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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Perfume Collector

Written by Kathleen Tessaro

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KATHLEEN TESSARO

# THE PERFUME COLLECTOR



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*For my son Eddie*
*Always, evermore . . . and then some*

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# *Paris, Winter 1954*

Eva d'Orsey sat at the kitchen table, listening to the ticking clock, a copy of *Le Figaro* in front of her. This was the sound of time, moving away from her.

Taking another drag from a cigarette, she looked out of the window, into the cold misty morning. Paris was waking now, the grey dawn, streaked with orange, seeping slowly into a navy sky. She'd been up for hours, since four. Sleep had inched away from her these past years as the pain increased, shooting up along the left side of her body.

The doctor had given up on her months ago. His diagnosis: she was not a good patient; arrogant, refused to follow directions. The cirrhosis was spreading rapidly now, pitting her liver like a sponge. For him it was simple: she had to stop drinking.

'You're not even trying,' he'd reprimanded her at the last appointment.

She was buttoning her blouse, on top of the examination table. 'I'm having difficulty sleeping.'

'Well, I'm not surprised,' he sighed. 'Your liver is completely inflamed.'

She caught his eye. 'I need something to help me.'

Shaking his head, he crossed to his desk; scribbled out a prescription. 'I shouldn't even give you these, you know. Take only one, they're very strong,' he warned, handing her the script.

'Thank you.'

Still, he couldn't resist one last try. 'Why don't you at least cut down on smoking?'

Why indeed?

Exhaling, Eva stubbed the Gitanes cigarette out in the ashtray. They were common – too strong. Unladylike. But that suited her. She could only taste strong flavours now. Cheap chocolate, coarse pâté, black coffee. What she ate didn't matter anyway; she had no appetite left.

There was something naïve, sweetly arrogant about the doctor's assumption that everyone wanted to live forever.

Picking up a pen, she traced a ring of even circles along the border of the newspaper.

There were still a few more details to be arranged. She'd been to the lawyer weeks ago, a diligent, rather aloof young man. And she'd left the box with the sour-faced concierge, Madame Assange, for safe keeping. But last night, when she couldn't sleep, another idea occurred to her. There was the passage, from London to Paris. The idea of an aeroplane intrigued her. It was extravagant and unnecessary. But there were a few things a person should experience in life; air travel was definitely one of them. She smiled to herself, imagining the approach to Paris,

the miles of cold, blue sea and then the first sighting of the city.

She winced. Pain again, knife stabs, followed by numbness down the side of her body.

She thought about the bottle of cognac. She didn't want to drink during the day. After 6 p.m. was her new rule. At least that's what she planned. But her hands were shaking now; her stomach lurched.

No. She would run a bath. Dress. And go to 7.30 Mass at Eglise de la Madeleine. Of all the churches in Paris, this was her favourite. There, Mary Magdalene, that wayward, difficult daughter of the Church, ascended regally into heaven on the arms of angels all day, every day.

Mass was like grand opera, a magic show with the most expensive props in town. And faith, a sleight of hand trick, in which one was both the magician and the audience; the deceiver and the deceived. Still, who could resist a good magic trick?

Folding over the paper, Eva pushed out her chair and stood up.

She would wear her best navy suit, sit in the front pew with the faithful. Together they'd listen to the young priest, Father Paul, struggle to make sense of the scripture, try with all his considerable intellect to apply it to the present day. He didn't always succeed. He didn't know how to justify the inconsistencies; hadn't yet realized that they themselves were the mystery. Still, his mental adroitness pleased her, almost

as much as it pleased him. Frequently he was reduced to searching through layers of various possible Hebrew translations for an unexpected verb form to finally shed light on some vast spiritual contradiction. But his heroism in trying wasn't lost on her. And she valued those who tried, especially those whose struggles were public and obvious.

Of course he didn't see it that way. Only a few years out of seminary, he imagined he was imparting spiritual sustenance and guidance to his flock. What he didn't understand was that his elderly parishioners, mostly women, were there for him, rather than the other way around. Father Paul was at the start of life. His glassy convictions needed protection. They waited patiently until he too, succumbed to the unbearable unevenness of God's will, the sureness of his grace, the darkness of his mercy.

These thoughts calmed her. Her mind was off, whirring again on a familiar track: the paradoxes of faith and doubt. Like a worn piece of fabric, made soft by much handling, comforting to the touch.

Mass and then, yes, the travel agent.

