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An Unlikely Hero

Gail Eastwood



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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

To my dad, my best PR man!
I love making you proud of me,
and I love you.

Chapter One

“Sorry, old man, but I’m telling you ‘no’ is simply not an acceptable answer. You can’t keep your head buried in books all of the time. I want you to meet my sisters.”

The son of the Duke of Roxley, Nicholas St. Aldwyn, Marquess of Edmonton, strode purposefully across the green by the River Cam, trying to keep pace with his longer-legged friend Gilbey Kentwell, Viscount Cranford. The late-afternoon sun cast exaggerated shadows of the young men upon the grass, as if to emphasize that while both were tall, Edmonton still did not quite reach the measure of his companion.

The viscount made no effort to slow his steps, but for a moment he did allow a grin to light up his normally serious face. “My apologies, Nicholas. I should have said, ‘No, thank you ever so very much. It is more than kind of you to ask, and I am overwhelmingly honored by the invitation, but I must regretfully decline.’”

Edmonton growled. “Dressing it up won’t improve it and neither will groveling.”

“Just so! ‘No’ means ‘no’ any way it is offered. I have work to finish up here, and obligations to see fulfilled.”

The two friends were headed toward the river and the newly built King’s Bridge, whose single arch was illuminated by dancing reflections of sunlight from the water beneath it. Beyond it the familiar Gothic spires of King’s College Chapel, Cambridge, rose majestically into a clear sky.

The marquess made an extra push to catch up. “You have nothing that can’t be put off for two

weeks or passed on to someone else. Of course you'll come. You wouldn't want to offend me—I'm far too valuable a friend."

Cranford's laughter bounced off the stone buildings across the river. "That sounds suspiciously like a threat, my so-called friend."

"At least hear the rest of the guest list, Gilbey. I promise you this affair at my father's will not be like any ordinary house party you have ever been to."

As they reached the bridge Cranford finally slowed and took stock of the determined expression upon his friend's face. Nicholas had obviously forgotten, as he often did, the vast differences in rank, wealth, and experience that separated the two friends. Gilbey had only attended two house parties in his life, both in the past year and then only through Nicholas's connections and in his company. Such meager exposure did not provide much basis for comparison.

"I'm sure the list is most impressive," he began dubiously as they crossed over the river. Only the quacking protest of some ducks and the faint rattle of traffic on King's Parade disturbed the surrounding quiet. "I might be more easily convinced if you can assure me that I would not be on anyone's list of potential husbands. You know I have had enough trouble with women in this past year to last me for the next several."

"You'll get over it."

"I suppose, in time. Nevertheless, I am not in the market for a wife, nor in the mood for a party, and I doubt very much that I would fit in amongst your father's exalted guests. What, pray tell, would be the point of attending?"

"Ah," said Edmonton with a significant lift of his expressive St. Aldwyn eyebrows.

He took hold of Gilbey's elbow and as Gilbey began to head toward the residence halls at one side of the smooth quadrangle lawn, Edmonton gently but firmly turned him to the right and propelled him in an entirely new direction. Their shadows melded into a single long stripe that moved along beside them.

"I say, Nicholas—"

The duke's son shook his head. "For one thing, it is imperative to improve your social cachet. Only a very select group are honored with invitations to parties at Rivington. Trust me, it will do you credit for many seasons to be numbered among the Duke of Roxley's guests."

"But, Nicholas—"

"As for the fair sex, you need not worry. You've learned not to fall passionately in love with opera dancers who neither expect nor desire you to love them, and you've learned how to avoid traps set by simpering young ladies who believe that they are passionately in love with you!"

Gilbey sighed, recognizing a sense of impending doom. "You make it sound so simple. I am still greatly obliged to you for helping me out of both of those unfortunate episodes. But, Nicholas—"

Edmonton shook his head again, still refusing to be interrupted. "I'm taking you for tea." They had entered a narrow lane, deep in shadow at this time of day, and his voice echoed between the buildings as did the sound of their footsteps on the pavement. "There won't be any opera dancers at Rivington and you will be relatively immune to all that will be going on. I'm asking you to come as my own personal guest. You can enjoy some fine fishing. And I promise that you will find my sisters fascinating."

"I'll be immune?"

"The point of the party is, after all, to provide husbands for my troublesome twin siblings. I suspect my father will not settle for anyone ranking lower than an earl. If you'll forgive my speaking frankly, despite your admirable progress in restoring your estates, your fortune and title are too modest to interest either my father or the other marriage-minded guests who will be at this affair."

Gilbey was not even slightly offended. Instead, he felt relieved and he brightened considerably. Perhaps Nicholas had not lost his perspective after all.

"I had not considered that," he replied cautiously. He did not wish to offend Nicholas, certainly, and it did sound as if he could attend the party without complicating his life.

He had heard of Nicholas's sisters, of course. In the two years since their come-out they had become notorious for refusing all offers of marriage and for putting their suitors through all sorts of

tests. As the twins were wealthy, titled, and supposedly quite beautiful, this behavior had only made them seem a greater challenge to certain gentlemen among the *ton*. To witness the contest might indeed prove interesting. Certainly, the chance to see Rivington, the duke's famed country estate, would be compensation of sorts for the time spent. Two weeks!

"To tell the truth, I could use your help," Edmonton confided in a more serious tone. "My father does not take a very active part in these things once he has them all arranged to suit his wishes. As a chaperon I will be sadly outnumbered at this affair. My aunt is coming to help, but she is bringing my cousin Adela, and I suspect they will be husband-hunting for themselves. I know I can trust you—you could be an extra pair of eyes for me."

"Huh. You're asking a man who wears spectacles."

"You happen to be extremely observant, my friend, when your head is not in a book. But you simply cannot go through life buried like that all of the time. I think you are wedded to this place."

"I'm not," Gilbey said, but his friend's comment had struck a sore spot. Gilbey's own sister Gillian had just made that accusation in her latest letter to him. Nicholas's invitation was the perfect way to prove her wrong. At any rate, Gilbey saw that he no longer had a choice. He owed Nicholas for so many kindnesses shown in the past three years, to refuse him this favor would be unpardonable.

"All right." He relented at last. "Right or wrong, no one is ever proof against your persuasiveness, Nicholas—as I of all people should know by now. God help our country the day you take your father's seat in the House of Lords! So who are the poor victims on the official suitors list?"

"Save us, you'd think my sisters were harpies with two heads."

"Knowing you, I think I'll reserve judgment on that until after I've met them."

Little more than a week later the viscount found himself ensconced in Lord Edmonton's elegant

traveling coach, pondering the butter softness of the leather upholstery and the comfortable difference a fine set of springs could make as the Gloucestershire countryside rolled past the window.

“We are nearly there, now,” Edmonton said offhandedly as the carriage turned into a lane. He nodded toward the window. “That’s the first entrance.”

Gilbey peered out, anxious for his first view of Rivington. A low wall with modest gateposts marked their entry into the Duke of Roxley’s domain, but there was nothing else. The drive rose and dipped over several hills of increasing size without any visible hint of a dwelling. As the carriage climbed to the top of each hill, Gilbey could see another patchwork of fields and woodlands laid out below him, yet the road still led on with no apparent end in sight. Impressed anew with the gulf between his own station and that of his friend, Gilbey cleared his throat uneasily.

“I am not convinced that this is the wisest idea that you have ever had, Nicholas,” he said.

The young man sitting opposite him chuckled. “You imply that at least some idea of mine in the past has had some merit. I think I am flattered. But you will see. Do you not trust me? Have I not been your social mentor these past three years? You will get on famously with my father once he discovers your genuine interest in his Italian marbles. And I think because you are a twin yourself, you may well understand my sisters better than most people.”

Gilbey’s uneasiness increased. Did his friend have some hidden expectations? He was not sure how to respond. Nicholas’s sisters were reputedly identical, although he had heard that among the *ton* they were irreverently known as “the lamb and the lioness.” Apparently they differed dramatically in temperament. Gilbey thought he could relate better to that difference than to the fact that they were twins. His own twin sister Gillian was petite, auburn-haired, and given to trouble, while he was tall, flaxen-haired, and peace-loving above all else.

“I doubt that I can provide any special perspective,” he warned Nicholas, shaking his head. “My twin and I are as different from each other as twins can be. It was nothing more than a trick of nature that had us formed and born at the same time. Now that she is comfortably married, my life is certainly

calmer.” He did not add that he missed her terribly.

“Consider it an experiment,” Edmonton said. He edged forward on his seat and directed Gilbey’s attention to the window once again. “Here. If you watch carefully you will get a first glimpse of Rivington beyond that stand of trees when we come to the top of the next rise.”

The note of anticipation in his voice told Gilbey volumes about his friend’s pride in and attachment to his ancestral home. It seemed as if Nicholas’s public façade of the polished, bored man of the world had gradually slipped away during the carriage drive from London, where they had gone from Cambridge to procure suitable clothes. Gilbey knew Nicholas well, and was fond of the private man behind the façade. It pleased him to share this small moment with his friend, and he positioned himself close to the window where he could see. He pushed away his concern that the private Nicholas would disappear once they arrived at Rivington among the Duke of Roxley’s guests.

“There it is!”

Gilbey peered over the treetops and caught his breath as he made out the impressive outline of crenellated towers and what seemed like countless chimneys, gables, and ornamental roof finials in the distance beyond. Rivington appeared to be the size of an entire village. The sight quickly was lost again behind the trees, and several more minutes passed before the carriage rounded the last of a wide, sweeping curve and the entire massive structure of Rivington came into view, set in its own private valley, with the River Coln at its feet.

Edmonton chuckled. “That first glimpse teases, but nothing can prepare you for the full effect of seeing Rivington from here.”

Gilbey could not tear his eyes away from the sight in front of him. Built on a slight rise beyond a decidedly Tudor gatehouse, Rivington sprawled over its site with a majesty that defied convention. From this side it showed some attempt at architectural symmetry, for an imposing façade with a central entrance was balanced by equal numbers of window bays stretching off to either side and a matching pair of towers. But this had clearly been imposed upon an eccentric collection of earlier structures,

whose irregular rooflines revealed themselves behind and at either end of the central section.

“The oldest tower and part of the chapel dates to 1380,” Nicholas said, the pride in his voice unmistakable. “The tower on the right was added later to provide a bit of balance.” He related a short history of the estate and his family’s three-hundred-year connection to it while the carriage covered the remaining distance to the bridge over the river and the ornate stone gatehouse.

Gilbey hardly noticed when they were greeted and waved through enthusiastically, so enthralled was he by the majesty of what he saw. Even his doubts and trepidation about being a guest at Rivington were temporarily forgotten.

Meanwhile, Nicholas’s twin sisters, Lady Venetia and Lady Vivian St. Aldwyn, were perched on the sofa in the Chinese dressing room between their chambers, their golden heads bent over a piece of paper.

“It’s just like being dealt a hand of cards—you don’t know what you’ve got until you sort it all out,” Venetia was saying. “Let me see the list.”

She scanned the paper and groaned, thrusting it back into her sister’s hand. “Aunt Alice did make additions, just as I thought.”

“Surely it cannot be as bad an assortment as Papa assembled the last time he did this to us.”

“You think not?” Venetia made a face that caused her twin to laugh, although she sobered immediately. “Consider Colonel Hatherwick. He is much too old. We already know that he comes only for the trout fishing. The only reason Papa keeps including him is because they are such good friends. Can you imagine being married to him? He reminds me of a fish!

“Then there is Lord Chesdale, ex-cavalry officer. Do you not recall how he constantly peers through his quizzing glass and talks of nothing but horses? He puts me in mind of an eggcup, with those long, spindly legs and that big barrel chest of his. And they say that Lord Wistowe has a different

mistress for each day of the week. I wonder how he keeps track of them!”

“Netia! What a thing to speak of! And I cannot help feeling that we are being uncharitable by judging them so before some have even arrived,” Vivian said. “Should we not try to keep an open mind?”

Venetia made a rather unladylike sound, something between a snort and a growl. “If I thought there was even the remotest chance that any of them would give us the same benefit, I would perhaps return the favor.”

Their discussion was interrupted by a discreet knock on the dressing room door. A young footman in splendid black velvet livery and powdered wig presented himself with a formal bow.

“Lady Venetia, Lady Vivian, I am sent to inform you that guests are arriving. There are two carriages at the front entry now—Lord Munslow’s and Lord Marchthorpe’s and another is approaching along the carriageway.”

“Lady Colney is not yet arrived, Martin?”

“No, my lady.”

“Thank you. We’ll come right away.”

The servant withdrew, and the two young women turned to each other.

“Lord Munslow,” Venetia said, wrinkling her pert nose. “And Aunt Alice is not here yet to do the greetings.”

“Lord Munslow? I don’t recall . . .” said Vivian.

“Come, we’ll reconnoiter from the gallery before we go down.” Venetia caught up her sister’s hand as she rose hastily from the settee.

“Oh, Netia, they’ll be wondering where we are!”

“Not if we’re quick enough, and besides, I don’t care if they do. None of this affair was our idea.”

Gilbey's anxieties returned to him in full force as Nicholas's carriage pulled up in front of Rivington. The massive scale of the house in such close proximity seemed overwhelming and seemed also to symbolize in a most solid form the very different world of wealth to which Nicholas belonged. So did the two other carriages which were drawn up before the grand entrance of the house. Both, Gilbey noticed, were every bit as elegant as Nicholas's, with gleaming appointments and handsome heraldic arms decorating the doors.

"Nicholas," he said, trying hard to control his voice, "I don't belong here. What could you have been thinking of? This is a mistake, an absurd mistake. If your coachman will take me back as far as Northleach, I will hire a post-chaise to take me back to London."

"Nonsense." The single word was spoken with the finality and unquestionable authority that proved Nicholas was every inch a duke's son. Further argument was pointless. Gilbey watched helplessly as several servants descended upon their carriage and his friend got out. He had no choice but to follow as one of the footmen continued to hold the door of the carriage open for him.

As he emerged he saw a bevy of footmen flocking about rather like blackbirds, he thought, in their black coats with silver lacings. They paused to pay their respects to Nicholas, and then returned to unloading what seemed to be more luggage than either of the two carriages ahead could possibly have held. The scene reminded Gilbey of a comic routine he had seen Grimaldi perform at Sadler's Wells, and that brought a smile to his lips.

"That's the spirit—smile in place, head up," counseled Nicholas in a low voice. "If you don't own the world, at least try to look as if you do, and half the people will believe it. Shall we go in?"

The vast entry hall had a marble floor and marble columns and a gallery that ran around all four sides of the huge room. The vaulted ceiling must have been forty feet from the floor and was lit by a skylight in the center. There were a number of people in the hall at that moment, including footmen depositing luggage and the guests who had arrived just before Nicholas and Gilbey. More servants entered bearing additional luggage, some of it from Nicholas's carriage.

Nicholas appeared to be looking for someone. “I don’t expect my father to—”

Just as he began to speak there was a cry and a sudden commotion behind them. Gilbey had a sinking premonition of disaster as he turned to look.

Until that moment, Lady Venetia and Lady Vivian had been observing the hubbub below them from a relatively unnoticeable position behind the rail of the gallery.

