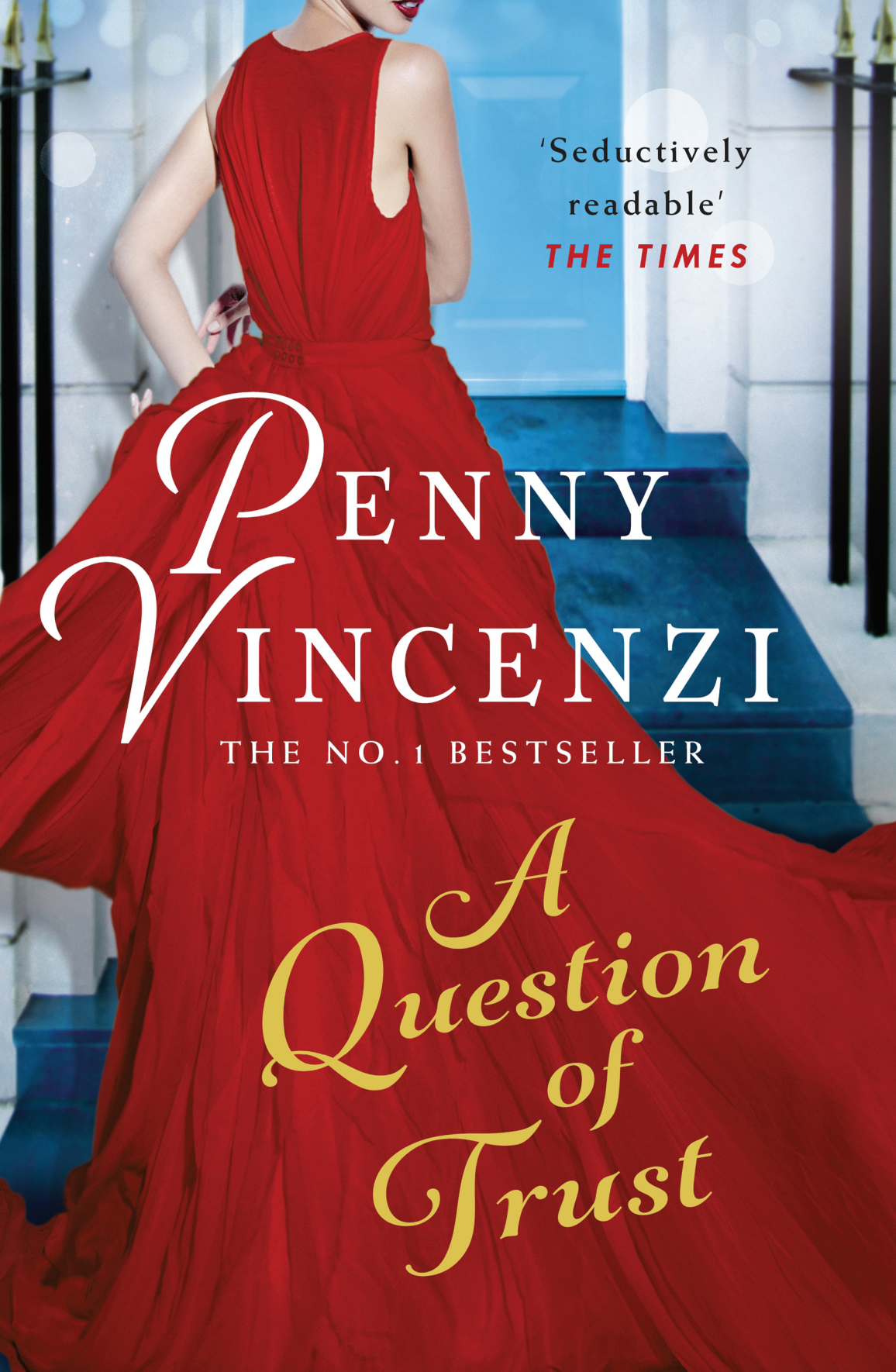
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PENNY VINCENZI
THE NO.1 BESTSELLER
A Question of Trust

Chapter 1

1936

Tom Knelston was very fond of saying that the first time he met Diana Southcott he had been up to his waist in shit.

And it was literally true; he had indeed been standing waist deep in a blocked drain outside his parents' cottage and she had come riding up the lane on the rather fine bay mare she had just acquired and was putting through her paces before taking her out next time she rode to hounds.

'Oh,' she said, pulling the mare up. 'Hello. That looks fun.'

Tom had looked up, trying to muster a smile in response to what she undoubtedly thought was a joke, thinking at one and the same time how beautiful she was – and how enragingly pleased with herself – and said, 'Yes, it is. Want to join me? I could do with some help.'

'I'd love to, but unfortunately I'd be late for luncheon. Good luck with it, though.' And she pressed her heels into the mare's sides and trotted on up the lane.

Tom looked after her for a moment – at her gleaming dark hair tucked neatly under her riding hat, at her perfectly cut hacking jacket, at her long slender legs encased in cream jodhpurs which, despite being spattered with mud, looked somehow immaculate – and returned to the drain.

He knew who she was: the only daughter of Brigadier Sir Gerald Southcott who lived at the Big House – officially West Hilton

Manor – in the village where Tom's family lived. He had seen her before many times, in church, at the village fete, at the Christmas concert in the village hall, together with her two elder brothers and her parents, all so clearly aware of their position and of doing their duty by the village.

Sir Gerald, who disappeared three days a week up to London where he worked in the City, spent the remainder of the week engaged in hunting, shooting and other country pursuits, and Lady Southcott was on the board of the village school, the cottage hospital and the orphanage which West Hilton shared with East Hilton and Hilton Common, a cluster of small Hampshire villages just south of Winchester. She was also one of the few women still to ride side-saddle – and look magnificent while doing so – when out hunting.

