

Upchurch

The Garden at Sands Hall

THE GARDEN AT SANDS HALL

By Mary Walton Upchurch

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CHAPTER ONE

The night was black as outer space, and in the interior of the Mercedes sports car, the dials and gauges on the dashboard glowed pale green in the dim light. In the passenger seat, Celia Middleton thought the dials were as mystifying as those in the cockpit of an aircraft. The power of the motor vibrated through her. The engine in overdrive was racing the darkness. Road signs and fence posts slipped by. At the touch of the accelerator, the car seemed ready to leap into the night. Celia thought dizzily, If we go any faster, we'll take flight.

She marveled at everything around her. She marveled at herself most of all. What was she doing here, driving to London with this strange man? She had never ridden in a sports car before. She didn't even like to drive fast. She herself was a cautious, careful driver. She didn't know why, but tonight was different. This drive was different. Tonight she was throwing caution to the wind.

Celia sneaked a glance to her right up at Edmund Sands in the driver's seat. His tall frame seemed to fill the car's interior; his black hair almost brushed the upholstered

ceiling. He had a bit of a receding chin, but his expressive eyes were beautiful. Relaxed, alert, he monitored the traffic carefully. Glancing from the road ahead to the rear view mirror, to the side view mirror, he judged distance, speed. His left hand rested lightly on the knob of the stick shift. The knob was burlled walnut, sculpted to fit the palm of his hand. Celia watched Edmund's fingers caress the smooth curve of the wood. She began to tingle with excitement.

They passed slower traffic easily. The lights of other vehicles streamed by like tiny spaceships. Celia smiled to herself, And this is our spaceship, as remote and intimate as if we were cruising through outer space.

The radio was playing rock 'n' roll so loud that conversation was impossible. Indeed, conversation was not needed. The exultant music filled the night and wrapped them in another kind of intimacy. The wild, irresistible rhythm of the Rolling Stones filled her with exhilaration, a connection to something limitless and free. The drumbeat merged with the beat of her heart. In this euphoric ride, Celia's inhibitions melted away. Everything seemed possible.

Surreptitiously, she studied Edmund's left hand resting on the stick shift beside her. It was a strong hand with long, aristocratic fingers. A heavy gold signet ring gleamed in the dim light. The ring was richly carved, probably a family crest. She longed to lean closer to see it clearly. Instead, out of the corner of her eye she glanced up at Edmund's profile. He was concentrating on the road and driving expertly. The car seemed like an extension of himself. It flashed through Celia's mind: he handles this car the way he makes love to a woman. She shivered and looked away.

What was she doing here? Edmund Sands was handsome, confident, attractive—

just the kind of man she tried to avoid. Like finely-tuned radar, she could instantly gauge a man's sex appeal. If it registered high, Celia would get away from him as soon as possible. Politely, gracefully, she would smile and move away. If she saw him first, she would walk in another direction. At a party, in graduate school, at a business meeting, she would take a seat on the opposite side of the room and talk to someone else. Her impulse to flee was instinctive. She had always been shy, but the problem had grown worse, ever since her disastrous affair with Jeffrey Lantern last year at Harvard. Now she was wary of any man she found desirable. Actually, she forced herself to admit, she was wary of her response to any man she found desirable. Again Celia shivered. For five months, she had avoided temptation—until this weekend, until this ride, until now.

Suddenly the car in front of them hit its brakes. Celia flinched, jerking her head back and jamming her right foot to the floor—nothing happened. Fear flashed through her. Then she remembered—she wasn't driving. The left front seat in an English automobile is the passenger seat, not the driver's seat. All this happened in an instant, as Edmund checked his mirrors and maneuvered smoothly around the vehicle.

Celia closed her eyes and waited for her heart to stop thudding against her ribs. She had been in England three weeks, but she could not get used to riding in the front passenger seat of an English automobile. It was nerve-racking because she instinctively reacted to the traffic and tried to drive. Now she took a deep breath to steady herself. This alarm was too much like her recurring nightmare, where she was driving on a multi-lane highway with fast, heavy traffic roaring past her. Enormous eighteen wheelers were bearing down on her. When she applied the brakes, nothing happened; when she turned the steering wheel, nothing happened. She was driving, but she was out of control.

Suddenly the car in front of her hit its brakes. She hit her brakes—the brakes failed. They were going to crash! The instant before impact, she always woke up, wringing wet, heart pounding, staring into the darkness.

Her heart was still pounding now. She looked up at Edmund Sands. He was relaxed, watching the road. Clearly he enjoyed driving. At that moment, he glanced over at her and caught her eye. He smiled. As she watched the warmth of his smile spread to his dark eyes, she felt the same warmth spread through her body. Suddenly everything seemed all right. Her heart stopped racing. Edmund turned his attention back to the road. Celia sighed, and, leaning her head back against the headrest, she closed her eyes and surrendered to the music.

#

Edmund Sands watched the red taillights of the car in front of him as it eased over to let him pass. He loved driving. It was a good way to relax and clear his mind before going back to work on Monday. On Sunday night he liked to drive back from the country with the music loud, driving fast.

