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Opening Extract from...

An Outrageous Affair

Written by Penny Vincenzi

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An Outrageous Affair

Penny Vincenzi



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The Main Characters

ENGLAND

Caroline, Lady Hunterton, née Miller
Sir William Hunterton, *her husband*
Chloe, *their daughter, later Mrs/Lady Piers Windsor*
Toby and Jolyon, their sons
Jack Bamforth, *Caroline's groom*
Joe Payton, *arts journalist, later Caroline's partner*
Piers (later Sir Piers) Windsor, *Chloe's husband*
Flavia, *his mother*
Guinevere Davies, *his first wife*
Pandora, Edmund and Kitty, *children of Piers and Chloe*
Rosemary, *their nanny*
Jean Potts, *Piers's secretary*
Ludovic Ingram, *lawyer, friend of the Windsors*
Magnus Phillips, *journalist and biographer*

NEW YORK

Brendan FitzPatrick, *screen name* Byron Patrick
Kathleen, *his mother*
Edna, Kate and Maureen, *his sisters*
Kevin Clint, *a theatrical agent*
Hilton Berelman, *talent scout for Twentieth Century Fox*
Fleur FitzPatrick, *daughter of Brendan and Caroline Hunterton*
Poppy Blake, *a colleague of Fleur*
Reuben Blake, *her brother*

HOLLYWOOD

Yolande duGrath, *drama coach*
Rose Sharon, *friend of Brendan*
Naomi MacNeice, *studio executive*
Perry Browne, *Publicist*

Chapter 1

1942

Caroline wasn't sure who was doing a better job at wrecking her life, her mother or Winston Churchill: her mother, she supposed, being clearly hell-bent on her personal downfall, on the destruction of her youth, although Winston was doing a pretty good job backing her up, removing any man under the age of forty-five from her orbit, enveloping the country in a funereal shroud of blackness and telling them all they had to look forward to was blood, sweat and tears. Of course such thoughts were near heresy, and she was frightened almost to express them herself, Mr Churchill being invested (probably quite justly) with Messiah-like qualities, worshipped and revered by the whole country; indeed when they all gathered round the wireless in the kitchen at the Moat House and listened to the majestic poetry of his voice, even Caroline stopped begrudging all that she was asked to give and give up. That was the whole trouble of course; it was all giving up, all negative. She would have rushed out tomorrow to join one of the forces, would have given her life gladly working in the Ops Room as a Wren, or as a mechanic in the ATS, would have personally toiled in the rubble of the bombed cities along with the fire services; would even have run a soup kitchen with the Red Cross, or trained as a nurse and volunteered for the most dangerous overseas postings. That was what she understood by the blood, sweat and tears Winston offered them, that was how she saw defending her island, whatever the cost might be, but her mother would have none of it, would not countenance her doing anything constructive, certainly not joining the services. 'Yes indeed,' she had said icily, when Caroline went and begged her permission to join the Wrens, proffering the famous poster: 'Free a Man to Serve the Fleet', 'and I think we can all imagine how you would be

freeing men, Caroline. You can stay here and help at home, just as important to my mind, with Janey leaving us and going to work in the munitions factory, wretched girl, and Bob gone as well from the garden, and I can keep an eye on you.'

And so it was that Caroline found herself leading a life of sterile, barren misery; sometimes days would go past and the only person she would talk to was Cook, and that only to be asked if she could pull some onions or find some eggs. She felt quite literally sick with boredom much of the time; and almost frightened at the knowledge that at the age of twenty, in what she could see perfectly clearly was the prime of her life, she was leading the life of a middle-aged matron for months, years on end, with very little chance of escape. She was in effect a prisoner, and so desperate that she was seriously considering running away, locked up as she was (never mind that it was in a beautiful house) in the depths of Suffolk, miles from anywhere, too far from any of the towns to be able to make her own way there, and fraternize with the servicemen on leave. Woodbridge was an hour's drive in the trap and more than two hours' bike ride away and Ipswich an unimaginable journey, and while her mother could have driven her in occasionally, or even to one of the local village dances, she flatly refused.

Her mother indeed was her enemy and jailer: delighted to have the war as her ally in removing most of the pleasures of life from her daughter, deliberately placing obstacles in the way of any that might still be stealthily making themselves available to her. Her father, who might have helped her, might have spared at least an occasional gallon of precious petrol and his elderly chauffeur (replacing the dashing young one long since called up) to drive her to the odd party, but he was unaware of her predicament, working round the clock (and frequently sleeping) at his factory, on double time producing military uniforms. Caroline was thus entirely at her mother's mercy, living out day after day of aching, sick boredom – in the conviction that her life was more than half over, and without even any real blood and sweat to relieve it.

