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The Decision

Written by Penny Vincenzi

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The Decision

Penny Vincenzi

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Prologue

1971

It was nearly over then. By this time tomorrow it would be settled. By this time tomorrow she would know. Whether she would still be a mother, a proper mother, the sort that did the ordinary things, got her child up every morning and tucked her up in bed every night, took her to school and picked her up again, knew when she'd had a tummy ache or a bad dream, got cross with her, argued with her, decided when to get her hair cut, or that she needed new shoes, told her off for skimping on her homework or her ballet practice, insisted she made her bed and tidied her room and wrote thank-you letters and cleaned out the hamster's cage . . . Or the other sort, the once-a-week sort, the provider of a perfect room and whatever-you-fancy food, who waited impatiently outside school, aware of the mild curiosity of the other mothers, the purveyor of treats and outings, and ultra-generosity to friends, surprised by a new dress, a fringe, a fad, always with time to give, over-indulgent, never cross, never critical, desperate to know about a school concert, a friend's party, plans for a holiday, watchful for new loyalties, jealous of new traditions . . .

Which would she be?

The mother with custody? Or the mother without?

Part One

Chapter 1

1958

Eliza was in the middle of curtsying to the Queen when she decided it was time she lost her virginity.

She was rather shocked at herself; not for the nature of the decision, but for managing to make it at such a moment. She had had a lot of trouble getting her curtsy absolutely right (one foot lined up perfectly behind the other, both knees bent, head erect, arms at side), it was hardly comfortable and she was inclined to wobble. Concentration was essential. And it was a terribly important moment in her life; both her mother and her godmother (who was actually presenting her) had instilled into her endlessly how lucky she was, that had she been one year younger it would not have been possible, because this was positively the last year of court presentation, it had been declared an anachronism, not in keeping with the new Elizabethan age. And here she was, in her blue silk Belinda Belville cocktail dress, in the presence of the Queen – so much younger and prettier in the flesh than her photographs, and the Duke – so amazingly handsome, and she was thinking not about being part of a deeply important tradition that had lasted for generations, but about who of all the young men she was dancing and flirting with that wonderful summer she might achieve this new ambition. It really was rather bad of her.

Concentrate, Eliza! What would her mother and godmother say if they knew that after all their organising and lunching and juggling with dates and guest lists and budgets for her Season, that her mind was fixed not on what to them was almost sacred part of the whole thing, but on something very unsuitable indeed.

She straightened slowly, (without a hint of wobble), and moved towards the side of the throne room, making way for the next wave of girls.

Eliza was attracting a lot of attention that summer. Indeed she had become a bit of a favourite with the popular press, had so far appeared in the *Express* three times and the *Mirror* four. Her mother had felt it rather lowered the tone of Eliza's Season, but Eliza thought it was wonderful and a lot of the other girls had been really jealous. She wasn't pretty; she could see it for herself: her features were too large, and her colouring too strong, with slightly olive skin, very dark hair combined with very dark blue eyes, and she had more than once heard her mother saying worriedly to her grandmother that she did hope no one would think there was foreign blood in the family. But she also knew that she was extremely attractive.

Boys had made passes at her from when she had been only fifteen, and she had always had an endless queue of would-be partners at pony-club dances. Indeed, she had first made the pages of *Tatler* the year before her Season, watching her brother Charles play cricket for the Old Etonians on Fathers' Day.

But this year was truly hers, and she was proving a star; she had already been granted the Big One, a full-page solo spot at the front of *Tatler*, taken by Tom Hustler, himself once a Debs' Delight and now a society photographer.

'Miss Eliza Fullerton-Clark,' the caption said, 'daughter of Mr and Mrs Adrian Fullerton-Clark. Eliza, a charming girl whose interests include ski-ing and the History of Art' (I didn't know that, thought Eliza, studying the photograph critically, grateful for Tom's lighting which disguised her slightly too-long nose, and made her eyes look simply enormous) 'will have her dance at the exquisite Fullerton-Clark home, Summercourt, Wellesley, later in the Season.'

The photograph had been granted its prominence by *Tatler's* social editor, Betty Kenward, the redoubtable Jennifer of 'Jennifer's Diary', the all-powerful goddess of High Society, whose word alone could promote a girl from being just, well, a girl, to a success, someone to be marked down as having a future. Which meant not a future in her own right, but as the wife of someone rich and powerful, at best heir to one of the great estates of rural England.

