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Envy

Judy Corbett

Chapter One

We were girls together, Isabel and I. That's where it all began. Two girls from the same village – in reality, different continents. She from the big house, Critchley Hall, I from The Shack on the Lower Road; or so I called it. And it did matter, even though she said it didn't. She liked me for what I was, she said. I felt like a shell she'd picked up on the beach. I felt like a keepsake.

We met on a rock – a volcanic accident – the kind of rock sailors are shipwrecked on; though there was no water, only a beautiful vale webbed over with hedgerows full of birds. She was sitting on one side of this rock reading a book and I was sitting on the other, also reading a book. I thought I was alone until I heard her yawn; a yawn like a small mammal sneezing. A very curious sound it was. I turned my book words down onto the grass and went to investigate from what creature the sound had emanated. And I found a girl whose body reminded me of a seed-pod just on the verge of bursting. I said, 'Hello,' and she looked at me through a sulky brown fringe. She 9 was pretty. I wished I had been born pretty. Her cheeks were the colour of sliced bread.

Of course we'd seen each other in the village: I, the urchin child gathering fruit in the summer lanes; she, always behind tinted windows so the whiteness of her skin in sunlight surprised me. But now, face to face, we prowled around each other like tigers, tails ramrod straight with fur all upstanding.

'I've seen you around,' I said.

'You live on the farm,' she said, 'your stepfather rents it from my father. You belong to us.' Teenage girls can be cruel. She had every idea how much those words would wound. I raised up my chin to try to dampen the fire that flared within. She saw. She blushed. She closed her book, indicating her regret. And that little slip of thoughtlessness was enough to put me on the winning side.

'Look,' she said. 'I didn't mean it.Why don't you come for tea?'

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At The Shack on the Lower Road, tea was a main meal at five o'clock. At Critchley Hall it was sugar and spice and small triangular cuts of bread without crusts. We sipped tea that tasted of burnt twigs out of pink-andyellow cups that had butterfly wings for handles. There were landscapes of reassuring peasant scenes hanging on the walls. Through a square of rippling glass I watched a gardener skim leaves with a net off the garden pond. The room was smaller than the child in me remembered. I'd been here once before.

'I've upset you, haven't I?' she said.

'Of course not,' I replied; her attention raising me moth-like to my feet.

'Then say I'm forgiven.'

I played the moment for dramatic effect. I stroked my chin, then tapped the ends of my fingers onto their reflection in the tabletop. 'I forgive you,' I said, without conviction. She smiled with relief, leaving soft indents where her fingers had been in the surface of her sandwich, then amazed me by putting lemon in her tea.We talked. She told me which moisturiser she preferred; had I discovered a certain kind of nail varnish guaranteed not to chip, had I ever hennaed my hair, and I stared at her in disbelief, my mouth just a little bit ajar.

Later, she showed me her bedroom. She told me the colour on the walls was gardenia. Her bed was heaped with a white cloud of pillows and suspended above the headboard was a dainty canopy of lace that reminded me of the Virgin Mary. I went to her dressing table and fingered the necklaces she wore about her neck.There was a musical box made out of shells that she said had belonged to the daughter of an emperor. It was filled with a tangle of beaded purses that her parents' friends had brought back for her from around the world.

'Try this,' she said, spraying my cuff with Eve's Delight. It was a wicked, molesting scent and when I put it to my nose I knew that nothing would ever smell the same again. It smelt rich and I was tired of being poor.

I thought of my bedroom, the room I shared with a couple of stepsisters of the Cinderella kind; though they weren't especially ugly and I was no aspiring princess.My mother was my real mother whom I loved and I had a stepfather who preferred me to call him uncle.

The bedroom we shared looked out over a paddock full of geese. The sound of them made me think of the potato famine – a lesson from school that had stuck. Squares of newspaper wedged the wardrobe doors shut. Three small iron-framed beds were pushed to the furthest corners of the room, as though contagion lurked in the horsehair mattresses. Every night I fell asleep to a landscape of watchful faces staring down from the cracks in the ceiling.We each had a little chest of drawers in which we hid our private things beneath a pancakestack of knickers. But privacy was all in the head: a state you strove for but never attained, like love or receipt of it. The broken lock on the bathroom door put pay to privacy. Every morning the gulls came back

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and settled on the granary roof, charring with the geese, and every night the sheepdogs rattled on their chains like weary ghosts.

Isabel must have noticed the dragging corners of my mouth. She said, 'C'mon, let's go and find my dad.'

We'd gone up a back stair and having walked along a landing framed with hunting prints we now came down a front stair. There were gilded putti on the ceiling of the stairwell. My plastic soles made shaming little thwacks on the marble stairs. There were logs piled up in a wicker basket like parcels of butter waiting to be melted in the flames of the drawing-room fireplace. Such demonstrations of grandeur made me want to act the clown.To my surprise, I opened my mouth and made a sound I'd not heard myself make before. I meowed like a cat that has a bird in its mouth and the echo burnished the walls with my longing. Isabel looked shocked, then laughed, then drew in her breath and sent up her own whines with mine so that our cattish voices carried upwards like smoke, like mating butterflies. She grasped my hand and launched it into the air with hers, in the way of cheering footballers after a goal. I was not impressed but I went along with it, for she looked unbearably pretty with her blackberry eyes and deep dimples in which a porcelain dove might have laid a clutch of small golden eggs. I hoped her prettiness would contaminate me. I hoped I could be changed. Even then I was aware of the rot that lay within.

We found Daddy polishing the flank of his sports car in a converted loosebox, where the growl of a V-6 engine had replaced the soft whinnies of Irish mares bred for their broad hindquarters.

'Hi there, Sweet Pea,' he said to Isabel, with his eyes on me. 'Are you two having fun?'

'We're going down to the peach house,' said Isabel. They made eye contact: pupil to pupil. There was something going on between these two. Something dark and normal. I felt out of my depth, and not for the first time. I offered him a primeval little pout to hide my gaucherie and the direction of his polishing changed from landscape to portrait. He wore the bottom half of a pinstripe suit, with his tie tucked in between the buttons of his shirt. Though it was a weekend, I wore my school jumper – at fifteen it was a garment I was proud of growing out of.

They then gave a little performance entirely for my benefit while I kept quiet. A not very funny joke from him; a whining 'Daad' from her; a cat's tail swipe with his duster aimed loosely at the back of her bare leg.

'Bring me back a plum, girls.' And Isabel grinned.

Later.We lay in the tall grass – The Rough – as it was called, where the mower couldn't reach and ate the fruit we'd picked in the glasshouse. I liked my fruit slightly green and unripe; Isabel liked hers brimming over, preferably with red juice. She bit into a plum, and I heard the skin snag on her teeth and the juice flooding her mouth and spilling onto her lips. She said, 'I love this weather,' tossing her plum stone into a stand of cow parsley. 'If I have to die, I want to die in the sun,' and she

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fell back into the grass with her arms above her head. Two wood pigeons with bloated undercarriages flew above our heads. I could feel the heat bouncing onto my legs from the span of bricks in the high garden wall.

'I'll remember that,' I said, and we laughed whilst

watching a thrush pull a worm out of the lawn.

'Come again tomorrow and we'll swim,' and then she got up and I saw a latticework of grass had imprinted itself on her thigh.

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