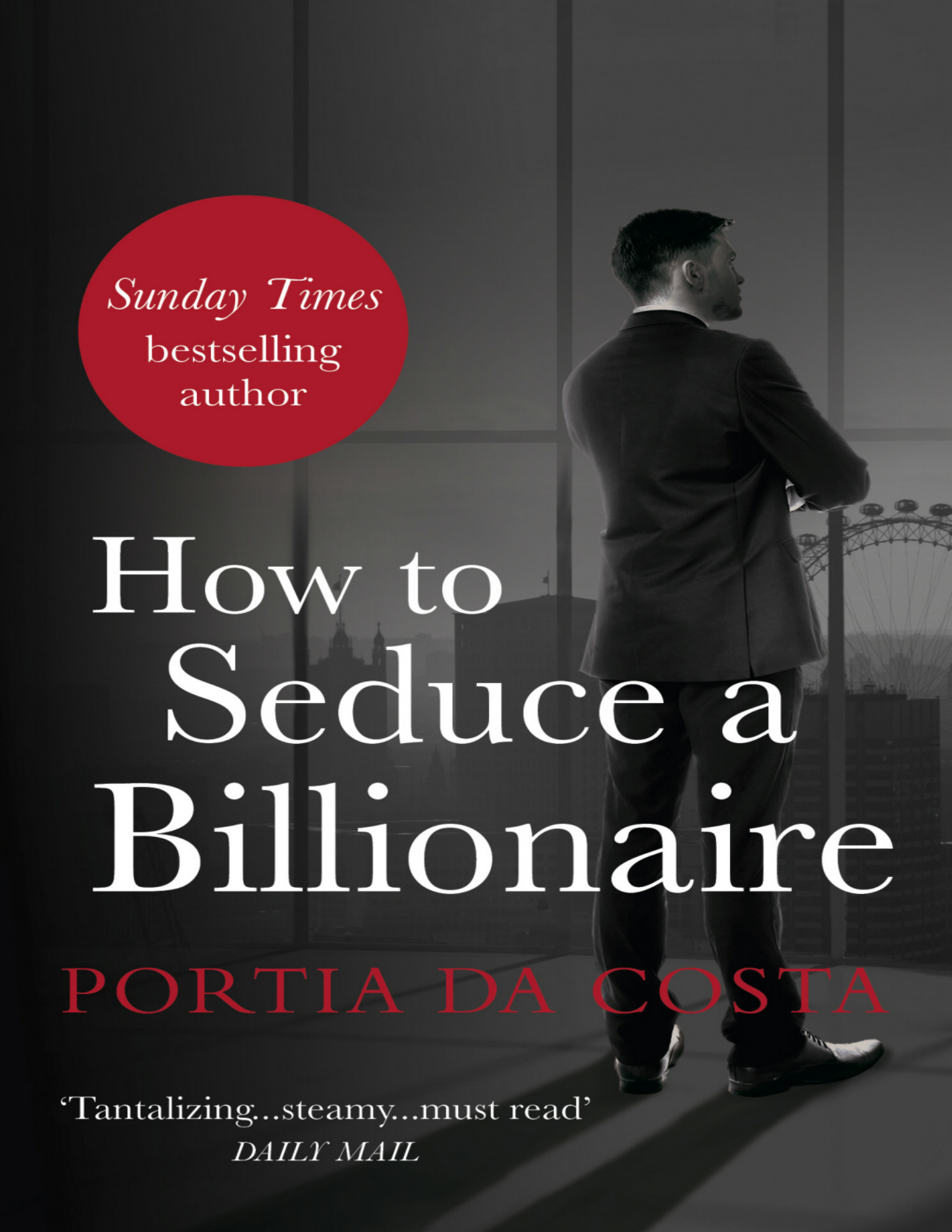




Sunday Times
bestselling
author

How to Seduce a Billionaire

PORTIA DA COSTA

‘Tantalizing...steamy...must read’

DAILY MAIL

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Sneak Preview of *The Accidental Call Girl*
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About the Book

The virgin and the billionaire...

Just because Jess Lockhart is a virgin in her late twenties doesn't mean she isn't interested in men. In fact, far from it: she fantasises about finding the perfect man who can fulfil her every desire.

Her new boss, handsome billionaire Ellis McKenna, seems perfect for the job. It is clear he is as attracted to her as she is to him. However, a tragic past has left Ellis vowing to never do 'serious' relationships again. Having allowed herself to be seduced by a billionaire can Jess teach him about love?

If you like *Fifty Shades of Grey* you'll love this!

About the Author

Portia Da Costa is one of the most internationally renowned authors of erotic romance and erotica, and a *Sunday Times*, *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestseller.

She is the author of seventeen *Black Lace* novels, as well as numerous short stories and novellas.