“That is Lord Munslow who just handed his hat to Blaine,” Venetia said in a low voice. “I suppose because he is tall he thinks no one will notice that bald spot on the top of his head. And that is the Marquess and Marchioness of Marchthorpe and their daughter, Elizabeth. We met them in London, Vivi—I distinctly remember how shy Elizabeth was. Their son Lord Lindell is on the guest list also.”

She paused for a moment, surveying the guests under discussion. “Look, there is Nicholas! And I would say Elizabeth has been miraculously cured of her affliction, would you not agree? She cannot seem to tear her eyes away from that fellow who just came in with him. Who is he, I wonder?”

“He is even taller than Lord Munslow. Is he not on the list?” Vivian peered down curiously, leaning a bit over the railing.

Venetia ran her finger down the paper. “I am quite certain he is not. Unless—perhaps this is he: Gilbey Kentwell, Viscount Cranford. I have no idea who that might be. We have already suffered most of these other people at one time or another.”

“Netia, you are incorrigible! My, I do think he is quite handsome. Look! Now he has removed his hat. His hair is so pale it is almost silver.”

Venetia did look up and noticed her sister’s position at the rail. “Hsst! Don’t hang over so, Vivi—someone will notice us! Then we’ll have no choice but to go down and do the pretty. We’ll be subjected to that soon enough as it is.”

As she drew her twin back from the rail she took a good look at the unknown visitor. “Hmph. Too tall, too blond, and too thin by half,” she pronounced. “Do you not think his nose rather long? He looks like a schoolmaster with those spectacles. I would hardly count him as a likely prospect!”

“I wonder if he is meant to be a prospect at all—for one thing, he is only a viscount, if indeed he is who we suppose,” Vivian answered. “Perhaps he is just a friend Nicholas brought with him from Cambridge.”

Venetia’s gaze sharpened with interest. “You don’t think Aunt Alice put him on the list? He is obviously not as wealthy and connected as Lord Newcroft, or surely we would have met him before now. After all, Lord Newcroft is on the list, and he is only a viscount. But that does put a different cast on things.”

It was Vivian’s turn to groan. “Nicholas will never forgive you if you get up to tricks with his friend, Netia. And Papa will never forgive you this time if you drive off all the men he’s lined up.”

“What about you, Vivi? Would you forgive me? Do you think there is anyone in this batch who could be the husband you need?”

At just that moment the sharp exclamation that claimed everyone’s attention broke through the sound of voices in the hall below. Both young women rushed back to the rail to see what was happening.

They were just in time to see a cascade of personal effects spill forth from a heavy portmanteau carried by one hapless footman. It was he who had cried out as the worn straps on the shabby luggage in question let go. A small amount of snowy linen fell into a heap, and books—dozens of books—scattered across the polished floor.

The reactions in the hall were as varied as the number of people standing there. Lady Marchthorpe exclaimed loudly in astonishment while her daughter Elizabeth shrank back as if she feared contamination. Lord Marchthorpe turned his back on the scene and shepherded his ladies to one side of the room as if he shared his daughter’s fear. Lord Munslow merely stepped to one side and surveyed the accident disdainfully. The footman turned to Gilbey and Nicholas and began to apologize in frantic

tones. The other servants appeared to be frozen in horror.

“Nicholas is laughing,” said Vivian in scandalized tones.

“His friend is turning bright red,” observed Venetia. Smiling mischievously, she added, “Perhaps now is a good time to go down and join them, after all.”

Chapter Two

If only the earth could have opened and swallowed him, his books, and his broken portmanteau, Gilbey would have been eternally grateful. Unfortunately, the stone floor beneath him remained as solid as ever. When he felt the blood rush to his face he mentally cursed for the thousandth time the nearly alabaster skin he had been born with. He groaned and turned to Nicholas, who was laughing rather unhelpfully beside him.

“Confounded baggage! Forgive me, Nicholas. What a scene! You see? I told you—”

The duke’s son stopped laughing long enough to draw a breath and punched the young viscount playfully on the shoulder. “I should have known I couldn’t separate you from your books for two weeks, Gilbey.” Turning to the room at large, he added in a louder voice, “What a splendid joke on me, my friends, don’t you agree? You have to admire Lord Cranford’s originality.”

Quite naturally, no guest would risk being so rude as to disagree with the son of their host. Gilbey watched the others transform their various negative reactions into artful titters of laughter. While most did not appear entirely convinced that they should go so far as to admire Gilbey, at least he would now be spared their immediate scorn. He thought Nicholas was the one who should be admired—he could turn a situation around so easily!

The poor footman who had been carrying the ill-fated portmanteau was still apologizing profusely, obviously afraid that he would be held to blame for the accident. Gilbey hastened to reassure the man, and Nicholas ordered the servants to start gathering together the collection of books.

“We’ll find something else to put them in,” he said with a chuckle still lurking behind his words.

Gilbey stooped to pick up a volume that had landed by his feet. As he inspected it for creased pages or a cracked spine he happened to glance up and saw a vision he thought he must have dreamed. Two young women, more lovely than any he had ever seen, had entered the room and were walking toward him. They had to be Nicholas's sisters, for although they had dressed their glorious, guinea-gold hair in somewhat different styles, they seemed in every other respect identical. They had the same graceful, slender figures, the same flawless, creamy skin, and the same delicate facial features. They wore matching gowns of apricot muslin. As he watched, transfixed, one of them bent gracefully to retrieve a book from the floor and held it out at arm's length.

"You never told me," Gilbey said accusingly to Nicholas under his breath.

"What?"

"That they were so exquisite!"

His friend shrugged, as if the omission did not signify. Gilbey reflected that perhaps it did not, for certainly he had heard others say that the St. Aldwyn twins were beautiful. Somehow the report had never impressed him, and perhaps the truth from Nicholas would not have made any difference. But a man would have to be made of stone not to feel an attraction to such goddesses, and Gilbey felt more certain than ever that the two weeks looming ahead of him would be miserably difficult. Immune? Ha! How could he have believed that his desire to remain unattached and uninvolved would render him both numb and blind? How could Nicholas have thought so, too? They had only taken into consideration the attitudes of the others at the party, never Gilbey's own feelings.

"*A Defense of Ancient Architecture*, by Morris," read the twin who had picked up Gilbey's book. She quirked an elegantly arched eyebrow in a manner so like her brother's that Gilbey was forced to smile, releasing his momentary paralysis. She was a few steps ahead of her sister and reached the young men first.

"Really, Nicholas, what a unique arrival. We seem to have more underfoot than a mere houseful of guests." She gave Nicholas a sisterly hug and stepped back to inspect Gilbey with a frankly appraising

stare.

“Hullo, Nicholas. Welcome home.” The second twin hugged her brother as well and then moved next to her sister to await the introductions. She glanced at Gilbey curiously, but the look was fleeting and demure.

“Allow me to present my good friend Lord Cranford,” Nicholas said, bowing to his sisters quite formally. He winked as he turned toward Gilbey. “My sisters, Lady Venetia and Lady Vivian St. Aldwyn.”

They held out their gloved hands to him in turn, and he dutifully kissed them. He tried very hard to keep his own hand steady.

Around them the servants had retrieved most of the errant books and collected them into a pile under the watchful eye of Blaine, who was apparently in charge. Someone magically appeared with a trunk in which to pack them.

“If I am not mistaken, this volume belongs to you, Lord Cranford.” The twin who had greeted Nicholas first, Lady Venetia, also addressed Gilbey first. She held out his book. “I must say, most people do not feel the need to bring such things to a house party.” She treated him to a heart-melting smile that revealed an enchanting pair of dimples in her cheeks. “Did you fear that we would not keep you amply entertained?”

For a moment Gilbey felt as tongue-tied as the greenest schoolboy. Nicholas’s sister was flirting with him and trying to provoke him at the same time, he knew. She had uttered the last sentence in a most suggestive tone, and when he looked into her eyes—her gorgeous violet-blue eyes—he saw the devil dancing there as surely as he had often seen it in his own sister’s eyes. How was he supposed to answer? She clearly knew the effect she had on a man.

“Netia—,” Nicholas began in a warning tone, but Gilbey was not about to let his friend fight all of his battles. He forced a cool smile onto his face and accepted the book from Venetia’s hand with what he hoped would pass for indifference.

“Thank you, Lady Venetia. As your brother knows, I find it difficult to be parted from my studies for long. My eccentricity is no reflection on your family’s hospitality, I assure you.”

That was the role he would play, he decided—the eccentric scholar, too devoted to his books to be of interest to anyone. How could he possibly keep his feelings under control if Nicholas’s sisters paid any attention to him at all?

“You are far more polite than my sister deserves,” Lady Vivian said with a reproving glance toward her twin. “Welcome to Rivington, Lord Cranford. We are pleased to make your acquaintance.” Gilbey caught only a sweet smile and a quick flash of her violet eyes before she added, “If you are a friend of Nicholas’s, you must be quite an exceptional fellow. I hope you will enjoy your stay with us. Please, will you excuse us while we greet our other newly arrived guests?”

Gilbey nodded and could not help watching in admiration as the twins moved away.

Beside him Nicholas chuckled. “Your ‘eccentricity’? I must say, friend, you slipped out of that one quite handily. I do apologize for Venetia’s behavior. She has gotten away with it for so long now I fear she cannot change. I trust you do not need me to tell you now which one of my sisters is ‘the lioness’ and which one ‘the lamb’?”

“They are both utterly enchanting, Nicholas. I can see that coming here was an even bigger mistake than I thought.”

Nicholas took him by the arm and began to walk. “Oh, nonsense. You’re not in love. Every man is bowled over the first time he meets them—why should you be different? Trust me, you’ll soon get caught up in the swim of things. There will be a good deal going on to hold your interest.”

Gilbey was not altogether pleased with the casual way Nicholas dismissed his reaction, but perhaps his friend was right. Why indeed should he consider himself different? Perhaps as he became a bit more accustomed to the twins, he would find their effect on him less powerful.

“You definitely had an improving effect upon Vivian, I must say,” Nicholas added. “She seldom has so much to say to anyone she has just met.”

The speculative gaze he turned on Gilbey made the young viscount distinctly uncomfortable. Before Gilbey could reply, however, Nicholas abruptly changed the subject. “Here, let me introduce you to these other guests while we are still here in the hall. There will be many more unfamiliar faces for you when we gather for dinner, and I must greet these people, anyway.”

He glanced about once again, as he had done just before the accident with the books. “My father does not condescend to greet guests upon their arrival, but I am surprised that my Aunt Alice is not here to supervise the ritual. She has served as hostess for my father ever since my mother’s death. I can’t remember her ever arriving later than I have, for anything!”

He pulled Gilbey toward Lord Munslow, casting back a grin. “Not to worry, old fellow. Refreshments will be served on the terrace outside the salon very shortly whether Aunt Alice is here or not. Tradition is tradition, after all.”

The twins watched the last footman stagger out of the hall carrying several pieces of Lady Marchthorpe’s baggage. As they followed him into the grand salon behind the hall, Venetia sighed.

“I hope that is the last of the guests for a while,” she said, smoothing an imaginary wrinkle from her skirt. “I have quite completely lost track of who has arrived and who has not, except for Aunt Alice, of course.”

“We’ve nearly everyone, I think,” Vivian replied. “Lord Amberton, the Upcotts, Lord Munslow, Lord Lindell, the Whitgreaves—”

“Oh, do stop!” exclaimed her sister, laughing. “You are making my head spin. We had best prepare to feed them all for the first of countless times ahead of us.”

She paused and looked at Vivian with concern. “Are you quite certain that you are up to this? We have dinner and the entire evening still to get through. Perhaps you should rest. I can pour tea and make

your excuses, if you like.”

Vivian shook her head. “I am fine. Besides, what kind of an impression would it make if I am absent so soon? I’ll be all right.”

Venetia shrugged and opened one of the French windows that gave access to the terrace outside. “I am just concerned that if you don’t rest until after you are already tired, you will have a more difficult time for these two weeks, Vivi. Please promise me that you will take some time to rest each day.”

“I promise. I am certain that some of our guests will wish to do the same.”

Venetia gave an unladylike snort. “Undoubtedly! Father will want every minute to be filled with activity.” She sighed again. “If only he would accept that you—”

“Never mind about Father right now,” Vivian interrupted, her voice firm. “I shall be fine, and we will get through this. Where shall we have them put the table?” She gestured toward a pair of approaching servants who bore between them a long table already adorned with a snowy linen cover that fluttered in the breeze.

“Under the tree, there, in the shade,” Venetia directed, pointing to the ancient beech at one corner of the terrace and shading her eyes from the afternoon sun. Turning back to her sister, she added, “Will you want your parasol? Shall I send someone to fetch it?”

Vivian rolled her eyes heavenward in obvious annoyance, sending a clear message to her sister even before she replied. “Do stop fussing, Netia! I am not a bit tired, I shall sit in the shade under the tree, and if I want my parasol I can certainly send for it myself!”

Venetia knew that she would have to bury her concern for the time being. In the space of an instant she gave her twin a sheepish smile that begged forgiveness and received an answering one that absolved her. As a steady procession of servants began to supply silver platters filled with cakes, fruit, and cold meats to the table along with brightly polished serving trays, steaming pots of tea, and vast quantities of porcelain teacups and plates, the two young women arranged themselves beside the table ready to do the honors for their guests.

“Let me see your smile, Netia,” teased Vivian.

“Let me see yours, Vivi.”

They made faces at each other and burst into laughter, quite unaware that one of their guests had arrived to join them. Only when Venetia looked up did she notice a thin, somewhat elderly gentleman standing quite still in the doorway.

“Sh-h! Lord Amberton!” Laughter still lurked in her voice as she nudged her sister.

The man came forward with a bow. “Ladies, with all candor I must tell you what a delightful picture you present, with your innocent laughter and beauty and surrounded by such a sumptuous feast. I suspect it might be almost too much for a weaker man’s sensibilities.”

Venetia avoided her sister’s eye, afraid that any exchange between them would free the laughter she suppressed at the man’s fulsome flattery. “Quite clearly you are not overwhelmed, Lord Amberton,” she replied with perhaps a touch too much sweetness. “I’m so glad.”

He reached for Venetia’s hand and raised it to his lips. “As am I, my dearest, as am I.”

She thought she detected a glint of challenge in his eyes and snatched her hand back quickly. A wary glance about her reassured her that there were plenty of servants about and that several stood in position near the table, ready to serve the food to any who wished it. Even so, she felt the absence of her father, brother, or aunt quite acutely.

Her father, she knew, would remain in his study until close to dinnertime. Only then would the duke emerge to preside over their guests. But where was Nicholas? Where was Aunt Alice? Would they leave her and Vivian so unsupervised for the entire two-week party? Surely her family could not hope that one of the invited suitors would trap her or Vivian into a compromising situation and solve the marriage problem once and for all.

“Some tea, sir?” She did not wish him to see that he discomposed her even slightly. “As you can see, you are the first to descend and join us.”

“I did not want to wait,” he said in a low, smooth voice that gave his words a suggestive tone.

Venetia managed to pour his tea with a steady hand and to pass him the cup without flinching, even though he very deliberately pressed his gloved fingers over hers as he took the cup from her. What if all the unattached gentlemen behaved this boorishly? How could she and Vivian stand two weeks of it?

