

Chapter 5

Lucia sat pensively in the bay window of the garden room, which offered a superb view directly down West Street toward the High Street. From here, she could see quaint Irene's house on the right, and by means of craning her neck slightly, she could just manage to keep tabs on Elizabeth and the Major's comings and goings from the Cottage next door. The Wyses too, were often under scrutiny, as their abode on the abutting Porpoise Street dictated that they need turn the Royce down West Street to do their morning shopping.

This magic window was the ideal vantage point to observe the comings and goings of fully half the town's members of Society, except that there had been no comings and goings at all. The morning marketing was performed with an unusually hurried and preoccupied air by all involved, and the streets then became as a ghost town.

It had been a week now since the town had become thus deserted. To the day, in fact, when Mrs. Blanchard had asked Diva if the card room were available on an extended basis. Diva replied that it was, to which Mrs. Blanchard had reacted with enthusiastic glee. Lucia heard from Elizabeth (who had heard it from Evie, who had heard it from Diva's maid, Janet) that Mrs. Blanchard had four card tables placed together in that small room, and had then proceeded to construct a jig-saw puzzle. Lucia had instantly realised that this sort of public grandstanding was nothing but a stunt, and if anyone were qualified to make that determination, it was certainly she.

Lucia had long maintained that jig-saw puzzles were no better than crosswords (and she had been on record to say crosswords were very bad, indeed). Mrs. Blanchard clearly had far too much time on her hands. But if that was true, Lucia's friends had all the time in the world as well, for they had joined in this silly craze. There they all sat for hours and hours putting back together a picture which someone had previously taken great pains to pull apart.

Lucia considered it an undignified occupation. It did not exercise the mind, unlike reading up on Cicero's description of the life of Alexander the Great, it did not feed the soul, as did evoking the sounds of the Masters on her Steinway. And it did not expand one's appreciation for Nature and provide exercise as did bicycling and callisthenics.

Neither did bridge fulfil any of these requirements it is true, but Lucia felt that a rather pedantic criticism, for the crux of the matter was that everyone was assembling jig-saw puzzles at Diva's, instead of following Lucia's lead at Mallards.

The ruined Roman villa was finished. The newly-bronzed bust of Hadrian looked splendid, as did an appropriately ancient-looking sundial. There had been

another one in the shop, with the whimsical inscription "I only keep track of the sunny hours", which Georgie rather fancied, but Lucia felt that would introduce quite the wrong tone into her Palace of Solitude.

The gazebo itself had been toned down extensively from Lucia's original grandiose plans as she had wanted it quickly constructed, and was now much more along the lines of a simple piazza. The workmen had put the final touches on it two days ago but Lucia felt that she had best postpone its grand unveiling. It would be tiresome to hear of jig-saw puzzles the entire evening.

Lucia was forced to face facts. Her and Elizabeth's campaign of reduction was proceeding along very ineffectually, the principle difficulty being that Lucia and Elizabeth both had great resistance to truckling to anyone. Jig-saw puzzles were Mrs. Blanchard's idea, and it went against Lucia's very nature to participate. She simply could not bring herself to visualise sending out invitations with the word "jig-saw puzzles" written in the left-hand corner, the self-same corner in which "bridge" or "un po' di musica" continued to hold their sacred and exalted positions. Besides, when she happened to casually enquire at the toy shop, she discovered that her friends had already availed themselves of all the available sets.

Feeling somehow vaguely disheartened, she quickly realised that stewing in her home was certainly not conducive to determining a method for expelling the infidel (Mrs. Blanchard) from the holy place (Tilling). She took up her marketing basket and proceeded down West Street.

"Indeed," Lucia mused once she reached the High Street and browsed the greengrocer's, "my opinion of jig-saw puzzles is quite well known, yet ingratiating myself regarding them is the surest method I know to insinuate myself back into the mainstream of things. This change of heart will be dissected by others. Mrs. Blanchard, no doubt, would remark on it if she knew my true feelings. Well, let her."

She practically threw down the lettuce she was handling, and uncharacteristically gritted her beautiful teeth. "Just let her try to challenge me," she said out loud, and had to explain to Mr. Twistevant that she had not been addressing him.

She contemplated all the ill-will that Mrs. Blanchard had metaphorically been raining upon her parade over the past weeks, and the constant leeching of her good intentions. Rage was an emotion to which Lucia had a passing acquaintance, but the feeling that she held at that moment could not be classified as such. Indeed, it would seem that her feelings about Mrs. Blanchard were unduly stirred up. True, she had run afoul of Lucia not nearly as many times as Elizabeth had done (and Lucia was guilty of the same crime against Elizabeth), so the true meaning behind Lucia's emotional state — regardless of any attempt on Lucia's

part to deny it — had more to do with her knowledge that Mrs. Blanchard was a mere interloper with a short lease. Mrs. Blanchard somehow felt little chagrin about sweeping into Tilling and setting herself up as monarch, all the while knowing she was going to abdicate at the end of September. What arrogance! The effort and time required to put Mrs. Blanchard in her place would be all for naught once that woman boarded her steamer for home. And Lucia abhorred wastefulness.

