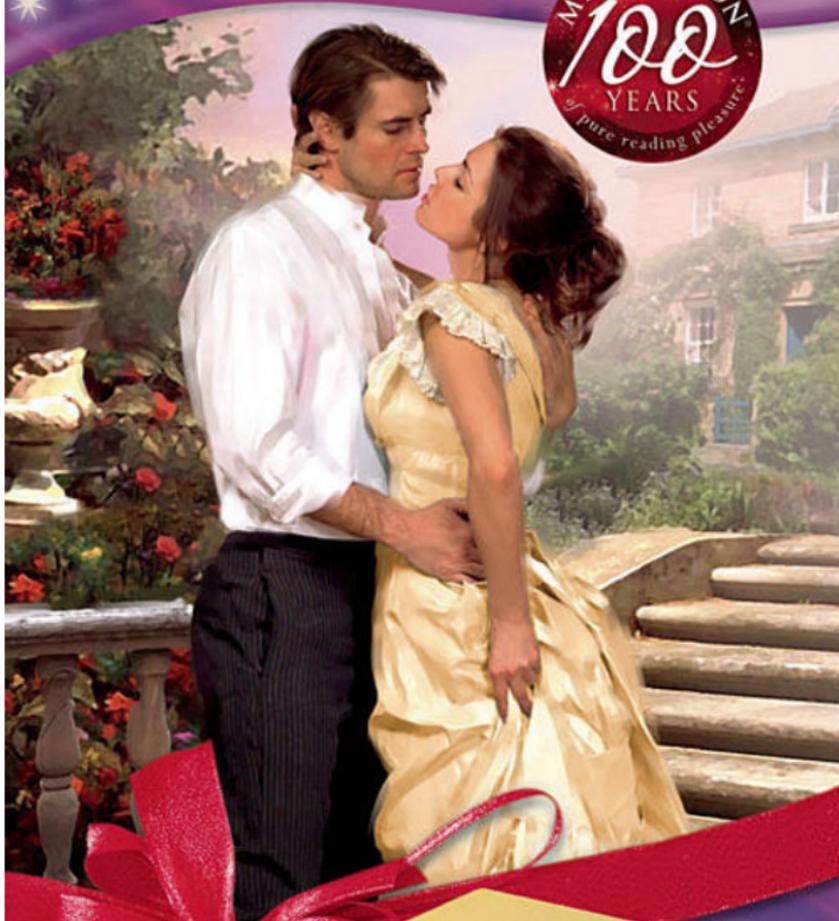
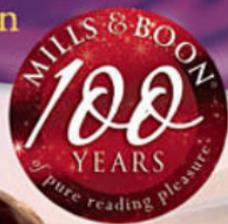


Scandalous Secret, Defiant Bride

Helen Dickson



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Historical

Helen Dickson

Scandalous Secret, Defiant Bride

Аннотация

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 centuries. Claiming the Marchesi bride. Some call Christina Thornton spoilt, others simply call her beautiful. But one thing's for certain: she's a young woman firmly in charge of her own destiny...or so she thinks! When the dark-hearted Count Marchesi rides into town, it is to claim Miss Thornton as his bride. Christina's stubborn protests are of no use, for her future is in the hands of this brooding Italian. But how long can wilful Christina resist her passionate husband, when her heart is urging her to give in...?

Содержание

SCANDALOUS SECRET, DEFIANT BRIDE	6
Prologue	7
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	86

Eyes narrowed, with a proud lift to her head, she waded out of the water and moved towards him, seemingly not in the least embarrassed at confronting a complete stranger in her sodden petticoat.

‘I trust you’ve had an edifying look, sir—pretending to be a gentleman, riding about the countryside on a fine horse on the look-out for poor, defenceless girls.’

Max smiled. ‘You? Defenceless? Now you do exaggerate. Something tells me you are afraid of no one.’ Her clenched fists and rose-tinted cheeks, the brilliance of her green eyes, told him so.

The accented voice was courteous enough, which only seemed to exacerbate Christina’s temper. ‘Have you nothing better to do with your time?’

‘I can’t think of anything more pleasurable just now than looking at you,’ he replied easily. ‘I was merely out riding.’

‘Then you must be a stranger, otherwise you would know you are trespassing. This is private land.’

A slow, appreciative smile worked its way across his face as his eyes raked her from head to toe once more and then moved back to her furious eyes. ‘A thousand apologies. I hadn’t realised. But my crime—if that is what it is—was well worth it.’

Helen Dickson was born and still lives in South Yorkshire, with her husband, on a busy arable farm where she combines writing with keeping a chaotic farmhouse. An incurable romantic, she writes for pleasure, owing much of her inspiration

to the beauty of the surrounding countryside. She enjoys reading and music. History has always captivated her, and she likes travel and visiting ancient buildings.

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FORBIDDEN LORD

SCANDALOUS SECRET, DEFIANT BRIDE

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Prologue

During the quiet of the afternoon heat, when everyone was at rest and nothing moved in Castello Marchesi in the Tuscan hills, the boy crept up the curving staircase and gingerly went towards the nursery. Pushing open the door, holding his breath, he halted on the threshold and peered inside. The light was subdued, the curtains having been partly drawn, one of them fluttering in the gentle breeze from an open window.

Rosa, the nursemaid, was nowhere to be seen, but he knew she wouldn't mind him being there. Looking directly ahead of him, his eyes came to rest on a cradle with diaphanous curtains.

Tiptoeing across the richly patterned carpet, he peered uncertainly over the side at the tiny bundle lying there—a girl just six weeks old. Inhaling the innocent fragrance of her, studying her face with a smile of wonder, he watched her sleep.

As he looked at her he felt a stabbing pain of joy to his heart and tears sprang to his eyes. Never had anything moved him as this child did, and with infinite gentleness he reached out his hand and touched the tiny fingers curled into a ball on the pillow beside her cheek. They twitched and he smiled, his bright blue eyes alight with tenderness.

‘Do you know how beautiful you are?’ he said aloud to the child, and then, more softly. ‘You are the most beautiful little girl I have ever seen.’

The child's eyes opened a moment—emerald green and sparkling, exquisite they were—unusual, the boy thought, he had been told that all babies' eyes were blue when they were born. They fluttered closed and he laughed softly. 'Oh, you little beauty,' he whispered, his heart aching for his own empty childhood. 'You see, little one,' he murmured, lightly brushing her cheek with the backs of his fingers, 'already I disturb your dreams. With eyes as lovely as yours you will set the whole world alight. If only you knew what trouble your arrival has created.'

This was true, for what a terrible time that had been when Lydia, the baby's mother, had died. Her father, Roberto, unable to cope with the grief of losing his beloved wife, had appeared at Castello Marchesi with the child and faced his mother, the boy's step-grandmama, and begged her to take the child. From where he sat in a secluded part of the balcony reading his book, he had heard it all.

Looking through the glass doors his gaze had been drawn to his step-grandmama. Tall and thin with a spine ramrod straight, her eyes were alight with the brilliance of a demon as she glared at her son. Although he hadn't known Lydia well, he was aware that she had been a wilful, spirited young woman—unlike her husband, who was totally subordinate to his formidable mother. As always, it was his step-grand-mama's voice that prevailed. Roberto had sat cowed, too distraught to put up a defence. That was when he had heard his own father calling his name from the drive below and he'd turned away.

Leaving the child to sleep, he left the nursery, only to return the next day clutching a small fluffy bear as a gift. But things were not right. Rosa was folding a basket of freshly laundered clothes on the table, and he saw that she was quietly weeping. His eyes went to the cradle and slowly he walked towards it and bent to look inside. It was empty.

He straightened slowly and turned, looking at Rosa with a sudden tension on his face. 'Rosa? Where is she? Where is the baby?'

'Oh, she's gone.'

'Gone? Gone where?'

'The English lady and gentleman—you remember, they came yesterday. The lady is the baby's aunt—Lydia's sister. They—have taken her to England.'

'You mean Grandmama has given her away?' He stood transfixed, unable and unwilling to believe the old lady would do such a cruel thing. 'But—Roberto will look after her. He is her father.'

'Roberto has gone.' She shook her head, sorrow etched into every line of her face. 'He said he was not coming back.' Rosa stopped what she was doing and looked at the boy. His eyes were wide open, his face like a chalk mask. 'The English couple will be her parents from now on,' Rosa said gently, wiping away her own tears, for she had become fond of the child and she would miss her.

'But how can they be? Roberto is still her father.'

‘She will have a new father and a new mother, one who will love her as much as Lydia, which she would not have—’ Rosa bit her lip to stop herself saying more, for Countess Marchesi had laid down a proviso before the couple left. She had insisted that the child be raised knowing who she was and when she was eighteen she would return to Italy and wed her betrothed—this young boy whose heart she had already stirred. Their union would join two of Tuscany’s most successful houses. The boy was at an impressionable age. These things were best left to his family to explain.

‘But this is her home. I thought we would be a family now. Oh, Rosa, this is too cruel.’

Striding out of the nursery, he went to his room and through the French windows out on to the balcony, where the olive groves and the vineyards with rows of ripening grapes spread out before him.

Having told him as gently as she could, Rosa watched him go. She’d never before encountered the pent-up, rigidly controlled grief that the boy displayed, and for the first time she realised his mind was so powerful that it seemed able to completely override all his emotions when he wished. Rosa had cared for him since the moment of his birth—the moment he had taken his first breath and his mother her last.

He was well cared for with everything money could buy, his school in England the very best, but of parental care there was a total lack. His step-grandmother was a cold woman who

grudgingly accepted his presence and wore the air of someone doing a duty where he was concerned. His father was kind, in his brisk, 'spare the rod and spoil the child' manner, but it was Rosa to whom the boy turned for the love and affection he craved, from Rosa, fifty and never married, that he received it.

All manner of things careered through the boy's mind, not the least of which was his own loss, of the child he felt closer to than any human being. It came to him that if the child had been given away then neither his grandmama nor her father could love her—if they did, then they would not have done it.

A dark anger rose up in him as he dwelt on the child's image, and with tears running fast down the coldness of his face—the first and the last he would ever shed—he looked up at the sky, a breathtakingly beautiful blue. And in a firm, clear and defiant voice he said, 'She was mine. That child was mine. One day I will find her. I swear I will.'

Chapter One

1895

It was the sound of her ringing laughter that first drew Maxwell Lloyd to Christina Thornton. Until now only the subdued call of birds, his own quiet breathing and the lazy drone of a browsing bee disturbed the silence of the woodland. Riding slowly along the dim chequered path, he heard more shrieks and laughter, now masculine as well as feminine. He came out of the trees and on to the edge of the small private lake on Sir Henry Thornton's estate. It basked in the benign warmth of the sun and

long tendrils of willow brushed the surface.

On the grass he observed two pairs of men's boots and stockings neatly tucked into the tops. Beside them were two piles of carefully folded trousers, shirts and tweed jackets. A little further apart what he saw brought a smile to his firm lips and told him much about the owner of the possessions. A small pair of leather shoes and more delicate cream stockings had been discarded with less care on the ground, and a red dress had been thrown untidily over a bush—such fine-quality material would not be worn by a servant.

Halting his horse on the edge of the trees, he surveyed the scene before him with astonishment. The sun was hot and the water looked cool and inviting and, had the lake not been occupied by three young things, he would have taken off his clothes and dove into the silent dark depths himself.

Two boisterous young men were cavorting in the water with a young woman scantily clad in what he assumed must be her petticoat. With carefree, wholesome hearts they were too absorbed in their antics to notice him, so he could look his fill.

But he only had eyes for the young woman. In those first dazzling moments he acted as any hot-blooded male would and all he could do was stare as a thrill of excitement ran through his veins. But Maxwell Lloyd was no ordinary man and he recovered at once.

Of medium height and as slender as a wand, her perfectly rounded breasts rose in two delectable white hemispheres above

the lace of her petticoat. Saturated, it clung to her, outlining her body, her hips arched from her small waist, and the perfect shape of her legs. Her breathtaking beauty quickened his soul and stirred his mind with imaginings of what further loveliness lay concealed beneath her flimsy attire. Her hair was an explosion of bright, rich, dark brown curls hanging down her back to her buttocks in a tangled mass. Her face was heart shaped, her mouth like a ripe raspberry.

