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PENNY
JORDAN

**Stranger from
the Past**

PENNY JORDAN

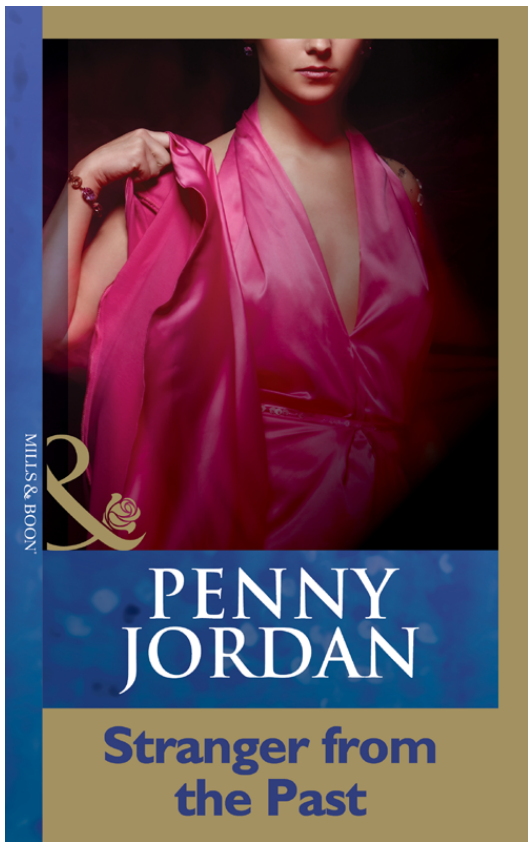
Stranger From The Past

Аннотация

Penny Jordan needs no introduction as arguably the most recognisable name writing for Mills & Boon. We have celebrated her wonderful writing with a special collection, many of which for the first time in eBook format and all available right now. Would they become lovers now? The demands of a growing business meant Sybilla had less time to think about the past, about a lonely future – and definitely no time to become emotionally involved. Ever again. Not after Gareth Seymour. Ten years had changed them both – but hadn't erased her feelings. That tormenting realization came when Gareth suddenly returned, threatening to send her emotions reeling back in time, to weaken her defences and leave her vulnerable once more to the man who'd shattered her confidence and broken her heart!

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**Celebrate the legend that is bestselling author
PENNY JORDAN**

**Phenomenally successful author of more than two
hundred books with sales of over a hundred million copies!**

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

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

About the Author

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.

Stranger from the Past

Penny Jordan



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CHAPTER ONE

OF COURSE, it would have to be raining, Sybilla reflected with disgust as she emerged from the supermarket with her overladen trolley.

It didn't help to improve her mood either, she knew, acknowledging that the rain had been forecast and that because she had already been running late she had decided to take a chance and hope that it held off until she had completed her shopping.

The way her life was going at the moment she really ought to have known better, she admitted ruefully as she stood under the shelter of the supermarket building and eyed the vast packed car park.

Her car was parked right at the back; the car park had been full when she'd arrived and that had been the only spot she could find.

She eyed the pencil-slim cream length of her skirt with a sinking heart as she acknowledged how inappropriate a garment it was in which to push a heavily laden trolley across a car park which seemed specifically designed not to ease the transportation of one's shopping to one's car, but to actively hinder it. The rain was becoming heavier; there were puddles on the tarmac, she was wearing a long-sleeved silk shirt, her skirt, brand-new expensive tights and equally brand-new and expensive high-heeled shoes.

She looked, she admitted as she glanced around, rather ludicrously inappropriately dressed for her task.

The majority of the other women shoppers were wearing comfortable, brightly coloured, weatherproof casual clothes, and flat or low-heeled shoes.

But then it was hardly her fault that her business partner's husband should have been involved in a car accident, necessitating Belinda's rushing off to his bedside, while it fell to her to step into Belinda's shoes, give up her precious day off, and take over Belinda's appointments for the day.

Fortunately Tom, Belinda's husband, had not been badly hurt; even so, Sybilla could well understand her friend's desire to be with him.

Perhaps if she hadn't offered to do her neighbours' shopping for them as well as her own she could have put off this trip to the supermarket, but Mr and Mrs Simmonds were elderly and had been so grateful for her offer of help with their shopping that she had felt she couldn't possibly cancel the trip.

Another wry glance at the dense cloud-packed sky confirmed that the rain wasn't likely to let up, and, since she could hardly stay where she was for the rest of the day, nor somehow magic her car to miraculously appear at the supermarket door, she really had no alternative but to accept that she was going to have to get wet and minimise the damage to her clothes as best she could.

Gritting her teeth, she stepped out from under the canopy, resolutely pushing the trolley in front of her, groaning when

she discovered that she had somehow or other managed to find herself one of those rogue trolleys with four wheels that appeared to want to go in the completely opposite direction to that she was pushing in.

It was too wet and she was too impractically dressed to get down and try to free the jammed wheels, which meant that somehow or other she was going to have to control the trolley by leaning against the left-hand side of it at the same time as she pushed it.

Normally blessed with a good sense of humour, Sybilla reflected that today was most definitely not going to be her day.

She tried not to imagine what the muddy spray of water from the tarmac was doing to the backs of her legs, and was within a few yards of her car, and just about to give a soft sigh of relief, when a large expensive-looking Daimler saloon car swept towards her.

Automatically she stopped, trying to pull the trolley out of the way, but, instead of it responding to her wishes, the inadvertently sharp tug she had given it made it yaw dangerously to one side.

Of course, she made an immediate grab for it, but it was too late; dangerously overladen with the burden of her neighbours' shopping as well as her own, to her absolute horror the trolley started to tip to one side.

As she leaned across it to try and steady the trolley it bumped painfully into her shin, and she felt the metal tear into the fragile fabric of her tights before finally toppling over.

The car, meanwhile, which had been the unwitting cause of her downfall, had stopped a couple of yards away, the driver no doubt intending to reverse into the empty parking space nearby.

Naturally enough, though, Sybilla didn't have much time to spare to pay attention to what was going on around her. She was far too concerned about how she was going to get her trolley back on its wheels, so at first she did not pay any attention to the opening and closing of the car door, save to mentally acknowledge that it had occurred with a very soft and expensive clunk, rather than with the sharp tinny sound her car door made.

