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**Waiting for
Mr. Wonderful!**

STEPHANIE HOWARD

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Waiting For Mr. Wonderful!

«HarperCollins»

Howard S.

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He was the pefect man...Tall, dark and handsome, Frenchman Jean-Claude Lasalle wasn't just Mr. Right, he was Mr.Wonderful! Only, his divorce had left him wary. He had made a vow never to marry again.... But Jean-Claude loved women. It had never been his plan to live without them!All he needed was the right womanAnd then he met Georgia Dee. She wanted a man who would say "I do," and mean it! She needed Jean-Claude's help, not his practiced charm. But there was nothing he enjoyed more than crossing swords with a spirited woman. Unless it was making love to her....

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“I do want to help you, Miss Dee...”

“Put it down to my passion for helping damsels in distress.”

“So, you’re a white knight in disguise? I stopped believing in fairy tales when I was twelve years old.

“But you still believe in monsters?” The deep blue eyes looked steadily into hers. “And though, alas, I’m definitely no white knight, I can help you fight the monster Duval.”

The next moment, she was drowning in the black-fringed blue eyes, feeling the warm physical aura of him wrap around her like an embrace. Jean-Claude Lasalle was clearly under the illusion that all he had to do to win any woman over was just look at her with those wonderful eyes of his and treat her to one of his heart-stopping smiles. And no doubt it usually worked. Women would drop like nine pins at his feet. She’d very nearly dropped herself. it was the raw sexuality of him. Some rare magic he possessed.

Stephanie Howard was born and brought up in Dundee in Scotland, and educated at the London School of Economics. For ten years she worked as a journalist in London on a variety of women’s magazines, among them Woman’s Own, and was latterly editor of the now-defunct Honey. She has spent many years living and working abroad—in Italy, Malaysia, the Philippines and in the Middle East.

Waiting for Mr. Wonderful!

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CHAPTER ONE

GEORGIA knew instantly who the dark-haired stranger was, even though she'd never set eyes on him before. It had to be the Frenchman. She was absolutely sure of it. Deep inside, she felt a quick dart of fear.

He was seated on the wooden bench that stood against the front wall of the house beneath a glorious canopy of April-flowering wisteria. And, though it was obvious that he was waiting for her, he appeared not to have noticed her sudden arrival outside the front gate. His head was bent over the newspaper spread out on his knee.

So, for the moment at least, she had the advantage. Squaring her shoulders and taking a deep breath, Georgia pushed the gate open and stepped onto the gravel path.

'Excuse me. Can I help you?' Her tone was clipped as she strode towards him. Who did he think he was, making himself at home in her front garden?

He glanced up at once, quickly folding his newspaper and tossing it down beside him on the bench. Then, as though he hadn't noticed her angry expression, with a slow, lazy smile he began to rise to his feet.

'Enchanté, mademoiselle. I am Jean-Claude Lasalle.'

The instant he'd glanced up, Georgia had stopped in her tracks, her anger and fear abruptly forgotten. Suddenly, quite unconsciously, she was holding her breath. He was the most gorgeous-looking man she'd ever seen in her entire life.

Somewhere in his mid-thirties, he was tall and muscularly lean. You could sense the whiplash power beneath the expensive-looking blue suit. And he exuded from every pore a poised, raw dynamism that seemed to turn the very air electric. Georgia felt herself shiver. This man had sex appeal to burn.

He started to come towards her. 'Forgive me for taking the liberty, but the seat looked so inviting and I didn't really want to wait out in the street.'

As he spoke, Georgia was aware of his eyes travelling over her. Swiftly. Expertly. Taking in every detail. Every nuance and shadow of her pale-skinned oval face with its wide hazel eyes and—in her opinion—over-generous mouth. Every shiny, shoulderlength strand of her mahogany-dark hair.

Devoured in a single glance! I'll bet he's even soused that I curl my eyelashes! she thought wryly.

Then as his gaze moved downwards, taking her in from neck to toe, she had the very strong impression that he'd also worked out the fact that beneath her fitted cerise wool suit she was wearing nothing but her underwear!

To her annoyance, she felt a flicker of warmth inside her. Shame on you, Georgia! she said to herself. You ought to be mad at him, but in fact you actually rather enjoyed that!

He stopped right in front of her, extending his hand in greeting, and now it was Georgia's turn to take a closer look at him—though she was considerably more discreet about it than he'd been! And the first thing she had to acknowledge, though it hardly seemed possible, was that Jean-Claude Lasalle was even more gorgeous up close.

His tanned, sculpted face with its strong nose and well-shaped mouth exuded a vibrant, powerful intelligence, and he had the most remarkable eyes, which at first Georgia had believed to be brown, but which she could see now were an astonishing deep cobalt-blue and fringed with lashes that any woman would envy. His hair, which flopped engagingly over his forehead, was as glossy as silk and as black as a raven's wing.

She accepted his proffered hand, which clasped hers with strong, cool fingers in a handshake that sent a delicious electric charge up her arm. 'Pleased to meet you,' she heard herself say. 'I'm Georgia Dee.'

'Yes, I know who you are.' The blue eyes smiled back at her. 'I came here in the hope that I might have a few minutes of your time. There's a rather important matter I'd very much like to discuss with you.'

His English was perfect, enhanced by a delicious French accent, and that lazy, warm smile was as seductive as sin. Georgia looked at him and felt her insides turn to jelly. You can discuss anything you like with me, she almost felt like saying.

Almost.

Mentally, she gave herself a shake. What was she thinking of? Had she forgotten who this man was? Was she out of her mind, allowing herself to be seduced by a handsome face and a far too easy smile? She snatched her hand away and took a couple of steps back as her anger and fear at once flickered back to life.

With suspicious, narrowed eyes, she looked into his face. 'Was it you who came looking for me this afternoon at my shop?'

Georgia had been out at the time, having a late lunch, but when she'd got back Kay, her assistant, had told her about their mysterious foreign visitor. He hadn't told Kay why he wanted to speak to Georgia, but Georgia had guessed without too much difficulty. And, for the rest of the afternoon, she'd been unable to think of anything else.

She watched him now, breathing carefully, as he responded. 'Yes, I did drop in at your shop. As I told your assistant, I planned to return later, but unfortunately I got tied up with other things. So, since I'm rather short of time, I decided to try and catch you here. I figured you'd probably get home from work about now.'

With another quick smile, he answered her unspoken question. 'It was very easy to find out where you lived. I simply looked up your home address in the phone book.'

'I see.' Her growing anxiety made it easy to resist his smile this time. Georgia fixed him with a sharp look. 'And what's this matter you wish to discuss with me? It must, as you say, be important for you to have put yourself to all this trouble.' In spite of her calm tone, she could feel her heart thumping.

'It is also rather urgent.' His expression had grown serious. As he paused, Georgia could feel his eyes scour her face. 'So let's not waste any more time. Let's go somewhere private and discuss it.'

He made as though to step past her and head for the front door of her flat.

'Just a minute!' At the harsh note in her voice, Georgia saw him hesitate. 'This important, urgent matter...does it in any way concern my shop?' She held her breath, fearing she knew what his answer would be, but praying with every fibre of her being that she was wrong.

