

## Chapter 11

The principal members of Tilling Society convened in Diva's back room. The resemblance to a War Council would, to the casual observer, be rather farfetched. No one could ever mistake the felt-covered card table for a tactical display showing the latest skirmishes, assaults and retreats. The lack of cigar smoke or other combustibles (as the Major was not present) also admittedly added nothing to this hypothesis. And, too, the number of women in the latest autumn fashions seated about the table might lead anyone with half a mind to believe that the idea this was a War Room to be rather farcical. Yet, the acrimony and deadly intent of the voices sitting about that table belied the cheery atmosphere.

"She's gone too far this time!" cried Diva. "Imagine tearing down Lucia's garden room."

"And my Cottage!" added Susan, whose normally pompous demeanour was badly shaken by Diva's announcement this morning of the impending destruction.

"Are ye certain of the facts, Mistress Plaistow?" the Padre queried, clearly distressed over the idea that one of their little company would consider such a terrible act.

"Absolutely," Diva said. "She told me so to my face. Quite proud of it, in fact."

"But what are we to do about it?" squeaked little Evie, her voice betraying her concern. "She's got the the Council to somehow approve it."

"Mmm," Diva agreed. "I have my own theories about that."

Elizabeth raced back to Mallards instead of visiting the town clerk's office as promised, just in time to stop an escalating argument between the foreman and Grosvenor, who had looked out the window and seen a wrecking ball apparently poised for mutilation, if not complete destruction of the garden room. Elizabeth took the foreman aside and explained that she had misplaced the legislation and that he would need to return in the morning. Mr. Ebeling complained bitterly about time-wasters and packed up his equipment.

Having settled that slight contretemps without anyone coming to blows (she simply told Grosvenor that there was nothing going on she need concern herself with) she retraced her steps.

Elizabeth searched for her Aunt in Diva's main room, to no avail. She hoped that the woman had not wandered off into town on her own and was considering organising a search party when Diva's Janet opened the back card room door with a plate of tea cakes in hand, and Elizabeth heard the unmistakable voices of her friends.

She hurried over and was in time to see Aunt Caroline holding court in the card room. A lavish tea had been set and her aunt had pinned her veil halfway

up to allow herself to sip tea unobstructed.

Aunt Caroline was offering her pronouncement on classical music. "I always fall asleep during any concert: especially of that droll man Mozart. And Beethoven is even worse. That ghastly Moonlight Sonata puts me right to sleep!"

There was a murmur of nervous amusement at this comment, flying full as it did in the face of all that Lucia espoused as worthy.

"Elizabeth!" Evie called out. "I was just on my way to the draper's for some bombazine for a morning frock, when I felt like popping in for an early tea. Your Aunt is lovely: why have you never let us meet her before?"

"Indeed," the Padre cried, 'Tis' such enjoyment as we have not had in these parts for quite a time."

The Wyses contributed their eloquent assent, and continued eating their banbury cakes.

Elizabeth felt buffeted, as if she were participating in that new Jocko del Ponte contest in Pisa. Excepting that she felt alone on the North side of the bridge, pulling with all her might, and all her friends were over on the South side of the river Arno tugging against her. True, none of them was wearing the prerequisite Conquistador outfit, but nonetheless...

"Oh you dear friends!" Elizabeth cried and turned to her Aunt. "The town clerk's office is not yet open," she bed, "so we must wait to deal with him."

Caroline merely smiled at the news and sat back in her chair. She removed her remaining glove and placed both in her lap. At this precise moment, Diva was serving her some fresh tea and glanced down at the woman's hands. Diva suddenly gave a small gasp, nearly dropping her tea kettle.

"My dear," asked Aunt Caroline, "Are you unwell? You look as if you might be sick."

"No, no," Diva waved her away, recovering quickly.

"Please excuse me, I'll get some fresh tea."

Elizabeth leaned over to her Aunt and smiled condescendingly. "Diva tends to be rather high-strung at times. We forgive her her little faults. We are all Christians after all, and none of us are perfect."

"I quite agree, Lizzie. I quite agree," her Aunt replied, in a tone Elizabeth was hard-pressed to interpret. Diva reappeared almost immediately and approached Elizabeth.

"Since you are acting Deputy Mayor, couldn't you get your Aunt — as a distinguished visitor — to sign the Mayor's book?"