Also by Portia Da Costa

The Accidental Series:

The Accidental Call Girl

The Accidental Mistress

The Accidental Bride

Novels:

Shadowplay

The Tutor

Entertaining Mr Stone

Continuum

The Devil Inside

Hotbed

Suite Seventeen

Gemini Heat

Gothic Blue

Gothic Heat

The Stranger

In Too Deep

The Gift

Short Stories:

The Red Collection

How to Seduce a Billionaire

PORTIA DA COSTA

BLACK
LACE

Prologue

He was tall, dark and handsome. Always tall, dark and handsome. A romantic cliché, but who was she to argue with her subconscious?

Dream Lover didn't speak as he climbed into bed with her. He rarely did speak. Her fantasies were visual, not auditory and her own sighs and moans were all the soundtrack that she needed.

Falling back against the pillows, she let her imagined lover take the lead. His smile was enigmatic as he loomed over her, a subtle play of light and shade, but his eyes were vivid and dark with desire. Aquamarine and too brilliant to be natural, they almost dazzled her as he moved in close to kiss her. His lips were mobile and velvety, and the contact compelled her mouth to yield, his tongue demanding entrance, and thrusting fiercely.

Oh yeah!

Fantasy hands settled on her body, the contact firm but not rough as he explored her. He cupped her breast, squeezing lightly, thumb flicking back and forth, driving her crazy even though he'd barely begun his magic. She squirmed, every bit of her coming to life. Especially certain bits ... The touch of his fingertips was smooth and warm, sliding easily against her skin. It felt lovely and made her wriggle even more ... until an intrusive memory popped unwelcome into her mind.

A nearly-man, someone she'd once dated and hoped for great things with, he'd had callouses on his fingertips when he'd touched her. They'd felt horribly rough against her skin when he'd tried to sneak his hand up her blouse, and

it'd destroyed every chance she might have had of getting turned on.

I'm my own worst enemy. Everything has to be perfect when in real life it probably never is.

As she banished the thought with a furious shake of her head, her hair lashed against the pillow as if she were already in the throes of orgasm. Still without speaking her phantasm-man soothed her, gentled her. His touch both calmed her down and shook her up at the same time, and he stroked her breasts, one then the other, alternating, knowing just when to switch. Then, kissing harder, he drifted that enchanted arousing hand further down, cupping her crotch in a light grip that employed a pinpoint degree of assertion and confidence. Her legs lolled apart of their own accord, making room for his exploration. Seducing him ...

Of course, it went right. Why wouldn't it? It was all idealised. Questing, he parted the hair of her pussy with those perfect fingertips, dipping in to touch her clit. She gasped, always astonished to be so wet at these times. Lost in her fantasy though, it was easy to get slippery and silky, effortlessly easy.

She cried out, her own voice sounded shockingly loud. Usually she was able to keep the noise down in a shared house, barely articulating any more than wordless Dream Lover did. For a moment, she worried that her house-mate Cathy would hear her, but then told herself not to fret. She'd never heard any sounds of erotic partying from Cathy's room, and her housemate led a happy, uninhibited sex life with a real, live lover. Cathy was normal, and shared good times with her steady man.

She's younger than me too.

No! Another intrusive thought ... It was a weird night tonight. Somehow she was more turned on than usual, and yet at the same time less able to concentrate on making Dream Lover real.

What had got into her? Had she lost it completely, from all this incessant brooding on ... her situation?

Closing her eyes tight, she focused on the dream man who was making love to her. He was passionate and beautiful, and though she still saw no exact likeness of him, he was somehow clearer. She didn't force the issue though. She had other priorities. Something else she needed to keep from slipping away ... Sensations that could be as fugitive as they were precious and exquisite.

Stroking, stroking, stroking. The pressure, the pattern just right. No man would ever match her own fingers. No man would ever map her own body as she did.

No man had ever even had a chance to try, because no man was perfect.

Stop it! Don't go there. Focus, idiot!

Slipping, circling, swirling, Dream Lover banished her conundrum. His touch and the way it journeyed over the folds and dips and hotspots of her sex was matchless; dominant without being domineering, powerful without being rough. The gathering pleasure made her rock her hips, jerk and thrust against the contact. But Dream Lover was Dream Lover and he didn't miss a beat.

Gasping, she rose to him again, imagination finally taking over, the fantasy and the sensations becoming one. As if sure of her readiness, the man she'd conjured up moved over her, gracefully settling between her legs, his idealised cock pressing for admittance against the entrance of her sex.

The unknown country.

But it felt right. It felt wonderful. Hot. Solid. An iron-stiff rod pushing inside her, yet living and sensitive. Driving, thrusting, possessing, the rhythm divine and metronomic. The way he knocked against her clit with each plunge triggering pleasure that bloomed like fireworks, streaming up into the heavens and taking her with them.

