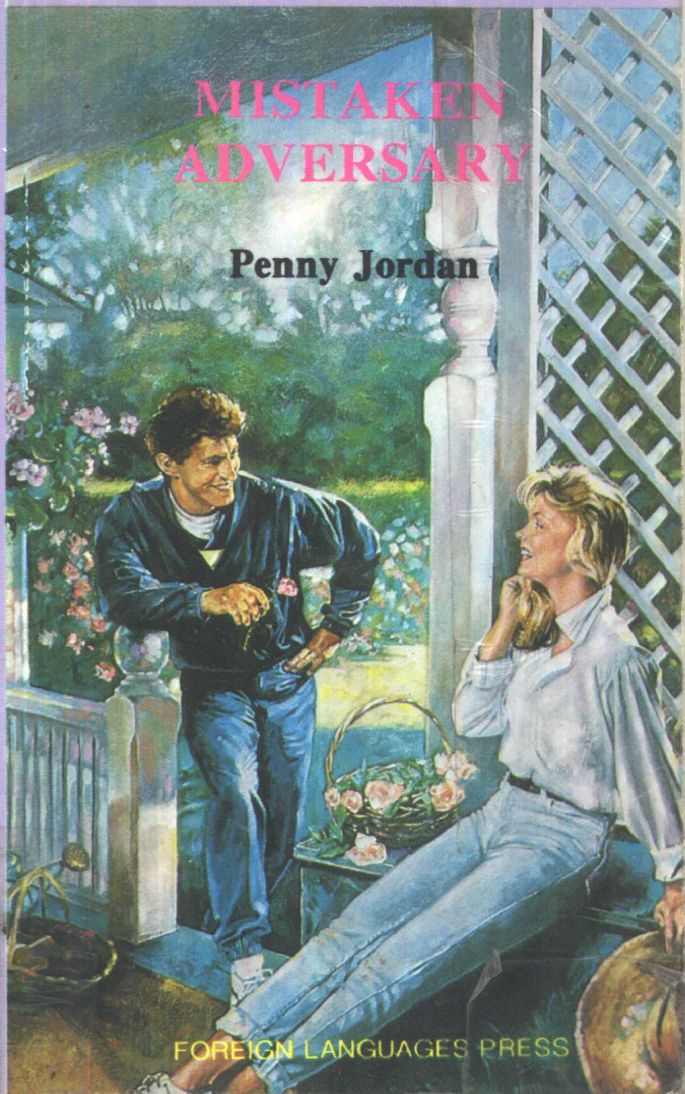




Silhouette

MISTAKEN ADVERSARY

Penny Jordan



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**PENNY
JORDAN**

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***“I thought all men hated
seeing a woman in tears.”***

“Only when they feel unable to do anything about it, when they can’t follow their instincts. . . .”

“To follow their instincts and do what?” she asked him wryly, thinking she already knew the answer, but Mitch’s response to her was nothing like what she had expected.

“To do this. . . .”

His lips were already touching hers, slowly caressing them, so that they softened and clung, instinctively responsive to a message so subtle and intimate that Georgia herself barely registered it.

PENNY JORDAN was constantly in trouble in school because of her inability to stop daydreaming—especially during French lessons. In her teens, she was an avid romance reader, although it didn't occur to her to try writing one herself until she was older. "My first half-dozen attempts ended up ingloriously," she remembers, "but I persevered, and one manuscript was finished." She plucked up the courage to send it to a publisher, convinced her book would be rejected. It wasn't, and the rest is history! Penny is married and lives in Cheshire.

Penny Jordan's striking mainstream novel *Power Play* quickly became a *New York Times* bestseller. She followed that success with *Silver*, *The Hidden Years* and her most recent blockbuster, *Lingering Shadows*. Watch for *For Better For Worse* available this month from Mira Books.

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CHAPTER ONE

SHE was late. She always seemed to be running late these days, Georgia reflected tiredly, as she checked the traffic and then hurried across the road.

