

## Prologue

‘Comtesse?’

Henri’s voice was barely a whisper, his touch on her bedchamber door a scratch; yet of course she heard him. Even by daylight, the Comtesse’s senses were keener than those of the living. ‘Enter,’ she commanded.

He straightened his coat in automatic reflex and entered with a bow. The Comtesse de Angouleme was sitting at her desk, a sheaf of business papers scattered across it, but the pen she was twirling between her fingers had been idle long enough that the ink had dried on the nib. Twin gilt candlesticks lit the room, their flames leaping at the sudden draught of air. The violet brocade curtains were drawn to shut out the sunlight; it might not burn the Comtesse as the superstitious claimed, but she’d never liked it. No vampire did.

She looked up from her papers to consider him with her pansy-dark eyes, and as always his heart seemed to seize up in pure admiration. Unlike the raw ugliness of the world outside and the Revolution, *she* was perfect. Her golden hair, her beautiful tiny hands, as white and unsullied as the hands of angels, her innocent face . . . The pale muslin dress that she wore, lace foaming around her throat and over her wrists, made her look as untouchable as a saint.

But now the Revolution had shattered the proper order of things, nobody was safe. If they could kill the King, they could kill anyone.

‘Madame . . .’ He hesitated, unwilling to share the bad news.

‘Speak freely, Henri,’ she said. ‘I need to know the worst.’

‘Three more of the footmen have left, madame,’ he said, ‘and two of the maids. Worse still, there are men from Paris at the National Guard outpost in the village. Jeanne reported that they’re wearing tricolour sashes.’

In the beginning, the tricolour had represented self-aggrandizing peasants and overly-educated fools with grandiose ideas above their station – of a ‘right to equal status’ and ‘freedom from tyranny’. But over the last year, their so-called ideals had descended to brutal murder of the very nobles who paid their wages and whom nature had set in authority over them. Now, word of the tricolour daggered fear into the hearts of even the staunchest aristocrats. And vampires were the purest aristocrats of all . . .

The pen snapped between the Comtesse’s fingers. ‘Men from the Tribunal on *my* property! Send word to little Pierre – he must have them cleared out. Tell them I’ve gone to Austria, or perhaps Prussia. It doesn’t matter where, as long as they leave. Heaven knows, I pay him enough.’

It was typical of the Comtesse to think of the local mayor as ‘little Pierre’, Henri reflected. She’d known him since he was a baby, and though he’d grown into a hard-fisted, hard-drinking man, he’d never be anything more than a child to her. ‘I will do as you command, madame,’ he said gravely. ‘But I fear the situation is perilously desperate. Will you not consider going to Austria in truth? Or to England? They say that aristocrats are received well there.’

‘Only if they can pay,’ the Comtesse said flatly. ‘Once my money runs out, once I’ve sold my jewels, what then? And that’s if I *could* leave the country. The Tribunal are watching the ports and the borders. Too many of my kind have already tried to run and failed. No, I won’t abandon my property. This land is mine. These people are *mine*.’ Her teeth flashed in a snarl. ‘Get rid of the Tribunal men, Henri. I don’t care how you do it. If I so much as see them—’

She suddenly fell silent. It took Henri a moment longer to hear what his mistress had already heard: running in the corridor outside, and heavier, booted footsteps beyond that.

The Comtesse’s private maid, Demetrice, thrust the door open and stumbled in without bothering to knock. Tears streaked her face, and her neat blue dress bore marks on the shoulders and sleeves. ‘Mistress, you must flee. The Tribunal men are here!’

The Comtesse sprang to her feet. 'Have those brutes mishandled you, Demetrice? Come here, child, let me see . . .'

'You should be more concerned for yourself, citizen.' The man who appeared in the doorway, flanked by a mob of followers, was meagre and unimpressive; his plain black clothing was relieved only by that detestable tricolour sash. His hair was dark and unpowdered, and his face, Henri decided, resembled nothing so much as that of a weasel. 'It is you, after all, that we have come here to visit.'

'You will address me with my proper rank!' the Comtesse said sharply.

