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PENNY
JORDAN

**The Tycoon's
Virgin**

PENNY JORDAN

The Tycoon's Virgin

Аннотация

Penny Jordan needs no introduction as arguably the most recognisable name writing for Mills & Boon. We have celebrated her wonderful writing with a special collection, many of which for the first time in eBook format and all available right now. Rescued – by a sexy, rugged stranger! Caz Ryan grew up with nothing. So she reinvented herself: and became a success – but only in business, never with men... When she heads to the country in search of her inheritance she's in for a shock – she's not an outdoors girl. Until she's rescued by tall, rugged Galem Brent. Suddenly the country holds a lot more appeal. Caz knows Galmen's going to seduce her. And she'll allow herself one weekend. But when Monday comes does she want to be the city girl she's strived to become... or the real Caz Ryan?

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**Celebrate the legend that is bestselling author
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Phenomenally successful author of more than two hundred books with sales of over a hundred million copies!

Penny Jordan's novels are loved by millions of readers all around the world in many different languages. Mills & Boon are proud to have published one hundred and eighty-seven novels and novellas written by Penny Jordan, who was a reader favourite right from her very first novel through to her last.

This beautiful digital collection offers a chance to recapture the pleasure of all of Penny Jordan's fabulous, glamorous and romantic novels for Mills & Boon.



Penny Jordan is one of Mills & Boon's most popular authors. Sadly, Penny died from cancer on 31st December 2011, aged sixty-five. She leaves an outstanding legacy, having sold over a

hundred million books around the world. She wrote a total of one hundred and eighty-seven novels for Mills & Boon, including the phenomenally successful *A Perfect Family*, *To Love, Honour & Betray*, *The Perfect Sinner* and *Power Play*, which hit the *Sunday Times* and *New York Times* bestseller lists. Loved for her distinctive voice, her success was in part because she continually broke boundaries and evolved her writing to keep up with readers' changing tastes. *Publishers Weekly* said about Jordan 'Women everywhere will find pieces of themselves in Jordan's characters' and this perhaps explains her enduring appeal.

Although Penny was born in Preston, Lancashire and spent her childhood there, she moved to Cheshire as a teenager and continued to live there for the rest of her life. Following the death of her husband, she moved to the small traditional Cheshire market town on which she based her much-loved Crighton books.

Penny was a member and supporter of the Romantic Novelists' Association and the Romance Writers of America—two organisations dedicated to providing support for both published and yet-to-be-published authors. Her significant contribution to women's fiction was recognised in 2011, when the Romantic Novelists' Association presented Penny with a Lifetime Achievement Award.

The Tycoon's Virgin

Penny Jordan



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CHAPTER ONE

‘MMM.’ Jodi could not resist sneaking a second appreciative look at the man crossing the hotel lobby.

Tall, well over six feet, somewhere in his mid-thirties, dark-suited and even darker-haired, he had an unmistakable air about him of male sexuality. Jodi had been aware of it the minute she saw him walking towards the hotel exit. His effect on her was strong enough to make her pulse race and her body react to him in a most unusual and un-Jodi-like manner, and just for a second she allowed her thoughts to wander dreamily in a dangerous and sensual direction.

He turned his head and for a shocking breath of time it was almost as though he was looking straight at her; as though some kind of highly intense, personal communication was taking place!

What was happening to her?

Jodi’s heart, and with it her whole world, rocked precariously on its oh-so-sturdy axis; an axis constructed of things such as common sense and practicality and doing things by the book, which had suddenly flung her into an alien world. A world where traitorous words such as ‘love at first sight’ had taken on a meaning.

Love at first sight? Her? Never. Stalwartly, Jodi dragged her world and her emotions back to where they belonged.

It must be the stress she was under that was causing her to somehow emotionally hallucinate!

‘Haven’t you got enough to worry about?’ Jodi scolded herself, far more firmly than she would ever have scolded one of her small pupils. Not that she was given to scolding them very much. No, Jodi loved her job as the headmistress and senior teacher of the area’s small junior school with a passion that some of her friends felt ought more properly to be given to her own love life—or rather the lack of it.

And it was because of the school and her small pupils that she was here this evening, waiting anxiously in the foyer of the area’s most luxurious hotel for the arrival of her cousin and co-conspirator.

‘Jodi.’

She gave a small sigh of relief as she finally saw her cousin Nigel hurrying towards her. Nigel worked several miles away in the local county-council offices and it had been through him that she had first learned of the threat to her precious school.

When he had told her that the largest employer in the area, a factory producing electronic components, had been taken over by one of its competitors and could be closed down her initial reaction had been one of disbelief.

The village where Jodi taught had worked desperately hard to attract new business, and to prevent itself from becoming yet another small, dying community. When the factory had opened some years earlier it had brought not just new wealth to the

area, but also an influx of younger people. It was the children of these people who now filled Jodi's classrooms. Without them, the small village school would have to close. Jodi felt passionately about the benefits her kind of school could give young children. But the local authority had to take a wider view; if the school's pupils fell below a certain number then the school would be closed.

Having already had to work hard to persuade parents to support the school, Jodi was simply not prepared to sit back whilst some arrogant, uncaring asset-stripper of a manufacturing megalomaniac closed the factory in the name of profit and ripped the heart out of their community!

Which was why she was here with Nigel.

'What have you found out?' she asked her cousin anxiously, shaking her head as he asked her if she wanted anything to drink. Jodi was not a drinker; in fact she was, as her friends were very fond of telling her, a little bit old-fashioned for someone who had gone through several years at university and teacher-training college. She had even worked abroad, before deciding that the place she really wanted to be was the quiet rural heart of her own country.

'Well, I know that he's booked into the hotel. The best suite, no less, although apparently he isn't in it at the moment.'

When Jodi exhaled in relief Nigel gave her a wry look. 'You were the one who wanted to see him,' he reminded her. 'If you've changed your mind...?'

‘No,’ Jodi denied. ‘I have to do something. It’s all over the village that he intends to close down the factory. I’ve already had parents coming to see me to say that they’re probably going to have to move away, and asking me to recommend good local schools for them when they do. I’m already only just over the acceptable pupil number as it is, Nigel. If I were to lose even five per cent of my pupils...’ She gave a small groan. ‘And the worst of it is that if we can only hang on for a couple more years I’ve got a new influx due that will take us well into a good safety margin, providing, that is, the factory is still operational. That’s why I’ve got to see this...this...’