She was not wrong. He looked straight at her. 'Yes,' he said. 'It does.'

The words seemed to hang for a moment in the air, dark and menacing, sending a rush of panic through her. So her tormentors had not given up, after all.

Until Kay had told her about Lasalle's visit this afternoon, Georgia had dared to believe that all her recent headaches were finally over. It had actually begun to look as though the Paris-based company who, six weeks ago, had begun an all-out campaign to persuade her to sell her thriving little clothes shop had finally accepted that it wasn't for sale. They would never get their hands on her beloved Georgia D, no matter what dirty tricks they employed.

She took a deep breath and looked Lasalle straight in the eye. 'In that case, you'll have to talk to my solicitors.'

Her voice was stiff with contempt as she reeled off their names. On the surface, Lasalle appeared to be a rather different type from the other couple of envoys who'd been sent over to harass her, but beneath the glossy exterior he was no doubt just another thug who took pleasure in bullying a defenceless woman.

'You'll have no trouble tracking them down,' she added with a cool smile. 'They're listed in the phone book which you're already so familiar with. Just give them a ring. I'm sure they'll be most helpful.'

Dismissively, she turned away, about to stride past him to the front door.

He moved faster than a viper. Before she'd taken a single step, Lasalle was standing in front of her, blocking her path.

'You surprise me. I had imagined that, considering recent events, you'd be a little more interested in hearing what I have to say.'

Considering recent events. How about that for a perfectly blatant attempt at intimidation? As a couple of those recent events went flashing through her brain—the mysterious fire in the storeroom that had damaged most of her stock, the dispute over her lease that had almost lost her the shop—Georgia felt her contempt for him instantly double.

'I'm sure my solicitors will be interested.' She barely glanced at him as she spoke. 'Give them a ring. Make an appointment to speak to them. But now, if you don't mind, get out of my way.'

'It's not your solicitors I wish to speak to.' He remained precisely where he was, fixing her with a look that seemed to pierce right through her skull. 'The person I've come here to Bath to speak to, Miss Dee, is you.'

'That's really too bad, I'm afraid, Monsieur Lasalle. I don't waste my time speaking to people like you.'

Her eyes flashed back at him, her cheeks pink with anger. What right did he think he had to take this overbearing attitude?

'So, what I would suggest is that you move out of my way, now, then just get off my property and go back to wherever it was you came from.'

She'd expected him at least to look a little put out by this attack, which had been delivered in her most lethally cutting tone of voice. But, instead, he simply looked into her furious face and smiled.

One dark eyebrow lifted. 'Is this,' he wanted to know, addressing her as though she were some disrespectful child who'd just had the temerity to talk out of turn, 'the way you generally treat people who are trying to help you?'

'Help me?'

'Yes, help you. That is what I'm trying to do.'

This was a new twist. 'And in what way are you trying to help me?' Georgia feigned a look of curiosity. What kind of idiot did he take her for?

The cobalt-blue eyes narrowed. 'You may not be aware of it, but you're in serious danger of losing your business. I came here to try to help you hang onto it.'

Another new twist. So, he was a white knight come to rescue her? He really must think she was totally naive!

Georgia fixed him with a cool look. 'That's terribly decent of you, but it just so happens that I don't need your help. I'm perfectly capable of hanging onto my business by myself.'

She paused for a moment, then added with a mocking smile, ‘What makes you think I’d fall for a ridiculous story like that, anyway? Why on earth would I believe that you want to help me? Why would you want to do that? You don’t even know me.’

‘Very true. I don’t. But I know a little about you, and I also know something about your situation...’ Before she could butt in and demand to know why he was so interested, he elaborated, a sudden harsh smile on his lips, ‘Actually, I would say I know more about your situation than you do if you seriously believe you can handle this thing yourself.’

‘What thing?’

‘The takeover bid.’

A tingle of fear ran down her spine. Ignoring it, she told him, ‘You’re a little out of date. I have reason to believe that the takeover bid’s been dropped.’

‘Really? Well, it would certainly be nice if you were right. After all your hard work building up your shop from nothing to become one of the most highly regarded fashion shops in the south of England, it would be a tragedy if it were to end up in the hands of someone else. I can appreciate that’s the last thing you’d want to see happen.’

‘You’re dead right. It is. And it’s the last thing that’s going to happen. Nobody’s going to get their hands on my shop.’

He was watching her. ‘I admire your confidence,’ he told her. ‘But alas, I very much fear it’s misplaced.’ He paused. ‘Perhaps you don’t appreciate the full extent of what you’re up against. Duval’s not the kind of man to give up on something he really wants.’

Duval. At the sound of that hated name, quite involuntarily, Georgia’s fists clenched. The owner of the French fashion chain which had been trying to buy her shop, Duval had come personally to pay her a visit once, seeking to win her round with a mixture of promises and veiled threats. And, though she’d no actual proof, she was totally convinced that Duval had been behind the series of events—including the storeroom fire and the wrangle over her lease—which had suddenly started happening after she’d refused to play ball.

Georgia didn’t scare easily, but Duval had scared her. For a time, it had looked as though he might manage to drive her out of business.

She felt a chill touch her skin now as, in a clinical tone, Lasalle spelled out to her, ‘Your shop is perfect for Duval. Just what he’s been searching for to provide him with a foothold so he can start expanding into Britain. And, believe me, he’s absolutely determined to have it.’

‘You would know that, of course.’ Anger and disgust filled her and she made no attempt to keep them from her voice. ‘Since it’s perfectly clear that you’re one of his lackeys. You’re a little different from the others, of course. Not quite so crude. I congratulate Duval on his subtle change of tactics.’

‘But it’s not going to work. I’m going to give you exactly the same reply as I gave the others... Go back and tell Duval he’ll never have my shop. And now...’ she tossed her head at him ‘...get out of my way and let me past.’

‘I’m not Duval’s lackey.’

Georgia flicked him a scathing look. My, but weren’t those low-lives touchy? ‘OK. Employee, then. I’m sorry I trod on a tender nerve. But the message is still the same.’ She glared into his face. ‘And now, for the last time, get out of my way.’

‘I’m not his employee either. I don’t work for Duval. That’s not why I’m here. Like I told you, I’m here to help you.’

‘Oh, yes. I forgot. And why do you want to help me? You didn’t get round to telling me that.’

‘No, I didn’t. My reasons are not something you need to know. Just be grateful that I do want to help you, Miss Dee—for, believe me, you very much need my help.’ His eyes raked her face, then suddenly he smiled. ‘Put it down to my passion for helping damsels in distress.’

‘So, you’re a white knight in disguise?’ She really was supposed to believe that! ‘Well, I’m sorry, Monsieur Lasalle, but I’m afraid I don’t buy that. I stopped believing in fairy tales when I was twelve years old.’

‘But you still believe in monsters? Having met Duval, you must.’ The deep blue eyes looked steadily into hers. ‘And though, alas, I’m definitely no white knight, I can help you fight the monster Duval.’

