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Something Dangerous

Written by Penny Vincenzi

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PENNY VINCENZI

Something
Dangerous

The Spoils of Time: 2

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The Main Characters

LONDON

Oliver Lytton, *head of Lyttons publishing house*

Lady Celia Lytton, *his wife and senior editor*

Giles, *twins Venetia and Adele, and Kit, their children*

Margaret (LM) Lytton, *Oliver's elder sister and business manager*

Jay Lytton, *her son by her dead lover Jago Ford*

Gordon Robinson, *her husband*

Jack Lytton, *Oliver's younger brother*

Lily Lytton, *his actress wife*

Barty Miller, *brought up in the Lytton family by Celia*

Sebastian Brooke, *bestselling children's author published by Lyttons*

Boy Warwick, *Giles's old schoolfriend*

Abigail Clarence, *a teacher, and friend of Barty*

Cedric Russell, *a society photographer*

COUNTRY

Lord Beckenham, *Celia's father*

Lady Beckenham, *her mother*

Billy Miller, *Barty's brother*

NEW YORK

Robert Lytton, *Oliver's older brother and successful property developer*

Laurence Elliott, *his estranged stepson from his marriage to Jeanette, now dead*

Jamie Elliott, *Laurence's brother*

Maud Lytton, *Robert and Jeanette's daughter*

John Brewer, *Robert's business partner*

Felicity Brewer, *his wife, a poet published by Lyttons*

Kyle Brewer, *their son, an editor*

Geordie MacColl, *an author published by Lyttons*

PARIS

Guy Constantine, *head of a French publishing house*

Luc Lieberman, *a senior editor*

Madame André, *Adele's landlady*

Chapter 1

Venetia Lytton was extremely fond of telling people that the whole country had gone into mourning on the day of her birth.

This announcement, although historically accurate, and guaranteed to win her attention in whatever company she chose to make it, gave nonetheless a slightly erroneous picture; it was left to her twin sister Adele, naturally inclined to a slightly more prosaic view of life, to explain that their birth had coincided almost to the hour with the death of King Edward the Seventh.

‘Oh – all right,’ Venetia would say crossly, ‘but it was still a terrifically dark day, Mummy said the nurses were sobbing harder and harder each time they brought in another bouquet of flowers and when Daddy arrived, the doctor actually greeted him wearing a black tie. So of course he thought something terrible had happened.’

Whereupon someone, usually one of the twins’ two brothers if they were present, would inevitably remark that indeed it had, and that she and Adele had been launched upon an unsuspecting world, then Venetia would pretend to sulk, Adele would smile serenely, and someone else (usually another young woman in search of a little attention for herself) would endeavour to change the subject.

It was not easy to divert attention from the Lytton twins; not only were they extremely pretty and very amusing, they were quite extraordinarily alike. It was said that the famous Morgan twins, Thelma and Gloria (better known as Lady Furness and Mrs Reginald Vanderbilt respectively), could not be told apart unless you were close enough to detect a small scar under Thelma’s chin, the result of a roller-skating accident when she was a child; the Lytton twins offered no such helpful clue. Venetia did have a small mole on her right buttock, and the twins had also observed, from the first moment such a thing was observable, that Adele’s nipples were darker and slightly larger than her sister’s, but since these were facts extremely hard to verify, and certainly of no use at all in normal social situations, most people had

no idea much of the time which of the twins they were talking to, sitting next to, dancing with.

It was a state of affairs that the twins still found amusing to encourage. They had gloried in it at school, each claiming constantly to be the other, confusing and enraging their teachers beyond endurance until their mother discovered what they were doing and, being immensely – and most unusually for her class and age – concerned for their education, threatened to send them to different boarding schools, which frightened them into submission, so deep was their dread of separation.

At their coming-out dance earlier that year, dressed in identical white satin dresses, large white roses in their gleaming dark shingled hair, they had produced so strong a sense of dizzy confusion that several members of the older generation at least had felt themselves to be rather more intoxicated than they were; and it was even rumoured that when they had been presented at court, they had changed places. But those who knew them best said not even Adele (at heart more outrageous if less extrovert than Venetia) would have dared do so dreadful a thing.