“I hope you found your accommodations acceptable, Lord Amberton,” Vivian said politely. Twin to the rescue! Venetia shot her a look of gratitude for her obvious attempt to distract the man.

“Indeed, Lady Vivian, I am quite comfortable. I find I have almost everything a man could possibly wish for, thank you.” His words were quite unexceptional in themselves. It was the emphasis he placed on the word “almost” and the look he directed toward Venetia that made her think his reply seemed exceedingly rude. She began to wish that the other guests—indeed, *any* of the other guests—would appear quickly.

“What delights have you ladies in store for us later tonight and tomorrow?” Lord Amberton queried. He took a sip of his tea as if he had only just remembered it was there.

“I don’t know about ‘delights,’” Venetia replied, fed up with the pretense of courtesy to the fellow. “You’ll be treated to the honor of dining with His Grace this evening, and as I am sure you know, he will not suffer any sort of idiocy. I believe there is to be mutton, onion pie, and—oh, what else was on the menu, Vivian? Some more of that stringy venison we had the other night?”

Lord Amberton laughed uneasily. “Your sense of humor is well-known, Lady Venetia, ha ha. Stringy venison indeed.”

Venetia summoned her most exquisitely charming smile and turned the full force of her dramatic, dark-lashed eyes upon the poor man. “Oh, but would I jest with you about such a serious matter? Perhaps you were not aware that my father has very simple tastes.”

She paused to let her comment take effect. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Nicholas approaching. “Tomorrow I think the gentlemen are invited to go swimming while the ladies tour the park.”

“Swimming?” Lord Amberton blanched. “I—I don’t swim. Do you not think it is a bit early in the

season for swimming? A—a bit cold?”

Vivian joined forces with her sister. “Oh, we do so admire hardy men.”

“As they do admire men with a fine sense of humor,” said Nicholas as he joined them. He darted a telling look at Venetia. “You may judge for yourself, Lord Amberton, my father’s ‘simple’ tastes.” With a broad sweep of his hands he called to their attention the vast expanse of building that bordered the terrace on three sides, and the gardens and park that extended in front of them as far as the eye could see.

“Yes, of course, ha ha,” responded Lord Amberton unhappily. “And swimming?”

“Is not among the plans for tomorrow, as far as I am aware. We do not generally count pneumonia as something we wish to send home with our guests.”

Venetia gave her brother a dark look as she turned back to reach for the teapot. “Not generally,” she muttered under her breath. “Tea, Nicholas? In a cup, I mean.”

“That is how I prefer it, yes, thank you.” He quirked an eyebrow at her and grinned as he reached for the cup.

As a handful of other guests began to filter out onto the terrace, Lord Amberton retreated to the safety of conversing with them. Watching him go, Venetia shook her head. “This could be the longest two weeks we’ve ever survived.”

It was a thoughtless statement, an exaggeration that she hadn’t really meant. Six years ago they had suffered through agonizing weeks that had tested them all and still gave her occasional nightmares. She regretted the words as soon as they slipped out of her mouth, but it was too late to recall them.

“I can remember worse,” Nicholas said, glancing pointedly at Vivian.

The mood between them was suddenly somber, and Vivian spoke up as if to break it.

“I am surprised that your friend Lord Cranford did not come down with you, Nicholas.”

Nicholas sipped his tea. “He is getting settled in his room. I had him put in one of the tower bedrooms. He is likely to become absorbed in studying the design of the place, but I’ve no doubt he will

appear soon—Cranford is no slacker when it comes to food.”

Venetia was relieved to have the conversation move on. “He does not look as if he would have much of an appetite. His interest in architecture is far more obvious.”

“Why would you say that, Netia? There is nothing wrong with the way he looks. He is slender but he has lovely broad shoulders.”

How quickly Vivian came to Lord Cranford’s defense! Venetia looked at her in surprise and noticed that Nicholas was looking at her that way, too.

“Did I say there was anything wrong with him, Vivi? He just looks like an underfed Viking. With spectacles.”

“Do not underestimate my friend Cranford, ladies,” Nicholas cautioned. “He is likely to surprise you.”

As if on cue, Venetia’s underfed Viking appeared in the entrance to the terrace, putting an abrupt end to the discussion. Before he could join his hosts, however, he was drawn aside by a matronly woman standing at the edge of a small knot of guests. Venetia noticed that he seemed surprised to be drawn into a conversation.

“Are you pouring, my dear?”

“Oh!” Venetia realized with a start that she had utterly failed to notice the approach of Lady FitzHarris and a few other guests seeking tea. “Yes. Yes, of course, Lady FitzHarris.” She busied herself with the task of filling cups. That was easier than asking herself how she could have been so preoccupied with watching Lord Cranford.

The guests seemed to have become unusually thirsty and Venetia doled out countless cups of tea. It amused her to notice how many people failed to address her or Vivian by name, undoubtedly to be safe in case they had gotten the twins mixed up. She lost track of the minutes and was caught by surprise when she looked up into the face of the next person to discover Lord Cranford. He was smiling and observing her over the top of his small spectacles with his striking blue-green eyes—eyes she had

noticed immediately when they had first been introduced in the hall. She wondered if Vivian had noticed them. There had been no time to compare impressions.

“You are very gracious to be doing the honors, Lady Venetia,” he said politely as she poured for him.

She gave him a demure smile that she thought would rival one of Vivian’s. “La, sir, are you certain you are addressing the right twin?”

He studied her for a moment before replying, and she struggled to maintain the look of innocence on her face. Then he leaned over close to her and spoke in the low voice of a conspirator.

“If you wish to pass as your sister, Lady Venetia, you would do well to disguise the look of mischief in your lovely eyes. It must give you away every time.”

His closeness and the intimate tone of his voice startled Venetia as much as his words. She felt her pulse leap and was relieved when he straightened and stepped back.

“I—I will keep that in mind, Lord Cranford.” She had to give him credit for being quite certain, even though he was dead wrong about her ability to masquerade. How surprised he would be if he knew how often she was called upon to use it. “Do you take cream? Sugar? Lemon?” She passed his cup to Vivian even though he shook his head. He had no choice but to follow it and move along down the table.

When his plate was fully loaded, Gilbey moved away from the table, prepared to balance his teacup precariously beside his food if anyone approached with whom he must shake hands. However, Nicholas came up to him almost immediately.

“My sister thinks you look like an underfed Viking,” the duke’s son reported. “She should only see you now.”

“Which sister?”

“Venetia.”

“I should have known.”

“Yes, and Vivian seems to be ready to leap to your defense at the slightest hint of criticism. You seem to have made an impression on both of them.”

Gilbey groaned. “That is not good, Nicholas. It would be far better if they had scarcely noticed me at all. What have I done? I’ve barely met them. I will have to try harder to be invisible. I’ll try not to engage in even polite small talk with them.”

Nicholas hardly seemed to be listening. “It certainly makes things interesting,” he said, almost to himself. He gestured toward the stone balustrade at the edge of the terrace and herded Gilbey in its direction, away from the press of other guests.

“You know, my friend, a great game is afoot.” He settled himself against the balustrade, looking out at the gardens laid out below. He waved his teacup back and forth, as if pointing out the opponents in an invisible wrestling match. “On one side is my father, determined that my sisters shall put off becoming betrothed no longer. He has decreed that they shall choose husbands from the lot of suitors at this party or forfeit their right to choose at all. On the other side you have my sisters, who have found fault with every man who has ever tried to woo them and who are highly unlikely to bend to my father’s wishes.

“I want you to know that I am not the only St. Aldwyn who can be stubborn. You are likely to witness a great clash of wills before these two weeks are finished. Throw into the balance each one of the suitors here who thinks he will win one of my sisters, and it makes for an interesting mix, don’t you think? But I confess that I had not anticipated that you might wind up in the middle of it.”

Chapter Three

The task of arranging the dinner seating was a delicate one, fraught with potential disaster. Venetia stood at one end of the vast stretch of table that had been put together in the state dining room, absently tapping the small bundle of name cards she held in one hand against the pages of the guest list she held in the other. She stared at the long rows of elegant, empty chairs in the dwindling daylight and tried to envision the guests seated at dinner.

“Hm, no, I think Lady Upcott next to Lord Whitgreave, instead of Lady Norbridge.”

Advancing to a position halfway down the table, she extracted a name card from those in her hand and exchanged the card with one already set in place on the table. “Yes, better, but then where to put Lady Norbridge?” She paced along the length of the table, studying the cards she had already put out.

She was alone. Most of the guests had obligingly gone off with Nicholas for a tour of the house after satisfying their appetites with refreshments on the terrace. She had insisted that Vivian use the opportunity to rest. The room was full of eyes, but all were unseeing, from the heraldic beasts above the chimney mantel to the plaster menagerie permanently lurking among the leaves in the sculptured ceiling cornice. As Venetia weighed matters of protocol and preference under their fixed gaze, she fought the temptation to turn everyone’s expectations topsy-turvy.

She paused when she came to the place marked LORD CRANFORD. She had dutifully placed him at the foot of the table, across from the voluble Colonel Hatherwick and the other unmarried viscount, Lord Newcroft. There was no avoiding the awkwardness of seating the lower-ranked men together—the absence of her aunt and cousin created the dreaded “uneven numbers” of men and women guests at the

table.

Of course, much would be made of who had the good fortune to partner the twins for dinner. Venetia had changed her mind at least three times already over which of the four marquesses among their guests would have that privilege this first night. *Would it not be fascinating to see the reactions were she to put Lord Cranford beside her instead? Or perhaps beside Vivian?* Her lips quirked into a mischievous smile at the thought. Now there was a test that would quickly reveal a good deal about their guests. Dare she?

“Ah, Venetia, there you are. Blaine said we might find you here.” The breathless, high-pitched voice of her Aunt Alice, Countess of Colney, arrested Venetia’s hand in midmotion just as it reached for Lord Cranford’s place card.

Venetia withdrew her hand quickly. “Aunt Alice!” She fished momentarily for an appropriate reply. “You’ve no idea how relieved I am to see you.” That choice safely did not specify. “Did you—?”

Her question went unfinished. Lady Colney, still slim and attractive in middle age and dressed in a highly fashionable lavender silk pelisse with a bonnet to match, bustled in and quite took charge of the conversation.

“Oh yes, I’ve a very good idea, my dear. You must have been fretting terribly. Never fear, we are here at last. Never tell me you are only just now arranging your dinner seating? I can imagine you were concerned about our late arrival, but you look to be resetting the places of everyone.” Lady Colney nodded critically at the telltale group of name cards in Venetia’s hand.

The countess sighed dramatically. “If only your poor mother were here, she would have taught you better. This should have been worked out well in advance, Venetia, for tonight and for all the subsequent nights as well. Let me see the list.”

Venetia surrendered the list of names and the place cards along with it, burying her mixed feelings about her aunt’s arrival. Fine. Let Aunt Alice take the responsibility for the puzzle of seating everyone appropriately. There shouldn’t have been last-minute changes. At least there were even numbers now,

not counting her father.

She dutifully bestowed a kiss upon her aunt's cheek. "I hope you did not have a difficult journey." Aunt Alice meant well, she had no doubt. If at times the woman failed to understand that no one could take the place of the twins' mother, and if at times she seemed a bit overeager to play her role as hostess at Rivington, that could at least be understood and forgiven. But her total preoccupation with appearances and her attitude toward Vivian was intolerable as far as Venetia was concerned.

"We simply got off to a late start, and some of the roads were terribly muddy and slow," Lady Colney said mournfully. "I can't imagine what people will think of us, being so tardy! However, I dare say we are not the only latecomers?" She quickly moved on to another topic of concern. "Where is Vivian? I should have thought your sister would at least be here helping you."

Venetia knew how to use her aunt's conversational technique. "Vivian is resting," she replied and then quickly changed the subject. "How is Cousin Adela? I trust she was not too fatigued from your journey? Where is she? Has she gone up to her room?"

Now that they must each make excuses for someone absent, Venetia felt they were at a draw. She doubted her aunt would still make an issue out of Vivian's absence, at least for the moment.

The countess sniffed audibly and made a great show of examining and switching some name cards. "Adela felt she needed to rest after our long journey, which is quite understandable. Certainly she did not wish to be fatigued at dinner."

"No, of course," Venetia agreed graciously. "Are you not weary as well, Aunt? I can finish this, if you would prefer to be resting."

Venetia supposed she should have known that her attempt to be civil was doomed.

"Someone has to be certain you don't make a botch of this, Venetia. Of course I would prefer to be resting, but obviously it will have to wait until we are finished here. Where is the card for Lord Amberton? I don't see it on the table or in the pile. His name is most definitely on the list."

"And he is most definitely here," Venetia replied regretfully. "Let me see. I thought I had seated

him between Lady Duncross and Lady Sibbingham, to tell the truth.”

“Between two countesses? You have not seated everyone according to rank, Venetia.” Lady Colney’s cluck of disapproval was too breathless to sound very much like a hen’s.

Venetia and her aunt were too busy hunting for the missing name card to notice when Vivian slipped into the room.

“Aunt Alice, you’re here! Is that my sister under the table? What in heaven’s name are you two doing?”

“Ouch! Dash it!” Startled by her twin’s voice, Venetia forgot where she was for just long enough to crack her head against the underside of the table as she attempted to straighten up. More annoyed than hurt, she backed out and rubbed the stricken spot as she held out the missing name card. “Here, he was on the floor.”

“Who?”

“Good afternoon, Vivian. Your sister somehow misplaced Lord Amberton,” Lady Colney said without any welcoming warmth in her voice. “I can just imagine how the poor man would have felt at dinner.”

“We’re so glad you arrived safely, Aunt. We were beginning to worry!” Vivian replied.

“Were you?” The countess softened visibly. “Well, ahem, we were just a bit delayed, that is all. I’m glad I arrived just in time to sort this all out.” She waved a hand vaguely at the table.

Venetia and Vivian exchanged a glance.

“I trust you are not ill, Vivian?”

“Not at all, Aunt Alice. I was only resting. Shall I help?”

Lady Colney looked from one twin to the other as if weighing the question carefully. Finally she said, “I suppose it will save me from walking miles up and down and around this table if you two would get on the other side and help to place the cards where I tell you. To start with, I think Lord Amberton should sit next to you, Venetia.”

It was only when they had finally arranged all the seating to their aunt's satisfaction that the twins had a moment to themselves. As the countess departed with a rustling of silk, Vivian whispered, "Did you lose Lord Amberton on purpose, Netia?"

"No, I swear I did not." Peeking out of the doorway to make sure her aunt was gone, she added, "But I'll tell you, I am not sitting next to him at dinner." She returned to the table and deftly switched his name card with that of her brother two seats away.

"I would much rather suffer Nicholas for my partner, to tell the truth!"

"I am partnered with Lord Ashurst," Vivian said. "I know nothing at all about him."

"Well, that means you shall have something to talk about during dinner, at least."

"I noticed that Lord Cranford is near the end, next to Cousin Adela, and across from Georgina Whitgreave." Vivian did not try to mask her disappointment.

