
Opening Extract from...

Forbidden Places

Written by Penny Vincenzi

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Penny Vincenzi

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The Main Characters

Grace Bennett
Charles Bennett (Major), *solicitor, her husband*
Frank *and* Betty Marchant, *Grace's parents*
Clifford *and* Muriel Bennett, *Charles's parents*
Florence, *his sister and* Imogen, *her daughter*
Robert Grieg (Major), *Florence's husband*
Clarissa Compton Brown, *an old friend of Charles's*
Jack (Squadron Leader), *her husband*
Giles Henry (Lt-Cdr, RN), *a musician friend of Florence's*
David *and* Daniel Lucas, *two young evacuees from Acton*
Ben Lucas (Sgt), *their father, and* Linda, *their mother*
May Potter, *a fellow WREN with Clarissa*
Michael Jacobs, *senior partner at Bennett & Bennett Solicitors*
Archibald McIndoe, *Pioneer plastic surgeon*
Corporal Brian Meredith, *a returning POW*

KEY VILLAGE CHARACTERS

Mrs Boscombe, *operator of the local telephone exchange*
Mrs Lacey, *Grace's superior on the Women's Land Army committee*
Mrs Merton, *the village schoolmistress*
Miss Baines, *Imogen's nanny*
Elspeth Dunn, *a music pupil of Grace's*
Jeannette, *an evacuee housekeeping for Muriel and Florence, and her daughter* Mamie

Prologue

June 24th 1995

'I'm going to make her tell us today. She's kept that secret from us for fifty years now, and I really feel that's quite long enough.' These words, spoken in a clear, melodic and extremely well-bred voice, echoed through the Palm Court of the Ritz Hotel, halting several conversations in mid-sentence, if not word and causing several more cups to rattle in their saucers; the owner of the voice, elegant and extremely stylish, dressed in a white silk suit, long shapely legs curled neatly beneath her gilt chair, became aware of the fact and smiled pleasedly at her companion. The companion, dressed more conservatively but still with considerable chic, in a black wool dress, a wide pearl choker round her long, graceful neck, looked back at her seriously for a moment and then said, 'Well I'd put my money on Grace personally, Clarissa. You've been working on her all this time with a complete lack of success. Anyway, does it really matter? As you say it's fifty years. Probably best left I'd have thought.'

'I just don't like not knowing things,' said Clarissa. 'Secrets irritate me, Florence. Fifty-year-old secrets irritate me even more. And that one of Grace's is a particularly intriguing one.'

'And I suppose you haven't got any yourself?' said Florence lightly.

'Me!' said Clarissa, her large brown eyes opening very wide, her smile sweetly frank as she looked at Florence. 'Of course not. Always tell everybody everything, I do. Can't keep anything to myself at all. You should know that, Florence darling.'

'Mmm,' said Florence; she looked back at Clarissa, her grey eyes thoughtful.

'And what's that supposed to mean?'

'Nothing. Nothing at all.' She visibly brushed the question aside. 'Only that we all three of us had a fairly – well, a very – eventful war. Wouldn't you say? None of us got off exactly lightly. Lots of interesting stories all round. And secrets come to that.'

'Well yes, but you and I knew each other's,' said Clarissa. 'Grace's has remained her own. Well, the main one anyway. And I think she owes it to us – oh now look there she is, the darling, now.'

She stood up and waved a graceful arm; 'Grace, over here!'

'Hallo, Clarissa, Florence!' said Grace, embracing them both, settling herself into her chair, tugging at her gloves. 'Sorry to be so late. I got stuck in traffic coming through the park. And then I was thinking, as I sat there, how it was all allotments once, and your friend, whatever was she called, Clarissa, oh yes, Bunty, she joined the pig club they ran from it. A pig farm, right under the Albert Memorial. Who'd believe that now?'

'Nobody I'm sure,' said Clarissa. 'Sit down, darling, and have some tea. Or shall we have some champagne? I think the occasion merits it, don't you? Let's get that sweet waiter over and ask for some.'

'Champagne!' said Florence. 'Clarissa, it's only half past four.'

'I know, I know. But I think one of the compensations of being our immense age is being able to do exactly what we like when we like. And just at the moment I'd like some champagne.'

'Yes,' said Florence, 'and you think it might loosen Grace's tongue. I warn you, Grace, she's going to get you talking today. Hell bent on it.'

'Oh really?' said Grace. 'About what I wonder.'

'You know what about,' said Clarissa, 'you know perfectly well. And I think after fifty years you really owe it to us to—'

'That is such a lovely suit, Clarissa,' said Grace. 'Where did you get it?'