The Moat House, which was currently serving as Caroline's prison, was situated on the outskirts of Munsbrough, a tiny and charming Suffolk village halfway between Wickham Market and Framlingham;

it had been in the Miller family for five generations when Caroline was born there. It was a beautiful, low, Elizabethan house, painted pink in the Suffolk manner, with heavy timbering and a small river running round three quarters of it which did duty as the moat of its name. There was a bridge over the moat which led into a small courtyard, with a high, curving wall, the same age as the house which, although small by regal standards, and having only eight bedrooms, was said to be one of the few where Queen Elizabeth had indeed actually slept. The hall of the house was flagstoned, leading on one side into a huge drawing room, and on the other an equally large dining room, and at the back the kitchen and utility rooms extended into an endless warren. There was a very fine rose garden, an orchard, and a walled vegetable garden greatly reminiscent of Mr McGregor's in *Peter Rabbit*, there was the large stable block, and beyond that four hundred acres of arable land (now leased out for the most part to a local farmer) grazed by the Millers' dozen or so horses.

Caroline's father, Stanley Miller, was a businessman, not a farmer, a big, burly, red-faced man, six feet three inches tall, and weighing at least seventeen stone, bullishly insensitive, good humoured and oddly patient, especially with children and animals; he had a big blanket factory just outside Ipswich which had made his father and his grandfather extremely rich and which made the shrewd Stanley even richer.

Jacqueline Miller had been the daughter of the modestly impoverished local solicitor, beautiful, with flaming red hair and dark green eyes; boys who had enjoyed her favours in the backs of cars and in cloakrooms during hunt balls testified to her almost voracious sexuality. It was said that she could come at least four times from every sexual penetration. However, sexy and beautiful as she was, by the time she was twenty her reputation was appalling, and no decent boy would have considered marrying her. But Stanley Miller, ten years her senior and desperately in search of a wife, had considerable problems with women; he was, despite his bluster, almost pathologically shy, incapable of talking about anything except the fluctuating price and future of the blanket industry, his exploits on the hunting field, and the weather. He was, moreover, to his immense embarrassment, a virgin. Jacqueline, equally desperate for a husband, and seeing him as an opportunity

and a challenge, put to work not only her determination and charm, but what was known locally as her 'lobster grip' and lured him into bed, thus winning his heart, his fortune and his undying love.

They were married three months after their first coupling; everyone had said that Jacqueline must have been pregnant in her wild silk wedding dress, and beneath her huge bouquet of lilies, but she was not; it was over two years later, in 1922, that she finally produced Caroline and confounded local gossip. (There were those who said that Caroline was not Stanley's child, eager to extract every possible ounce of scandal from the relationship, but they were wrong, and if she had her mother's red hair, she had her father's blue eyes and height to prove it.)

But despite Stanley's great love for Jacqueline and her genuine fondness for him, the marriage was unhappy; his insensitivity, his almost total inability to communicate with her did not improve with the years, and she had finally grown lonely and hopelessly frustrated and even depressed. She was an intense, emotionally demanding woman; marriage to Stanley, she confided to her unusually sympathetic GP, was like marriage to some alien from another country who could neither speak to her nor understand what she said.

Caroline, being an only child, absorbed more of the odd, erratic tension in the house than she would have done had she had brothers and sisters. She observed her mother's swings of mood, heard her bright brittle voice on the telephone, watched her at breakfast on certain mornings, nervously shredding her toast into a mountain of crumbs, her face pale, her eyes heavy, looking blankly at *The Times* behind which her husband sat unusually silent, unwilling to meet anyone's eyes, even those of Janey the housemaid as she brought in the coffee.

Jacqueline kept Caroline at a distance; it was as if she was afraid to love her, to touch her, to hold her. Caroline could not ever remember her mother so much as coming to her room to kiss her goodnight except on the rare occasions in her childhood when she had been ill; she would get a graze of her mother's lips on her cheek, a pat on her hand, as she left the room to go up to bed; and when she had been smaller and tried to hug her, she had been gently put away from her, with the words 'Oh, darling, not now, Mama is tired.'

Her father was more affectionate, had allowed her to sit on his knee while he read her stories when she was tiny, had given her great big bear hugs when she hurt herself, and still did when he was especially proud of her – like when she had been blooded at her first hunt, or not cried when she had broken her collar-bone after falling off her swing – but she had grown up regarding physical contact as a rare, hard-won prize. And physical contact's grown-up sister, sex.

Caroline had discovered sex when she had been not quite eleven years old. She hadn't known it was sex of course, just a delicious explosion between her legs that had soared deep up into her body and slowly throbbed its way into nothingness. She had been in bed at the time, rather casually exploring her genitals with her hands, and wondering what the strange new hairiness she found there exactly signified, when she noticed that when she touched a certain place there was a fierce darting sensation. Not sure whether she liked it or not, she touched the place again . . . and then again . . .