Celia Middleton had been a wonderful surprise this weekend. She had appeared so suddenly—radiant and beautiful—that it had almost made him believe in a beneficent God. No, he frowned, Impossible. He didn't believe in such a God. Edmund slipped a surreptitious glance at Celia in the passenger seat. Her eyes closed with a beatific expression, she was gently swaying to the music. She was magnificent, with glowing complexion and Titian curls. He ran an appraising eye down her long, shapely legs. He

smiled secretly, Maybe there was a God after all.

On impulse, he had canceled his plans for the weekend with Victoria Hamilton and motored down to his estate in Oxfordshire on Saturday afternoon. He didn't know why, but he felt restless, dissatisfied. He had come down to the country with no other thought than to relax with a good book and do some riding. When Edmund arrived at Sands Hall, his two English setters greeted him ecstatically. He met his steward in the entrance hall.

"Hello, Houston. I decided on the spur of the moment to pop down for the weekend."

Surprised, flustered, the steward's wide eyes opened wider than usual. "Oh, Mr. Sands! How do you do, sir. Mr. Sands—" Houston hurried after him as Edmund crossed the large flagstone hall on the way to the library. "Mr. Sands! The landscape architect, you know the one from Harvard who wrote to ask permission to see the Repton drawings—"

"Oh, is *he* here? What a bore!" Edmund saw the steward pale under his displeasure. "Well, never mind, Houston. It's all right." Edmund dismissed him with a gesture as he reached the library door.

"But Mr. Sands," he said faintly, "the landscape architect—he's not a—"

The dogs bounded into the library, and Edmund closed the door behind him, leaving the agitated steward in the hall. Edmund strode into the room and then stopped short in astonishment. At the window, silhouetted against the afternoon sun, stood a beautiful young woman. Startled, she had turned to face him. Her reddish blond hair curled in ringlets around her face, and back-lighted against the window, her hair shone

like a halo. Edmund caught his breath and stared. Tails wagging, the English setters rushed up to her. She leaned down to pat them, and as she did so, she smiled shyly up at Edmund. Her face wrinkled in a slightly quizzical look. It was an apology—for surprising him with her presence or for astonishing him with her beauty? It flashed through Edmund's mind, She must be so accustomed to dazzling people that she's apologizing for taking my breath away.

"Mr. Sands? I hope I'm not disturbing you." Her voice was soft and melodious, with an enchanting accent. What was it? She took a step towards him and waited for him to speak.

He could not utter a word.

"I— I'm Celia Middleton. I wrote to ask permission to see your Repton drawings?" Shyly, her expression asked, Did he remember? There was no reply. She hesitated and then added, "Your steward has been very helpful."

"You— Edmund stammered, "*you* are the landscape architect?"

"Yes," she said simply.

Edmund gave himself a shake. "Forgive me, Miss—?"

"Middleton. Celia Middleton." She took a quick step back as the dogs pressed against her.

Edmund called his dogs to him and then walked over to her and held out his hand. He clasped her hand, and his heart skipped a beat. "Edmund Sands. How do you do?"

"How do you do?" Her gaze fell before his.

With an effort, he relinquished her hand. "Please don't let me interrupt your work."

She wrinkled her brow again. "I'm afraid I may be interrupting *you*. I don't believe your steward was expecting you this weekend." She hesitated. "If you like, I could come back another time."

"No, no! That's not necessary. You're quite right Houston wasn't expecting me I came on the spur of the moment I've only just arrived." He smiled reassurance. "Please, don't let me interrupt you."

"Well, if you're sure I won't be in your way?"

"Not at all." With a gesture of his hand, he invited her to return to her work spread out on the library table.

Eagerly her eyes turned toward the drawings. "Oh, thank you, Mr. Sands! It's *such* a privilege to be allowed to see the Repton drawings. And to hold them. Thank you so much!" Happily she resumed her seat and bent over the drawings.

Without knowing what he was doing, Edmund walked over to his desk and sat down while his dogs rested obediently at his feet. He leafed through a Sotheby's catalogue, but he saw nothing except that dazzling smile, those shining eyes. They were sapphire blue with long dark lashes. Celia Middleton. What a lovely name. She must be an American. But she didn't seem like other American women he had met. She seemed gentle and shy. Edmund glanced over at Celia seated with her back to him, her reddish blonde hair cascading in curls down her back. She had skinny little elbows. Was she married? He had not had the presence of mind to check her left hand.

He sat at his desk, dazzled. He wanted her to smile at him again. And again. She was studying a book intently and making notes while she turned a page back and forth. She appeared to be comparing two pages. As she worked, she played idly with her curls,

twirling her ringlets lightly around her finger.

Magically, Edmund's mood was transformed to one of anticipation. As he watched Celia, he leaned back in his chair, stretched out his legs, rested his elbows on the arms of the chair and lightly tapped his fingertips against his lips. The late afternoon light streaming through the tall windows gilded her curls. Behind her, in the mahogany bookcases, the leather volumes stamped in gold glowed in the mellow light. Generation after generation of his family had acquired these books, read them, cherished them. Edmund looked around the neoclassical library, enjoying as he always did its grand proportions, elegant details, and handsome family portraits. This was his favorite room in the house, a room where ideas and learning were treasured.

