

Title

**Miss Silver Series**

**THE BRADING COLLECTION**

**By**

**Patricia Wentworth**

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***About this eBook***

“The Brading Collection” by Patricia Wentworth

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## ***The Brading Collection***

### **Chapter One**

Miss Maud Silver picked up her knitting. She was using the odds and ends of wool left over at various times from jumpers knitted for her niece Ethel Burkett, stockings for the Burkett boys, woolly frocks and cardigans for little Josephine, and combining them in a striped scarf which she considered really “very tasteful, very artistic”. As she knitted a narrow lemon-coloured stripe, her hands low, her needles held in the continental fashion, she allowed her glance to dwell with reserve upon the visitor who had just been ushered in. She judged him to be about fifty-five years of age, of no more than medium height, and very upright, spare, and grey. There was no look of ill health, but the greyness was noticeable in the well-cut suit, in the close-cropped hair, in the cool eyes, and even in the tinge of the skin. Miss Silver was reminded of one of those slim fishlike insects which sometimes emerge disconcertingly from between the leaves of an unused book. The card which he had sent in lay on the small table at her elbow.

*Mr. Lewis Brading  
Warne House  
Ledstow*

Ledstow lay between Ledlington and the sea. She knew all that part of the country well. Randal March, an old pupil of hers, was now the Chief Constable of the county. She had been a governess before transferring her interest to detection. Her friendship with the March family was most affectionately maintained.

A number of her cases had taken her into Ledshire. She thought that she had heard Mr. Brading’s name, but the connection eluded her. She made no attempt to pursue it, her attention being required for Mr. Brading himself. Like so many of her visitors, he was at the moment regretting that he had come. She had no means of judging whether the stiffness of his manner proceeded entirely from this cause, or whether some part of it was natural to him, but that he was embarrassed, uncertain, and engaged in wondering why he had come was plain enough to an experienced observer. Some of her clients were voluble, but whether they had too much or too little to say, most of them in that first five minutes would have been glad to be on the farther side of the front door with the bell unring and the errand which had brought them there not yet committed to words.

The “Private Enquiries” which were her professional occupation had brought Miss Maud Silver some strange confidences and taken her into some dangerous places. They had also provided her with the modest comforts of her flat in Montague Mansions. They had bought the peacock-blue curtains, now drawn back from the two windows, and the carpet in a matching shade which had weathered the war years but was now beginning to show signs of wear. They had also indirectly provided the photographs which thronged the mantelpiece, the

top of the bookcase, and any other place upon which a frame could be induced to stand. While the frames were old-fashioned—plush, or silver filigree upon velvet—the photographs were for the most part quite modern pictures of babies. Sometimes a young mother was included, and there was a fair sprinkling of girls and young men, but very few older people. Every photograph was an offering of gratitude from someone who stood in safety or lived in happiness and contentment because Miss Maud Silver had fought a successful battle for justice. If the battle had been lost, most of these babies would never have been born.

Lewis Brading had been diagnosed correctly. He was wishing that he had not come. The room reminded him of schoolboy visits to his Forrest aunts. Yellow walnut chairs whose contorted legs and bad carving were scarcely atoned for by their wide, capacious laps. The same type of wallpaper, the same outmoded pictures—The Soul's Awakening, Millais' Huguenot, The Monarch of the Glen. The same litter and clutter of photographs. An old maid's room, and Miss Silver herself the period old maid in a state of perfect preservation.

It was at this point that his interest as a collector was awakened. Not his line of course, but he could recognise a museum piece when he saw one. The dowdy, old-fashioned clothes—where in heaven's name did anyone get such garments nowadays? The net front with slides of whalebone in the collar, the thick stockings, the shoes exactly like old Cousin Mary's, beaded toes and all, the rigidly netted hair with its Alexandra fringe, the cameo brooch with its head of a spurious Greek warrior, the neat features, the mild deprecating air, the eternal knitting, made up a picture as disarming as it was out of date. His momentary feeling of embarrassment displaced by a convincing sense of male superiority, he said,

"I have been told a good deal about you, Miss Silver."

The change of mood did not go unnoticed. Miss Silver was aware of it, and of a flavour of condescension in Mr. Brading's not very pleasing voice. She did not care about being condescended to, she did not care about his rather grating tone. She coughed slightly and said,

"Yes, Mr. Brading?"

"From the Marches, I think you know them."

"Oh, yes."

The rather indeterminate coloured eyes remained fixed upon his face. He began to feel annoyed with Randal March, and with the situation. Not that March had sent him here—he hastened to make that clear.

"He doesn't know that I have come to see you, and I shall be obliged if you will not mention it. He is, as you know, our Chief Constable. It so happens that I met him at dinner the other night, and the subject of detection having come up, he gave it as his opinion that the best detective he knew was a woman. He did not mention your name, but one of the other guests did. There was some talk about a case in which you had been concerned—the Melling murder—and I was sufficiently interested to remember your name and to look you up in the telephone directory."