There was a silence. Georgia stared at him, suddenly unsure what to believe. There’d been an earnest floss, almost an urgency in his eyes when he’d spoken then. Could he be on the level, after all? Was he really here to help her? Ought she to listen to whatever it was he’d come to say?

He seemed to read her mind. ‘Let’s go inside and talk. It’s important. I know how much your shop means to you.’

‘I doubt that.’

She glanced away. Her shop meant the world to her. For over three years she’d poured herself, body and heart and soul, into making it the runaway success it had become. It was the fulfilment of a dream. A lifetime’s ambition realized. But it was much, much more to her than just a business. It was the means to enable her to pay back those she loved. The thought of losing it and all it stood for made her blood run cold.

‘All the more reason to hear me out. Come on. Let’s go inside.’ As he spoke, he stepped forward and touched her lightly on the arm.

The touch of him scorched her. Something flared deep inside. A rush of excitement. A twist of longing like a knife. Georgia almost gasped out loud as she blinked up into his face.

Next moment, she was drowning in the black-fringed blue eyes, feeling the warm, physical aura of him wrap around her like an embrace. She opened her mouth, a mere breath away from saying, OK.

But at the last moment she stopped as a sense of panic seized her. It was utterly insane, but all at once she had the feeling of having been taken over by some irresistible force. He has the power, she suddenly sensed, to make me do anything he wishes. But I must resist. I must. Hurriedly, she took a step back.

‘No!’

Her tone was firm. She glared into his face. Jean-Claude Lasalle was clearly under the illusion that all he had to do to win any woman over was just look at her with those wonderful cobalt-blue eyes of his and treat her to one of his heart-stopping smiles. And no doubt it usually worked. Women would drop like ninepins at his feet. She’d very nearly dropped like a ninepin herself. It was the raw sexuality of him. Some rare magic he possessed.

But she refused to be one of his conquests. She would not do as he wished. She had no reason to trust him and every reason not to. In recent weeks, she’d learned to be sparing with her trust—especially when dealing with mysterious Frenchmen who were displaying just a little too much interest in her shop. Who knew what he might be planning?

‘No!’ she said again. ‘I’ve already told you the arrangement. If you want to discuss my business, you’re going to have to speak to my solicitors.’

‘And I’ve already told you I’ve no intention of doing that.’ The seductive charm had gone. His eyes were hard again. ‘I speak to you or I speak to no one. And time is short. I’ll be leaving Bath first thing tomorrow. So, if you want to hear what I have to say, you’d better make up your mind fast’

‘I’ve already made up my mind. I don’t want to hear what you have to say.’ Georgia shot him a withering look. ‘Now get out of my way.’

‘You’re making a big mistake.’ He ignored her command, and that withering look had simply bounced off him like rainwater. ‘But do what you like. I’m not going to insist If you want Duval to take your shop from you, what business is it of mine?’

He glanced down at her with a grim smile. ‘And he will take it from you. I know Duval well and that’s one thing I can guarantee.’

‘Don’t try to intimidate me! I’m not scared by your stupid threats! And if you don’t get out of here this minute I’m going to call the police and have you thrown off my property!’

But he was already leaving anyway, heading swiftly up the gravel path. At the gate, he turned to look at her. That was a warning, not a threat. And you’re just wasting precious energy shouting at me when you ought to be saving it for your coming fight with Duval.’ He flicked her a dark look. ‘He hasn’t finished with you yet.’

‘How do you know? You do work for him, don’t you?’ Anger and fear and confusion rushed inside her. ‘Since you seem to know so much, why don’t you tell me what he’s planning?’

He answered none of her questions. ‘Up until now, you’ve had it easy. He’s played pretty clean, at least by his standards. But all that’s about to change. He’s beginning to get impatient. And when Duval gets impatient he starts to play dirty and he doesn’t give a damn who he destroys in the process.’

Georgia was aware that her cheeks had turned as white as sheets of paper. She stared at Lasalle numbly as he pulled open the gate.

‘I don’t believe you. You’re making all this up. You’re just trying to scare me. But I’m sorry, it won’t work.’

Brave words, but even to her own ears they sounded hollow. She did believe him and she definitely was scared.

She watched in dismay as the gate shut with a dismissive click. Then, without so much as a backward glance at her, Lasalle was stepping off the pavement and striding across the road to where a shiny low black Porsche was parked. As he snatched the door open and was about to climb inside, sudden panic rose up in Georgia’s throat.

‘Wait! Where are you going? Hang on! Don’t go yet!’

Without realizing what she was doing, Georgia was hurrying up the path after him. Perhaps she’d been too hasty. She ought to have listened to him, after all. He’d offered to help her. She shouldn’t have just sent him away.

She reached the gate as he slid behind the wheel and slammed the door.

‘Wait!’ she called out. ‘Please wait! Please come back!’

But he paid her no heed. With a squeal of tyres, he was gone.

Jean-Claude got back to his hotel in central Bath to find a whole stack of phone messages and faxes waiting for him at Reception.

‘You’re an extremely sought-after man.’ The receptionist smiled at him prettily, cheeks pinking with pleasure as the blue eyes smiled back at her. For Georgia had been perfectly correct in her assumption that women the world over, regardless of age or race, tended to fall like ninepins at Jean-Claude’s well-shod feet.

Jean-Claude was not unaware of this power he possessed and which he’d first properly recognized at about the age of sixteen, and he’d never been particularly reticent about exploiting it. Good fortune, he firmly believed, was not something to be wasted, particularly not good fortune with women.

For Jean-Claude loved women. Looking at them. Being with them. Talking to them. Making love to them. Without women the world would be a grey and charmless place.

All the same, as he took his pile of messages and told the pink-cheeked receptionist, ‘Thank you, mademoiselle,’ flirtation was actually the last thing on his mind. At the sight of the heap of paperwork, his brain had switched instantly to business, and no woman yet had succeeded for very long in taking precedence over business in his personal list of priorities.

For, as much as he loved women, he had yet to discover one who stimulated and satisfied him half as much as his work. His work was what drove him. Women were a hobby—albeit a hobby which he pursued with great passion.

As he headed for the lift, he was already flicking through the sheaf of messages, a couple of which required urgent responses. He glanced at his watch as the lift doors opened. If he got down to it, he'd have time to fit those in before dinner.

He stepped into the lift. One of the messages, however, he would put aside to deal with later. It concerned the business he'd just been dealing with, the business of Georgia Dee, which at the moment could best be described as unconcluded. Remembering, he smiled. Georgia Dee was full of surprises.

His first sight of her had been perhaps the biggest surprise of all, for she was not at all what he'd been expecting. He'd known she would be young—twenty six years old, according to his information—but he'd been expecting some hard-bitten, tough-faced businesswoman, for who else would have the guts to stand up to a man like Duval? But, instead, she was the most beautiful, fresh, lovely creature, with the face of an angel and a body to invite sin—a perfectly irresistible combination!

As the lift soared up towards the top floor, Jean-Claude frowned to himself. What, if anything, should he do about Miss Dee? When he'd left her fifteen minutes ago in a blaze of frustration, it had been his intention simply to wash his hands of her. Chances were he could manage without her assistance anyway, though her cooperation might have made his task a little easier.

