Chapter One

ELLEN FENWICK FIRST CAME TO THE VILLA Meridiana in April. Long before the train ran into the station at Florence she had been sitting on the edge of the seat, a starter poised for a race, handbag, overcoat and umbrella disposed on one arm, so as to leave the other free for her luggage. She recognized that she had not the same grip on the *wagon-lit* attendant as the companion who had shared her sleeper as far as Pisa. This woman, the wife of an hotel-keeper in Lucca, with a daughter married in England, had chattered to her in bad English ever since they found themselves in the same compartment at Calais, but she was a hardened traveller, who with one wave of her hand in its tight black glove subdued the unknown terrors of the journey and left Ellen free for enjoyment. Replying 'Yes!' 'Really?' 'Do you?', 'That must be nice for your daughter!', she sucked into her eyes the mountains of Northern Italy, the pink farms, and the interrupted glimpses of the sea, appearing between the rattling tunnels.

Now it was dark, and she was alone. To watch the Signora,

who had been her family in space for twenty-four hours, stump away under the platform lights of Pisa between her husband and son who had come to meet her, was for Ellen the final parting from home.

As soon as the train left Pisa she opened the door of the *cabinet de toilette* and looked at herself in the mirror, partly to make sure that she was tidy, partly to reaffirm her identity. The mirror showed her an image which to eyes whose horizon was already widening appeared slightly comic. She had not cut her hair short, in the fashion, but wore it in two thick plaits, coiled over her ears. The new felt hat, which in the shop had seemed to settle harmoniously on the coils, now proved only to be comfortable if she allowed it to slip forward over her nose. She pushed it back, relentlessly driving the hairpins into her ears. The lifted brim exposed a candid forehead, delicate eyebrows and grey eyes, smudged beneath with fatigue and strain. The cheeks were too thin for the bone-structure of nose and chin. It was the kind of face that suggests a daughter taking after her father. Ellen, when she looked at it again, always hoped that it would have improved since her last inspection, but did not often think that it had.

She put a finger under one hairpin and tried to relieve the pressure, but as soon as she removed the finger the hat drove the hairpin back. Well, she must suffer so as to arrive looking like a suitable governess, and perhaps at the villa she need not wear a hat. Mrs Rivers had written that they were five miles out of Florence. She hoped that Miss Fenwick liked a country life.

Ellen had made an imaginary picture of Mrs Rivers, seeing her, the mother with the little girl, an authoritative figure, much older and wiser than herself, invulnerable, the mother seen by the little girl. Ever since Lady Gressingham had told

her that Madeleine Rivers was Rose Danby's daughter, the image had crystallized into something like Rose Danby's stage presence. This had been for Ellen the thing that clinched her decision to take the job for the summer. She had looked blank with astonishment when Lady Gressingham, telling her about Madeleine Rivers, had added, 'Poor girl! It's not so easy, you know,' the old woman remarked, 'to be a famous person's child.' But, Ellen thought, so interesting! She had always been stage-struck. The treats that she had enjoyed most from her first pantomime had been visits to the theatre. Rose Danby, whom she had seen whenever she had an opportunity, had stimulated her sense of life as it really was but was so seldom allowed to be. This made the prospect of six months in a villa in Italy as governess to Rose Danby's granddaughter so dazzling and so unlike anything that had ever happened to her as to outweigh the inevitable terrors of one desperately homebound for seven years.

Besides, if she did not make a break now, when would she? 'Are you wise,' her mother's friends said, 'to throw up a permanent position for a temporary one? Is it a good thing to let your place at the High School be filled, even for a term? Suppose they decide to keep on your substitute?' To her mother's friends, Ellen was always a girl doing her best, but not to be expected to do it well. To her headmistress Ellen's sudden desire to go abroad for a summer after her mother's death appeared a mild form of illness, the result of shock, which she treated with the sane and liberal understanding that Ellen had always admired and suddenly found intolerable. Only Alice, who would miss her most, said 'Go!' – but Alice was fond of her.

Well, Ellen thought, suppose they don't want me back? Do I really want to stay here until the Board present me with

a cheque and a set of coffee-cups? Until I am the only one on the staff who remembers the old girls when they come to their daughters' prize-giving? Is Ainley the world? Here, in this swaying train between two unknown foreign stations, at least it was not. The excitement that had been working in her all through the journey made her courage rise. Even if, by some mischance, nobody met her at the station – a possibility that had haunted her for several days – she had money, she had an Italian phrase-book; she was not a child! With resolution she shut the door of the cabinet on the face in the mirror that still betrayed some qualms, and collected her things.

She thought at first that there *was* no one to meet her. She stood on the platform by her suit-cases, and the mob of chattering, gesticulating Italians swept round and past her as if she were a stone dividing a stream. As the platform began to clear she saw a man unmistakably English hurrying towards her. In that second of impact before the whole stranger is refracted through speech, her impression of Charles Rivers, beyond the obvious facts that he was of medium height and broadly built, sunburnt and dressed in casual clothes, was that he was exasperated. At once she felt in some way at fault; perhaps, after all, her train was late, or she should have gone down to the barrier. As soon as he smiled and spoke to her cordially, the impression receded.

'Miss Fenwick? I thought you must be. I'm Charles Rivers. My wife was so very sorry she couldn't come down to meet you. Some people turned up unexpectedly for a drink and stayed late. I do hope you've had a good journey? Are these all your things?'

A porter appeared and swept her suit-cases on to a barrow. Mr Rivers took her coat over his arm and said, 'Got your

ticket?' With relief she felt herself out of her own charge and in capable hands.