'Oh you are so irritating,' said Clarissa. 'I got it at Harvey Nichols. If it matters.'

'It does to me, I like to know these things. I feel I'm still catching up. I've never quite got over being the country mouse on clothing coupons while you swanned round looking dazzling in your Wrens uniform.'

'Yes, well I must say you did often look a bit dreary,' said Florence, reaching for a sandwich with a slender, beautifully manicured hand, 'quite a lot of the time anyway.'

'Thanks, Florence. And you did know how to make me feel worse. Quite a lot of the time.'

'Girls, girls,' said Clarissa, 'let us not get rowdy. Not here anyway. Ah, the champagne. How lovely. Grace, darling, you first.'

'Thank you,' said Grace, 'but I think I should warn you, Clarissa, I have absolutely no intention of having my tongue loosened. If Florence is right and that's what you want.'

'Oh really!' said Clarissa. 'What harm could it possibly do now? For you to tell us all about it? And anyway as if we'd tell.'

'I might not tell, Clarissa,' said Florence, 'but you certainly would. Anyone and everyone who'd listen.'

'Oh, how unkind,' said Clarissa. 'Of course I wouldn't. And anyway, who'd listen to the ramblings of an old lady?'

'Everyone listens to you,' said Florence briskly, 'they have to, they don't have any choice.'

'I do hope you're more tactful when you're in the House of Commons, Florence darling,' said Clarissa, 'although I suppose it's not really a very tactful place. If I talked like that to my shareholders, I'd be in a lot of trouble. Anyway, as I said in the first place, Grace, the time has come.'

'But why?' said Grace. 'Why specially now?'

'Well, because it's such a milestone. As I said. Fifty years we've been meeting here in this restaurant, every single midsummer day, such a lovely idea I must say, even though I say it myself, and never missed once, have we, no matter what happened?'

'Well, except that one year when Florence was canvassing and we all went to help, and had the meeting up there,' said Grace.

'And the other year when Grace took all her pupils to play at that lovely festival in Ireland and we went to listen,' said Florence, 'and don't forget when you were in New York, opening your company there, and we all went up the Empire State together—'

'Yes, all right, all right,' said Clarissa, 'you're just proving my point. We've always had the meeting, and we've always stayed absolutely and utterly close. And supported each other. Husbands, babies, success and failure, heartaches and happiness, shared it all.

And still Grace keeps this huge secret to herself. And I absolutely know for a fact there is a secret, that there was much more to it all than you ever let on. I think it's very mean of you.'

'Well I'm sorry,' said Grace, 'sorry if you think I'm mean. But I still can't tell you.'

'But—'

'Excuse me,' said Florence, 'fascinating as this is, I simply have to go and make a phone call. Check out what's happening with the European vote. I'll be back very soon. Don't tell her a thing, Grace, will you?'

'Now Clarissa,' said Grace, watching Florence disappear in the direction of the foyer and the phones, and her blue eyes had a surprisingly steely expression in them suddenly. 'I wasn't the only one with a secret, was I? We all had them. And you wouldn't want me to try and make you tell yours, would you?'

'No, but that's quite different,' said Clarissa smiling sweetly, and there was a flush suddenly on her still-lovely English rose skin. 'Mine was – well – more personal. As you might say.' She looked round to make sure Florence was not yet returning. 'It could hurt still if it was told. Your story – what we know of it anyway,' she added briskly, 'was the sort they make movies about. Unbelievably exciting. A husband who—'

'Not different at all,' said Grace interrupting her, smiling equally sweetly. 'A secret is a secret. And I made a promise, all those years ago, never to tell anyone mine, and I never have. And I never will.'

Chapter 1

Spring 1938

The first thing Grace Marchant did on meeting her future husband was burst into tears. This was not because he did or said anything unkind to her, rather the reverse; it was because she was in considerable physical pain, having fallen off her bicycle, and mental anguish, having tipped a box of eggs and a pound bag of sugar out of the basket and onto the road as a result.

