

The Rake's Unconventional Mistress

Juliet Landon

REGENCY



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Historical

Juliet Landon

The Rake's Unconventional Mistress

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Indulge your fantasies of delicious Regency Rakes, fierce Viking warriors and rugged Highlanders. Be swept away into a world of intense passion, lavish settings and romance that burns brightly through the centuriesThe Rake and the Spinster School-ma'am Miss Letitia Boyce didn't begrudge her sisters their fun with the pick of London's available bachelors. She'd chosen her path and knew book-learning and marriage rarely mixed. Her proof was Lord Seton Rayne, who had made it abundantly clear that an unmarried school-ma'am was of no interest to him – no matter her good connections. Wealthy and titled, one of the most notorious rakehells in town, Seton had every heiress hurling herself at him. So his sudden kissing of captivating, unconventional Letitia took them both by surprise...Ladies of Paradise Road High Society Scandal and Seduction

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'I've never taken a kiss from a school-ma'am before.

'It's a novelty. Worth repeating, I think.'

'No...*no*! Don't *dare* to handle me so.'

Letitia's fury was not only for his contemptuous embrace, but for herself, too, for she ought to have seen it coming, or at least made it more difficult than she had.

He watched her brilliant flint-stone eyes spark and glisten with rage, her beautiful mouth tremble with shock, and the flippant words he was about to deliver, the laughing retort, did not emerge as he intended. His eyes grew serious, suddenly contrite. 'A woman of independence and courage,' he said, relaxing his grip.

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

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

THE RAKE'S UNCONVENTIONAL MISTRESS is the third in the *Ladies of Paradise Road* trilogy. They feature descendants of characters you will have met in ONE NIGHT IN PARADISE.

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**Ladies of Paradise Road*

Dear Reader

If you take a peep at the first pages of any Mills & Boon book you'll see (perhaps with a smile) that the address in England really is Paradise Road in Richmond, Surrey, which is also where a great medieval palace stood beside the River Thames. So I made this romantic address the setting for my Regency trilogy, of which this story is the third part, because I felt such an appropriate name ought to be celebrated for the 100th Anniversary. There is, in fact, a previous story—ONE NIGHT IN PARADISE—concerning the distant ancestors of my Regency characters, set in Elizabethan times when the palace was still in use.

What do my Mills & Boon editors think about my using their address for such a romantic purpose? Well, I know that if I were to set a story around the royal manor of Shene (the original name for Richmond) in Anglo-Saxon times, they'd be as enthusiastic about the eleventh century as they have been about all the other periods. They are, of course, as unashamedly romantic and imaginative as their writers and readers—just one of the reasons why working with them is such a joy.

Happy Anniversary, Mills & Boon!

Juliet

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Chapter One

Richmond, Surrey. 1814

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

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

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

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

‘You approve, then?’

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

‘Stop!’ Letitia begged them, laughing. ‘It’s only their first term. They’ll soon be pitching the gammon like the rest of us.’

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

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

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

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

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

But Letitia *was* prejudiced by the other epithets she had heard, not so glowing, that although he was wealthy and titled—and who in their right minds could ignore that?—he was also a rake. And what was her mother doing to allow her younger sisters to be seen exclusively in his company, she would like to have known. Granted, her lovely sisters had reached their twenty-second birthday some

months ago, quite a serious matter for any ambitious mother. But Lord Seton Rayne, younger son of the Marquess of Sheen, must by now have had every heiress in London hurled at him, despite his reputation, and still he had not made a permanent choice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was not that she begrudged her sisters a single moment of fun with the pick of London's available bachelors, never having enjoyed being caught up in the social whirl of balls, routs and drawing-rooms, house-parties and assemblies. Her twin sisters did, and popular they were, too. Well mannered, well dressed and gregarious, they graced every event with their petite charm and blonde curling hair, not least because there were two of them. Good value by any hostess's standards. By their demanding mother's standards they were worth their weight in gold *and* a liability, for she could not conceive how one could be married without the other, and where did one find two equally wealthy titled bachelors, these days? The twins were just as sceptical.

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

Her late father had understood his daughter perfectly—her socialite mother did not. After her father's sudden death in the hunting field, Letitia had made her bid for complete freedom away from her mother's dominance. Her father would have approved, though it was her mother's elder brother, Uncle Aspinall, who had helped her to purchase Number 24 Paradise Road in Richmond, in the county of Surrey. He had also been the only one of her relatives, apart from her sisters, to approve of her plan to open a seminary there.