Her teeth clamped hard together, keeping in her shouts, but inside she cried, *Oh thank you, thank you, thank you!*
Whoever you are ...

Afterwards, she lay still and gasping. Wrung out like a dishrag, sweaty and dishevelled.

This was getting ridiculous.

You need to get a real man, you bloody fool. You need to find out what it's really like. Nobody but a nun is still a virgin at twenty-nine nowadays, regardless of whatever life 'stuff' happens to them.

Holding out any longer for some crazy ideal of a perfect man was stupid. There were no perfect men, and if she kept holding out for one, she'd find herself holding out forever, and end up as a dried up spinster with only her sketching and good works or whatever to keep her occupied. She'd bet good money that any normal woman would be prepared to sleep with more than a frog or two in the hopes that one of them might turn out to be moderately princely.

Waiting for desire was daft. The years were flying by. She had to go half way, and take a risk; *work* to feel passion. Just sitting around expecting lust to suddenly arrive, kaboom, was pathetic.

Next time a nice man with potential crossed her path, she had to give him a chance, and not keep turning away because he wasn't Dream Lover.

As long as he's just a little bit tall and dark and handsome

...

Shaking her head, she sat up and smoothed down her nightgown.

Time to draw ...

‘Oh no! Why today? Why do you have to do this to me?’

Jess Lockhart stared up into the pouring rain and almost shook her fist. She would have done it if there hadn’t been cars whizzing by, driven by people who’d think she was a loony; cars that flung up sheets of muddy spray that soaked her shoes and legs as they passed.

Why had this happened just when she wanted to look her best at work? She didn’t normally dress up. Smart casual, in fact very casual, was her usual look. But today she wanted to appear a bit more polished, just in case, because of the mighty, exalted VIP who was visiting.

Not that the new owner of the insurance group she worked for was likely to descend from on high to tour the cubicle farm. Why would he? He was a businessman, a tycoon, a financier. He wasn’t interested in what the lowly drones at the coalface were doing, just the monetary assets that Windsor Insurance, his new acquisition, represented.

‘Why does nobody I know ever drive past?’ Jess growled at no car in particular.

This was the busiest part of the city and not everybody was going in the same direction, but surely somebody else was heading for Windsor Insurance? But most likely they wouldn’t even recognise such a rain-soaked and bedraggled mutt as their work colleague.

Now, if she’d got up in good time, she could’ve checked the weather forecast and known that sharp, heavy showers were on the way. But no, she’d been awake half the night, stupidly fantasising about Dream Lover, and then equally stupidly trying to capture his image on paper.

Consequently, when it was time to get up, she'd slept in, woolly-headed and weary. If she'd woken up at her normal hour, she could have begged a lift from Cathy, but she'd left it too late. Cathy was an angel, and she'd offered to wait ... but that would have made her late for work too.

Now you're paying the price for your midnight shenanigans, dimbo, and as you didn't even have the foresight to bring an umbrella, you're going to get soaked to the skin between the bus station and work. Brilliant!

Blinking water out of her eyes, Jess realised that the hair that had begun as a chic and elegant up-do was fast collapsing, its structure undermined by the teeming deluge. With a muttered oath, she pulled out the securing clip, and slung it aside in disgust, to run her fingers through the thick straggles of her sodden hair.

So much for 'maple syrup' low-lights and a twenty-quid conditioning mask.

Just about to retrieve the clip, she darted back from the kerb's edge. Despite the double yellow lines and 'No Stopping' signs, a vehicle actually was pulling up beside her now, its slowing speed only splattering her with a light swish of rainwater this time. Her hairclip was crushed to shards beneath the wheel of a distinctive, retro looking powder blue car. A long, low, classic Citroën. An uncle of hers had driven one once upon a time, and she'd always loved riding in it, because of the way its suspension made you feel as if you were floating on air. Happy, innocent days those had been, when she and her sister had accompanied her uncle's family on sketching holidays to Cornwall.

But what was a vintage 'blue whale' like Uncle Mark's doing here in this neck of the woods, jostling amongst the school run SUVs and the hot hatches and the occasional luxury saloon or hybrid?

Looks like I'm going to find out.

A figure within the blue car leant across the passenger seat and rolled down the window.

‘Can I give you a lift somewhere?’ said a deep, musical voice, easy on the ear, but very ‘not from round here’. The accent was hard to pin down though – basically British, but with bits of other things – especially amongst the drumming rain and the honking car horns.

Jess blinked again. And not just from the water running into her eyes. It was like a double recognition. *Really* weird, making her feel weird too, as if she’d been whirled around several times, far too fast.

No, surely not ... Surely it’s not him ... or him!

