

Title

Miss Silver Series

THE ALINGTON INHERITANCE

**By
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About this eBook

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The Alington Inheritance

Chapter 1

Jenny sat forward in her chair. It was eight o'clock in the evening. She sat leaning forward, her elbow on her knee, her chin in her left hand, her brown eyes, big and mournful, now fixed on Miss Garstone's pale face, now taking a quick glance round, as if to see the other presence that was so plainly in the room. There was a candle shaded by two propped books on the chest of drawers a little behind the bed. It was a cottage room, oddly shaped, with the thatch coming down to just above the little windows.

Miss Garstone lay in a narrow bed, her head raised by pillows, her arms neatly laid down by her sides, her face as pale as if she were already dead. She had not moved since they had brought her home that morning. She had not moved and she had not spoken. The doctor had been and gone. Miss Adamson, the village nurse, had been there all day. Now she had gone home to get one or two things she would need for the night.

"It's not likely she'll come round at all. And there's nothing to be frightened of, Jenny."

Jenny said, "No——" and then, "I'm not afraid."

"Well, I won't be long—not longer than I can help." Her footsteps went away down the narrow stair where you could not walk quietly however hard you tried, because the stairs were all twisty and they had never had a carpet on them since they were first built three hundred years ago.

As the sound of Miss Adamson's feet on the stairs died away and the other sounds of her going ceased, Jenny drew a long breath. Miss Adamson had been very kind, but she would rather be without her. As this was the last time she and Miss Garstone would be alone together, that gave her a solemn hushed feeling. She looked at the quiet white face with the grey hair parted neatly in the middle, and the clean white nightgown coming up to the chin and down to the wrists, and she wondered very much where Miss Garstone was. Was she asleep? And if she was asleep, did she dream? Jenny herself nearly always dreamed when she was asleep. She did not always remember her dreams, but she always knew that she had dreamed. Sometimes she remembered what the dreams were, sometimes they were just out of sight, sometimes there was no remembrance.

She mustn't think about her dreams, she mustn't think about herself. She wondered what could have happened to Miss Garstone on that lonely bit of road. Every day for as long as

Jenny could remember, or nearly every day, Miss Garstone had got on her bicycle and gone off to the village. If she had not things to do for herself, there was always plenty to do for Mrs. Forbes who lived in the big house.

Jenny didn't wonder about Mrs. Forbes, because she was one of the people to whom she was so much accustomed that she hadn't to think about her. If you have always known someone and they are always there, you don't think about them, you take them for granted. Mrs. Forbes was always there, and so were her little girls Joyce and Meg, and her grown-up sons Mac and Alan. There was a lot of difference between them in age. That was because of the war. Mac and Alan had been born in the first years of Mrs. Forbes' marriage, and the two girls came after the war, so that the boys were quite grown-up and the girls were only nine and ten. They were all part of Jenny's life. She hadn't any relations of her own. When Mr. Forbes died she felt as if she had lost an uncle. He was always nice to her in a vague, absent-minded sort of way. He had been a very absent-minded sort of person. He had always struck Jenny as being only half there. Sometimes she wondered where the other half was. But the half that was there was always vague and kind.

Miss Garstone had always been there, too. Jenny called her Garsty. She was energetic, kind and industrious, but quite unsentimental. It was very strange to see her lie all day and never stir at all. Jim Stokes who worked for Mr. Carpenter had found her at twelve o'clock when he came whistling home to his dinner. She had done her shopping and started home, but she had not got farther than half way. There were the marks where the bicycle had run off the road. What had made it run? Nobody knew. If it was a car, it hadn't stopped to pick her up—it hadn't stopped at all. And Miss Garstone hadn't moved after she had fallen. She had lain there amongst the dusty trails of blackberry at the side of the road with her broken bicycle in the ditch beyond her, and no one to say what had happened.

Jenny had got as far as this when Miss Garstone moved. Her eyelids quivered and then opened. Her eyes looked out, looked all round the room, and then closed again. It was an unseeing look. Jenny's heart beat faster. She said "Garsty——" in a hushed sort of way as if she was calling to someone who might hear her but who mustn't be disturbed. The eyes opened again. This time they saw. She said in quite a strong voice,

"Jenny——"

Jenny said, "Yes?"

"I've been hurt."

"Yes, but you'll be all right now, Garsty."

"I—don't—think—so——"

Jenny stretched out her hand and took the pale hand nearest her. Miss Garstone had always been proud of her hands. They were her one beauty and she cherished it. They lay on the bed, the nails even and shining, the fingers a little curved, lying there quite empty. Jenny took the hand that was nearest to her. It felt slack and weak and empty. She said, "Oh, Garsty, Garsty!"

The eyes opened. Miss Garstone's voice came again. She seemed to be continuing something that she had been saying in the dream in which she walked. She said,

"So it all belongs to you. You know that, don't you?"

"Don't worry about it now, Garsty."

Miss Garstone shut her eyes, but she was not at peace. The hand that was under Jenny's kept on moving. It was like something that was trying to wake up and couldn't quite manage it. Jenny's hand closed on it warmly.

"Don't. Don't try, Garsty. It's bad for you. You mustn't. Another time when you're better——"

The eyes opened again. For the first time the head moved. A very slight movement. It said, "No." She lay quiet, her eyes open, fixed on Jenny. Then she spoke in a thread of a voice.

"Did I say it?"

"I don't know."