His eye fell on the large antique globe on a floor stand beside him. Made in 1620, the globe was yellowed with age. Idly Edmund reached out to touch it, the early seventeenth century world—product of science and imagination. The globe recorded the discoveries of the first great age of British sea voyages and exploration. Here were drawn quaint Tudor galleons sailing the ocean in search of Spanish caravels with red crosses emblazoned on their large square sails. Flush from victory against the Spanish Armada, Britain was challenging Spain and Holland for control of the seas and the wealth of the New World and the Far East. This was the era when the first Sands had gone to sea, and from his exploits had grown the Sands Shipping Company. Edmund was president of that company today.

He turned the globe slowly, trailing his finger lightly across the shiny surface. Here were Britain's first tentative footholds around the world—Jamestown, Bantam, Pulo Run. Adventurers were pioneering the sea routes and trade that would make Britain great.

Australia wasn't on the globe, and North America was only shown in sketchy, distorted detail along its east and west coasts. So little was known of the vast interior that whimsical beasts and fanciful Indians embellished the continent. In areas of the globe where knowledge failed entirely, imaginary sea creatures were drawn in an ocean. The southernmost part of the globe was labeled *Terra Incognita*. Edmund peered closer. The Spice Islands were shown with surprising accuracy. These islands in the Far East were the source of wealth so fabulous that it had spurred exploration of the entire world.

This globe had belonged to Edmund's ancestor whose portrait hung above the mantelpiece. Edmund looked up at Philip Sands, the Elizabethan seaman whose trade to the Spice Islands had founded the family shipping fortune. Sands had been one of the first to sail into the Flores Sea to bring home a fortune in cloves and pepper from Sumatra. Edmund studied the self-assurance of the man in the painting. Dressed in white ruff, doublet, and hose, he struck a jaunty pose with one hand on his hip. "Merchant adventurer" was the quaint term the family had always used to describe him, but "pirate" would have been more appropriate, Edmund thought proudly. Philip Sands' pirate blood had been the secret of success for Sands Shipping. In generations when that buccaneer streak had asserted itself in brilliant planning and daring and dash, the family shipping business had prospered. With a sly gleam in his eyes, the Elizabethan rogue smiled down at Edmund. With the same sly expression, Edmund smiled back at him.

Edmund's shrewd, speculative gaze turned again to Celia Middleton who was quietly taking notes at the library table. Edmund rose and walked over to her. Looking up as he approached, she put down her pencil and pulled off the white cotton gloves she wore to protect the rare books. There was no ring on her left hand. Edmund's face

brightened.

"I trust these books are helpful to you, Miss Middleton."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Sands, they are wonderful!" She gestured to the book that was opened to a landscape plan of the park around Sands Hall. "I'm writing a thesis on Humphry Repton, and it's such a privilege to see one of his original Red Books! And to be allowed to handle it!" Turning again to the open volume on the table, she said softly, "It's so beautiful."

He leaned closer to inspect the watercolor plan in the book. A light scent of roses clung to her. "Yes, very handsome indeed. It's a landscape plan for this house?" She nodded yes, and he asked, "When was it drawn?"

"In 1797. It's an early Red Book." They both studied the drawing. In an impulsive burst of enthusiasm, Celia said, "Mr. Sands, have you ever considered actually implementing this plan?"

"What? You mean build the lake in this drawing here? Why, Miss Middleton, I don't know anything about it. I've never seen this book before."

Astonished, she turned to look up at him. "You have an original Red Book drawn by one of the most famous landscape designers in English history, and you have never even looked at it before?" Her eyes grew wide. "You must be a very busy man to overlook such a treasure as this!"

Her lashes were long and lovely. "I see that I have been remiss indeed," he said, pulling up a chair. "But now you have piqued my interest. The Sands have been treasure hunters since Elizabethan times. Tell me about this prize."

"Yes, of course." Eagerly she put her gloves back on and then moved the book

closer to Edmund. She spoke with natural animation and energy. "Humphry Repton was the most famous landscape designer in England at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He specialized in designing the parks of grand country estates, like yours. His trademark was to present his ideas to his clients in a Red Book." She indicated the volume bound in red leather on the table. "It's drawn by hand and written by hand, too. It shows how your estate looked when Repton was hired and how he proposed to change it." With great care, she turned the page back to a watercolor view of Sands Hall as it was in 1797, with a broad lawn rolling down to a stream that flowed across the foreground of the picture. The mansion on rising ground looked new; the landscape, bare. "The trees are much larger now, of course. But really, things don't look much different in this illustration from the way they do today." Edmund studied the watercolor and nodded.

Celia continued enthusiastically. "Now *this* is what made Repton so famous. When I lift up this half of the picture, look what's underneath." She lifted the flap with the stream drawn on it and revealed an illustration of a large lake with clusters of trees framing the view of Sands Hall. "There! You have the same view of the house, but now the landscape is transformed into an idyllic park with a beautiful lake that looks very natural."

