



# Chapter One

## The London Fever Hospital, Islington 1874

The cold passionless light of early morning filtered through the narrow windows of the female ward, and the overpowering smell of carbolic floated in a miasma above the freshly scrubbed floor. The eerie silence was broken by an occasional feverish moan and the rasp of laboured breathing from the regimented rows of iron bedsteads. Following in Sister's brisk footsteps, a young houseman struggled through a haze of sheer exhaustion to complete his ward round. He had already been on duty for seventy-two hours and had at least another twelve to survive before he could even think of sleep.

'Is there any hope for this one, Dr Harcourt?' Sister stopped by the next bed and tidied the tumbled sheets, smoothing them to pristine glassiness with a practised hand.

Dr Harcourt studied the patient's temperature chart and he frowned. 'It's too early to say, Sister, but I'd say her chances are slim.'

Inclining her head slightly, the nurse was unsurprised. She had seen many patients succumb to the dreaded typhoid fever. 'We can but hope and pray for her, the poor soul.'

'Have any relatives come forward to claim her?' Dr Harcourt brushed a stray lock of dark hair from his eyes, forcing his tired brain to concentrate. 'Do we know her name?'

'No, doctor. There were few survivors from the sunken vessel and she was only wearing her night-clothes when she was taken to Bart's. They said that there was nothing about her person which would identify her.'

'All alone in the world,' he murmured. 'That is sad indeed.' He lifted the girl's wrist, examining the palm as he took her pulse. 'This is not the hand of a working woman. I'd say this girl has never done a hard day's work in her short life.' Gently he laid the limp hand back on the coverlet, and he suppressed a sigh. It was difficult to remain detached and professional when faced with such a tragedy. He had three sisters of his own, the youngest of whom was probably the same age as this survivor of a collision on the river in which more than fifty souls were known to have perished. The schooner *Caroline*, laden with cargo from the East Indies and just an hour or two from port, had been struck by a steamship in thick fog, and had sunk within minutes in the polluted water near the Beckton sewage outfall. Bodies were still being washed up on the foreshore, most of them totally unrecognisable.

Dr Harcourt noted the patient's temperature on the chart and hooked it over the rail at the foot of the bed. Slowly he dragged his scattered thoughts back to the present, but as he observed the outline of the girl's emaciated body beneath the covers he could not help

being affected by how pathetically small and vulnerable she looked. Despite her sickly pallor and sunken cheeks, the heart-shaped face retained traces of her youth and undoubted former beauty. He glanced at the nurse's rigidly controlled expression, noting with some surprise that her lips were moving as if in prayer. They had done everything known to medical science in order to save the girl's life – now it was up to a higher power. Despite his strict Protestant upbringing, Giles Harcourt had seen too much suffering to be able to believe unconditionally in a merciful God. Even so, he too offered up a silent prayer for the girl. It seemed such a criminal waste for a young life to be snuffed out before it had barely begun.

'The next few hours will be critical, Sister,' he murmured in answer to her unspoken question. 'Should anyone come to see her you may allow them in.'

'Yes, doctor.' The nurse made a move towards the next bed, hesitating and glancing over her shoulder with one winged eyebrow raised when the doctor did not immediately follow her. She too was tired and hungry. It had been a long night and her feet ached miserably. She yearned for the relative peace and quiet of the tiny ward kitchen where she could enjoy a refreshing cup of hot, sweet tea and a slice of buttered toast, but she was too well schooled in the rigid discipline of her profession to allow her impatience to show in front of the young houseman. She was, after all, just a nurse and must always defer to the superior intellect of the male physicians, even the junior doctors

like this pale-faced young man who looked as though he was going to collapse at any moment. She stood with her hands folded meekly in front of her and her eyes cast down, but in her imagination she could hear the singing of the kettle on the gas ring and smell the heady fragrance of Darjeeling as boiling water was poured onto the tea leaves.

In spite of his desperate need to sleep, and entering an almost dream-like trance, Dr Harcourt found himself wishing that the girl's delicate, translucent eyelids would flutter open to reveal what he was certain would be a pair of blue eyes. But they remained stubbornly closed as if weighed down by the crescents of thick, corn-coloured eyelashes that rested on bruised smudges above sweet cheekbones. Her hair had not been shaved, as had been the custom in past times, but had been confined to a white linen cap, and escaping tendrils of sunlight-gold gave a tantalising clue as to what this fragile creature must have looked like before the shipwreck that had almost cheated her of life.

The sister could stand it no longer and she tut-tutted beneath her breath, hastily covering her lapse of etiquette by tucking the girl's stick-thin arm back beneath the covers. 'I doubt if anyone will come to see her after all this time, doctor. It's been nearly three weeks since the accident.'

