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**Some Sort
of Spell**

PENNY JORDAN

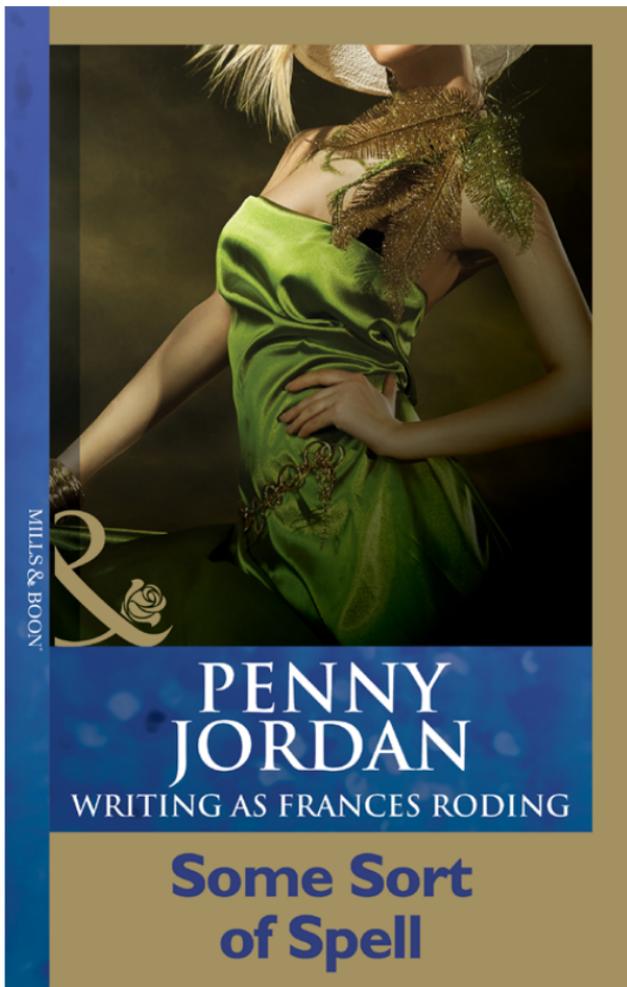
Some Sort Of Spell

Аннотация

She didn't ask to be rescued. Beatrice's half sister had done a lot of crazy things, but inviting Elliott Chalmers to temporarily share their home while his was being renovated – that was the limit! Everyone knew that Beatrice and Elliott had never seen eye to eye over her dedication to her orphaned siblings. He'd even nicknamed her "Cinders. "Well, handsome prince or no, she hadn't invited him to interfere. And although silently grateful for the added household discipline, Beatrice drew the line where Elliott seemed most intent on crossing – her personal life!

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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.

Some Sort of Spell

Penny Jordan



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CHAPTER ONE

ALL THE WAY home from the interview her head was aching. She loathed driving in London's traffic at the best of times, and today, tensed up as she was with anxiety over the interview, her temples had started pounding almost as soon as she got into her car.

She was a nervous driver at the best of times, and as though other drivers sensed it they ruthlessly cut in on her, flaunting their superior self-confidence and skill in front of her aching eyes.

It was a relief to turn into the long drive of the house, a huge Victorian pile in Wimbledon with a massive garden. Her parents had bought it just before the twins were born.

Several other cars were pulled up untidily on the drive.

Even before she opened the front door she could hear the thud of pop music. As she turned the door handle and walked in, an adolescent male voice called out, 'She's home!'

The music stopped. Upstairs several doors slammed, and several pairs of feet thudded down towards her. Being left with the task of singlehandedly bringing up her four teenage siblings when only twenty-two herself hadn't been easy. Now, six years later, she was used to it, or so she told herself.

Sebastian and Benedict, the twins, came down first; tall, blond, and extraordinarily good-looking, at just short of twenty-one they dazzled the eye, even when one was used to it. Miranda

was close behind them, eighteen, and as dark as her brothers were fair. William came last, glasses perched on the end of his nose, fair hair tousled.

There were times like this, when they surrounded her with their love and affection, when she would willingly have given them ten times as much as she had to take the place of the parents they had all lost.

There were others when she felt almost claustrophobic from the unending twenty-four-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week responsibility that went with her guardianship of her four younger siblings.

No one, least of all themselves, had expected that two such brilliant and dazzling stars of the London stage as Charles and Cressida Bellaire would be so unceremoniously and unfairly deprived of life at the very peaks of their careers, and after the initial grief that had overwhelmed those they had left behind had come the appalling task of dealing with the financial chaos of a couple who had wholeheartedly and energetically put into practice their belief that life should be lived a day at a time.

Of course, had he known of his untimely death, their father might have had the forethought to provide for his families' future, but as it was...

They had been a celebrated and glittering couple, twice married to one another and once each to other partners, and their deaths had left a hole in the lives of their children and close friends that Beatrice doubted could ever be filled.

She was their eldest child, the child of their first youthful marriage. Impossible to imagine that her mother had only been eighteen when she was conceived. They had been divorced shortly after she was born—her father had been offered a prestigious contract in Hollywood, and her mother had balked at going with him, preferring to stay in Stratford where she was getting growing recognition for her own power as a Shakespearean actress.

Within a year both of them had remarried, her father to a rising starlet, whose name very few people, including Charles himself it seemed, had been able to recall to mind later, and her mother to a wealthy industrialist, fifteen years her senior, with a son of ten.

That marriage had produced Lucilla, her half-sister, the only child of the family who had not been blessed with a Shakespearean name. Ironically enough, it was Lucilla who had been Charles's favourite, for all that she was not his child.

Of course the press had had a field day over their second marriage. By then both of them were well known. After her second husband's death Cressida had returned to the stage, and on Charles's triumphant return from Hollywood to appear in one of the most ambitious versions of *Hamlet* ever put on the stage, it was inevitable that the two should meet again.

Their stormy relationship had all the ingredients necessary for high drama—and, Beatrice sometimes thought wryly, of a Restoration farce, but she kept these thoughts strictly to herself.

It wasn't that she hadn't loved her parents; she had—everyone had—but not even their most fervent advocates could deny that in many ways they had been irresponsible.

Even so, life without them had been darkly shadowed for a very long time, and not just financially.

Uncle Peter, her godfather and her parents' closest friend, had helped them, tracking down various royalties due from her father's films and pointing her in the direction of a careful bank manager and accountant. Fortunately the house had been paid for, and the unexpected bonus of a long-forgotten bank account had yielded sufficient funds to put the others through school.

Maybe it was because Lucilla looked so much like their mother that she had been Charles's favourite, Beatrice mused, as she tried to ignore her pounding head and sort out the garbled conversations battering her eardrums.