"It's—so—difficult. I—must—tell—you. I oughtn't—to—have—kept it—from you. I never meant—to go—without—telling you. It seemed—best—at the time. Your mother——" She stopped. "She was Jennifer Hill. Your father—your father didn't know—he didn't know about you—that you were coming—I don't think he knew—but Jennifer never said. He was Richard Forbes—Richard Alington Forbes. Alington belonged to him. But you know that—I didn't keep that from you—everyone knows it." The cold hand under Jenny's warm one twitched and turned.

Jenny said quickly,

"Don't worry yourself, Garsty. Oh, please don't!"

"I must." The two words came out quite clearly and strongly. They were weighted with a deep earnestness. After them she fell silent. It was like watching someone drift. Presently she spoke again.

"I ought not to have done it. At first I wasn't sure. And there you were, just a tiny baby, and your mother dead and she didn't tell me anything. If she had told me—I wouldn't have—let her down. Oh, I wouldn't! Do you believe me—because it's true——"

"Of course I believe you. Oh, don't trouble yourself."

The pale lips said, "I must——" on a failing breath. She was silent again. After what seemed like a long time she spoke in a faint voice. "I didn't think there was anything more—not till you were seven and Mr. and Mrs. Forbes had been here all that time. I was talking to a friend of mine, and she said, 'There's a way you can be quite sure, you know. If there was a marriage, it will be at Somerset House.' Did I tell you about the letter?"

"No. Never mind about it now."

Miss Garstone took no notice. She went on in that whispery voice which was like the trees sounding in a little wind, or something that you heard in a dream. She said,

"About the letter—it was in that little chest of drawers. It's there still—I put it back—I didn't want to read it. But you're their daughter—you have the right. It was the only letter she had from him, because they were together. She was in the W.R.A.F.'s—you know that. He was killed before he could write again. His plane was lost. He went out on—what do they call them—a reconnaissance or something like that—and he didn't come back. He didn't come back——" There was a pause. The eyelids fell. The room was very quiet. The minutes went by.

Then very suddenly the eyes were open again.

"I only saw the one sentence—just the one—but it made me think. I couldn't get it out of my head. You see, he called her 'My wife—my precious wife'—there, at the end of the letter. I couldn't help thinking if they were married, then the house was yours—it was all yours."

It didn't penetrate. It was just something that the pale lips were saying. Jenny couldn't believe it. The hand which held Miss Garstone's was steady. Her mind shut all its doors. She couldn't believe it at all. She said,

"If they were married, she would have said."

"I thought of that—I thought he felt that way about her. But it couldn't be true—it couldn't really be true——"

The thought came into Jenny's mind, "Why couldn't it?" Before she knew what she was going to do she heard herself saying,

"Why couldn't it be true?"

Miss Garstone looked at her. She made an effort that moved her head a little, and she looked at Jenny.

“I knew you would ask me that some day.”

All at once there seemed to be a tingling in the air between them.

“I knew it. Now it’s come. I wasn’t brave enough—I couldn’t face it. I can’t die without telling you—I never went to Somerset House—I was afraid——”

“Why were you afraid?”

“I loved you so much.”

Jenny’s heart melted in her.

“Oh, Garsty!”

“I thought—it was all wrong—I can see now. I thought if I said—and if it was true—that they were married—I thought——”

“Don’t trouble now, Garsty.”

“I must—there’s so little time——”

“Tomorrow——”

“I haven’t got any tomorrow. I never went to Somerset House—they would have taken you away from me. I couldn’t bear it—it was because I loved you so much——” The lids came down again. There was a long silence which gradually became peaceful. Then suddenly the hand under Jenny’s twitched and pulled. The eyes opened.

“You were born—here in this room. She came back—Jennifer came back. She never spoke. They weren’t here then, you know—Mrs. Forbes and the boys. The house was empty—because of course it belonged to him, and if she was his wife and he was dead, then it belonged to Jennifer and to her baby. Only she never said—she never said anything. She would sit all day by the window. What I told her to do she did. She wasn’t ill—not in body—but she was like a person in a dream. I had this cottage and we stayed here. The Forbeses came—because he was the heir. Mrs. Forbes came down and had a talk with me. She said it was stupid to stay on here—but I said ‘Jennifer has no people and she has no money—but I’ve got this cottage—it’s my own—no one can turn me out.’ She saw I meant it, and she didn’t say any more. Jennifer never roused at all. When her time came and you were born it was all easy. But she died that night——”

There was a long pause. When Miss Garstone spoke again there was a difference in her. She did not speak to Jenny. The eyes that she opened did not see her. They were fixed on someone else. Jenny had the feeling that if she could turn her head she would see who that someone was. She could not see, but she knew what Garsty saw. There was a presence in the room. She didn’t know whether it was the presence of death or of life. She saw Garsty smile and say something, but she did not know what she said. And then in a moment it was over and Garsty was gone.

Chapter 2

Miss Adamson was away for an hour. She would not have been so long, but she met a number of people, and of course they all wanted to know about the accident and about how Miss Garstone was, and what with telling them and their saying how dreadful it was, and how shocking to think that anyone would run a woman down and not see if they had killed her, the time just slipped away. Then she had to let herself into her cottage and feed her cat and get what she wanted for the night, and it all took time. She hurried all she could, and then she made haste back along the lonely stretch of road where the accident had happened, and round the corner past the gate into Mr. Carpenter’s farm, and then on to where the light shone from the window of the room where Jenny was watching. On the other side of the road was the empty lodge of Alington House where the Forbeses lived.