But she dared not allow Mrs. Blanchard's antics to remain unchecked: retreating behind the ramparts of Mallards and allowing her free reign would serve merely to undermine all the hard work she had put in over the years to gain (and some might suggest continuously regain) her leadership of the other residents. The more Lucia considered it, the more she felt the need to sweep herself clean of the woman. But the means to outmanoeuvre Mrs. Blanchard were proving elusive.

She entered Ye Olde Teashop with a firm smile and a determinedly light spirit. She traded acknowledgements with two town councillors who were there for tea, and strolled into the back room. There, in the sacred chamber used for bridge since time out of mind (well, at least since Diva had opened her shop a few years ago) was the object of Lucia's sojourn. As she entered she saw the back of Evie Bartlett's head and the profiles of Mr. and Mrs. Wyse (all having clearly succumbed to the wiles of the woman sitting across from them), occupied in a vain attempt to complete the puzzle laid out before them. There were half-finished tea cakes on dessert plates, along with a long-brewed teapot sitting disregarded along one edge of the table. Lucia noted two empty chairs as she exchanged pleasantries with everyone.

"Hello Mrs. Pillson," Hattie said without taking her eyes off the piece in her hand. Lucia surveyed the mosaic. It was so large as to barely fit on the four card tables and depicted some sort of parade. No, that wasn't quite right. Lucia cocked her head and it all came into focus: it was the changing of the guard at Buckingham palace. But why was Mrs. Blanchard viewing it upside down when there was an empty seat directly across from her? This was apparently a common question, for before Lucia could ask it, Mrs. Blanchard said, "I always put them together upside down. It's more of a challenge that way. Otherwise it's too easy."

"I see. I just came by to thank you once again for that lovely costume party the other week, and —"

"Yes. I must give another one soon. Although I still wonder why no one came as a pirate. Those costumes are exceedingly easy to do."

"Yes," Lucia agreed, then pointed. "There, perhaps?" she asked, indicating a hole which needed a patch.

"No. Tried that already. But thanks all the same."

Lucia smiled and stood at Mrs. Blanchard's elbow for a moment. "That looks terribly engrossing. I am beginning to understand how you could work at it for hours."

Mrs. Blanchard glanced up. "Why not join us then?" she asked, indicating the chair opposite her. "I'm sure you'll want the puzzle right-side up, as you're a beginner."

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Lucia asked lightly as she seated herself and picked up one of the unassembled pieces.

"Mmm, a little birdie told me, I suppose," Mrs. Blanchard mused, half-aloud.

"What Hattie is trying to say," Susan said in a hurried tone, "is that we all know how busy you are, my dear. No time for frivolities such as a jig-saw puzzle."

"Why, I take the opposite view entirely," Lucia countered. "I am all for exercises which strengthen hand and eye coordination, and which offer a suitable pastime to occupy one's body while allowing the mind freedom to engage in conversation. Here, perhaps this fits there. No, not quite. Why, I declare! This is not as simple as it looks."

Her three friends glanced at her as if to chastise her for even considering otherwise, and they bent once more to the task at hand.

"Mr. Georgie was here yesterday, just where you're sitting," Evie offered, concentrating on the white gloves of the lead guard. "We finally finished off a lovely picture of Windsor Castle."

"And the previous puzzle was indeed a fascinating portrait of a seascape. The Orkneys, I am told," Mr. Wyse offered, nodding vaguely toward the northeast.

"Georgie said nothing about it to me," Lucia said archly. "I thought he was spending all of his time finishing his sunflower sketch for the exhibition."

There was dead silence at the table for a few heartbeats until finally Evie said, "Has he submitted it yet?"

"No, I don't think so," Lucia replied.

"No, certainly not," Mr. Wyse said, eager to close the subject before Lucia quizzed them about the exhibit's location change. "We do not judge submissions until next month." He turned to Lucia. "Mrs. Blanchard has kindly consented to attempt a work of her own for our little show." He bowed to Mrs. Blanchard.

"How nice," Lucia said cordially. "A landscape, perhaps (no, this tiresome little piece doesn't want to go there, either), or a portrait. Wait! A still life?"

Mrs. Blanchard smiled. "I think I shall keep it a secret, or you'll be tempted to steal my idea."