None of her siblings, it seemed, could stop speaking for long enough to let just one of their number have their say. They all had to bombard her at the same time.

Twin boys, then a daughter and then another son had been produced by her parents during their second marriage. They were the products of their most fruitful years, both emotionally and career-wise, and she loved them all. Like their parents they were confident and beautiful. Unlike her. 'The runt of the litter', as Lucilla had more than once mockingly described her. And it was true enough. She was plain-not ugly; just good old-fashioned plain. Without the startling physical attractiveness of her siblings

to throw her own lack of looks into relief she might just have got away with it unnoticed, but because she was a Bellaire... because she was a daughter of that famous couple... because her brothers and sisters were so undeniably physical replicas of their beautiful parents, her own lack of looks was thrown into constant prominence.

Only Lucilla was unkind enough to remark on it. The others, in view of their famed Bellaire outspokenness—also a gift from their parents—were amazingly tactful, not to mention protective of her. Painfully so at times, and in more ways than one, she recognised wryly, remembering the fate meted out to those men friends who had actually been daring enough to get past the front door.

‘It isn’t that we don’t want you to get married,’ Benedict had explained kindly to her on the last unfortunate occasion she had brought a man home. ‘It’s just that you haven’t found anyone yet who’s good enough for you.’

By whose standards? Beatrice had wondered a little bitterly. There had been nothing intrinsically wrong with the last one, Roger. He was a nice, quietly spoken man in his late twenties, who lived with his mother. She had met him in the library when he was changing the latter’s library books. They had struck up a conversation, and their relationship had progressed slowly and tranquilly to the point where she couldn’t put off the inevitable any longer.

She invited him home.

He had of course been completely out of his depth, and it was only when she hadn't heard from him in four weeks that Miranda carelessly admitted that he hadn't seemed too happy when she and the twins had explained to him that taking on Beatrice meant taking on them as well.

As well he might not be, she thought fretfully. Beautiful and multi-talented they might be; they were also a formidably daunting prospect to anyone not well acquainted with the Bellaire mental and physical energy and psyche.

'Nonsense,' her closest friend, Annabel Hedges, had expostulated when Beatrice put this view to her. 'Selfish, that's what they are. They know which side their bread's buttered on. You wait on them hand and foot, and you shouldn't do it. Turf them out, sell the house and make a life for yourself, Bea, before it's too late.'

How could she, even though sometimes it was what she longed to do? After their parents' death they had been so lost, so painfully dependent on her... Of course, then all three boys had been at boarding school and so had Miranda. Lucilla had just left RADA, and was starting out on her own stage career. But first Miranda and then the boys had pleaded and begged to be allowed to attend a local day school, and there had been the financial angle to consider, so she had given way. And once they were all at home they needed her there as well, so she had given up her catering course and stayed at home to care for them.

Today, though, she had made a bid for independence.

‘Well, did you get the job?’ Benedict, elder of the twins by ten minutes, grinned down at her from his six foot two height.

All of them were tall—apart from her. All of them had long bones and sleekly muscled bodies—apart from her. She was small and, while not exactly plump, quite definitely curvaceous. How she envied her sisters their slender small-breasted figures. Hers... She made a face to herself. Hers was definitely more along Earth Mother lines, she thought enviously.

Behind Benedict on the stairs, William scowled ferociously and addressed his eldest brother.

‘What does she need a job for? We need her here, at home.’

‘Yes, but you know Bea,’ Sebastian, younger of the twins, put in mischievously. ‘She does so adore a lame dog.’

‘What’s he like, Bea?’ demanded Miranda, shouldering her brothers aside. ‘Is he as absent-minded as Uncle Peter said?’

Beatrice had spent the afternoon supposedly being interviewed for the job of personal assistant to a young composer, who was a friend of her godfather’s, but in fact, instead of being interviewed she had spent most of her time answering the phone and sorting out the chaos of unanswered post on the desk he had shown her.

‘Yes to both questions,’ she told them crisply. Her head was still pounding—tension, of course, and not caused entirely by her anxiety over the interview, or driving through the London traffic.

She had not forgotten last night’s row with Lucilla. Unlike the others, Lucilla was not under her guardianship because she had

been over eighteen at the time of their parents' death.

Beautiful, wilful, always antagonistic towards her elder sister, and financially independent, she had nevertheless chosen to remain in the family home, but now it seemed she had changed her mind. She had announced last night that she intended moving out of the Wimbledon house and in with her latest boyfriend.

Fair-mindedly, Beatrice had to admit that Lucilla had a right to her own privacy and that she was, additionally, old enough to make her own decisions, but her latest boyfriend was an aging television producer, already three times married, and with a particularly unsavoury reputation. Lucilla had tossed her blonde head and scowled bitterly when Beatrice had pointed this out.

When backed into a corner, Lucilla was always at her most dangerous and last night had been no exception. Beatrice felt as though she still bore the scars—hence the headache.

'I'm glad you're back,' William commented plaintively. 'I'm starving!'

William was the clever one, destined for Oxford, or so his school said, and as heartbreakingly handsome as the rest of the clan, although he preferred not to think so. Unlike the others, William was not intent on making a career for himself in the world that had once been their parents'; he had his sights set on other goals. Now, though, like any other seventeen-year-old, he was more concerned with his empty stomach than his potentially glittering academic career.

An expectant silence followed his announcement and Beatrice

felt her spirits plummet as she observed the four pairs of waiting eyes. The task of finding and then keeping staff to run the huge Victorian house and its gardens was a constant thorn in her side.

No sooner was someone suitable found and installed than for one reason or another they decided to leave. Mrs Meadows had been with them less than three months.

‘Where’s Mrs Meadows?’ she asked sinkinglly.

‘She got angry because Lucilla told her she was bringing some people round for dinner,’ Miranda told her carelessly. ‘So Lucilla told her she was fired.’

It was only with the greatest effort that Beatrice was able to hold back the words springing to her lips. With magnificent fortitude she managed a weary, ‘I see.’

Obviously her words conveyed more than she allowed herself to say, and just as obviously she had not yet had the full budget of bad news. All the Bellaire offspring, apart from herself, were natural and effective hams. And, as the saying went, she could see from their faces that they were big with news.

‘Well, what is it?’

It was left to Miranda to produce the scrawled note.

‘Lucilla said to tell you that they’ll be here at half past eight. She wants you to make your salmon mousse for starters, and then she wants that lamb thing that you do with the apricot stuffing, and then raspberry pavlova. She said to tell you that it was terribly important to make a good impression, so could you make sure that the silver’s polished and that you use the Waterford glasses.’

Controlling her temper, Beatrice muttered under her breath, 'If it was that important, why didn't she take them out to dinner?'

Unlike the rest of them, Lucilla was comparatively well off. Her father had left her some money—a trust fund which was administered by her brother, Elliott Chalmers.