Elizabeth grinned broadly. Another feather in her cap, and another volley to ensure the complete destruction of Lucia's dominance. She would have to think of something nice to do for Diva. Her friend had obviously (finally!) come to appreciate Elizabeth's natural gifts, which in the main constituted generous amounts of moral superiority and outstanding intelligence. This naturally did not mean that Elizabeth would be Androcles to Diva's lion should the situation

arise at some future date, but merely that this particular instance merited a small token of gratitude.

"What a splendid idea, Diva! So glad you thought of it. Now, Aunt Caroline, don't bother yourself with getting up," Elizabeth said, with a nod toward the woman's walking sticks. "I'll just run over to the Town Hall and bring the book back. That is, if you don't mind signing it."

"Of course not, Lizzie. I'd love to. But I can't fathom how anyone would think I am important enough for such a great honour."

Elizabeth excused herself and trundled off. Her immediate concern was prizing that piece of paper out of her Aunt's clutches. It would be impossible to attempt the same stunt against the town clerk as the one which originally netted her such a prize, unless she could come up with another batch of dwellings which deserved to be pulled down. The only practical means seemingly left to her was to recapture that simple slip of paper so that destruction could commence on a grand scale tomorrow morning. She hurried on to the Town Hall.

Back at the Tea House, Diva gave a long, penetrating look through the thin mourning veil. She stood staring for a few moments longer than was strictly polite, causing Mr. Wyse to put down his teacup.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Plaistow. I don't intend to offend, but might I enquire if this is perchance a continuation of the apparent physical frailty you exhibited but a few moments ago? And may I be of some assistance?"

Diva answered without turning her head. "No, Mr. Wyse. I'm fine. And I'm quite certain this woman is not who she says she is."

The Padre, staunch defender of the Truth, stood up, dropping all traces of foreign dialects in his excitement. "Is this so? Are you quite certain Mrs. Plaistow?" Diva smiled and nodded vigorously, and the Padre turned toward the impostor. "Are you here merely to swindle our Mrs. Mapp-Flint by attempting to mislead her? If this is so, thanks to the sharp eyes of Mistress Plaistow, you won't get away with it!"

"Kenneth," Evie said slowly, "I think I know what Diva's getting at."

"Which is?" asked Mrs. Wyse.

Evie turned to Aunt Caroline with a twinkle in her eye. "Shall you tell them, or shall I?"

In response, the assembled group heard a familiar silvery laugh issue forth from the depths of that veil, as it was thrown back to reveal the unmistakable features of their own beloved Lucia.

"You've discovered me!" she laughed. "Mea culpa! Mea culpa!"

Mr. Wyse's eyes bulged and he just managed to swallow the mouthful of tea he had been in the midst of consuming, while Mrs. Wyse gasped and put her

hand to her throat with a cry of, "No!" Evie wasn't quite as lucky as Mr. Wyse, as her forkful of mince found its way down the front of her blouse instead of its intended destination. There was a scramble to clean it off as Lucia explained.

"Yes, Susan. Diva, what gave me away? I thought my disguise perfect. And I considered my dramatic skills second to none. I am slightly disappointed that you managed to see through them so quickly. Although I must admit some relief at having been discovered," Lucia said, putting her hand to her forehead. "It is tedious work to hide from your friends, even for a good cause."

Diva had taken Elizabeth's seat and sat with her mouth open, ready to begin the moment Lucia paused in her speech. "It wasn't anything like that. It's your ring. I recognised your wedding band when you took off your glove. The one I helped you pick out for your marriage to Mr. Georgie. I'd advise you to put your gloves back on before Elizabeth returns. She's got a sharp eye.

"But why this charade, Lucia? What's with all the wrinkles? And that eye. You didn't injure yourself I hope?"

Lucia laughed. "So many questions! My modest expertise as to stage techniques helped me apply this makeup to look quite a bit older. And the use of the skin off the inside of an eggshell for a blind eye I feel was a stroke of genius."

Mrs. Wyse, always odiously interested in material concerns, asked, "And whose motor is that parked outside? Did you hire it from Maxwell Park?"

"No, no," Lucia said, "My dear friend Olga Shuttleworth was at the races and allowed me to use it to complete the deception."

There was an almost audible mental ripple through her audience, and it was obvious to all assembled that it had been Olga who was responsible for the masterful makeup job, and no doubt the eggshell stroke of genius had not been Lucia's. But they were willing to turn at least one blind eye to that fact, as not even Olga would have had the audacity to attempt such a clever deception. For that alone, Lucia deserved respect.