The man in the car was the spitting image of the pictures she’d seen of today’s VIP visitor ... and he could also have been Dream Lover at a pinch.

The familiar but unfamiliar man grinned, his face lighting up in a sunny, happy, amused expression, glowing somehow, almost dazzling. Eyes that were a bluish green – bluer than his car, but not as green as the actual green of leaves or grass – almost seemed to twinkle at her.

Dear God, it is him! It’s the VIP! The new big boss of all bosses!

‘Lift?’ he prompted, making Jess realise that she must look a complete fool, standing there, wet and bedraggled, with her mouth hanging open, and was probably compounding that impression with every second that passed. Yet still she stood there, and time seemed frozen, apart from the ominous approach of an incoming traffic warden, heading along the street.

But what was this handsome devil, this mighty captain of business, doing cruising along, driving himself in an obviously ancient car when he should be riding in a limousine with a brace of PAs and a chauffeur to look after him? And the VIP’s clothing didn’t fit the surroundings either. He looked as if he was on his holidays. His suit was light-coloured, fawnish linen, stylish but slightly crumpled, and he wore his flower-patterned cheesecloth shirt with the tails out.

It's definitely him though. Handsome as the devil, but nothing like your everyday average billionaire tycoon. Definitely eccentric.

'Thanks, but it's all right. I'm nearly there. I wouldn't want to trouble you, and I'll get rain on the upholstery of your car. Thanks ...'

He laughed softly, cheerful and clearly entertained by her absurdity.

'Sod my upholstery, it'll survive.' He quirked his dark brows at her, and his smile was oddly entreating. 'Please won't you get in? You're getting drenched, and I'll never forgive myself if you end up catching a cold or flu when I could've prevented it. I'm not a pervert or a kidnapper, honestly.' He glanced quickly up the street at the approaching warden. 'I think I'm going to get a ticket any second if we don't move on.'

'Okay then. Thanks.'

Jess slithered into the passenger seat, embarrassingly aware of the slim skirt of her one good suit riding up her thighs. Her tights felt horribly slimy on her wet legs, but she'd wanted to look 'well put together' today and groomed, so she'd worn a pair. Normally she relied on a spot of fake tan.

'Where to?' The VIP arched his eyebrows at her again. And what eyebrows they were! Dark and very firmly marked, they were a perfect match for the near-black brown of his slightly tousled hair and the sexy roguish stubble of his semi-beard.

I don't think Dream Lover has ever had a beard.

'Um ... Windsor Insurance. It's about two monoliths down, on the left. You can't miss it. There's this silly picture of a castle on the logo.'

And it's your latest acquisition, Mr Beach Bum Billionaire, I think you'll find.

'A silly castle, eh?' he observed, setting the car in gear, eyes on the traffic, yet still making her feel as if he was

scrutinising her intensely. 'And what are you then, the lost princess?'

'Nope, just a serf. A minion. A lowly member of one of the claims teams.'

'Oh, not so lowly. Not from where I'm sitting.' Before Jess could even form a response to that, he gestured towards their destination, which now hove into view on the left. She hadn't noticed but he was driving quite fast in the wet and had navigated his way neatly through the hurly-burly of the morning rush hour. 'That it?'

Was he even going to mention who he was? Maybe not. Maybe he wasn't going to bother inspecting the troops, after all, and was just going to hang out with higher management echelons?

'Yes ... Yes, thanks. You could drop me just here. That's the staff entrance.' She nodded to where some of her work colleagues, most of them considerably dryer than she was, were filing through the double doors.

As she put her hand on the car door handle, he stayed her, his fingers on her arm. It was the lightest contact, but she almost rocked in her seat, imagining the same lightness of touch in another context. A night-time context, slight and gentle, but the beginning of more, so much more.

Jess! What the hell ... What ...

Incredibly, her body roused. It was so sudden and so incongruous that she almost swayed in the seat.

Why now? In these circumstances? In the rain, with a man she'd met seconds ago, and would probably never meet again, other than perhaps a nod of acknowledgement as he swept through the claims department on some kind of royal progress.

And yet, it'd happened, shaking her in a way that had always seemed like some magic unknown, a state fantasised about and achieved in solitude, but never experienced out here, in the real world. How could one fleeting touch from this displaced beach bum catch her

unawares and take her effortlessly to the domain of Dream Lover?

Staring at him, she could almost see her every thought mirrored in those tropical ocean eyes. As if he knew her. Totally. Understood her lack of experience, and comprehended that she didn't *want* to lack experience, but simply didn't want to throw away something precious in a meaningless act with someone she didn't quite care enough about.

'Are you okay?' He frowned. Looked puzzled. Probably not as completely bedazzled and befuddled as she was, but somehow, amazingly, affected by the moment. 'Do you have towels in there?'

