

MILLS & BOON™



Legacy of  
the Past

# **Anne Mather**

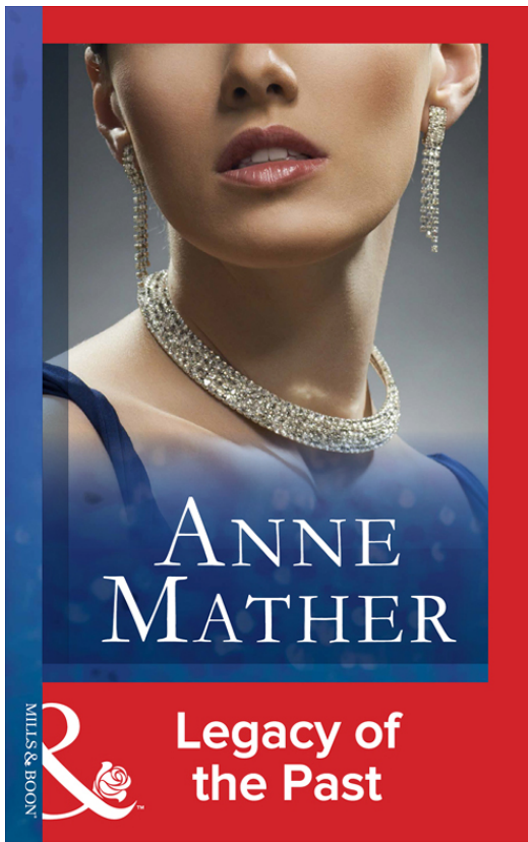
## **Legacy Of The Past**

### **Аннотация**

Mills & Boon are excited to present The Anne Mather Collection – the complete works by this classic author made available to download for the very first time! These books span six decades of a phenomenal writing career, and every story is available to read unedited and untouched from their original release. ‘You disturb me as much as I disturb you...’ Young widow Madeline has had her fill of romance – she is content to focus on bringing up her daughter. Until her quiet life is rocked to its foundations by dynamic, irresistible Italian billionaire Nicholas Vitale. Soon her long-buried passions are stirring – especially when she finds that he may not be as totally unattainable as she first imagined...

# Содержание

Legacy of the Past	7
Table of Contents	8
CHAPTER ONE	9
CHAPTER TWO	35
CHAPTER THREE	49
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	63



Mills & Boon is proud to present a fabulous collection of fantastic novels by bestselling, much loved author ANNE MATHER

Anne has a stellar record of achievement within the publishing industry, having written over one hundred and sixty books, with worldwide sales of more than forty-eight MILLION copies in multiple languages. This amazing collection of classic stories offers a chance for readers to recapture the pleasure Anne's powerful, passionate writing has given.

We are sure you will love them all!

I've always wanted to write—which is not to say I've always wanted to be a professional writer. On the contrary, for years I only wrote for my own pleasure and it wasn't until my husband suggested sending one of my stories to a publisher that we put several publishers' names into a hat and pulled one out. The rest, as they say, is history. And now, one hundred and sixty-two books later, I'm literally—excuse the pun—staggered by what's happened.

I had written all through my infant and junior years and on into my teens, the stories changing from children's adventures to torrid gypsy passions. My mother used to gather these manuscripts up from time to time, when my bedroom became too untidy, and dispose of them! In those days, I used not to finish any of the stories and *Caroline*, my first published novel, was the first I'd ever completed. I was newly married then and my daughter was just a baby, and it was quite a job juggling my household chores and scribbling away in exercise books every chance I got. Not very professional, as you can imagine, but that's

the way it was.

These days, I have a bit more time to devote to my work, but that first love of writing has never changed. I can't imagine not having a current book on the typewriter—yes, it's my husband who transcribes everything on to the computer. He's my partner in both life and work and I depend on his good sense more than I care to admit.

We have two grown-up children, a son and a daughter, and two almost grown-up grandchildren, Abi and Ben. My e-mail address is [mystic-am@msn.com](mailto:mystic-am@msn.com) and I'd be happy to hear from any of my wonderful readers.

# **Legacy of the Past**

## **Anne Mather**



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

# Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Title Page](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[Copyright](#)



## CHAPTER ONE

MADELINE folded the last letter and placed it in the envelope, sealing it thankfully. There; she was finished!

She pulled the plastic cover over her typewriter, locked her drawer and slipped the keys into her shopping bag. Walking to the door she lifted down her sheepskin coat and put it on, surveying the room as she did so to satisfy herself that everything was tidied up for the week-end. Then, satisfied, she opened the door and stepped into the corridor outside.

The lone, rubber-tiled corridors stretched away ahead of her, flanked by classrooms and more corridors. Deserted now, without the chattering throng of boys and girls, it looked stark and uninspiring.

Suddenly the figure of George Jackson, the school porter, appeared from around one of the many comers and made his way towards her. Madeline smiled at his approach, liking the elderly custodian who looked after things so efficiently.

‘Not away yet, Mrs. Scott?’ he asked, as he neared her. ‘It’s past five o’clock, you know.’

Madeline nodded. ‘I’m just going, George. I’ve left the last few letters on my desk, as usual.’

‘All right, I’ll see to them.’ George searched his pockets for his pipe. ‘You get along now, my dear. That daughter of yours will be wondering where you are.’

‘You may be right,’ said Madeline, smiling again. ‘See you on Monday.’

She walked away down the corridor, her heels almost soundless on the rubber flooring. Although it was empty the school still had appeal for her. She enjoyed working there as secretary to Adrian Sinclair, the headmaster. She had been his secretary for over five years now, ever since they came to Otterbury, in fact.

The staff entrance opened on to the school car-park. Madeline, who owned a scooter, left it here and she walked quickly across to where it was parked, the only machine left on the car-park. As she kicked the starter she shivered. Although it was late March, the air was still icily cold in the mornings and evenings, and riding the scooter was not as much fun as it had been during the warm summer months.

She rode to the exit and slowed as she reached the main road. Traffic streamed by, mostly workmen leaving the nearby automobile factory. Although Otterbury was only a small town, the big new factory which had recently sprung up on its outskirts had enlarged the population considerably and new council houses were gradually being built to house the men who at present commuted from further afield.

She turned into the main stream when there was a break in the traffic and changing gear she increased her speed easily. She enjoyed the feeling of freedom the scooter gave her and the menacing vehicles which swarmed past her did not bother her a

jot. She was not nervous, she never had been about driving, and riding the scooter took little effort.

Suddenly an enormous red car sped past her, its smooth, snake-like body a sure indication of unlimited speed. Madeline grimaced as the draught of its passing affected her like swell on the ocean and she was hardly righted again before she had to apply her brakes for all she was worth as the tail of the monster seemed to be hurtling at her. The driver had halted abruptly, twin brake lights like beacons illuminating the road even in daylight.

Madeline was too close. She put both feet to the ground tentatively, but the scooter was skidding and a second later she hit the rear of the other vehicle. It was not a severe bump. Her brakes had saved her that, but the scooter overturned and she landed in the road, feeling foolishly like a schoolgirl falling from her cycle.

As she attempted to scramble to her feet two strong hands assisted her, while a voice like crushed ice demanded: 'Whatever do you think you're doing?'

Madeline's eyes widened, and she gazed up at the man confronting her so angrily. Was he actually blaming her? Why, he was the one to blame!

'This is a highway, not a child's playground!' he continued relentlessly, his tone uncompromising. 'You ought to think ahead. Or stay off the road altogether,' he added, as an afterthought.

'Now, wait a minute,' began Madeline indignantly. 'It was your fault for stopping so precipitately.' She fumed as sardonic eyes

surveyed her, and she wondered what nationality he really was. There was a faint but unmistakable accent in his voice that was definitely not English. 'This road was not built for motor racing, and cars usually signify their intentions to give their followers forewarning—'

'I am aware of that,' he interrupted her. 'All right, I admit I did stop abruptly, but if I hadn't something much more serious could have happened. If you will walk round to the front of the car you'll see for yourself.'

Straightening her shoulders, even though she felt a little shaky, Madeline walked slowly round the red monster. Then she halted, thrusting her hands into the pockets of her coat. Three vehicles were in collision in the centre of the road, a lorry and two cars, one of which had obviously run into the other two. A police car came whining up the road from Otterbury as she stood there, but happily no one seemed seriously injured.

'Well?' said her companion, looking rather amused now. 'Does that convince you that my motives were reasonable?'

Madeline shrugged. 'Of course. I'm sorry I was so quick to jump to conclusions, but really, a scooter doesn't have the braking power of a car like this.' She indicated the automobile.

The man inclined his head. Then he said, rather belatedly: 'Are you hurt?'

