

Prologue



The Tube had broken down. Again.

I clutched the overhead rail by dint of standing on the tippiest bit of my tippy toes. My nose banged into the arm of the man next to me. A Frenchman, judging from the black turtleneck and the fact that his armpit ‘was a deodorant-free zone’. Murmuring apologies in my best faux English accent, I tried to squirm out from under his arm, tripped over a protruding umbrella, and stumbled into the denim-covered lap of the man sitting in front of me.

‘Cheers,’ he said with a wink, as I wiggled my way off his leg.

Ah, ‘cheers,’ that wonderful multipurpose English term for anything from ‘hello’ to ‘thank you’ to ‘nice ass you have there.’ Bright red (a shade that doesn’t do much for my auburn hair), I peered about for a place to hide. But the Tube was packed solid, full of tired, cranky Londoners on their way home from work. There wasn’t enough room for a reasonably emaciated snake to slither its way through the crowd, much less a healthy American girl who had eaten one too many portions of fish and chips over the past two months.

Um, make that about fifty too many portions of fish and chips. Living in a basement flat with a kitchen the size of a peapod doesn’t inspire culinary exertions.

Resuming my spot next to the smirking Frenchman, I wondered, for the five-hundredth time, what had ever possessed me to come to London.

Sitting in my carrel in Harvard's Widener Library, peering out of my little scrap of window at the undergrads scuttling back and forth beneath the underpass, bowed double under their backpacks like so many worker ants, applying for a fellowship to spend the year researching at the British Library seemed like a brilliant idea. No more student papers to grade! No more hours of peering at microfilm! No more Grant.

Grant.

My mind lightly touched the name, then shied away again. Grant. The other reason I was playing sardines on the Tube in London, rather than happily spooling through microfilm in the basement of Widener.

I ended it with him. Well, mostly. Finding him in the cloakroom of the Faculty Club at the history department Christmas party in a passionate embrace with a giggly art historian fresh out of undergrad did have something to do with it, so I couldn't claim he was entirely without a part in the break up. But I was the one who tugged the ring off my finger and flung it across the room at him in time-honoured, pissed-off female fashion.

Just in case anyone was wondering, it wasn't an engagement ring.

The Tube lurched back to life, eliciting a ragged cheer from the other passengers. I was too busy trying not to fall back into the lap of the man sitting in front of me. To land in someone's lap once is carelessness; to do so twice might be considered an invitation.

Right now, the only men I was interested in were long-dead ones.

The Scarlet Pimpernel, the Purple Gentian, the Pink Carnation... The very music of their names invoked a forgotten era, an era of men in knee breeches and frock coats who duelled with witty barbs sharper than the points of their swords. An era when men could be heroes.

The Scarlet Pimpernel, rescuing countless men from the guillotine; the Purple Gentian, driving the French Ministry of Police mad with his escapades, and foiling at least two attempts to assassinate King George III; and the Pink Carnation... I don't think there was a single newspaper in London between 1803 and 1814 that

didn't carry at least one mention of the Pink Carnation, the most elusive spy of them all.

The other two, the Scarlet Pimpernel and the Purple Gentian, had each, in their turn, been unmasked by the French as Sir Percy Blakeney and Lord Richard Selwick. They had retired to their estates in England to raise precocious children and tell long stories of their days in France over their post-dinner port. But the Pink Carnation had never been caught.

At least not yet.

That was what I planned to do – to hunt the elusive Pink Carnation through the archives of England, to track down any sliver of long-dead gossip that might lead me to what the finest minds in the French government had failed to discover.

Of course, that wasn't how I phrased it when I suggested the idea to my dissertation advisor.

I made scholarly noises about filling a gap in the historiography, and the deep sociological significance of spying as a means of asserting manhood, and other silly ideas couched in intellectual unintelligibility. I called it 'Aristocratic Espionage during the Wars with France: 1789-1815.'

Rather a dry title, but somehow I doubt 'Why I Love Men in Black Masks' would have made it past my dissertation committee. It all seemed perfectly simple back in Cambridge. There must have been some sort of contact between the three aristocrats who had donned black masks in order to outwit the French; the world of the upper class in early nineteenth-century England was a small one, and I couldn't imagine that men who had all spied in France wouldn't share their expertise with one another. I knew the identities of Sir Percy Blakeney and Lord Richard Selwick – in fact, there was a sizable correspondence between those two men. Surely, there would be something in their papers, some slip of the pen that would lead me to the Pink Carnation.

But there was *nothing* in the archives. Nothing. So far, I'd read twenty years' worth of Blakeney estate accounts and Selwick laundry

lists. I'd even trekked out to the sprawling Public Record Office in Kew, hauling myself and my laptop through the locker rooms and bag searches to get to the early nineteenth-century records of the War Office. I should have remembered that they call it the *secret service* for a reason. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Not even a cryptic reference to 'our flowery friend' in an official report.

Getting panicky, because I didn't really want to have to write about espionage as an allegory for manhood, I resorted to my plan of last resort. I sat on the floor of Waterstone's, with a copy of *Debrett's Peerage* open in my lap, and wrote letters to all the surviving descendants of Sir Percy Blakeney and Lord Richard Selwick. I didn't even care if they had access to the family archives (that was how desperate I was getting), I'd settle for family stories, half-remembered tales Grandpapa used to tell about that crazy ancestor who was a spy in the 1800s, anything that might give me some sort of lead as to where to look next.

I sent out twenty letters. I received three responses.

The proprietors of the Blakeney estate sent me an impersonal form letter listing the days the estate was open to the public; they helpfully included the fall 2003 schedule for Scarlet Pimpernel re-enactments. I could think of few things more depressing than watching overeager tourists prancing around in black capes, twirling quizzing glasses, and exclaiming, 'Sink me!'

The current owner of Selwick Hall was even more discouraging. He sent a letter typed on crested stationery designed to intimidate, informing me that Selwick Hall was still a private home, it was not open to the public in any capacity, and any papers the family intended for the public to view were in the British Library. Although Mr Colin Selwick did not specifically say 'sod off,' it was heavily implied.

But all it takes is one, right?

And that one, Mrs Arabella Selwick-Alderly, was currently waiting for me at – I dug the dog-eared scrap of paper out of my pocket as I scurried up the stairs in the South Kensington Tube station – 45 Onslow Square.

It was raining, of course. It generally is when one has forgotten one's umbrella.

Pausing on the doorstep of 43 Onslow Square, I ran my fingers through my rain-dampened hair and took stock of my appearance. The brown suede Jimmy Choo boots that had looked so chic in the shoe store in Harvard Square were beyond repair, matted with rain and mud. My knee-length herringbone skirt had somehow twisted itself all the way around, so that the zipper stuck out stiffly in front instead of lying flat at the back. And there was a sizable brownish blotch on the hem of my thick beige sweater – the battle stain of an unfortunate collision with someone's cup of coffee at the British Library cafeteria that afternoon.