Taking the ashtray to the sink, she emptied it, rinsed it out. Below, in the alleyway, something moved . . . a looming shadow – shifting, cutting. Black wings beating, wheeling as one, until they filled the entire wall opposite, blotting out the pale rays of the winter sun.

Suddenly another memory took hold. A breathless, stumbling terror; the smell of green fields and damp woodland – and a massive flock of ravens, reeling across the

open sky, wings glistening like ebony, beaks like razors – crying, shrieking.

Eva grasped the counter, pressed her eyes closed. The ashtray dropped, clattering into the porcelain sink.

It shattered.

'Damn!'

Eva peered warily out the window, her heart still pounding. The shadow was gone. A flock of common city pigeons most likely.

Picking up the pieces, she lined them up on the counter top. It was an old, inexpensive object. But it reminded her of another time, when life was full of beginnings.

The clock ticked loudly.

She wavered only a moment.

Reaching for a glass, Eva took down the bottle of cheap cognac and poured with unsteady hands, gulping it down. Instantly the alcohol warmed her, radiating out through her limbs; taking the edge off.

That doctor understood nothing.

He didn't know what it was like to live between memory and regret with nothing to numb it.

Pouring another, Eva ran her finger over the rough edge of the broken porcelain.

She would glue it.

Bathe.

Wear her navy suit.

Tilting her head back, she took another swallow.

It didn't matter anymore if the cracks showed.

## *London, Spring 1955*

Grace Munroe woke up with a start, gasping for breath.

She'd been running, stumbling, over uneven ground, in a thick, dense forest; searching, calling out. But the harder she ran the more impenetrable the woodland became. Vines grew, twisting beneath her feet, branches whipped against her face, arms and legs. And there was the panicky feeling that time was running out. She was chasing someone or something. But it was always just ahead, out of reach. Suddenly she lost her footing, tumbling head over heels into a deep, rocky ravine.

Heart pounding in her chest, Grace took a moment, blinking in the dusky half-light, to realize that she was in her own bedroom, lying on top of her bed.

It was a dream.

Only a dream.

Reaching across, she turned on the bedside lamp, falling back against the pillows. Her heart was still galloping, hands trembling. It was an old nightmare, from her childhood. She thought she'd grown out of it. But now, after years, it was back.

How long had she been asleep anyway? She looked across at the alarm clock. Nearly 6.30. Damn.

She'd only meant to take fifteen minutes. But it had been nearly an hour.

Mallory would be here any minute and she still had to dress. Grace didn't want to go tonight, only she'd promised her friend.

Going to the window overlooking Woburn Square below, Grace pulled back the heavy curtains.

It was late afternoon in April, the time of year when the daylight hours stretched eagerly towards summer and the early evening light was a delicate Wedgwood blue, gilded with the promise of future warmth. The plane trees lining the square bore the very beginnings of tender, bright green buds on their branches that in the summer would form a thick emerald canopy. Only now they were just twigs, shaking violently with each gust of icy wind.

The central garden had been dug and planted with produce during the war; its railings had been melted down and had yet to be restored. The buildings that survived in the area were blackened by smoke and pitted from shrapnel.

There was a sense of quickening in the air, the change of seasons, of hope tempered by the impending nightfall. Outside, the birds sang, green shoots of hyacinth and narcissus swayed in the wind. Warm in the sun, freezing in the shade, it was a season of extremes.

Grace had a fondness for the sharpness of this time of year; for the muted, shifting light that played tricks on

her eyes. It was a time of mysterious, yet dramatic metamorphosis. One minute there was nothing but storms and rain; a moment later a field of daffodils appeared, exploding triumphantly into a fanfare of colour.

Grace pressed her fingertips against the cold glass of the window. This was not, as her husband Roger put it, their real house. He had more ambitious plans for something grander, closer to Belgravia. But Grace liked it here; being in the centre of Bloomsbury, close to London University and King's College, it reminded her of Oxford, where she'd lived with her uncle until only a few years ago. It was filled with activity; businesses and offices, and students rushing to class. In the street below, a current of office workers, wrapped in raincoats, heads bent against the wind, moved in a steady stream towards the Underground station after work.

Grace leaned her head against the window frame.

It must be nice to have a job. A neatly arranged desk. A well-organized filing cabinet. And most of all, purpose.

Now that she was married, her days had a weary open-endedness about them; she floated like a balloon from one social obligation to another.

Roger took each engagement very seriously. 'Did you speak to anyone at the Conservative Ladies Club luncheon? Whom did you sit next to? Tell me who was there.'

He was uncannily skilled at dissecting hidden meaning behind every interaction.

