

# TAINTED TEA FOR TWO

By Susanne Marie Knight

## Prologue

SKULKING DIDN'T come naturally, but the intruder managed to walk past the maid, unnoticed. Once inside the library, the intruder shut the oak door, then leaned against it.

Noxious fumes from the furniture wax seeped under the door and fouled the inside of the room. The intruder's nose twitched, but there was no time to worry about the discomfort. When the servant finished polishing the corridor's brass and woodwork fixtures, her routine dictated the library as the next stop.

The intruder hurried over to the computer; its cold, sleek design incongruous with the Georgian splendor of the room's decor. As always, the computer was on. A blue-swirled planet Earth hovered on the screen, poised to disappear at the slightest touch of the keyboard or mouse.

A yank on the mouse diffused the screen image into a directory of files. "So, they think the old bugger will improve with a bit of physical rehabilitation, hmmm? Maybe even regain his health? We'll just see about that."

The intruder accessed the "D" drive on the computer where CD ROM telephone listings were always located. Names and addresses from the southeastern section of the United States of America scrolled up on the screen.

"The States? Who the hell was looking at this? No, damn it, I need a London specialist. Not a physical therapist, though, like they want. Someone who handles hard-core body building and aerobic exercise. Yes, that is exactly what the old bugger needs—overtax his heart and hasten his trip to the undertaker!" The intruder paused. "And yet..."

Maybe an American was just what the doctor ordered. A Yankee—by definition: good-natured, dull, and stupid. The Yanks even coined a word for what was needed: patsy.

Typing "Fitness Trainers" in the appropriate heading, the intruder scanned the names that appeared on screen and in the interest of time, selected the first entry. "1st Place Athletics—Marty Jackson, former Mr. Universe, owner and personal trainer. Norfolk, Virginia."

The intruder snickered and copied down the information. "Perfect. By the time I get through digging a recriminating hole around this Jackson, he won't see the light of day again. And no one will suspect me—ever."

It would take a bit of doing to insure that Mr. Jackson was hired, especially since the patsy had to be flown in from the States, but the intruder had considerable influence.

After restoring the computer screen to the familiar visage of Earth, the intruder returned to the door and glanced into the corridor. Luckily the maid, who was slightly hard of hearing, had stepped into an alcove to steal a couple of puffs.

The intruder slipped outside into the cool, fresh air, without bumping into anyone from Embrey Hall. A good, clean escape in this venture augured well for what lay ahead.

Two brownish wrens swooped down from leafy beech trees and warbled agreement with the

intruder's thoughts. Another favorable sign. It was a certainty the old man's poisoning would go like a charm.

---

## Chapter 1

MARTY JACKSON knocked on Embrey Hall's large entrance door for the third time. "Hello? Is anybody home?" There had to be someone inside. After all, she was expected, wasn't she?

Or maybe not. She'd been stranded without the promised chauffeur at Heathrow airport, then had to make her own arrangements to get to here. Wherever here was. With a sweep of her head, she took in the Hall's majestic gateway, impressive brick frontage, and acres and acres of pure, unadulterated wilderness.

She gulped. This place was huge, absolutely huge...and way out in the boonies. Not within easy walking distance to the nearest town of Aldsworth. It had better not come to that though. Being paid to travel to England had, at first, been a dream come true, but things were sure going sour and fast.

*Don't give up, Marty. You've only just arrived.*

Desperation seeping into her gut, she adjusted her straw hat, smoothed a stray curl behind her ear, and pounded on the door. "Hello?"

Finally, the door creaked open to reveal a pencil-thin man in a black-and-white uniform. He took one look at her, wrinkled his pug nose, then sniffed. "Wot d'you want?"

Marty put down her suitcase and returned the man's rude stare. "I'm Marty Jackson."

No spark of recognition lit his gaze.

She skewed her lips. "Viscount Embrey's expecting me. I'm his personal fitness trainer."

The man, maybe a butler, continued to block her way. "No arrival of a trainer was mentioned t'me." He made a move to close the door.

She didn't fly all this way to be intimidated by a twirpy-looking penguin. Picking up her suitcase, she pushed him aside, entered the dim entryway, then looked around. Spooky. All four corridors leading from the main door were shrouded in inky darkness.

