

Prologue

A watched phone never rings. At least, my phone wasn't ringing. The same, unfortunately, could not be said of the man sitting in front of me, whose mobile kept shrieking with all the abandon of an inebriated teenager on a roller coaster. Each time his phone shrilled out 'Danger Zone' from *Top Gun*, I lunged for my bag. After a mere ten minutes on the bus, my abs had got more of a workout than they had in months.

I hauled my computer bag up onto my lap for easier access and slid my hand into the front pocket, just to make sure that the phone was still there. It was. Further inspection revealed that the ringer was on, the volume turned up, and all the little bars indicating signal strength blinking merrily away. Damn.

Sticking the phone back in my bag, I listened to the man in front of me recite his weekend's activities for the fifth time. They seemed primarily to involve adventures in alcohol poisoning, and an encounter with a burly bouncer that grew more elaborate with each retelling. Craning my head towards the window, I checked the progress of the traffic ahead of us. It hadn't. Progressed, that was. The bus sat as steadily immovable as an island in a tropical sea, placidly parked behind a string of other, equally immobile

buses. It didn't improve the situation that the light was green.

I knew I should have taken the tube.

There had been all sorts of good reasons to choose the bus that morning, as I set out from my Bayswater flat towards the British Library. After all, the tube always broke down, and it couldn't be healthy to spend that much time underground, and the fact that it was actually not raining in England in November needed to be celebrated... And the bus had cell reception while the Underground didn't. I glowered in the direction of my phone.

Life would be far more pleasant if I were better at fooling myself.

One day. It had only been one day by the calendar, two years in terms of agonised phone staring, and about half an hour in boy time. It is a truth universally acknowledged that time moves differently for men. There was, I reminded myself, no reason why Englishmen should differ from their American counterparts in this regard.

There was also the fact that Colin didn't have my phone number. But why let reality interfere with a good daydream? And my daydreams... Well, they weren't really the sort of thing one could get into on a public bus, even if other people – I scowled at the man in front of me, who had progressed from bar-hopping to amorous adventures – had no such scruples. Besides, if Colin wanted my phone number, he knew how to find it.

After a sleepless night alternating between daydream and denial, I had finally admitted to myself just how much I really hoped he wanted it. Colin was, not to put too fine a point on it, the first man who had made my pulse speed up since a break-up of massive proportions the previous winter.

Admittedly, when we'd first met, the emotion quickening in my veins hadn't been attraction. Irritation was more like it, and that sentiment, at least, had been entirely mutual. What it all boiled down to was that I was going through his family's archives and he didn't want me to.

It wasn't prurient interest that drove me to Colin's family papers, but academic desperation, the sort that sets in at some point after the third year of grad school, as the bills begin to mount, teaching bored undergrads loses its lustre, and the coveted letters 'Ph.D.' continue to dance a mocking jig just out of reach. No dissertation, no degree. I had nightmares of becoming one of those attenuated grad students who lurk in the basement of the Harvard history department, surrounded by books so overdue that the library has long ago given up toting up the fines. Every now and again, you'll encounter one of them making the long trudge up the stairs to the first floor, and wonder who on earth they are, and how long they've been down there.

I refused to become one of the forgotten basement dwellers of Robinson Hall. Among other things, the vending machine down there had a very limited selection.

Unfortunately, the dissertation topic that I had chosen with such naive optimism at the end of my second year proved to be just like its subject: elusive. I was after a trio of spies, the Scarlet Pimpernel, the Purple Gentian, and the Pink Carnation, those daring men in knee breeches and black cloaks who twirled their quizzing glasses in the face of danger and never failed to confound the agents of the French Republic.

Unfortunately, they also confounded me. There was, I discovered, a reason that no one had written a book on the topic. The material just wasn't there. True, we knew who the Scarlet Pimpernel and Purple Gentian were, and even much of what they had done, but the Pink Carnation's identity remained shrouded in mystery, the only evidence of his existence a series of contemporary accounts in newsletters and diaries, each recorded exploit more improbable than the last. Some scholars, sitting in the security of their twentieth-century studies, had decreed that the dearth of corroboratory evidence could mean only one thing. The Pink Carnation was a creature of myth, a deliberate

fabrication invented by the British government to buoy their beleaguered nation through a prolonged and desperate struggle.

They were wrong.

I enjoyed a good little gloat over that. There's nothing like a little 'I told you so' to make one's day. On a rainy day the previous week, Mrs Selwick-Alderly, an elderly descendant of the Purple Gentian, had admitted me to a virtual Ali Baba's cave of historical documents, the diaries and letters of the Purple Gentian and his half-French bride, Miss Amy Balcourt. Then there was Amy's clever cousin, Miss Jane Wooliston – better known as the Pink Carnation. As a dashing spy, she was an unlikely choice. Whoever heard of a spy named Jane? Or Wooliston, for that matter? The very name suggested fleecy sweaters and woolly hats, a frizzy-haired Miss Marple puttering about the village green. It was the sort of discovery that had 'tenure' written all over it.