The problem was that she hadn't been able to park her car close enough to the agency who supplied her with the computer programming work she did at home, which meant she had had to walk right across town—not a very long way, but it all added extra time to her schedule, time she could barely afford to lose, time when she wasn't earning money, when she wasn't—

She checked herself with a small grim exclamation. She had a very strict rule which meant that, once she was out of the house and on her way to visit Aunt May, she did not ~~allow her growing~~ anxiety over money to show in any way which ~~could~~ alert her aunt to what was happening and ~~so de-~~stroy the concentration that she, so desperately needed if she was to get well.

If she was . . . There was no if about it, Georgia told herself fiercely. Aunt May was going to get better. Hadn't they said at the hospice only last week how well she was doing, what a wonderful patient she was?

Georgia stopped walking, her expression of stern concentration softening as she thought about her aunt. Her great-aunt, really: an indomitable lady

of seventy-odd, who had stepped in and filled the gaping chasm left in her life when her parents were so tragically killed in a plane crash, who had filled her life and her world so completely and so lovingly, who had helped her to overcome the trauma of losing her parents, and who had brought her up so wisely and so caringly that she considered herself to be far better loved, far better understood, than many of her contemporaries. And even when the time had come for her to spread her wings, to leave school, and her home, to go on to university and from there to London and her first job, her aunt had encouraged her every step of the way.

Keen, ambitious, intelligent and adaptable; those had been only some of the compliments and praise Georgia had received as she climbed the corporate ladder, determinedly reaching towards the goals she had set herself. A real high-flyer was how others described her, and she had been proud of that title, single-mindedly telling herself that there would be time. ~~Once she was established in her career, once she had achieved all that she wanted to achieve, seen and done all she wanted to see and do—to take life at an easier pace, to think about a serious relationship with someone and perhaps about children of her own.~~

Of course she had still kept in touch with her aunt, spent Christmases with her, and some of her other holidays, encouraged her to come up to London for brief stays in the tiny flat she had bought in one of the prestigious dockland developments, unfortunately just when their price was at its highest...

Yes, she had seen her path so clearly ahead of her, with no obstacles in her way, nothing to impede her progress, and then the blow had fallen.

Having an unexpected few days extra leave with nothing planned, she had gone north to the Manchester suburb where she had grown up, and discovered the shocking truth of her aunt's illness. A 'growth'. A 'tumour'. So many, many different polite ways of describing the indescribable, but no real escape, no nice polite way of covering up what was actually happening.

She had taken extra leave, ignoring her aunt's insistent command that she return to London and her own life. With her aunt she had seen doctors, specialists, made hospital visits, and then, once all the facts were known, she had gone back to London—but not for long. Just for long enough to hand in her resignation and to put the flat up for sale—which went through, but at a price which had left her with no financial margin at all.

Then had come the move out here to one of her aunt's favourite small Cheshire towns, and the purchase of the cottage, with what had been a horrendously large mortgage even before the recent interest rate increases. The work she received from the agency, no matter how many hours she worked, could never ever bring in anything like the salary her skills had commanded in London. And now added to those other burdens was the cost of ensuring that her aunt could continue to receive treatment at the very special hospice, only a handful of miles away from the cottage.

Today, as she did every day and every evening, Georgia was on her way to see her aunt, to spend time with her, achingly conscious of how frail she was, frantically sick inside with anxiety for her, desperately praying that she would keep on fighting... that she would get better...

It was only with the discovery of her aunt's illness that Georgia had realised that without her she would be completely alone in the world. That knowledge had bred inside her an anguish, a fear, which she was totally at a loss to control. It was, moreover, an emotion which was totally out of place in an adult woman of close to thirty. Of course she loved Aunt May, of course she desperately wanted her to get better—but to experience this despairing, consuming sense of desertion and fear... What she was going through now was worse, far worse, than the emotions she had experienced when she'd lost her parents. She was, she sometimes thought, getting dangerously close to going completely out of control, to giving in utterly and wholly to the maelstrom of emotions threatening her.

