

A woman in a Regency-style green dress with white lace trim and a pearl necklace stands in front of a background of autumn foliage. The text is overlaid on the image.

Mistress
in the
Regency
BALLROOM

Juliet Landon

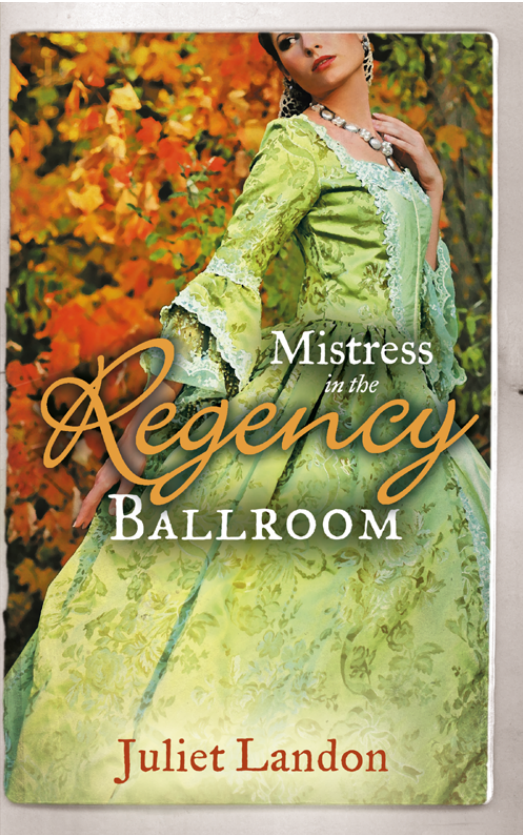
Juliet Landon
**Mistress in the Regency Ballroom:
The Rake's Unconventional
Mistress / Marrying the Mistress**

Аннотация

THE RAKE'S UNCONVENTIONAL MISTRESS Miss Letitia Boyce has chosen her path and Lord Seton Rayne, one of the most notorious rakehells in town, made it abundantly clear that an unmarried school ma'am was of no interest, even to him – no matter her connections. So his sudden desire to kiss the unconventional Letitia takes them both by surprise.
MARRYING THE MISTRESS Helene Follet hasn't had close contact with Lord Burl Winterson since their one fateful night together, a night that still tantalises them both. Now Burl has become her son's guardian she's forced to live under his protection, but what she really craves is to find a loving home in his safe, strong arms...

Содержание

About the Author	5
Mistress	6
In The Regency Ballroom Collection	7
Chapter One	9
Chapter Two	34
Chapter Three	54
Chapter Four	74
Chapter Five	96
Chapter Six	119
Chapter Seven	141
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	157



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About the Author

JULIET LANDON'S keen interest in art and history, both of which she used to teach, combined with a fertile imagination, make writing historical novels a favourite occupation. She is particularly interested in researching the early medieval and Regency periods and the problems encountered by women in a man's world. Her heart's home is in her native North Yorkshire, but now she lives happily in a Hampshire village close to her family. Her first books, which were on embroidery and design, were published under her own name of Jan Messent.

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The Rake's Unconventional Mistress

Chapter One

Richmond, Surrey. 1814

‘Well?’ said Letitia, closing the door of the parlour behind her, shutting off the gentle hum of voices. ‘What do you think? Shall you beg Mama to come and rescue me, or shall you tell her how capable I am?’

Garnet placed an arm through hers and pressed it to her side. ‘Mama *knows* how capable you are, dearest. She simply didn’t want you to do this all on your own, that’s all. It doesn’t fit in with her plans for any of us, least of all her eldest daughter.’

‘Well—’ Letitia smiled, acknowledging the truth ‘—she always knew I’d go down a different path. She must have expected it. A pity she couldn’t find time to come and see for herself, though. She knows how to make her displeasure felt, doesn’t she?’

Persephone, Garnet’s twin, was like her sister in everything except in the degree of assertiveness. ‘Oh, Mama’s displeasure is no rare thing these days, Lettie,’ she said. ‘You know how easy it’s been to set up her bristles since we lost Papa. You’re well out of it, but not too far for us to visit whenever we like.’

‘You approve, then?’

‘Of *course* we do,’ the twins chorused. ‘Very select. Seven lovely young ladies. Hanging on your every word. So respectful. Yes, Miss Boyce, no, Miss Boyce.’

‘Stop!’ Letitia begged them, laughing. ‘It’s only their first term.

They'll soon be pitching the gammon like the rest of us.'

The white hallway was bright with spring sunshine that bounced off the jug of creamy lilac blooms and shone in patches upon the pink-toned Axminster rug. Through two open doors could be seen a polished post-chaise with the Boyce crest upon the panel, a liveried postilion sitting erect upon one of the horses while another waited on the pavement beside the folding steps.

A large bay gelding was brought to a standstill behind the coach, its rider showing no sign of impatience as the three, with arms linked, came to stand beneath the elegant white portico, still finding last-minute messages to send, approvals to be repeated, thanks and farewells mixed like potpourri.

'Lord Rayne is to escort us back to London,' Persephone whispered, unable to prevent a deeper shade of pink creeping into her cheeks. 'He's *so* gentlemanly, Lettie.'

'He's taking us to Almack's this evening,' Garnet added, her eyes shining with excitement. 'It will be the most *horrendous* bore, but Mama insists on it.'

This, Letitia knew, was intended to convince her that they would not enjoy it much and that *she* would enjoy it less, even if she too had been invited by the handsomest beau of their acquaintance. She glanced up at him, then wished she had not, for he caught her eye in a look that seemed to reflect, with added amusement, a certain perception that was by no means enthusiastic. Without prejudice, her glance might have agreed with her sisters' description of him as the most perfect tulip, the

best-dressed, the most eligible *parti*, a Corinthian out of the very topmost drawer.

But Letitia *was* prejudiced by the other epithets she had heard, not so glowing, that although he was wealthy and titled—and who in their right minds could ignore that?—he was also a rake. And what was her mother doing to allow her younger sisters to be seen exclusively in his company, she would like to have known. Granted, her lovely sisters had reached their twenty-second birthday some months ago, quite a serious matter for any ambitious mother. But Lord Seton Rayne, younger son of the Marquess of Sheen, must by now have had every heiress in London hurled at him, despite his reputation, and still he had not made a permanent choice.

The look Letitia caught, the one that made her turn hastily away, seemed to have read her like a book. His slow blink returned to her, telling her in words as clear as the town crier that she might disapprove all she liked, but *she* had nothing to fear, that unmarried females who ran seminaries were of no interest to him except as objects of amusement, however well connected they might be.

But if Letitia hoped to avoid an introduction, it was not to be. ‘Come,’ said Garnet, gently urging her forward. ‘Will you not allow me to present Lord Rayne to you before we leave? My lord, you said how you longed to meet our elder sister. Well, here she is.’

He bowed from the saddle, touching the brim of his grey

beaver with the silver knob of his whip, his dark eyes taking in her tall figure as if—she thought—he was about to make a bid at Tattersalls for a good general-purpose sort of hack. ‘Miss Boyce,’ he said, ‘I am pleased to meet you at last. I had begun to suspect that you were a figment of your sisters’ imaginations.’

‘I can well believe it, my lord,’ she replied, unsmiling. ‘I suppose you must meet so few women of independence, these days.’ Making it clear that this briefest of exchanges was at an end, she turned away to place a kiss upon her sisters’ cheeks, to shoo them into the carriage and to watch them move off, waving merrily.

Responding to a signal from his rider, the bay gelding took his place on the far side of the carriage and pranced away, swishing his tail as if to cock a snook at the lone figure on the pavement who could not quite understand why she felt so baffle-headed and gauche. Had she been unnecessarily defensive? Had she taken his greeting the wrong way? Would he have noticed? Did it matter if he had?

She walked back into the shadowy hall, studied the nearest brass doorknob, then turned it and entered the room, relieved to be back in her natural element. Seven heads lifted, sure that Miss Boyce would find something complimentary to say about their drawings of daffodils.

It was not that she begrudged her sisters a single moment of fun with the pick of London’s available bachelors, never having enjoyed being caught up in the social whirl of balls, routs and

drawing-rooms, house-parties and assemblies. Her twin sisters did, and popular they were, too. Well mannered, well dressed and gregarious, they graced every event with their petite charm and blonde curling hair, not least because there were two of them. Good value by any hostess's standards. By their demanding mother's standards they were worth their weight in gold *and* a liability, for she could not conceive how one could be married without the other, and where did one find two equally wealthy titled bachelors, these days? The twins were just as sceptical.

The problem of mates for her eldest daughter had rarely occupied Lady Boyce's sleepless nights as it did with the twins, for Letitia might as well have been a boy for all the interest she showed in finding a husband. For her, the schoolroom had never been a place to escape from, her father's vast library had been a favourite haunt, and a visit to a museum, a lecture on the structure of the ode, or a discussion on Greek vases and their classification was more in her line than an obligation to dine with her mother's gossipy guests in their gracious Mayfair home. She did, of course, do her duty in this respect, but most of her friends were artists, poets, politicians and writers.

Her late father had understood his daughter perfectly—her socialite mother did not. After her father's sudden death in the hunting field, Letitia had made her bid for complete freedom away from her mother's dominance. Her father would have approved, though it was her mother's elder brother, Uncle Aspinall, who had helped her to purchase Number 24 Paradise

Road in Richmond, in the county of Surrey. He had also been the only one of her relatives, apart from her sisters, to approve of her plan to open a seminary there.

‘A *seminary*?’ Lady Boyce had said, as if her daughter had blasphemed. ‘How do you ever expect to attract a *husband*, Letitia, if you’re stuck in a seminary with young *gels* all day? Really, how *can* you be so vexatious?’

‘I shall not be stuck in it all day, Mama,’ she had said. ‘It’s not going to be *that* kind of seminary. And they won’t be much younger than seventeen, just on the eve of their coming-out. There’s so much they ought to know at that age,’ she added, remembering the deficiencies of Mrs Wood’s Seminary for the Daughters of Gentlemen. ‘If Papa had not talked to me about interesting things, I would have been as tongue-tied as most of the other girls at Mrs Wood’s.’

‘And tongue-tied is one thing no one could ever accuse *you* of being,’ her mother retorted, not intending the compliment. ‘But I wish you would consider *my* feelings for once, Letitia. How I’m going to explain this to my friends I really don’t know. They may look on eccentricity in the older generation as something to be expected, but no one expects it from a twenty-four-year-old who ought to be turning her mind to raising a family. It’s *most* embarrassing.’

‘It was never my wish to be an embarrassment, Mama, and I have nothing against men, or marriage, or families, either. But I have never been able to understand why educating one’s mind

is acceptable in a man, but frowned on in a woman. Papa never thought women's brains were inferior to men's, did he? It was he who taught me to read.'

'Your Papa, God rest his soul, had radical views about most things, Letitia, but when he left you a sizeable legacy to do with as you pleased, I doubt if he ever thought it would please you to run completely wild, buy your own house and make an utter cake of yourself.'

'Uncle Aspinall doesn't think so, Mama. And thank heaven for it. Without his help I don't think I could have managed half so well.'

This comparison did nothing to mollify Lady Boyce. 'Aspinall,' she snapped, 'has no children of his own, which is why he knows so little about what parents want. I hardly expected he would side with me on this matter, and I was right as usual, but if he likes the idea of having a *blue-stocking* for a niece, there's little I can do about it. Indeed I suspected you were inclined that way when you tried to conceal a *Latin dictionary* in your reticule when we went to Lady Aldyth's rout party. Was there *ever* such a trial to a devoted mother?' Lady Boyce's imposing figure described a convincing swoon that would have done justice to Mrs Siddons, landing gracefully on a striped brocade settee with lion's paws feet.

It was from both parents that Letitia had inherited the height that had not afflicted her sisters to the same extent. For a woman, she was taller than average, which had never done much to help

when she was obliged to look down upon so many of her dancing partners. Sitting down with men to talk was more comfortable for both parties, Letitia being blessed with a serene loveliness that, combined with an ability to talk interestingly and without affectation on any number of current affairs, captivated the more liberal-minded men of her acquaintance. Whether it helped for her to have fine ash-blond hair that strayed in wisps over her face and neck resisting all efforts to contain it, or to have large eyes the colour of thunderclouds rimmed by unusually dark lashes, or to have a figure that Juno herself would have been proud to own, were not things that occupied Letitia's mind, for in the wide unchartered territory of men's preferences she was lamentably ignorant.

The priority in most men's minds, her mother had told all three of her daughters, were that they should remain innocent, be adept at all the social graces and, above all, show no inclination to be bookish. If there was anything a man deplored above all else, it was a woman who knew more than he did on any subject except domestic matters. The twins had no wish to argue with that, but Letitia understood that it was far too generalised to be true, for there were men she knew personally who had accepted her exactly as she was, bookish or not. Unfortunately for Lady Boyce, these same men were not interested in marrying her eldest daughter, either, because they were already married or too engrossed in their own special subjects to be leg-shackled to a wife and family.

If Letitia was affected by this lopsided state of affairs, she never let it show except, occasionally, by an inclination to pity both the men and women who lived by such shallow conventions. Nevertheless, the stark truth was that book-learning and marriage rarely mixed and that, as she had now earned a reputation as being ‘Lady Boyce’s unconventional eldest daughter’, she was highly unlikely to find a mate of *haut ton* as her mother would have preferred.

‘What will people say?’ whined Lady Boyce for the fiftieth time. ‘That I threw you out to make shift for yourself? You have no need to earn your own living, Letitia. It’s simply not *done* by women of your standing, you know.’

But it *had* been done, and so far Lady Boyce had been too busy to visit Number 24 Paradise Road, relying on the twins’ information to fuel the smouldering fires of her disapproval. Naturally, she urged them to tell Letitia about the ball she was planning, the guests she would be entertaining, the visits, the soirees, the titled men they were meeting. They had brought her a copy of the newly published novel by the author of *The Infidel*, which all society had talked about last year. They were sure it would not be available in Richmond for some time, though their mother had deemed it a wasted gesture. ‘Lettie will not read *that* kind of thing,’ she had told them.

‘What kind of thing, Mama?’ they had asked, innocently.

‘*That* kind of thing. Novels. Racy novels.’

‘Is it racy, Mama?’

‘Oh, I don’t know, dears. It looks racy to me. What’s it called?’

Waynethorpe Manor? Sure to be.’

‘So you haven’t read it, Mama?’

‘Me? Read such rubbish? Why, no, of course not.’

‘Then how can you judge it, Mama?’

‘Oh, I flicked through it when I was in Hatchards, and I could tell. I don’t see Letitia reading it unless it explains how to tell a Turner from a Reynolds, which I’m sure I don’t care about unless there’s a difference in the price.’

Meant to tease, the conversation veered predictably into areas about which Lady Boyce had strong views, but no knowledge. The twins smiled and took the book to Richmond, just the same.

Letitia picked up the brown paper package and opened it, finding the three volumes of brown leather tooled with gold lettering. She peeped at the title page of the first one.

Waynethorpe Manor

A Novel in Three Volumes by the Author of *The Infidel*

London

Printed for the Mercury Press, Leadenhall Street

1814

She closed it again, smiling. But seven faces could not conceal their curiosity. ‘May we read it, Miss Boyce? Please may I be the first? Is it the new one? *The Infidel* was *so* romantic. My mama told me I should not be reading it, but *she* read it. I *know* she did.’

Letitia chuckled. ‘Perhaps I shall look through it first, and, if I think it’s suitable, I’ll lend you my copy. I would not wish

to offend your mamas. Now,' she said, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece, 'it's almost time for our accounting lesson. Mr Waverley will be arriving at any moment, and we must not keep him waiting. Leave your paintings as they are, and we'll come back to them after tea. Come, girls, into the parlour.'

Rewrapping the volumes, she carried them away to safety.

The Honourable Bartholomew Waverley was indeed arriving on foot as she spoke, to take the Friday lesson that would, in theory at least, initiate Miss Boyce's pupils into the mysteries of household accounting that every good wife, wealthy or not, needed to know. It was the kind of thing Letitia included in her curriculum, which other seminaries did not, and so far there had been plenty of parents who agreed with her that it was essential learning. Mr Waverley had been a friend of Letitia's since they had met at a lecture to which her father had taken her many years ago in London. By good fortune, he lived in a beautiful house that faced north-west across Richmond Green, and his willingness to become involved as escort, guide and tutor was one of the reasons why Letitia was sure she could take on such a responsibility. Their relationship was warm, but never more than that—more like that of brother and sister. They were both quite content to have it so.

Mr Waverley was not only a reliable friend, but also an excellent companion who saw nothing remarkable in Letitia's exceptional interest in subjects deemed to be a man's territory. They attended meetings and discussion groups together where his keen mind and knowledge of things scientific and mathematical

balanced nicely against her preference for the arts subjects. He was, in fact, the perfect friend. He stood with his feet upon the fanlight's semi-circular shadow that fell upon the Axminster. 'I'm standing on your cheese segments.' He grinned.

'So that's what I can smell. And, yes, you *are* invited to dinner. Come inside, Bart. The girls are in the parlour already.'

'With Gaddy?'

'Yes, Gaddy's in there, too.'

Miss Gaddestone was Letitia's cousin who lived with her by dint of a reciprocal arrangement whereby she received board and lodging for her services as chaperon whenever she was required. And since several of the tutors employed by Letitia were gentlemen, Miss Gaddestone was always there in a corner of the room for the sake of propriety and to keep an eye on good manners. She was kindly and well liked, a stickler for correctness who took her duties very seriously, sitting there with her basket of sewing, saying little, but hearing all.

The exchanged smile needed no explanation, for both of them were aware that one or two of the pupils harboured fantasies about Mr Waverley that had very little to do with accounting. He was tall and pleasant-faced, brown-haired and courteous with well-manicured hands, and eyes that smiled easily. He was also the son of a viscount, wealthy and unmarried, quite a catch for any woman, if he had shown the slightest interest. Naturally, the pupils were sure that he and Letitia were more than just good friends.

'I'll go in, then,' he said.

'Yes. The twins have been.'

'Oh? Not Lady Boyce?'

'No. They brought me something, Bart.'

He studied her laughing eyes, almost level with his. 'Not the book? But you've already got your copies. Did you tell them?'

'Heavens, no. Mama's sure it's not suitable reading.'

'She's probably right, dear heart.' He smiled. 'So do I get to read it now? Come on, that's part of the bargain, remember.'

'All right. You can take it home after dinner. Go on in.'

'Promise?'

'I promise.'

It was getting late by the time Mr Waverley left, though Letitia had not minded having the three boarders stay up for an extra hour or two of good conversation, since the morrow would be Saturday and free from lessons. Miss Gaddestone had contributed with hilarious tales of her childhood in rural Wales, and their next-door neighbour at Number 22, Mrs Quayle, with whom the three young ladies had their rooms, had connections with society women that made her a fount of fascinating information, mostly of a cautionary nature.

By the light of a single oil lamp, Letitia unlocked the drawer of her writing-desk and carefully lifted out a scuffed leather-bound book where the pages of the first half had grey well-thumbed edges, the second half still pristine. It seemed to open by itself at the last page of handwriting.

Unscrewing the silver top of her inkwell, she peered in to check the shine of liquid against the light, picked up her quill and studied its sharpened end. 'Stop prevaricating,' she whispered to it. 'Go on, write it. It's what you want to say. Write it, before you forget.' Obediently, the quill dipped and began to describe.

He sat the huge bay gelding like a god, scowling at the sun until he was obliged to acknowledge her, though she did not wish it. His eyes she could not see, though she knew how they looked at her, how they refused to light, but scanned in one glance from head to toe, touching a nerve of her anger, making her fists clench, halting her breath. She said something ungracious that did not, as she had intended, make him smart, but dismiss her as too clever by half and not worth his time.

She felt her heart thudding, her eyes wanting, but not wanting, to take in more of him, his gloved hands on the reins, now reaching to pat the glossy neck before him, settling his mount as she wished he would settle her. She had never felt so unsettled. So overlooked. There are more interesting things, she told herself, to occupy your thoughts. Yet for the life of her she could not will them to return.

The quill was laid to rest as a shuddering sigh wafted across the page, and for several moments she stared at the words as if someone else had written them. But that was what writers must do to record every scrap of information that came their way, especially writers to whom such things came with exceptional rarity, as one had today. Was it worth recording? she asked herself, closing the book and returning it to the drawer. Yes, it

was. Comfortable or not, she could hardly afford to let it pass, her experience of men being what it was.

The ride to Hampton Court Palace on the following day, ostensibly to visit Mr Waverley's elderly mother, was augmented by five of Letitia's pupils, two of whom were local day girls who, if they had wished, could have stayed with their parents. So while Miss Gaddestone and Mrs Quayle rode in the barouche, the others rode their own horses, some of which were stabled with Letitia's. As a good horsewoman, she had been keen to introduce riding lessons into her list of subjects, there being too few young ladies of seventeen, she said, who knew how to look easy in the saddle. She had no say, however, regarding the quality of the mounts their fathers had provided for them, which was something she would have to work on, once things became more established.

The cavalcade of one carriage and seven riders ambled along the river path to the village of Hampton with not quite the striking image Letitia had had in mind at the outset, though she did not believe they would be much on show at a place like Hampton Court. The last time she had visited, the gardens had been overgrown and the elderly inhabitants too intent on their feet to notice any passing horseflesh.

While Mr Waverley rode round to the south side of the palace where his mother had a grace-and-favour residence, Letitia led the way round to The Green, and from there in through the West Gate, which, she had been informed, would lead them directly to

the place where they could leave the horses and go on foot into the courtyards.

What Mr Waverley had failed to mention was that the large area from gate to palace, known as the Outer Green Court, was the province of the cavalry academy where recruits underwent intensive training before joining Marquess Wellington's army in Spain. Along the left-hand side ranged the red-brick barrack block, the yard in front of which was packed with mounted men in blue tunics with silver frogging across their chests, white pantaloons tucked into shining boots, tall fur helmets, with braids, tassels, belts and buckles, sashes and saddlecloths, curved scabbards and yards of silver cord. As the barouche and six riders began to cross the parade ground, large glossy horses with stamping hooves and jingling harness moved off in synchronised groups, with civilians around the perimeter to watch the exercise.

But Letitia's elderly coachman, slightly deaf and revelling in his audience, could not hear her call to him to stop, the blast of a trumpet coinciding with her warning and, at the same time, spooking several of the horses. Almost unseating two of the pupils, the mounts half-reared and pranced out of control while others scattered and wheeled, preventing Letitia from reaching the coachman who, still oblivious to the danger, thought it unlikely that a group of cavalry would take precedence over his carriage and pair. In this, however, he was mistaken, for the cavalry recruits threatening to mow him down were the 10th Light Dragoons, who believed by divine right that they took

precedence over everything at all times.