Dr Harcourt came back to earth with a jolt. 'Yes, of course,' he said hurriedly. 'Just make certain that she is kept well hydrated, Sister. I'll stop by again before I go off duty this evening.' He forced his weary legs into motion and he moved on to the next bed where another

woman, this time much older and almost certainly terminal, lay moaning softly in her delirium. She was, the doctor decided, noting the sickly colour of her skin and the shallowness of each painful breath, much closer to meeting her maker than she had been when he had examined her last evening. 'I think this one will not see the light of another day, Sister. Have her bed moved nearer to the door so that when the inevitable happens the other patients will not be disturbed.'

'Yes, doctor. It will be done immediately.'

In the echoing cathedral-like reception area of Bart's hospital in West Smithfield, an irate man hammered his fist on the polished mahogany desk, glaring at the clerk. 'Come off it, mate. There weren't that many survivors from the *Caroline*; you must have a list of them as was admitted that night.'

The clerk swallowed hard and his fingers twitched nervously as he flipped through the pages of the admission book. 'I wasn't on duty that night, sir.'

'Well someone was. You can't tell me that it ain't wrote down somewhere. I'm looking for me sister and I won't budge until I get some information.'

'Perhaps if you told me your name I might be able to assist further.'

'What's that got to do with anything?'

'Er – there's no need to take that tone with me, sir. Without a name I can't help you.'

'Stranks,' the man growled. 'Me name is Stranks. Now are you going to help me or do I have to choke the information out of you?'

The clerk gazed round the busy atrium of the hospital, raising his hand to attract the attention of a passing porter. 'Er, Mr Simms, could you spare a moment?'

Flexing his muscles, Simms strode over to the desk. 'Having trouble, Mr Blunt?'

The clerk took a step backwards even though the high counter stood between him and the angry man who had marched in off the street making unreasonable demands. 'This gent seems to think we are keeping something from him, Mr Simms. I've told him that I'm not in a position to give out the information he requires.'

'Look, mate . . .' Stranks modified his tone as he stared up at Simms' lantern jaw and beetle brows drawn together in a warning scowl. 'I'm looking for me young sister. We was both passengers on the ship what went down in the river three weeks ago, and I been searching for her ever since. I been round every hospital in London making enquiries and someone told me that you'd taken some of the survivors in here. It ain't much to ask, is it? I just want to know if little Lucy was one of 'em.'

Simms glanced at the desk clerk and his expression softened slightly. 'Seems a reasonable request, Mr Blunt. Have you anyone on your books answering to that description?'

'Like I told the gent, I wasn't on duty that night, Mr Simms. But if the person would give me his sister's full name, I'll see if there's a matching entry.'

'Lucetta Froy, that's her name. She's about so high.'

Stranks raised his hand to the level of his shoulder. 'Pretty little thing she is, with yellow hair and blue eyes. You wouldn't forget her if you'd seen her.'

'No family resemblance then,' muttered the clerk, flicking through the pages of the tome.

'I heard that, cully,' Stranks said, fisting his hand. 'Any more lip from you and I'll . . .'

Simms tapped him on the shoulder. 'No need for that, mister. Let the man do his job.'

Blunt flicked through the pages of the admission book, studying the entries with the tip of his tongue held between his teeth. 'Nothing in that name, sir.' He looked up, his face alight with curiosity. 'You say her name is Froy, and yet yours is Stranks.'

'She's me half-sister,' Stranks muttered through clenched teeth. 'Any more quaint remarks from you, mister, and you'll be sorry.'

Blunt closed the book with a snap. 'No mention of Froy or Stranks,' he said triumphantly, but on seeing the look on Stranks' face he changed his tune. 'But there was a young woman who might fit the description. She developed a fever and was sent to the Fever Hospital in Islington.' Blunt shook his head. 'Typhoid, I believe – you might be too late.'

But he was speaking to thin air. Stranks had raced from the building, barging through the half-glassed doors and almost knocking down a woman and child in his haste.

'Well!' Simms said, shaking his head. 'He's a rum 'un and no mistake.'

'I'd say the young lady would be better off in the

next world than living with a brute like him,' Blunt said, adjusting his spectacles with the tip of an ink-stained index finger.

'You wasn't as close to him as I was,' Simms said, grimacing. 'He smelt like a midden and I'll wager he's a stranger to soap and water.' Simms leaned across the desk, speaking in a low voice. 'I heard that there was prisoners being brought back from the East Indies for trial on board the *Caroline*. I wouldn't be at all surprised if he weren't one of them.'

'Well, we'll never know, Mr Simms,' Blunt said, glancing nervously over his shoulder. 'Don't look now, but Matron has just come out of her office, and she's coming this way.'

Stranks erupted into Duke Street and was immediately seized by the scruff of the neck. 'Did you find her?'

'Let go of me, Guthrie.' Stranks jerked free from the hand that held him. 'She ain't there.' He glanced up and down the street. 'There's a copper over the road – best move on afore he spots us.' Shoving his hands in his pockets he put his head down and crossed the busy street with Guthrie hobbling along as fast as his gammy leg would allow.

'For God's sake, man,' Guthrie said breathlessly. 'I can't keep up with you. Anyway, they ain't looking for us. We're dead – drowned in the Thames. We're free men.'