Evie squeaked, "Yes, but what are you doing here? I thought you were at the racecourse for another few days running the races for Mr. Frost?"

"What I am doing here, my dear Evie? I've nearly finished what I came here to do: stop Elizabeth from tearing down the garden room. But to manage it, Diva, I must ask for the use of your telephone before Elizabeth returns. Here's a penny."

A buzz of conversation began the moment Lucia left the room, and did not die down. Lucia returned in time to hear Evie murmur, "Lucia triumphs over Elizabeth yet again."

"Ah, do not take it so strongly. Elizabeth and I are often on friendly terms. It is just on occasion when I feel

the need to remind her that we are all in this together." Those assembled had to suppress the urge to roll their eyes or giggle at this nonsense and Mr. Wyse, usually gallant and fair-minded in the extreme, allowed himself a depreciating comment re: Elizabeth.

"It is true that Mrs. Mapp-Flint is capable of demonstrating a rather strong will at times..."

"Yes," agreed Lucia. "And as I suspected, the town clerk's office is, indeed, open. He knew nothing about the demolition of Mallards Cottage, and in fact the council had voted instead to tear down a row of slums across town. No doubt Elizabeth somehow finagled the clerk to sign the wrong sheet, or perhaps she later altered the addresses."

Mrs. Wyse, who had been deep in thought, posed a question. "And what role are we to play upon her return? Do we continue this charade as if we know nothing?"

All but the Padre smiled. He cleared his throat. "I'm afeared I canna agree with that idea, Mistress Wyse. I canna lie."

Evie looked exasperated at her husband. "No one's asked you to do anything of the sort, Kenneth. Just don't offer any information, that's all."

The Padre raised his eyebrows at being spoken to so harshly, but evidently thought the better of responding (or more likely simply ran out of time) as they heard the front door bang sharply, and Lucia hastily resumed her disguise.

"Thanks to you all," Irene announced as she breezed in, "the thing's finally paid for. Now we just need to wait until Lucia gets back for Mr. Georgie to present it to her. Hullo!"

The veiled woman nodded to Irene, then laughed.

"Hold on!" the quaint one cried. "I know that laugh! It couldn't be you, could it Lucia?"

"Yes, it's me."

"Looks like I've let the cat out of the bag, then. Oh, well." Irene said, slightly dejectedly. Then started. "Beloved, what are you doing in that get-up?"

Lucia was thrilled to the marrow at Irene's little speech, and at any other time would have quizzed her further (or pretended to already know everything about it and thus gain the information that way). But time was short.

Lucia smiled. "First of all, your secret — whatever it is — is still safe as I quite honestly don't have the slightest inkling as to what you are speaking of. And secondly, it's a trick I'm playing on Elizabeth. So don't let on," Lucia asked as they heard the front door open once again, less violently this time.

"Your secret's safe with me," Irene whispered conspiratorially, "...whatever it is."

Elizabeth breezed in with a large book under her arm and a rather flushed face. "Here we are. I had a bit of discussion with the sergeant, but I soon set that right," she announced, then saw Irene. "Oh, Miss

Coles, have you met my Aunt Caroline?"

"Why no..." Irene replied in an odd voice, as if she were quite amused by something. But as Irene was an enigma to Elizabeth at the best of times, she disregarded her attitude as irrelevant.

Irene stuck out her hand. "How'd you do. My name's Irene Coles. Quaint Irene to most everyone."

Aunt Caroline smiled beneath her veil and clasped the outstretched hand. "How do you do."

Irene grinned mischievously. "We were just telling your Aunt all about your husband's duel... which he declined to fight," she glanced up at the ceiling and began ticking off events on her fingertips. "And then there was that faulty latch in the secret cupboard in the garden room and all that food you were hoarding spilled out. Oh, and your book, of course. We haven't heard much about that. Did it ever go into a second impression?"

Caroline nodded. "I'd love to read it, Lizzie, dear."

Elizabeth smiled grimly and stepped forward, placing the visitor's book in front of her Aunt. "Enough of that now, Irene mine. You can get acquainted some time later. Right now I have something for this distinguished guest to sign." Elizabeth was somewhat perplexed to understand why her friends did not come to her rescue and silence Irene. Instead, she was surprised at the seeming joviality with which her pronouncement was met: all but the Padre who seemed put out. Aunt Caroline held out her hand, and Mr. Wyse obliged with a pen.

