A WEDDING AT HEATHERLY HALL

Also by Julie Houston

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A WEDDING AT HEATHERLY HALL

Julie Houston



An Aria Book

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Prologue

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On this day

For our *ON THIS DAY* feature this week, we are heading back eighty-six years to 1936 to resurrect a mystery that continues to fascinate and yet remains unresolved.

It was the evening of October 15th 1936, and the newly crowned Edward VIII, together with Mrs Wallis Simpson, was the honoured guest of Henry Astley, eleventh Marquess of Stratton, and his wife, at Heatherly Hall on the outskirts of the village of Westenbury. The Marquess of Stratton, allegedly wanting to show his allegiance to Edward when so many disapproved of the new king's relationship with his divorced American lover, Mrs Simpson, is known to have commissioned a fabulous and priceless jewellery set of necklace and matching earrings for the American divorcee. The future Duchess of Windsor's jewels were unique, not only due to the record price they would eventually fetch, but also because these pieces immortalised one of the most controversial love stories of modern times. The set, made from the famous Yorkshire Whitby jet, was to be presented to Mrs Simpson (whose fabulous collection would, in time, reach the highest world record for a single owner jewellery sale ever conducted) at a celebratory dinner to be held at Heatherly Hall in honour of the royal couple's visit to the area.

While the black Whitby jet is very beautiful, it is not, in itself, the most valuable or expensive of stones. However, this

particular Jet Set, to be presented to Mrs Simpson by the then Marquess of Stratton, was reputed to have been studded with diamonds excavated from the Kollur mine in India, with one particularly ravishing stone seemingly hewn at the same time as the world-famous Koh-I-Noor diamond given to Queen Victoria in the 1840s. Named the Sah-I-Noor diamond, the Heatherly Hall stone was allegedly won in an evening of intense gambling in 1860 during the early days of the British raj in India by George Astley, ninth Marquess of Stratton, and had remained in the vaults of the Astley family bank in London. Until, that is, Henry, George's grandson, made the decision to honour Edward VIII's lover by having the diamond set into the Whitby jet necklace.

But here's the rub: on the evening of the gala dinner at Heatherly Hall, when Henry Astley went to fetch the Jet Set from his locked bedroom drawer ready to present to Wallis Simpson, he found the leather jewellery box empty. According to the story passed down through the decades, the Jet Set was never seen again. One would have imagined that, over the years, with the Sah-I-Noor diamond being so celebrated, it would eventually have reappeared in some form or other, whether in its original state or broken up. However, its disappearance remains a mystery…

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Heatherly Hall, Westenbury, Yorkshire

January

'Do you not think it looks a bit, you know, *meaty*?' Hannah Quinn pulled a face as she poked suspiciously at the contents of the dish on the table in front of her with a knife.

'Don't worry, nothing in there's had even a sniff of an animal; it's a totally vegan haggis.' Rosa Rosavina smiled in her sister's direction. 'Lentils, mushrooms and oats and that's it. Stop poking at it like that; I'm not convinced it's going to stay in one piece before I get it to the table.'

'And stop complaining as well, Hannah,' Eva Malik, the third of the Quinn triplets added, moving Hannah to one side before shooting a dish of glazed carrots towards the haggis. 'Hell, that's hot.' She shook her fingers and reached for a bottle of wine. 'It's about time you learned to cook, Hans, especially if you insist on inviting hordes of people for Sunday lunch.'

'I just *had* to have a big lunch here at the hall for everyone, since it was Burns Night this week as well as Lachlan's birthday.' Hannah smiled.

'How's it going then?' Eva raised an eyebrow. 'You know, you and Lachlan?' She and Rosa glanced at each other before redirecting their eyes simultaneously towards Hannah. When an answer, re Hannah's six-month relationship with Lachlan, the

hall's estate manager, was not forthcoming, Eva turned back to the bottle of wine in her hand.

'So, Eva,' Hannah eventually said, obviously not wanting to pursue the subject of her relationship with Lachlan, 'we're leaving it up to *you* to address the haggis.'

'Address it?' Eva stared. 'As in: "Sorry, Haggis, we welcome you here to Heatherly Hall, but I'm afraid we're moving with the times and you're vegan now?" Something along those lines? Blimey…' Eva broke off as Lachlan Buchanan strode through the ornate double doors of what had previously been the hall's ballroom.

