

Chapter 4

The search for sunflowers about Tilling did not proceed exactly as planned. A cursory bicycle excursion convinced Lucia that a more thorough examination on foot would be necessary to properly probe for that elusive blossom. As she was preparing to do so, Georgie came up with the masterful idea of making a survey from the church tower.

Thus it was that Lucia was positioned along the lookout of the Norman church tower with one of her first husband's telescopes, and Georgie with a pair of opera glasses to scout for that particular yellow colour.

"Drat that woman," Georgie said for the umpteenth time as he continued peering through his glasses.

"Which one?" asked Lucia.

"Why, Elizabeth, of course," Georgie said crossly. He slowly put down his glasses and looked at her. "Oh," he said, his voice filled with meaning, "you mean Mrs. Blanchard."

Lucia kept a lightness in her voice which she did not feel, and asked, "So what do you think of her?"

"She's quite nice," Georgie said, opting for truth over tact. "Well mannered, and overall quite pleasing. For an American."

Lucia said nothing, and Georgie went back to his search. She paused for a few moments and wiped the end lens of her telescope, looking about at the misty marsh in the distance and the red Georgian bricks of Tilling and sighed. "Has it ever struck you just how beautiful a town it is in which we live, cam ? It is magnificent, really. Its loveliness is genuinely overwhelming at times."

"Yes," Georgie admitted, dragging himself out of his pool of bitterness over Elizabeth and into the loftiness of Lucia's sentiments. "It is quite exquisite."

"And to think that I am the Mayor of all this radiance."

"Not for long, surely? You said you weren't going to accept another term. Have you changed your mind?"

"No, no, not at all, Lucia sighed wistfully. "But while I am still Mayor, I should like to leave behind some lasting token of my time here. I admit I have managed a few things during my tenure: I have lain the groundwork for pasteurised milk, a strict censorship of the films, and relaid steps out by the Gun Garden. But these achievements pale beside the gifts bestowed upon mankind by more worthy poets and philosophers. That is not to say that I am considering a book (poor Elizabeth!), but I would like to bestow a more permanent contribution unto Tilling."

"You did pay for repairs and modernisation of the church organ, and a new operating theatre for the hospital," Georgie offered, convinced that what Lucia was lamenting was the lack of public reclame she felt

was her due.

"For heaven's sake, that was years ago now," Lucia said. "Even before I became Mayor. That hardly counts."

Despite her seemingly-wistful comments, Georgie was convinced that Lucia was not prepared to return for a fourth term. Lucia proclaimed that she had done all a civic-minded person could do (some might say she'd done too much), but Georgie knew she had an least one ulterior motive.

Oh, the exhaustion of which she had twice complained was true enough. Not physical exhaustion, mind you: Lucia had never been more physically fit (faithfully applying the techniques from An Ideal System of Callisthenics for Those No Longer Young long ago proved a tonic against physical ailment), but Georgie could see her running out of ideas to propose to the council which were both practical and financially sound.

Her true motivation for this desire to achieve a final burst of accomplishment, Georgie was convinced, was so that the moment she stepped down, everyone would see how flat and purposeless were municipal affairs without her. How dull the new mayor would be (it wouldn't matter who was chosen from the town council — the comparison would be certain to be lacking). And they would all appreciate Lucia all over again.

Georgie fervently began wishing that he might spot a bit of yellow so that he did not have to continue listening to his wife bemoan her lack of municipal achievement this year. Much to his astonishment, he did just that.

"Lucia!" he sputtered, "Look!" His shaking hand was unable to hold steady his glasses, and he had to direct Lucia's gaze by way of other landmarks until she managed to focus in through the correct clump of trees, and into the precise garden near the east end of the High Street.

They could see only a tiny corner of the plot, but the sunflowers were unmistakable, and the pair hurried back down the narrow wooden stairway to their waiting bicycles.

The proprietor of the little cottage to which the garden was attached was an amiable middle-aged fellow with the interesting name of Mr. Frost. He welcomed their visit and was only all too pleased to offer the loan of his garden to the Mayor's husband. Georgie got started right away.

Elizabeth found an invitation to Mrs. Blanchard's ball awaiting her after her discussion with Mrs. (no longer Lucia) Pillson, and spent the next several days debating on what to wear. Not for a moment did she consider not appearing, as everyone would then assume she had not been asked.

That there were plenty of ornate costumes choices abounding throughout literature and history was

obvious. For example, she could don an Elizabethan gown, but she was afraid Lucia might reprise her old role as Queen Elizabeth (a role which she, herself, should have the sole right to assume, considering her namesake). She could borrow one of Diva's old costumes and appear as Mary Queen of Scots, but she flattered herself that she would need to take it in too much for it to be a practical selection. Something out of the ancient world briefly commended itself to her, but Lucia had perhaps lately overdone the Classical Age.