From that night on she was hooked, a junkie, permanently hungry for the pleasures she could give herself. She was a little alarmed at first: the explosions were so violent, left her feeling so odd, at once peaceful and startled, that she was afraid there might be something wrong with her, that there was some strange condition in her body that she ought perhaps to tell someone about. She even pondered who for a time: Mama? No, Mama did not invite intimate disclosures; she would simply look at her rather distantly and say, 'Caroline, I really haven't got time to talk to you now. Talk to Nanny about it.' Nanny then? No, certainly not; Nanny's answer to anything physical that was not absolutely one hundred per cent normal and understood was a dose of syrup of figs, and a stern commandment to come and tell her if the dose didn't work. How could she tell Nanny about this odd thing that was half pleasure and half pain and only came when she herself brought it to being. Papa? Of course not, Papa was a man, and a very insensitive man at that; jolly and affectionate he might be, but not a person to listen quietly and attentively while you stumbled your way through something you didn't understand at all. A friend? Well yes, perhaps a friend, but then Caroline didn't really have any friends. Nobody liked her enough to be her friend, she was too

bossy, too prickly, too selfish; she was an only child, hopeless at sharing, at playing even, and at ten was known as stuck-up, a loner, hostile to advances that she didn't know how to meet.

She was a pretty little girl, everyone agreed, with her shiny auburn hair and her big blue eyes, but she had, in those days, not an ounce of charm. An odd, difficult little girl, thought Caroline, who knew she was considered thus, with an odd, difficult little secret. She decided not to share it. It was after all one of the few nice things in her life.

She was twelve when she discovered what the secret was. Home for the holidays from Wycombe Abbey, which she hated even more than the little dame school in Framlingham, bored even with riding one long hot day, she went upstairs to her mother's room and began idly riffling through her drawers. She often did that, when her mother was out and she was bored; it was more interesting than reading or talking to Cook, exploring the endless piles of clothes, many of them never worn, or even taken out of their boxes. Jacqueline was a compulsive shopper, she found in it a comfort, an almost physical pleasure and she turned to it in her frustration rather as another woman would have turned to drink. At least three times a week, until the war and petrol rationing prevented her, she would take the car into Ipswich or the train to London and shop, and come back, easier, better tempered, great mounds of clothes emerging from the boot of the car.

Suddenly, as Caroline dug into a pile of silk chiffon slips she felt something hard. A box, she supposed, more goodies; but no, it wasn't a box, it was a book. How peculiar, she thought, what a funny place to keep a book when there was a small bookcase right by her mother's bed; maybe she didn't know it was there, had put it in by mistake, with some of the boxes.

Caroline pulled the book out, turned it over. It was obviously a novel, she thought, *Bodily Love* by Florence Graves. *Bodily Love*! What a hopelessly silly title. Probably her mother was ashamed to be reading such a thing, and that was why she kept it hidden. Then she opened it, started flicking through it, and discovered why her mother was ashamed – and also, in a huge rush of recognition, what her own strange, delicious sensations meant. She sat motionless, through the long afternoon, lost in a strange new territory, charted

for her only by Florence Graves and her flowery prose, learning of 'the ebb and flow of natural desire', of the 'crest of the wave of passion', of the 'trembling release of climax'. Only half understanding, her heart thudding, her cheeks burning, she learnt of the nature of a sexual relationship between men and women; of the 'needs' of men; of Florence Graves's passionate affirmation that women felt such needs too. She had known, like all country children, the facts of birth, had seen calves and foals born, and had even once been an unseen witness to the mating of a bull and a cow, and had vaguely assumed that humans must follow roughly the same courses of action; what had seemed unthinkable, until that hot afternoon in her mother's bedroom, was that there might be any suggestion of pleasure in it.

Startled, she suddenly heard the car in the gravel drive, her mother's voice telling the chauffeur to take it back to Framlingham and meet her father off the train; she thrust the book back where it had been, carefully rearranging the underwear over and round it, fled to her own room and shut the door. She felt herself invaded with an intense sense of physical excitement, a need for release; she lay down on the bed, and slowly, sensuously, as if actually in the presence of a lover, pulled up her skirt, and stroked her own stomach tenderly for a few moments before deliberately, confidently, almost proudly, inserting her fingers into her wet vagina, seeking out what she now knew to be her clitoris and, with a sudden frantic urgency, brought herself to swift, violent orgasm.

Caroline's encounter with Florence Graves and her philosophies had a profound effect on her. Already acutely aware of her body and the pleasure she was able to extract from it herself, she had never before considered that she might be able to share that pleasure with somebody else. From that day on, as she lay in her bed masturbating, she conjured up visions of being held, kissed, entered; the thought did not disturb her, as it did so many young girls; it excited her, made her happy.