'Blimey,' Eva said again, taking in Lachlan's kilt and sporran. Descending into a strong Yorkshire accent, she added, 'You've a grand pair o' legs on you there, love. There really is something about a man in a skirt.'

'*Kilt* please.' Lachlan threw Eva a pained look as he picked up a carving knife, waving it in her direction, and Eva stepped back in alarm. 'So, you Sassenachs…' he grinned '…this is what *should* happen: a previously designated reciter…' Lachlan raised an eyebrow at the triplets and waited '…ah, you want me to do it? I thought you'd never ask. So, a previously designated reciter,' he repeated, 'reads a poem over the haggis. A *guid whisky gill* is then offered to the piper, chef and reciter…'

'Hang on,' Eva interrupted, 'Rosa's the chef and you're the reciter. Who's the piper? Anyone here play the bagpipes?'

'Again, I thought you'd never ask.' Lachlan grinned, stretching his whole six foot over the back of an ancestral sofa – so that Rosa, Hannah and Eva automatically bent their heads in unison for a sneaky upskirt – before retrieving a set of pipes from behind it.

'Blimey.' Eva grinned for the third time in as many minutes as Lachlan attempted a few wailing notes. 'You kept that to yourself. And actually…' she winced as the whining lament reached some sort of climax '…maybe not a bad thing.'

'And then,' Lachlan continued, obviously enjoying himself,

'with some *alacrity*, the haggis is sliced open with a ceremonial dirk…' Lachlan put down his bagpipes and waved the knife once more '…though, to be fair, any old knife will do. The meal is then served with all its many courses, as well as copious helpings of *guid ale and whisky*.'

'Right. All its courses, Rosa?' Hannah and the other two turned expectantly to their village vicar.

'Soup, main and pud.' Rosa raised an eyebrow. 'And lucky to get that. I was so tired this morning, it was all I could do to drag myself out of bed, wash my face and take the ten o'clock Sunday service. Lucky there were no christenings or I might have ended up dropping the baby in the font.' Rosa yawned loudly.

'You're OK, aren't you?' Eva was concerned. Ever since Rosa had become ill with Hodgkin's lymphoma eight years previously, there'd always been the fear that her sister might fall ill once again. 'You've a new husband, new stepdaughter and you're racing around attending to everyone in the village, dashing about looking after your parishioners as well as cooking for Hannah. And you're surprised you're feeling tired?' Eva's eyes narrowed as she looked across at Rosa, sizing her up. 'Any nausea…?'

'Eva,' Rosa snapped. 'I'm *not* pregnant. You do know, you constantly eye me up like I'm some sort of prize breeding heifer every time I see you, don't you? You *know* I can't get pregnant the conventional way after the treatment for my cancer.'

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry.' Eva pulled a face of contrition as Hannah elbowed her crossly. 'It's just I know it's what you want, so badly. I promise I won't say another word. Or ever, ever ask you again. So,' she went on, 'I bet you've already been over to administer to Mum again as well, before you came on up here?'

'Well, you know Mum never misses church normally…' Rosa frowned '…but she wasn't there today, sitting in her normal pew with Virginia. Actually, Virginia wasn't there either.'

'Really?' Eva frowned. 'Never known that big sister of ours

miss the chance to prostrate herself in front of God and his judgement.'

'Bit bitchy that, Eva. Virginia *is* our sister…'

'Only by adoption,' Eva said curtly. 'I've never felt the same bond with Virginia I have with you two.' She scowled. 'In fact, she drives me mad.' She shook her head. 'Ever since it became common knowledge Bill wasn't actually my father, and Yves Dufort *was*, she's never missed an opportunity to try and get one over on me.'

'That's Virginia for you.' Hannah put down the Scotland-flag-decorated napkin she was attempting to origami into a thistle and drained her glass before reaching for the bottle of wine once more.

'I thought you were cutting down on the booze again, Hannah?' Eva raised an eyebrow.

'I have done,' Hannah said, cheerfully refilling her glass. 'I only drink at the weekend now.'

'Really?' Rosa frowned, glancing at Hannah's full glass. 'You had a couple of glasses…'

'Oh, don't go all vicarly on me, Rosa.' Hannah scowled. 'Anyway, back to Virginia… She's so envious, isn't she? Bitter even. She can't bear it that we three have been handed this place…'

'*On a plate*, were her words.' Eva grinned. '"You three have been handed Heatherly Hall *on a plate*." It's really getting to her, especially now the new art retreat here looks like it's going to be a success.'