Edmund reacted with delight at the transformation.

"Isn't it lovely!" Celia exclaimed, never taking her eyes from the drawing. "The new carriage drive crosses the lake over a bridge, approaches the house from the best angle, and then arrives at the front door." Edmund replaced the flap and then lifted it up again to compare the views of the house with the lake and without the lake. Celia said, "The Red Books were the most effective presentation technique that a landscape architect

has ever used. They're easy to understand, and they're beautiful."

Her enthusiasm was contagious. Edmund studied the picture of the lake in front of his house. "Yes, this does make the proposal easy to understand," he said. "It's very appealing."

Celia stood up and walked over to the window. "I was just trying to imagine what the lake would look like. That's what I was doing when you came in." Edmund joined her by the window, and together they looked out at the broad lawn rolling down to the stream and beyond to the green pastures rising to the distant wooded ridge. "Repton wanted to dam the stream over there behind those trees and form a broad lake across the front of the house." She made a graceful gesture with both hands to show the extent of the water. "A carriage drive crosses the lake over a stone bridge and then sweeps across the lawn up to the front of the house." She turned triumphantly to him. "Can't you just *see* it? Wouldn't it be fabulous?"

"Yes, it would." Edmund continued to gaze thoughtfully out the window. "I wonder why my ancestors never built it. Perhaps they didn't have the vision."

Celia's eyes widened with inspiration. "You know, Mr. Sands, *you* have the vision. *You* could build the lake. Just think how exciting that would be to build a 1797 Humphry Repton landscape in 1969!"

Edmund turned from the window. He leaned back against the windowsill and looked at Celia. Her slate blue eyes were the color of a twilight sky. They were sparkling with excitement. "I would like to discuss the idea in more detail with you, Miss Middleton."

She gasped, "You would?"

He laughed at her astonishment. "Yes, I would. Let's discuss it over dinner tonight."

Imperceptibly she drew back, the enthusiasm draining from her face. She became flustered. Edmund noticed this, but he continued easily, "The servants weren't expecting me, but I daresay Mrs. Mockby can whip up a simple dinner for two."

Celia hesitated. Her eyes darted over to the books on the table. "Oh, thank you for the invitation. I would love to talk to you more about the Repton design ... but ... I'm afraid ... I can't stay to dinner." She walked over to the library table and began gathering up her notes, adding awkwardly, "I have to ride my bicycle back to the inn, you know, before it gets dark."

"You came on a bicycle? From The Rum Runner?"

"Yes, I'm staying there tonight." She glanced up at him and saw his surprise. "I've only been in England three weeks. I can't possibly drive yet." She laughed nervously. "Actually I don't think I'll ever be able to. I can't get used to driving on the left-hand side of the road." She was stuffing her notebooks and pencils into a satchel. "Thank you so much, but I think I'd best be going."

"But won't you dine here at Sands Hall? You could easily spend the night here as well. There's no need to stay at The Rum Runner!" She glanced up quickly, and he saw that he had shocked her. "Or if you prefer," he added smoothly, "I'd be happy to give you a lift back to the inn after dinner."

"Oh, thank you so much. You're very kind—" She fastened the straps of the satchel and swung it over her shoulder. "But I believe I'd best be going."

"Miss Middleton, Sands Hall can certainly offer you better hospitality than The

Rum Runner!" Edmund had intended this to sound light-hearted, but he heard the touch of asperity in his voice. He tried again. "Just when you have whipped me up to a veritable fever pitch of enthusiasm for Humphry Repton, it would hardly be fair to leave now." He fixed her with his most charming expression.

Her eyes fell before his gaze. "No ... well ... certainly, it would be terrible to do that." She hesitated and then blurted out, "Of course, I come from such a different part of the world, I don't know what you'd think of me if I say that where I come from, it wouldn't be quite the thing for me to accept your invitation." She snatched up her purse and walked to the door. "Of course, I'm sure that sounds perfectly ridiculous to you and I'm sure it *is* perfectly ridiculous—"

Edmund anticipated her and arrived at the library door first. "Wait, Miss Middleton, wait! Of course, you're right. 100% right." He smiled reassurance as he held the door closed. "Perhaps we could *both* dine at The Rum Runner this evening. They serve a good shepherd's pie, and the local brew's not a bad drop."

Her face brightened in relief. "What a good idea!"

Edmund returned her smile as he reached out to relieve her of her satchel. He gestured to the sofa. "Would you care to wait here for a few moments? I'll be right back." He deposited the satchel on the floor beside the sofa and looked at her with an amused, ironical expression. "I won't be long. You appear to be in a great hurry for your dinner."

