“Damn!” she said. "I want to be in my hand and I’m stuck on the table.

“Not your day, Grace.”

She played the final cards in a desultory fashion and was rewarded with the unpleasant surprise of a trump still in the hands of the enemy on the final trick.

“Down two.”

“You’re not on form all today. You’re usually so...” Anne searched for the right word.

“...aggressive,” interrupted Jane.

“I’ll make some tea, now,” Sybil said, putting the cards aside.

Grace Finch sank back in her chair and faced her friends.

“I’m sorry. I have never played so badly.”

“As long as you’re back on form for the tournament,” said Jane.
Grace gave a weary look, but said nothing. She had little experience of losing and was uncertain how to cope with it.

When Sybil returned with tea, they left the bridge table and settled more comfortably.

“Have you arranged your holiday yet?” Anne asked generally.

“Scotland again,” moaned Sybil. Gerald doesn’t seem to know that there are golf courses anywhere else.”

“We haven’t decided anything yet,” said Jane. “It rather depends on how Sebastian does on his “A” levels, or whatever they’re called now.”

It was Grace’s turn. She took a breath, then sighed.

“Are you going on holiday, then?” Jane asked somewhat impatiently. “At least you don’t have Joanna doing any more exams.”

Grace Finch eyed her friends carefully. She had known them for a long time and had shared many family secrets with them. Well, intimacies, if not secrets.

Grace knew a lot about pushy Jane, fussy Sybil and passive Anne. She had been privy to their disappointments and embarrassments. She had comforted and consoled them given them advice and tea.
Each of them had been grateful, in their own way; and each had envied her seemingly charmed life.

“I’m not certain I shall ever enjoy a holiday again,” said Grace. “Not with the problem I have.”

“You’re not ill, are you?” Anne asked.

“No. Nothing like that. It’s just that I am now confronted with a situation, and for the first time in my life, I just don’t know what to do.”

Her friends sat slightly forward with concern.

“You know.” Grade began stoically, “how I’ve always tried to do my best for Joanna.”

They nodded sympathetically.

“I’ve tried not to spoil her, and I’ve tried to encourage her talent. I don’t think I’ve been particularly pushy.”

There were soft murmurs of, “No, no.”

“Well - ”

Here she paused.
“I hardly know where to begin.”

No one helped her. Each of them sat expectantly, trying not to hope for the worst.

“You all know,” Grace began bravely, “that Joanna is an extremely talented singer. You’ve all heard her sing since she was a little girl - though some of you haven’t taken the opportunity of hearing her recently.

“After she finished her course at the Guildhall, she— well, she lost some of her motivation. I saw to it that she practiced and continued her lessons - her teacher, you know was in the Paris Opera for years....”

Grace’s friends knew all about Joanna’s teacher.

“Well, everyone knows how great Guillaume Dumont was, but he has been retired from the stage for a long time now and he wants to give up teaching at the end of next year.

“It’s probably just as well, because I really don’t think he’s pushed Joanna hard enough.”

“What has Joanna done, apart from practicing her singing?” Jane asked.

Grace toyed with the handle of her tea cup. Sybil, sensing danger, promptly refilled it.
“It’s so use pretending,” Grace said. “She hasn’t done a damn thing. Oh, she goes to parties and sees friends, and she does practice, but she’s not done anything since taking her A.G.S.M. and that,” she added sadly, “was three years ago.

“I thought she’d stay in London when she finished, but she came back up here and there just aren’t many musical opportunities around.”

Jane put the cards away and brought the ash tray from the bridge table. She lit a cigarette and settled back to savour it, and Grace Finch’s discomfiture.

“You know I like to see young people do well,” Grace continued, sounding like the chairman of a philanthropic trust. “I just felt I had to do something to get that girl moving.”

“Oh Grace,” said Sybil, “Children loathe that. Joanna refused at the first hurdle, I expect.”

Grace glowered.

“If only she had, my dear. If only she had.”

Realising that this was clearly a two—biscuit story, Sybil silently offered the plate round again as Grace continued. “Have you been reading about that Italian tenor, Andrea Bortolini?”
“The one who’s beginning to rival Domingo?” Anne asked.

“That’s the one. Well, he’s in London now, nearly indefinitely, I understand, and - ”

She paused and looked embarrassed.

“The point is I wrote to him”

She looked at the expressions on her friends’ faces.

“I wrote to him and told him that Joanna was an admirer and a pupil of Dumont. I explained that she would be needing a new teacher and could he suggest someone. And, while I didn’t want to presume, could he meet Joanna after a performance of his brilliant Otello.