Torn between stopping the carriage and rounding up her struggling pupils, Letitia yelled at Miss Gaddestone who was half-standing, waving her arms like a windmill at the advancing line of dark blue tunics in the hope that they would wait. Using a more immediate approach, Mrs Quayle took up her parasol like a golf club and swiped wildly at the coachman, sending his top hat bouncing like a football under the feet of the cavalry horses. She said afterwards, by way of apology, that she had been aiming for his shoulder. Nevertheless, it brought him at last to an abrupt halt.

The six attractive female riders having trouble with their mounts and the coachman having trouble with his dignity were immediately surrounded by the elite cavalry corps, aged from eighteen to twenty-two, who were not so disciplined that they could conceal their grins in view of the farce before them. Nor could they totally ignore the plunging, whirling, side-stepping and reversing mêlée that blocked their way. Unable to resist the temptation, a few of the young men caught the reins of the worst-behaved horses just as their commanding officer, on a very large bay gelding, rode through the ranks as if the Red Sea was parting for him, and came to a halt beside the coachman's box.

Beneath the black fur of his helmet, the officer's expression was thunderous as he barked at the furious coachman. 'I take it you were never a part of His Majesty's Services, man?'

'No, sir. I was not!'

‘Then you may not be aware that a blast on a trumpet is some sort of *signal*, and that not even a dimwit with half a brain would take a carriage forward across a line of cavalry unless he had a *death wish*. Who is in charge of this *nursery*?’

‘I am responsible for the safety of these young ladies,’ Letitia called out to him. ‘And if the commanding officer had *his* wits about him, he would have seen that all was not clear *before* he issued his command. I hope this will be the worst that can happen to your men when they go into battle, for they will be—’

Although the two antagonists had recognised each other instantly, Captain Lord Rayne had decided not to listen, turning his mount away before her insults were finished, snapping and barking at his men and Letitia’s coachman, bringing order to the chaos so quickly and efficiently that even the horses obeyed him. Letitia was the last one to pass him, but neither of them cared to acknowledge the other by so much as a glance, and she was left to bring up the rear, seething with anger and humiliation under the barely controlled grins of the men and the wide-eyed stares of the spectators. There was a scattering of applause as she left.

The drumming of hoofbeats on the gravel behind her made her turn to see a young cavalryman with a boyish face drawing alongside, holding out a battered top hat that had once been black. ‘Captain’s compliments, ma’am,’ he said.

The discomfiting episode of the parade ground was bound to have repercussions that would follow Letitia’s party, quite altering the purpose for which she had brought them, which was

to see the palace architecture and for the riding experience. Now, the excited pupils were far more interested in the young men who had dashed to their aid—which was how they preferred to see it—than in the beauty of the patterned brick chimneys, and they begged to be allowed to watch, if only for a few minutes, the men performing their battle drill. Letitia could hardly refuse. So, leaving the girls with their two chaperons, she went off in search of the grace-and-favour apartments where Mr Waverley's mother lived.

The maze of stone-flagged passages in the Tudor part of the palace soon gave way to the more recent but equally convoluted muddle of courtyards and poky chambers of the William and Mary additions, which had once been the royal apartments, but were now shabbily redundant. After wandering without success from one long passageway to another, she sat down upon a dusty windowseat in a small bare room that might in earlier days have been a butler's pantry. Looking out on to yet another cobbled courtyard, she tried to remember by which side she had entered it, and which might conceivably be the south side.

Before she could draw back, a tall uniformed figure strode through the colonnade opposite her and stopped to look about him. Almost identical in dress to dozens of others, there was no mistaking the set of the powerful shoulders, the length of muscular leg, the officer's arrogant bearing that singled him out from all the rest. She did not watch to see where he went, but held herself flat against the cold wall, hoping that the sage-green

velvet habit would not be seen against the mossy brickwork. He was the last, the *very* last person she wished to bump into here, of all places.

Listening for the smallest sound, she held her breath while trying to distinguish the rattle of roosting pigeons and the thudding of her heart from the hard echo of a footfall upon stone floors. It grew louder, then stopped at the doorway and took a step inside.

Lord Rayne ducked his head beneath the lintel. ‘What’s this?’ he said, softly. ‘Abandoning your chickens, Mother Hen?’

Letitia glared at him, then looked away, fixing her eyes on the flaking distemper of the opposite wall, disdaining to answer such a nonsensical question. She felt very vulnerable, for though he had not bothered to close the door, the passageway behind him was completely deserted.

‘Mute?’ he said, coming forward to rest a hand high on the wall near her head. ‘Interesting. You had plenty to say a few moments ago out there, Miss Boyce. Would you not like to continue, now I have your undivided attention?’

One lightning-quick glance told her that his eyes were as brown as chestnuts, hard and mocking, and that it would not be the first time he had ever had a woman so completely at a disadvantage. Still, she refused to give him any more ammunition, it being clear that her ungracious retort yesterday was remembered and that he was angered by today’s unladylike response in front of his men. It *had* been unladylike. There was

no getting away from that.

‘An apology, then? Would that be too much to ask?’

‘Yes, my lord. It *would*. Please leave me alone,’ she said with as much dignity as she could summon, though he must have heard her voice waver. He was uncomfortably close on purpose, she thought, to intimidate her.

‘Leave you alone...here? Ah, no, that would be ungentlemanly, Miss Boyce. You are either hiding, or you are lost. Which is it?’

Taking refuge in silence, she turned her head to one side, her cheeks burning under his intense scrutiny, her mind working furiously towards a way to resolve this dreadful hindrance. Not for the world would she give him the satisfaction of an apology, nor even an explanation. But he was between her and the door and, although hoydenish behaviour was not her style, whatever he chose to believe, a quick dash for freedom seemed to be the only way to extricate herself.

Riding habits, however, were not designed for the quick dash. No sooner had she gathered up her skirts with one hand than his long leg moved to prevent her, his body pressing her back against the wall with a determination she could not break. She felt the shameful pressure of his thigh against hers, and the warmth of his face, so closely restricting. ‘Let me go!’ she whispered. ‘You insult me, Lord Rayne. This surely cannot be the gentlemanly conduct you offer my sisters.’ She pushed against his shoulder with her riding crop, but even her well-built frame was no match

for him, and there was little she could do to prevent his mouth slanting across hers, taking the apology she had refused to offer.

It was no mere peck, and when she tried to end it by breaking away, he caught her chin to bring her back to him, stopping her protests with another angry kiss more searching than the first. Even through the thickness of uniform, braids and buttons, she could feel the surge of authority that he felt obliged to impose, left over from the earlier incident and now aggravated by her refusal to yield. His arms were controlling her, determined to humble, demanding submission. It had nothing to do with desire, she was sure, but with obedience, the same obedience she had refused him earlier before crowds of onlookers.

‘No,’ he growled, ‘this is not what I offer your sisters, Miss Boyce. I am not offering anything, but *taking* your apology. No one is allowed to walk off my parade ground yelling insults at me, not even a woman. Besides, I’ve never taken a kiss from a schoolma’am before. It’s a novelty. Worth repeating, I think.’

‘No...no!’ Letitia snarled. ‘Don’t *dare* to handle me so. Get off me! I owe you nothing, and that was *not* an apology. I never apologise to *hooligans*.’ Her voice, hoarse with rage, spat out the last word as she found a space to bring up her riding crop with a backhander that would have left a mark had he not caught it in time.

Her fury was not only for his contemptuous embrace, but for herself, too, for she ought to have seen it coming, or at least made it more difficult than she had. There was also the painful truth

that her first kiss from a man had been taken from her with such ill will rather than for reasons of tenderness and affection that she had always believed were the prerequisites for lovemaking. His intention had quite obviously been to chasten her, making it doubly humiliating.

He held her wrist and riding crop in mid-air, clearly taken aback by the vehement eruption of her fury, his other hand ready to catch her next move. He watched her brilliant flint-stone eyes spark and glisten with rage, her beautiful mouth tremble with shock, and the flippant words he was about to deliver, the laughing retort, did not emerge as he had intended. His eyes grew serious, suddenly contrite. 'A woman of independence *and* courage,' he said, relaxing his grip. 'Steady now.... I've had my say, and I would not wish you to believe your sisters have a hooligan as an escort. Can we not call a truce now?' He held out a hand. 'Friends?'

But Letitia whisked away out of his reach as if he'd offered her a viper. 'After that *disgraceful* behaviour towards a lady, my lord? If you can believe I need *that* kind of friendship, you must indeed be more queer in your attic than the rest of your kind,' she snarled. Lifting her arms, she replaced her hat over her brow, wishing she had worn a veil. 'Stand aside and allow me to find my way out of this *darned* place.'

He might have smiled at the strong language, but his mouth formed a soft whistle instead while his eyes took in the neat waist and voluptuous curves, the arch of her back and the proud tilt of

her head on the long neck, which yesterday she had kept hidden. He cleared his throat. 'I know this place like the back of my hand. I will be glad to—'

'I'm sure you *do*, my lord. Every little nook and cranny. I can find my own way, I thank you.'

'What were you trying to find?' he said, ignoring the innuendo. She had to give in, or run into yet more problems. 'The Gold Staff Gallery. Lady Waverley's apartments.'

'Number 17. So you know Lady Waverley, do you?'

'No,' she said, enigmatically. She swept past him through the door, but a distant shout put further bickering at an end.

'Lettie! Lettie, where are you?'

Relief swept over her, flooding into her voice. 'Here!' she yelled. 'I'm here...Bart!' The voice cracked on the last note, giving her away.

Mr Waverley strode round the corner, quickening his stride at the sight of her, reaching out. 'Lettie, where've you been? You here, Rayne?'

'How d'ye do, Bart. Miss Boyce was lost,' said Rayne. 'We were on our way to find your lady mother. Number 17, isn't it?'

Smiles, indulgent and comforting, warmed Mr Waverley's face. 'Little goose,' he said, tucking her arm through his. 'You'd get lost in your own backyard, wouldn't you? Thank'ee, my lord. That was kindly done.'

'You...you *know* each other?' Letitia whispered.

'As lads,' said Mr Waverley. 'Both at Winchester together.'

Live in the same town, too. I never went in for all *this* stuff, though.’ He grinned, flipping a hand towards the silver frogging across Rayne’s broad chest.

But despite the sage-green velvet that covered her own breast, Letitia could still feel the imprint of that bulky silver braid, the ache in her arms, and the assault of Lord Rayne’s mouth upon her lips. That was bad enough, but worse still was the pain of his contempt, which she believed was less for her indiscretion on the parade ground than for the fact that she was, as he put it, a ‘schoolma’am’ and therefore less entitled to his respect than her sisters.

Chapter Two

Far from being disturbed by the parade-ground incident, Letitia's five pupils rode back to Richmond brimming over with excited chatter about the way they had been saved from bolting horses or, at least, being thrown and trampled to death. Their exaggeration served two purposes—first, in masking Letitia's quietness and, second, in providing Mr Waverley with all the details that she did not particularly want to repeat.

He had not attached any importance to finding Lord Rayne there at the palace, or to the fact that he had been helping Letitia to find her way about. It was, he agreed, a devilish place in which to lose one's bearings. And it was not Letitia who asked him about Lord Rayne's exact function as a captain of the 10th Light Dragoons, but Mrs Quayle and Miss Gaddestone, who were still chuckling like girls about the poor coachman's top hat.

'He trains cavalry for Marquess Wellington,' Mr Waverley told them. 'Not just the 10th Light Dragoons, the Regent's Own, but other regiments, too. He's done his share of fighting, but he sold out once and was re-commissioned. There's no one better than Rayne for preparing young lads for battle. He lives with his brother and sister-in-law up at Sheen Court for some of the time.'

Mrs Quayle of Number 22 knew his brother. 'That's Lord Elyot,' she said to Miss Gaddestone, holding her broken parasol across her knees. 'Lady Elyot's a lovely lady. She's on the

Richmond Vestry Committee, in charge of the strays that wander into the town.'

'Stray dogs?'

'*Women, dear,*' said Mrs Quayle, pursing her lips, implying a certain condition. 'Lord Elyot is Assistant Master of Horse, you know. the Royal Stud is there at Hampton Court, so he and his brother work hand in glove with the King's horses. Breeding,' she whispered, raising an eyebrow and leaning towards her friend. 'Horse mad, that family.' She might as well have said 'breeding mad'.

Letitia made no contribution to the conversation, nagged by the thought that it was her own untypical defensiveness that had brought about that outrageous scene in the little room, not in defence of her charges, which would have been understandable, but in defence of her own position as their guardian. Had it been anyone else but Lord Rayne who had appeared, she would probably have said very little except to admit their mistake. But at first sight of him, it was as if all the hostility in her being had rushed to the fore, to pay him back for the perceived slight she herself had provoked yesterday. It was all so farcical, when she cared not a whit what the dreadful man thought of her.

Yet she cared very much that she had been shown such shocking disrespect, kissed by one of the most notorious rake-hells in town, not because she was what he wanted, but because he suspected that was what would upset her most, a blue-stocking, worth in his eyes only the novelty value. So much for

leaving the protection of her family. So much for independence.

After dinner she pleaded tiredness, leaving her two companions, Mrs Quayle and Miss Gaddestone, to their own company. This was the time she usually reserved for writing her thoughts while she was unlikely to be disturbed.

Tonight, the pen refused to speak for her.

For the best part of an hour she struggled for a way to translate her confusion into words, to describe the physical sensations and to explain her emotions, but this time not even anger would untangle itself sufficiently to make the slightest sense, and eventually she closed the book in weary surrender. Perhaps tomorrow she would be able to see it better from a distance.

That, she told herself, was half the problem, for while she could see perfectly to read and write, to sew and draw, she needed her spectacles to be able to see *anything* clearly at a distance, and only amongst friends would she have been seen wearing them. If only she'd had the courage to wear them that afternoon, she might have been able to anticipate the trouble before it happened. Locking away her notebook, she reached for her reticule and took out the leather and silver-banded case that held her plain steel-rimmed eyeglasses.

Coldly, they clamped each side of her face, but instantly each dark recess of the room came to life with detail, the faint rose pattern on the bed-curtains, the reflections on glass and metal, the sharp moulding around the ceiling. The lamp flame was a little miracle.

Her maid, Orla, entered with a tray, smiling at the bespectacled figure that stared about her in wonderment. ‘The day will come, ma’am,’ she said, ‘when every other lady will be wearing those.’

‘In public? Never.’

‘In public, ma’am. You mark my words.’

Letitia was silent. Her father had refused to wear his except in private. Letitia had been with him when he approached the fence and ditch all wrong, and she had never hunted since, knowing that it could have been her. He had died in her arms.

Her inability to put down in words what she had gained by the experience of that disturbing day kept sleep at a distance. Her success as a writer of novels depended to a large extent on her sincere and often vivid accounts of passionate relationships, which, for the most part, were the result of an active imagination combined with brief and surreptitious observations. It was not a satisfactory method for any writer of integrity, even though her first novel to be published, *The Infidel*, had been a runaway success. The second, recently published, seemed just as likely to please, if her pupils’ eagerness was anything to go by.

Her notebook was her lifeline, a personal record, added to daily, where not only her own thoughts and experiences were logged, but other people’s, too, including those of her pupils, relatives and friends: their mannerisms, figures of speech, and the tales they recounted. Descriptions of places were important, too, which had been one of her reasons for wanting to visit

Hampton Court Palace that day. She needed the details, the colours and scale, the sounds and patterns. She had returned with an indigestible muddle of emotions, too contradictory to string together in words.

But therein lay another problem—that of writing about relationships when she had only her own to draw on. If she wished to continue giving her readers the kind of detail they craved, it surely made some sense for her to gain a deeper understanding, a more informed perception of the human heart in all its seasons. Some had dubbed her novel ‘racy’, even ‘scandalous’, because she had followed her characters into places where other writers had not, but as long as she remained anonymous, she was perfectly safe from the disapprobation of those who felt shamed by such personal matters. How could any young woman enter matrimony, she wondered, without knowing the first thing about the state of mind, and body, of the man she would be tied to for the rest of her life? If her own pupils read her books, then so much the better for them. No one would ever suspect her, Lady Boyce’s eccentric daughter, of writing about people in love.

Later that night, however, long after Orla had plaited her tresses into a silver pigtail as thick as a wrist, the notebook was brought out for a second airing to receive a scattering of adjectives, which, while they added colour to a new kind of scene, had little to do with the emotion that simmered behind it. Nevertheless, as she climbed back into bed, she could not resist taking a look at two faint bluish marks on her upper

arm. 'Lout!' she whispered. 'Ill-mannered *boor!*' He would have laughed about her with his comrades, for certain, marking up a score for the superior male sex.

At that moment, the thirty-three-year-old lout in question lay sprawled across his bed staring up at the dim pool of light made by a single oil lamp on the canopy. He had scarcely moved for the last hour, but now he rolled off to the edge and sat there with his dressing gown gaping, his hands dangling in repose between lean thighs.

Feeling unsociable and critical of his behaviour that afternoon, he had left the company of his brother and sister-in-law, unable to convince himself that Miss Lettie Boyce deserved all she got. Nonplussed by his uncharacteristic discourtesy, he wondered what devilry had made him follow her, insisting on playing out an incident that would have been better put behind them. A bevy of silly females and a deaf coachman were not, after all, the worst thing that could have happened to disrupt his exercise. To make matters worse, the woman he had shamed was the elder sister of the twins he was currently escorting, the sister they had fondly told him about.

He had formed a picture of a dowd, a frumpish bookworm securely on the shelf. He had caught a glimpse of her yesterday when she had clearly formed *her* own picture of *him* and decided he was not worth her civility. So he had not suffered any guilt at dismissing her as a sharp-tongued hen-of-the-game, even without a closer look. But today he'd seen her on horseback,

superb, stylish and proud, the only one of the women to keep control of her mount. Later, he had come across her in that grubby little room where her dignity had been no less impressive, defying him, refusing to be intimidated, spitting fire from her remarkable eyes and rousing in him the kind of aggression he kept only for male opponents with whom he fenced and boxed. Never before had he vented it on a woman.

She was a beauty, too, once he'd got close enough to see: tall and athletic, and undeserving of the 'schoolma'am' he'd taunted her with. Now he would have to find a way to put things right, if only for the sisters' sakes, his first try having been justifiably rejected. He sighed and stood up, dropping his gown to the floor. The thought of seeing the bubbly twins again did not, for once, give him any particular pleasure.

His chance came quite unexpectedly at church next morning when the two Misses Binney asked him if he could find the time, just once, to attend their supper party in the company of his brother and sister-in-law. 'It's several months since you've been,' Miss Phoebe Binney complained, touching his arm with the tip of one gloved finger. 'You brought Mr Brummell with you last time, remember. Such an interesting man, and such good company.'

'Dear Miss Phoebe,' said Rayne, taking her hand between his own, 'I remember it well, and so does he. But I usually return to barracks on Sunday evening ready for work in the morning.' From the corner of his eye he could see the tall plume of dark

blue feathers on a velvet hat moving towards the west door, and he knew that, if he stayed talking to Miss Phoebe, his chance would be lost.

‘Oh, dear. Then you won’t be able to get to know our latest addition to Richmond’s talent, will you?’ Miss Phoebe’s eyes searched, pausing at the vicar’s latest captive. ‘Miss Boyce, you know. Bart Waverley has promised to bring her with him again. Such a bright star. Her father was Sir Leo Boyce, the architect of those magnificent... Well, of *course*. Your parents are neighbours, are they not?’

But Rayne’s refusal had already begun to veer like a weathervane towards acceptance. ‘I can return to barracks early tomorrow, Miss Phoebe. Thank you, I look forward to this evening.’ Surrounded by several other females, the plume was fast disappearing down the path towards the lychgate, leaving Rayne in little doubt about the reason for the haste.

The terraced three-storey building on Maids of Honour Row facing the Green was well known to the Richmond set as one of the most popular literary salons outside London, not only for its attraction to ‘blues and wits’, but as a place of political neutrality where complete freedom of speech was actively encouraged. The home of the two elderly Misses Binney, both of them highly intelligent and well educated, its guest lists were noted for assembling people of all ages and experiences, the only requirement being that their manners must be impeccable and that they must contribute to the evening with at least a modicum

of cleverness. Needless to say, an invitation to one of their 'supper parties' was an honour few ever declined and, as the best society hostesses were celebrated for their brilliant repartee, the contribution of women to the discussions, whatever the subject, was treated with due seriousness.

When Rayne arrived with Lord and Lady Elyot, the drawing room already buzzed with conversation, and the first notes of a song on the piano, followed by a voice, then laughter, made them smile even before the door closed behind them. Heads turned with greetings, absorbing them into the pool of black and grey, ivory and amber, the blue-white flash of diamonds and the wink of a quizzing-glass.

'Ah, Rayne, old chap. Come over here and tell us about...'

Courteously, he nodded, but preferred to wait a while. This was not the kind of place to which he would normally have come to pursue a woman, nor was he quite sure why he'd accepted the invitation so optimistically when Miss Boyce was unlikely to give him the time of day, let alone engage him in conversation. She was not his type anyway; he preferred his women friends to be affable and accessible, not needing too much effort on his part and certainly not as enraged as she had been by his kiss, even if the reason behind it was controversial. Unsurprisingly, she was a complete innocent and more than likely to stay that way if she was as determined as she appeared to be to redirect her social life. A *seminary*, of all things. Why, with the blunt Sir Leo had left her in his will, she must be one of the best catches of the

decade, but for her non-conformity.

‘Eccentricity is all the rage these days,’ murmured a sweet voice in his ear. ‘There are plenty of them about, if you think on it.’

Rayne smiled. ‘Amelie, my dear, what are you talking about?’

Slipping an arm through his, Lady Elyot squeezed gently. ‘You know well enough what I’m talking about, brother-in-law dearest. I’m talking about the one your eyes could not keep away from in church this morning. The one who sits over there in the corner talking to Miss Austen. It’s not like you to be so hesitant. Nor, come to think of it, was it like her to dash off without coming to speak to us. I don’t suppose she was the reason you changed your mind about delaying your return to Hampton Court, was she?’

He looked down at her, catching the teasing in the lustrous dark eyes, remembering the time, nine years ago, when he and his brother had first seen her in Rundell and Bridges choosing silverware, both of them wanting her, as most men did. Even after bearing three children, she was still a stunningly lovely woman, gentle and compassionate, whose love had tamed his brother’s wild heart as no other woman could have done. Rayne trusted her opinion as much as his brother’s.

‘Nonsense,’ he said with a sideways grin. ‘Whatever gave you *that* idea? You’ve met her then, have you?’

‘Well, of course I have, love. I was one of the first people she contacted about opening a seminary in Richmond when there are already six others, not to mention all the boys’ academies.