Edmund took his eyes from the traffic and glanced at Celia. Eyes closed, she was moving to the music, her head and her body swaying slightly. She probably had no idea how erotic she looked at this moment. No, he was certain she hadn't. Edmund thought back to his *faux pas* last night when he had invited her to dine alone with him at Sands Hall. Though she pretended otherwise, he had shocked her. That certainly hadn't been his intention. But she was from the South, and he knew that the South was a conservative part of the United States. Yet manners had changed so rapidly in the sixties that in 1969 it was a surprise to find a woman who declined to dine alone with a man. Well, Edmund shrugged, Perhaps it would be more fair to say she had declined to dine alone with a strange man in his strange house. And why should he take umbrage at that? It certainly was part of his hospitality when dining alone with an attractive woman to offer brandy in front of the fire after dinner. The sofa in front of the fire in the library was as big as a bed. In such a setting, a spark could easily burst into flame. Many times he had ended an intimate dinner with passionate lovemaking. It was the perfect dessert, after all. Edmund looked again at Celia. Her soft sweater outlined the swell of her breasts. He felt his desire for her stir. Celia Middleton was right, he thought slyly. She did need a chaperone. Hell, she needed a whole battalion of chaperones.

Generally he could read a woman like a book, but if that were true, then Celia was a mystery, and he was puzzled by the clues. She was shy and reserved, yet an erotic allure clung to her like the light fragrance of perfume. It was baffling and, at the same time, enticing. She was the kind of woman who could drive a man to madness, he felt sure of it. Edmund straightened his shoulders confidently. That didn't worry him. It only made him more interested.

How experienced was she? Was she a virgin? Not likely in this day and age! Still, he did wonder. She dressed modestly, and sometimes she seemed so closed up. Sometimes she seemed wary, even fearful. Perhaps a lover had treated her badly. Edmund frowned at the thought. Did she have a lover now? Edmund's face hardened, and his eyes narrowed as he pictured a strapping young man pacing Celia's apartment at this moment, glancing impatiently at his watch, wondering what was keeping her from his bed. Edmund pictured her primly saying goodnight to him at the door of her apartment and, as soon as she was on the other side of the door, greeting her lover with an eager, passionate kiss. Perhaps he would take her right there where she stood, against the closed door while Edmund still stood in the hall. He winced at the thought. No! He would not surrender her to another man tonight. Celia Middleton was going to belong to him tonight—and not to anyone else.

Edmund relaxed his hands on the wheel. The important thing was she was not married. If she had a lover, Edmund could cut him out by the end of the week. There was nothing to it. All he had to do was smile at a woman, and she melted. Send her flowers. Quote a little poetry. It worked every time. Edmund nodded confidently, Every time.

And if there were no lover waiting for her tonight, then so much the better. Edmund checked the clock and the speedometer and made a rapid calculation. They should reach her apartment in twenty minutes. He would park the car, retrieve her luggage from the boot, and insist on carrying it up to her apartment. Then, assuming there were no boyfriend waiting inside, she would feel compelled to invite him in. She would offer him a nightcap. He would accept. They would relax on the sofa, and then he would reach over and gently brush the curls back from her face ... and then His heart began

to race. He glanced at Celia absorbed in the music. Her breasts were magnificent. She's prim and proper, but I'll bet she's a wild woman in bed. I'll bet she—

He glanced at Celia again and then back at the clock. Gently he pressed his foot down on the accelerator.

#

After they had met in the library at Sands Hall on Saturday afternoon, Edmund had driven Celia back to the Rum Runner for dinner. When they stepped inside the front door of the pub, they found the warmth and conviviality of the usual Saturday night crowd. Lights were reflected in the polished dark wood of the bar, in the gleaming copper pots hung from the ceiling, and in the sparkling rows of glasses and bottles arranged behind the counter. "Mr. Sands!" the proprietor exclaimed. "Welcome, sir, welcome!" His broad red face beamed as he bustled forward to greet them. "Would you like a table by the window? Right this way."

Ducking his head to avoid the low rafters, Edmund followed Celia through several small crowded rooms to a larger room with windows overlooking the river. "What a wonderful view!" Celia exclaimed as she sat down. The setting sun dappled the river with rose and amber as swans glided through the water, swirling trails of silver and gold behind them.

Edmund pointed out the window to the massive stone arches that spanned the sleepy river. "That bridge was built in the fourteenth century." He paused, enjoying her pleasure. "Now what will you have to drink, Miss Middleton? The local brew's quite

good."

"Thank you. I'll try a half pint."

When Edmund returned to the table with their drinks, Celia was gazing dreamily out at the river. "This is the most beautiful spot. Thank you for suggesting it, Mr. Sands."

He sat down and smiled, sharing her pleasure. "Miss Middleton, won't you call me Edmund?"

She turned to look at him. "Yes, of course, Mr. Sands."

"Edmund," he said gently.

She hesitated. "Edmund."

His smile grew broader. "And may I call you Celia?"

"Yes, of course. Please do."

"Very good." He felt pleased, expansive. He took a drink of the beer and savored its mellow aftertaste. Celia looked out the window again, and as she watched the swans on the water, she sighed with contentment. "You know, Celia, you're not at all like other American women I've met. I thought American women were rather bold and straightforward with ..." he hesitated, "uh, very informal manners."

She looked back at him, her eyes sparkling with laughter. "Something tells me you've softened that description past all meaning."

"Well, perhaps I have. But seriously, am I correct in assuming you may be a little different because you are from the South?"