They were enjoying their season hugely; their mother had chosen one of the early Easter courts deliberately, feeling it would be more memorable, more distinguished: 'By June it's getting so dreadfully busy, you're in danger of being just another dance.'

Not that the occasion, held at Celia's parents' London house in Curzon Street, was in danger of being any such thing: had the house itself been less magnificent, the guest list less distinguished, the champagne less fine, the music less fashionable, the very fact that it was a dance for the twins would have made it remarkable. They were, unarguably, two of the most popular and brilliant debutantes of their year, caught up in a heady haze of dances and parties and country house weekends, with all the excitement of the actual season – the Derby, Ascot, Henley and the rest – still ahead. Their photographs appeared constantly in the society papers, and they had even been awarded the great accolade of a whole page in *Vogue*, wearing their Vionnet presentation dresses. Their mother, while complaining ceaselessly that their season was absorbing too much of her time, was extremely pleased with their success. To launch one beautiful and popular daughter would have been gratifying, to be able to claim two was triumphal.

Today, their eighteenth birthday, there had been even more reference to the country-in-mourning than usual; so much so that Giles, their

elder brother by five years, said at breakfast that he would withdraw from the evening's party if he heard any more about it.

'And then you'll be sorry, Venetia, because I shall tell Boy Warwick not to come either.'

'I couldn't be less bothered,' said Venetia airily, pulling out a compact from her pocket, dabbing more powder on to her small, perfectly straight nose. 'It was you who invited him, not me, he's your friend—'

'Venetia, darling, don't do that at the table, it is so dreadfully common,' said her mother briskly. 'Now of course Boy will be coming, I can't have the arrangements upset at this point. I will check with Cook that everything is in order for dinner this evening – we're only nineteen I think, now that Barty can't come—'

'Such a shame,' murmured Venetia to Adele, and then seeing her mother's eyes on her, smiled brightly and said, 'I was just saying what a shame that was. Still, I suppose it is a long way. From Oxford. Just for dinner.'

'Well, she would have stayed a couple of days,' said Celia, 'but her finals are looming, and she is very anxious about them. I think we must respect that, don't you?'

'Of course,' said Adele.

'Absolutely,' said Venetia.

Their eyes met over their coffee cups: then fixed with sweet innocence on their mother.

'We will miss her,' said Adele, with a careful, quick sigh. 'She's so clever, I'm sure she'll get her first anyway.'

'Absolutely bound to,' said Venetia.

'Absolutely nothing of the sort,' said Celia. 'I cannot understand how you two can still have so little grasp of the connection between hard work and success. No achievement is automatic, and especially no academic achievement. Your father got a first, but he worked unimaginably hard for it, didn't you, Oliver?'

'What's that, my dear?' Oliver Lytton looked up from *The Times*, frowning gently.

'Apparently you worked very hard to get your first, Daddy,' said Venetia.

'I really can't remember much about it,' said Oliver. 'I suppose so.'

'Mummy says you did.'

'As I hadn't met your mother then, I really think it's a little difficult for her to say.'

'Mummy doesn't find anything difficult to say,' said Adele, and giggled; Venetia echoed her.

Celia glared at them. 'I really have more important things to do than engage in extremely silly arguments. And if I'm going to be able to be home in time for your birthday dinner I shall have to leave for the office in half an hour. Giles, do you want to come with me?'

'I – think I might go on ahead,' said Giles quickly, 'if you don't mind.'

'Mind? My dear Giles, why should I mind? I'm delighted you're taking your work so seriously. What particular aspect of it is to occupy you this morning? It must be very urgent, that it can't wait thirty minutes? Nothing's gone wrong, I hope.'

God, she was so unfair, thought Giles; so awkwardly, arrogantly unfair. Putting him in his place, underlining his lowly position at Lyttons even here at the family breakfast table.

'Nothing's wrong, Mother,' he said. 'But I have pages of proofs to read and mark up on the new Buchanan book and—'

'It's not going to be late, I hope,' said Celia. 'It really is imperative it goes on sale in July. I would be very worried to think—'

'Mother, it's not late. It's absolutely on schedule.'

'Then why the rush?'

'Celia, do leave the boy alone,' said Oliver mildly. 'He simply wants to get on with his job before the telephones start ringing. Proof correcting is painstaking work; I always liked to do it early in the day myself.'