For a while, she was satisfied with fantasy; then, shortly after her fifteenth birthday, she began to long for reality. Her mother had made no attempt to educate her sexually; the whole of Caroline's year at school had been given a highly inadequate and confusing

talk on reproduction in so far as it was accomplished by the rabbit, and told that if they had any questions about human biology, they should ask their parents. Consequently, to Caroline's straightforward mind, there were no moral issues, indeed no emotional ones to be confronted; simply the hurdle of finding someone willing to engage on what she now saw as a great adventure.

Adventure came in the form of Giles Dudley-Leicester, sixteen-year-old Etonian son of one of her mother's few friends. Giles was tall, skinny, and chinless; he had slightly watery blues eyes, a lisp and a serious lack of imagination. But he had two things in common with Caroline: he was a good horseman, and he was desperate for sex. After a Meet of the Harriers just after they both broke up for Christmas (for which Stanley had lent Giles a horse) they came back to the Moat House for tea and to wait for Sarah Dudley-Leicester to collect her son. Cook had laid out teacakes, buns, cucumber sandwiches, fruit and chocolate cake and a pile of gingerbread; they fell on it, ravenous, and ate the lot.

'Funny how hunting makes you so hungry,' said Giles, shovelling two sandwiches into his mouth at once. 'Can't understand it really, all you do is sit there.'

Caroline watched him with distaste. 'I'd have thought there was a bit more to it than that,' she said. 'You do have to concentrate rather. And we have been out for nearly five hours. I ache all over. I might have a bath. D'you want one?'

'Might be an idea,' said Giles. 'Can't think of anything I'd like better, as a matter of fact. Would that really be all right?'

'Yes, of course,' said Caroline. 'Mama's out, I'll use her bathroom, and you can use the nursery one. You know where it is, don't you?'

'What? Oh, yes, of course. I remember your nanny bathing me once when we were small and we all fell in the silage one afternoon. My ma will be relieved, she always complains about the filth in the car when I've been out.'

'But you're not going home naked, are you?' asked Caroline.

'What? No, of course not.' Giles was scarlet.

'Well then, I don't see how you having a bath can save her car.'

'Oh. Oh, no. Of course. You're right. Yes.'

'Follow me,' said Caroline wearily.

* * *

She was already getting into the bath when she remembered there were no towels in the nursery bathroom. She reluctantly put on her mother's bathrobe, collected a couple of towels from the linen cupboard and went up the stairs to the nursery floor. Giles was still lounging in the bathroom chair, reading *Horse and Hound*.

'Here. I brought you some towels.'

'What's that? Oh, right, fine, jolly good. Thanks, Caroline.'

She walked over to him and handed him the towels. As she bent towards him, the robe swung open just enough to show the top of her breasts; Giles looked up and found them confronting him. He went scarlet. Caroline smiled slightly contemptuously. 'Sorry,' she said. 'I'll leave you in peace.'

She was just turning away when she glanced down at him; beneath his muddied white breeches, the unmistakable line of his erection stood out. Caroline didn't hesitate. It was the situation, and the opportunity, she had been waiting for, in perfect and totally unexpected harmony. She bent down again, and laid her hand on the bulge.

'That looks nice,' she said matter-of-factly.

'Oh, my God,' said Giles. He looked earnestly terrified. But the bulge remained steadfast.

Caroline walked over to the door and locked it. 'Come on,' she said.

'Oh, Caroline, no,' said Giles.

'Why not? Don't you want to?'

'Yes. Yes, of course I do. But we shouldn't. And somebody might come.'

'I hope,' said Caroline giggling at her own wit, 'that we both will.'

'Oh, my God,' said Giles again.

'Never mind about Him. And Mama is out. Now then, Giles, have you ever done this before?'

'Er – well not exactly.'

'That makes two of us. But we should manage it. Now take your trousers off, and your shirt too. I believe nakedness is a help.'

Had Giles been more experienced, and less desperate for sex himself (his only experiences thus far having been homosexual activity at Eton), he might have refused. As it was, he felt he had no option. Half afraid, he removed his clothes; Caroline was lying

on the floor, the discarded bathrobe serving as bedding; she patted it invitingly, smiling, while eyeing Giles's large erect penis with some trepidation. She had not expected it to be so large, and couldn't quite imagine how the small orifice which seemed to fit quite snugly round her own finger could possibly accommodate it. But she was nothing if not brave; and besides there was no going back now.

'Come on. I can see you want to,' she said conversationally. 'I think we're going to have a great time.'

Thinking about it in later life, she was always amazed it hadn't been worse. Giles was well endowed, totally without skill, and frantic; he plunged into her almost without warning, and it hurt dreadfully.

'Is that all right?' he whispered in her ear, in between tearing at her mouth with his.