"Mr. Sands ... Edmund, have you ever heard of Scarlett O'Hara?"

He looked blank. "No, I don't think I have."

"Thank goodness!" she laughed. "I have finally found a corner of the world where

I won't be teased about Rhett Butler and my accent." She saw his puzzled expression.

"What a relief to be in a place that never heard of southern belles and barbecues!"

Although he didn't know why, Edmund smiled too.

Becoming more serious, Celia placed her forearms on the table and leaned toward him. "I think it's fair to say that in the South, people are more reserved and conservative, more formal, more polite than in some other parts of the United States. I've been living in Massachusetts for six years, and I know that's what people there tell me all the time." She took a sip of her beer and looked at him thoughtfully. "In that respect, we're like the English. And the resemblance is no surprise, really, because a large part of the South was settled by the English and their descendants."

"Yes," Edmund nodded, "the Virginia colonies and the Carolina colonies."

"And the Georgia colony, too, don't forget. When the soil wore out from planting too much cotton and tobacco, the English and the Scots-Irish settlers moved west into new territory, into Alabama and Mississippi. That's where I come from. The heart of the deep South, the Black Belt in Alabama."

"So that accounts for your charming accent and your soft-spoken ways."

"Yes," she said wryly. "It also accounts for some other similarities between Southerners and the English."

"Such as ...?"

"Well, for one thing, Southerners don't always say directly what they mean. Sometimes the proper Englishman doesn't either. Now admit it—it takes an Englishman of the old school to understand what is truly meant when a group of old boys get together."

Edmund nodded, "This is true."

She nodded too. "You have to know how to interpret the raised eyebrow, the widened eyes, the silences. What's *unsaid* can be more important than what's *said*."

"Very true."

"Well, it's the same thing in the South, at a party, at church, at a business meeting. Some outsiders who try to fit in never do, and they never have the least idea why they don't." She leaned forward to emphasize her words with her hand. "But I'll tell you why they don't. It's because they've listened to the spoken words—and not to the unspoken ones!"

Edmund laughed. "It sounds rather confusing."

"Oh, it is," she said proudly. "At home, people sometimes say with complete sincerity things that everyone knows *they don't mean at all*. Everyone, that is, who knows how to speak the language."

Edmund said, "I believe Southerners are known for being gracious and polite."

She said with the glimmer of a smile, "We're known for being saccharine and insincere."

He persisted. "And Southern women are famous for being beautiful and bewitching."

"And scheming and manipulative."

Edmund threw up his hands in mock despair. "My dear, Miss Middleton, will you not allow me to give you one single compliment?"

"Sir, it's important to know what's real and what's not."

"Madam, I think you are going to teach me."

#

In the car, Celia opened her eyes and glanced up at Edmund behind the wheel. She felt euphoric. The rock ‘n’ roll was pulsing through her. The Rolling Stones, the Beatles, Bob Dylan. She was floating on a wave of vitality and desire. The power of the Mercedes’ engine was pulsing through her. Where her knee rested against the car door, she felt the vibration of the motor most strongly. It made her tingle all over. She didn't know why; she didn't care why. Tonight she felt alive and free.

Edmund Sands was a handsome man. He had piercing green eyes, black hair, high cheekbones, and a straight nose. A deep scar on his left temple ran up into his hair and gave him a slightly rakish appearance. He was intelligent, confident, commanding. I'll bet he's magnificent in bed, Celia thought. I'll bet he's beautiful undressed ... like a Greek god ... just like Jeffrey.

Jeffrey! She caught her breath and stared straight ahead. She sat up and shivered. What are you doing? she asked herself sternly. Get a hold of yourself! You promised yourself that would *never* happen again! Get a hold of yourself and it never will! Stop this raving before you make another fool of yourself. Do you want to end up like you did before—with hell in your heart?

She squeezed her eyes shut, wincing as she relived the scene. "Oh, Jeffrey—don't go! I can't bear it! You know I'd do anything for you—*anything!*" In desperation, she tried to put her arms around him, but he thrust her from him.

"Forget it, Celia," he sneered. "You were fun for a little while, but now, you're

Gone with the Wind." After four months, her heart still shriveled at his words.

A cold dread seeped through her. Edmund Sands was just the kind of man she had sworn to avoid. And he might even become a client. He had asked her to give him a proposal for implementing the Repton design that she had been studying in his library. Was she going to ruin a fabulous professional commission and her very first commission, at that? No, Celia thought desperately. As soon as he pulled up in front of her apartment, she would jump out, retrieve her luggage, thank him politely and promise to send him the proposal. Then she would hurry inside the apartment building. Under no circumstances would she allow him to come upstairs with her to her apartment. Celia took a deep breath. She could do it. She would do it. She closed her eyes and pursed her lips with determination.

#

After dinner at the Rum Runner on Saturday night, Celia and Edmund had attended church the next morning. The Sunday morning congregation and organ filled the village church with music. As the clergy and choir recessed down the aisle, voices rose in celebration.

Joyful, joyful we adore Thee

God of light and God of love.

Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee

Praising Thee our lord above.