She suddenly had an inspiration. Yes, something which did not require too much work, yet could be quite interesting. A costume using the colours of yellow and black recommended itself to her. A very unusual monarch. She set to work immediately, the thought of Diva's envious looks inspiring her. She rummaged through her attic for several old clothing pieces, and took them down to her dressmaker. True, Miss Greele announced quite bluntly that Elizabeth had increased in size since that attire had been last worn, but Elizabeth simply bade her to let out the seams a bit. When informed that there was certainly not that much material available, Elizabeth commanded the woman to do whatever was necessary to make the outfit presentable.

She soon found that she was not the only one making use of Miss Greek's exemplary talents in preparation for this get-together. She had spotted Evie popping out of Heynes's with a furtive glance, and even Mrs. Wyse who had never before been seen stepping foot in the local draper's shop was observed doing just that. In a loud aside she had once been overheard to remark that the majority of her dress labels were in foreign languages — inferring that they were from France — and therefore she needed to send them out to be cleaned as her maid could make neither heads nor tails of the instructions. The idea that Susan had deigned to cross the threshold of the Tilling dressmaker's shop was proof as to the fever which had gripped the town.

This wave of enthusiastic fervour, instead of levelling off or washing out, rose higher and higher over the next few weeks. Questions were asked of the participants, rumours circulated (Diva denied any plans to resuscitate her Queen Mary outfit, which convinced Elizabeth that she was planning on wearing it — or a variation of it), and red herrings abounded. Even Irene, Lucia's most staunch supporter, was seduced into the enemy's camp, as she had yet no idea that Lucia loathed Mrs. Blanchard: Irene was positively identified as having been in the tailor's shop on at least two occasions (once by Elizabeth, a most reliable observer).

The menfolk, too, were by no means immune to this rising tide of white-capped tension. Mr. Wyse was seen in the cobbler's shop inspecting a pair of riding boots, while Georgie was glimpsed fretting to himself

in front of the window pane of the haberdashery shop in Malleson Street. When the Major approached, he had quickly ducked into the toy shop next door.

This manner of costuming was a new arena for competition, and everyone in Tilling rose to the challenge. In the end, even Lucia was caught up in the tide which, if she was not careful, would engulf everyone. And when it was thought that this current of excitement could not get any higher or more turbulent, Mrs. Blanchard proceeded to add more fuel to the fire (to change the metaphor) with a morning announcement in the High Street the Thursday before the party.

"Have you decided just what you are going as?" she had asked Evie Bartlett, who replied, "Why, yes. Kenneth and I have just about finished our costumes." Mrs. Blanchard had looked very pleased, then said, "It will be so much fun having everyone walk about as if they are actually the characters they are pretending to be. Of course, a simple costume such as a pirate could be the most fun to try and guess. There are so many famous buccaneers to choose from."

This added requirement swept through Tilling like a wildfire. The lending library was besieged with esoteric requests for books on this or that historical figure. Lucia sent away to London for several reference books, while the Wyses drove out to Hastings to peruse the booksellers over there.

But the day finally arrived when books were put back on the shelves, faux pearl necklaces were adjusted, ties were straightened, and everyone descended upon Grebe at dusk. Despite the warm night, everyone wore a cloak or coat of some kind to hide their outfits from each other. The unveiling would take place only after the hostess' threshold had been crossed.

The Padre and Evie were the first to arrive, presenting themselves at exactly nine o'clock Saturday evening.

Miss Thalman, who was not in costume, bade them enter and make themselves at home. They found Mrs. Blanchard in the parlour. She was attired in a brown dress heavily adorned with fringe, and a feathered bonnet.

"How do you do, sir and madam?" she said, smiling. "I am Pocahontas, daughter of the Indian chief Powhatan. And who might you be?"

The padre was dressed in a simple pair of breeches and a loose tunic and knelt before his wife, who was wearing a plain, but attractive dress. He spoke, "But, soft! Ach! What light through yonder window breaks? 'Tis' the east, and Juliet 'tis' the sun!" To be sure, this passionate speech of Romeo's sounded distinctly odd when delivered in a heavy, predominantly Scottish accent, but Mrs. Blanchard did not seem to mind. She clapped her hands in delight.

Evie appeared not to notice her genuflecting suitor, and instead looked about her as if she had lost

something, "O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?"