'Oh, yes,' said Caroline, trying to sound matter-of-fact, anxious not to moan, and equally anxious not to move, lest the pain should get worse. 'Yes, that's fine.'

'Thank Christ.' He began to move up and down; she thought she might scream.

'Giles, could you –'

'Yes, what?'

'Could you just lie still for a bit. Just for a bit.'

'I'll try.'

He lay, remarkably still; Caroline lay beneath him, trying to distract herself from her pain, looking up at the peeling paint on the ceiling, and wondering idly whether her mother had ever even considered having it painted, and gradually began to experience a totally different sensation: a softening, a yielding, a desire to move somehow forwards, to go on and on into a new place, she knew not quite where. Tentatively she moved; at first very gently, then a little more strongly. It was a mistake; Giles felt it as a signal, and unable to control himself any longer, began to plunge in and out of her like a frightened horse, groaning and clutching at her hair. Caroline opened her eyes again, seeking the reassurance of the ceiling and saw his face, contorted, red, his eyes clenched shut. She thought she had never seen anything so hideous.

It was over in seconds after that; a huge, final plunge, a last groan that was almost a bellow, and Giles came shuddering into

her. It hurt so much that Caroline had to bury her teeth in his shoulder to muffle her scream; and then, almost at once, just as she started to feel the softening again, his penis began to subside, and as she moved hopefully against him, slithered out of her altogether.

'I say,' said Giles, rolling off her, still panting. 'I say, that was all right, wasn't it?'

'Yes,' said Caroline, carefully, 'yes, it was all right. Um – Giles, I think I'll go and have my bath now.'

'Rightho,' said Giles.

Right through the Christmas holidays, on every possible occasion, they had sex. Once her body had recovered from its initial ordeal, Caroline began to enjoy it; she stopped shrinking from Giles's penis, stopped feeling any pain, and went forward to him, joyfully, hungrily. Giles, in his turn and at her request, moved a little more slowly and gently; and from a book he had found in his father's dressing room – 'What would we do without our parents' guilty secrets?' asked Caroline cheerfully when he told her about it – he learnt a little technique, and began to stroke Caroline's breasts (a little heavily to be sure, and rather as if he was petting the family labrador, but never mind, she said, it was still nice) and to kiss her rather more slowly and gently as he made love to her. They found themselves remarkably free to pursue their newfound pleasure: the hunting season was in full swing, and both sets of parents agreed it was a splendid way for them to spend their time, and how delighted they were that their two odd, rather difficult children had formed such a splendid friendship; after each day out, after they had had tea or lunch, and providing Jacqueline was out and Nanny well and truly asleep, they made their way up to the nursery bathroom, where Caroline had installed a pile of old linen from the cupboard, as being more comfortable than the bathmat, and tore off their clothes.

What neither of them gave a moment's thought to was contraception.

'She's what?' said Jacqueline, staring at Caroline's headmistress across her office. 'Caroline is what? What did you say?'

'Caroline is pregnant, Mrs Miller.'

'I assure you there must be some mistake. Moreover I shall

consult my solicitor immediately, about what I can only term as slander. How dare you say such things about my daughter?'

'Mrs Miller, there is no mistake. Caroline is pregnant. Roughly three months. I have had her examined by the school doctor, and he has done a pregnancy test, just to make quite sure. I was naturally of precisely your opinion. That it could not be possible. But the fact remains that she is.'

'But – what does she say? Surely she denies it?'

'No, Mrs Miller, she doesn't.'

'Oh, my God.' Jacqueline rested her head on her hands for a moment. Then she looked at the headmistress. 'You'd better tell me about it.'

'I will. And I'll ask Matron to come in. She can tell you more than I can.'

Matron related the story in full. Soon after the start of term, Caroline had fainted in morning chapel. 'I assumed it was her period. I put her to bed for the morning, and asked if she was experiencing severe pain. She said she wasn't. I didn't think a great deal about it. Then two days later it happened again. She said she often fainted, and I shouldn't take any notice. I decided to keep an eye on her, and found her vomiting several times, usually in the morning. She said she'd eaten something and that she was sure it was nothing. About a week after that started she fainted again; it still never occurred to me of course that she might be pregnant. But I was worried and called the school doctor. She examined Caroline carefully, and then said she would like to talk to her in private. An hour later she came in and said she was very much afraid that Caroline was pregnant, but that of course she might be wrong, and before upsetting everybody, she would like to do a pregnancy test. That takes a few days, as you probably know. Anyway, I'm afraid it is positive. There is absolutely no doubt. Caroline is pregnant.'

'Oh God,' said Jacqueline.

'You had no idea, no idea at all that this might be – well, possible?' said the headmistress.

'Of course not. Of course I didn't.'

'I see.'

There was a long silence.

'What – what should I do?' said Jacqueline. 'What would you suggest?'