'So how *was* Mum?' Hannah asked. 'Is she feeling any better?'

'Actually, she's a lot better.' Rosa smiled. 'It's Virginia who I find really hard work at the moment. I really don't know how Tim puts up with her.'

'Well, poor old Timothy's always done as he's told. That brother-in-law of ours really is incredibly wet.' Eva started

laughing. 'Actually, probably just terrified of Virginia. I'll never understand how it wasn't Virginia who followed Grandpa Cecil into the church, rather than you, Rosa.'

'She once told me she'd seriously thought about it – she'd seen it as her calling, but didn't believe God or the parishioners would *ever* approve of female vicars.' Rosa grinned. 'Her way of telling me she doesn't think I'm any good at the helm of All Hallows.'

'Cheeky mare,' Eva sniffed. 'She doesn't improve with age, does she? Not like this bottle of wine.' Eva swirled the ruby red liquid around her glass, before placing the glass under her nose and inhaling deeply. 'Jolly glad Bill laid down all this wonderful stuff and left the lot to us.'

'Well, if it was up to Our Virginia, you'd be relinquishing your share of everything here, wine and all, Eva.' Hannah raised an eyebrow. 'She doesn't think it at all Christian that you're still hanging on in here now the DNA test proved you weren't actually Bill's natural daughter.'

'I don't profess, and never *have* professed, to be guided by any Christian values,' Eva snapped. 'Having once had a grandfather – and now a sister – running the village church, I long ago distanced myself from any religious dogma telling me how to live my life.' Eva, in the process of bringing the glass of wine to her mouth, placed it, instead, on the kitchen table while pulling herself up straight in the chair. 'Shall I pour it back in the bottle then? You know, if I'm taking what isn't now considered to be mine?'

'Oh, don't be so bloody sensitive.' Hannah laughed and shook her head in Eva's direction.

'Even if he *had* known you weren't his, Bill would have included you in his will,' Rosa soothed. 'He loved you just as much as he did me and Hannah.'

'You know,' Eva said, picking up her wine and taking a sip, clearly mollified. 'I've really hardly told *anyone* the truth about

my being Yves Dufort's natural daughter rather than Bill's. Even when Yves came over from France to officially open the art retreat last month, he made no mention of who I was to the guests and journalists. And yet half the village appears to know.' She scowled and tutted. '*You* two haven't been telling everyone, have you?'

'Well, it's not a great secret, is it?' Hannah looked slightly guilty. 'And I'd have thought it's something to be proud of, to be the natural daughter of France's greatest living artist, rather than something to hide?'

'I'm not ashamed of being Yves Dufort's daughter – far from it – but I'd still rather Bill had been my biological dad, as we always thought he was. Especially as he left a third of his shares in this place to me.'

'It'll be Virginia mouthing off about it in the co-op or at Young Wives' meeting – anywhere she can get an audience,' Hannah said sagely.

'You know,' Rosa now said, 'Mum's hypochondria really is her hobby these days. And Dad just listens and sympathises.'

'He adores her, doesn't he?' Hannah said, almost wistfully, glancing across at Lachlan.

'Always has,' Eva agreed, 'despite her landing him with her sister's new-born triplets. Not many men would have adopted us the way he did.'

'I've been called up to her bedroom to say a final prayer over her more times than I can remember.' Rosa grinned. 'She always says she wants to go to her maker absolved of her sins…' Rosa broke off quickly to attend to the huge vat of Cullen skink simmering on the stove.

'Absolved of her sins?' Eva said, as she and Hannah stared at Rosa's back. 'You're not a Catholic priest, Rosa. And since when has Mum done anything sinful? Susan was always the good girl – a teacher, married lovely Dad, went to church regularly before she did the noble thing adopting us three new-borns when naughty little sister Alice got herself pregnant, even though they

already had three-year-old Virginia and not enough money to go round.'

'Oh, I don't know.' Rosa, still stirring, shrugged nonchalantly.

'Actually, you *do* know,' Hannah interjected. 'Remember when she had "*a touch of HIV and was going to end up like Freddie Mercury*"? She told me she'd written letters to all four of us girls and we weren't to judge her too harshly. So, there is *something* there, you know.'