'They put you at the first table, near the front. That's

good. Make certain you write to Mona Riley and thank her for the invitation. Perhaps you could arrange an informal dinner? Or better yet, invite her for tea somewhere and see if you can wangle a dinner party out of her. It would be better if they asked us first. One doesn't want to seem eager.'

He was counting on her to grease the wheels, only Grace wasn't much of a social mechanic. And she lacked any pleasure in the game.

Still, she needed to hurry, she reminded herself, if she didn't want to keep Mallory waiting.

Opening the bedroom door, she called down the steps to the housekeeper, who was cleaning downstairs. 'Mrs Deller!'

'Yes?' came a voice from the kitchen, two flights below.

'Would you mind terribly bringing me a cup of tea, please?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

Grace hurried into the bathroom, splashed her face with cold water and dabbed it dry, examining her features in the mirror. She really should make more of an effort – buy some blue eyeshadow and black liquid eyeliner; learn to pencil in her eyebrows with the bold, stylized make up that was all the rage. Instead, she patted her nose and cheeks with a bit of face powder and applied a fresh coat of red lipstick. Her hair was long, just below her shoulders. Without bothering to brush it out, and with the deftness of much practice, she arranged it into

a chignon, pinning it back with hairpins. Downstairs the doorbell rang.

'Damn!'

Of all the times for Mallory to actually be on time!

Flinging open the wardrobe doors, Grace grabbed a blue shantung silk cocktail dress and tossed it on the bed. She stepped out of her tweed skirt and pulled her blouse up over her head without undoing the buttons.

Where were the matching navy shoes?

She scanned the bottom of the wardrobe. Bending down, she felt the heel of her stocking begin to ladder up the back of her calf.

'Oh, bugger!'

Unfastening her suspenders, she could hear Mrs Deller answering the door; the soft inflections of women's voices as she took Mallory's coat. And then the steps of the old Georgian staircase creaking in protest as Mallory made her way upstairs.

Grace yanked a fresh pair of stockings from her chest of drawers and sat down on the edge of the bed to put them on.

There was a knock. 'It's only me. Are you decent?'

'If you consider a petticoat decent.'

Mallory poked her head round the door. Her deep auburn hair was arranged in low curls and a string of pearls set off her pale skin. 'Haven't you changed yet? It's already started, Grace!'

Grace hooked the tops of her stockings and stood up. 'Isn't it fashionable to be late?'

'Since when are you concerned with what's fashionable?'

Grace pivoted round. 'Are my seams straight?'

'Yes. Here.' Mallory handed her the cup of tea she was carrying. 'Your housekeeper asked me to give you this.'

'Thank you.' Grace took a sip as Mallory rustled across the room in her full-skirted evening dress, perching delicately on the edge of the armchair, so as not to crease the fabric.

'What have you been doing all afternoon, anyway?' Mallory chided.

'Oh, nothing.' Grace didn't like to admit to sleeping during the day; it felt like the thin edge of the wedge. 'And what about you? What did you do?'

'I've only just got back from the hairdresser's an hour ago.' Mallory turned her head, showcasing both her lovely profile and the result of their handiwork. 'I swear, Mr Hugo is the only person in London I'll let touch my hair. You should go to him. He's a miracle worker. Have you got spare a ciggie?'

'Just there,' Grace nodded to a silver cigarette box on the table. She took another gulp of tea and put it down on the dresser.

Mallory took one out. 'What are you wearing tonight?'

'The blue taffeta.'

'Old faithful!' Mallory smiled, shaking her head. 'We have to take you shopping, my dear. There are such beautiful things out at the moment.'

At thirty, Mallory was only three years older than Grace but already established on the London social scene as one of the fashionable young women. Married to Grace's cousin, Geoffrey, she tried to take Grace under her wing. However, Grace proved frustratingly immune to her instruction.

'You don't like this dress?' Grace asked.

Mallory shrugged. 'It's perfectly fine.'

Grace held it up again. 'What's wrong with it?'

'It's just, oh, I don't know. You know what Vanessa's like. Everything's always cutting edge, up to the minute. The very latest look of 1956 . . .'

'Which is remarkable because it's only 1955, Mal.'

'That's exactly what I mean! She's ahead of her time.'

'Yes, but I don't have to compete with Vanessa, do I? We can't all be trendsetters. That woman has far too much time on her hands and far too much money.'

'Perhaps, but nobody wants to miss one of her parties, do they? You need to start entertaining properly too. Tonight will be a good opportunity to steal some names from Vanessa's guest list. I've got a little notebook and pencil in my handbag if you need it.'