‘Leo Jefferson,’ Nigel supplied for her. ‘I’ve managed to talk the receptionist into letting me have a key to his suite.’ He grinned when he saw Jodi’s expression. ‘It’s OK, I know her, and I’ve explained that you’ve got an appointment with him but that you’ve arrived early. So I reckon the best thing is for you to get up there and lie in wait to pounce on him when he gets back.’

‘I shall be doing no such thing,’ Jodi told him indignantly. ‘What I want to do is make sure he understands just how much damage he will be doing to this village if he goes ahead and closes the factory. And try to persuade him to change his mind.’

Nigel watched her ruefully as she spoke. Her high-minded ideals were all very well, but totally out of step with the mindset of a man with Leo Jefferson’s reputation. Nigel was tempted to suggest to Jodi that a warm smile and a generous helping of feminine flirtation might do more good than the kind of

discussion she was obviously bent on having, but he knew just how that kind of suggestion would be received by her. It would be totally against her principles.

Which was rather a shame in Nigel's opinion, because Jodi certainly had the assets to bemuse and beguile any red-blooded man. She was stunningly attractive, with the kind of lushly curved body that made men ache just to look at her, even if she did tend to cover its sexy female shape with dull, practical clothes.

Her hair was thick and glossily curly, her eyes a deep, deliciously dark-fringed, vibrant blue above her delicately high cheekbones. If she hadn't been his cousin and if they hadn't known one another since they had been in their prams he would have found her very fanciable himself. Except that Nigel liked his girlfriends to treat flirtation and sex as an enjoyable game. And Jodi was far too serious for that.

At twenty-seven, she hadn't, so far as Nigel knew, ever had a serious relationship, preferring to dedicate herself to her work. Nigel knew that there were more than a handful of men who considered that dedication to be a total waste.

As she took the key card her cousin was handing her Jodi hoped that she was doing the right thing.

Her throat suddenly felt nervously dry, and when she admitted as much to Nigel he told her that he'd arrange to have something sent up to the suite for her to drink.

'Can't have you driven so mad by thirst that you raid the mini-bar, can we?' he teased her, chuckling at his own joke.

‘That’s not funny,’ Jodi immediately reproved him.

She still felt guilty about the underhanded means by which she was gaining access to Leo Jefferson’s presence, but according to Nigel this was the only way to get the opportunity to speak personally with him.

She had originally hoped to be able to make an appointment, but Nigel had quickly disabused her of this idea, telling her wryly that a corporate mogul such as Leo Jefferson would never deign to meet a humble village schoolteacher.

And that was why this unpleasant subterfuge was necessary.

Ten minutes later, as she let herself into his hotel suite, Jodi hoped that it wouldn’t be too long before Leo Jefferson returned. She had been up at six that morning, working on a project for her older pupils, who would be moving on to ‘big’ school at the end of their current year.

It was almost seven o’clock, past Jodi’s normal evening-meal time, and she felt both tired and hungry. She stiffened nervously as she heard the suite door opening, but it was only a waiter bringing her the drink Nigel had promised her. She eyed the large jug of brightly coloured fruit juice he had put down on the coffee-table in front of her a little ruefully as the door closed behind the departing waiter. Good old plain water would have been fine. Her mouth felt dry with nervous tension and she poured herself a glass, drinking it quickly. It had an unfamiliar but not unpleasant taste, which for some odd reason seemed to make her feel that

she wanted some more. Her hand wobbled slightly as she poured herself a second glass.

She read the newspaper she had found on the coffee-table, and rehearsed her speech several times. Where was Leo Jefferson? Tiredly she started to yawn, gasping with shock as she stood up and swayed dizzily.

Heavens, but she felt so light-headed! Suspiciously she focused on the jug of fruit juice. That unfamiliar taste couldn't possibly have been alcohol, could it? Nigel knew that she wasn't a drinker.

Muzzily she looked round the suite for the bathroom. Leo Jefferson was bound to arrive soon, and she wanted to be looking neat and tidy and strictly businesslike when he did. First impressions, especially in a situation like this, were very important!

The bathroom was obviously off the bedroom. Which she could see through the half-open door that connected it to the suite's sitting room.

A little unsteadily she made her way towards it. What on earth had been in that drink?

In the suite's huge all-white bathroom, Jodi washed her hands, dabbing cold water on her pulse points as she gazed uncertainly at her flushed face in the mirror above the basin before turning to leave.

In the bedroom she stopped to stare longingly at the huge, comfortable-looking bed. She just felt so tired. How much longer

was this wretched man going to be?

Another yawn started to overwhelm her. Her eyelids felt heavy. She just had to lie down. Just for a little while. Just until she felt less light-headed.

But first...

With the careful concentration of the inebriated, Jodi removed her clothes with meticulous movements and folded them neatly before sliding into the heavenly bliss of the waiting bed.

As Leo Jefferson unlocked the door to his hotel suite he looked grimly at his watch. It was half-past ten in the evening and he had just returned to the hotel, having been to inspect one of the two factories he had just acquired. Prior to that, earlier in the day, he had spent most of the afternoon locked in a furious argument with the now ex-owner of his latest acquisition, or rather the ex-owner's unbelievably idiotic son-in-law, who had done everything he could at first to bully and then bribe Leo into releasing them from their contract.

'Look, my father-in-law made a mistake. We all make them,' he had told Leo with fake affability. 'We've changed our minds and we no longer want to sell the business.'

'It's a bit late for that,' Leo had replied crisply. 'The deal has already gone through; the contract's been signed.'

But Jeremy Driscoll continued to try to browbeat Leo into changing his mind.

'I'm sure we can find some way to persuade you,' he told Leo,

giving him a knowing leer as he added, ‘One of those new lap-dancing clubs has opened up in town, and I’ve heard they cater really well for the needs of lonely businessmen. How about we pay it a visit? My treat, we can talk later, when we’re both feeling more relaxed.’

‘No way,’ was Leo’s grim rejection.

The gossip he had heard on the business grapevine about Jeremy Driscoll had suggested that he was a seedy character—apparently it wasn’t unknown for him to try to get his own way by underhanded means. At first Leo had been prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt—until he met him and recognised that Jeremy Driscoll’s detractors had erred on the side of generosity.

A more thoroughly unpleasant person Leo had yet to meet, and his obvious air of false bonhomie offended Leo almost as much as his totally unwarranted and unwanted offer of bought sex.

The kind of place, any kind of place, where human beings had to sell themselves for other people’s pleasure had no appeal for Leo, and he made little attempt to conceal his contempt for the other man’s suggestion.