Rosa carried on determinedly with her careful soup-stirring. 'Mum's always had a bit of the drama queen about her. Anyway, she's absolutely fine now.'

'And you, Reverend Rosa Rosavina, need to sit down and take it easy.' Eva took the wooden spoon from Rosa's hand and stirred enthusiastically, slopping some of the contents of the pan onto the hotplate as she did so. 'So, Rosa, you're feeling tired? Any, you know? Sore…?'

'Eva, I'm *not* pregnant.' Rosa cut Eva off once more. 'You've *just* promised you would never, ever ask again…'

'OK, OK, sorry.' Eva wiped at the spilt soup with a dishcloth, silenced for a good ten seconds. 'But your frozen eggs in the clinic in Wimbledon, Rosa? Shouldn't you and Joe be making some decision about those…?'

She broke off as her two daughters, eight-year-old Laila and four-year-old Nora ran in, together with Chiara, Rosa's stepdaughter.

'I've been showing Chiara the rudie-nudies,' Laila boasted.

'Ladies with *no clothes* on.' Four-year-old Nora appeared scandalised. 'I don't know *why* they haven't not got their vests and pants on…' She turned. 'And why's Uncle Lachlan got a dress on?' Nora stared in fascination both at the kilt, Lachlan's hairy legs and the man himself as he stood over by the window overlooking Heatherly Hall's acres of park and farmland while endeavouring to get an actual tune out of the bagpipes.

'*Uncle* Lachlan?' Eva mouthed in Hannah's direction as the man in question turned away from them, put down the sulking

bagpipes and bent to pull out a bottle of whisky from his bag. '*He's* getting his feet under the table,' she mouthed, amused. 'And, Chiara,' Eva went on, turning to Rosa's seven-year-old stepdaughter, 'what Laila has been showing you up in the long gallery is art. Beautiful artwork created by Bill Astley, the previous Marquess of Heatherly Hall.'

'Where is he now?' Chiara asked, eyes big as saucers.

'He died,' Laila interrupted importantly. 'And now my mummy and my Aunty Rosa and Aunty Hannah are a bit like King Charles and are in charge round here. And people have to do what they say.'

Chiara giggled at that but looked a bit nervous. 'And which one is the queen?' she asked looking at each of the triplets in turn. 'Is there a Queen of Heatherly Hall?'

Laila shook her head. 'No, of course not. But there *is* another marquess now,' Laila said knowingly. 'He's the *fourteenth* marquess…'

'Thirteenth,' Eva corrected her daughter.

'And where is *he*?' Chiara turned her blonde head in all directions apparently in the hope of manifesting some aspect of royalty.

'Nobody likes him,' Laila sniffed. 'He's called Jonny Astley and his wife is an awful loud American lady called Billy-Jo and Mummy says…'

'Enough, Laila. That's enough.' Eva raised an eye in her elder daughter's direction.

'But Mummy, you *said* so,' Laila argued, unwilling to let it go. 'Chiara, Jonny Astley was Bill's *real* son and because he was the leg… leg… hit… image… leghitimage… he was the *real* son and a man as well… he became the next marquess. But Bill left Heatherly Hall to Mummy and my Aunty Rosa and my Aunty Hannah because he loved them best and didn't like his real son, Jonny, and Jonny was very cross and slammed the door and he and Billy-Jo went back to America where they belonged.'

'Laila, enough. Take Chiara and Nora and go and wash your hands for lunch.' Eva gave Laila one of her looks.

'*My* real mummy's in Australia,' Chiara suddenly announced. 'And I'm going to see her soon.'

Eva looked across at Rosa who appeared to flinch at her stepdaughter's words, but then stood and smiled before bending to kiss Chiara's blonde head. 'Chiara, sweetheart,' Rosa was now saying, 'I'll explain all about Bill Astley and the hall to you properly when we get back to the vicarage this evening.' Rosa replaited Chiara's hair before tying the narrow pink ribbon around its end.

'Right,' Hannah said, returning from the far end of the room where the huge oak dining table was laid for the ceremonial Burns' supper feast. 'I know it's lunch rather than supper, but we're about ready to eat. Where are Joe and Andrea?'