'What?'

'Towels. For drying yourself.'

'Er ... No, not really, it's mostly hand-dryers.' Now there was a point.

He leant forward, popped open the glove compartment, and fished out a box of man-size tissues, as yet unopened. 'Take those. They'll be better than nothing. Your boss should provide better facilities for his staff than just hand-dryers. Especially in this soggy climate.'

'Oh, I couldn't ...' Easy for him to be Lord Bountiful. Nobody would get soaked to the skin by dank northern weather on his tropical-somewhere hideaway or any other parts of a billionaire's exalted world.

'Oh, go on. It's just a box of tissues.' He reached over, unzipped the top of her tote bag and shoved in the box of tissues. 'Now, off you go. You'll be late, and we wouldn't want that, would we?'

'No, we wouldn't,' she shot back at him, glad to have retrieved her backbone from somewhere. He'd given her a very brief lift – and the weirdest jolt of pleasure – but he wasn't the boss of her ... even if he was.

'Thanks again,' she cried, opening the passenger door and shooting out before things could get any weirder.

Soft laughter rang in her ears long after she'd entered the building, echoing as if imprinted on her brain.

2

Portrait of a young woman as drowned rat. I wouldn't want to draw that!

Jess could still see her face in the ladies' room mirror. Her makeup had mostly gone to hell, as had her hairstyle, leaving her looking generally gobsmacked and waterlogged.

And the man who'd given her an almighty shaking up for a variety of reasons had seen that impressive look, and obviously found her a rich source of amusement.

Arrogant bastard! In your world there'll always be a nice dry car to take you where you want to go! No slumming it in the rain like us plebs ...

Now though, at her desk, an hour later, she felt warmer, better, and at least slightly dryer. His big box of tissues had helped with the blotting, and she'd set it beside her computer, like a talisman. She entertained silly, subversive thoughts about hanging on to it when it was empty, as a keepsake of their 'moment'.

Or at least your moment, Jess. Ridiculously bad timing. Couldn't have been worse.

Silly mare, she chided herself, yet, even as she went through routine tasks, she tried to reclaim the sensations.

Heat, even though she was shivering. Heart racing. The deep, slow, honeyed surge, low in her belly. Astounding ... alarming ... wonderful! Everything she could induce in her fantasies, yet never feel here in the real, living world!

Unfortunately, though, the man who'd induced those feelings would never know it. Hell, he'd probably completely forgotten her even before she'd reached the

door to the building, even though the smell of his gorgeously spicy cologne was still powerful and exotic in her brain.

Those blue-green eyes. That sunny smile. They were still with her too. And she kept seeing his strong, lightly tanned hands, so relaxed yet sure on the steering wheel ... and in everything they did, probably. Could this man be the full-on placeholder for Dream Lover? A face she could picture in her fantasies? An avatar to make do with until somebody real came along? If they ever did ...

Banishing that grim thought, she felt her fingers itch to start doodling, and after a sly look around, she succumbed, pretending to jot notes on her pad, yet in reality pencilling the curve of that smiling mouth, that sexily stubbled jawline. Just elements. She daren't get absorbed in a full face sketch or she'd get no work done and somebody would notice. Not a good strategy at the best of times, but doubly unwise today. Everybody was supposed to look super-efficient, and wholeheartedly dedicated to insurance, for the 'royal' visit: the arrival of the group's new owner to inspect their very humble and fairly insignificant division. Which was weird, but apparently the VIP's eccentric habit.

And management doesn't know the half of it. She grinned to herself while she doodled the curve of his gorgeous lips on her pad. *That stuffy lot upstairs will have a fit when they see your flowered shirt with the tails hanging out.*

So, she'd actually met Ellis P. McKenna, international financier and general all-round filthy rich tycoon. One to one. He was the scion of a billion-dollar entrepreneurial family who'd bought out Windsor Insurance as part of a group along with a large number of other financial concerns, just like someone going out and buying three sweaters in different colours rather than only one. If actual whole companies were so easy to acquire and dispose of to him, it didn't bode well for the little people like her who worked in them.

We all might be just as disposable as cheap jumpers if you decide to keep this operation lean and mean, Mr McKenna.

Jess shuddered. She needed her job, because she didn't have any reserves. Ensuring that her gran had been comfortable at Baxendale Court in her final years had hoovered up every scrap of Jess's modest savings, and she was still gradually paying off the loan she'd taken out to make up the difference. She didn't regret a thing, and would do it again in a heartbeat, but it had left her finances since then a tad precarious, even long after Gran had passed on.

Impatient suddenly, she flung down her pencil, breaking the point and attracting curious looks from Jim and Michelle, who shared her 'pod' of desks.