"Aunt Alice switched things about so that he is partnering Lady FitzHarris," Venetia said with a sigh. They would have to try out other arrangements on another night. "Come, let us escape upstairs before Nicholas's touring group comes upon us here. I don't want to hear him pontificate about the ceiling paintings or the 'original carved chimneypiece dating from 1590.'"

"It might be enlightening to see if the members of the group are interested. We know so little about most of them. Although 'tis clear one of them considers himself a poet." Vivian fumbled for a moment at her belt. Smiling, she withdrew a small folded piece of paper and handed it to her sister. "I found this slipped under the door of our sitting room."

Venetia held it up to the pale light still coming in the window. "'N'er did Venus shine so fair / As two stars here residing / Twin suns whose shining golden hair / Lights hearts with love abiding,'" she read, wrinkling her nose. "'Would that Venus had her twin! / What double glory might have been! / Love's own beauteous face as two / But still no fairer than are you.' Good heavens! It goes on for four verses! Who could have written this?" She turned it over. "It isn't signed."

"Yes, I noticed," Vivian answered. "It seems we have a mystery to solve during dinner."

The St. Aldwyns gathered with all their guests in the long drawing room before proceeding in to dinner. The Duke of Roxley finally appeared to greet everyone, and all seemed to be going smoothly. Quite improperly Venetia managed at the last minute to go in on her brother's arm, and it was only when they reached the table that she discovered she had been outmaneuvered. Lord Amberton's name card sat at the place just to her left, and Nicholas's was once again two seats away.

Unfortunately, there was nothing she could do about it now. When could Aunt Alice have switched the cards back? As Venetia took her place, she noticed that although Nicholas was partnering the Countess of Sibbingham, he was across the table from Lord and Lady Marchthorpe's daughter, Lady Elizabeth. She had a sudden suspicion that the culprit might not have been her aunt at all.

The twins' father sat at the head, looking distinguished in a splendid dinner coat of darkest maroon velvet set off by his snowy linen and a waistcoat of embroidered ivory satin jacquard. He was a handsome man, with deeply etched features and a thick crop of white hair. He surveyed the table and his guests with the air of a benign ruler.

Venetia surveyed the guests as well, wondering who among them might be the anonymous poet. Her feelings were undoubtedly less benign than her father's, but she hoped that her fixed smile hid them. She noticed with some small sense of satisfaction that even Aunt Alice had not followed the rules of rank to perfection.

The amiable Duke and Duchess of Brancaster quite properly flanked her father, with the duchess seated on his right as the highest-ranking lady present. Below them Lady Elizabeth's parents, the very proper Lord and Lady Marchthorpe, sat across from each other, but this meant that the marquess and marchioness were placed above the proud Duke of Thornborough. Then Aunt Alice had risked offending the other countesses in the group by seating Lady Duncross, an elderly Scottish countess who was

friendly with the duke, above her station across from him.

As a widower, His Grace was a potential suitor for the twins. Would the old duke dabble in anonymous poetry? Venetia doubted it. Thornborough was notoriously high in the instep. He would never fail to put his name on some creation of his, and he probably thought writing poetry quite beneath him.

The Marquess of Ashurst, Vivian's partner, was seated below Lady Duncross and directly across from Venetia. She studied him with surreptitious glances as the meal began. He was undeniably handsome, with dark hair and shaggy dark brows over deep-set eyes, but he said little and did not seem to smile easily. He was reputed to be cynical and unsociable. Would such a man indulge in poetry?

The warm, mouth-watering scent of shrimp bisque penetrated to Venetia's brain and she paused to take a spoonful of her soup before continuing her scrutiny of the guests. So far, none had made any comments that might link them to the poem, either in the drawing room or at the table.

On Vivian's right was Lord Wistowe, whose notorious reputation as a rake made Venetia wonder what her father had been thinking to include him on the list. He had the kind of roguish good looks and angelic smile that she could imagine many ladies found irresistible. He was behaving quite charmingly to his partner, Lady Elizabeth. Nicholas seemed to be watching them rather carefully, although he was not noticeably neglectful of his own partner.

Venetia let her gaze wander past the many other guests until it came to rest on Lord Cranford at the far end of the table. He was dutifully assisting their neighbor Lady FitzHarris, a widowed baroness who had been invited to help make up the numbers. The viscount turned his attention to the twins' cousin Adela on his other side whenever she made a remark, and appeared to listen politely to Lord and Lady Whitgreave's daughter Georgina opposite him, but Venetia thought she could discern a lack of enthusiasm. Colonel Hatherwick seemed to be carrying the conversation. Most of the time Lord Cranford appeared to be busily studying either the dishes in front of him or the splendid mural panels that covered the walls and ceiling.

Could the viscount have written the anonymous poem? Judging by his arrival, he was the bookish sort, but the author of the poem was also clearly a romantic. Was he? He certainly did not impress her as being so. If the poet was not Lord Cranford, then who? She allowed her glance to stray from one guest to another, weighing what she knew of each of them, hoping that her speculations did not show on her face.

Beside her, Lord Amberton consumed his soup with noisy enthusiasm.

“I had no doubt His Grace would set an excellent table, Lady Venetia, despite your attempts to tease me,” he said in between mouthfuls.

“The rest of the meal is yet to come, sir,” Venetia replied coolly. She watched Vivian converse quietly with Lord Ashurst. Despite his reputation, the marquess was doing a reasonably good job of holding Vivian’s attention at their own end of the table. Only occasionally did Venetia see her sister’s gaze slip to the far end where Lord Cranford sat. It never occurred to her that her own glances returned there far more often than Vivian’s.

Gilbey was studying the group assembled at the duke’s table almost as thoroughly as Venetia. Nicholas had been right about the guest list—the diners seated at this table represented the highest levels of British society. Three dukes and a duchess, five marquesses if you included Nicholas, one marchioness, four earls, and no less than five—five!—countesses. . . . It was enough to make one wonder who was left in London to carry on with the remainder of the Season.

The very fact that all these people had been willing to come attested as much to the Duke of Roxley’s prestige and power as to the beauty of the six younger ladies who brightened the table like the candles in the crystal chandeliers over their heads. All were turned out in their most elegant finery, the ladies in white or in luminous colors with fine jewels setting off their pale skin, the men in more somber

colors but every bit as flawless.

If the company glittered, the table itself nearly equaled them. Gilbey had always been proud of his own family's display of plate in the dining room at Cliffcombe, his home in Devonshire, but he had never seen anything like the silver that gleamed in the candlelight on the St. Aldwyns' table. Fabulous ten-branched candlesticks that featured the figures of stags and hunters in their bases towered like small trees planted on the dining table. The brightly polished covers of huge serving dishes waiting to reveal their steaming contents reflected the faces of the diners as well as the flames of the candles. Two large silver epergnes with dolphin figures as supporters graced the table as well, holding towers of fruit for later consumption.

Certainly it was all most impressive, as Nicholas had promised, and Gilbey felt rather surprised to find himself there. Even the room was spectacular. He was glad to have a further chance to admire the special features Nicholas had pointed out during the tour. But nothing captured his attention quite the way Nicholas's sisters did, not even the attractive young women beside and across from him.

How could two such beautiful women be so truly identical and yet so different? He did not seem to have any trouble telling the twins apart, although apparently other people did. Lady Venetia held her head at an altogether different angle than did Lady Vivian, and she moved with a smooth, natural fluidity that contrasted sharply with the hesitant, rather deliberate way her sister moved. Too, Venetia was restless and moved often, while Vivian was calm and only moved for a purpose.

Were others simply less observant? He had been quietly studying the twins in the drawing room before dinner. He saw no reason to stop studying them simply because dinner had begun, although he now sat a good deal farther away from them. He did his best to appear attentive to those around him. Fortunately Colonel Hatherwick was an avid talker who easily relieved him of the burden of making conversation at their end of the table.

What surprised him was how often he had to turn his gaze elsewhere lest Lady Venetia catch him watching her. She spoke very little to her partner, Lord Amberton, and appeared to be studying the other

guests almost as avidly as Gilbey was studying her. It did seem as though her gaze strayed to his end of the table with disconcerting frequency, however.

It is not very likely she is looking at you, he counseled himself. Upon consideration it seemed much more likely that she might be casting glances at the young Earl of Lindell, who was sitting just on the other side of Lady Adela. Still, it was safer to become absorbed in the play of light bouncing off the silver on the table or in the formation of the clouds in the painting on the ceiling at those moments when her head turned in his direction.

Lady Vivian, on the other hand, seemed quite absorbed in her own dinner partner, Lord Ashurst. In an interesting turn-about, the quiet twin appeared to be talking considerably more than her sister. Gilbey could not see her quite as readily as he could see Lady Venetia, for Lady Vivian was seated on the same side of the table as himself, with eight places between them.

“The glacéed carrots *vont très bien* with the salmon, don’t you think?” Lady FitzHarris said, interrupting his thoughts. “Could I ask you to pass the dill sauce, Lord Cranford, *s’il vous plaît?*”

Gilbey located and obtained the sauce for her, spooning some onto her plate with a gallant smile. He wondered if the plump baroness felt ill at ease among the other guests or if she always sprinkled French phrases into her speech to seem fashionable. Was he the only one who was uncomfortable? But then, these people would have been trained for these roles since birth, not left to their own devices from the tender age of eight, as he and his sister had been.

He glanced at Nicholas, seven places up from him on Lady Venetia’s side of the table. Nicholas’s father had not succumbed to grief at the loss of his wife, although the place at the foot of the table had been left vacant in her memory. Quite without meaning to, Gilbey happened to catch his friend’s eye. The duke’s son winked and raised his wineglass in a salute. He had taught Gilbey the custom of “taking wine,” and Gilbey answered with his own glass. Just as he took a sip, however, there was motion beyond Lady Venetia near the far end of the table. The elderly Duke of Thornborough struggled to his feet to offer the first toast of the evening.

“To the King, God bless him and grant him peace.”

“To the King!” And so it went, through all the traditional toasts from the Prince Regent and the nation on down to the host and his fair daughters, the health of the company, and the skill of the cooks. The glasses were charged and recharged several times, keeping the servants busy.

“La! I shall be quite giddy by the time I drink another glass,” declared Lady Adela when her glass was filled once again. Unfortunately she accompanied this pronouncement with a dramatic fluttering of her hand that caught the poor footman’s arm just as he was refilling Gilbey’s glass. Glass, bottle, and footman all lurched at the same moment, sending the wine quite where it did not belong.

“Oh, heavens!” cried Adela, leaping up in alarm even as the horrified footman began to beg Gilbey’s forgiveness. The dark red wine splashed down Gilbey’s arm, soaking into his coat-sleeve, pooling on his trousers, and finally running down his leg.

“Never mind, never mind. It was purely an accident,” Gilbey mumbled, rising slowly to test whether the wine had quite finished its travels. He was certain the carpet beneath his feet was worth a hundred times the value of his modest clothing. When he looked up he realized that all the eyes around the table were turned toward him.

So much for not attracting attention, he thought with a sigh. The sooner he retreated from the dining room the sooner the rest of them would return to their meal and forget him. Certainly he was not needed to help chaperon anyone in such a structured setting as dinner. Perhaps he could even escape the inevitable evening of cards that was bound to follow.

“Oh, my dear sir! Your poor coat!”

“How terribly clumsy! That footman should be turned off.”

The fuss was beginning and would only escalate. It would be ungentlemanly to point out that Lady Adela was most at fault, but Gilbey did not want to see the poor footman lose his position.

“My fault, all my fault,” he murmured. “No one to blame but myself, please—just what comes of making a wrong move at the wrong moment.” He would make certain to speak to Nicholas and the duke

later. With polite apologies to his host and the gathering in general, Gilbey turned tail and fled.

Much later, after hours of whist and six-handed loo with various partners, including Lord Cranford, the twins had finally begged leave to retire to their rooms. They had changed into the night rails carefully laid out for them and, after dismissing their maids, were reviewing their evening while they took turns brushing each other's hair.

"Netia, you were positively wild this evening!" Vivian said wonderingly, submitting to her sister's ministrations. "What did you think you were about? Such deep play, for casual card play among our guests. I thought Father would have apoplexy."

Venetia laughed, although she did not miss the note of mild reproof in her sister's voice. "He was not the only one who was disturbed. But did you not think it a good way to discover which of our suitors does not mind dipping into his pockets? It does little good to marry a rich husband if the man is tight-fisted."

"I suppose you are right. It is also wise to discover which of them is bitten with the gamester's habit."

"Lord Munslow and Lord Chesdale seemed a bit inclined that way, I thought. We will have to test that out some more." She paused, working the brush carefully through a tangled bit of Vivian's hair. "Of course, I like a man with some spirit of adventure. It doesn't do to be afraid of taking risks."

"I think Lord Cranford was relieved not to be at your table."

"Do you? Hm. I wonder about him." Venetia gave Vivian's hair a final stroke and the twins exchanged places. "You do realize of course that Lord Cranford was not the one who spilled his wine at dinner," Venetia said, settling herself on the sofa. She handed the hairbrush to her sister.

"I could not see what happened at all from where I was sitting."

“It was all Adela’s fault, but you know she would never admit to it. I saw the whole thing happen.”

Vivian gave her sister’s hair a mischievous tweak. “Yes, you did seem to be paying attention to that end of the table.”

“I was trying to guess which of our guests was the secret poet. Or did you forget about that in your efforts to draw out the taciturn Lord Ashurst?”

Venetia’s back was turned to her sister so she could not see if this sally was met with a blush. “You did seem quite occupied with him, Vivi, or am I mistaken?”

For a moment the strokes of the brush stopped. “He did not seem so bad as his reputation,” Vivian said noncommittally. “I do not recall that he made any disrespectful remarks, and although he seemed rather solemn, he responded well enough when I asked him intelligent questions.”

“Well, that is better than it might have been. All of our guests must have been on their best behavior. Lord Wistowe seemed quite charming, although I suppose that comes naturally to a rake.”

“Did you come to any conclusion about our poet?”

“No. The only conclusion I have made after the entire evening is that it must not be Lord Amberton. I don’t believe he has the wit to put two rhyming lines together and have them make sense.”

“Oh, Netia!”

The two young women lapsed into giggles. Just as they quieted, however, they heard a small sound at the door of their chamber and turned to see that a slip of paper had appeared under it.

“Oh, no, not another poem,” groaned Venetia.

Vivian moved to retrieve the folded note. She broke the wax seal and stood by the door scanning the contents.

“Don’t read it now, Vivi—open the door and see if anyone is still in the passage!”

But Vivian did not open the door. Instead she sagged against it, all color drained from her face.

Venetia was on her feet in an instant. “Oh, Vivi, not a seizure. You’ve been doing so well!”

Before she reached her sister’s side, however, Vivian shook her head. “No, I am all right. But ’tis

not a poem, this time.”

Chapter Four

With a mixture of alarm and curiosity curling through her, Venetia took the paper from her sister's trembling fingers and read.

Lady Venetia,

I will save you the great trouble of choosing a husband by casting myself in that role. If you do not agree, I will inform the entire world that your sister has the falling sickness, and the name of St. Aldwyn will become synonymous with scandal and deceit. I will reveal myself on the day of the betrothal ball. Looking forward to our future together, I remain for now your Secret Admirer.