'I'm perfectly aware of the mechanics of proof correction,' said Celia. 'I've done a great deal of it myself. I simply wanted to—'

'Celia—' said Oliver quietly. His eyes met hers; she stared at him for a moment, then stood up, pushing her chair back loudly, throwing down her napkin.

'Well, clearly I must get to Lyttons myself,' she said, 'since Giles is setting such an extremely good example. If you will all excuse me.'

Giles waited a moment, looking miserably down at his plate, then hurried out after her. The twins watched him; then, 'Poor old Giles,' said Venetia.

'Poor old boy,' said Adele.

'I'm afraid,' said Oliver, 'I fail to see quite why Giles should be deserving of such sympathy.'

'Daddy! Of course you can see. Mummy never loses a single opportunity to put him in his place, make it clear she's boss, at the office as well as here.'

'Adele! That was quite uncalled for. I think you should apologise.'

She looked at him, serious, almost shocked just for a moment, then the small, beautiful face broke into a sweetly flirtatious smile.

'Daddy, don't be silly. I was only joking, you know I was.' She jumped up, went over to him, kissed him quickly. 'Of course Mummy's not the boss. You are, everyone knows that. But – well, Giles is so nervous about his new job. And Mummy going on at him doesn't exactly help. Does it?'

'She wasn't going on at him,' said Oliver firmly, 'merely making sure there was no problem.'

'Yes, of course. Sorry, Daddy. It's sort of hard for us to understand, I suppose. Not being part of Lyttons ourselves. How important it is that everything goes well.'

'Adele,' said Oliver, 'nothing would make me happier than for you to be part of Lyttons. Or at least to think you would be one day.'

'And maybe we will,' said Venetia. 'Let's hope.'

'Let's hope,' said Adele, echoing her, giving her father another kiss.

He smiled at them both and stood up, scooping up the daily papers. 'Well, we shall see. Meanwhile, you must enjoy yourselves as much as you can. Now I, too, have work to do. What are your plans for the day? Some important shopping, no doubt.'

'Desperately important,' said Venetia.

'Absolutely desperately,' said Adele. 'Big country house party on Saturday for a start. We need new shoes, we've danced all ours through. Bye, Daddy. See you later.'

Left alone at the table, they looked at one another.

'Poor old Giles,' said Venetia.

'Poor old boy,' said Adele.

Giles walked briskly along the Embankment away from Cheyne Walk, away from his parents, wishing passionately he was not going to see them again in little less than an hour's time. He had been working at the House of Lytton on Paternoster Row, unarguably one of London's great publishing companies, for almost two years now, rising in its hierarchy from post boy to clerk to the trade counter to junior editor; the rise had, of course, been swift, hardly a proper apprenticeship, but he had still had to go through it.

'It's important you do,' Oliver had said. 'You have to understand what every phase in the process means, how it forms the whole.' And of course Giles agreed with that, he had not expected to come in as Mr Lytton the Third, and start publishing his own list on day one. He had worked with a will, had enjoyed it.

He had made friends, had enjoyed the others seeing that he was not stuck up, did not consider himself too good for such lowly tasks. But

this new phase was much more interesting. Spotting the typesetters' errors, the mis-spellings, the wrong placing of punctuation marks, and then copying the corrections from one master proof on to other secondary ones, was more like proper publishing, reading each new book as it came off the presses, discovering exactly what lay behind the titles in the catalogues, the endless editorial meetings, the discussions as to whether this or that cover might be more suitable, the growing excitement that accompanied a new publication.

He enjoyed it all; and he didn't mind working late, he didn't mind working hard, he didn't mind being told to do something again and again, he didn't even mind being told he had done something wrong. What he did mind, almost unbearably, was his mother and her overpowering presence, her interference in everything he did. When his father pointed out that he had sent a second proof down with errors still on it, he felt mortified, apologised and put it right; but when his mother leaned over his desk, watching him as he marked up the proofs, pointing out a mistake he had missed, when she had come into the sales office and said she would like to go over some invoices with him personally, 'just to make quite sure they're absolutely correct', he almost felt like crying. It did not seem to be her desire on those occasions to help him to do things right, rather to point out that he had done them wrong and to make sure that everyone in the place saw her doing it, saw her stressing her superiority over him, observed her making it clear that he was so frequently at fault, that he might be her son, but she was not prepared to tolerate his ineptitude.