As a member of the Vestry, I was probably in the best position to discuss the idea with her, and had she not proposed to make hers different from the others in many ways, I'd not have been so encouraging. Besides, I know her mother, as you do.'

'What ways?'

'Subjects about which young women of a marriageable age seem to know so little these days. The art of conversation, for one. That's sadly neglected by so many mamas. She takes them on visits to places of interest, to art galleries and studios of the leading painters, visits to the House of Commons to hear debates, to the theatre and the royal palaces. She wants them to learn better riding and driving skills, too. You'd be surprised how many young women are unable to ride really well,' she added, waving to a friend across the room.

'No, I wouldn't,' he said.

'I believe she has a lot to offer that others don't. We have Kew just across the park and I'll lay any odds that half her pupils' parents have never been to see the gardens, let alone the succession houses. She intends to teach them how to keep household accounts, and to plant a herb garden, and to cook with them.'

'To cook? What on earth for?'

'Seton dear, you're so old-fashioned. What do you expect a wife to do these days? Stand around like a gateau and simper?'

'Gateaux don't simper, dear Amelie. And I think it sounds like an expensive exercise, since you ask.'

‘Ah, but Miss Boyce is no fool. She knows one cannot start such a venture on a shoestring, but don’t be supposing her fees are anything like the usual. Nothing but the best for Miss Boyce’s pupils. She had the house extended and refurbished before she moved in, and her pupils are from Richmond’s best families. Colonel and Mrs Lindell’s daughter is one, the vicar’s eldest daughter is another, and Sir Mortimer Derwent’s girl, too. Oh, and Sapphire Melborough from up on the Hill.’

‘Mm...’ said Rayne. ‘Interesting. Quite a handful.’

Whether he meant the entire package or Sapphire Melborough alone, Lady Elyot did not ask, though she might have been able to guess. ‘With her connections,’ she said, ‘she’s had no problem attracting the right kind of client. How do *you* find Lady Boyce these days? Has she tried to interfere with your friendship with the her twin daughters yet?’

‘Not yet.’

‘She will.’

‘She’ll only try it once, Amelie.’

‘Oh, so you’re not *so* keen, then?’

‘There are plenty of other fish in the sea. Lady B. is a shark.’

‘Yes,’ she whispered, ‘but some will be harder to catch, I believe. Like the elder Miss Boyce.’

‘Hah!’ said Rayne, laughing off the suggestion. ‘I wouldn’t even know which bait to use to catch *that* one. I leave her to the *literati*, m’dear.’

Lady Elyot withdrew her arm, responding to her friend’s

repeated beckoning. ‘Well, you *do* surprise me, Seton dear. I would not have thought you were too old for a challenge as lovely as that. Stay with the safe twins, then. You can hardly miss there, can you?’ She drifted away before he’d realised he’d forgotten to ask her who the Miss Austen was, talking so earnestly to Miss Lettie Boyce. But her taunt rang in his ears rather like a warning bell, overlapping the cheery male greeting behind his shoulder.

‘Seton, good to see you here. Having an evening off?’

He was aroused from his reverie just in time to catch the remains of a smile on Bart Waverley’s attractive face that had been directed, not at him, but at Miss Boyce, who had clearly been heading in his direction until she saw who he was about to address. Then she had smoothly stopped by the side of Baron Brougham, the Member of Parliament who was talking to Sir Joseph and Lady Banks, greeting all three with a kiss to both cheeks, turning her back upon the two who watched.

‘Oh, that looks rather like a cut to me,’ said Mr Waverley with a laugh. ‘I wonder what we’ve done to deserve that.’

‘I cannot imagine,’ said Rayne. ‘Who is the lady in the corner, Bart? Did I hear the name Austen correctly?’

‘Miss Jane Austen. She’s staying here with the two Misses Binney. Lives over at Chawton. Shall I introduce you?’

‘Yes, if you will. She looks like a homely sort, and I feel a bout of charity coming on.’

‘Then a word in your ear, old friend. A little less of the condescending manner. Miss Austen and most of the ladies here

could give you an intellectual run for your money any day of the week, so if you start off in patronising mode, you'll find yourself tied up like a bull in a pen. Just be warned.'

'Thank you, Bart. What is Miss Austen's forte?'

'Writing,' said Mr Waverley. 'Even Prinny is one of her admirers.'

'Good grief. Then I'd better tread carefully.'

'The trouble with you, Seton, is that you've never fished in deep waters, have you? Come on, I'll introduce you.'

With the metaphors becoming increasingly visual, Rayne and Mr Waverley waded through the company to reach Miss Austen, only to find that they had been beaten to it by both Lady Elyot and Mr Lawrence the court painter, both of whom had been waiting in line for the chance to speak with her.

Nor was it quite as easy as he had thought to capture a few moments of Miss Boyce's time when she was surrounded by artists and poets, publishers and politicians, writers, actors and musicians and, in one case, a painted scent-drenched playwright who seemed desperate to hold centre stage until Miss Phoebe and Miss Esme, her sister, drew him kindly towards the supper table, still declaiming *King Lear*. Rayne eventually discovered her standing with her back to him, listening intently to Mr William Turner talking about his latest tour of the northern counties, a small untidy man whose strong Cockney accent was at odds with those who asked questions of him.

Among others, Miss Boyce wanted to know what his plans

were for the Royal Academy Exhibition. ‘You only presented one painting last year, Mr Turner. Will there be more than one this year?’

He obviously knew her, fixing her with an impish glare down his beaked nose, rather like an outraged gnome. ‘Virgil,’ he said. ‘Begins with a D.’

‘Dido?’ said Miss Boyce, promptly. ‘Dido and Aeneas?’

The amusement and applause was as much for the master’s pretend-anger as for Miss Boyce’s sharpness, but he scowled and shook her hand, telling her she had no business to be guessing in one. Then, because there was some turning and teasing, she saw who stood behind her and allowed the ravishing smile to drain away, edging past her friends with a quick look of annoyance over her shoulder, which, Rayne suspected, may have been partly to do with the fact that a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles rested halfway down her nose.

Striding away towards the supper room, she attempted to outpace him, but was prevented by a group of chattering guests who hesitated, then parted to let her through, allowing Rayne to meet her on the other side of them. ‘Miss Boyce,’ he said, ‘may I help you to some supper?’

Rather than move her spectacles up, she tilted back her head to look down her nose, just as Mr Turner had done a moment earlier. ‘Help, Lord Rayne?’ she said, scanning his figure like the proverbial schoolma’am with a tardy child. ‘Help? Why, no, I thank you. Your assistance, I seem to remember, comes at the

kind of price I'm not prepared to pay. Go back to your gaming tables and whatever Sunday-evening company you usually keep. You seem to be out of your depth here.'

'You look even better with spectacles than you do without them,' he replied, refusing to flinch under the lash of her tongue.

'And you, my lord,' she said, removing them with a haughty flourish, 'look much better *without* them.'

'You flatter me, ma'am.'

'No, do I? I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to.'

'Still way up in the boughs, I see. Isn't it time you came down?'

'To your level? Heaven forbid. I fear I should be trampled on.'

Tucking her folded glasses into her reticule, she turned away, heading once again for the supper room.

Rayne's own brand of cynicism would, at times, have been hard to beat, but this woman's meteoric put-downs would have silenced most hardened cynics. He followed on, more slowly, watching the swing of her hips under the charcoal-grey beaded half-dress over pale grey satin, the low-cut back and peach-skin shoulders, the long wisps of moonlight-blond hair escaping from her chignon to curve into her graceful neck. Needled, curious, perplexed, he followed her to the array of food, not sumptuous, but plentiful. But it was not easy to identify the tiny pieces of something, the squares of something else, rolls and balls garnished with greenery, jellies and glasses, and a confusion of cakes.

Without a word, he took the plate from her hand, placed a

selection of bite-sized delicacies upon it and gave it back to her, poured two glasses of lemonade and bade her follow him. ‘This way,’ he said, as if he could sense her relief. He found a vacant sofa beside a table and waited for her to be seated before he asked, ‘May I?’

She glanced at the space beside her as if to estimate how much of it he would need, then she nodded, refusing to meet his eyes, taking the lemonade from him with a mechanical ‘thank you’, and placing it on the table. ‘Is this all for me?’ she said, looking at the plate. ‘Where’s yours?’

‘I wondered if we might share it,’ he said, watching for her reaction.

She made a small involuntary move backwards as if trying to steel herself for something very unpleasant. ‘I have suddenly lost my appetite,’ she said. ‘And anyway, such a gesture would be taken to mean that I have accepted you as a close friend, which is very far from the truth, my lord. If it were not for the fact that you are known to be on good terms with my sisters, I would not be sitting here with you like this. Certainly not sharing a supper plate. Mr Waverley usually does this for me.’

‘I accept what you say entirely, Miss Boyce. So may I suggest that, for the time being, you pretend that I am Mr Waverley?’

Dipping her head with a genteel snort of laughter, she turned her dark grey eyes to him at last. ‘Lord Rayne, my imagination is in perfect working order, I assure you, but there are some things it would find quite impossible to tackle. That is one of

them.’ As she spoke, her eyes found the black frockcoat and white breeches of her friend, resting there affectionately. ‘Mr Waverley’s manners are faultless,’ she said. Picking up one of the tiny squares of pastry, she placed it absently in her mouth, still watching until, catching her companion’s amused expression, she realised what she had done. Instantly, she stopped chewing and blinked.

‘There, now. That wasn’t difficult, was it? Having vented some of your spleen, you’ve found your appetite.’

Swinging her head away, she finished the mouthful. ‘Fudge!’ she snapped. ‘I have not *vented my spleen*, as you put it, in years. In fact, I’m not sure where it is, so long has it been unvented. Here, have one of those. They’re quite good. But don’t take it as a peace offering. You may be the bees’ knees with my sisters, my lord, but if they knew what I know, they’d not be so convinced that you’re as gentlemanly as all that.’

‘Yet you have agreed to sit and share supper with me,’ he said, taking two of the tasty pieces.

‘Don’t be bamboozled by *that*,’ she said.

‘Why not? Is it not true?’

‘Because,’ she said, taking another piece and studying it, ‘there is a limit to the length of time I can stay blue-devilled, that’s why. I have rarely had reason to hold a grudge against anyone, so I lack the practice. I suppose it’s a form of laziness, but I find the effort not worth the reward. I might have been able to keep up a high dudgeon for a few more weeks if there were not so many

people known to both of us who would wonder why I insisted on being so uncivil to you. Which I *could*.' The piece disappeared into her mouth at last.

'Oh, I have absolutely no doubt of that, Miss Boyce.'

'But,' she munched, 'I should find it so *tedious* to explain. Naturally, I can accept that men of your...experience...may become confused from time to time about who to bestow good manners on, and who not to. That's not the problem. The problem is that when one is on the receiving end of shabby behaviour, one tends to take it personally. If I'd known you had such an aversion to women like me, my lord, I would never have ventured near the parade ground yesterday. Not in a million years. And had I known that your tolerance extends only to women of my sisters' sort, pretty, gregarious women, you may be sure I would have taken my pupils round to the back entrance. So, you see, it's not so much that I've decided to forgive and forget how insulting you can be towards *some* women and mannerly towards others, depending on who is watching, but that I really cannot be bothered with people of your sort. The world is so full of really *interesting* people to spend time with, don't you agree?'

Taking the glass of lemonade, she downed half the contents in one go, replaced the glass on the table and, withdrawing her spectacles from her reticule, replaced them on her nose. Then, treating him to an innocent wide-eyed stare, she rose. 'Thank you for sharing your supper with me,' she said sweetly, and walked away to join a group, linking her arm through one of them like

a favourite niece.

Leaning back, Rayne let out a silent whistle like a head of steam being released. ‘Whew!’ he murmured. ‘The lady is certainly not stuck for words, is she? I think there may be more work to be done here, old chap, before this episode can be closed.’

Chapter Three

Creamy white pages danced with shadows. Hovering like a merlin, the loaded quill point swooped, squeaking on the line, eager to tell what it knew.

Even George Brummell himself would have approved of the cravat, spotless white, perfectly creased against the bronzed outdoor skin around the jaw, touching the dark curl of hair before the ears. One could not tell whether the hair had been combed or not, but the way it rumbled on to the forehead might have taken others some time to achieve. A broad forehead, straight brows, deep watchful eyes, still mocking, a nose neither hooked nor bulbous, a wide mouth without fullness, but showing perfect teeth. Taller than me, for a change, and, I suspect, no padding upon the shoulders. My sisters say he boxes, shoots, fences and hunts, and this I can believe for he has the athlete's grace and assuredness, thighs like a wrestler's under skintight white breeches, well-shaped calves. The tables were turned, this time. I was amongst people I knew and liked, at ease and not inclined to sham a confusion I did not feel. I see no need to like him for their sakes, but I will say that, as far as looks go, he must be called a Nonpareil. Would that his manners matched his appearance. My sisters must see quite another side to him, which makes one wonder which side is the right side and which the reverse. Outwardly, some semblance of politeness must be maintained, I suppose. In Miss

Austen, for example, I detected no other side than that which I saw her present to everyone, whether they knew of her books or not. Such a delightful lady, well into her thirties, she has asked me to call on her tomorrow before her return to Chawton. To be granted a private meeting—what could be more excessively civil?

As usual, the cathartic labour of love released her pent-up thoughts and tumbled them on to the page, ready for use in another form in the story she had only recently begun. It was work that had to take second place nowadays to the needs of the seminary, still occupying several hours of each day. Apart from the emotional satisfaction of daily creating her own characters and scenes, the financial reward was a bonus she had never anticipated. *The Infidel* she had sold for £80 to the publisher who had seen in her writing an extraordinary talent, and the first edition had sold out in less than a year, bringing in a reward of £200. That had been more than enough to spur her into the next one, *Waynethorpe Manor*, just published with a subscription list that took up the first three mottled pages and glowing reviews from *The Lady's Magazine*, and even *The Lady's Monthly Museum*, usually cautious about what it recommended.

For a woman possessed of such an independent spirit, the delight of being well paid to do what she most enjoyed was a welcome boost to her confidence that had given her the courage to set out along her own path. Her father's legacy and her uncle's active encouragement had made it possible. Now she was truly a woman of means, and if that brought with it a certain non-

conformity that made her family uncomfortable, then it would have to be so. She could devise her own romances and walk away from them without the slightest loss of sleep.

Her enthusiastic publisher, Mr William Lake, had never met his most popular novelist face to face, however. Not even Letitia could bring herself to talk to him about her work, so Mr Waverley was the one who took her manuscripts to Leadenhall Street, to convey Mr Lake's comments and to negotiate on her behalf. This had been, so far, a very satisfactory arrangement which meant that, for his services, Bart was usually given his own copies to read before anyone else, and a vicarious share in her wild success. Knowing the author only as Miss Lydia Barlowe, the publisher had agreed that the creator of *The Infidel* should be known only as 'A Lady of Quality', since it was abundantly clear to him that, with a friend of such superior breeding as the Honourable Bartholomew Waverley, that was what she was sure to be. It was not his business, he assured the go-between, to probe any further.

Leaving her young charges to the Monday-morning care of the two elocution, play-reading and singing tutors, Letitia set out alone to the Misses Binney's house, wearing a favourite but rather worn velvet pelisse of faded lilac, keeping the nippy April breeze out with a swansdown tippet inside the neckline. She had noticed last night that Miss Austen had worn a long-sleeved brown gown trimmed with black lace, an acknowledgement of the death of the Queen's brother last month.

This morning, the mood had lightened to a white gauze

gown under a sleeveless spencer of pale green quilted silk complemented by a soft Paisley shawl and satin slippers made to match. Partly covered by a pretty lace cap, her dark curls framed her sweet face, though, in the daylight, Letitia could see shadows beneath her brilliant eyes and the delicate, almost transparent skin that she understood had once been flawless. Life, she saw, had not passed Miss Austen by without leaving its mark upon her, though she moved with the grace of a much younger woman, her welcoming smile as open as ever.

Their meeting last evening had been too brief for either of them, with so many others awaiting their moment of glory, and now Letitia could not hold back a pang of guilt for the strain that more talking might impose.

‘My dear Miss Boyce,’ said Miss Austen, ‘it’s no strain to talk to those who share a love of good literature. Especially—’ she twinkled ‘—without the background noise. That’s what I find most difficult. The politicians do tend to *boom*, don’t you find?’

Letitia loved her puckish sense of humour. They sat opposite each other by the long window that looked out across The Green where people strolled like coloured beads caught in the sun. ‘I think the playwright did his share, too...’ she smiled ‘...but I must not be too harsh. He is to escort us all to Mr Garrick’s Temple after lunch. He knows Mrs Garrick well, so we shall be introduced.’

‘Then we shall not say another critical word about loud voices. I take it you have tutors to come in daily. Are they there now?’

‘Indeed. Elocution and music on Monday mornings. The “voice day” we call it.’

‘Music...ah! It *is* important,’ she agreed, ‘for every woman, young or not, to be able to entertain her guests and to sing for her supper, too, when asked. Not to contribute in some way would be exceedingly poor form. But I have always thought it to be a little...well...insincere, even dishonest, to pretend to an enthusiasm one does not possess, as if other people’s likes and dislikes carried more weight than one’s own. Without sounding pompous, Miss Boyce, this is why I think you and I could become good friends, for you do not appear to me to be afraid of showing what you do. For a young woman of your background, the pressures to conform must have been very great indeed. But here you are in a fashionable place like Richmond, running an exclusive seminary, which I own I would rather have attended than The Abbey at Reading. It’s nothing short of courageous. I suspect there is very little you would hesitate to try, despite what society thinks of it.’

Beneath such a misplaced tribute, Letitia was faced with an instant dilemma of whether to accept it with thanks and to say nothing about Miss Austen’s suspicion, or whether to confide in her about the writing, which no one but Mr Waverley knew of. It was a decision that could not be delayed, for upon her response would depend the true nature of any future friendship. On the one hand, Miss Austen would see nothing especially difficult in admitting to a profession at which she herself was a success but,

on the other, the kind of writing for which ‘A Lady of Quality’ was known would most certainly not come within Miss Austen’s approval. The friendship would end before it had begun. Letitia could not bring herself to shock so excellent a writer whose books she truly admired, for it had been made quite clear during their previous discourse that Miss Austen’s opinion of writers who ‘stepped over the bounds of propriety with too colourful imaginations’, as she had delicately phrased it, were definitely not to be recommended.

Nor was there any chance that Letitia might admit to being a writer *without* saying what she had written, or how very successful she was, the very idea of pretending to be unpublished being too full of pitfalls to contemplate. So, in the time it took her to smile, she decided upon an even greater deception as the price of Miss Austen’s much-needed regard and the approval of a like-minded spirit.

‘You honour me with your friendship, Miss Austen,’ she said. ‘I don’t know that I would call it courage, exactly, but I believe my bid for independence of mind may have begun as soon as I gave my first yelp. Or so my mama always maintains. May I ask about your next book? Is it soon to be published?’

‘About May, I think. It seems so long since I began writing it I can sometimes scarce remember what it’s about. It isn’t quite the seamless progress it appears to those not in the business,’ she explained. ‘*Mansfield Park* was begun in the year 1811, almost three years ago, but there are usually some overlaps when parts

have to be revised or even rewritten, and then I may find I have two books in hand, the one I *thought* was finished and the one I'm in the middle of.'

'I see. So when one is published, you re-read it after quite an interval? That must be quite refreshing.'

'In a way. But I'm always struck by what *could* have been written, rather than what I actually wrote. Several years later, one's experience of life is slightly changed. Small changes, but enough to make a difference.' Her tone became wistful, reflective. This was exactly what Letitia needed to know.

'Experience is vital, then? Does not the imagination and observation make up for what one can never hope to experience in life?'

Miss Austen sighed, speaking with less assurance. 'Marriage is what you mean, I suppose. Yes, on that subject you may be right, for I shall never enter that estate now and you yourself have taken a brave risk in placing yourself outside your family's protection. And although I can observe some of the tenderness of married love from my relatives, that's probably as far as I need to go in my stories.'

'But before that? In the wooing? The relationship of lovers?'

There was a pause, and the hands that lay in Miss Austen's lap began to move and caress. 'That, too,' she said. 'There were two occasions: one of them I had hopes of, the other could never have progressed. I withdrew my consent immediately. It was a mistake. Without love, you see.' She smiled sadly as

the moment of pain lifted. 'One needs to *feel* the love. It's the same with writing. One *can* write about the anguish and uncertainty; one can write about the wonderful sensitivities of the mind, men's minds, too. But as I get older, I realise that it's the true experiences that have informed my writing as no mere imagination could possibly do, even though it was quite some time ago now. There's no substitute for sincerity, is there? I think my readers would demand it from me now, Miss Boyce.'

'I'm sure they won't be disappointed in *Mansfield Park*. I look forward to reading it. Have you another one planned?'

'I have another,' she smiled. 'I shall call it *Emma*. And this heroine will have faults, for a change. They cannot all be so perfect, can they?'

They continued to talk for another half-hour, which was much longer than Letitia had intended. By the time of her departure, they were on first-name terms, had exchanged addresses and had given promises to write and to visit. They embraced at their farewell, Letitia both elated and cast down by her most significant artifice. Deception on such a scale weighed heavily upon her.

There was one thing, however, that afforded her some relief, for in denying her writing, she had been spared the obligation that would inevitably follow of having to talk about her stories. Miss Austen had seemed happy enough to explain her published heroines' attributes and foibles, but Letitia could never have done the same with anything like her skilled understanding. Perhaps, she thought, that was because she did not understand them as

well as Miss Austen understood hers.

Another aspect of her meeting with the famed Miss Austen was the conviction that, whatever the authoress had meant to say, there was no substitute for experience. This was something that no page in her notebook was ever likely to supply. She was going to have to take the bull by the horns, one day very soon. The question to be answered was—how?

Her return to Number 24 Paradise Road, taken at a very brisk walk, coincided perfectly with the mid-morning break when the pupils gathered in the garden room to take a cup of chocolate and a biscuit while conversing, as a good hostess should, with the tutors and chaperons. Their lessons that morning had been more in the nature of rehearsals for, in five days' time, all seven pupils were to entertain an invited audience of local guests, including tutors and parents, at the Richmond home of Sir Francis and Lady Melborough whose daughter Sapphire was a pupil at Letitia's seminary.

Understandably, they were nervous, but nerves, they were told, were no excuse for trying to opt out of it, or for unnecessary displays of modesty. The second half of the morning was a run-through of the singing, leaving the piano solos and duets, the harp-playing and poetry recitals, for the days ahead.