She shivered. "Maybe Viscount Embrey neglected to tell you. I agreed to sign on for three weeks."

The butler held out his bony hand. "Here now, let's have a look at the paperwork."

Thoroughly annoyed, Marty dug into her handbag, and pulled out the contract. Shouldn't someone apologize for inconveniencing her?

The butler grabbed papers and scanned the words. Marty wondered how he could read in the pervading gloom.

"Ooh, the secretary signed it. That explains everything." The man returned the papers, then sniffed. "Come along then. I'll show you t'your room."

The lukewarm reception was an improvement. Marty followed the butler up a magnificent staircase, turned left down a corridor, right down another corridor, left, right, until he opened a door into a furniture-crammed bedroom. Goodness, she'd need a compass to find her way around.

"I'll send up a maid t'unpack." He pivoted on his squeaky black shoes and closed the door.

And she was a monkey's uncle if she didn't hear the words, "bloody Yank," drift back to her. Cripes, that was quite an insult for one who called Virginia home. Was this all-expense-paid

assignment in the land that had once been Camelot worth this abuse?

Maybe not, but then again, thoughts of her fantasy vacation in Italy on the heels of England soothed her. "*Buon giorno, Italia*. Here I come!"

Marty took out her most prized possession: a paperweight in the shape of a giant, clear crystal. She held it upside down, and the colorful pearls suspended inside gently floated to the bottom. A kid's toy, of course, but she never went anywhere without it. It was the last thing her father had given her.

She gave it a place of honor on the night stand, then tucked her clothes away in an old armoire. A few minutes later, a series of chills skittered up her spine. She stopped, pulled off her straw hat, and fingered her unruly cap of curls.

Nerves, that's all. The antiques littering the floor space were starting to close in on her. Even the air had an ancient smell to it. Several slow, deep breaths were in order.

Ah, much better. Could think better, too. To get away from her claustrophobia, she walked over to the window and swept aside the lacy curtains. After a tug, the window opened to admit a rush of flower-scented air. From her second story vantage point, she saw a garden rich with rhododendrons, camellias, and magnolias. Lush, bushy beech trees grew in clumps, their heavy branches draped over weathered, high gates and provided shade for a myriad of brick pathways. In the distance, a meandering stream rippled through the valley landscape, bubbling with life on this crisp, clear afternoon. Truly a garden of earthly delights. Who could remain depressed at such a sight?

She replaced the lacy curtain. Now that she was here in Aldsworth, Gloucestershire, she'd clear things up with Viscount Embrey, assess his fitness needs and get started on his regimen. This was a plum job. When she finished her contract, her long-awaited vacation could begin. Surely things would go more smoothly from here on out.

As if to dispute this last sentiment, a bold knock sounded on the bedroom door. Before Marty had a chance to respond, a small girl peeked her head inside. "Hallo, ducks!"

Slipping into the room, the girl—no, young woman—marched in front of Marty and gazed at her from head to toe.

"Had to have a look-see for myself! Nardo tol' me you were a blinkin' female, but I didn't believe him. He's got the last laugh after all." The woman's eyes, ringed with black cosmetics, bulged out even further and a mischievous smile lit her vivid red lips. "A looker, too. Gor, but Ol' Toff'll be cheesed off!"

Marty stepped back from this tiny bundle of energy who stood much too close for her comfort. Nardo had to be the stuffy man who answered the door. The woman's black uniform and white apron pegged her as one of the household staff. But who was old Toff? He sounded formidable.

"Yes, I'm afraid my name does cause a fair amount of mix-ups," Marty agreed as she held out her hand in greeting. "I thought I'd taken care of any misunderstanding on that with Mr. Smythe-Davis."

"The secretary?" The dynamo shook her head with all the fury of a hurricane. "No good talkin' about him. 'Round two weeks ago, Ol' Toff sacked him. Without a bye-your-leave." She shrugged. "No tears over that one, though. His morbid face put all the help in a sour mood. Thought he was a Romeo, he did. Pinched my bottom too often for my tastes."