Jeremy Driscoll, though, it seemed, had a skin of impenetrable thickness. Refusing to take a hint, he continued jovially, ‘No? You prefer to have your fun in private on a one-to-one basis, perhaps? Well, I’m sure that something can be arranged—’

Leo’s cold, ‘Forget it,’ brought an ugly look of dislike to

Jeremy's too pale blue eyes.

'There's a lot of antagonism around here about the fact that you're planning to close down one or other of the factories. A man with your reputation...'

'Oh, I think my reputation can stand the heat,' Leo replied grittily.

He could see that his confidence had increased Jeremy's dislike of him, just as he had seen the envy in the other man's eyes when he had driven up in his top-of-the-range Mercedes.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of the newspaper that Jeremy had rudely continued to read after Leo's arrival. There was an article on the page that was open detailing the downfall of a politician who had tried unsuccessfully to sue those who had exposed certain tawdry aspects of his private life, including his visits to a massage parlour. The fact that the politician had claimed that he had been set up had not convinced the jury who had found against him.

'I wouldn't be so sure about your reputation if I were you,' Jeremy warned Leo nastily, glancing towards the paper as he spoke.

Giving him a dismissive look, Leo left.

Leo frowned as he walked into his suite. There was no way in a thousand years he was going to change his plans. He had worked too hard and for too long, building up his business from nothing...less than nothing, slowly, painstakingly clawing his

way up from his own one-man band, first overtaking and then taking over his competition as he grew more and more successful.

The Driscoll family company was in direct competition to Leo's. Since their business duplicated his own, it was only natural that he should have to close down some of their four factories. As yet Leo had not decided which out of the four. But as for Jeremy Driscoll's attempt to get him to back out of the deal...!

Tired, Leo strode into the suite without bothering to switch on the lights. At this time on a June evening there was still enough light in the sky for him not to need to do so, even without the additional glow of the almost full moon.

The bedroom wasn't quite as well-lit; someone—the maid, he imagined—had closed the curtains, but the bathroom light was on and the door open. Frowning over such sloppiness, he headed towards the bathroom, closing the door behind him once he was inside.

Giving his own reflection a brief glance in the mirror, he paused to rub a lean hand over his stubble-darkened jaw before reaching for his razor.

Jeremy Driscoll's bombastic arrogance had irritated him to an extent that warned him that those amongst his family and friends who cautioned that he was driving himself too hard might have something of a point.

Narrowing the silver-grey eyes that were an inheritance from his father's side, and for whose piercingly analytical and defence-stripping qualities they were rightly feared by anyone who sought

to deceive him, he grimaced slightly. He badly needed a haircut; his dark hair curled over the collar of his shirt. Taking time out for anything in his life that wasn't work right now simply wasn't an option.

His parents professed not to understand just where he got his single-minded determination to succeed from. They had been happy with their small newsagent's business.

His parents were retired now, and living in his mother's family's native Italy. He had bought them a villa outside Florence as a ruby-wedding present.

Leo had visited them, very briefly, early in May for his mother's birthday.

He put down his razor, remembering the look he had seen them exchange when his mother had asked wistfully if there was yet 'anyone special' in his life.

He had told her with dry humour that not only did his negative response to her maternal question relate to his present, but that it could also be applied indefinitely to his future.

With unusual asperity she had returned that if that was the case then it was perhaps time she paid a visit to the village's local wise woman and herbalist, who, according to rumour, had an absolutely foolproof recipe for a love potion!

Leo had laughed outright at that. After all, it was not that he couldn't have a partner, a lover, if he so wished. Any number of stunningly attractive young women had made it plain to him both discreetly and rather more obviously that they would like to

share his life and his bed, and, of course, his bank account... But Leo could still remember how at the upmarket public school he had won a scholarship to the female pupils had been scornfully dismissive of the boy whose school uniform was so obviously bought secondhand and whose only source of money came from helping out in his parents' small business.

That experience had taught Leo a lesson he was determined never to forget. Yes, there had been women in his life, but no doubt rather idiotically by some people's standards, he had discovered that he possessed an unexpected aversion to the idea of casual sex. Which meant...

Unwantedly Leo remembered his body's sharply explicit reaction to the woman he had seen in the hotel foyer as he had crossed it on his way to his meeting earlier.

Small and curvy, or so he had suspected, beneath the abominable clothes she had been wearing.

Leo's mother did not have Italian blood for nothing, and, like all her countrywomen, she possessed a strong sense of personal style, which made it impossible for Leo not to recognise when a woman was dressing to maximum effect. This woman had most certainly not been doing that at all. She had not even really been his type. If he was prepared to admit to a preference it was for cool, elegant blondes. Most definitely not for delectably sexy, tousled and touchable types of women, who turned his loins to hotly savage lust and even distracted his mind to the extent that he had almost found himself deviating from his set course and

thinking about walking towards her.

Leo never deviated from any course he set himself—ever—especially not on account of a woman.

With an indrawn breath of self-disgust, Leo stripped off his clothes and stepped into the shower.

As a teenager he had played sports for his school, which, ironically, had done wonders to increase his ‘pulling power’ with his female schoolmates, and he still had the powerful muscle structure of a natural athlete. Impatiently he lathered his body and then rinsed off the foam before reaching for a towel.

Once dry, he opened the bathroom door and headed for the bed. It was darker now, but still light enough, thanks to the moonlight glinting through the curtains, for him not to need to switch on the light.

Flipping back the bedclothes, Leo got into the bed, reaching automatically for the duvet, and then froze as he realised that the bed—his bed—was already occupied.

Switching on the bedside lamp, he stared in angry disbelief at the tousled head of curly hair on the pillow next to his own—a decidedly female head, he recognised, just like the slender naked arm and softly rounded shoulder he could now see in the lamplight.

The nostrils of the proudly aquiline nose he had inherited from his mother’s Italian forebears flared fastidiously as they picked up the smell of alcohol on the softly exhaled breath of the oblivious sleeping form.

Another scent—a mixture of warm fresh air, lavender and a certain shockingly earthy sensuality that was Jodi's alone—his senses reacted to in a very different way.

It was the girl from the foyer. Leo would have recognised her anywhere, or, rather, his body would.

Automatically his brain passed him another piece of information. Jeremy Driscoll's oily-voiced suggestiveness as he had tried to persuade Leo to go back on their contract. Was this...this girl the inducement he'd had in mind? She had to be. Leo could not think of any other reason for her presence here in his bed!

Well, if Jeremy Driscoll dared to think that he, Leo, was the kind of man who...

Angrily he reached out to grasp Jodi's bare arm in strong fingers as he leaned across her to shake her into wakefulness.