Madeline could not suppress a smile. 'No,' she replied, shaking her head. 'I'm all in one piece, thank you. You'd better examine your car. It's much more likely to be in need of repair.'

He smiled too, rather mockingly, and Madeline found herself thinking what an attractive man he was. Tall, with broad shoulders tapering to slim hips, he was very tanned, and his eyes were a dark blue. His hair was very dark as well, and it was this that made Madeline think he might be a Spaniard, or an Italian. He moved with an easy fluid grace of movement and his attitude of indolence seemed to conceal a leashed vitality. The cut of his suit was impeccable and had obviously been made by a master craftsman, and the faint accent and his excellent grasp of English seemed to point to an expensive education. She wondered who he could be. She knew by sight most of the affluent people in Otterbury, but this man was a stranger. And, as though aware of her thoughts, he said:

‘As I am attached to the Sheridan factory, I hardly think we need concern ourselves with the repair of my car. Besides, it’s only slightly dented, as you can see.’

Sheridans was the car factory further up the road, an Italian-American concern, this being their first enterprise in England. That also seemed to explain his accent. He was obviously of Italian descent, but had probably spent many years in the States.

‘That’s all right, then,’ she said, bending to pick up the scooter and her shopping bag, which was fortunately closed. The man forestalled her, however, lifting the scooter effortlessly and scanning it with a practised eye.

‘Your scooter seems to be intact,’ he said. ‘If anything should go wrong just give us a ring and I’ll arrange to have it fixed. The

number is Otterbury 2001.'

Madeline thanked him, conscious now of how dishevelled she must appear. As he handed her the scooter she was overwhelmingly conscious of his eyes appraising her quite openly and she felt her cheeks grow hot with embarrassment.

'Th ... thank you,' she stammered, and kicked the starter. To her relief it started first time and she sat astride the seat and said: 'Good-bye.'

'Au revoir ... Miss ... Miss ...?' He smiled and waited for her answer.

'It's Mrs. Scott,' she corrected him, and with a brief smile she rode away. She was aware of his eyes watching her as she rode down the road, and she prayed she would make no more mistakes.

Within seconds he sped past her, his hand lifted in acknowledgment, and she felt herself relax again.

Reaching the centre of Otterbury she turned right at the traffic lights towards Highnook. Highnook was a suburb of Otterbury where a lot of new housing had gone up, including the block of flats where Madeline lived with her daughter, Diana. The flats were in Evenwood Gardens, overlooking the River Otter, and Madeline always felt a thrill of pleasure when she reached her home. It was such a nice flat and Otterbury was such a pleasant town.

The flat was on the first floor, and as she opened the door and entered the small hallway, she called:

‘Diana! Are you home?’

There was no reply, so she closed the door and removed her coat. The living-room opened off the hallway. It was a large room with plain distempered walls which Madeline had ornamented with several plaques. The wall-to-wall carpeting, which had taken a lot of saving for, was sapphire blue, while the three-piece suite was white leather hung with dark blue fringed chair-backs. The heating was all electric, unfortunately, for Madeline preferred an open fire in at least one room. She now turned up the valve which operated the radiators, for although the room was warm compared to the cold air outside it was by no means comfortably so. The room had a homely, lived-in atmosphere. A china cabinet contained her few pieces of really good china and glass and the rest of the space was filled with bookshelves, well filled with novels, a television, and Diana’s pick-up which stood on a table in an alcove with a stack of ‘pop’ records beside it.

Madeline lit a cigarette and turned on the television. She had shopped at lunchtime and the chops she had bought for their dinner would not take much cooking.

Carrying her shopping bag through to the kitchen which opened off the lounge and was very tiny, she unpacked the food and put on the kettle. Then she returned to the lounge. It was nearly six, so Diana ought not to be long.

She walked into the bedroom which she and Diana shared. There was only one bedroom with a small bathroom and closet adjoining it. The flats were really only intended for one person,

but as the two-bedroomed flats had been two pounds more a week, Madeline had had to content herself with the single bedroom. She did not mind for herself, but Diana was getting to an age when she objected to not having a room of her own. However, when they arrived in Otterbury after Joe's death, Madeline had been grateful enough of a place of their own.

She stripped off her jersey dress and went into the bathroom to wash and brush her teeth. As she did so, she found herself wondering what the man in the car had really thought about her. She had found him immensely attractive, but then any woman would. She wondered how old he was. He had only looked to be in his early thirties and as she herself was thirty-three, he was probably about her age.

Brushing her hair, which when loosed from the French knot she usually wore it in fell to her shoulders, she wondered how old he had taken her for. She knew she did not really look her age. Adrian Sinclair was incessantly telling her that she looked more like Diana's sister than her mother, but Adrian wanted to marry her and that was his way.

Of course, Diana grumbled sometimes too, that Madeline wore clothes which were not in keeping with her position as the headmaster's secretary, and a respectable widow, but again, Diana was old-fashioned in some ways. She supposed that was due in some measure to Joe's influence.

Critically, she decided that her eyes were her best feature, greenish-grey with tawny lights and her hair was silky-soft and



the colour of rich amber. She was tall; too tall, she always thought, although at least she was nicely rounded and not angular. All in all, she reflected, she was an average, presentable female, but certainly not outstanding in any way.

Now the man, she sighed, he had been outstanding, in every way. She felt sure that dozens of women must have thought so too. After all, in his income bracket, if women were rather dull or drab, their beauty parlour, hair-stylist and plastic surgeon could soon remedy that. From the rather world-weary cynicism she had seen round his eyes and his mouth, he was all too bored with his life and well aware of his own magnetism.

Madeline grimaced at herself in the mirror, amused at her own thoughts. Good heavens, she was behaving like a child, simply because she had happened to meet a man who without question was way out of her sphere!

She slipped her arms into a quilted housecoat and as she buttoned it she pushed all thoughts of the man out of her mind. No matter how she felt, Diana was always her first consideration. Poor Diana, who after all had never really recovered from the shock of losing Joe when she was just seven years old.

As she merged from the bedroom, a key in the lock heralded the arrival of her daughter. Diana breezed in cheerfully enough, a slender, younger edition of Madeline except that her hair was dark brown. Diana was sixteen, and at the commercial college in Otterbury. She was often late home at present as the college was rehearsing for its end of term play and Diana had a starring role.

They were performing a play written by another of the students and it was to be staged in the college hall with the proceeds going to local charities.

Diana was not as tall as Madeline and wore her hair fashionably long. Dressed in a dark grey duffel coat and swinging a tartan bag, she was a typical teenager.

‘Hello, Mum,’ she greeted Madeline, flinging her bag on to a chair, ‘Isn’t it cold tonight? I’m freezing!’

Madeline nodded. ‘Yes, it’s not much like spring,’ she agreed. ‘Did you have a good rehearsal?’

‘So-so,’ replied Diana, indifferently. ‘Miss Hawkes always tries to run the affair like a military tattoo, but apart from that it was all right. It seems such an uproar I’m sure it will never come right.’

Madeline chuckled. ‘It will on the night, I’m sure. Never mind, it will soon be over. Term ends in three weeks, doesn’t it?’

‘Yes, thank goodness. Gosh, then we’ll have two whole weeks with nothing to do! It will be glorious!’

Madeline smiled and went into the kitchen. As she prepared the vegetables and put the chops under the grill she decided not to say anything to Diana about falling off the scooter. After all, no harm had been done and Diana often said that Madeline ought to use the bus during peak traffic hours. Diana was a little possessive about her mother at times, probably due to the fact that she was her only relative, and Madeline did not want to cause her any more worry.

They had their dinner in the lounge. One end had been

converted into a dining recess by the addition of a velvet curtain, shielding the table from view. Diana set the table while Madeline dished up the meal and they sat together afterwards, idly watching the television while Madeline had a cigarette with her coffee.

‘Shall I wash up?’ asked Diana, stretching lazily. ‘Is Uncle Adrian coming round tonight?’

‘I think Adrian’s coming and I should be grateful if you would do the washing up. I want to change into something more suitable.’

Diana smiled and rose to her feet and Madeline looked at her queringly.

‘Are ... are you going out tonight?’ she asked tentatively.

‘Why, yes. Jeff asked me to go to the Seventies Club.’

‘Oh!’ Madeline nodded.

‘Do you mind?’

Madeline ran a tongue over her lips. ‘No. No. Why should I?’

‘No reason, but I’ve noticed you don’t really enthuse about my going out with him.’

Madeline half-smiled. ‘I’m sorry, darling. Of course you must go.’

Diana shrugged. ‘Well, it’s something to do,’ she said lightly.