The afternoon sun and sharp breeze were perfect for their outing to Hampton House, the home of the late Mr David Garrick. That same morning, Letitia's pupils had been studying one of the actor's most acclaimed roles as Shylock in

Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, and the invitation to visit Garrick's Temple to the Bard had come at a most opportune moment, even if the exuberant playwright Mr Titus Chatterton was hardly the one she would have chosen to escort them. But Mr Chatterton and the old Mrs Garrick were personally acquainted, and this was the kind of connection one needed if six adults and seven young ladies were to descend upon a frail ninety-year-old widow all on the same afternoon.

To buffer her against Mr Chatterton's incessant theatricals, Letitia had requested the company of their elocution tutor, Mr Thomas, whose popularity was almost on a par with Mr Waverley's. The latter was also one of the party, riding horseback like everyone except Mrs Quayle and Miss Gaddestone, who sat behind the coachman, his dignity having been restored by the presentation of a replacement hat from the late Mr Quayle's wardrobe. This time, Letitia warned the girls, they were unlikely to interfere with any cavalry drills.

It was when they rode through Bushy Park's avenue of chestnut trees towards the Diana Fountain that Letitia realised how close they were to Hampton Court Green where the cavalry offices and stables were situated and that, as they turned right on to the avenue of limes, they had been recognised. A group of helmetless recruits sat on the white-painted fence waiting for orders, swinging round to ogle the riders who passed behind them.

Coming under the multiple stare of male eyes, the seven young

ladies adjusted their posture and became alert as if, Letitia wrote in her notebook that night, someone had pulled their strings and brought them quietly to life. At the same time, several of the horses reacted, too, exchanging whinnys and pricking ears, rolling eyes and prancing under tight reins, responding to unintentional messages.

Letitia reined in her pretty grey Arab mare. 'Keep going!' she called, resolving to have their riding tuition increased now that the good weather was here to stay. Waiting until they had passed her, she brought up the rear alone since Mr Chatterton, with his captive audience of two ladies, rode beside the barouche. The other two men were some way ahead, oblivious to the cavalcade behind them. From the corner of her eye, she could see the uniformed young men donning helmets, mounting horses and heading for the gate that would release them on to the avenue. Soon, the drumming of hooves followed her, keeping a respectful distance but ready to overtake her pupils as soon as she relinquished her rearguard position.

One young man, more reckless than the rest, cantered on to the grass beside her, laughing at his comrades for their prudence. A sharp command brought the young man's mount wheeling round on its haunches and, before Letitia could turn to look, the captain's bay gelding was beside her, towering over her dainty mare, garnished with tassels and braids and padded with several inches of white sheepskin under the ornate saddle. Shining black boots and silver spurs caught her eye, but she would not look at

him. In front of her, the swish of a tail away, Jane Doveley's horse had taken a fancy to walking crab-wise, highlighting yet again the sad fact that all was not as it should be with the young riders and their mounts.

'I see you could not stay away, Miss Boyce,' said Lord Rayne in a voice that held more than a hint of amusement.

'This is the way to Hampton House, Lord Rayne. We are obliged to avoid the public highways, but the last thing we need is a cavalry escort. We have our own chaperons, I thank you.'

'Not very effective, are they? They don't even know we're here.'

He spoke too soon. Responding to the calls, Mr Waverley and Mr Thomas had turned and were cantering back, astonished to find that their duties had been taken over by at least a dozen mounted men. The first help Mr Thomas offered was to take Miss Doveley's horse by the bridle.

Mr Waverley greeted his old school friend and asked—foolishly, Letitia thought—if he intended to go to the Garrick house with them.

'No, he certainly does not!' she replied with more emphasis than she had intended. 'Poor Mrs Garrick would suffer a fit of the vapours to see such a crowd on her property. Please return, my lord. We shall go on nicely as we are.'

'What you need, Miss Boyce, is a good riding instructor for some of your young ladies. Do you not agree, Bart?'

'Well, I, er...'

‘The good riding instructor to be yourself, of course,’ said Letitia. ‘So, having got that detail out into the open, perhaps you should know, my lord, that it doesn’t matter what Mr Waverley thinks about it, their lessons are in *my* hands, and I shall arrange any extra ones myself, I thank you.’

‘No need to take a pet about it, Lettie,’ said Mr Waverley, reasonably. ‘Rayne’s only making a suggestion, and there’s no one more experienced than he.’

‘Yes,’ said Letitia. ‘That’s exactly what I am afraid of.’

‘And if he was offering me his help, I’d take it. He might even reduce his fee for seven of them.’

‘You mean I’d be expected to *pay* him for an hour in the company of my pupils? I think not. And anyway, Lord Rayne is fully occupied with his own business all week, and our weekends at Paradise Road are not for lessons. It’s quite out of the question.’

‘I could make an exception,’ said Rayne. ‘I’m sure the parents would notice the difference.’

‘I’m sure the parents would also notice the difference if some of the mounts they’ve provided were not the ones they’ve had since the girls were ten, or the ones they use to pull the family dog-cart. But that’s not for me to tell them, unfortunately.’

‘But *I* could,’ Rayne persisted. ‘Coming from me, and knowing that it was myself who’d given them some schooling, they’d allow me to find them something more suitable for their daughters. These nags hardly add much to *your* image, either, do they? Unless your intention is to entertain, of course.’

‘My image is my own affair, my lord,’ she snapped.

His low reply was meant for her ears alone. ‘Yes, my beauty, and I could make it mine, too, if you could curb your sharp tongue. The nags are not the only creatures around here that need some schooling.’

She pretended not to have heard, but she had, and the words bit deep into her shell, angering and exciting her at the same time. Why did he think, she wondered, that it was not obvious why he wanted access to seven attractive young ladies on a regular basis, with her personal approval? Did he think she was a dimwit not to see what he was about?

‘Your persistence must be an asset when you’re teaching battle tactics, Lord Rayne, but I find it irritating. Thank you for your offer, but I prefer to do these things in my own way and in my own time.’

She had not, however, made any allowance for the timely interference of Miss Sapphire Melborough, whose parents were important members of the Richmond set and who, at almost eighteen years old, saw in Lord Rayne a close resemblance to Sir Galahad of Arthurian fame. What she knew of his reputation made him all the more dangerously attractive to her. By falling behind her companions and by making her dapple-grey dance about naughtily, she allowed herself to be caught by Lord Rayne’s hand on her bridle and brought back to the wide path, blushing in confusion. It was doubtful whether the performance had fooled anyone, Miss Melborough being one of the better riders, her

mount usually well mannered, but it served to reinforce Lord Rayne's argument tolerably well.

'Oh, thank you, my lord,' she said, slightly breathless. 'I cannot *think* why Mungo should choose to be so wilful when I was trying so *hard* to do everything Miss Boyce has told us about looking where we're going.'

'Perhaps,' said Rayne, with a glance at Letitia, 'Miss Boyce also finds it difficult to see where she's going.'

'But Miss Boyce is the most *elegant* of horsewomen, my lord. You must have seen that for yourself. And her beautiful grey mare is...'

At the merest signal from Letitia, the beautiful grey mare bounded forward on delicate hooves towards the barouche, which was approaching the village of Hampton, and although her instructions to the coachman were hardly needed, neither would she stay to hear the silly exchanges between those two, or to his impertinent observations about not being able to see. It was not hard for her to believe that this deficiency was partly behind his offer, knowing as she did that, in order to correct anyone's riding, one must be able to see perfectly. Yet she did not think his offer was entirely for her sake, either. The man was nothing if not an opportunist.

Entering the riverside grounds of Hampton House, she left Mr Waverley and Mr Thomas to dismiss the cavalry in whatever way they chose, going with the playwright Mr Chatterton to meet their hostess in the sadly neglected mansion that David

Garrick had lovingly referred to as 'his pretty place by the Thames-side.' Bound to the upkeep of two grand houses under her husband's will, old Mrs Garrick was now reduced to doing almost everything for herself and understandably did not wish anyone to see the dilapidations of the house. She was happy for them to go down to Mr Garrick's 'Temple to Shakespeare' by the river, which is what they had most hoped to see.

It was a domed, octagonal, brick-built place with steps up to a portico of Ionic columns and a room beyond where, they were told, the actor used to entertain his friends or learn his lines in full view of the river. A statue of the bard was here, too, with objects said to have belonged to him, though the glass cases were dusty and a mouldy smell hung in the air. Between them, Mr Chatterton and Mr Thomas, a young Welshman with the most perfect diction, took it upon themselves to be the guides.

Miss Gaddestone, Mrs Quayle and Mr Waverley hovered on the edge of the group while Letitia, hoping for a few moments to herself, wandered down the sloping lawn to the water's edge. A weeping willow swept the grass with new fronds like pale green hair and, as she passed through its curtain, a figure moved away from the trunk and into her view. Against the mottled shadows, she had not noticed him.

The fur helmet was cradled under one arm, his dark hair caught by patches of light, thickly waved and long enough at the back to be tied into a pigtail, which she knew was a badge of this regiment. She wished he had stayed with them.

He followed as she turned away, though she felt rather than heard his presence. But there was nowhere for her to hide and her impulse to run was held in check, and she was gently steered away from the direction of the Temple, feeling rather like a hind evading a dominant stag.

‘Out of the frying pan into the fire,’ she snapped. ‘I came here to avoid the commentary, but perhaps I should have braved it, after all. Don’t captains have duties to perform on Monday afternoons?’

‘Surely, Miss Boyce, you would not begrudge me a few moments of your time?’

‘Oh, be assured that I would, my lord. I thought I’d made that plain last night at the Misses Binney’s. However, if you are also hoping to claim a few moments of Miss Melborough’s time on the way home, I would rather you respect my wishes and do your flirting when she is under her parents’ protection, not mine. I cannot be held responsible for what *you* get up to. Is that too much to ask?’

‘Not at all. I am happy to oblige. So, having dismissed the young lady from our thoughts once and for all, I wonder if you would care to reconsider your objections to allowing some help with the riding problem. You admit that you do have one?’

‘I neither admit nor deny it, Lord Rayne. It is my concern and nothing to do with you. Thank you for your offer. The answer is still no.’

They had been walking quickly, and now Mr Chatterton’s

distantly garbled ranting came to them on the breeze combined with the honking of geese on the water. The winding path had taken them downhill out of sight of the Temple and into a dell where they came to a standstill, their antagonism almost tangible as they faced each other like a pair of duellists waiting for the next move.

‘Do you answer no to everything, Miss Boyce, as a matter of course?’ he said, softly.

She hesitated, suspecting that he had re-routed the subject towards something more personal. She could not be sure. ‘No,’ she said, ‘but I find it a useful tool to use when an alternative won’t do.’

His head bent towards her. ‘Surely you don’t think there is only one alternative, do you? There are many tones between black and white, you know. There is *maybe*, and *perhaps*, or *let’s discuss it*, or *what exactly do you have in mind?* And dozens more.’

‘I know exactly what you have in mind, Lord Rayne.’

‘Tch! Miss Boyce!’ he exclaimed in a dramatic whisper. ‘That is the most unintelligent thing I’ve heard from you so far. Would you believe me if I said the same to you?’

‘No, of course I would not.’

‘I should hope not indeed. Still, if you’re quite determined not to accept the best offer you’ll have for some time, then so be it. We shall consider the matter closed because Miss Boyce has a bee in her bonnet about my precise intentions. Which, by the way, are not at all what she thinks.’

‘Lord Rayne,’ said Letitia, looking towards the silver ribbon of water and the blobs of white floating upon it, ‘I think we ought to return. I have nothing to gain and much to lose by taking a walk alone with you. Perhaps you should allow me to walk back on my own.’

‘I do not think you should be allowed to go anywhere on your own, Miss Boyce. Will you take my arm up this bank? We’ll go up towards the house.’

‘I’m not exactly *blind*, my lord.’

‘So defensive,’ he said, crooking his arm for her. ‘Come on. Mind that branch.’

She hesitated, unaware of any obstruction on the path. It was shadowed and dappled with greenery, and it would be unnecessarily foolish to ignore his offer of help, and she *was* defensive, and insecure, and a whole lot of other devices acquired during years of having to battle against convention, her mother, her desires, her poor eyesight and its disadvantages. Her hesitation was interpreted as obstinacy.

‘Can you not bring yourself to accept help of *any* kind?’

‘I can’t see any branch!’ she yelped.

Unable to stifle a chuckle of exasperation, he went behind her, bending to unlatch the skirt of her sage-green habit from a mossy twig projecting from a branch. ‘Now,’ he said, offering his arm again, ‘shall we go, or shall you fight the elements single-handed?’

Subdued, she took his arm and used his steely strength to negotiate the overgrown path up to the house, unsure how she

had come to this point in a relationship that could not have begun in a worse manner. She understood that everyone had at least two sides to their characters, but so far she had allowed him to see only one of hers. It was her own bizarre two-sidedness that concerned her most, for she was not sure which of the two was the real Lettie Boyce, nor did she approve of the deception she was being forced to present, especially to those close to her. For some reason she could not explain, it mattered to her that this man's opinion should be placed on a firmer footing.

'Lord Rayne,' she ventured, not quite knowing what to say.

'Miss Boyce?'

'You may have...well, you see...I am not quite what you think.'

'And you are about to tell me what I think, are you? I thought we had agreed on the absurdity of that, just now.'

'I *meant* to say, if you will allow me, that I may have given you the impression that...well, you spoke earlier about my sharp tongue, and—'

'And the fact that you might personally benefit from a little schooling? Yes, I remember, Miss Boyce. Are you taking up my offer, then?'

'Lord Rayne, you are the most *odious* man of my acquaintance.'

'Abominable,' he agreed, smiling broadly.

Chapter Four

As a result of her meeting with Miss Austen Letitia came away with a feeling of relief that she had not revealed anything of her own writing. Yet with every sentence she wrote, she was reminded that, apart from one derisory kiss from the odious Lord Rayne, her heroine and her heroine's creator were both still innocents with fervent imaginations. Although the kiss was very clear in her memory, it had not been given in the right circumstances and was therefore untypical.

Mr Waverley had told her that afternoon how much he was enjoying *Waynethorpe Manor* as much as, if not more than, the first novel. His mother, he told her, had begged to be the next to read it.

'Is that wise?' Letitia asked him before he left that evening.

'She's one of your most avid readers. Of course it's wise.'

'I hope she doesn't suspect...'

He took her by the shoulders in brotherly fashion, laughing at her touchiness. 'She doesn't suspect anything, Lettie. She and Lake are well acquainted, and he's told her that the author is a certain Lydia Barlowe, but no more than that.'

'Perhaps I should have used different initials.'

'Nonsense. No one is ever going to make the connection.'

Her friend's approval of *Waynethorpe Manor*, however, satisfied her that the author's lack of emotional experience had

not in any way affected his enjoyment, though whether she could convince her readers for a third time remained to be seen.

‘What’s the new one about?’ he asked.

‘About a young lady called Em...er...Perdita, rather like one of my pupils, in some ways.’

‘Which pupil?’

‘Any one of them. Inexperienced. Looking for excitement.’

‘Looking for love, you mean.’

‘Yes, that, too,’ she said, giving herself away at each reply. Surely Bart would recognise the heroine?

‘You have only to look at the material right under your roof.’

‘What d’ye mean?’ she asked, rather too sharply.

‘I mean your seven young ladies, who else?’ They had reached the pavement where Mr Waverley’s horse was being held by the young groom. Taking the reins with a nod of thanks, he spoke to Letitia in a confidential whisper. ‘As a matter of fact, there is a young lady who might fit your Perdita’s description, up to a point. The lass from Scotland. One of the boarders.’

‘Edina Strachan? In what way?’

‘Nothing I can quite put my finger on, but you must have noticed how inattentive she’s become this new term. Her mind certainly isn’t on her household-management accounts, and I’d swear she’d been weeping before she came to the dinner table yesterday. She moons about like a lovesick calf.’

‘You don’t think she might be in love with you, do you, Bart?’

‘Good grief, no, I do not. She’s either still homesick or

lovesick, I tell you. Perhaps something happened while she was at home at Easter. You might keep an eye on the situation.'

'Yes, thank you for the warning. I will. I'll ask Mrs Quayle what she knows about it.'

But Mrs Quayle, the widow in whose house next door the three boarders had rooms, had nothing to add to Mr Waverley's observations. 'Homesickness, my dear,' she said that evening. 'It's only her second term away from home. We may have to work harder on her Scottish lilt, for if she cannot be understood, she's not going to make much headway in the marriage mart, is she? Perhaps we could get Mr Thomas to give her an extra half-hour each week?'

'So you don't think she's in love?'

'Who knows? With all those young Hussars swarming about, it wouldn't surprise me if all seven of them were. Don't worry, I'll keep a look out.'

'Yes. Thank you.'

That same evening, Letitia sat with the attractive seventeen-year-old Edina, whose guardian grandparents lived at Guildford. After talking at length about her family, it seemed that Edina was relieved to be away from their strait-laced Presbyterian influence and more involved with the kind of social life she had previously been denied. The symptoms that Mr Waverley had identified could not be homesickness, Letitia decided, therefore it must be love.

That evening, Edina's early signs were written into the

notebook with some elaboration to make up for what Letitia had not personally observed.

The remainder of the week passed uneventfully except for the visit on Thursday of Miss Garnet and Miss Persephone Boyce in the company of Uncle Aspinall and Aunt Minnie, the latter requiring a tour of the house and redesigned gardens. Sir Penfold Aspinall, a bluff, good-natured giant who had done so much to help his sister's eldest daughter to set up house, approved of everything he saw, partly because he trusted her good taste and partly because he liked the idea of being surrogate father to his remarkable niece. His wife, shrewish and disapproving, had come chiefly to take note and then to convey to Lady Boyce every detail to which they could mutually object.

The twins' main purpose in visiting their sister seemed to be to catch sight of Lord Rayne, whose absence had been the cause of some concern. They asked if it was true that he was visiting her.

'Visiting me? You must be bamming!'

'Has he?'

'Of course not. Why would he visit *me*?'

'We heard he was riding with you on Monday.'

'Me and about twenty others on the way to Garrick's Temple.'

'Oh, well, if that's all.'

'That *is* all. I suppose he'll be escorting you on Saturday?'

'No,' said Persephone, pouting.

'Too busy with preparations for the foreign visitors. Apparently they'll all need mounts,' said Garnet. 'We shall go to

Almack's, anyway.'

'It won't be the same. He's such a tease.'

'Is he?' said Letitia, relieved to hear that his commitments would keep him away from Richmond that weekend. 'Come to the garden and see my new summer-house. I think you'll like it.'

Aunt Minnie had found it first. She was taking tea there, dunking an almond biscuit in her cup before she heard them coming. 'Ridiculous waste of money, Letitia,' she said, brushing away dribbles of tea from her lace tippets. 'What are your fees for this place?'

'With extras, usually twenty pounds a term. More for the boarders.'

'Hmm! I don't know what your mama will say to that.'

Uncle Aspinall chuckled. 'It has nothing to do with Euphemia,' he said. 'Cheap at the price, I'd say. What are your young ladies doing now, Letitia?'

'French, with Madame du Plessis, Uncle.'

'Tch! French indeed,' said Aunt Minnie, sourly. 'That monster Bonaparte has a lot to answer for.'

But Uncle Aspinall had nothing but compliments to offer about the way his niece had furnished the rooms, the feminine colour schemes, the new garden layout and the adjoining conservatory. The hanging baskets, potted palms, window-boxes and newly planted vines had brought the garden well into the white painted room. 'Like a jungle!' Aunt Minnie carped. 'Ridiculous!'

It was not until Saturday evening when Letitia gathered her pupils into the downstairs parlour for a last check that she discovered an unwanted addition to the guest list that she could do nothing about when the invitation had been issued by Miss Sapphire Melborough, the daughter of their hosts.

Letitia kept her annoyance to herself, though she would like to have boxed the pert young woman's ears. 'I don't mind you inviting Lord Rayne, Sapphire dear,' she said, fastening the pearl pendant behind her neck, 'but it might have been more polite if you'd asked me first. And your parents. We have to be very careful about the audience, you know.'

'But they *like* Lord Rayne,' said Sapphire, understating the case by a mile, 'so I know they won't mind him coming with Lord and Lady Elyot. And I didn't think you'd disapprove, now that you and he have made up your differences. I told him about our concert and he said he'd like to hear me sing.'

'Next time, dear,' said Letitia, turning Sapphire to face her, 'ask me first, will you? He may be one of Richmond's *haut ton*, but the 10th Light Dragoons, or Hussars, whichever you prefer, have quite a reputation.'

Sapphire's bright cornflower eyes lit up like those of a mischievous elf. 'The Elegant Extracts is what I prefer, Miss Boyce. It's so fitting, isn't it?'

'It's also one of the more repeatable tags. There now, let me look at you. Yes, I think your family will be proud of you. Nervous?'

A hand went up to tweak at a fair curl, and the eyes twinkled again. ‘With Lord Rayne watching me, yes.’ Provocatively, she lifted one almost bare shoulder in a way that some women do by instinct. It would only be a matter of time, Letitia thought, before this one and her parents managed to snare the Elegant Extract, unless one of her own sisters did first.

‘Stay close to Edina, Sapphire. I think she feels the absence of her parents and guardians at a time like this.’

‘Yes, Miss Boyce. Of course I will.’

There was more to Letitia’s annoyance than having to show friendship to a man she would rather have avoided. He had told her sisters that he would be too busy on Saturday to escort them when he must already have accepted Sapphire’s invitation to hear her sing. Persephone and Garnet would be sadly out of countenance to learn that he was not as committed to them as they thought. Their mother even more so. All that was needed now to set the cat among the pigeons was for them to believe that *she* had invited him to the Melboroughs’. She could only pray that they would not come to that conclusion as easily as they’d learned of his precise whereabouts on Monday.

As it transpired, this particular problem faded into insignificance beside the others of that evening. Though she had made every effort to present her pupils to perfection in appearance, manners and performance, the one who outshone them all without the slightest effort was herself. Gowned modestly in palest oyster silk and ivory lace, her aristocratic

breeding and her refined silvery loveliness drew the eyes of the appreciative audience before, during and after each individual contribution. Making good use of her gold enamelled scissors-spectacles that hung from a ribbon looped about her wrist, she was able to see most of what was happening while combining an image of seriousness with a charming eccentricity, for the folding spectacle was not an easy accessory to use.

When she was not using it, it seemed hardly to matter that she could see only the indistinct shapes of the guests for, with Mr Waverley to help her through introductions and to murmur reminders in her ear, she felt the disadvantage less than she might otherwise have done. It also quite escaped her notice that the admiring eyes of so many men turned her way, or that the women's eyes busied themselves with every perfect detail of her ensemble.

Miss Gaddestone, petite in a flurry of frills, mauve muslin and bugle beads, and Mrs Quayle, like a plump beady-eyed brown bird, were the other two who knew the seriousness of Letitia's handicap, but who were too interested in their own roles to play chaperon to her as well as the pupils. They knew Mr Waverley would do that.