The two young men, one dark, the other fair, were teasing her mercilessly, splashing her with water and shrieking louder when she tried to back away and fell, dowsing the whole of her in the lake. The fair-haired young man took her hand and hauled her to her feet; not a bit chagrined, with a riotous sense of fun she laughingly threatened them with the same. In mock-terror the two young men immediately dove under the water and, when they emerged, with strong swift strokes began swimming towards the centre of the lake.

The young woman watched them go without attempting to follow. Throwing back her head, she laughed loud, with none of the ladylike posturing of other young ladies of Max's acquaintance.

'Cowards,' she called, shaking her fist high. 'You can look out. When you come back I'll get my own back. I swear I will.'

Max was riveted. Vibrant and vital, she had a freshness and a delightful simplicity that captured his attention.

Suddenly her back stiffened and she became still, like a

young animal that has caught the scent of danger. She spun round and her gaze flew directly to where horse and rider stood. Eyes narrowed, with a proud lift to her head she waded out of the water and moved towards him, seemingly not in the least embarrassed at confronting a complete stranger in her sodden petticoat. There was indignation in the thrust of her chin and anger in her narrowed eyes. Stopping a short distance away, her feet were luminously white on the green grass.

How small and slender they were—like a child's, Max thought. He could see her eyes were heavily lashed, tilted, feral, and emerald green. Something that had lain dormant for many years stirred inside him. There was something about her, the boldness in her eyes, the tilt of her head that attracted him.

'Good afternoon,' she said boldly, having no idea who he was. 'We were unaware that we were being spied on.' Lifting her chin haughtily, she met the brilliant blue eyes beneath dark brows that were observing her with frank interest—far too much interest, she thought as he scrutinised her with a thoroughness that made her feel more undressed than she was. His gaze moved over her unabashedly. She stiffened with indignation. No one—especially not a man—had looked at her in quite that way before.

The man was obnoxious, she decided, although the clean-shaven face beneath his thick black hair was terribly handsome, she would grant him that. There was also an uncompromising authority in the set of his jaw and an arrogance in the tilt of his head that was not to her liking. Astride a magnificent strawberry-

roan horse, his skin was as brown as if he was used to hot climes, which put her in mind of her friend's brothers, when they had come back from serving in the army in India.

Christina's pride had been pricked and she was hardly in the mood to forgive this stranger for being at hand when she was so scantily clad. With ill-suppressed ire she scowled up at him. 'I trust you've had an edifying look, sir—pretending to be a gentleman, riding about the countryside on a fine horse on the look out for poor, defenceless girls.'

White teeth gleamed in a reckless smile as Max responded. She was like a kitten spitting and showing its claws. Again his gaze slid from her moistened lips, following the line of her throat down to the tantalising orbs of flesh exposed to his view above her clinging wet petticoat. With her head thrown back and her irate breathing, they quivered and peaked invitingly, emphasising the undeniable fact that she had left her childhood behind and was on the brink of becoming an alluring woman.

'You? Defenceless? Now you do exaggerate. Something tells me you are afraid of no one.' Her clenched fists and rose-tinted cheeks, the brilliance of her green eyes, told him so.

The accented voice was courteous enough, which only seemed to exacerbate Christina's temper. 'Have you nothing better to do with your time?'

'I suppose I could find something to occupy me,' he replied easily, 'but I can't think of anything more pleasurable just now than looking at you. I was merely out riding. The day is too

pleasant to remain indoors.’

‘Then you must be a stranger, otherwise you would know you are trespassing. This is private land.’

A slow appreciative smile worked its way across his face as his eyes raked her from head to toe once more and then came back to her furious eyes. ‘A thousand apologies. I hadn’t realised—but my crime, if that is what it is, was well worth it,’ the foreign voice said smoothly.

‘We prosecute trespassers.’

‘Really?’ His eyebrows arched and his eyes gleamed with sardonic amusement, which seemed to infuriate her all the more.

‘There are notices.’

‘I’m afraid I didn’t see them.’

‘You would have, if you’d stayed on the road.’

Her tart reply almost brought Max to outright laughter. ‘Then since I am trespassing and you apparently are not, I can only assume you must be related to the Thorntons.’

‘Sir Gerald Thornton is my father.’

His eyes widened as a slow realisation of who she really was made its way from the wound that had been inflicted on his heart so many years ago and never healed. ‘I see,’ he said, giving no indication that he knew more about her than she would like. ‘Forgive me if I seem surprised.’

‘Why should you be?’

‘It’s not every day I come across a young woman cavorting near-naked with two gentlemen in the same state of undress.’

Unashamed of her behaviour and resenting his interference, she threw back her shoulders and lifted her head haughtily, unaware as she did so how the gesture lifted the roundness of her pert breasts and caused Max to experience an exquisitely painful sensation in the pit of his belly.

‘One of the gentlemen happens to be my brother.’

‘And the other?’

Turning her head, she looked in the direction of the lake. There was no denying the look of melting adoration when her eyes lit upon James’s bobbing fair head as he continued to swim away from her.

‘Oh, goodness, he—he’s...’

‘A close friend?’ Max suggested softly.

Her head swivelled round to find his eyes probing hers. As she comprehended his meaning, bright pink stained her cheeks, her expression telling him they were in love so there was nothing wrong with what they were doing. ‘Yes—yes, he is. He is also a gentleman, which you clearly are not.’

Max raised a sardonic brow at her tone and contemplated her snapping green eyes. ‘That’s quite a temper you have there.’

‘Yes. It can be quite ferocious when I’m provoked. Now, please go away. We are enjoying the sun and minding our own business. I suggest you mind yours. You are intruding.’

‘You have plenty of cheek, I’ll say that,’ he chuckled softly.

‘Say what you like. I don’t care. Just go away.’

‘Hostile, too. I don’t usually encounter such hostility on a

first encounter.’ Max looked down at this spirited young woman, her flashing eyes and defiant chin elevated to a lofty angle. He cocked a dubious brow. ‘However, I would have supposed a true gentleman would not engage in this kind of sport with a gently reared young lady. I find it hard to believe your father allows such wantonness.’

Her hand pushed back the heavy weight of her hair from her forehead. ‘He doesn’t know; besides it’s none of your business, Mr...’ She shrugged for she couldn’t care less who he was. ‘Whoever you are.’

‘Maxwell Lloyd,’ he provided, finding himself unable to look away from her. In his experience, beautiful females were always conscious of their appeal and the fact that she either didn’t care, or didn’t know, further added to her allure. Firm hard flesh, he thought—she would be hard and soft in all the right places. Damn it! What was wrong with him? It wasn’t spring, when a man was expected to have aberrant thoughts, when the wind was soft on exposed flesh after a long, hard winter—when sap was rising—and she was right. What had it to do with him?

Suddenly the sun was painfully, unbearably brilliant. He wanted to ride away. What did he care for these three young people enjoying the day and each other? And at the same time he wanted to prolong the moment, to keep the girl talking—this special girl—to fill his eyes and his ears with the sight and the sound of her.

The name was unfamiliar to Christina. She tossed her head

haughtily. 'No matter. Please go away. Not only are you a trespasser, you are offensive.'

'I apologise if that's how I seem to you, Miss Thornton. But I have to say that you are the rudest, most impudent young woman I have ever come across, and I have every sympathy with your parents,' he told her calmly, 'and why they don't take you in hand I can't imagine. My father would have had you thrashed and locked in your room with nothing to eat and drink but bread and water for a week.'

For an incredulous moment Christina was speechless, then, forgetting her intention to walk away, she glared up into his far-too-handsome face, with authority and arrogance stamped all over it, her eyes two brilliant chips of ice. That was the moment she decided he was detestable.

'I can thank God he is not *my* father, who is more civilised,' she hissed. 'I am perfectly content with the one I've got. I don't give a damn who you are or where you come from—'

'You also have a dirty mouth, Miss Thornton,' Max reproached her mockingly.

Christina could feel the colour burning on her cheeks as she gazed at him with pure loathing. 'I say what I like. My only concern is that wherever it is you do come from you return there and stop bothering me.'

Max grinned affably and prepared to ride away. 'I think I like bothering you, Miss Thornton, and I shall enjoy bothering you a good deal more before I'm done.' Inclining his head politely, his

eyes doing one last quick sweep of her delectable body, he said, 'Good day', and rode away.

When the stranger had disappeared back into the woods, somehow Christina managed to turn and make it back to the edge of the lake. Suddenly the brightness had gone out of the day and the breeze held a bitter chill. Stepping into the water, feeling the coldness lap at her ankles, she paused and took a deep breath and tried to stop the angry trembling inside. What a dreadful, dreadful man, even more dreadful than any man she had ever met, and she detested him thoroughly.

Suddenly James rose out of the water and splashed towards her, his lips stretched in a wide smile over his youthful face, his blue eyes laughing and so very appealing, and suddenly the warmth came back into the day and the obnoxious Mr Lloyd was forgotten.

The Thornton family had a long and distinguished history in Cambridge. In the reign of Queen Anne, William Thornton, a man who revelled in hunting and was a lover of all country pursuits, had bought several hundred acres of farmland and forests, built the magnificent Tanglewood and settled his family there.

It was so named because of the thick woodland that had to be cleared so the house could be built. It stood at the end of a drive of beech and oak like a timeless old lady, its brooding structure of mellow stone preserved for centuries, looming out of the shadows of another time.

Having separated from James and Peter, Christina made her way to the back of the house. It would never do if Mama saw her in her bedraggled state. Hopefully she'd make it to her room and she would be none the wiser.

She entered the servants' block, with its numerous rooms housing at least fifteen servants, as furtively as any criminal. Unfortunately she had to go by the kitchen, which was the proverbial hive of industry, with extra catering staff employed to assist cook with the evening's dinner party. She would be lucky to pass unnoticed. She didn't. Holding her breath as she sneaked past the open door, she froze when Mrs Barnaby's voice boomed out.

'Miss Christina! Well, I never.'

Carrying her stockings, her skirts saturated halfway up to her waist, her wet petticoat uncomfortable beneath her dress, with her face a picture of guilt, Christina slowly turned and looked into the cavernous kitchen with its ranges, dressers and gleaming copper pans and a massive central table. Kitchen maids, preparing ingredients for Mrs Barnaby's use, and scullery maids, scouring pans at a large pot sink, paused in their work to gape open mouthed, their eyes popping out on stalks, at the young miss who resembled a drowned rat. Although it was nothing new. It wasn't the first time they'd seen her in a similar state—often much worse.

Attired in a pristine starched white apron and cap, moving towards her, her hands on her ample hips, Mrs Barnaby's eyes

ran up and down her appalling appearance disapprovingly. 'Why, Miss Christina, it's plain to see you've been on one of your jaunts. I don't know what your mama will say to this.' Hadn't she seen her crossing the park in the direction of the lake with Mr Peter and his friend hours ago, their laughing faces as they larked about seeming to suggest they were up to something exciting?

Mrs Barnaby had been at Tanglewood since before Christina was born and, with the familiarity of an old retainer, felt she could say what she liked—indeed, every one of the servants and even Lady Thornton stood very much in awe of her.

Well and truly caught and in something of a fix, knowing she would have to bluff her way out of it, on a sigh and shifting restlessly from one foot to the other, Christina shrugged. 'I'm sorry, Barney,' she said, addressing Tanglewood's large and cosy cook by the nickname she'd used since she'd learned to talk. 'I know how it must look to you, but I had the most awful accident and slipped and fell into the lake. Please don't tell Mama. You know how cross she gets. Besides, I know she's got company this afternoon, so I don't want to disturb her. I don't want her to see me looking like this.'

'And I should think not. She would scold you most severely, as would your papa.'

'Papa would understand.' She smiled sweetly.

Mrs Barnaby sighed, shaking her head. If her parents couldn't stop her, who was she to interfere? 'Ah, well, I'm up to my eyes in preparations for tonight, so away with you and have Molly

prepare you a bath.’

As Christina scampered off to her room, Mrs Barnaby went back to preparing the food for the evening’s dinner party. Would the girl never grow up? She was seventeen and supposed to be a young lady, but there had been nothing ladylike about her just now. An image of the handsome young Mr James Embleton’s sisters came to mind—sweet natured they were, always stitching samplers or dabbling in water colours or playing the piano, a trouble to no one, which could not be said of Miss Christina.

Defiant of all restrictions and rebellious of all convention, she was a complex young woman—untameable, hot tempered, truculent when she failed to get her own way, and an angel when she did. Her parents despaired of ever making a lady of her.