Elizabeth watched as her Aunt signed with a flourish. The signature somehow looked vaguely familiar, and Elizabeth merely supposed she had seen it on one or another legal document pertaining to the recent sale of Mallards to Lucia.

"So why haven't you ever brought your Aunt around to see us, Mapp?" Irene enquired. "Do you think so poorly of us?"

"As I have already told everyone, she has never before visited Tilling."

"I see," smirked Irene. "Then perhaps you can tell us again how Mallards was a second home to you long before it was yours."

"Don't be silly, quaint one," Elizabeth sputtered. "I never said such a thing." She saw the meditative looks which followed that announcement, as Elizabeth — and everyone else — quite distinctly recalled her making that very statement.

Elizabeth thought quickly. "Aunt Caroline, would you like a tour of the town while it is still light?"

Susan, oblivious as ever, looked incredulous. "But Elizabeth, it is not even tea time yet."

Elizabeth ignored her and continued. "I can make arrangements for you at the King's Arms. I'm afraid I have no room at the house."

Aunt Caroline rose and took up her walking sticks. "That won't be necessary, Lizzie, as I shan't be staying.

It was very nice meeting you all."

Elizabeth escorted her Aunt out of Diva's asking more questions than Hamlet as she babbled away. Caroline still had the by-law paper in her pocket, and Elizabeth was at a loss on how to get it back, as any opportunity for doing so appeared to be slipping away.

"Are you quite certain you won't be staying in town just a bit longer? I would love to have you. Some of my flowers are still blooming. Pity the annual Art Exhibition has dosed."

"Yes, my dear," Caroline said, "I would love to see your garden. How is the wisteria? And the roses I planted so long ago? My Friendship's Border, as I used to call it. Let us use the motor and we shall stop at Mallards for lunch if you have nothing better to do."

Elizabeth was momentarily confused. She had long ago claimed the rose bed as her own "Friendship's Border" and was startled to hear anyone else refer to it as such. She momentarily mulled over that, but her mind was racing with the realisation that she had been so preoccupied with that paper she had made the mistake of offering to show her Aunt the interior of Mallards. But Elizabeth Mapp-Flint wasn't nearly beaten yet.

"Oh, my dear Aunt Caroline," she said, "I would so love to show you the garden at Mallards. But at the moment I have let the house and have taken a smaller abode out by the marshes, about a half-mile out of town, called Grebe. I don't know if you recall it. Quite a comfortable place. We all switch homes during the end of summer —"

Aunt Caroline paused in her ponderous journey to the Daimler. "But it is October, dear. Surely long past the time for you to be playing General Post."

"True, true. But when I received an offer for the month of October from a rather well-to-do couple whom I have previously had the pleasure of renting to, well, how could I resist? And a generous offer, of course, was the deciding factor."

"And who is this generous couple?"

"No one you know, I am certain," Elizabeth said, thinking quickly. "They are... Mr. and Mrs. Pillson of Riseholme."

That settled it. Although Lucia was entirely satisfied that her impersonation was completely successful (witness the fact that it was only a minor dress error on her part which enabled the eagle-eyed Diva to see through the deception) she had harboured vague misgivings with regard to spending a protracted amount of time with Elizabeth. These misgivings were not predicated upon the idea that Elizabeth might see through the illusion, but stemmed instead from the notion that she might be unable to keep from becoming hysterical over Elizabeth's continuous frenzied attempts to weasel out of all the varied traps Lucia was enjoying laying out in front of her. But Lucia was still

made of mere flesh and blood, and the opportunity to hear firsthand Elizabeth's pronouncements and complaints about her and Georgie was too powerful an enticement even for her to withstand, and she caved. There were side benefits to this charade that even Lucia hadn't considered.

"Hmm. I seem to recall a Mrs. Pillson... No matter. Please help me in, dear. Let us go to Grebe, then, and you shall tell me all about Mr. and Mrs. Pillson."

Lunch was quite pleasant and uneventful. Elizabeth found herself detailing the inequities and frustrations of life with Lucia. Her Aunt seemed strangely amused by this soliloquy, keeping her questions to a minimum.