Already eighteen when his stepmother remarried her former husband, Elliott, on the verge of departing for Oxford, had remained, like herself, outside the charmed Bellaire ring, but unlike her he had not looked into it enviously. In fact, occasionally, watching Elliott watching her family, Beatrice suspected that she had detected signs of almost sacrilegious mockery, not to say impatience, in his cool grey eyes.

'Oh, and by the way, she's bringing Elliott with her,' Benedict put in with a grin. Beatrice's dislike and antipathy towards Lucilla's half-brother was a well-documented fact.

Beatrice herself felt as though she wanted to scream. Elliott Chalmers! That was all she needed! Of all the supercilious, bossy, domineering, sarcastic men, he really took the biscuit. She seethed bitterly as she headed for the kitchen, remembering how, after their parents' death, Elliott had advised her to keep the children in their boarding schools, warning her against landing herself with the responsibility of their welfare.

'They're my *family!*' She had thrown the words at him, her face flushed with temper.

'They're miniature vampires,' he had countered unrepentantly, 'and if you let them—and you will—they'll suck you dry.'

She had never forgiven him for his callousness, and she never would.

Alerted by the sounds coming from the kitchen, the four younger members of the Bellaire tribe retreated into the wings. Had anyone accused them of selfishness, they would cheerfully have accepted the accusation, but not really felt much guilt. They all loved Beatrice, but she was not like them. She was quite content with her life; she had no ambitions, no bright, luring dreams like their own. All of them took the security she had brought to their lives for granted, and, although they didn't know it, that they were able to do so was one of the most precious gifts Beatrice had given them.

She had been in her last year of a catering course at an exclusive private college when her parents had been killed in an air crash, and although all her dreams of owning and running her own restaurant had long since died, normally she still loved cooking.

Not today, though. She fumed inside as she set about preparing Lucilla's dinner party.

William, judging from the diminishing clatter of utensils that it was safe to do so, emerged into the kitchen and looked hopefully at her.

He would be wasted at Oxford, Beatrice thought wryly. With a talent like that he should have been headed for the stage. Even so, she found herself weakening and stopping what she was doing to make a perfect melting omelette, which he devoured with relish.

Long experience informed her that, while Lucilla expected her to prepare and serve food for her dinner party, she would not want her sister nor her younger siblings sitting down at table with her guests.

In spite of her beauty and her success as an actress, Lucilla was one of those people, always restless, never contented, who go through life defensive and envious of anyone they believe has something they do not.

Quite why there had always been a thread of antagonism between them Beatrice didn't know, but it was undoubtedly there. She knew that Lucilla resented her, but she could never understand why. If anyone, she ought to have been the one to feel resentful. After all, Lucilla had been Charles's favourite, not her. Lucilla had inherited the looks and the talent. It was her own guilt over that tiny seed of enmity that always made her go to greater lengths to appease Lucilla than she would have done for anyone else, but it never worked. Lucilla was relentlessly contemptuous of her.

At seven o'clock, with everything for the dinner party under control, she produced pizza and salad in the kitchen for everyone else.

William, despite his earlier omelette, ate almost twice as much as the others. At the moment he was tall and gangly, but in a few years' time he would have the same beautiful physique as his older brothers.

Oddly enough Elliott, who wasn't as tall as the twins, being

just under six foot, always somehow seemed to make them look smaller whenever he walked into the room. He dwarfed everyone around him with the power of his personality—and with his wealth, Beatrice thought bitterly.

Knowing that he would be here tonight was really the last straw. Her head was still pounding despite the tablet she had taken; it showed all the signs of progressing into a migraine. The smell of food almost nauseated her, and she longed to go upstairs and lie down.

‘Aren’t you going to get changed?’ demanded Miranda when she had finished eating. ‘You can’t sit down to dinner like that. You know what Lucilla and her friends are like. It’ll be designer dresses and everything that goes with them.’

Miranda was heavily into clothes. She was doing a course at college which she hoped eventually would lead to a career in theatrical costume design.

‘Oh, come on, Mirry,’ Sebastian cut in. ‘You know our dearest Lucilla would never allow Bea to sit down with her friends. You shouldn’t let her get away with it!’ He frowned, looking so severe for a moment that Beatrice couldn’t help smiling.

Of all of them Sebastian was perhaps her favourite: just a little less colourful than his elder twin, just a little less self-confident and consequently just a little less overpowering. He was the one she felt closest to. He came up to her now and hugged her.

‘Poor Bea, we all treat you dreadfully, don’t we? But despite it all you still love us, don’t you?’

Oh, so easily they tied her to them... How many times after their parents' death had she heard those words? How *could* she have deserted them? How *could* she have been selfish enough not to care?

Very easily, if you'd been a true Bellaire, a surprisingly strong inner voice taunted, but she ignored it, quickly clearing the table and shooing them out.

A quick last-minute look at the dining-room showed her that Lucilla would not be able to fault a thing.

The dining-room was at the back of the house overlooking the gardens, lush now with early summer promise. The Hepplewhite table and chairs, discovered by her mother and bought for a song, gleamed richly in the evening sunshine. Snowy white linen napery, glittering crystal, shining silver. A bowl of fruit carefully frosted to look decorative added a touch of colour. She hoped Lucilla had remembered the wine.

After dinner, Lucilla would want to take her guests into the small drawing-room for coffee. Beatrice hurried into it, gritting her teeth against the pain as she rushed round picking up belongings carelessly scattered on the chintz-covered sofas. This room too overlooked the gardens, but on two sides instead of one. It was a warm, gracious room, and only this morning she had filled it with freshly cut flowers.

In the hall the grandfather clock chimed. Eight o'clock. Where had the time gone?

In the kitchen all was in order, but the heat from the oven

brought a flush to her creamy skin. Her fine brown hair had escaped from its confining knot and was curling wildly round her face. She knew from experience that her nose would be shiny and that her soft hazel eyes weren't as large or as lustrous as the magnificent dark blue orbs inherited by the rest of the family. A throwback, her mother had once laughingly called her. At the time it had hurt, but she had learned to smile and be grateful for what she *did* have. After all, it was scarcely her parents' fault that she wasn't like them... that she wasn't a beautiful Bellaire.

She heard a car and then another, and wiped her hands before walking into the hall.

'Ah, there you are...'

Tall and impossibly beautiful, Lucilla was glittering with malice as she swept in, her friends at her heels. Beatrice felt her heart sink. She knew Lucilla in these wild, almost dangerous moods.

Tonight her sister was dressed in dark pink silk, a perfect foil for her colouring and a clever choice. It made the other women in the party, both brunettes, fade into insignificance.