'Well, naturally, she must be removed from the school at once. That goes without saying.'

'You mean permanently?'

'I'm afraid I do.'

'But why?'

'Mrs Miller, do be reasonable. This is a highly respected, much sought-after school. You must be aware of what it would do to our reputation if it became known that a girl here was pregnant. Even had been pregnant.'

'I see. Suppose –'

'Yes?'

'Suppose it was a mistake. A hysterical pregnancy. They do happen.'

'Mrs Miller, she has had a pregnancy test, the Aschheim-Zondak test. It is highly accurate. Perhaps you don't know exactly what that involves,' said Matron carefully. 'Her urine has been injected into a mouse. The mouse, on biopsy, showed distinct ovarian changes. There can be no mistake.'

'Well, suppose she had a – a miscarriage?'

'Mrs Miller, I'm sorry. I know what you are saying. But the answer is no. Now shall I send for Caroline?'

'Yes, all right,' said Jacqueline.

Going home in the car, they were both silent. Caroline was white, and had to ask for the car to be stopped twice, so she could be sick; otherwise she said nothing at all. Jacqueline stared out of the window.

When they finally got home she went upstairs to her room. 'I'll talk to your father when he gets home,' was all she said.

They confronted her in the drawing room after dinner. They had discussed it carefully, they said, and had a long conversation with a friend of Jacqueline's who was a gynaecologist in London. He had contacts who might be able to help. It would mean going to a clinic somewhere in the country. Caroline had no idea what they meant. They asked who the father was, and when it had happened. She told them, and listened to them calling her a slut and a disgrace, and stood shaking while her father rang the Dudley-Leicesters and asked them to come over.

She felt very sick and very faint, and said so; they told her to go

to her room and to stay there. She lay on the bed crying, and afraid, and listening to her parents shouting at the Dudley-Leicesters, and wondered whatever was to become of her.

Later that night her mother came to her room, looked at her distantly and merely told her that they would be going up to London with her the next day. Caroline did not dare ask why.

There were interviews with doctors, with psychiatrists, endless internal examinations that hurt, questioning about her last period, the last occasion intercourse had taken place. Finally she found herself in a small hard bed in a tiny white bright room in a clinic somewhere in the wilds of Northumberland, being given an enema by a hatchet-faced nurse, and then pushed roughly from the lavatory, where she was sitting at once vomiting and straining, on to the bed and given yet one more of the internal examinations, this time not even with a gloved hand, but a hard steel probe. It hurt horribly.

'All right,' said the doctor (she supposed he was a doctor), 'I think we can just about do it. Get her ready now.'

And they put her into a robe and shaved her pudendum and told her to climb on to a trolley, and without a word, pushed her, sick with fear, along the corridors and into another small room. There the same doctor was standing, sleeves rolled up, black rubber mask in hand.

'Now then,' he said, pushing the mask over her face, making her feel she would stifle, 'let's hope this is going to be a lesson to you.'

As she lost consciousness she felt him pushing her legs apart and saying, 'Put her in the stirrups . . .' and she tried to scream but the mask was smothering her, and the room was swimming and they were pushing her trolley into the brilliant lights next door.

When she woke up, she felt terribly sick; she moved, leant over from her bed and threw up into the basin beside her. Her stomach ached badly; feeling herself cautiously, tears streaming down her face, she found she was padded with cotton wool, and that in spite of it the sheet and her gown were soaked with blood. Terrified, she pressed the bell; the nurse who had given her the enema came in.

'What is it?'

'I'm bleeding. Terribly. And it hurts. Is it – is that all right?'

The nurse looked at her with distaste. 'You should be grateful you're bleeding. You girls are all the same. What do you expect?'

'I don't know,' said Caroline meekly.

And she didn't.

She didn't expect the pain, which was bad; the endless bleeding which was frightening; the internal examination she had to have next morning before she was allowed home; the weakness, the soreness that lasted for weeks; least of all she didn't expect the misery, the tearing, awful misery that went on day after day without relief. Her mother continued to ignore her, treating her like some unsatisfactory housemaid; her father was awkwardly more kind, and once took her in one of his bear hugs when he found her sobbing in the drawing room one morning, but never mentioned the matter either. Only Janey cared for her, held her as she wept, filled endless hot-water bottles, made her cups of hot tea, through the first few dreadful days, brought her books to read from the library, lent her her old wireless to listen to. But Janey didn't talk about it either.

About two weeks after it had all happened, when she was just beginning to feel better, she was sitting in the kitchen, drinking hot chocolate and reading Cook's *Daily Mail* when she heard the door open and Jack Bamforth came in.