Once lunch had been finished and Aunt Caroline was preparing to leave, it was obvious to Elizabeth that the moment of truth had come. She paused and took a deep breath. It was now or never. She assumed an attitude she hoped would appear nonchalant. "And by the way, may I see that demolition authorisation?"

"Whatever for, Lizzie? I phoned the clerk while you were at the Town Hall, and he assured me that there had been some sort of clerical error. So, naturally feeling quite relieved, I celebrated by burning it in the grate at Diva's. I was certain you'd be pleased."

"Yes, indeed. Thank you," Elizabeth managed to sputter. She was so completely shocked by this latest turn of events she did not notice Lucia's slip in using Diva's Christian name. Instead, she became morosely silent, and did not even attempt a token protest at her Aunt's decision to leave Tilling so soon.

As the motor pulled away amid much waving, it was not lost upon her that she had, once again, managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. It was a bitter taste, but the bile was not unfamiliar. It did not lessen her anger, but she welcomed it as an old familiar friend, as someone with a chronic illness can feel comfortable upon the routine return of the ailment.

It also occurred to her upon dismal reflection that she had orchestrated her own downfall. By announcing her plans to Diva she had, in effect, broadcast those intentions to all of Tilling. Elizabeth knew that she herself had led a quiet life, a life quite free of incident, but she shuddered to think what the repercussions were to be once Lucia was appraised of her failed plan. It would be quite futile to suggest that Diva had, in some queer fit of mental lunacy, made it all up. (Grosvenor would see to that. A parlourmaid simply does not imagine a wrecking ball outside the front door of her mistresses' home.) And nor would it sound in the least plausible to insinuate that Diva was telling a fib in a quest to seek retribution for some imagined slight (a charge Elizabeth knew to be patently untrue, because of her own generally exemplary conduct — but there would still be talk, as Diva was such a gossip!).

All of this and more she reviewed in her mind. Resigning from the Town Council was the most pressing and painful step, for it would be much more

embarrassing if she put it off until Lucia's return and found herself kowtowing to that superior smile. Lucia would, naturally, not bask in Elizabeth's discomfiture, but would be grand, magnanimous, and very, very noble. Just the thought of it made Elizabeth feel quite ill.

As she stood stewing in her own brackishness, Major Benjy rounded the corner to the house, golf bag to hand. It was an odd time for him to be returning from the links, then Elizabeth recalled his odd behaviour earlier in the day.

Major Benjy paused upon seeing his wife standing in the front garden, hoping that at this awkward time of the day she would be busy elsewhere, but he trudged gamely ahead. He tipped his hat and attempted to saunter by nonchalantly.

"Now, dear one," Elizabeth said grimly as he passed, "Perhaps you can explain what you were doing with that wheelbarrow earlier today?"

Benjy looked his wife over. Having got to know her quite well, he was fairly certain by the look on her face and the way she was clenching her fists that a deep sense of rage was lurking just below the surface. It occurred to him that her Aunt's visit had been not only unexpected, but also had clearly not been a complete success. And he knew that once he explained that those wheelbarrow bits and pieces were the components from which one could (and did) construct a whisky still, she was likely to vent the full fury of her wrath upon him. Nevertheless, he was a man, and prepared to shoulder as a man what he perceived to be his matrimonial duties. He took a deep breath, raised his eyes to the heavens, and answered his wife truthfully.

The tension in the Council Room was almost palpable as those assembled awaited the first appearance of Lucia since the awful road widening debacle. The curtains were drawn across all the windows, casting the entire room into a stygian mood. Mr. Pacelli, the town clerk, looked absolutely miserable as he wiped off his perspiring forehead.

They heard Lucia enter the building downstairs, say hello to someone and ascend the stairs to the meeting room. Even Mrs. Bellwether, not one of Lucia's most loyal advocates since Irene's painting fiasco, was not immune and began nervously drumming her fingers on the table. What rightful wrath could they expect to be rained upon them from a Mayor whom they had let down? True, Lucia had been the one to propose Mrs. Mapp-Flint's return to the council chambers, but she could hardly be held responsible for the council's conduct in her absence. Fortunately, Mrs. Mapp-Flint had seen fit to resign yesterday afternoon after being confronted by the clerk over her duplicity. Lucia breezed in, removing her gloves.

"I must apologise for my tardiness, ladies and gentlemen. I was reading to the children of the workhouse and lost all track of time.

