



The Bewitching Hour Preview

selected excerpt

“Wear the nose.”

“I’m not wearing the nose.”

“Wear it,” Rhonda prodded. “The costume is nothing without it.”

“That’s just it,” Julie replied, surveying herself in the antique floor-length mirror in her bedroom. “I’m not exactly sure I want to draw attention to myself in this.”

She wore a form-fitting black dress, narrow to the knees, then flaring out at the bottom. Around her neck she donned a chain of plastic spiders, accented with matching eight-legged earrings above. Topping the outfit was a pointy black hat that seemed to reach the ceiling.

“The witch is a classic symbol of Halloween,” Rhonda said in a tone reminiscent of a nature documentary.

Julie rolled her eyes at the mirror.

“It’s a great costume,” Rhonda went on. Then she reached into the shopping bag at her feet and pulled out a small black broom, which she shoved into Julie’s hand. “There,” she said. “You look great. But you should wear the nose.”

“I’m not wearing the nose.” Covered with crags and crevices and a hook at its bridge, the fleshy rubber nose also sported a huge wart on its tip. Julie intended to stand firm. “And if this costume is so great,” she added, “how come *you’re* not wearing it?”

“Because I’m the sexy devil,” Rhonda replied, quoting the packing label that had come with her slinky costume. It was little more than a piece of silky red lingerie held on with spaghetti-thin straps. She shook her behind to jiggle the pointy red tail that hung from it. “And because beggars can’t be choosers. People who decide they want to go to Halloween parties at the last minute have to be content with what I can find in my closet.”

Julie glared at her friend, thinking how appropriate that Rhonda had dressed as a devil. The glittering red horns emerging from her auburn mane provided the perfect accent to the wicked twinkle in her eyes.

“Excuse me,” Julie said, “but I don’t exactly think I *decided* to go to this party. I think you decided for me. In fact, I think you’re forcing me into it.”

“Only to save you from yet another pathetic night of crying into your caramel apples, Jules. You need to get out, meet guys, make friends, have fun, meet guys.”

“You said that one twice.”

“Sorry, I was trying to be sneaky and plant subliminal messages in your head.”

Julie turned back to the mirror, trying to decide if she should pull her dark, shoulder-length hair back into a barrette or let it stay loose.

And without being asked, Rhonda supplied an answer. “It’s much cuter if you let it frame your face.”

Julie nodded silently and brushed through the hair with her fingers, pulling some of the layered locks toward her cheeks.

“Now look,” Rhonda continued, “if you won’t wear the nose and be scary, at least put on a better bra and look sexy.”

“What?” Julie asked, losing interest in her hair.

“That dress isn’t low-cut for nothin’, Jules. And whatever you’re wearing under it is smashing you as flat as a pancake. Is that a sports bra or something?”

Julie watched as Rhonda helped herself to Julie’s lingerie drawer, rifling through it until she found what she was looking for. She snatched out a black, lacy push-up bra, leaving what was once a neatly stacked collection of underwear in a shambles of white, pink, and black silk. “Aha!” she said, holding it up. “This should do it.”

“But that’s the bra I bought to wear to the ballet with Patrick last Christmas under my good black dress.”

“So?”

“Well, it’s sort of...for special occasions,” Julie explained. Even though the night had not turned out to be so special. Patrick had been the only rowdy drunken man sitting in the third row at the Nutcracker yelling for the ballerinas to ‘take it off.’

Rhonda shook her head skeptically at Julie’s claim of saving a bra for a special occasion. “Then pretend this *is* one,” she instructed. “Your cleavage needs a boost, Jules.”

“Thanks so much for noticing.”

“It’s not that there’s anything wrong with them,” Rhonda explained, “but you’re not maximizing their potential. There are going to be a lot of nice single guys at this party.”

“And you’re suggesting that I should reel them in with my boobs?”

“It’s a start. Men like them, you know.”