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

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

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

‘It was never my wish to be an embarrassment, Mama, and I have nothing against men, or marriage, or families, either. But I have never been able to understand why educating one’s mind is acceptable in a man, but frowned on in a woman. Papa never thought women’s brains were inferior to men’s, did he? It was he who taught me to read.’

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

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

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

It was from both parents that Letitia had inherited the height that had not afflicted her sisters to the same extent. For a woman, she was taller than average, which had never done much to help when she was obliged to look down upon so many of her dancing partners. Sitting down with men to talk was more comfortable for both parties, Letitia being blessed with a serene loveliness that, combined with an ability to talk interestingly and without affectation on any number of current affairs, captivated the more liberal-minded men of her acquaintance. Whether it helped for her to have fine ash-blonde hair that strayed in wisps over her face and neck resisting all efforts to contain it, or to have large eyes the colour of thunderclouds rimmed by unusually dark lashes, or to have a figure that Juno herself would have been proud to own, were not things that occupied Letitia’s mind, for in the wide uncharted territory of men’s preferences she was lamentably ignorant.

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

If Letitia was affected by this lopsided state of affairs, she never let it show except, occasionally, by an inclination to pity both the men and women who lived by such shallow conventions. Nevertheless, the stark truth was that book-learning and marriage rarely mixed and that, as she had

now earned a reputation as being 'Lady Boyce's unconventional eldest daughter', she was highly unlikely to find a mate of *haut ton* as her mother would have preferred.

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

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

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

'*That* kind of thing. Novels. Racy novels.'

'Is it racy, Mama?'

'Oh, I don't know, dears. It looks racy to me. What's it called? *Waynethorpe Manor*? *Sure* to be.'

'So you haven't read it, Mama?'

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

'Then how can you judge it, Mama?'

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

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

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

Waynethorpe Manor

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

London

Printed for the Mercury Press, Leadenhall Street

1814

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

Letitia chuckled. 'Perhaps I shall look through it first, and, if I think it's suitable, I'll lend you my copy. I would not wish to offend your mamas. Now,' she said, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece, 'it's almost time for our accounting lesson. Mr Waverley will be arriving at any moment, and we must not keep him waiting. Leave your paintings as they are, and we'll come back to them after tea. Come, girls, into the parlour.'

Rewrapping the volumes, she carried them away to safety.

The Honourable Bartholomew Waverley was indeed arriving on foot as she spoke, to take the Friday lesson that would, in theory at least, initiate Miss Boyce's pupils into the mysteries of household accounting that every good wife, wealthy or not, needed to know. It was the kind of thing Letitia included in her curriculum, which other seminaries did not, and so far there had been plenty of parents who agreed with her that it was essential learning. Mr Waverley had been a friend of Letitia's since they had met at a lecture to which her father had taken her many years ago in London. By good fortune, he lived in a beautiful house that faced north-west across Richmond Green, and his willingness to become involved as escort, guide and tutor was one of the reasons why Letitia was

sure she could take on such a responsibility. Their relationship was warm, but never more than that—more like that of brother and sister. They were both quite content to have it so.

Mr Waverley was not only a reliable friend, but also an excellent companion who saw nothing remarkable in Letitia's exceptional interest in subjects deemed to be a man's territory. They attended meetings and discussion groups together where his keen mind and knowledge of things scientific and mathematical balanced nicely against her preference for the arts subjects. He was, in fact, the perfect friend. He stood with his feet upon the fanlight's semi-circular shadow that fell upon the Axminster. 'I'm standing on your cheese segments.' He grinned.

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

'With Gaddy?'

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

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

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

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

'Yes. The twins have been.'

'Oh? Not Lady Boyce?'

'No. They brought me something, Bart.'

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

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

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

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

'Promise?'

'I promise.'

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

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

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

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

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

The quill was laid to rest as a shuddering sigh wafted across the page, and for several moments she stared at the words as if someone else had written them. But that was what writers must do to record every scrap of information that came their way, especially writers to whom such things came with exceptional rarity, as one had today. Was it worth recording? she asked herself, closing the book and returning it to the drawer. Yes, it was. Comfortable or not, she could hardly afford to let it pass, her experience of men being what it was.

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

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

While Mr Waverley rode round to the south side of the palace where his mother had a grace-and-favour residence, Letitia led the way round to The Green, and from there in through the West Gate, which, she had been informed, would lead them directly to the place where they could leave the horses and go on foot into the courtyards.