"Now, as to recent events." There was an audible groan from one or two of the men assembled. Mrs. Bellwether leaned forward, her fingers trembling too badly to continue their drumming. Lucia continued.

"It is quite clear that you were all bullied, coerced, or otherwise manipulated into giving her exactly what she wanted, so we have no need to go on about that." She sat. "Let us review the minutes from the last meeting, shall we?"

The assembled members stared at each in momentary disbelief. Could they have been absolved so effortlessly by the woman against which they had committed (albeit unknowingly) the most heinous treason? Apparently so. This was Lucia in all her glory. Lofty ideals, noble sentiments, and a great willingness to forgive the innocent pawns in her battle with Elizabeth. The councillors could hardly believe their good fortune. Mr. Pacelli was so overcome by Lucia's generosity he had to excuse himself for a few moments to recover his composure.

Once the minutes had been read and accepted, Lucia stood and brought up the first order of business.

"I have received an invitation to attend the coronation of the King. We need not go into the sorry state of affairs which have led to the Queen's decision to abdicate. I am certain the man she has decided to marry is worth the throne. As Virgil says, 'Love conquers all things.'"

The councillors looked at each other and even those who might have disagreed with that sentiment nodded. This was clearly not the time to challenge the Mayor.

"The coronation will take place early next May, when I shall be long gone from my position as Mayor. As a favour, therefore," she said (with perhaps an ever-so-subtle stress on the word 'favour?'), "I would wish to impose upon this council to allow me one last bit of pomp and circumstance and attend the coronation as the official representative of Tilling."

There was murmurings of assent and knuckles rapped on the table. Considering the current state of affairs, it is likely they would have agreed to demolish Grebe if Lucia had proposed it. One of Lucia's councillors stood.

"I feel it is my duty, as I have already accepted the post of Mayor after the end of your term next month—"

"And what better choice. Mr. Martin?" Lucia interrupted.

"Err, yes. Thank you. I feel it is my duty to say that it would be both a pleasure and an honour, in partial recognition of all that you have done for us."

Lucia smiled in satisfaction at this tribute, and sat. "And now, perhaps, we could have the curtains opened and brighten up the room?"

Mr. Martin remained standing. "In a moment. We

have something further for you, Mrs. Pillson. Please enter, ladies and gentlemen."

He motioned toward the door, and from the inner office filed in all of Lucia's closest friends. There was Diva, quaint Irene, the Bartletts, the Wyses, the Mapp-Flints and bringing up the rear was her dear husband, Georgie.

He was the one who stepped forward as Irene proceeded to open all the curtains but the centre one. Georgie cleared his throat. Then cleared it again. He finally managed to begin after a poke in the back from Irene.

"Mrs. Pillson, in appreciation of your public service, we your friends would like to present to you this token of our esteem and affection."

Mr. Wyse cried out and was echoed thrice by all those assembled, even Elizabeth. "Three cheers for the Mayor."

With that, Irene pulled the curtains on the centre window to reveal an exquisite stained glass window. It depicted Lucia in her Mayoral robes, regally presiding. Her hand rested on several open law books, while through the open window behind her the town of Tilling rose unmistakably in the distance.

Georgie looked over to Lucia and was rather startled to see a tear roll down her cheek. She stood once again and stepped over to Georgie, taking his hands.

"What a wonderful gift!" she managed to say after a long pause.

"That's got them back for rejecting the portrait Irene did of you," Georgie whispered.

Lucia turned toward Irene. "How splendid of you, my dear. All of you. I am truly touched. It... it is a monumentum aere perennius: 'A monument more lasting than bronze'. And a tribute I shall remember always."

"How could you forget it," cried the quaint one eagerly. "You'll pass it every day."

The councillors timidly laughed at this, unsure if it was meant as an amusing anecdote. Apparently it was, for Lucia's friends laughed as well.

Elizabeth Mapp-Flint's dire predictions regarding her treatment by Lucia came true in all its horrifying vividness once she and Georgie returned in triumph from Maxwell Park at the end of the month. Not only was Lucia noble about Elizabeth's attempted misfeasance (she passed it off publicly as a momentary lapse of sense, such as any high-strung woman who was getting on in years and was in such a position might be induced to suffer) but she even asked Elizabeth to her very next dinner party, an invitation which Elizabeth found herself unable to accept. In point of fact, Elizabeth found herself unable to accept any parties at all (nor give any) for a full fortnight. But she eventually was worn down, and slowly rejoined the afternoon teas and evening dinners which were

such a staple of social life in this exciting little town. As expected, everyone was extremely cordial to her. Quite maddeningly so, in fact.