Jodi was fathoms-deep asleep, sleeping the sleep of the pure of heart—and the alcohol-assisted—and she was having the most delicious dream in which she was, by some means her sleeping state wasn't inclined to question, wrapped in the embrace of the most gorgeous, sexy man. He was tall, dark-haired and silver-eyed, with features reassuringly familiar to Jodi, but his body, his touch, were wonderfully and excitingly new.

They were lying together, body to body, on a huge bed in a room with a panoramic view of a private tropical beach, and as he leaned towards her and stroked strong fingers along her forearm he whispered to her, 'What the hell are you doing in my bed?'

Her brain still under the influence of her ‘fruit cocktail’ Jodi opened bemused, adoring eyes.

Why was her wonderful lover looking so angry? Smiling sleepily up at him, she was about to ask him, but somehow her attention became focused on how downright desirable he actually was.

That wonderful naked golden-brown body. Naked. Yummy! More than yummy! Jodi closed her eyes on a sigh of female appreciation and then quickly opened them again, anxious not to miss anything. She watched the way the muscles in his neck corded as he leaned over her, and the sinewy strength of his solid forearms, so very male that she just had to reach out and run an explorative fingertip down the one nearest to her, marvelling at the difference between it and her own so much softer female flesh.

Leo couldn’t believe his eyes—or his body. She, the uninvited interloper in his bed, was brazenly ignoring his angry question and was actually daring to touch him. No, not just touch, he acknowledged as his body reacted to her with a teeth-clenching jerk that gave an immediate lie to his previous mental use of the word ‘unwanted’. What she was doing—dammit—was outright stroking him, caressing him!

Torn between a cerebral desire to reject what was happening and a visceral surge of agonisingly intense desire to embrace it, and with it the woman who was tormenting him with such devastating effectiveness, Leo made a valiant struggle to cling

to the tenets of discipline and self-control that were the twin bastions of his life. To his shock, he lost. And not just the campaign but the whole war!

Jodi, though, fuelled now by something far more subtle than alcohol, and far stronger, was totally oblivious to everything but the delicious dream she had found her way into.

Imagine. When she touched him, like so, the most extraordinary tremors ran right through his whole body—and not just his, she acknowledged as she considered the awesome fact that her own body was so highly responsive, so reactive to every movement of his.

She was so lucky to be here with him on this wonderful private island of love and pleasure. Tenderly she leaned forward and flicked her tongue-tip delicately against the hollow at the base of his throat, revelling in the sensation of his damp skin against her tongue, its texture, its taste, the way that fierce male pulse thudded to life at her touch.

Leo couldn't believe what was happening. What she was doing; what he was letting her do. He found himself lying back against the pillow as she was the one to arch provocatively over him, whilst her tongue busily and far too erotically laved his skin.

Even in the less than half-light of the shadowy bedroom he could see the naked outline of her body with its narrow waist and softly flaring hips; her legs were delectably shaped, her ankles tiny and delicate, the shadowy triangle of hair between her thighs so soft and tempting that...

His throat dry with angry tension and gut-wrenching longing, Leo felt his whole body shudder.

He could see her breasts, soft, rounded, creamy-skinned, with darkly tender crests and tormentingly erect nipples.

Unable to stop himself, he lifted his hands carefully, cupping them. He could feel their warm weight, and he could feel, too, the tight hardness of those wanton peaks, tauntingly challenging him to...

Jodi gasped and then shivered in delight as she felt the rough pressure of her lover's tongue against her nipple.

'Oh, it feels so good,' she whispered to him, closing her eyes as she gave herself up to the sensations he was arousing. Her hand slipped distractedly from his arm to her own body, flattening betrayingly against her belly as she drew in a juddering breath of delirious pleasure.

Leo could scarcely believe the sheer wantonness of her reaction to his touch. He tried to remind himself that she was there for a purpose, doing the job she had been hired for, but his senses were too drugged to allow him to think rationally.

He had known then, in that fleeting second he had seen her in the hotel foyer, that she could affect him like this; that he would want her like this, no matter what the stern voice of his conscience was trying to tell him.

His hand slid to the curve of her waist and flared possessively over her hip, which fitted as perfectly into his grip as though they had been made for each other.

Her hands were on his body, their touch somehow innocently explorative, as though he was the first man she had ever been so intimate with—which was a ludicrous thought!

The soft whispers of female praise she was giving him had to be deliberately calculated to have the maximum effect on a man's ego—any man's ego—he tried to remind himself. But somehow he couldn't stop touching her—couldn't stop wanting her!

Jodi sighed blissfully in a sensual heaven. He seemed to know instinctively just how and where to caress her, how to arouse and please her. Her body soared and melted with each wonderful wave of erotic pleasure. Voluptuously she snuggled closer to him shivering in heady excitement as she let her hands wander at will over his body—so excitingly different from her own.

The bedclothes, which she had pushed away an aeon ago so that she could look at the powerful nakedness of the male body she was now so hungry for, lay in a tangled heap at the bottom of the bed. Moonlight silvered her own body, whilst it turned the larger and more muscular shape of her lover's into a dark-hued steel.

She ached so much for him. Her hands moved downwards over him, her gaze drawn to his taut, powerful magnificence.

Deliberately she drew her fingertips along the hard length of his erection, closing her eyes and shuddering as a deep thrill twisted through her.

Leo couldn't understand how he was letting this happen! It went totally against everything he believed in! Never before in

his life had he experienced such intense and overwhelmingly mindless desire, nor been so driven by the fierce pulse of it to take what he was being so openly offered.

Every single one of his senses was responding to her with an uncheckable urgency that left his brain floundering.

The scent, the sight, the feel of her, her touch against his body, even the soft, increasingly incoherent sound of her husky, pleading moans, seemed to strike at a vulnerability inside him that he had never dreamed existed.

He reached out for her, giving in to the need burning through him to kiss every delicious woman-scented inch of her, and then to do so all over again, slowly and thoroughly, until the unsteadiness of her breathing was a torment to his senses. He finally allowed himself the pleasure of sliding his fingers through the soft, warm tangle of curls concealing her sex, stroking the flesh that lay beneath and slowly parting the outer covering of her to caress her with full intimacy.

She felt soft, hot, moist and so unbelievably delicate that, ignoring the agonised urging of her voice against his ear, he forced himself to love her slowly and carefully.

He could feel her body rising up to reach his touch as she writhed frantically against him, telling him in broken words of open pleasure that jolted like electricity through his senses just what she wanted from him and how. She somehow managed to manoeuvre both of them so that he was pushing urgently against her and then inside her, as though the intimacy was beyond his

own physical control.