Sir Francis and Lady Melborough had taken a fancy to Letitia from the start, looking upon her at times as one of the family, though it had always been one of her policies to maintain a respectful distance between herself and the pupils' parents to avoid any appearance of favouritism. Lady Melborough was a

perfect forecast of how Sapphire would look in another twenty years, kindly and flighty and of a more blue-blooded ancestry than Sir Francis. She had prepared well for this event, her house being the most perfect setting, high-ceilinged and spacious, gold-and-white walled, moulded and mirrored.

As a newly knighted city banker, Sir Francis was self-important and ambitious, handsome and middle-aged with an eye for the feminine form, and for his own form, too. He stood facing a very large gilded mirror to speak to Letitia where, with lingering looks, he could see over her shoulder both his own front and her back, the curve of which he thought was enchanting. Letitia found his closeness uncomfortable, his affability fulsome, his attentions too personal for politeness. She edged away, trying to identify Mr Waverley's brown hair amongst so many others, and when she noticed the unmistakable frame and dark head of Lord Rayne approaching from across the room, the sudden relief she felt was quite impossible to hide.

'Why, Miss Boyce,' he said, 'am I dreaming, or did I see a fleeting welcome in your smile? Do tell me I'm not mistaken.'

'It would be impolite of me, to say the least, Lord Rayne, to admit any feeling of relief. Sir Francis is our host and I'm sure he's doing all he can to make the evening a success.'

'Then I take it you would not appreciate a word of warning?'

This was the first time she had seen Lord Rayne in evening dress, and she found it difficult to reconcile the former soldier in regimentals with the quietly dressed beau in charcoal-grey

tail-coat, left open to show a waistcoat of grey silk brocade. Whatever else she disliked about him, she could not fault his style. ‘Warning?’ she said. ‘Are you the right person to be warning me of *that*?’

‘Of what, Miss Boyce?’

‘Lord Rayne, you take a delight in putting me to the blush. But I shall not rise to your bait. You of all people must know what I refer to.’

‘Will I never be forgiven for that, Miss Boyce? Am I not to be allowed to warn you of similar dangers from old married men who ought to know better?’ Despite the teasing words, his eyes were seriously intent.

‘It is not necessary. I am not a green girl, my lord, and I have Mr Waverley to protect me.’

‘Ah, Mr Waverley. So you do.’

Their eyes roamed together, identifying the elegant figure in dark blue and white only a few paces away. Side by side, he was talking and smiling with Mr Jeffery Melborough, Sapphire’s older brother, shoulders almost touching, their backs reflected in the long mirror above a semi-lune table. Before Letitia could withdraw her glance, a slight movement in the mirror caused her to squint, trying to understand why young Mr Melborough’s hand was slipping between the long tails of Mr Waverley’s coat, its white cuff almost disappearing.

‘What’s he doing?’ she frowned. ‘I think he’s picking Bart’s pocket. I must go and warn him.’

‘No, come away...over here.’ Lord Rayne’s voice was suddenly commanding, his arm across her waist urging her forward. ‘Look, here are Mrs Quayle and your cousin. It must almost be time for the second half. Ladies,’ he bowed. ‘May I procure—’

‘But what if he *was* trying to reach Mr Waverley’s pocket? Is there not one in the lining of the tails?’

‘—a glass of punch for you?’

Face to face with the two chaperons, Letitia had little option but to abandon Mr Waverley to his predicament, whatever it was, in favour of the excited chatter covering every aspect of the evening, including Lord Rayne himself, as soon as his back was turned.

‘Did you *know*,’ said Mrs Quayle, ‘that he actually *offered* for your house when it first came on the market? I had no idea, but that’s what Lady Adorna Elwick has just told me. She’s his sister, you know. Lives at Mortlake. Over there, with the tall gentleman. Her *beau*,’ she whispered. ‘Isn’t she a *vision*?’

‘Yes, I met her earlier,’ said Letitia, recalling the stunning beauty in gossamer gold-threaded muslin that seemed to reveal more than it covered. The Merry Widow, they called her, with good reason. ‘Strange that no one mentioned it before. Lord Rayne has said not a word.’

‘Well, perhaps he doesn’t want you to know,’ said Mrs Gaddestone.

‘That he wished to purchase my house? Why not?’

Miss Gaddestone opened her mouth to answer, but was checked by her friend's elbow connecting firmly with hers. 'Oh! Am I not meant to say?'

'Say what? Gaddy, what *are* you talking about?' said Letitia.

Helplessly, Miss Gaddestone blinked at Mrs Quayle, who rose to the occasion as if this was what she'd intended. 'Lord Rayne,' she breathed from half behind her fan, 'is still recovering from a thwarted love affair, his sister says. Number 18, you see, belongs to the Bostons, and Lady Boston is Lady Elyot's niece, and when the two of them lived there before They were married, Lady Boston and Lord Rayne formed an *attachment* to each other.'

'Before she was Lady Boston, you mean?'

'Yes, she was plain Caterina Chester then, but she—'

'Mrs Quayle,' said Letitia, 'what are you implying? That Lord Rayne wanted Number 24 so he could live near the lady he once had a *tendre* for? If that were typical, he'd have to offer for dozens of properties a year, wouldn't he? Anyway, Number 18 is empty for most of the year. I was told that the Bostons live up in Northumberland. Or is it Cumberland?'

Fluffing up her feather boa and settling it again upon her shoulders, Mrs Quayle tried again. 'It is,' she said. 'The Bostons keep a skeleton staff there. They come down from the north about twice a year. Still, it sounds to me as if he's not quite got over the lady, doesn't it? I wonder if she feels the same way.'

'I think you're probably jumping to conclusions,' said Letitia. 'Perhaps he had his sights on Number 24 because Richmond

houses don't come on the market too often. Well, not the kind he'd want to buy.'

But the information, so carelessly given, found a corner of her mind into which it did not fit as snugly as it ought. The notion of Lord Rayne being capable of a lasting affection for a woman seemed uncharacteristic of such a man. More than that she would not allow herself to dwell on, though it became quite a struggle to prevent certain images from developing in her mind that had no business there in the first place. Especially when she did not even like the man.

As if she could not resist the chance to needle him for something as indefinable as that, she joined him towards the end of the interval as he and Mr Waverley were chatting together. Instead of greeting her with his usual smile, Mr Waverley was studying his shoes as if they had been the subject of some discussion while Lord Rayne's expression held traces of sympathy.

'Ye...es,' Mr Waverley was saying. 'Right. Ah, Lettie. It's all going rather well, don't you think?'

'It is indeed,' she replied. 'And just think, if Lord Rayne had been with my sisters as they expected him to be, he would have missed such high-class entertainment. But one must choose, I suppose, between hearing Miss Melborough sing and thereby pleasing two prospective parents-in-law on the one hand, or escorting two Miss Boyces and pleasing only *one* parent. It must have been a very difficult decision to make, my lord. I hope the

concert is worth the sacrifice. Shall I let my sisters know who took their place, or shall you be the one to explain the problem?"

Rayne's eyes, heavy-lidded and patently bored with the subject, looked beyond her. "There was no problem, Miss Boyce, although if you wish to make a drama of it, please don't let a detail like that prevent you. I realise how dull life must be for you without some kind of diversion, however small."

"Yes, my lord. You can have no idea how tedious it is to put on concerts of this kind and to be making visits almost every day. Compared to the excitement of routine cavalry drill and the polishing of tack, we live very sedate lives. What is it to be on Monday? Ah, yes, our theatre evening. Oh, what a bore."

"Lettie, I think Lord Rayne means that—"

"Bart dear, I know what he means."

"If I may interrupt," said Rayne, tonelessly, "I believe we may have covered this ground only recently. We're getting to the "I know what you're thinking" part, if I'm not mistaken. Bart, would you be a good fellow and...?" He touched Mr Waverley's lace cuff with the tip of his fingers.

"Yes, of course. Will you excuse me, Lettie? I'll catch up later."

Letitia stared at the prompt departure. "What was that about?" she snapped. "Why did you—?"

"Because, my sharp-tongued beauty, I have some advice for you."

"Then I don't think I want to hear it, thank you."

"Yes, you do. It's about what you saw earlier. With Mr Jeffery."

‘Oh. Were you giving him a set-down?’

‘Not at all. It was a fudge between them, and Bart was embarrassed. Nothing was taken from his pocket. It was just a bit of nonsense. It would please Bart if you were not to mention it.’

‘Oh, boy’s pranks, you mean.’

‘Exactly. There are certain things a woman is innocent of when she has no brothers.’

Letitia blinked, not knowing how to reply to that. Without knowing it, he had pinpointed a basic truth that lay behind her writing problem, not simply by being brotherless, but being without the kind of understanding that comes from years of observing what young males do, how they behave together, what they look like under the formal attire and what they say to each other. It was a private jest between friends. She ought to have guessed.

Caught unawares, she foolishly pursued the other matter instead of granting him the last word. ‘So what am I to tell my sisters, my lord? I would not want them to think it was I who invited you here this evening.’

‘Miss Boyce,’ he said, visibly stifling a sigh, ‘you appear to be rather obsessed by what other people think, despite your efforts to make it seem otherwise. If I were you, I’d leave me to deal with my own affairs as I think best and try minding my own business.’

‘It will be very much my business, Lord Rayne, if my sisters were to suspect *me* of keeping you here at Richmond. In fact, they have already asked me if you have visited me. How foolish

is that, I ask you?

‘Extremely foolish, Miss Boyce. I cannot think of a single reason why I should want to call on you at Paradise Road. Can you?’

‘Not unless it was to take a look at the alterations I’ve made since *you* looked it over. Enjoy the music, my lord.’

The tiff gave her nothing like the satisfaction she had hoped for and, if it had not been for her pupils’ efforts to please, and her own part in that, she would have felt even more irritated than she did. As it was, the parents were well satisfied that they had made the right choice of school for their daughters and that their money was being well spent on all the right accomplishments. In that respect, the exercise had been well worth the effort.

Sir Francis and Lady Melborough went even further by letting it be known that Lord Rayne had agreed to give their daughter some riding tuition and to find her a better mount than the one that had been Mr Jeffery Melborough’s hack. Then, it was only a matter of minutes before first one father and then another approached Lord Rayne with similar requests, effectively appointing him as personal tutor to their daughters and charging him with the purchase of suitable horses to replace the present ones, to Letitia’s quietly seething anger. The only saving grace in her eyes was that the extra lessons would be outside school hours and it would be the parents rather than she who paid him. The only one to miss out on this new arrangement was Miss Edina Strachan, whose relatives had not attended.

‘You did that on purpose, didn’t you?’ Letitia said to him.

‘I didn’t actually have to *do* anything, Miss Boyce. It was Miss Melborough herself who broached the subject to her father and he who asked me what I thought. What I thought is what I’d already said to you. Simple as that.’

‘You have a knack of getting your own way, that’s all I can say.’

‘I wish it was all you could say, ma’am. Unfortunately, I do not hold out any hopes on that score until you’re taken in hand and held on a tight rein.’

‘Which will not be *your* business, my lord.’

‘Not yet. You’ll have to be caught first. Goodnight, Miss Boyce.’

This was not, however, the last she heard from him that night, for as she stood listening to the quietly spoken vicar’s wife, mother of Verity Nolan, the deeper voices of Lord Rayne and Lord Elyot came to her ears from the other side of a wide marble column, weaving around Mrs Nolan’s opinions of the piano duets.

‘Attracted?’ said one, in answer to some question. ‘Intrigued, certainly. I can’t say I’ve ever come across such a combination of looks, intelligence and prickliness.’

‘So well balanced,’ Mrs Nolan was saying, eagerly. ‘Of course...’

‘You’ve had it too much your own way, Sete. That’s the problem.’

‘...there were times when the bass line was a little strong,

but...'

'Yes, I know I have. She seems to think so, too.'

'What about the sisters? Not so much fun?'

'...but that's only to be expected. A little more practice, and...'

'Getting tedious, Nick. Too predictable. The elder one is a cracker, and I fancy the challenge. You can see why she and the mother don't see eye to eye.'

'So, you fancy taking on a *blue-stocking*.' There was low laughter and some words about no stockings at all that made Letitia blush. 'Well, give it a try and see how it goes. She may prove to be worth the trouble, if looks are anything to go by. D'ye think she's interested?'

'She's very green, for all her ways. And I think she may be interested, but she'd not admit it. I may need some help, Nick. Are you willing?'

'Of course. You helped me with Amelie. Just let me know.'

'Thanks, I will.'

'Miss Boyce?' said Mrs Nolan. 'Are you all right? You're very flushed, my dear. I was saying—'

'Yes, quite right, Mrs Nolan. More practice, I'm sure. Now, I must go and say farewell to Lady Melborough and gather my brood together.' Slipping away into the crowd, Letitia made her way in a daze between the chattering bodies, her mind reeling from the kind of talk she should not have listened to. As her first taste of the way brothers spoke to each other in private, it would

have been more enjoyable if the subject of their speculation had not been herself.

It now became imperative for Letitia and her pupils to take their leave of their hosts, pack themselves into carriages and escape to the safety of Paradise Road away from the controversies surrounding Lord Rayne's unwanted presence. If he had not been invited, Letitia was sure she would not be feeling so annoyed, even if she ought to have anticipated some trouble, in view of her previous experiences.

Her farewell to her host and hostess, however, could not be rushed through in a few brief words, and when Sir Francis took her to one side, impolitely monopolising her attention, it was more than she could do to snub him by refusing point-blank to cross the threshold of his large library where he promised to show her a rare volume of John Donne's poetry before she left. Just to one side of the columned hall, the white double doors were wide open and, since anyone could see inside, Letitia saw no danger in following him.

John Donne was one of her favourite poets, but the library was not well lit and, when Sir Francis opened the book upon his desk and moved it across to show her the handwritten script, she found it impossible to see much except the first decorated letter. Deciding there and then that this was to be the extent of her obligation to him, she bent to look more closely as his hand smoothed over the pattern of words on the page. His body moved too close as only a father would have done, innocent but

invasive, nevertheless. His breath smelled of brandy. She was tired, emotional and, she thought later, too keyed up to think sensibly, and what happened next was as much the result of her over-reaction as Sir Francis's uncomfortable closeness.

She moved away and took a hasty step backwards, hitting her heel against some unseen object, and crashing down over the top of it on to the carpeted floor, forcing a yelp from her lips.

Lights tipped and jerked crazily.

Hands reached out.

Shapes bent over her.

A man's face loomed through a haze of shock.

'No...no, don't *touch* me!' she whispered. 'I can manage alone.'

'Miss Boyce, take my hand. It's me, Rayne. Let me help you to get this footstool out of the way. You fell over it, I believe. Are you much hurt?'

Somewhere behind her, she heard the deeply cutting voice of his brother asking Melborough what in hell's name he thought he was doing to invite a young lady to be alone with him, telling him with unarguable finality that it didn't matter whether the doors were open or not, he should have known better. The thud of Sir Francis's footsteps on the carpet was swallowed into the soft hum from the hall.

Letitia struggled to sit upright against the desk. 'My eyeglasses,' she said. 'I heard a crack just now. They're hanging from my wrist. Please, if you would move your foot, my lord.'

There was a tinkle of glass as he obliged. *'Damn!'* he said.
'Oh...oh, no!'

Crouching down beside her, he removed the ribbon from her gloved wrist from which dangled the golden scissors-spectacles, one half now empty of glass, its pieces on the floor. 'I'm so sorry,' he whispered. 'I didn't see them there. Why in pity's name doesn't he get some lights in here?' Carefully, he picked up the pieces. 'Truly, I'm sorry. I'll have them mended immediately. Leave it with me. Come, Miss Boyce, you should go straight home. Can you stand now?' Tucking the broken parts into his pocket, he held out his arms to her as Lord Elyot watched.

Although she had heard, only a few moments ago, how indelicate their talk about women could be, she made no protest as his arms enclosed her shoulders and gently pulled her upright, nor did she object when his cheek almost touched hers. She clung to his arm. 'Yes, I can stand, thank you. Ouch...oh, *ouch!* I'm all right, really. It was nothing.'

'No, you're not!' said Lord Elyot, sternly. 'You've had a nasty fall.'

'Not as bad as I've had on the hunting field, my lord.'

'That was years ago. Rayne and I will support you. See,' he said, offering her his arm, 'this is entirely proper. It will cause not the slightest comment for you to take both our arms, Miss Boyce. Will it?'

Obediently linking her arms through theirs, she winced visibly as the dull pain came pulsing into her knee and elbow. 'Thank

you, my lord. You are very kind.' From the corner of her eye, she caught a look from Lord Elyot sent across her head to his brother.

'A little kindness goes a long way, eh, brother?' he said, softly.

Bustling towards them, Miss Gaddestone was all concern. Mr Waverley was not far behind, then came the others, flocking to her with smiles of sympathy and tender enquiries. Her arms were relinquished to others on a wave of affection that bore her out towards a waiting carriage, lifting her into it, settling her with rugs and cushions.

'Bart, will you...?' she began.

'Leave it all to me,' he said. 'Came a cropper, did you, Lettie?'

'In a manner of speaking,' she replied, catching Lord Rayne's eye.

Chapter Five

With so much to be said about the success of the evening, it was very late when the three boarders and Mrs Quayle left Number 24 for their beds next door. Everyone they had spoken to agreed that Miss Boyce's very select seminary excelled in the quality of the teaching and in the astonishing progress of the pupils. The only sad note was the absence of Edina's parents and grandparents, though Letitia did her best to sweeten the disappointment by drawing attention to the absence of her own family, too. It could not be helped, she said, if one's family could not always be where one wanted them to be.

Later, sitting up against a bank of pillows in her own bed, Letitia felt the sadness as keenly as her Scottish pupil, knowing that her sisters would gladly have come if their mother had chaperoned them. What would it take to get her here? she wondered. What would it take to win her approval?

Other incidents had left a sour taste in Letitia's mouth, the last one being by far the most serious and the one her friends had kindly glossed over as being no more than an accident, though they must have realised there was something more to it than that. She had been warned, and had assured Lord Rayne that she was capable of looking after herself, and now he would think she had brought it upon her own head.

It had also served her right for trying to manage without

wearing her spectacles on such an important occasion, and now they were broken. Amongst her literary friends it mattered less, for most of them wore them openly. But tonight she had wanted to look her best, to be a credit to her pupils and to set an example of womanly perfection, as far as she was able.

But her efforts to hold herself above the reach of rakes had been less than successful, for the one whose attentions set up her hackles more than any other had discussed her with his brother as if she were a filly ready to be taken in hand. It was what he had rudely told her more than once. Perhaps that was the way they discussed her sisters also—her ‘tedious, predictable sisters’. Unlike them, she had always been too threateningly bookish for any man to think of in romantic terms, and even Rayne found her—apparently—intriguing rather than attractive, a challenge, a diversion, nothing too serious. Nor had Bart ever shown her any romantic intentions.

Between bouts of reflection, her pencil on the page described the atmosphere, mannerisms, expressions and ensembles, the music and voices, the colours, the blurred flutter of fans and feathers, the perfumes and the faint, warm, male scent of the man who had lifted her from the floor, effortlessly. The pencil stopped, her head fell back upon the pillow, eyes closed, remembering. Was that how it would feel to be lifted, carried, laid upon a bed?

Busily, the pencil continued its word pictures. Her elbow and knee throbbed. She took another sip of warm chocolate

while constructing an image of Lady Boston who would, naturally, be ravishingly beautiful, not at all sharp-tongued or intellectual, and probably pining up in Northumberland for the brother of her uncle-in-law. Was he within the permitted degree of consanguinity? Did it matter these days? She fell asleep, wondering about it, convinced that Lord Rayne did not intend anything more than a light flirtation, being still half in love with Lady Elyot's beautiful talented niece. Yes, she was sure to be talented and experienced. A society high-flyer she would be.

Several times she woke when her knee and elbow pressed upon something, sending her thoughts rushing back into the angry pocket of her mind where Sir Francis's unfortunate lack of manners hovered like a giant question mark over the messages she was unconsciously sending out about her accessibility. Was her learning attracting the wrong kind of man? Was it perhaps to do with her care of younger women? For Lord Rayne to overstep the mark was one thing, but for the father of one of her own pupils to forget the respect due to her was nothing short of shameful. By dawn, she felt as if she had hardly slept at all.

Monday morning, usually kept for music, was taken at a leisurely pace over jugs of barley water and coffee, cook's best biscuits and a continuous flow of laughter and discussion about future events. Sitting outside in the garden, Letitia used the opportunity to show them the new shoots of herbs, dill, parsley, rosemary and thyme, and to make a game of recognising them by smell alone. Then there were formal thank-you letters to be

written to their hosts, leaving Letitia to put her feet up in the roomy summerhouse where the footman came to find her with the news that she had two morning callers.

‘Lady Elwick and Lady Elyot,’ he called to her.

She swung her legs down, but her guests would not allow her to stand for longer than it took to exchange kisses to both cheeks.

‘We came to see how you are this morning...’

‘...taking a ride through the park...’

‘...and to thank you and the girls...’

‘...for the concert. We must do it next at Sheen Court.’

Letitia was used to the twins’ interwoven sentences, but she had not encountered these two sisters-in-law together until now. Lady Elyot was a dark classic beauty; Lady Adorna Elwick was fair and quite unlike her two brothers. However, she shared with them their noble parentage, so was entitled to be known as Lady Adorna from birth, whereas the title of Lady Elwick came via her late husband. To confuse matters more, she had been known from childhood as Dorna, and the name still held.

Lady Dorna laughed readily, caring nothing for the crinkles around her merry blue eyes, the same shade exactly as the flimsy morning gown and low-cut velvet spencer. Ribbons flowed from her ruched poke-bonnet, and a lacy parasol was furled into a spear as she took the chair next to Letitia. ‘Isn’t this *cosy*?’ she laughed, looking about her at the cushioned benches, basket chairs and rattan tables. ‘One could have a secret *rendezvous* in a place like this, Amelie. Couldn’t one? Oh, what fun! I think mine

is too small for anything as romantic as that. Perhaps I ought to enlarge it.'

Lady Elyot shook her head, smiling at her sister-in-law's artlessness. 'Dorna, you are shocking Miss Boyce, dear. This darling place is used only for taking tea and writing one's journal, isn't it, Miss Boyce? Tell Dorna I'm correct. Mind you, if I had it, I'd use it to do my painting in.'

'That is what I use it for, my lady. Writing *and* painting.'

'Of course you do. As soon as we met I could see you were artistic. Writing and art: two sides of the same voice. You keep a journal, do you? Most women seem to, nowadays.'

'It's one of the subjects we teach. That, and the art of letter-writing. Speech-writing, too. There are sure to be occasions when they'll be expected to say something intelligent in public.'