Stranks dodged in between a costermonger's barrow and a brewer's dray where a couple of burly deliverymen were unloading barrels and rolling them down a

ramp into a pub cellar. 'Shut up,' Stranks muttered. 'D'you want the whole of London to hear you?'

Guthrie stopped by the open trapdoor and he inhaled the smell of beer with a gasp of pleasure. 'I say let's stop for a jug of ale. It's what I missed the most out there in that heathen land.'

'No time for that,' Stranks said, grabbing him by the arm and dragging him down the street. 'And no money until we've got the heiress safe and sound.'

Guthrie fell into step beside him. 'All right then. Have it your way, but where is the little trull?'

'Looks like they took her to the Fever Hospital in Liverpool Road. Hurry up, mate, there's no time to lose. The silly cow went down with typhoid. We've got to get to her before she croaks or there's no money in it for us.'

'You're so sure of yourself,' Guthrie grumbled. 'How do you know that her family will pay up?'

Stranks stopped for a moment, breathing hard. 'We've been over this a dozen times, you idiot. Her pa was a wealthy merchant with a house in the best part of Islington and she was his only child.'

Guthrie grinned, revealing a row of broken and blackened teeth. 'And we know the parents didn't survive, don't we, cully? You saw to it that they never come up for air.'

'Keep your voice down, you fool,' Stranks hissed. 'I never touched his missis. She went down like a stone, but her old man was made of tougher stuff. I thought he was going to pull me under, so I had no choice. Anyway, there was no witnesses so we're in the clear.'

'If you say so, Norm. You're the boss.'

'That's right, you keep that fact in your thick head, Guthrie. Remember that we're officially dead so we're free men, and when we collect from the family we'll be set up for life. There must be a fortune to be had from the Froys for the safe return of their little angel.'

'I've always wanted to be rich,' Guthrie said, sighing. 'They used to call me a clodpole in the workhouse. They said I'd never amount to nothing, but I'll show 'em.'

'Come on then, mate. What are we waiting for? Let's get to the hospital and find out if we've got the right girl.'

Half an hour later, having decided that it was too risky to claim the unidentified girl as Lucetta Froy, Stranks decided that it would be safer to refer to her as Lucy Guthrie, just in case the police became involved, as his name was synonymous with crime and a sure giveaway.

'Are you certain that this is your relation?' the ward sister demanded, unconvinced. She did not like the look of these two men, whom she deemed to be ruffians of the worst order, and her sensitive nostrils twitched as the rank odour of their bodies overpowered the strong smell of disinfectant.

A lady of breeding, Sister Eugenia Demarest had trained at the London Hospital in Whitechapel, and she was used to dealing with people from all walks of life, from the high-born to the lowest of the low. She

knew instinctively that these two men fitted into the latter order, but as the young houseman had pointed out, the girl was of a different class altogether.

'She is our little Lucy,' Stranks said, baring his teeth in what he hoped was a pleasant smile. 'We had almost given her up for lost, and now she's found.'

'Thank the Lord,' Guthrie said piously. 'Us will go to church to give thanks for her safe return to the bosom of her loving family.'

Stranks gave him a savage dig in the ribs with his elbow. 'Don't overdo it,' he muttered. He turned back to the nurse, who looked as though her knickers were starched as well as her pristine white cap and apron. He knew that she was suspicious and that she was looking down her long pointed nose at them. He'd like to get that one on her own down a dark alley – he'd soon have her cut down to size and begging for mercy, or maybe for more. Perhaps that was what the sad old virgin needed.

'Have you any proof of identity?' Sister Demarest demanded. These two ruffians might have fooled the almoner, but then Miss Parry was an innocent and thought the best of everyone. Sister Demarest folded her arms across her flat chest. 'Well, have you?'

'All lost when the ship went down, Sister,' Stranks said, meeting her stern gaze with a straight look. He was good at lying. He had learned to lie as soon as he could talk. With a drunken scoundrel of a father and a mother who was no better than she should be, life had been hard in the slums of Hoxton, and Norman Stranks had existed on the streets since he was eight

years old. Cheating, lying and stealing had come easily when it meant the difference between survival or the less attractive alternative. A brief spell in the workhouse had further hardened him and a year in Pentonville prison had completed the process. It was there that he had met the simple-minded Guthrie and for good or ill they had been accomplices in crime ever since. Now he could see a way out of the vicious circle of reoffending, capture and imprisonment and he was going to grab it with both hands. The only problem was that the answer to all their problems lay close to death on the bed before them.

Stranks fell on his knees and buried his face in the snow-white coverlet. 'Don't die, little Lucy. Oh, my duck, please don't leave us.' He looked up at Sister Demarest and the tears that trickled down his cheeks were real. 'Get her better, Sister. Us wants to take our little angel home.'

The girl's eyelids fluttered and her lips parted in a long sigh. Her eyes opened and she stared uncomprehendingly at Stranks. For a moment it seemed that the fever had abated and Sister Demarest pushed Stranks aside so that she could take the patient's pulse.