The reason she fell off the bicycle was partly her own fault and partly that of Miss Parkin's Scottie which everyone in the village agreed – with the exception of Miss Parkin herself – should be kept on the lead, certainly in the High Street. He had seen a cat coming out of the butcher's shop and charged; Grace, who was not concentrating wholly on what she was doing, but was enjoying the feel of the late spring sunshine on her face and admiring the cherry blossom trailing over the wall of the vicarage, collided with him. The Scottie was fine, despite a lot of anguished yelping; Grace suffered two cut knees, a badly grazed elbow, and the wrath of Miss Parkin who told her she should be looking where she was going. Grace was too well brought up and too gentle to argue, and too clearsighted not to realize Miss Parkin had at least some right on her side, but as she was picking herself up, Miss Parkin hovering irritably by her, trying to recover her dignity and to suppress the pain of her stinging knees – no wonder children cried so much when they fell over – she heard a car pull up beside her and what her mother would call a dark brown voice say, 'Are you all right there?' Grace looked up into the face of an extremely handsome man (amazed afterwards at how much

she took in, thick blond hair, brilliant blue eyes, very nice mouth, lightly tanned skin) and then down again at her muddy skirt, her bleeding knees and the congealing mass of egg and sugar on the road and started – to her greatly increased humiliation – to cry.

'Oh look, let me help,' he said and he got out of his car – a rather nice little MG, she noticed distractedly – picked up the bike, set it against the wall of the butcher's shop, and then took her hand and led her to the wooden seat set by it (more usually used for tying dogs to than sitting on), and sat her down. Grace looked up at him and tried to smile, groping in her pocket for a handkerchief; the young man passed her his own, and went to rescue her bike.

'It's fine,' he said, 'no lasting damage there.'

'Well of course not,' said Miss Parkin (a degree of anxiety and guilt clearly setting in), 'it was only a tumble. And I'm sorry if Mackie got in your way, Grace, but I really can't be held responsible for the butcher's cat.'

'No of course you can't,' said the young man, 'but perhaps your dog should be on the lead. In the middle of the village.'

And he smiled at her very charmingly.

'Mackie on the lead!' said Miss Parkin, in tones that implied he might as well have suggested Mackie should have been sent off to work in a travelling circus or do a little bear-baiting. 'Mackie has never been on the lead, ever, he—'

'Miss Parkin, never mind,' said Grace, fearing that Miss Parkin was about to go into one of the quivering states of umbrage for which she was famous. 'It's all right, really. I – should have been looking where I was going. You were right.'

Miss Parkin was clearly mollified by this, and offered to replace the eggs; Grace shook her head and gratefully accepted the glass of water Mr Briggs the butcher had brought her, enjoying his shop's place in the drama.

'Well now,' said the young man, coming back to the seat, sitting down beside her. 'You must let me see you home. You look quite pale. Oh, and by the way,' – he held out his hand – 'Charles Bennett. How do you do.'

'How do you do,' said Grace, taking the hand rather weakly. It

was a nice hand, she thought, very firm, nice and dry – she feared her own was a bit clammy – 'Grace Marchant.'

'And do you live in Westhorne?'

'Yes, I do. Just on the edge of the village. By the green.'

'Then I insist on taking you home. Come along, I'll wheel your bicycle. You're in no state to ride it. I'll just move my car along a bit to a wider place, and then we'll go.'

Grace's conquest, as her mother insisted on describing it to her father at supper, was considerable.

'He's the son of Clifford Bennett, you know? The solicitor in Shaftesbury. And he has a share in a practice in London as well. They're very rich, they live in the most beautiful house over at Thorpe Magna. His mother is an Honourable…' Grace's father caught her eye and winked. 'The Honourable Muriel Saxton, she was, she was quite a well-known social figure. Her own daughter, that is Charles's sister—'

'That would quite possibly figure,' said Frank Marchant with one of his quick sweet smiles.

Mrs Marchant ignored him. 'Charles's sister, she was quite a well-known debutante, I believe. She lives in London, married a barrister. It was a very big wedding—'

'Mother,' said Grace laughing, 'who told you all this?'

'Well everyone knows, dear. It's common knowledge. And of course Charles isn't married. A bachelor gay. And rich.'

'Mother, I really don't think I'm very likely to marry Charles Bennett, if that's what you're thinking,' said Grace. 'I wouldn't get too hopeful, if I were you—'

At which point the phone rang.

Betty Marchant went to answer it. They could hear her voice from the hall, moving into its gracious extra-well-modulated mode. Frank raised his eyebrows at Grace; then Betty came in. She was flushed, and her eyes were very bright.

'It's him,' she said. Triumphant would not have been too strong a word to describe her tones.

'Who?'

'Charles Bennett of course. He's rung you up, Grace. Well, go along, dear, quickly, don't keep him waiting.'

Grace was still smiling when she picked up the phone. 'How did you get my number?' she said.

'From Mrs Boscombe of course.'

'Oh of course.'