To be confronted therefore with a pair of immaculately polished male shoes, topped by equally immaculate and very expensive-looking dark-coloured trousers, startled her so much that she automatically abandoned the trolley and tried to stand up, horribly conscious of the appearance she must present: her fair hair hanging in rain-sodden strands around her face, her cream shirt and skirt no doubt liberally spattered with dirty rainwater-spots, her tights ripped beyond redemption, and her general appearance was one of a woman so totally unable to control her life that she was not in the least surprised that the man seemed to assume that she needed some help.

She would have accepted it, and thanked him for having the consideration to offer it, if, just as she was getting to her feet, she hadn't heard his voice.

Immediately she froze, recognising it instantly, even though she knew it must be all of a decade since she had last heard

it. True, in that decade it had altered, deepened, hardened perhaps...certainly matured, but there was no evidence that his years of working in America had altered his speech pattern. As the man put out his hand to help her to her feet Sybilla withdrew icily from him and, without bothering to lift her head and look at him, was just starting to say coldly and admittedly untruthfully that she could manage when the passenger-door of the Daimler opened, and a woman wearing a pair of high-heeled shoes even more expensive and less weatherproof than her own came clicking across the tarmac towards them, exclaiming in a bored voice, 'Gareth, what on earth is going on? We're going to be dreadfully late, although why on earth you couldn't have got your grandfather's solicitor to come up to the house instead of our having to trail down here into this dreary little town...'

The sharp, petulant words suddenly ceased. Deliberately refusing to look at or acknowledge either of them from her semi-squatting position, Sybilla turned her back on them and then started to get to her feet.

Behind her she could hear the woman saying contemptuously, 'For goodness'sake, Gareth, let's go. What an idiotic thing to do. Stupid woman.'

Sybilla could feel the hot angry colour rising up under her skin. She had always cursed its fairness, just as she had always hated her soft fair hair, longing for the more dramatic colouring she so envied in others: thick, curly, almost black hair, warm olive-tinted skin that tanned quickly and, well, eyes that were a

sharp definite colour rather than softly luminous and somewhere between lavender and grey.

In the old days Gareth had always favoured girls with exotic semi-Mediterranean looks. She remembered one whom he had brought home from London with him, a dark gypsy-like wildness about her, a full, pouting red mouth, sparkling brown eyes... She and Gareth had been inseparable. She remembered how she had envied her...resented her. She had been fifteen at the time, Gareth almost twenty-two.

She suppressed the small stab of remembered pain. She had been such a child, nursing a huge crush on someone so unobtainable that her silly childish love for him had been totally ludicrous.

She had heard him say so himself. Not to her, of course. No, the conversation she had overheard had been between Gareth and his grandfather.

She had gone up to the house on the pretext of visiting Gareth's grandfather, but in reality hoping for a glimpse of Gareth, and perhaps, just perhaps he might deign to spend a few heavenly minutes with her, talking with her.

She had used the side-gate to the garden, scrambling through the undergrowth, pausing as she'd reached the summer house and heard Gareth's voice.

What had prompted their conversation she never knew. All she did know was that, as she'd frozen outside the summer house, hearing with awful clarity every single word of what was being

said, in that handful of seconds her childish adoration for Gareth had changed into a corrosive and bitter self-contempt, a loathing of her own immaturity, her foolishness, so that in that moment it was as though she had been split in two, one half of her still being the foolish child who had so stupidly worshipped Gareth, the other a new Sybilla, an adult, aware Sybilla, who could see her folly for all that it was.

Yes, of course—he had eyes in his head, Gareth had said. Of course he could see how Sybilla felt about him. Of course he was aware of the dangers of the situation, and of course he intended to do all that he could to remedy it. It would make his task easier, he had pointed out grimly to his grandfather, if he had not encouraged Sybilla to treat the Cedars as though it were her second home.

‘I like the lass,’ Thomas Seymour had replied gruffly, warming Sybilla’s chilled heart. ‘She’s got a kind heart, bless her. This place is like a morgue when you aren’t here, Gareth.’

‘Well, you know the remedy for that, don’t you? Sell it and buy something smaller. Move closer to town.’

Sybilla had crept away while they were still arguing.

She knew all about Gareth’s desire for his grandfather to sell the large house where he lived virtually alone and to move to something smaller and more convenient; but Thomas Seymour was as stubborn as his grandson. The Cedars had been in the Seymour family since the first Seymour had set up business in the town during Queen Victoria’s reign.

That business still existed, and Thomas Seymour had continued to run it right up until his death three weeks ago.

Sybilla knew that Gareth was back, of course. She could not have failed to do so. Everyone knew. What no one knew as yet was what Gareth intended to do with the business he had inherited from his grandfather.

The two men, so close in so many ways, had never been able to work in harness. They had tried it when Gareth left university, but had quarrelled too often and too passionately for it to work. Gareth had gone to America, carving a new and very successful career for himself in the development of the kind of laser technology he had wanted to introduce into the family firm and which his grandfather had steadfastly refused to allow.

As a result of Thomas Seymour's refusal to move with the times the Seymour business had over the last decade slowly fallen into a decline. The rumours in the town were that, now that Thomas was dead and Gareth had inherited, he would find a buyer for the business or close it down altogether.

Sybilla had refused to be drawn into any kind of verbal speculation about what Gareth might or might not do. She told those who commented on it that she really had no interest in either the business or Gareth himself, her voice losing a little of its normal husky thread of amusement and becoming instead cool and just a little withdrawn. Her too-fair skin might still betray her on occasions, but she had learned over the years how to skilfully deflect attention from areas that caused her anxiety and

discomfort, and unfortunately Gareth Seymour had continued to remain one of those areas.

Of course, she was long over that idiotic crush, but the soreness, the humiliation, the sheer mental angst of discovering that not only did he know how she felt about him, that he was aware of what she had truly believed to be her own secret and very personal feelings, but that he could so callously and cruelly make light of them, still lingered.

That was when she had realised the huge gap that yawned between a girl of fifteen and a man of twenty-two, when she had actually realised the difference between being a child and an adult, when she had realised that in order for her to bridge that gap, in order for her to become an adult herself, she was going to have to become like him: cruel, unfeeling, unkind. And she had known that she was not ready to take such a drastic step, that she preferred to remain as she was, and so she had stopped surreptitiously dabbing on immature touches of make-up, had stopped trying to behave and dress in a way she considered grown-up, and had instead reverted to the safe comfort of adolescence; back to her ancient jeans and old sweatshirts, back to tying up her hair to keep it off her face...back to spending her time roaming the countryside about her home instead of poring over fashion magazines and wishing that there was some way she could transform herself into the kind of dark beauty she had known Gareth preferred.