Lucia dearly wished to say, "Like you stole the idea from me to have a party with Chinese lanterns?" but refrained. She laughed instead, it sounding like a peal

of miniature bells. 'Then I shall look forward to see it hanging on the wall of the Institute.'

"Why, it is not even finished yet, and already you've got it sold to the man who runs the nuthouse?" Mrs. Blanchard asked, glancing up.

"Nuthouse?" asked Lucia in mock incomprehension, then smiled. "No, no. The Institute. The Art Institute. That is where the exhibition is held each September." She glanced at the Wyse. They clearly found the intricacies of Buckingham Palace so incredibly fascinating, they were unable to pay attention to the conversation. Evie, too, suddenly appeared so completely absorbed in the conundrum spread out before her that she was unable even to lift her eyes.

"Oh, dear," Mrs. Blanchard said. "I suppose I have put my foot in it. My guess is that it was to be a surprise. Is that so, Mr. Wyse?"

Little Evie let loose with a timid little squeak of excitement.

Mr. Wyse looked up and smiled widely, his monocle dropping from his eye. "Yes, indeed," he said, wiping his moist hands on his trouser leg.

"Indeed," Susan repeated, putting back down with a trembling hand the puzzle piece she had just picked up. She glanced over at her husband, who looked completely in over his head, and she cleared her throat. "We would have held it there, but Hattie — Mrs. Blanchard — came up with an even better idea. She has offered us Grebe which we may use at our discretion."

"I see," Lucia said with the terrible attitude she assumed when presiding on the borough bench and passing judgment on some vagabond scoundrel.

The mouse squeaked again, and covered her mouth with her hand.

"And just when was I to find out about this?"

"At our next meeting, of course," Mrs. Wyse said, apologetically.

"Of course," Mr. Wyse repeated.

"Come now, Mrs. Pillson," Mrs. Blanchard broke in. "This is all my doing. Naturally, if you object we shan't have it at Grebe at all. You are, after all, still the president of the art committee."

"Yes," Lucia said, wondering if perhaps Mrs. Blanchard had put too fine an emphasis on the word "still". "And while I am still the president, I think it would be a delight to have the exhibit at Grebe. Ah! Here is the correct place for this little puzzle piece. Oh. Perhaps not."

"You what?" Elizabeth nearly shrieked.

"Please, Elizabeth!" said Lucia, gesturing for her to keep her voice down. "I had to. Don't you see: it would have been me against Tilling. We mustn't make any wrong moves in this campaign, my dear."

They were sitting in a secluded booth at the

Trader's Arms, in order to discuss the situation in a manner they hoped would avoid any reasonable chance of exposure, each with a sherry positioned in front of them as camouflage. They had retreated to this out-of-the-way hotel in which, legend had it, a conspirator of old had once plotted the murder of a Tilling Mayor. He had been found out and hanged. Neither current occupant of that booth was contemplating anything so drastic, of course. They would gladly settle for Mrs. Blanchard simply leaving town.

"I don't understand you, Lucia. That was a perfect moment to pull the exhibit back to the Institute and deny her some leverage. You've made a great mistake."

"I don't think so. It wasn't the time. However..."

"Yes?" Elizabeth asked, leaning forward in the same eager manner as a would-be cutthroat when discussing payment.

"She is going to submit a picture for the exhibit."

"Ah!" Elizabeth smiled. "How very rash of her."

"Yes, isn't it? Wouldn't it be just too terrible if the committee regretted that the limited wall space at its disposal would not permit of her work of art being exhibited?"

"Why my dear, I am positively frightened of you. What a memory you've got!" Elizabeth was referring to a note worded exactly that way which she had once had delivered to both Lucia and Georgie along with the pictures which they had submitted. Of course, that was a battle long ago and very far away, and Elizabeth felt it was rather mean to have resurrected such an old, old wound. But instead of showing she had been stung, Elizabeth merely smiled sweetly. "We may have some leverage, after all."

They would likely have demurred over the brigand-like suggestion that each slit her wrist and press them together to seal their conspiracy with a blood bond. They instead settled for simply raising their glasses in a toast and sipping daintily at the contents.

Elizabeth, like Lucia, wished for the art show to fail miserably. But not quite completely. There would be a next year, and — come Hell or high water (how appropriate, considering Grebe was built out along reclaimed marshland!) — Elizabeth would be residing at Grebe. After all, since it had been appropriate to hold the exhibit there while Mrs. Blanchard was the tenant, the physical characteristics of the location would not change when Elizabeth herself was the occupant. Just let Lucia try and stop her. She smiled in anticipation of the possibility of that future conflict and raised her glass for another toast.