The front door next admitted Diva and the Mapp-Flints, both having reached Grebe at the same moment. The Major was first to reveal his costume: a rather tall top hat sporting a huge brass buckle. He had on knickers and a jacket of jet black, and a false cotton beard to which blacking had been applied. He bowed to Mrs. Blanchard. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am, err, John Smith of the American colonies at Jamestown." Mrs. Blanchard curtsied and allowed him to kiss her hand. "Good evening, Mr. Smith. I am Pocahontas." "Indeed. Ha!" the Major said, suddenly uncomfortably aware of his wife standing close by. He needn't have worried. Elizabeth's attention was entirely taken up by Diva, and vice versa. They both acted as if viewing themselves in a looking glass, in that as Diva began unwrapping her cloak, Elizabeth did likewise, and at the same careful pace. It was clear that they were both dreading the revelation that they had (once again) independently come up with the same outfit, and thus were possibly only moments away from a humiliating revelation. They each put down the paper bag they had brought, and stood back up.

Diva took a deep breath, and so did Elizabeth. As if on cue, they both dropped their coverings to reveal their costumes. Diva had on a light kerseymere dress of a vaguely Egyptian look, reinforced by the scarab costume jewellery she wore about her neck. Elizabeth had on a black blouse and dark leggings, both having had bits of one of the Major's old tiger skins liberally sewn on, seemingly haphazardly.

They both surveyed each other's garments, heaved a great sigh, and simultaneously burst into murmurs of relief. Diva pulled out a gold and black Egyptian headdress out of the bag she had carried in with her, and Elizabeth pulled out a black fur cap from the bag she had brought.

Elizabeth spoke first. "How de do, Mrs....?"

"Queen Cleopatra, thank you," Diva said in mock haughtiness. "And you?"

"Burte Khan."

There was a pause. "Who?" Diva asked again.

"Burte. Genghis Khan's wife."

"Oh. I didn't even know he had been married."

Elizabeth, instead of being curt over Diva's honest ignorance, took her arm, and they joined the others. She was prepared to forgive Diva on this occasion, the joy at them both having chosen separate costumes mellowing her out rather considerably.

A significantly robust Joan of Arc anachronistically sporting the Order of a Member of the British Empire on her bosom, and an aging D'Artagnan in the guise of Mr. and Mrs. Wyse soon joined the group, with a

leather-clad Boudicca, fearless and aggressive leader of the tribes of England, following soon after, smoking a pipe.

Lucia and Georgie finally appeared, he in a suit of tin armour, she in a flowing, flowery white dress, with a costume sword in its sheath strapped to her hip.

Elizabeth walked up to her, all smiles. "Let me guess, dear Worship, fudging from Mr. Georgie's outfit, might I guess Guinevere?"

Lucia laughed. "Actually, you are rather close, Mrs. Mapp-Flint. I am Nimue, the Lady of the Lake."

"And I am King Arthur," Georgie piped in.

"Of course! I should have guessed as much. Superb costuming, Mr. Georgie. But doesn't that hurt? How did you manage to sit in your motor all the way here?"

Georgie giggled and turned red. "I actually had to put on the leg parts just outside, beyond the hedge. That's why we were so late."

Lucia smiled at Elizabeth and took an appraising step back. "Now, what are you supposed to be?" she wondered aloud, lending a bit more stress to the word "supposed" than Elizabeth felt was absolutely necessary.

"I shall give you three guesses."

"I shall not be up to it, I am sure," Lucia said, looking askance at the jumble of tiger pieces and Elizabeth's silly hat.

"Mr. Georgie, then," Elizabeth cooed. But Georgie just smiled and shook his head.

"Burte Khan. Genghis Khan's wife."

There was a blank stare from both the Once and Future King and his consort for the evening, and they said in unison, as if they had been practising: "Oh."

"Angel!" the tyrant of England exclaimed as she approached, throwing her arms around Lucia's neck. "Absolutely exquisite costume!"

"Thank you, Irene dear. And who might I have the pleasure of addressing?"

"I am Boudicca! Defender of England! I just finished her portrait, so she was fresh in my mind. I'm submitting it to the exhibit. My portrait shows Boudicca in all her true womanhood, but I thought I'd best not be too accurate in person. Don't want to embarrass poor Georgie-porgie."

Georgie said, "Oh, you're too tarsome!" but it was clear that he was enjoying himself.

"Very evocative of the period, Irene," Lucia pronounced, taking in Irene's rather scanty dress-

"Now, now, everyone," Mrs. Blanchard announced. "I would like us to proceed out to the back garden. It's much cooler than the house. There are refreshments of most kinds outside to the left."

Elizabeth found herself walking out with Mrs. Blanchard, who hadn't the courtesy to wait to the end, like a proper hostess. "What a pleasant surprise. You never mentioned it was to be a fete champetre.: we in Tilling are accustomed to simple indoor festivities, not

grand outdoor parties."