So much for impressing Mrs Selwick-Alderly with my sophistication and charm.

Tugging my skirt the right way round, I rang the buzzer. A crackly voice quavered, 'Hello?'

I leant on the reply button. 'It's Eloise,' I shouted into the metal grating. I hate talking into intercoms; I'm never sure if I'm pressing the right button, or speaking into the right receiver, or about to be beamed up by aliens. 'Eloise Kelly. About the Purple Gentian?'

I managed to catch the door just before it stopped buzzing.

'Up here,' called a disembodied voice.

Tipping my head back, I gazed up the stairwell. I couldn't see anyone, but I knew just what Mrs Selwick-Alderly would look like. She would have a wrinkled face under a frizz of snowy white hair, dress in ancient tweeds, and be bent over a cane as gnarled as her skin. Following the directive from on high, I began up the stairs, rehearsing the little speech I had prepared in my head the night before. I would say something gracious about how lovely it was of her to take the time to see me. I would smile modestly and express how much I hoped I could help in my own small way to rescue her esteemed ancestor from historical oblivion. And I would remember to speak loudly, in deference to elderly ears.

'Poor girl, you look utterly knackered.'

An elegant woman in a navy blue suit made of nubby wool, with a vivid crimson-and-gold scarf tied at her neck, smiled sympathetically at me. Her snowy hair – that part of my image at least had been correct! – was coiled about her head in an elaborate confection of braids that should have been old-fashioned, but on her looked queenly. Perhaps her straight spine and air of authority made her appear taller than she was, but she made me (five feet nine inches if one counts the three-inch heels that are essential to daily life) feel short. This was not a woman with an osteoporosis problem.

My polished speech dripped away like the drops of water trickling from the hem of my raincoat. ‘Um, hello,’ I stammered.

‘Hideous weather today, isn’t it?’ Mrs Selwick-Alderly ushered me through a cream-coloured foyer, indicating that I should drop my sodden raincoat on a chair in the hall. ‘How good of you to come all the way from – the British Library, was it? – to see me on such an inhospitable day.’

I followed her into a cheerful living room, my ruined boots making squelching noises that boded ill to the faded Persian rug. A chintz sofa and two chairs were drawn up around the fire that crackled comfortably away beneath a marble mantelpiece. On the coffee table, an eclectic assortment of books had been pushed aside to make room for a heavily laden tea tray.

Mrs Selwick-Alderly glanced at the tea tray and made a little noise of annoyance. ‘I’ve forgotten the biscuits. I won’t be a minute. Do make yourself comfortable.’

Comfortable. I didn’t think there was much chance of that. Despite Mrs Selwick-Alderly’s charm, I felt like an awkward fifth-grader waiting for the headmistress to return.

Hands clasped behind my back, I wandered over to the mantel. It boasted an assortment of family photos, jumbled together in no particular order. At the far right towered a large sepia portrait photo of a debutante with her hair in the short waves of the late 1930s, a single strand of pearls about her neck, gazing soulfully upwards. The other photos were more modern and less formal, a crowd of family

photos, taken in black tie, in jeans, indoors and out, people making faces at the camera or each other; they were clearly a large clan, and a close-knit one.

One picture in particular drew my attention. It sat towards the middle of the mantel, half-hidden behind a picture of two little girls decked out as flower girls. Unlike the others, it only featured a single subject – unless you counted his horse. One arm casually rested on his horse's flank. His dark blond hair had been tousled by the wind and a hard ride. There was something about the quirk of the lips and the clean beauty of the cheekbones that reminded me of Mrs Selwick-Alderly. But where her good looks were a thing of elegance, like a finely carved piece of ivory, this man was as vibrantly alive as the sun on his hair or the horse beneath his arm. He smiled out of the photo with such complicit good humour – as if he and the viewer shared some sort of delightful joke – that it was impossible not to smile back.

Which was exactly what I was doing when my hostess returned with a plate filled with chocolate-covered biscuits.

I started guiltily, as though I had been caught out in some embarrassing intimacy.

Mrs Selwick-Alderly placed the biscuits next to the tea tray. 'I see you've found the photos. There is something irresistible about other people's pictures, isn't there?'

I joined her on the couch, setting my damp herringbone derriere gingerly on the very edge of a flowered cushion. 'It's so much easier to make up stories about people you don't know,' I temporised. 'Especially older pictures. You wonder what their lives were like, what happened to them...'

'That's part of the fascination of history, isn't it?' she said, applying herself to the teapot. Over the rituals of the tea table, the choice of milk or sugar, the passing of biscuits and cutting of cake, we slipped into an easy discussion of English history, and the awkward moment passed.

At Mrs Selwick-Alderly's gentle prompting, I found myself

rambling on about how I'd become interested in history (too many historical novels at an impressionable age), the politics of the Harvard history department (too complicated to even begin to go into), and why I'd decided to come to England. When the conversation began to verge onto what had gone wrong with Grant (everything), I hastily changed the subject, asking Mrs Selwick-Alderly if she had heard any stories about the nineteenth-century spies as a small child.

'Oh, dear, yes!' Mrs Selwick-Alderly smiled nostalgically into her teacup. 'I spent a large part of my youth playing spy with my cousins. We would take it in turns to be the Purple Gentian and the Pink Carnation. My cousin Charles always insisted on playing Delaroché, the evil French operative. The French accent that boy affected! It put Maurice Chevalier to shame. After all these years, it still makes me laugh just to think of it. He would paint on an extravagant moustache – in those days, all the best villains had moustaches – and put on a cloak made out of one of Mother's old wraps, and storm up and down the lawn, shaking his fist and swearing vengeance against the Pink Carnation.'

'Who was your favourite character?' I asked, charmed by the image.

'Why, the Pink Carnation, of course.'

We smiled over the rims of our teacups in complete complicity.

'But you have an added interest in the Pink Carnation,' Mrs Selwick-Alderly said meaningfully. 'Your dissertation, wasn't it?'

'Oh! Yes! My dissertation!' I outlined the work I had done so far: the chapters on the Scarlet Pimpernel's missions, the Purple Gentian's disguises, the little I had been able to discover about the way they ran their leagues.

'But I haven't been able to find anything at all about the Pink Carnation,' I finished. 'I've read the old newspaper accounts, of course, so I know about the Pink Carnation's more spectacular missions, but that's it.'

'What had you hoped to find?'