'Oh God!' Grace shuddered. 'I can't bear the thought of it!'

'Honestly!' Mallory rolled her eyes. 'What did you do up in Oxford for entertainment anyway?'

'My uncle is a don. We had people round for cauliflower cheese and played bridge.'

'How ghastly!' Mallory laughed. 'You're going to have to get over this aversion to speaking to other people if you want to be an asset to your husband. He's not going to be promoted on his good looks alone,' she smiled. 'You haven't got a light, have you? Do you like this?' She stood up, twirling round, showing off the full skirt of the deep red off-the-shoulder dress she was wearing. 'It's new. From Simpson's.'

'Very fetching.' Grace stepped into her navy dress. 'There's a lighter in there, isn't there?'

Mallory rifled round in the cigarette box. 'Not that I can see. Here.' She popped the cigarette into the corner of her perfectly rouged mouth. 'Let me do you up.'

Grace stood in front of her while Mallory zipped up the back of her dress. 'Roger must've taken it. We're always losing lighters. That one's my favourite though. I'll kill him if he's lost it.'

Mallory tugged at a good two inches of fabric that should have been fitted closely to Grace's waist. 'This is too big. You've lost weight again.' There was an accusatory tone in her voice.

Grace crossed to her dressing table, opened a drawer and took out a box of matches. She tossed them to Mallory, who caught them midair, with the hidden athletic reflexes of a childhood tomboy. 'Light me one too, will you?'

'With pleasure. After all, you are my date tonight.'

'Thank you for that.' Grace caught her eye in the mirror

and winked, as she put a pair of pearl clips on. It wasn't lost on her that Mal was actually trying to help her. 'It was good of you to invite me.'

'We can't have you wasting away while Roger's out of town.' Mallory lit two cigarettes and passed one to Grace. 'Besides, it's not often I get to ditch my husband for someone who actually listens to what I say. He can't bear Vanessa anyway, thinks she's a bad influence.'

'Is she?'

'Of course.' Mallory picked up a pamphlet lying on top of a stack of books on the table. 'What's this?'

'Nothing.' Grace wished she'd had the foresight to put them away now. 'Just a schedule of classes.'

'The Oxford and County Secretarial College?' Mallory flipped through; it naturally fell open to the pages Grace had already dog-eared. 'Advanced Typing and Office Management? Bookkeeping?' She made a face. 'What's all this about?'

'You never know,' Grace slipped on the navy pumps, 'it might be quite helpful. Roger may well open his own offices one day. I could be a valuable asset to him; organize his appointments, type letters . . .'

'But Grace, you *have* a job,' Mallory pointed out. 'You're his wife.'

'That's not a job, Mal.'

Mallory flashed her a look. 'Really? I wonder if you've read the fine print on your marriage certificate. It's up to you to create a home, a family, a vision of where you all

fit in the world and where you're going. Think about it – the children's schools, where you spend the weekends, your entire social circle – it's all down to you.' She put on an exaggerated accent. 'Oh, the Munroes? Of course I know them! Isn't she wonderful? Her son is at Harrow with our eldest. And I love what she's done with the house, don't you?' Mallory took another drag, tossing the leaflet down. 'Believe me, Ducky, you have a job. Besides, this place is in Oxford. How many times do I have to remind you that you live in London now?'

'Yes, but the courses only last a few months.'

'A few months? Are you mad? What's Roger supposed to do while you're gone? Mallory exhaled. 'Honestly, you should learn something useful in your spare time.'

'Like what?'

'I don't know . . .' The whole idea of self-improvement was alien to her. 'Flower arranging. Or the harp, perhaps.'

'The harp? What's useful about a harp?'

Mallory thought a moment. 'It's soothing. Isn't it? And you get to stroke something between your legs in public!'

'Good God, you're depraved!' Grace laughed. 'I'll tell you what's soothing — rearranging a filing cabinet, ordering new stationery or getting the books to balance.'

'Grace . . .' Mallory threw her hands up in despair. 'Do you listen to anything I say? Honestly, you're not in Oxford now. And I'll tell you a little secret,' she dropped her voice to a stage whisper, 'men don't like clever wives, they like charming ones!'

'No!' Grace gasped in pretend shock. 'You don't think I'm charming?'

Malloy rolled her eyes. 'You're delightful. I'm only saying—'

'I understand,' Grace cut her off. Mallory wasn't about to be persuaded. Every time they met, she had new suggestions for enhancing her homemaking skills; talents she clearly felt Grace was lacking. Why should tonight be any different?