The man brushed dust from his sleeve. 'If we are to speak of ranks, then I am Citizen Chauvelin, an agent of the Committee of Public Safety. You, on the other hand, are no more than a *ci-devant* aristocrat: a useless relic of a bygone era. In our free France, there are no more peasants, no more nobility – only equality between men. Your titles are worthless, citizen.'

'How dare you speak like that to the Comtesse!' Henri moved to put himself between the threatening mob and his mistress. 'I demand that you leave this place at once, or our guards—'

'You have nobody to call,' Chauvelin cut in. 'The servants of this household are under arrest or have fled. This woman is accused of treason against the Republic and bribery of officials. You, citizen, may be under her influence, in which case the charges against *you* will be reduced. But I advise you to stand aside while she is taken into custody.'

Two men with tricolour sashes stepped forward, carrying shackles interlaced with wild garlic flowers. Henri hesitated; he had faithfully served the Comtesse for years, as had his father and grandfather before him. But these Tribunal men were no idle threat, and he had no desire to be imprisoned in some dank city prison.

The Comtesse stood fast. 'Henri, Demetrice – protect me!' she commanded.

A sudden fury fired Henri as though he'd just drunk a carafe of hot wine. Every other thought faded, leaving him with a single burning passion – he must protect the Comtesse, no

matter what. Without hesitation he flung himself at the approaching men. Demetrice joined him, screaming and flailing, her nails seeking their eyes.

'Enough!'

Chauvelin drew his pistol, cocked it and fired at the Comtesse. The detonation was impossibly loud in the curtained room. Henri would have ignored it – his mistress was invulnerable to bullets, after all – but she *screamed*. Drawn by an impulse he couldn't control, Henri turned from the man he'd just punched to see the Comtesse crumpled on the floor. Blood ran from her shoulder, soaking her white dress.

The distraction was enough for the other men to subdue Henri and Demetrice. In the mob, Henri recognized people from the village, other servants from the chateau – people he'd known all his *life*. But they held him down as though he was some demented madman, looking at him with combined pity and fear.

Chauvelin coolly exchanged his empty pistol with a loaded one from one of his subordinates. 'Chain her,' he ordered. 'And open the curtains. Let's have some light in here.'

The Comtesse's eyes were wide with pain. 'How – *how* . . .' she gasped, bloody tears running down her face.

'The Committee of Public Safety has authorized the use of wooden bullets.' He watched, pistol cocked, as his men chained her hands behind her back.

Henri struggled helplessly as the curtains were torn open. Dust cascaded down as the heavy old brocade was forced back to let harsh sunlight into the room. Even though it couldn't harm her, the Comtesse turned her face away, wilting in her captors' hands.

'What now?' she demanded. The flow of blood down her arm was slowing. 'Will you take me to Paris for trial? I've heard that's what you *peasants* do.'

'That will be . . . unnecessary.' Chauvelin finally lowered his pistol. 'Normally you would go to Paris, and to the prison or the guillotine. However, for blood-drinkers like yourself who have resisted arrest, I'm authorized to conduct an immediate trial before nightfall. The Republic

cannot permit its enemies to escape. Before the sun has set, you will face the stake and the guillotine.'

'You can't do this to me!' The Comtesse was weakened by the sun, but it still took additional men to restrain her as she was dragged towards the door. 'I'm the Comtesse de Angouleme! I've held these lands for centuries. I have friends in Paris. They'll have you killed for this!'

'You have no friends in Paris any more, citizen,' Chauvelin said. 'And you'll receive far more justice from the Republic than any common citizen of France did before the Revolution.' He removed a snuffbox from his pocket and took a pinch of snuff as his men half dragged, half carried Henri and Demetrice after her. 'These days, citizen, the Republic rules in France. You aristocrats and blood-drinkers, you *sanguinocrats* are no longer welcome – and will no longer be tolerated.'

## Chapter One

'You mean they don't even wear no trousers?' Sarah asked, shocked.

'They don't wear any *breeches*,' Melanie corrected her. 'All the *aristos* – that's what they call the nobs over there when they're being rude about it – called the ordinary people *sans-culottes* because of how they weren't wearing nice knee-breeches. But frilly clothes don't do them much good now they're all getting their heads cut off. Ain't – *isn't* – that so, Nellie?'