In short, they were the perfect First Family of the village, popular but slightly distant. Tom, whose father was the village postman, and who was already discovering rather egalitarian principles nurtured by his grammar-school education, regarded them with less awe than most of the village and was rather satisfied by his exchange with Diana. His mother he knew would have quite possibly made a small bob and his father – perhaps slightly grudgingly – raised his cap as she passed them by.

It was many years before he spoke to her again.

Tom was the golden boy, set bang in the middle of five siblings, with two elder sisters and two younger brothers. His sisters alternately adored him and resented the adoration showered upon him by their parents, being the longed-for first boy, and his little brothers looked up to him and considered him the fount not only of all wisdom, but pretty much every other quality as well. He was certainly the cleverest of them – Jack and Mary Knelston were conscious of that – and at parents' evenings Miss Rivers, his teacher at the village school, reported favourably upon his exceptional reading skills; while most of the children were still struggling with the simplest of stories, Tom, at six, was reading real books – *Babar the Elephant* being his favourite, with its illustrations and thick cardboard covers – and at eight venturing into such glories as *Huckleberry Finn*, which resulted in him

making his own raft and setting sail across the stream at the bottom of the village, soon to sink in a morass of water weeds. His favourite present every Christmas was *The Monster Story Book for Boys*, which silenced him for several days.

When Tom was ten, Miss Rivers asked Jack and Mary to come and see her. In her view, Tom was exceptionally bright – grammar-school material. She would like to enter him for the scholarship.

Jack and Mary felt panicked. They couldn't possibly afford school fees, they said – they were at least £5 a year – and why should Tom rise to the unimaginable heights of a grammar-school education and not the other children? It wouldn't be fair.

Miss Rivers explained that there wouldn't be any fees, that a third of grammar-school places were free to children from elementary schools, provided by way of the scholarship examination; the only cost would be his uniform.

There was a silence and then she continued, 'I really do think Tom is an exceptional child; it would be wrong to deny him this chance.'

Whereupon Mary said, with the look on her face that Jack knew there was no escape from, that if Tom passed the scholarship they would find the money for the uniform somehow.

Miss Rivers was delighted and said she would enter Tom along with two other boys and one girl in their class – since 1922 girls had been considered worthy of free education – and that the examination would be held in the early spring.

Words were exchanged as the Knelstons walked home; Mary told Jack he had heard what Miss Rivers said, it would be wrong to deny Tom this chance, and if she had to take in washing to pay for the uniform she would. After a brief struggle, Jack gave in.

'But none of the others'd better want it,' he said, 'or you'll be doing the washing for the whole village.'

When they told Tom he went pink with pleasure. He'd often looked at the grammar-school boys as they got off their school bus in their uniforms and thought how lucky they were. He'd never dreamed he'd have a chance to join them.

'Why lucky exactly, lad?' Jack asked, genuinely intrigued.

'Because they get to know so much,' said Tom simply, and it was this that swung Jack round wholeheartedly. If it was knowledge that above all mattered to Tom, then Jack could sympathise; he had had to leave school at twelve and found the education he was enjoying stopped for ever. He'd embarked on a correspondence course for a while in geography, always his favourite subject, but once marriage and babies overwhelmed him, he gave up. He was, however, genuinely worried that Tom might be lost to the family as he grew older; but he told himself that he hadn't sat the exam yet, and might not even pass it. Miss Rivers's idea of exceptional might not be the same as the examiners'.

Tom did pass the scholarship, though, and with very high marks. Mary was about to advertise herself as a washing resource when Tom's godmother, Isobel, stepped in and said she would like to pay for the uniform. Isobel was a rather glamorous figure; she had gone to school with Mary but married well – to the heir to Parsons, the big department store in Hilchester, the nearest proper town. She and the heir, one Alan, lived in a red-brick villa on the edge of Hilchester and had the unimaginable luxury of a housemaid. They also had help in the garden.

Isobel had remained close to Mary and, being childless, became involved in Mary's large family and was particularly fond of Tom. When he heard what she was going to do for him he went into Hilchester on the bus to thank her personally. Isobel was very touched and celebrated by giving him chocolate eclairs for tea and trouncing him at draughts.

Tom was very happy at the grammar school. Tall and well built, good at games as well as lessons, he was never in danger of being bullied; there was a genuine cross section of class in the school and the sons of local farm workers, jobbing builders and tradespeople were taught alongside those of businessmen, teachers and doctors. Tom particularly attracted the attention of the history master, a rather flamboyant character called Tristram Sherrin; he was a brilliant, inspiring teacher, and had sent many boys on to read history at university. He ran a chess club after school, which Tom joined, after which he would

sit and chat with the boys and talk about their futures and their aspirations. Tom told him that what he really wanted to do was become a barrister: 'The law really interests me, and I'd love to stand and argue people's cases in court.' Sherrin said this was an admirable ambition, but a university degree was essential, adding tactfully that he feared this would not be an option for Tom on financial grounds. However, Tom might become a solicitor, by way of taking articles, and this too was fascinating work. 'Not as glamorous, perhaps, but I think you'd enjoy it. I have a friend who is a solicitor; if you're interested when the time comes, we can have a further conversation.'

Tom said he would be very grateful and challenged him to another game of chess which he won. Sherrin looked after him as he left the room and marked him down as a boy to watch.

As Tom reached sixteen and faced the School Certificate, there was certainly no sign of him developing the dreaded ideas above his station. He was as devoted a son as could be wished for and by the time of the chance meeting in the lane with Diana Southcott, he was also becoming extraordinarily good-looking.