The hair colourant, bought on impulse but not as yet used,

had been thrown into the dustbin, the allure of its promise of shining raven locks ignored, the make-up she had bought with her precious earnings from her paper-round pushed to the back of her dressing-table drawer.

If her parents had wondered why, after haunting the Cedars, she never went near the place until she was sure that Gareth had returned to London, they had been too tactful to mention it.

In the intervening decade she had meticulously seen to it, then, on his brief visits home, that they never ran into one another, and she had intended to keep things that way.

However, if fate had decreed that their paths must cross she would have chosen for them to do so under far different circumstances from those occurring right now, with her virtually kneeling at his feet, looking for all the world very much like the ungainly, scruffy fifteen-year-old she had been and not the elegant, assured twenty-five-year-old businesswoman she now was.

No, she decided bitterly, today was most definitely not her day.

She stayed where she was, praying that he wouldn't recognise her, waiting for him to answer his companion's imperious summons and walk away, but to her consternation he stayed right where he was, ignoring the rejection of her tense back, ignoring her determination to pretend that he wasn't there, ignoring, it seemed, everything else and everyone else.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw him right her recalcitrant

trolley and then start to pick up her shopping.

Both of them reached for the can of shaving-foam she had bought for her neighbour's husband at the same time, his hand impossibly brown, his fingers hard and warm as just for a second they touched hers.

Once that casual, inadvertent touch would have sent her into transports of teenage delight, would have stirred her as intimately and erotically as a far more personal and passionate touch, and perhaps it was because of that...because of her memories...her awareness of how vulnerable to him she had once been that she snatched back her hand, curling her fingers closed, not quite able to stifle her small betraying gasp of shocked protest.

Of course, all that did was to have exactly the effect she had feared, making him focus on her and study her, and even with her head averted, and her hair swinging forward to conceal her profile he still managed to recognise her.

‘Sybilla. It is you, isn't it?’

What could she say? Undignified and idiotic to continue to try to ignore him.

Instead she had to struggle to her feet and from somewhere find some semblance of a polite contained smile, one that acknowledged his recognition of her and at the same time made it clear that the past was exactly where she wanted to keep her memories of him.

‘Gareth, I'd heard you were back.’

‘You didn't attend the funeral.’

Was that a hint of criticism in his voice? She swallowed hard, refusing to allow it to jar her conscience. It was true that she had stayed away from Thomas's funeral, and equally true that she had done so simply because she had not wanted to run into Gareth. On the face of it it could seem as though she had simply not cared enough for the old man to pay her last respects, but that had not been true. She had loved him almost as if he had been the grandfather she had never had, had loved him and had respected him, even though in recent years she had become increasingly aware that his once firm grip on his business affairs was slackening...that the company was in fact going downhill.

She had made sure she was out of town on the day of the funeral.

Her father was now retired and he and her mother were living fifty miles away, close to her brother and his family. They had been away on holiday when Thomas died, and she had used their absence as an excuse to pay a duty visit to their home to make sure that everything there was in order and safe from burglars or any other damage—a weak excuse, but it had been the only one she could find, unable to face the thought of confronting Gareth *and* dealing with her grief.

If her friends were surprised by her decision, knowing how close she had been to Thomas towards the end of his life, they were too tactful to make any comment.

His death had come as a surprise to the whole town. It was true that he was well into his eighties, but he had always seemed

so strong...so alive.

Privately Sybilla believed that, given the choice, he would have much preferred the immediacy of his fatal heart attack to a long-drawn-out period of illness, but that did not stop it being a shock to all those who had been close to him, herself included.

His only close family had been Gareth, but he had had many friends, and, even though a manager had been appointed to run the business, Thomas had still put in an appearance at the factory every working day.

His presence would be missed in the town.

‘My parents were away and I had promised them I’d keep a check on their house,’ she responded coolly now to Gareth’s comment.

She had no alternative but to stand up and confront him. He was, she noticed, still holding the can of shaving-foam...and he was looking at it in a very odd and angry way.

She swallowed hard, averting her face, determined not to allow herself to be affected by his maleness...his presence...his sheer irritating but overwhelmingly undeniable masculinity.

‘Please don’t let me delay you,’ she told him in a controlled frosty little voice.

‘You’re not,’ he responded quietly and, she suspected, untruthfully. Certainly his elegant female companion seemed to think so, to judge from the increasingly petulant expression marring the model-like perfection of her features.

Surprisingly she wasn’t a brunette but a blonde, a rather cold

and icy-looking blonde in Sybilla's opinion, for surely those sharp blue eyes were a touch too sharp, a touch too hard. Certainly they were assessing her in a very critical and condemning fashion, subjecting her to surely a far more intense scrutiny than she actually merited.

'Gareth, we're going to be late,' she protested a second time as Sybilla firmly turned her back on him and started to gather up the remainder of her purchases.

He was still holding the shaving-foam, and as she stood up, dropping her armful of things into the trolley he, instead of adding it to the pile, handed the can directly to her so that she was obliged to reach out towards him for it.

'Yours, I believe.'

Something about the way he said it made her focus on him.

The grey eyes were regarding her almost remotely, his face a mask she couldn't read. In maturity it had a hard-boned masculinity that made her suddenly sharply aware of him as a man in several ways her innocent teenage self would never have been able to be aware of. Not that she was exactly what one might describe as a woman of the world. Far from it—unlike Gareth's woman friend, to judge from her appearance and demeanour.

There had been boyfriends, of course; dates, parties, the usual round of social entertainments, but for some reason she had never felt comfortable enough with any of the men who had dated her to allow them to get too close to her or too intimate with her, either emotionally or sexually.

She reached out to take the shaving-foam from Gareth, conscious as she did so of a certain mental withdrawal, a discernible coolness in the way he was regarding her.

Well, why should that surprise her? He had always treated her with a certain aloof disdain, even if for a while in her teens she had foolishly managed to persuade herself that there was an imagined degree of warmth, of caring in his manner towards her.