It was so much more of a relief than she would have been willing to admit that she felt dazed, and, as if half under an anaesthetic, heard her own voice replying that she had slept pretty well in the *wagon-lit*, that her companion had been an Italian woman who got out at Pisa, that she had never been to Italy before, only once some years ago for a holiday to Belgium, and once to Paris for a week.

'I think you'll like it here,' Mr Rivers said as he shut her into the car and got in beside her.

The strange city through which they drove was the scenery of a dream. She saw tall, flat-fronted houses with shuttered windows, stone façades lit by street lamps. Mr Rivers said, 'The *Duomo* – the Cathedral,' and she peered at a mass of building, improbably striped black and white – not her idea of cathedrals. It was only when she caught a glimpse of the arches of a bridge, of lights reflected in flowing water, and her companion said, 'The Arno,' that expectation burst in her like a bubble; what had been names and distance on the map suddenly assumed substance. She thought, This is Florence. I'm here! and longed for Alice rather than for a stranger with whom she was not yet ready to share her excitement.

As they emerged from the main streets and drove along the Lung'arno between the river and the houses, he began to talk to her about Juliet.

'I think you'll find her nice to teach. She's very bright – at least, we think so. I suppose she may be just like any other kid of eight, really.'

At once Mr Rivers slipped into focus. He was no longer a stranger, but a parent. Strangers might be formidable; but parents, with their assumed deprecation, their barely concealed

conviction that their children were never ordinary, were not strangers: they were an annexe to what had been her life for seven years.

'I'm very much looking forward to seeing Juliet. Will she be up?'

'No, we thought you'd like to have your first evening in peace. Besides, it's rather late for her. She's been ill, you know. I expect Madeleine told you. She had a very bad go of measles and middle-ear trouble in February, and she's still a bit thin and tearful, not quite like herself. So we thought she should have a summer out of London, somewhere where we could be sure of the sun. Madeleine needed a holiday, too, after nursing her. And then Helena Gressingham offered to lend us this villa; much too good an offer to refuse, as you'll see tomorrow.'

'I've seen pictures of it.'

She could see them now hanging on the faded green distemper of the schoolroom at Hawton Towers. To remember them brought back the smells of blackboard chalk and toast made by the fire. Those pictures had seemed to her so beautiful, the sky so blue, the big white house with its square, red-roofed tower a house in a fairy-tale, unlike any house she knew in the Northern county of grey stone. They had certainly played their part with Rose Danby in deciding her to come to the villa.

'Oh, those dreadful water-colours of Violet's!'

'Are they dreadful?'

He laughed.

'Well, didn't you think so?'

She could not explain that she had never seen them out of her own imagined context. She only said lamely:

'They were in the schoolroom at Hawton Towers.'

'Yes, I'm sure they were!' He added, with a faint inflexion of surprise, 'You know the Gressinghams quite well, don't you?'

'My father was the doctor for a big, scattered practice that included Hawton. I did lessons at the Towers with Angela Gressingham for two years before she went away to school. Since my father died and we moved into Ainley and Angela got married, I haven't been there so often, but I go over whenever Angela comes up to stay. Lady Gressingham has always been very kind to me.' With an effort she added formally, 'I was most grateful to her for recommending me for this post.'

'She told us that we were very lucky to get you, and I'm sure we are.'

They had crossed the river by a bridge, and seemed to be climbing steadily, a narrow road between the high walls of gardens and houses. Once they were crowded – Ellen thought that they would be crushed – into the wall by a car tearing down towards them at breakneck speed. She sagged now with fatigue, her head felt too heavy for her neck and her eyelids dropped. The journey had become a journey outside place and time. She could not remember the beginning nor imagine the end. It merged with a journey out of childhood; she was back again in the big car that was bringing her home from the Towers after Angela's Christmas Party. Nearly lost in her mother's old fur coat that came down to her ankles, she hugged on her knee beneath it her present from the Christmas tree. They drove over a patch of moorland, and a blizzard swept across, plastering the window of the car with half-frozen snow. She saw the windscreen wiper climbing heavily under a wedge of snow, and heard old Carter grumbling to himself behind the wheel. Her feet in their bronze sandals were numb with cold, her nose and ears felt icy. She began

to be frightened and to feel that she would never get home: the car would be stuck in the snow up here on the moors, and only after the thaw would her dead body and Carter's be found. Then, almost before she realized it, they were off the moor. The wheels were crackling on the ice in the village street; she saw the shape of the church thickened by snow; the Vicarage buried in snow-bushes; their own house with the curtains drawn back to show the lights, and as the car drew up, the door opened and her mother stood in the lighted doorway. Now, as she half woke, half dozed again, the two journeys were still confused, and she did not know if she were going towards an old or a new homecoming.

Mr Rivers' voice saying, 'Well, here we are,' jerked her into the present. She stumbled out of the car, and stood on a sweep of gravel, feeling the air cool against her cheeks. In the pale façade that rose above them an archway sprang into light. Looking through, Ellen saw what seemed to her like the quadrangle of a college with round pillars, a vaulted cloister and pale walls. Servants – a man in a white coat, a girl with swinging print skirts – came to take the luggage.

Mr Rivers said something to them in Italian of which she understood only, 'The Signorina Fenwick from England.' To her, 'This is Ofelia. This is Gastone.' Their welcoming smiles made her feel as if they were really glad to see her. 'They'll bring all your things.'

She walked beside him across the courtyard, roofless except for the cloister running down one side. Before they reached the door in the opposite wall it opened. A young woman, pretty as a flowering tree, stood in the doorway, holding out both hands in a graceful gesture of welcome.

'Here you are, my dear! I'm so glad to see you. Welcome to your new home.'