Jack Bamforth was her father's groom; he had been with the family for most of Caroline's life. He'd taught her to ride, holding the fat little Shetland steady while she dug her small heels in and shouted, 'Giddyup.' He had carried her into the house when she had had her first bad fall and been concussed; he had taken her out hunting for the first time, reining his horse in patiently so as to be near her, urging her over the fences, steadying her nerve; he was, she often said, her best friend. When she discovered this annoyed her mother, she said it more frequently. Jack was thirty-five years old, small – about five feet seven inches tall – and very slightly built; he had a gloriously equable disposition, an eye for a horse that was legendary, and a face that would have sent Michelangelo into raptures: perfectly sculpted, classically beautiful bones, wide, innocent grey eyes and a mouth that said little but spoke volumes – mostly on the subject of carnal desire.

Jack had a wife, a big, sexy woman with a sharp tongue on her;

but he also had a most awesome reputation for taking his pleasures elsewhere. All these elements set together, with his soft, flat Suffolk accent which gave his every utterance a kind of lazy charm, made him wonderfully easy to talk to, confronting any painful or difficult situation with a head-on gentleness that took any embarrassment out of it. Once when Caroline had been about fourteen and her period had started right in the middle of a day's hunting and her breeches had become horribly stained, and she just didn't know what to do, he had ridden up beside her and said, 'Best if we go home now, Miss Caroline, you look very tired and that horse is lathering horribly.' As she had sat riding back beside him across the peaceful fields, silent, near to tears with misery and embarrassment, even while grateful for the rescue, he had simply said, 'Nobody noticed, you know, nobody at all, only me because I was supposed to keep an eye on you,' and she had immediately felt eased and soothed. And another time, when she had been much younger at a gymkhana, and no one would pair up with her for the games, he had come over and put his arm round her and said, 'Silly lot of children round here, aren't they?' instead of pretending not to notice.

She looked up at him standing there, looking at her rather seriously, anxiously even, and wondered how much he knew, and how much she wanted him to know. What had happened to her had been the ultimate disgrace; best hidden, best buried. Even from Jack. Only – only burying it seemed to be making it worse.

'Morning, Miss Miller.'

'Good morning, Jack.'

'How are you?'

'I'm perfectly fine, thank you,' said Caroline crisply.

'Good. Are you sure?'

'Of course I'm sure. Why shouldn't I be?'

'Because you don't look fine. Not exactly.'

'Well I am,' said Caroline and burst into tears.

'Dear oh dear,' said Jack calmly. 'Dear oh dear.' He put his arm round her gently, and held her, like a father, like a brother; she could smell him, horsey, faintly sweaty. For the rest of her life those things were associated for Caroline with comfort. 'Here, have a hanky,' he said.

'Thank you. Thank you, Jack.' She blew her nose hard. 'I didn't mean to do that. It's just that – well I don't seem to be able to stop crying.'

'Want to tell me about it?' he asked carefully.

'What? Tell you about what?'

'Your illness. The virus you've had. I heard about it from your mama. I was very sorry.'

'Ah yes,' said Caroline, remembering her mother had told her that everybody knew she had had a strange virus which had necessitated a brief spell in an isolation hospital, but that she was hopefully clear of it now. She looked up at Jack and saw that not for a moment did he think she had had a virus, and that his grey eyes were very soft and concerned. 'Oh, no, Jack, it was nothing serious. I'm better now. I'm just – well a bit tired, that's all.'

'Well,' he said, gently careful, 'that's all right then.'

'Yes. Yes, I hope so. Anyway, it's over now. Well and truly over.'

'Good. Well I just wanted to let you know I was here if you needed me.'

'Thank you, Jack. Thank you very much.'

She was sent to another school, a morbidly depressing establishment in the Midlands. When she complained about its harsh regime, with its cold showers and daily hikes in all weathers, its terrible food, her mother told her she was lucky that any school would take her in.

But after only two terms, she had behaved so badly, been so rude and difficult to all the staff, so totally uncooperative when it came to doing any work, broke bounds, played truant, that they expelled her as well.

'You're seventeen now,' said her mother coldly when her trunk was unpacked for the last time, and she was lying on her bed, wondering what on earth was going to become of her. 'I see no reason to try to give you an education which you clearly have no interest in. You can stay at home and learn to be useful. Janey is leaving, to go and work in a factory in Framlingham, silly girl; all this war business has gone to her head, and Cook will need help as well. I suppose your father and I will need to find some sort of future for you, but

I really cannot quite imagine what – unless it is on the pavements in Piccadilly.'

'I'd prefer that to helping Cook, thank you,' said Caroline.

Jacqueline lifted her hand and struck her across the face. 'I am at a loss to understand you,' she said.

'That's half the trouble,' said Caroline, and walked out of the room, refusing to let the tears start until she was safely out of her mother's hearing.

Jack Bamforth had said much the same thing as her mother, only more kindly. He made a special journey to the house one day, to ask her if she would like to come to the stables and talk to him.