‘Yes. Besides, Adrian will probably be round later. He said he had some marking to do, but I guess he’ll find time,’ Madeline smiled wryly.

‘He always finds time for you,’ murmured Diana slyly.

Madeline compressed her lips. 'Yes, that may be so. But that means nothing, Diana, absolutely nothing.'

Diana shrugged regretfully and began carrying the dishes through to the kitchen. Madeline stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray and walked through to the bedroom. She was becoming a little tired of Diana's insinuations about herself and Adrian. Truthfully they were insinuations based on fact, but Madeline had no wish to make insinuations reality.

As she dressed in dark blue stretch slacks and an Italian silk over-blouse, she found herself wishing, not for the first time, that Joe was still alive. Diana was growing up now and becoming quite a responsibility in many ways. Also, she had worshipped Joe and he had adored her. He had been a bachelor for so many years before he married Madeline and he had found Diana utterly irresistible. Madeline wondered now whether her marrying Joe had precipitated his condition. He had certainly had more responsibilities and had worked hard in the years following their wedding. But his illness had been incurable, and the doctors had told her numerous times that she had made his last years happy ones.

She decided to leave her hair loose and emerged from the bedroom looking youthfully attractive. Diana was touching up her make-up with a deft hand. She wore only dark eyeshadow and lipstick, her olive skin not requiring any further cosmetic.

She looked critically over her shoulder at her mother.

'Does Uncle Adrian approve of slacks?' she asked pointedly.

Madeline looked amused. 'I can hardly see how it matters,' she answered lightly. 'I'm wearing them, not Uncle Adrian.'

'I know, but honestly, Mum, you'll probably marry him one day and then you really will have to dress more in keeping with your position.'

'My dear Diana, I have no intention of marrying Uncle Adrian. I've told him, and incidentally you, so a hundred times. Heavens, I'm thirty-three, not fifty-three, and although I'm sure it seems a great age to you, I don't intend taking to my rocking chair yet.'

Diana frowned. 'Uncle Adrian is no older than Daddy, would have been had he—' She halted.

'Oh, darling, I know. But that was different.'

'How?'

Madeline glanced at her watch. 'Isn't it time you were going?'

Her daughter shrugged. 'I suppose so. Okay, suit yourself.' She pulled on the duffel coat. 'I'll go, then.'

'All right, darling. Look after yourself.'

Diana kissed her mother's cheek and whirled out of the flat. Madeline walked into the kitchen. Evidences of Diana's hasty washing-up session were to be found on the floor which was almost swimming with water. The dish-mop was soaking and causing a wet stain to trickle over the window ledge and down the tiles to the sink.

Madeline squeezed out the dish-mop and taking the large mop she soaked up the water from the floor, wiping clean the parquet flooring. Then she put away the dishes which Diana had left on

the bench, and returned to the lounge.

She had just settled herself in front of the television when the door bell pealed.

Lazily, she rose to her feet and padded to the door. Opening it, she found Adrian Sinclair waiting to be admitted.

Adrian was a tall lean man in his early fifties. Twenty years older than Madeline and a bachelor, he found his secretary utterly charming and desirable and all his hitherto undisturbed feelings were being violently churned by her apparent lack of romantic interest in him. Frankly, Madeline wondered what it was about her that appealed to older men. She found Adrian intellectually stimulating but emotionally cold, and marriages were not built on intellect alone. He made no headway in any other direction with her.

‘Come in, Adrian,’ she said, smiling now. ‘Is it still as cold?’

‘Colder,’ remarked Adrian, coming in and loosening his overcoat. ‘Hmm. This is a cosy room, Madeline. I always feel at home here.’

‘Good. I’m pleased.’ Madeline closed the door and relieved him of his coat before following him across the room. ‘Do you want a drink before I sit down?’

‘Thank you. I’ll have a small whisky.’

Adrian seated himself on the couch in front of the television where Madeline had been seated before his arrival and after pouring the drink, Madeline joined him.

She enjoyed Adrian’s companionship and his ready humour

and was glad he made no strong attempts to force their relationship into anything more. He often broached the subject of marriage, but Madeline had tried to make it plain from the outset that there could never be anything more than friendship between them.

Adrian came to the flat as often as he was able, whether or not Diana was at home. He liked Diana and she was very fond of him. He had been Uncle Adrian since she was eleven years old and she saw no reason to change that now.

He owned a house in Otterbury, run for him by an efficient housekeeper. The house was near the Otterbury Secondary School of which he was headmaster, and although it was large and rather gloomy for a man living alone, he liked it, and kept it well filled with a selection of *objets d'art* which would furnish a museum. Madeline had sometimes mused that should he ever marry and have children about the house he would be in an eternal state of anxiety about his collection.

'There was an accident on the Otterbury road today,' he remarked now, casually. 'Two cars and a lorry collided. It was in the late paper.'

'Oh! Was there?' Madeline suppressed her own knowledge of the accident. She had no intention of telling Adrian any more than Diana about her own mishap. Like Diana, he deplored her constant use of the scooter on the busy road and would have preferred her to use public transport on those evenings when he was unable to bring her home.

‘Yes. Some people move too fast for safety. Most of these collisions could be avoided with a little forethought.’

‘Oh, I agree,’ averred Madeline, sitting down beside him, and hoping her face would not give her away. ‘The traffic from Sheridans moves pretty fast.’

‘It does indeed. I’ll be glad when those houses are finished beyond the factory. Then those blighters won’t have to come into Otterbury to take the London road. Most of the cars make a racetrack of that stretch outside the school. I’m eternally grateful our crowd are away before them. Can you imagine what it would be like with a swarm of cyclists leaving our gates and trying to integrate with that lot? Heaven help them!’

Madeline accepted a cigarette from him and after they were both smoking, she said: ‘Have you ever been round the Sheridan factory?’

‘No. Not since it was opened. I once went over the site during the early stages of construction. It’s a terrific place. Apparently it will employ about five thousand men when it’s fully operational. They’ve brought several key workers over from Italy, of course, and from their factory near Detroit. I’ve heard that Nicholas Vitale himself has come over from Rome to make sure everything is going satisfactorily. Of course, he’s only here for a visit. He’s the big boss. His father started the business, you know. A man called Masterson is running this end. He’s an American, I believe, and he’s bought his family over. They’ve leased that house near Highnook. Ingleside, I believe it’s called.’



‘Yes, I know the place, Adrian. It’s enormous. Didn’t it belong to some penniless member of the aristocracy at one time?’

‘Yes. Old Lord Otterbury himself used to live there years ago.’ Adrian chuckled. ‘Trust Americans to install themselves in the local stately home!’

Madeline laughed. ‘It must be nice to be free from money worries.’

‘My dear Madeline, you too could be free from money worries if only you would let me take care of you.’

‘I know, Adrian, and I appreciate it. But I just can’t see myself as a headmaster’s wife, dispensing tea and sympathy to the parents of the children. I’m not the type, I’m afraid.’

‘Nonsense, Madeline, you would adapt yourself easily.’ Adrian sighed. ‘Seriously though, Diana would be agreeable to your marrying me. She’s like a daughter to me already.’

‘I know that, Adrian. She’s a great advocate for your cause. It’s simply that – well, I enjoy my freedom, and more important still – we’re not in love with one another.’

‘Were you in love with Joe?’ Adrian frowned when Madeline did not answer. ‘Besides, I do love you, Madeline. Being in love is for young people. We’re adults; mature people, not teenagers hankering after the moon. Wouldn’t you like to relax sometimes and put your feet up instead of rushing out to school every morning and working all day just to rush home again in the evenings?’

Madeline sighed. All that Adrian had said was true. Diana

would be delighted if they got married. Indeed she would be very enthusiastic. She liked and respected Adrian and would enjoy the social distinction of being the headmaster's stepdaughter. And Madeline knew how pleasant it would be to have loads of spare time to read all the books she would like to read; explore all the museums and art galleries that she enjoyed visiting; maybe even have a larger family.

At this she drew herself up with a start. She could never resign herself again to a life like that. She was not a mercenary person at heart and the idea of marrying someone for the material benefits that were to be enjoyed appalled her. She couldn't do it. She and Diana had managed alone this far, and in a couple of years Diana would be working and able to supply herself with the little luxuries that Madeline could not always afford.

'I'm sorry, Adrian,' she said, sighing again. 'I couldn't do it. Much as I like and respect you, I don't see how we could make a go of it. You're too set in your ways to change anyway. You would hate having a teenager in the house, upsetting your precious collection and rousing you at all hours to the sound of the latest pop group. You have no idea what it would be like.'

'Nonsense,' said Adrian once more. Then he sighed as he saw the reluctance on her face. 'All right. Forget it. Anyway, where is Diana tonight?'