And yet, until now, she had prided herself on being a sensible, mature woman, a woman not given to the wilder impulses of emotionalism. Yet here she was, virtually trying to make a bargain with the gods, feverishly begging for her aunt's recovery. And still, on some days, her very bad days, it seemed to her that, no matter how hard she willed it to be different, her aunt was slowly slipping away from her...

And now, if she didn't hurry, she would be late for visiting time. Her arms were beginning to ache

with the weight of the paperwork she was carrying. The woman who ran the agency had looked askance at her when she had asked her for extra work. They had the work, plenty of it, she had told Georgia, adding that people as skilled and dedicated as her were hard to come by—but was she really wise to overload herself to such an extent?

Georgia grimaced to herself. She needed the money and needed it desperately. The mortgage alone... When she had visited the building society last week, to see if there was any way of alleviating the crippling burden the mortgage had become, the manager had been sympathetic to her plight.

Had she thought of taking in a lodger? he had suggested. With a variety of new industries springing up locally, many of them offshoots of international concerns, there was a growing demand for such a service.

A lodger was the very last thing Georgia really wanted. She had bought the cottage for her aunt, knowing how much the latter had always dreamed of just such a quiet retreat, and she wasn't going to sell it or give up. Just as Aunt May wasn't going to give up her fight to hold on to life.

Tonight, before evening visiting time, she had someone coming round to see her—the prospective lodger she did not want. A male lodger at that. Not that the sex of the potential intruder made much difference; Georgia had lived in London for long enough to know that it was perfectly feasible for male and female to live together, sharing a roof, without there having to be any hint of a sexual relationship between them.

In fact she herself had been for a time the third member of just such a trio, and had found that, of her two co-habitees, Sam had been the easier to get along with. No, it wasn't her potential lodger's sex that put her off him, it was the necessity of having a lodger at all.

As the parish church bells rang out the hour, she suddenly realised that standing still was wasting precious time. Hurriedly, she stepped forward, almost cannoning into the man coming in the opposite direction.

As he took evasive action, so did she, thus beginning one of those familiar patterns of attempted avoidance of one another, so amusing to the onlooker and so time-consuming to the participants, whereby both of them, in trying to avoid the other, made the same move at the same time, thus prolonging the delay in what looked like some kind of complicated dance-step.

In the end it was the man who put an end to it, standing still and smiling ruefully as he suggested, 'Perhaps if I just stand still and you walk round me?'

He was a very tall man, and very well built as well, with broad shoulders and narrow hips, the kind of man who looked as though he either worked out of doors or engaged in some kind of outdoor physical activity. Certainly he was very fit, very lithe, because he moved easily and speedily, putting out a steadying hand as Georgia's impatience both with him and with herself boiled over, and her too tense body reacted to that impatience, almost causing her to stumble as she tried to avoid him.

His touch was brief and non-sexual, and yet it set off inside her the oddest of reactions, causing her to stiffen and look directly at him, unaware of the mixture of panic and anger flashing their twin messages from her eyes.

He was still smiling, a rueful curling of a very masculine mouth that matched the amusement in the sun-speckled golden eyes. He had a tan, the kind that came from being out of doors over a long period of time. His dark hair was thick, touched with gold where the sun warmed it.

He was good-looking—if you were the kind of woman who appreciated that kind of male machismo, Georgia acknowledged grudgingly. Personally, she had always preferred brains to brawn, and right at this moment she wasn't interested in either.

Irritated, and at the same time both defensive and vulnerable without knowing why she should be, instead of returning his smile with the friendly warmth it invited and deserved, she over-reacted, glowering at him, as she demanded grimly, 'Will you please let go of me and get out of my way?'