Rather belatedly, she noticed Marty's outstretched hand. "You're a real lady, aren't you, ducks? M'name's Charlotte, but you can call me Lottie. Everyone does. Except Ol' Toff, of course."

Marty smiled. Her hand actually vibrated after contact with Lottie's. "Pleased to meet you,

Lottie. What do you do here and who in the world is old Toff? Is he the viscount?"

Lottie's screech of laughter disturbed even the wrens nesting on the closest beech tree. Marty watched as the birds trilled their protests and flew off into the late afternoon light.

"Lord love you, ducks! That's the best snicker I've had all week." Lottie wiped a merry tear with the corner of her apron, smudging her makeup and dirtying the unsoiled material. "Ol' Toff—that's my name for him. Toff means, you know, a big shot, full of himself. Describes his lordship's son down to his bones. You'll be meetin' him soon enough. He is..." She stood at attention—all of five feet, or less. "...the *Honorable* Gregory George Gresham. The three G's—gruff, grouchy, and... though I do hate to admit it, gorgeous."

Handsome with an attitude. Marty grimaced. She'd met enough of those kinds of males to fill a bottomless pit.

"I wouldn't mind havin' a go at him myself, though." Lottie leaned over and nudged Marty in the ribs. "He'd give a girl her money's worth, know what I mean?"

"Ah, sure." Marty felt heat creep into her face. She wasn't a prude, but Lottie's plain speaking disconcerted her. "I think, ah, I'd like to see the viscount now. Could you ask him if this is a convenient time?"

"Me ask?" Again came the shrill laugh. "No, ducks. You've got to learn the lay of the land. I'm just one of the housemaids. It's the valet you need to ask. He controls his lordship. Has to, 'cause ever since the accident, the ol' man's a bit touched in the head."

Great. A grouchy son and a half-crazy father. This was going to be one helluva assignment. Maybe she should've stayed home. "Where do I find Mr....?"

"Compton. Plain Compton. Stay here and I'll—"

Another loud knock reverberated through the room. Before she could answer it, the door opened to reveal the reed-thin butler, Nardo. Marty massaged the bridge of her nose. Was privacy as illusive here as good manners?

"Miss Jackson," snapped the man. "You're t'follow me, quick like, to the library. Mr. Gresham requires a word with you."

Well, she didn't require a word with him, and she certainly didn't care for the dictatorial command. "Tell him I'll be right there. And, for your information, it's *Ms.*"

Lottie hid her giggles behind her small hand. "Gorblimey! Heads'll roll now." After saying that, she quickly left them alone.

Nardo wrinkled that pug nose as if the air had suddenly turned rancid. "Here now, my instructions are t'wait."

"Fine." Marty opened her suitcase and grabbed her business valise. If she hadn't been more than 3,500 miles from home, she would've headed straight out the front door and not stopped until she parked her buns on her own comfy couch. But she'd already signed the contract. Like it or not she was stuck here for the duration. Mr. Big Shot Gresham could be as gruff and grouchy as he wanted, but she didn't have to put up with it. His father was her boss. She only hoped the son didn't get his bad attitude from his dad.

With as much dignity as she could muster, she placed her hat back on her head. Her long skirt swaying with the force of her movements, she followed Nardo out into the corridor. A sharp turn left, down some stairs, a long walk then a right turn and another right. Good grief, this was a big house.

Thoroughly lost, Marty stood behind Nardo as he knocked on the library door. A "Do not disturb" sign hanging on the doorknob shook from the vibrations. After hearing a man call out, "Enter," Nardo gestured for her to go inside, so she did. Conflicting odors assaulted her nostrils:

a mixture of cigar smoke, decaying books, and furniture polish. Before she had a chance to take stock of her surroundings, a deep, resonant voice cut through the stale air. "So it's true."

Marty focused on the speaker. A man with hair as dark as ebony rigidly sat behind an immense wooden desk. His lean face shaded with a five o'clock shadow one hour before its appointed time, he stared at her—antagonism glinting in his dark eyes. The tie around his neck was loosened and the vivid white sleeves of his fine linen shirt were rolled up as if preparing to engage in a thankless task. Stacks of papers littered the desktop and the computer keyboard to the left of him.