'She's gone to the Seventies Club with Jeffrey Emerson. Do you know him?'

'I know of him,' replied Adrian thoughtfully. 'His brother is

in the first year at my school, but Jeffrey goes to the Grammar, doesn't he?"

'Yes. He's only seventeen. He has taken his Advanced Levels in G.C.E. and now he's waiting for a place at university.'

'Ah, yes. I remember Hetherington was talking about him the last time we had dinner together.' Mr. Hetherington was the headmaster of the Grammar School. 'He said that his mother is quite different, however. He can hardly believe that Jeffrey is her son. She's quite coarse, I believe.'

Madeline bit her lip. 'Jeffrey is quite a handsome boy and as you say he is intelligent, but I wonder sometimes if he's a little wild, at least away from school.'

Adrian frowned. 'Yes. Maybe.' He looked ponderous. 'Are you worried about his influence on Diana?'

'Yes. Yes, I am.'

'But Diana isn't a tearaway.'

'Oh, I know.' Madeline moved restlessly. 'It's just that she's so young.'

Adrian shrugged. 'They mature earlier these days. Diana is a sensible girl. She would never behave stupidly.'

'Wouldn't she?' Madeline rose to her feet. 'Wouldn't she?' She smiled. 'No. I suppose not.'

Adrian smiled too. 'Look, I know how you feel. You're her guardian. You feel doubly responsible because she has no father.'

'What ... what does Jeffrey's father do?'

'He works for a firm of haulage contractors,' answered Adrian.

‘As I said before, Jeffrey is certainly the changeling in that family.’

The Seventies Club was located over a coffee bar of the same name in Otterbury High Street. Its members were all teenagers from the local schools or the technical colleges and the music was provided by a jukebox which was provided free by the owner.

This Friday evening it was packed with youngsters, all gyrating and turning madly to the lusty music issuing from the jukebox. A low bar along one wall served coffee or Coca-Cola and the lighting was subdued and mellow.

Diana Scott and Jeffrey Emerson were dancing together and as the music ended, Diana collapsed, laughing, against her partner.

‘Gosh,’ she exclaimed, ‘I’m fagged out. Shall we sit down for a while?’

Jeffrey grinned down at her, and his arms closed round her, holding her a prisoner.

‘I’d rather stay like this,’ he murmured softly, and Diana blushed scarlet. She liked Jeff very much and was pleased that lately their relationship seemed to be entering a more serious stage. She had never had a steady boy-friend before and she wanted to be like the other girls who spent their time discussing the merits of different boys.

She wriggled free, however, and holding his hand, she drew him across the room to the bar. They perched on stools together and Jeffrey ordered two coffees and took out a packet of cigarettes which he offered to Diana. Diana shook her head and

Jeffrey lit his own and put them back in his pocket.

‘I thought you intended to try smoking sometimes,’ he remarked lazily.

‘I did ... I do.’ Diana bit her lip.

‘You’re frightened,’ he jeered, and she stiffened her shoulders.

‘No, I’m not. Give me one.’

Shrugging, Jeff handed her a cigarette and lit it. Diana drew on it as she had seen other people doing and then began to cough chokingly.

Jeff grinned and pounded her on the back and Diana shuddered.

‘Ugh, it’s horrible!’ she exclaimed. ‘I don’t know how you can.’

‘You must persevere,’ said Jeff. ‘Go on, have another drag.’

‘No, thank you.’ Diana was adamant. She threw the cigarette on the floor and put her foot on it.

‘Hey!’ Jeff was indignant. ‘They don’t grow on trees, you know.’

‘No. Plants,’ replied Diana sarcastically, and Jeff looked furious.

‘Very amusing,’ he said coldly, and stalked off across the dance floor.

Diana was flabbergasted. She had never dreamed he would walk away and leave her. Her heart was pounding rapidly and she felt herself going cold inside.

She knew that all the other girls at the Club envied her her association with Jeffrey Emerson. He was a very attractive boy

and could have his pick of the girls. That he should choose her had always thrilled her enormously because prior to the last two months he had treated her like a child. Since she had started at the Commercial College she had grown up greatly and did not realize just how appealing she was with her silky hair and wide eyes. When he had started dating her, her prestige with the others had gone up a lot, and part of his attraction was that he was the current heart-throb.

The music had started again and she saw him approach a slim, fair girl and obviously ask her to dance. Diana felt hurt and angry. How dared he treat her like this? She had a good mind to go home. But she knew she wouldn't. She would wait and see whether he came back. It was galling, but she couldn't walk out on him. Not now.

She ordered another coffee and sat sipping it pensively. If he didn't come back between dances she would have to go home. It would be awful!

She was in the depths of despair, two dances later, when she was aware that someone had joined her. Hardly daring to look round, she gave him a sidelong glance. To her relief, it was Jeff.

Jeff's face was rather remote, but he said:

'Do you want to dance?'

Diana felt her hands go clammy. 'I ... well, do you?'

He shrugged. 'Yes. I'm going to dance,' he replied coolly.

'All right.' She slid off her stool.

The music was slow and haunting now, a love-song being

crooned by a current disc idol. Jeff drew her into his arms and put his cheek against her hair. They moved slowly, their arms wrapped round each other. Diana could feel herself trembling and he murmured: 'Relax.'

'I'm sorry,' she whispered, aware of herself apologizing for nothing. But anything was better than his indifference.

Jeff looked down at her. 'Are you?' he asked.

'Why did you walk away?' she murmured, looking anxious.

'I don't like being treated like an idiot.'

'But I wasn't ... oh, Jeff, I guess I am silly at times. Can't we forget about it?'

Jeff's eyes softened. 'All right, Diana. I guess I was as much to blame for taking the huff. Did I make you jealous?'

Diana blushed. 'Yes, you succeeded in that direction,' she remarked softly, against his neck, and felt his arms tighten possessively about her.

When the music ended he glanced at his watch.

'It's nine-thirty,' he said quietly. 'Let's go, hmh?'

She nodded and went to collect her coat. Outside the air was clear but bitterly cold and they walked swiftly along to the bus stop. Jeff lived at the opposite end of Otterbury, near the secondary school, in fact, but he always saw Diana right home.

The bus dropped them at the end of Evenwood Gardens and they walked up the darkened road towards the second block of flats where the Scotts lived. Before they reached the second block, between the two tall buildings, was a small ornamental

garden with flower beds and a bench set among rose trees and rhododendron bushes. The last few dates they had had together had ended on the bench where they said a prolonged goodnight to each other. Although it was cold they still walked through the gardens to the bench, but they did not sit down tonight. It had been raining earlier in the day and everywhere was still slightly damp, but the bushes at least provided a little privacy.

‘Well,’ said Diana, looking up at Jeff, ‘thanks for bringing me home.’

‘It was a pleasure,’ he said softly, pulling her to him, close against his warm body. ‘Oh, Diana,’ he groaned urgently, and his mouth met hers.

Diana slid her arms around him, returning his kiss more responsively than ever. Their minor upset this evening had merely served as an incentive to their mutual attraction for one another and Diana, no less than Jeff, found something infinitely more absorbing in their embrace than ever before.

Diana knew very little about kissing of this kind, not being as old as Jeff or as experienced, but she was aware of a kind of danger not far away. Something about his intense hold on her and the increased tenor of his breathing warned her he was emotionally disturbed in a way hitherto unknown to her. With a feeling of revulsion, she suddenly drew back and swallowed hard.

Jeff fastened his overcoat with unsteady fingers and said:

‘Have you any idea what kissing like that does to a fellow?’ in a tight, withdrawn voice.



Diana bit her lip and clenched her fists. 'Is ... is something wrong?' she asked nervously.

Jeff laughed shortly and mirthlessly. 'Oh, no. Not at all.' He looked furious. 'Look, I've got to go.'

'Will ... will I see you tomorrow?'

Jeff hesitated, and then hunched his shoulders. 'Oh, yes, I guess so. I have a lecture in the morning, but tomorrow afternoon I'm refereeing the rugby match. Would you like to come?'

'Could I?' Diana was interested.

'Of course. We could have tea afterwards at my mother's and then go to the pictures in the evening. If you'd like to.'

Diana looked more at ease. 'I'd love to, you know that. Will your mother mind?'

Jeff shook his head. 'Of course not. Well?'

Diana smiled. 'All right.'

Jeff managed a smile in return and thrust his hands into the pockets of his coat. 'I must go now,' he said. 'See you tomorrow. We'll meet at the school.'

He left her at the entrance to the flats and then walked back down the gardens to catch his bus.