Later, five minutes down the road, still feeling hot and bothered, still anxiously aware of how much time she had lost, she waited for the lights to change so that she could cross the road to the car park, and she happened to turn round and catch sight of her own expression in a shop window. She was frowning: a cross, bitter expression pursed her lips, her body so tense and strained that she automatically tried to relax it.

She didn't, she recognised as the lights changed and she crossed the road, like the image she had just seen. It had shocked her into realising how much these last few months had changed her, draining her of her sense of humour, her optimism.

As she reached the car park, she remembered uncomfortably how she had reacted to the man in the street, someone who had cheerfully and pleasantly tried to turn a moment of irritation for them both into a light-hearted and warm exchange of good-humoured smiles. Her aunt would have been shocked by her behaviour to him; she had always stressed not just the importance of good manners, but the necessity of treating others with warmth and kindness. Her aunt was of the old school, and she had imbued in Georgia a set of values and a pattern of behaviour which was perhaps a little out of step with modern-day living.

Rather to her shame, Georgia recognised that her time in London, and the stress of the last few months, was beginning to wear down that caring attitude to others which her aunt had always believed was so important. Too late now to wish she had been less abrasive with that unknown man, to wish that she had responded to his pleasant good manners with equal good humour, instead of reacting so rudely. Still, she was hardly likely to run into him again, which was perhaps just as well: she hadn't missed the way his friendly smile had hardened a little when she had reacted so unpleasantly to him, to be replaced by a very grim look of cool withdrawal—of sternness almost.

* * *

Tiredly, Georgia unlocked her front door. The visit to the hospice had left her feeling drained and very, very afraid. No matter how much she tried to deny herself the knowledge, she could see how frail her aunt was growing, how terrifyingly fragile—so that in some odd way it was almost as though her very skin was becoming transparent. And yet at the same time she was so calm, so at peace with herself, so elevated almost, as though—and this was what terrified Georgia more than anything else—as though she was already distancing herself from her, from the world, from life...

'No! No!' Georgia bit her lip as she realised she had cried the protest out aloud. She didn't want to lose her aunt, didn't want...

Didn't want to be left alone like a child crying in the dark. She was being selfish, she told herself critically; she was thinking of her own emotions, her own needs, and not her aunt's...

All through the visit she had talked with desperate cheerfulness of the cottage and the garden, telling her aunt that she would soon be coming home to see everything for herself, telling her—as though the words were some kind of special mantra—about the cat who had adopted the cottage as its home, about the special rose bushes they had planted together in the autumn, which were now producing the buds which would soon be a magnificent display of flowers. Her aunt was the one who was the keen gardener, who had always yearned to return to her roots, to the small-town atmosphere, in which she herself had grown up. That was why Georgia had bought the cottage in

the first place—for her aunt... her aunt, who wasn't living here any more, her aunt who...

Georgia could feel the ball of panic and dread snowballing up inside her and, as always, she was afraid of it, trying to push it down and out of the way, totally unable to allow it to gather momentum, to force herself to confront it. She was so desperately afraid of losing her aunt, so mortally afraid.

The cottage was only small: three bedrooms, one bathroom, and a tiny boxroom which she was using as her office, and then downstairs a comfortably sized living-kitchen area, a small cosy sitting-room and a dining-room which they never used, preferring the comfort of the kitchen. Its garden was large and overgrown: a gardener's paradise, with its rows of fruit bushes, its well-stocked borders, its small fishpond and its vegetable beds. But it was Aunt May who was the gardener, not her, and Aunt May—

Georgia swallowed the angry tears gathering in her throat as she remembered the look on her aunt's face when they had first come to look at the cottage. It had been that look of almost childlike wonder and pleasure which had pushed Georgia into taking the final step of committing herself to buy the cottage, even though she knew she could barely afford it. She had bought it for Aunt May. They had had nearly three months in it before Aunt May's health had started to deteriorate, before the doctors had started talking about a further operation, before it had become necessary for Aunt May