Molly was folding some of Christina’s clothes away into drawers when Christina flounced in, crashing the door behind her and making Molly almost jump out of her skin.

‘I need a bath,’ she declared, throwing her muddied stockings on to the bed and kicking off her shoes. ‘I’m filthy.’ Immediately she began peeling off her clothes.

Molly stopped what she was doing and wrinkled her nose. For all the world her young mistress looked like a wild thing. ‘I can see that.’

Molly was a first-class lady’s maid. Lady Thornton had employed her when Christina was fourteen years old. She was thoroughly experienced, a first-rate hairdresser and experienced in dressing a lady and everything that appertained to her office.

Molly had never met anyone quite like her mistress. In the beginning she'd been tempted to seek another position, but as she got to know her better she found there was something so appealing about her that she'd decided to stay.

'Have you seen Mama?'

'No, but I know her company left some time since.'

'I suppose she'll want to rest in preparation for the dinner party this evening.' Christina stepped out of her undergarments, leaving them in a wet heap on the carpet, from where Molly immediately retrieved them, curious as to their dampness, but deciding it would be better not to ask.

'I'll wear my sapphire blue gown tonight.' Wrapping her robe around her now naked body, Christina tied the belt tight around her small waist. 'I want to look my absolute best.'

Molly gave her a puzzled look. 'But you don't like that dress. You hate sapphire blue.'

'I've changed my mind,' she said, James having told her that sapphire blue was his favourite colour.

Sitting at her dressing table, she carefully began studying her face from every angle—which she had taken to doing frequently of late, much to Molly's quiet amusement—one didn't have to be a genius to know the cause of this sudden interest in her looks and that it had everything to do with her brother's friend.

'And you can dress my hair—all sophisticated like, with some of those glittering combs Mama likes to wear.' So James will notice how grown up I am, how pretty I am, she thought. She

knew she hadn't imagined his liking for her, although as yet he hadn't told her he had any special feelings for her. He was always telling her what a good sport she was, that she was clever and interesting, and once, when she'd made an extra-special effort with her appearance, as she would do tonight, he had told her she was pretty. How she wished he would get a move on. He would have to go back to university soon. Perhaps she was going to have to make the first move.

Having brought the sapphire blue gown from Christina's dressing room, Molly was surveying it with disapproval. 'I don't think this is suitable for a quiet dinner party at home. The neckline is daringly low—far too revealing in my opinion.'

'Nonsense, Molly. It's perfect.'

'You will certainly not wear it,' came her mama's firm voice from the doorway. Lady Thornton breezed in. 'Molly is quite right. The cleavage is far too deep and will shock Mrs Travis, the vicar's wife, who will be sitting across from you. Dear me, what would she think? The evening will be a low-key, conservative affair, so your pale yellow muslin will do nicely, so be a dear and get it out, will you, Molly? And your hair, Christina—wear it down tonight. I prefer to see you with it that way for the present. There will be plenty of occasions for your sophisticated hair-dos on more formal occasions.'

'But, Mama—'

'No, Christina, and that is my final word.' Lady Thornton smiled kindly at Molly's relieved expression, glad that she had

come in time to prevent a disagreement between maid and mistress.

Christina was a constant worry for Audine Thornton. Her daughter had always been unmanageable and refused to live by the rules of polite society. It concerned her that, because of her nature, Christina would probably never form a union with a man who would be prepared to put up with her wild ways. Unfortunately Gerald, her husband, who had given Christina free rein to do just as she liked from early childhood, didn't share her concern.

'I'm going to rest for a while, but I've come to tell you to be punctual and that you must be on your best behaviour. The company will be from the local community and perhaps not as young as you would like, so, if you get bored, please remember your manners and don't let it show. There are a few additions to the invitations—Reverend Kingston and his wife—oh, and our new neighbour.'

'What new neighbour?' Christina asked sullenly, absolutely mortified that her mama had forbidden her to wear the sapphire blue.

'The one who is renting Cranworth House while Major Illingworth is in India. He took up residence a few days ago. I sent him an invitation yesterday, thinking it would be polite to welcome him to the neighbourhood. I'm so pleased he sent a note to accept.'

Christina wasn't the slightest bit interested in Cranworth

House's new tenant. Turning back to the mirror as her mama went out and Molly prepared her bath, she sighed. What did she care about any of the invited guests, as long as James was there?

Mingling with the guests—twenty in all, elegant, wealthy, local people, who were partaking of pre-dinner drinks, sherry for the ladies and brandy for the gentleman—Max took a glass from the salver of a circulating servant. Of course, by now everyone knew who he was and couldn't wait to be introduced. His arrival among them had caused quite a stir—it wasn't often that a man with so colourful and mysterious a background appeared among them.

Uncommonly tall and lithe, his features strong and darkly handsome, he moved among them with the confident ease of a man well assured of his masculinity and his own worth. His hair, parted at the side, was thick and glossy black, and he had the kind of looks that set feminine hearts aflutter.

Max conversed politely, seeming to give them his full attention, but the major part of it was concentrated on the door as he waited for the daughter of the house to make an appearance. And then, as if he was seeing a dream, there she was. Everyone paused in their conversations and glanced her way. Her smile was dazzling and she seemed to bestow it on every one of those present—and did he imagine it, or did everyone resume talking with more animation than before? He smiled. Christina Thornton could lift the mood of a room simply by walking into it.

Max's whole sum and substance became concentrated on the

slender young woman. She drifted in like a butterfly in a pale lemon muslin gown, lovely and expensive, completely at odds with the young hoyden he had met earlier by the lake. The waist was tight, around which was fastened a narrow gold velvet ribbon. The skirts dipped and swayed as she glided over the smoothness of the richly patterned carpet to reveal the tips of her gold-slipped feet. She moved with a fluency and elegance that drew the eye. Her back was straight, her head tilted proudly, and her small breasts thrust forwards showed beneath the modest bodice of her gown. Her hair, a rich dark brown bordering on black, thick and gently curling, was drawn off her face and hung to her waist.

She had an individuality that had nothing to do with her beauty, which took Max's breath away. With her creamy-white complexion she was utterly feminine, but there was nothing demure about her. When in company other young ladies would keep their eyes cast modestly down—Miss Thornton showed no such restraint. Filled with restless energy, she stared directly, looking about her with a keen interest, her glance filled with anticipation and bright expectancy. When her eyes picked out James Embleton, the object of her desire, she smiled the widest smile that warmed and lit her features.

But then she saw Max. His eyes pierced her with their steadfast gaze and her smile disappeared. Something shifted in Christina. She was most surprised to find him among the guests and curious as to how he had come to be invited, but she did not show it.

Tearing her offended gaze from his and lifting her head in that unique way she had of showing her haughteur and defiance, with a deliberate snub she turned her back on him and made a beeline to where James stood talking to Peter.

They were animatedly discussing the cricket match that was to be played the following day, one that was played twice a year, the second a return match at the rival village of Farnley. Christina was swamped with dismay when they told her they were to play. She hadn't much use for cricket, considering it boring and a waste of time.

'You are to play cricket? But I—I thought we could take a picnic—the three of us, to the lake. Peter, you promised.'

James smiled an apology. 'I'm afraid not, Christina. We'll have a picnic another day. It can't compete with cricket. What do you say, Peter?'

'Certainly not. Look, there's Hal Jenkinson. He's in charge. Let's go and have a word.'

Seeing Christina's downcast face, James smiled. 'I'm sorry, Christina. Look, have Mrs Barnaby prepare a basket and we'll picnic during a break in the match—at lunch time. How about that?'

She brightened a little. 'Yes—yes, I will.'

As they were about to walk away, Peter turned back. Tall and still rather gangly, with light brown curly hair and brown eyes, he was like his mother. Sensing his sister's disappointment, he gave her a pitying smile. 'You go on, James. I'll be with you in a

moment. I'd like to have a word with Christina.' Taking her arm, he drew her to a quiet corner. 'Christina—this is awkward, but I feel I must say something.'

'What about?'

'James.'

Christina stiffened, not liking her brother's tone, which was suddenly serious and more often than not heralded a telling off.

'What about James?'

'Look, I know you like him, Christina, a lot, but try not to show it quite so much. This afternoon—well—you did go overboard a bit at the lake—you know, taking your dress off and...'

'Why?' she gasped. 'You've never minded before.'

'That's because we're always alone—and you're my sister—but—you do trail after James a bit, and—well—you're too forward, Christina, by far.'

'Forward?' Her eyes snapped with righteous anger. 'I am not. I don't see James complaining.'

'He wouldn't. He's much too polite.'

'I need no instructions on how to conduct myself when I am with him,' Christina retorted crossly, careful not to be overheard as her cheeks flushed with hot indignation.

'I'm simply trying to warn you of the dangers.'

'What dangers?'

'To stop you getting hurt—as you surely will. James sees you as my sister, someone who is fun to be with, and nothing more than that.'

‘Keep your warnings to yourself, Peter. I can take care of myself—and I will make him care for me.’

‘He won’t, Christina.’ Peter’s tone was sharp. ‘You will be wasting your time and more than likely make a fool of yourself into the bargain. Stop it now. Please.’

When he’d gone Christina was suddenly snatched from her angry preoccupations by a voice behind her, a voice that was deep and rich in timbre—and foreign.

‘Well, well, so we meet again, Miss Thornton. Who would have thought we would do so—and so soon?’

She spun round. Tall and incredibly handsome in the black and white of his evening dress, his black hair brushed to a smooth shine, Mr Lloyd towered over her.

His eyes were full of mockery when he smiled and quietly said, ‘I fear my presence this evening is going to bother you some more.’

Christina straightened imperiously. ‘What are you doing here?’ she retorted ungraciously, with none of the manners her mama had tried to instil into her. ‘How have you managed to wheedle your way into my parents’ dinner party?’

‘Lady Thornton very kindly invited me.’ His smile widened. ‘In truth, I suspect she took pity on my single state and thought to draw me into the fold, so to speak.’

‘As she would a stray dog,’ Christina retorted drily. ‘I didn’t know you were acquainted with Mama.’

‘I wasn’t, until yesterday when she issued the invitation. Since

I am new to the area and wish to become acquainted with my neighbours, although my stay is only temporary, I accepted. It would have been ungracious of me to refuse.'

'Why? Where do you live?'

'At Cranworth House.'

Christina's lips parted in surprise and, despite herself, she felt her interest quicken. 'Oh, really—so you are the foreigner.'

'If that is what you want to call me, then please do so, although it is not a term I like. I am half-Italian.'

'And the other half?'

'English.'

'But why should you object to being referred to as a foreigner? If you are Italian—a very rich Italian, by all accounts—then surely the term is not incorrect.'

Max's mouth tightened ominously. 'And how can anyone here know my circumstances? My affairs are private. But then in a small community such as this, I suppose a stranger will be the subject of gossip and speculation. Have you done your share of speculating, too, Miss Thornton?' he asked, one sleek dark brow arched, his eyes gleaming with derisive humour.

Realising that Mr Lloyd was trying to provoke her, Christina turned to walk away. Max stepped in front of her to bar her way. Their combined movements brought them closer together. He stared at her with impudent admiration, his gaze resting for a moment on the gentle swell of her breasts before moving up to her face. His brilliant blue eyes, the curl of his well-cut lips and

the lounging insolence of his long body were saying something to her she did not understand. Perplexed, instinctively she looked away. Beneath his close scrutiny her cheeks had grown pink and hot, for she was young and had not yet learned the control which comes with age and experience.

‘Mr Lloyd, I would be obliged if you would step aside. I don’t want to talk to you.’

Directing a glance of wry humour at her, his eyes narrowing, he said, ‘Tell me, Miss Thornton. Are you normally hostile to everyone you meet, or is it just me?’

Her chilled contempt met him face to face. ‘It’s just you.’

‘Do you mind if I enquire as to why?’

‘You can ask, but I’m not obliged to answer.’

‘You have certainly none of your mother’s good manners,’ he remarked, looking towards where Lady Thornton flitted amongst her guests in a rustling lavender-grey dress. ‘She also looks so young you are more like sisters than mother and daughter.’

Christina’s eyes narrowed and her lips twisted scornfully. ‘What an expert flatterer you are, Mr Lloyd. Mama is still youthful, I grant you, but given the fact that she has produced two offspring, she can hardly be mistaken for my sister.’

‘I see you have met my daughter, Mr Lloyd.’

