



London, 1822

Lady Caroline Elmhurst

Devil take it. I have seen this done a hundred times on the stage and read it a hundred more in novels, yet tying my sheets together proves almost impossible in real life.

‘Milady, they’ll break the door down,’ my maid whimpers.

‘Don’t be a fool. Here, put these on.’ I throw some petticoats at her. We have been unable to stuff all my possessions into my trunk and bags, and I am determined to leave nothing behind for that rapacious cow of a landlady to take. I wrench at the sheets and break a nail. ‘Oh, don’t stand there snivelling. Come and help me.’

Mary shuffles across the room, half in and half out of a petticoat.

Outside, the thunderous knocks on the door

resume. 'Open up, madam. We know you're in there,' bellows one of the seething mob of creditors. Heavens, it is like the French Revolution! How dare they!

'I am unwell, sirs,' I call in a quavering voice, tightening a monstrous knot that takes up half the length of the sheets.

'She's a dreadful liar and a whore to boot,' says a female voice, that of my landlady, Mrs Dinsdale. I can imagine how she stands there, mottled arms cradling one of her infernal cats, snuff sprinkled over her shoulders and grubby shawl. My shawl, my precious blue Kashmir, that I gave her in lieu of rent, the dirty, fat, ungrateful thing.

'Send your maid out, then.' The door shudders under their blows, and the tallboy we have pulled in front of it shifts a little on the floor.

'She is very poorly too, sir. Why, she is covered with stinking sores – oh horrors, I believe it is the smallpox.'

Is there a pause for reflection? If there is, it lasts but a few seconds. I loop the sheet around the bedpost, tie it in another hefty knot, and sling my rope out of the window. The trunk and bags follow. 'Out!' I hiss to Mary. 'Oh, sir,' I call out, 'I am too ill to move. I beg of you, come back another day.'

'Enough, Lady Elmhurst. We've had enough of your tricks and lies. Open the door, if you please.'

‘Sir, I cannot. Have pity on a poor widow.’ I shove Mary towards the window.

‘I can’t. I’m afraid of heights.’ She clings to me like a limpet.

I shake her off.

‘Oh, don’t ask me to do it, milady.’

‘Would you rather I leave you here? Get down that rope, girl.’ I long to slap sense into her, but she is my only ally. I peer out of the window. There is a good six feet or so below the knotted sheets, but if she lands on one of the bags, she’ll have a good soft landing. ‘Come on, Mary. We’ll laugh about this later, I promise you. I’ll give you my blue-spotted muslin.’

‘Very well. And an inside seat in the coach.’

‘Yes, yes, but *go*.’ I shove her out of the window. ‘I fear I shall swoon,’ I add loudly, for the benefit of the creditors outside the door, hoping it explains the silence that results when we have flown the coop.

Mary’s face, like a piteous white flower in the dark, gazes up at me. Her mouth opens. If she is to scream, we are lost, and she seems set to dangle indefinitely in mid-air like some ridiculous spider. I look around the room for something to inspire her descent, and dart back to the window with it. She does scream a little as cold water hits her – doubtless she thinks it is the chamber pot, but even I am not so hardened – and then swears horribly as she lands. The china jug rolls from my hand as I fling myself on to the

rope, there is a loud scraping sound as the bed moves, and I find myself catapulted on top of Mrs Dinsdale's cabbages.

I scramble to my feet. It is raining, of course, and pitch dark, and Mary sobs as she gathers our bags. 'I am giving notice, Lady Elmhurst.'

'Very well, but I shall not pay you a penny.'

She mutters something under her breath, probably a prediction that she will not get paid anyway, and I am sorry to say it is all too likely.

If my hands were not full of my worldly goods, I swear I would box her ears, but she has stuck with me so far, and I need her help. 'Come along. You're a good, brave girl, and remember the blue-spotted muslin. It looks far better on you than it does on me.'