Mrs. Blanchard looked at her with a slightly amused expression and said, simply, "No, I suppose I never did mention it," apparently wondering what the fuss was all about.

The garden had been strung with Chinese lanterns, chairs were scattered in dumps here and there, a gramophone was placed prominently near the house with an electrical cord running into the open kitchen window, and a large wooden platform rather like a dance floor, with an overhanging shelter, had been built along one side. Upon it, two large tables were staggering under the weight of an enormous quantity of food of all kinds. A third table was groaning under the weight of two punch bowls and several bottles of liquor. Elizabeth again attempted to be pleasant. "Mrs. Blanchard, it's just after dinner. How can we possibly enjoy all this? You've rewarded us much too much!"

"In your case, Elizabeth dear, I'd say that it looks as if you've rewarded yourself quite a lot already," she replied, and patted Elizabeth lightly on the rump. Elizabeth stopped shock-still as Mrs. Blanchard continued into the garden. Never had she been so directly insulted by anyone. Never before had someone been so blatantly rude concerning her ample frame. (Was weight a positive obsession with Americans? This was not the first time Mrs. Blanchard had mentioned it.) In any case, it was astoundingly presumptuous for Mrs. Blanchard to presume enough familiarity to discuss that aspect of her appearance. But naturally, Elizabeth couldn't possibly take notice of this insult. It would be beneath her to do so, and she mustn't let it be known that it bothered her. And so in pursuit of that policy, she looked about for Diva in order to discuss with her the finer points of that very subject.

Upon her own arrival out of doors, Lucia spotted the Chinese lanterns instantly and congratulated Mrs. Blanchard on such a successful and inviting atmosphere. Privately, she crossed off from her mental list the Chinese lanterns she had often promised herself she would use for one of her own get-togethers. Alas, yet another idea no longer available to her. This Mrs. Blanchard, with her lanterns and her costume balls, was truly becoming quite a challenge.

"Mrs. Blanchard!" Lucia cried. "Such a lovely party. I see now where all the workmen in town had gone. They were here to build this lovely platform."

"Yes, so glad you like it," Mrs. Blanchard said. "I had that built in case it rained. It would be just like your unpredictable British weather to rain on my party."

Lucia smiled wistfully at the thought of things which might have been, and meandered over to the buffet. She debated a long time, finally selected some sort of petite blueberry pastry, and was about to bite

into it when she paused in shock. What she was hearing was so awful that she was unable to believe her ears, yet she had to admit of its authenticity. She turned to look. Sure enough, there was the loyal Musketeer betraying Queen and Crown. She listened intently.

"Of course," Mr. Wyse said, bowing toward the house. "I was in conversation just yesterday with my wife, Susan. We were discussing whether it might not, in fact, be the time to consider a new venue for our little exhibition. The Mapp-Flint's humble abode — of which you are the current tenant, of course — may be just the locale we seek."

"Yes," agreed Joan of Arc, and Lucia found herself fervently wishing for a fire onto which she might throw a faggot or two. "Algernon and I have often and often lamented how cramped and unsuitable is the Art Institute for proper display of the masterpieces for which we are the brief custodians. I believe I speak for both of us when I say we would love to see them hung here."

"Oh, good!" Mrs. Blanchard exclaimed. "I was worried that I might upset someone by suggesting it. Rather forward of me, I know, but I do so like to speak my mind. I think that is so important."

"As you may or may not know," the Maid of Orleans continued, "the hanging committee is composed of myself, my husband and Mrs. Pillson. Although moving the exhibit to Grebe requires a vote, I feel quite safe in saying that you need not be concerned. It is by simple majority, after all."

"Thank you," Mrs. Blanchard said. "I feel such a part of your little town already."

"And as part of this new venue," Mr. Wyse continued, bowing to Mrs. Blanchard, "May we be encouraged to hope that you will grace us with the submission of a painting or two of your own?"

"Oh, Mr. Wyse!" Mrs. Blanchard objected halfheartedly. "I don't know what to say. I'm not much of a painter, you know. I suppose you might say I collect them as opposed to drawing them."

"Oh, please," Susan said, "You must think it over, at the very least, before disappointing us."

"Very well," Mrs. Blanchard replied, "I shall certainly consider it. But, please, call me Hattie."

Lucia walked stiffly away. From the the other side of the garden she could hear the padre telling one of his Scottish stories, and Georgie's high-pitched giggle. Lucia could not recall the last time she had felt so deserted. She was certain that if she attempted to rally her forces against this infidel, that she would come away empty-handed. Even Georgie had espoused contentment with her. And the Wysees were unfortunately correct, in that a simple majority vote was all that was required. The deed was as good as done: the September art exhibition would be held at Grebe.