As he spoke he was recalling not so much what Randal March had said as his manner. It had impressed him. In retrospect he found it impressing him again.

Miss Silver regarded him thoughtfully.

"You were interested enough to make an appointment. You have kept it. What can I do for you, Mr. Brading?"

He made an abrupt movement.

"Does my name convey anything to you?"

She hesitated.

"I feel that it should do so, but for the moment—no, of course I should have remembered at once—the Brading Collection."

The interest in her voice was mollifying. It made amends for a momentary lapse of memory.

He said, "Yes", with justifiable pride.

Miss Silver had finished the lemon-coloured stripe which she had been knitting, and was now attaching a thread of dark blue wool. This accomplished, she said,

"But of course—that was very stupid of me. Your Collection is quite famous. I have often felt that it would interest me to see it. Jewels with a history—that opens up a very wide field."

"A little too wide. I have some reproductions of famous jewels, but the Collection is limited for the most part to articles of jewelry which have some connection with crime. The exceptions are a few pieces of family interest."

She continued to knit, and to look at him.

"The Collection must be a valuable one."

His laugh had that grating sound.

"I have sunk a good deal of money in it. I sometimes ask myself why. When I am gone no one will value it."

Miss Silver said,

"I fear that is often the case. Each generation has its own tastes and interests. But I suppose that you have formed yours in order to please yourself, and not for the sake of your children."

He said still more harshly,

"I have no children—I am not married. My present heir would be a cousin, Charles Forrest, who would, I imagine, immediately convert the more valuable items of the Collection into cash."

Miss Silver's needles clicked. The striped scarf revolved. She said,

"You are in some anxiety, are you not? Perhaps you will tell me how I can help you."

Up to that moment he had not really made up his mind. He was not conscious of making it up now, but he said,

"Anything I tell you will be in confidence?"

"Of course, Mr. Brading."

March had said she was discretion personified. He frowned.

"I haven't anything very definite to say. I am uneasy, and I think I have grounds for this uneasiness. It really does not amount to more than that. I had better begin by telling you how I am placed."

Miss Silver inclined her head.

"I will be glad if you will do so."

He went on speaking, sitting rather stiffly upright, his right hand moving a little on the arm of his chair, the fingertips sometimes following the pattern of the carved acanthus leaves which bordered the upholstery, sometimes tapping with a nervous movement.

"Until recently I owned Warne House, near the village of Warne in Ledshire. It is a very small village about three miles out of Ledstow. When I became seriously interested in jewels I realised that to house a valuable collection would require some thought. Eventually I decided to build an annexe to the house which should be virtually a strong-room. I had experts down, and in the late nineteen-twenties such a strong-room was constructed. It is not built on to the house, but is connected with it by a thirty-foot passage which is kept brightly lighted at night. A hill rises up sharply on that side, and the annexe is partly built into it. I won't trouble you with technical details, but as far as concrete and steel can make a place burglar-proof, the annexe is burglar-proof. There are no windows, their place being taken by a first-class air-conditioning plant, and there is only one entrance—from the glazed passage, which terminates

in a steel door. When that is opened there is still a small lobby and another steel door before the main building can be entered. Have I made myself clear?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Brading."

She was reflecting that he had the lecturer's manner, though fortunately it was not every lecturer who addressed his audience with so much dryness and precision.

He brought his fingertips together and resumed the address.

"Once you are inside the main building the plan is a very simple one. There is the large room which houses my Collection, with my secretary's bedroom and a bathroom opening from it on the left. Facing you as you come in, there is another door which leads to a passage, and opening upon this passage is my own bedroom, a second bathroom, and a laboratory. I am engaged upon some interesting experiments with stones—but that is by the way. The whole structure has been designed to be, and I believe is, quite impregnable."

Miss Silver had continued to knit. She said,

"Why are you telling me all this, Mr. Brading?"

His hand went back to feeling the pattern of the acanthus leaves. The platform manner wavered.

"Because I wish you to understand that every precaution has been taken."

"But you are not satisfied?"

He said with a drag in his voice,

"My reason should be."

"Pray continue."

"I have taken every precaution. During the war I had the Collection removed to a place of greater safety inland. I was myself occupied in the Censorship—I am a considerable linguist. When the war was over I found myself no longer interested in keeping up Warne House. It was much too big for me. There were the consequent staff difficulties, and—in short, I was not interested. It was suggested to me that it was admirably suited for conversion into a country club. A syndicate was formed to purchase it, and I moved into the annexe. I hold a proportion of the shares, and I have retained my old study, which is situated on the same side of the house as the annexe and lies just to the right of the door which opens upon the glazed passage. To sum up, my secretary and I have all our meals in the club, and I keep my study, but the Collection is housed in the annexe and we both sleep there. A woman comes over from the club to clean, but she is never alone in the building. It is one of my secretary's duties to superintend her."