More whimpers from Mary as we haul our belongings through Mrs Dinsdale's vegetable bed, have a brief fight with the laundry on the line and escape into the alley at the back of the lodging house. Stumbling in the dark, we make our way to the street, where I send Mary to find a hackney carriage – I am reluctant to show my face too near the lodgings, lest other creditors are on the prowl. My shoes are quite ruined – I have trodden in some most unpleasant substances – and, oh heavens, is that rustling sound a rat?

Just as I am about to give up on Mary and deciding

which of my bags I should take, for I cannot carry them all myself, a hackney carriage draws up. The driver and I have an acrimonious exchange about the justice of extra charges for the luggage. I am happy to say I win, but then Mary and I must load all the things ourselves, while he snickers and makes comments about bedraggled slatterns. And indeed, from Mary's appearance, that is what we probably both look like. I treat his comments with the contempt they deserve, and we set off, finally, for the early-morning coach that will take us out of London and away from my creditors.

There, another unpleasant surprise awaits. As we are so late, there are only two seats left, but only one of them is inside.

'You promised,' Mary says, and there is mutiny in her voice.

'So I did. Come, fair's fair. We'll cut for the inside seat.' I pull my pack of cards from the capacious reticule with which I travel. 'High I go inside, low you go outside.'

She cuts a king, and cackles with glee as I pull a four. 'High I go inside, low you go outside,' I repeat, and push her towards the coach as she opens her mouth to howl protest. 'And if you don't keep quiet, I'll tell everyone you stole my petticoats – why else would you be wearing four?'

I help her on to the roof of the coach with a

vigorous shove to the arse, hand her the umbrella (I am not totally without feelings) and settle myself inside, opening the book of sermons I carry to repel male attention.

Oh, that I have come to such a pass. I, that diamond of the first water, the former Miss Caroline Duncan, the catch of the season only seven short years ago, and now . . . twice widowed, down on my luck, forced to fight off unkind creditors; and it is true, I did allow the gallant Colonel Rotherhithe to assist in the payment of the rent. He was so very insistent. He even offered to pay my milliner, although I found out later he had not. But then I have always been gracious enough to accept gifts from admirers; why, even Mr Linsley, the gentleman with whom I had a brief *affaire de coeur* before I succumbed to Elmhurst, brought me a basket of mushrooms from the country. I remember their earthy scent and rich, meaty lobes and my stomach growls louder than the carriage rattling over the cobbles.

As for Elmhurst, God damn him and rot him in hell for squandering the money I inherited from dear Bludge, and for dying in such an unnecessary and absurd way, and what a fool I was to love him so. I miss Elmhurst quite dreadfully despite his faults. How degrading it was to have his brother snatch back the family diamonds and sapphires before I could sell them. It is true, though, that his family never liked

me, and said very unpleasant things in my hearing about women of little breeding (meaning me) marrying rich gentlemen with one foot in the grave (meaning my first husband, Viscount Bludge, who was indeed several decades older than me).

And they have continued to say the most dreadful things about me as I have grieved and suffered this past year. There is no family loyalty towards me at all (the stupid fools).

I am most sadly put upon by all, and indeed, if I cannot find some gullible fool with a great deal of money to marry soon, all shall be lost.

I can only hope my latest dark cloud has a silver lining. Perhaps this most recent venture will have a happy outcome for me – no, it *must* have a happy outcome, for things could not get much worse than they are now, as I flee with my possessions and a sulky maid my only (unwilling) companion.

I find the letter from Lady Otterwell in my reticule and read it again. Yes, I have accepted the invitation to their house in the country – I doubt my creditors will follow – but what I have agreed to is worse than anything I envisioned even in my darkest hours.

Lord Otterwell has a longing for theatricals, and so I shall become – oh, the horror – that most vile and depraved of creatures, an *actress*!