'Joe's helping Andrea with the kiln in the outhouse,' Eva said. 'Apparently, it's not heating up as it should. And Daisy and Jude are coming too, you say? That's great, Hannah; I know how friendly you've become with her.'

Hannah nodded. 'Ever since Daisy's been working with her dad, Graham, she's the one who turns up to deal with the hall's livestock. We've really become quite good mates.' Graham was the village vet.

Eva glanced at her watch. 'What time did you tell them to come, Hannah?'

'Quarter of an hour ago. Daisy's probably got her hand up some cow and Jude will have been commandeered by one of his constituents complaining about the potholes in the road or machete-wielding thirteen-year-olds causing mayhem down on the council estate. God, I wouldn't be either a vet or an MP for any money.' Hannah glanced out of the tall window and down on to the formal gardens where, despite the cold wind, dark clouds and threat of rain, visitors to the café – Tea and

Cake – were still queuing for the hall's famous ginger flapjack and a welcome cup of tea.

'Oh,' she said, 'they're coming now. With Joe and Andrea. Right, is that it? Another glass of something and then food? I'm starving.'

2

'Sorry we're late!' Daisy Maddison walked into the room bringing with her a blast of cold air. 'Hell, it's not half cold out there; it's starting to rain too.'

'Where's Jude?'

'He's just helping Andrea and Joe with the kiln. I think they've finally got it working again. So…' Daisy turned to Eva. 'How's it all going with the lovely Andrea then? All good?' She lowered her voice as the three little girls came back into the room, pouring and spilling juice for themselves and bagging their seats at the table. 'He's bloody gorgeous. What is he again?'

'What *is he*?' Eva laughed.

'Where's he from?'

'His mum's Italian and dad's Russian. He was born in Moscow, but lived most of his adult life in Milan.'

'Blimey – Moscow to Milan to Midhope. How exotic is that?'

'Being a village vet not exotic enough for you?' Hannah laughed and held up the bottle of wine in Daisy's direction.

'Please.' Daisy removed her coat, threw it over the sofa and held out her hand for the glass of wine. 'Exotic? Standing in cow shit all day? Oh, I just seem to have been training *for ever*.' Daisy broke off to kiss Lachlan. 'Wow, you're looking very… very…'

'Very?' Lachlan raised an eyebrow.

'Scottish. Yeah, that's it, Scottish. And very lovely too.'

Daisy, though she'd spent hours alongside Lachlan helping with the estate livestock, had obviously only ever seen him in his work clothes. 'So, what *do* you wear under—?' She broke off as Joe Rosavina, Andrea Zaitsev and Jude Mansell made an appearance, followed by a tall, dark-haired man. The four women turned expectantly, none of them having any idea who the stranger might be.

'I'm afraid these are the hall's private quarters,' Hannah started. 'What were you looking for?'

'He's looking for Lachlan,' Joe said, glancing to where Lachlan was still contemplating his bagpipes.

'For me?'

'Sorry, Lachlan, we met last spring… I'm a day early…' The man's accent was heavily North American.

'Oh, apologies, didn't recognise you.' Lachlan moved over to the man, extending a hand. 'And yes, we were expecting you tomorrow. Zachary, isn't it?'

'I can go and come back tomorrow.' The man was clearly embarrassed. 'I don't want to intrude on your lunch. I've booked a room for the week at The Jolly Sailor down in Westenbury.' He hesitated, eyeing Lachlan's traditional national costume. 'Is it fancy dress?'

'Burns Night.' Lachlan smiled. 'Even though it's lunchtime and a few days late.'

'Look, I'll leave you.' The man made to retreat through the still-open door.

'No, no, come in. At least have a drink with us and get warm.' Lachlan turned to the others. 'This is Zachary Anderson…'

'Zac, please.'

'Zac's from… Maine, isn't it?'

Zac nodded.

'He was here at the hall for a day last spring. He's researching a book about old English ancestral homes. And,' Lachlan went on, 'I said you three would help him all you can with what you know of Heatherly's history.'

'Not much I'm afraid.' Rosa frowned. 'There are various books in the town's library, I believe, but, to my shame, I have to admit to knowing very little. What about you two?' Rosa turned to her sisters.

'A bit embarrassing really,' Hannah admitted. 'You know, to be running the place and not know much of its history. Bill never really appeared to know much either, did he? He was always far more interested in the present than the hall's past.'

'I'll come back tomorrow.' Zac again made to turn to leave.