But now his mood had mellowed. Whether he really needed her or not, he rather liked the idea of having another go at winning her round. For a start, he was extremely partial to brunettes, especially brunettes with such glorious hazel eyes. And she had lots of spirit, and there was nothing he enjoyed more than crossing swords with a spirited woman. Unless, of course, it was making love to her.

As the lift doors opened, he stepped out onto the landing, a sense of warm anticipation gathering in his heart. Over dinner, he'd decide how to bring these pleasures within his grasp.

Lasalle wasn't staying at the first hotel Georgia phoned. Nor at the second one and nor at the third. Maybe, she thought bleakly, he wasn't staying at a hotel at all. Perhaps, instead, he was staying with friends. And time was so short. He'd said he was leaving Bath first thing tomorrow. How would she manage to track him down before then?

But then, with her fourth try, she finally struck gold.

'Yes, we do have a Mr Jean-Claude Lasalle staying with us,' the receptionist told her. 'Would you like me to put you through—?'

Georgia cut in quickly, 'No, thanks. Please don't bother. I'd prefer to drop round to the hotel and speak to him in person.'

Ten minutes later, she was jumping into her red Polo and heading for the city centre.

Thank heavens! she thought. I'm saved! It was like winning a reprieve. Since that terrifying moment when she'd stood at the garden gate and watched him disappear in the proverbial cloud of dust, she'd been utterly convinced that she'd made a ghastly mistake.

Maybe he wasn't genuine. There was always that possibility. But she also had to consider the possibility that he was. And if that was the case and he really did want to help her, then she'd been out of her mind to dismiss him the way she had. If it was true that Duval was about to come after her again, she was going to need every bit of help she could get.

She shivered, remembering all the strange things that had started happening after she'd turned down Duval's third and final offer.

The first odd occurrence had concerned the lease on her shop. She'd been about to renew it, a perfectly routine affair, when suddenly, out of the blue, she'd been notified by her landlord that the lease was not renewable, after all. She'd have to find new premises by the end of the month.

That had been a nightmare. She could never have done it. Suitable premises in the city centre were rarer than hens' teeth. But at the very last moment her solicitor had established that her landlord had no right to refuse to renew her lease.

Still, that hadn't been the end of it. Next, her landlord had tripled the rent.

It had been totally out of the question that she could ever have paid such a sum, and for a while it had looked as though she might actually have to sell her flat in order to keep going till she could

find new, cheaper premises. But in the end, after a fight, her landlord had been forced to back down again. He'd still put the rent up, but not by three times what it had been.

Georgia had barely recovered from all that when there was a fire in the storeroom which resulted in her losing most of her stock. The insurance company had paid up, but what was lost was irreplaceable. The only thing to be grateful for was that it had happened in between seasons, before the bulk of her summer stock arrived from France. Otherwise, it would have been a total disaster.

She'd no evidence to prove it, but Georgia was convinced that Duval was the one she had to thank for all her troubles. Each time something had happened, he'd instantly materialised, either by phone or in the shape of one of his lackeys, renewing his last offer, urging her to accept it and dropping hints that she'd be extremely unwise not to cooperate.

It had been a nerve-racking time, but Georgia had held out and, in the end, Duval had dropped from sight. Her solicitor had told her it was safe to assume that he'd finally abandoned his bid to take her over. But now Lasalle was saying that this wasn't so and warning her that Duval was about to start playing dirty. That scared her to bits. What was dirty in Duval's book? She'd been under the impression he was playing dirty already!

Of course, as far as Lasalle himself was concerned, there were still a lot of questions to be answered. Who was he? Who was he working for? Why did he want to help her? But, all the same, she was convinced that it had been a big mistake to send him away without even hearing what he had to say. If there was any chance at all that he really was genuine, she had to find a way to get him back on her side again.

As she headed through the light evening traffic in the city centre, Georgia was already planning how she would do that. She'd get him alone and apologize profusely for her rudeness, beg him to forgive her and plead for his help. And since it was a pretty safe bet that he was the type of man who would enjoy a begging, pleading woman—it would appeal to his overbearing masculine vanity!—he'd soon forgive her and do as she wished. Then, when she'd had a chance to consider what he had to say to her, she'd be able to judge whether he was genuine or not.

She smiled to herself. It was going to be easy. She had Jean-Claude Lasalle all figured out.

At the hotel reception desk, however, she received a bit of bad news.

'I'm sorry,' the receptionist told her, casting a quick glance behind her at the row of numbered cubby-holes where the guests' keys were kept, 'but Mr Lasalle appears to have gone out.'

Damn. 'I don't suppose he said where he was going?' If she knew where he'd gone, maybe she could go after him.

But the receptionist shook her head. 'I'm afraid I have no idea. We don't keep track of our guests' movements,' she added sniffily.

Georgia took a seat in a corner of the lobby with a good view of the door. Chances were he'd gone out to dinner, but it would be pointless to try and track him down, for there were any number of restaurants he might have gone to. No, she'd just have to sit here and wait till he got back.

She leaned back and suppressed a sigh. It would probably be a long wait. Jean-Claude Lasalle, with his designer suits and shiny Porsche, was not the type of man to make do with a quick bite. No takeaway Chinese or instant hamburger for him. He'd be treating himself to three leisurely courses of Bath's best, with a bottle of good wine and a shot of brandy to follow. Suppressing another small sigh, she reached for one of the magazines on the table.

An hour and a half later, there was still no sign of him. Georgia stood up to stretch her legs and stifled a yawn. She'd read every single magazine on the table from cover to cover and she was starting to grow tired of the sniffy receptionist's beady stare. Maybe she thinks I'm some high-class hooker who's arrived a little early for my appointment! she thought.

But there was a more worrying consideration. It was far too hot here in the lobby and she'd caught herself very nearly nodding off a couple of times! That really was serious. Imagine the disaster if she was sitting there in a state of oblivious slumber when he finally walked into the lobby! For it

was perfectly possible that the beady-eyed receptionist might not actually bother to tell him she was there. He could be fast asleep in bed by the time she discovered he was back.

Georgia frowned. Maybe I ought to stay on my feet and pace about, she told herself. That would keep me awake, as well as entertaining the receptionist! But then she had a much better idea.

She crossed again to the reception desk. 'I wonder if you'd mind checking if Mr Lasalle has left a message for me?' She smiled a long-suffering smile. 'You see, he was supposed to meet me here, and I can't believe he'd be this late without letting me know.'

With a haughty little smile, the receptionist obliged, turning to the row of cubby-holes behind her. Then, as Georgia held her breath, terrified her ruse mightn't work, she proceeded to do precisely what Georgia had prayed she'd do. She reached up and inserted her hand into one of the cubby-holes.

A moment later, she was examining the slip of paper she'd removed. 'No, I'm afraid there's no message. This is a fax for Mr Lasalle.' And she returned the slip of paper to the cubby-holes.

Georgia was struggling not to grin. Of course there was no message for her! But she'd got what she wanted. She now knew his room number, something the sniffy receptionist would never voluntarily have told her. So she could go ahead and put her brilliant idea into action!