Eleanor didn't look up from drying the china. Slacking at one's job in the Baroness of Basing's household was a bad idea, even amongst her fellow servants in the kitchen downstairs. She'd spent enough time working her way up to an indoors maid position, and the possibility of serving as an actual lady's maid was almost within her grasp. She wasn't going to ruin her chances now.

'That's pretty much it,' she agreed, picking up another fancy plate, one of the set with pink designs and gilt edging. 'Though the papers say the citizens are all in rags mostly anyhow, except for the ones in their Assembly.'

'It tears my heart,' Mrs Dommings said, kneading the dough with powerful hands, 'to hear you talking about what they're all wearing and not about what those evil Frenchies are doing. A nation what kills their own king is cursed by God and man alike.' She punched the dough again. 'If it weren't for that heroic Scarlet Pimpernel saving the poor persecuted nobility from the guillotine, hundreds more of them'd be dead. Dead for good, if you count the vampire ones. I don't know how he does it.'

Eleanor and Melanie rolled their eyes at each other, suppressing sighs. Mrs Dommings was the world's worst bore when she got onto the subject of the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel and how he rescued innocent aristocrats from having their heads cut off. What was the point of discussing the man when the only thing anyone knew about him was that he was mysterious? Even rescued French aristocrats knew nothing about him – or claimed to know nothing.

Sarah began to peel carrots for the servants' supper. She and Melanie were part of the mansion's day service; the night service would come on duty later. Lady Sophie rarely ate regular meals, but servants needed sustenance, like any other human. Still, when you had a vampire for your mistress, you worked by night and you didn't complain. 'I wish we didn't have to learn French. It doesn't make no . . .' She paused and corrected her grammar at a glare from Mrs Dommings. 'That is, it doesn't make *any* sense.'

'The Baroness likes having the household able to speak French for when she has French visitors,' Eleanor said, conscious of her position as the senior maid of the three. 'Besides, with all the aristocrats leaving France, maybe we'll end up working for one of them.' More importantly, if one couldn't speak French then one had no hope of rising in the household to work above stairs. Eleanor had no intention of spending her entire life in the kitchen.

‘That’s a proper attitude, Nellie,’ Mrs Dommings said. ‘Not that her ladyship ever likes to have staff leave, but who knows? We all said that what’s happened in France couldn’t happen, and it did. Just goes to show. Their king dead, their poor queen and prince and all their friends prisoners. Shocking.’

Eleanor nodded, and kept a tight grip on her thoughts. *I just need to keep working. If I can learn French like her ladyship wants, if I can be good enough at embroidery, good enough at serving, then perhaps some day I can get out of this kitchen . . .*

Her ladyship the Baroness of Basing might be a good mistress – but it was also true that she didn’t like staff to leave. And Eleanor wanted more than life in Basing. A lady’s maid might travel to London with her ladyship, and might even be able to find a situation there with one of her ladyship’s friends, or – in Eleanor’s wildest dreams – employment as a modiste and embroiderer. Nobody could accuse her ladyship of not having friends, both living and vampire. There were two of them visiting at this very moment, and the gentleman was *definitely* wearing breeches. Embroidered satin ones, too.

‘How’re you getting along with young William, Nellie?’ Mrs Dommings asked. She tried to make it sound casual, but her beady eyes were sharp and alert. ‘Haven’t heard much from you about him lately.’

‘Haven’t been seeing him much lately, ma’am,’ Eleanor said.

‘Well, you know what her ladyship says,’ Mrs Dommings pressed. ‘It’s better to marry than to burn.’

‘That may be so, but it wasn’t me who was burning,’ Eleanor said. She put down the last of the dishes, aware of Melanie and Sarah trading glances and suppressing sniggers. She wished she could direct the conversation back to the mysterious Pimpernel. ‘Honest, ma’am, he was the one as did all the running, and I’ve been doing nothing but telling him no.’

‘That’s as may be, but no man ever went running after a woman without her leading him on,’ Mrs Dommings said firmly. ‘If it wasn’t for your mother being so far away in her ladyship’s country estate, I’m sure that his mother would already have been talking to her.’