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

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

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

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

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

'No, sir. I was not!'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One lightning-quick glance told her that his eyes were as brown as chestnuts, hard and mocking, and that it would not be the first time he had ever had a woman so completely at a disadvantage. Still, she refused to give him any more ammunition, it being clear that her ungracious retort yesterday was remembered and that he was angered by today's unladylike response in front of his men. It *had* been unladylike. There was no getting away from that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'No,' he growled, 'this is not what I offer your sisters, Miss Boyce. I am not offering anything, but *taking* your apology. No one is allowed to walk off my parade ground yelling insults at me, not

even a woman. Besides, I've never taken a kiss from a schoolma'am before. It's a novelty. Worth repeating, I think.'

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

Her fury was not only for his contemptuous embrace, but for herself, too, for she ought to have seen it coming, or at least made it more difficult than she had. There was also the painful truth that her first kiss from a man had been taken from her with such ill will rather than for reasons of tenderness and affection that she had always believed were the prerequisites for lovemaking. His intention had quite obviously been to chasten her, making it doubly humiliating.

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

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

He might have smiled at the strong language, but his mouth formed a soft whistle instead while his eyes took in the neat waist and voluptuous curves, the arch of her back and the proud tilt of her head on the long neck, which yesterday she had kept hidden. He cleared his throat. 'I know this place like the back of my hand. I will be glad to—'

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

'What were you trying to find?' he said, ignoring the innuendo.

She had to give in, or run into yet more problems. 'The Gold Staff Gallery. Lady Waverley's apartments.'

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

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

'Lettie! Lettie, where are you?'

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

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

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

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

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

'As lads,' said Mr Waverley. 'Both at Winchester together. Live in the same town, too. I never went in for all *this* stuff, though.' He grinned, flipping a hand towards the silver frogging across Rayne's broad chest.

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

Chapter Two

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

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

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

Mrs Quayle of Number 22 knew his brother. 'That's Lord Elyot,' she said to Miss Gaddestone, holding her broken parasol across her knees. 'Lady Elyot's a lovely lady. She's on the Richmond Vestry Committee, in charge of the strays that wander into the town.'

'Stray dogs?'

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

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

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

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

Tonight, the pen refused to speak for her.

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

That, she told herself, was half the problem, for while she could see perfectly to read and write, to sew and draw, she needed her spectacles to be able to see *anything* clearly at a distance, and only

amongst friends would she have been seen wearing them. If only she'd had the courage to wear them that afternoon, she might have been able to anticipate the trouble before it happened. Locking away her notebook, she reached for her reticule and took out the leather-and silver-banded case that held her plain steel-rimmed eyeglasses.

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

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

'In public? Never.'

'In public, ma'am. You mark my words.'

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

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

Her notebook was her lifeline, a personal record, added to daily, where not only her own thoughts and experiences were logged, but other people's, too, including those of her pupils, relatives and friends: their mannerisms, figures of speech, and the tales they recounted. Descriptions of places were important, too, which had been one of her reasons for wanting to visit Hampton Court Palace that day. She needed the details, the colours and scale, the sounds and patterns. She had returned with an indigestible muddle of emotions, too contradictory to string together in words.

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

Later that night, however, long after Orla had plaited her tresses into a silver pigtail as thick as a wrist, the notebook was brought out for a second airing to receive a scattering of adjectives, which, while they added colour to a new kind of scene, had little to do with the emotion that simmered behind it. Nevertheless, as she climbed back into bed, she could not resist taking a look at two faint bluish marks on her upper arm. 'Lout!' she whispered. 'Ill-mannered boor!' He would have laughed about her with his comrades, for certain, marking up a score for the superior male sex.

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

Feeling unsociable and critical of his behaviour that afternoon, he had left the company of his brother and sister-in-law, unable to convince himself that Miss Lettie Boyce deserved all she got.

Nonplussed by his uncharacteristic discourtesy, he wondered what devilry had made him follow her, insisting on playing out an incident that would have been better put behind them. A bevy of silly females and a deaf coachman were not, after all, the worst thing that could have happened to disrupt his exercise. To make matters worse, the woman he had shamed was the elder sister of the twins he was currently escorting, the sister they had fondly told him about.