I stared sheepishly down into my tea. 'Oh, every historian's

dream. An overlooked manuscript entitled *How I Became the Pink Carnation and Why*. Or I'd settle for a hint of his identity in a letter or a War Office report. Just something to give me some idea of where to look next.'

'I think I may be able to help you.' A slight smile lurked about Mrs Selwick-Alderly's lips.

'Really?' I perked up – literally. I sat so bolt upright that my teacup nearly toppled off my lap. 'Are there family stories?'

Mrs Selwick-Alderly's faded blue eyes twinkled. She leant forward conspiratorially. 'Better.'

Possibilities were flying through my mind. An old letter, perhaps, or a deathbed message passed along from Selwick to Selwick, with Mrs Selwick-Alderly the current keeper of the trust. But, then, if there were a Selwick Family Secret, why would she tell me? I abandoned imagination for the hope of reality. 'What is it?' I asked breathlessly.

Mrs Selwick-Alderly rose from the sofa with effortless grace. Setting her teacup down on the coffee table, she beckoned me to follow. 'Come see.'

I divested myself of my teacup with a clatter, and eagerly followed her towards the twin windows that looked onto the square. Between the windows hung two small portrait miniatures, and for a disappointed moment, I thought she meant merely to lead me to the pictures – there didn't seem to be anything else that might warrant attention. A small octagonal table to the right of the windows bore a pink-shaded lamp and a china candy dish, but little else. To the left, a row of bookcases lined the back of the room, but Mrs Selwick-Alderly didn't so much as glance in that direction.

Instead, she knelt before a large trunk that sat directly beneath the portrait miniatures. I've never been into domestic art, or material history, or whatever they're calling it, but I'd spent enough afternoons loafing around the British galleries of the Victoria and Albert to recognise it as early eighteenth century, or an extraordinarily good reproduction. Different-coloured woods marked out fanciful patterns

of flowers and birds across the lid of the trunk, while a large bird of paradise adorned the centre.

Mrs Selwick-Alderly withdrew an elaborate key from her pocket.

‘In this trunk’ – she held the key poised before the lock – ‘lies the true identity of the Pink Carnation.’

Stooping, Mrs Selwick-Alderly fitted the key – almost as ornately constructed as the chest itself, with the end twisted into elaborate curlicues – into the brass-bound lock. The lid sprang open with well-oiled ease. I joined Mrs Selwick-Alderly on the floor, without even realising how I’d got there.

My first glance was a disappointing one. Not a paper in sight, not even the scrap of a forgotten love letter. Instead, my sweeping gaze took in the faded ivory of an old fan, a yellowed scrap of embroidered cloth, the skeletal remains of a bouquet still bound with a tattered ribbon. There were other such trinkets, but I didn’t take much notice as I sank down onto my haunches beside the trunk.

But Mrs Selwick-Alderly wasn’t finished. Deliberately, she eased one blue-veined hand along either side of the velvet lining and tugged. The top tray slid easily out of its supports. Within... I was back on my knees, hands gripping the edge of the trunk.

‘This...it’s amazing!’ I stuttered. ‘Are these all...?’

‘All early nineteenth century,’ Mrs Selwick-Alderly finished for me, regarding the contents of the trunk fondly. ‘They’ve all been sorted by chronological order, so you should find it easy going.’ She reached into the trunk, picked up a folio, and then put it aside with a muttered ‘That won’t do.’ After a moment’s peering into the trunk and making the occasional clucking noise, she seized on a rectangular packet, one of those special acid-free cardboard boxes they use to protect old library books.

‘You’d best start here,’ she advised, ‘with Amy.’

‘Amy?’ I asked, picking at the string binding the box together.

Mrs Selwick-Alderly started to respond, and then checked herself, rising to her feet with the help of the edge of the box.

‘These letters tell the tale far better than I could.’ She cut off my

incoherent questions with a kindly, 'If you need anything, I'll be in my study. It's just down the hall to the right.'

'But, who is he?' I pleaded, pivoting after her as she walked towards the door. 'The Pink Carnation?'

'Read and see... ' Mrs Selwick-Alderly's voice drifted behind her through the open door.

Urgh. Gnawing on my lower lip, I stared down at the manuscript box in my hands. The grey cardboard was smooth and clean beneath my fingers; unlike the battered, dusty old boxes in the stacks of Widener Library, someone cared for these papers well. The identity of the Pink Carnation. Did she really mean it?

I should have been tearing at the twine that bound the box, but there was something about the waiting stillness of the room, broken only by the occasional crackle of burning bark upon the grate, that barred abrupt movement. I could almost feel the portrait miniatures on the wall straining to peer over my shoulder.

Besides, I counselled myself, mechanically unwinding the string, I shouldn't let myself get too excited. Mrs Selwick-Alderly might be exaggerating. Or mad. True, she didn't look mad, but maybe her delusion took the form of thinking she held the key to the identity of the Pink Carnation. I would open the box to find it contained a stack of Beatles lyrics or amateur poetry.

The last loop of string came free. The cardboard flap fell open, revealing a pile of yellowed papers. The date on the first letter, in a scrawling, uneven hand, read 4 MARCH, 1803.

Not amateur poetry.

Dizzy with excitement, I flipped through the thick packet of papers. Some were in better condition than others; in places, ink had run, or lines had been lost in folds. Hints of reddish sealing wax clung to the edges of some, while others had lost corners to the depredations of time and the clutching fingers of eager readers. Some were written in a bold black hand, others in a spiky copperplate, and many in a barely legible scribble. But they all had one thing in common; they were all dated 1803. Phrases rose out of the sea of

squiggles as I thumbed through...‘provoking man...brother would never...’

I forced myself to return to the first page. Sinking down onto the carpet before the fire, I adjusted my skirt, refreshed my cold cup of tea, and began to read the first letter. It was written in ungrammatical French, and I translated as I read.

‘4 March, 1803. Dear Sister – With the end of the late hostilities, I find myself at last in a position to urge you to return to your rightful place in the House of Balcourt...’



Chapter One



‘... **T**he city of your birth awaits your return.

Please send word of your travel arrangements by courier at first opportunity. I remain, your devoted brother, Edouard.’

‘The city of your birth awaits your return.’ Amy whispered the words aloud.

At last! Fingers tightening around the paper in her hands, she gazed rapturously at the sky. For an event of such magnitude, she expected bolts of lightning, or thunderclouds at the very least. But the Shropshire sky gazed calmly back at her, utterly unperturbed by the momentous events taking place below. Wasn’t that just like Shropshire?