Miss Silver was accustomed to clients who expended themselves in detail upon non-essentials because they wished to defer the moment when something unpleasant must be said. The dark blue stripe finished, she returned to the lemon-yellow.

"You have been very lucid, Mr. Brading. You have taken all these precautions which you describe, but there remains the human element. This building in which you live with your Collection is not remote, but it is isolated by the very nature of the precautions which you have taken. In this isolation you live with another person. My attention is naturally focused upon this person, your secretary. Who is he, what are his antecedents, and how long has he been with you?"

Lewis Brading leaned back in his chair and crossed one leg over the other. A very slight smile just changed the set of his lips. He said,

"Exactly. Well, here you are. His name is James Moberly, his age is thirty-nine. He started life in humble circumstances, took a scholarship, went in for experimental chemistry, and became involved in some rather ingenious proceedings of a fraudulent character."

Miss Silver said, "Dear me!" She continued to knit.

Lewis Brading's fingers began to tap out a little tune upon the acanthus leaves. He was not exactly smiling now, but he looked pleased.

"He was employed by a man who was engaged in the perpetration of a series of frauds. Articles of jewellery were stolen and some of the stones replaced by very clever copies. The reward offered by the insurance company was then claimed and a double profit made. The whole thing came to light during the war. The principal was a Frenchman who operated from Paris. He disappeared at the time of the collapse of France. The affair came my way through my work in the Censorship. I made it my business to follow it up. James Moberly served in the army—I don't think he ever got beyond being a clerk at the base. I kept track of him, and when he was demobilised I offered him a job as my secretary. That surprises you?"

Miss Silver said gravely, "I believe that you expected it to do so."

He gave his dry laugh.

"Undoubtedly. And now I will give you my reasons. James Moberly has the technical qualifications which I require for my experiments. They are not so common as you may suppose. He served a useful fraudulent apprenticeship with M. Poisson—known, I believe, amongst his criminal associates as Poisson d'avril, I imagine on the principle of *lucus a non lucendo*, since he was by no means a fool."

Miss Silver showed that she had taken the allusion. In the manner of the governess who commends a pupil, she murmured,

"Poisson d'avril being, of course, the French equivalent for an April fool."

A slight bleak pinching of the lips replaced the slight bleak smile. He had a feeling that he had been set down, but could not believe that that had been her intention. Miss Silver's gaze remained mild and enquiring. He said,

"In addition to Moberly's technical qualifications, I considered that his antecedents would give me a useful hold over him. He had never been brought to book, and if he behaved himself in my employment he would not be, but if he put a foot wrong, if he abused his position in the slightest degree, he would expose himself to prosecution."

Miss Silver said, "Dear me!" again. The busy needles checked for a moment in the middle of the lemon-coloured stripe. She observed,

"It seems to me that you have embarked upon a very dangerous course."

The eyebrows rose. He laughed.

"He won't murder me," he said. "You must give me credit for a little intelligence, you know. If anything were to happen to me, James Moberly's dossier would come into the hands of my cousin Charles Forrest, who is also my executor. If he is not satisfied that everything is above-board, the dossier will go to the police. There is a letter with my will instructing him to that effect, and James Moberly knows it."

Miss Silver's needles moved again. She did not comment. To anyone who knew her it would have been evident that she disapproved.

If Mr. Brading was not aware of this, it was because it did not occur to him that there was matter for disapproval. He was, in fact, quite pleased with himself and his expedient for ensuring his secretary's fidelity. He even invited applause.

"Quite a good idea, don't you think? I've got the whip hand, and he knows it. As long as he stays honest and does his job, I pay him well and he is all right. Self-interest, you see. That's as powerful a motive as you can have. It pays him to be honest and to do his job to my liking. You can't have a stronger motive than that."

Miss Silver reached the end of her row. She said in a tone of great gravity,

"You are engaged upon a dangerous course, Mr. Brading. I think you must be aware of this yourself, or you would not be here. Why have you come to see me?"

He had a sudden frown.

“I don’t know. I have been—how shall I put it—obsessed. Yes, I think that is the right word—” he repeated it with a good deal of emphasis—“obsessed with the idea that something is going on behind my back. I am neither nervous nor imaginative, but I have that feeling. If there is any foundation for it, I should like to know what it is. If there is none—well, I should like to be assured about that.”

Miss Silver said,

“Have you nothing more to go upon than a feeling?”

She saw him hesitate.

“I don’t know—perhaps—perhaps not. I have thought—” He broke off.

“Pray be frank with me, Mr. Brading. What have you thought?”