Anger boiled out of her. "This is blackmail, Vivi! We can't give in to this. Who could have written this? Who could know? It isn't even right. You don't have the falling sickness. You've never lost consciousness during a seizure and you've never fallen. It's not even a sickness. What do they know about it? How could they know?"

Thoroughly distraught, Venetia paced in front of the door, turning each time her words reached a new crescendo. She shook the paper in her hands as if somehow the words written on it could be forced off into oblivion where they belonged.

Placing gentle hands on her shoulders, Vivian steered her twin to the sofa and made her sit down.

"You begin to sound like Father, Netia. Don't. You know 'tis true I have epilepsy. Denying it as he

has will never make it go away.”

Venetia had tears in her eyes. “Oh, Vivi, I know.” She swallowed and could not go on. There was so much shared pain that she could never express, and so much grief. Until six years ago their lives had been so trouble-free, and then in one night so much had changed!

“I hate that name for it, and I hate how ignorant people are about it. I hate the fact that we have to hide it from everyone. If we didn’t have to hide it, if people were not so afraid and so unreasonable, no one could write us a hateful note like this!”

“Shh, Netia. We cannot change the way things are,” Vivian hugged her sister and removed the blackmail note, now badly crumpled, from her fingers.

Venetia jumped up from the sofa. “How can you remain so calm? Does it not make you angry? It is all so unfair!” She began to pace about the room again.

Vivian sighed. “Of course I get angry! But most of the time I consider it a gift that I am alive at all. ’Tis a gift that Mother was not granted, and mine is a conditional gift—I must accept the circumstances. I have come to terms with it better than you have, but perhaps that is just my nature. No one knows better than you how angry I was in those first months after the accident, when the seizures began.”

Vivian smoothed out the note, her calm motion at odds with her words. “I do still feel angry when Father tries to gloss things over with some reference to my ‘delicate nerves,’ or when Aunt Alice insists I do it purposely for attention. But if I have to live with this, as I must, there is just one thing I would change, Netia, and that is Father’s insistence that I marry.”

“That is but another thing that makes me angry, Vivi. How can he be so blind? Does he not see the possible jeopardy in which that places you? Your husband could have you shut away for life! But do not fear. No blackmailer will make me break my vow. I will not marry until we have found the right husband for you.”

Vivian went to her and they clasped hands silently, allies against an uncertain future.

After a moment Venetia managed to smile. “If such a paragon does not exist, then poor Nicholas

will simply have two spinster sisters on his hands in the future.”

They moved back to the sofa and Vivian picked up the note. “I wish I had opened the door,” she said ruefully.

“It does not matter,” Venetia reassured her. “In such a matter as this, I doubt the writer was also the bearer. He probably paid one of the servants to deliver it.”

“What shall we do?”

“We must find him out, Vivi. Only by discovering who he is can we then find some way to stop him. We cannot allow him to carry out his threat.”

“Nor can you marry such a blackguard! I would rather be exposed than see you meet such a fate. But how will we discover him? We have shown little enough talent in that line. We could not even discover our anonymous poet.”

“We will not go to Father, that much is certain. We will question the servants and pay more attention to our guests, and we’ll try to discover some clues. To begin, let me see that note.”

Down in the yellow drawing room many of the Rivington guests clearly intended to continue their card play into the morning hours. Like the twins, however, Gilbey had retired for the night. Ensnared in a huge, old, heavily-carved oak bed with simple hangings of crimson worsted, he watched the flickering light from the dying fire dance over the substantial stone walls of his room.

In the four hundred and thirty-nine years preceding his arrival, how many other people had lain here doing the same thing? He tried to distract himself by imagining those people, and failing that, tried to perform a numbers game to determine how many nights that had been, allowing for leap years and the change in the calendar.

Nothing successfully kept his thoughts away from the events of this particular evening. After the

fiasco at the dinner table, he had escaped to his room, thoroughly dismayed by his apparent inability to avoid attracting attention. Twice in one day! It was as if the Fates had decreed some other plan for him. Was he destined to play the fool? Invisibility was a far more comfortable way to ensure he attracted no romantic entanglements here.

He had barely begun to consider the disastrous effect the wine stains were going to have on his limited wardrobe when one of the many chamber servants employed by the duke appeared, ready to assist him and take charge of the damaged clothing. Gilbey was more than a little impressed. His brother-in-law's estates were well run, but this palatial residence tended by scores of servants ran so smoothly it seemed as if the very walls must have eyes and ears.

He had hoped to stay in his room for the remainder of the evening, certain that the portion of dinner he had eaten would be sufficient. But the valet's arrival had been followed by a tray laden with delicacies, and a short while after that a note had arrived from the duke himself, summoning Gilbey to the great man's study.

Escorted by a footman, Gilbey had traversed endless echoing corridors and passed through many rooms he recognized from Nicholas's tour. He had yet to formulate an accurate plan of Rivington in his mind—it seemed to defy logic with its many additions and odd changes in levels. He thought moving through the house was almost like a journey through time, so many centuries were represented there.

When he finally arrived at the duke's study, Gilbey was not at all surprised to find the room far grander than its name implied. Although the light from a number of handsome multi-branched candlestands illuminated the room, much of its magnificence was still lost in shadows. Within its cavernous depths Gilbey made out several sculptures set on pedestals, including a few that looked genuinely antique to his educated eye.

Seated behind a massive flat-topped mahogany desk ornamented with ormolu, Nicholas's father was dwarfed by the proportions of his surroundings. For a fleeting moment, Gilbey was struck by the thought that His Grace, the Duke of Roxley, for all his wealth and power, was after all no more than a

man, and an aging one at that.

“Please sit down, Lord Cranford.”

The duke indicated a chair with a nod of his head, and Gilbey realized that he had already been discreetly deserted by the footman. He knew he should have felt honored to be summoned for a private audience with the duke, but given the way his visit had been going so far, he felt somewhat uneasy. It helped that the duke’s voice and even his tone of unmistakable authority sounded so much like Nicholas’s.

He was mistaken, however, about the footman. The servant had merely disappeared into the shadows; he reappeared instantly when the duke offered Gilbey a glass of port.

“I was concerned when you did not rejoin us at dinner by the time the ladies withdrew,” the duke said. It was clear that he expected an explanation.

“I apologize if I caused any concern or offense. Your Grace,” Gilbey replied carefully, accepting a glass from the footman. “None was intended. I did not think I would be missed.”

“I am responsible for the welfare of all my guests. I must apologize for the accident that befell you at dinner. If your garments cannot be cleaned, they will be replaced, of course.”

“That is most generous of you, sir, but altogether unnecessary. I’ve no wish to be any trouble to you.”

“Hmph, no doubt.” The duke set down his own glass and leaned back in his chair, interlacing all but his index fingers and tapping those thoughtfully against his pursed lips. His face had been shadowed before but now light from the candles nearest him shone upon his face, revealing an expression Gilbey could think of only as calculating.

“At the risk of being offensively candid, I would like to ask what it is that you do wish to accomplish here, Lord Cranford. As we are not at all acquainted, I trust you will forgive my bluntness.” He smiled a lopsided smile and arched an eyebrow exactly the way Nicholas did. Gilbey knew he really was not being offered any choice.

“As a duke I am granted amazing license in polite company,” His Grace continued. “You must realize that you are here merely by the request of my son, suddenly thrust among a very carefully selected group of guests who have been assembled for a particular purpose. What exactly, sir, is your own business at Rivington?”

So that was it. Gilbey smiled in a way he hoped the duke would find reassuring. Reading people was a talent the viscount had discovered he possessed at an early age, and he understood very well what the duke, despite his declared frankness, had left unsaid. His Grace wanted to know if Gilbey posed any threat to his well-laid plans to marry off his daughters, or if Gilbey had come seeking political favors or hoping to ingratiate himself with the powerful elite gathered here. He wanted to know Gilbey’s credentials as well as his intentions.

Gilbey didn’t blame the man one bit. After all, Gilbey was a stranger. By confronting him, the duke could test his personality and social skills. The choice of strategy impressed him. He hadn’t the slightest doubt that it had been quite deliberate.

“Your Grace, allow me to reassure you—I hope without seeming unappreciative of your hospitality—that I have come here for no purpose of my own at all. I promise you I have no wish to attract the attention of your daughters, or anyone else for that matter, and I seek nothing. I had no intention of coming here, even after Nicholas—uh, Lord Edmonton—invited me. However, your son has rather admirable powers of persuasion, as I am sure you are aware.”

“You do not find my daughters attractive?”

Now, that was a sticky question. Gilbey took a gulp of his port. Wouldn’t do to offend his host, or to give him a wrong idea, either. “My first impression of your daughters is that they are both beautiful and charming, Your Grace. If I were seeking a wife, I would be sorry indeed that my station is so far below what they deserve. But as Nicholas—uh, your son—is well aware, I have only just finished my stint at Cambridge and am newly named a Fellow of my college.”

“Don’t wish to give up the stipend before you’ve even begun to collect, eh?”

Gilbey felt the cursed tingling of a blush start in his face. “No, sir—that is, it’s not the stipend. I have studies I wish to complete and traveling I wish to accomplish before I am tied down to a wife and family. I am rather young yet to be married.”

“Yes, you are.” The duke leaned forward. “Perhaps you can enlighten me as to why my son was so keen to have you here?”

Gilbey set down his glass. “That, Your Grace, is a question you would do well to ask Nicholas.” Gilbey was not about to risk offending the duke by telling him his son thought he would not adequately supervise his daughters. But the sooner Gilbey could extricate himself from these treacherous waters, the better. “I must say that I am delighted to have the opportunity to see Rivington, Your Grace. It is even more magnificent than I expected from the descriptions I have read.”

“Have an interest in architecture, have you? What was your field of study at Cambridge?”

“History. Roman civilization in particular.”

“Ah. Perhaps you might recognize this, then.” The duke picked up a small object from his desk. Quite unexpectedly, he tossed it in Gilbey’s direction.

With his heart in his throat Gilbey leaned forward and caught the object. Opening his hands slowly, he examined what lay there. It appeared to be a miniature axe, made out of bronze, somewhat oxidized and eaten away by time.

“It appears to be a votive object, sir. May I ask where it came from?”

“A few miles up the road,” the duke answered. He rose from his chair and picked up the branch of candles that stood by his desk. Walking off into the shadows behind him, he summoned Gilbey to follow. “This was found there, also,” he said, setting the candles where they threw light upon a head and torso carved in stone.

Gilbey sucked in his breath. “Minerva. Made from local stone?”

The duke nodded.

The atmosphere in the room was changing, thawing. Gilbey felt as if he had been plucked out of

the treacherous water and put into a rescue boat.

“Have you heard of Lysons, over there at Cambridge?” the duke asked. “Excavated a huge Roman villa at Woodchester some twenty-five years ago.”

It was Gilbey’s turn to nod.

“It is thought that this entire area had a number of villas. Several years ago he dug up another near Withington,” the duke continued. “I was interested in his work, struck up an acquaintance. He presented me with these.” Roxley moved again, and Gilbey followed.

“This is my favorite. Perfect little figure of Diana, wouldn’t you say?”

The duke had stopped in front of a fluted marble column on which was perched a small bronze statuette. It was indeed quite perfect: a semiclad female with a bow in her hand and a dog—or was it a lion?—at her feet. Gilbey reached up to adjust his spectacles so that he might improve his admiration and nearly knocked them off his face when the duke said. “Reminds me of my daughter Venetia.”

Gilbey rocked back as if the statue had kicked him. What the devil was that supposed to mean? The duke was smiling and Gilbey thought he had better say something to cover his involuntary reaction. “Lady Venetia, Your Grace?”

“Yes, my daughter the huntress. She will find herself a husband and one for her sister, too, I don’t doubt.” The smile disappeared suddenly and was replaced by a level stare. “I would be most displeased if she chose someone unsuitable, Lord Cranford. I’m certain that you understand my position.”

Fresh from this interview Gilbey had been obliged to join the party playing cards in the yellow drawing room. His attempts to catch Nicholas’s eye or have a word with him failed utterly, perhaps because he had to devote so much of his attention to keeping away from the twins. Periodically the groups would break up and regroup, specifically so that no one would play with the same partner all evening. Gilbey

worked very hard to avoid being paired with any of the younger ladies.

Unfortunately, this strategy appeared to have given both Lady Norbridge and Lady Sibbingham the idea that he preferred the company of older women, specifically that of widowed countesses. They had flirted with him outrageously all evening. Lady Norbridge was no more than thirty-five and did have certain charms—large green eyes and an admirable figure, if only she would not flaunt it quite so openly. He had been unfailingly polite without encouraging them, he hoped. He doubted either of them had meant anything serious by their actions.

No, the biggest problem had been himself. Despite Lady Norbridge's distracting green eyes, he had not been able to stop thinking about two pairs of violet blue ones that belonged to the golden-haired twins. He had not been able to stop watching them during the evening, even from across the room. He hoped that no one had noticed.

The contrast in their personalities was remarkable. Vivian had been determinedly modest, insisting that she had no skill at cards and warning all her partners of their handicap. Whenever she played well, a look of genuine surprise lit her sweet face quite delightfully in the warm glow of the candles. Gilbey was certain she had no idea that she had utterly charmed several of the gentlemen present. It struck him as odd that her father had barely mentioned her during the after-dinner interview in the duke's study. Shouldn't such a daughter, the very model of modesty and decorum, be the apple of her father's eye?

Venetia, on the other hand, had challenged her partners to match her skill and had played with a reckless aggressiveness much like a man's. Gilbey had been astonished at the size of the wagers she placed, encouraging others to follow her lead, quite careless of the results. She seemed vibrant—full of energy and passion. Gilbey was not surprised by the number of men who had been ready to worship at her temple.

Lying in bed now, he indulged in an dangerous fantasy. If he wanted a wife, if he were an eligible suitor, if he could have his choice—which sister would he prefer? He wrestled with the dilemma and finally gave up. How did one choose between a pearl and a diamond?

Poor Nicholas! Small wonder he was concerned about keeping an eye on the twins for two weeks! There were nine suitors, and only two of them could win. In the days ahead the competition among them was likely to become the very devil.

Chapter Five

Venetia and Vivian were up early the next morning and had already been out walking in the garden terraces and the nearby woodland paths before most of the house was awake. Morning mist clung to their bonnets and wool cloaks as they reentered the house.

“It will be interesting to see which of our guests come to breakfast this morning,” Venetia said, handing her red cloak to the footman who stood ready to receive it. “Some of them may have barely been to bed.”

“You do not think the prospect of attending church with us this morning will be enough to rouse them again?” Vivian answered Venetia’s sly grin with one of her own.

“We shall see.”

Breakfast had been set up in the tapestry room under the fixed gazes of medieval lords and maidens woven in cloth. The muted colors of the wall hangings and rich oak paneling gave the room a warm feel despite the coolness of the misty morning outside the casement windows. When the twins entered they were surprised to find Nicholas and Lord Cranford already seated at one of the several tables, happily munching on sliced smoked ham, a variety of breads, fresh honey, and early strawberries from the Rivington hothouses. A pained expression came across Lord Cranford’s face as soon as the twins approached, however. Indeed, as he and Nicholas arose from their chairs, he began to choke on the tea he had just attempted to swallow.