Unfortunately, like Ali Baba's cave, this one came with a catch. Instead of forty thieves, my treasure trove came complete with one very irate Englishman. Mr Colin Selwick didn't much like the idea of strangers rooting about in the family archives, and he became positively apoplectic at the prospect of the publication of his family's papers. He was also definitely, undeniably possessed of more than the ordinary measure of good looks. After a couple of late-night encounters, the sparks he was emitting weren't all of the negative variety.

Two nights ago, there had been a little incident involving a dark room, an arm above my head, and a deliberate movement forward that might have been about to turn into a kiss, when...

Brrring!

Ringring! It was ringing! I lunged for the bag and snatched out the phone, hitting the green RECEIVE button before the caller could think better of the enterprise. 'Hello?' I breathed.

'Eloise?' Instead of a masculine murmur, the voice had the crackly quality of old film.

Damn. I deflated against the nubby upholstery. Served me right for not checking the number before I hit RECEIVE.

I settled the phone more firmly against my ear. 'Hello, Grandma.'

Grandma wasted no time on trivialities. 'I'm so glad I've caught you.'

I stiffened. 'Why? Is something wrong?'

'I've found you a man.'

'I wasn't aware I had lost one,' I muttered.

Of course, that wasn't entirely true. To say I'd lost him might be a bit extreme, though. In the first place, I wasn't sure that he was mine to lose. In the second place...

In the second place, Grandma was still talking. With an effort, I dragged my attention back to the phone, just as the bus started to crawl slowly ahead. '—in Birmingham,' she was saying.

'What about Birmingham?' I asked belatedly.

Over the headrest, the man in front of me gave me a dirty look. 'Would you mind?' he said, gesturing to his phone.

On the other end, Grandma was clamouring for attention. 'Darling, have you been listening to a word I've said?'

'Sorry,' I muttered, slinking down in my seat. 'I'm on the bus. It's a bit noisy.' As if in retaliation, the man in front of me upped the volume.

With a hint of a huff, Grandma started over. 'As I was telling you, I was at the beauty parlour yesterday, and who should I see but Muffin Watkins.'

'Really! Muffin!' I exclaimed with false enthusiasm, as though I had any idea who she was.

'And she was telling me all about her son—'

'Dumpling?' I suggested. 'Crumpet? Scone?'

'Andy,' Grandma said pointedly. 'He's a lovely boy.'

'Have you met him?'

Grandma ignored that. 'He just bought the loveliest new

apartment. His mother was telling me all about it.'

'I'm sure she was.'

'Andy,' declared Grandma, in the ringing tones of a CNN correspondent delivering election results, 'works at Lehman Brothers.'

'And Bingley has five thousand pounds a year,' I murmured.

'Eloise?'

'Nothing.'

'Hmph.' Grandma let it go. 'He's very successful, you know; only thirty-five, and he already has his own boat.'

'He sounds like a regular paragon.'

'So I've given your number to his mother to give to his younger brother, Jay,' Grandma concluded triumphantly.

I took the phone away from my ear and stared at it for a moment. It didn't help. I put the phone back to my ear. 'I don't get it. You're setting me up with the inferior brother?'

'Well, Andy's mother tells me he's just started seeing someone,' Grandma said, as though that explained everything. 'And since Jay is in England, I don't see why you can't just meet for a nice little dinner.'

'Jay is in Birmingham,' I protested. 'You did say Birmingham, right? I'm in London. Not exactly the same place.'

'They're both in England,' countered Grandma placidly. 'How far away can it be?'

'I'm not going to Birmingham,' I said flatly.

'Eloise,' Grandma said reprovingly. 'You have to learn how to be flexible in a relationship.'

'And we're not having a relationship! I haven't even *met* him.'

'That's because you won't go to Birmingham.'

'Grandma, people don't go to Birmingham; they go away from Birmingham. It's like New Jersey.'

The man in front of me let out an indignant 'Oi!' but whether it was addressed to my rising volume level or the slur to the northern metropolis was unclear.

‘I just want to see you married before I die.’

‘We’ll just have to keep you around for a good long while then, won’t we?’ I said brightly.

Grandma changed tactics. ‘I met your grandfather when I was sixteen, you know.’

I knew. Oh, how I knew.

‘Not everyone is as special as you, Grandma,’ I said politely. ‘Oh, look, it’s my stop. I have to go.’

‘Jay will call you!’ trilled Grandma.

‘I’ve heard that one before,’ I muttered, but Grandma had already rung off. Undoubtedly to phone Mitten, or Muffin, or whatever her name was, and break out the celebratory champagne.

Grandma had been trying to marry me off, by one means or another, since I’d hit puberty. I kept hoping that, eventually, she would give up on me and switch her attention to my little sister, who, at the age of nineteen, was dangerously close to spinsterhood by Grandma’s standards. So far, though, Grandma stubbornly refused to be rerouted, much to Jillian’s relief. I would have admired her tenacity if it hadn’t been directed at me.