Sinking to the grass, Amy contemplated the place where she had spent the majority of her life. Behind her, over the rolling fields, the redbrick manor house sat placidly on its rise. Uncle Bertrand was sure to be right there, three windows from the left, sitting in his cracked leather chair, poring over the latest findings of the Royal Agricultural Society, just as he did every day. Aunt Prudence would be sitting in the yellow-and-cream morning room, squinting over her embroidery threads, just as she did every day. All peaceful, and bucolic, and boring.

The prospect before her wasn’t any more exciting, nothing but long swaths of green, enlivened only by woolly balls of sheep.

But now, at last, the long years of boredom were at an end. In her hand she grasped the opportunity to leave Wooliston Manor

and its pampered flock behind her forever. She would no longer be plain Amy Balcourt, niece to the most ambitious sheep breeder in Shropshire, but Aimée, Mlle de Balcourt. Amy conveniently ignored the fact that revolutionary France had banished titles when they beheaded their nobility.

She had been six years old when revolution exiled her to rural England. In late May of 1789, she and Mama had sailed across the Channel for what was meant to be merely a two-month visit, time enough for Mama to see her sisters and show her daughter something of English ways. For all the years she had spent in France, Mama was still an Englishwoman at heart.

Uncle Bertrand, sporting a slightly askew periwig, had stridden out to meet them. Behind him stood Aunt Prudence, embroidery hoop clutched in her hand. Clustered in the doorway were three little girls in identical muslin dresses, Amy's cousins Sophia, Jane and Agnes. 'See, darling,' whispered Mama. 'You shall have other little girls to play with. Won't that be lovely?'

It wasn't lovely. Agnes, still in the lisping and stumbling stage, was too young to be a playmate. Sophia spent all of her time bent virtuously over her sampler. Jane, quiet and shy, Amy dismissed as a poor-spirited thing. Even the sheep soon lost their charm. Within a month, Amy was quite ready to return to France. She packed her little trunk, heaved and pushed it down the hall to her mother's room, and announced that she was prepared to go.

Mama had half-smiled, but her smile twisted into a sob. She plucked her daughter off the trunk and squeezed her very, very tightly.

'Mais, maman, qu'est-ce que se passe?' demanded Amy, who still thought in French in those days.

'We can't go back, darling. Not now. I don't know if we'll ever... Oh, your poor father! Poor us! And Edouard, what must they be doing to him?'

Amy didn't know who *they* were, but remembering the way Edouard had yanked at her curls and pinched her arm while

supposedly hugging her goodbye, she couldn't help but think her brother deserved anything he got. She said as much to Mama.

Mama looked down at her miserably. 'Oh no, darling, not this. Nobody deserves this.' Very slowly, in between deep breaths, she had explained to Amy that mobs had taken over Paris, that the king and queen were prisoners, and that Papa and Edouard were very much in danger.

Over the next few months, Wooliston Manor became the unlikely centre of an antirevolutionary movement. Everyone pored over the weekly papers, wincing at news of atrocities across the Channel. Mama ruined quill after quill penning desperate letters to connections in France, London, Austria. When the Scarlet Pimpernel appeared on the scene, snatching aristocrats from the sharp embrace of Madame Guillotine, Mama brimmed over with fresh hope. She peppered every news sheet within a hundred miles of London with advertisements begging the Scarlet Pimpernel to save her son and husband.

Amidst all this hubbub, Amy lay awake at night in the nursery, wishing she were old enough to go back to France herself and save Papa. She would go disguised, of course, since everyone knew a proper rescue had to be done in disguise. When no one was about, Amy would creep down to the servants' quarters to try on their clothes and practice speaking in the rough, peasant French of the countryside. If anyone happened upon her, Amy explained that she was preparing amateur theatricals. With so much to worry about, none of the grown-ups who absently said, 'How nice, dear,' and patted her on the head ever bothered to wonder why the promised performance never materialised.

Except Jane. When Jane came upon Amy clad in an assortment of old petticoats from the ragbag and a discarded periwig of Uncle Bertrand's, Amy huffily informed her that she was rehearsing for a one-woman production of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

Jane regarded her thoughtfully. Half apologetically, she said, 'I don't think you're telling the truth.'

Unable to think of a crushing response, Amy just glared. Jane clutched her rag doll tighter, but managed to ask, 'Please, won't you tell me what you're really doing?'

'You won't tell Mama or any of the others?' Amy tried to look suitably fierce, but the effect was quite ruined by her periwig sliding askew and dangling from one ear.

Jane hastily nodded.

'I,' declared Amy importantly, 'am going to join the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel and rescue Papa.'

Jane pondered this new information, doll dangling forgotten from one hand.

'May I help?' she asked.

Her cousin's unexpected aid proved a boon to Amy. It was Jane who figured out how to rub soot and gum on teeth to make them look like those of a desiccated old hag – and then how to rub it all off again before Nanny saw. It was Jane who plotted a route to France on the nursery globe and Jane who discovered a way to creep down the back stairs without making them creak.

They never had the chance to execute their plans. Little knownst to the two small girls preparing themselves to enter his service, the Scarlet Pimpernel foolishly attempted the rescue of the Vicomte de Balcourt without them. From the papers, Amy learnt that the Pimpernel had spirited Papa out of prison disguised as a cask of cheap red wine. The rescue might have gone without a hitch had a thirsty guard at the gates of the city not insisted on tapping the cask. When he encountered Papa instead of Beaujolais, the guard angrily sounded the alert. Papa, the papers claimed, had fought manfully, but he was no match for an entire troop of revolutionary soldiers. A week later, a small card had arrived for Mama. It said simply, 'I'm sorry,' and was signed with a scarlet flower.

The news sent Mama into a decline and Amy into a fury. With Jane as her witness, she vowed to avenge Papa and Mama as soon as she was old enough to return to France. She would need excellent French for that, and Amy could already feel her native tongue

beginning to slip away under the onslaught of constant English conversation. At first, she tried conversing in French with their governesses, but those worthy ladies tended to have a vocabulary limited to shades of cloth and the newest types of millinery. So Amy took her Molière outside and read aloud to the sheep.

Latin and Greek would do her no good in her mission, but Amy read them anyway, in memory of Papa. Papa had told her nightly bedtime stories of capricious gods and vengeful goddesses; Amy tracked all his stories down among the books in the little-used library at Wooliston Manor. Uncle Bertrand's own taste ran more towards manuals on animal husbandry, but *someone* in the family must have read once, because the library possessed quite a creditable collection of classics. Amy read Ovid and Virgil and Aristophanes and Homer. She read dry histories and scandalous love poetry (her governesses, who had little Latin and less Greek, naïvely assumed that anything in a classical tongue must be respectable), but mostly she returned again and again to *The Odyssey*. Odysseus had fought to go home, and so would Amy.

