazy!' His joyful cry was accompanied by his dropping his suitcase in order to pick her up in a bear-hug and swing her round in the hallway.

It was very difficult to remain angry with someone who looked so pleased to see her, and who could lift her up in his arms so easily she might have been a child!

Stazy gave him a rueful grin. 'Put me down, you clown.' She punched him playfully on the shoulder. 'And then could you explain to me exactly how you got up here?' she added reprovingly,

sure that it hadn't been done legitimately. 'Please don't say you used the elevator! ' She was fully aware of just how aggravating this man could be.

'Okay, Staze.' He put her down, still grinning, his American accent much more noticeable than her own. 'It was really easy.' He bent down to pick up the suitcase. 'I pressed the button for Apartment 4, told the lady that answered that I was the guy in Apartment 7, J. Hunter, and that I had forgotten my key to get into the building. It worked.' He shrugged. 'I saw it in a movie once.' He grinned his satisfaction at his success, having followed Stazy through to the sitting room as he gave his explanation. 'I didn't—Ub-oh, am I interrupting something?' He came to a halt as he spotted Jordan standing near the window, and the bottle of champagne and two glasses still on the table.

Stazy could see exactly the thoughts that were going through Zak's head—and probably so could Jordan. But Zak couldn't have been further from the truth, no matter how damning the evidence!

Jordan stepped forward, holding out his hand in greeting to Zak. 'J. Hunter,' he introduced dryly. 'The "guy in Apartment 7",' he tacked on deliberately so that there would be no mistake on Zak's part. 'And the J stands for Jordan,' he supplied.

The two men were of similar age, similar height too, but there the similarity ended; Zak brimmed over with boyish good humour, while Jordan was much more reserved as the two men shook hands.

'Sorry about that.' Zak grinned unrepentantly. 'But Stazy can be damned awkward when she wants to be,' he said affectionately.

'The word is private, Zak,' she put in before Jordan could add anything to that—one way or the other! 'Jordan Hunter, meet Zak Prince. And vice versa.' She resented having to make this introduction at all. One—or both!—of these men had to leave! But one looked like being her employer for the foreseeable future, and the other one—! That suitcase Zak had brought in with him looked distinctly ominous!

'Prince.' Jordan repeated the name slowly, his expression thoughtful as he looked at Stazy.

She watched him warily. What was he thinking? Did he know—? Had he realised—?

He turned to Zak. 'We were discussing the merits—or otherwise—of princes earlier,' he explained. 'The fairy-tale kind,' he amended softly.

Stazy had said she hadn't kissed a prince yet that hadn't turned into a frog! Well, it was true —literally—Zak was chief frog!

'Need I say more?' She looked irritatedly at the blond giant who had invaded her apartment so effectively.

Jordan smiled at the joke. 'I'm sure you have a lot more to say to this particular Prince,' he drawled. 'And that you would probably prefer to say it when I'm not around! Tomorrow is Sunday,' he continued consideringly. 'Will you be able to start work on Monday?'

She blinked at his directness. Of course she could start on Monday—her diary wasn't exactly overflowing with work, as she had already told him. But—

'Get some ideas together,' Jordan ordered as he walked confidently to the door. 'And we'll discuss them Monday evening when I get back from work.' He glanced across at Zak as the other man made himself comfortable on one of the bean-bags before sitting forward to top up the champagne for himself in one of the glasses. 'At my apartment,' Jordan stated hardly. 'I'll expect you around seven-thirty.'

Stazy walked with him to the door. 'I'm sorry about Zak,' she said awkwardly. 'I—He—'

'You don't owe me any explanations, either, Stazy,' He reminded her of her own comment to him earlier in the evening.

Of course she didn't. This was business, after all. Although a part of her suspected that hadn't been Jordan's intention when he'd come to her apartment half an hour ago! Perhaps it was as well Zak had arrived when he did...