She felt. She felt...

Jodi heard the low, visceral male sound he made as he entered her, filled her, and sharp spirals of intense pleasure flooded her body.

Just hearing that sound, knowing his need, was almost as erotically exciting as feeling him move inside her. Long, slow, powerful thrusts lifted and carried her and caused her to reach out for him, drawing him deep inside her. The pleasure of feeling her body expand to accommodate him was so indescribably precious that she cried out aloud her joy in it and in him. She loved this feeling of being wrapped around him, embracing him, holding him, somehow nurturing and protecting his essential male essence.

Somewhere on the periphery of his awareness, Leo recognised that there was something that his mind should be aware of, something important his body was trying to tell him, something about both the intensity of what he was experiencing and the special, close-fitting intimacy of the tender female body wrapped around his own. But the age-old urgency of the need now driving him was short-circuiting his ability to question anything.

All he knew was how good she felt, how right, how essential it was that he reciprocate the wonderful gift she was giving him by taking them both to that special place that lay so tantalisingly almost within reach...another second, another stroke, another heartbeat.

He felt her orgasm gripping her; spasm after spasm of such vibrant intensity that its sheer strength brought him to his own completion.

As she lay in his arms, her body trembling in the aftershock of her pleasure, her damp curls a wild tangle of soft silk against his chest, he heard her gasping shakily, 'That was wonderful, my wonderful, wonderful lover.'

And then as he looked down into her eyes she closed them and fell asleep, with all the speed and innocence of a child.

Broodingly Leo studied her. There was no doubt in his mind that she was a plant, bought and paid for with Jeremy Driscoll's money.

And he, idiotic fool that he was, had fallen straight into the trap that had been set for him. And he suspected, now that he had time to think things through properly, that this was something more than Jeremy Driscoll supplying him with a bedmate for the night.

Jeremy was simply not that altruistic. Not altruistic in any way, shape or form, and Leo knew that he had not mistaken the dislike and envy in the other man's eyes earlier in the day. Jeremy knew that he, Leo, was not about to change his mind. Not unless Jeremy Driscoll believed he had some means of forcing him to do so.

Now, when it was too late, Leo remembered the newspaper article Jeremy Driscoll had been reading,

For a man in his position, an unmarried man, the effect of

a public exposé, a woman selling her kiss-and-tell story to one of the national newspapers, would not be devastating. But Leo would be pilloried as a laughing stock for being so gullible and, as a result, would lose respect in the business world. If that happened he would not be able to count on the support and belief he was used to. No businessman, not even one as successful as Leo, wanted that.

He got out of bed, giving Jodi a bitter look as he did so. How could she lie there sleeping so peacefully? As though...as though...Unable to stop himself, Leo felt his glance slide to her mouth, still curved in a warmly satisfied smile. Even in her sleep she was somehow managing to maintain the fiction that what had happened between them was something special. But then no doubt she was a skilled actress. She would have to be.

The reality of what he had done pushed relentlessly through his thoughts. His behaviour had been so totally alien that even now he couldn't imagine what had possessed him. Or, at least, he could, but he couldn't understand how he had allowed it to get so out of control.

Or why he was standing beside the bed and continuing to look at her, when surely his strongest urge ought to be to go and have a shower as hot and strong as he could stand until he had washed the feel, the scent, the taste of her off his body and out of his senses. But for some incomprehensible reason that was the last thing he wanted to do...

Just in time he managed to stop himself from reaching out

to touch her, to stroke a gentle fingertip along that tender cheekbone and touch those unbelievably long, dark lashes, that small, straight nose, those soft, full lips.

As though somehow she sensed what he was thinking, her lips parted on a sweetly sensual sigh, her mouth curling back into another smile of remembered pleasure.

What the hell was he doing, letting her sleep there like that? By rights he ought to wake her up and throw her out. He glanced at the alarm clock supplied by the hotel. It was two o'clock in the morning, and he told himself that it was because of his inbred sense of responsibility that he could not bring himself to do so.

It just wasn't safe for a woman—any woman, even a woman like her—to wander about on her own so late at night; anything could happen to her!

But he wasn't going to get back in that bed with her. No way!

Going into the bathroom, he pulled on the complimentary robe provided by the hotel and then made his way into the sitting room, closing the bedroom door behind him as he did so and snapping on the light.

The first thing he saw was the almost empty cocktail jug and the glass Jodi had drunk from.

Grimacing, he pushed it to one side. She had even had the audacity to order a drink on Room Service. Because she had needed the courage it would give her to go to bed with him?

He warned himself against falling into the trap of feeling sorry for her, making excuses for her. She had known exactly

what she was doing...Exactly...He frowned as he moved a little uncomfortably in his chair.

He was wide awake now and he had some work he could be doing. When his would-be seducer woke up they were going to need to have a short, sharp talk.

There was no way he was going to allow Jeremy Driscoll to blackmail him into backing out of the contract he had made with his father-in-law.

Still frowning, he reached for his briefcase.

CHAPTER TWO

RUBBING her eyes, Jodi grimaced in disgust at the sour taste in her mouth. Her head ached, and her body did too, but they were different sorts of aches; the ache in her body had a subtle but quite distinctly pleasurable undertone to it, whilst the one in her head...

Cautiously she moved it and then wished she had not as a fierce, throbbing pain banged through her temples.

Instinctively she reached across, expecting to find her own familiar bedside table, and then realised that she was not in her own bed.

So where exactly was she? Like wisps of mist, certain vague memories, sounds, images, drifted dangerously across her mind. But no, surely she couldn't have? Hadn't! Frantically she looked to the other side of the large bed, the sledgehammer thuds of her heart easing as she saw to her relief that it was empty.

It had been a dream, that was all, a shocking and unacceptable dream. And she couldn't imagine how or why...But...She froze as she saw the quite unmistakable imprint of another head on the pillow next to her own.

Shivering, she leaned closer to it, stiffening as she caught the alien but somehow all-too-familiar scent of soap and man rising from the pillow.

What had been vague memories were becoming sharper and

clearer with every anxious beat of her heart.

It was true! Here in this room. In this bed! She had. Where was he? She looked nervously towards the bathroom door, her attention momentarily distracted by the sight of her own clothes neatly folded on a chair.

Without pausing for logical thought she scrambled out of the bed and hurried towards them, dressing with urgency whilst she kept her gaze fixed on the closed bathroom door.