He had formed a picture of a dowd, a frumpish bookworm securely on the shelf. He had caught a glimpse of her yesterday when she had clearly formed *her* own picture of *him* and decided he was not worth her civility. So he had not suffered any guilt at dismissing her as a sharp-tongued hen-of-the-game, even without a closer look. But today he'd seen her on horseback, superb, stylish and proud, the only one of the women to keep control of her mount. Later, he had come across her in that grubby little room where her dignity had been no less impressive, defying him, refusing to be intimidated, spitting fire from her remarkable eyes and rousing in him the kind of aggression he kept only for male opponents with whom he fenced and boxed. Never before had he vented it on a woman.

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

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

'Dear Miss Phoebe,' said Rayne, taking her hand between his own, 'I remember it well, and so does he. But I usually return to barracks on Sunday evening ready for work in the morning.' From the corner of his eye he could see the tall plume of dark blue feathers on a velvet hat moving towards the west door, and he knew that, if he stayed talking to Miss Phoebe, his chance would be lost.

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

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

The terraced three-storey building on Maids of Honour Row facing the Green was well known to the Richmond set as one of the most popular literary salons outside London, not only for its attraction to 'blues and wits', but as a place of political neutrality where complete freedom of speech was actively encouraged. The home of the two elderly Misses Binney, both of them highly intelligent and well educated, its guest lists were noted for assembling people of all ages and experiences, the only requirement being that their manners must be impeccable and that they must contribute to the evening with at least a modicum of cleverness. Needless to say, an invitation to one of their 'supper parties' was an honour few ever declined and, as the best society hostesses were celebrated for their brilliant repartee, the contribution of women to the discussions, whatever the subject, was treated with due seriousness.

When Rayne arrived with Lord and Lady Elyot, the drawing room already buzzed with conversation, and the first notes of a song on the piano, followed by a voice, then laughter, made them smile even before the door closed behind them. Heads turned with greetings, absorbing them

into the pool of black and grey, ivory and amber, the blue-white flash of diamonds and the wink of a quizzing-glass.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Well, of course I have, love. I was one of the first people she contacted about opening a seminary in Richmond when there are already six others, not to mention all the boys’ academies. As a member of the Vestry, I was probably in the best position to discuss the idea with her, and had she not proposed to make hers different from the others in many ways, I’d not have been so encouraging. Besides, I know her mother, as you do.’

‘What ways?’

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

‘No, I wouldn’t,’ he said.

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

‘To cook? What on earth for?’

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

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

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

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

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

‘Not yet.’

‘She will.’

‘She’ll only try it once, Amelie.’

‘Oh, so you’re not *so* keen, then?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Then a word in your ear, old friend. A little less of the condescending manner. Miss Austen and most of the ladies here could give you an intellectual run for your money any day of the week, so if you start off in patronising mode, you’ll find yourself tied up like a bull in a pen. Just be warned.’

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

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

‘Good grief. Then I’d better tread carefully.’

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

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

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

Among others, Miss Boyce wanted to know what his plans were for the Royal Academy Exhibition. 'You only presented one painting last year, Mr Turner. Will there be more than one this year?'

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

'Dido?' said Miss Boyce, promptly. 'Dido and Aeneas?'

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

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

Rather than move her spectacles up, she tilted back her head to look down her nose, just as Mr Turner had done a moment earlier. 'Help, Lord Rayne?' she said, scanning his figure like the proverbial schoolma'am with a tardy child. 'Help? Why, no, I thank you. Your assistance, I seem to remember, comes at the kind of price I'm not prepared to pay. Go back to your gaming tables and whatever Sunday-evening company you usually keep. You seem to be out of your depth here.'

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

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

'You flatter me, ma'am.'

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

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

'To your level? Heaven forbid. I fear I should be trampled on.' Tucking her folded glasses into her reticule, she turned away, heading once again for the supper room.

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

Without a word, he took the plate from her hand, placed a selection of bite-sized delicacies upon it and gave it back to her, poured two glasses of lemonade and bade her follow him. 'This way,'

he said, as if he could sense her relief. He found a vacant sofa beside a table and waited for her to be seated before he asked, 'May I?'

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

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

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

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

Dipping her head with a genteel snort of laughter, she turned her dark grey eyes to him at last. 'Lord Rayne, my imagination is in perfect working order, I assure you, but there are some things it would find quite impossible to tackle. That is one of them.' As she spoke, her eyes found the black frockcoat and white breeches of her friend, resting there affectionately. 'Mr Waverley's manners are faultless,' she said. Picking up one of the tiny squares of pastry, she placed it absently in her mouth, still watching until, catching her companion's amused expression, she realised what she had done. Instantly, she stopped chewing and blinked.