Max turned and smiled at his host. Inwardly, however, he was not smiling, and he was mentally dictating a sharp reprimand, which he would deliver to the man who had masqueraded as Christina’s father for the seventeen years of her life.

‘I have had that pleasure—and very charming she is. You must be very proud.’

Sir Gerald beamed. He was still a handsome man, despite his balding pate and slightly protuberant belly. ‘She most certainly is. And of course there is Peter, my only son, who is at Cambridge reading law—and doing well, I’m happy to say. Do you have family, Mr Lloyd?’

Max shook his head. ‘Sadly, no. I have no siblings. My mother died bringing me into the world, and my father followed her several years ago.’

‘Then what brought you to England?’

His expression became guarded. ‘Several reasons, one of them being that my mother came from Cambridge—and I was at university here. I had a yearning to see it again—to spend some time here and look up old friends. It is where I spent many happy years in my youth.’

Christina gritted out a thin smile. ‘I believe there were some Lloyds in these parts many years ago—is that not so, Papa?—and if my memory serves me correctly, a wild bunch they were, too. In fact, I do believe one of them was hanged for holding up coaches on the Cambridge Road,’ she remarked airily.

The sweetness of her tone did not hide the sneer she intended. Max met it with a flicker of amusement showing on his lips, and his eyes narrowed challengingly. ‘Indeed! You must tell me more, Miss Thornton. However, I do not believe it is the same branch—my mother’s maiden name was Lloyd, you see, but I

am intrigued by your highwayman none the less. We may have much in common. I always thought I was a direct descendent of Genghis Khan.'

Gerald smiled to himself. For one dreadful moment he thought he was going to have to intervene to defend his guest from his sharp-tongued daughter, but it seemed there was no need. He thought Mr Lloyd was quite capable of dealing with rude young women.

Failing to detect the teasing light in Mr Lloyd's eyes, Christina's eyes opened wide. 'Who is he?'

Her sublime ignorance made Max want to laugh out loud, and it took a tremendous effort to keep his face straight. 'When you have a few hours to spare, Miss Thornton, I will be happy to relate his exploits—but I will tell you he was a thousand times more formidable than your highwayman.'

'And do you take after this ancestor of yours, Mr Lloyd?' she asked in all innocence. 'And why do you use your mother's name and not your father's? Is there something wrong with it?'

'Christina,' her father said testily, shooting a sharp look of reproach at her, a look telling her not to disgrace herself. Now she really had overstepped the mark. 'Whatever name Mr Lloyd chooses to call himself by is his business, so please guard your tongue. Please forgive my daughter, Mr Lloyd. She is impulsive and far too outspoken for her own good. Those not familiar with her may take offence, but there's none meant. Is that not so, Christina?'

Christina affected an expression of smooth innocence, but neither man was deceived by it. ‘Oh, absolutely.’

Quite undaunted, a dazzling smile broke the firm line of Mr Lloyd’s mouth. ‘I never pretend to be anything other than what I am, Miss Thornton. I do have my reasons for using my mother’s name, one of them being that when I use my Italian name in England, it draws unwelcome attention to me that I can do without.’

Sir Gerald sighed heavily when he looked fondly at his daughter. ‘Quite right, so no more questions, Christina. Unfortunately, I have fathered a rebellious, unbiddable child, Mr Lloyd. She was always difficult and of an unpredictable disposition. It grieves me to have to say that nothing has changed now she has reached maturity. All our attempts to discipline her have been unsuccessful, and now it’s too late.’

Max’s lazy smile hardened into a mask of ironic amusement as his gaze settled on Christina’s rosy face. ‘You have my sympathy, but it’s never too late to instil discipline.’

Christina was both appalled and amused. Her tenderhearted father, always good humoured, ready to laugh and generous to a fault, had never raised anything other than his voice to her in all the years she had been growing up, and the very idea that he would start now was downright laughable. ‘Yes, it is.’ She tucked her hand into the crook of her father’s arm when the butler announced dinner. ‘I’m too old to be spanked—and Papa wouldn’t do it anyway, would you, Papa?’

‘Don’t count on it,’ Sir Gerald replied with mock gravity while patting her hand affectionately.

‘Sir Gerald,’ Max said quietly, his expression suddenly serious. ‘I wonder if I might call on you tomorrow. There is an important matter I wish to discuss with you—you and Lady Thornton.’

Sir Gerald’s brows rose quizzically. ‘There is? I’m curious. Very well, although you’d better make it early—I have a cricket match to umpire, which I’m looking forwards to. In fact, I do believe they’re in need of an extra player, so, if you’re up for it, see Hal Jenkinson. He’s the captain. Do you play cricket?’

‘I most certainly do,’ Max replied. ‘I consider cricket as being a great part of human life and I cannot imagine what would become of the English without it.’

‘My thoughts absolutely. So, will nine o’clock suit for our meeting?’

‘Of course.’

Christina peered at him sharply, wondering why all the men she knew were so fanatical about knocking a ball about a field, and she was also curious as to what a perfect stranger could have to discuss with her father.

Chapter Two

Both Sir Gerald and Lady Audine Thornton, well mannered and well bred, were the ideal hosts. Whenever they entertained they liked to relax the rules. There was always plenty of amusement without any of the coarser element that vulgarises so many of the stately homes of England. They had sufficient force

of character to steer clear of any such difficulties at their dinner and weekend parties.

Christina was most put out because James was seated on her side of the dining table and too far away for her to speak to him, but she was pleased Mr Lloyd had been seated further along, so she was saved the painful ordeal of having to converse with him. She did, however, study him surreptitiously throughout the meal. He seemed relaxed and comfortable as he ate sparingly and sipped his claret, completely at ease among the room full of strangers, and yet she had a feeling that beneath his relaxed exterior there was such a carefully restrained power, that a rash of gooseflesh raised itself on her forearms and a cold shiver raced along her spine.

Her parents kept up a flow of small talk. Fortunately the guests were all well acquainted and the conversation was animated and interesting, mostly about local matters. Mr Lloyd was a popular figure, everyone wanting to talk to him about Italy, and he spoke to them calmly and at length, explaining in detail what it was like.

Christina was to recall later how, on observing her parents, they exchanged worried glances and seemed unusually quiet as Mr Lloyd spoke, but she thought nothing of it just then. She realised their new neighbour was clever and keen minded as the conversation progressed, and he was evidently no stranger to the world at large. To her surprise she was anything but bored as she listened. He was so worldly and so well informed that she was fascinated and a little awed, and when he described the cities

Sienna and Florence, and areas that were most dear to his heart, he seemed to sweep away the four walls and let sunshine and blue skies into the room.

Doing her best not to show her interest, she surreptitiously cast glances his way along the line of guests. At one point, without warning, he turned and she was caught in the act of staring at him. His gaze captured hers, and Christina raised her chin. A strange, unfathomable smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, and he slowly inclined his head towards her. Angrily she averted her gaze. What a conceited, arrogant man he was, and she sincerely hoped that when the evening was over it would be the last she would see of him.

When the meal was over and the ladies had retired to the drawing room, leaving the gentlemen to smoke their cigars and cigarettes and drink their port, bored out of her mind, Christina waited with considerable impatience. She was eager to talk to James, but when the gentlemen finally joined the ladies she was disappointed when he stuck to Peter and they continued discussing tomorrow's cricket match.

Standing with the vicar's wife, who was regaling her with the various stalls she had arranged to be set up the following day in the cricket field, Christina looked around her restlessly for an excuse to get away. Her gaze settled on Mr Lloyd, who was engrossed in conversation with Hal Jenkinson, who was not only the captain of the cricket team but the local doctor.

As if sensing her interest, Max turned. Their glances clashed

and for a second she found herself marvelling at the colour of his eyes. They were bright blue, warm and glowing, as blue as a tropical sea, and in their depths was an enquiring look, as though to ask her what she had seen in them to arouse her interest. His eyes narrowed and his mouth lifted in one corner, and he cocked an eyebrow quizzically.

Furious with herself and with two spots of dark colour high on her cheeks, with as much dignity as she could summon she turned away.

As the evening wore on and it was clear that James was not going to come and talk to her, she flounced through the French windows on to the terrace.

From where he stood lounging indolently against the piano, on which one of the ladies was entertaining them by playing some lively, popular songs, Max's eyes narrowed, and after a few moments he followed her.

Pacing impatiently up and down the terrace, a scowl marring her perfect features, from the corner of her eye Christina glimpsed a tall figure in the shadows. Convinced he was watching her, she walked towards him. The man was standing with one shoulder propped negligently against the trellising, idly smoking a cigar, the smoke curling slowly up into the night sky as he watched her in speculative silence. Only when she moved closer still and he stepped into the light spilling on to the terrace from the drawing room did she see it was Max Lloyd.

'Why, Mr Lloyd!' she said, boldly taking the offensive. 'I might

have known it would be you lurking in the shadows. You seem to have a penchant for creeping up on people.'

In no mood to be baited by the whip of her vitriolic tongue, Max's eyes narrowed and his lean face darkened. 'You're mistaken, Miss Thornton. I never creep. Like you, I was merely taking the night air and seeking privacy to smoke my cigar.' He extinguished his cigar in an ashtray placed conveniently on a low wall for those who, like himself, liked to smoke outside so as not to cause offence to the ladies.

'Please don't put it out on my account.'

'I didn't.'

Christina, momentarily distracted by the sound of laughter, was looking towards the French windows. A gentleman appeared, but after taking a look on to the terrace he went back inside. Max saw disappointment cloud her eyes and knew she had been hoping it was James Embleton who had come to look for her. Her reaction annoyed him and his temper took over.

'It has not escaped my notice that you have been watching Mr Embleton a great deal,' he remarked, shoving his hands deep into his trouser pockets. 'You have had eyes for no one else all evening.'

'And you would know that, wouldn't you,' she snapped, determined to make her escape, 'since you have been watching me?'

Max's dark eyebrows arched and his eyes gleamed with sardonic amusement. 'Don't flatter yourself, Miss Thornton. I

have watched you no more and no less than anyone else present tonight.'

Christina's mouth was hard, her eyes like flint. 'How dare you speak to me like this? You keep your nose out of my business. James is a gentleman and he treats me—'

'Like a lady? Is that it?'

He advanced towards her, and for a moment Christina felt compelled to back away from him, almost stumbling over the short train of her dress.

'What I saw you doing today were not the actions of a well-brought-up young lady,' he told her—but then, he thought, even the most naïve could see that Christina Thornton was no meek young miss who did as she was told.

Christina threw back her shoulders and lifted her head imperiously, the action saying quite clearly that she was not ashamed. 'We were doing nothing wrong,' she retorted with an insistence meant to convince him. It was as though she had resolved to justify her actions, knowing very well that if anyone else had come along—and heaven forbid it had been one of her parents' acquaintances—her reputation would have been ruined for life.

'It was you I saw cavorting near naked in the lake in your petticoat and with your hair flying loose, which no lady of my acquaintance would dream of doing,' he said accusingly, not stopping to consider why he was in such a temper and why he was intent on goading her.

Max was appalled by his own words. What was wrong with him? Why was he being like this, when all he wanted to do was talk to her, look at her? He sounded priggish and intrusive, even to his own ears, and as her expression said so clearly.

‘I am different from the women you know. That’s not unusual. I am a foreigner for one thing and in Italy I believe young women are—more modest, less free and easy, and I think you want to subdue me on this account.’

‘It is for your parents to do that and why your father hasn’t done so I can’t imagine. As I told you this afternoon, I know my own would have done if you were his daughter.’

Incredulous Christina was struck speechless. For one mad moment she was tempted to slap the smile from Mr Lloyd’s arrogant lips, but she knew she could not shame her parents by creating a scene in front of their friends. Forgetting her intention to escape the presence of this overbearing man, she glared murderously into his face.

‘Then I can thank God I’m not his daughter,’ she hissed, her chin jutting dangerously and her eyes flashing in the semidarkness. ‘I wouldn’t wish the most loathsome fate of having you for a brother on my worst enemy, and I shall continue to behave as I like, however controversial that may seem to you.’

‘The kind of behaviour I witnessed today would be considered both offensive and unacceptable where I come from.’ He lifted one eyebrow ironically. ‘You know, you really should do something about that temper of yours. You’re lit up like a

firecracker that's about to explode at any minute.'