She went back to her seat, picked up a magazine at random and waited till the receptionist disappeared into the office behind the desk, as she did from time to time. Then Georgia leapt to her feet, tore across the lobby and dived through the doorway that led to the lifts and stairs. Scarcely pausing for breath, she sprinted up to the top floor.

What she'd do was wait for him outside his room. There, she'd be able to pace about in private and, when he finally arrived, she'd be able to speak to him more easily, away from curious, prying eyes.

As she approached his room, however, she was taken by surprise. A maid suddenly emerged through the half-open door, carrying an armful of used bath towels.

'Good evening.' She smiled at Georgia. 'I've just been tidying the bathroom.' And she held the door open to allow her to pass inside.

Georgia's immediate, instinctive reaction was to point out the mistake.

'It's not my room,' she was about to confess. 'I'm not even a guest here.'

But, for some quite unfathomable reason, she didn't.

She hesitated for only a second. 'Thank you,' she replied. Then, with barely a thought for what she might be walking into, she quickly squared her shoulders and strode through the open door.

CHAPTER TWO

GEORGIA blinked open her eyes, suddenly realising that she'd fallen asleep.

Horrors! What had she been thinking of? She squinted at her watch and discovered to her dismay that it was very nearly midnight. And Lasalle still wasn't back yet. What the devil was the man up to?

Stiffly, she sat up, pushing her hair back from her face. Just be grateful that he is up to it, whatever it is, she told herself. Imagine how it would have looked if he'd come walking through the door and found you fast asleep at the foot of his bed!

It was at that moment that, through the bathroom door, she heard the sound of the shower.

Georgia froze, refusing to believe her ears for a moment. Surely not? He'd come back, calmly walked past her—for there was no way in the world he could have failed to notice her!—and then, as though everything were perfectly normal, he'd gone into the bathroom to have a shower! If nothing else, he deserved ten out of ten for cool.

She heard the shower switch off, and jumped up from the bed. What on earth ought she to do now? Flee while she still had the chance? It was tempting, but it would be a pretty silly thing to do at this stage. No, the only course of action was to stay right where she was and try to act as cool as him. For one thing, it was rather necessary that she explain what she was doing here, for heaven knew what must be going through his head!

Shoulders squared and quickly smoothing the rumpled skirt of her cerise wool suit, she turned to face the bathroom door just as Lasalle came walking through it.

‘So, you’re awake?’ He was wearing nothing but a white towel around his hips. He smiled with amusement into her carefully composed face. ‘I hope I didn’t disturb you. I tried to be as quiet as I could.’

Very funny. So, he was planning to play this for laughs at her expense? Well, at least he was being civilised. It could have been worse.

Georgia smiled an ironic smile. ‘I’m sorry,’ she apologised, struggling to keep her eyes on his face as she spoke, though the temptation to examine the bronzed, muscular body, with its broad, powerful shoulders and taut, flat stomach, was very nearly irresistible. ‘I didn’t mean to fall asleep. But the room was so hot. I must have dozed off.’

‘You certainly must have. But don’t worry about it. You made an extremely charming, if unexpected, picture curled up there on the bed when I walked in.’

‘I only sat on the bed because the chair was so uncomfortable.’ She cast a quick, accusing glance at the low-backed chair in question and saw to her dismay that it was now draped with his clothes. Good grief. He must have undressed right here in the room in front of her. Thank heavens she hadn’t wakened in the middle of that!

‘I only meant,’ she added lamely, ‘to sit down for a minute.’

Inwardly, she was cringing at the grossness of her faux pas. Tired of pacing about the room, she’d gone to sit on the end of the bed, then, just to be more comfortable, had stretched out for a moment, certain she had the will-power not to fall asleep. She’d fully intended being on her feet when he finally came walking through the door! But she’d blown it. What an absolute idiot she’d been!

Not that Lasalle appeared even the least bit put out. Perhaps finding young females asleep on his bed was something that happened to him every day of the week. He hadn’t even bothered to ask how she’d got in!

Which was another thing. Why on earth had she come into his room in the first place? She must have been crazy, though it had seemed harmless at the time. Talk about walking into the lion’s den!

She watched as he switched on the pair of bedside lamps, her eyes lingering in spite of herself on the smooth, muscular back that rippled deliciously with every sinuous movement. Earlier today, she’d decided that Jean-Claude Lasalle was the most ravishing man she’d ever set eyes on in her life and nothing she was seeing now was causing her to revise that opinion. He really was a perfectly glorious specimen.

But hang on, she hadn’t come here to admire him, and it was actually the last thing she ought to be doing! That could lead to all sorts of trouble!

She cleared her throat as he turned to look at her again. ‘I suppose you’re wondering why I’m here...’ Before he could deny that—for he’d no doubt already come to his own conclusions!—she hurried on, carefully ignoring the amused glint in the blue eyes. ‘Well, I came here to apologise. For turning you away earlier without hearing what it was that you wanted to tell me.’ She smiled a contrite smile. ‘I was rude and I’m really sorry.’

As she paused, she was hoping she’d sounded convincing, for she hadn’t quite struck the note she’d intended. She’d been planning to plead a little and appeal to his male vanity, but, standing here in his bedroom with him dressed in just a towel, that hadn’t quite seemed the most appropriate thing to do.

She smiled again. ‘I made a mistake and I hope you can forgive me. I’d really like to hear what it was you came to tell me.’

Lasalle said nothing for a moment. He let his eyes scan her face in that intensely probing way he had. Then, abruptly, his gaze dropped down to scan the slim, cerise wool suit. ‘Why don’t you take something off?’ he said. ‘You must be incredibly hot.’

Take something off? So, that was what was on his mind! He probably hadn't been listening to a single word she'd said!

Georgia regarded him calmly. 'Actually, I'm not hot at all.' It wasn't true, of course, but that was scarcely the point! 'I'm perfectly comfortable as I am, thank you very much.'

'If you say so...but don't tell me you plan on sleeping like that?' His tone was amused. 'Surely that would be a little uncomfortable?' As he spoke, he casually tossed back the quilted bedcover. 'Personally, I prefer to sleep with nothing on at all—at least, when I'm expecting female company.'

In vain, Georgia fought the vision that rushed up before her eyes. Him lying on the bed in perfect naked glory, one hand held out towards her, inviting her to join him.

That was quite bad enough, but what was twenty times worse was the shameless way she found herself reacting to this vision. She felt a thrust of pure longing, a wicked shiver down her spine.

Shame on you, Georgia. She squashed the feelings instantly and hurried to correct his total misreading of the situation.

'Hang on a minute. You've got something terribly wrong here.' Only half-conscious of what she was doing, she folded her arms like a barrier across her chest. 'I came here to speak to you. I didn't say anything about sleeping. I simply came to hear what it was you wanted to tell me.'

'At this hour? At midnight?'

'It wasn't midnight when I arrived.'

'Nevertheless, it's midnight now.' One black eyebrow lifted sceptically. 'Do you really, seriously expect me to believe that you were waiting in my room at midnight in order to talk?'

'Yes, I do, as a matter of fact.' Georgia flashed him an angry look. 'I'm afraid you're deluding yourself if you think I came for anything else.'