But then, teenage girls were notorious, weren't they, for building their castles of dreams on impossibly insecure foundations?

She couldn't really blame Gareth for deriding her foolish adoration of him, but she was determined never to allow him or anyone else to affect her emotions so dangerously again, and, even more importantly, to make it abundantly clear to him that, however foolish she might have been at fifteen, that foolishness was now safely behind her.

The teenager Sybilla had been had lost no opportunity to be with him, seeking him out on the flimsiest of excuses, haunting the house where he had grown up under the guardianship of his grandfather, hanging adoringly and blushing on his every word...silently begging him to notice her...to want her...to love her.

But that teenager no longer existed. Firmly from the moment she had overheard and realised that he knew how she felt about him, and that it was the subject of open discussion between himself and his grandfather, she had been determined to show

him that he was wrong, that he meant nothing to her, and it was for this reason that she had so strictly adhered to her resolve to ensure that she never came into any kind of contact with him, either by accident or design.

At least no one could ever claim that today's unfortunate accident could be anything other than an unwanted coincidence. Not even Gareth himself.

She took a box of tissues from him, almost snatching at it in her desire to escape from him just as soon as she could. And why on earth the sight of a can of Mr Simmonds' shaving-foam should cause him to glare at her so disapprovingly, she really didn't know.

'Oh, do come on, Gareth.'

The blonde was glowering at her now, making it plain how she regarded her, her hand reaching possessively for Gareth's arm, scarlet nails gleaming dangerously against his suit-clad arm.

'You know you're mentioned in the will?'

Sybilla had almost turned away from him, but his curt, almost acid words stopped her. 'Yes,' she agreed tonelessly, without looking at him. Henry Grieves, Thomas's solicitor, had already been in touch with her about the collection of Dresden figures, which Thomas had directed were to be hers.

She had been a little girl of no more than six or seven the first time she had seen the figures and fallen in love with them. Now she blinked away emotional tears, trying not to remember how at Christmas Thomas had told her that he had left them to her.

He had always said that eventually the figures were to be hers, but she had treated his comments as a joke, knowing how valuable they were, and knowing also that Thomas knew that her love for them had been formed in the days when she had had no knowledge at all of their financial worth.

In many ways she would have preferred that he had not left them to her, even though she appreciated that they had been a gift of love.

Now though, sensitively suspecting that Gareth was somehow criticising her...perhaps even suggesting that she had pressurised Thomas into leaving her such a valuable gift, she tensed defensively.

‘I only mention it because you haven’t come to collect the figures.’

His mildness confused her, coming so quickly after his earlier apparent coldness.

She couldn’t tell him that the reason she hadn’t been up to the house was because she had known he was there.

In the distance a church clock struck the hour, causing Gareth to frown. ‘I have to go now, but...we really ought...’

‘Gareth, for goodness’ sake...’

Sybilla was already turning away from him, determinedly pushing her trolley in the direction of her own car. She was, she discovered, trembling slightly, her legs oddly weak.

She told herself it was the shock of her trolley’s overturning, but in her heart of hearts she knew it was more than that. That

the reason for her unfamiliar and unwanted weakness lay with the six-feet-odd of lean hardened maleness she had just walked away from.

Shaking because of one inadvertent meeting with Gareth Seymour. Ridiculous. She had stopped being vulnerable to him or any other man when she was fifteen years old. Hadn't she?

CHAPTER TWO

OF COURSE, Sybilla could not now go straight into the office as she had originally planned. She would have to go home and change her clothes, do something about her damp hair, and generally make herself look a bit more like the efficient and well-groomed businesswoman she purported to be, before she went through Belinda's diary and dealt with her workload for the day.

Fortunately, Belinda's first appointment wasn't until lunchtime, according to their shared secretary.

Five years ago, when the two girls had decided to start up an agency providing temporary secretarial services, neither of them had envisaged how successful they were going to be. The town had been very small and parochial in those days, and it had only been with the opening up of a new motorway system and the consequent increase in small businesses establishing themselves in the newly developed business park just outside the town that the whole area had become more prosperous. Now, in addition to having on their books twenty very proficient secretaries, they could also provide clients with a wide range of other staff, including computer-operators and programmers.

Sensibly so far they had concentrated on ploughing back the profits they'd made into the business and on expanding it slowly and carefully, and only the previous week they had been approached by their local newspaper, who were keen to

include them in an article they planned to run on successful local enterprises.

One of the drawbacks of running one's own business, as Sybilla had discovered, was that it left little time for social and leisure activities.

She had a good circle of friends, some from her schooldays, others she had made since through the business; at least twice a week she attempted to visit the town's new leisure centre and spend an hour or more in the swimming pool there, but of late she had found that the demands of their growing business meant that she had less and less free time.

Belinda had said ruefully just the other day that her husband and two teenage children were beginning to complain that they never saw her, and had told her friend, 'It's not so bad for me, but you don't seem to have any social life at all these days, and you know what they say about all work and no play...'

Sybilla had laughed, but too many of her friends were beginning to make the same comments to her, and only last week the next-door neighbours, for whom she had done this morning's shopping, had warned her that she was never going to find herself a nice young man and settle down if she wasn't careful.

Because she liked and respected the Simmondses, Sybilla had refrained from telling them that she was quite happy as she was. Perhaps she had an over-jaundiced view of the male sex, but it seemed to her that, even in this day and age, once a woman was married and had children it became incumbent on her to

juggle so many demanding roles that Sybilla felt it was small wonder that so many potentially very successful career women found themselves abandoning the unequal struggle of competing successfully with their male colleagues for promotion at the same time as they tried to meet the demands of their husbands and children.

When she fell in love she would feel differently, Belinda had told her when she'd voiced this view to her, agreeing that, without that leavening magic, to an outsider it could seem that it was always the woman who seemed to have the responsibility for making relationships work, for keeping life harmonious and happy.

Sybilla had contented herself with lifting a cynical eyebrow. She knew quite well that to those who thought they knew her she represented something of an enigma. With her close friends she was warm and affectionate; to those who needed her help—like her neighbours, like Thomas Seymour—she gave it generously and happily, but when it came to men, especially those who indicated that they found her attractive and wanted to get to know her better, she was cool and off-putting.