‘Seven-thirty Monday evening,’ she acknowledged briskly, closing the door firmly behind Jordan once he had left.

Now she must go and tackle Zak. Because he wasn’t staying here. No matter what sort of persuasion he might try to use!

‘Zak, will you get out of that bathroom right now!’ Stazy banged loudly on the bathroom door in accompaniment to her demand. ‘I’ve been waiting almost an hour to take my shower,’ she cried furiously.

‘Calm down, Stazy,’ he soothed in a completely unruffled voice. ‘You aren’t due at Jordan’s for another half an hour yet.’

So much for making Zak leave, she told herself. As she had known he would from the onset, Zak had wheedled his way into persuading her to let him stay, just until he got fixed up with a hotel. Which, as Stazy knew only too well, would probably never materialise; Zak liked his home comforts, someone always there—usually for him!

Stazy had made it clear that his ‘someone’ wasn’t going to be her; if he was staying in England for any length of time, at her apartment, then he could do his share of the chores and cooking. His share of the cooking yesterday had comprised taking her to the nearest fast-food restaurant for Sunday lunch, assuring her that she could have the chicken or the ribs when she’d protested she didn’t even like burgers. As a change it had been fine, but as a staple diet—Zak’s staple diet, if left to his own devices!—it just wasn’t good enough.

‘Move it, Zak,’ she told him in a strained tone. The last thing she needed was to be stressed out when she went to see Jordan. Besides, it was her bathroom!

Apart from getting to know her in her apartment, Jordan hadn’t seen her doing business yet, and she wanted to make a good impression. He might have reconsidered things since Saturday, and decided he didn’t want his place redecorated after all...

‘I mean it, Zak.’ She rattled the door handle impatiently. This was worse than when she had lived at home and had to fight her three brothers for the use of one of the two bathrooms. ‘If you aren’t out of there by the time I count to five, you can start looking for somewhere else—’ She broke of her tirade as the bathroom door was opened from the inside, and Zak stood there enveloped in a cloud of steam, with one towel draped about his neck, and another one—thank goodness!—draped about his waist and thighs. ‘I hope you haven’t used all the hot water,’ she grumbled as she strode past him into the now overheated bathroom. ‘Zak—!’ she gasped as she looked around.

‘I’ll clear the mess up later,’ he hastily assured her at her dismayed wail. ‘You aren’t the only one with somewhere to go this evening, you know,’ he defended as she turned to glare at him angrily.

‘Spare me the details,’ she snapped. ‘Just go away and leave me to—’ She broke off as the doorbell rang.

‘I’ll get it,’ Zak told her hurriedly, obviously glad of the excuse to escape. ‘You just carry on with your shower.’

He had gone before Stazy had time to stop him. And it had been the internal bell. Which could only mean one person... Jordan had changed his mind about the decorating. Damn it. She needed that job. She certainly wasn’t about to crawl back home, having failed in what she set out to do. It was—

‘Jordan,’ Zak told her with a grin as he strolled back down the hallway, using the towel that had been draped about his neck to dry off his hair after his fifteen-minute shower.

‘Well?’ Stazy finally said when the tension of waiting for him to continue became too much for her; she had known it was Jordan, but what did he want?

Zak blinked innocent blue eyes. ‘I thought you were in a hurry to take your shower?’

‘I am,’ she ground out between gritted teeth. ‘What did Jordan want?’ As if she couldn’t guess.

She had regaled him on Saturday with those two tales of confusion concerning her profession, and now Zak had answered the door to him wearing only a towel—two towels, to be exact. Jordan probably thought she was a high-class call-girl!

‘Oh, that,’ Zak replied, unconcerned. ‘He said could you make it seven forty-five instead of seven-thirty? He’s only just got in from work, and he would like to take a shower.’

Jordan hadn’t changed his mind. Well, until Zak had opened the door to him a couple of minutes ago, wearing only a couple of towels, he hadn’t...