Lucilla had her arm draped through that of her companion, and Beatrice's heart sank even further as she recognised the TV producer and the challenge in Lucilla's eyes.

'Elliott darling, where are you with that wine?' she called over her shoulder.

Elliott brought up the rear of the party. Like the other men he was wearing a dinner-suit, but as always he seemed to dwarf the

others with his presence. Without moving a muscle he somehow managed to convey an adult forbearance of the antics of other, lesser mortals.

It was that air of insufferable superiority about him that always infuriated her so much, Beatrice decided as Lucilla passed her the wine with one hand and waved the other to her friends, indicating that they should hand her their coats.

‘Still playing the Martha, are we, Beatrice?’ Elliott murmured to her as he handed her his. ‘You really ought to go for another role, my dear. This one’s getting rather wearing, although I must admit at times it becomes you.’

Beatrice could feel hot blood scorching her skin as she fought against her anger. Stiff-backed, she took the coats into the cloakroom.

Lucilla hadn’t introduced her to her friends, but then she never did. More than any of the others, Lucilla enjoyed being a Bellaire. She had even changed her surname from Chalmers to Bellaire. Beatrice risked a glance at Elliott and wondered sardonically how he had liked that. Although he had never expressed it, she sensed it was his opinion that a Chalmers was superior to a Bellaire any day of the week.

Yes, of all of them, Lucilla was the one who clung the most to their parents’ memory and reputation. She enjoyed being described as her mother’s daughter, and there were even times when Beatrice didn’t wonder if she would have preferred to be their only child, she was so fiercely possessive of her status.

By the time Beatrice had served the main course, her headache had worsened to such a degree that she could barely see. She took in the sweet, intending to tell Lucilla that she would have to attend to her guests' coffee herself, when one of the brunettes piped up gratingly,

'Lucilla my dear, you're so lucky to have such excellent staff.' She had a transatlantic accent which no doubt accounted for her lack of knowledge about Lucilla's family background, but Beatrice stiffened with misery and resentment as she saw the amused smiles touch other more knowing mouths.

As though he was a magnet, she found her gaze drawn to Elliott. He was regarding her impassively, drinking the last of his wine, his eyes taunting her over the rim of his glass.

'Oh, Beatrice isn't the help, Angela,' he drawled mockingly, looking at her. 'She's Lucilla's sister.'

The brunette's mouth fell open in shock.

'Oh, but she can't be...' she began, and the TV producer smiled dazzlingly into Lucilla's eyes and said with both relish and amusement, 'Oh, but she is. The runt of the litter, isn't that what you call her, darling?'

Later, Beatrice couldn't remember anything about how she got out of the room. Somehow she found herself back in the kitchen, its familiar surroundings swaying horribly as the pain in her head reached crescendo proportions.

It was no use pretending that their laughter hadn't hurt. It had. Almost blinded by the pain in her head, she leaned her face

against the cool wall tiles.

She supposed she ought to have expected something like this. Lucilla had been furious with her last night, and her friend's ignorance had given her an ideal opportunity to get her own back.

'It's your own fault, you know. You should learn to say "No" and mean it!' The coolly amused voice somewhere in the region of her left ear was the last straw. Elliott had followed her into the kitchen! Oh, he would... he would! It was either scream, Beatrice thought bitterly, or burst into tears, and she didn't think she had the energy for the former.

To her chagrin, he turned her round. Elliott took one look at her tear-blotched face and burst out laughing.

'Now I've seen everything,' he told her unkindly. 'A Bellaire who doesn't cry beautifully. My poor Beatrice! You really *are* the cuckoo in the nest, aren't you?'

It was too much. To be reminded of her lack of looks, now, when she was feeling at her most vulnerable, and by this man of all men! She wanted to scream and rage. She wanted to pick up something heavy and throw it at him. She wanted... She gritted her teeth and looked into his eyes.

Her own widened, and she stared at him blinking. He was looking at her with a mixture of encouragement and amusement as though... as though he *wanted* her to lose control. But why?

It was the final, but the final straw.

She launched herself at him like a small spitting cat, and would have raked her nails down his face if he hadn't stopped her by

gripping hold of her wrists.

‘Hallelujah!’ she heard him exclaim softly and inexplicably. ‘But you know, my dear Beatrice, I can’t let you get away with it—it wouldn’t be good for you. A classic production, none the less, and that being the case...’

He moved, shifting his weight somehow, so that she fell heavily against him. His arms tightened round her, and she could feel the steady drum of his heart.

She looked at him in bewilderment. Her head was still pounding. She wasn’t sure how she came to be in his arms or, more important, why.

He bent his head, his eyes silver grey and quite brilliant; her own widened as she realised that he intended to kiss her. She moved jerkily, but not quickly enough.

His mouth felt warm and surprisingly soft against her own. She could taste the wine he had been drinking. She felt dizzy... shaky and dangerously vulnerable. The sensation of his tongue-tip moving against her lips completely unnerved her. She was still trying to decide whether that was because she didn’t like it or because she did, when the kitchen door opened and Lucilla walked in.

‘Where’s the coffee?’ she began peremptorily, stopping abruptly as she saw Elliott holding Beatrice in his arms.

‘Oh, my God, now I’ve seen everything! Elliott, what on earth are you doing? You must be hard up for a woman if you’re having to resort to Beatrice! Honestly, she wouldn’t know what to do

with a real man—you should see the wet specimens she brings back here.’

With a tormented sound, Beatrice tore free of Elliott and raced past Lucilla, not caring any longer what anyone might think of her odd behaviour. She was past caring about that. She had never felt so humiliated, or so... so disturbed in all her life.

In the sanctuary of her bedroom she sank down into a chair. Her whole body was trembling.

Elliott had kissed her!! Elliott, who she well knew disliked and despised her; Elliott whom she loathed and detested; Elliott, who had made her forget, however briefly, that she was plain, and remember only that she was a woman!

She couldn't believe it... she didn't want to believe it.

She *would not* believe it!

CHAPTER TWO

THE NEXT MORNING, for almost the first time in her life, Beatrice overslept. She woke up and stared in shock at her alarm, her brain still fogged with the tablets she had taken for her headache.

It was almost nine. Why had no one been to wake her up? Where was everyone? Panicking, she got out of bed and hurried into her bathroom, dressing quickly in jeans and a bulky sweatshirt. She always wore loose tops; they disguised the lush fullness of her breasts. She always felt uncomfortable about the size of her chest, aware that if she didn't wear something concealing men stared at her. She was too used to thinking of female beauty in terms of her mother and sisters to realise that, to some, her petite curvy shape was the embodiment of all their most private fantasies, and she would have been shocked had any of them told her so.

She could hear voices coming from the kitchen. At least everyone else had not overslept, although it was unheard-of for the rest of her family to even think about getting their own breakfast.