She knew that her friends presumed that this was because she had dedicated herself to her career and that there was no room in her life for a man who might demand too much from her.

But the truth was that she was afraid of allowing herself to become emotionally involved with anyone.

She had seen too many marriages and relationships break up

under the kind of strain that her own responsibility to the business would put on her to want to risk the same thing happening to her. The truth was that, for all her outward demeanour, at heart she was still the same idiotically romantic girl she had been at fifteen.

When she loved she wanted it to be completely and without reserve; and she wanted it to be forever.

Logic told her that she was being both naïve and foolish, and that in setting such impossibly high goals for herself she was almost deliberately making it impossible for her to form any kind of man-to-woman relationship. Instead of lowering her ideals a little and accepting reality she was deliberately withholding from herself the pleasure and happiness she might have found by doing so, and all because she was still punishing herself for being such a fool over Gareth.

She had been fifteen, for heaven's sake. Little more than a child. All right, so she *had* behaved embarrassingly and idiotically, but she wasn't the only girl who had ever had a crush on someone. All right, so it was unfortunate that Gareth had realised how she'd felt, but that was no reason for her to feel that to allow any man to believe she cared for him was to open herself to humiliation and hurt.

Mentally she might be twenty-five, she acknowledged wearily as she parked her car in her drive, but emotionally she was still trapped in the time-warp of the girl she had been at fifteen. Not an admission she liked making, even to herself.

Ten years on and she was still afraid of making a fool of

herself over another man in the way she had done over Gareth Seymour.

Perhaps Belinda was right. Perhaps if she actually was to fall in love...But in order to allow herself to fall in love she would need first to feel secure in her relationship with the man concerned, and before that could happen...

She sighed to herself as she got out of her car. If Belinda were privy to her thoughts no doubt she would tell her that she was trying to put the cart before the horse, and chide her that one did not allow oneself to fall in love...that love was an inescapable force, too powerful to resist.

Her house was one of a small row of traditionally built stone cottages a mile or so outside the town.

She had bought it three years ago when her parents had moved away; it was large enough for her needs but small enough not to overwhelm her, and, best of all, it had a long back garden, with views from the upstairs windows of the surrounding countryside.

Most of her neighbours were retired couples, although in recent months two young married couples had moved into the terrace, both of them working for the new companies springing up in the town.

The neighbours for whom she had been shopping were both in their eighties and very independent. They had two sons and a daughter, and several grown-up grandchildren, but their daughter and her family now lived in Australia, and their sons lived too far away from them to be able to do much more than visit a handful

of times a year, so Sybilla had found that she had taken on the role of an 'adopted' granddaughter to her neighbours.

Now, as she headed for her own back door, Emily Simmonds had obviously seen her and came out of her own house, exclaiming, 'Heavens! What on earth has happened to you?'

Sybilla quickly explained her trauma with the shopping trolley, but had to refuse Emily's compensatory offer of a cup of tea, saying that she had to get changed and rush back to her office.

Once she had carried Emily's shopping into her kitchen for her, she hurried back to her own house, hastily unpacking and storing away her own purchases before running upstairs and into her bedroom.

The image thrown back to her by the full-length mirror there confirmed her worst fears about her appearance.

Her hair had dried now, but the rain had destroyed the sleek silkiness of its normal style and it would have to be rewashed, her skirt was spattered with mud-stains and would have to be cleaned, and as for her shirt...the front of it was still slightly damp, and to her chagrin she realised that where the fine fabric was clinging to her body it had become virtually transparent. The bra she was wearing beneath it was silk too, and her face flamed with angry colour as she realised that in all probability the rain had soaked through that as well, and that Gareth must have...

She swallowed hard, telling herself fiercely that she was a fool and worse if she thought for one single moment that Gareth

Seymour would have had the slightest interest in looking at her body either clothed or unclothed.

It didn't take her long to change and redo her hair, and within the hour she was parking her car outside the office she and Belinda rented in the centre of the town.

'Sorry about the delay,' she apologised to Meg as she hurried in.

'No problem,' the other girl assured her. 'Oh, and Belinda rang in to say that Tom's fine, and that she'll be back in tomorrow if you want to take your day off then. I've been through her diary for you. She's got a lunch booked for today with Talbot Engineering. Ray Lewis from Talbot Engineering.'

Sybilla's heart sank. Ray Lewis was a very good client, but as a man...From the moment they had met he had made it plain to her that he wanted more than a business relationship with her, but he was a married man, and even if he hadn't been he was not the type to appeal to her. She realised that his personal good looks and smooth charm might have deceived another woman, but to her they were simply a mask he used to conceal his insincerity and sexual greed.

She had met his wife and had instantly felt sorry for her. It was plain that she adored her husband, and equally plain that she was terrified of losing him, as she most probably would do, Sybilla thought cynically.

Ray Lewis was a rich and successful man, and he was the kind of man to whom loyalty...love...the promises he had made in

marriage meant nothing. Sooner or later he would start looking around for a woman he could show off...the kind of woman a man of his financial success ought to have as a wife. Until then, no doubt, he would content himself with a series of unimportant little affairs...but one day...

Sybilla's mouth curled in disgust. She had made it as plain to him as she knew how that the only relationship she was interested in having with him was limited strictly to business, but he had refused to take the hint, and because of this she and Belinda had agreed that he would become Belinda's client.

Socially it wasn't always possible for her to avoid him, but she had begun to hope that he had at last taken the hint. The last thing she wanted to do was to have lunch with him, but Meg was saying quickly, 'He's thinking of expanding the company, and he wants us to provide him with extra part-time staff while he gets things off the ground. I know that when he made the appointment he told Belinda that this was the only day he had available as he was involved in negotiations with his bank for the rest of the week.'

It was the kind of business they just could not afford to turn down. She had, Sybilla acknowledged, no real option other than to take Belinda's place over lunch.

The morning was already virtually gone, and as soon as she had gone through the post it was time for her to leave for her lunch appointment.

Belinda had arranged to meet Ray Lewis at a very popular and very expensive restaurant some miles outside the town. It was

the kind of place that was favoured by the well-heeled business fraternity during the day, and the local 'in' crowd at night.

Privately Sybilla found the atmosphere rather oppressive and rich; she preferred both a less rarefied atmosphere and a plainer diet, but it was typical of the kind of place Ray Lewis would choose...the kind of place designed to impress.