Across the room, Georgie was sitting in a booth, perspiring heavily. He had seen Lucia enter with Mrs. Mapp-Flint, and had watched them absorbed in earnest discussion. He was absolutely flabbergasted to see the two together, acting as if they were best of friends. The Major and the padre, or perhaps even the Major and Mr. Wyse would be a more believable combination than

the pair he was now studying. He was burning with curiosity to learn what those two had in common, but already knew he could never ask Lucia point-blank. For if he told her where he had seen her, her very first question (he was certain of it) would be to ask what he was doing there.

He could explain, quite frankly, that Mr. Frost had suggested they go out for a pint or two that afternoon. That was true enough. But Georgie felt that Lucia would have to be placated with a statement that he was still finishing up his sketch of the sunflowers: an aspect of the tale not entirely factual. The truth of it was, the picture had been finished two days ago and lay, quite dry and already back from the trainer's, in Mr. Frost's front hall.

Even if she believed his tale, it was still no guarantee that he would be skillful enough to coax out of her the reason she was lounging about in the middle of the afternoon, drinking with Elizabeth. If she did not want him to know something, nothing he could say would drag it out of her.

But perhaps he could guess. Had Mrs. Blanchard finally broken down Lucia's resistance to the siren song which for so long had dogged the Major's wedded footsteps? He knew Lucia didn't think much of Mrs. Blanchard, but stooping to consort with the enemy was a new low, especially for his wife.

Besides, he thought, returning to his earlier deliberation, if she knew his picky was finished, she would no doubt try and drag him off for another round of bridge, or an afternoon of jig-saw puzzles (which were quite fascinating for the first hour or two, but hurt his brain after that), or playing Mozart duets which she had already secretly practised but pretended to have just received. No, Georgie was, for the very first time, cultivating Tilling friends outside Lucia's sphere of influence. It was quite refreshing, actually. It was high time he was allowed to do as he pleased. And as long as he could keep Lucia ignorant of such matters, he was certain that she would allow him to continue to do so.

It was not until some half hour later when Lucia and her cohort in crime finally left the premises, that Georgie could finally flee. The culprits had left via Curfew Street, so Georgie skulked around the other way, up Porpoise Street. This meant that he needed to pass by Starling Cottage, but it couldn't be helped. As he approached their house, he drew up his collar and assumed a stooping, lame gait in case the Wyses happened to be peering out the window. Once safely beyond their house, he resumed his spry walk and reached West Street without mishap.

He was turning up toward Mallards and congratulating himself on his cleverness when a cry caused him to jump. He turned to face Diva.

"Mr. Georgie!" she called out breathlessly, hurrying up the road to him.

"Dear Diva, whatever are you doing out this time of the afternoon? I would have thought your shop would be keeping you busy."

"Taking my Paddy for a walk," Diva explained, showing the empty leash she held in one hand and pointing to her Irish terrier. "He's over in front of Taormina."

"I shouldn't think that Irene would like that," Georgie observed, peering across the street.

"I shall dean up after him, of course," Diva replied tartly, moving to obstruct Georgie's view. "But I've been meaning to talk to you about a mystery I'm certain you can shed some light on."

Had Diva seen him come up Porpoise Street with that odd walk, Georgie wondered? Or had she seen him at the Trader's Arms? In either case, he decided he would take a page from Lucia's book when she did not wish to reveal something, and feign complete ignorance until Diva grew tired of explaining herself.

"Lucia and Elizabeth," Diva began, and Georgie relaxed with a sigh. It wasn't about him. She continued, "Something is astir. They've somehow agree to do nothing about Hattie. And I don't know why."

"Hmm," Georgie said, pretending to be deep in thought and stroking his beard. He should confide in Diva, so that both of them could put their heads together over this. But how could he explain his presence at the hotel restaurant? He was suddenly blessed with inspiration. "I have become friends with a Mr. Frost—"

"Yes, he's the one with the sunflowers."

"Good, you know all about that, then."

"I should say so," Diva exclaimed, "To hear Elizabeth tell it, she was the wronged party. Of course, I saw through that easily enough —"

"Yes," Georgie interrupted. "But as I was saying, I have been visiting a gentleman by the name of Mr. Frost. He saw Lucia and Elizabeth enter the Trader's Arms and have a cocktail together. Imagine that!" Georgie, of course, was not at all certain that Mr. Frost noticed the two women enter and occupy that remote booth, but he felt that in this case a certain artistic license was called for.

"When was this?" Diva asked, thunderstruck.

"Just today," Georgie said. "They looked as if they were plotting something — there was a conspiratorial attitude about them."

Diva wondered briefly about a person who could come away with so vivid an impression of complete strangers, but her mind was abruptly derailed off that train of thought when she glanced up the street.