'You are *so* progressive in your thinking, Miss Boyce.' Sliding gracefully into the other basket chair, Lady Elyot lifted a ladybird off the arm and placed it gently on to the vase of tulips. 'There will also be times when they'll be expected to attend a local Vestry meeting. Our new Vestry Hall is only a few doors away from here. Why not bring them along one day, just to listen?'

'Thank you. That would certainly open their eyes. We shall all be going to the theatre this evening. The girls are studying *The Merchant of Venice* and, by chance, that's the play being performed.'

'A coincidence indeed!' said Lady Dorna, delightedly. 'We have arranged to go, too. We're to have dinner first at the Castle,

then straight to the Theatre Royale. Now why don't you join us for dinner, Miss Boyce? You and your boarders. And your two chaperons?'

'Lady Dorna, it is more than kind of you to invite us, but we couldn't possibly all come. That would be far too many because our party includes Mr Waverley and Mr Thomas, the elocution teacher. He wants to come, too. Why do you not come to us instead? It would be much more convenient, I think. We shall be dining early at six o'clock in time for the performance at eight. Just a simple repast. We'd be honoured if you would share it with us.'

Lady Elyot was concerned about the short notice to Letitia's cook, but Lady Dorna had no hesitation in accepting. 'Why not?' she said. 'Seton hopes to be with us, too. What a party we shall be.'

'Is not Lord Rayne at Hampton Court today?' said Letitia.

'Yes, but he's returning in time for our theatre dinner.'

'That's not like him,' said Lady Elyot. 'Seton has never been too keen on Shakespeare.'

'Well, dear, that's what I put to him, but he tells me he's reforming.'

And perhaps, Letitia thought, Lord Rayne has received another invitation from Miss Sapphire Melborough who, like the other day pupils, would be attending with their parents. With this certainty in her mind, she found it hard to accept that she was being used by the scheming young woman as a way of including

Lord Rayne in her social life, whether she approved or not. If that were the case, there was little she could do about it, but she would have preferred the Melbourns rather than herself to have the pleasure of feeding him.

To her relief, Mrs Mappleton, the cook, seemed quite unperturbed by an extra five guests to cater for. Mrs Brewster, the housekeeper, after indulging in the obligatory astonishment, soon began to warm to the idea of entertaining an extra two lords, two ladies and a captain. It was still before noon, enough time to send for more meat and fish, to prepare more side-dishes and desserts, and enough time for Letitia's pupils to decorate an enlarged dinner table. It was good experience, she told them, opening the double doors between dining and drawing rooms, thinking how right she had been to buy the extending table and matching chairs from Gillow of Lancaster. Lady Boyce had insisted it would be too large for Letitia's purposes. Rather than set thirteen places, however, she sent an invitation to Mr Titus Chatterton, who lived near Mr Waverley on The Green, asking him to dine with them. He was an entertaining guest, for all his face paint and flamboyance, and one could not help but like him.

For the remainder of the day, she showed her pupils how a good hostess must prepare for last-minute diners without the slightest sign of improvisation or muddling through, and without upsetting one's cook or housekeeper.

By the time the first carriages rolled up at the door, the day pupils had returned home and the duty of receiving the guests

was shared by the boarders as part of their education.

Acting as assistant host, Mr Waverley took the head of the table with Lady Dorna to his right while Letitia and Lord Elyot took the opposite end, and although there were more ladies than gentlemen, the arrangement could not have been more comfortable for the three youngest ladies for whom this was a kind of lesson. The guests appeared to understand it well, this being the first visit for four of them, and even though good manners forbade any show of amazement at Letitia's exquisitely tasteful surroundings, it was impossible for them not to appreciate the ivory-handled cutlery and fine engraved glassware, the blue-and-white Wedgwood dinner service matching the posies of bluebells and white lilac filling every space between silver dishes.

It was too early in the year for fresh green vegetables, but root varieties had been made into a pie, with a fricassee of turnips, and roasted potatoes, still a talking point. Nor was there any shortage of lamb, gammon or game, salmon and sole, pies and rissoles, sauces and garnishes and, as the guests were so appreciative and unpretentious, the meal flowed easily along with good wines and home-made orange wine for the younger ones. Tarts and cheesecakes, blancmanges, fruit jellies and creams were toyed with as the talk, inevitably, veered towards the contrast between the pupils' study of Shakespeare and their greater penchant for the novels such as *The Infidel* and, more recently, *Waynethorpe Manor*. The general opinion seemed to be that they could not

have been written by a woman, in spite of what the title page told them.

Letitia had no opinion to offer on that, but laughed as she offered her poor excuse. ‘Variety? My pupils are encouraged to discuss whatever they read, whether it’s classical or popular fiction. If it’s well written, it’s readable.’

Captain Ben Rankin, Lady Dorna’s good-looking friend, was intrigued by this view. ‘So you’ve read them, too?’ he said.

‘Indeed I have, Captain. I would not otherwise allow my young ladies to.’

‘And you approve, I see. Does Mr Thomas approve, too?’

The articulate young Welshman came readily to her rescue. ‘If Miss Boyce approves, then so do I, sir. We don’t necessarily read these stories *out loud*, as we do with Shakespeare, but—’

But the company had already dissolved into laughter at the idea of anyone reading *The Infidel* out loud, and Letitia’s pink cheeks went unnoticed except by Mr Waverley and Lord Rayne who, sitting five places away from her, was finding it difficult to give his undivided attention to Mrs Quayle on one side and Miss Strachan on the other.

As they left the table, he caught up with Letitia. ‘Allow me to thank you, Miss Boyce, for including me in your party. That was a memorable meal.’

She had had little choice in the matter of his inclusion, but saw no advantage in saying so. ‘Thank you, Lord Rayne. It’s given you the opportunity to see how I’ve changed things since you last

saw the inside of the house.’

‘I never saw the interior until now.’

‘Oh? You would have bought it unseen?’

‘My agent saw it. He recommended it to me, that’s all.’

‘I see. I had heard...’She must not tell him what she’d heard.

‘Otherwise?’ Deliberately, he looked across the room to the group where Lady Dorna stood talking. ‘My sister means well,’ he said, in a low voice, ‘but she inhabits a delightful world where realities and fancies mix rather freely. None of us would have her any different, but it sometimes leaves us with some explaining to do. Would you like me to explain anything to you, Miss Boyce?’

‘No, I thank you. There is room for all of us. But whatever I heard about you wanting my house has completely escaped me. It’s of no consequence.’

‘None at all. I could never have made it look as handsome as it does now.’ His eyes did not follow his compliment, but took a route over her piled-up silvery braids, her graceful neck adorned with a single rope of pearls, her beautiful shoulders and bosom framed by pale grey silk piped and latticed with silver satin.

‘No, a house generally does better with one mistress, my lord, rather than a succession of them. Take my *tedious, predictable* twin sisters, for instance. Even they might be at odds about some details. By the way,’ she whispered, as if about to disclose a confidence, ‘the blue-stocking *elder* sister is *not* interested, despite what you believe. I cannot *think* how you came by that notion, my lord, unless you share the same kind of problem with

reality as Lady Dorna. Could it be that, I wonder?’

Lazily scanning, his eyes came to rest on hers, slowly revealing an understanding of where her phrases originated. They widened, then smiled, then grew serious again as she reached the end of her disclosure. ‘So,’ he said, quietly, ‘the ears make up for the eyes, do they? No use for me to apologise, I suppose?’

‘No use at all, my lord. It merely confirms what I knew already.’

‘That’s the pity of it, Miss Boyce. It only confirms what you *thought* you knew already. But we’ve had this conversation before, haven’t we? Both of us have preconceived ideas about the other. You believe I am shallow. You *think* I believe you to be—’

‘A *challenge* is what you said. You fancy a challenge. Forget it, my lord. You could never hold my interest. My sisters, however...’

‘Whom we shall leave out of it, if you please.’

‘They’d not be pleased to hear you say that.’

‘Then they’d better not hear it, had they? As I was saying, you appear to believe I cannot be serious about a woman, and that what you overheard confirms it, and that I could only be interested in you for the novelty value.’

‘I didn’t *imagine* that, my lord. I *heard* it.’

‘I was being uncivil, on purpose. It was not meant—’

‘Oh, *spare* me!’ she snapped. ‘I’m so looking forward to hearing some *good* acting, aren’t you? See,’ she said, turning, ‘the coats and capes are being brought in. Mr Waverley...Bart...’

where are you? If you will take three of the ladies in with you, and perhaps Lord and Lady Elyot will take...’ She bustled away, managing and marshalling four people into each of the three coaches until, quite by accident, she was the only woman left with one male guest. ‘Lord...er...Rayne?’ she whispered. ‘Oh!’

Leaning against the hall table with feet wide apart, he was quietly laughing. ‘Managed yourself into a corner, Mother Hen?’ he said. ‘Come on, then. You and I are going to walk it. It’s not far.’

‘I know how far it is,’ she growled. ‘It’s not that.’

He did not move. ‘You want me to carry you there?’

‘Tch!’ She sighed, wondering how she could possibly have done something as foolish as this. She would rather have walked with Mr Chatterton in his high-heeled shoes than with Rayne, whose arrogance both excited and annoyed her.

The footman bowed and withdrew, leaving them alone in the hall with a mountain of misunderstandings to keep them apart.

He waited, then reached her in two strides, backing her into the hard edge of the opposite table. She gripped it, leaning away from him, seeing for the first time the crisp detail of his neckcloth, the white waistcoat and its silver buttons, undone at the top. Again, she breathed the faint aroma given off by his warm skin, but now there was to be no making of mental notes for her writing when he was so frighteningly close, no time to express how she was affected, or the sensation of her heart thudding into her throat.

He placed a large knuckle beneath her chin, lifting it. ‘Yes, my beauty, I know. This is not what you planned, is it?’

‘Don’t call me that! I’m not your beauty, nor am I—’

‘And you can glare at me all you want, but this evening you will do as I say without argument and without biting my hand off. Do you hear me?’

‘I shall—’

‘Do you *hear* me? Without argument. Just for once, if you please.’

She nodded, looking at his mouth, then at the faint bluish shadow around his jaw, then back to his eyes that had noted every detour. His thighs pressed against hers, and she understood that, suddenly, he was struggling to suppress an urge to do what he had done once before. She must prevent it. ‘Let me go,’ she whispered.

He did not move. ‘Where are your spectacles? Have you another pair? Do you have them with you?’

‘In my reticule. Let me go, please.’

‘You will take my arm,’ he commanded, ‘and you will be civil.’

‘Yes, I will be civil.’

‘I have your word on it?’

‘Yes...now *please...let* me go.’ She took hold of his wrist, expecting it to move but, when she looked again at his eyes to find the cause of his delay, she saw how his gaze rested upon the staircase as if to measure its length. Panic stole upwards, fluttering inside her bodice. Her fingers tightened over the

soft fabric of his coat-cuff. 'No,' she whispered. 'Don't...please don't.' She saw the reflection of the two wall-lamps in his eyes, heavy-lidded with desire.

'I could,' he said, 'but I suppose they will not delay the performance of Shakespeare for us, so we'd better go. Come, my beauty, adjust your shawl. There, now take my arm, and try to remember what you have agreed.'

Speechless and shaken, she did as she was told. Arm in arm they went out into the cool evening, pulling the heavy door closed behind them.

Earlier that afternoon she had formed a clear plan of where everyone would sit, herself being nowhere near Lord Rayne. However, arriving at the theatre only a few minutes later, Letitia found her plans already displaced by the earlier arrival of the day girls, their parents and friends. Although Miss Sapphire Melborough clearly hoped that Lord Rayne would join her parents in their box, he merely bowed politely, held a few words of conversation with her mother, then rejoined Letitia, taking the two seats left over after the others had taken theirs. It was not at all what Letitia had intended, and Rayne knew it as he quelled her budding protest with a stern glance, positioning her chair next to his at the back of the box and almost herding her into it with one uncompromising word. 'There,' he said.

She delayed for as long as she dared but, in the end, there was nothing for it but to accept the situation when the musicians in the pit ceased playing and the curtain glided upwards. The scene

of merchants and their clients against a background of Venetian waterways would normally have riveted her attention. But this time she was sitting close to Lord Rayne against the high back of the box with a partition on one side of her, and her usually obedient concentration was distracted by the sensation that, for all her determination to deny him any sign of encouragement, he had won that round with ease.

He had another way of putting it, in a whisper, when she turned slightly to glance at him. Catching her angry expression, his unsmiling eyes made his advice all the more telling. 'Stop fighting me, my beauty. I intend to win.'

Turning her attention to her reticule, she drew out a pair of pocket spectacles that swung inside a mother-of-pearl cover, holding them to her eyes as if his words meant nothing. But the spectacles trembled, and she knew he had seen before she transferred them to her other hand.

That evening at Richmond's Theatre Royal was to be remembered for many reasons, the chief of which was the way in which Lord Rayne attended to her needs as they had not been since her father died, not even by Mr Waverley. Independent to a fault, she had intended to take charge of the event, putting herself last, as usual, in spite of there being enough adults to watch over the three boarders. But if she had thought they would prefer her to the others, she was wrong. They did not need her, and she had no other role to play except to stay by Rayne's side, where he wanted her.

‘Miss Melborough is hoping you will visit her,’ she said.

‘Then she will be disappointed. This evening, Miss Boyce, I am with no one but you, and you will not get rid of me.’

‘Hasn’t this gone on long enough, my lord?’ she said, demurely, opening and closing her spectacle-cover. ‘You’ve made your point, I think. You’ve had your fun and enjoyed the stares. But these girls are my pupils, and you place me in a very awkward position by paying me this attention one evening and then, as you are sure to do, paying the same kind of attention to someone else next time they see you. They all know you and my sisters are seen in each other’s company. They know that Sapphire’s parents are keen on an alliance. I am not unused to being talked about in one way or another, but this evening will not be easy for me to live down, my lord. Perhaps you think you’re doing me some kind of favour, but I assure you, you’re not. Surely you can see that?’

Handing her a glass of negus, he took the spectacles from her and popped them into the opening of the reticule that hung on her arm. ‘It’s a great pity, in a way,’ he said, ‘that you overheard what you did, for now it will be harder than ever for me to convince you that I am not simply flirting with you.’

‘You are mistaken in the matter, Lord Rayne. I was convinced you were doing exactly that at our first meeting. I’m afraid I cannot be unconvinced, nor would any woman be, in the same circumstances.’

‘That would not have happened to *any* woman, Miss Boyce.’

‘No, of course not. How often does one encounter a

shortsighted, lost schoolmistress? Not one of your greatest challenges, I would have thought.'

He sighed. 'Miss Boyce, will you try to dredge from the depths of your *deep* intellect something we agreed on before we set out? Something you gave me your word on, if you need a clue?'

'Yes, my lord, but—'

'Good. Then keep it, will you?'

'But you haven't answered my question.'

'Oh? I thought I had. I wish you would listen as well as you talk.'

'Odious man!' she muttered.

Mr Waverley was amused by the new partnership. 'What's happened, Lettie? The fellow's sticking to you like glue. I think he's smitten.'

'Fudge!' she said. 'Bart, rescue me. Walk home with me. Don't leave me alone with him. He's only trying to show Miss Melborough that she has some competition, that's all. I know the kind of tactics such men use.'

'Maybe, but Sir Francis doesn't look too pleased about it, either, does he? He's been sending you the oddest looks. What's *that* all about?'

She did not explain. She had noticed the crowded Melborough box during the interval but, without peering through her lenses, had not been able to see who the visitors were. Nevertheless, she was receiving the distinct impression that Sir Francis, who would normally have been amongst the first to ingratiate himself with

her, was keeping well out of her way.

Undeterred by her watchful escort, she managed to speak to many of her friends, her pupils' parents and their friends, too, and had thought that, as they began to seat themselves for the second half, she might be invited to join their ranks. But Lord Rayne was having none of it and, disregarding the interest and envy of her pupils, he steered her back to the same chair with the utmost propriety, giving them little to gossip about except that their guardian was once again being claimed by him.

And indeed there was nothing to which she could object except his closeness; no touching, no arm across the back of her chair, no flirtatious remarks, no compliments except in his eyes. It was, she thought, as if his aim was to familiarise her with his nearness as he would with an unbroken young horse. Which, after all, would have been the way of any suitor except this one, for whom conventional methods were usually too slow.

Years of watching her vivacious sisters take centre stage, however, had caused her to develop an unhealthy cynicism, enabling her to see through and partly to despise the ploys men used, the foolish games they played. And in view of her previous encounters with this particular buck, she was unlikely to let go of her conviction that she was being used as some kind of instrument in one of his games in full view of the pert and eager Miss Melborough, not to mention her ambitious parents. While she could not help but absorb the exciting vibrations from the man at her side as she had never done before with anyone, it

was her steely common sense that pulled her emotions back from taking precedence over her writing, which needed information of this kind more than her starving sensitive heart did. If it was common sense, then it must be right, for what else did a woman like her have to rely on?

Agog with curiosity to see whether Lord Rayne would walk back to Paradise Road with Miss Boyce, her pupils were almost as excited to hear him call farewell to his relatives and to see him take one of the carriages with Letitia and Mr Waverley, which seemed to them a little odd when Mr Waverley lived almost next door to the theatre. Mr Chatterton and Mr Thomas had only yards to go. What the pupils did not discover is that, by tacit consent, Mr Waverley, Lord Rayne, Miss Gaddestone and Miss Boyce stayed up until past midnight in the drawing room, drinking red wine from sparkling cut glasses through which the candlelight danced and winked. Talking like old friends, not one waspish word was heard between them. Then the two men left, Lord Rayne having accepted a lift back to Sheen Court in Mr Waverley's phaeton.

It was usual, at the end of each day, however late, for Letitia to enter notes into her book before they suffered from distortion or, worse, amnesia. This night, the notebook stayed locked in her drawer while she lay against the pillows to watch the shadows move over the bed-curtains, not because she was too tired to write, but because her thoughts were torn by conflict, her heart entering a period of slow ache in anticipation of the pain that was

sure to come unless she armoured herself against it. Of *course* he was teasing her. Her sisters said he was a tease. This was nothing but a game to him. Nothing but a game.

For the next two weeks it began to look as if Letitia's reading of events was accurate, the only communication from Lord Rayne being a formal note of thanks for an enjoyable evening, then a brief visit in person to return her mended spectacles. But since she was out with her pupils at the time, they did not meet. In a way, she was relieved to have missed him, for she had nothing to say except to offer him her thanks.

She was even more certain of her ground when, only two days later, she took her pupils to London to the Royal Academy Annual Exhibition at Somerset House where she found her sisters and mother in Lord Rayne's company. By chance, Miss Melborough was not one of the party, having twisted her ankle the day before and, in some discomfort, had been left to work on her watercolour until their return.

Letitia's sisters, as always, were glad to see her and to unload on her their latest experiences, shopping trips and parties, their mama's dinner party and the men who had caught their attention most. Lady Boyce greeted her eldest daughter more formally with a stand-off embrace and a showy kiss past each cheek that could hardly have been called motherly. After relating to Letitia what she had missed by not being at home, her remarks centred around the attention being shown to Garnet, especially by Lord Rayne. 'There'll be an announcement soon, Letitia,' she said, waving her

fan to friends Letitia could not quite identify. ‘Mark my words. I’m never wrong about these matters. I can always tell when a man is about to declare himself. Well, heaven knows, it happened to me often enough before your dear papa snared me. Lord Rayne is *very* keen, you know.’

‘Yes, Mama.’

‘So these are your *gels*, are they?’ she said, glancing round. ‘They look respectable enough. Isn’t that Sir Mortimer Derwent’s daughter?’

‘Maura. Yes. They live in Farnham. She boards with us.’

‘Your papa used to hunt with them. And there’s your Mr Waverley. Still faithful, is he? Who are the other two?’

‘That’s Mr Dimmock, our watercolour teacher, and Mr Ainsley, our drawing master. Rosie has stayed at home with one of the girls, but the lady over there in brown is Mrs Quayle, our next-door neighbour. Would you allow me to introduce her to you? She’d be so thrilled.’

‘Another time, dear. Nice to see you. Keeping well, are you?’

It was pointless for Letitia to reply when the orange turban had already turned towards other faces and, since that exchange appeared to be the sum total of her mother’s interest, she adjusted her spectacles and moved away to the walls lined with pictures.

Softly, Lord Rayne’s voice spoke into her ear. ‘You’re using them I see, Miss Boyce?’

She turned to face the dark serious eyes and immaculate form of the one man she had hoped not to see. ‘Yes, my lord. Thank

you for returning them to me. They're quite perfect. I cannot tell where the mend is.'

'Ayscough on Ludgate Street,' he said, gravely. 'My mother gets hers there. He recognised them.'

'He should. That is where they were bought. But please don't let me keep you from your obligation to my sisters. I had not expected to see them here, nor my mother. They don't usually show much interest in this kind of event.'

'I did not come with them, Miss Boyce. I came with Lord Alvanley and George Brummell. Over there...see? They're helping me to find something suitable for my study.'

'Oh...I thought...'

'Yes, I can see you did. I believe that's what you were meant to think.' His quick glance in Lady Boyce's direction qualified his remark. 'If I may offer you a word of advice, it would be not to—'

'No, please don't offer me any advice, my lord,' she said, quickly cutting him off. 'It's no concern of mine what my sisters do or don't do. All I wish for is their happiness, not to interfere in it. Have you seen a painting you like?'

He paused, obviously not content to be diverted. 'I've seen one prime article in particular I like the look of, Miss Boyce,' he said. 'I wish it was as easy to purchase as a painting.'

'For your study wall?'

'For my study, certainly. For my wall, no.'

'Good day, my lord,' she whispered, trying to hide her flushed cheeks behind the panel of her bonnet. 'I shall leave you to make

your choice.’

‘And you don’t wish to give me the benefit of *your* advice?’

‘I don’t wish to incur any more of my mother’s disapproval than I have already, my lord.’

‘By talking to *me*? Surely not.’

‘She would misunderstand, and so would my sisters. Need I say more than that?’

‘Usually you say too much, Miss Boyce, but on this occasion you have said too little. I thought you had become independent of Lady Boyce’s management.’

‘I have taken a very big step, my lord, but I have hopes that she will visit me, one day, not cut me out altogether. I am already well outside her plans.’

‘But not her influence, apparently. Time you were, then. So, if I am not allowed to advise you, I shall tell you this. Lady Boyce may be allowed to keep a finger in your pie, for the time being, but, by God, she won’t put a finger near mine unless she wants it snapped off. When I want a woman, I shall not be asking her permission.’

‘Not even when the woman is her daughter, my lord?’

‘Not the eldest one, no. Good day to you, Miss Boyce.’

Her cheeks were still very pink when Mr Dimmock joined her to discuss some of the paintings with her and found, to his dismay, that she had so far seen very few of them.