'Have a drink,' Lachlan insisted.

'Stay for lunch,' Rosa insisted in turn. 'There's tons. Really. You're more than welcome. I'll lay another place for you.'

'No, absolutely not…'

'Absolutely, yes.' Hannah grinned across at the man. 'The more the merrier. And you'll get to hear Lachlan torturing the pipes.'

'Well, if you're sure?'

'Totally.' Rosa, Hannah and Eva spoke as one.

'Come on, have a drink,' Hannah said. 'Numb your senses before Lachlan assaults our ears with that bag of wind.'

'So, Zac,' Jude Mansell said, helping himself to bread and lifting his spoon, 'have you written many other books? Besides this one you're researching?'

'Several, actually. I'm based at the University of Maine – it's the state's only public research university – where I'm an associate professor of history.'

'Oh, you're not teaching at the moment?'

'I'm on a one-semester sabbatical: English history fascinates me – particularly pre- and post-industrial eighteenth-century history – and I just decided to bite the bullet and get the book I've always wanted to write actually researched.'

'Fabulous soup, Rosa,' Daisy enthused. 'What is it exactly?'

'Cullen skink.' Rosa smiled.

'Cullen stink?' Four-year-old Nora sniffed suspiciously at the contents of her bowl. 'Don't like this, Mummy.'

'It's fish,' Laila said knowingly. Showing off in front of the others that she knew the correct way to eat soup, as once taught her by Bill, Laila manoeuvred the monogrammed silver spoon across the bowl and away from her.

Obediently, Nora picked up her own spoon, copying Laila, but pulled a face as she sucked tentatively at its contents.

'So, which other ancestral homes are you researching, Zac?' Hannah asked, heading off Laila's incessant determination to be the centre of attention.

'Oh, the usual.' Zac smiled across at Hannah, while Rosa and Eva – noting the frisson of interest between their sister and this exceptionally handsome newcomer – exchanged glances.

'The usual?' Lachlan had obviously been aware of the longer-than-necessary glances between Hannah and Zac but smiled back pleasantly at the American.

'Oh, erm, Castle Howard, Harewood House, Chatsworth House. I intend working my way through Yorkshire over the next few months.'

'I think you'll find Chatsworth is actually in Derbyshire.' Lachlan smiled.

'I bow to your superior knowledge,' Zac replied, lowering his head slightly in the other man's direction as Hannah frowned across at Lachlan.

'Funnily enough,' Daisy said, 'I've been looking after Dad's dog, Malvolio, while Dad's away for the week. He's become incontinent…'

'Your dad has?' Rosa asked sympathetically. 'Become incontinent? Oh, the dog? Sorry!'

'What's in continent?' Nora, struggling with her soup, laid down the heavy spoon and took a large bite from her bread roll.

'Incontinent means he's going to live in France or Germany or Spain,' Laila said sagely.

'Is he? Why?' Nora frowned through her mouthful. 'Doesn't he like living with Daisy?'

'He's weeing a lot.' Daisy smiled. 'Where he shouldn't, Nora. So, I have to put a load of newspapers down for him. Anyway, going through the pile of old newspapers I found in Mum and Dad's utility, I came across an article about Heatherly Hall. It was in the *Midhope Examiner* – the "On This Day" article they run every weekend – and from last October. Did you know Edward VIII and Mrs Simpson actually stayed here?'

'Really? Here at Heatherly Hall? Gosh, how exciting is that?' Hannah gazed, almost reverentially, around the room. 'Mind you, the layout has been altered so much in the past forty years we can't be sure which were the original sitting rooms and bedrooms: probably what's now the conference centre and wedding venue, over in the west wing of the hall. I didn't even know Edward was actually crowned king?' she added. 'I thought he fell in love with Mrs Simpson and, when they wouldn't let him marry an American divorcee, he resigned?'

'Abdicated.' Jude laughed. 'He was king for just 325 days. He didn't manage even a year before he abdicated for the woman he loved.'

'So, this article,' Daisy said, spooning the last of her soup and wiping her mouth on her napkin, 'was about some mystery involving a piece of jewellery.'

'A jet set?' Hannah nodded. 'Jewellery made from Whitby jet? Yes, I remember Bill telling us the story when we were just little girls and Mum and Dad let us stay up here at the hall for Sunday lunch. Don't you remember?'