When Amy was ten, the illustrated newsletters announced that the Scarlet Pimpernel had retired upon discovery of his identity – although the newsletters were rather unclear as to whether they or the French government had been the first to get the scoop. SCARLET PIMPERNEL UNMASKED! proclaimed the *Shropshire Intelligencer*. Meanwhile *The Cosmopolitan Lady's Book* carried a ten-page spread on 'Fashions of the Scarlet Pimpernel: Costume Tips from the Man Who Brought You the French Aristocracy.'

Amy was devastated. True, the Pimpernel had botched her father's rescue, but, on the whole, his tally of aristocrats saved was quite impressive, and who on earth was she to offer her French language skills to if the Pimpernel retired? Amy was all ready to start constructing her own band when a line in the article in the *Shropshire Intelligencer* caught her eye. 'I have every faith that the Purple Gentian will take up where I was forced to leave off,' they reported Sir Percy as saying.

Puzzled, Amy shoved the paper at Jane. ‘Who is the Purple Gentian?’

The same question was on everyone else’s lips. Soon the Purple Gentian became a regular feature in the news sheets. One week, he spirited fifteen aristocrats out of Paris as a travelling circus. The Purple Gentian, it was whispered, had played the dancing bear. Why, some said Robespierre himself had patted the animal on the head, never knowing it was his greatest enemy! When France stopped killing its aristocrats and directed its attention to fighting England instead, the Purple Gentian became the War Office’s most reliable spy.

‘This victory would never have happened, but for the bravery of one man – one man represented by a small purple flower,’ Admiral Nelson announced after destroying the French fleet in Egypt.

English and French alike were united in their burning curiosity to learn the identity of the Purple Gentian. Speculation ran rife on both sides of the Channel. Some claimed the Purple Gentian was an English aristocrat, a darling of the London *ton* like Sir Percy Blakeney. Indeed, some said he *was* Sir Percy Blakeney, fooling the foolish French by returning under a different name. London gossip named everyone from Beau Brummel (on the grounds that no one could genuinely be *that* interested in fashion) to the Prince of Wales’s dissolute brother, the Duke of York. Others declared that the Purple Gentian must be an exiled French noble, fighting for his homeland. Some said he was a soldier; others said he was a renegade priest. The French just said he was a damned nuisance. Or they would have, had they the good fortune to speak English. Instead, being French, they were forced to say it in their own language.

Amy said he was her hero.

She only said it to Jane, of course. All of the old plans were revived, only this time it was the League of the Purple Gentian to whom Amy planned to offer her services.

But the years went by, Amy remained in Shropshire, and the only masked man she saw was her small cousin Ned playing at being a

highwayman. At times Amy considered running away to Paris, but how would she even get there? With war raging between England and France, normal travel across the Channel had been disrupted. Amy began to despair of ever reaching France, much less finding the Purple Gentian. She envisioned a dreary future of pastoral peace.

Until Edouard's letter.

'I thought I'd find you here.'

'What?' Amy was jolted out of her blissful contemplation of Edouard's letter, as a blue flounce brushed against her arm.

A basket of wildflowers on Jane's arm testified to a walk along the grounds, but she bore no sign of outdoor exertion. No creases dared to settle in the folds of her muslin dress; her pale brown hair remained obediently coiled at the base of her neck; and even the loops of the bow holding her bonnet were remarkably even. Aside from a bit of windburn on her pale cheeks, she might have been sitting in the parlour all afternoon.

'Mama has been looking all over for you. She wants to know what you did with her skein of rose-pink embroidery silk.'

'What makes her think I have it? Besides,' Amy cut off what looked to be a highly logical response from Jane with a wave of Edouard's letter, 'who can think of embroidery silks when *this* just arrived?'

'A letter? Not another love poem from Derek?'

'Ugh!' Amy shuddered dramatically. 'Really, Jane! What a vile thought! No' – she leant forward, lowering her voice dramatically – 'it's a letter from Edouard.'

'Edward?' Jane, being Jane, automatically gave the name its English pronunciation. 'So he has finally deigned to remember your existence after all these years?'

'Oh, Jane, don't be harsh! He wants me to go live with him!'

Jane dropped her basket of flowers.

'You can't be serious, Amy!'

'But I am! Isn't it glorious!' Amy joined her cousin in gathering up scattered blooms, piling them willy-nilly back in the basket with more enthusiasm than grace.

‘What *exactly* does Edward’s letter say?’

‘It’s splendid, Jane! Now that we’re no longer at war, he says it’s finally safe for me to come back. He says he wants me to act as hostess for him.’

‘But are you sure it’s safe?’ Jane’s grey eyes darkened with concern.

Amy laughed. ‘It’s not all screaming mobs, Jane. After all, Bonaparte has been consul for – how long has it been? Three years now? Actually, that’s exactly why Edouard wants me there. Bonaparte is desperately trying to make his jumped-up, murderous, usurping government look legitimate...’

‘Not that you’re at all biased,’ murmured Jane.

‘...so he’s been courting the old nobility,’ Amy went on, pointedly ignoring her cousin’s comment. ‘But the courting has mostly been going on through his wife Josephine – she has a *salon* for the ladies of the old regime – so Edouard needs me to be his *entrée*.’

‘To that jumped-up, murderous, usurping government?’

Jane’s voice was politely quizzical.

Amy tossed a daisy at her in annoyance. ‘Make fun all you like, Jane! Don’t you see? This is exactly the opportunity I needed!’

‘To become the belle of Bonaparte’s court?’

Amy forbore to waste another flower. ‘No.’ She clasped her hands, eyes gleaming. ‘To join the League of the Purple Gentian!’



Chapter Two



The Purple Gentian was not having a good day. Lord Richard Selwick, second son of the Marquess of Uppington, prime object of matchmaking mamas, and chief foiler of Napoleonic ambitions, stood in the front hall of his parents' London home and scuffed his boots like a sulky schoolboy.

'That will be enough of that.' His mother shook her head at him in fond exasperation, setting the egret feathers precariously perched on her coiffure wafting in the still air of the front hall. 'It's an evening at Almack's, not a firing squad.'

'But, Mother...' Richard caught the whine in his own voice and winced. Bloody hell. What was it about being home that instantly drove him back to the manners and maturity of a twelve-year-old?

Richard took a deep breath and made sure his voice came out in its proper register. 'Look, Mother, I'm quite busy right now. I'm only in London for another two weeks, and there are a number of things...'

His mother made a noise that in anyone of lower rank than a countess would have been given the unmannerly name of snort. As a cowed member of the *ton* had once commented, 'Nobody *harrumphs* quite like the Marchioness of Uppington.'