Jane shifted uneasily in her chair. She liked gossip, but hated opera and was piqued that her enjoyment of Grace’s confession was marred.

“Did you have tickets?” Anne asked. “They’re supposed to be impossible to get”.

“No, I didn’t have tickets. I hinted as much to Bartolini and hoped that his English was up to subtlety.”

“No doubt a lost cause.” said Jane.
“On the contrary. Within a week, Joanna had the most charming note in stilted, but grammatically correct, English. It enclosed two tickets and an invitation to come to his dressing room after the performance.

“That was three weeks ago. We went down by train - ”

“Just how did Joanna react to all this?” Sybil interrupted.

“She was very good, actually. She was only furious for a day or two. But I know Joanna; she likes famous people and she has several of Andrea’s records.”

“Oh - ’Andrea’ is it?” asked Jane.

Grace ignored the tone but replied:

“He really is delightful. A strong, dazzling and utterly disarming personality. Such a gentleman, too. But I digress.”

For all of her obvious embarrassment, Grace Finch knew she was telling a good story, and whatever humiliation would result, she would hold the stage as long as possible.

“We had excellent seats, as you can imagine. It was a Saturday matinee - very thoughtful, don’t you think? Covent Garden is such a wonderful place.”
“Joanna loved the performance. It does go on a bit, though, rather like a panto, everything has to be said or sung half a dozen times before they get on with the plot. Anyway, Joanna loved it, and then we went back stage, told the man at the door that we were there as guests of Andrea Bortolini and we were taken to his dressing room.

“He still had all his make—up on as we talked, he took it off. Then he disappeared behind a screen, just like they do in the films, and when he emerged, he was just like a normal man in a business suit.”

“Imagine!” said Jane.

“He was very polite and spoke to Joanna - mostly about her music and her repertoire. Then, he asked her to sing!”

“I would have died,” said Anne.

“Joanna stood up straight, took a deep breath and launched into the “Willow Song” that Renata Scoto had just sung in the opera. I thought it was dreadful cheek and hardly knew where to put myself. I didn’t even know she knew it.”

“Poor Grace, was it awful?” Anne asked.

“You haven’t heard Joanna recently, have you? Well, she was very good and what’s more, he thought so, too. When she had finished, he said, ‘Bravo! Bravo!’ and then made her repeat a bit and showed her how to breathe it better.”
“I shouldn’t think she needs an Italian to show her how to breathe!”

“It’s all very technical, Jane. He made her hold a note as long as she could, then put his hand on her stomach to squeeze even more air out - to develop her diaphragm”

Sybil suppressed a giggle.

“Well, after that, he said that he had an engagement, but would try to think of a teacher for her. He doesn’t teach at the moment. We said goodbye and caught the six—ten home.

“It had done better that I had hoped. It was enough just to hear him I could see that Joanna was more enthusiastic than I had seen her in long time and I hoped that she might actually do something about finding some work.

“When we got home, she went straight to her room and wrote to Andrea, thanking him for all he had done. It was all I had hoped for, and I said so to Joanna. ‘You don’t mind your old mother doing the odd little thing for your career do you?’ And she said she didn’t.”

“You must have been very proud of her.”

“Oh, I was, Anne. I was. To hear her sing before Andrea Bartolini was a real moment of motherly triumph.”
She sat in reflection and basked in recollection. She showed no signs whatever of continuing her narrative.

"Is there more to this, Grace?" Jane asked.

"Too much," she replied darkly. "The following Wednesday, Joanna received an enormous box of flowers with a card saying 'Diva Joanna, Love Andrea.'

"On Thursday, he telephoned. Joanna was out, but he wanted to know if she had received the flowers. I said she'd call him back, but he wouldn't give a number.

"I know she wrote to thank him because I posted it for her. After that, he called several times and talked to her for nearly half an hour each time. Then he asked her to dinner in London."

"Oh Grace! She surely didn't go."

"How could I stop her? She's twenty—three and I started it all."

"Italian musicians, dear!" said Sybil.

"Italian anything," said Jane.

"It was only dinner," protested Grace. Then she added in a whisper, "at least the first
time.”

“Oh, Grace!”

“She’s gone off with him” she sniffed. “On holiday. To Venice”.

In spite of the secret relish they privately had (and would not admit even to each other), Grace was as old friend who could not be left unsupported.

“Oh Grace! You poor thing,” they said. “You were right to tell us. How can we help?” they asked.

“No. No. That’s not the problem- though that’s bad enough.”

“What could be worse?” Jane asked.

“You see,” she began. “He asked me to join them at his palazzo. Now, should I go, or not?”