She longed to be able to shower and clean her teeth, brush her hair, but she simply did not dare to do so. Appallingly explicit memories were now forcing themselves past the splitting pain of her alcohol-induced headache. She couldn't comprehend how on earth she could have behaved in such a way.

She had been drinking, she reminded herself with disgusted self-contempt. She had been drinking, and whatever had been in that potent cocktail Room Service had sent up to the suite had somehow turned her from the prim and proper virginal woman she was into a...an amorous, sexually aggressive female, who...

Virginal! Jodi's body froze. Well, she certainly wasn't that any more! Not that it mattered except for the fact that, driven by her desire, she hadn't taken any steps to protect her health or to prevent...

Jodi begged fate not to punish her foolishness, praying that there would be no consequences to what she had done other than her own shocked humiliation.

Picking up her handbag, she tiptoed quietly towards the

bedroom door.

Leo was just wondering how long his unwanted guest intended to continue to sleep in his bed, and whether or not five a.m. was too early to ring for a room-service breakfast, when Jodi reached for the bedroom door.

Even though his body ached for sleep, he had been furiously determined not to get back into his bed whilst she was in it. One experience of just how vulnerable he was to her particularly effective method of seduction was more than enough.

Even now, having had the best part of three hours of solitude to analyse what had happened, he was still no closer to understanding why he had been unable to stop himself from responding to her, unable to control his desire.

Yes, he had felt that bittersweet pang of attraction when he had first seen her in the hotel foyer, but knowing what she was ought surely to have destroyed that completely.

He tensed as he saw the bedroom door opening.

At first, intent on making her escape, Jodi didn't see him standing motionlessly in front of the window.

It was light now, the clear, fresh light of an early summer morning, and when she did realise that he was there her face flushed as sweetly pink as the sun-warmed feathers of clouds in the sky beyond the window.

Leo heard her involuntary gasp and saw the quick, despairing glance she gave the main door, her only exit from the suite.

Anticipating her actions, he moved towards the door, reaching it before her and standing in front of it, blocking her escape.

As she saw him properly Jodi felt the embarrassed heat possessing her body deepen to a burning, soul-scorching intensity. It was him, the man she had seen in the foyer, the man she had thought so very attractive, the man who had made her have the most extraordinarily uncharacteristic thoughts!

Out of the corner of her eye Jodi could see the coffee-table and the telltale cocktail jug.

‘Yes,’ Leo agreed urbanely. ‘Not only have you illegally entered my suite, but you also had the gall to run up a room-service bill. Do you intend to pay personally for the use of my bed and the bar, or would you prefer me to send the bills to Jeremy Driscoll?’

Jodi, who had been staring in mute distress at the cocktail jug, turned her head automatically to look at him as she heard the familiar name of her least favourite fellow villager.

‘Jeremy?’ she questioned uncertainly.

Jeremy Driscoll’s father-in-law might own the local factory, and Jeremy himself might run it, but that did not make him well-liked in the locale. He had a reputation for underhand behaviour, and for attempting to bring in certain cost-cutting and potentially dangerous practices, which thankfully had been blocked by the workers’ union and the health and safety authority.

But what he had to do with her present humiliating situation Jodi had no idea at all.

‘Yes. Jeremy,’ Leo confirmed, unkindly imitating the anxious tremor in her voice. ‘I know exactly what’s going on,’ he continued acidly. ‘And why you’re here. But if you think for one minute that I’m going to allow myself to be blackmailed into giving in...’

Jodi swallowed uncomfortably against the tight ball of self-recrimination and shame that was lodged in her throat.

Did Leo Jefferson—it had to be him—really think that she was the kind of person who would behave in such a way? His use of the word ‘blackmail’ had particularly shocked her. But was the truth any easier for her to bear, never mind admit to someone else? Was it really any more palatable to have to say that she had been so drunk—albeit by accident—that she simply had not known what she was doing?

To have gone to bed with a complete stranger, to have done the things she had done with him, and, even worse, wanted the things she had wanted with him... A woman in her position, responsible for the shaping and guiding of young minds...

Jodi shuddered to think of how some of the parents of her pupils, not to mention the school’s board of governors, might view her behaviour.

‘Well, you can go back to your paymaster,’ Leo Jefferson was telling her with cold venom, ‘and you can tell him, whilst you might have given me good value for his money, it makes not one jot of difference to my plans. I still have no intention of cancelling the contract and allowing him to buy back the

business.

‘I have no idea what he hoped to achieve by paying you to have sex with me,’ Leo continued grimly and untruthfully. ‘But all he gave me was a night of passably good if somewhat over-professionalised sex. If he thinks he can use that against me in some way...’ Leo shrugged to underline his indifference whilst discreetly watching Jodi to see how she was reacting to his fabricated insouciance.

She had gone very pale, and there was a look in her eyes that under other circumstances Leo might almost have described as haunted.

Jodi fought to control her spiralling confusion and to make sense out of what Leo Jefferson was saying. She was going to avoid thinking about his cruelly insulting personal comments right now. They were the kind of thing she could only allow herself to examine in private. But his references to Jeremy Driscoll and her own supposed connection with him were totally baffling.

She opened her mouth to say as much, but before she could do so Leo was exclaiming tersely, ‘I don’t know who you are or why you can’t find a less self-destructive way of earning a living.’

Ignoring the latter part of his comment, Jodi pounced with shaky relief on his ‘I don’t know who you are’.

If he didn’t know who she was, she certainly wasn’t going to enlighten him. With any luck she might, please fate, be able to salvage her pride and her public reputation with a damage-

limitation exercise that meant no one other than the two of them need ever know what had happened.

She had abandoned any thought of pursuing her real purpose in seeking him out. How on earth could she plead with him for her school's future now? Another burden of sickening guilt joined the one already oppressing her. She had not just let herself down, and her standards, she had let the school and her pupils down as well. And she still couldn't fully understand how it had all happened. Yes, she had had too much to drink, but surely that alone...

Cringing, she reflected on her reaction to Leo Jefferson when she had seen him walking across the hotel foyer the previous evening. Then, of course, she had not known who he was. Only that...only that she found him attractive...

She felt numbed by the sheer unacceptability of what she had done, shamed and filled with the bleakest sense of disbelief and despair.

Her lack of any response and her continued silence were just a ploy she was using as a form of gamesmanship, Leo decided as he watched her, and as for that anguished shock he had seen earlier in her eyes, well, as he had good cause to know, she was an extremely accomplished performer!

'I have to go. Please let me past.'