'You must leave now,' she said firmly. 'You are disturbing my patient.'

Stranks scrambled to his feet, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. 'Is she coming round, Sister? Is she going to get well?'

'I can't say, but she must be allowed to rest. If you don't leave I will have to summon a porter to escort you from the ward.'

Guthrie took Stranks by the arm. 'Come on, mate. Do as she says.'

'All right, but we'll be back later,' Stranks said grudgingly. 'But you ain't going to keep us from our sister now we've found her.'

'Keep your voice down, and go,' Sister Demarest said, pulling the curtain around the bed. 'Come back tomorrow and with God's grace you might find that the fever has broken and the patient will be able to recognise you.'

In the dim recesses of her fevered brain, Lucetta could hear the murmur of vaguely familiar male voices and an inexplicable fear seized her. Then there was the unmistakable clink of brass rings as the curtains were drawn around her bed and she forced her heavy eyelids to open, but a shaft of fear ran through her body. Everywhere was white, except for the flower print on the curtains. She had no idea where she was – or who she was. She closed her eyes and drifted off to another place and another time. A place of safety and calm – somewhere achingly familiar – somewhere else.

## Chapter Two

The scent of the Spice Islands was not the sweet, nutty aroma of cinnamon and cloves or the spicy tang of pepper, cardamom and ginger that Lucetta had romantically expected it to be. The cloying odour of rotting vegetation, hanging like a steamy mist in the tropical heat, had come as a shock after months at sea with nothing to breathe but the cool salt-laden air. The first sight of the mountainous, palm-fringed island, bright with exotic blooms of frangipani and hibiscus had hit her senses in a flood of colour. Everything here was so dramatically different from the pale northern watercolour landscape of England or the sepia tints of London that it had left her breathless with wonder.

Now, after three months in this island paradise, she was used to the strange smell of the jungle that permeated the stuccoed walls of the British consul's residence in Denpasar. The odour was all-pervading and even managed to seep into the sandalwood chests that contained her clothes. When she dressed, with the help of Naomi, the flower-like Balinese girl who had been assigned to her as a personal maid, Lucetta had been horrified to find that her new gowns, which had cost a small fortune in London, felt damp to the touch and hung limply from her slender body.

Perhaps this exotic place was not paradise after all, and if the truth were told she had not wanted to come to this strange land, but Papa must be obeyed in all things. He had decided that a sea voyage would be beneficial to her mother's delicate constitution, and there was no question of leaving sixteen-year-old Lucetta alone in London with only the servants to care for her. The only alternative had been to invite Aunt Eliza and Uncle Bradley to stay with her in Islington, and that meant enduring the company of their son, spoiled, spotty-faced Jeremiah. Lucetta had disliked him intensely when they were younger, and although they had seen little of each other while he was away at boarding school, she doubted whether he had changed very much and if he had, then it was probably not for the better.

Lucetta had reluctantly opted to accompany her parents, and she had not regretted her decision. She had fallen in love with what she had seen of the island and its gentle people. If only she had more freedom to explore its mysterious interior she would have been content to stay longer than the intended four months while Papa toured the neighbouring islands in search of merchandise to stock his wholesale warehouse in London. But she soon discovered that the same strict rules applied even though they were so far from home. It seemed to Lucetta that Queen Victoria's influence had spread from the outposts of the British Empire to the Dutch East Indies. The British consulate was dominated not by the consul, Sir John Boothby, but by his wife, Pamela, who observed all the niceties and

traditions of English upper class life, even down to afternoon tea with cucumber sandwiches and toasted muffins. Despite the tropical heat, steaming bowls of brown Windsor soup were served at dinner, followed by a fish course and then the inevitable roast meat with at least two boiled vegetables. Lucetta would not have been surprised if suet pudding and custard had appeared on the table as a dessert, but this was either beyond the scope of the Balinese cook, or Lady Boothby had been persuaded that fresh fruit was more palatable after a heavy meal.

Lucetta would have liked to learn more about the Balinese culture and she tried desperately to communicate with her maid Naomi, but as the girl only spoke her native tongue and a few words of Dutch, and Lucetta spoke neither, they had mostly to resort to sign language interspersed with inevitable fits of the giggles. Naomi's given name was Nyoman, but Lucetta had such difficulties with pronunciation that she opted for a more English-sounding alternative. When this seemed to delight rather than to offend Naomi, Lucetta gave her a hug and presented her with a bead necklace by way of setting a seal on their friendship, to which Naomi responded by taking a spray of frangipani from her sleek dark hair and tucking it behind Lucetta's ear.

The days of enforced leisure passed pleasantly enough but Lucetta longed for a little excitement. There were occasional trips into town with Lady Boothby, when the good woman was not otherwise occupied with her charity work, but these were infrequent and

Lucetta was not allowed to explore unless chaperoned by Miss Dodd, Lady Boothby's steely-eyed maid, who complained bitterly of the heat which made her feet swell and played havoc with her varicose veins.