“Oh, heavens. Bones in the tea, sir? If so we must really speak to our cook,” Venetia teased him. “Good morning, Nicholas. And may I wish you a good morning also, Lord Cranford?”

Cranford was blushing bright red and still coughing. Nicholas moved to pound him on the back.

“Poor Lord Cranford. Are you quite all right?” asked Vivian with a good deal more sympathy.

The viscount nodded, but he remained standing even after the ladies were seated and Nicholas had returned to his chair.

“I do beg your pardon!” he finally managed to sputter once he had found his breath. “My appetite is apparently more awake this morning than the rest of me. Lady Venetia and Lady Vivian, good morning.”

Unfailingly polite, thought Venetia. She was not sure she found that such a great virtue. She smiled sweetly. “We have been up and awake for hours, sir. Are you prone to city habits, staying up far into the night? I’m afraid we follow country ways here at Rivington. Perhaps you should try the coffee.”

At least he had the grace to laugh. He made no move to join them at the table, however. “I think I am quite finished trying anything this morning. I’ve already consumed a most generous breakfast. I hope you will excuse me. I was not up late last night—in fact, I retired just after you ladies. However, I have a few things to do to get ready this morning before attending church . . .”

Venetia arched an eyebrow and gave her sister a significant look. If Lord Cranford had retired just after they had, he could have delivered the blackmail note. She saw that some sense of the idea reached Vivian, for a small frown suddenly creased her pale forehead.

“What nonsense, Gilbey,” Nicholas said. “You’ve no need to be ready any sooner than we are. We won’t be leaving for St. Michael’s until just before ten o’clock.” He smiled wickedly. “One might almost get the impression you wish to avoid our company.”

Venetia thought Lord Cranford looked as if he would like to strangle Nicholas. *Interesting*. Perhaps he truly was trying to avoid them. Why? Could it be because he had secrets to hide from them? Didn’t want them to guess he was really a blackmailer? Didn’t feel the need to court them because he already had another way to win one of them as a wife?

Now that she stopped to consider it, he had managed very neatly to keep apart from both her and

Vivian last night. He had even been absent for a good part of the dinner. *He could have been writing the note then*, said the little voice in her head.

“One might not be surprised if I wished to avoid *your* company, Nicholas, since you are ungracious enough to make the suggestion,” Cranford said. “I can’t imagine that anyone would not wish to remain in the company of your delightful sisters, however.”

Bravo. It was an admirable reply, one her brother richly deserved. Venetia studied Lord Cranford’s face with renewed interest. Telltale color still washed across his cheekbones, but a smile was lurking around his mouth. The light from the windows reflected off the lenses of his spectacles, effectively screening his eyes from her view. Something her brother had said the day before came back to her as she looked at the viscount: *Do not underestimate my friend Cranford, ladies*. Now she wondered exactly what he had meant.

“Surely you don’t mean to abandon us, Lord Cranford?” she said. “Why, you haven’t even finished what was on your plate.”

As he turned toward her the reflection disappeared from his spectacles, revealing his breathtaking blue-green eyes. She could read indecision there and in the way his smile wavered for a moment.

“No, not at all, of course not,” he said, fidgeting with his watch fob. “But you really must excuse me . . .”

“We have been out walking in the gardens, Lord Cranford. You might find a quick turn along some of the paths quite delightful at this time of day,” Vivian commented suddenly.

What in heaven’s name was she about? Venetia tried to kick her twin under the table but couldn’t quite reach without making an obvious effort. If they were going to investigate Lord Cranford as a suspected blackmailer, they would have to spend some time with him. Offering him reasons to absent himself was not the way to go about it!

Cranford looked relieved. “I truly do have a few things I must see to before we go off this morning. If I have a chance, Lady Vivian, perhaps I will try to steal a few moments to walk in the garden. Thank

you for suggesting it. If not this morning, then perhaps tomorrow.” He bowed. “Ladies, Nicholas. Until later.”

Venetia watched him leave. He actually was a handsomely built man—she wasn’t certain why she had not noticed it before. Perhaps the chocolate brown coat he was wearing this morning was cut better than the one he had worn yesterday. She had to admit that she felt a little begrudging admiration for him. He had clearly meant to quit the table from the moment she and Vivian walked in, and despite her protests he had achieved his object without even being rude.

He paused in front of the carved and columned doorway to allow a small knot of guests coming into the room to pass him. The group included Lord and Lady Whitgreave with their daughter Georgina, Lord Lindell, Lord Newcroft, and Lady Duncross tottering along behind them on the arm of Lord Chesdale. Cranford greeted them quietly and went out.

Lord Chesdale lifted his quizzing glass and peered at the viscount’s retreating figure. When he turned back to the trio seated at the table he did not look at all pleased. “Good morning, Lady Venetia, Lady Vivian, Edmonton,” he said. “I see that Lord Cranford has already been here, well ahead of the rest of the pack.”

A string of carriages wound their way out of the park at Rivington later that morning, headed for the ancient little church at Yanworth. Gilbey remembered passing through the tiny hamlet with Nicholas. It amounted to no more than a handful of small estate cottages, but the church was older than even the oldest parts of Nicholas’s home, dating back to the twelfth century.

Nicholas had told him the church was decorated with interesting wall paintings, and Gilbey was looking forward to viewing them. All he had to do was keep to his own company and keep an eye on Lady Venetia and Lady Vivian from a distance. Since he had to share the drive to church with someone,

however, he had sought out Lady FitzHarris. The plump, cheerful baroness had been a harmless enough dinner partner and Gilbey did not think anyone, male or female, could possibly misread his motives in accompanying her. They rode in Nicholas's carriage, listening to Colonel Hatherwick rhapsodize about the fabulous trout fishing to be found just a short distance downriver. Venetia and Vivian rode in their father's carriage up ahead along with the Duke of Thornborough.

The expedition proved blessedly uneventful. The wall paintings were indeed interesting, and Gilbey managed to evade the twins without losing sight of them. No one in particular tried to engage him in conversation. Few of the Rivington guests had failed to come along—Gilbey guessed that none of the suitors wanted to risk missing opportunities that could be used to advantage by their rivals. The Marquess of Ashurst was the only one of the single male guests who had not come.

Venetia and Vivian also noted Lord Ashurst's absence, and his defection from the ranks sparked a discussion once they returned from church. They took refuge in the gardens for a few minutes of privacy.

"You see, Netia, you cannot say that Lord Cranford is the only one making no attempt to court us," Vivian said in a low voice, leading the way down a flagstone path between huge evergreen topiaries. "Lord Ashurst was pleasant enough at dinner last night, but he was not very attentive during the evening, and this morning he did not even come. It is quite probable that he took a dislike to me because I pestered him with so many questions. But according to your logic, he is just as likely to be the blackmailer as Lord Cranford."

"Oh, heavens, Vivi! I'm certain that Lord Ashurst has not taken you in particular dislike. They say he dislikes everyone. And his case is considerably different than Lord Cranford's."

Venetia glanced about quickly to make sure no one else was in this part of the garden. "What

possible reason could the marquess have for resorting to blackmail to make me his wife? He is high-placed, handsome and wealthy. Plenty of women would willingly wed a reclusive misanthrope like him for those other qualities. That reputation is less damaging than Lord Wistowe's, and I doubt many women would balk at marrying him, either, even if he is such a rake."

The path ended at a short flight of steps leading up to the next terrace. This was a rectangular rose garden enclosed by sheltering walls of yews. The scent of the early blooms washed over the twins as they entered. Vivian went to the fountain at its center and sat down on the edge, gazing at the bronze figure of a woman captured forever pouring water from an urn into the pool. The sound of the trickling water was comforting.

"Netia," she said, "you are assuming that Lord Cranford has an interest in marrying you. Do you not remember what we said of him when he first arrived?"

Venetia patrolled restlessly around the borders.

"I know, we said he was probably not meant for the list. But I have learned a little bit about him from Nicholas. He had an uncle who gambled away most of his inheritance before he came of age. He needs money to restore his estates." Venetia stopped and looked directly at her twin. "Why would he not be interested in marrying me?"

She went on before Vivian could reply. "The best way to determine whether or not he could be the blackmailer is to spend more time with him, Vivi. That is what I was trying to set up at breakfast. Why did you help him by offering him an excuse to be elsewhere? I could have kicked you—I tried, to be honest."

"Well, I like that! My own twin. But truly, Netia, I do not believe he could be the blackmailer."

"You are blinded by the paleness of his hair, or mesmerized by the sea color of his eyes."

"So, you have noticed his eyes, too, have you?" Vivian got up again and moved toward her sister. "Well, I am not blinded. I know you were thinking after breakfast that because he retired just after we did last night he had the opportunity to deliver the blackmail note. But you said yourself that the

blackmailer probably had one of the servants deliver it. The fact that none we questioned this morning had done so does not mean it is not true. Whether he did or not, don't you think that the blackmailer would make certain his time was accounted for all evening, to avoid our suspicion? I think the fact that Lord Cranford has no alibi, as they call it, is a sign of his innocence."

It was a long speech for Vivian. That alone told Venetia how deep her sister's feelings ran.

"If it isn't Lord Cranford, Vivi, then who can it be? He has a motive, and surely he must be aware that he has no chance of winning one of us any other way. If nothing else, Father would never approve of him. Why would it be anyone else?"

"That is what we must try to find out, Netia. If we determine to focus our efforts only on Lord Cranford, the real culprit may be completely overlooked."

Venetia had been toying with a pink blossom she'd plucked from the border and now she threw it into the fountain. It swirled about for a moment and then the petals began to separate. "All right. I agree we must look closely at everyone, not just Lord Cranford. We cannot afford to fail in this—we have far too much at stake. But I do not agree that he should not be a suspect."

Vivian turned toward the steps at the foot of the garden. "Come. If we do not go in, we will not have enough time to get changed for the picnic." With a mischievous smile she added, "Netia, I think you simply can't accept that Lord Cranford might be immune to your charms."

The Duke of Roxley's idea of a picnic was quite different from anything Gilbey imagined. Wagonloads of servants had been sent ahead to prepare the site, and as the guests who had chosen to walk there set off through the garden, more servants were leaving with what looked like supplies for an entire army. The rest of the guests would arrive by carriage.

The walkers constituted a sizable group, including all the young guests and a few who could not

bear to be classified as anything else, such as Lord Amberton and the intrepid Lady Norbridge. Eight ladies and nine gentlemen in all made up the group. Lady Elizabeth, Lord and Lady Upcott's daughter Lady Caroline, and Miss Whitgreave had successfully won permission to join the walking party without their parents, so there was a spirit of joyful rebellion in the ranks. The twins' Aunt Alice, Lady Colney, had promised to serve as chaperone.

Nicholas led the way up the central path through the gardens, pointing out the branching paths and walkways that led to individual terraces designed with their own themes. He raised his voice to reach the ears of his audience, who had quickly become a disorderly line strung out behind him.

Following along at the rear, Gilbey spotted a peacock feather lying on the grass beside the flagstones and picked it up, absently twirling it in his fingers. He had been observing the members of the party as they chose companions and jockeyed for position in the line, but now the thought of peacocks in the garden distracted him. He had always admired the beautiful birds. Hoping for a glimpse of one strolling on the side paths, he failed to notice that ahead of him Lady Norbridge had stopped to let the others in the group pass by her. The next thing he knew she had fallen into step beside him.

"I was very disappointed that you chose to abandon us so early last night," she said in a low voice, casting a sidelong glance at him that quickened his pulse despite his sense of dismay. She took the feather from his hand, brushing her fingers against his quite deliberately, he was certain.

Botheration! This was not what he needed. It did not help that her choice of words was so similar to Lady Venetia's at breakfast. Twice in one day he was being accused of abandoning an attractive woman. How much self-control was a man expected to have?

With relief he noticed that the twins' cousin, Lady Adela, had stepped aside from the line and was waiting for him and Lady Norbridge to catch up to her. Talking to her should be safe enough. At least there was no wine anywhere about.

"La, there you are, Lord Cranford," she gushed, tipping her chin up and looking directly at Lady Norbridge instead of at him. "I felt so terrible about what happened at dinner last night, I just had to

“speak with you.”

The line of walkers had progressed through a gate at the back of the garden and had begun to ascend a fairly steep hill following a path through the ancient beech woods. Just after Adela spoke, she slipped on some leaves on the path. Gilbey reached out and steadied her by her elbow. Had she done it deliberately?

He risked a glance at Lady Norbridge and could have sworn that she bristled. There were certainly sparks in her eyes. She looked very beautiful and quite displeased.

Botheration. Now what was he supposed to do?

“You mustn’t concern yourself about last night,” he told Lady Adela gallantly. “Accidents happen. I hope you escaped the reach of the wine? That was an exquisite gown you were wearing.”

Lady Adela positively beamed, and beside him Lady Norbridge glowered. Perhaps he had gone a little overboard?

“Naturally, both of you looked splendid last night, as you do this minute. I’m sure I have the envy of all the other gentlemen, walking here with the two most handsome ladies in the group.”

Of course, it was a lie. Lovely as they were, neither lady could compare to the twins. Probably all three of them knew it. Whatever made Nicholas think that he, Gilbey, had learned how to handle women? He was saved from further conversation however, as they came down the other side of the hill to find the rest of the group standing about in the hollow. A somewhat winded Lord Amberton was seated on a stone bench, puffing and blowing between complaints.

“Bless me, but no one said we were going mountain climbing! I thought this was meant to be a pleasant stroll to the picnic site.” The path ahead led up another steep, wooded hill.

While the twins and Nicholas endeavored to reassure him, the other members of the party were using the opportunity to regroup. Gilbey desperately looked for someone else to walk with, and finally discovered Lord Ashurst, who appeared to be keeping apart from the group.

“Lady Vivian and her sister are stuck with Amberton, now,” the marquess observed bluntly. “He is

like a bulldog they will have trouble shaking loose.”

Gilbey nodded. “He is not the only one.” The twins were surrounded by Lord Amberton, Lord Wistowe, Lord Newcroft, and Lord Chesdale. Georgina Whitgreave and Lady Caroline walked together behind them, looking neglected, while Lady Elizabeth was keeping very close to Nicholas. Gilbey noted with relief that Lady Norbridge had sought out Lord Munslow and that Lady Adela had been reined in by her mother and now walked dutifully between that good lady and the very young Earl of Lindell.

Their route wound through the woods, up and down hill, until finally it descended a long slope to an open meadow beside the River Coln. There the intrepid foot travelers found long tables set out, clad in snowy linen and laden with all kinds of dishes. Rugs had been spread upon the grass, and soft pillows offered comfortable seating. The guests who had come by carriage were settled and already eating.

With appetites sharpened by exercise, the new arrivals clustered around the tables, waiting to be served, and then joined their cohorts. Gilbey and Lord Ashurst were the last to be served. They took their loaded plates and slipped off to one side, where they could observe the scene before them.

The twins had, with applaudable tact, plunked themselves down in the midst of the group of young ladies, forcing their admirers to dance attendance on all of them. Gilbey noticed that Venetia was the one who kept the gentlemen hopping, sending one back to the table for one thing and directing another to the carriages to fetch something else.

“Not one of them is worth so much as the littlest toe of either of the twins,” Lord Ashurst muttered.