A chill ran down Eleanor’s spine. She’d thought that she’d been clear with William the last time they spoke. All it had been was a couple of strolls together. He wasn’t a bad man – but if their parents, or worse, her ladyship, wanted them married, then she wouldn’t have a choice. She was already twenty-two. A lot of the maids were married by that age. The walls of the old house seemed to close around her like the sides of a tomb.

Of course she *could* say no; marriage in church needed both man and wife to say yes to the vicar, after all. But her life wouldn’t be worth living, with her mother against her, all the older servants saying she’d led him on, her ladyship frowning on her behaviour – small chance of Eleanor ever getting a higher position or going to London if that happened. It was easy for people to say you just had to stand up for yourself, but harder actually to do it when you had to live with the consequences. Maybe rich ladies could write pamphlets about the rights of women – but Eleanor would lay money they didn’t have to spend their time cleaning the grates, drying the dishes or peeling the carrots . . .

Her black mood was broken by the creak of the kitchen door swinging open. She hastily grabbed for the final plate to give it an unnecessary polish, not wanting to look idle, before glancing over to see who it was.

Mr Barker the butler surveyed the kitchen like a general looking over his regiment of soldiers, thumbs lodged in his waistcoat pockets. His nose was red; he must have been at the gin again, and still thinking nobody noticed. ‘Her ladyship has called for wine, ratafia and biscuits for her guests,’ he announced, ‘and the usual for herself.’

‘It’s your turn, Sarah,’ Melanie said, her tone somewhere between glee and malice. ‘Go fetch the lancet and cup. I showed you where they were.’



White around the lips, Sarah scuttled over to the cupboard which held her ladyship's private cups. Eleanor didn't really *want* to watch, but there was a perverse fascination to the whole process. Charitably she fetched a clean linen rag as Sarah quickly cleaned the long thin knife with water from the boiling kettle on the hob. The new maid might still be coming to terms with French and proper grammar, but she'd grasped this part of her job fast enough. After all, her ladyship was a vampire – and vampires needed more than biscuits to sustain themselves.

'Get a move on,' Mr Barker scolded. 'Do you think she's going to wait all day? And you, Nellie, mind that you don't get any of the blood on your clothing. You'll be taking it up to her.'

'Me, sir?' Eleanor was delighted – this was a chance to prove she could manage the work – but also surprised. Waiting on her ladyship with guests present was usually reserved for the upper housemaids and servants. Despite her best efforts, she'd never yet been granted the opportunity.

'Her ladyship asked for you specially,' Mr Barker said. He patted her on the shoulder in an avuncular way. 'Now don't get panicky, girl. Just remember your lessons and your manners and you'll do perfectly well. The drinks are on a tray outside in the corridor – I've set the glasses ready. All you need to do is put the tray down on the table, make your curtsy, and leave.'

'Yes, sir,' Eleanor said, already imagining all the things that could go wrong.

Sarah gasped as the lancet went into her vein. She gritted her teeth as the blood trickled out into one of the little glass cups that the Baroness liked to use.

'That's it, dearie,' Mrs Dommings said gently. She always turned motherly when she was supervising the girls letting blood – probably because *she* never got asked for it any more, Melanie had once said spitefully. Her ladyship preferred the younger girls. 'That's right. Now put the knife down and make sure you bandage yourself properly.'

Mr Barker turned Eleanor around to inspect her. Eleanor was frantically grateful she was wearing her better gown today – a nice grey-blue muslin with a clean white collar. Her white apron was still spotless, despite the summer heat and the kitchen work, and her hair – pale

blonde which refused to turn golden, however many times she washed it with chamomile – was neat and tidy. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘You’ll do. Have you got the biscuits ready, Melanie?’

‘All ready, sir.’ Melanie’s tone was deferential, but the glance she shot at Eleanor was pure jealousy. ‘Here they are.’

Eleanor collected the plate of biscuits, the side-plates, and the cup of blood. ‘Is there anything else, sir?’

‘That’s all of it,’ Mr Barker said. ‘Now get a move on – it’s been five minutes since her ladyship rang.’