And Eliza's future had been most carefully planned. Sarah Fullerton-Clark, together with her best friend (and Eliza's godmother) Anna Marchant, or rather the Hon. Mrs Piers Marchant, had visited Mrs Kenward in her eyrie at the top of a small flight of stairs from the *Tatler*

editorial floor. Mrs Kenward had given them the regulation small tomato juice and shared with them the almost mystical tools of her trade: her diary of the Season, with every girl's dance and date so far, and a list of eligible young men, rich and well-connected, christened (by the tabloids) the 'Debs' Delights'. The Delights had a longer lifespan than the debs, and were summoned for several summers, at no cost to themselves, to attend dances and parties, Ascot and Henley, and whole weekends at fine country houses, where the only requirement upon them was to wear the right clothes, not to drink too much, to be polite to their hostess and to smile at and charm the prettier debs. (The plainer ones tended to go unsmiled at, and undanced with; Eliza knew more than one girl who regularly arrived on Friday evenings and went right through to Sunday midday totally ignored by everyone, and certainly not asked to dance.)

Charles was on the list of course; he was extremely good-looking, which meant if it was a toss-up between inviting Eliza to a cocktail party or dance or another girl without a brother, Eliza usually won. He was very tall and dark, and charmingly diffident, a favourite with the mothers; Sarah and Anna had left Mrs Kenward's office with a recommendation for the date for Eliza's dance and some starred names of young men on the list, denoting particularly impressive titles or fortunes.

Eliza was staying with the Marchants in London during the week that summer, since she was doing – as well as the Season – a course at one of London's smarter secretarial colleges. Her mother had been anxious that the course would be too much for her and she'd look tired at all the important dances, but the principal assured her that girls doing their Season were permitted to come in at midday after an important party, so they could get their beauty sleep. And as Eliza had assured Sarah, typing along to the strains of Victor Silvester and his Ballroom Orchestra (this was to ensure the steady rhythm essential to a good typist) was hardly arduous.

Eliza was determined to work, and not in some feeble little job either; her allowance from her father was very small and anyway, she wanted a career. She knew what everyone including her mother said, that a job was just something to do until you got married and to earn you a bit of pocket money, but Eliza wanted more; she wanted a job that was interesting and absorbing, something she cared about 'that will make me a person, in my own right,' she said to Charles, 'you know, not just as someone's wife or whatever.'

Fashion fascinated her particularly: not just clothes, but the way they worked, how you could tell so much about a person from what they wore, how important they were to the picture you presented to the world. Her college had a tie-up with *Vogue*, and many of their girls got secretarial jobs there; maybe that would be something she might do. It would be a start anyway. A start to her career.

In spite of her decision, taken in such sumptuous circumstances, Eliza was still a virgin as the date for her dance approached. Lots of her friends claimed to have Done It, or rather implied they had – but she suspected most of them were lying. Everyone was petrified of getting pregnant, and it had been dinned into them by their mothers that girls with bad reputations were usually finished in the marriage market. Some boys were very badly behaved, of course, and there were lots of stories of girls being found in compromising situations in bedrooms and libraries and even wine cellars in country houses, but somehow, it just hadn't happened to her; and she really didn't want the occasion rushed through. She wanted it to take place in style.

Besides, she'd been terribly busy, had had a wonderfully successful time. She'd been to literally dozens of dances and cocktail parties; she'd had a starring role in the Berkeley Dress Show, that great annual opportunity for debs to be models for a day, and managed to catch the eye of the photographer from the *Evening Standard* and hit the front page, wearing a white evening dress by Hartnell. And at Queen Charlotte's Ball – the Harlots' Ball as the Debs' Delights called it – she had been quite near the front in the line of girls pulling the giant cake into the ballroom: yet another photograph in the tabloids.

And then there was her own dance, so much discussed and planned – what should she wear, how many of the girls she 'owed to' had to be invited, even whether she should share with someone, which was the classic means of halving the cost – but she categorically refused. It was to be her night, and hers alone. It had passed far too quickly, a magical fairy-tale evening, when she'd felt like a story-book heroine, just drifted by without any clear memories of anything, except fragments: the perfect June night, the garden filled with roses, the white marquee so gorgeously dressed up, the crowds and crowds of friends, the band playing exactly what she wanted, the endless champagne, her father flushed with pride, her mother kissing her and telling her how proud of her they were. She'd danced and danced, literally till dawn, with an endless flow of charming

young men and then fallen into bed, amazed that she wasn't drunker, considering how much champagne she had consumed.

It was the crown on a wonderful summer; and she wished it need never end.