Other than this, Lucetta spent most mornings attempting to entertain her mother, either by reading to her or taking her for short walks in the rose-scented gardens before the heat became too oppressive. Once a month the wives of minor officials and senior clerks were invited to the consulate to take afternoon tea, and there were occasional card parties in the evening, but the guests were mostly middle-aged and Lucetta longed for the company of young people, although she knew better than to complain. She was only too well aware how important this business trip was to her father, and she would not upset Mama's delicate constitution for all the tea in China, or even all the spice in the Spice Islands. She resigned herself to another few weeks of idleness, and resolved to make the best of things.

On a morning that was indistinguishable from any other, breakfast was brought to Lucetta on the vine-shaded veranda outside her ground floor bedroom. She sipped her coffee wondering what she would do today. Papa would almost certainly be off somewhere on the island buying up all the intricately carved teak-wood, seagrass and rattan furniture that he intended to ship back to England and sell for a handsome profit. Lucetta had heard him tell Sir John that he had already purchased enough to fill the entire hold of the *Caroline*, the clipper ship that would take them home

when Papa was satisfied that his business was done. She sighed, thinking of London and the pleasant life that she had left behind. She did not often allow herself to yearn for home, nor would she have admitted the truth to her mother, but Lucetta missed the trips to the theatre, the outings to the Zoological Gardens and Madame Tussaud's and meetings with her old school friends from Miss Milton's Academy for Young Ladies, which she had left last spring.

It would be autumn by the time she returned to London and there was much to look forward to. She thought longingly of her blue and white bedroom on the second floor of the elegant townhouse in Thornhill Crescent, one of the best parts of Islington. All the memories of her happy childhood were encapsulated in that bright, sunny room. Her dolls with their beautiful wax faces still sat on the sofa beneath the window, although it was several years since she had played with them, but they were too well loved to be packed away in tissue paper and stored in the far recesses of the attics. Her favourite books were neatly displayed on the white-painted bookshelves and a rosewood escritoire awaited her return in the alcove next to the fireplace. It was there she wrote in her journal every evening before she went to bed. She had brought it with her, but there was little enough to write about. Life in the consulate was comfortable but hardly exciting.

A waft of frangipani from the blossom tucked into Naomi's glossy black hair brought Lucetta back to the present and she turned her head to see her maid tipping

the contents of a china jug into the bowl on the washstand.

Lucetta acknowledged her presence with a cheerful smile. 'Thank you, Naomi.'

Naomi moved gracefully to the cedar chest and opened it. She held up a sprigged muslin morning gown. 'Yes, missy?'

'Not that one, thank you,' Lucetta said, shaking her head. 'I think I'll wear the blue silk.'

Naomi's eyes clouded and her lips trembled. '*Saya tidak mengerti, missy.*'

'No, I'm sorry. Of course, you don't understand me and I haven't the slightest idea what you just said.' Lucetta swung her legs off the teak steamer-chair and stood up. Even this early in the morning her flimsy cotton wrap clung to her skin where perspiration had pooled between her shoulder blades. She reached for her leather shoes and found that they had sprouted a white fungal bloom overnight. She sighed, handing them to Naomi. 'I'd be grateful if you would clean them.' She made a polishing motion with her hand and Naomi nodded, smiling as she took the shoes.

'Blue silk dress,' Lucetta repeated slowly. She pointed to the azure sky. 'Blue – like sky.'

'Ah! Blue.' Naomi repeated the word triumphantly and disappeared back into the relative darkness of Lucetta's bedchamber.

Shuffling barefoot across the grass matting, Lucetta followed her into the cool room.

Naomi selected the gown from the cedar chest and held it up for Lucetta to see. 'Blue dress for Missy.'

'Well done,' Lucetta said, clapping her hands. 'Thank you, Naomi.' She reached out to take the dress but it felt damp and the strange jungle odour emanated from its folds. Lucetta would not have been surprised to find mushrooms growing from the seams, but a few minutes in the hot sunshine would put that to rights. It would be too complicated to explain this to Naomi and she went outside to drape the garment over the wooden railing. She returned to the room to find Naomi watching her with a worried frown puckering her smooth brow.

'Missy no dress?'

'No, thank you. I can manage on my own. You go and get your breakfast, Naomi.'

'Breakfast?'

Lucetta raised her hand to her mouth, making a pretence of eating, and she rubbed her tummy. 'Yum, yum – breakfast,' she said, chuckling. 'You go now, Naomi.'

Naomi's lips parted in a wide smile and her almond eyes danced with laughter. 'I go now, missy.'

When she was alone, Lucetta allowed the cotton wrap to fall to the floor. She stretched her arms above her head, revelling in the caress of the cool air that wafted through the open French windows. Padding over the marble tiles to the washstand, she dipped her flannel in the bowl of water scented by rose petals floating on the surface. She shivered with pleasure as the liquid streamed down her neck, trickling sensuously between her firm young breasts.