Her own perfectionism, her attention to detail, her almost visionary capacity for predicting literary taste, were legendary in the industry at large, let alone within Lyttons; she was talked about, admired, adulated, a legend in her own time. And it was well-earned, that admiration, that adulation; the beautiful, brilliant Lady Celia Lytton moved among the great literary figures of her day, took her place alongside the greatest editors, the finest publishers, the most brilliant authors. And that was quite right and as it should be. But it did seem to him that she could afford to be at least a little generous in furthering the ambitions and supporting the career of her own son: rather than crushing them at every turn with something so fierce and ferocious he would have called it jealousy, had not the very notion seemed absurd.

'I think we're getting it,' said Venetia, bursting into the sitting room that she and Adele shared. 'Isn't that thrilling?'

'Don't tell me!'

'I am telling you. I heard Mummy talking to Brunson. She said to be sure to see he kept the area in front of the house clear this afternoon.'

'Does sound promising, doesn't it? Oh, how marvellous. Mind you, it is time. I mean—'

'I know. Her very own too. Just for driving herself up and down to Oxford.'

'Well, but we'd rather share, wouldn't we? I wonder what it'll be. I mean one of those darling baby Austins would be wonderful, wouldn't it?'

'Utterly wonderful. Of course, a sports car would be more – dashing. Bunty Valance has got an Aston Martin, can you imagine. You don't think we might—?'

'Not a chance,' said Adele. 'They're bound to give us something tame to learn on. Can't be very difficult, can it?'

'Of course not. Bunty said it's simply a matter of being able to keep going in a straight line, and learning which pedal to stop and which to go.'

'Well, there you are then. What heaven. I must say, I'm looking forward to tonight as well—'

'Me too,' said Venetia.

Adele looked at her. 'Especially seeing—'

'Well – yes. I mean – yes. Adele, you do think—'

'Definitely. Couldn't have been more obvious—'

'Truly?'

'Truly. And Babs says he's left—'

'But you didn't say—?'

'Of course not. Because she rather does—'

'Herself? I thought so.'

'But you're much more—'

'Do you think so?'

'Not just think,' said Adele. 'I know.'

'Goody,' said Venetia with great satisfaction. This was the kind of conversation the twins had all the time; a kind of verbal shorthand, phrases, subjects anticipated and therefore the need to actually speak them removed. It fascinated their friends, irritated their brothers, and absolutely enraged their mother, who could not bear to be excluded from anything.

'I wonder what Maud's doing?' said Adele suddenly.

'Still asleep, at this very minute I expect. It's only six o'clock over there.'

Maud Lytton was their cousin; born by some strange quirk of human biology exactly one year after them; they met only occasionally, but they were fond of her.

‘Of course. One of these years we ought to spend the day together. She’s such fun.’

‘Bit of a long journey for a birthday tea. But – yes. It’s time she came over again. We should suggest it. Mummy’s a bit funny about her, though, isn’t she?’

‘Only because she’s American. She thinks they’re all common.’

‘She’s so ridiculous,’ added Venetia with a giggle. ‘Mummy, I mean, and to think she used to be a socialist. Come on, let’s go. Now, shall we have the Marcel wave or not?’

Venetia hesitated. ‘Not today. We might not like it and that would spoil tonight. Next time?’

‘Next time.’

They arrived back just before lunch. The morning had not been quite absorbed by the hairdressers, they had made a trip to Harvey Nichols where they bought each other a birthday present, a tradition since they had first had their own spending money at the age of eight.

Today, the presents they bought one another were diamanté clips for their hair, Adele’s an arrow-like shape, Venetia’s a curving crescent moon; they agreed that they would wear them that evening.

Luncheon they were taking that day informally, in the nursery dining room with Nanny; they adored her, and felt for her, bereft as she was of charges during the day now that Kit was at school. Kit was eight; unlike Giles, he had not been sent away to Prep school; besotted with her youngest, Celia had refused to part with him, to subject him to the brutality and misery she knew Giles had endured. Time enough for him to go, she had said, at thirteen, and the headmaster of the school she had chosen, a small establishment in Hampstead much favoured by the intelligentsia, had said he was an absolute certainty for Winchester, and possibly even as a scholar; it was one of the innumerable sources of resentment Giles felt against his small brother.