'Explode? Believe me, Mr Lloyd, you wouldn't want to see my temper explode. My father would show you the door if he knew you were speaking to me like this.'

Max chuckled softly, his anger of a moment earlier abating in the face of her ire. There was an edge to her that was cutting, but beneath her glaring eyes and acrimonious tongue, he sensed the warmth and passion in her, the longing to be free, to be wild and to do as she liked when she felt like doing it. He could not blame her for that; in fact, God help anyone trying to tame her—if such a thing were possible, which he doubted—and to break that spirit of hers.

She was flushed and could barely speak because of her anger, and he had a strange feeling that her rage was directed not just at himself but at James Embleton for not seeking her out.

'Somehow I don't think he would. He would probably congratulate me for having the courage to deal with his headstrong daughter and thank me for pointing out to her her—faults.'

'Faults? Why, you unspeakable, insufferable... And I don't suppose you have any *faults* yourself, have you, Mr Lloyd?'

'On the contrary. I would be the first to admit that I have many. I am far from perfect, Miss Thornton.' His lips smiled, his teeth flashing white. 'Now, have you finished being rude to me, or are you to continue giving me a dressing down?'

Christina stared at him. He was incredulous! One minute

he was reproaching her most severely for what he called her unacceptable and offensive behaviour, and the next he was treating their altercation lightly, as though it was of no consequence whatsoever. Continuing to smile, he perched his hips against the back of a bench and continued watching her intently. She did not know this man. She had never seen him before today, and yet he was watching her with a look that was much too personal—and possessive.

She became uncertain, and was beginning to feel very foolish, bad tempered and childish. In truth, he had done nothing wrong, whereas she had been ill mannered and should know better. A rueful smile lit her eyes and her lips curved softly as she responded with a spontaneity which, when she was to think of it later, would astound her.

‘You are quite right. I have been rude to you—and I beg your pardon,’ she uttered lightly, ‘but I am the one who has had a dressing down—which is a first for me—apart from Mama, of course, but she does it on such a regular basis that it doesn’t make any difference.’

Max’s eyes smiled his approval at her sudden change of attitude. ‘I’m glad to see you’re not angry any more,’ he said quietly. ‘Shall we call a truce and agree that we are even?’

A mischievous smile curved her soft lips. ‘That depends.’

‘On what?’

Her brows lifted in mocking challenge. ‘On whether or not you can get enough runs tomorrow to save Leyton from total

humiliation.’

‘You are asking me to play in the match?’

‘Absolutely. Since you are to reside in Leyton indefinitely, you might as well make yourself useful.’

He smiled. ‘Done.’

It was a brilliant day, the summer air clear and sparkling. Christina and Molly arrived at the cricket field in a little pony carriage stacked with a heavy picnic hamper Mrs Barnaby had packed with freshly baked, mouth-watering pastries, tarts, sandwiches and delicious tit-bits. Without the slightest interest in the game, but in a love-struck state, Christina was keen to see the recipient of her unrequited devotion in action on the cricket pitch.

Enthusiastic young men in traditional white were milling about the field, waiting to start the serious business of the game in an effort to win the special trophy—a silver cup, to be presented by Christina’s father. He didn’t consider his participation an obligation, playing in a spirit of social duty and finding it a satisfactory bond of union with rustics and dependents. He was a true, passionate devotee of the game.

A large crowd had gathered—an amazing pleasure excursion from both villages and nearby hamlets—the women in every kind of dress and fancy hat and colourful parasols, the lads strutting about like peacocks while the young single women preened before them. Almost every patch of grass had been claimed. People lolled about or sat in deck chairs, some of the

men drinking foaming mugs of ale that were being sold at one of the stalls.

There were entertainments for the children, who were playing noisily and romping about with reckless abandon. Colourful tents and booths had been erected, and even a coconut shy and archery range, and a band played a lively tune—in fact, it was more like a feast day than a cricket match.

Leaving the carriage and carrying the picnic hamper between them, Christina and Molly strode into the thick of it. Choosing a position of vantage and commanding a good view of the cricket pitch, with Tanglewood looming out of the trees behind them, to tower in magnificence over the village of Leyton and surrounding countryside, they settled themselves on the warm grass, but it wasn't long before they strolled over to the coconut shy to try their hand with the villagers.

Later, when Molly had gone to gossip with some of the employees from the house, leaning her back against a tree, Christina felt her eyes drawn to the players assembling on the pitch. One figure in particular coming through a gate at the side of the field caught her attention. He was a tall man, lithe and broad shouldered and with an easy way of walking. As he drew closer to her brother on the pitch, Christina recognised the strong dark features and proud, confident manner. It was Max Lloyd. She smiled smugly to herself, happy that he had taken up her challenge to join the team. Whether or not he could save Leyton from being beaten was another matter entirely.

Despite herself she stared at him. As if he sensed her gaze, he turned and looked at her, half-raising his hand to acknowledge her, his eyes locking on hers. The effect of that lingering gaze on her was startling. Somewhere deep inside her a tremor was awakened beneath the intensity of his gaze and she suddenly felt afraid and insecure. Quickly she looked away, searching for her father. The cricketers and the crowd were becoming restless, impatient for the game to start, but they could not begin without the umpire.

Christina got to her feet and went to ask Peter what could be keeping Papa. Mr Embleton, James's father, stepped forwards and informed everyone that unfortunately Sir Gerald was unable to take part and had asked him to stand in. After conversing with the players and a great deal of shaking of heads, they began moving into position to begin the match.

'Where's Papa?' Christina asked her brother, deeply concerned. 'He's always umpired the game. Has something happened?'

'Calm yourself, Christina. He wasn't feeling himself, so he prevailed on Mr Embleton.'

'Is Papa ill?'

'No,' he replied, beginning to move away, as impatient as everyone else to start playing. 'He's just not up to umpiring today.' Looking towards the picnic hamper, he grinned. 'I'm glad you've come prepared. No doubt Mrs Barnaby has packed enough food for the entire cricket team. Look, I'll see you for

lunch. We lost the toss, so Farnley are to bat first.'

Peter left her just as James stepped up to bowl. Christina's eyes devoured him, thinking how wonderful he looked with the sun shining on his fair head and forming a halo of bright light that almost took her breath away. Seeing her standing on boundary, he waved to her, and in that moment Christina's heart soared.

And so the match progressed. Christina settled herself beneath the tree beside the hamper to await lunch. The heat and the crack of ball against bat lulled her into a sleepy state and she closed her eyes, totally uninterested now James was no longer bowling. There was a great deal of clapping and shouting as the atmosphere became loud and tribal.

Suddenly there was a stirring among the crowd and Christina was aware that there was a subtle change in the atmosphere. Opening her eyes, she saw Max Lloyd striding out to bowl. She sat up straight. It was impossible not to respond to this man as his masculine magnetism dominated the scene. There was a vigorous purposefulness in his long, quick strides that bespoke an active, athletic life. He caused an amazing buzz of anticipation around the field when he grasped the ball, and when the umpire called 'play' and he started his run in, every spectator seemed to catch their breath.

It became evident almost immediately that he had an awesome power and could dominate any kind of bowling, the very essence of a natural cricketer. His commanding presence caught the spectators' imaginations. He seemed to have a boundless energy

and an all-consuming enthusiasm. His forearms were of an unusual strength and he had an impressively muscular upper body. Taking four wickets within an hour, it was clear to all that he didn't do things by halves and this was one of his attractions—it made him so compelling and irresistible to watch.

Max Lloyd was determined and clear sighted about his objectives and Christina couldn't keep her eyes off him.

During the break for lunch, as they all gathered round and munched their way through the hamper, Christina couldn't resist sneaking a look at an extremely popular Max Lloyd, and she noticed again how incredibly blue his eyes were and how attractive he was with his finely marked brows slightly raised and his hair all tousled. He was studying her closely and she was aware of the tension and nervousness in herself. A curious sharp thrill ran through her as the force between them seemed to explode wordlessly.

'Are you enjoying the match?' he asked, strolling towards her and dropping down on to the grass beside her, where she lolled against a tree sipping lemonade.

'Certainly not. I hate the game. Grown men knocking a ball into the air with a bat? What's interesting in that?' she declared scathingly. Putting her empty glass down, she drew her knees up and wrapped her arms round her legs.

'It's clear you know nothing about the finer points of cricket,' he laughed, leaning back on his elbow and stretching his long, lean body out on the grass.

‘How can I? I’m merely a woman.’ Christina uttered with sarcasm.

Max grinned. ‘I’d have you in my team any day,’ he said softly.

She looked at him with a stirring of respect. ‘Why, thank you for that—but if my tennis is anything to go by, I wouldn’t be any good. I rarely hit the ball and when I do it never goes where it should.’ She looked at him steadily. ‘You bowled well. You must have played a great deal.’

‘I have, but not for a long time—not since my university days, in fact. I’m a bit rusty.’

‘Then you must be quite formidable when you’re on form. There’s nothing wrong with your bowling arm. So far you’ve proved an asset to the team.’

‘Enough to save Leyton from humiliation?’ he enquired, the question reminding her of what she had said last night.

She laughed lightly, her small teeth shining like pearls in the brightness. ‘It might very well be, if your batting is equally as good. We shall have to wait and see.’

‘I will be the last to bat.’

‘Then I wish you luck,’ she said, suddenly becoming aware of his closeness. He looked terribly attractive in his whites, with his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows to show off the sunburned strength of his forearms, the neck of his shirt open to display the equally sun-browned column of his throat. ‘The village plays Farnley twice a year and they’re tough opposition.’

‘I’ll do my best.’

‘How did your meeting with my parents go?’

A shadow crossed his face and he looked away. ‘Why do you ask?’

She shrugged. ‘I’m curious as to why Papa isn’t umpiring. As a rule neither fire, famine nor flood would keep him from the village cricket match. I saw him at breakfast and he was as excited and enthusiastic as he always is before the match.’ She frowned and gave him an enquiring look as a sudden disconcerting thought occurred to her. ‘You must have been one of the last people to see him. You didn’t say anything that might have upset him, did you?’

‘I sincerely hope not.’ Max looked towards the pavilion where Peter and his friends were indulging in a spot of larking about. ‘Your brother and his friends are enjoying themselves,’ he remarked suddenly, keen to change the subject, ‘and it’s clear that particular young man has turned your head.’

For the moment Christina’s concern about her papa was gone and she didn’t mind that Mr Lloyd knew how she felt about James. ‘What extraordinary beings young men are,’ she remarked grudgingly. ‘Peter can’t abide anything unconnected with that beastly game. During the holidays on wet days he and his friends play cricket in the gallery, without regard to furnishings and precious objects. I think it unfair that men can be so free. I envy my brother and James. They are able to do as they like, while I strain beneath the restrictions put on me by my parents and society. I do so hate it.’

‘I can see how difficult that must be for one so spirited,’ he remarked with mock gravity. ‘Better had you been born of the male gender.’

Her eyes gently enquiring, Christina found herself quite intrigued by this stranger and their extraordinary conversation. Her mouth trembled into a smile. ‘Do you know, Mr Lloyd, I do believe you’re right. But I do believe it is man who keeps women oppressed.’

‘I agree.’

‘You do?’

‘Absolutely. In an ideal world there would be equality in both sexes. But this is not an ideal world.’

‘Are you a radical, Mr Lloyd?’

‘I do have opinions that do not always agree with those of my friends and associates, so if that is what is meant by being a radical then I suppose I am.’

They looked towards the cricket pitch. James was striding towards the wicket to take up the batting. Tall and fine, he looked splendid in his freshly ironed white trousers and shirt. Her heart quickened.

Max watched her glance at the youth, saw the melting in her eyes, and, as he stood up to join his fellow players in the pavilion, his own were speculative.

Max Lloyd had swiftly established himself as a formidable player, and when he’d buckled on his pads, taken up his bat and begun to score runs in previously unheard-of quantities, hitting

his fourth straight six, cutting between two fielders, the cheers from players and spectators were deafening. There was no other player on the field of that class. His murderous treatment of the bowlers caused them to rethink their method of attack. His finest performance, his team mates noticed, had come just before the end of the day's play when they were most needed and he steered his side to safety.

The crowd melted a pathway before him as he came off the pitch and strode through them, some giving him hearty congratulatory pats on the back. From her place on the grass Christina had a clear view of him. His face was strong, striking, disciplined and exceptionally attractive, the expression cool and unmoved by his fellow cricketers' mood of good cheer.