She repeated the action again and again, taking

delight in the relief of feeling fresh and clean, although she knew that by noon she would be just as hot and sticky and in desperate need of another wash. But first she must go through the motions of dressing and putting up her hair, after which she would seek out Lady Boothby and make polite conversation, enquiring about her hostess's health and her charitable work at the hospital in Denpasar. By that time Mama would have left her room and be comfortably ensconced on the chaise longue in the drawing room while Naomi's seven-year-old sister fanned her with a palm leaf. Lucetta would read to her mother or simply sit and listen while Evelyn Froy reminisced about her idyllic childhood in the Hampshire vicarage where she had been born and raised. After taking luncheon in the dining room the ladies would retire to their rooms for an afternoon nap, to be awoken by their maidservants at four o'clock in time to dress for tea. The day ahead was as predictable as sunrise and sunset and not nearly as exciting.

Quite suddenly, Lucetta had the urge to escape from the confines of the compound and an irresistible need to do something different and even dangerous. With droplets of water still glistening on her skin, she pulled her fine lawn shift over her head and rang the bell for Naomi.

'I've changed my mind,' she said as Naomi came through the French doors with the blue silk gown draped over her arm. 'I'm going riding, Naomi. I'll need my riding habit, please.'

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Outside the cool interior of the consulate the heat was so intense that it hit Lucetta with a force that took her breath away. She hitched up the long skirt of her riding habit and made her way through the gardens safe in the knowledge that the morning parlour, where Sir John and Lady Boothby took breakfast, was on the far side of the building. Mama would not have risen from her bed, and Papa would have left for the north of the island at dawn. There was no one apart from an aged gardener to see her making a bid for freedom.

She crossed the gravelled compound, making her way to the stable block where the little mare she normally rode whinnied in recognition at the sight of her. The head groom hurried to greet her, and although he eyed her doubtfully he was too well trained to question the consul's guest when she asked for her mount to be saddled. Lucetta stroked the horse's soft muzzle and spoke softly to the animal. She had taken a chunk of sugar crystals from her breakfast tray that morning and secreted it in her pocket. She offered it now to the mare on the palm of her flattened hand. She smiled at the gentle touch of the horse's velvet lips on her skin, and her heartbeats quickened in anticipation of doing something as daring as leaving the consulate unchaperoned. She waited while the groom saddled the mare and led the animal to the mounting block. He held the reins while Lucetta climbed onto the side-saddle.

'Thank you,' she said, acknowledging his assistance with a smile. 'You can let her go now.'

But the groom held on to the reins, shaking his head. 'Missy not go alone.'

'It's quite all right,' Lucetta said firmly. 'Sir John said I might take the horse for a short ride. I won't go far.'

'No, missy. Not safe.' The groom signalled to one of his underlings who led a heavy-looking mule of an animal from the stables and prepared to mount.

'No,' Lucetta said, snatching the reins from the startled groom's hand. 'Thank you, but I will go alone. There is no need to trouble your man.'

She could see by the groom's set expression that he had not understood, or if he had then he was feigning ignorance. 'Thank you, but I don't need an escort.' She urged the mare forward using her riding crop to tap the animal gently on its flank. They were off at a smart trot before any of the startled stable hands could stop them. By chance the consulate gates had been opened to admit a despatch rider with a satchel of mail for the consul, and Lucetta rode through them before the gatekeeper had a chance to obey the shouts from the stables.

A triumphant cry escaped her lips as she encouraged the little mare to canter along the road that led away from the town. Soon they were galloping along the edge of a palm-fringed beach. The white sand and the sparkling turquoise sea looked so inviting that Lucetta was tempted to stop and tether her mount in the shade of the palms, but there were people around: local farmers leading donkeys laden with panniers filled with rice for the market; fishermen dragging their nets in the lagoon where the distant sound of thunder was not a threatening storm but the crashing of breakers on the coral reef. Lucetta was not bold enough

to go on the beach unattended; at least not until she found a place that was completely deserted.

She rode on, heading inland and pausing for a moment to gaze in wonder as the land dropped suddenly into a deep valley where narrow terraces had been carved out of the hillside to form paddy fields for the cultivation of rice. Shaded by tall palms, the lush green land was misted with heat haze. Lucetta remembered having come this way once before, with Papa and one of Sir John's grooms. If memory served her correctly, there was a fascinating Buddhist temple not far distant from this place. She had spotted it then and had asked to be allowed to explore, but the groom had shaken his head, murmuring something in his native tongue, and Papa had been in too much of a hurry to reach a workshop where he had hoped to make trade.

Lucetta patted the mare's sleek neck and with a gentle pressure of her heels encouraged the animal to walk on. Within minutes she was riding through a village lined with minute dwellings constructed of bamboo, with dirt floors and thatched roofs. Open at the front and sides, they were so different from the brick and stone buildings with which Lucetta was familiar that she could hardly believe that whole families lived in such a way. Chickens roamed freely, pecking at the ground, and mangy-looking curs lay sleeping in the shade, apparently indifferent to Lucetta's presence. Small children stopped their play, plugging their thumbs in their mouths to gaze at her wide-eyed, while their mothers barely glanced up from

washing clothes in what was little more than a drainage ditch at the side of the road.