Oh, come on, Mr McKenna, let's see you again. We'll all sit here tugging our forelocks for a bit, then we can get back to our normal drone activities ... and I can be sure that Dream Lover is just Dream Lover, a man I once met for about thirty seconds.

Would he even acknowledge her? Or just swan past, barely noticing the faces behind the desks? She pushed his box of tissues to a more prominent place. Perhaps that might remind him?

Even as Jess was thinking that, there was a faint jumble of voices out in the corridor, a small commotion like a looming weather front. People around her sat up straight, fiddled with their ties or smoothed their hair. Michelle even pressed her lips together to refresh her lipstick. Ridiculous! The VIP would come blowing through the office, barely breaking stride, a self-identified deity amongst them, hardly bothering to acknowledge the individual insects he now employed.

The minor hubbub intensified, still approaching. Unconsciously, Jess did the smoothing of the hair thing too. She'd drawn it back now in the best 'do' she could manage

at short notice and with her clip smashed and gone, a ponytail at the nape of her neck, secured by a covered elasticated band she'd discovered at the bottom of her bag. She patted at her blouse too, the only part of her ensemble that had more or less avoided getting soaked. Unlike her skirt, which was soggy round the hem, and her shoes, which audibly squelched when she walked. She could have changed into her comfy shoes, but they were far too casual. Ah, the irony, considering that Ellis McKenna was more casually dressed than anyone here.

Jess's heart thudded. Some of those voices were distinct now – those of her bosses – but another one also sounded vaguely familiar.

Oh holy shit, you are tall, dark and handsome, Mr McKenna!

The potential candidate for Dream Lover met the height credentials too.

Flanked by the Windsor Insurance bigwigs in their best dark suits, stringently ironed shirts and sober ties, the man with the vintage Citroën strolled into the room, looking like a shabby but dazzling peacock god surrounded by a scuttling murder of crows. Sharp aquamarine eyes scanned the desks and the people behind them, registering, summing up, and passing by with the efficiency of a Terminator. It took but a split second for him to find her ... and smile.

Oh no!

Without any warning to his entourage, the newcomer abandoned them and strode towards her. Jess had the ridiculous urge to shoot to her feet.

God damn it, he's not a king or anything! I haven't even decided whether he's Dream Lover or not yet.

Sitting tight, she offered him a friendly smile. He had stopped and given her a lift, after all. 'Hello, Mr McKenna,' she said quickly, getting in there first, amazed that she suddenly felt both super-confident and quivery as a jelly

inside. He was definitely having Dream Lover effects on her.

His gaze flicked to her nameplate. 'Hello, Ms J. Lockhart. Have you dried out yet?'

'Yes, thank you.'

His brow puckered as he took in her still damp hair, and then, as he peered around the edge of her desk, her wet-hemmed skirt and her sodden shoes.

'Fibber,' he said in a low voice, possibly audible only to her as he leant closer. Jess gripped the edge of her desk to steady herself, made woozy by a sudden waft of his intoxicating male fragrance. It seemed stronger now than it had been in the car.

Who the hell were you intending to impress that you needed to top up your cologne?

His Mediterranean eyes, and the way they flashed, supplied the answer.

I've told you before! Don't be idiotic, Jess, you're nothing to him.

But against all reason, that was wrong. The way he looked at her said she was something to him. Something she couldn't completely believe. She could almost imagine she was *his* Dream Lover.

He didn't say more, but his intent expression, and the little quirk of his firm, rosy, biteable lips said their conversation was merely postponed, not over. With a wink, he turned from her, his sharp eyes focusing elsewhere, this time on a step stool against the filing wall, close to her desk. Swooping down, he drew it out, and then leapt lightly up onto it, just a yard or so from where Jess was sitting.

'Right, everyone. I guess you know who I am, and if you don't, I'm Ellis P. McKenna and three weeks ago I took Windsor Insurance into the UK portfolio of the McKenna Group.' He beamed around at everybody. Jess didn't know what the men in the section were making of this, but she could feel a cresting wave of fluttering female excitement

building in the room. *Stop showing off*, she wanted to say to him, even though every part of her subconscious and most of her conscious mind loved his display. His body was lithe, but strong-looking, and its proximity was like having some kind of sweet, heady alcoholic syrup bubbling inside her. He was inducing all the reactions that her fantasies managed to trigger, but which never occurred outside of them. Against her will, she found herself zeroing in on his waist ... his linen clad thighs ... his crotch ... Wondering and wondering.

Desiring ... At last. An actual living, breathing man. It was just like in the car. She was experiencing real female lust for a male who wasn't simply a figment of her imagination. All her adult life she'd wanted this to happen, and she'd believed she was weird and a freak because it hadn't. She'd never experienced the siren call. Never want to give ...