Unsurprisingly, the atmosphere among the locals was euphoric, and when Mr Embleton had presented the cup to the captain and people began crowding the stall for more ale to celebrate and commiserate with the losers, it was clear the celebrations would go on for most of the night.

Concerned about her father, Christina hurried home as the sky was a deep, flawless blue fading into a pool of glowing pink and red on the horizon. Against its warm, rosy colours lay the stark black silhouettes of the trees, beyond which stood Tanglewood with the lowering sun at its back.

Christina wasn't the only one to leave. In no mood for celebrating, Max slipped through the gate to walk along the path that would lead him to his house just a short distance away, there

to await the outcome of his meeting with Sir Gerald and Lady Thornton that morning.

‘Mama? What’s happened?’ were the first words Christina spoke as she hurried into the drawing room, dishevelled and with her hair all over the place, descending upon her mother like a whirlwind. Her mother was alone, sitting at her writing desk with a pen in her hand but not writing, just staring into space. ‘I have been so worried. Why didn’t Papa umpire the match? It must be something serious for him to stay away.’

Audine rose and faced her daughter. ‘Ah, there you are. I wondered when you’d be back.’

Christina’s eyes were wide with concern, for her mother’s usually tranquil face was drawn and almost grey and she seemed uneasy. ‘What is it? Oh, Mama, are you all right?’

‘I’m fine,’ she replied quickly, a forced smile on her lips—even in her hour of terror she was not going to upset her daughter. Sitting on a small sofa, she made a pretence of smoothing her skirts. ‘Have you enjoyed the cricket match?’

‘No, of course not. You know how I hate that wretched game—and I’ve been worrying all day about Papa.’ Christina sat beside her mother on the sofa, facing her. Audine seemed nervous and avoided her eyes. Her hands were trembling in her lap. Christina could feel the tension in her—that strength of character which had helped her bear the burdens of life with quiet dignity seemed to have been taxed to its limits. ‘Mama, you would tell me if he were ill, wouldn’t you?’

‘Of course I would,’ she said, fingering the tassels on a cushion nervously.

‘Then if he isn’t ill, has his decision not to go to the match anything to do with Mr Lloyd’s visit earlier? Mama, what is it? Why are you looking so frightened?’

‘Oh, my darling girl, I am not frightened of anything. It’s nothing, really it isn’t, and your worries are commendable but unnecessary. Now why don’t you go and get changed for dinner? You must be hungry after all that fresh air.’

‘Where’s Papa?’

‘Upstairs. He’ll be down shortly. After his meeting with Mr Lloyd he was—tired—that’s all it was.’ She smiled tenderly. ‘Your papa’s not as young as he was and, although he would never admit it, it’s catching up with him.’

Christina didn’t believe her and knew she was only trying to placate her. ‘Mama, I’m not a child and I cannot ignore what stares me in the face. We both know that for Papa to miss the cricket match it would have to be something extremely serious. Please don’t keep anything from me.’

‘I wouldn’t, not if I thought you should know. Rest assured that you papa is perfectly well.’

‘And it has nothing to do with Mr Lloyd?’

For a split second Christina glimpsed in her eyes the pain of a woman deeply wounded. A cloud seemed to pass over her face and then just as quickly it was gone.

‘Did Mr Lloyd play in the match?’ Audine asked quickly in an

attempt to divert the conversation away from her husband.

‘Yes. He’s quite an exceptional player—saved the day—a good all rounder, isn’t that what they say? Papa would have been terribly impressed. It’s a shame he missed it.’

‘Yes, yes it was, but I’m sure Mr Embleton made a perfectly good umpire. As a matter of fact, Mr and Mrs Embleton have invited your father and I to visit them tomorrow and to stay overnight. I have to say that it will be a change and will do your father good to have a change of scene.’

‘Are Peter and I not invited?’ Christina was quick to ask, sincerely hoping they were.

‘No, my dear, I’m afraid not. It’s for the older generation.’ She smiled at her daughter’s crestfallen face. ‘Don’t be too upset about it, Christina. I’m sure James will find his way to Tanglewood some time during the day. You—like James, don’t you?’

Christina nodded and her eyes flashed darkly beneath their ebony lashes. ‘Yes, very much, and I mean to have him, if I can make him see me beyond Peter—who seems to think I’m some inept, empty-headed ninny. My heart is set on it.’ Getting up, she paced to and fro across the richly patterned carpet, her cheeks flushed to a rosy glow with some inner excitement. ‘I have decided that I want to marry him, Mama, and no other man will do.’

Audine disliked the wildness of her daughter’s mood and was tempted to scold her, but, relieved the conversation had veered away from Mr Lloyd and the threat he posed to her beloved

daughter's future, she decided to let her have her say. Never had she seen so much animation and passion in her. It seemed to permeate the atmosphere of the very room.

‘And when did you arrive at this momentous decision, Christina?’

‘Oh, a long time ago—ever since that first time Peter brought him home.’ She tossed her head, causing her hair to shimmer. ‘It occurred to me then that he was everything I wanted.’

‘And what of James?’ Looking into the sparkling green eyes, Audine said gently, ‘Will he be willing to fall in with your plans, do you think? Do you think it will be that simple?’

‘It has to be,’ she replied with a wickedly radiant smile. ‘He’ll be delighted when I tell him about it.’

‘You are still very young to be talking like this. Why the rush? You have plenty of time to think of marriage.’

‘Oh, no, Mama,’ Christina said, seating herself back on the sofa and frowning a little at her mother’s anxious face. ‘You were married at twenty and I will very soon be eighteen. James will want me, I know he will.’

‘A girl’s first romance always seems so enduring, so very real, but in reality the dreams never turn out that way.’

Christina jerked her head up. ‘It’s not like that with James and me. I know it’s for real, Mama. I believe it. It may be a dream for now, but I will follow it through.’

Audine smiled resignedly, reaching out and tenderly tucking a stray lock of hair behind Christina’s ear. ‘Of course you will. You

have character, intelligence and spirit to do that. You will never be satisfied with empty self-delusions. Whatever happens, my darling, always look life in the eye and never make compromises. But James has had sufficient time to let you know how he feels,' she pointed out gently.

'I know, but Peter's always around.' Christina smiled confidently, trusting and full of hope. 'I'm certain he is only waiting for the right moment to declare himself.'

'Then we shall have to wait and see.' On impulse Audine put her arms around her daughter and hugged her warmly. 'For now you need guidance and advice.'

'And you will always be on hand to give it to me, won't you, Mama? You and Papa.' She felt the arms about her tighten slightly, but she didn't see the bright tears that sprang to her mother's eyes.

'Yes—always,' Audine whispered, her throat constricting with painful emotion. 'But all this is still just a dream, my darling.'

'A dream not beyond my grasping,' Christina said, freeing herself from the embrace. 'I will show James how much I care for him—and before long he will be hopelessly head over heels in love with me. You see if he won't.'

Audine looked hard at her daughter's beautiful, rapt face. She would be perfectly happy for Christina to realise her dream, but with the arrival of Mr Lloyd she very much doubted it. Audine knew how stubborn she could be, how single-minded, and that she would have her way at any cost. But love? What did Christina

know of love? As yet she had no real inkling of the intensity, the sheer driving force of passionate love, but when it touched her she would not deny herself the having of it.

Yet she wasn't sure that James Embleton was the right man for her headstrong, rebellious child. She needed a man with drive and a fire in his veins to match her own. A man who would curb her conceits and that wild streak in her—a man like Mr Lloyd, perhaps? Or perhaps she should call him by his Italian name and title, Count Maxwell Marchesi, who had every right to take away their precious girl.

Christina had an underlying fear that something was very wrong and her concern that something had happened to upset her parents deepened throughout dinner. Celebrating the match result with his friends at the public house in the village, Peter was absent. Her father was quiet, distracted, asking few questions about the cricket match that had always been so dear to his heart. Her mother tried very hard to act as if everything was normal, but Christina wasn't fooled.

The following day after her parents had left with Mr and Mrs Embleton, and convinced Mr Lloyd's meeting with them before the match had something to do with their dejection, she walked the short distance to the house where he was staying. The day was hot and sultry, and, glancing up at the sky, she suspected a thunderstorm threatened for later.

Of modest proportions, the old, ivy-clad house nestling in a wooded hollow, with gardens packed with an abundance of

flowers and climbing plants, was a picture. Having been here many times to visit Major Illingworth when he had been home from India, Christina was familiar with the house. Inside it was beautifully decorated in peach and palest green with heavy damask hangings and tasteful furniture.

Opening the gate, she walked up the path to the door, knocking forcefully. It was opened by a man of medium height. Of slender build, with Roman features and sleek black hair, he was dressed with impeccable neatness in a black suit.

‘Hello! I’m Miss Thornton. Is Mr Lloyd at home? He isn’t expecting me, but I would like to see him.’

‘*Si, si*. Please, step inside. If the *signorina* will be kind enough to wait a moment, I will tell him you are here,’ he said, his voice heavily accented.

‘There’s no need, Lorenzo. I saw Miss Thornton coming down the path.’ Casually attired in a lightweight jacket and trousers, his white shirt open at the neck, Max Lloyd came striding into the hall. ‘Miss Thornton! Good morning,’ he greeted breezily, giving her a debonair bow. His gaze briefly appraised her pale yellow gown before raising his eyes to her glare.

‘Mr Lloyd!’

He frowned. ‘Dear me! With a look like that, I gather you’re displeased about something.’

‘How very perceptive of you, Mr Lloyd,’ she answered. Tossing him a cool glance, she swept past him into the drawing room, removing her bonnet as she went.

‘Come in, why don’t you?’ he said, chuckling softly, amazed by her daring, not to mention her cheek. Looking at her retreating figure appreciatively, the small train of her dress rustling softly over the carpet, after speaking quietly to Lorenzo in Italian, he followed her and closed the door. ‘Welcome to my humble abode,’ he said, his mouth quirked in a half-smile.

Christina stopped in the centre of the room and turned to face him. ‘There’s nothing humble about your dwelling that I can see, Mr Lloyd—unless, of course, you’re used to something on a far grander scale.’

‘Tell me, Miss Thornton,’ he said, moving to stand in front of her, ‘do you make a habit of calling on gentlemen alone?’

‘Of course not, but I had to come—and with good reason.’

Max’s eyebrows lifted in mute enquiry.

Christina locked her gaze on his. ‘Who are you really? You told me that Lloyd was your mother’s maiden name and that you prefer to use it to avoid complications and to be inconspicuous when you are in this country. So, how are you known in Italy, I would like to know?’

He answered her with slow deliberation. ‘Max—which is short for Maxwell.’

‘I know that. And?’

‘Count—Count Marchesi.’

Her eyebrows shot up. ‘Count? I am impressed.’

His smile widened. ‘I thought you might be.’

‘And why would Count Maxwell Marchesi want to rent a

cottage in this out-of-the-way little village in Cambridgeshire masquerading as Mr Lloyd?’

‘I am not masquerading, and I told you I am here to reacquaint myself with old friends and to spend some time in Cambridge.’

‘That may be so, but why go to all the trouble of renting a house? You could have stayed in a hotel in Cambridge.’

‘I prefer the country.’

‘You prevaricate, Mr Lloyd.’

‘I am entitled to. It is, after all, my business where I stay. Had I wanted to stay in Cambridge then I would have done so.’

‘I am convinced there is more to it than that. What is your real reason for coming to Leyton?’

‘There has to be another reason?’

‘Yes, I’m certain of it. What did you want to speak to my parents about yesterday? You don’t know them and, as far as I am aware, you have never met them before. Whatever passed between the three of you upset them terribly. In fact, I’ve never seen my father so upset, or my mother for that matter.’

‘Then I am sorry about that. It was not my intention to cause them distress,’ he said with such sincerity that Christina found herself believing him and wondering if she was barking up the wrong tree. However, she went on regardless.

‘So? Will you tell me?’

‘Have you asked your parents?’

‘Yes. They were non-committal.’

‘So am I.’

‘They dance around the issue—just like you’re doing now.’

‘I cannot tell you.’

‘You mean you won’t.’

‘Both.’

‘Does it concern Peter—or me?’

‘I’ve told you, you must ask your parents. And now no more questions—and it’s too nice a day to be sitting inside. Let me offer you refreshment. You are my first visitor and I would like to welcome you to my home—temporary though it is.’