Her mother was pale but happy next morning, relieved at the success of the dance, relieved it was finally over. It had occupied her thoughts and fed her anxieties for almost a year; but it seemed to have been worth it.

Worth the bank loan Adrian had had to take out, the sleepless nights, the endless work. The expense hadn't stopped at Eliza's dance, of course, it was all the attendant expenditure: Eliza's six dance dresses, two of them long for the grander dances, one white for Queen Charlotte's Ball, her clothes for Ascot and Henley, Sarah's own dresses, all the hats and shoes and gloves, the mums' luncheons, the pre-dance dinners – but it was all an investment, in Eliza's future, and not even to be questioned.

Having her dance at home in the country, rather than in London, had saved a lot, and was so much nicer, everyone had (apparently genuinely) said and certainly numbers had not been in the least affected.

Eliza's dress had been from Belville Sassoon again – but Sarah had had her own dress run up by her dressmaker and Adrian's tailcoat being a little worn and slightly out of date was desirable rather than the reverse. Nothing more common than spanking-new evening clothes on the older generation; people might even think, heaven forbid, they'd been hired. Adrian had bought his coat soon after they had first met; she had invited him to a dance in the country and, seeing where Sarah Cunninghame's infatuation with him just could be leading, Adrian had considered it a sound investment for two weeks' salary and twenty-five year' later, it still looked superb – a tribute to his own unchanging shape as much as Messrs Hawes & Curtis's skill.

And Charles of course, darling Charles, had looked brilliantly handsome as always; he had danced with her not once but twice, telling her how lovely she looked, how proud of her he was. Not many sons would do that.

All the young people had behaved pretty well; there had been the usual horsing around by some of the male element and a couple of the girls had been really rather drunk, especially the one doing strip-tease by the ladies' loos, but it had all stayed good-natured and Eliza had clearly had a lovely time. And as a final coating of icing on the cake, both *Tatler* and *Queen* had sent photographers.

Sarah was a little anxious that so far into her Season, Eliza had clearly still not found anyone she considered special, but she was only seventeen, a bit too young perhaps to be thinking about marriage.

‘Hallo, Mummy. Pleased with your night’s work?’

‘Oh, Charles, hallo. Darling, you look tired. Sit down and I’ll get you some breakfast.’

‘No, I’m fine. Had some earlier. Well, it all went well, didn’t it? And Eliza looked jolly nice.’

‘Didn’t she? And seemed to enjoy herself.’

Sarah smiled at him: her firstborn and the great love of her life. After Adrian, of course. She could hardly believe he was twenty-one, and out in the world. Well, not quite; he’d have to do his National Service first finally settling down to his career. He was hoping to go overseas: ‘Hong Kong, or maybe Gib. See a bit of the world before I have to buckle down in the City.’

‘Darling,’ she said, patting his shoulder affectionately, ‘I shall miss you.’

‘Oh, nonsense. Time’ll fly by. I’m looking forward to it actually. Some of the chaps are taking a short service commission, doing three years. I did wonder about that, get a bit more out of it.’

Sarah looked at him, slightly alarmed; she and Adrian had been looking forward to stopping Charles’s allowance, or at least cutting it drastically. Another year in the army would mean another year of expense.

‘But in the end I decided against it,’ he said. ‘I want to get on with the job, make a bit of dosh, that sort of thing.’

‘And you’ll be called up as soon now you’ve left Oxford?’

‘Yes. Six weeks’ basic training in some Nissen hut and then Mons, hopefully, and the regiment. It should be fun.’

‘I believe it’s awfully tough.’

‘Can’t be worse than the first half-term at prep school.’

‘Charles! Were you really so unhappy?’

‘Well, a bit. I was homesick. And quite hungry, the food was awful. But it didn’t do me any harm, did it? God, I’ll certainly send my kids. The old place looked nice last night, didn’t it?’ he added.

‘Didn’t it? Your grandfather would have been so happy.’

The old place was an exquisite small Palladian villa, built at the top of a gentle rise, smiling graciously down on the village of Wellesley, a little

to the south of Marlborough and looking just slightly – although beautifully – out of place there, like a fashionable woman wearing her couture clothes to walk down the village street. Built in 1755, it had a charming legend. A young but very well-born architect called Jonathan Becket was looking for work and was at a soiree one evening in Bath. He had actually studied with John Wood the Younger, who, with his father, was responsible for many of Bath’s architectural wonders. There he met and fell in love with the beautiful Lady Anne Cunninghame, and she with him; married to Sir Ralph Cunninghame, she was the young and dreadfully spoiled daughter of the eccentric Earl of Grasmere, used to having her own way in all things and not in the least in love with her middle-aged husband apart from his wealth.