This was one of Celia's favorite hymns, set to the music of "Ode to Joy," the

triumphant finale to Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. How fortunate that it should be the recessional hymn this Sunday morning when she was visiting Edmund's church. Celia sang enthusiastically from memory. Beside her, Edmund was following the hymnal. He didn't know the words, but she did. Her heart swelled with song. She felt happy, buoyant. She hadn't felt so happy in months. Not since last winter at Harvard before Jeffrey had left her. No—she mustn't think of that. It would ruin her happiness, and that was too precious to lose.

Determined not to think about Jeffrey, Celia looked around her at the church instead. It was a country parish church, but its size and beauty declared that wealthy men had built it. She wondered whether the prosperity was due to the economy of the area in general or to the prosperity of the Sands family in particular. Her eyes traveled up the lofty line of the windows. Up, up, up, until she tilted her head back to admire the dark, wooden-beam ceiling with the golden angels that seemed to hover above them. The stained glass Gothic windows glowed in deep red, violet, forest green, gold, and white. The morning sun streaming in through the windows splashed color everywhere, on the limestone arches, the slate floor, and the black and white marble monuments. The light spangled the congregation with random jewel tones. Celia noticed when they stood up to sing that a glowing ruby light fell on the back of Edmund's hair. Like the Pentecostal flame, she smiled to herself.

She recalled his astonishment last night at supper at The Rum Runner when he realized that she intended to go to church the next morning. They were lingering over brandy.

"Of course I'd be glad to show you the village church," he said. "It's our family

church, and I have rather a personal interest in it, having just paid to restore the roof. It's quite good Perpendicular Gothic, sixteenth century. But we can see it anytime. There's no need to attend the service."

"But I *want* to attend the service. That's by far the best way to 'see the church' as you say, when the people are in it. Churches don't come alive until the service begins. The music, the prayers, the architecture—everything there for the glory of God."

Edmund looked surprised. "Do you believe in God?"

"Yes, of course."

"You do? Why in the world do you believe in God?" He genuinely wanted to know.

Celia spread her hands in an eloquent gesture. One hand indicated the scene outside the window; the other hand indicated the convivial people in the room. She said simply, "Just look around you."

She was looking around the church now as the choir filed past her down the aisle. She loved the flowers best. This dignified church had stood for four hundred years, a testimony to the endurance of faith and beauty. Yet the flowers were as fresh as today. Seated in the front pew, Celia could see the individual blossoms in the exuberant arrangement of white lilies and red roses on a stand in front of the lectern. The congregation knelt for the benediction.

Then Edmund was gesturing to her. She realized everyone was waiting for them to leave first. How quaint! Quite like the lord of the manor, she thought as Edmund stepped into the aisle and offered her his arm. She accepted it, and before the eyes of the entire congregation, they walked down the aisle to the church door. Celia felt her

happiness was complete.

At the door, Edmund greeted the minister and introduced her. He was a tall, thin man with white hair and billowing white robes. Then the congregation came pouring out the door, and she was swept away by the crowd. She lost sight of Edmund.

Two little old ladies beetled up to her. They were short and dumpy, but they moved with an energy that radiated friendliness. Their shapeless Sunday hats hardly came up to Celia's breast. A wrinkled face with twinkling eyes beamed up at her. "How do you do. I'm Miss Potts." The other lady, a feather askew on her hat, chimed in, "And I'm Miss Emily Potts." Her pale eyes smiled up at Celia.

"How do you do. I'm Celia Middleton."

"Oh yes, we know!" Miss Potts exclaimed. "You came with Edmund Sands this morning!"

Her sister chimed in, "You came with Edmund. We think it's wonderful!"

"And you're so beautiful!" cried Miss Potts. "We noticed you right away, as soon as you walked into the church."

Her sister bobbed the feather enthusiastically. "Oh my, yes! As soon as you walked down the aisle, we noticed you. I said to Sister, 'Just like a bride and groom!' My dear!" she clasped her hands together and gazed beatifically up at Celia. "So romantic!"

"Oh, no, Miss Potts! Thank you for the compliment, but I promise that's not the case at all. I just came down this weekend to study some drawings in Mr. Sands' library and—"

"Oh, my dear," Miss Potts wagged her finger at her, "I liked you instantly. I could tell you're different from the *others* he brings down here." Her eyes grew wide to

emphasize her meaning.

"And besides," her sister added darkly, "he never brings any of *them* to church!"

"Oh no, never!" exclaimed Miss Potts with satisfaction. "I don't think Edmund has darkened the church door since he buried his wife. And that was years ago!" she cried triumphantly. She waved a cautionary finger at Celia. "Now don't you believe what you read in those gossip columns about him, my dear. I'm sure he couldn't be as wicked as they make him out to be in the—"

"Oh no, indeed. He couldn't be!" cried the feather triumphantly. "We knew his mother!"

"Tell me, my dear, are you related to the Middletons in Surrey?"

There was an infinitesimal pause, and Celia seized it. "No, ma'am, I'm not. I'm from the United States."

The feather froze.

Miss Potts' mouth dropped open. "An American!" she squeaked in dismay.