Surprised by this comment, Gilbey smiled. “Perhaps we should be in there offering our own services, sir?”

The marquess shook his head. “I wouldn’t be so presumptuous.”

“Presumptuous?”

“Certainly. Do you think we are any better qualified to attend them than the rest?” He shook his head again. “I would not wish to inflict myself upon them. I cannot fathom what Roxley thinks he is about. If this sorry group of suitors is the best he can do for his daughters, then he is a fool.”

Gilbey could hardly believe his ears. Cynical the marquess might be, but that comment did not come from a man who was cold or aloof. It appeared that Lord Ashurst was exceedingly modest, perhaps even to the point of being shy. He clearly held Nicholas's sisters in high esteem.

Gilbey decided that he rather liked the marquess. "We may cause more offense by staying away than if we join the throng, I regret to say," he replied. "I see that we are observed, and I suspect we are judged neglectful."

Ashurst looked around. "By whom?"

"Lady Venetia. She has cast several dark looks in our direction."

"Has she? I didn't notice." Ashurst sighed. "I suppose we have no choice, then. It simply won't do to offend our hostesses."

Later, after all the guests were fully sated, the company prepared to scatter about the meadow to enjoy the fine afternoon. Equipment for quoits, battledore and shuttlecocks, ninepins and trap-ball had been brought along for any who wished to play, and sketching materials were available. For a little while, however, Venetia insisted that the men compete in the games, while the ladies watched. It seemed to Gilbey that she singled him out particularly, perhaps in retribution for his earlier inattention.

He allowed Lord Amberton to beat him at trap-ball, and the Viscount Newcroft, a small, agile fellow, beat him handily at battledore and shuttlecocks. Despite his dandyish ways and the affectation of constantly using his quizzing glass, Lord Chesdale had the competitive spirit to be expected from an ex-cavalry officer, and he was clearly disappointed with his easy victory at quoits. Gilbey, however, was quite pleased with his own undistinguished performance.

Eventually Venetia relented and allowed the guests to do as they wished. Many simply strolled or lounged upon the pillows, indulging in relaxed conversation. Gilbey wandered down to the river's edge,

intent upon investigating its potential for fishing. Everyone else seemed contentedly occupied. The twins had gathered up pads and paint boxes, so he had restrained his own impulse to sketch or paint. Nicholas was caught up in a game of tag that Lady Norbridge had started by tickling people with Gilbey's peacock feather. Their muted squeals and laughter made a pleasant counterpoint to the gentle murmurs of the river, which was slow enough here to sport masses of water crowfoot in the center of the stream.

Gilbey admired the turquoise bands on a damselfly that hovered near some yellow flag at the water's edge. The sun was warm and brought out the insect's jewel colors. The mild breeze was fresh and sweet—in fact, the day was idyllic, all trace of the morning's mist vanished. Why then did he feel so at odds?

He asked himself all the obvious questions. Was it because he would rather be back at Cambridge with his nose in a book? Or was it because he did not fit in here at Rivington among the duke's guests? The answer was always no. Still, he could not seem to banish the restlessness and discontent that plagued him.

He was lost in thought, still watching the damselfly above the surface of the water, when the sound of voices near him intruded upon his consciousness.

"Netia, you have already made them wait upon us like servants, and the games provided ample opportunities for us to observe their fitness and physical skills. Why is that not enough for one day?"

"I want to see how far they will go. Courtesy is a fine quality, but do you want to marry a man with no backbone?" There was a brief pause, and then Gilbey heard Venetia say, "I expect the river is still quite cold."

Gilbey knew he should not be shamelessly eavesdropping. A clump of brush and a willow tree with its roots reaching right into the water stood between him and the twins, effectively screening him from their view. But what the devil were they up to?

"What if the current takes your hat too quickly, or what if none of them will go after it?" Vivian asked quite rationally.

Venetia sighed. "Well, it is only a hat, after all. I think it would still be worth the price to see if any of them will go after it."

So, it was all a plot. Was everything the twins did so calculated? Gilbey did not like the feeling that gave him. He stepped back behind the bushes and the tree trunk and emerged on the other side.

"Lord Cranford!"

"Oh dear."

Surprise and displeasure registered on their faces. Vivian was properly bonneted and she held a parasol to protect her from the sun as well. Venetia stood bareheaded with her wide-brimmed cork hat in her hands. The sun shone gloriously on her golden hair, which must have come partially unpinned when she removed the hat.

The sight of her fanned Gilbey's disapproval into anger. How could she be so unbearably beautiful and yet so cold, so self-serving?

"I know Nicholas can be manipulative at times, but I have never known him to be so utterly calculating and heartless," he said, venting his feelings without the slightest preamble. "I overheard what you are planning to do and I'll be damned if I'll stand by and say nothing while you trick your own guests into a cold bath for your own amusement."

"Oh, please, Lord Cranford, it is not quite as you think!"

"Never mind, Vivi. I shall do it anyway." Venetia looked at Gilbey defiantly.

In the split second before she drew back her arm and sailed the hat through the air to land in the river, Gilbey realized several things. One was that he had been unpardonably rude to his hostess. It did not matter how justified he might have been. Another was that it had felt good to speak his mind honestly for once, even if he was rude. A third was a sudden revelation that his anger was out of proportion to her mischief and that he would do well to examine it further when he calmed down. But the fourth thing overpowered all the others in that instant, and it was a flash of *déjà-vu* that took him all the way back to Devonshire.

The defiant look. The hat sailing through the air. It was as if his sister Gillian stood there on the riverbank. Gillian, who always got into mischief. Gillian, who so often needed to be bailed out of trouble.

Only it was Venetia who needed to be bailed out of trouble now. Intent on defiance and mischief, she had not paid attention to her footing. At the moment she released the hat she slipped and with a genuine cry of distress tumbled into the river.

Chapter Six

Venetia was not in the water for more than a minute, but to her those seconds seemed like a lifetime. The shock of the cold water quite took her breath away. She struggled to find air and panicked when she discovered that she could barely move. One of her hands was tangled in the tendrils of the crowfoot weeds and her feet could not seem to get clear of the weight of her soaked skirts.

What a horribly embarrassing way to die, she thought just before she felt strong arms close around her. As her head emerged from the water, she gulped in a huge breath. Relief and gratitude surged through her. For a moment she just savored the secure, wonderful feeling of being held. It hardly mattered that the body she rested against was just as wet as she was or that water from her hair was still streaming down her face and neck. Then she opened her eyes.

Blue-green eyes stared down into hers, the anger she had seen in them just before she slipped now replaced by concern. Lord Cranford. Of course.

“Are you all right?” he asked. His voice was deep and had a rough edge to it that she did not remember.

He helped her to stand, keeping one strong arm around her waist to steady her. The water was still swirling around them, knee-deep, tugging gently at her skirts. She opened her mouth to reply, but what came out was a gurgling, spluttering cough. Gracious! She had not realized she had swallowed half the river.

“Best get it up, if you can,” he said gently, turning her away from him.

She coughed out what she could. Then she began to shiver, and she felt him slip an arm behind her

knees and scoop her up into his arms. He carried her out of the river as if she weighed nothing.

There was a crowd awaiting them on the bank, drawn there by Vivian's cries of alarm, but Venetia had only one thought in the moment before she and Cranford arrived there. *How can he be so warm when he has been in the cold river?* Instinctively she huddled against him, pressing closer to the heat that radiated through his wet clothes and hers.

"What happened?"

"Yes, what happened?"

"By Joseph! Is she all right?"

She heard all the questions, and she heard Cranford answer. "She slipped and fell into the water. She is all right, just frightened, wet, and chilled."

He forgot to say embarrassed to death, she thought. Perhaps it would have been better to have drowned. At least he did not say that she had deserved it, although she was certain that he thought so.

"Have you anything to wrap around her?"

He set her on her feet and immediately she was enveloped in a soft pink silk shawl she recognized as the Duchess of Brancaster's, and a warm red plaid one that could belong to no one but Lady Duncross. Even so, she missed Lord Cranford's warmth. She had no chance to turn back to him, however; Vivian was fussing about her and suddenly Aunt Alice was there, too, and then Nicholas was there, steering her through the crowd of guests, heading for the carriages.

She did not consider her appearance at all until she saw Lady Elizabeth shrink back as she passed by. Then with a sinking feeling she recognized the awful truth. *No doubt I look like a half-drowned rat. Mayhap Elizabeth fears I will bite her. Or drip on her, even worse!*

Behind her she heard shouts and a commotion, but she kept moving steadily toward the carriages. Her teeth were chattering and she had finally realized how thoroughly revealing her wet garments must be. She drew the two shawls closer around her.

After a moment she heard Nicholas laugh. "So that's what the noise is all about. Colonel

Hatherwick has rescued your hat, Netia. He hooked it out with his fishing gear when he saw it come floating downstream.”

Venetia didn't know whether to laugh, scream, or cry.

Gilbey had flung his spectacles on the bank before he entered the water, but once he had found them again, he followed along behind Lady Venetia and her entourage. He had, of course, noticed the coldness of the water when he had first plunged in after her, but it was peculiar that he had never noticed it again until the moment he released her. Now he felt somehow bereft as well as wet and chilled. His wet clothes were sticking to him like a plaster. His hair was dripping water onto his spectacles and more droplets trickled down his neck. He imagined he cut quite a miserable figure. But worse than that, once again he was at the center of everyone's attention.

Lord Whitgreave shook his hand, sending drops of water in every direction. “Well done, sir, I say.”

Someone else slapped him on the back. “Jolly good show.”

Gilbey noticed a few less-than-congratulatory glances directed his way. Then Lord Wistowe fell into step beside him and gave him a knowing leer. “You sly dog, Cranford. Didn't know we ought to be keeping an eye on you. Got a good armful, eh? Just how did you manage to be right there when it happened?”

His tone was not particularly friendly. In fact, there was an underlying implication to his words that Gilbey did not like at all. He clenched his jaw to hold in his anger and merely said, “Stroke of fate, I suppose.”

By rescuing Lady Venetia, how many enemies had he made? Had his prompt action compromised her reputation? What else could he have done? Was he supposed to stand back and do nothing while they waited for one of her suitors to play the hero? The water was not dangerously deep, but he had seen

right away that she had been in difficulties.

Gad, she had fit so perfectly in his arms. How beautiful she was when she had opened her eyes and stared up into his. Would the memory of those moments torment him forever? How much better for him if he had never touched her!

Up ahead he saw her bundled into the Duke of Roxley's landau. Lady Vivian climbed in beside her, but not before she touched Nicholas on the shoulder and pointed back toward Gilbey. As the carriage set off, Nicholas trotted back to join him.

"Bit cold for swimming, old man?" he said with a huge, lopsided grin. "Remind me to thank you properly when we've gotten you warmed and dried. You look like something the dog dragged in. What the devil happened, anyway?"

How to answer? Nicholas would likely be insulted on his sister's behalf if Gilbey explained things just the way he saw them. On the other hand, Gilbey was getting very tired of being perfectly polite to everyone, especially when so many of the people around him did not seem to play by the same rules.

"It seems your sister likes to play games," he said in a clipped tone, choosing his words carefully. "She had some idea of tossing her hat into the river to see who would retrieve it, but she accidentally threw in more than she intended."

Nicholas laughed, not just a cursory chuckle but a heartfelt belly laugh that lasted at least a full minute. He clapped an arm across Gilbey's wet shoulders and steered him toward a carriage, signaling to the coachman at the same time. He was still laughing as they climbed in.

"You find that humorous?" Gilbey said stiffly.

Nicholas wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "I know Venetia, and I know you, my friend. I think I am able to fill in all the blanks you have left in the story. I only wish you knew each other as well as I do! Of course, I can go to Vivian for a full accounting." He lapsed back into laughter which Gilbey could not share.

Gilbey stared out the carriage window. He saw nothing funny about the situation. He was in danger

of falling in love with a woman he was not sure he even liked or approved of. But the woman was not even the worst part! Falling in love at all was unthinkable—utterly ruinous, a disaster of major proportions. He was not a man who could afford to love. Thank God Venetia could never be his. If only he could get her out of his mind. From there it was only a short way to his heart.

The remaining guests returned to Rivington from the picnic in small bunches, drifting in almost randomly as they saw fit. The St. Aldwyn carriages made several trips to the picnic site and back, for it seemed that no one felt moved to walk back. As there was no further entertainment planned until dinner, the guests filled the time by wandering through the picture rooms and galleries of Rivington, writing letters in the salons, or wandering in the gardens.

Venetia had chosen to remain in her room, for although she was quite recovered from her dip in the river, she was not in the best of moods. To Vivian, this was an ideal opportunity to slip off and attend to a matter that she knew her sister would disapprove.

Assuming that Lord Cranford was also fully recovered from his unintended bath, where would he spend the hours until dinner? Vivian suspected the library was the most likely place, for his interest in old architecture and his predilection for books would both lead him there.

The library occupied the original hall of the old manor house that formed part of the north wing of Rivington. With its great vaulted ceiling of wooden beams, the room was one of her own favorites. Many times she had curled up in a chair there, imagining the medieval lord of the manor dining with his family and guests on the dais at the far end of the room, proudly showing off the great oriel window he had installed there. His massive carved fireplace with its heraldic motifs seemed to fit comfortably among the much newer wall cases filled with books.

Vivian did not see Lord Cranford in the library when she arrived there, but neither had she seen him

in any of the other rooms she had passed through on her way there. Had she guessed wrong? What if he and Nicholas had devised some other amusement for themselves? She decided to settle in the alcove of the oriel window to continue with one of Miss Austen's novels and wait for a bit.

Anne Elliot had just come to realize her error in sacrificing her romance with Captain Wentworth when Vivian heard voices and looked up to see Lady Norbridge and Lord Munslow enter from the screen passage. She was surprised to see them—they seemed to her the most unlikely among the guests to be interested in books. They looked equally surprised to see her.

"Why, Lady Venetia, we did not expect—we did not mean to disturb you," Lady Norbridge faltered. Her heavy scent of lilac clashed with the room's musty scent of old leather. "I hope you are quite recovered . . .?"

"I am Lady Vivian, and it is quite all right. We are happy to have our guests make use of the library."

Lord Munslow cleared his throat. "No, no, wouldn't think of disturbing you. Didn't think there'd be anyone here." He paused as if uncertain what to do or say next.

Finally it dawned on Vivian that they might have come seeking privacy rather than books. Well, they would have to go elsewhere if they wanted a private tête-à-tête. She had gotten there first and she was not about to relinquish her post. At least she was reading. She lifted her chin and smiled at them sweetly.

Lady Norbridge appeared to have recovered her composure. "I do beg your pardon. It is so difficult to tell you apart. How does your sister do now, Lady Vivian? We were all quite concerned over her mishap."

Ah, polite conversation. Of course they couldn't just leave. "She says it was nothing. She is fine now, thank you." Vivian wondered if she should suggest that they try the solarium upstairs, but she realized they would likely be shocked at her forwardness. Shouldn't she be the one who was shocked? They seemed to have gotten this backward.

Just as she came to the conclusion that at least Lord Munslow could be removed from the list of interested suitors, Lord Cranford appeared in the arched passage doorway.