Blinking, she realised he was speaking again. But there had been a pause. A pause where he'd looked back into her eyes, and, yes, watched the birth of her physical attraction to him. Had he sensed its unusualness?

'What I just wanted to assure you all was that there won't be any redundancies or any cuts in salaries. Well, not at this level.' He winked again, to all the deskbound assembly in general. 'I haven't decided about this lot yet though.' He made an elegant sweeping gesture to the suits in his retinue, then beamed again, obviously highly amused by their discomfiture.

'Well, that's it really. I'm not one for speechifying. I just didn't want anyone to worry.' He leapt down from his vantage point. 'As they say in the movies, "Have a nice day."'

Yes, please go. I can't think. I need to settle down. Go away, Mr Dream Lover McKenna. Just walk out of my life so I can keep you in my fantasies.

A new emotion sluiced through her, as shocking and intense as the lust she'd felt. It was a black, aching sense of loss and despair. Why feel what she felt now, for a man she'd never see again? Why couldn't it have happened with someone attainable, with whom there might be a future? And more to the point, somebody that she liked, not this clearly supremely arrogant alpha male.

But Ellis McKenna didn't walk. He stayed where he was, scoping her, and frowning.

'You really are still a bit damp there, Ms J. Lockhart, aren't you?' The frown deepened, became layered somehow, as if his attention to her was operating on multiple levels at once. 'We can't have that. I'm not keen on the idea of an employee of mine coming down with pneumonia on the very first day I meet her. I think you'd better come with me.' Imperiously, he held out his hand, as if to draw her up from her seat. 'Please?'

And there it was again, that strange hint of entreaty in his eyes. That very human quality, a need for genuine interaction, however brief.

What the hell is going on? This is just barmy!

Still not sure whether she was succumbing to a consummate manipulator, or a man's real wish for her company, she took the offered hand, snatching up her bag from the side of her desk. His fingers closed around hers, firm and unyielding as if he thought she might flee if he let up on the hold. It was impossible not to follow him now as he led her the length of the desk farm, running the gauntlet of dozens of pairs of curious eyes tracking their every move.

'Where are we going? You can't just waltz me away somewhere,' she hissed, in the lowest voice she gauged he could hear without it carrying to the curious ears of her colleagues.

'I can. I'm the boss,' he said, twinkling at her over his shoulder.

‘You’re only the boss of me as an employee, not as a person. I ought to report you to my union rep for harassment.’ And in any other circumstances, it might have been harassment, but this ... this was something else entirely.

He stopped as they got to the lift, and released her hand.

‘I’m sorry. I’m being a bit of an arse, aren’t I? Do you want to go back to your desk?’ His expression was still that curious blend of provocation and appeal. He was daring her to walk back between the rows of avidly gaping faces, yet hoping that she wouldn’t call his bluff.

But what on earth is he planning?

Jess shot into the lift, and almost adhered herself to the far wall, about as far away from Ellis McKenna as she could get. After pressing the button for the top floor, he winked at her, and leant against the opposite wall. Why did she feel disappointed that he didn’t lunge in her direction?

But, he didn’t need to lunge. He just did it with his ocean-green eyes, scrutinising her from head to foot while a little smile played around his lips.

Jess wished, wished, wished she looked more impressive. She lifted her chin and eyeballed him back boldly, but she was all too aware of the soggy hem of her skirt, her squelchy shoes and the stringy wet strands of her hair. Still, pretending she looked fabulous, she stayed strong, trying not to be intimidated by his effortless, scruffy glamour and his sexual aura, an emanation so intense it was like a mist that filled the cabin of the lift.

Oh shit. Oh Lord. I want him. I’ve no practical idea how to do sex, but I want to do it with him, even if I will be the most hopeless lay.

Ellis tilted his head a little, his eyes narrowing almost as if he’d heard her. For about a fifth of a second, he caught his plush lower lip between his teeth, and looking at him, at that complex expression on his face, she could imagine that it wouldn’t matter to him that she was inexperienced.

Whatever happened, he would be good enough for both of them. He'd be sensational.

The 'ding' of the lift arriving at their destination made her jump, physically. They'd been in the lift less than thirty seconds but it felt like a lifetime.

'Where exactly are we going?' she asked, following him as he strode out of the lift, then paused to wait for her.

'I've commandeered old Jacobson's office for the day. He's slumming it, in with one of his henchmen.' Ellis winked at her again. 'He says he doesn't mind in the slightest but I can see he's really fuming inside.'

Jess had no idea what Mr Jacobson, the head honcho, looked like when he was fuming. He hadn't even been the one to interview her, and staff on her level never really interacted with senior management.

Looks like I'm interacting with a level of management way above 'old Jacobson' today. It isn't possible to reach a higher level than this.