'Tush!' His mother waved his words away with a sweep of her feathery fan. 'Just because you're a secret agent doesn't mean that you can put off settling down forever. Really, Richard.' She took a furtive look around the hall to make sure no servants were in evidence, as, after all, it wouldn't do to have her son's secret identity getting out,

and servants did gossip so. Having ascertained that none were about, she warmed to her theme. 'You're nearly thirty already! Just because you're the Purple Gentian – ridiculous name! – doesn't mean that you don't have *responsibilities!*'

'I'd say saving Europe from a tyrant is a jolly good responsibility,' Richard muttered under his breath. Unfortunately, the marble foyer had excellent acoustics.

'I meant responsibilities to your family. What if the Uppington title were to die out entirely because you couldn't be bothered to spend one little evening at Almack's and meet a nice girl? Hmmm?' She cocked her head to one side, narrowing her green eyes at him, green eyes which were, Richard thought sourly, altogether too shrewd for either his good or hers. His mother, as he knew from unfortunate past experience, had the rhetorical slipperiness of Cicero, the vocal endurance of an opera singer, and the sheer bloody-minded tenacity of Napoleon Bonaparte. Sometimes Richard had the sinking suspicion that he had a far better chance of preventing Bonaparte from conquering Europe than he had of thwarting his mother's plans to see him married off within the next Season.

Nonetheless, Richard battled on valiantly. 'Mother, Charles has produced a child for every year he's been married. I sincerely doubt that the title is in any danger.'

His mother frowned. 'Accidents do happen. But that's not even to be thought of.' Reconsidering her tactics, Lady Uppington began to pace along the expanse of the foyer, bronze silk skirts swishing in time to her steps. 'What I meant to point out was that sooner or later you're going to have to give up playing at espionage.'

Richard's jaw dropped. *Playing* at espionage? He shot his mother a look of equal parts outrage and incredulity. Just who had provided Nelson the intelligence that destroyed Napoleon's fleet at Aboukir? And who had prevented four determined French assassins from murdering the king in his gardens at Kew? Lord Richard Selwick, alias the Purple Gentian, that was who! Had he not been constrained by the immense respect and filial affection he bore his mother,

Richard would have produced a *harrumph* that would put the marchioness's to shame.

But as all this never made its way from Richard's mind to his mouth, his mother blithely carried on with her lecture. 'All this gadding about on the Continent – you've been at it for almost a decade, Richard. Even Percy retired after he met his Marguerite.'

'Percy retired because the French discovered he was the Scarlet Pimpernel,' Richard grumbled unthinkingly. Hit by a sudden, horrible surmise, he jerked his head up. 'Mother, you wouldn't...'

Lady Uppington paused in her perambulations. 'No, I wouldn't,' she said regretfully. For a moment, she gazed dreamily off at an arrangement of flowers in one of the alcoves in the wall. 'Such a pity. It would be so effective.'

Shaking her head as if to whisk away the temptation of the thought, she resumed her brisk progress around the room. 'Darling, you know I could never sabotage you. And you know both your father and I are terribly proud of you. Don't think we don't appreciate that you trusted us enough to confide in us. Look at poor Lady Falconstone – she only found out her son was an agent for the War Office after he was captured by that French spy and they started sending her all of those nasty ransom notes in French. And he never even had a special name or made it into the illustrated papers.' The marchioness indulged in a maternal smirk. 'We just want to see you *happy*,' she finished earnestly.

Sensing another maternal oration coming on, one of those I-bore-you-and-thus-know-what's-best-for-you lectures, Richard made a pointed move towards the door. 'If that's all for the moment, Mother, I really must be off. The War Office...'

The marchioness gave another of her infamous *harrumphs*. 'Have a good time at White's, darling,' she said pointedly.

Richard paused halfway out the door and flashed her an incredulous look. 'How do you always know?'

Lady Uppington looked smug. 'Because I'm your mother. Now, shoo! Get along with you!'

As the door closed behind him, Richard heard his mother call out gleefully, 'Almack's at nine! Don't forget to wear knee breeches!'

The banging of the door drowned out Richard's heartfelt groan. Knee breeches. Bloody hell. It had been so long since he had last been dragged by the ear through the dreaded doors of Almack's Assembly Rooms that he had completely forgotten about the knee breeches. Richard looked understandably glum as he headed down Upper Brook Street towards St James Street. The prospect was enough to send anyone into a precipitate decline that would make the consumptive Keats and drugged Coleridge look like strapping specimens of British manhood. How did his mother contrive to rope him into these things? If the Foreign Office had thought to let his mother loose on France...she'd probably have the entire country married off within a month.

'Afternoon, Selwick!'

Richard absently nodded to an acquaintance in a passing curricule. As it was just after five, the hour for flirting while on horseback, a steady stream of fashionable people in carriages or on horseback passed Richard as they made their way to Hyde Park. Richard smiled and nodded by rote, but his mind was already slipping away, across the Channel, to his work in France.

When he was very little, Richard had resolved to be a hero. It might have had something to do with his mother reading him the more stirring bits of *Henry V* at far too young an age. Richard charged about the nursery, duelling with invisible Frenchmen. Or maybe it came from afternoons playing King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table in the gardens with his father. For years Richard was convinced that the Holy Grail lay hidden under the floor of the ornamental Greek temple his mother used for tea parties. When Richard appeared with a shovel and a pickaxe while the Dowager Duchess of Dovedale was partaking of an *al fresco* tea, his mother was not amused. She declared an end to the grail-searching sessions at once.

Sent to Eton to learn the classics, Richard raced through the

adventures of Odysseus and Aeneas, earning an utterly undeserved reputation as a scholar. Richard burnt for the day when he could set out on his own adventures.

There was only one problem. There seemed to be very little call for heroes nowadays. He had, he realised, the ill fortune to be living in a time of singular peace and civility. Other employment would have to be found.

With that in mind, Richard looked first to estate management. He did have his own little estate, but the steward was a genial man of middle years, universally liked and unusually competent. There was little for Richard to do but ride about making polite conversation with his tenants and kissing the occasional baby. There was certainly something satisfying about it, but Richard knew that playing the role of gentleman farmer would leave him bored and restless.

So Richard did what any other young man in his position would do. He set out to become a rake. By the time he was sixteen, the second son of the Marquess of Uppington was a familiar figure in the fashionable gaming dens and bawdy houses of London. He played faro for high stakes, drove his horses too fast, and changed his mistresses as frequently as he did his linen. But he was still bored.