Eleanor hurried up the stairs, halting in the servants’ corridor to arrange the refreshments on the tray. It also gave her an opportunity to overhear the remaining conversation in the kitchen.

‘I don’t see why *she* got asked,’ Mrs Dommings snapped. ‘It’s not like Nellie has talent for anything other than sewing. Why not Jill or Susan?’

‘Her ladyship asked for her specially,’ Mr Barker said in a tone which shut down the conversation. ‘And I’m not going to argue with her ladyship. Are you?’

Her ladyship was in the front lounge with her guests; that was where she always received visitors in the afternoon. Eleanor paused outside the room to put down her tray and check that her hands were clean. It was a pity that there weren’t any mirrors around, as there would be in houses owned by people who were, well, *alive* – but one got used to it.

Eleanor took a deep breath to steady her nerves. Her mind was unhelpfully supplying images of all the things she might do wrong. She might trip over the carpet the moment she entered the room. She might spill the ratafia and biscuits all over the guests – or worse, the blood all over her ladyship. She might say something she shouldn’t. She might not say something she should. She might slip on a rug, slide all the way across the floor, crash into the

windows, tear down the curtains and break the glass. And *any* of those furnishings were worth more than a year of her salary.

A bray of inane male laughter burst from the room, audible in the corridor and probably in the next few rooms as well. It gave Eleanor a sort of courage; she might be just a maid in this household, but at least she wasn't *stupid*. Pulling herself together, she walked in.

Light fell across half the room from those windows which had their curtains open, so that the guests sat in a burst of sunlight. However, her ladyship was shielded from the brightest rays with heavy velvet drapes. Vampires might be able to walk in the sunlight, but they didn't like it. As her ladyship caught sight of Eleanor, she gestured for the maid to come forward with the tray of refreshments. Her ladyship's hair was heavily powdered – no changes in fashion for *her* – and her skin was just as spotlessly pale, like cream. She wore light grey and lavender silks, her wide skirt spreading out in a sea of complex embroidery, and her face was so perfectly serene that one would never imagine she couldn't use a mirror to paint it in the morning.

The two guests, by contrast, wore the height of current fashion, and both were living, breathing humans. The man was tall – no, positively gigantic, Eleanor decided, at least six foot – with gleaming blond hair and sparkling blue eyes, but a stupefied look of vagueness which spoiled the otherwise polished effect. His cream silk coat and breeches were as expensively cut as her ladyship's own clothes, and embroidered with an elegance which made Eleanor wish she could examine it more closely. He lounged in his chair, apparently never having been told that it was polite to sit up straight.

The woman with him was very modern, with her hair barely powdered. Its natural red-gold glowed in the sunlight in a way that made Eleanor burn with envy. She was wearing the latest style of dress: a high-waisted flowing muslin frock and silk sash in the same shade of cream as the man, with not a single pannier to bulk out her skirt. She laughed in response to something, and the man – her husband? – smiled at her.

Eleanor desperately ran through the rules of etiquette in her head. *Guests first, then her ladyship.* She bobbed a curtsey to the man, and offered the tray.

He looked up at her with a lazy smile as his hand closed round one of the glasses – and then his face froze, the smile slipping off it like butter from a hot plate. His eyes narrowed with sudden, sharp intelligence. But seconds later that focus was gone, and he was blinking vaguely again, ferrying glasses and decanters from the tray to the side table. ‘Deuce take it, my dear Sophie,’ he said to her ladyship, ‘you might have warned us!’

His female companion followed his gaze, and her eyes widened. ‘Pardieu!’ she exclaimed, in a distinctly French accent. ‘She’s the spitting image. Who would believe it?’

Eleanor stood there like a stump, her surprise fading to annoyance, as the guests scrutinized her with decidedly undignified interest. Apparently she looked like someone they knew – that much was obvious – but that didn’t mean they had to be *rude* about it. But what else should she expect from the aristocracy? They’d behave that way and call it honesty, but if someone like *her* expressed their feelings it’d be called insolence and she’d lose her job. She couldn’t afford that. So she kept her gaze down, and offered her ladyship the cup of blood.