When Diana opened the door of the flat and went in she found her mother just preparing coffee and sandwiches in the kitchen while Adrian Sinclair was stretched out on the settee watching the television. It was apparently the repeat of a football match held in some continental country and after greeting Diana, Adrian returned to his viewing while Diana went out to the

kitchen to see her mother.

Madeline smiled cheerfully at her. 'Well?' she said. 'Did you have a good time?'

'Yes, thanks,' said Diana, sighing a little as she remembered the kiss they had exchanged. She supposed idly it was the first real kiss she had ever experienced. Prior to tonight all the kisses she had been given were light, casual affairs, and even Jeff had been the same. Now suddenly it was all different. Tonight's kiss had been full of emotions that she had not realized existed.

Madeline was looking at her curiously and she asked: 'Why the faraway look in your eyes? Where have you been?'

'Just to the Club,' exclaimed Diana, flushing and feeling rather embarrassed. 'I ... we ... I'll go and get undressed, Mum, and then I can go straight to bed after supper.'

'All right, darling.' Madeline frowned to herself. There was something different about Diana tonight and she couldn't decide what it was. It disturbed her to realize that Diana was getting to the stage where she did not tell her mother everything.

## CHAPTER TWO

ON Saturday morning, Madeline and Diana usually went shopping together. They bought most of the food required for the following week and the perishable goods were stored in the pocket-sized refrigerator, in the kitchen.

‘I’m going to the grammar school rugby match with Jeff this afternoon,’ remarked Diana, as they ate their lunch. ‘Then we’re going to have tea at his home and go on to the pictures.’

‘Really?’ Madeline raised her dark eyebrows. ‘Will his mother be pleased about that?’

Diana smiled. ‘Why shouldn’t she be? Besides, we won’t be there long.’

‘Have you met his family before?’

‘No. But that doesn’t matter.’

Madeline shrugged. ‘Well, I hope everything turns out all right. Does this portend a more serious relationship in the future? I hope not. You’re very young, both of you.’

‘Oh, Mother!’ Diana exclaimed, and carried her dessert plate through to the kitchen.

While she was making the coffee her mother joined her, her expression thoughtful.

‘Just remember,’ went on Madeline quietly, ‘you’re still only a child and Jeff is still at school. He intends to go to university in the autumn, so you’ve told me, so it’s no use either of you doing

anything silly.'

'I don't see that you've any reason to talk to me like this,' protested Diana exasperatedly. She hated being talked down to. 'After all, I've not said anything, have I?'

'No. But last night you looked rather strange, when you came home.'

Diana felt her cheeks flame again. It was annoying to be so transparent.

'For no reason,' she retorted abruptly, and turned off the percolator.

Madeline wondered, was she being over-anxious about Diana? After all, as Adrian said, girls did mature earlier these days. She hoped so; how she hoped so!

After the meal was over Madeline washed up while Diana went to change. Then she got out the vacuum cleaner. She always did the apartment through on Saturday afternoons.

Diana emerged looking young and fresh in a tweed skirt and a chunky sweater. She was wearing a quilted anorak with a hood which actually belonged to Madeline and which was the colour of honey with a darker brown lining. It suited Diana's olive colouring as much as Madeline's and she looked rather ruefully at her mother.

'You don't mind, do you?' she asked, indicating the anorak.

Madeline grimaced, an amused look on her face, 'Would it matter if I did?' she asked, smiling. 'No, go on. It will at least keep you warm. And you're wearing your new boots, I see. I'm

glad you got them, even if they were expensive.'

'Well,' said Diana, 'I want to look nice to meet his parents.'

'Y ... yes,' said Madeline doubtfully. 'Oh, well ...' she shrugged. 'Have fun!'

'I will. G'bye.'

After Diana had gone, Madeline set to work with a vengeance. She was not particularly fond of housework, but it had to be done and she was not one for shirking it.

By the time she had finished it was teatime, so she made herself a snack. Adrian always took her out for dinner on Saturday evenings, so she did not bother with much of a meal. They usually went to a hotel just outside Otterbury, and had a drink before the meal. Madeline always enjoyed the change it made as she did not go out at all during the week.

She changed into a jersey dress of amber-coloured material and combed her hair up into the French knot. As she applied a light make-up to her face she thought that at least her skin was good. It was smooth and unlined and she was aware that she did look younger than her thirty-three years. Amused at her thoughts, she realized that all this self-criticism had been brought on by the man in the red car and she wondered again whether she would see him any more.

Adrian arrived at seven-thirty. Dressed in a fawn lounge suit he, too, looked younger and distinguished, and Madeline smiled as she admitted him.

'You look very smart this evening,' she complimented him.

Adrian raised his eyebrows. 'Thank you. So do you. The Crown won't really do us justice, will it?'

Madeline pulled on a loose suede coat. 'I expect it will be as pleasant as usual,' she replied, matter-of-factly.

Adrian drove an old Rover which was remarkably comfortable. He was always saying he would have to get a new one, but Madeline knew his old car would survive a few more years yet. Adrian disliked change. He was a creature of habit. That was why she knew that she could never think seriously of marriage with him, if for no other reason than his staid ways.

The Crown was only three miles from Otterbury, on the Guildford road. It was a reasonably sized hotel, catering mainly for evening motorists who wanted to get away from the noise and bustle of the towns. It had built up a reputation for good service over the years and its restaurant was both efficient and well patronized. The food, cooked by a French chef, was delicious and varied in taste and Madeline always felt quite a gourmet eating there.

The road to the Crown ran past the Sheridan factory, and she felt her eyes drawn to the place as they passed. She wondered what position the man held. He had said he worked at Sheridans, so he was possibly one of the managers. Driving the kind of automobile he drove, she hardly associated him with the shop floor. Besides, his clothes had had that definite air of good tailoring about them, and even Adrian's suits did not fit him so well or look so expensive as that. And Adrian was a headmaster!

But then Adrian bought things to last and they usually did.

The Crown was very crowded, but their table was reserved week by week, so that at least was secure. Since the arrival of the Italians and Americans the town of Otterbury and its environs seemed to be getting smaller and the population was overrunning its limits everywhere. Adrian grumbled as he had to push his way through to the bar for their drinks. He fought his way back to her side as she stood near the entrance. He was carrying a vodka for her and a whisky for himself.

‘What a scrum!’ he muttered, easing himself into a position beside her. ‘It’s getting more like a rugby match every week. It never used to be like this.’

‘I don’t suppose the proprietors are grumbling,’ remarked Madeline wryly. ‘They’ll be grateful for the trade.’

‘I expect they are, but really, there’s nowhere to sit, and the fumes over by the bar are nauseating.’

Madeline smiled. She was not as averse to crowds as Adrian, but even she could see that there was not much fun in standing in the doorway all evening.

‘Let’s go and have our supper then,’ she said. ‘After all, we can have a drink in there in comparative luxury.’

‘An excellent idea,’ said Adrian at once. ‘Lead on.’

The supper room, too, was crowded, but Adrian’s table, under the window was waiting for them. They seated themselves thankfully, and Madeline removed her coat.

They ate grilled salmon and peach soufflé, and Madeline

sighed with enjoyment as she sipped her coffee.

‘That was absolutely delicious,’ she murmured, smiling. ‘You must admit, Adrian, if we were to change our hotel, we wouldn’t get a meal like that.’

Adrian smiled. ‘Yes, you’re probably right. I feel altogether different about things now.’

They lit cigarettes and were idly discussing a novel they had both read when a shadow fell across the table. Madeline looked up in surprise to see an elderly man smiling down on them. Adrian, looking up too, rose swiftly to his feet.

‘Hetherington!’ he exclaimed. ‘It’s a long while since we’ve met.’

Mr. Hetherington smiled benignly down and said:

‘May I join you for a moment?’

‘Of course, sit down,’ said Adrian easily. ‘Oh, by the way, this is my secretary, Mrs. Scott. I don’t believe you’ve met before. Madeline, this is Mr. Hetherington, the headmaster of the Grammar School.’

‘Yes, I know,’ said Madeline, smiling, and shaking hands with Mr. Hetherington. ‘Do sit down. We have finished.’

Hetherington seated himself in the vacant chair and said:

‘I see you like the cuisine here, too.’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Madeline enthusiastically. ‘Do you come here often?’

‘Only as often as I can safely leave my wife,’ replied Hetherington slowly. ‘She’s a semi-invalid, you know, and I don’t



like leaving her alone. However, I had a business engagement this evening and we came on here for a meal, afterwards.’ He turned to Adrian. ‘I’m glad I’ve run into you, Sinclair. I wanted a word with you.’

‘Oh, yes?’ Adrian was intrigued. ‘What about?’

‘Shall I leave you?’ Madeline looked questioningly at Hetherington.