"Mr. Georgie!" she cried, "Look!"

He spun around. There, at the top of the hill were Elizabeth and Lucia standing at the door of Mallards, deep in conference.

"Well I'll be..." Diva muttered, transfixed. The two women spoke for a few moments more as they held

hands, then blew each other a kiss, and Lucia finally disappeared into Mallards while Elizabeth walked around the corner, presumably to the Cottage.

"I have never seen the like," Diva said in awe, then added poetically, "While your friend holds you affectionately by both your hands you are safe, for you can watch both of his."

Georgie could only nod sagely.

"But what does it mean?" asked Diva. "Have they really been wicked enough to make up on the sly for real this time? Oh! Excuse me, Mr. Georgie. Well, you know what I mean."

"Indeed I do. It certainly looks like it, doesn't it? I wonder what could have caused —." He stopped abruptly and turned to Diva. She had the same idea, and in unison they both said, "Hattie."

"The only possible answer," Georgie said excitedly. "The only one. That explains everything. Their clandestine meeting. The fact that they won't say a word against Hattie. Who, by the way, hasn't asked either of them to call her 'Hattie'. They are the only two still addressing her as Mrs. Blanchard. That alone must be driving them both crazy."

"Yes! Elizabeth refuses to say anything against Hattie," Diva said. "Prattles on in the most ludicrous manner about how wonderful a woman she is, and how nice she is, and all that nonsense. Anyone could see she doesn't mean it."

"But Elizabeth and Lucia were sharp enough to each other at the bridge table the other day."

Diva shook her head, dismissing Georgie's objection. "And exactly who set up that little party? Lucia did. And she invited Elizabeth. Unless she had wanted to serve her out over something, which she didn't do unless I missed it —"

"No, I agree. I was there. There was nothing to miss." Georgie said.

"Yes, I know. I kept an ear out. So if the bridge party wasn't meant to serve out Elizabeth, it must have been for serving out someone else. And who else was there but you and Elizabeth and Lucia and her?" Diva's eyes sparkled at the conclusion they had reached after so little effort.

"I declare," Georgie said in awe. "You are very clever."

"Thank you, Mr. Georgie. But we both figured out this one. Now comes the next part."

"Yes," agreed Georgie. "What are we to do about it?"

Diva became very gracious. "For my part, I shall continue to be very cordial to them both. And as for Hattie..."

"Yes," Georgie asked. "Do we warn her?"

"Warn her? About what? I get the impression that Mrs. Blanchard can take care of herself. She has done splendidly so far. And it wouldn't hurt to have those two taken down a peg or two. Oh, dear! I've done it

again."

Georgie giggled. "I quite understand, Diva. No need to apologise."

Diva looked sheepish, but continued on. "That's settled, then. Oh, Mr. Georgie, I haven't been so wildly excited about anything like this in such a long time. This is quite thrilling!"

Georgie rubbed his hands together as he relished the warfare which was clearly exploding across Tilling in the same manner as a fifteen-inch naval gun discharging shells from an ironclad positioned in the harbour. There were some near-misses so far: the bridge game which had led nowhere, and Mrs. Blanchard's costume party of which (now that he considered it in this new light) Lucia had not been particularly enamoured. But Georgie was certain those were simply test shots for range and distance, and the true shelling had not yet begun in earnest.

"Well, I back Lucia, naturally," Georgie said firmly.

"Naturally," Diva agreed. "But I am not at all certain that I back anyone in particular this time around."

"Not Elizabeth? Isn't that a dereliction of your duty as a friend?"

"Now, Mr. Georgie. That would be terribly shallow of me to back Elizabeth simply because she is my best friend. Elizabeth would agree, by the way."

"Oh, I see," Georgie said, because he couldn't think of any other response.

"Besides," Diva continued, "I get tired of Elizabeth thinking she runs the place. I shall enjoy these skirmishes. All rather fun. Paddy! Get out of that flower bed!"

Georgie let himself into Mallards quietly, and stole out to the garden room. He heard, even before he opened the door, the strains of a piece by Bach he knew they had never played together before. As he entered, the music abruptly ceased, and Lucia switched in mid-fingering to the bars of the Moonlight Sonata.

'So she's got a new piece of music,' thought Georgie, "And she'll undoubtedly spring it on me tomorrow and pretend she hasn't tried it out yet. So like her.' And so exasperated was he over this sly manoeuvring on the part of his wife, that he abruptly disregarded his earlier conviction to say nothing about her affairs with Elizabeth, and instead use the same story which had worked so successfully upon Diva.