'I don't know what about,' said Caroline rudely.

'Yes, you do. And it would do you good. Come on. You can help me with some tack at the same time.' He held out his hand; oddly moved, her eyes filled with the tears that always seemed to be at the back of them these days, Caroline took it.

Later, up to her elbows in warm soapy water, she said suddenly, 'I'm a bit of a case, aren't I, Jack?'

'Oh, I don't know,' he said. 'You seem all right to me. Miss Miller,' he added after a few moments.

Caroline hated him calling her Miss Miller; it made her feel distanced from him. 'Jack, I wish you'd still call me Caroline. I – I think you're my only friend. I don't want you to be so formal.'

'All right. But it'll have to be Miss Miller in front of your pa and your mama.'

'Of course.' She sounded almost meek.

'Why do you keep doing it then?' he said conversationally.

'Doing what?'

'Getting thrown out of these schools.'

Caroline sighed, and opened a tin of saddle soap. 'Maybe it's because I just desperately want to get a reaction out of someone. All my father ever says is, "Talk to your mother." About anything, anything at all. Good or bad. And my mother is so dreadfully distant and cold, I just want to shock her into some sort of emotion. Even anger. The other day she hit me, and I really felt good for a bit. Does that sound awfully weird to you?'

'No, not really. A bit extreme maybe, but not weird. You seem to

be writing off your own future pretty sharpish though. Just to get a reaction from your parents.'

'I know.' She sighed, and looked at him, trying to smile. It didn't quite work.

There was a silence. Caroline reached out and took another bridle off its hook.

'This is filthy, Jack,' she said, and then started to cry again.

Jack put his arms round her and held her for a long time.

'Poor girl,' he said. 'Poor little girl.'

'I'm not really little. Old enough to know better. That's what everybody keeps saying.'

'Oh,' he said, letting her go and returning to the saddle he was polishing. 'Everybody is quite often wrong, in my experience. I don't think we're ever old enough for that. Any of us. Will they find you another school, do you think?'

'No. They've said they won't. I've got to stay here and help Cook. For now anyway. Maybe if there really is a war, I'll find something to do. Do you think there will be one? Papa doesn't.'

'Oh, yes. Oh, I certainly do,' said Jack. 'Your pa's wrong there. No doubt about it at all. We'll be at war in a very few months, I would say.'

'Oh, well, that'll give me something to look forward to,' she said.

By 1942, when she was twenty and had been leading the life of a middle-aged matron for three years, she was so desperate that she was seriously planning to run away. She had never really liked reading (although she had recently developed what was almost an addiction to women's magazines, her favourite being *Woman & Beauty*), she loathed sewing, and her only real pleasure was playing the piano. She had been considered quite a talented pianist at school, and had won several medals at classical music festivals, but it was not the music of Chopin and Bach and Brahms that filled the Moat House now, but songs from the hit parade, 'The White Cliffs of Dover', 'Blues in the Night', 'We'll Gather Lilacs' and the swing rhythms of Mr Glenn Miller. 'In the Mood' was to be heard particularly frequently coming from the music room, played sometimes briskly, sometimes as a morose dirge. Jacqueline had once remarked somewhat rashly that she was growing a little tired of the tune; Caroline would have had both hands cut off rather than

stop playing it at length daily after that. She had very few opportunities for revenge.

Jacqueline was in any case seriously unwell herself: her headaches had worsened into a particularly vicious form of migraine, and she would lie in her room sometimes for days at a time, vomiting and in appalling pain, her vision so seriously affected that she was liable to fall downstairs or crash into furniture if she tried to move about. Caroline tried to feel sorry for her and failed almost entirely; and indeed, as the migraine did provide her with at least a few hours of freedom every so often, she would wake occasionally to hear her mother vomiting or groaning and experience a stab of positive pleasure.

There was a bus twice a week, and every so often, if it coincided with the migraine days, Caroline would catch it into Woodbridge, but it was no fun on her own. Although she did from time to time hang around one or other of the pubs, hoping to get chatted up by the local servicemen, they tended to be wary of someone so obviously out of their class, and to go for the local girls, hanging round the bar in giggling groups, and she would leave in time to catch the bus home again, feeling foolish and more lonely than ever. The only men to be found in the country were the prisoners of war, set to work on the land, and not even Caroline would have considered fraternizing with them.

'I really think,' she said to Jack one day as they rode across the fields, 'I might as well go and join a convent. It couldn't possibly be worse than this.'

'Oh, I think it could,' he said. 'A bit worse. You couldn't go riding for a start. Cheer up, Caroline. Something'll turn up soon. You see if I'm not wrong.'

'Jack, I know you're wrong,' said Caroline. 'Nothing is going to turn up. It can't.'