Feeling like an intruder, Lucetta allowed her horse to continue plodding along the dirt road, which seemed to be leading nowhere. Just as she was thinking that she must have come the wrong way the track opened out into a clearing at the foot of steep cliffs. She gasped in wonder at the sight of a temple hewn into the rock and covered in intricate carvings of strange-looking beasts and deities. Without thinking, Lucetta dismounted and, clutching the reins, she approached the gaping mouth of the god figure that framed the entrance to the pitch-dark interior of the temple.

Without warning, she found herself surrounded by monks in blue robes who were shaking their fists and shouting at her in their native tongue. The mare reared in terror and the reins were snatched from Lucetta's hand. Terrified and unable to make them understand that she meant no harm, Lucetta looked round for a means of escape, but found her way blocked by women and children who had appeared seemingly from nowhere. They surrounded her, pointing and staring as if she were an animal in the zoo. A small boy wrenched the riding crop from her hand and ran off shrieking with laughter as he wielded it in the air, and a toothless old woman snatched Lucetta's hat and put it on her own head. The other women began to laugh and taunt her, but the monks turned on them and started pushing them away. In the midst of all this chaos Lucetta did not hear the sound of approaching

hoofbeats until a group of men, dressed in the manner of European sailors, burst into the clearing and reined in their horses, throwing up clouds of grey dust.

'Hello there.' A young officer leapt off his horse, pushing his way through the chattering women and children. The Balinese were small by comparison and they scattered before him as he approached Lucetta. He doffed his cap. 'You seem to be in a spot of bother, ma'am,' he said, grinning broadly.

Lucetta couldn't help noticing that his companions were laughing as they dismounted, and instead of rushing to his aid they stood back watching with obvious amusement.

'You save your maiden in distress, young Galahad,' one of them shouted above the din.

Lucetta felt her cheeks burning with humiliation. Fear was replaced by embarrassment. She knew that she must look a sorry sight, hatless and with her hair having escaped from the tight chignon at the nape of her neck. Her cream linen riding habit, made especially for her by Mama's dressmaker in London, was stained with sweat and dust and her plumed riding hat was now perched jauntily on the head of the old woman who had stolen it moments earlier. Lucetta brushed a stray lock of hair from her brow and drew herself up to her full height. 'Thank you, sir. But it was a simple misunderstanding.' Despite her brave words she was uncomfortably aware that her voice shook and she was trembling from head to foot.

'Are you hurt, ma'am?'

She shook her head but her reply was lost as one of

the monks stepped forward uttering a tirade of angry words. The women and children fell silent as he spoke, or perhaps, Lucetta thought, it was due to the fact that the sailors wore side arms and had formed a tight line behind the young officer. He stood his ground, and taking a handful of coins from his pocket he dropped them into the monk's outstretched hand. This brought an immediate reaction from the women, who surged forward clamouring for money, but this time it was the monks who stepped in and with a few words delivered in ominous tones they dispersed the crowd. With a final impassioned few words from their leader, the monks disappeared into the dark interior of the temple and there was silence except for the chattering of monkeys in the trees and the background chorus of the tropical birds.

Shaken and secretly ashamed of herself for causing such a scene, Lucetta forced herself to appear calm although she was inwardly quaking. 'Thank you. I'm very grateful to you, sir, but it was a simple mistake. I was out riding and lost my way.'

He held her hand for a brief moment. 'Which could have proved extremely dangerous for you, Miss Froy.'

'You know my name,' Lucetta said, staring at him in astonishment. 'Have we met before?'

His serious expression melted into a charming smile. 'You would not have noticed me, ma'am. I'm the first mate on the *Caroline*.'

'I'm afraid I don't remember you, Mr . . .'

'Sam Cutler, miss.'

Lucetta felt her blush deepening. This was so

embarrassing. She must have seen this young man every day during their six-week voyage and yet she had absolutely no recollection of him. 'I'm sorry, but then it was a big ship, and . . .'

Her voice tailed off as she realised that the men accompanying Sam Cutler were listening with unconcealed interest and obvious amusement.

'And you were strictly chaperoned by that stern missionary lady with no sense of humour,' Sam said helpfully. 'Miss Trim, wasn't it? I believe she even tried to convert some of these heathen fellows with me.' He turned to his shipmates. 'No success there then, mates? They have neither manners nor morals according to that lady. You must forgive my men, Miss Froy; they meant no disrespect to you earlier.'

The man who had spoken out before had the grace to look slightly abashed. 'No offence meant, miss.'

'None taken,' Lucetta said, smiling. 'It was fortunate for me that you all happened along when you did.'

'I would escort you home, Miss Froy, but we have important business to attend to. Have you far to go?'

'Only to the British consulate, but I'd be grateful if you would put me on the right road.'

Sam bowed from the waist, signalling to the man who had teased him for his chivalry. 'Bates, fetch Miss Froy's horse.'