She pushed open the door and came to an abrupt halt. Sitting in the chair that had once been her father's was Elliott Chalmers. 'Good morning, Beatrice. Headache all gone?'

There was no sign of Lucilla, and the others were all watching

her with varying degrees of curiosity.

‘Why didn’t someone come and wake me?’

‘Because I told them not to!’

Her eyes swivelled to meet Elliott’s, expressing their total disbelief.

‘Isn’t it time you went home, Elliott?’ she demanded frigidly, clutching at the frayed remnants of her dignity. What on earth was he doing here? He must have stayed the night.

‘Haven’t you heard? This *is* my home... at least for the next three months. Lucilla invited me to move in when she heard about the problems I’m having with the contractors.’

Dimly Beatrice remembered Lucilla mentioning something about the work that was being done on Elliott’s London apartment, but she had said nothing about inviting him to move in with them.

Anger burst into life inside her, and she longed to shriek that he was not staying, and that he could leave right away, but she knew that in an outright quarrel she had no hope of outwitting him. Elliott never lost his temper and was a formidable foe, as she well remembered from her teenage years.

‘Thoughtful of her to suggest I stay here, wasn’t it?’ he continued with a cool effrontery that took her breath away.

He must have heard her indrawn gasp—there could be no other explanation for the gleam she suddenly saw in his eyes as he drawled, ‘Yes, I knew you’d think so, Beatrice.’

‘Stay if you want,’ she said ungraciously. ‘There’s enough

room.’ That wasn’t at all what she had intended to say, but it was too late to recall the words now.

The grey gleam deepened, making her suddenly feel acutely vulnerable for some reason.

‘Most gracious of you.’

‘Ah, but you haven’t heard the house rules yet, has he, Bea?’ Benedict teased, blue eyes dancing with amusement. ‘No reading under the bedclothes, Elliott—it’s bad for your eyes... and for your spots—depending on what you’re reading,’ he added incorrigibly, making Beatrice flush scarlet as she remembered her long-ago words to her brother when she had caught him sneaking pin-up magazines into his room.

‘No raiding the fridge at night. No drinking parties. No smoking—of any kind. And definitely no girls in your room after lights out. Have you told him that bit yet, Bea?’ Benedict was grinning irrepressibly at her.

‘Ben,’ she began repressively, but Elliott seemed unmoved by her younger brother’s disclosures and merely said affably, ‘Since I don’t date *girls*, I don’t think I’m going to have any problems.’

He stood up, brushing toast crumbs off his immaculate pin-striped suit. This morning he looked every inch the successful businessman that he was and Beatrice reflected darkly that it spoke volumes for the Machiavellian character she had always suspected he possessed that neither of the twins so much as tried to get a rise out of him over his sober attire. Had any of the men she had infrequently dated appeared at the house thus dressed

they would have been baited almost to the point of insanity. Like their parents before them, the twins displayed a cheerful irreverence towards anything even remotely Establishment. But it was as though Elliott was protected by his own invisible radar, and, what was more, they seemed to know it because they treated Elliott with... with respect, she acknowledged a little resentfully, recalling how often she had wished they might accord her that same virtue.

‘Just as well you’re not starting the new job this morning, Bea,’ commented Benedict, lazily helping himself generously to the butter and plastering it on his toast. Without looking up from his task he added, ‘Did you know that Bea’s got herself a job, Elliott? Working for a famous composer, would you believe, or at least he will become a famous composer one day. Isn’t that what Uncle Peter says, Bea?’

Her muscles still felt stiff from the pain of her migraine, and for some reason it hurt to force the calm smile with which she acknowledged her brother’s comments.

She was conscious of Elliott watching her with the same unblinking intensity that a cat might watch a mouse. Already she was tensing her body against one of his mocking remarks, but when she nerved herself to look directly at him she saw that he had switched his attention from her to Benedict and, what was more, that the look the two of them were exchanging had for some reason brought a bright gleam of triumph to her brother’s eyes.

That made her frown. As far as she knew, Elliott had always got on reasonably well with the rest of her family. *She* was the only one of them who disliked him.

‘I suppose you know that Lucilla is leaving here to move in with her latest boyfriend,’ Sebastian commented, and, as Elliott’s attention switched from one twin to the other, Beatrice found she was expelling a faint sigh of relief.

She was a coward, she acknowledged wryly as she got up to make some fresh coffee; definitely one of the ‘peace at any price’ brigade, but why not? Not everyone could be a moral crusader, not just ready but eager to spring into battle at the slightest provocation. The twins, especially Benedict, thrived on conflict of any kind, and there was nothing Ben loved more than a stimulating argument, as she had good cause to know.

‘She *is* over twenty-one,’ Elliott pointed out.

‘Well over,’ Miranda added *sotto voce* to Elliott’s calm remark, earning herself a frown from Beatrice, and the lift of one faintly querying eyebrow from Elliott himself.

‘Even so, I don’t think her proposed move is a viable one,’ Elliott continued calmly, ‘and I’ve told her as much. Of course she’s a free agent, but...’

‘But you control her purse strings,’ Benedict put in a little crudely, adding, with a wicked gleam in his eyes, ‘and sanctions could be imposed...’

Beatrice tensed, but Elliott refused to rise to the bait.

‘Indeed they can,’ he agreed, ‘but sanctions, if indeed there are

to be any, are a subject only for discussion between the concerned parties, if you follow me, Benedict. Which puts me in mind of another matter,' he continued, before Benedict could make any comment. He glanced at his watch. 'I don't have time to discuss it now, which is perhaps fortunate. I'm going to the city if anyone wants a lift. I'll be leaving in exactly fifteen minutes.'

Miranda stood up quickly, gulping down her coffee. This morning her black hair was arranged in a spiky halo around her face. Her lipstick was white, and she had stencilled a floral design around and beneath one eye.

Although she hated to admit it, Beatrice observed that the overall effect was unarguably attractive, but then Miranda would look good in a sack, and make-upless.

'Yes, please, I'd love a lift, Elliott.' She smiled winningly at him, the smile of a girl who had no doubt of her own attractions. 'Could you drop me at Covent Garden? I want to browse round the market stalls. I need some antique lace...' Her smile switched suddenly to a frown. 'Oh God, I'd forgotten. I'm going out tonight and I was going to wear... Bea, will you be an angel and wash and iron my black dress for me? I think it's on my chair, or it might be on the floor.' She frowned as she tried to concentrate, and, knowing her sister's untidiness, Beatrice did not for one moment doubt that she was having difficulty in visualising exactly where she had dropped the obviously now all-important garment.

'I'm afraid Beatrice won't be able to do that for you, Miranda,' Elliott said pleasantly, without taking his eyes from the

newspaper he was scrutinising.