‘You see?’ Lady Sophie said as she picked up her drink. She took a sip, and the fresh blood showed scarlet on her lips before she licked it away. ‘I told you that I could surprise you, Percy.’

‘Faith, but that’s true. I believe the last time I was that astounded was when my lovely Marguerite said yes to me.’ The man poured ratafia for the woman, then wine for himself. Then he actually addressed Eleanor. ‘You must excuse us, my dear. We were astonished by your face, that’s all. A minor resemblance to a person we both know. I trust you’ll forgive us.’

‘Of course, milord,’ Eleanor mumbled, stunned that he’d actually bothered to apologize to her. She wondered who it was that she looked like.

Her ladyship patted Eleanor’s arm, her flesh cold through the layers of glove and sleeve even in the heat of summer. ‘Nellie’s been in my service the last few years. She’s a good

obedient girl, and very skilled at embroidery. You were admiring my gloves earlier, Marguerite. Your work, Nellie, I think?’

‘Yes, milady,’ Eleanor said, with a surge of genuine pride this time.

‘Good enough for London,’ Marguerite said, smiling at Eleanor. ‘You really should visit us more often, my dear Sophie. London society could use a little of your judgement.’

‘Why do I need London when I have you to bring me all the news?’ her ladyship asked. She put her empty cup down on Eleanor’s tray. ‘There, run along now, Nellie . . . Besides, my dear Marguerite, I hear that London society is currently full of French émigrés, escapees, and other visitors from that poor country. Tell me, is it true what they say about the Scarlet Pimpernel?’

The man – Percy – snorted as Eleanor sidled towards the door. ‘Zounds, the fellow’s a positive bore! London talks of nothing else. I composed a small poem on the subject.’

‘Ah yes,’ her ladyship said. ‘I heard of that one. They seek him here, they seek him there . . .’

Percy waved a pale, long-fingered hand. ‘Sometimes I’m inspired, m’dear. But those of us who’d rather discuss more important matters, such as the cut of our coats or the height of our cravats, are shunned, utterly shunned. Even my beloved wife prefers to discuss him over dinner . . .’

Eleanor closed the door behind her, cutting off the conversation. Temptation gnawed at her. She wasn’t particularly interested in the Scarlet Pimpernel or French aristocrats, but she *did* want to find out why they’d been so startled by her appearance – and who she resembled. Maybe they hadn’t been willing to discuss it while she was in the room, but now she wasn’t there . . .

The servants below stairs had their own private conspiracies and secrets: how to procure extra food, where one could skimp on the cleaning, and for occasions like this – when her ladyship or upstairs servants were keeping secrets – where to listen in. The Yellow Room

had been named for its lemon-striped wallpaper and topaz curtains. It was directly next to the front lounge, and the two fireplaces shared a chimney. Eleanor knew there wouldn't be anyone cleaning in there at this hour. She slipped into the room quietly, setting her tray with the bloodstained cup down on a side table, and crept across to the big fireplace. In the summer heat there were no fires – and no ashes – to worry about.

Murmurs resolved into clear voices. Her ladyship's was the first that Eleanor could distinguish. ' . . . property's an issue, of course. Though I do my best to help . . . '

'England's a deuced big place.' That was Percy's voice. 'And the English people are a friendly lot, my dear Sophie. They will surely sympathize with victims who've been hounded out of their own country just because of their birth. After all, one cannot help being of noble birth.'

'For as long as the victim's money lasts, perhaps,' her ladyship replied. Her tone was surprisingly sharp. 'But the declaration of war against France in February may have put things on a different footing. Public attitudes are likely to change. And what of the Scarlet Pimpernel? Will he and his League continue to ply their trade?'

'I don't know why you're asking me,' Percy said airily. 'If I must be serious, I reserve it for something far more important. Like my—'

'Yes, your clothing. I know. But consider, my friends, the plight of those vampires still trapped in France. The living aristocrats can dissimulate and hide themselves among the teeming mobs, but what chance do those like me have, faced with the stake and guillotine? Surely the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel should take this into account when selecting targets for rescue.'