Christina shook her head. ‘Thank you, but I have to get back.’ She was thinking that James might call and she didn’t want to miss seeing him, yet she was curious to know more about Mr Lloyd—Count Marchesi.

‘Nonsense. I refuse to take no for an answer. Come,’ he said, striding to the door. ‘Lorenzo has prepared tea and cakes for us in the garden.’

‘How very civilised.’

‘We Italians pride ourselves on the warmth of our hospitality.’

‘But it isn’t tea time.’

‘Does it matter?’

‘Well, in certain circles it would—but, no, I suppose you can be excused—since you’re Italian.’

His chuckle was rich and deep. ‘How nice of you to say so, although I’m not quite sure whether I should be flattered or offended by your remark.’

‘You must interpret it as you like—but I truly meant no

offence.’

They went outside and walked along a flagstone path that separated the flower beds leading to an arbour. A white lace table cloth covered a small, round, wrought-iron table on which delicate china tea things and cakes had been set out. Max pulled out a chair for Christina and Lorenzo poured the tea before excusing himself and disappearing along the path and into the house.

‘That’s Lorenzo, by the way, my steward, secretary and—’

‘General factotum by the look of things,’ Christina was hasty to add. ‘He seems to know how to lay a perfect tea table as well as take care of his secretarial duties.’

Sitting across from her and resting one foot atop his other knee, Max unbuttoned his jacket and leaned back in the chair. Relaxed and comfortable, he looked across at his companion, transfixed as he stared at her seated against a backdrop of vibrant climbing red roses. Having removed her bonnet and with her luxuriant hair tumbling over her shoulders and her green eyes glowing from between the thick fringe of black lashes, she presented such a captivating picture that he was torn between the urge to shove the table and its crockery away and pull her into his lap, and the equally delightful desire simply to relax and feast his eyes on her.

He was unable to believe she was here with him after so many years. Ever since she had been taken away from Castello Marchesi, without fully realising what had happened he had

carried his dream of meeting her again in his heart, and the fact that the boy had become a man had not diminished that dream.

Chapter Three

‘Would you like a cake?’ Max said, picking up a plate and offering Christina one of the dainty confections Lorenzo had purchased at the village bakery earlier.

Christina took one and put it on her plate. She smiled, diverted by his ever-present courteous formality, even when she wasn’t being particularly nice to him. A lazy somnolence had descended on the garden and the perfume of roses—red, white, pink and yellow—was heavy and sweet.

‘Why do you stare at me?’ she asked, settling back in her seat and taking a bite out of her cake, finding it virtually impossible to ignore the tug of his eyes and voice.

‘Because I’ve never met anyone quite like you.’

‘Are you always so...?’

One black arched brow lifted in mild enquiry. ‘What?’

‘Forthright? Why do you always seem to be on the verge of laughing at me?’

‘Not at you, Miss Thornton. For some unfathomable reason you amuse me—and because I happen to like you.’

‘I’m surprised.’

‘Why?’

‘Because there have been times when I have been less than polite to you. In fact, I’ve been positively beastly.’

‘I agree, but you’re forgiven.’

‘That’s gracious of you to say so, but I really was quite horrid to you when we first met.’ Christina glanced at him and smiled, shaking her shining head as the memory of how she had looked and what he must have thought assailed her, and when she met his eyes she saw that he remembered it too.

‘You mean when you were cavorting semi-naked in the lake.’

‘Yes. I was quite shameless,’ she murmured, finishing off her cake and licking the sticky sweetness off her fingers, unwittingly unaware of how this simple childish gesture warmed Max’s blood.

‘I agree, you were. You see, life in Italy has the Italian woman living under close scrutiny of family members. Her acquaintances with the opposite sex are selected and chaperoned, and if she were to be seen swimming almost naked with two young men, her reputation would be ruined and she would in all probability see out the rest of her life in a convent.’

A note of reproach hardened his voice and Christina wondered why, but quickly dismissed it as of no importance. ‘Dear me! I find that a bit extreme, but then—I’m not Italian,’ she remarked airily. ‘You seem very at home here, Mr Lloyd.’

‘Max—please call me Max.’

‘Very well. Mister Lloyd does seem rather formal, and I positively refuse to call you Count. You must call me Christina. Tell me what it’s like where you come from?’

‘In Tuscany?’

She nodded.

‘It’s very beautiful. Enchanting. Timeless. It is a different way of life altogether. You have to see it to appreciate it.’

‘What is it you do there?’

‘Why should I do anything? Being a count, I might be extremely rich and not have to work.’

‘You don’t strike me as a gentleman of leisure—no matter how rich you are.’

‘You’re right. I’m not. I like to be busy.’

‘So, what do you do?’

‘I grow grapes—as my family has done for centuries.’ He went on to talk about his vineyards, of which he was inordinately proud. He was full of enthusiasm and talked vividly about the Tuscan climate and the effect it had on the grapes, and how the weather could be one’s best friend or a grape grower’s worst enemy, and how they prayed for warm, dry summers before the *vendemmie*, the grape harvest, in the autumn. Christina proved to be an avid listener.

‘So you are very rich,’ she remarked when he fell silent.

‘My prosperity is largely due to my ancestors and in particular to my grandfather. He was a superb businessman.’

‘I suspect you take after him.’

‘I’d like to think so.’

‘How interesting you make it sound.’

‘It is. I—would like for you to see it,’ he said, watching her expression carefully. ‘Would you like to?’

She nodded emphatically. ‘But it’s just not possible.’

‘It might be. You would be made most welcome, Christina,’ he said, using her name for the first time and sending an unexplainable thrill of pleasure through her.

‘Are you married?’ she asked impulsively, wanting to know all there was to know about this strange foreign man who had unexpectedly appeared in their midst.

‘No.’

‘Are you likely to be?’

‘Why?’ he asked, his dark eyebrows drawing together over his incredulous blue eyes. ‘Would you like to marry me?’

His question spoken in jest caused her to laugh out loud and brought a sparkle to her eyes, yet somewhere deep inside her she could feel the first stirrings of discomfort. ‘Of course not. What I mean is,’ she said when he shot her a thoroughly amused look, ‘is there a woman in your life—someone special?’

‘You’re very inquisitive, Miss Thornton.’

Her eyes glowed mischievously. ‘It’s in my nature. I can’t help it.’

‘Then the answer to your question is that there are many women in my life.’

‘Any one in particular?’ she persisted, letting her eyes drift over his thick, smoothed-back black hair to his face, noting the Italian nobility and pride stamped on his bronzed features.

He met her eyes and the line of his mobile mouth quirked in a half-smile. ‘There might be.’

She glanced at him obliquely, a warmth beginning to suffuse

her face that had nothing to do with the heat of the day. His voice was low pitched and though she wasn't used to men like Max Lloyd—Marchesi, she knew it was sensual and was unsure how to respond to it. 'You're very secretive. In fact you're as mysterious to me now as you were before I met you.'

'Which adds to my appeal, I hope.'

'Appeal? Now that's a strange word to use. I don't find you in the least appealing.'

'You don't?' he asked with mock disappointment.

'No, of course I don't.'

His eyes narrowed and darkened, becoming warm and seductive. 'And you are sure about that, are you, *signorina*?'

'Yes.' Christina was glad he had called her *signorina*. It sounded alien to her, emphasising the difference between them and reducing the effect his blatant masculinity was beginning to have on her, bringing her drifting spirit back to reality. Her dawning response to him was solid enough reason to end the visit immediately. 'I think I'd better be going. I've been here long enough and there must be things you have to do.'

'Why are you nervous all of a sudden?'

His penetrating blue eyes were searching her face. She was not imagining his interest in herself. She might have no experience of men, but she was perfectly able to recognise admiration in a man's eyes. Suddenly it was like being on an obstacle course of emotions that left her confused. Without warning she had passed from the love she bore James to the more dangerous ground on

to which this stranger sought to entice her.

She made absorbing work of putting on her bonnet. Until she'd come into the garden she had known exactly what she wanted, but now her dream was clouded with uncertainty. Now there was something else, something dark and secret stirring inside her that had nothing to do with James, and she didn't like it, not one bit.

'I don't know what you mean,' she said, avoiding his eyes.

'That's a pretty bonnet you are wearing. Would you like to know what I see when I look at you?'

'Not if you're going to sound like some amorous Latin lover I don't.'

He laughed softly, noting the tremulous brightness in her eyes and the way her fingers trembled as she tied the bow beneath her chin. 'We Italians are born with the ability to make love. Are you not curious to know more, Christina?'

She swallowed convulsively, her cheeks having turned a glorious shade of pink. 'Yes,' she whispered with all the honest innocence of youth. 'Of course I want to know more, of course I want to know what it feels like to be kissed, but certainly not by some Latin Lothario.'

Inexplicably, Max threw back his head and shouted with laughter, the sound disturbing the quietness of the garden and causing startled birds to take flight. At one and the same time this delightful girl managed to be an intriguing, alluring young woman and an enchanting young girl. In the course of three days she had treated him with outright anger and

rebellion, cold disdain, and now with a sprightly impertinence and lightheartedness that he found utterly exhilarating. Still chuckling, he shook his head slowly, his eyes sparkling with humour, his teeth gleaming white between his parted lips.

‘I am immensely flattered that you should liken me to Rowe’s libertine, but let me assure you, my dear Christina, that I am nothing like that reprobate. However, it is clear to me that I have made an impression on you and it warms my heart to know it.’

‘You have no heart,’ Christina quipped good naturedly, smiling radiantly, finding it impossible to be cross with him when he hadn’t done anything wrong or said anything to offend. ‘If you had, you would never have lured a helpless female out into the garden for tea and cakes.’

‘I did not lure you and you are anything but helpless,’ he told her, grinning broadly. ‘However, I won’t embarrass you or offend your tender ears by explaining to you what Lothario was really like, so here,’ he said, pushing the plate of cakes towards her, ‘have another cake.’

‘I should be leaving,’ she said, standing up. ‘I swear the sun is getting hotter.’

‘In Italy the people are content to take their ease when the sun is at its height. Won’t you stay a while longer until it cools down?’

‘I mustn’t. I’ve been here for ages and if I don’t show my face soon Molly—my extremely strict maid who has promised to keep a watch over me while Mama is away—will send out a search party.’

‘Then we mustn’t upset Molly. Come, I’ll walk back with you.’

‘No, you can’t possibly. It isn’t far.’

‘I insist.’

And so Max accompanied her back to Tanglewood, and not until he’d left her did she remember the reason for her visit to his house.

To Christina’s delight, James arrived at Tanglewood later in the day. Smiling in anticipation and hope, from the long window in the drawing room she watched him get off his horse. Handing it to a groom, he bounded up the steps to the house.

‘Don’t look like that, Christina,’ Peter remarked crossly, putting down his newspaper and standing up.

‘Like what?’ she retorted, pretending innocence.

‘Like the cat that got the cream. Since his house is full of guests for the weekend, James has come to stay the night. We’ve planned to do a spot of fishing in the morning. We’re taking the boat out on the lake at first light.’

Christina’s eyes lit up. There was nothing she loved more than fishing in the early morning when the fish were at their keenest. ‘That sounds like fun to me. I’ll be there.’

‘No, you won’t. This time it’s to be just James and me. If Mama were here, she wouldn’t allow it.’

‘Well, Mama isn’t here.’

‘The answer is still no.’

‘But I always go with you.’

‘Not this time, so don’t come trailing after us. It’s becoming

embarrassing, the lengths you go to to attract James's attention, as if you consider him your personal property. He's not interested, can't you see that? Really, Christina, why can't you be like other young ladies, who sew and read romantic novels that are all the rage?

'I hate romantic novels,' she remarked, her lower lip drooping petulantly. 'There are far more interesting things to do than read about heroines swooning over devastatingly handsome gentlemen all the time.'

'Ha! And I don't suppose you can see a similarity between that and your own silly behaviour with James. You never find his sisters hanging about like you do. Why can't you be more like them and interest yourself in clothes and fashions—?'

'For which I care even less.'

'At least they are demure, delicate and refined—and quiet.'

'And such dreadful bores.'

'Where are you going?' Peter demanded, throwing down his newspaper and striding after her.

Christina smiled back at him sublimely. 'To welcome James.'

'Christina! James is my friend and my guest. I would be obliged if you would remember that and not make a fool of yourself.'

'Fiddlesticks! Calm down, Peter. Please don't make a scene in front of James.'