"A delightful Pocahontas," said Elizabeth through clenched teeth. Lucia had not noticed Mrs. Mapp-Flint's

approach, but did not immediately acknowledge her presence, as Elizabeth still had not apologised for the sunflowers (but had paid the submitted bill without comment). But after a few moments more, Lucia finally broke down. She could stand the strain of being abandoned no longer.

"And the Major makes such a realistic-looking John Smith," Lucia said as she watched him lift his fake beard to sip at a glass filled to the brim with what was undoubtedly not his first whiskey and soda. She continued, "You know, Pocahontas saved John Smith's life. They became very close in later years."

Elizabeth's face turned dark with rage as she attempted to bore a hole through Mrs. Blanchard's back by sheer force of will. "No. I did not know that," she said carefully. "Thank you for that information."

It was Elizabeth's turn to share dreadful news. "Mrs. Blanchard was discussing with me a few moments ago how she truly wanted to ingratiate herself with you and the Wyses. You three are the only ones in our little circle to employ male servants — the Wyses have their butler, Figgis, and you have Cadman, your chauffeur. Since I confirmed her supposition that tax rates are higher for male than for female staff, it was clear to her that you three are the wealthiest in town."

Lucia pursed her lips, not trusting herself to speak. So Mrs. Blanchard had revealed herself at last, allowing her shallow mask of manners to fall away: she was a gold-digging social climber at best. At worst... These were not pretty thoughts, and Lucia was again thankful that Mrs. Blanchard was a tenant of Grebe, and not Mallards. Which reminded her "And the Wyses have agreed to hold the art exhibition here," Lucia added, almost casually. Elizabeth made no reply, and Lucia turned to look at her. Even by the dim light of the Chinese lanterns, Elizabeth's livid face was unnerving to behold. Lucia sat on a nearby chair. Elizabeth followed, choosing a chair one seat removed.

They both watched the new curator of the art exhibition cavort in an obvious and unseemly manner about the garden. Minutes passed, and the silence between them grew terrible.

Mapp stole a sidelong glance at Lucia. That was followed by a return glance. Elizabeth had a sudden flash of compassion for Lucia. But instead of recovering from her moment of weakness, as she had expected, the feeling lingered.

Lucia sighed. So did Elizabeth. Then Lucia finally spoke. "We need to do something about this situation," she said meaningfully, staring at Mrs. Blanchard.

Elizabeth said nothing for a time. They both sat in silence. The party-goers were clustered about the wooden pavilion at the other end of the lawn, bubbling over with laughter and good humour. Georgie was demonstrating the difficulty he was having trying to sit, while Romeo was involved in the midst of a rather

convoluted mock-marriage proposal to Juliet. And the Major was still enjoying himself by the cupful. Elizabeth no longer had the energy this evening to police him. Instead, she was privately lamenting that fact that her grand scheme to bring the art exhibition to the Cottage had been thwarted by that Blanchard woman. She finally spoke.

"Yes, I agree with you. We need to do something."

Both women visibly relaxed and sat back in their chairs, rather in awe at the significance of this moment. Neither could believe what had just transpired: it was too fantastic, too unreal. And yet, there it was. Unbeknownst to anyone else at the party, an historic accord had just been reached between two rival factions — factions who had been feuding virtually since the moment they had met so many years ago. What made this historic accord even more remarkable (if such a thing were possible) was that the competition between Mapp and Lucia had been no ordinary war. Even the most casual reader would be hard-pressed to disagree that their rivalry made the tragic and protracted conflict between the Montagues and the Capulets seem like a simple disagreement over a game of piquet.

Of course, there was still the armistice to be signed. Doubtless each party had a list of grievances against the other which she might or might not be willing to put aside in the cause of the Common Good — bargaining chips which she would doubtless use in an attempt to force the other's hand.

But all this lay in the future. For now, it was enough that the two parties had agreed, in principle, to cooperate.

They stood. Lucia offered her hand. "It is agreed, then." Elizabeth took it, and said simply, "If anyone asks, I warn you that I shall deny this conversation to the grave."

Lucia smiled grimly, nodding her agreement. "Fino a domani."

"Until tomorrow" was a long time to wait, especially when the free flowing spirits offered by the ample banquet managed to drag the party on to an interminably late hour. And it was a particularly painful moment for Lucia when Mrs. Blanchard turned on the gramophone and played several records of what she supposed were classical compositions. She half-expected to hear the Moonlight Sonata among the other arrangements which issued from that tinny, scratchy box, but was fortunately spared that ignoble happenstance.