Mallory checked her lipstick in her compact mirror. 'When's Roger coming home anyway?'

'In a week. Maybe sooner.'

'He's been away on business a long time. You must miss him.'

Grace said nothing.

'When he's home, you'll forget all that nonsense. Now, have you got a belt you can wear?' She rustled up behind her. 'Really! Didn't anyone explain to you that you're meant to gain weight in the first few years of marriage? How am I meant to become the spoiling godmother if you don't get down to the business of fattening up?'

Something changed in Grace's eyes. Inhaling hard, she turned away. 'I don't think I have a belt,' she said quietly, looking through the dresses hanging in her wardrobe.

Mallory stared at Grace's slim back.

She'd obviously hit a nerve.

'Here,' Mallory reached across, tugging a cummerbund

of black velvet from another evening gown. 'This one will do just fine,' she said, fitting it round Grace's waist.

Grace looked small tonight, even younger than usual. She reminded Mallory of a little girl dressing up in her mother's clothes. It was the hairstyle, so conservative and staid; it would've suited an older woman but on Grace it only accentuated her youth. It made her eyes look even larger than normal; they were a very clear grey-green colour, wide set and almond-shaped.

'Do you think this is all right?' Grace examined her reflection in the mirror, tense.

It wasn't like Grace to care too much what others thought. Suddenly Mallory realized it was one of the things that secretly she'd admired about her friend, despite their constant sparring.

'It's perfect,' she assured her. 'Now let's go or we shall miss the whole thing.'

Coming down the stairs, Grace paused to check the second post on the hall table.

'Oh look!' She held up an envelope. 'I've got airmail! From France. How exciting!' She tore it open. 'Who do I know in France?'

'Is it from your uncle?' Mallory pulled her coat on.

'No, he's in America, lecturing.' Grace unfolded a letter, began reading.

Mallory waited; tapped her foot impatiently. 'We must go.' She took out her car keys. 'What is it anyway?'

'This doesn't make sense.'

'Is it in French?'

'No. No, it's in English.' Grace sat down on the hall chair. 'There's an aeroplane ticket.'

'An aeroplane ticket? For where?'

'To Paris.' Grace looked up, handing her the letter. 'This is a mistake. Some sort of very bizarre mistake.'

Mallory took it.

It was typed on the kind of heavy, good quality paper that signaled official correspondence. In the corner she noted the name and address of a law firm in central Paris: Frank, Levin et Beaumont.

*Dear Mrs Munroe,*

*Please accept our sincere sympathies for your recent loss. Our firm is handling the estate of the deceased Madame Eva d'Orsey, and it is our duty to inform you that you are named as the chief beneficiary in her will. We request your presence at our offices at your earliest convenience, so that we may go through the details of your inheritance.*

*Again, we apologize for this intrusion on your time of grief and look forward to being of service to you in the near future.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Edouard A. Tissot, Esquire*

'Oh!' Mallory looked up. 'I'm so sorry. I had no idea you'd recently lost someone, Grace.'

Grace's face was unchanging. 'Neither had I.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Mallory, I've never met any Eva d'Orsey. I have no idea who this woman is.'



Vanessa Maxwell knew how to throw a party. It was her greatest contribution and would doubtless be her lasting legacy to those who had known, if not loved her, long after she was gone.

The first rule was that they were almost always held on the spur of the moment. Unlike some hostesses who sent out invitations a month in advance, Vanessa understood that the success of the entire venture depended upon the delicate relationship between anticipation and fulfilment; too long a wait between one and the other resulted only in indifference and boredom. And any event that didn't demand the frantic re-juggling of previous commitments, a trail of white lies and the testing of long-held personal loyalties wasn't worth attending.

Secondly, she was ruthless about whom she invited. She almost never returned an invitation with one of her own. In fact, she was famous for picking people she'd only just met, pairing them up in unlikely, possibly incendiary ways. She tossed elder statesmen next to starlets, seated royalty across from working-class playwrights; once she sent her chauffeur to the Florida Club only to return with an entire jazz ensemble plucked off stage and half a dozen dancers

from an all-male burlesque review in Soho to 'liven things up a bit'.

Lastly, her events were held in rooms far too small, far too bright. People rubbed up against one another, jostled for space, occasionally landed in one another's laps. While any other hostess would lull her guests into a coma with soft lights and deep comfortable sofas, Vanessa demanded that everyone, regardless of age or position, wedge themselves into a cramped pub in Shepherd Market, around the slippery border of a public swimming pool or onto the balcony of a private club. People shouted to be heard, grabbed at the drinks floating by on silver trays, eavesdropped shamelessly on intimate conversations as they allowed their hands to wander, brushing up against the warm limbs of strangers.