Hetherington shook his head and taking out his pipe he began to fill it.

‘Not at all,’ he replied. ‘Do you mind if I smoke?’ Madeline said: ‘No, not at all,’ and Hetherington lit his pipe ponderously.

‘Now,’ he said, when he had it going, ‘you know Conrad Masterson, don’t you, Sinclair?’

Adrian frowned. ‘Conrad Masterson? No. Who’s he? Oh, wait a minute, you don’t mean the American who’s now running the Sheridan factory?’

‘That’s right. Do you know him?’

Adrian shook his head. ‘No. I’ve only heard his name in passing. Why?’

‘Well, you’ll know he’s bought that house that used to belong to Lord Otterbury at Highnook.’

‘Yes, I had heard,’ Adrian nodded, and Madeline listened interestedly. What was all this about?

‘Well, I have his son, Conrad junior, at school. He’s thirteen and quite a bright boy. But that’s not what I was going to tell you.’ He chuckled. He was quite aware that his colleague was

positively bursting with curiosity for him to get to the point. 'No, actually, Masterson himself came in to see me earlier in the week and invited me and my wife to go up to his house for a drink on Monday evening. I explained that Mary was not up to social visiting, so he suggested that I came anyway and brought along anyone I cared to. I wondered whether you might like to come along with me. Like most Americans, Masterson is very gregarious and he wants to get to know people. Naturally, your position as headmaster of the only other secondary school in the town brought your name first to my mind. I was going to ring you tomorrow, but when I saw you here this evening, I couldn't miss the opportunity to speak to you myself. I hope you don't think I'm intruding?'

'Not at all.' Adrian was obviously intrigued and flattered. 'It sounds a most fascinating prospect. I must admit these newcomers to our town interest me enormously.'

Madeline hid a smile as she remembered his antipathy earlier in the evening when he had had to struggle to get drinks simply because of the crowd of newcomers.

'I've never visited America,' Adrian went on, 'and I should welcome the chance to discuss the country with people who really know what they're talking about. Of course I'll come.'

'Good. Good,' Hetherington smiled in satisfaction. 'I too think it should prove quite a stimulating affair.' He turned to Madeline. 'Do you enjoy working for our distinguished friend, Mrs. Scott?'

Madeline smiled. 'Very much, thank you. Adrian is a very

considerate employer; not a slave-driver.'

Hetherington puffed at his pipe. 'Yes, I should think he would be, with a pretty thing like you. Can't you jolt him out of his bachelor state? I understand you're a widow.' Madeline looked down at her cigarette and then with a twinkle in her eyes, she said. 'I think Adrian is quite happy as he is, don't you?' She controlled her laughter.

'We're not children,' remarked Adrian sarcastically, not at all amused. In his opinion, Hetherington was too keen on making preposterous remarks and getting away with them.

'No, I'm sure you're not,' agreed Hetherington, chuckling himself. 'Anyway, Sinclair, why don't you ask Mrs. Scott if she would care to accompany us on Monday evening? I think she would enjoy it, too.'

'I'm sure she would,' said Adrian, nodding his approval. 'Will you come, Madeline?'

'I ... I don't know,' she began awkwardly. 'I wasn't invited, and I really don't think....'

'Nonsense,' exclaimed Hetherington, shaking his head. 'Masterson will be only too delighted to welcome you. And after all, you won't be alone. Adrian will be there beside you.'

Madeline hesitated, and Adrian urged her to accept. 'Please say you'll come, Madeline,' he coaxed her, persuasively.

'But Diana—'

'—is quite capable of taking care of herself for one evening,' said Adrian firmly. 'Yes, Hetherington, we'll both come. Shall I

pick you up?’

‘Well ... yes. That would be best, and then you can collect Mrs. Scott.’ He rose to his feet. ‘And now I must go and allow you to continue your evening uninterrupted.’ His eyes twinkled. ‘Keep him in order, Mrs. Scott.’

Madeline laughed at Adrian’s outraged countenance and Hetherington walked away, still chuckling.

‘Really!’ exclaimed Adrian exasperatedly. ‘He really is the limit! Who does he think he is?’

‘He’s a rather charming old man,’ remarked Madeline mildly. ‘I like him. He was only joking. Adrian, don’t get so heated over nothing.’

Adrian sighed and smiled ruefully. ‘I suppose you’re right as usual. He always makes me feel like one of his pupils, I’m afraid.’

Madeline laughed merrily. ‘Rather an old pupil, wouldn’t you say?’ she said cheerfully.

After they left the Crown they drove back to Madeline’s flat. It was only about ten o’clock, so she invited Adrian in for more coffee. Diana was not in when they arrived, but she came in soon after.

She was flushed and not as full of daydreams as the previous evening and Madeline felt rather relieved, if a trifle apprehensive about her rather dejected expression. She had not known how to deal with her the previous evening and it was obvious that she did not know how to deal with her tonight either. She decided to play the game as it was played to her and refused to start worrying

again after such a pleasant and relaxing evening.

‘Have you had a nice evening?’ Diana asked, looking across at Adrian.

Adrian sank down into the comfort of the couch. ‘Very nice, thank you, Diana. Come and tell me about that boy-friend of yours. Did he give you a good time?’

‘Yes, thank you,’ said Diana politely. She pulled off the anorak and sat down beside him. ‘We had tea at his mother’s and then we went to the pictures. We saw a Western epic at the Odeon.’

‘I see. Was it good?’

Diana wrinkled her nose. ‘It was all right,’ she conceded. ‘We don’t always see a lot of the film,’ she remarked, watching idly for Adrian’s shocked expression.

She was not disappointed. Adrian raised his eyebrows in disapproval. Her outspoken words had shocked him. She was certainly changing this elf-like daughter of Madeline’s. Madeline was right. She was becoming a handful.

‘How was the tea?’ asked Madeline herself, coming through from the kitchen, with a tray of coffee. ‘Did you get on all right with his parents?’

Diana shrugged her slim shoulders eloquently. ‘I suppose so. His mother made some rather barbed comments about Jeff neglecting his studies recently, as though I was the entire cause, and that he would have to pick himself up if he was expecting them to send him to university in the autumn. Poor Jeff!’ Diana sighed in remembrance. ‘He looked positively furious and told

her rather rudely that it was his affair whether or not he went to the university. I think he's having second thoughts.'

'I see.' Madeline ran a tongue over her lips. 'But of course, you told him he must go to the university, didn't you, Diana? He's quite a clever boy. His headmaster says so. You mustn't come between him and his work.'

Diana looked mutinous, but remained silent, and Adrian and Madeline exchanged glances.

'What did you have for supper?' asked Diana suddenly, changing the subject, and shrugging, Madeline related the events of their evening, describing their meeting with Hetherington and his subsequent invitation to visit the Mastersons.

'Gosh!' Diana sounded envious. 'Do you think I could come?'

Adrian frowned. 'I'm afraid not, Diana. This is a grown-up affair. It would probably bore you to tears.' Diana compressed her lips. 'Grown-up,' she muttered. 'What am I?'

Adrian reached for his cigarette case. 'Little more than a schoolgirl,' he replied smoothly. 'Diana, you have years and years ahead of you. Enjoy what's yours today. Don't hanker over the future before it arrives.'

Diana sighed. 'Uncle Adrian, I don't want a lecture. Anyway, I think it will be jolly exciting. Who will be there?'

'Oh, the executives from the factory, I expect,' replied Adrian. 'They're mostly married men, with their families over here. As I've said, it's a pretty dull affair.'

'What on earth shall I wear?' exclaimed Madeline suddenly.

‘You’ll think of something,’ replied Adrian, smiling. ‘I’d better give old Hetherington a ring tomorrow and find out what time we have to be there. I should hate us to arrive while they’re having dinner.’

‘Oh, yes,’ nodded Madeline. ‘You can let me know on Monday.’ She stretched lazily. ‘I’m tired. It’s been a long day.’

‘That’s my cue,’ murmured Adrian dryly, rising to his feet. ‘I’ll be off. Will I see you tomorrow?’

‘You can come round if you want to,’ said Madeline easily. ‘Please yourself. If not I’ll see you Monday morning.’

‘Right. Good night, then. Good night, Diana.’

‘Good night, Uncle Adrian,’ said Diana, kissing his cheek. ‘Mind how you go.’

After Adrian had gone, Madeline carried the dishes into the kitchen and Diana followed her and picked up the tea towel to dry them.

‘Are you seeing Jeff tomorrow?’ asked Madeline, turning on the hot tap.

‘Yes. Why? Do you want me for something?’ Diana frowned.

‘Oh ... er ... no.’ Madeline smiled rather uncertainly at her daughter. ‘Where are you going then?’