Mrs Boscombe was the lady on the local telephone exchange. Not only did she supply anyone she approved of (a hugely necessary qualification) with anyone else's telephone number, she would deliver messages ('Your sister said to tell you she'll be here on the three o'clock bus') and pass on the information she gleaned from a devoted listening-in ('No point ringing her now, dear. She's gone for a walk and then on to see the vicar about Mrs Babbage's sister').

'I phoned to see how you were,' said Charles.

'I'm fine, thank you. And thank you for your great kindness this morning.'

'My pleasure. Look, there was something else. If your knees aren't too sore, that is. How would you like to come over on Sunday afternoon, have a game of tennis?'

'Oh,' said Grace, mild panic gripping her heart. 'Oh, well, I don't know – that is, I'm not very good I'm afraid.'

'Oh, good heavens, nor are any of us. My sister and her husband are coming down for the weekend. They're Londoners, so frightfully out of practice. But it would be nice. Do come.'

'Well, thank you,' said Grace. 'It sounds lovely.'

'Good. About three then?'

Grace walked back into the dining room and with great reluctance, trying to sound casual, told her parents what Charles had said. From that very moment she knew, until he was officially engaged to someone else, her mother would be planning the wedding.

Grace was nineteen years old. She had been educated at a small girls' day school near Salisbury, done well in her Higher School Certificate and gone on to do a secretarial course at her parents' insistence, despite having a hankering to pursue a musical career. She was a talented pianist, she sang very nicely, and she also played the violin rather beautifully; but it was a hopeless field to find work in, her parents had pointed out, and anyway she was a girl, she

would be getting married before she knew it, and she could always perhaps join an amateur orchestra or operatic group. Grace hated the idea of amateur anything, she wanted to do it properly or not at all; but she also knew that if she wanted to be a musician she would have to be extremely tough and single-minded, and the fact that she had fallen at the first hurdle, that of her parents' opposition, undoubtedly meant she lacked both those qualities, and quite possibly the talent as well.

Frank Marchant was a bank manager in Shaftesbury; modestly well-off, but devoid of the kind of ambition that might have taken him much higher up his own particular ladder. This was a source of some anguish to Betty, who was very ambitious – not for herself naturally, but, as women were supposed to be, for her husband. She had worked very hard on Frank for a great many years, urging him to apply for this and that job, entertaining and being charming to his more important customers, having a considerable yearning for a bigger and grander house than the overgrown cottage in Westhorne where they lived; a slightly more impressive domestic help than Mrs Hobbs who came in daily and Mr Hobbs who helped in the garden, a husband she could boast about more, and an entrée into the kind of society where she felt (on no stronger basis than a rather ill-informed instinct) she truly belonged. She yearned to give and go to large dinner and tennis parties and be invited to the kind of dances that found their way into the pages of *Tatler*, partly on her own account and partly so that her daughter might then marry into that class and enjoy its privileges in her turn.

As it was, while being a highly respected and active member of the village, the chairwoman of countless worthy causes and having an undoubted cachet of her own as the bank manager's wife, she knew she hadn't made it, and never would now: that the best she could hope for in the way of a social life was the black-tie suppers she and Frank gave and went to, with Mrs Hobbs in a black dress and white apron waiting at table, dances at the tennis club and of course the Round Table and, her ultimate social achievement, an annual very grand dinner dance in London at the Savoy given by the bank for their more successful managers.

But she still had hopes for Grace.

Grace had a job working as junior secretary to the managing director of Stubbingtons, a haulage contractor based near Shaftesbury; she didn't like it, in fact she hated it, and so far the prospect of the escape her parents had pointed out to her in the form of marriage seemed to be nowhere in sight; but she was only nineteen, and even if three of her closest friends from school were already engaged, and one actually married, she and the rest still clearly had a little time in hand. In spite of marriage (and motherhood) being the one unarguable career for any girl, it didn't as yet appeal greatly to Grace; wifedom, as far as she could make out from observing her mother, consisted largely of performing a great many rather tedious tasks and making sure that her father's every wish and instruction was carried out.

Frank Marchant was actually a very sweet man, not in the least like some of her friends' fathers, who seemed to have their entire household in a state of feverish anxiety and expected unthinking obedience and respect, simply by virtue of being the breadwinner. Nevertheless he still got the paper to read if he wanted it, even if Grace or Betty were in the middle of it, the programme he wanted to listen to on the radio even if they were listening to something else, the last slice of cake, the best cut of meat; it was an unquestioning process, had always been thus and always surely had to be. Grace had occasionally wondered in her idler moments whether, if a wife went out to work and helped to win the bread, she would perhaps be entitled to at least the suggestion that she might like to hear the end of a concert before it was switched over to the news, and even a little help with clearing the table after supper, or her views on the rising crisis in Europe listened to, but she knew there was no point in voicing such thoughts to her mother, and even most of her own generation regarded them as verging on sacrilegious. Some of the more intellectual girls at school had put such points to the debating society and had even argued them vigorously, but they were always beaten soundly. Had Grace been educated in a more intellectually vigorous environment, rather than at what was little better than a finishing school with a nod in the direction of higher education, her whole life might have turned out very differently.