Sir Ralph for his part was so afraid of losing her that he could refuse her nothing; and when she spoke longingly of a ‘fine house, created precisely for me’ young Becket got his commission and created a breathtaking place, not large, set against the grand houses of its day (a mere ten bedrooms, and only three receiving rooms), but very beautiful with its glorious south front ‘greeting the morning sun’ as Lady Anne described it in her journal, with its classical pillars, its gently curving steps, its wide terrace, its exquisite orangery, set some five hundred yards from the house; ‘It is just for me,’ she went on, ‘created to suit my beauty as my darling says.’

Her darling (presumably Jonathan Becket, rather than Sir Ralph) went on to serve her with a wonderful park behind the house and a small sloping grass sward to the front of it; most of the park had now been sold, leaving only ten acres for the present day incumbents and as protection against the ever-present threat of building development in its immediate vicinity.

The house was christened Summer Court; it was to be largely a summer residence, for Sir Ralph liked the bustle of Bath for much of the time, and she saw herself holding her own small court there; the name was contracted to a single word by one of her more modest descendants.

It was hugely uncomfortable; always at least five decades behind with its modernisation, impossible to heat satisfactorily. When Eliza arrived for her first term as a boarder at Heathfield, she was astonished at the other girls’ complaints about the cold dormitories, the draughty study bedrooms, the ‘dribbly’ showers. It seemed the height of luxury to her, accustomed as she was to waking to ice on the inside of her windows and

a four-inch bath deemed disgracefully wasteful. But she adored the house. It had stayed with the Cunninghames through ten generations; Sarah's mother, the last Lady Cunninghame, had been the first in the line to fail to produce an heir. She had produced only one child, and that was Sarah.

Mercifully – as Sarah saw it – there were no other claimants to the house: no cousins, no male uncles even. And thus it was that Sarah's father, the ninth baronet, had been forced, his signature dragging with dreadful reluctance across the paper, to entail it to her. Or rather, to her and her husband. It was better than selling it, which was the only other option. And Sarah did love it.

'Never let it go' had been his last words to her; and she promised. It was owned by a trust, and they were merely its tenants for life; it was slowly bankrupting them. But keeping it was what mattered and the children loved it as much as she did; Summercourt was their treasure and their home, it was where everything important happened.

Charles, brought up from his earliest years to regard it as his legacy, would roam its woods and fields as a child, pretending to be the son of Lady Anne; as he grew older, he took it very seriously, acquainting himself with such country pursuits as hunting and shooting, as befitted the heir to such a gem. The fact that the estate was far too small to support anything more than rabbit shooting and a few pheasants didn't apparently trouble him; but Eliza once overheard two of the fellow undergraduates he'd invited down for a few days discussing 'Charles's Brideshead fantasies' and that they'd expected something ten times its size, 'Drives and lodges, that sort of thing.'

There was no proper drive even, only a rather pretty tree-lined avenue up from the village, and certainly no lodges. The house had no privacy from the front, which the family rather liked; it had been designed to stand as part of the village. But the charming stone cottages, pretty Norman church, medieval duck pond and seventeenth-century inn that had set the house off so prettily in 1755 and lain at its feet (another of Lady Anne's fanciful phrases) had become extended by a sprawling growth of mock-Tudor bungalows to one side and to the left another of council houses – albeit it for the most part with lovely gardens – a garage, a school (late Victorian, not beautiful), a bus shelter, a children's playground and a shop.

But it was a proper village; it had a heart. The school was thriving, the church more than half-full most Sundays, and the inn (now the White

Hart pub) busy; most people knew most people. And the Fullerton-Clark family were popular – the children had all gone to the village school for the first few years of their education, Sarah ran all sorts of local enterprises, opened the grounds several times a year – most famously for the Easter Egg Hunt, in which the whole village took part – and Adrian did his bit as he put it by drinking in the White Hart whenever he could. He also played for the village cricket team, where he was something of a liability and always sent in to bat last, but much appreciated for his good nature, his generosity in the bar afterwards.

The village had even been made to feel part of Eliza's dance; the local band had played a set and the fireworks had been let off on the village green rather than at the back of the house.

Yes, Sarah thought, her father would have been very happy last night, happy with what she had managed to do.

And even forgiven her for marrying Adrian. Perhaps.