He sat in the large upholstered chair near the fireplace which in winter was so draughty, due to the nearby garden window, but in the summer was deliriously cool via the self-same breeze. The music soon came to an end (Lucia had begun it later in the piece rather than earlier) and Georgie murmured his congratulations. Lucia jumped, though of course she must have known Georgie was there.

"Oh, my dear! How you startled me! I was just running through a few well-remembered sonnets."

Georgie, without turning, could hear the rustle of pages which signified her hiding the new music book under the other ones stacked at the end of the piano.

"All finished painting for today, caro?" she asked when the deadly deed had been done.

"Oh, yes. Quite done. Do you know," Georgie asked, finally turning to face her, "that Mr. Frost was over at the Trader's Arms this afternoon?"

Lucia showed the stuff of which she was made, and did not flinch an atom. "Is that so? Such a lovely hotel, I always thought. And to think Mrs. Mapp-Flint booked us there when we first visited Tilling. I was rather surprised at this the more we got to know her, as she usually has such appalling taste."

This brow-beating of Elizabeth was all in proper form, but this time Georgie knew what game was afoot and did not fall for it.

"Yes, funny you should mention Elizabeth, for Mr. Frost said that he saw her there today."

Lucia's facial muscle twitched the slightest bit. "How interesting. I wonder what she was doing there." Lucia got up hurriedly and faced the bay window. "Oh, there's Diva walking Paddy. And there's Irene. Now they're discussing something. Irene's pointing at Paddy. No, Diva's going back home now."

"And," Georgie continued on remorselessly, despite the intense interest he had regarding the goings-on in the street (which he was not in a position to see), "Mr. Frost said that he saw someone who looked quite a bit like you accompanying her."

"Really?" laughed Lucia, "I can't envision anything more implausible. Imagine Elizabeth and I visiting anywhere like that together. Why, it is silly. And downright impossible, for as you heard, I have been here practising my Beethoven."

"I didn't say it was you," Georgie explained, enjoying himself. "I only said that it looked quite a bit like you."

"Most likely a summer tourist," Lucia said, turning back to face Georgie. "And aren't you going to tell me what you have been doing these past few days?"

Georgie was startled at this counter-offensive. "Whatever do you mean?"

"I mean that no one spends two weeks painting sunflowers. Impossible to believe. Ludicrous, in fact."

It wasn't fair of Lucia to change the subject like that and put him on the defensive. And just when he was having so much fun, too.

"I tried a different style with them, but it didn't turn out very well, so I had to go back to my usual technique," he explained breathlessly, sounding not in the least convincing.

"I see," said Lucia. "So have you been painting today?" Her eyes seemed to pierce him with a gimlet thrust.

"Of course," he lied and got up, it being his turn to

stare out the bow window nervously. There was a long pause, and it was clear to Georgie that if he went on about Elizabeth, Lucia would go on about Mr. Frost. They both had a secret, and Georgie was determined that his was to remain inviolate — at least for the present. If the price for that was his acceptance of the fallacy that Lucia and Elizabeth were still at each other's throats, even when he knew better (and, worse, that she knew he knew) then so be it.

There was no further movement on the painting front until the following morning after breakfast.

"It is turning out to be a rather lovely day, isn't it?" Georgie finally said after a very quiet meal.

"Yes," agreed Lucia, apparently accepting this unspoken armistice with good grace. "Will you be painting today?"

"Mmm. Possibly, quite possibly."

"I see. I am relieved that you will be occupied as I have a hundred arrears to get through for my council meeting tomorrow. I find it all so interesting. The great decisions which must be made. The terrible matters which must be weighed. The right of the individual versus the right of the community in which he lives. Did you know that the Tilling children have no proper playground? They must make do down among the cricket salts. Such an intolerable situation. It must be rectified at once. What if a tramp were to come along?"

"In fact, I think I shall leave now," Georgie mused, half to himself. He knew that when Lucia got that pedantic, Oxford-like tone in her voice it was time to escape. He gathered up a brand-new pair of leather gloves, and fled the house.

Lucia got up and parted the window curtains. She watched Georgie walk down toward the High Street. Her monologue had ceased the moment he was out of earshot, as it had been orchestrated solely to drive him out. She was not mean enough to have consciously conceived of the plan to follow him when she had begun that rather pedantic little speech, but she suddenly realised the opportunity which presented itself once the front door had shut behind him. And she also had to admit to herself that she was aching to know what had so fascinated her Georgie that he was spending all sorts of hours away from her at that Mr. Frost's house. She took the first hat which came to hand and darted out.

Georgie took no pains to be discreet, and in fact soon exasperated Lucia with his dawdling. He first said good morning to Irene, who had set up an easel facing her own house and was busily painting. Lucia's concern was that if Irene spotted her, that exuberant socialist would undoubtedly cry out in joy and lung toward her, thereby alerting Georgie. Irene fortunately was facing the house, so when the time came, Lucia found she was able to slip by quietly.