And then, just when Richard had resigned himself to a life of empty debauchery, good fortune smiled upon him in the form of the French Revolution. For hundreds of years, the Uppington estates had adjoined those of the Blakeney. Richard had spent countless afternoons hunting with Sir Percy, raiding his kitchens for tarts, and kicking about the Blakeney library, reading Percy's extensive collection of classical works, all of which contained bookplates with the Blakeney coat of arms, which happened to contain a small scarlet flower. When the Scarlet Pimpernel began making headlines, it didn't take much for Richard to put two and two together and come up with the fact that his next-door neighbour was the greatest hero to appear in England since Henry V.

Richard had begged and pleaded until Percy agreed to take him along on a mission. That one mission went well, and became

two, and then three missions, until Richard, with his gift for the heroic, became absolutely indispensable to the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel. So indispensable that Percy and the others had forgiven him when... No. Richard squashed the thought before it could grow into memory, stomping up the steps to his club with unnecessary vigour.

Richard felt himself relaxing as he entered the masculine stronghold of White's. The smells of tobacco and spirits hung heavy in the air, and from a chamber to his right, he could hear the heavy thud of darts being flung against a target – and missing, if the curses coming from that room were any indication. Meandering through the first floor, he spotted several hands of cards in progress, but none that he cared to join. One of his sister's many suitors made enthusiastic welcoming motions at Richard from the small table where he was ensconced with two friends over a bottle of port. Unfortunately, his welcome was a little too enthusiastic. He toppled himself right over the side of his chair, taking the table, port decanter, and three glasses with him. 'Well, that's one person we won't be seeing at Almack's tonight,' murmured Richard to himself, as he nodded in passing at the flailing boy and his port-sodden companions.

Richard found his quarry in the library.

'Selwick!' The Honourable Miles Dorrington flung aside the news sheet he had been reading, leapt up from his chair and pounded his friend on the back. He then hastily reseated himself, looking slightly abashed at his unseemly display of affection.

In a fit of temper, Richard's sister Henrietta had once referred irritably to Miles as 'that overeager sheepdog,' and there was something to be said for the description. With his sandy blond hair flopping into his face, and his brown eyes alight with good fellowship, Miles did bear a striking resemblance to the more amiable varieties of man's best friend. He was, in fact, Richard's best friend. They had been fast friends since their first days at Eton.

'When did you get back to London?' Miles asked.

Richard dropped into the seat next to him, sinking contentedly into the worn leather chair. He stretched his long legs comfortably out in front of him. 'Late last night. I left Paris Thursday, stopped for a couple of nights at Uppington Hall, and got into town about midnight.' He grinned at his friend. 'I'm in hiding.'

Miles instantly stiffened. Anxiously, he looked left, then right, before leaning forward and hissing, 'From whom? Did they follow you here?'

Richard shouted with laughter. 'Good God, nothing like that, man! No, I'm a fugitive from my mother.'

Miles relaxed. 'You might have said so,' he commented crossly. 'As you can imagine, we're all a bit on edge.'

'Sorry, old chap.' Richard smiled his thanks as a glass of his favourite brand of scotch materialised in his hands. Ah, it was good to be back at his club!

Miles accepted a whisky, and leant back in his chair. 'What is it this time? Is she throwing another distant cousin at you?'

'Worse,' Richard said. He took a long swig of scotch. 'Almack's.'

Miles grimaced in sympathy. 'Not the knee breeches.'

'Knee breeches and all.'

There was a moment of companionable silence as the men, both fashionably turned out in tight tan trousers, contemplated the horror of knee breeches. Miles finished his whisky and set it down on a low table beside his chair. Taking a more thorough look around the room, he asked Richard quietly, 'How is Paris?'

Not only Richard's oldest and closest friend, Miles also served as his contact at the War Office. When Richard had switched from rescuing aristocrats to gathering secrets, the Minister of War had wisely pointed out that the best possible way to communicate with Richard was through young Miles Dorrington. After all, the two men moved in the same set, shared the same friends, and could frequently be seen reminiscing over the tables at White's. Nobody would see anything suspicious about finding two old friends in hushed conversation. As an excuse for his frequent calls at Uppington House,

Miles had put it about that he was thinking of courting Richard's sister. Henrietta had entered into the deception with, to Richard's big-brotherly mind, a little too much relish.

Richard took his own survey of the room, noting the back of a white head poking out over a chair back. He lifted an eyebrow quizzically at Miles.

Miles shrugged. 'It's only old Falconstone. Deaf as a post and fast asleep to boot.'

'And his son is one of ours. Right. Paris has been...busy.'

Miles tugged at his cravat. 'Busy how?'

'Stop that, or you'll have your valet baying for your blood.'

Miles looked sheepish and tried to rearrange the folds of his cravat, which had gone from being a perfect waterfall to simply falling all over.

'Lots of comings and goings from the Tuilleries – more than usual,' Richard continued. 'I've sent a full report to the office. Along with some information helpfully compiled by our mutual friend Monsieur Delaroche at the Ministry of Police.' His lips curved in a grin of sheer glee.

'Good man! I knew you could do it! A list of all their agents in London – and right out from under Delaroche's nose, no less! You do have the devil's own luck.' Richard's back was too far away to reach, so Miles slapped the arm of his chair appreciatively instead. 'And your connections to the First Consul?'

'Better than ever,' Richard said. 'He's moved the collection of Egyptian artefacts into the palace.'

Egyptian artefacts might seem a topic beyond the scope of the War Office. But not when their top agent played the role of Bonaparte's pet scholar.

When Richard created the Purple Gentian, the talent for ancient languages that had stunned his schoolmasters at Eton had come to his aid once again. While Sir Percy had pretended to be a fop, Richard bored the French into complacency with long lectures about antiquity. When Frenchmen demanded to know what he was

doing in France, and Englishmen reproached him for fraternising with the enemy, Richard opened his eyes wide and proclaimed, 'But a scholar is a citizen of the world!' Then he quoted Greek at them. They usually didn't ask again. Even Gaston Delaroche, the Assistant Minister of Police, who had sworn in blood to be avenged on the Purple Gentian and had the tenacity of...well, of Richard's mother, had stopped snooping around Richard after being subjected to two particularly knotty passages from the *Odyssey*.

Bonaparte's decision to invade Egypt had been a disaster for France but a triumph for Richard. He already had a reputation as a scholar and an antiquarian; who better to join the group of academics Bonaparte was bringing with him to Egypt? Under cover of antiquarian fervour, Richard had gathered more information about French activities than Egyptian antiquities. With Richard's reports, the English had been able to destroy the French fleet and strand Bonaparte in Egypt for months.