As she spoke, she had to concentrate on keeping her eyes from the bed, which seemed suddenly to have grown to fill the entire room, not to mention having sprouted a set of bright red flashing lights.

'I've been waiting for you for hours. Ask the receptionist downstairs. I've been here at the hotel since just after half past seven.'

'My, you must have been keen.'

'Yes, but not for what you think. The only reason I came at all and waited till now is because you told me you were leaving Bath tomorrow morning and that what you had to tell me was important and urgent. No other reason,' she emphasized, fixing him with a hard look.

While she'd been reeling off this defence, Lasalle had seated himself on the bed.

'What a shame.' The blue eyes danced beneath their scandalously long lashes. 'So what, may I ask, brought about this sudden change of mind?'

'I realised I'd been too hasty.' She tried a persuasive smile. 'Look, I really am sorry for the way I acted earlier and I seriously do want to hear what you have to say.'

'I've no doubt you do.' He was slipping off his gold watch and laying it down on the bedside table. 'Trouble is, it's a bit late for serious discussions now.'

'I know, and I apologize.' She tried another persuasive smile. 'Couldn't you just tell me whatever it is very quickly?'

'I'm afraid not.' He shook his head. 'It's been a long day and I'm tired. The only thing on my agenda right now is bed.'

'So, what are we going to do? You're leaving tomorrow.'

'You're right. I am. So I guess that's it.' He sighed and paused a moment before adding, 'Unless, of course, you feel like spending the night here. I suppose it's always possible that we might manage to fit in a few minutes of serious discussion in the course of the night.'

Georgia was aware of a frosty look descending on her face. 'I'm afraid that solution doesn't appeal to me in the slightest.' She glared at him for a moment, then carefully softened her expression. Somehow, she had to get round him and pin him down on her terms.

‘What about tomorrow morning? I could come here to the hotel early. We could fit in a few minutes before you leave.’

He was shaking his head again. ‘I’ll be leaving very early. And I’m not really a morning person. More of a night owl. Early-morning meetings aren’t my thing.’

‘But this is important!’ Georgia glared at him again. He was enjoying this, making her pay for turning him away earlier. She could see the amusement flickering across his face. ‘What am I going to do if you refuse to help me?’

‘I’m not refusing to help you. I told you...stay the night.’

This was impossible. ‘I’m not staying the night. What do you think I am? You’ve got a damned cheek!’

‘OK. It seems to me that’s the end of the discussion. If you’re not staying, I’m going to get some sleep now.’

And before she had a chance to close her eyes or turn away he was loosening the towel at his waist and tossing it to the floor. A moment later, in one smooth movement, he had slipped between the sheets.

Georgia’s cheeks had turned the same bright colour as her suit. Damned exhibitionist! He’d done that on purpose. But if he’d been trying to embarrass her into just turning around and leaving he was about to discover that she didn’t embarrass quite that easily!

She fixed him with a defiant look. ‘There must be some way round this. We could speak on the phone, for example. Give me your number and I’ll ring you.’

He was leaning back against the pillows, his hair very black against the white linen. He smiled at her. ‘I can see you’re reluctant to leave. So, why not just slip off your things and join me in here?’

She was getting nowhere. She was beaten. Angrily, Georgia turned away. ‘Don’t kid yourself. I’m not in the least reluctant to leave. I’m just sorry I made the mistake of coming in the first place.’ She stomped off towards the door. ‘Good night and goodbye.’

He made no answer, but she could feel the blue eyes following her. Then, as she snatched the door open and was about to step out into the corridor, he said, ‘If you still want to hear what I have to say, come to the hotel tomorrow afternoon about five.’

‘I thought you were leaving tomorrow morning...?’

Frowning, she turned to face him. But, at that precise moment, he switched off the bedside lights.

The sudden darkness blinded her, in spite of the faint light from the corridor. Georgia blinked and continued to stare unseeingly towards the bed. Had he really meant that invitation? Dared she believe him? She felt totally thrown. What had provoked this abrupt turnaround?

‘Are you still there?’ Suddenly, he spoke again. ‘Look, make up your mind. Either come here and join me or leave, closing the door behind you, and let me get some sleep. I don’t like people hovering about.’

Stifling a curse, Georgia stepped into the corridor and closed the door with a sharp, decisive click.

‘Well, this is what I call interesting! But I’m not really surprised. I knew he was much too gorgeous to be a villain!’

Georgia had told Kay all about her two meetings with Lasalle yesterday, including the ignominious business of her falling asleep on his bed, a scenario that had hugely amused her assistant.

‘What I don’t understand,’ she’d joked, ‘is why you refused to stay the night. A dish like that doesn’t walk into a girl’s life every day.’

There was no arguing with that, but, as Georgia told her now, ‘I’m still not as convinced as you are that he’s actually on the level.’ For, though she intended keeping the appointment at his hotel this afternoon, she still had a few lingering doubts about Jean-Claude Lasalle.

‘I don’t even know who he is, for heaven’s sake. In spite of what he was saying, he could still be one of Duval’s men. I mean, why on earth would someone suddenly show up like that, completely out of the blue, offering to help me? Maybe it’s all just an elaborate scheme to try and trick me. Today could turn out to be a total waste of time.’

‘Never.’ Kay was incorrigible. ‘How could a meeting with a man like that ever turn out to be a total waste of time?’ She fixed Georgia with a narrow look, half joking, half serious. ‘Who knows? This could finally be the Mr Wonderful you’ve been waiting for.’

‘Yes, and pigs might fly.’ At least Georgia was sure about one thing. Jean-Claude Lasalle was a pretty tasty packet of goods, but there was no way in the world he was going to turn out to be Mr Wonderful!

The Mr Wonderful thing was a joke that had grown up between her and Kay—who was her good friend as well as her valued assistant. Kay kept telling her it was time she found herself a man.

‘Work’s not everything,’ she would chide her. ‘You need a love life as well.’

‘You happily married people are all the same,’ Georgia would counter, for Kay had been blissfully married to Eddie for seven and a half years. ‘But I’m not looking for a man. Right now, work suits me fine.’

In a way, it was true. For the past three and a half years, since throwing open the bright blue doors of Georgia D—with only a scarily hefty bank loan and a bucketful of ambition to prop her up—the huge amount of work involved in making the business a success had absorbed a vast chunk of both her time and her emotions. Of course, there’d been men on the scene. But never anyone serious. None of them had ever amounted to more than the occasional pleasant dinner date.

Sometimes, she felt the lack, as she occasionally confessed to Kay, but the plain truth was she simply hadn’t met a man who’d even half tempted her to start getting serious.

‘Your problem is,’ Kay had once observed wisely, ‘that you’re not looking for Mr Right, you’re looking for Mr Wonderful.’ And maybe, Georgia had to confess, she was right.

A man who’ll sweep me off my feet and turn my whole head inside out and fill my life with love and magic and excitement. Passion. Fire. Enchantment. Wonder. I’m crazy, she often told herself, but that really is what I dream of.

And Jean-Claude Lasalle? Well, he would know all about passion. And there was a fire in him, even a little magic, and he was undeniably exciting. But, in spite of all that, he was no Mr Wonderful. Mr Wonderful, above all, would be a one-woman man, and it was as plain as the exceedingly handsome nose on his face that Jean-Claude Lasalle was definitely not that!