“This seems to be a popular spot. Am I intruding?”

Lady Norbridge replied before Vivian could say a word. “Ah, Lord Cranford, the hero of the day. Not at all—do join us.” With a rather exaggerated swaying of her hips and provocative swishing of her soft green silk skirt, the older woman went to him and put her hand on his arm. “Lord Munslow and I were just leaving, but I have something that belongs to you. I would like very much to return it—sometime.”

Lord Cranford looked as if he did not know what to say, and Vivian could not blame him. Now she *was* shocked. The invitation in Lady Norbridge’s tone was quite blatant.

When Lord Munslow and the countess had left the room, Lord Cranford turned to Vivian. “The worst thing is, I cannot even call to mind anything of mine that she might have.”

Vivian could not find a reply. She had wanted to speak with him. Her hunch about the library had proven right, and her opportunity was at hand. But what had seemed so easy in her mind was not so easy to carry out. Finally she blurted, “I hope you suffered no ill effects from the river? We owe you many thanks.”

“No thanks are due. It was but a moment’s work, and I am perfectly fine.” With an odd expression on his face he added. “An early season swim is hardly the worst thing that could happen.”

He began to stroll casually about the room, looking around him. “This makes a magnificent library. What a splendid idea to install it in here.”

She swallowed and nodded. “Yes, I have always loved it.” She wanted to talk to him about Venetia. But how was she to bring up the subject? She felt very stupid.

“I’m sorry, Lady Vivian,” he said, “I can see I have interrupted your reading. I shall be quiet and let you get back to it.”

No! That was the last thing she wanted. “’Tis only *Persuasion*, a novel that came out this past year.

Really, I do not mind.”

“May I ask how your sister is faring now after her ordeal?”

Yes, oh yes. That was better. “She is fine now, thanks to you. I am certain she will wish to thank you herself.”

“As I said, no thanks are necessary. I was simply the nearest. Anyone would have done the same.”

They might not be so modest about it. That was another thing she liked about him, beside the fact that he never had difficulty distinguishing between her and her sister. She really did not believe he could be the blackmailer.

“About this afternoon—there was one thing . . .” Oh, why was this so hard to do?

“I know. You have every right to upbraid me. I owe you an apology for this afternoon. I was unspeakably rude.”

“Oh, no. I mean, that isn’t it at all . . .” She set her book down and stood up. Perhaps she would do a better job if she walked around the way Venetia would have.

“The thing is, of course, you do not know my sister very well. If you did, you would see her actions in a very different light. I cannot blame you for protesting her behavior towards our guests; I am sure it must seem both callous and—and somewhat capricious. But she is not like that at all. Perhaps her idea about the hat *was* ill-advised—certainly it turned out to be so, did it not?”

She had circled away from where he was standing and now she turned back to face him. “Truly, she is sweet and generous, quite different from what people think. If only you could understand . . .”

But of course, how could he, when she could not tell him the whole truth? “Venetia does not do such things for amusement. How else are we to know which man would make a good husband? It is not merely our own happiness and future at stake, but a matter of the family fortune and lineage as well . . .”

“Do you not trust your father’s judgment?”

Ah, now how was she to answer that? Naturally a man would see it in such simple terms. But she could not expose her father’s failings any more than she could reveal her own affliction. What would

Venetia say? She was so much better with words.

“Our father has allowed us a certain measure of choice. We take these steps precisely for that reason. There are many men who would, uh, take advantage of our situation. Venetia is only trying to make certain that we know what we are getting. She means no harm by it.”

“I see,” said Lord Cranford.

Vivian could not tell if he understood even slightly. At least she had tried. So much of Venetia’s behavior was for her sake, she could not bear to have him think ill of her twin.

The viscount came up to her and took her right hand. “I think you are the one who is sweet and generous to attempt to defend your sister. I will try to remember what you’ve said. I only hope you two are not looking for perfection to match your own, for you will never find it.” He raised her hand and kissed it.

Vivian sighed. “You are very kind.” *And so handsome, too.* If only he were eligible! He would make a fine husband for anyone. Well, anyone except for her. Any man who was patient, kind, and understanding enough to live with her infirmity should be spared from such a fate. Marriage was not the right future for her, no matter what her father or even Venetia believed. If only she knew how to convince them.

Chapter Seven

Venetia slept badly that night and was still out of sorts when she awoke the following morning. Breakfast in her room and the prospect of the day's planned activities did nothing to improve her state of mind. Later, as she surveyed the simple blue walking dress her maid had laid out for her to wear to the morning's archery competition, she wished she could spend the entire day alone.

Her bad mood had everything to do with the Viscount Cranford and very little to do with her own folly, at least in her own view. If Cranford had not happened along when he did, she thought, she most certainly would not have slipped when she threw her hat into the river, and she would not have needed rescuing. Perhaps Colonel Hatherwick would still have fished the hat out with his fishing pole, but perhaps not. If one of the other gentlemen had gone into the river after it, it would never have floated downstream to where the colonel was indulging his passion. She and Vivian might still have learned something of value about their suitors.

What made it so much worse was the indignity of having fallen in. What a foolish predicament to have gotten into! She felt grateful to Lord Cranford for rescuing her, and at the same time she resented him.

The fact was, she could not put the rescue out of her mind. The image of Lord Cranford's striking eyes and the vivid sensation of his strong arms wrapped around her invaded all her thoughts. Her inability to banish them was ridiculous!

She had actually caught herself thinking that if he was indeed the blackmailer, perhaps marriage to him would not be so terrible. A harebrained notion! Only a heartless, unscrupulous blackguard would

resort to such a tactic as blackmail. The man had to be morally bankrupt, not to mention avaricious and cruel! The fact that she considered such a marriage for even a moment proved how thoroughly Lord Cranford had confused her. She was sorry to think that Nicholas was such a poor judge of friends, but who else could be the villain? Lord Cranford was the only stranger among them. All the other guests had been handpicked by her father and Aunt Alice and were well-known among the *haut ton*.

A light rap on her door brought her back to the present. Vivian entered, her face showing a perfect mixture of surprise, concern, and reproof.

“Netia! You are not even dressed. Aunt Alice is already gathering everyone. Are you feeling unwell? I hardly knew what to think when you did not wish any company for breakfast.”

How can I explain? Venetia thought. She had never held anything back from her twin before now, but Vivian did not share her suspicions about Lord Cranford. Vivian had not felt the viscount’s arms around her, or looked up into those eyes at a moment when time seemed to stand still. How could Vivi possibly understand the confusion that was tormenting her?

“Where is Millie? Did you send her out? Shall I help you to dress instead?” Vivian asked. “I guess I had better. You are standing there as if you have forgotten how to move.”

Venetia sighed. Not sharing her trouble with her sister made her feel even worse. “I wish we could swap places, Vivi. You could be me and I could suffer an attack of ‘delicate nerves,’ as father calls it, and stay in my room all day.”

Of course she didn’t mean it. She said it unthinkingly, more to herself than to her sister, but Vivian looked stricken. “Oh, Netia. What a terrible thing to wish for! Anyway, I wouldn’t dare to take your place. What if I had a seizure?”

Venetia rushed across to hug her sister, her own frustrations swept aside. “I wasn’t serious, Vivi! You know I’ll always stand by you. If I could wish for anything, it would be that you could be cured. Or that the accident never happened, so we could have Mama back, too.”

If she was utterly, ruthlessly honest, Venetia had to admit that a tiny spark of envy did lurk

somewhere in her dark side—a horrible, unattractive reality. Just occasionally she did wish she could have an excuse to get away from everything the way Vivian could when she suffered a seizure. Venetia had cast herself in the role of caretaker, but sometimes she grew weary of the part—indeed, sometimes she felt as though the weight of it might actually break her. When she was tempted to throw off that mantle, she would think of the burden that Vivian carried and knew that her own would never be so heavy.

“Here, do help me to dress,” she said to break the awkward moment. “I don’t know what is the matter with me this morning. This gown is a good choice for today, is it not? Just the right color—blue for ‘blue-deviled.’ Perhaps I am just discouraged that we have made so little progress in our investigations. We are no closer to discovering either our poet or our blackmailer than when we started.”

Vivian gathered up the walking dress and held it up at arm’s length. “Is that what was bothering you last night? You were very quiet again at dinner, and you were paying very little attention while we played charades and anagrams. Why, Netia, you did not even thank Lord Cranford for rescuing you from the river—I noticed that you did not go near him once all evening. ’Tis not like you to be so thoughtless.”

Was Vivian testing for a reaction? Did she suspect something? She was fishing very near the truth. “Did I not thank him?” Venetia said innocently, tying the ribbon closure of her chemisette and straightening the ruff at her neck. “Oh dear. I must make certain to do that—I never meant to slight him. Did he seem offended?”

“No,” Vivian answered thoughtfully. “He seemed preoccupied, although I’d say he seemed content to stay away from you.”

Venetia only paused for half a heartbeat. “Perhaps he was afraid I would need to be rescued again. Seriously, perhaps he is afraid to get close for fear we’ll discover he is the blackmailer. I wish we knew how to find out for certain. If only the servants had known something, or the note had yielded some usable clue. I wish we could discover something—anything.” She held out her arms to receive the dress.

“I wish that you would discover Lord Cranford is not the blackmailer, so we could begin to look for someone else.”

What Venetia really longed for at that moment was for Lord Cranford and the rest of the guests as well to disappear out of Rivington and her life altogether. She knew the chance of that, however. “If only we had some magic wishes,” she said. “I’d give anything for these two weeks to be over, or better yet, to have never begun.”

Venetia’s was not the only bad mood to be found in Rivington that morning. Gilbey, too, had spent a tormented evening and a restless night. He was certain that if even a hint of how he was feeling showed on his face, no one would dare to come near him or speak to him. He got through breakfast civilly, but now as he joined the other guests for the archery tournament, he wondered if putting a weapon into his hands would be wise. Suppose he just happened to mistake Lord Wistowe for one of the targets?

He had to admire the arrangements for the competition, despite his black mood. The range had been set up on a south-facing lawn at the far end of the walled garden, with targets at measured intervals at the bottom of the slope. Instead of the standard round targets, the figures of medieval knights in armor had been painted on canvas and attached to hay bales. Gilbey liked that—it suited his state of mind perfectly. If he wished he could even attach names to the figures; he would likely name one as Nicholas, who deserved a few shots for bringing him to Rivington in the first place. At the top of the slope a gaily striped canopy offered shade for the ladies, and bright pennants on poles fluttered in the breeze.

“Care to make a wager? Highest score, lowest score, most lost arrows, whatever you wish.” Lord Munslow’s voice penetrated Gilbey’s thoughts.

Gilbey turned around and saw Lord Chesdale gesturing at the other earl with his quizzing glass in hand. “Five pounds says you’ll lose your money no matter what you wager.” That could be nearly half a

year's pay for one of their servants, Gilbey reflected. Behind the two earls several other guests laughed.

Gilbey stepped away before they could try to include him in their wagering. Not to join in would be considered unsporting, but he hated to squander his resources. An altogether different danger was that Lady Norbridge might notice him standing alone, a fate he wished to avoid. Finding Nicholas seemed like a good idea until he saw him standing by the rack of bows waiting for the archers, with Lady Elizabeth close beside him.

"Are you skilled at archery, Lord Cranford?" Lady Caroline Sainsberry, the daughter of the Earl and Countess of Upcott, had quietly come up behind him. Gilbey rather liked Lady Caroline—although she looked fragile with her curly blond hair and porcelain skin, her conversation focused primarily on horses and sport. She was not loud and did not put on airs like the twins' cousin Adela.

"I'm afraid not," he said, feeling rather guilty at the lie. He had won his college archery cup for two years in a row, but he was determined to excel at mediocrity on this day. There would be no accidents, no dramatic rescues, nothing to draw attention or rile the legitimate suitors.

"A pity," said the young woman. "It would be so lovely to see someone best that gaggle of popinjays." She inclined her head toward the wagering gentlemen. "I thought you might be just the one to do it." Forced to reconsider, she surveyed the other guests. "Hm, perhaps Lord Newcroft. He acquitted himself rather well in the games yesterday . . ."

She wandered away, leaving Gilbey a clear view of the twins as they arrived. They stopped for a moment, framed by the green archway of clipped yews that opened onto the lawn. One sister was clad in blue and the other in a deep rose color, but Gilbey had to think and observe them for an instant before he could tell which twin was which. Then he smiled.

Venetia was in blue. He could tell by the elegant way she stood, and by the way she held her head. Vivian tended to keep her hands behind her back and spent a good deal more of her time looking at the ground than her sister. Venetia could be counted upon to toss her head every so often in a way that reminded him of a spirited mare. He almost laughed when she did so just at the moment he thought of it.

Then there was something new, he had realized. Venetia preferred hats. Not for her the demurely closed bonnets that Vivian favored. The one she had thrown into the river yesterday had been a simple confection of cork and silver gray crepe, and this one, though narrower in the brim, was trimmed primarily with blue ribbons to match her dress. No foolish fantasies of flowers, fruit, or feathers for her. There was a single large feather, but it curled around the side of the crown quite sensibly, instead of sticking up like a weather vane ready to catch the slightest breeze. He suddenly realized that he was smiling in approval, and turned away.

What was he doing? Was this the way to get Lady Venetia off his mind? He didn't want to admire her, like her, or be around her—he didn't even want to see her. *And that is as much a lie as what you told Lady Caroline*, said a little voice in his head.

The call went up for the archers to prepare to shoot. Gilbey, his black mood restored, went over and snatched up arrows and a bow at random. Nicholas had gotten him into this coil, but he had only himself to blame for agreeing to help. If only he hadn't! He would not now feel honorbound to stay. How much simpler just to leave! From what he had seen so far, there was no lack of supervision over the young ladies. Nicholas seemed so taken up by Lady Elizabeth he did not appear to be in any way concerned.

The archers took their places along a line marked in the grass and listened while the Duke of Roxley's gamekeeper gave them instructions. Gilbey was intrigued in spite of himself. They were to shoot at each of the targets in succession, beginning with the farthest one, as if an enemy were advancing upon them. They would have six seconds to shoot at each target.

How does one defeat an enemy who is advancing from within? Gilbey thought as he nocked his first arrow and positioned himself to shoot. A powerful force was at work in him, and he did not know how to stop it. His heart and mind refused to follow the course he had set for his life—to avoid the mistake his father had made.

Gilbey closed one eye and sighted along the shaft of his arrow, waiting for the command to begin. He had always liked the pressure of timed shooting—it added an element of excitement to an activity

that sometimes seemed closer to science than sport.

When the command came, he reacted reflexively. In that initial instant, nothing existed but the bow, the arrow, the target, and himself. Inside his head a clock began to tick off the six seconds. With the smooth ease of long practice, he pulled and released.

“By Jove, you’ve nailed the fellow right through the heart,” Lord Amberton exclaimed.

Most of the first shower of arrows had missed widely.

“Who do you think you are, Cupid?”

More like that mythical cherub’s victim, Gilbey reflected as he prepared his next shot. Surely he was the one who had taken a direct hit to the heart. The love arrow’s poison was spreading through his system even as he stood there trying not to think of Venetia watching him. He released again, and this time his arrow had no difficulty in missing the target altogether.