The soft huskiness of her voice reminded Leo of the way she had moaned her desire to him during the night. What the hell

was the matter with him? He couldn't possibly still want her!

Even though he had made no move to stand away from the door, Jodi walked towards it as determinedly as she could. She had, she reminded herself, faced a whole roomful of disruptive teenage pupils of both sexes during her teacher training without betraying her inner fear. Surely she could outface one mere man? Only somehow the use of the word 'mere' in connection with this particular man brought a mirthless bubble of painful laughter to her throat.

This man could never be a 'mere' anything. This man...

She had guts, Leo acknowledged as she stared calmly past him, but then no doubt her chosen profession would mean that she was no stranger to the art of making a judicial exit.

It went against everything he believed in to forcibly constrain her, even though he was loath to let her go without reinforcing just what he thought of her and the man who was paying her.

Another second and she would have been so close to him that they would almost have been body to body, Jodi recognised on a mute shudder of distress as Leo finally allowed her access to the door. Expelling a shaky, pent-up breath of relief, she reached for the handle.

Leo waited until she had turned it before reminding her grimly, 'Driscoll might think this was a clever move, but you can tell him from me that it wasn't. Oh, and just a word of warning for you personally: any attempt to publicise what happened between us last night and I can promise you that any ridicule I suffer you

will suffer ten times more.'

Jodi didn't speak. She couldn't. This was the most painful, the most shameful experience she had ever had or ever wanted to have.

But it seemed that Leo Jefferson still hadn't finished with her, because as she stepped out into the hotel corridor he took hold of the door, placing his hand over hers in a grip that was like a volt of savage male electricity burning through her body.

'Of course, if you'd been really clever you could have sold your story where it would have gained you the highest price already.'

Jodi couldn't help herself; even though it was the last thing she wanted to do, she heard herself demanding gruffly, 'What... what do you mean?'

The cynically satisfied smile he gave her made her shudder.

'What I mean is that I'm surprised you haven't tried to bargain a higher price for your silence from me than the price Driscoll paid you for your services.'

Jodi couldn't believe what she was hearing.

'I don't...I didn't...' She began to defend herself instinctively, before shaking her head and telling him fiercely, 'There isn't any amount of money that could compensate me for what...what I experienced last night.' And then, before he could say or do anything more to hurt her, she managed to wrench her hand from his and run down the corridor towards the waiting lift.

A girl wearing the uniform of a member of the hotel staff paused to look at her as Jodi left Leo's suite, but Jodi was too

engrossed in her thoughts to notice her.

Leo watched her go in furious disbelief. Just how much of a fool did she take him for, throwing out a bad Victorian line like that? And as for what she had implied, well, his body had certain very telltale marks on it that told a very different story indeed!

To Jodi's relief, no one gave her a second glance as she hurried through the hotel foyer, heading for the exit. No doubt they were used to guests coming and going all the time.

'Stop thinking about it,' she advised herself as she stepped out into the bright morning sunlight, blinking a little in its brilliance.

The first thing she was going to do when she got home, Jodi decided as she drove out onto the main road, was have a shower, and the second was to compose the letter she would send to Leo Jefferson, putting to him the case for allowing the factory to remain open—there was no way she was going to try to make any kind of personal contact with him now!

And the third: the third was to go to bed and catch up on her sleep, and very firmly put what had happened between them out of her mind, consign it to a locked and deeply buried part of her memory that could never be accessed again by anyone!

Jodi opened the front door to her small cottage, one of a row of eight, built in the eighteenth century, with tiny, picturesque front gardens overlooking the village street and much longer lawns at the rear. After carefully locking up behind her she made her way

upstairs.

It was the sound of her telephone ringing that finally woke her; groggily she reached for the receiver, appalled to see from her watch that it was gone ten o'clock. Normally at this time on a Saturday morning she would be in their local town, doing her weekly supermarket shop before meeting up with friends for lunch.

As luck would have it, she had made no such arrangement for today, as most of her friends were away on holiday with their families.

As her fingers curled round the telephone receiver her stomach muscles tensed, despite the fact that she knew it was impossible that her caller could be Leo Jefferson; after all, he didn't even know who she was, thank goodness! A small frisson of nervous excitement tingled through her body, quickly followed by a strong surge of something she would not allow herself to acknowledge as disappointment when she recognised her cousin Nigel's voice.

It was no wonder, after all she had been through, that her emotions should be so traumatised that they had difficulty in relaying appropriate reactions to her.

'At last,' she could hear Nigel saying cheerfully to her. 'This is the third time I've rung. How did it go with Leo Jefferson? I'm dying to know.'

Jodi took a deep breath; she could feel her heart starting to pound as shame and guilt filled her. The hand holding the

receiver felt sticky. She had never been a good liar; never been even a vaguely adequate one.

‘It didn’t,’ she admitted huskily.

‘You chickened out?’ Nigel guessed.

Jodi let out a sigh of relief; Nigel had just given her the perfect answer to her dilemma.

‘I...I was tired and I started to have second thoughts. And—’

Before she could tell Nigel that she had decided to write to Leo Jefferson rather than speak with him her cousin had cut across her to say tolerantly, ‘I thought you wouldn’t go through with it. Never mind. Uncle Nigel has ridden to the rescue for you. My boss has invited me over to dinner tonight, and I’ve asked him if I can take you along with me. He’ll be speaking to Leo Jefferson himself next week, and if you put your case to him I’m sure he’ll incorporate the plight of the school into his own discussion.’

‘Oh, Nigel, that’s very kind of you, but I don’t think...’ Jodi began to demur. She just wasn’t in the mood for a dinner party, and as for the idea of putting the school’s case to Nigel’s boss, who was the chief planning officer for the area, Jodi’s opinion of her own credibility had been so undermined that she just didn’t feel good enough about herself to do so.

Nigel, though, made it clear that he was not prepared to take no for an answer.

‘You’ve got to come,’ he insisted. ‘Graham really does want to meet you. His grandson is one of your pupils, apparently, and he’s a big fan of yours. The grandson, not Graham. Although...’

‘Nigel, I can’t go,’ Jodi protested.

‘Of course you can. You must. Think of your school,’ he teased her before adding, ‘I’m picking you up at half-past seven, and you’d better be ready.’

He had rung off before Jodi could protest any further.