He spoke quietly, but it was as though he had shouted out loud, as five pairs of eyes mirroring different degrees of shocked disbelief turned in his direction.

Miranda was the first to recover.

‘Why?’ she demanded baldly.

‘Because tonight your sister is going out, and she’ll be too busy washing and ironing her own dress.’

Miranda gaped at him. ‘Beatrice going out! But she never goes out,’ she claimed with admirable disregard for the truth.

‘Never?’ One dark eyebrow rose in amusement. ‘I suspect that’s an exaggeration, but I’ll let it pass. I can see you’re suffering from shock,’ he added with avuncular kindness.

‘You never said anything about having a date.’ Miranda switched her attack, fixing hurt eyes on Beatrice’s blank face. ‘Who are you going out with?’

‘Me,’ Elliott interrupted calmly. ‘Not that it’s really any of your concern, my sweet selfish child, and since, as I’ve already pointed out, I shall require her to wash and iron her own party dress, it thus follows that she won’t have time to do yours. Do it yourself, mm, Mirry?’ he suggested, smiling at her. ‘It won’t hurt you.’

Beatrice wasn’t sure which held her the most transfixed, his outrageous comment about taking her out, or the effect of that singularly sweet smile which had been directed at her sister, but which was having the oddest effect on her own senses.

Quickly pulling herself together, she opened her mouth to tell

him in no uncertain terms that they most definitely did not have a date, when he strolled over to her, leaned down, and before she could stop him placed a brief kiss against her parted lips.

When she wrenched away from him, he apologised insincerely. 'Ah, obviously my mistake. I thought you wanted me to kiss you, Bea! Goodbye. Don't worry about it,' he added with kindly indulgence. 'It's just an automatic reflex, that's all.'

As he sauntered off through the kitchen door, he called back over his shoulder, 'Ten minutes, Mirry, otherwise I'm going without you.'

For a moment the kitchen fairly hummed with the intensity of the silence, and then Benedict looked speculatively at Beatrice and said thoughtfully, 'I wonder why he's taking you out, Bea. I wouldn't have thought you were his type at all.'

Beatrice already knew she wasn't. Elliott's taste normally ran to long-legged model-like creatures with haughty expressions and rather county-type backgrounds, but that didn't make her brother's comment any less painful to bear.

Before she could say anything Sebastian added appreciatively, 'I like his style, Bea... kissing you like that. Mind you, you did rather goggle at him. I wonder who he's in the habit of kissing goodbye after breakfast. He's rather a fastidious soul, our Elliott. As far as I know he's never had a live-in companion, has he?'

'I expect he normally sleeps over at their place,' Benedict responded. 'It would be much more economical that way, and you know how our Elliott feels about saving money.'

If she hadn't been so ruffled and upset Beatrice would have reminded her brother that he was being more than a little unfair. Elliott might not splash his money about in the theatrical fashion of their late parents, but he was far from mean, and always gave her brothers and sisters extremely generous gifts of money for birthdays and Christmas.

He never gave her anything, though. He probably felt, if indeed he gave any thought to the matter at all, that being adult she was beyond the age of meriting gifts of any sort. Not that she would have accepted money from him even if he had chosen to give it, but last Christmas at the family party they always had on Boxing Day both Mirry and Lucilla had sported expensive designer dresses bought out of the generous cheques given to them by Elliott. She had worn the old black velvet she had had for years—her one and only 'formal' outfit.

Stubbornly she reflected that, whatever Elliott's purpose in announcing that they were going out tonight, she was not going to go with him, and she would tell him so, tonight, when she hoped they wouldn't have an interested audience.

She heard Mirry racing downstairs, and then the slam of the front door and the sound of a car starting up.

'I love that new Jag Elliott's just bought,' enthused Sebastian as he poured himself a fresh cup of coffee.

'Yes, he's slipping a bit,' Benedict responded darkly. 'A sporty car like that doesn't fit in with his image. It betrays the fact that there's a lot more to him than meets the eye. Did you know he was

going to be staying here?’ he asked Beatrice almost accusingly.

‘No, I didn’t. Shouldn’t you two be at the studio by now?’ she asked, glancing at the kitchen clock.

The twins had both landed parts in a popular ‘soap’ series which paid well, although Benedict constantly bemoaned the fact that it was too trite for words and hardly qualified as acting.

‘God, yes!’ Sebastian gulped down his coffee. ‘Come on, Ben, get a move on, otherwise Sam Johnson will be tearing a strip off us again!’

Sam Johnson had been a friend and contemporary of their parents and he was directing the production they were working on. Like everyone else, he tended to make allowances for the famous Bellaire temperament. For a moment a faint frown touched Beatrice’s forehead. It was occurring to her more and more recently that too many people, including herself, made too many allowances, perhaps. She moved uncomfortably in her seat. It wasn’t exactly that her brothers and sisters were spoilt, but just occasionally recently she had detected something in their manner to others that suggested a rather unpleasant sense of superiority. Quickly she checked the thought. She was becoming over-sensitive; she had Elliott to thank for that. He always made her feel prickly, and aware of the vulnerabilities and flaws in her family in a way that she always wished she could ignore. It was as though in Elliott’s presence she saw them in a different light... almost indeed as though he deliberately incited them, especially Benedict, to reveal aspects of their personalities to her that she

would rather have remained unaware of.

It was almost eleven before she had the house to herself and after twelve before she had finished tidying bedrooms and cleaning bathrooms. Downstairs the washing machine hummed, and Mirry's dress, carefully handwashed, was outside drying off, ready for ironing later in the day.

The telephone rang while she was preparing a casserole of veal for the evening meal.

'Well, Bea, I believe you've got the job,' announced Peter Staines.

'Yes, I start next Monday.' She frowned as she remembered the distinctly challenging way in which Benedict had made his announcement about her job to Elliott this morning. It had almost been as though... as though he had expected Elliott to forbid her to take it, Beatrice realised on a sudden spurt of resentment. As though Elliott Chalmers had any jurisdiction over her. But why should Benedict do that?

Before she could puzzle any further, Peter was continuing firmly, 'Now, Bea, you mustn't let that family of yours persuade you out of taking this job. It will be good for you, and besides, you've got a perfectly adequate housekeeper who...'

'Had,' Beatrice interrupted him him wryly. 'Mrs Meadows has left.' There was a brief silence from the other end of the line. 'Don't worry, though, Uncle Peter. I'm still taking the job.'

She hadn't realised until that moment just how determined to do so she was. Especially if by so doing she was in some way

going against Elliott, she acknowledged, although what possible difference it could make to him whether she worked or not she did not know.

They chatted on for a while about Jon Sharman's musical talent until Peter announced that he had an appointment and rang off.