Over those long months in Egypt, Richard became fast friends with Bonaparte's stepson, Eugene de Beauharnais, a sunny, good-natured boy with a genius for friendship. When Eugene introduced Richard to Bonaparte, presenting him as a scholar of antiquities, Bonaparte had immediately engaged Richard in a long debate over Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars*. Impressed by Richard's cool argument and immense store of quotations, he had extended an open invitation to drop by his tent and dispute the ancient past. Within a month, he had appointed Richard his director of Egyptian antiquities. Among the sands of the French camp in Egypt, it was a rather empty title. But on their return to Paris, Richard found himself with two rooms full of artefacts and an entrée into the palace. What spy could ask for more? And now his artefacts had been moved into the palace, Bonaparte's lair...

Miles looked as though he had been handed a pile of Christmas presents in July. 'And your office with it?'

'And my office with it.'

'Damn it, Richard, this is brilliant! Brilliant!' Miles so forgot

himself as to raise his voice above a whisper. Quite far above a whisper.

At the far end of the room, old Falconstone stirred. ‘Whaaat? Eh, what?’

‘I quite agree,’ Richard said loudly. ‘Wordsworth’s poetry is quite brilliant, but I shall always prefer Catullus.’

Miles cast him a dubious glance. ‘Wordsworth and Catullus?’ he whispered.

‘Look, you were the one who shouted,’ cast back Richard. ‘I had to come up with something.’

‘If it gets around that I’ve been reading Wordsworth, I’ll be booted out of my clubs. My mistress will disown me. My reputation will be ruined,’ Miles hissed in exaggerated distress.

Meanwhile, Falconstone had staggered to his feet, and did a bizarre little dance as he tried to catch his balance with his cane. Spotting Richard across the room, his face darkened to match his burgundy waistcoat.

‘Blasted cheek showing your face here! After you been consorting with them Frenchies, eh, what?’ Falconstone roared with the complete lack of shame of the extremely deaf and the complete lack of grammar of the extremely inbred. ‘Blasted cheek, I say!’ He tried to poke at Richard with his cane, but the effort proved too much for him, and he would have gone tumbling had Richard not steadied him.

Glowering, Falconstone yanked his arm away and stalked off, mumbling.

Miles had jumped to his feet when Falconstone had charged Richard. He looked at his friend with concern. ‘Do you get much of that?’

‘Only from Falconstone. I really do have to get around to freeing his son from the Temple prison one of these days.’ Richard resumed his seat and drained the remainder of his scotch in a single swallow. ‘Don’t be such an old woman, Miles. It doesn’t bother me. Look, I prefer Falconstone’s rantings to all those debutantes twittering about

the Purple Gentian. Can you imagine what I'd have to put up with if the truth got out?

Miles cocked his head thoughtfully, sending a lock of floppy blond hair tumbling in front of his eyes. 'Hmm, adoring debutantes...'

'Think how jealous your mistress would be,' Richard said dryly.

Miles flinched. His current mistress was an opera singer as well known for the range of her throwing arm as that of her voice. He had already courted concussion by flirting openly with a ballet dancer and had no desire to repeat the experience. 'All right, all right, point taken,' he said. 'Oh, damnation! I promised her I would have supper with her before the opera. She'll probably break half the dishes in the house if I'm late.'

'Most of them over your head,' commented Richard helpfully. 'Since I prefer you with your head all in one piece, you'd better relay my assignment quickly.'

'How right you are!' Miles replied fervently. He struggled to collect himself and regain the gravity incumbent upon a representative of the War Office. 'All right. Your assignment. We're pretty sure that Bonaparte is using the peace to plot an invasion of England.'

Richard nodded grimly. 'I thought as much.'

'Your job is to uncover as much as you can about his preparations. We want dates, locations and numbers, as quickly as you can get them. We'll have a string of couriers posted from Paris to Calais to relay the information as you find it. This is it, Richard!' Miles's eyes glowed with sporting fervour, like a hound on the trail of a fox. '*The* assignment. We're relying on *you* to keep old Boney out of England.'

A familiar tingle of anticipation rushed through Richard. How had Percy been able to give this up? The rush, the excitement, the challenge! Heady stuff, to know the safety of England depended upon him. Of course, Richard didn't delude himself that he was the country's sole hope. He knew the War Office had a good dozen spies scattered around the French capital, all striving to uncover the same

things. But he also knew without false modesty, that he was their best.

‘The usual code, I suppose?’ They had developed the code their first year at Eton as part of an elaborate plan to outwit their bullying proctor.

Miles nodded. ‘You’ll leave for Paris in two weeks?’

Richard rubbed his forehead. ‘Yes. I have some personal business to take care of – and I’ve promised my mother to squire Hen around to scare the fortune hunters away. Bonaparte should be away at Malmaison for most of next week, anyway, and I’ve left Geoff to keep an eye on things while I’m gone.’

‘Good man, Geoff.’ Miles rose and stretched. ‘Now if he were here, the three of us could have a bang-up night of carousing just like old times. I guess it’ll have to wait till we’ve foiled old Boney once and for all. Cry God for England, Harry, and St George, and all that.’ Miles was frantically trying to rearrange his cravat and smooth down his hair. ‘Damn. No time to stop off at home and get my valet to tidy me up. Oh well. Give Hen a kiss for me.’

Richard shot him a sharp look.

‘On the cheek, man, on the cheek. God knows I’d never try anything improper with your sister. Not that she isn’t a beautiful girl and all that, it’s just, well, she’s your *sister*.’

Richard clapped his friend on the shoulder in approval. ‘Well said! That’s exactly the way I want you to think of her.’

Miles muttered something about being grateful that his sisters were a good deal older. ‘You turn into a complete bore when you’re chaperoning Hen, you know,’ he grumbled.

Richard raised one eyebrow at Miles, a skill that had taken several months of practice in front of his mirror when he was twelve, but had been well worth the investment. ‘At least *I* didn’t let my sister dress me up in her petticoat when I was five.’

Miles’s jaw dropped. ‘Who told you about that?’ he demanded indignantly.

Richard grinned. ‘I have my sources,’ he said airily.

Miles, not a top agent of the War Office for nothing, considered this for a moment and his eyes narrowed. ‘You can tell your source that she’s going to have to find someone else to fetch her lemonade at the Alsworths’ ball tomorrow night unless she apologises. You can also tell her that I’ll accept either a verbal or a written apology as long as it’s suitably abject. And that means very, very abject,’ he added darkly. Miles snatched his hat and gloves up from a side table. ‘Oh, stop grinning already! It wasn’t that amusing.’

Richard rubbed his chin as though in deep thought. ‘Tell me, Miles, was it a lacy petticoat?’

With a wordless grunt of annoyance, Miles turned on his heel and stomped out of the room.

Picking up the news sheet Miles had left behind, Richard settled back down into the comfortable leather chair.

Two weeks, he thought. In two weeks he would be back in France, risking discovery and death.

Richard couldn’t wait.