I hadn’t been entirely lying about it being my stop; the bus, imitating the tortoise in the old fable, was slowly inching its way past Euston Station, which meant that I would be the next stop up, across the street from one of the plethora of Pizza Expresses that dotted the London landscape like glass-fronted mushrooms.

I stuffed my phone back in my bag and began the torturous process of navigating the narrow stairs down from the upper level of the bus, consoling myself with the thought that with any luck, this Jay-from-Birmingham would be as reluctant as I was to go on a family assisted set-up. I could think of few things more ghastly than sitting across the table from someone with whom the only thing I had in common was that my grandmother shared a beauty parlour with his mother. Anyone who had seen Grandma’s hair would agree.

Swinging myself off the bus, I scurried through the massive iron gates that front the courtyard of the British Library. The pigeons, bloated with the lunchtime leavings of scholars and tourists, cast me baleful glances from their beady black eyes as I wove around them, making for the automatic doors at the entrance. It was early enough that there was a mere straggle of tourists lined up in front of the coat check in the basement.

Feeling superior, I made straight for the table on the other side of the room, transferring the day's essentials from my computer bag into one of the sturdy bags of clear plastic provided for researchers: laptop for transcribing documents; notebook in case the laptop broke down; pencils, ditto; mobile, for compulsive checking during lunch and bathroom breaks; wallet, for the buying of lunch; and a novel, carefully hidden between laptop and notebook, for propping up at the edge of my tray during lunchtime. The bag began to sag ominously.

I could see the point of the plastic bags as a means of preventing hardened document thieves from slipping out with a scrap of Dickens' correspondence, but it had a decidedly dampening effect on my choice of lunchtime reading material. And it was sheer hell smuggling in tampons.

Toting my bulging load, I made my way up in the elevator, past the brightly coloured chairs in the mezzanine café, past the dispirited beige of the lunchroom, up to the third floor, where the ceilings were lower and tourists feared to tread. Perhaps 'fear' was the wrong word; I couldn't imagine that they would want to.

Flashing my ID at the guard on duty at the desk in the manuscripts room, I dumped my loot on my favourite desk, earning a glare from a person studying an illuminated medieval manuscript three desks down. I smiled apologetically and insincerely, and began systematically unpacking my computer, computer cord, adapter and notebook, arraying them around the

raised foam manuscript stand in the centre of the desk with the ease of long practice. I'd done this so many times that I had the routine down. Computer to the right, angled in so the person next to me couldn't peek; notebook to the left, pencil neatly resting on top; bag with phone, wallet, and incriminating leisure fiction shoved as far beneath the desk as it could go, but not so far that I couldn't occasionally make the plastic crinkle with my foot to make sure it was still there and some intrepid purse snatcher disguised as a researcher hadn't crawled underneath and made off with my lunch money.

Having staked out my desk, I made for the computer station at the front of the room. I might know who the Pink Carnation was, but I stood a better chance of making my case to a sceptical academic audience if I could definitively link many, if not all, of the Pink Carnation's recorded exploits to Miss Jane Wooliston. After all, just because Jane had started out as the Pink Carnation didn't mean she had remained in possession of the title. What if, like the Dread Pirate Roberts, she had handed the name off to someone else? I didn't think so – having worked with several of Jane's letters, I couldn't imagine anyone else being able to muster quite the same combination of rigorous logic and reckless daring – but it was the sort of objection someone was sure to propound. At great length. With lots of footnotes.

I needed footnotes of my own to counteract that. It was the usual sort of academic battle: footnotes at ten paces, bolstered by snide articles in academic journals and lots of sniping about methodology, a thrust and parry of source and countersource. My sources had to be better.

From my little dip into Colin's library that past weekend, I had learnt that Jane had been sent to Ireland to deal with the threat of an uprising against British rule egged on by France in the hopes that, with Ireland in disarray, England would prove an easy target. Ten points to me, since one of the daring exploits with which

the Pink Carnation was credited was quelling the Irish rebellion of 1803. But I didn't know anything beyond that. I didn't have any proof that Jane was actually there. In the official histories, the failure of the rebellion tended to be attributed to a more mundane series of mistakes and misfortunes, rather than the agency of any one person.

According to the Selwick documents, Jane wasn't the only one to be dispatched to Ireland. Geoffrey Pinchingdale-Snipe, who had served as second in command of the League of the Purple Gentian, had also received his marching orders from the War Office. A search for Jane's name in the records of the British Library was sure to yield nothing, but what if I looked for Lord Pinchingdale? Ever since reading the papers at Mrs Selwick-Alderly's flat, I'd been meaning to look into Geoffrey Pinchingdale-Snipe, anyway, if only to add more footnotes to my dissertation chapter on the internal workings of the League of the Purple Gentian.

I hadn't had a chance to pursue that angle because I had gone straight off to Sussex.

With Colin.

The agitated *bleep* of the computer as I accidentally leant on one of the keys didn't do anything to make me popular with the other researchers, but it did bring me back from the remoter realms of daydream.