‘Well, actually, just for a walk in the afternoon,’ replied Diana quietly.

‘Would you like to bring him back here for tea?’

Diana’s eyes brightened. ‘Could I?’ Jeff had only been to tea once before at the flat and then Madeline had had a headache

and had had to leave them to their own devices.

She smiled now. 'Of course. After tea, if Uncle Adrian comes round, we might play Monopoly or something.'

Diana looked disgusted. 'Oh, Mum, Jeff and I won't want to play games!'

Madeline shrugged. 'All right. What will you do then?'

'We might go to the Seventies Club.'

Madeline frowned. She did not like the idea of Diana going to a place like that on a Sunday evening, but alternatively it was better to know they were there, rather than wandering round the streets.

'All right,' she said, 'you do what you like.'



## CHAPTER THREE

DURING Monday, Madeline found her thoughts straying often to the evening ahead. It was quite an occasion for her to go out during the week. Now and then she and Adrian would take the train to London and go and see a show or listen to a concert at the Royal Festival Hall, but these outings were few and far between as Adrian was usually busy during the week, and besides, there was Diana to consider. She was still very young to be left too long alone and Madeline always put her first.

On Sunday Adrian had come to high tea at the flat and met Jeff. They had had quite a good time together. Jeff was intelligent and could discuss topics with Adrian which neither of the women could have done. Madeline found him quite charming and wondered whether she was worrying unduly about Diana. After all, surely young people could be friendly without getting themselves into bother. He was a nice-looking boy and whatever his background he was able to take care of himself and act as politely as the next person.

At lunchtime on Monday, Madeline went into the town centre. She had decided to treat herself to a new dress for the evening. She rarely indulged herself, except for necessities, and even Diana had gone as far as to say that this kind of affair did not happen every day. Madeline suspected that Diana was hoping for some development in her relationship with Adrian, and if so,

Madeline knew she was going to be disappointed.

She found what she wanted in a small dress shop in Gilesgate. It was more than she had expected to pay, but she couldn't resist it after trying it on. It was a delicious shade of leaf green chiffon, an ankle-length dress with sequins studded on the bodice. The neckline was low and round and embroidered with tiny beads and it had long sleeves which ended in cuffs, also embroidered with beads. It was the ideal dress for the occasion and she took it back to work feeling very pleased with her expedition. When Adrian asked to see it later in the afternoon she refused to show it to him.

'Wait until tonight,' she said teasingly. 'I want to surprise you.'

Adrian chuckled. 'All right, my dear, have it your own way. But I shall expect you to model it before we leave for the party.'

Madeline smiled and shook her head. Really, Adrian was a dear, she thought, sighing. Why couldn't she decide to marry him and be done with it?

They were due at the Mastersons' at nine o'clock and Adrian called at ten minutes to nine. He had already collected Mr. Hetherington and he was waiting in the car when they went down. Diana was not going out this evening. Jeff was studying and she had decided to wash her hair and play her records.

Madeline was wearing a brushed wool coat in a creamy colour and for once had left her hair loose on her shoulders. She looked about twenty-five and Diana had said, rather scathingly:

'Good heavens, Mum, no one will believe you have a daughter of over sixteen!'

‘That’s all to the good, surely?’ Madeline had answered, but Diana had sounded non-committal. Madeline wondered whether the fact of Diana losing Joe at such an early age had made her doubly dependent on herself, and doubly willing to resent her mother’s youthful appearance. It was as though she was afraid Madeline might forget she had a daughter altogether, which was ridiculous.

Of course, Joe had been so much older, and Diana would have obviously greatly preferred a homely, buxom type without any pretensions to attraction. Perhaps her campaign on Adrian’s behalf was fixed on the idea that as Adrian was middle-aged he might tone her mother down somewhat.

Madeline was amused at her speculations. Ought she indeed to make Adrian and Diana happy and marry him after all? But then she squashed the idea. It wouldn’t make anybody happy really. The novelty of having a headmaster as her stepfather would wear off with Diana if he tried to press any restriction upon her; Adrian would be continually in a state about his precious collection and Madeline – well! she would be utterly bored by the whole affair. Nothing, not even security, was worth that much.

Hetherington was most complimentary about her appearance. Adrian had already said how delightful she looked in the new dress, so Madeline felt sure she was going to enjoy herself, and relaxed completely.

The Mastersons’ house, Ingleside, was not far away. Standing in its own grounds and floodlit by night, it looked very impressive

as they turned between the permanently open drive gates. There were several cars parked in front of the house on the gravelled courtyard. Madeline saw that most of them were the wide, luxurious type, made by the Sheridan factory and its counterparts. They looked superlatively comfortable and she envied their occupants such vehicular superiority. There were several Sheridans like the one into which she had skidded last week on her scooter, but not one red one.

The house, which had been built during the sixteenth century, had been renovated extensively and although from the outside it looked typically Elizabethan, inside central heating, electric lights and fitted carpets had done away with much of its atmosphere.

The hall, wide and high with a carved roof was lit by electric candelabra, set at intervals round the walls giving a restful, luminous quality to the polished panelling and oak furniture. The floor, too had been polished and was ideal for dancing. However, most of the guests seemed to have congregated in a large lounge to the right of the hall and the manservant who had admitted them and taken their coats went into the lounge to advise his employers of their arrival.

Madeline was entranced by the place and was fascinatedly studying the minstrels' gallery when a dainty little woman in rich purple pants and blouse came out of the lounge to greet them. She introduced herself as Lucie Masterson, and said that her husband would join them later.

‘He’s closeted with Nicholas – you know, Nicholas Vitale, at the moment,’ she said, after she had discovered their identity. ‘They’re always talking business these days. I do hope you won’t think he’s being rude. But Nicholas is the boss and they do have a lot to discuss while he’s here.’

‘That’s quite all right, Mrs. Masterson,’ replied Hetherington, smiling. ‘We understand.’

‘Good,’ Lucie beamed. She could have been any age between thirty-five and forty-five, speculated Madeline, who thought she seemed a rather shallow woman at first appraisal.

Lucie drew them into the throng in the lounge. There were about thirty guests, all standing around drinking cocktails and exchanging small talk. A radiogram played soft music in a corner and there was an aroma of French perfume and Havana tobacco. A rich red carpet covered the floor, the colour of which was echoed in the heavy velvet curtains. There were couches and armchairs upholstered in soft leather while the white walls were relieved of starkness by vivid prints.

Many of the guests seemed to be married couples, Madeline discovered, as Lucie introduced them around. There was an almost equal number of Italians and Americans, and Lucie explained that Sheridans had factories in both countries as well as here. When Adrian and Mr. Hetherington got caught up in technical discussions with some of the older guests present Madeline found herself beside a young American couple called Fran and Dave Madison.

‘Do you live in Otterbury,’ asked Fran, interestedly, as Madeline accepted a cigarette from Dave.

‘Yes. I have a flat not far from here, actually,’ replied Madeline. ‘Do you?’

‘Yes. We, too, have a flat,’ confirmed Dave. ‘But we’re expecting to have a house soon in the new development near the factory later in the year.’

‘Oh, I see. You’re from America?’

‘That’s right,’ Dave grinned. ‘I guess the accent is unmistakable.’

Madeline chuckled. ‘I thought you might have been here visiting the Mastersons,’ she said. She looked at Fran. ‘Do you like England?’

‘It’s okay, I guess,’ said Fran, without enthusiasm. ‘There’s not much to do, is there? We’re hoping to go to Italy later on. Have you ever been abroad?’

‘Just to France,’ said Madeline ruefully. ‘Since my husband died, my daughter and I don’t go away a lot.’

‘You have a daughter?’ exclaimed Dave in surprise. ‘A baby daughter?’

‘No. Actually, she’s sixteen,’ replied Madeline, smiling. ‘But thank you for those few kind words.’

‘They weren’t kind,’ exclaimed Dave, grinning. ‘I wouldn’t say you looked more than twenty-five or six.’

Fran was looking a little put out now and Madeline was glad when another man came to join them. He was like Dave, tall and

fair, with pleasant freckly features.

‘Hi there, you two,’ he said easily, obviously knowing the Madisons well. ‘Have we got a new member of the organization?’

‘No,’ answered Dave, turning to him. ‘Madeline, this is Harvey Cummings – he, too, is a member of the Sheridan clan.’

‘How do you do,’ said Madeline politely, nodding at the newcomer.

‘I’m fine,’ answered Harvey, grinning. ‘Especially when a lovely woman is interested. Say, do you have a husband somewhere around?’

‘I’m a widow,’ replied Madeline, her cheeks reddening. His rather direct approach was a little disconcerting, to say the least.