There was an air of danger to her gatherings; the frisson of mischief. At her most famous dinner party she hired a sprinkling of actors to pose as staff and one as an unfortunate guest who was then dramatically poisoned during the first course. It was then up to the remaining guests to solve the mystery before the police arrived or they themselves were eliminated through one heinous end or another.

It was just this kind of daring enterprise that had catapulted her and, by default, her husband, businessman and tobacconist Phillip Maxwell, to the top of the London social scene.

Grace had never been invited to one of Vanessa's parties before; to say they didn't travel in the same circles was

putting it kindly. Grace's husband Roger knew Phillip Maxwell professionally and had known Vanessa before either of them were married. But Grace, coming from Oxford, was still an outsider.

Mallory, however, had been twice before; a distinction she both relished and pretended not to notice. She'd been the first to fall into the water at the famous midnight pool party and charmed everyone with the nonchalance with which she proceeded to wear her sopping wet gown, transparent and clinging to her admirable figure, for the rest of the evening.

Tonight, however, was a relatively simple affair by comparison. As loyal members of the Tory Party, the Maxwells were hosting a campaign fund-raiser aimed at securing Anthony Eden as prime minister. Eden, appointed Churchill's natural successor upon his resignation, had called a general election for 26 May and his pledge that 'Peace comes first, always,' struck a chord with a nation weary from sacrifice and loss.

To highlight this dawning age of prosperity, Vanessa had organized an impromptu 'Summer Fete' in the Orangery of Kensington Palace, with traditional entertainment and food, including a coconut shy, dunk tank, horseshoes, egg and spoon races, jugglers and even pony rides, while vats of Pimm's, strawberry ice, caviar tarts and champagne made the rounds. The only difference was that the tickets were purchased in pounds rather than pennies, and the stalls were manned by famous faces from the stage and screen.

As soon as they entered it was clear from the crush of bodies that most of fashionable London was in attendance. A large banner with the slogan 'United for Peace and Progress' hung across the entrance. People were shouting and waving to one another across a sea of faces; smoke clouds hung thick and heavy; the constant throbbing tempo of a brass band could be heard pulsing like a heartbeat beneath the general roar.

Holding each other's hands, the two girls slipped through the crowds.

'Can you see her?' Grace scanned the long gallery.

'She's over there!' Mallory shouted back, waving to a small, dark-haired woman, surrounded by people on the other side of the room.

She dragged Grace through the throng.

'Vanessa!'

Vanessa turned round. Dressed in a gauzy evening gown of layered black chiffon, she had sharp, even features and rather small, deep brown eyes. Although not very tall, she was so delicate and perfectly proportioned that despite her unremarkable face she could only be described as exquisite. Next to her, other women appeared suddenly bedraggled and bovine. Her manner was relaxed; almost bored, as if she weren't greeting her guests so much as auditioning them. And every detail of her person was flawlessly finished – from the smooth centre-parting of her hair drawn back behind her ears to reveal a pair of magnificent emerald clips, to her long,

slender fingers, accented with creamy, pale polish, the precise translucent shade of the small cluster of rosebuds that adorned her waist. Vanessa smiled, taking a long, slow drag of her cigarette. 'Welcome, ladies! I hope you're feeling lucky. There's a tombola that includes a ladies' gold watch from Asprey and the tickets are going like hot cakes. That new comedian Benny Hill is hosting the auction.'

'The one from the television?' Mallory's eyes widened.

'The very same. And let me tell you, he's nothing like that in real life!'

'How did you manage it?'

'The same way I manage anything – through sheer unrelenting gall.' She turned to Grace, looking at her steadily from beneath hooded lids. 'I don't believe we've had the pleasure.'

'Oh, I want you to meet my friend, Grace Munroe. Roger's wife.'

'Hello,' Grace held out her hand. 'And thank you for having me. This is simply . . . well . . . incredible!'

Vanessa received Grace's fingertips with a squeeze, tilting her head to one side, 'So, you're Roger's wife. We were all wondering where he'd disappeared to.' Taking another deep drag, she regarded Grace with frank curiosity, as if she were a rare specimen on display in a museum. 'You're related to Lord Royce, aren't you?'

'He's my second cousin on my mother's side. He inherited the title when my grandfather died.'