So she ignored Kay’s wink as she set off from the shop at four forty-five to keep her appointment. All she wanted from Lasalle was to find out what he knew about Duval and—if she decided he really was genuine—how he proposed to help her fight him.

Less than fifteen minutes later, she was walking up to the hotel reception desk to find herself looking into the beady-eyed face of the same woman who’d been on duty last night. Having witnessed Georgia’s departure from the hotel just after midnight, she must really be wondering what the devil was going on!

So, let her wonder!

‘Georgia Dee for Mr Lasalle,’ Georgia told her, adding with a confident smile, ‘He’s expecting me.’

But her smile instantly died. The woman shook her head. ‘I’m afraid Mr Lasalle isn’t here. He’s gone to London.’

‘London?’ Georgia was aware of her mouth dropping open. ‘London?’ she said again. ‘But we have an appointment!’

‘There’s a message for you, however.’ The woman was turning away to extract a slip of paper from Lasalle’s cubby-hole. ‘He phoned a little while ago to say he’d been held up, but that he’d be here to keep your appointment just as soon as he could.’

‘And how soon will that be? Has he left London? Did he say?’ It was about a three hour drive from London to Bath, though possibly a little less in a Porsche! Just how long was she expected to hang about?

But the receptionist couldn’t help her. ‘He didn’t say how long he’d be.’ She shrugged sympathetically. ‘Men!’ she observed.

Georgia smiled back at that. Maybe she’d misjudged her, after all. ‘It looks like I have no choice but to wait.’

But as she turned away and went to seat herself on one of the chairs Georgia was biting back her anger. Hanging around waiting for Jean-Claude Lasalle was getting to be a habit she could well do without!

An hour passed.

The receptionist glanced across at her and said, ‘Why don’t you go out and stretch your legs for a bit? If he arrives while you’re gone, I’ll tell him you’re here.’

That sounded like a good idea. Georgia thanked her and went for a walk. Twenty minutes later, full of hope, she returned. But the best news the receptionist could give her was that he’d just phoned again.

‘He was calling from his car phone and I could hardly make out a thing. But he seemed to be saying that he wouldn’t be long.’

Wouldn’t be long. What was that supposed to mean? ‘I’m going out for another walk,’ Georgia informed the woman between clenched teeth. If she was forced to sit about here for another single moment she’d end up eating the carpet in frustration!

With difficulty, she wasted another twenty minutes, but this time as she approached the hotel she knew he’d arrived. A familiar sleek black Porsche was parked arrogantly outside.

Seething, she hurried up the steps to the main door. Then she was sweeping into the lobby, where she spotted him instantly, sitting in an armchair reading a newspaper. As he rose to his feet, tossing the newspaper aside, she advanced on him furiously, anger smouldering from every pore, her glossy dark hair bouncing against her shoulders.

‘So, you’ve finally arrived!’ Her hazel eyes blazed at him. ‘Are you aware that you’re two hours late for our meeting? You asked me to meet you here at five. It’s now nearly seven o’clock!’

If he dared to make a joke of it and say she ought to be used to waiting, she would throttle him right there on the spot with her bare hands!

Perhaps he read that in her face, for he answered in a sober tone, almost managing to sound genuinely apologetic, ‘I’m sorry. I got held up. It really couldn’t be helped. I got here as soon as I could. I can’t apologise enough.’

That took the wind out of her sails a bit, but she hadn’t finished with him yet.

‘You’re absolutely right—you can’t apologise enough! Do you think I have nothing better to do than sit around for hours waiting for you?’

‘No, I don’t think that.’ He frowned into her angry eyes. ‘Look, I suggest we go up to my room and talk. Come.’ As he spoke, he took her lightly by the arm.

Georgia snatched her arm away as though he’d bitten her, partly out of anger—how dared he lay a hand on her?—and partly from shock at the jolt that went through her. The sheer erotic power of it almost took her breath away.

Almost. She managed to snap, ‘I don’t need your help! I’m perfectly capable of walking on my own!’ Then she swung away furiously and marched ahead of him to the lifts.

They made their way up to the top floor in total silence. And not once did Georgia glance at him. She kept her eyes fixed straight ahead. She’d never been so furious with anyone in her life.

It wasn’t just that he’d kept her waiting, though that was bad enough. What had really triggered her explosion of fury was the way he’d been sitting there calmly reading his newspaper, just like that

first time when she'd found him in her garden. So perfectly in control. So utterly uncaring. He seemed to think he had the right to behave as he pleased with her, that she was somehow at his beck and call.

Well, she was going to have to put him right about that!

At last, the lift doors opened and Lasalle took his key from his pocket, then stepped aside to let her pass ahead of him. He did the same when they reached his door. What perfect, impeccable manners! Too bad she wasn't even the least bit impressed! She swept past him, then swung round to face him as he closed the door.

'As I was saying down in the lobby just a moment ago...do you really think I have nothing better to do than sit around for hours waiting for you?'

'No, I don't, as I already said. It's just been one of those days. Every single thing that could possibly go wrong did go wrong.'

Did he expect her to feel sorry for him? Georgia scowled into his face. 'Well, thanks to you, it's turned into one of those days for me too!'

'I think we both need a drink.' Abruptly, he turned away, heading for the fridge bar in the far corner. 'Why don't you take a seat while I fix us a couple of whiskies?'

'I don't drink whisky.'

Georgia glared at his back. And I don't feel like taking a seat, she nearly added. But that was just her anger talking. She actually did feel like sitting down. All that churning emotion had made her quite dizzy.

From the small group of chairs round the coffee table beside the window, she chose one with its back to him and also with its back to the bed. It might be a little unsettling to have to sit and look at that!

She heard the clink of glasses, the sound of a bottle top being unwound, the clatter of ice cubes, the splash of liquid against them. Then his footsteps were coming back towards her across the carpet. Georgia scowled straight ahead of her and refused to turn round.

'You'll drink this whisky,' he was saying. 'It's a special twelve-year-old single malt. I have a friend in Scotland who sends me regular supplies.' As he came to the end of the sentence, suddenly he was standing right in front of her, holding a glass out towards her.

Startled, Georgia jumped and looked up into his face and was instantly thrown into a state of confusion.

She'd forgotten just how powerfully he was capable of affecting her and, taken by surprise, she was suddenly helpless before him. All at once, she could feel her heart clattering against her ribs and a squeeze of shameless pleasure at the sheer physical beauty of him. There was another sensation, too. A shaft of piercing longing that twisted oh, so sweetly inside her.

She held her breath. Heaven help me if he ever tries to seduce me, she thought. Where would I find the power to resist?

Numbly, she took the glass, carefully avoiding his fingers. She wouldn't touch it, of course, for she never drank whisky, but if she took the glass without a fuss he might just move away. And, in fact, that was what he did. Taking a mouthful from his own glass, Lasalle turned to seat himself across the coffee table from her.

He leaned back and suddenly smiled. 'You didn't give me a chance to tell you, but you're looking even more stunning than ever today.'