After what seemed like years, the padre was finally heard to indistinctly utter, "Good night, good night! Ach, partin' es such sweet sorrow, that I shall say good night till' it be morrow." The Bartletts dragged themselves off, followed closely by everyone else. Lucia wound up helping Georgie out of his armour, although he had very little of it left on him as it was. Elizabeth

had to coax the Major downstairs from the master bedroom, since he was convinced that this was his house. Elizabeth explained to him that while he was correct, it was currently being let furnished to someone else.

In matters of religion, the residents of Tilling unknowingly followed the teachings of the seventeenth century French philosopher Pascal, who reasoned that if God does actually exist, adherents will gain an eternity of bliss; on the other hand, if God does not actually exist, what have they lost? Being excellent bridge players (some more excellent than others) they, as a group, appreciated the merits of hedging. As Sunday was the day following the party, Lucia felt her statement *fino a domani* had best wait another full day for implementation. It would be rather unseemly to begin the campaign on the seventh day.

In fact, it was at half-past nine o'clock precisely on Monday morning that the telephone at Mallard's rang, and Lucia responded to Grosvenor's summons.

"Yes?" Lucia spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Good morning, dear Worship," Elizabeth said earnestly. "Anything I can do for you today?"

It had been a long time since Elizabeth had called each morning to see how she, as the Mayoress, could help the Mayor in her duties. Clearly, then, Elizabeth was quite prepared to wage war against their common foe. But she was remarkably wise to be couching it in such a subtle manner, so as not to alert anyone. They both knew that if word got out that they had organised against Mrs. Blanchard, the rest of Tilling might rise against them in revolt. Not because they particularly liked Mrs. Blanchard and wished her to win, but because they knew what being under Lucia's (or Elizabeth's) thumb was like.

Tilling in general did not enjoy coming to heel when called upon to do so. It instead preferred being enticed and flattered and made much of before consenting to pay homage to their respective queens. It was a matter of principle, and of honour. And if Tilling happened to discover what the corporation of Pillson & Mapp-Flint Ltd. was up to, they would no doubt be quite amused to watch Lucia and Elizabeth squirm a bit.

No, this must never happen. For the very first time, Lucia truly appreciated Mapp's quickness — her ability to grasp the subtle nuances of a situation. Lucia had never been on this side of that sharp mind, and took this rare opportunity to appreciate it from a wholly different angle.

"So glad you called, Elizabeth-mia. So very glad. I thought, perhaps, I would hold a bridge party at Diva's this afternoon. Do you think you might be available? Not a large group: you and myself, of course. Her, naturally. And perhaps the Major?"

"Ur..." Elizabeth said on the other end of the line.

"Are you certain, Lucia — I mean Lulu?"

Lucia willed Elizabeth to understand. Once could not battle the enemy by remaining distant and aloof. Elizabeth certainly should have known that by now via her own battles versus Lucia. One had to come forth to challenge your opponent in mortal combat. For this was to be a battle to the end.

"Of course, dear. We must show our firm resolve."

"I see," Elizabeth said, enlightenment clearly showing in her voice. "But I think, don't you dear, that the Major might be more of a hindrance than a help?"

"It's entirely up to you, my sweet Mayoress. Perhaps Georgie, then?"

"I agree. Quite a good choice. Shall we say two o'clock?"

"Yes. I shall send out the invitation right away. She should receive it by then."

Lucia replaced the receiver in its cradle and walked back to the garden room, shaking her head in wonderment. It was difficult to get used to the idea that, for the moment at least, she and Elizabeth were allies.

It took almost no time for the news to reach Diva's ears that the hanging committee, which disallowed Wasters as a suitable venue for the exhibition, was all too eager to entertain the thought of displaying pickies at Grebe. Evie was the indiscreet bearer of this particular news in the High Street during the morning's marketing. Diva was still raving over the success of Saturday night's gala party, when Evie suddenly interjected.

"Kenneth tells me that the Wyases have agreed to hold the art show at Grebe."

Diva paused, open-mouthed. "Grebe?"

"Yes," squeaked the little mouse-like woman.

"But that doesn't make any sense," Diva mused out loud. "Are you sure you have your facts straight, Evie?"

As if to corroborate her story, Evie added in an aside, "Mrs. Blanchard has won over the Wyases."

"That's the only way they could have been persuaded to put it there," Diva agreed, then abruptly changed her tone. "I think that's terribly mean of them, pulling it from me just to give it to Mrs. Blanchard. Grebe's not an appropriate venue," she added, apparently fond of the phrase.

"What does Lucia have to say about it?"

Evie squeaked her amusement. "No one's asked her. It is a simple majority vote, anyway. Two against one, even if Lucia doesn't like the idea."