She had changed into a smart navy suit and a fresh silk shirt. Outside it was still raining but this time she was prepared. Her navy pumps and tights wouldn't show the rainspots, and she was armed with her umbrella just in case she had difficulty in parking outside the restaurant.

'I've no idea what time I'll be back, although I'll try to keep it as short as possible,' she promised Meg.

The other girl laughed and suggested mischievously, 'I could, if you like, telephone you at the restaurant.'

Sybilla groaned. 'No...don't you dare. It's the kind of place where they bring the phone to the table. Horrendous.'

She was a few minutes later arriving at the restaurant than she had planned. The bar was full, but she could see Ray Lewis. He was standing with a group of people and had his back to her.

As she approached him he turned round and, on seeing her, exclaimed loudly, 'Sybilla!'

And then, before she could stop him, he had taken her in his arms and was kissing her on the mouth.

As she froze with anger and rejection he whispered in her ear, 'I knew that sooner or later you'd start to see things my way. You

and I—’

‘Belinda isn’t available. It was too late to cancel and so I’m taking her place,’ Sybilla told him curtly. She couldn’t create a scene here in this crowded bar, however much she deplored Ray’s behaviour. Nor could she take the risk of publicly humiliating him, much as she would have liked to do so, for his wife’s sake if not for her own.

As she tried to manoeuvre herself away from him he held on to her, taking a very obvious delight in refusing to let her go.

She could feel both her temper and her embarrassment increasing, but refused to allow him to see it, instead saying coolly, ‘I suggest you let me go, Ray. We’re being watched, and I don’t think you’d want your wife...’

She didn’t have to continue. He was already releasing her and stepping back from her. He really was a most despicable man, she reflected, refusing to give in to the craven impulse to look quickly around the bar to see who might have witnessed his unpleasant behaviour. She could only hope that none of their other clients had seen it.

‘If I’d known I was going to have the pleasure of your company I’d have arranged to take you out to dinner. Somewhere very private and very discreet, if you take my meaning.’

Sybilla most certainly did. She made no attempt to hide her revulsion from him as she told him curtly, ‘This is a business lunch, Mr Lewis, nothing more.’

‘Hey, come on, what’s with the “Mr Lewis”? And as for all that

crap about business...you and I both know that potentially we've got a lot more than business going for us. I like you, Sybilla. I like you one hell of a lot. You're a very desirable woman. A very successful woman. Some men might find that threatening, but not me. In fact...' He was reaching out towards her again, and instinctively she stepped backwards, tensing as she bumped into someone.

As she turned her head to apologise to them she heard Ray adding sickeningly, 'I find it a turn on. I find *you* a turn on.'

And she knew that the person standing behind her had heard him as well.

Trying not to let either her embarrassment or her anger show, she forced a polite smile to her lips and turned round properly to apologise. And then her face froze as she saw that the man she had bumped into was Gareth Seymour.

Her apology died in her throat. The look he was giving her was contemptuously disdainful, the way he withdrew from any further physical contact with her bringing a hot wash of colour to sting her face.

This was the last person she would have wanted to witness Ray's unwanted advances towards her. Twice in one day now she had been humiliated in front of Gareth; twice she had been made to feel a fool in front of him.

At her side, Ray was asking her what she wanted to drink. Automatically she told him mineral water, unable to drag her eyes away from Gareth's face and the cold contempt so plainly

portrayed there.

‘Oh, come on. You can have something more exciting than that,’ Ray was pressing her.

She shook her head. She rarely touched alcohol and never when she was involved both in business discussions and driving, but Ray was one of those men who seemed to think it clever to insist on overruling anyone who refused a drink, and she suspected that in the end she would be forced to give in and let him buy her a drink she didn’t want and had no intention of consuming.

‘I know this is supposed to be a business lunch, but there’s no law that says we can’t combine business with pleasure, and you know already how much I’d like to give you pleasure,’ Ray was saying suggestively and far too loudly. Certainly loudly enough for Gareth to have heard him, to judge from the look of distaste that crossed his face.

As she started to turn away from him he said curtly to her, ‘The owner of the shaving-foam, presumably. I can’t say I’m impressed by your choice of...friends these days, Sybilla.’

It was outrageous, unforgivable, and totally and completely uncalled for that he should make such a comment to her. They hadn’t seen one another for ten years; they were virtually strangers to one another, and he had no right, absolutely no right at all to pass criticism on her regarding matters about which he was completely uninformed and completely wrong!

She was halfway to opening her mouth to tell him so when

she realised what she was doing. Quarrelling with Gareth, and in public too, was the last thing she needed. Far better to treat his unfounded and ill-judged condemnation of her with the contempt *he* seemed to think *she* deserved.

Even so, as she turned away from him she couldn't resist saying under her breath, 'Fortunate for me, then, isn't it, that your opinion of me...or my friends doesn't rate very highly in my personal scale of life's vital statistics?' And then, as she caught sight of the woman she had seen with him earlier in the day coming towards them, she added for good measure, 'As it happens, I wasn't too impressed with your friend either. Scarlet nail-polish at nine o'clock in the morning is rather overdoing things a little, isn't it?'

With that she turned back to Ray and said quickly, 'I'm rather hungry and short of time. Do you mind if we go straight into the restaurant?'

Before he could object she started to walk towards the restaurant, praying that Ray would follow her.

Of all the people to have run into. And why, oh, why had she allowed herself to be baited into that extraordinary and totally out-of-character bitchiness about his woman friend? It had been completely unnecessary...completely over the top. The smart thing, the sensible thing to do would have been to quietly ignore his gibe and just walk away from him. Instead of which she had had not just to go running headlong into trouble, but to actually verbally invite it. Even in the white heat of her resentment and

anger she had been able to see that Gareth hadn't been too pleased by her attack on his woman friend, and who in his shoes could blame him?

She remembered how overawed and diminished she had felt by the girls he used to bring home, how young and vulnerable she had felt in comparison, and wondered a little grimly if it had been those old memories, memories she ought to have rooted out and destroyed long, long ago, which had been responsible for today's outburst.

Whatever the cause, it was pointless regretting it now. All she could do was to hope that she and Gareth did not come into contact with one another again.