Wearily Jodi studied the screen of her computer. She had spent most of the afternoon trying to compose a letter to send to Leo Jefferson. The headache she had woken up with had, thankfully, finally abated, but every time she tried to concentrate on what she was supposed to be doing a totally unwanted mental picture of Leo Jefferson kept forming inside her head. And it wasn’t just his face that her memory was portraying to her in intimate detail, she acknowledged as she felt herself turning as pink as the cascading petunias in her next-door neighbour’s window boxes. Mrs Fields, at eighty, was still a keen gardener, and as she had ruefully explained to Jodi she liked the strong, bright colours because she could see them.

Jodi’s own lovingly planted boxes were a more subtle combination of soft greens, white and silver, the same silver as Leo Jefferson’s sexy eyes.

Jodi’s face flamed even hotter as she stared at her screen and realised that she had begun her letter, ‘Dear Sexy Eyes’.

Quickly she deleted the words and began again, reminding herself of how important it was that she impress on Leo Jefferson the effect the closure of the factory would have not just on her

school but also on the whole community.

All over the country small villages were dying or becoming weekend dormitories for city workers, although everyone here in their local community had worked hard to make theirs a living, working village.

If she could get Nigel's boss on her side it was bound to help their case. Frowning slightly, she pushed her chair away from her computer. She ought to be used to fighting to keep the school going now. When she had first been appointed as its head teacher she had been told by the education authority that it would only be for an interim period, as, with the school's numbers falling, it would ultimately have to be closed.

Even though she had known she would get better promotion and higher pay by transferring to a bigger school, as soon as Jodi had realised the effect that losing their school would have she had begun to canvass determinedly for new pupils, even to the extent of persuading parents who had previously been considering private education to give their local primary a chance.

Her efforts had paid off in more ways than one, and Jodi knew she would never forget the pride she had felt when their school had received an excellent report following an inspection visit.

Her pride wasn't so much for herself, though, as for the efforts of the pupils and everyone else who had supported the school; to have to stand back and see all the ground they had gained lost, the sense of teamwork and community she had so determinedly fostered amongst the pupils destroyed, was more than she wanted

to have to bear.

She had proved just how well the children thrived and learned in an atmosphere of security and love, in a school where they were known and valued as individuals, and Jodi was convinced that the self-confidence such a start gave them was something that would benefit them through their academic lives. But somehow, trying to explain all of this to Leo Jefferson was far harder than she had expected.

Perhaps it was because she suspected that he had already made up his mind, that, so far as he was concerned, the small community he would be destroying simply didn't matter when compared with his profits. Or perhaps it was because all she could think about, all she could see, was last night and the way they had been together...

With every hour that distanced her from the intimacy they had shared it became harder for her to acknowledge what she had done. It just wasn't like her to behave in such a way, and the proof of that, had she needed any, was the fact that he, Leo Jefferson, had been her first and only lover!

Too overwrought to concentrate, Jodi stood up and started to pace the floor of her small sitting room in emotional agitation.

Shocking though her behaviour had been, she knew and could not deny that she had enjoyed Leo Jefferson's touch, his lovemaking, his possession.

But that was because she had been half-drunk and half-asleep, she tried to defend herself, before her strong sense of honesty

ruthlessly reminded her of the way she had reacted to him when she had first seen him, when she had quite definitely been both sober and awake!

It was nearly six o'clock. Her letter wasn't finished, but she would have to leave it now and go and get ready for the evening.

Nigel was going to a lot of trouble on her behalf and she ought to feel grateful to him. Instead, all she wanted was to stay at home and hide from the world until she had come to terms with what she had done.

CHAPTER THREE

LEO grimaced as he ran a hand over his newly shaven jaw. There was no way he felt like going out to dinner, but when Graham Johnson, the chief planning officer for the area, had rung to invite him to his home Leo had not felt he could refuse.

It made good business sense to establish an amicable arrangement with the local authority. Leo had already met Graham and liked him, and when Graham had explained that there was someone he would find it interesting to meet on an informal basis Leo had sensed that Graham would not be very impressed were he to turn him down. And besides, at least if he went out it would stop him from thinking about last night, and that wretched, unforgettably sexy woman who had got so dangerously under his skin.

As yet, Jeremy Driscoll had made no attempt to contact him, and Leo was hoping that he had the sense to recognise that Leo was not to be coerced—in any way—but somehow he doubted that Jeremy had actually given up. He wasn't that type, and, since he had gone as far as paying his accomplice to play her part, Leo suspected that he was going to want value for his money.

Did Driscoll avail himself of Leo's tousle-haired tormentor's sexual skills? It shocked Leo to discover just how unpalatable he found that thought! Was he crazy, feeling possessive about a woman like that, a woman any man could have? Unwantedly

Leo found himself remembering the way her body had claimed him, tightening around him almost as though it had known no other man. Now he was going crazy, he told himself angrily as he peered at the approaching signpost to check that he was driving in the right direction.

‘Jodi, you aren’t listening to me.’

Jodi gave her cousin an apologetic look as he brought his car to a halt outside his boss’s house.

‘Come to think of it, you’re not exactly looking your normal, chirpy self.’ He gave her a concerned look. ‘Worrying about that school of yours, I expect?’

Ignoring his question, Jodi drew a deep breath, determined to tackle him about an issue that had been weighing very heavily on her mind.

‘Nigel, what on earth possessed you to order that cocktail for me last night? You know I don’t drink, and because it never occurred to me that it was alcoholic...well, there was so much fruit in it...’

‘Hey, hang on a minute,’ Nigel protested in bewilderment. ‘I never ordered you anything alcoholic.’

‘Well, whatever the waiter brought to Leo Jefferson’s suite definitely was,’ Jodi informed him grittily.

‘They must have misunderstood me,’ Nigel told her. ‘I asked them to send you up a fruit cocktail. I thought it seemed expensive—what a waste; I bet you didn’t touch it after the first

swallow, did you?’

Fortunately, before she was obliged to lie to him, he took hold of Jodi’s arm and walked her firmly towards the front door, which opened as they reached it to reveal their host, Graham Johnson, a tall grey-haired man with a warm smile.

‘You must be Jodi.’ He shook Jodi’s hand, and introduced himself. ‘I’ve heard an awful lot about you!’

When Jodi gave Nigel a wry look their host shook his head and laughed.

‘No, not from Nigel, although he has mentioned you. I was referring to our grandson, Henry. He’s one of your pupils and an ardent admirer. With just reason, too, according to his parents. Our daughter, Charlotte, is most impressed with the dramatic improvement the school has achieved in Henry’s reading skills.’

Jodi smiled her appreciation of his compliments and a little of the tension started to leave her body as they followed Graham into the house.

Mary Johnson was as welcoming as her husband, informing Jodi that she had trained as a teacher herself, although it had been many years since she had last taught.

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