Grace was extremely pretty; she had reddish-gold hair (although a little too wildly curly for her choice, and requiring a great deal of determination with the setting lotion), dark blue eyes, a straight little nose and a perfect (and fashionable) cupid's bow of a mouth. She was quite tall (almost five foot seven) and very slim, although a small bosom caused her some anguish, with nice legs and very pretty hands; she had charming manners, a sweet, biddable disposition and, beneath her shyness, a certain sharp-sightedness about both herself and others.

She was an only child; her parents were inordinately proud of her and, although they would have liked a son, 'he never came along' her mother would say with sigh, adding more cheerfully that a daughter was yours for life and that you had the great joy of grandchildren. And now Grace was well into her twentieth year and not a serious boyfriend, let alone a father for the grandchildren, in sight; and Betty Marchant was, although she would have died rather than admit it even to herself, growing a little worried.

Frank Marchant insisted on driving her over to the Bennetts' house on Sunday; Grace was perfectly happy to go on her bike, she said, but Mrs Marchant had been horrified and said whatever would the Bennetts think, that they might even assume they didn't have a car, and that of course Frank must take her.

'I wish you'd teach me to drive,' said Grace, 'then I could take myself about.' But her father answered time enough when she was twenty-one, that was the age to start driving, certainly for girls, and the roads were getting so crowded these days he'd never know a moment's peace and he never minded taking her anywhere, in fact it was a good opportunity for them to talk in peace. Grace and her father greatly enjoyed talking to each other; when Betty was present, it was rare for either of them to be able to complete a sentence.

The Priory (which had never actually been a priory but was christened thus in the mid nineteenth century by the socially ambitious businessman who had bought it) was an exquisite Queen Anne house set on the outskirts of Thorpe Magna, behind a very high, curving brick wall.

Frank Marchant pulled up his Morris outside the gates, which were hung on tall, stone posts, and Grace got out, holding her tennis racket and feeling suddenly and helplessly shy.

She walked up the curving drive, studying the tall windows, the wide doorway, the wisteria growing beside it that drooped over the upper part of the house, looked warily at the black labrador that was loping towards her, barking half-heartedly, at the three cars parked to the side of the house, Charles's green MG, a rather dashing red Morris Tourer (presumably the town-dwelling sister's) and a heavily imposing Daimler, and at the figure bent over the flowerbed beyond the drive, presumably the gardener.

'Afternoon,' he called to her, and she nodded just slightly distantly (as one would to a gardener, she thought, especially in a house like this one, thinking too that it was hard for him to have to work on a Sunday, that the Bennetts must be very tough employers).

She tugged the bell pull, heard it jangle through the house, and he called out to her. 'They're all at the back, on the courts, they won't hear you, go on round this way.'

'Thank you,' said Grace, and started in his direction, a little worried still by the dog who was clearly not going to let her out of his sight; but the front door opened suddenly and Charles hailed her.

'Hallo! Sorry, didn't hear you. We were just having a knock-up. Magnus, come here at once. Get down. Get down I said. Bloody dog. Where's your car?'

'I came with my father,' said Grace awkwardly. 'He dropped me off.'

'Oh, I see.' He looked awkward too, anxious not to seem surprised. She liked him for it, and at the same time felt shyer still. 'Right then, follow me.'

'I was going round that way. Your gardener was just telling me—'

'Who? Not here today – Oh, you mean Dad. Come and meet him.' He laughed, slightly awkwardly again, led her over to the stooping figure.

'Father, this is Grace Marchant.'

Clifford Bennett stood up, smiling; he was very tall, taller than his son, white-haired, with the same piercing blue eyes.

'You must be the damsel in distress we've heard so much about,' he said, holding out his hand. 'Clifford Bennett. How do you do.'

'How do you do,' said Grace, flushing, appalled to think how nearly she had walked past him, dismissing him totally, praying Charles wouldn't say anything that would reveal her lack of sophistication.

He didn't. 'You joining us, Father?'

'No, no, got to get these beds sorted out. Dreadful time of year in the garden, weeds outpace flowers ten to one. You like gardens, my dear?'