Diva's feeling of worthlessness was both heartfelt and sharp. "How typical!" Diva snorted. "I'm always the one who has to pick up after everyone. I'm always the one who doesn't get the credit due me when I offer really terrific ideas" (although offhand she couldn't think of any she had came up with recently — excepting moving the exhibit), "and generally get every single one of my good ideas stolen out from under me and used by

someone else. I'm rather tired of it, I can tell you." She found she was speaking to herself, as Evie had fled into the post office. She turned and nearly ran into Elizabeth.

"Good morning, dear Diva."

"Good morning, Elizabeth. Any news?"

Elizabeth shifted her marketing basket from one arm to the other. "I would like to reserve the card room in the back of your tea shop if I might: for two o'clock onward. Unless someone else has beat me to it, as I'm sure it gets quite busy." Elizabeth showed all her teeth.

Diva debated whether Elizabeth's comment was meant to be satirical, then decided she had intended it to be in earnest. It was highly unusual for Elizabeth and she to be on such downright friendly terms, without even so much as an undercurrent of resentment or bitterness. Diva knew that this rare event surely could not last very long, and she was loathe to waste it,

"It is all yours, Elizabeth. Tell me, have you heard the news?"

"What news, sweet one?"

"The art show is going to be held at Grebe."

"Yes, as a matter of fact —" she stopped short, and lamely added, "I found out at the party Saturday evening." She had almost said Lucia had told her, but that might raise questions which were best left unasked.

Diva said, "So aren't you going to try and stop it?"

"How? The last time I attempted to prevent one of my tenants from holding a get-together, I got nowhere. As you well know." That last bit was not really necessary, and Diva could discern a bit of distant froth in the glassy calm of their friendship. She backed down.

"But I'm still surprised that there isn't anything you could do about it."

"And Mrs. Blanchard is such a nice woman," Elizabeth continued, ignoring Diva's plea. "Why not allow her some involvement in the very best activities of our town?"

Diva looked at Elizabeth as if she had been speaking in tongues. Why would Elizabeth praise someone — anyone — like that? And without a hint of venom or a back-handed compliment? Something was not quite right, and she suddenly felt the need to be alone in order to ponder the implications.

"I shall keep the card room open for you, Elizabeth. Two o'clock."

"Thank you, sweet one."

Diva continued on with her shopping, deep in thought. Overall, she found that she loathed Lucia as president, but had already forgiven her at the literary circle two weeks ago now. It would not do to start all over again, especially as her original stance had netted her nothing. The fact that Lucia was not directly involved in the Wyses' decision-making was hardly

evidence: knowing Lucia's finger was in everyone's pie, as it were, Diva decided that they must have acted with her connivance if not her blessing. No, clearly this was an affront to their friendship.

As Diva turned over the heads of lettuce in the bin outside Twistevant's, she considered Mrs. Blanchard. Naturally, Hattie (as she had asked Diva to call her) was above all this petty carping, and deserved to be handled with tact and charm. It was obvious that the poor woman had been tricked into offering Grebe as a location, as it was ludicrous to assume that someone so new to the town would have imposed herself onto everyone else in so direct a manner.

So what should she do? Ignore the art show? That would be unkind to Mrs. Blanchard, but would serve out Lucia and the Wyses. Or what about going on with her contributions to the exhibition just as usual? But that would be irritating, and what of her pride? None of these seemed adequate answers, and Diva cried out in frustration, "Why can't I make a simple decision?"

"What's that?" a voice at her elbow asked, startling her. She turned to see Irene lighting her pipe.

"Good morning, Irene. Any news?"

"Is it true about the art show?" asked the Quaint One, puffing away and throwing the spent match into the gutter.

"Yes. It would seem so. The Wyses have decided it's to be at Grebe."

Irene curled her lip. "Dark place, isn't it? I must say it's not like Lucia to be so subservient to a stranger like that. Mrs. Blanchard is an all-right bloke, but scarcely worth all this fuss. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, I quite agree," Diva said, suddenly conscious of the parallels between Elizabeth's and Lucia's attitudes about the American. Neither would say a word against her.

Irene waved goodbye. "Pity. Still, I suppose Lucia had her reasons. Au reservoir."

Diva considered it odd that Irene, who had the most to lose from the location of the show — having had her work hung in the Royal Academy of all places — was so nonchalant regarding the move to a house half a mile out of town. Then again, whatever Lucia desired was fine with Irene.

Left with an unsettled feeling about the entire matter, what with her inconclusive analysis and Irene's indifference, Diva trudged home with two heads of lettuce in her basket, but very little food for thought.

The two o'clock bridge party at Diva's to probe the enemy's weaknesses did not turn out to be quite as momentous as planned. Lucia had a very difficult time convincing Georgie to play at the same table with someone who had maliciously and deliberately tried to ruin his still life. But his genuinely kind nature and love of the game eventually won out.