The afternoons were normally the only time of day Beatrice could call her own, but today, because of Mrs Meadows's defection, she had to drive to their nearest supermarket and stock up on food. When she came back she felt drained and tired, and there was still the rest of the housework to tackle, she remembered as she unlocked the front door. She was dreading ringing the agency and reporting yet another failure.

The telephone rang just as she finished putting away her shopping. She picked it up wearily, tensing as she heard Elliott's clipped tones.

'Are you due out anywhere this afternoon?' he demanded crisply.

'No.' Cursing herself for telling him the truth, she asked warily, 'Why?'

'I've arranged for someone to come round. She used to be my nanny before your mother married my father. She's been living in semi-retirement for some time, but she's agreed to see you.'

'*She's* agreed to come round and see *me*?' Beatrice was both ragingly angry and baffled. How dare Elliott make these sort of high-handed arrangements without discussing them with her

first! What was he playing at?

‘Thank you, Elliott,’ she responded with a crispness that nearly rivalled his own, ‘but unfortunately I have no need of a nanny right now!’

‘Unfortunately?’ She heard him chuckle. ‘If that’s really what you think, the situation could soon be remedied, Bea.’

The laughter threading through the words, the picture immediately conjured up by his mocking comment momentarily stunned her as she fought against the refined cruelty of his words. Surely a man like Elliott, a connoisseur of women if all she heard about him was true, must see how remote was the possibility of her ever having her own child or children. He might not know in all its detail the paucity of her love life, but she suspected he had a pretty good idea. She might not actually be the only twenty-seven-year-old virgin in the western hemisphere, but there were times when it felt suspiciously like it.

And it wasn’t even by choice, she thought indignantly. She’d like to have seen him trying to conduct a passionate affair surrounded by four inquisitive and highly interested younger siblings!

‘Come on, Bea, the thought of being a mother can’t be that shocking, although to be honest with you that wasn’t exactly what I had in mind.’

No, she could just imagine it wasn’t, Beatrice thought bitterly. ‘Then perhaps you’d be kind enough to explain exactly why this... this person is coming to see me,’ she demanded in frigid

accents.

He laughed again, the disembodied sound making her shiver disturbingly.

‘Now, Bea,’ he chided, ‘don’t go all Sarah Siddons on me, it doesn’t suit you. I approached Henrietta to see if she’d be prepared to take over the post vacated by Mrs Meadows.’

‘Thank you, Elliott,’ Beatrice responded again with awful calm, once she had recovered from her shock, ‘but I think I’m perfectly capable of finding my own housekeeper.’

‘Oh, any number of them,’ Elliott agreed affably. ‘But finding them isn’t the problem, is it? And besides,’ he continued after allowing a telling pause for his comment to sink in, ‘I don’t think it’s a housekeeper so much that you need. Someone more along the lines of a warden from one of Her Majesty’s prisons would be more like it,’ he continued reflectively, ‘or perhaps an ex-public-school matron...’

As she slammed the phone down on him, she was sure she could hear him laughing.

Odious... horrible... detestable, interfering man! she raged, scrubbing the kitchen table with a sudden upsurge of vigour; and if he thought for one moment that she would seriously entertain employing his ex-nanny...

An hour later, feeling rather bemused, Beatrice had the suspicion that the boot was rather on the other foot.

Henrietta, as her visitor firmly informed her she wished to be addressed, appeared to be a martinet of the old school, who, as

she told a dazed Beatrice, was very particular about those for whom she worked.

‘Of course, when Master Elliott asked me to consider coming to work for you...’ She paused, but the expression on her face was a revelation to Beatrice. ‘Such a delightful little boy he was! But you have rather a large household here,’ she continued briskly.

‘Yes... but... Well, what we need is a housekeeper rather than a nanny,’ Beatrice told her as gently as she could. Against her will she had found herself drawn to this small upright woman with her plain face and forthright views.

‘Oh yes, I know that, but when I was first a nursery maid they taught us properly, housework included, although I’m only a plain cook. To be honest with you, looking after small children is too much for me these days; I get a touch of rheumatism in the winter and I can’t run after them the way I once could.

‘Three brothers and a sister you’ve got, so Master Elliott said...’

Her decision had nothing to do with Elliott at all, Beatrice told herself defensively later; it was the appeal in those words, the faint wistfulness in the other woman’s smile, and her own imagination as she compared the empty lonely life that had unwittingly been described to her with the hustle and bustle of her own.

It was perhaps just as well that she didn’t see the light in her new employee’s eyes as she walked briskly down the road.

If there was one thing she liked, Henrietta Parker reflected

happily as she went home, it was a challenge. That dear boy Elliott had been quite right. She was far too young and active to retire. The Bellaire clan was exactly what she needed.

Totally unaware of what she was unleashing on her family, Beatrice started her preparations for their supper.

Mirry's dress, washed and ironed, hung upstairs in her room. All the bathrooms had been cleaned and supplied with fresh towels. The discarded clothes she had found in every room but Elliott's had been washed and put back in their rightful places.

She had noticed that Lucilla's clothes were still in her room, so presumably she had not yet made up her mind about leaving. If Elliott must meddle in their affairs, why couldn't he confine his meddling to where it was most needed? Beatrice thought waspishly. In other words, why couldn't he confine it to his own half-sister?

Mirry was the first to arrive home, lifting an eyebrow when she saw her elder sister's untidy state.

'You're going to have to get your skates on if you're going to be ready for Elliott.'

Turning away so that Mirry wouldn't see the slow burn of anger reddening her skin, Beatrice said as calmly as she could, 'Oh, that's all off now.'

'I suppose he only wanted to talk to you about paying you rent or some such thing while he's living here. On the way to town this morning he asked me how much we pay,' she added, munching an apple she had picked out of the fruit bowl, her eyebrows lifting

expressively. 'Honestly, as if we pay anything!'

Beatrice refrained from pointing out that although she only had her grant both Benedict and Sebastian were now earning reasonable amounts of money, certainly enough to buy themselves new and definitely sporty-looking cars, and in Benedict's case a wardrobe full of new clothes.

Was that why Elliott wanted to take her out? Until that moment she had not got round to thinking much about any possible motive, being too incensed over his high-handed announcement of his intention.

That being the case, and knowing that the last thing she wanted to do was to spend an evening with him, she couldn't understand the small stab of disappointment deep inside her.

She was still in the kitchen preparing vegetables for the evening meal when Elliott came in.

'Well, Cinders, not ready yet?' he commented as he walked into the kitchen and put down his briefcase.

As always whenever she was with him Beatrice immediately became aware of a prickly defensiveness coupled with an intense awareness of him.

'I'm not going out with you, Elliott,' she told him angrily.