'I love them,' said Grace, 'really love them. One day I want to have a walled garden of my very own, filled with roses and wonderful climbing things –'

She flushed again, surprised at her willingness to talk to him, hoping he wouldn't find her foolish. He didn't seem to. 'We've got one here, although I don't know if it would be wonderful enough for you, bit neglected, I'm afraid. Get Charles to show it to you later. No, on second thoughts I'll show you, it's my favourite too. Come and find me when you've finished your game. Enjoy it.'

'Thank you,' said Grace.

'Right,' said Charles. 'Come and meet the folks.'

Folks didn't seem quite the right word, having a rather cosy, warm sound to it. Charles's mother, tall, thin, 'iron-grey all over,' Grace said later to her father, with a low-slung voice reeking of generations of upper-class breeding, greeted her as if she was interviewing her for a job – as hired help, thought Grace desperately, trying to hang onto her sense of humour. Where exactly did she live, what did her father do? On receiving the answer to her second question, she nodded briefly and turned to her daughter as if to indicate that the interview was over.

The daughter, Florence, was marginally worse: equally tall, dark-haired, with the same gauntly good-looking face, the same good long legs and identical voice. Her nails were long and red, her mouth wide and full, painted the same brilliant colour. She clearly didn't think Grace was worth talking to at all, merely smiled at her fleetingly and began on a long description to her mother of a house she and her husband were in the process of buying near what

sounded like Sloane Squaw. Only her husband seemed friendly and interested in making Grace feel welcome; his name was Robert and he was very tall and heavily built, with slicked-back dark hair, surprisingly pale skin and eyes, and a long and imposing nose which he was inclined to look down quite literally. But he seemed very nice, smiled at her warmly and was, he told her, an absolute ass at tennis – 'So I hope you are too.'

'Don't be beastly, Robert,' said Florence, her glance at Grace's just slightly worn grey tennis shoes – despite being desperately whitened by her mother that morning – making it plain that she assumed Grace must indeed be exactly that. 'Girls who live in the country are always marvellous at tennis. Play every day, I expect. Or are you a golfer, Miss Marchant?'

'Please call me Grace,' said Grace. 'And no, I don't play golf. And I'm not marvellous at tennis either, certainly don't play every day. I don't have time.'

'Oh no, of course,' said Florence. 'I forgot, Charles said you had a job.' She made it sound as if a job was a rather nasty disease.

There was a silence, then Charles said, 'Well, come on then, let's have a knock-up, shall we? Grace, are you brave enough to play with me?'

Much to her surprise she was as good a player as Florence, and a great deal better than Robert, who was indeed an absolute ass. She got the impression he was not prepared to try very hard in any case, that he saw the whole thing as mildly silly, which comforted her. She and Charles, who was really quite good and very enthusiastic, won the first set, and then Charles suggested she played with Robert. Florence, clearly irritated, started playing very hard indeed and doing some sneakily down-the-line serves; twice the ball was out when she called it in very firmly, and no one either dared or wished to contradict her. Even so, Grace and Robert only just lost.

'You're really very good,' said Charles, leading her back to the chairs by the court. 'I don't believe you don't practise lots.'

'I played a lot at school,' said Grace. That was a mistake.

'And where did you go to school?' asked Mrs Bennett. 'I think it's so wonderful the way girls go to school these days. I would have adored to go but of course I was educated at home, and

actually a lot of our friends still don't believe in girls going away, although I insisted on it for Florence. So broadening to the mind, I think.'

'I went to – to St Catherine's, near Salisbury,' said Grace. 'It's only very small. Very cosy. You won't have heard of it.'

'No, I don't think so,' said Mrs Bennett carefully. 'I'm not very familiar with any of the local schools. Florence went to St Mary's Wantage, which wasn't terribly cosy. A little too academic I thought. Perhaps she would have been better at a place like yours—' Her voice tailed off; she clearly didn't think Florence would have been anything of the sort.

'Let's have tea,' said Charles, rather too heartily.

After tea, which they ate on the terrace at the back of the house, served by the kind of properly uniformed maid Betty Marchant had fantasies about, Mr Bennett, who had clearly taken a fancy to Grace, insisted on showing her the walled garden. It was enchanting, a little closed-off world, the air filled with birdsong, climbing hydrangea pushing into flower on the walls, the beds filled with tangly shrubs, great massing clouds of dark and pale blue lobelia tumbling over onto the brick-laid paths and, set in the centre, a wonderful old stone seat.