The next conundrum Lucia faced was the

pedestrian traffic in the High Street. Evidently puzzlemaking as the latest rage was on the decline, for the marketers were no longer dashing in and out of shops at top speed in order to get through with their shopping as quickly as possible. Instead, they were beginning to stroll about as they were wont to do, taking discreet surveys of the contents of each other's baskets and engaging in idle chitchat.

Lucia decided to risk walking down Malleson Street, journeying in the direction away from the High Street, and circle about to come back down to it. She hoped she could recall which house it was that Mr. Frost resided in, instead of using Georgie as a navigational guide.

It has been said that when King Edward III made one of his Royal Visits, he employed twenty-two guides through the forests from London to Tilling. After the first fifteen minutes of fruitless searching, Lucia would gladly have availed herself of just one of those escorts to help her find Mr. Frosts' house. The way was difficult to recall, and Lucia finally had to admit defeat. She wandered back along the road near the Belvedere Platform which overlooked the marshes, and turned back down toward the High Street, resigned. Since she was out on this fine morning, she might as well do some shopping.

She was about to turn onto the High Street when she heard Georgie's unmistakable high-pitched giggle. She stopped in her tracks and listened. Yes, there it was again. She focused on it and made swift progress toward the proper house. Once she reached it, she recalled having seen it before. There was the little cottage abutting the road, the tiny coach house next door being used as a motor car garage, and the merest patch of walled garden between the two.

She stopped between the houses and peered around the corner into the open garage. There was Georgie with a pair of new work gloves on, standing by Mr. Frost, who was busy under the hood of what looked like a racing auto. It was a sleek green motor car shaped something like a cigar. Its wheels were outside the chassis, sporting patched tyres, and in fact the entire single-seat vehicle looked like it had been through better times.

Lucia could hardly believe her own eyes. Georgie, he of the petit-point, croquet and bridge parties was seemingly helping overhaul a motor engine. She stood there, stupefied. But the more she observed, the more she saw that it was, indeed, her Georgie. She gave no thought to being observed by passers-by on the quiet street, and watched and listened.

"How tarsome!" Georgie exclaimed, as Mr. Frost handed to him what looked like nothing more than an oily sprocket. "I shall get my new gloves all greasy."

"Now, now, Mr. George," Mr. Frost admonished, "You bought them to help me out. They're going to get all sorts of filth on them."

"Oh, very well," Georgie said and took hold of the metal piece more firmly.

"That's better," Mr. Frost said, smiling.

"Are you actually going to enter this in the race, Mr. Frost?" Georgie asked.

"Sure. It can't win, it's only a '29 Bentley. Can only do just over a hundred with a good tailwind. Now, if I had one of them new Auto Union jobs, why it'd be a different story."

"If you can't win, why are you going to race?" asked Georgie.

Mr. Frost paused in his work and leaned against the side of the patched motor car.

"Son, why do the birds fly? Why do the fish swim? I don't know what you were born to do, but I was born to race."

Georgie supposed he was born to dust his bibelots, but somehow that didn't seem germane to the discussion.

"I like the Bentley look," Mr. Frost continued, "but they stopped makin' 'em in '31. Damn shame, too. Good car." He slapped the hood down. "Shall we take her for a spin?"

Georgie looked askance. "Oh?! Why, yes. Certainly. But—"

"The sidecar, my boy! Here, help me hook it up."

They made short work of adding a dilapidated green sidecar to the motor. Georgie adorned himself with an aviator's cap and goggles, while Mr. Frost attired himself in the same, with a scarf and heavy gloves as well.

Lucia was rooted to the spot in fascination, but was startled into action when the engine roared to life and she suddenly perceived she was risking exposure. She felt a momentary surge of panic, realising she had no idea in which direction Mr. Frost was planning on driving, but she just as quickly regained her composure. Recalling that, on their first visit, Mr. Frost had explained that he was a widower, and that there had been no evidence that he kept servants of any kind, Lucia turned and calmly walked through Mr. Frost's front door. She watched from behind the curtains in the front parlour where Mr. Frost had served them tea and saw the motor inch out of the narrow garage, pause for Georgie to close the dilapidated coach house door, and finally race off toward the Landgate and the open road.

It was only after the motor car had disappeared around the corner that Lucia realised her heart was beating rapidly. The flight from the front of the house to the parlour was not significant enough to explain it. No, it had been something more: Lucia had to face the idea that it had been the purr of that powerful motor which had enthused her. The grace and animal-like form of that vehicle which (despite the sidecar) looked as if it were hungry, eager to burst forth and sample all that life had to offer. It appeared ready to meet every challenge head-on. 'Well, perhaps not head-on,' Lucia

thought to herself, 'but very nearly.'