'Oh yes, you are.' She could see him looking at her stubborn closed face, and her working clothes.

'You know,' he said softly, 'I'm quite prepared to take you dressed like that. It won't be quite what the other female guests are wearing, but if you're not worried about that, then I'm

certainly not. You'll definitely stand out—but then isn't that what a Bellaire likes?"

Too many thoughts crowded into her brain at once, and she could only stare furiously at him.

"Temper, temper!" he chided her gently, tapping her cheek with one long forefinger, and then casually picking up a piece of carrot and chewing it.

Anger exploded inside her, filling her with heat, enveloping her like a dark red mist, the force of it making her tremble.

"I am *not* going out with you, Elliott."

"Oh yes, you are." All at once his easy calmness dropped away, revealing a grim determination powerful enough to alarm her. He placed his hands either side of her on the table, imprisoning her against him, standing so close to her that she could almost feel his body heat. "You're coming out with me tonight, whatever it takes to get you there, and that includes taking you upstairs and physically stripping and re-dressing you myself. *I* might enjoy that experience, but I doubt that you would. How many men have seen you naked, Beatrice?" he demanded softly, watching the betraying tremble of her mouth with pitiless eyes.

What was more frightening than his threat was the ease with which her brain conjured up a mental picture of what he had threatened. She trembled, her eyes darkening in a bewilderment that he registered as she sought to suppress the shockingly intimate picture of herself like that in his arms...

"I..."

‘What’s the matter?’ he goaded softly. ‘Does the thought of being with a man frighten you so much that it renders you speechless? Or is it the fact that it’s never happened at all?’ he probed cruelly.

All at once her control broke. ‘Stop it!’ she moaned frantically, covering her face with her hands. ‘I...’

‘I mean what I’m saying, Beatrice,’ he told her warningly. ‘Either you go upstairs now and get ready to come out with me, or I do it for you.’

She let her hands drop and looked into his eyes and knew that he meant every single word he said.

As he stepped away from her she felt so shaky that she could barely stand up. She had to do what he said; she had no alternative. Her bruised mind had trouble in accepting the awful reality of it.

Somehow she made it to her room. She was standing in front of her wardrobe, surveying its contents in dazed shock, when the door opened.

For a moment she thought it was Elliott come to enforce his threat and she froze, but when she turned round she saw that it was only Mirry, who now stood just inside the door, surveying her with a frowningly critical intensity.

‘Elliott sent me up to help you find something to wear.’

Almost defensively Beatrice was already reaching for her black velvet, but Mirry whipped it from her, frowning horribly.

‘No, not that. It makes you look like a middle-aged spinster,

if such a thing still exists.’

‘But it’s all I’ve got.’

‘Mm...’ Still frowning, Mirry said, ‘Hang on, I won’t be a minute.’

She was back in less than five carrying a clear perspex box, inside it was something in brilliant jade-green satin.

‘I filched this from Lucilla’s room. Don’t worry,’ she chided as she saw Beatrice’s worried expression. ‘She won’t even notice it’s gone. It’s one of her mistakes, but it’ll look great on you. Look...’

Beatrice felt her eyes rounding in appalled despair as Mirry shook out the rich fabric.

It was a blouse, only a blouse like none that she would ever dream of wearing. It had a demure collar and three-quarter dolman sleeves, but its sole fastening was two long ties at the front that apparently knotted in a large bow. Beatrice stared at it with horrified and fascinated eyes, wondering how Mirry ever thought she would be able to wear an article like that that quite plainly needed to be worn without a bra.

‘I can’t wear that,’ she said wildly at last. ‘It’s... it’s... It would be indecent!’

‘Rubbish, you’d look stunning in it,’ Mirry corrected firmly. ‘It looked ridiculous on Lucilla; she’s far too flat-chested.’

‘I can’t wear it. It would mean going without a bra...’

‘So?’ countered Mirry, eyeing her judiciously. ‘Come on, Bea, you’ve got exactly the right sort of figure for it. Catch me hiding away my main assets, if I had a figure like yours!’ she added

teasingly, watching the flush of colour come and go in Beatrice's pale face. 'Look, it isn't that shocking once it's on,' she told her, taking pity on her. 'Just try it and see.'

'I haven't got anything I could wear with it.' For which she was eternally grateful, Beatrice thought fervently, recognising the light of determination in her sister's eyes.

'Of course you have,' said Mirry. 'There's that black silk skirt.'

Beatrice frowned and then remembered. The skirt belonged to a two-piece she had bought on impulse in the sales, and then discarded, feeling that the vivid cerise and black top really did nothing for her.

The skirt in question was short and fitted her perfectly... too perfectly, she thought despairingly now, knowing that once Mirry got the bit between her teeth, so to speak, she would not let go. One look at her sister's determined, vivid face told her that as far as Mirry was concerned her elder sister's transformation into someone fit to be taken out by a man of Elliott's discrimination was becoming a cross between a challenge and a vocation.

'Trust me,' Mirry pleaded now, confirming her thoughts. 'After all, it is my job, and you can't possibly go out with Elliott wearing that ghastly velvet rag.'

Somehow or other, mainly due to the threat of Elliott being called upstairs to give his view on Mirry's chosen outfit, Beatrice allowed herself to be bullied into 'just trying it on'.

This took some time longer than envisaged, due to the fact that Mirry insisted on running back to her own room to find a pair

of sheer black tights, essential with the silk skirt, so she assured Beatrice. Beatrice had never worn black tights in her life; she always stuck to brown.

Rather grudgingly, Mirry agreed that she could wear her faithful black satin pumps, and somehow Beatrice found that she had allowed herself to be chivvied into her sister's chosen outfit.

Mirry wouldn't let her look at herself in the mirror until she had everything on. She grinned when Beatrice rather blushing agreed to remove her bra.

'Honestly, Bea,' she teased, 'I'm your sister, not some rampant male intent on having his wicked way with you! Don't worry so much. It's not as though Elliott has designs on you either, but we want him to be proud of you, don't we? You're not doing this for yourself,' she added with mock gravity. 'Think instead that you're doing it for the family.' She assumed a soulful expression, and then spoiled the whole effect by giggling.

'You know, you do have a really sizzling figure. You shouldn't cover it up so much with those awful bulky sweatshirts and things.'

She tied the satin blouse in the requisite bow as she finished speaking and then gently turned Bea to face the mirror.

'There,' she said softly. 'Now you can look.'

Bea didn't know if she dared, but at last she plucked up her courage and studied her reflection.

Her legs in their black tights looked unfamiliarly slender, her ankles almost fragilely narrow. The skirt, rather too faithfully for

her taste, followed the curvy outline of her hips, narrowing into her waist. The blouse... She could feel heat scorching her skin as she saw what the blouse did to her body.

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