Right. I straightened up and purposefully punched in 'Pinchingdale-Snipe.' Nothing. Ah, déjà vu. Futile archive searches had been my way of life for a very long time before I had the good fortune to stumble across the Selwicks. Clearly, I hadn't lost the knack of it. Getting back into gear, I tried just plain 'Pinchingdale'. Four hits! Unfortunately, three of them were treatises on botany by an eighteenth-century Pinchingdale with a horticultural bent, and one the correspondence of a Sir Marmaduke Pinchingdale, who was two hundred years too early for me, in addition to being

decidedly not a Geoffrey. There was no way anyone could confuse those two names, not even with very bad spelling and even worse handwriting.

The logical thing to do would have been to call Mrs Selwick-Alderly, Colin's aunt. Even if the materials I was looking for weren't in her private collection, she would likely have a good notion of where I should start. But to call Mrs Selwick-Alderly veered dangerously close to calling Colin. Really, could there be anything more pathetic than looking for excuses to call his relations and fish for information about his whereabouts? I refused to be That Girl.

Of course, that begged the question of whether it was any less pathetic to check my phone for messages every five minutes.

Preferring not to pursue that line of thought, I stared blankly at the computer screen. It stared equally blankly back at me. Behind me, I could hear the subtle brush of fabric that meant someone was shuffling his feet against the carpet in a passive-aggressive attempt to communicate that he was waiting to use the terminal. Damn.

On a whim, I tapped out the name 'Alsworthy,' just to show that I was still doing something and not uselessly frittering away valuable computer time. From what I had read in the Selwick collection, Geoffrey Pinchingdale-Snipe had been ridiculously besotted with a woman named Mary Alsworthy – although none of his friends seemed to think terribly much of her. The words 'shallow flirt' had come up more than once. Geoffrey Pinchingdale-Snipe's indiscretion might be my good fortune. In the throes of infatuation, wasn't it only logical that a man might reveal a little more than he ought? Especially over the course of a separation? If the War Office was sending Lord Pinchingdale off to Ireland, it made sense that he would continue to correspond with his beloved. And in the course of that correspondence...

Buoyed by my own theory, I scrolled down through a long list of Victorian Alsworthys, World War I Alsworthys, Alsworthys from every conceivable time period. For crying out loud, you'd think their name was Smith. The foot-shuffling man behind me gave up on shuffling and upped the level of unspoken aggression by conspicuously flipping through the ancient volumes of paper catalogues next to me. I was too busy scanning dates to feel guilty. Alsworthys, Alsworthys everywhere, and not a one of any use to me.

Or maybe not. My hand stilled on the scroll button as the dates 1784–1863 flashed by. I quickly scrolled back up, clumsily engaging in mental math. Take 1784 away from 1803...and you got eighteen. Um, I meant nineteen. This is why my chequebook never balances. Either way, it was an eminently appropriate age for an English debutante in London for the Season.

There was only one slight hitch. The name beside the dates wasn't Mary. It was Laetitia.

That, I assured myself rapidly, scribbling down the call number, didn't necessarily mean anything. After all, my friend Pammy's real first name was Alexandra, but she had gone by her middle name, Pamela, ever since we were in kindergarten, largely because her mother was an Alexandra, too, and it created all sorts of confusion. Forget all that rose-by-another-name rubbish. Pammy had been Pammy for so long that it was impossible to imagine her as anything else.

Behind me, the foot-shuffling man claimed my vacant seat with an air of barely restrained triumph. Prolonged exposure to the Manuscript Room does sad, sad things to some people.

I handed in my call slip to the man behind the desk and retreated to my own square of territory, nudging my plastic bag with my foot to make sure everything was still there. Between Mary and Laetitia...well, I would have chosen to be called

Laetitia, but there was no accounting for taste. Maybe she got sick of dealing with variant spellings.

Except... I scowled at my empty manuscript stand. There *was* a Laetitia Alsworthy. Just to make sure, I scooted my computer to a more comfortable angle, and opened up the file into which I had transcribed my notes from Sussex. Sure enough, there it was. One Letty Alsworthy, who appeared to be friends with Lady Henrietta Selwick. Not close friends, I clarified for myself, squinting at my transcription of Lady Henrietta's account of her ballroom activities in the summer of 1803, but the sort of second- or third-tier friend you're always pleased to run into, have good chats with, and keep meaning to get to know better if only you had the time. I had a bunch of those in college. And, in its own way, the London Season wasn't all that different from college, minus the classes. You had a set group of people, all revolving among the same events, with a smattering of culture masking more primal purposes, i.e., men trying to get women into bed, and women trying to get men to commit. Yep, I decided, just like college.

Pleased as I was with my little insight, that didn't solve the problem that Letty was a real, live human being with an independent existence from her sister Mary. Her sister Mary who might have corresponded with Geoffrey Pinchingdale-Snipe.

I should have known that Mary wouldn't be the writing type.

Behind me, the little trolley used to transport books from the bowels of the British Library to the wraiths who haunted the reading room rolled to a stop. Checking the number on the slip against the number on my desk, the library attendant handed me a thick folio volume, bound in fading cardboard, that had seen its heyday sometime before Edward VIII ran off with Mrs Simpson.