Rosa and Eva both shook their heads.

'You were always the one most interested in this place, Hannah,' Rosa said. 'You loved Heatherly Hall from the minute you set foot in it. Always nagging Mum and Dad to let us come up to see Bill.'

Eva nodded. 'Dad thought we should get to know our natural father, but Mum didn't want us to. She never came with us when

Dad brought us up to see Bill, did she? The thing is,' Eva went on, turning to the others in explanation, 'our mum's always been a bit jealous of Alice, because Alice was our birth mum, and, I guess, Mum was relieved that, most of the time we were growing up, Alice lived in the States and we had very little to do with her.'

'This all very confusing.' Andrea frowned. 'Pass the wine over, Eva – let's see if alcohol helps it make more sense.' He grinned at Eva and she took the bottle over to him, planting a kiss on his cheek as she poured the wine.

'Actually, you know…' Eva stood, the bottle at half-mast '…it is coming back a bit now. In fact, don't you remember, you two, Bill told us the story of the missing Jet Set and we went off all around the place, treasure hunting. Tapping at the oak panelling and desperately hoping to find a secret passageway. We never did.' Eva laughed, and lowered her voice. 'But we did end up in the attics where we'd been told we mustn't go. *And* came across Bill's artwork: the rudie-nudies that the girls have just discovered for themselves.'

Rosa frowned, trying to recall the stories Bill had tried to tell them. 'I have to say, I do seem to remember Bill mentioning something about it when we were teens. But, to be honest…' here Rosa actually laughed and glanced across at Joe, loving the fact that he was hers, that she'd adored him since she was sixteen '…I reckon we were more into boys and music than history at the time, and probably far too impatient to sit and take it all in.'

'You should have listened to Bill Astley.' Jude smiled. 'It really is quite a fascinating tale. One of the guys in the village, who's always helped with leafletting and so on, has talked to me about it in the past. When I told him I was coming round here for lunch, he insisted on telling it all again. I'm not convinced he knows as much as he thinks he does, but his name's Roy Newsome. Lives just behind The Jolly Sailor. He's always in the pub, having a pint. If you're interested in the whole story – perhaps you could hold an evening of local history or something here – he might be able to shed a bit more light on what actually happened.'

'If it happened back in 1936, this Roy bloke must be getting on a bit now?' Eva frowned.

'No, no,' Jude went on, 'Roy's well into his seventies. I think it was his dad who was around at the time, and was involved somehow.'

'*Involved?*' Hannah leaned forward. 'You mean this Roy reckons his dad had something to do with its disappearance?'

'I doubt it.' Jude laughed. 'If his dad had nicked a priceless set of jewellery intended for the king's mistress, I wouldn't have thought he'd have been singing from the treetops about it. I get the impression his dad was perhaps working up here at the hall when the Jet Set just disappeared into thin air.'

'To be quite honest,' Rosa went on, standing to help Joe clear the soup plates, 'I'm not convinced Bill knew a great deal about it either. I seem to remember him saying that there was a story about a necklace and earrings – I've never heard of it being referred to as the Jet Set, but I guess that's what you're talking about – that his father had commissioned in order to impress someone visiting the hall. Apparently, before he could present it to whoever, it disappeared and was never seen again. Bill was convinced that, knowing the little he did about his father, there probably never *was* such a jewellery set and Sir Henry Astley, the eleventh marquess, made up the story of it being stolen to get out of not actually having had the money to commission it in the first place.'

'Bill didn't get on with his father then?'

'He didn't really know him. Bill was a bit of an afterthought, I believe, and, by the time he was growing up, his parents – Henry and Winifred – were divorced and he was living in London with his mother who was originally from there. The war took off his two very much older brothers and he suddenly found himself inheriting both the title of the Marquess of Stratton as well as, at the time, a badly-in-need-of-repair Heatherly Hall. Quite a shock after his London life.'

'And now it's in your hands.' Jude's eyes gleamed with interest and excitement. 'You three actually own a historic hall.'

'Sorry, Jude.' Rosa laughed. 'That probably doesn't sit comfortably with your socialist principles? And, in truth, we certainly don't *own* Heatherly Hall – we're just looking after it for the trust. Deciding the best way forward to have it continue to pay for itself.'