Chapter Six

Leaving William Lake's lending-library in Leadenhall Street, London, Lord Seton Rayne tossed a pile of books on to the seat of his curricule and climbed up beside them, having accomplished what he had promised to do for his mother, the Marchioness of Sheen, who had been unable to find extra copies for her friends anywhere. He was about to call to his tiger to loose the horses' heads when he noticed the tall hurrying figure of the Honourable Bart Waverley leap down the steps of the library and dash across to the other side of the street carrying a leather briefcase under his arm. This was singular, Rayne thought, because there had been no sign of Bart inside the library.

Watching the striding figure disappear round the corner, he then looked up at the windows above the library where the gold-printed words read, Mercury Press, Est. 1790. Publisher W. Lake, Esq. Did Bart know William Lake personally? Was there some business between them? Not being one to poke his nose into other people's affairs, Rayne let the matter rest beside a strange feeling that a connection was escaping him.

Later that afternoon, he made a detour through the winding corridors of Hampton Court Palace on his way from the barrack block and stables to his own apartments bordering the Outer Green Court, his home during weekdays. Pausing for a moment outside the dingy little room where he and Miss Letitia Boyce

had exchanged kisses—oh, yes, she had *exchanged* kisses, he was convinced of that—he smiled and closed the door, continuing his walk round to the gardens on the sunny south side of the palace’s grace-and-favour apartments.

Residents and their elderly guests strolled along the overgrown pathways and sat on benches in the shade, snoozing, reading, or watching the boats on the distant river. One erect resident, lace-draped, white-haired and bespectacled, held a book up high as if she were singing from it. She looked up as Rayne approached, lowering the book with a smile. ‘Lord Rayne,’ she said. ‘Finished for the day?’

‘I have indeed, Lady Waverley,’ he said with a bow. ‘And you?’

Her smile softened as she removed her eyeglasses. She was still a lovely woman, arched brows, cheekbones firmly covered. ‘No, not me,’ she said. ‘I have some way to go yet.’ She indicated the book and the pages yet to be read. ‘It’s the newest one Bart lent me. I’ve been so looking forward to it, you know. Of course, he must be allowed to read it first, dear boy. Come and sit with me a while.’ She drew in a heap of soft shawl and lace, moving up to make room for him.

Rayne sat, removed his helmet, and ran a hand through his hair.

‘Are you not supposed to powder your hair?’ she said, watching the gesture. ‘I thought the Prince’s Own had to wear powder and a pigtail.’

‘We do on parade, my lady. Makes too much mess for

everyday wear.’ He looked at the book on her lap. ‘Did you say Bart lent it to you? My lady mother is on Hatchett’s subscription list, but she wants extra copies to give to her friends. They’re very scarce. Where does Bart get his from?’

‘From Lake the publisher. He’s almost sold out of the first edition, apparently, but we’ve known him for years.’

‘Ah! That explains it.’

‘Explains what?’

‘Why I saw Bart leaving the Mercury Press this morning.’

‘Oh, did you? Well, he brought me this yesterday.’ She tapped the book. ‘It’s his own copy, given him by the author. Perhaps he was there on some business for her.’

‘He knows the *author*? So it *is* a woman, then?’

‘Oh, yes, he knows her well. He meets Lake on her behalf. A young lady cannot go there on her own, can she? Bart’s done all her business transactions with Lake from the very first book. He gets to read it, then he passes it on to me. Am I not fortunate? I doubt I could wait any longer.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Oh, I’ve pestered him for ages to hurry up and—’

‘No, I meant about the author being a young lady. Does she live in Richmond, near Bart?’

‘It may be that she does, but I’m not too familiar with who lives there, so I don’t really know, and he refuses to tell me any more except that she’s earning quite an income from these.’ Again, she tapped Volume One, leather-bound and gold-tooled. ‘Mind you,’

she continued, 'I have no doubt that Lake is doing very nicely out of it. He's unlikely to be offering her the kind of deal he'd offer a man, even if she is more popular.'

'But isn't that why the author has Bart to act for her?'

She smiled her indulgent, motherly smile. 'Of course. But you know what dear Bart's like, don't you? He was never the forceful kind, was he?'

'No, my lady.'

The sounds of the late afternoon passed them by with a shower of dandelion clocks, as they thought about Mr Waverley's many fine qualities, of which forcefulness was not one. 'Will he ever marry, do you think?' said Rayne, gently.

The shake of Lady Waverley's head would easily have been missed, had Rayne not been watching for it. 'No,' she whispered. 'Shouldn't think so, Seton. Marriage is not for Bart's kind, is it?'

'It's not unknown, my lady.'

'But it rarely works. Best to stay single. He's happy enough.'

'He'd make a wonderful father.'

Lady Waverley took that as the compliment it was meant to be, and said no more on the delicate subject. Rayne, however, returned to the young lady author. 'A Lady of Quality, I believe she calls herself,' he said, smoothing a hand over his helmet's glossy fur. 'So I suppose I must not ask if you know the identity of this mysterious wealthy young woman.'

'Only Bart himself knows that, and he'd not *dream* of breaking a confidence, not even to his mother. Mr Lake knows her only as

a certain Miss Lydia Barlowe, but that *must* be a nom de plume. No lady of quality ever had such a common name.'

Rayne bellowed with laughter. 'Lady Waverley, I do believe you're a snob,' he teased.

She agreed, smiling at the notion. 'Yes, dear, I believe I am. It's one of the few allowances left to a woman of my age. That, and being able to sit and talk to a man like you, alone, without being suspected of flirting.'

'And if I were not so afraid of being called out by your son, I would indulge in some serious flirting with you, my lady.'

The smiling face tipped towards him. 'Does Bart go in for... for calling men out?'

'Duelling? Not by choice, I don't suppose. But if you're asking if he's well enough equipped to protect himself, then, yes, he certainly is. He could do some damage with pistol, rapier *and* gloves, too. And the young lady writer, whoever she is, has chosen an excellent business partner, with Bart's head for accounts.'

'It's pity he won't be offering for her. Even if she is a commoner.'

Rayne smiled, which Lady Waverley took for sympathy, but which was, in fact, nothing of the sort. Lydia Barlowe. *L.B.* How careless of her, he thought. How endearingly, wonderfully careless.

Letitia's proposal to visit Strawberry Hill House at Twickenham, just across the river from Richmond, had an

ulterior motive that no one but Mr Waverley could be expected to guess, for it was where Mr Horace Walpole had written, in 1764, his famous Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*. Others, including Letitia, were to follow this trend, literally, while readers made pilgrimages to the amazing house-cum-castle he had built to satisfy his every Gothic whim. No serious romantic novelist could afford to miss such a place with its towers and turrets, chapel, cloisters and chambers littered with historic curios.

The great man himself, son of a Prime Minister, had died seventeen years ago and now it was possible for visitors to look round by arrangement with the housekeeper, a favour that Letitia had gone to some trouble to secure for her party of pupils, tutors and chaperons. She was not inclined to hurry through the rooms, having made it so far with notebook and pencil, sketching and scribbling as they were shown into the long gallery, the library, past carved screens, mock-tombs and suits of medieval armour, gloomy portraits and up winding spooky staircases.

Miss Sapphire Melborough, however, having other things on her mind, had soon seen enough of Strawberry Hill and was incautious enough to enquire of Mrs Quayle, in an undertone bordering on despair, how much longer they might be stuck here. She had asked the wrong person, for Mrs Quayle was thoroughly enjoying herself despite the appropriate melancholic expression. She passed on the plaintive query to Letitia, which Sapphire had neither wanted nor expected her to do.

‘Why? Who wants to know?’ said Letitia.

‘Miss Sapphire. She’s had enough.’

‘If it’s her ankle, she can rest on the bench over there and wait.’

‘I don’t think it’s her ankle, Letitia.’

Beckoning to her pupil, Letitia noted the pouting rosebud mouth. ‘What is it, Sapphire? We’re only halfway round. There’s much more to see.’

‘But I...well, you see...’ Pulling in her bottom lip, she nibbled at it.

‘See what? Are you unwell? Do you wish Mrs Quayle to...?’

‘No, Miss Boyce, only that I expected to be home by now because Lord Rayne is to bring my new horse and give me my first lesson on it. I’m afraid I shall miss it if I stay here much longer.’

‘Sapphire, I made it clear three days ago that on Friday we’d be having an extended visit. If you forgot to tell your parents, that is your responsibility. My claim on your time takes priority, I’m afraid, and when we’ve concluded our visit here, we shall be taking tea at the tea gardens in Twickenham. I told you that, too, if you recall. You’ll have to have your riding lesson tomorrow instead, won’t you?’

Sapphire could not stifle the sigh. ‘Yes, Miss Boyce. But Lord Rayne will not be pleased to be kept waiting.’

‘Lord Rayne’s displeasure is not my concern, Sapphire. You’ll be writing an account in your journal of this visit next week, so I suggest you pay attention to what you’re seeing.’ *Or not seeing. As if I care a fig about Lord Rayne’s arrangements.*

The cream tea at Church Street's sunny tea garden could not be hurried any more than the tour of the house, so it was past time for dinner when the carriages arrived back at Paradise Road after taking the day girls home. Letitia did not go up to Richmond Hill House with Sapphire, having no wish to hear about the missed riding lesson.

There was much to be written about by candlelight that evening.

The following day, Saturday, was bright but blustery, a stiff breeze rattling the window frames and rolling the last of the blossom across the walled kitchen garden like drifts of snow. Wandering alone, Letitia peered into the glass frames while the covers were up, at the strawberry beds white with flowers, at the budding cucumbers, the tiny spears of chicory and lamb's lettuce. In the furthest corner, the gardener's son was shovelling gravel on to the path and raking it over. Like coarse oatmeal, Letitia thought, adjusting her spectacles more firmly on to her nose. Fine wisps of hair whirled around her face as gusts of wind moulded her cotton day dress into the contours of her body and, to find a place of shelter, she opened the door of the stone-built potting shed built against the high wall, and entered.

She was instantly enclosed by the earthy aroma of potted plants and trays of seedlings covered by layers of damp newsprint. Racks of tools hung along one side, with buckets and pots, hoses and string, raffia and bell jars. A long low bench was covered with sacking as if the old gardener had used it to indulge

in an occasional nap, and a pile of sacks at one end suggested a pillow. Intrigued, she bent to look more closely, to confirm her theory.

A long curling hair lay upon the pillow, clearly not the gardener's. Lifting it carefully away, she held it up to the high dusty window where a beam of light caught its shining gold. A sound behind her made her turn sharply and to frown in annoyance at the hefty figure of the gardener's son filling the doorway. One hand was hooked over the top edge of the door. 'Can I 'elp you, ma'am?' he asked.

His question, and the quiet way he asked it, made her feel as if she'd naughtily strayed out of bounds. Nor did she like being trapped in so small a place. 'No, thank you...er...Tom, is it?'

'Ted,' he replied, not moving or looking politely away, as if he knew of her discomfort and was enjoying it. No more than twenty years old, he had already filled out with brawn, his shirt sleeves rolled up to show well-muscled sunburnt forearms, his front buttons opened too far down for any lady's eyes to dwell there for more than a second. 'Can I do anything for ye?' he asked.

Damsels being pursued and seduced by young males glowing with rude health was the stuff of her novels, and this the kind of situation not too far removed from some of the scenes in them, though so far no major part had been taken by the gardener or his son. Then, she had imagined a kind of helpless excitement rather than the raw anger she now felt at the threat of trespass

by an uncouth lad. The girls and Mrs Quayle were in Richmond, shopping. Gaddy was still in her room. The gardener, Ted's old father, was nowhere to be seen. This present danger was very far removed from the harmless entertainment of fiction where one could turn a page and return to safety.

Still frowning, she asked, 'Have you finished the path?'

'Yes, ma'am. All done.' His glance at the sack-covered bench lingered and returned to her, but not to her face, and she knew how he must have seen the clinging cotton of her dress revealing her figure as she bent to the glass frames.

'Then I'll find you another task to do,' she said, suspecting that he would twist whatever she said to mean something different. 'Where's your father?'

'Oh, we don't need to bother about him, ma'am. He'll not be in for a while yet. Got a task for me, 'ave you? Is that what you want, eh?' He spoke slowly, insolently, his words taking on an intimacy far beyond their worth, his pleasant features as relaxed as his body, his blue eyes alight with anticipation.

'Ted, will you move away from the door, please? I want to go out.'

But he took his hand from the top edge, stepped further inside and began to close it, darkening the confined space. 'No, you don't,' he said. 'I know what you want. It's what all you young lasses want.'

Letitia's hand groped behind her, closing over the rim of a terracotta pot. In the very moment she brought it up to hurl

at Ted's approaching head, the door re-opened with a crashing force, slamming it into the lad's rear end as he ducked to avoid the missile.

Like an angry bullock, he roared and turned to rush upon the intruder, but his progress was interrupted by a shining Hessian boot across his shins that sent him flying headlong into a stack of logs outside the door. The pot that Letitia had thrown shattered upon the door frame, and as she picked her way through the shards to find out who her rescuer was—supposing it to be Mr Waverley—she was in time to see the stocky Ted about to launch himself upon Lord Rayne.

Assuming that his lordship would certainly go down like a skittle, she let out an involuntary yelp of fright for, though she had once written of a brawl between two rivals, she had never seen a blow landed. She did now, but only just, delivered with such lightning speed that Ted did not see it coming at all. She heard a sickening crack as Rayne's fist connected with the cheek, and the grunt that followed, the thud as Ted fell back hard into the log pile where he slithered and stayed, swaying to one side.

'Get up!' Rayne snapped, standing over him.

Ted struggled and clawed his way up, holding an arm out against the possibility of a second punisher. 'Don't,' he mumbled.

'Get off home!'

'Yessir...I wasn't...I didn't....honest.'

'Out!'

Slouching, clutching at his face, Ted staggered away with a

sullen glance at Letitia. ‘She wanted it,’ he muttered, ‘as much as t’other one.’

This insult was not allowed to pass any more than his first had been and, before he had taken another step, he was yanked backwards by a strong hand beneath his arm, only to be knocked sideways by a fearsome blow beneath his jaw, laying him out into a patch of feathery fennel. This time, he did not move.

‘Oh, you’ve killed him,’ Letitia whispered behind her hand.

‘If he opens his mouth once more, I will,’ Rayne said, looking round for a water-butt. Taking up the full bucket of water from beneath the tap, he swung it back and discharged the contents over the prone body. Then, placing the empty bucket upon Ted’s chest, he stepped back, removed Letitia’s hand from her mouth and drew her like a parent with a child along the path to the door in the wall that led to the house garden.

Closing the door upon the last ugly scene, he released her. ‘I’m sorry you had to see that,’ he said, ‘but unfortunately there was no choice. Are you all right?’

She nodded. ‘Yes. Thank you for being there. I’m very much obliged to you. If I’d known he...oh, dear...it must begin to look as if I’m forever getting myself into...well, the truth is that...’

‘The truth is, Miss Boyce, that you *do* seem to attract a rather immediate kind of response; while I can understand *why* it happens, I find it more difficult to understand why you *allow* it to happen. One could, I suppose, attribute it to not being able to see clearly, but surely that cannot always be the case.’

‘Lord Rayne,’ she snapped, coming to an abrupt standstill on the path, ‘I do not *allow* any of these...these *incidents* to happen to me. Do you really believe that...oh...this is *too* much! Why should I care a fiddler’s thumb what you believe? I have thanked you for dealing with this latest incident but, if you recall, you yourself behaved just as badly, if not worse, because Mr Waverley did not arrive in time to stop you.’

‘Miss Boyce, Bart would not have arrived to find what I might have found just now if I’d been five minutes later. It’s fortunate that I saw him following you as I entered the garden, but my point is that you need some protection before something truly serious happens to you. Bart is all very well, but he’s not here when he’s needed, is he? Nor does he have any obligation to be.’

‘Why should a woman need protecting in her own garden, my lord?’

‘Why? Because you appear to employ untrustworthy servants. That’s why.’

‘I don’t employ him. He’s the gardener’s *son*, helping out.’

‘Helping himself, more like. How many others has he helped out?’

Immediately, she remembered the long curling blonde hair that could have belonged to at least three of her seven pupils, or one of the maids. Surely that young lout had not forced himself upon one of them there, in the potting shed? There was a path that connected her garden with Mrs Quayle’s next door along which the three boarders came to lessons each day. But could

they also have used it at night to meet that dreadful man? It was unthinkable. They were all highly respectable young women. Like herself. Like the young heroines in her novels. Highly respectable, but eager for adventure, and very vulnerable. Were these young creatures simply more audacious than her, or more foolhardy?

‘I don’t know,’ she said, ‘but I intend to find out. If this incident has served no other purpose, my lord, it’s certainly alerted me to the danger of—’

‘Of not being protected sufficiently and of not being able to see what you’re doing half the time. There’s an easy remedy for both those problems, Miss Boyce.’

‘That’s *not* what I was about to say. You are determined to put me in the wrong. Very well, allow me to turn the tables, for once. In future, kindly refrain from organising my pupils’ riding lessons while they’re still in my care. I have first call on their time and I shall not be releasing any of them before the hour of five, unless there’s a very exceptional reason.’

‘So you think I’m free before the hour of five, do you?’

‘You were yesterday, according to Miss Melborough.’

‘Then she was mistaken. I told her father I would bring the new horse over after dinner, which is exactly what I did. I spent an hour or so with them in the paddock while it was still light. Are you jealous, Miss Boyce?’

‘Of what, exactly?’

‘Of me spending time with the Melborough wench?’

‘Oh *do* rid yourself of that addle-pated notion, Lord Rayne. Spend whatever time you wish with whomever you wish, my sisters included, but don’t expect me to tailor my time to fit yours.’

‘Why not? You’re prepared to accept all the advantages and compliments of having your pupils well mounted and taught by the best riding master while refusing to co-operate in any way. In fact, Miss Boyce, you appear to be hellbent on making it difficult for everyone concerned.’

Letitia was silent. He spoke no more than the truth, placing her yet again at a disadvantage. Fortunately, he did not pursue the matter while there were more side-saddle-trained horses to be acquired for the others. Enough time for her to revise her timetable, if she could swallow her pride.

They stopped just in front of the summerhouse as if by mutual consent, in view of what had happened earlier. So far, her anger had overcome other emotions, but now she felt again the sickly fear as the little shed had darkened and the man’s swaggering presumption told her that she would not be able to hold him off. Was it mere coincidence that she had been made a target three times since placing herself beyond the protection of her family and friends? Had she been less than careful? In London, Uncle Aspinall had taken the place of her father, but now he, too, was miles away, and the only man to offer her his protection, as opposed to being recruited like Mr Waverley, was one of those who had treated her discourteously. And yet, just a moment ago,

he had knocked a man down for less.

Rayne was waiting for a sign from her but, having no particular direction in mind, she took his left hand in hers and turned it to look at the knuckles that she was sure would hurt. A grey-blue bruise was already forming.

‘I usually wear gloves,’ he said. ‘It’s nothing.’

Removing her spectacles, she looked more closely. Tears prickled behind her eyelids as she was reminded of her narrow escape and, although she would not submit to pathetic weeping, she was unable to hide the delayed reaction that trembled her hands. Ted had not touched her except with his menace, which had been far worse than the thorough kisses Lord Rayne had given her.

Her shaky breathing was noticed as she struggled to control herself. His hand took possession of hers, with her spectacles, drawing her over the threshold into the shady summerhouse. ‘Shh!’ he said. ‘It’s all right. No harm done. You must tell your gardener that his son is not welcome. There’s no shortage of labour. My brother’s man will find someone for you, if you wish.’

‘I’b dot crying, really I’b dot,’ she sniffed.

‘No, of course not.’

Even so, when he drew her very gently into his arms and held her like a bird against his chest, she stood quietly to absorb the safety and strength of his embrace. ‘Why did you cub?’ she whispered.

‘To take you for a drive in my curricle.’

‘But that would give the impression that we’re good friends, by lord. And we’re not, are we?’

‘By no stretch of the imagination are we good friends, Miss Boyce.’

‘It would not look good.’

‘On the contrary, it would send out quite the wrong kind of message. Unless...’

‘Unless what?’

‘Unless I were to be seen taking you to my sister’s house at Mortlake. A social call. That might just disguise any enjoyment we might be tempted to feel.’

She drew herself out of his arms. ‘I should not be allowing this,’ she said, wiping her nose in an unladylike gesture on the back of her hand.

‘Because you may find that you’re enjoying it?’

‘Because I must set an example to my pupils. If they were to see...well, anyway...it won’t do, will it? Young ladies of good birth—’

‘Like yourself.’

‘—like me, do not allow Corinthians to—’

‘Thank you.’

‘—to embrace them—’

‘As they do in novels.’

‘Lord Rayne, would you stop interrupting me for one moment while I try to finish what I’m saying? Please?’

‘Certainly, Miss Boyce. What were you saying?’

‘I don’t know. I can’t remember. You’ve put me off.’

‘Then go and get changed, and we’ll drive up to Mortlake.’

Predictably, she balked at his tone. ‘Do all your female acquaintances promptly do your bidding, my lord?’

‘Yes. All except one. Five minutes?’

‘Multiplied by three. Shall you wait in the parlour?’

‘I shall wait beside my curricle, if it’s still there.’

‘Well, then, try not to look like the cat that’s swallowed the canary, if you please. We cannot have anyone getting ideas.’

‘Put these back on,’ he said, holding out her spectacles, ‘and you’ll see that I’m wearing my deepest scowl of discontent.’

‘Thank you,’ she snapped, putting them on as they entered the house. ‘I don’t quite understand why I’m agreeing to this. We have nothing pleasant to say to each other.’

Not in the least put out by her cynicism, he held the door open for her. ‘Then we shall have to resort to our usual mode of bickering like terriers. See you outside in ten minutes.’

‘Fifteen. Not a moment sooner.’

Ten minutes later she tripped down the front steps wearing a cream-muslin day dress under a spencer of apricot kerseymere and a floppy straw hat tied round the crown and under the chin with a long apricot scarf. Peeping from beneath the banded hem of her dress, a pair of apricot kid half-boots completed the captivating picture.

‘Where are your spectacles, woman?’ he said, curtly.

‘In my reticule.’

‘Well, you’re not going to see much without them. Put them on.’

‘I cannot. They ruin the effect.’

‘Miss Boyce, you may take my word for it that the wearing of spectacles out of doors will become all the rage, once you are seen wearing them while being driven in my curricle. Now, put them on, if you please.’

Reluctantly, she fished them out of her cream silk reticule but, because she was wearing kid gloves, they swung upsidedown before she could catch them. Taking them from her, he held them open at eye-level. ‘Hold your head up...there...that’s better. Now I can see you,’ he said with a smile, adjusting a wisp of hair beside her cheek.