Propping the heavy volume on the foam stand, I listlessly flipped open the cover. I had ordered it, so I might as well look

at it. Besides, the computer in the back was now occupied, and I doubted its present occupant would show me any more mercy than I had shown him. A salutary lesson on 'do unto others,' and one that I was sure I would forget by lunchtime.

The documents at the front of the volume were far too late, Mitfordesque accounts of nightclub peccadilloes during the Roaring Twenties. I'd come across this kind of volume before, letters pasted onto the leaves of the folio with glorious unconcern for chronology, medieval manuscript pages sandwiched between Edwardian recipes and Stuart sermon literature. Otherwise known as someone cleaning out the family attic and shipping the lot off to the British Library. Checking the number I had scribbled down from the computer, I saw that it had marked the Laetitia Alsworthy material as running from f. 48 to f. 63, and then again from f. 152 onwards.

After lunch, I was really going to have to give in and call Mrs Selwick-Alderly.

Turning by rote to page forty-eight, my hand stilled on the crackly paper. The letter pressed into the centre of the page was short, only three lines. Despite its having been pasted into the folio quite some time ago, I could still make out the phantom impressions of two deep lines incised into the paper, one vertically, one horizontally, as though it had been folded into a very small square, the better for passing unseen from hand to hand. There was also a series of crinkles that prevented the paper from lying completely flat against the page, as though someone had crumpled it up with great force and then smoothed it out again.

But it was the signature that caught my attention. One word. One name.

Pinchingdale.

As in Geoffrey, Lord Pinchingdale. The signature was unmistakable. It most certainly wasn't Marmaduke. What on

earth was he doing writing to Mary's sister? Forgetting about computer hogs and lunch plans and the way the wool of my pants rasped against my waist, I settled the folio more firmly on its stand and hunched over to read Lord Pinchingdale's short and peculiar note.

'All is in readiness. An unmarked carriage will be waiting for you behind the house at midnight...'



Chapter One

Letty Alsworthy awoke to darkness. Midnight coated the room, blurring the edges of the furniture and thickening the air. Letty's tired eyes attempted to focus, and failed. The armoire in the corner was top-heavy with shadow, like a lopsided muffin spilling out of its pan. On the other wall, the drapes fell flat and opaque against the one window, no grains of light filtering through the cheap material. The fireplace across from the bed was a hollow cavern, bare even of ashes, nothing more than a darker patch in a landscape of shadow. A fire in June would be an extravagance, the sort of extravagance the Alsworths could ill afford.

All was dark and still.

Rolling her face into her pillow, Letty came to an irrefutable conclusion. It wasn't morning yet.

She let her head slump back into the pillow, accompanied by a satisfying crackle of feathers. If it wasn't morning, there was no reason for her to be awake. She could just snuggle back down into the sagging mattress, pull the sheet back over her shoulders, plump her pillow, and go back to sleep. Her eyelids approved of that assessment. They were already dragging steadily shut.

But something had woken her.

Letty struggled reluctantly up on her elbows; the movement unleashed a nagging ache behind her temples, which agreed with her eyelids that she really was not supposed to be awake yet. Yanking her unravelling braid out from under her left shoulder, she peered blearily around the room. There was little to peer at. The narrow room contained nothing but the armoire, a wobbly night table, and one chair that had previously belonged to the drawing room, but had been banished due to a poorly repaired crack in the frame. When the owner advertised the house as ‘furnished’, he intended the word in its most minimal sense. Between her mother’s and sister’s excesses among the bonnets and ribbons of Bond Street, and her father’s inability to pass a book without buying it, Letty had been in no position to argue. As it was, they were fortunate to be able to eke out another Season in London. Letty had learnt to pinch a penny until it screamed for mercy, but there wasn’t much more left to pinch.

In the hall, the crooked grandfather clock emitted the high-pitched whine that passed for a ping. Beneath its nasal wheezings, Letty heard a strange rustle and rattle, followed by a click.

Letty froze, suspended awkwardly on her elbows.

That click had not come from the clock. In the stillness that followed the twelfth chime, Letty heard it again, this time accompanied by a scramble and a shuffle, like movement hastily muffled. Someone was scurrying about in the room next door.

Burglars? If they were, they were going to be very disappointed burglars. Her mother’s jewels sparkled nicely by candlelight, but they were nothing more than paste. Anything real had long since disappeared into the gaping maw of household expenses. Her sister Mary had one pair of genuine pearl earbobs left, and Letty had a rather pretty pair of enamel bracelets – at least, until the next butcher’s bill came due.

On the other hand, burglars might turn vicious if they didn’t find what they were looking for. And that was Mary’s room they

were in. Mary was not likely to submit docilely to the extraction of her last pair of genuine pearls.

Folding the sheet carefully back, Letty lowered herself to the ground. Her toes curled as they touched the cold boards, but luck was with her. There was no telltale squeak.