With a bit of luck they shouldn't do so. He, after all, couldn't be staying around for very long. He would doubtless arrange for Thomas's business to be put up for sale or perhaps even closed down, and he would then return to America, and she doubted that anyone in the town would ever see him again. Over the last few years it had been only his love for his grandfather that had brought him back, and now that Thomas was dead...

Despite the fact that Gareth had refused to join the family business, had wanted to make his own way in life, he and Thomas had always remained close. Always after his visits Thomas was full of what he had done...what he had achieved. Sybilla had nerved herself to listen to Thomas singing his praises because she knew how much he meant to the older man.

After Gareth's parents had been killed in an accident Thomas

had brought him up, and there was a very, very strong bond between them.

Once, naïvely, she had asked Thomas if he had not been upset by Gareth's decision to branch out on his own, but wisely Thomas had told her that Gareth must have the right to define and shape his own life, and that to try and keep him within the confines of their small town when he wanted to be elsewhere would be to destroy the bonds between them and would eventually destroy their relationship completely.

She hadn't understood that then, at seventeen, but she did now. She had already heard from those who had been there how grim-faced Gareth had been at the funeral, and how obvious it had been to the onlookers that he was deeply upset by the loss of his grandfather, even though he had kept his emotions under control.

Now she wondered what role his companion played in his life. Over the years Thomas had never talked to her about the women Gareth knew. She knew that Thomas had wanted him to marry... wanted him to have children, but as yet it seemed that he had not found the women with whom he wanted to settle down. Unless...

Gareth's emotions and future were nothing to do with her, she told herself grimly as the waiter pulled out her chair for her. In fact she had no business thinking about Gareth at all... or admitting him into her mind. By rights she ought to be concentrating on Ray and the new business they hoped to get from him.

That was, after all, why she was here, and the sooner she made

that clear to Ray as well as to herself, the better.

Lunch was every bit as difficult as she had envisaged. Several times Ray tried to trick her into accepting a dinner-date with him, but on every occasion she side-stepped the issue, until in the end he was starting to become truculent and angry with her.

Knowing that she was going to have to confront him, Sybilla told him firmly, 'You're a married man, Ray, and even if I were attracted to you that fact alone would mean that as far as I'm concerned there could not be any kind of relationship between us.'

'The old-fashioned sort, are you? Well, marriage isn't what it used to be, Sybilla. In fact, my marriage—well, let's just say—'

'Let's just not say anything,' Sybilla interrupted him firmly. 'We're here to discuss business, Ray, and nothing more. And now I really do have to leave. I've got another appointment this afternoon,' she fibbed, 'and I need to get back to the office first.'

She could tell he wasn't pleased but there was no way she was going to be blackmailed into a relationship with him she did not want. No way at all.

She was still feeling raw and uncomfortable when she neared the office, her discomfort over lunch lying under her skin like an irritating piece of grit, but not so much because of Ray Lewis. No, the cause of her discomfort lay more deeply buried within her psyche than that. It was because of her run-in with Gareth that she felt so at odds with herself, so angry with herself for allowing Gareth to provoke her into that unseemly,

almost juvenile, retaliation. To provoke her. She frowned as she worried at the words. Why on earth should Gareth have wanted to provoke her? Surely, like her, the last thing he could want was any kind of communication between them whatsoever?

He had made it plain enough to his grandfather ten years ago how little he'd relished her childish adoration of him.

Had he provoked her or was she looking for excuses for her own behaviour? Was she...? But no. His comment to her had been a definite and deliberate provocation. Stripping the whole affair of all of its emotional camouflage and looking at it calmly and logically, she could see absolutely no reason for Gareth to have made the comment he had unless he had wanted to provoke her. But why? So that he could give vent to his contempt of her. But why should that be necessary?

Unless perhaps he had wanted to underline to her how much he despised her. Was he afraid that she might still harbour that idiotic teenage crush? Her face burned with indignation at the thought. That had been ten years ago. She had changed since then. She was a woman now.

A woman. Was she? She was an adult certainly, but a woman...She tried not to remember the number of times she had backed off from members of his sex, from all the men who had wanted her...desired her...all the men whose sexual advances she had rejected in a flurry of protests and fear.

Fear not of them as men, but of allowing them to get too close to her in case ultimately they hurt her emotionally. As Gareth

had hurt her.

But it was ridiculous to remain fixated on something... someone who had played such a relatively small part in her life. Other girls had similar crushes and went on to form other, more mature relationships; why hadn't she?

Was it something to do with the trauma of overhearing him telling his grandfather that he was aware of her feelings and most certainly did not feel flattered by them? Was it because she was too sensitive...too afraid of loving another man who would not want that love? But that hadn't been love she had felt for Gareth. She had been a child. She had been fifteen...and an immature fifteen at that, but not too immature to understand what the sensations she'd experienced whenever she'd thought about Gareth meant. She shook her head, trying to clear her mind of so many disturbing thoughts, thoughts she had successfully managed to push to the back of her mind in recent years, telling herself that she was simply one of those women more interested in remaining independent and establishing a career than in men.

By the time she walked into the office her head was aching. Meg exclaimed sympathetically over her pale face and strained eyes, offering her an aspirin.

She shook her head, telling her wryly, 'I'm allergic to them. They always make me most vilely sick. No, I'll be OK. It's just a tension headache, that's all.'

'I hope you're right,' Meg told her. 'There's a bug going round that starts off with a headache and then develops as full-blown

flu. Half the town seems to be going down with it.'

'Don't tempt fate,' Sybilla pleaded. 'The last thing we need right now is a flu epidemic.'

There had been several calls while she'd been out, and as she attended to these she started signing the letters Meg had prepared in her absence. At four o'clock she had a girl to interview, a possible new addition to their pool of temps, who had trained as a computer-operator prior to the birth of her first baby, but who now wanted to get back to work. They were always on the look-out for reliable staff, and if Ray did ask them to provide him with extra temps while he was expanding his business they would need to take on at least three new girls. Of course, after her lunch-date with him he might decide to place his business elsewhere. If he did, then he did, she decided grimly, half inclined to wish that he would, even though she knew from a business point of view his was a very valuable contract.

At ten to four Belinda rang to confirm that she would be back at the office in the morning.

'How did the lunch with Ray Lewis go?' she asked.

'Not very well,' Sybilla admitted.

'Mm. I'm sorry I had to land you with that one, but I know how good you are at being tactful and diplomatic.'