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

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

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

'Don't be bamboozled by *that*,' she said.

'Why not? Is it not true?'

'Because,' she said, taking another piece and studying it, 'there is a limit to the length of time I can stay blue-devilled, that's why. I have rarely had reason to hold a grudge against anyone, so I lack the practice. I suppose it's a form of laziness, but I find the effort not worth the reward. I might have been able to keep up a high dudgeon for a few more weeks if there were not so many people known to both of us who would wonder why I insisted on being so uncivil to you. Which I *could*.' The piece disappeared into her mouth at last.

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

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

Taking the glass of lemonade, she downed half the contents in one go, replaced the glass on the table and, withdrawing her spectacles from her reticule, replaced them on her nose. Then, treating

him to an innocent wide-eyed stare, she rose. 'Thank you for sharing your supper with me,' she said sweetly, and walked away to join a group, linking her arm through one of them like a favourite niece.

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

Chapter Three

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

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

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

For a woman possessed of such an independent spirit, the delight of being well paid to do what she most enjoyed was a welcome boost to her confidence that had given her the courage to set out along her own path. Her father's legacy and her uncle's active encouragement had made it possible. Now she was truly a woman of means, and if that brought with it a certain non-conformity that made her family uncomfortable, then it would have to be so. She could devise her own romances and walk away from them without the slightest loss of sleep.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Indeed. Elocution and music on Monday mornings. The "voice day" we call it.'

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

Beneath such a misplaced tribute, Letitia was faced with an instant dilemma of whether to accept it with thanks and to say nothing about Miss Austen's suspicion, or whether to confide in her about the writing, which no one but Mr Waverley knew of. It was a decision that could not be delayed, for upon her response would depend the true nature of any future friendship. On the one hand, Miss Austen would see nothing especially difficult in admitting to a profession at which she herself was a success but, on the other, the kind of writing for which 'A Lady of Quality' was known would most certainly not come within Miss Austen's approval. The friendship would end before it had begun. Letitia could not bring herself to shock so excellent a writer whose books she truly admired, for it had been made quite clear during their previous discourse that Miss Austen's opinion of writers who 'stepped over the bounds of propriety with too colourful imaginations', as she had delicately phrased it, were definitely not to be recommended.

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

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

‘About May, I think. It seems so long since I began writing it I can sometimes scarce remember what it’s about. It isn’t quite the seamless progress it appears to those not in the business,’ she explained. ‘*Mansfield Park* was begun in the year 1811, almost three years ago, but there are usually some overlaps when parts have to be revised or even rewritten, and then I may find I have two books in hand, the one I *thought* was finished and the one I’m in the middle of.’

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

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

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

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

‘But before that? In the wooing? The relationship of lovers?’

There was a pause, and the hands that lay in Miss Austen’s lap began to move and caress. ‘That, too,’ she said. ‘There were two occasions: one of them I had hopes of, the other could never have progressed. I withdrew my consent immediately. It was a mistake. Without love, you see.’ She smiled sadly as the moment of pain lifted. ‘One needs to *feel* the love. It’s the same with writing. One *can* write about the anguish and uncertainty; one can write about the wonderful sensitivities of the mind, men’s minds, too. But as I get older, I realise that it’s the true experiences that have informed my writing as no mere imagination could possibly do, even though it was quite some time ago now. There’s no substitute for sincerity, is there? I think my readers would demand it from me now, Miss Boyce.’

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

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

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

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

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

Her return to Number 24 Paradise Road, taken at a very brisk walk, coincided perfectly with the mid-morning break when the pupils gathered in the garden room to take a cup of chocolate and a biscuit while conversing, as a good hostess should, with the tutors and chaperons. Their lessons that

morning had been more in the nature of rehearsals for, in five days' time, all seven pupils were to entertain an invited audience of local guests, including tutors and parents, at the Richmond home of Sir Francis and Lady Melborough whose daughter Sapphire was a pupil at Letitia's seminary.

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

The afternoon sun and sharp breeze were perfect for their outing to Hampton House, the home of the late Mr David Garrick. That same morning, Letitia's pupils had been studying one of the actor's most acclaimed roles as Shylock in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, and the invitation to visit Garrick's Temple to the Bard had come at a most opportune moment, even if the exuberant playwright Mr Titus Chatterton was hardly the one she would have chosen to escort them. But Mr Chatterton and the old Mrs Garrick were personally acquainted, and this was the kind of connection one needed if six adults and seven young ladies were to descend upon a frail ninety-year-old widow all on the same afternoon.