This time it was Marguerite who answered. 'From what I've heard, Sophie, the League helps all those it can, but its guiding principle must be to succour those in immediate danger. Sadly there are far too many such victims in France at the moment – aristocrat or commoner, rich or poor, living or vampire.'

‘Some in more danger than others,’ Lady Sophie said. ‘Especially those prisoners currently in the Temple . . .’

There was a pause, and Eleanor leaned in closer. ‘So tell me, my dear Percy, would you like to borrow my little embroideress?’

‘That’s a demned generous offer of you,’ Percy answered. The room on the other side of the wall seemed to grow very silent. ‘Not that I’m objecting in the least, but why?’

Her ladyship laughed. ‘Have I told you that I knew your father and your grandfather, and generations before that?’

‘Only about every time you see me,’ Percy said lazily. ‘Not that I’m objecting. I’m sure they’d be glad to be remembered by someone who’s been one of the prime beauties of England for the last few centuries.’

‘They were good men. They understood the value of our place in society – that there must be nobility to rule, just as there are others to follow. I am sure that the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel – not that I know the identity of such men or women, of *course* – would stand by those values and do their utmost, as dear Marguerite said, to help those who need it.’ Her ladyship paused. ‘I believe that you may be stamped from the same mould, Percy.’

He chuckled. ‘Sink me, my dear Sophie, but if you say more then I’m liable to melt from embarrassment—’

‘You have no need to tell us that my husband is a good man,’ Marguerite cut in. ‘He is too English to accept such praise, but I will do it for him. He is the *best* of men, madam.’

Her ladyship laughed. ‘I don’t doubt it. In fact, I’m quite sure that a sterling man such as yourself is capable of passing on a message to any incognito paragons – what is that phrase they’re quoting these days, *a little wayside flower?* – or knows someone who will.’

‘Oh, I know everyone who *matters*,’ Percy answered. ‘And if I don’t, then my beloved Marguerite here surely does.’

‘If you care to put it that way,’ Lady Sophie said. ‘But sincerely, my dear Percy—’

‘Don’t be sincere! I never am. It gives a person wrinkles.’

‘Be serious, my dear boy, and don’t interrupt for a moment. I’ve been talking to some of our recent unwilling émigrés – well, shall we say that not all of them are as discreet as they should be? Between that, and the existing rumours of the Scarlet Pimpernel, one could point one’s finger at a number of people who might be involved in certain French escapades. Believe me, I’m not going to say anything, but—’

Eleanor leaned into the fireplace, her heart in her mouth, straining to catch the slightest whisper . . . and heard a noise from behind her. The handle of the door was turning.

Panic seized her. She sprang to her feet and bolted across the room. There was no time to reach one of the other exits. Instead she flattened herself against the wall behind the opening door, one hand pressed against her lips.

She couldn’t see who entered, but she recognized the heavy breathing. It was Mr Barker. He must have come looking for her when she didn’t return to the kitchen.

Eleanor reviewed her situation grimly. Being caught listening to her ladyship’s private conversations with guests would utterly ruin her chances of advancement. Even if Mr Barker didn’t actually tell Lady Sophie, *he’d* know – and it’d take Eleanor years to work off this sort of disgrace. She’d be peeling carrots and providing blood for her ladyship until she grew too old for that, and then she’d just be peeling carrots. But as long as he didn’t open the door any further, she might still get away with this. She hadn’t left any traces by the fireplace. She could claim that she’d been delayed somehow while returning with her ladyship’s cup. And she was good at plausible explanations . . .

Her eyes were drawn to where the bloodstained cup sat on its tray, on the table by the fireplace.

Mr Barker might not notice. Eleanor formulated very detailed and fervent prayers for his temporary blindness . . .

The door closed.



Heart hammering, Eleanor silently raced across the room to pick up the tray, then ran to one of the other doors. It opened on a different corridor that would let her circle back to the kitchen. If she could think of a good excuse for her lateness, she might *just* pull this off.

She stumbled back into the long kitchen, and gave her best smile to Mrs Dommings and the other maids. 'All done, ma'am,' she said.

'You took your time.' Mrs Dommings frowned. 'I'd expect you to be quicker when you're running errands, Nellie.'