She could see herself, engine exhaust billowing out behind her, navigating the hills and paths outside the town. Her enjoyment of the freedom that bicycling afforded her was only a shadow, she now knew, of the tremendous excitement it would give her to handle her own car — to be in the driver's seat and wrest ultimate control over speed and destination from such a powerful vehicle.

She was naturally astute enough to realise that the dangers of bicycling would be manifestly multiplied once the speed of the motor was taken into account. But if she was careful not to race about in an open-topped vehicle while trailing a long, flowing scarf, she felt she could easily manage to avoid Isadora Duncan's fate.

It was just those outstanding characteristics (the freedom and power — not so much the danger) which embodied all that Lucia herself believed in: she whose life was filled with such yearnings and passion for living. She knew at once that she must somehow become involved in what would appear to have the makings of an incredibly exhilarating autumn stunt. She was confident that if she would only stay her hand, circumstances would likely arise which she could use to her advantage in gaining a foothold (or a handhold) in this project. She was eager to open this new chapter in her life, and trusted that an opportunity was certain to present itself. And she would be ready to embrace that opportunity. For now, though, she would wait, and she prepared to hurry home in order to requisition a standard book or two on motor car racing from the London Library.

She glanced down as she approached the front door and spotted something vaguely familiar. There, leaning against the wall was Georgie's beautiful sunflower sketch, already finished and, indeed, already framed. Lucia nodded sagely to herself as she stepped out into the sunshine.

The Muse of Tragedy cast a mildly disapproving eye over the plans of one Mrs. Lucia Pillson, noting that she had, as usual, little concern for other's feelings. Not once had she truly considered poor Georgie's sentiments in the matter of the motorcar.

She was overreaching herself. She wished everything to go her own way. (The fact she was usually able to accomplish this feat against all odds was immaterial to the issue at hand.) But human nature did not include a wish to be led about by the nose. Perhaps it was time to throw a pair of sabots into Lucia's manufactories of pride.

For a start, the Muse raised one cosmic hand and, taking careful aim with a paintbrush, gently applied a dab of controversy to one of Lucia's pet projects. He smiled very satisfactorily and sat back to watch events unfold.

Chapter 6

The annual meeting of the hanging committee of the Tilling Art Exhibition was of a fixed and involute pattern. The paintings would begin appearing at the Art Institute, having already visited the trainer's shop and been wrapped in protective brown paper. By the following week the pictures would have been taken out of their wrappings and lined up along one wall for inspection by the committee at noon. Once the committee approved each piece, it was assigned a place on the wall, where a carpenter hired for later that afternoon would see to its placement.

It was highly unusual for any sketch to be refused due to lack of artistic merit or questionable subject matter, and indeed this had happened only twice in recent memory, both having been nude figure studies submitted by Quaint Irene. While Mr. Wyse considered Irene's fanciful works to show great character, both Mrs. Wyse and Lucia felt that such works, though technically proficient, were not the sort of thing idle tourists would necessarily appreciate.

This ritual of art submissions and discussions which had proceeded along so smoothly the last few years (with only a very few minor bumps and jostlings — which would be expected, considering the participants) was brought up short by the transfer of the exhibit to Grebe, and Mrs. Blanchard's intrusive involvement. When the sketches began arriving, Mrs. Blanchard took it upon herself to unwrap each parcel and arrange them along the baseboard of her front hall and parlour. Naturally, she was not expected to be mute over this display of Tilling's finest of amateur works, (or in the case of Irene, professional works), and spoke her piece when the committee met in conclave that following Monday morning at ten o'clock (the accustomed starting time having been altered in deference to Mrs. Blanchard stating she had another engagement at noon).

"I think that sketch of the ships down at the harbour is exquisite," Mrs. Blanchard offered as the committee began their examination down the line. "And that one of the Landgate at dusk is superb as well. By Mrs. Bartlett and Irene Coles, respectively, I am told."

"Yes," Mr. Wyse said, bowing at each painting. "Both quite vivid."

Mr. and Mrs. Wyse, so observed Lucia, continued in this coddling manner, raving over Georgie's sunflowers and her own portrait of the Town Hall, until they came to Mrs. Blanchard's piece.

"I painted this one," Mrs. Blanchard said. "It is a picture of a picture. Quite striking, I thought."

Lucia had to agree. The painting was of a jig-saw puzzle in progress. The view was directly down upon the work, as if the puzzle itself had been framed. Here and there could be seen the green felt of Diva's card