This resumption of social niceties did nothing to lessen Elizabeth's apprehension on Guy Fawkes Night. It was possible that one or two of her friends were contemplating using her as an example and burning her in effigy... and she was also certain that none of them had the time or inclination to actually construct a guy, thus necessitating use of the original article. She did not seriously entertain such thoughts, but it was very possible Irene would pull some sort of rash stunt, in which case Elizabeth would be prepared. This preparation consisted in the main of sending Withers to perform the marketing that day and making certain her doors and windows were latched that night.

But Irene apparently had better things to do, or perhaps Lucia had prevented her from carrying out any nefarious plan, for November's bright blue weather gave way to blustery December without significant incident. Indeed, it was as if the frenzied activity of the last few months had exhausted both the physical and psychical aspects of society, and the cold weather had lulled them all into a state of stupefaction, similar to a bear, who spends the majority of his winter napping.

The days fed into each other, so that before anyone could have guessed, Christmas was found to be fast approaching. Christmas dinner was typically a quiet affair, with cards and the occasional gift being distributed and opened in private. For the first time in several holiday seasons, Elizabeth decided not to give in to her natural impulse. For Diva and she had developed a feud over a certain framed sketch of the marsh. Elizabeth had painted it and bestowed it upon Diva as a gift one Christmas, and found it re-wrapped and presented to her the following Christmas. Diva had the audacity to assure her that it was not the same picture and was, instead, one that Diva herself had painted. While it was true that many examples of that particular gilt-edged frame could be found in the framer's shop (it being one of the cheapest styles, and thus rather popular) surely Diva could not suppose that Elizabeth would believe such a preposterous story. Instead, the picture found its way back to Diva's the following year, and was returned to Elizabeth the year after that. It would now be the fourth time this particular sketch changed hands (unless Diva was somehow telling the truth), and Elizabeth was tiring of this game. Also, too, her precarious position as regards the rest of Tilling, along with Lucia's unusual invitation to Christmas dinner this year, decided Elizabeth's conduct. She showed up at Mallards in a new dress of mauve mist, hauling along the Major in his Sunday best. Evidently Lucia's table was to be very full as everyone else had already arrived.

Foljambe guided them through the house to the garden room, where Lucia was holding court.

"Elizabeth, dear. So nice of you to come to my little pranzo."

"Thank you for asking us, I'm sure."

"I canna recall such a fine dress as you have on, Mistress Mapp-Flint, as bein' worn before."

"True, padre. It is new, I must admit. Quite simple, but my Benjy-boy insisted."

Lucia rose. "Shall we go into dinner?"

Conversation revolved around rather neutral topics for the most part, consisting of discussions regarding the upcoming spring motoring season and the coronation.

In order to become truly a master of the racing craft," Lucia said, "would naturally require devoting my entire life to it in order to gain a modicum of proficiency. It would not be fair to Tilling when there is still so much to do, and so many events which need orchestrating."

"And what of Mr. Frost," asked Mr. Wyse after clearing his palate with a sip of champagne, "We have not seen anything of him as of late."

"He has proceeded to Monaco and then Carthage to prepare for the Tunis Grand Prix."

"Thanks to the munificence of Lucia," Evie said proudly.

"Purchasing the man a new motor after she had accidentally trashed his."

"It was the least I could do," Lucia announced modestly, waving her fork.

Finishing off the last of the lemon sole, Diva added, "And to think that he named his new car La Lucia in gratitude."

Lucia turned to Georgie, quite pleased. "Gino, did you tell on me? It was to be our little secret!"

"Sorry," Georgie responded (as previously agreed).

"Your dutiful husband couldn't help himself. Such a nice thing, after all."

Surfeit with food and wine, Elizabeth was decidedly bored with all this discussion and self-aggrandizement, and her natural instincts rebelled against allowing Lucia centre stage.

"How tedious that must be, to have your name on a motor like that, paraded about in public."

"Why?" asked Irene, menacingly.

"Quaint one, if I must explain it to you..."

Lucia had vowed from the outset that nothing would spoil her party. Elizabeth seemed intent on doing just that, but her hostess was equally determined not to allow it, and she hoped to quell her with a reprimand.