'Oh it's lovely!' said Grace. 'So perfectly set away, a little world all of its own.'

'That's exactly why I like it,' he said, 'and I tell you what I like to do; I bring a large glass of whisky out here in the evening, and the paper, and I feel quite safe from everyone and everything.'

Grace thought that if she had to live with Muriel Bennett she would do something much the same, and she'd fit a lock on the gate as well.

Not that that was very likely. Thank God.

'Do stay for supper if you would like,' said Muriel Bennett when they returned from the walled garden. 'There isn't much, of course, it being Sunday evening, but—'

'No, really, it's very kind,' said Grace, 'but my parents are expecting me. In fact, I wonder if I might ring my father and ask him to come and collect me—'

'What a ridiculous idea,' said Charles. He had been rather quiet ever since the game of tennis had finished. 'Of course I'll take you home. Would you like to ring anyway? So they aren't worried?'

'Well, that would be very kind. If you're sure—'

'Of course. Follow me.'

He led her through some French windows into the drawing room, which, although very nicely furnished and with a fine fireplace, was rather less grand than she, and certainly her mother, would have expected, and out into the hall where the phone stood on a low table alongside a very large pile of *Country Life*.

'There you are,' he said, 'go ahead. Look' – he hesitated – 'we might even go for a drive before I take you home. If that would be all right with your parents.'

'Oh – well yes,' said Grace, more relieved that he wasn't dying to get rid of her than anything else. 'Yes, I'll ask them.'

They drove away from the house in silence, down the narrow, high-hedged lanes. It was a lovely evening. 'I thought we might go up to Old Wardour,' said Charles. 'Would you like that?'

'Yes. Yes I would.'

Old Wardour Castle was a much-revered local ruin, set high on a hill above the exquisite house built in the eighteenth century to replace it; its walls still standing, it looked austerely beautiful against the dusky sky.

'Nice old place, isn't it?' said Charles. 'I used to come up here on my pony when I got home from school every holidays, first thing I did. Did you have anywhere like that?'

'I used to head for Shaftesbury and the bright lights,' said Grace. 'On the bus,' she added and laughed.

'You mustn't mind my mother,' he said suddenly. 'She can't help being such a snob. It was how she was brought up. But she's a wonderful person really.'

'Of course I didn't mind,' said Grace untruthfully. 'I thought she was very nice. And your father. He was so sweet showing me his garden.'

'Yes, he obviously liked you. So did old Robert. Bit of a wandering eye, Robert. Florence has a rather difficult time with him, as far as I can gather.'

'Does she?' said Grace. It seemed to her it would be Robert who had a difficult time.

'Yes. Oh God, I shouldn't have told you that. There's something about you', he said, looking at her intently, 'that invites confidences. My father obviously felt it too.'

'Is there?' said Grace. She felt herself blushing.

'Yes. You're what the Italians call *simpatico*. Ever been to Italy?'

'No. I've never been abroad. I'd love to.'

'Well, if all this nonsense in Europe gets any worse, it won't be safe to go anyway. My father thinks war's inevitable.'

'Do you?' said Grace.

'No, not really. Not inevitable anyway. I think Chamberlain might be a slightly better man than he's given credit for. What does your father think?'

'The same as yours,' said Grace. She waited for him to ask what she thought, but he didn't.

On the way home, they passed the gates of Old Wardour Cemetery, final resting place for the Arundell Estate and indeed the entire village of Wardour.

'That's my favourite place,' said Grace, looking in at it almost wistfully, the iron gates, the tangle of trees, the ghostly clusters of headstones.

'What, the cemetery? Bit of an odd place to like,' said Charles, sounding amused.

Grace flushed. 'I know. But I think it's so romantic. And beautiful.'

'Well – yes, OK. Each to their own, I suppose.' He smiled at her. 'Got time for a drink?'

'Oh, yes. That would be very nice.' They had a couple of drinks in a pub near Swallowcliffe, and then Charles drove her home.

'I would ask you in but—' said Grace.

'No, no, of course not. I have to get back. My mother expects me and anyway I have an early start tomorrow. When you work with – for, who am I kidding? – your father there's no room for slacking. And we've got a big caseload at the moment.'

'Do you enjoy being a solicitor?' said Grace.

'Yes, it's quite good fun,' he said, 'and especially in a small town like Shaftesbury. The firm'll be mine one day, of course, and I look forward to that. Especially the London practice. That's great fun.'

'How often do you go up there?' said Grace.

'Oh, not very often, unfortunately. Father goes up for a couple of days each week, and it's my job to keep the home fires burning. But in the fullness of time I hope to spend quite a lot of time up there. I'll be making a few changes altogether.'