“I prefer to be appreciated for my mind,” Julie announced smugly.

“Well, that’s great if you want to attract a guy with taped glasses and a pocket protector, but even *you* have better taste than that. Now, look, it’s the bra or the nose, one or the other. Halloween rule: you dress as something funny, scary, or sexy. And you’re definitely not either of the first two unless you wear the nose. I’m not letting up on this. Now what’s it gonna be?”

Julie sighed. “You are infuriating,” she said, plucking away the black bra that dangled from Rhonda’s fingers.

Then she shoved her friend into the hallway, shutting the thick wooden door in her face. That was one advantage to living in an older home—a slamming door sounded solid and forceful, like it meant something. And at the moment, it was serving as a good way to take out her frustrations.

Alone, she unzipped the back of the too-snug witch dress and lowered it to her waist. Then she shed her boring stay-in-place white bra for the sexy black uplifting one. She turned back to the mirror.

It certainly did help the appearance of her breasts—that she couldn't deny. Swelling toward each other, they appeared much larger than their average size. Generally pert, the bra made them look downright firm, pretty, and sexy. She felt almost pleased until she pulled the dress back into place and zipped it up.

The bra helped provide more than enough cleavage to accent the curvy black costume. And Julie knew that if Rhonda had worn it, she'd have been a definite knockout. But Julie wasn't used to wearing something this sexy or revealing and she wasn't sure she could pull it off. She wasn't even certain that she wanted to. Could she actually leave the house looking this way?

She opened the door to let the she-devil back inside, and Rhonda's eyes gleamed with wicked delight as she gave her friend the once-over. "You look great, Jules. Really."

"I'm sure Patrick would love it," Julie mused dryly. He had pushed her to wear sexy, revealing things for the entire time they'd been together, but she'd seldom surrendered her casual, conservative style of dress, even for him. So it seemed terribly backward and ironic to start wearing such things now that he was gone.

"Well, this has nothing to do with Patrick," Rhonda reminded her. Which was true. *Nothing* she did had anything to do with Patrick anymore. He'd left her over four months ago. And she knew that she was better for it. But the loss still hurt.

"I'm not sure I'm going to the party," she announced.

"What?" Rhonda snapped. "We're supposed to leave in half an hour."

"I don't wanna go," she whined. "This dress isn't me, these spiders aren't me, and this hat *certainly* isn't me. I'm not witchy, and I'm not sexy, and I don't want to do this."

Rhonda scrutinized her for a moment, then her voice grew stern. "Grow up," she said. "This isn't a junior high mixer. It's a grown-up party with grown-up people. So act grown-up about it."

“In *this*?” she asked, motioning with one hand down at the dress and with the other up at the too-tall hat.

“Look, I know you’re afraid to re-enter the single world again, but you promised me you’d go and I counted on that. The only people I’ll know at this bash are my old neighbors, so even as outgoing as you think I am, I can’t walk into this place alone.” Rhonda sighed and laced her fire-engine red fingernails together. “And besides,” she added softly, “I’m only making you do this because I care about you and want to help you get over Patrick.”

Julie tried to smirk, but couldn’t. She hated it when Rhonda turned sincere. “I know,” she finally conceded with a large sigh of her own.

“I mean, what you saw in Patrick, once you got beyond the initial charm, I’ll never know. But it’s over, Jules, and you have to get on with your life.”

Julie nodded, knowing full well that Rhonda was right, but still unable to verbalize her agreement. She’d been with the guy for over three years, after all. Even though he was a liar. And a cheat. And an all-around general jerk. Despite herself, she’d been in love with him. And even though she knew he was already living with and engaged to someone else—commitments he’d never been able to make to her—she still wasn’t completely over him.

“Love stinks,” Julie finally muttered.

“I know,” Rhonda agreed. “It takes some time to get over a bad relationship. And some effort, too. Now, I’m telling you, wear the nose.”

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