Daisy nodded. 'It's a local legend, apparently, although I'm local and I'd never heard about it until I came across the old newspaper in Mum's utility. I was across at one of the farms up by Norman's Meadow yesterday and ended up asking the cowman there about it. Apparently, the legend of the Jet Set at Heatherly Hall rears its head every few years or so. You know, a bit like the Loch Ness monster?'

'*I* know, we could do a sort of murder mystery evening here and tell the story,' Hannah said excitedly.

'Someone was murdered?' Andrea asked, still confused by the discussion.

'No.' Eva laughed. 'Well at least I don't think so.'

'Alright – a mystery evening, then. Without the murder.' Hannah's enthusiasm wasn't to be diminished by the absence of a corpse.

'The problem is, Hans,' Eva said, 'no one is really sure what *did* happen. It *is* over eighty years ago. If you were planning on holding a sort of Agatha Christie mystery evening, with everyone dressed up, you'd have to use quite a bit of poetic licence.'

'We could get the local Amateur Dramatic Society in to act it out, then plant some cheap jewellery and let the audience have a treasure hunt round the hall and then supper, for £30 a head…'

'My dad's big into am-dram,' Daisy said enthusiastically.

'I'm still lost,' Andrea said plaintively. 'You Brits are bit strange. The men dress up in skirt, stab a pudding while reciting poetry over it and then want to get dressed up and act out some murder that happened a century ago.'

'No, no one was murdered.' Joe laughed. 'Have another glass of wine,' he offered, grinning as he passed over the bottle to Andrea.

'And my Granny Vivienne is too.'

'Is too, what?'

'Big into am-dram,' Daisy said proudly. 'In fact, she was a famous actress, on TV, in her day.' Daisy's eyes gleamed with pride. 'An evening dressed up, and acting out the mystery of the disappearing Jet Set in this fantastic hall would be right up her and my dad's street. And mine too, actually. Let's do it.'

'OK!' Hannah was just as excited. 'What do you think, Lachlan?'

'Well, it will need a lot of thought – a lot of planning…' Lachlan shook his head. 'We'll be bang in the middle of lambing season.'

'Hang on…' Hannah started feverishly scrolling through her phone '…right, one hundred years ago this March, Agatha Christie published her third book – *Murder on the Links* – and the second featuring Hercule Poirot. That's it,' she added in some triumph, 'we'll have a week in March celebrating the centenary of the life and works of Agatha Christie, culminating in our own production of *The Jet Set of Heatherly Hall* – in the style of Christie – followed by a treasure hunt – maybe a facsimile of the original Jet Set if we can find out more about it – topped off with a fabulous dinner. Forget £30 – we can charge £50 a head at least.'

'*I've* actually done quite a bit of community theatre.' Zac Anderson spoke for perhaps only the second time since sitting down for lunch.

'Is that the equivalent of our amateur dramatics?' Hannah asked, dimpling at the man.

'Sure.' He smiled back.

'Don't take too much on, Hannah,' Lachlan warned.

'Oh, it'll be *fine*.' Daisy, usually in league with Lachlan where the stock and the land were concerned, was now very much rooting for Hannah. 'In fact, it'll be wonderful.' She turned to Zac, patting his arm. 'And will you be around for the next couple of months to join us in rehearsal?'

'I fully intend being in the UK until the Easter break,' Zac said, holding Hannah's eye once again. 'It would be an honour to join you for weekly rehearsals if I'm near enough and if you think I can make a contribution.'

'Great stuff.' Hannah beamed at everyone around the table.

'OK,' Rosa said, as Joe and Eva jumped up to help her bring dishes and plates to the dining table. 'Crispy neeps and tatties cake as well as the glazed carrots. Lachlan? Drum roll for Lachlan please as he gives us a rendition on the bagpipes and then addresses the haggis…'

She broke off in surprise as the huge oak-panelled door leading to the outside long red-carpeted corridor was flung back on itself to reveal Virginia, the fourth of the Quinn sisters, standing in the doorway. Coatless, she was exceptionally wet – it had obviously been raining heavily – and her fair bob, usually so neat and without a hair out of place, was dripping.

'Virginia?' Rosa stepped towards her.

'You *knew*,' Virginia spat at her and, with a sinking heart, Rosa closed her eyes. 'Did you two know as well?' She swung round wildly, searching out first Hannah and then Eva. 'You all knew, didn't you? You effing bitches…'