‘You’ve obviously had some experience as a lady’s maid,’ she said, blushing at this very public intimacy.

‘It would be useless to deny it. One must be versatile, these days.’

Climbing up into the confined space of the curricle, she bit back yet another rejoinder, realising that she would not always be allowed to have the last word with this man, as she did with her pupils, and that to allow him to have it, once in a while, was by no means as unpleasant as she had thought. Quite the opposite. Absorbed in Rayne’s dexterity with whip and reins, with the classy paintwork and upholstery of the curricle and the prancing matched bays, she said very little, experiencing for the second time that morning the strange sensation that things were

happening outside her carefully laid plans.

But the last thing she wanted was for her name to be romantically linked to his when it could cause nothing but problems and eventual heartache. Could she depend on his discretion when, only the other day, he had made his intentions plain? Would his daring sister jump to her own conclusions about their unsettled relationship? Would he encourage her to?

As it turned out, Lady Dorna's reaction to her brother's newest interest was to be the least of her concerns, for they were seen during that brief journey by at least five acquaintances of Letitia's sisters and mother, who would be eager to take the news back to London that same day. Known to be extremely fastidious in his choice of companions, Lord Rayne had never before been seen taking up a bespectacled female in his curricula.

Letitia was more disturbed by this unforeseen complication than Rayne, who brushed it off airily as being no one's concern but theirs. Forbearing to labour the point that she could ill afford to upset her mother more than she had done already, she said no more about it while imagining the indignation at Chesterfield House later that day.

Both the drive and the visit to River Court went well, Letitia making more effort than usual to respond to Rayne's charming company if only to show her appreciation of his earlier gallantry. It was unfortunate, she thought, that the problem of her mother's forthcoming exasperation could not be dealt with as promptly as Ted's.

As ever, Lady Dorna was delighted to see them together, and their return to Richmond began with some amusement at her assumption of a close friendship. ‘Nonsense!’ said Letitia as the curricule swung at full tilt out of the gates. ‘One single drive doesn’t mean anything at all.’

‘Of course not. Quite meaningless.’

‘I hope she doesn’t think—’

‘No fear of that, believe me, or she’d not have married Elwick, God rest his soul.’

‘Was he a dear man?’

‘Dear?’ he said, easing the horses round onto the road with a turn of his fist. ‘Hardly. As dull as ditchwater. She didn’t need his title. Didn’t need his wealth, either. Can’t think what she needed him for, come to think of it.’

‘She has two beautiful children.’

He glanced at her, hearing a wistful note creep into her voice. ‘So could you, Miss Boyce,’ he said, quietly. ‘Quite easily.’

So quietly did he say it that she could hardly believe her ears, though she blushed to the roots of her hair.

She would have preferred it if he had allowed her to go into the house alone, but he seemed intent on escorting her into the hall as if he’d known she might need some support. With a glance towards the hall table and its array of top hats, gloves and canes, the footman gave her the news she would rather not have heard. ‘Sir Penfold and Lady Aspinall are waiting in the drawing room, ma’am. And Lieutenant Gaddestone and Miss Gaddestone are

with them.'

'Then they'll be staying for lunch. Tell cook, will you?'

'I believe cook already knows, ma'am.'

'Good. Lord Rayne, will you stay, too?' She did not think he would.

His reply was unhesitating. 'Thank you, Miss Boyce. I will.'

'Are you sure?' she whispered, darting a look towards the door.

'Quite sure.'

'Then we shall be ten,' she told the footman, 'counting the three boarders and Mrs Quayle.' Removing her spectacles, she tucked them into her reticule, passed her hat and gloves to her maid, and went into the drawing room to meet her guests. With Lord Rayne close behind her, she found she could brave Aunt Minnie's hostile glare with more tranquillity than if she had been on her own.

Chapter Seven

Having met often at Tattersalls, White's Club and at Jackson's Boxing Saloon, as well as at Chesterfield House, Sir Penfold Aspinall and Lord Rayne greeted each other warmly. Letitia received the impression that Uncle Aspinall liked him, though Aunt Minnie could only favour him with a vinegary smile meant to show her disapproval of his appearance here at Paradise Road.

It is doubtful whether Rayne even noticed, being more interested in the appearance of another of Letitia's cousins, Miss Gaddestone's younger brother Lieutenant Fingal Gaddestone, who had been away at sea for almost three years. Rosie Gaddestone's girlish face shone with happiness, her arm linked through his as if to anchor him to her while his other hand held Letitia's. The two cousins had once been close, each of an independent spirit that recognised the need to break the family mould, which both of them had done successfully, but not without some anguish. Old Lady Gaddestone, Lady Boyce's sister, had died while he was away, some said of a broken heart, and Rosie had gone to live with her cousin Letitia rather than stay alone in London.

Disengaging her hand from his, Letitia could see the kind of changes that affected so many naval men: bronzed skin, lines around the eyes and mouth, a lean fitness and a newly assured manner that she assumed he had acquired as an officer. He was

now a handsome young man with sun-bleached hair, a friendly smile and a teasing manner that made Letitia change the subject hurriedly and turn to her other guest. ‘Lord Rayne, will you allow me to introduce my cousin Fin to you?’

‘Certainly,’ he said, stepping forward with a slight bow.

Both men drew themselves up smartly, pulling back their shoulders as if an extra half-inch could make all the difference.

‘My lord,’ said Lieutenant Gaddestone.

‘Where are you lodging, sir?’

‘Temporarily with my uncle and aunt in London until I can find a suitable place of my own. Then I shall settle down and live a normal life. Did you serve, too, my lord?’

‘Briefly, in Spain. Cavalry. A few years of that was enough.’

‘So now you’re a man of leisure?’

‘Not exactly. I train cavalry recruits at Hampton Court Palace. You must come and see, one day. My elder brother is responsible for the Royal Stud there. We shall need every available horse once the celebrations begin next month. It’s going to be a busy time.’

Aunt Minnie could not resist asking, with a certain acid relish, ‘And will you be escorting Miss Boyce, or her two younger sisters, my lord?’

Blandly, Lord Rayne studied her as if trying to make up his mind, then said, ‘Lady Aspinall, as soon as I’ve made a final decision on that, you will be the first to be told of it. There, how will that do?’

Minnie Aspinall was not so stupid that she could not tell when she'd been snubbed for impertinence and, although Letitia thought she deserved it, she herself quaked at the damage it was doing.

The tension was broken by the arrival of Mrs Quayle and her three charges, and the meal progressed peacefully, the conversation to-ing and fro-ing with ease, neatly bypassing Aunt Minnie's simmering disapproval of her niece's friendship with Lord Rayne, her glowering silence being wasted on the company who had so much to say to each other. Letitia knew only too well that the news would be taken back, post-haste, to Lady Boyce and her twin daughters with predictable results.

However, Aunt Minnie refused to relinquish her role as critic and, as soon as she was able, reminded Rayne that Letitia's *dear* sisters had obtained vouchers for Almack's that same evening and were hoping to see him there. But to her great annoyance, he refused to pass on any message to her nieces except an enigmatic smile. She tried again on a different tack. 'Young Lieutenant Gaddestone and Letitia have *always* had a *tendre* for each other since they were children. He seems particularly interested in her now, doesn't he, my lord?'

'I suppose it's to be expected, Lady Aspinall. They must have plenty of news to exchange after an absence of three years,' he said.

She did not give up. 'Indeed, yes. He's done *terribly* well for himself, you know. Went out to the Americas with pockets to let

and came back with a considerable share of prize money. Yes, he'll be a good catch for some fortunate young lady before too long. Of course, the army don't go in for prize money, do they?'

'No, my lady. They don't.' Cultivated through generations of blue blood, the patronising smile in his voice and the quirk of one eyebrow was quite enough to remind her that her observation had backfired. Cavalry officers, drawn mostly from the wealthy aristocracy, could afford to fight for the sake of adventure and glory rather than for the pay, which was not good. Their colours, kit and horses usually cost a fortune, and few officers emerged wealthier than they were already. After that, Aunt Minnie confined herself to observing the two cousins and making plans for their future.

That evening, while her sisters were at Almack's, Letitia spent several hours writing her notes into her journal and continuing her story about the young Perdita who, by coincidence, was experiencing similar emotions and conflicts to herself.

She took her leave of him, allowing her hand to rest in his a moment longer than was appropriate for one who had only that day insisted they could never be good friends. To humour her, he had cheerily agreed, but the look in his eyes told a different story, and the pressure of his fingers was like a caress around her heart, adding to the slow thaw that had begun with his first disturbing kiss. He would never know what that had done to her. He would not understand how a maid could be melted, insidiously, by a gentle embrace offered that day out of compassion. What

was an untutored girl to understand by this, except that he saw her as some trophy to be won? Was it too late for her to refuse him her heart? Had he already claimed it? ‘Good day, my lord,’ she said. ‘Thank you for...’

‘For what?’

‘For the drive. For staying. For being here.’

He nodded, smiling with wicked brown eyes. ‘Progress, Miss Perdita? Are we making some progress at last?’

She watched his two giant strides take him to his high curricule, revealing the length of his steely thighs and calves. Responding like quicksilver to his commanding hands, his team leapt away, leaving Perdita to watch him disappear into the blue autumn haze, already counting the hours before she would see him again.

Lord Rayne, on the other hand, had said nothing about progress to the author, nor had *his* wicked brown eyes smiled as he took his leave of her after luncheon. He had looked sternly at her instead. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘don’t be going on any drives with your cousin, will you? Naval officers don’t have much practice with horses, and you two together would be a liability.’

‘Thank you for your advice, Lord Rayne. Your concern is touching.’

‘My concern is mainly for the horses. Good day, Miss Boyce.’
When shall I see you again?

Halfway across the pavement, he stopped and turned as if he had heard her. ‘Tomorrow. At church. You’ll be there?’

‘Yes.’ She nodded, startled by his reading of her mind.

His acknowledgement was curt to the point of incivility, his two strides to the curricle seat taken without another glance.

Her intention to be at church next morning, however, was upset by an incident that shocked the adults involved in the smooth running of Miss Boyce's select seminary.

Letitia and Miss Gaddestone were preparing to leave the house, waiting for Mrs Quayle and the three girls to join them, when the three arrived with serious faces, without their chaperon.

'Is she coming?' said Letitia, drawing on her gloves.

'Yes,' said Edina. 'She asks that you wait for her while we go on ahead. Shall we go?'

'Yes. We'll catch you up. Go with Miss Gaddestone.'

Once they were out of the way, Mrs Quayle entered the house through the back door, leading an unkempt Sapphire Melborough, who ought to have been at church in her parents' pew. Sapphire was sullen and indignant, her pouting mouth reddened as if she'd been eating strawberries. Her long fair hair, which should have been braided, hung down on to one muslin-covered shoulder, the fabric of which was loosened by the undone row of hooks and eyes down the back of her bodice. One hand held the front of her dress in place while the other carried her pink bonnet and reticule, and her prayer book.

If Letitia was lost for words, Mrs Quayle was not. 'I think,' she said in her severest tone, 'that this young lady has some explaining to do. First, she may like to tell us why she prefers to spend her Sunday morning in the potting shed rather than at

church with her parents.’

Guessing the answer to that, Letitia started from a more obtuse angle. ‘Where do your parents think you are, Sapphire?’ she said.

‘At church or at home, Miss Boyce,’ the young woman whispered. ‘They’re away visiting for the day, but I pleaded to stay behind.’

‘So you could come down to Paradise Road while we were at church?’

‘Yes.’ The blue eyes had lost their merry twinkle, taking on a heavy-lidded tiredness, guarded against probing personal questions.

‘To meet the gardener’s son?’

‘How...how did you...?’

‘Tell me! Never mind how I know.’

‘Yes.’

Bristling with indignation, Mrs Quayle felt obliged to add details she knew Sapphire would not willingly have offered. ‘The great hulking lout ran off, buckling his belt up, leaving this young madam—’ she cast a jaundiced look at Sapphire’s dishevelled state ‘—to pull herself together as best she may. Down on the bench they were, when I found them, rolling about like a couple of pups, and him with a black eye as big as a cabbage.’

‘Yes, thank you, Mrs Quayle. Sapphire, come here and sit down. Did you walk down Richmond Hill on your own? Without a maid?’

‘Charity came with me, ma’am, to keep watch.’

‘To keep *watch*? For pity’s sake, what has it come to? Where is She now? Still out there?’

‘I don’t know, ma’am.’

‘Sapphire, how long has this been going on?’ Before the girl could develop her fib, it was snapped off in a sudden burst of anger. ‘Don’t *lie* to me, young lady. The truth, if you please. How long?’

‘Not long, Miss Boyce. Since I first hurt my ankle.’

Letitia closed her eyes, seeing the occasion in one quick blink. They had left Sapphire behind in Miss Gaddestone’s care to finish off her watercolour in the summerhouse while the rest of them went to the Royal Academy. Gaddy would have dozed off. The gardener’s son would have beckoned, offering Sapphire an irresistible alternative. She was not a girl to refuse that kind of adventure, as she herself had done. She would have pushed aside any reservations and taken whatever experience was waiting for her, and she would emerge at the tender age of seventeen knowing far more about a man than Letitia knew at twenty-four, a novelist who wrote about such relationships as if she knew what she was talking about. Sapphire’s behaviour could not be excused or condoned, but neither could she be condemned out of hand for wanting to know exactly what would be expected of her in marriage, before committing herself to it.

‘With the *gardener’s* son, Sapphire? Is that the best you could do? Could you not have waited for marriage?’

Sapphire hung her head as if in shame, but there was no trace of shame when she lifted it again to look Letitia full in the face. ‘I could, Miss Boyce,’ she said through swollen lips, ‘but Ted’s not like the men my parents approve of. He’ll keep it to himself, not prattle and boast as others do, swapping details, comparing, laughing about it, giving one a reputation and a silly nickname to match. I wanted to find out what I need to know without everyone hearing about it. He’s had lots of girls. He knows what he’s doing. Not like some of them. And now I know what it’s like. It was *not* what Mrs Quayle says, rolling about like pups. It was good, or I’d not have returned.’

‘Have you no shame, Miss Melborough?’ Mrs Quayle snapped.

Sapphire did not look her way. ‘My body is my own to do with as I please. Yes, I know about bloodlines and all that, but experience with men has not stopped some women from making good marriages, and it won’t stop me. The difference is that I shall be going into it with my eyes open. As men do.’

‘And have you given any thought to the consequences, young lady?’ said Mrs Quayle, unconvinced by the argument. ‘Do you *want* to bear the gardener’s brat? Will your own father recognise it, if you do?’

‘There won’t *be* any consequences of the kind you mean.’

‘How can you be sure, Sapphire?’ said Letitia. ‘You run a very serious risk.’

‘My father tells me one must be prepared to take risks in life.’

‘I don’t doubt he did, but I don’t suppose he had this kind of

thing in mind when he said it. Turn round and let me fasten you up.’

As Letitia might have expected, Sapphire’s back was covered by tiny pink scratches that rough sacking would make upon delicate skin. But she was not prepared for the pale grey-blue rows of fingertip marks on the upper arms, shoulders and back as if some violence had been used. Finishing the fastenings, she turned Sapphire to face her. ‘Tell me the truth, if you please. Did the gardener’s son force himself on you?’

The blue eyes opened wider, astonished and innocent, and Letitia knew she did not lie. ‘No, he didn’t, Miss Boyce. Ted’s not like that. I know it might be best for me to say that he did, but that wouldn’t explain why I came down here on a Sunday morning when I told the housekeeper and Mama I’d be going to church, would it? I’d have gone straight there, not to your potting shed. I won’t get Ted into any more trouble than he is already. Someone’s already beaten him up.’

It would have been so easy for Letitia to tell her, but she held her tongue. This was not the time. ‘Do you love him, then?’ she said.

‘No, Miss Boyce, of course I don’t. It’s not love we were after.’
‘What *was* it, then?’ said Mrs Quayle, sharply.

Letitia thought the question unnecessary, quelling Mrs Quayle’s curiosity with a frown. ‘My concern,’ she said, ‘is for your personal safety, which has been put at risk. And what on earth am I to tell your parents, when you choose to use *my*

property to misbehave on while you were not supposed to *be* here? I shall have to insist that they find another seminary for you, Sapphire. Just when it was all going so well.'

'Do you have to tell them?'

Letitia recognised the plea for privacy, and there was a moment of hesitation before she replied, 'Yes, they must know. Certainly they must. They are responsible for you still, and I cannot pretend not to know what's been happening. That would make me as irresponsible as you. You must see that. I can only be thankful that it's been stopped before it gets any worse, though it will be bad enough if that young man has fathered a child on you. I pray it has not happened.'

'He must be got rid of *immediately*,' said Mrs Quayle.

'He will be. I should have done it sooner.'

'Why?'

'Well...er...because it's his father who's employed here, not Ted. He only helps out when he's needed.' She recalled Rayne's caustic and rather indelicate words about who else Ted had 'helped out'. 'Has he been associating with any of the other girls, Sapphire?'

'No, Miss Boyce.'

'Are you quite sure?'

'Yes, ma'am. Quite sure.'

Letitia sighed with relief. 'Stand up. I'll tidy your hair before I take you home. Turn round.'

'I'd rather stay here with you, ma'am, if I may. My parents

won't be home until this evening.'

'Very well, but you must stay upstairs out of the way. I'll have your lunch sent up on a—' Her words were cut off by the insistent clang of the front doorbell, followed quickly by a loud commanding voice. 'Oh, no! That's Mama!' she whispered to Mrs Quayle. 'Quick! Take Sapphire upstairs.'

But it was too late to take Miss Melborough anywhere before the footman opened the door, his announcement obliterated by the loud greeting of Lady Boyce who had come on a mission of some urgency. '*Letitia!*' she bawled, then stopped abruptly to take in the unusual scene of her eldest daughter dressing the hair of a dishevelled young beauty, while her plump brown neighbour looked on with alarm written clearly on her face. With eyes sharpened by years of training, Lady Boyce saw that something was seriously amiss—a minor tragedy that demanded her personal investigation.

The hour that followed was one of the most difficult Letitia ever had to endure while defending Sapphire Melborough against Lady Boyce's embarrassing inquisition, far worse than Mrs Quayle's barbed enquiries. After ignoring repeated invitations to visit Paradise Road, she had chosen that Sunday morning to descend upon her daughter at last, not with smiles of appreciation, but solely to find out more about the relationship with the man she had earmarked for one of her younger daughters. Hoping to arrive before Letitia's return from church, she had intended to do at least half an hour of snooping. She

did not enjoy having her plans dislodged, but she *did* enjoy demanding answers to searching questions, regardless of the fact that Miss Melborough's plight was no concern of hers. This kind of detail had never stopped her in the past, and nor did it now.

Usually able to hold her own in an argument, Letitia was this time no match for her mother, particularly on an issue that needed handling with great sensitivity. No amount of protectiveness towards Sapphire would do: that was seen as being on the side of the sinner. And as for Letitia's ideas of a seminary, it had already sunk to a level of vulgarity made worse by the noisy and untimely appearance of Charity, the young lady's maid who, more to save her skin than for any finer feeling, blurted out before anyone could stop her, her own innocent part in the role she had been told to play that morning. With additions.

Letitia's prayer for another unscheduled appearance in the form of Lord Rayne had no effect. If anyone could have dealt with Letitia's mother, he could. But he did not appear and, after Sapphire's eventual tearful departure to Letitia's bedroom, Lady Boyce needed no more convincing that she was right about the seminary being a grave mistake, already being regretted. Having made her opinions clear about the scandal of Melborough's daughter, she was not inclined to take luncheon with her niece, Rosie Gaddestone, or with Mrs Quayle and the boarding pupils. Instead, she launched once more into an attack upon Letitia, demanding to be told what she meant by driving out with her sisters' beau, making it look to the world as if she had stolen his

affections. Did she realise what a disservice she was doing by this selfish behaviour? Did she realise the gossip it was causing? And the embarrassment? Did she *have* to wear those silly spectacles to draw attention to herself? Did she know how close Garnet was to being engaged to Rayne? Did she really believe a man like him could be seriously interested in *her*? Could she not see that she was not the kind of female such men married?

‘Mama, you’ve not told me anything I don’t already know. There is not the slightest possibility of marriage. Lord Rayne lives here in Richmond at the weekends and, because of my relationship to Garnet and Persephone, he and I are acquainted. Not good friends, Mama, just acquainted. He took me to Mortlake to see his sister, Lady Dorna Elwick, who is a friend of mine. There’s no more to it than that. Garnet has nothing to fear.’

‘And what about the theatre? I heard—’

‘There were fourteen of us, Mama.’

‘Well,’ she said, looking round at the blue, white and gold décor, the walnut table and chairs, the embroidered seat covers and cushions as if they belonged in a dingy street tavern, ‘it’s bad enough for you to be doing *this* kind of thing, without trying to take your sister’s future husband.’

‘Are you not being premature, Mama? You know how Lord Rayne tends to...?’

‘Yes, Letitia. I *do* know. That’s the problem. And you’re not helping matters, are you? And now this *shocking* scandal, too.’

‘Which no one need know of, Mama, unless you tell them.’

‘Then you must tell Rayne you no longer need his company,’ she said, rising. ‘That should redirect his interest. Don’t ask him to lunch with you again, either. That young Waverley is more your type. Summon my carriage, if you please. It’s time I was going.’

‘But don’t you wish to look round the house, Mama?’

‘No time today. I have guests coming this evening.’

‘I see. First things first, of course.’

Not being finely tuned to such nuances, Lady Boyce failed to pick up the cynicism. And had not Rosie Gaddestone entered the hall just as she was about to depart, she would have missed seeing her altogether after an interval of eight months. Her quick peck to each of Gaddy’s cheeks was both hello and goodbye, delivered to Letitia with the same artificiality.

It was not like Letitia to weep over matters such as this, but the only thing preventing her on this occasion was not fortitude but the gentle clasp of Gaddy’s arms around her shoulders and the scent of lavender in an embrace that lasted as the hall clock ticked and chimed over their heads.

‘Has Mrs Quayle told you?’ she whispered into Gaddy’s lace cap.

‘Yes, love. We’re not having a good day today, are we?’

‘No. Was Lord Rayne at church?’

‘Yes. He asked about you. I said you’d been delayed.’

‘We could have done with him here just now.’

‘A change of heart, Lettie dear? That’s not like you.’

‘I’m not much like me at the moment.’ She held her cousin away, her hands buried in the tiers of lace over her arms. ‘Oh, Gaddy, what a business this is. Now we may be sure that Mama will tell anyone who’ll listen what a mess I’m making of it.’ And *unless Lord Rayne stays well out of the way, she will broadcast Sapphire’s scandal far and wide. That’s for sure*

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