Letty groped for her candle, and then thought better of it. There was no need to advertise her presence. As a weapon, the candleholder was too short and stubby to be of any use. It was more likely to irritate than stun. Instead, Letty gently eased a poker from the iron stand beside the fireplace. The slight clink as the tip caught on the edge of the stand reverberated like a dozen crypt doors clanging. She froze, both hands on the shaft of the poker. Deadly silence assaulted her ears, a listening sort of silence. And then the scrambling started again. Letty's breath released in a low sigh of relief. Thank goodness.

With her weapon clenched close to her side, Letty crept out into the corridor. Like everything else in the house, the hallway was small and narrow, papered a serviceable brown that trapped the shadows and turned them to mud. A triangle of light, like a large wedge of cheese, extended into the hallway from Mary's half-open door.

'Put that there.' A woman crossed the room in a swish of blue skirt. From somewhere behind the door, a rustle of fabric followed, and the chink of the wardrobe door being shut. 'No, not that green. The other green.'

Letty's grip on the poker relaxed. That wasn't a burglar; that was Mary.

What Mary was doing wearing her best driving dress at midnight was another matter entirely. As Letty watched, Mary turned and deposited a pile of scarves in the arms of her maid, filmy creations of gauze designed more to entice than warm. Their purchase had set Letty's housekeeping accounts back at least two months.

‘Pack these,’ Mary directed. ‘Leave the wool.’

Clutching the pile of scarves, Mary’s maid looked anxiously at her mistress. ‘It’s past midnight, miss. His lordship—’

‘Will wait. He does it so well.’ Bending over her dressing table, Mary opened the lid of her jewellery box and contemplated the contents. Closing it with a decisive click, she thrust the box out to the maid. ‘I won’t be needing these anymore. See that Miss Letty gets this. With my love, of course.’

There was only one possible reason for Mary to bequeath her bagatelles. And it wasn’t love.

Taking care not to let the poker scrape against the floor, Letty tiptoed back into her own room, leaning the unwanted weapon carefully against the wall. She wouldn’t be needing it. At least, she didn’t think she would. In the course of her long career as de facto keeper of the Alsworthy ménage, Letty had confronted all manner of domestic disruption, from exploding Christmas puddings to indignant tradesmen, and even, on one memorable occasion, escaped livestock. Letty had bandaged burns, coaxed her little brother’s budgie out of a tree, and stage-managed her family’s yearly remove to a rented town house in London.

An attempted elopement was something new.

The whole situation was straight out of the comic stage: the daughter of the house hastily packing in the middle of the night with the help of her trusty (and soon to be unemployed) maid, the faithful lover waiting downstairs with a speedy carriage, ready to whisk them away to Gretna Green. All that was needed was a rope ladder and an irate guardian in hot pursuit.

That role, Letty realised, fell to her. It didn’t seem quite fair, but there it was. She had to stop Mary.

But how? Remonstrating with Mary wouldn’t be any use. Over the past few years, Mary had made it quite clear that she didn’t care to take advice from a sister, and a younger sister, at that. She responded to Letty’s well-meaning suggestions with

the unblinking disdain perfected by cats in their dealings with their humans. Letty knew just how Mary would react. She would hear Letty out without saying a word, and then calmly go on to do whatever it was she had intended to do in the first place.

Rousing her parents would be worse than useless. Her father would simply blink at her over his spectacles and comment mildly that if Mary wished to make a spectacle of herself, it would be best to let her get on with it as quickly as possible and with as little trouble to themselves as could be had. As for her mother... Letty's face twisted in a terrible grimace that would undoubtedly lead to all sorts of unattractive wrinkles later in life. There was certainly no help to be found from that quarter. Her mother would probably help Mary into his lordship's carriage.

Letty looked longingly at the poker. She couldn't, though. She really couldn't.

That left his lordship. London was crammed with men answering to that title at this time of year, but Letty had no doubt which lordship it was. Mary had never lacked for admirers, but only one man was besotted enough to agree to an elopement.

Letty conjured Lord Pinchingdale in her mind as she had seen him last week, dancing attendance on Mary at the Middlethorpes' ball. Discounting the dotting expression that appeared whenever he encountered Mary, Lord Pinchingdale's had always struck her as an uncommonly intelligent face, the sort of face that wouldn't have looked amiss on a Renaissance cardinal or a seventeenth-century academician, quiet and thoughtful with just a hint of something cynical about the mouth. A long, thin nose; a lean, flexible mouth that was quick to quirk with amusement; and a pair of keen grey eyes that seemed to regard the world's foibles for what they were.

Which just went to show that physiognomy was never an exact science.

Take Mary, for example. She had the sort of serene expression generally associated with halos and chubby infants in mangers, but her porcelain calm hid a calculating mind and an indomitable will to make Machiavelli blush.

I should have seen it coming, Letty scolded herself, as she jammed her feet into a pair of inappropriate dancing slippers. The signs had all been there, if only she had been looking for them. They had been there in the reckless glitter in Mary's dark blue eyes, in the increasingly brittle quality of her laugh – and in the way she had pleaded a headache after dinner that night, as an excuse to slip away to her room.