Even with his black eyebrows slashed in a vee of displeasure, the man was a compelling hunk of masculinity. Or to quote Lottie: gorgeous. His glare, however, gave Marty the willies. "Ah, hello. I'm Marty Jackson." She extended her hand.

He ignored it. "Nardo, you may leave us."

With an expressive sniff, the butler turned abruptly, which caused his shoes to squeal in protest, and closed the door. Instead of shaking her hand, Gregory Gresham gave her the once-over. By the downturn of his firm lips, he obviously didn't like what he saw.

Pompous ass! Marty returned her hand to her side and sat down, uninvited, on the nearby armchair. "And you are?" she inquired sweetly.

"You're sitting on my suit jacket."

"Oh!" She jumped to the left and extracted a pin striped coat with a label from Henry Pool & Co., Saville Row. Very, very expensive. "I *am* sorry." Not!

Running his hand through his thick, dark hair, Gresham leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. "This will never do. Lord Embrey is in the most delicate of health. What possessed Smythe-Davis to send for a woman?"

Delicate health? She felt like a lead weight had settled in her stomach. She was a fitness trainer, not a rehabilitative therapist. "I wasn't told about the viscount's poor health. I assure you, Mr. Gresham, I cleared up any misunderstanding about my gender with Mr. Smythe-Davis."

Sighing, Gresham waved a well-manicured hand. "As I let the boulder go this past fortnight, I'm not surprised he neglected to inform the staff."

Some intangible unpleasantness filtered through Gresham's words. Marty shuddered in response. She inhaled to quiet her growing unease but the room's murky air caused her to cough.

Gresham frowned. "Miss Jackson, I want it understood that I had no part in the decision to send for you. I believe that importing a foreigner for this task is foolhardy, at best." He raised an eyebrow. "It appears I am right. However, you are here, I cannot dispute that. Now, please be so kind as to explain your qualifications and how you plan to restore the use of Lord Embrey's left side."

An enjoyable vision of using this man as a punching bag flashed in front of Marty's eyes. What an insufferable man! But she could handle him. Years of public contact had prepared her for dealing with people like the *Honorable* Gregory George Gresham. But maybe she wouldn't have to deal with him for long. He'd just given her the perfect way out of this nightmarish assignment.

She reached into her valise and removed Mr. Smythe-Davis' correspondence. "My company, 1st Place Athletics, has won national fitness awards for three years in a row. We specialize in building, firming, and toning muscles. Our clientele range from out-of-shape novices to world-class competitors."

Keeping her voice neutral was almost as difficult as lifting ninety-pound barbells. She dropped the letters in front of Gresham. "As you can see, no mention was made of the viscount's poor

health. I was hired as his personal trainer to get him started on an exercise program."

"This letter is addressed to Marty Jackson, Mr. Universe. Are you, perhaps, not what you seem?"

Although her father had been dead sixteen years, the memory still was painful...as was Gresham's inference. She hadn't the heart to remove her father's "Mr. Universe" title from the company's promotional literature. "Martin Jackson, my *father*, started the business. He's, ah, he died some time ago. I am carrying on in his name."

Literally. She was everything to 1st Place Athletics that her father had been except for being Mr. Universe. In fact, she felt more like her father than she did her own self. A silent sigh escaped her lips. One of her goals for this trip was to discover herself.

Marty waited while Gresham scanned the rest of the papers. A fax message appeared on his computer screen and he took time out to print it, read it, and put it in a neatly labeled file.

When he finally looked up, she shrugged. "My expertise doesn't include people with debilitating conditions. The viscount suffered a stroke, I presume?"

Gresham nodded.

Surely Gresham wouldn't expect her to honor the commitment. Italy, here I come! "I'm sure you'll agree the contract is null and void. Your father needs a physical therapist, not someone with my qualifications. If it's convenient, I'll leave tomorrow morning." She had to make one last parting shot, though. "And, as I advised your butler, my name is *Ms. Jackson*."

She reached to reclaim the letters, but Gresham's hand shot out to stay her movements. "I believe you're being a bit hasty, Ms. Jackson. May I view the contract?"