‘Great. I mean great for me,’ said Harvey exuberantly. ‘I thought you looked rather lonely and unattached. May I attach myself to you?’

Madeline looked rather helplessly at the Madisons. ‘Is your wife not here?’ she asked cautiously.

Dave roared with laughter. ‘Harvey married? Are you kidding? Who would take on a liability like him?’

‘Take no notice,’ said Harvey with mock disdain. ‘It’s simply that no one understands me.’

Madeline laughed. She was enjoying this good-natured bantering. It was so long since she had been in company young enough to indulge in it. Adrian, although easy-going in his own way, was definitely not the type to make fun of himself. And even Joe had had no time for facetiousness, and because of her early

marriage Madeline had missed out on this kind of lighthearted interchange.

‘Oh, here’s Con,’ said Dave suddenly. ‘And our illustrious chief. They must have finished their business.’

Madeline and the others looked round. Two men were entering the room, both tall, but one was broader in the shoulders with lean good looks. They were both dressed in dark suits, but the broad-shouldered man was much darker skinned than his companion and was immediately recognizable to Madeline as the man who had driven the red car. Who was he? Conrad Masterson or Nicholas Vitale? Surely it could not be the latter!

‘Which one is Mr. Masterson?’ she asked Fran softly.

‘Why, the one on the left, honey,’ replied Fran. ‘Don’t you know him?’

‘No, I’m afraid not. So the darker man is Nicholas Vitale?’

‘Yes – handsome, isn’t he? He’s Italian, of course. That’s why he’s so dark-skinned. He’s spent a lot of time in the States. We all fell for him, naturally. But as you can see, I settled for Dave.’ She laughed at Dave’s indignant face. ‘Darling, Nicholas is the most elusive male since Adam!’

Madeline felt her stomach turn over. She had skidded into the car belonging to the owner of Sheridans. No wonder he had been annoyed!

Nicholas Vitale surveyed the throng in the lounge of the Mastersons’ house with cynical boredom in his eyes. Gatherings of this nature always bored him. Too much to drink and too many



predatory females hanging around him. Had he not had business with Conrad Masterson he would not have been here tonight. He had found a small club in London which was much more to his taste. However, he was here now, and he was expected to stay at least for an interval.

His keen eyes searched the room for Harvey Cummings. Harvey was his personal assistant and public relations man. Harvey liked these kind of affairs and in truth they had had some good times together, but somehow he didn't feel he was going to enjoy himself tonight.

He saw Harvey almost at once. He was standing with Dave Madison and his wife and another girl. He supposed the girl must be with Harvey.

Excusing himself from his host, he made his way through the chattering crowds to Harvey's side. He acknowledged the greetings of the other guests in passing, but to the regret of the female contingency, he did not stop to talk. Everyone knew who he was, of course, and he knew they would be speculating about his activities. His private life was practically non-existent at times and he knew he had a ruthless reputation where women were concerned. To a certain extent his reputation was justified, but Nicholas himself was well aware that the women who involved themselves in his life expected no more than he gave them. If they were willing to play the game Nicholas's way, he was certainly not the man to complain. Only Harvey of his circle of associates ever saw the real man behind the mask of diplomacy.

Harvey and his girl-friend were absorbed in conversation as he approached them and he had time to wonder who the girl was and what they were talking about. She was tall and slim and had hair of a very unusual and lovely colour. It swung loosely on her shoulders and looked thick and silky. He mused that Harvey could usually pick his women.

Putting a hand on Harvey's shoulder, he said:

'Do you mind if I break up this tête-à-tête?'

Harvey swung round and groaned. 'God, I thought it was the law! Must you creep up on a guy like that?'

Nicholas grinned, and then his eyes narrowed. The girl with Harvey was known to him. She had been riding the scooter which had bumped into his car last Friday. She had obviously recognized him, too, for her face was suddenly suffused with colour.

'Well, well,' he drawled. 'The world is really a small place.'

Harvey looked puzzled. 'How's that? Do you two know one another?'

'Mrs ... er ... Scott and I collided last Friday,' said Nicholas dryly. 'I was in my car at the time and she was riding a scooter.'

'Indeed?' Harvey raised his eyebrows. 'Say, Madeline, you didn't say you knew Nick when he walked in.'

'I don't ... that is....' Madeline felt schoolgirlishly embarrassed. 'Mr. Vitale merely helped me up, that's all. We were hardly introduced.'

Nicholas was amused. Last week he had thought she had a

very interesting face, but tonight she was quite lovely. He wanted to know more about her. He had taken down the number of her scooter as she was riding away and he had intended finding out more about her. What was she doing with Harvey? Particularly if she was married? He had no scruples about the kind of married women he knew, who invariably were involved with some man or other, but this creature was different. She wasn't like the usual run of his acquaintances. She had a clear, open countenance; honest, you might say, and beautiful, wide eyes.

'Be a pal, and get me a drink, Harvey,' he said blandly, ignoring Harvey's expression.

Harvey grimaced. 'Now why did you come over here, old buddy?' he asked in a mock-aggressive tone.

'So you could buy me a drink,' remarked Nicholas complacently. 'Run along ... old buddy.'

Harvey sighed and looked regretfully at Madeline.

'So be it. We all have our crosses to bear,' he remarked soulfully, causing Madeline to laugh at his injured manner, as he walked away.

After he had left them, Madeline twisted her glass nervously between her fingers, feeling tongue-tied. She was aware that he was studying her thoughtfully, and then he said:

'You're not annoyed that I broke up your conversation with Harvey, are you?'

Madeline looked up and shook her head vigorously.

'Heavens, no! I only met him about half an hour ago.'

‘I see. I thought perhaps that you were his latest conquest.’

Madeline smiled. ‘Oh, no. Nothing like that.’

‘Good.’ Nicholas looked serious and drew out his cigarette case. ‘Do you smoke?’ After she had taken one he went on: ‘And your husband? Is he here tonight?’

‘No. My husband died nine years ago.’

‘Nine?’ He looked very surprised. ‘Forgive me, but I thought you were newly married.’

‘Oh, please,’ Madeline sighed. ‘I’m thirty-three. Don’t say I look like a teenager, please.’

He smiled. She was refreshingly different. Women of her age usually liked to be thought very young. It was his experience that women never liked to be thought the age they really were. The very young ones liked to be thought older and experienced, and the older ones spent all their time trying to recapture a youth which simply emphasized their actual ages.

‘All right,’ he agreed mildly. ‘But you are a very attractive woman. And I think I ought to apologize for my rather churlish behaviour last week. I was not very polite. I’m sorry. I assure you I am not usually so ungallant. However, had we not met this evening, I should have definitely made an effort to discover your address and make some atonement.’

‘That’s not necessary,’ murmured Madeline, feeling out of her depth.

‘I must disagree. That afternoon I had had a rather disturbing telephone call from my daughter before leaving the factory and

I'm afraid I was in quite an angry frame of mind.'

'That's all right,' replied Madeline, her heart sinking unreasonably at the mention of his daughter. She might have known he would be married. 'Is ... is your wife over here with you?'

'My wife, also, is dead,' he replied with a shrug. 'She died when Maria was born, all of fifteen years ago.'

'I see.' Madeline bent her head. 'I have a daughter, too. She's a year older, sixteen.'

'Really?' He looked astounded. 'Maria is still in Rome. She wants to come over here and join me. Of course, she objects to my long absences abroad and as she lives with my mother she's rather spoiled and usually gets what she wants.'

'Do you intend being here long?' asked Madeline, looking up again.

He made an undecided gesture. 'Two months; three maybe. I've only been here ten days. I can't tell. If I like it here I may stay on.'

Harvey arrived back just then with a tray of drinks. He was not as tall as Nicholas, although he was a tall man, and they both seemed giants compared to the men Madeline was used to associating with.

They all stood talking together for a while and then presently were joined by Con Masterson and another young couple who were introduced as Paul and Mary-Lee Lucas. Mary-Lee chattered away easily to Madeline, asking her if she had any

children and explaining that she herself had four. Madeline envied her her complete lack of self-consciousness.

Madeline herself still felt rather bemused by the whole affair. Con Masterson was now talking seriously to Nicholas Vitale and he was listening intently, now and then drawing on the cigarette between his fingers. Even in profile he was a remarkably handsome man, his eyelashes long and thick and very black. She wasn't sure whether she felt glad or sorry that their conversation was ended. She had enjoyed talking to him, but it was probably just as well that Harvey had come back. After all, it was obvious that Nicholas Vitale was perfectly at his ease with women and his charming manner was too expert to be assumed. No, he had had plenty of practice, while she was a mere novice when conversing with men.

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.