‘He isn’t the only one,’ she told Zak determinedly, grabbing the towel draped about his neck. ‘See you later.’ She closed the bathroom door firmly in his face.

A lot later, she hoped. With any luck Zak would have left for wherever he was going by the time she finished her own shower, leaving her to get ready to face Jordan in peace and quiet.

Quiet. It was something she had learnt to value the last three months. At home there had always been so much going on, people constantly around. But since she had moved here she had become used to doing what she wanted, when she wanted, and that included whether or not she spent time with others!

Though it had been the desire to be around people that had involved her in Jordan Hunter’s life on Saturday . . . !

But she had won herself a job from that. At least, she hoped she had.

It was seven forty-five exactly when Stazy rang the doorbell of the apartment next door. And she was, she hoped, dressed for the part, her pale blue blouse tucked neatly into the waistband of navy blue striped trousers. Businesslike, but the fitted style of the blouse and trousers was also feminine. After all, Saturday evening when she’d worn the clinging blue dress she had been out on a date; this evening was work.

Although she wasn’t too sure of that once Jordan had opened the door and invited her in, and she saw the dining-table set for two, with candles flickering on it, the other lighting in the room subdued.

‘I thought we could eat first,’ Jordan told her lightly as she frowned across the table. ‘Unless you’ve already eaten?’ he enquired at her dismayed expression.

No, she hadn’t already eaten, had been too nervous. She’d thought she would make herself a sandwich or something after she got back. Food was something else she didn’t have to worry about too much now that she lived on her own; there were no rigid times for meals any more, there was no one else to answer to...

She might not have eaten yet this evening, but sitting down to a candlelit meal with Jordan Hunter was hardly businesslike! Especially as he looked more handsome than ever tonight, wearing a black shirt and fitted denims.

‘Don’t look so worried,’ he teased. ‘This isn’t another variation of the little boy and his bedroom theme! And I can see for myself that you aren’t wearing red underwear! ’ Those golden eyes looked at her assessingly.

Stazy looked down self-consciously at her blouse. It was made of silky material, not exactly see-through, but a red bra would certainly be visible through the lightcoloured material. And Jordan had taken the time to notice that fact in the two minutes since she’d entered his apartment!

That and the candlelit dinner were what bothered her.

Jordan laughed softly as she still looked reluctant. ‘It’s just a Chinese takeaway,’ he admitted. ‘I’ll blow out the candles and turn up the lights if you would feel more comfortable?’

She was being silly. It was only a meal. And they could discuss some of her ideas as they ate. ‘No, this is fine,’ she told him briskly, putting down the list of ideas she had brought in with her. ‘I’ll help you serve the food.’

It wasn’t ‘just’ a takeaway as Stazy knew it: chicken noodle soup first, followed by three Chinese meat dishes, with bamboo shoots and rice, and to follow there was sticky-toffee bananas and apples. Jordan opened a bottle of deliciously cool, crisp white wine to go with it.

‘I’m too full to work now I’ve finished this,’ Stazy warned Jordan as he made them coffee.

He sat back down in the chair opposite hers. ‘I owe you an apology for Saturday evening. I behaved very badly—’

‘Of course you didn’t,’ Stazy protested. ‘I had a good time.’

‘Is that why you left so suddenly?’ Jordan returned quickly. ‘Because you were having such a good time?

No, that had been for another reason completely. She had thought back to Saturday evening a couple of times during yesterday and today, and she had almost decided she must have been mistaken about the man she had thought she’d seen at the reception. Almost...

‘Jarrett explained to me that marriages tend to make you uptight,’ she replied easily.

‘Did he indeed?’ Jordan murmured dryly. ‘I see you have a house-guest,’ he added softly.

He caught her completely off-guard with this sudden change of subject!

She had been in the process of sipping her coffee, but she almost choked on it at that moment. She certainly didn’t need to ask whom Jordan was referring to!

‘Zak can be hard to get rid of,’ she acknowledged frankly.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.