"Yes, ma'am." Celia's face wrinkled up in sympathy at her distress. "From Alabama."

This was met with a stunned silence.

"But ... but ... you knew all the prayers—" cried Miss Potts.

"And all the hymns!" cried her sister.

"I'm an Episcopalian," Celia said. "You know, that's the American branch of the Anglican Church."

Edmund appeared at her elbow. "There you are, Celia. Good morning, Miss Dorothea, Miss Emily." He nodded politely to the ladies who were still staring

dumbfounded at Celia. "Come along, Celia. I'll take you back into the church and show you the Tudor monuments. They really are quite good."

#

Traffic became heavy as they approached London, and Edmund slowed to the pace of city traffic. The street lamps blazed garish orange light. The rock 'n' roll was still playing. The magic of the ride still lingered. Edmund and Celia had not spoken during the hour and a half trip. The drums and bass guitar of a song ended in crescendo. A rich silence followed. Then a single guitar strummed a deep resonant chord, and the melodious voice of James Taylor began to sing "Carolina in My Mind".

In my mind I'm gone to Carolina

Celia caught her breath. This was Jeffrey's song, her song, their song. Instantly she was transported to a bright blue October day in Boston and to the exhilaration of being with him. She was looking up into his eyes, his clear, blue, smiling eyes. He was a Tarheel from the University of North Carolina, and Carolina blue was his favorite color, and James Taylor, his favorite Carolina musician. Jeffrey put his arms around Celia, and she smiled up into his eyes. With the dazzling sunlight behind him, the light from his eyes dazzled her, too. Carolina blue, Carolina blue eyes, she teased him. Jeffrey pulled her close and whispered huskily in her ear, "Darlin'." In the Mercedes sports car, Celia closed her eyes. She felt Jeffrey's lips brushing her ear, his warm breath making her tingle with excitement. And for a magical moment, she forgot the pain of how it had ended and remembered only the intoxication of being in love.

Suddenly a sweet clear voice joined James Taylor. It was her voice. Her Southern accent blended with his deep Southern accent. Her voice floated above his and wove a tapestry of sound, of memory, of happiness. At the end of the song, Celia extended the last note just as James Taylor did.

As their voices died away, Edmund switched off the radio. The abrupt gesture broke the spell for Celia. The silence was very loud, and she opened her eyes. It was painful to come back to reality. She felt bereft, embarrassed. "Did it sound as bad as that?" she asked.

They were stopped at a traffic light, and he turned to her. "On the contrary," he said softly, holding her with his eyes, "it was so lovely that nothing else could follow it." She felt a thrill of pleasure and looked away. Was he telling her the truth? Or was he teasing? She glanced at him again and saw his strong shoulders and arms. Her heart began to pound. They would be at her apartment any moment now. Like a mantra she repeated silently, desperately, He's not coming up with me. He's not coming up with me. He's *not* coming up with me.

Edmund turned the corner, pulled up in front of her apartment, and stopped. Immediately Celia reached for the handle of the car door. In the dim light, she couldn't find it.

"Allow me." Edmund reached across her with his left arm and opened the door. His arm almost brushed her breast. She caught a light whiff of lavender mixed with his own masculine scent. He leaned so close to her that she felt dizzy. Suddenly her knees turned to water. She didn't think she could get out of the car! In her confusion, she saw Edmund turn to face her and lean close. He was going to kiss her! She put her hand up to

stop him and, with a burst of energy, flung open the door and struggled out of the seat. She propelled herself out of the car with so much energy that she almost stumbled in the street. She rushed around to the back of the car. At a more leisurely pace, Edmund joined her, opened the trunk, and took out her bag. Celia snatched up her satchel and then reached for the small suitcase that Edmund held. Without relinquishing it, he closed the trunk and headed for the door of her apartment.

She trailed behind him. "No, wait—Edmund—Mr. Sands!"

He had reached the entrance of the apartment building. The attendant was holding the door open for them. Edmund turned back to look at her with a reassuring expression, as she hurried up to him. Awkwardly, she launched into her speech even before she was through the door. "Thank you very much for the ride, and thank you for a lovely weekend."

He smiled confidently as he strode over to the lift and pressed the call button. "I enjoyed it very much, too. But it needn't end quite yet, you know."

"I'll say goodnight here."

"Celia, allow me to carry this up for you."

She couldn't look at him. She could only look at her suitcase. "No, really. I'd rather take it here."

The elevator door opened. Edmund held it for her, and helplessly she stepped in. He stepped in after her. The door closed on them. For a wild moment, Celia thought she might faint. The doors opened, and they stepped out onto Celia's floor. Celia caught the elevator door and held it. "Thank you, Mr. Sands, for a lovely ride. Now—please—let me take my bag."

"It's no trouble at all. Allow me to carry it to your door."

Desperately Celia reached over and took hold of the handle beside Edmund's hand. "No, thank you."

"But my dear—" Edmund objected.

Suddenly Celia jerked the handle, and, surprised, he let it go. Before he knew it, she was hurrying away down the hall. "Thank you. Goodnight!" she called without looking back.