‘Darling Nanny, it’s beautiful,’ said Venetia.

‘Absolutely wonderful,’ said Adele.

They sat side by side on the nursery sofa, smiling at Nanny, holding her gift, a small but very pretty cut glass vase. She liked to give them one present between them for their birthday (although not Christmas), and their parents had very often done the same, one dolls’

house, one dolls' pram (although twin style), one artist's easel and box of paints.

'It makes sense,' Nanny would say, 'only one birthday, after all.'

The twins never minded being turned into one in this way; they saw themselves if not quite as one, then certainly two parts of a whole. They still liked to dress identically, partly for fun, partly because, as Venetia had remarked, 'We always know exactly how we look. We don't need mirrors.'

Usually they shopped together; but if they were out separately, they always bought two of whatever they chose. 'Not so we can dress the same,' Adele would explain, 'but because we know the other will want it too.'

The hair clips they had bought that day were the occasional exception; deliberately chosen so that they could be swapped halfway through the evening; the childish fun to be had with that, begun in the nursery, was endless. They had always been sent to school with different coloured hair ribbons; amused and surprised that it should not have occurred to anyone that they would, they swapped them over whenever it suited them. It was a whole term before anyone discovered that their both achieving a distinction in their Grade One piano examination was not so much due to extra practice by the less musically talented Venetia, as to Adele entering the examination room twice. For such sins, they were punished, but they continued, with blithe disregard for such consequences, to exploit their situation.

The only thing they could not bear, and the threat of which ensured good behaviour, was separation.

'So, what are you doing the rest of the day?' asked Nanny now, heaping shepherd's pie (another nursery birthday tradition) on to their plates. 'Shopping, I suppose.' She sounded faintly disapproving; she felt the twins were over-frivolous. In this she was not alone; their mother, who had confidently expected them to go to university, or to take a secretarial course at the very least, and then to show some interest in working at Lyttons, was of much the same opinion.

'I find it quite distressing,' she said to Oliver at least once a week, 'that all those girls want to do is first buy clothes and then wear them. That expensive education, totally wasted.'

To which Oliver would reply that surely the purpose of education was to enrich the mind, rather than train it rigorously for some specific occupation. 'Their education will be valuable to them whatever they do. Even,' he added, looking wryly over his spectacles at her, half

smiling, 'if they settle for marriage as their career. They're very young, let them have some fun. Plenty of time for them to develop careers if they want to.' And he would then endeavour to change the subject.

'No, Nanny darling, actually we're not going shopping,' said Adele now, 'because we've already done it. And had our hair done. So we're staying in this afternoon and – well, just staying in. Getting ready for tonight.' She looked at Nanny. 'You haven't heard any rumours about – about this afternoon, have you, Nanny?'

'What sort of rumours?' said Nanny. She sounded flustered. 'And anyway, you know I'm always the last to hear anything in this house. Now, Adele, look what you're doing, you don't want to get gravy on that pretty dress.'

The twins exchanged a look; Nanny's inability to deceive over even the mildest matter was legendary.

They were not too surprised therefore – although rapturously delighted – when Brunson called them downstairs in the middle of the afternoon, saying there was a delivery for them, and they opened the front door to see their parents standing in the sunshine, one on each side of a scarlet Austin Seven, and holding a banner across it which said HAPPY BIRTHDAY. The next two hours were spent weaving rather unsteadily up and down the Embankment, under the instruction of Daniels, the chauffeur; they came into the house at six, flushed with triumph and saying there was nothing to it.

'And we thought we'd drive ourselves down to Sussex tomorrow afternoon,' said Adele carelessly to her mother. 'So much less trouble for everyone.'

To which Celia replied that it would be a great deal of trouble for everyone if they had a crash and that they would not be driving themselves anywhere for several weeks.

'That's so unfair! Barty drove herself up to Oxford last term.'

'Barty had had hours of driving lessons and had to satisfy both your father and me that she was competent before we allowed that. Now, hadn't you better go and have your baths? Your friends will be arriving in less than an hour. Not to mention – yes, Brunson?'