'Christina!' Peter called her, but Christina was determined to be deaf. 'You will behave yourself.' She answered with a haughty

shake of her head.

Christina went into the hall to greet James, an irate Peter coming after her, still ranting, but quieter now James was present. She was sorry really, for she loved her brother and hated being on the cross with him, but she found it irksome that he was forever trying to tell her what to do, believing he knew what was best just because he was older than she was. At times he could be so tiresome, worse than Mama where convention was concerned. If only he had a more casual approach to things and didn't take things so seriously.

The rest of the day passed in a pleasant haze for Christina. Peter and James retired to the billiard room and she followed. Ignoring Peter's glower and his silent demand that she leave this male preserve so they could play the game and drink their port in peace, she took a seat in the window bay and settled down to watch. She would have loved to challenge them to a game, for she was rather good at it and often beat Peter when they were alone, but that would have been taking things too far and have Peter physically marching her out of the billiard room and packing her off to bed.

Sneaking a glass of port when they became absorbed in the game, she sipped it slowly, feeling her body relax as the alcohol warmed her stomach. She never drank anything stronger than wine weakened with water, which was all her mama would permit. She wasn't sure she liked the taste of this rich, fortified wine, but if James liked it then she decided there could be

nothing wrong with having a glass.

She sat and watched him lean over the table, the large gaslights above the table shining on his golden head. When Peter went out to get another bottle of port, she stood up and sidled over to where James was chalking his cue. Her face was flushed with the wine and her head felt woolly.

‘Peter tells me you’re taking the boat out on the lake in the morning, James.’

‘That’s right, Christina. First thing.’

‘You won’t object to me going with you, will you, James?’

He smiled, trying to hide his discomfort. Much as he liked Christina and always found her fun to be with, he wished she’d stop seeking his attention all the time. He wasn’t stupid or blind and knew in which direction her thoughts were leading her, but if she was waiting for him to declare himself, then she was in for a long wait. She might be the sister of his closest friend and very beautiful—anyone looking at her could not deny her that—but when he decided to settle down to wedded bliss, it would be with a woman with a far gentler and easier temperament than Christina Thornton.

‘I’m sorry. Better not, Christina. Not this time. Peter—’

Sudden anger flashed in her eyes. ‘Oh, bother Peter. You want me along, don’t you?’

‘Well—I—I...’

He looked beyond her and Christina saw relief flood his eyes when Peter came striding in carrying a bottle of port. Peter

looked at his sister accusingly. She put her chin up defensively in the face of his scowl, and with a flare of temper and feeling more than a little sick from the port, she turned and flounced out of the room.

Christina slipped from her bed when dawn was breaking, the sky a faint and rosy pink on the horizon. Careful to avoid the domestic quarters, where sounds of industry coming from the kitchen could be heard already, she let herself out of the front door. Running through the woods to the lake beyond, she hoped to be there long before Peter and James and was prepared to wait. With a bull-headed stubbornness that afflicts those who love, she was convinced that when they saw her they would capitulate and let her go with them.

Disappointment swamped her when she saw that the boat was already bobbing gently in the middle of the lake, both Peter and James oblivious to her standing on the bank watching them cast their lines into water.

Anger hot and fierce consumed her. How could they? How could they be so cruel? Peter was the worst kind of beast and James didn't care for her after all or he would have stood up to Peter and not done this.

What was wrong with her? Why wasn't he attracted to her? Was she plain, was she ugly? What? Compounded out of vanity and complacent confidence that she could make him love her, she had wanted him to notice her so much.

Her heart and her quick, intelligent mind now realised that she

had made herself look a fool, running after him the way she had, and her heart quailed contemptuously at her forward conduct. The enormity of it all hit her like a rock and stung her to new rage, rage at herself with all the fury of thwarted and humiliated first love.

Blinded by tears, she whirled about, knowing only that she must get away from the lake. So lost was she in her anger and self-chastisement that she didn't see the horse and rider coming towards her. A voice calling her name startled her. She jumped, not expecting anyone to be in the woods at this hour. She stopped and stood very still as the powerful figure of Max Lloyd drew level and he dismounted.

'Christina? I didn't expect to see you at this hour. You're out and about early.'

'I can see I'm not the only one.'

'I like to ride early.' He looked concerned as he studied her tear-stained face and the droop of her slender shoulders, realising she was in the grip of some powerful emotion, for there were tears of rage and misery in her eyes. 'Is something wrong? You look upset to me. You have been crying.'

'I'm perfectly fine,' she retorted, averting her eyes while realising she must look a mess. She took a deep breath, trying to stifle her rising embarrassment. Max Lloyd had caught her at her most vulnerable. Anger at being so surprised made her voice tremble and her eyes gleam like two hard green stones as she said coldly, 'Please excuse me. I'm—in a hurry to get back to

the house.’

‘Then I’ll walk with you.’ Taking the reins of his horse, he walked beside the irate young woman, matching her quick strides with his own. Turning his head, he looked at her for a moment, touched by her obvious youth and perhaps also by some private scruples. As she moved she had the animal grace of a young thoroughbred, yet at the same time a warm, vibrant femininity that touched a deep chord in him.

‘You’ll probably resent me saying this, but you look more than a little out of sorts. What, I ask myself, is so important as to drag you from your bed at this hour and make you cry?’

‘Fishing,’ she snapped. ‘And I’m not crying.’

He arched a brow. ‘Fishing? You like fishing?’

‘I do.’

‘Alone?’

‘No. Peter and James have taken the boat out on to the lake.’

Max was beginning to understand. Concealing the irritation he always felt when James Embleton’s name was mentioned, he said, ‘And you wanted to go with them.’

‘Yes. They refused to take me.’ She sighed, her face crestfallen. ‘I was too late anyway.’ Turning to look at him, she saw the blue eyes laughing in the tanned face and amusement tugging at the corners of his firm lips, which quickly rekindled her ire. ‘Don’t you dare laugh. It’s in very poor taste.’

‘Why should I laugh?’

‘Because there is no more foolish sight than a woman who

makes a fool of herself over a man who does not want her—the way I have done over James Embleton.’

‘So the unimaginable has happened.’

She nodded. ‘It looks like it.’

‘I think you are more upset with your own behaviour than James Embleton’s rejection of you. So he isn’t as susceptible to your charms as you would like him to be.’

‘You don’t understand. You’ll never understand,’ she blurted out before she could stop herself.

‘I can understand only too well. You seem to have got yourself into quite a pickle, as you English say, over this young man. You are very young, Christina, and have much to learn.’

Christina stiffened with childish fury. How dare this impudent foreigner say these things to her? ‘I’m not obliged to discuss my feelings with you. It’s always the same assumption. Can no one think of me in any light but as a silly naïve girl?’

A slow, lazy smile swept across Max’s face, and Christina braced herself for him to say something mocking, but his deep voice was filled with admiration and teasing. ‘You are a delightful girl, Christina, who has a habit of doing without thinking first. Like I said, you have much to learn about life—and men.’

She stopped abruptly and glowered up at him. Not for one second was she deceived by his tender concern. ‘And who will teach me these things? You?’

He smiled and his eyes shone with a roguish gleam. ‘I would like to.’

‘Is there something wrong with me? Am I not attractive to look at?’

‘You worry too much,’ Max said, his eyes held by the pale, graceful figure. The lights in her glorious hair changed colour rapidly in the light that filtered through the upper branches of the trees, from the deepest brown to a rich mahogany. A kind of anger welled up inside him against James Embleton for causing her distress. ‘Take it from me, there is nothing wrong with the way you look. James Embleton must be blind. He doesn’t know what he’s missing.’

‘He doesn’t?’

‘No.’

‘Then—would you like to kiss me?’

Max frowned and looked away. She didn’t know what she was asking.

Christina misinterpreted his response and continued to walk on in a huff, her hands clenched and her chin thrust out. ‘There, I knew it. There is something wrong with me.’

Striding after her, Max took her arm and spun her round to face him. ‘Have you never been kissed?’

She shook her head sullenly.

Cupping her chin in his hand, Max looked deep into her eyes, his own intense and gentle at the same time. ‘One day I will kiss you, Christina. That I promise you, and when I do you will want me to go on kissing you. But not now, not when you’re all fired up and thinking of someone else. When I kiss you it will be because

it is me you want. Do you understand?’

Max was attired in snug-fitting calf-coloured breeches and tan riding boots, bottle-green jacket and a rakish cream silk cravat around his neck and she looked at him hard, as if for the first time. His magnificent physique was displayed in a way that made her throat go dry. With a thick lock of black hair drooping across his brow and his incredible blue eyes, she thought how terribly attractive he was, the most attractive man she had ever met, and there was no point in denying it.

With the quietness of the woods all about them, for a moment she was held by his gaze, unable to drag her eyes from the ones that commanded her attention. It was as if he searched out her very soul, and he had a way of making her feel consumed by that heated regard. His fingers still cupped her chin and his touch excited her, warmed her, but her mind shied away from going any deeper than that, for it seemed obscene to even consider she might have feelings for any other man but James. He seemed to sense her discomfort; his smile became positively wolfish.

‘You must think me stupid,’ she retorted, taking a step back so that he had to release her chin. She looked away and stiffened her spine. Max’s dark brows drew together over incredulous blue eyes.

‘No, I don’t. You decided that.’ For a moment he studied her with heavy-lidded, speculative eyes. ‘Perhaps I will kiss you after all.’

Christina found she was unable to move when his hand

suddenly cupped her cheek. ‘Look at me,’ he said in a low, velvety, unfamiliar voice that sent apprehensive and exciting tingles darting up her spine. She raised her eyes to his tanned face. Although no one had ever attempted to kiss her before, she took one look at the slumberous expression in his eyes and was instantly wary.

‘Are you really going to kiss me?’

A slow, lazy smile that made her heart leap worked its way across his face and Christina was unable to drag her eyes from his hypnotic gaze. ‘Yes, I am.’

Terrified of what would happen next and that she would make a complete idiot of herself, she whispered, ‘I—don’t think you should. It doesn’t matter—really...’

Ignoring her protests, Max tilted her face for a kiss. Lowering his head, he touched her lips with his. Then he looked at her to assess her reaction. ‘Well?’

Christina’s eyes were wide with bewilderment—and disappointment. ‘Was that it? Is that all there is to kissing?’

Max looked down at her, gazing into the wide, luminous eyes of this unpredictable girl, and tenderness began to unfold within him. ‘No,’ he murmured. ‘There’s much more.’ Placing his hands on her shoulders, he pulled her towards him, so close that her breasts pressed against his chest and the rest of her body fitted perfectly into his. Her question, spoken in complete innocence, caught Max completely off guard. Every feminine ploy in existence had been used on him in the past, but

without success—and yet this artless child-woman, her candour combined with her upturned, beautiful face and alluring body pressing against him, acted like a powerful aphrodisiac.

Lost in a confusion of apprehension and yearning, suddenly Christina saw something primitive and alarming kindle in his eyes, and so lost was she in her own thoughts that it took a moment before she realised that his gaze had dropped to her lips and that he meant to kiss her again.

‘You don’t have to—’

Without hesitating for a moment, with desire surging through him, heating his blood and sending it singing through his veins, Christina Thornton became an alluring and incredibly enticing woman. Ignoring his conscience, which suddenly reared up with acid disgust to remind him that he was deliberately seducing a gullible child, Max thrust it away and smothered her objections with another kiss, completely different to the one before. It was long, tender and devouring, and at first Christina didn’t know what to think of it, and then as his lips began to move over hers, coaxing, fiercely tender, determined, her body jerked and she tore her lips from his, struggling like a young animal caught in a trap, until she felt his large masculine hand curve round her nape, his long fingers sliding into her hair, and his breath warm on her parted lips.

His mouth claimed hers once more, his lips insistent and moving with inflaming expertise over hers. Dizzily, Christina slid her hands up his chest, feeling the power of him, the sheer

strength packed into the hard muscles beneath her fingers as she yielded her lips to his, parting them beneath the sensual pressure, and the moment his tongue slid between them, invading her mouth and taking possession of her, she became lost in a sea of pure sensation.

Melting against him and moulding her body to his length, she clung to him for support, unaware of how this innocent action triggered an instant reaction from Max. His arms tightened around her, his hand caressing her spine as he deepened his kiss, his parted lips moving over hers and crushing them with hungry ardour.

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