His gaze swept over her, perfectly openly, just like that first time in the garden, seeming to take in every tiny detail of the pale blue Chanel-style suit she was wearing. He gave a small, impudent click of appreciation. 'Very chic. Very classy. It very much suits you.'

Georgia fixed him with a spiky look. 'So glad you approve.'

Normally, she had no problem accepting compliments from men, but right now anything he said would have irked her. Besides, the compliment had struck her as just a little too smooth, as though

it had been plucked from a familiar, well-thumbed repertoire. He no doubt handed out compliments like that all the time.

Feeling an acute sense of relief, she revised her earlier judgement. If he ever tried to seduce her, she'd resist him with ease. It was true that at times he had a powerful effect on her, but that was only because of a superficial weakness on her part. Deep down, she wasn't attracted in the slightest to men who collected women the way some small boys collected postage stamps. Which was precisely the type of man that Jean-Claude Lasalle was.

Taking charge of herself again, she looked him in the eye and very pointedly set down her untouched glass on the coffee table. 'Right,' she said, 'I don't know about you, but now that we've finally managed to keep our appointment I'd rather like to get down to business. You said you had something important to tell me.' She sat back in her seat and regarded him expectantly. 'Feel free to go ahead. I'm listening.'

In response, Lasalle took another mouthful of his whisky. He looked back at her with interest. 'Don't you ever relax?'

'I didn't come here to relax. I came to hear what you have to tell me. I was under the impression that was supposed to be the point of this somewhat belated meeting?'

'Don't worry. I plan to tell you. But can't I just drink my whisky first? I've had a hell of a day and I've just driven all the way from London.'

'So you said. My heart weeps.' Georgia flicked him a callous look. It cheered her up no end to know he'd had a hellish day. She shifted in her seat. 'So, how do you suggest we pass the time? Are we going to sit here in silence while you drink your whisky or are we going to indulge in polite conversation?'

'I vote for polite conversation.'

'OK. You choose a subject. Restaurants? Films? Where we go for our holidays? Or maybe, to make it really entertaining, we could swap life stories? Let's start with yours. I enjoy a good horror story.'

Lasalle was smiling. 'Do I detect a touch of English irony?' He took another mouthful of whisky, watching her over the glass. 'That's one of the things I like about you English. You never entirely lose your sense of humour.'

'Is that so? Personally, I used to have rather a soft spot for the French, but I'm afraid that's suddenly gone out the window. Though I suppose it's really rather unfair to judge a whole nation by someone like you. You, after all, are hardly typical.'

'You're wrong. I would say I'm typically French. Charming. Urbane. All the usual Gallic qualities.' As he said it, his gaze held hers and he smiled.

Georgia very nearly smiled back. Even through her irritation, there was something about that smile of his that she found deeply appealing. But she was damned if she would succumb. She fixed him with a cool look. 'I see I'm not the only one with a sense of humour.'

'So, we have something in common. That's good.' He was still smiling. 'Two people who're planning to team up together should definitely have a few things in common.'

'Planning to team up together? Excuse me? What did you say?'

He was setting down his whisky glass on the table between them. 'You wanted to get down to business, so that's what I'm doing...'

As she frowned, he leaned forward and looked deep into her eyes, so that Georgia had to fight very hard to stop from blinking. And she was suddenly very conscious that she was sitting in his bedroom with a huge king-sized bed just a couple of whiskies away over her shoulder.

She held her breath, eyes unblinking, as he leaned even closer and elaborated, 'That's what I want to propose. That you and I get together. I think we'd make a beautiful team.'

CHAPTER THREE

'OH, REALLY?'

What was going on here? Georgia peered into Lasalle's face. If this was some kind of chat-up line, it was doomed to fail.

She fixed him with a cool look. 'You're going to have to explain that, I'm afraid.'

'Gladly.' He sat back a little in his seat, his expression sobering as he began to speak again. 'You want to save your shop, and in order to do that you're going to have to beat off Duval. I'm out for Duval, too, so we share the same goal. And we'll each achieve what we're after more easily and more quickly if we agree to cooperate with one another.'

He paused and looked into her eyes, suddenly smiling as he added, 'I promise that's the only kind of beautiful partnership I had in mind.'

Sure it was. She'd have to be seriously stupid to believe that, though she could tell he didn't actually expect her to, anyway. That look in his eyes was pure sexual challenge and, to her dismay, it had provoked a warm flare inside her.

It was hopeless. He just had to look at her and it was like flicking on a switch.

All the more reason to keep her expression carefully blank. The only way to deal with a man like Jean-Claude Lasalle was to convince him you were totally immune to his charms.

'I'm not sure I'm interested in any kind of partnership,' she told him. 'But at least I begin to get the picture. You told me you wanted to help me, but the person you really want to help is yourself. You think you can get to Duval through me.'

'Sure.' He looked amused. 'You wouldn't expect me to help you for nothing? What is it you English say? There's no such thing as a free lunch?'

Quite. But this admission actually made his position more credible. There now appeared to be a legitimate motive behind his offer to help her.

She relaxed just a little. 'OK. I accept that. You somehow gain by my cooperation. But what about me? Do I gain as well? You've said you plan to help me, but why should I believe you? I don't even know if I actually need your help.'

'You think you can fight Duval alone?'

'I've managed to up till now.' As he was about to butt in, she hurried on and pointed out, 'And I've only got your word for it that he's about to come after me again. Maybe you're just saying that to scare me into going along with you. According to my solicitor, Duval's probably backed off.'

'Then your solicitor's a fool.' Lasalle's tone was dismissive. 'It simply isn't in Duval's nature to back off.'

That had occurred to Georgia too, though she'd refused point-blank to dwell on it. She'd told herself it was just her paranoia talking.

And maybe it was. 'How can you be so sure? There's been no sign of him for a couple of weeks now. You're only guessing he hasn't backed off—unless you know something you're not telling?'

'I'm telling you what I know. I know Duval.' His eyes were narrowed to dark blue pinpoints as he looked at her. 'And after the lease business and the rent rise and the mysterious fire in your storeroom you must have a pretty shrewd idea of the nature of the man yourself.'

Hearing him recite that list of horrors, Georgia felt her stomach twist. She looked at him, fear growing inside her. 'How do you know so much about my business?' Maybe he was one of Duval's henchmen, after all?

Lasalle sighed impatiently. 'I have an interest in Duval. I make it my business to know what he's up to.' He paused, his expression grim. 'And he's not finished with you yet. Maybe there hasn't been any sign of him for a couple of weeks but, take my word for it, that's not because he's backed off. He's just lying low, plotting his next move.'

'And what's his next move going to be, since you seem to know so much?'

'I don't know what it's going to be. I just know there will be a next move. And I'd advise you to prepare yourself for something seriously nasty. As I already told you, he's starting to get impatient.'

Georgia was suddenly aware that she was nervously chewing her lower lip. Something seriously nasty? Surely not another fire? She'd had nightmares about that. Another fire could ruin her. Last time had been bad enough, but it would be far more serious now, with her precious consignment of new summer clothes about to arrive any day from France. If that went up in flames, how on earth would she survive?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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