He looked at her, at first curiously, and then with some intensity.

“I have thought once or twice that I have slept rather too heavily—and I have waked with the feeling that something has been going on.”

“How often has this happened?”

“Two or three times. I have no certainty about it—it just presents itself as a possibility. I have had the feeling that someone else has been in the annexe—” He broke off with a shake of the head. “No, that’s putting it too strongly. I can’t get further than what I said before—it presents itself as a possibility.”

Miss Silver made an almost imperceptible movement. It did not get as far as being a shake of the head, but to anyone who knew her—let us say, to Inspector Abbott of Scotland Yard—it would have conveyed dissatisfaction if not dissent. She said after a slight preliminary cough.

“You will forgive me, Mr. Brading, if I do not see why you are consulting me.”

“No?”

She repeated the word in a quiet thoughtful manner.

“No. You seem to have some vague suspicions, and I assume that these are directed against your secretary.”

“I did not say so.”

She laid down her knitting for a moment and said briskly,

“No, you did not say so. But you and Mr. Moberly are alone in this annexe which you have described. I suppose, like yourself, he has a key?”

“Yes, he has a key.”

“Then what you have said amounts to this. You suspect that he admits, or has admitted, someone to the annexe after taking the precaution of drugging you.”

“I have not said any of those things.”

“You have implied them. May I ask what you had in your mind when you asked me to see you? In what way did you think I could be of any service?”

The smile was still there. If it afforded any evidence of pleasure, it was not the kind of pleasure of which Miss Silver could approve. He lifted his hand and let it fall again.

“I thought it might not be a bad thing to have Moberly watched.”

Miss Silver had resumed her knitting. She was upon a grey stripe rather wider than either the lemon or the blue. Over the needles she contemplated Mr. Brading and his smile.

“I am afraid I cannot be of any help to you there. The case would not be at all in my line. I could give you some advice, but before I do so”—she broke off—“there is a question I should like to ask.”

“What is it?”

“Your secretary, Mr. Moberly—has he ever asked you to release him?”

“He has.”

“Recently?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Urgently?”

“You might put it that way. And now what is your advice?”

“That you should let him go.”

The hand lifted again.

“I’m afraid that wouldn’t suit me.”

She said with some urgency.

“Let him go, Mr. Brading. I do not know what your motive may be, but you are keeping a man against his will, and you are keeping him by means of a threat. That is not only wrong, it is dangerous. I have said this before. If I repeat it now, it is because I feel it my duty to warn you. Resentment may pass into hatred, and hatred produces an atmosphere in which anything may happen. You would, I think, be well advised to house your Collection in a museum and adopt a more normal way of life.”

“Really? Is that all?”

She looked at him steadily.

“Opposition stiffens you, does it not, Mr. Brading? Is that why you came to me? Did you, perhaps, feel the need of something to stiffen you? If that is the case, I think it is a pity that you came.”

She laid her knitting down upon the table at her side and rose to her feet. The audience was over.

Lewis Brading had no choice but to follow her example. He took a formal leave and went out. A good deal against his will and his intention, he had been impressed.

## **Chapter Two**

Stacy Mainwaring stood at the window looking out. She stood because she was feeling too restless to sit, and she looked out because she was expecting a client and she wanted to see her arrive. Sometimes you can get quite a good idea of what a person is like from walk, carriage, manner of approach. When two people meet, each is to some extent affected by the other, neither is quite the same as when alone. Stacy had a fancy to see Lady Minstrell before they met.

She looked down from her third-floor window and saw the London street, very hot in the afternoon sun. It was a quiet street, the tall old-fashioned houses mostly let out in hastily improvised flats to meet the pressing need for accommodation. Stacy had two rooms and the use of a bath. A great many people only had one, and thought themselves lucky.

She looked along the street and wondered if the woman in the bulging coat was going to be Lady Minstrell. Even if the temperature was nearing ninety, London could always produce a fat woman swathed to the chin in furs. If this particular woman stopped at No. 10, Stacy was going to say no. Perhaps she would say no anyhow—she hadn’t made up her mind. Ever since Lady Minstrell had rung her up and made the appointment she had been trying to make up her mind, but it just wouldn’t play. Every time she got within sight of saying yes or saying no it balked and she had to start arguing with it all over again. Ledshire was a big county. You could probably live for years in Ledshire and never run up against Charles Forrest. You might even live there for years and never run up against anyone who knew him. On the other hand you might meet him point-blank in Ledlington High Street any day of the week, or find yourself at a cocktail party or having tea with people who were discussing the divorce. “I see Charles has got rid of that girl. What was her name? Something rather odd, but I don’t remember what” ... “Walked out and left him, didn’t she? Something rather new for old Charles—what? It’s generally been the other way on.” That was the sort of thing people said,