Mrs. Blanchard had replied to Lucia's note stating she would be charmed to play, and arrived in the

highest spirits. Since the Pillsons needed to be split up Lucia found herself partnering Elizabeth. This was not the most auspicious arrangement, as neither one was particularly forgiving of the other's playing style. Yet, the armistice which had been forged a mere two days ago provided the two women with a shared purpose which would hopefully manage to override, for the moment at least, their natural propensity to challenge the other.

There were three tricks left to play out in the first hand, when Lucia and Elizabeth lost two in a row. Such an event would normally have drawn blistering sarcasm from Elizabeth in the course of the proceeding, and she realised that if she avoided dressing down Lucia, Mr. Georgie would certainly think it very odd. Mapp looked across the table at Lucia searchingly. Lucia was looking at her, half-expectantly.

Elizabeth tried a tentative stab, hoping Lucia would understand. "Lulu," she snarled sweetly, "Surely you realise that if you had played the ten on the last trick, and the two on this one, we would have been out only this trick instead of both of them?"

Lucia heaved a sigh and relaxed. "Yes, dear, that is so. But that would not have worked, as you would have seen if you'd been paying attention. If I'd tried the ten, then Georgie would have played his trump on that play instead of this one, and we would have lost both anyway. Surely you can see that?"

"No I would not have," corrected Georgie, obliviously. "I would have held my trump until the end anyway."

"No you wouldn't have, Georgie. Don't be silly."

Later in the rubber, Elizabeth gave a scathing mock-analysis of Lucia's lineage. She could see the Mayor wince under such strong criticism and received a gentle kick under the table as a reminder that there was such a thing as going a bit too far. They continued playing.

The last half of the second rubber saw Lucia seemingly forget her manners after an extremely complicated play on Elizabeth's part. Her strategy, which Lucia began to dimly perceive only near the tail end, failed miserably.

"Elizabeth-mia," Lucia said, "While it is possible that you could have succeeded — no one would have liked that more than I — it might be best next time to communicate with your partner a bit more."

Elizabeth, giddy with the new game they were playing in front of their opponents, stuck out her tongue. Lucia seemed a bit startled by this physical display, but quickly recalled their purpose here today. "No matter, it's only a game, isn't it. My deal?"

Mrs. Blanchard, witness to all this, was terribly amused. And Georgie, who normally took all events in Tilling very seriously, for once smiled along with Hattie. As they were partners and were managing to

win most every rubber by a wide margin, this dereliction was not terribly surprising.

"Oh, dear," Mrs. Blanchard said. "You take your game quite seriously, don't you? And at your age, too," she said, looking at Lucia.

"My age?" Lucia asked, looking up from her shuffling and thus almost losing control of the cards. Luckily, she caught them from careening about the room just in time.

"Yes. I would ask it, but I'd be afraid that you wouldn't remember what age you had settled on. Oh, do I start the bidding?"

Lucia smiled a brittle smile at this joke, if it was a joke, and said nothing. For someone who enjoyed speaking her mind, Mrs. Blanchard certainly seemed to have quite a lot of things to say.

"And where is your husband, the Major?" Mrs. Blanchard asked Elizabeth.

"My Benjy-boy is out on the links enjoying a round or two of golf. Why do you ask?" Elizabeth said, and Lucia could sense, rather than actually see, a dangerous glint in her eye.

"Such an amiable fellow. How long have you two been married? I bid two hearts."

"It seems like only yesterday that my Benjy-boy and I were wed," Elizabeth replied. "Three spades — I mean four."

Lucia raised an eyebrow at this, and wondered if Elizabeth might be overbidding her hand, especially as it was so early in the auction and as she seemed not to be regarding her cards. Lucia's concern was well-founded as the hand progressed, as Elizabeth's winning of the contract was virtually the only thing they managed to achieve that hand.

"Such a delight," Mrs. Blanchard said. "I rarely have so much fun at bridge. Of course, jig-saw puzzles are more my speed."

After the end of this disastrous third rubber, the Pillsons excused themselves to journey home and dress for tea, and Elizabeth excused herself as well, her purse considerably lightened. She and Lucia's verbal altercations during the game were performed excellently, mostly through force of habit. Surely no one would suspect a conspiracy involving two such staunch foes. As she let herself in to the Cottage, Elizabeth nonetheless could not shake the nagging feeling that, although playing at being enemies had its positive aspects, not the least of which was the mental stimulation she enjoyed while sparring with Lucia, she admitted that a tiny part of her would like Mrs. Blanchard returned to America so that she and Lucia could freely have at it once again.