'Telephone, Lady Celia. Mr Brooke.'

'Oh – yes, thank you, Brunson. I'll take it upstairs in my study.'

Celia picked up her heavy silver hairbrush and hurled it across her bedroom. It hit the wall above her bed and dropped rather

ignominiously silently on to her pillow. She stood up and stalked over to the window, looked down at the Embankment. It blurred with her tears; the realisation that she was crying made her angrier still. 'Damn,' she said, 'damn damn damn. Filthy bloody manners. You don't treat people like that, Sebastian, you simply don't.'

She pulled her dressing-table door open viciously, took out her cigarette case and paced up and down the room, smoking, inhaling hard, trying to calm herself. It was absurd, she knew, to be so upset. But she was. And the twins would be upset too, when they heard he was going to be late for their birthday dinner, very late, possibly not arriving until it was over, simply because he had been delayed in Oxford, because of some ridiculous additional reading he had agreed to give at the last minute.

'Bastard. Bastard—' She had not realised she was speaking aloud; very aloud. Kit put his head round her door.

'Mummy? You all right?'

'Yes. Yes, I'm fine. Thank you, darling.'

'I thought I heard you shouting. You don't look fine.'

'Well, I am. Good day at school?'

'Yes, very. Where are the twins?'

'Getting ready.'

'What's that wizard car outside?'

'The little red one? It's their birthday present.'

'They've got a car! Lucky beasts. Can I go and sit in it? When can I have a ride, I want a go—'

Celia laughed, restored as always to good humour by his presence. The intensity of her feelings for Kit, her beloved youngest child, was so powerful it eclipsed almost every other emotion she knew. Not only beautiful, with his bright gold hair and his dark-blue eyes, not only brilliant – reading at four, writing stories and poetry at seven – but hugely charming, with the kind of social grace seldom seen in a child. At an age when most boys were able to converse only about cricket, model trains and the beastliness of school, Kit liked to talk about books, other people, adults as well as his own friends, and the events of the day. He read the newspaper every morning at breakfast, and for his last birthday had requested his own Gecophone radio, with its horn and neat wooden box, so much more convenient than a crystal set, so that he could listen to the news and to concerts in his own room.

The twins found this entirely baffling; their own preferred, and indeed only, form of home entertainment being the gramophone on which they played records of dance music, practising new steps with

one another ready for the next party or nightclub. Fashion and society magazines satisfied all their literary requirements.

'You'll grow up dreary and boring like Giles,' they had warned Kit, 'or even Barty.' To which he would reply that he thought Barty was the jolliest of girls, and Giles not boring at all either; but in fact he was not in the least serious himself, and he loved to sit on the twins' beds listening to them chattering and giggling, asking them about their friends, most of whom made a great fuss of him when they came to the house, and where they were going that evening.

'You'd better be careful, baby brother,' Venetia had said one night, 'Mummy wouldn't approve of your interest in this sort of thing, you know. Far too frivolous.'

'Mummy approves of everything I do,' said Kit, with sublime self-confidence, and although he smiled as he said it, it was perfectly true.

'Kit, run along, darling,' said Celia now, 'go and get changed for dinner.'

'OK.'

'And don't say OK in your grandmama's hearing. Please.'

'OK.'

'Kit!'

She looked at him sharply; his face was innocently blank. Then he grinned at her. 'I won't. I promise. Hallo, Father, just going.'

Oliver frowned at Celia.

'I wish you wouldn't smoke in our bedroom, Celia.'

'I'm sorry, Oliver.' She so rarely apologised that she was surprised to hear herself doing it. 'I was – very annoyed about something.'

'Then perhaps you should try to be annoyed in your study. What is it?'

'Sebastian's going to be very late. Possibly not here until after nine.'

'Really? What's happened?'

'He's been asked to give a second reading. At the Bodleian. The first one was sold out completely.'

'Well, that's good for all of us.'

'You know perfectly well that's not the point. It's rude and unkind and extremely arrogant. Clearly being the most prominent children's author in the country has finally gone to his head. The twins will be so upset—'

'Celia, I don't really think they'll mind very much at all. They have their own friends here, they're going on to some nightclub, I don't really think the absence of one rather elderly gentleman—'