'What?'

'Oh good Lord, you don't want to hear about that. Look, I ought to get you back. Thank you so much for coming over today. It's been a very good afternoon.'

'Thank you for asking me,' said Grace.

He shook her hand and she got out of the car; there was no mention of another meeting. Grace let herself into the house feeling just slightly depressed.

'Before you say a word,' she said to her mother who was hovering excitedly in the hall, 'I really don't think he likes me very much, his mother is an old witch, and his sister made it clear that she saw me as so much beneath her I had no business even in the same room. Which I suppose I am. Beneath her I mean,' she added, trying to smile.

'How exceedingly rude,' said Betty Marchant. Two bright spots of colour rose in her cheeks; she was clearly upset. 'Well, I certainly don't want you marrying into that family.'

'Mother,' said Grace wearily, 'I do assure you there is absolutely no question of my marrying into it. Unless perhaps I ran away with dear old Mr Bennett.'

'Grace, you know I don't like that kind of talk,' said Betty Marchant.

Clifford Bennett was in his study listening to the nine o'clock news when the phone rang in the hall. 'I'll get that,' he called to Muriel. 'Worried client. Told him he could ring tonight.'

Five minutes later he went into the drawing room, where Muriel sat by the fire working on her latest tapestry, a design of her own, based on her father's coat of arms.

'I have to go up to London first thing, Moo my dear. Catch the milk train, I think. Just thought I'd warn you.'

'The milk train! What on earth for? And why a Monday, you never—'

'I told you I have a very worried client. Difficult case. I want to see him early and then brief Counsel.'

'Clifford, I do think it's time you eased up a little on your workload,' said Muriel. 'You're sixty next year. And you seem to be taking more and more on. You did say you were going to ease out of the London office, train Charles into it, but I haven't seen much sign of that.'

'I know, my dear, I know. But John Reeves is desperately overstretched, poor old boy. And, between you and me, a bit out of his depth, particularly on this case. It's a most interesting one, a matter of fraud, my client took out a life assurance policy two and a half years ago and—'

'Clifford, you're in my light. Well, go if you must. But I think you really must be firmer with John Reeves in future. He's taking advantage of your good nature.'

'All right, my dear. I'll try.' He paused, sipping at his whisky. 'Sweet little thing this afternoon, wasn't she?'

'What, the Marchant girl? All right, I suppose. A bit – ordinary. I wish Charles could find himself some really suitable girl and settle down. Amanda Bridgnorth for instance, she's charming, and so pretty, and she looks wonderful on horseback—'

'Moo dear, I hope and trust Charles would be looking for a little more in a future wife than her skill on horseback. And I would personally greatly prefer Grace Marchant as a daughter-in-law to Amanda Bridgnorth.'

'Oh, don't let's even think about the possibility,' said Muriel with a small careful shiver. 'I can just imagine what her mother must be like. Apparently she makes curtains for people.'

'Moo, really!' said Clifford, shaking his head even as he smiled at her. 'I'm going to do some work on this case now. I'll sleep in the dressing room tonight, so I don't disturb you in the morning. Goodnight, my dear.'

He went back into his study and phoned the London number, to confirm that he would be there in the morning.

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'I don't think I want to do that again,' said Robert Grieg, putting his foot down rather hard on the accelerator as the car finally pulled onto the London road.

'Do what?'

'Come all this way, just for a weekend. It's too far, and I'm exhausted in the morning.'

'But Robert, we don't do it very often. The last time was Easter, when we could have stayed longer. And it was you who didn't want to—'

'Well, I'm afraid I find it very tedious, after a day or so. I really don't like the country—'

'Robert, you like going to the Whittakers. Or the Bedfords. They live in the country.'

'Yes, well, they have a little more to offer. They always arrange a proper dinner party, and there are plenty of people our own age. The entertainment at Thorpe is listening to your mother's views on life and watching your father in the garden.'

'That is so unfair!' said Florence. 'They often ask people to dinner, or Sunday lunch, and you can always play tennis.'

'Florence, I loathe tennis, as you ought to know. And the people on offer are hardly the most scintillating. Look at that funny little thing today.'

'She was all right.'

'You didn't behave towards her as if she was all right, if I might say so. Anyway, that's not the point. Now can we stop this please, it's extremely boring. I really don't want to spend any more weekends down there. All right?'

'What do I say if – when they ask us?'

'Well, obviously, make some excuse. They must be able to see it's a long way.'

Florence stopped arguing. She had learnt the value of silence.