'Maybe her ladyship wanted her to join in the conversation,' Melanie sniped.

'Her ladyship spoke very kindly of my embroidery,' Eleanor said smugly. True enough, and if she could use it as an excuse for those extra minutes . . . 'I'm very sorry, Mrs Dommings. I didn't mean to keep you waiting.'

Mr Barker appeared from where he'd been hidden by the shadows. Judgement showed in the heavy lines of his face, and the set of his shoulders threatened punishment rather than mercy. 'So tell me, Nellie. Did you happen to step into the Yellow Room while you were on your way back?'

Eleanor's throat went dry. He *had* seen the tray and cup. He'd been waiting for her to return and incriminate herself. She desperately sought for an excuse, but none came. 'I – that is, I was feeling a little ill for a moment, sir. I just put the things down while I was seeing to it . . .'

Everyone's attention was on her as she fumbled for words. Abruptly the sound of a fan snapping open broke their focus. All of them, Eleanor included, turned to see her ladyship standing at the head of the stairs leading down into the kitchen.

All the maids hastily bobbed curtsies. Mrs Dommings creaked into a more mature one, while Mr Barker inclined his head. It was protective behaviour on their part as much as proper deference; her ladyship *never* ventured below stairs. 'May I be of assistance, milady?' Mr Barker said.

‘Actually, it’s Nellie I’ve come for. Dear Percy and Marguerite are in need of a seamstress, so I’ve offered to lend her to them for a few months. Do you think the household can spare her, Barker?’

Mr Barker gave Eleanor a judgemental glance that made her want to murder him. But to her surprise, he said, ‘I think the household can manage well enough, milady. Shall I make arrangements for her transport to Richmond?’

Lady Sophie nodded, grey eyes luminous in her pale face. Here in the kitchen, a place for living humans, she was entirely out of place – a pallid ghost, however beautiful, among living people. ‘See to it.’

A moment later she was gone.

‘A word with you, Nellie,’ Mr Barker said, not asking for her permission any more than her ladyship had when sending her away. He propelled her to the yard outside, away from curious eavesdroppers.

‘Sir?’ Eleanor said, wondering if the thunderbolt was about to hit. She couldn’t hope for her ladyship to walk in a *second* time.

He shut the door behind them, blocking off the noise and smells of the kitchen. In the yard, the August heat was like a hammer. ‘That was why you were listening, wasn’t it? You heard her discussing your position in the household and you wanted to know more.’

Eleanor looked at the tips of his polished shoes, hoping that a show of humility would mollify him. ‘I . . . can’t say, sir.’

‘You can’t and you shouldn’t.’ He lifted her chin, forcing her to look him in the eyes. ‘Listen to me very carefully, Nellie. You’re a good girl and you work hard.’ His breath smelled of gin. ‘I’m not saying that a servant never listens in on their master or mistress. I’m saying that a good servant never gets *caught* listening. I was a footman once, so I know how it is. You’re going to someone else’s household, and you’re going to represent us there. I want you to do

your very best. You do *not* want to embarrass yourself or her ladyship. You know what happens to maids who are turned away without a character, don't you? You know where they end up.'

Eleanor was about to stammer a response of *yes, sir* or *no, sir* – as soon as she could decide which was most appropriate – and then she realized that his hand was trembling very slightly.

*He's afraid too.* Understanding seized her; it was like suddenly seeing an abyss open in front of her. *I always thought that upper servants like Mrs Dommings and Mr Barker were secure, but they're just as afraid as we are . . .*

Eleanor bit her lip. 'I'll do my very best to be a credit to this household and work as hard as I can.' *And maybe, the thought played in the back of her mind, if I do a good enough job I might get promoted, or even more . . .*

He released her, waving her to the kitchen. 'Get back to work, girl. I've got things to see to.'

Eleanor nodded and obeyed. After all, this was the only way she was going to get out of here. Away from Basing, away from her ladyship's control, away from the narrow four walls of a life in service where nothing would ever change . . .

Still, perhaps she shouldn't be wishing for change. Look at France, after all. Things could always be worse.