Tactful and diplomatic. Well she certainly hadn't exhibited those virtues today, Sybilla reflected a couple of hours later as she prepared to leave the office.

The girl she had interviewed had been very promising, and had

left agreeing to think over their terms and come back to them.

Now all she had to do was spend the evening going over the paperwork she was taking home with her, and with a bit of luck the next day she would be able to enjoy the day off she had forgone today.

Her garden was crying out for some attention and she had promised herself that this year she would redecorate her spare room. She had also promised her parents she would visit them and spend more than her normal brief weekend with them, and even Belinda had warned her that if she didn't allow herself a proper holiday this year she would be in danger of becoming a workaholic.

Her head was still aching when she got home and the back of her throat felt sore as well.

She told herself that it was all that talking over lunch that was responsible for her sore throat, sternly refusing to admit the possibility that she was succumbing to the virulent strain of flu Meg had told her was sweeping the town.

She couldn't afford to be ill, she told herself grimly half an hour later as she sipped a mug of coffee. And she didn't intend to be, either.

Even so, at eight o'clock, when her headache still hadn't gone away and her sore throat persisted, she found herself giving in to the desire to go upstairs and soak in the luxury of a long hot bath, prior to indulging in an early night.

Wearily she finished her coffee and headed for the stairs.

CHAPTER THREE

THE bath might have eased the tension of the day from Sybilla's muscles, but it had done nothing to alleviate either the pain in her head or her sore throat, she admitted as she climbed out of the steaming scented water and wrapped herself in a large dry towel, frowning as she suddenly heard someone ringing her doorbell.

She paused, hoping that whoever it was might go away, but she had always been one of those people who found it impossible to ignore either a ringing telephone or a doorbell, and whenever she'd tried the anxiety and guilt she'd experienced had been so acute that she had learned it was far easier to give in and to acknowledge their summons no matter how inconvenient it might be.

It would probably only be Emily, her neighbour, anyway, calling round to thank her for getting their shopping this morning and hopeful for a bit of a chat.

She hurried downstairs, her feet still bare, her body damp beneath her towel, apologising as she started to open the door.

'Sorry to take so long, I was just having a bath—'

And then abruptly she fell silent as she realised that it wasn't her next-door neighbour who was standing there.

'Gareth,' she proclaimed weakly. 'What on earth...? What are *you* doing here?'

‘Thanks for the warm welcome.’

He was over the threshold and standing in the hall beside her before she could stop him, tall, broad-shouldered, filling the small space, making her realise how small and vulnerable she was in comparison. Without her shoes she barely stood much higher than his shoulder.

She felt a rash of gooseflesh break out on her skin, and a reaction burning deep within her body that made her feel a helpless surge of anger and fear.

It wasn't right that he should affect her like this...it wasn't fair. She was over him completely and absolutely. Or so she had believed.

How could he stand there like that, challenging her shock at seeing him, when he must know? She shivered suddenly, sending a small shower of water droplets from her damp hair on to her bare shoulders.

She watched as Gareth homed in on her tiny betraying shudder, grey eyes narrowing as he focused on her.

Her mouth felt unbearably dry. She had to fight an overpowering impulse to flick her tongue over her dry lips to moisten them. As though he knew somehow what she was feeling, he looked at her mouth.

‘You know, you hardly look a day older than you did at fifteen.’ The flat hard words jolted through her, hurting her.

What was he trying to say? That, to him, she was as sexually unappealing now as she had been then? Well she hardly needed

him to tell her that.

The arrogance of the man! Did he really think...? Resolutely ignoring that sharply painful *frisson* of sensation she had experienced earlier, that brief moment of self-awareness when she had realised that, somehow, some part of her was still physically capable of reacting to him, she responded curtly, 'Really? It must be the poor light in here.'

No doubt he was comparing her make-up-less, shiny face to the *soignée* elegance of his woman friend's sophistication. Well she didn't care what he thought of her, she told herself recklessly. He wasn't the only man in the world, and his opinion wasn't important to her any more. He could think what he wished of her.

'What is it you want, Gareth?' she demanded, refusing to give in to the weakening sensations beginning to spread through her body.

He was standing much, much too close to her. She could smell the cold crisp scent of the night on his skin and clothes. If she touched his face it would feel cool, the bones hard beneath his skin, and if *he* touched *her*...

She swallowed nervously, her eyes darkening betrayingly as they mirrored her confusion and apprehension.

As she grappled mentally with the appalling unwantedness of what she was feeling, she heard Gareth saying drily, 'Now *that* might be construed as a very leading question, or an extremely naïve one, only I don't think naïveté is quite your style any more, is it?'

She stared at him, unable to comprehend the implications of his soft-voiced words. In another man she might have judged them sexually provocative, but, coming from Gareth...

His manner towards her held a mixture of contempt, disdain, and a quality which was almost a controlled anger, and none of that added up to the kind of response to her which might have led to his making a sexually provocative remark.

She looked past him at the closed front door, reflecting grimly that ten years ago she would have given her very soul for this degree of intimacy with him, whereas now...whereas now all she wanted him to do was to go and leave her alone. His presence here in her hallway was too overpowering...too...too emotionally dangerous, so much so that she could almost feel the air between them crackling with hostility and anger.

And yet why on earth should he be hostile towards her? Surely not because Thomas had left her the Dresden?

Gareth had never been avaricious. Thomas had been a wealthy man, but she knew that Gareth had always insisted on making his own way through life. When he was at university he had taken holiday jobs, refusing to allow Thomas to increase his allowance, determined to stand on his own two feet.

So why should Gareth be hostile towards her? From the moment she had overheard that conversation, had realised that he knew of her feelings for him and deplored them, she had avoided him, refusing to return to the Cedars until she'd known he wouldn't be there. A year's sabbatical after he had finished

university and then the fact that he had opted to work in America meant that in the two years before he had left university and taken up his post in Boston she had barely seen him at all, so surely he could hardly still be angry with her because at fifteen she had dared to fall in love with him? Nor, logically, could his anger come from a misplaced belief that just because he was spending a few days back in town she was going to start mooning over him the way she had done as a teenager. She had surely already proved to him that she knew quite well that her feelings were not reciprocated, and that the last thing she wanted was to open herself up to any further humiliation and pain.

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