Letty had a fair inkling of what Mary had been thinking. Letty's older sister had passed three Seasons as society's reigning incomparable. Three Seasons of amassing accolades, bouquets, even the odd sonnet, but shockingly few marriage proposals. Of the offers that had come in, three had been from younger sons, four from titles without wealth, and an even larger number from wealth without title. One by one, she had watched her more eligible suitors, the first sons, with coronets on their coaches and country estates to spare, contract matches with the chinless daughters of dukes, or bustling city heiresses. The Alsworthys were an old family – there had been Alsworthys in Hertfordshire when the first bemused Norman had galloped through, demanding to know the way to the nearest vineyard – but by no means a great one. They had never distinguished themselves in battle or ingratiated themselves into a monarch's favour. Instead, they had sat placidly on their estate, overseeing their land and adding extra wings onto the house as fancy and fashion demanded. They were comfortable enough in their own way, but there was no fortune or title to sweeten the marriage settlements or to shield them from the mocking murmurs of the *ton*.

Surely even Mary must realise the disgrace that a runaway marriage would bring, not only on her, but on the entire family.

Heaven only knew, thought Letty grimly, their family didn't need any extra help when it came to making themselves ridiculous.

She would have to prevail upon Lord Pinchingdale's better judgement – assuming he had any. Up until tonight, Letty had always thought he had.

Snagging her cloak from the wardrobe, Letty settled it firmly around her shoulders, yanking the hood down over her flushed face and frazzled braid. There was no time to twist her gingery hair up. Instead, she shoved everything back behind her ears and hoped it would stay there. Although she had no personal experience in the matter, from what Letty had heard of eloping lovers, they were a fairly impatient breed, and she had no confidence that Lord Pinchingdale would wait patiently by his carriage until Mary deigned to come traipsing down. Letty grimaced at the image of Lord Pinchingdale attempting to scale the skinny branches of the tree outside Mary's window in time-honoured heroic fashion. That was all they needed, a peer with two broken knees sprawled on the pavement outside their house. Letty couldn't even begin to imagine the captions in the scandal sheets. 'Viscount Laid Low by Love' would be the least of it.

Would it be too much to hope that the French would do something truly, truly awful in the next few hours so that there would be no room left in the papers for frivolities?

Dealing with a thwarted lover in a dark alleyway wasn't the sort of escapade that lent lustre to a debutante's reputation. But, Letty reasoned, as she picked her way carefully down the back stairs, she didn't see what else she was to do. She couldn't let Mary elope with Lord Pinchingdale and bring down scandal and ruin on all of their heads. Once she had sent Lord Pinchingdale packing, Letty promised herself, she was going straight back to bed. She was going to climb beneath the covers and pull the eiderdown up to her neck, and let her head sink into the pillow...

Letty hastily clamped her hand over a mammoth yawn.

Emerging from the service entrance into the dark little area at the back of the house that substituted for a garden, Letty took stock of the situation. If she squinted, she could make out the dark form of a carriage hulking among the shadows at the end of the narrow alley behind the house, black against black. Drat. She had so hoped that it would all turn out to be a false alarm, a moment of midnight misapprehension. But that carriage was far too large and solid to be a figment of anyone's imagination. Letty cast a quick look up at the neighbours' windows. All were dark, swathed in Sunday calm.

Holding her breath against the stench of a recently emptied chamber pot, Letty ventured tentatively down the alley, following the soft snuffle of equine breath in what she hoped must be the direction of the carriage. Whoever thought a midnight elopement was a glamorous thing? wondered Letty sourly. Perhaps she would feel differently if it were her own elopement, but Letty rather doubted it. Love went only so far. Some smells were too strong to be ignored, even by the most ardent of Juliets.

'Lord Pinchingdale?' Letty stumbled her way to the coach. Bumping up against one of the rear wheels, she felt her way forward. 'Lord Pinchingdale?'

There was no response from the shadowy interior.

Which meant, Letty admitted, that he probably wasn't there.

She didn't much like the alternatives. Lord Pinchingdale might have got bored and decided to scale the ivy – but wouldn't she have heard the thud? A new and terrifying possibility struck Letty. What if he and Mary had already fled, leaving the carriage standing outside as a decoy? They would lose precious time searching while the lovers were already tearing up the miles to Gretna Green in a well-sprung travelling chaise, smaller and lighter than the cumbersome coach.

Letty groped along the door, looking for the latch. 'Lord Pinchingdale?' she whispered sharply. The restless scrape of the

horses' hooves on the cobbles and the sound of the coachman shifting on the box above blotted out her words. Letty twisted the latch sharply, stumbling backward as the stiff door unexpectedly gave. Catching her balance by dint of grabbing on to the door frame, she leant head and shoulders inside the cavernous interior, which stretched before her like one of the bottomless caves of fairy tale, so dark she couldn't make out the difference between seats and floor, window or wall.

'You aren't here, are you?'

She realised it wasn't quite the done thing to talk to inanimate objects – or to people who weren't there – but if she didn't say something, she was quite likely to kick something instead.