Venice, a few weeks earlier

Colonel Maximilian Franklin alias the Reverend Tarquin Biddle alias Vicomte St Germain-d'Aubussy alias Lord Francis Bartholemew alias Sir Rowland Weston alias Viscount Glenadder alias Mr Sebastian Fitzhugh-Churchill alias Count Mikhail Orchovsky alias the Earl of Ballyglenleary, et cetera, et cetera.

Upon other occasions I have appreciated the Contessa's choice of spontaneity over finesse, but when her irate husband's servants throw me into the canal, I regret I did not remove my boots.

I'm dying, sinking into hell, my breath going, dragged down to a dark, noisome abyss, and my last thoughts are of mist and the sun rising like a new copper penny; green fields and the song of a lark against a glittering hazy sky.

God or the devil knows where I am going, but I want to go home.

I am surprised to find that hell is a warm, noisy sort of place where a lot of people, many with high piping voices, chatter incessantly, and I am destined to vomit for all eternity.

'That's it, sir. You'll feel better for it.'

The voice is familiar. Barton, my manservant, is

here too? And those dark eyes ranged around me must belong to imps or devils or some such, with the flicker of firelight in the background. But it's a gentle golden light, not the raging fires I anticipated. As the most recent paroxysm dies away, I become aware that I'm not in fact dead, but I am stark naked beneath some sort of rough blanket, and lying on a – a *table*? Surrounded by Italian children?

Barton, concern on his ugly face, nudges the basin beneath my chin. 'You want to get it all up, sir. You know what's in them canals.'

I do indeed, and am inspired to do as he says.

Later, and after several attempts to sip wine, I take note of my surroundings. There are indeed a fair number of children, ranging in age from a small child barely walking to a girl of about sixteen, who looks vaguely familiar. They gaze at me with unabashed curiosity; apparently I am the evening's entertainment. The room is low-ceilinged, and firelight dances off copper pots and low dark beams, pinkish plastered walls with a saint in an alcove. The air is scented with wood-smoke, tobacco and garlic. Someone, the mother of the brood, I presume, clatters around at the hearth, and a male figure is slumped in a chair, puffing on a pipe.

The oldest girl approaches me and shyly asks in Italian how I am doing.

'It's Maria from the piazza,' Barton says. 'The one you always buy flowers from.'

Flowers for the Contessa – bought with her money. Ah, yes, Maria. Of course I barely noticed her, as generally I only notice women who are rich and beddable, but she apparently saved my life. I clasp her hand and thank her. She giggles and tells me how she was riding home in her brother Giovanni's gondola when they found milord in the water, apparently dead, but I puked as soon as he pulled me aboard. Encouraged by this sign of life, they brought me to their home. Maria then sent Giovanni for Barton, suspecting that something untoward had happened for the English milord to end up fully bare-arsed and three-quarters drowned. She giggles mightily at this point. And now, if milord is feeling better, dinner is to be served and the family needs the table. Milord's servant has brought trousers for milord. Barton, enterprising and capable man that he is, has packed our things, suspecting that Venice and I have outworn each other's welcome.

Later that evening, with the family asleep around us, Barton and I confer in whispers by the fireplace. Indeed, so sore is my throat that I can barely talk.

'Paris, then, sir? Or how about Vienna?'

I look up from my writing case, tossing billets-doux into the fire. 'No. It's been too long. I want to go home.' My fingers search for the hidden spring in the writing case, and with a quiet click the secret compartment opens.

Barton raises his scarred eyebrows as gold glints in the firelight. 'Ireland?'

'No. England.' England. It must be the damn weakness from nearly drowning that makes me want to weep.

He shakes his head. 'Well, I suppose no one knows you in England. It's as good a place as any. Near twenty years since I was there, too. What shall we do there? The usual?'

I nod and lay a handful of coins on the table for the family who have saved my life and shared their meagre food with us. It is the least I can do, for I plan to steal away before dawn.

'And your name this time, sir?'

My name.

'My own name.'

He looks at me blankly.

'My name is Nicholas Congrevance.' It is a stranger's name on my tongue.

'Yes, sir. Of course it is, sir.' He winks at me.