"After all that I have been through, what with authorisations with the wrong address on them and so on, the ignominy of having my name on a motorcar seems to pale in comparison."

This little barb, instead of hushing the former Acting Deputy Mayor, appeared to excite her.

"You are better at shouldering such burdens than I could hope to be," Elizabeth smiled. "Especially when

you feel that the town is in such good hands that you can afford to partake of a pleasant holiday excursion in the midst of a municipal crisis. That the crisis was of Elizabeth's own making was a detail she felt unnecessary to consider. Lucia became silent, an action Elizabeth assumed to be no more than proper reticence about bringing up such a sore topic, and having centre stage, decided to use the opportunity to manoeuvre the subject away from cars and wrecking balls.

"I've not heard from my Aunt as of late."

The entire room froze, as if caught in the midst of a cataleptic fit. Irene paused in lighting her pipe, and Diva became glassy-eyed. All eyes turned toward Lucia, whose gimlet eyes seemed to bore into the centre of Elizabeth. "Is that so?" she asked. "I think you ought to write to her, wouldn't you say?"

"Oh, I couldn't see bothering the poor woman," Elizabeth responded breathlessly. She had the vague notion that perhaps this was a subject she should not have begun on, but she was at a loss to know precisely why she was feeling uneasy. What had her friends told Lucia about Aunt Caroline?

"Why not? Don't you know her address?" Irene asked, a slight smirk on her face. Mr. Wyse interjected instantly, attempting to smooth over the outburst. "My sister-in-law, the Contessa, writes quite frequently."

"Yes," agreed Elizabeth, responding to Mr. Wyse, but looking at Irene. "Then, I have so few servants — when compared with you and Susan — I am compelled to do so much myself that I find it difficult to find the time to sit and write. Not to mention the expense. Of course, the tax on male servants is so high."

The collected holiday-makers gasped. It was the height of rudeness to remark upon such personal financial issues in polite company (even when true), and the group recalled the gaffe when Mrs. Wyse (then Mrs. Poppit) made some allusion to the impact of the super-tax on their incomes.

Lucia had had enough. Vow or no, she would make certain that Elizabeth would regret stirring up such animosity on Christmas day. She began gently.

"So sorry you've had no response from your Aunt. I would have expected her to send at least a note of thanks for your hospitality. After all, one is not often treated to mutton, vegetables and rice pudding."

Elizabeth gave pause. She had never discussed the luncheon with anyone, but instantly surmised that Withers had, after the fact, informed Grosvenor or Foljambe as to the contents of the menu and Lucia had heard of it that way.

"And your lengthy list of grievances against Georgie and I, I am certain were quite entertaining."

Elizabeth mulled over this little speech in silence. She had not yet put all the pieces of the puzzle together (although she was typically astute at guessing the nature of a puzzle without possessing all the pieces), yet she felt on the verge of solving it, for surely Withers had

not hung about during lunch, so Lucia must have been informed as to the subject of her conversation with her Aunt by some other means.

"What nonsense!" Elizabeth cried. "I have, on occasion seen fit to criticise one or two aspects of your decision as mayor, but to criticise you? Never!" She sounded vehement, and just a shade offended.

Lucia smiled as the women prepared to adjourn to the garden room, and said in a distinctive voice, "My apologies, dear Elizabeth, if you felt I was disparaging you. Shall we go into the garden room, Lizzie?"

Elizabeth gave a gasp as she suddenly recognised that particular voice, and everything came crashing down around her ears. From somewhere far, far away she heard Irene cackle and Mr. Wyse dear his throat.

"You!" She managed with a strangled cry.

"Me? Me what?" Lucia asked, appearing perplexed.

"I—," Elizabeth took a deep breath. "It's been a lovely evening, Lucia, but we really must go."

"So soon?" Georgie asked. "Why, it's not even nine o'clock yet. Surely you'll stay for the roasted chestnuts?" It had occurred to him that without the Mapp-Flints, the numbers were just right to facilitate two bridge tables, but he did not allow that selfish thought to prevent him from performing his duties as host in trying to convince his guests to remain.

"I'm afraid not," Elizabeth said, trembling in her effort to resist the desire to see if Lucia's blood still clotted.

As she lurched toward the front hall amid protestations from her ever-suffering husband demanding a whisky and soda, Elizabeth thought that never had she felt so awful. She was certain that, under the circumstances, she would have to rally to die.