If they were already gone, there was nothing she could do. She could send a groom after them, in the hopes of arresting their flight and hauling Mary back – but she couldn't see much point to it. The odds of not being seen, or of the groom not telling a friend who would tell a friend, were so slim as to pose no temptation to even the most hardened and reckless of gamblers. The story would be all over London by the time the maids opened the curtains and brought in the morning chocolate.

Behind her, a new sound interrupted the rustle of leaves and the snuffle of snores from someone's open window. At the crunch of booted feet on gravel, relief coursed through Letty, heady as strong tea. They hadn't left, then! Who else would be tromping about in their backyard? The servants were all asleep, worn out with a day that began before dawn. It had to be Lord Pinchingdale.

Extricating herself from the maw of the carriage, Letty swivelled to face the newcomer, prepared to tell him exactly what she thought of midnight elopements and those idiotic enough to engage in them. The words stilled in her throat as her gloom-adjusted eyes took in the apparition before her. Instead of a gentleman garbed for travel, a hunched, hulking

thing shambled towards her. As Letty instinctively shrank back against the carriage, feeling around behind her for a weapon, her panicked eyes sought the creature's face. He didn't have one. Letty's eyes scanned for the usual appendages – mouth, ears, nose. Nothing. There was only darkness where his face should have been. Darkness and a pair of eerily light eyes that glittered disquietingly out of the surrounding emptiness.

The edge of the carriage floor bit into Letty's back.

Letty clutched tight to the sides, preparing to hitch herself up and flee out the opposite side. Not being prone to flights of fancy, Letty didn't think of faceless spectres and the other stock characters of popular novels. They weren't out on the moors or on the grounds of a ruined abbey, but in the heart of London. Letty defied any spectre, with the possible exception of those in the Tower, to make a go of haunting amid the grimy bustle of the metropolis. It just couldn't be done.

No, it was clearly a man, a rather large man with appalling posture, wearing something wrapped around his face and a hat pulled low over his ears. Letty's pulse thrummed with more mundane terrors – robbers, bandits, highwaymen.

'What do you want?' she asked sharply, readying herself to bolt.

The muffled man threw his arms into the air in a gesture of disgust. 'What do I want?' he demanded, in a voice that even through the folds of cloth savoured of John Knox and Robert Burns. 'What do I want, she asks me?'

Letty hadn't thought it that unreasonable a question.

'Get along inside. Orders are I'm to take ye to the inn.'

'Orders from whom?' asked Letty suspiciously, even though she had a fairly good idea.

The coachman muttered something generally uncomplimentary about the mental capacities of the other half of the species. 'Who d'ye think? Lord Pinchingdale, that's who. Come along now.'

Himself'll be waiting for ye, and we dinna have all night.'

And before Letty had the chance to explain that she wasn't at all the 'ye' in question, a pair of large hands closed around her waist and boosted her high into the air.

'Up ye get.'

'Put me down!' she hissed, wriggling in his grasp. 'You've made a mistake!'

'No mistake,' rasped her captor, grappling with her as though she were a particularly slippery fish just off the hook. Sounding aggrieved, he demanded, 'Would ye hold still? I'm just tryin' to help ye into the carriage.'

Since her arms were pinned uncomfortably to her sides, Letty did the only thing she could. She lashed out with one small, slippered foot, catching her captor squarely in the shin. Unfortunately, it was the same foot she had stubbed earlier in the day. Pain shot up her leg, but it was almost worth it for the resulting grunt of pain from the coachman. But he didn't let go.

'What part of "put me down" don't you understand?' Letty whispered fiercely, dealing him an elbow to the ribs.

'Women!' grunted the coachman in tones of intense disgust.

With no further ado, he tossed her unceremoniously into the carriage. Letty landed on her backside. Hard. Above the sound of the door slamming shut, she heard the coachman declare, in a voice that packed as much 'I told you so' as one could muster through a scarf, 'Orders are ye're to go to the inn, and it's to the inn you'll go.' He didn't say, 'So there,' but the words were firmly implied.

Scrambling to her knees, Letty crawled towards the door, hindered by her cloak, which twisted around her legs as she went, pulling her back. 'For heaven's sake!' she breathed, yanking her cloak out of the way. Something ripped. Letty didn't care. If she could just get out before the coach began moving...there were so many things she wanted to do that she didn't know where to

begin. Lock Mary in an armoire. Give Lord Pinchingdale a piece of her mind about his staff and his morals.

Propping an elbow up on one of the seats, Letty made a grab for the door handle. With a crack like a gunshot, the coachman snapped his whip. Four horses burst into concerted motion, propelling the coach forward. Letty's hand swiped uselessly through empty air as she lurched sideways, banging into the bench. She couldn't scream. Any loud noise would alert the neighbours, bringing down on her head exactly the sort of attention she hadn't wanted. The coach swerved again, sending Letty jolting sideways – right into the other shoulder.

Clutching her wounded arm, Letty glowered helplessly in the direction of the box as the carriage carried her inexorably away towards her sister's assignation.

She knew she should have stayed in bed.