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

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

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

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

One young man, more reckless than the rest, cantered on to the grass beside her, laughing at his comrades for their prudence. A sharp command brought the young man's mount wheeling round on its haunches and, before Letitia could turn to look, the captain's bay gelding was beside her, towering over her dainty mare, garnished with tassels and braids and padded with several inches of white sheepskin under the ornate saddle. Shining black boots and silver spurs caught her eye, but she would not look at him. In front of her, the swish of a tail away, Jane Doveley's horse had taken a fancy to walking crab-wise, highlighting yet again the sad fact that all was not as it should be with the young riders and their mounts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Well, I, er...’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Entering the riverside grounds of Hampton House, she left Mr Waverley and Mr Thomas to dismiss the cavalry in whatever way they chose, going with the playwright Mr Chatterton to meet their hostess in the sadly neglected mansion that David Garrick had lovingly referred to as ‘his pretty place by the Thames-side.’ Bound to the upkeep of two grand houses under her husband’s will, old Mrs Garrick was now reduced to doing almost everything for herself and understandably did not wish anyone to see the dilapidations of the house. She was happy for them to go down to Mr Garrick’s ‘Temple to Shakespeare’ by the river, which is what they had most hoped to see.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'No, of course I would not.'

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

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

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

'I'm not exactly *blind*, my lord.'

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

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

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

'I can't see any branch!' she yelped.

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

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

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

'Miss Boyce?'

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

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

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

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

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

'Abominable,' he agreed, smiling broadly.

Chapter Four

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Perhaps I should have used different initials.'

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

Her friend's approval of *Waynethorpe Manor*, however, satisfied her that the author's lack of emotional experience had not in any way affected his enjoyment, though whether she could convince her readers for a third time remained to be seen.

'What's the new one about?' he asked.

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

'Which pupil?'

'Any one of them. Inexperienced. Looking for excitement.'

'Looking for love, you mean.'

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

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

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

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

'Edina Strachan? In what way?'

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

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

'Good grief, no, I do not. She's either still homesick or lovesick, I tell you. Perhaps something happened while she was at home at Easter. You might keep an eye on the situation.'

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

But Mrs Quayle, the widow in whose house next door the three boarders had rooms, had nothing to add to Mr Waverley's observations. 'Homesickness, my dear,' she said that evening. 'It's only her second term away from home. We may have to work harder on her Scottish lilt, for if she cannot be

understood, she's not going to make much headway in the marriage mart, is she? Perhaps we could get Mr Thomas to give her an extra half-hour each week?

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

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

'Yes. Thank you.'

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

That evening, Edina's early signs were written into the notebook with some elaboration to make up for what Letitia had not personally observed.

* * *

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

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

'Visiting me? You must be bamming!'

'Has he?'

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

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

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

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

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

'No,' said Persephone, pouting.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'French, with Madame du Plessis, Uncle.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Yes, Miss Boyce. Of course I will.'

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

As it transpired, this particular problem faded into insignificance beside the others of that evening. Though she had made every effort to present her pupils to perfection in appearance, manners and performance, the one who outshone them all without the slightest effort was herself. Gowned modestly in palest oyster silk and ivory lace, her aristocratic breeding and her refined silvery loveliness drew the eyes of the appreciative audience before, during and after each individual contribution. Making good use of her gold enamelled scissors-spectacles that hung from a ribbon looped about her wrist, she was able to see most of what was happening while combining an image of seriousness with a charming eccentricity, for the folding spectacle was not an easy accessory to use.

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

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

Sir Francis and Lady Melborough had taken a fancy to Letitia from the start, looking upon her at times as one of the family, though it had always been one of her policies to maintain a respectful distance between herself and the pupils' parents to avoid any appearance of favouritism. Lady Melborough was a perfect forecast of how Sapphire would look in another twenty years, kindly and flighty and of a more blue-blooded ancestry than Sir Francis. She had prepared well for this event, her house being the most perfect setting, high-ceilinged and spacious, gold-and-white walled, moulded and mirrored.

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

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

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

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

This was the first time she had seen Lord Rayne in evening dress, and she found it difficult to reconcile the former soldier in regimentals with the quietly dressed beau in charcoal-grey tail-coat, left open to show a waistcoat of grey silk brocade. Whatever else she disliked about him, she could not fault his style. 'Warning?' she said. 'Are you the right person to be warning me of *that*?'

'Of what, Miss Boyce?'

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

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

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

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