'I hope he doesn't decide to take reprisals on people like me when you've flitted on to wherever you plan to flit to next,' she said crisply, as Ellis ushered her into the Executive Director's office suite. Jacobson's secretary gave her a curious glance, but only momentarily. The woman barely seemed to have eyes for anyone but Ellis McKenna.

'No interruptions please, Ms Brown,' he instructed, pausing at the older woman's desk to bestow a brain-melting smile.

'Of course, Mr McKenna,' she replied, sounding suspiciously breathy.

You make all women crazy, don't you? Jess accused him silently as he held open the door to the inner sanctum for her.

The way his beautiful mouth quirked seemed to suggest, once again, that he'd heard the thought.

It was a large office, with a very fine leather-topped desk, banked computer workstations to one side, and an

‘informal’ area over by the floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over the busy street below. Across the rooftops, in the distance, there was a tantalising view, between two high rises, of the city park, a bit of breathing space amongst the built-up metropolis. There was even the faintest glint of the boating pond, the glitter of water.

Two long settees faced each other at right angles to the triple-glazed glass, with individual armchairs drawn up to the sides and a couple of small, low tables strategically placed.

But wasn’t really the seating arrangement that caught Jess’s eye. It was the collection of items assembled, some on one of the tables, some on one of the couches.

Ellis led her to the nearest couch.

‘I think you should take your skirt and your shoes off.’

Jess gasped. What the hell?

The dazzling, roguish god laughed, his white teeth glinting.

‘No, I’m not planning to ravish you ...’ He paused, and for a moment a more saturnine expression crossed his face.

‘Well, not unless you absolutely insist. But really, your skirt is still wet at the hem, and I swear I can hear your shoes squishing as you walk.’ He nodded at the offending footwear. ‘It’s bloody cold today, considering it’s supposed to be summer round here at the moment, and like I said before, I’d never forgive myself if you ended up catching a chill.’

Thunderstruck, Jess said the first thing that came into her head. ‘Why? It’s not your fault.’

‘Oh, I think it is, in a way. The big boss is visiting, so you chose to wear a smart but rather flimsy suit and insubstantial shoes. It *is* my fault.’

‘That’s nonsense. I always dress smartly for work.’

He narrowed his sea-blue eyes.

‘All right ... Yes, this isn’t my usual work suit. It’s my interview suit. And these are my best dressed up shoes.’

‘Well, take them off for a while then. I’ve had the heating turned on, so we can slip your skirt over the radiator and your shoes beneath.’ He leant over and patted one of the curious items on the nearest settee: a thick, fluffy bathrobe in navy blue. ‘You can wear this while they dry off, and we can have a nice little chat and drink some hot chocolate. That’ll warm you up.’ He nodded towards a tall vacuum jug standing on one of the tables, with china cups and saucers, and a basket with what looked like home-made cookies nestling in a white table napkin. How had he assembled all this stuff in just an hour? Had he decided the moment he’d first seen her that he’d hijack her from her desk like this?

‘I can’t take my clothes off just like that. It’s ... um ...’ She clasped her bag, as if it were a weapon with which to defend herself from him. ‘I mean ... you’re like the super duper boss of me. I only met you for a few minutes less than an hour ago, and this is an open office, for God’s sake!’

‘Who do you think is going to ogle you? It’s just storage across there, as far as I can tell, and I don’t think the birds are particularly interested in us.’ He gestured towards the building across the road. He was right; the only living creatures that could overlook them were a few pigeons roosting on the windowsills across the way. ‘I’ll turn my back, of course.’

The situation was hurtling into the surreal. Jess shook her head. It was as if she’d stepped through a magic portal at some time since the blue Citroën had drawn up beside her. Or maybe that was the event horizon, entering his car.

‘Okay then, if you don’t trust me not to look, Jacobson has a small executive bathroom.’ He waved towards a door at the end of the computer bank. ‘You can change in there instead.’

Stop acting like a ninny, Jess. Just treat this like a game, a hoot. Pretend it’s all a big giggle and an adventure. He’ll be gone in a few hours, and he’ll most likely never come back.

You'll laugh about this afterwards and he is fabulous fantasy material ...

'I trust you not to look, but I think I'll still change in there.' Kicking off her wet shoes, she swept up the thick, luxurious robe and then hurried off towards the door to Jacobson's bathroom.

This was the weirdest situation she'd ever found herself in, and she needed a moment to regroup. To think and to look at her reflection in the mirror and convince herself she wasn't in an extended and augmented version of one of her own erotic fantasies. A freaky dream that she'd wake up from in a minute, and then have to drag her half-asleep body out of bed, to go to work.

And she needed a minute away from the challenging, macho aura of Ellis McKenna ... The only man she'd ever met who actually honest to God turned her on.