Contact with the warmth of his skin made her flush...and flustered. His strong grip was unexpected. Pulling her hand away, she produced the legal document.

Minutes ticked by as Gresham scrutinized the document. Marty looked around the library. Claw-footed tables, boxy armchairs, and lit shaded lamps dominated the floor plan while a gallery of old-style portraits hung above the overflowing bookcases.

It was grand enough, and maybe even cheery—if you liked pictures of dead people looking down at you. But an air of neglect rippled below the surface of wealthy respectability. The oriental carpet was worn, and the books filling the many shelves had seen better days. Although Gresham looked slightly ruffled, his appearance didn't blend in with the room's subtle deterioration. Instinct told her that he didn't approve of the run-down surroundings.

But why was she concerned? Come tomorrow morning, she'd be on her way to Italy, to begin her dream vacation, three weeks early!

"Ms. Jackson." Gresham adjusted his black reading glasses. His eyes were the color of grey storm clouds. "Paragraph twelve, section three states you are responsible for developing an exercise program appropriate for Lord Embrey's current fitness level. As of three weeks ago, his fitness level includes recovering from a thrombotic stroke."

Gresham removed his glasses; his steely gaze demolished her hopes of wiggling out of this assignment. "You signed the contract without stipulation. Since you have been brought to the Hall to perform this duty, at great expense I might add, I see no alternative but to hold you to this agreement. Unless, of course, you repay those monies already spent on your behalf. In addition, given the gravity of Lord Embrey's condition, a substantial penalty for breach of contract would not be unethical."

Marty could only gasp. Gresham couldn't be serious, could he?

"I assure you, I am in earnest. As a barrister for the Queen's Bench, I cannot afford to allow bounders to escape their responsibilities."

Bounders. So he considered her a bounder?

One corner of his mouth lifted—in amusement or contempt? "You may have until ten o'clock tomorrow morning to give me your decision."

Marty fisted her hands. Just her luck to have a run-in with a straitlaced lawyer. She narrowed her gaze. *Oh, I'll give you my decision, buster. First a left, then a right.*

Either unaware or uncaring of her anger, Gresham turned his attention to another incoming computer fax. "That is all, Ms. Jackson."

He was dismissing her? She stood. "I think not."

"Pardon me?"

"Just so you know, Mr. Gresham. I leave a room when I want to." She gave him the smile she usually reserved for offensive jocks: wide, with no ounce of warmth in it. "Fortunately for you, I can't wait to leave this one."

A knock at the door interrupted the verbal sparring match. Nardo entered looking a bit harried. "Excuse me, Mr. Gresham, but Lady Helena just arrived. She demands t'see you. The younger Mr. Gresham wants you, too. Seeings how you're still... busy, wot'll I tell them?"

Marty sucked in her cheeks, withholding laughter. Anyone making demands on the insufferable Gresham must be A-OK. She liked Lady Helena already.

Gresham ran a hand through his hair, then stood and reached for his coat. He was tall—well over six feet two. "Show Lady Helena and my cousin to the drawing room. Ms. Jackson and I are finished."

Marty didn't bother to hide her genuine smile. What prophetic words! *We certainly are!* She took a step to leave the room.

Gresham's powerful hand circled her upper arm, stopping her cold. "At seven o'clock the dinner bell rings, a signal for you to change and join everyone downstairs. Dinner is at eight, sharp. I'm certain you'll want to meet your new employer."

Marty glared at his hand. He took the hint and removed it. "I'll keep that in mind," she murmured.

"Good." Gresham slipped on his jacket, then straightened his tie. He now looked every inch the proper British barrister, except for the five o'clock shadow. "Friday nights the entertainment at the Hall is rather low key. You needn't dress to the nines."

"Thanks. I didn't intend to." She also didn't intend to show up for dinner, either, but she didn't plan to tell him that.

Despite the fact she'd have to ask someone directions to her room, Marty sauntered out of the library as if she didn't have a blessed care in the world. Even thoughts of Italy couldn't cool the simmering anger inspired by the not-so-honorable Gregory Gresham. If he truly planned to hold her to the contract, she was his financial hostage. True. But if she had to spend the next three weeks in this dreary house with that bossy barrister, she just might end up killing someone.