'Aye, aye, sir.' Bates ambled over to the mare. She had found a patch of grass in the shade of a pandanus tree and was munching away placidly. He led the animal back to Lucetta and tossed her effortlessly onto the saddle. 'There you are, ma'am. Best get back home

as fast as you can. There are a couple of dangerous men on the loose.'

'Thank you, Bates. That will do,' Sam said, frowning.

Lucetta was quick to hear the warning note in his voice and her curiosity was aroused. 'Who are these men, Mr Cutler?'

'Two criminals who were transported to Australia for life, but somehow managed to escape from the penal colony and made their way here, goodness knows how, but they did. We have the unenviable task of taking them back to London in irons, but they jumped ship last night.'

'But isn't that a task for the army or the Navy? Aren't there any policemen in Bali?'

'Apparently we're the best they've got at the moment,' Sam said with a wry smile. 'You'll be safe enough on the main road, so there's no need to be afraid.' He swung himself up into the saddle with the ease of an accomplished horseman and when the animal attempted to unseat him, he brought the spirited creature under control with a firm hand and a few softly spoken words. 'Follow us, Miss Froy. We'll put you on the road to Denpasar, if you're sure you can make it back from there.'

'Thank you,' Lucetta murmured shyly. 'I hope you catch your criminals, Mr Cutler.'

He smiled and his teeth gleamed white and even in his suntanned face. 'We will, never fear. And may I suggest that you take a groom with you next time?'

Lucetta knew that she had been foolish, but she didn't need a ship's officer to speak to her as if she were a

naughty child. The admiration she had felt for him just moments ago was replaced by indignation, quickly followed by humiliation. She was about to put him in his place when he leaned towards her and planted a kiss on her lips. It was over in a flutter of a butterfly's wing and his touch was just as light, but the brief salute brought a cheer from his men and a gasp of shock from Lucetta.

'H-how dare you?' she murmured breathlessly.

'I'm sorry, Miss Froy, but you have the most adorable pout that I've ever seen. You must forgive my bad manners, but I couldn't resist the temptation.'

'Come on, sir.' Bates called from the edge of the clearing. 'We'd best leave the temple before the monks turn nasty.'

'Lead on, Bates. We'll follow.' Sam tightened the reins, wheeling his horse around. 'We will escort you as far as we can, but do take care on the way back to the consulate. Don't stop for anyone or anything.'

Angry, shaken and yet oddly disturbed by the fleeting touch of his lips, Lucetta chose to ignore this last warning and she urged the little mare forward at a brisk trot. She had not realised how far she had strayed from the beaten track, and as she followed the cloud of dust thrown up by the horses' hooves she had to admit that she would have had great difficulty in getting back to the main road on her own. When they parted at the crossroads, Sam reined his horse in so that they were side by side with their knees almost touching. 'We have to leave you now, Miss Froy.'

'Thank you, I know my way now,' Lucetta said, avoiding his intense gaze. 'I hope you catch the criminals.'

'And I hope that you sail with us again on the *Caroline*. Perhaps we might be on nodding acquaintance then.'

This brought her chin up and she met his eyes, suspecting him of teasing, but to her surprise she saw no hint of mockery in them. He was not handsome, she thought, or even particularly good-looking but his eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled and his mouth curved humorously even when he was being serious.

Lucetta gulped and swallowed. She had lost her riding hat to the old woman at the temple and she was most likely suffering from a touch of the sun. 'I must be on my way,' she murmured. 'I have to get back to the consulate before I'm missed.'

She was about to ride on but he reached out to hold the reins. 'Take care, Miss Froy.'

'Lucetta. My name is Lucetta.'

He took her hand and raised it to his lips. 'Goodbye, Lucetta. We will meet again, I'm certain.'

'I don't want to hurry you, sir,' Bates called from a little further along the road where the men had reined in their horses, 'but we'll never catch them at this rate.'

Sam rode off, leaving Lucetta staring after him. She had lost her riding crop as well as her hat, and she could almost hear the freckles popping out on her nose and cheeks. She would be in for a scolding from Mama when she reached home. The sun was high in the sky

and the heat was oppressive, but the ride back to the consulate was uneventful until Lucetta came to a stall by the wayside where two men had stopped to buy fresh coconuts. Her heart sank as she realised that it was her papa and his guide Agung who were sipping the cool sweet coconut milk. There was no chance of getting past them without being seen and she reined in her horse.

‘What in heaven’s name are you doing riding out alone?’ Henry Froy demanded angrily. ‘Have you no idea how dangerous it is for a young person such as yourself to be abroad unchaperoned in a foreign country?’

‘I’m sorry, Papa. I just wanted to get some fresh air.’

‘Fresh air? Are you mad, girl?’ Henry peered at her through the heat haze. ‘Just look at you, Lucetta. How did you come to be in that dishevelled state? Where is your hat? You’ll get a touch of the sun, that’s for certain.’

Lucetta could see Agung staring at her with his mouth open and her father’s face had flushed to the colour of a boiled beetroot, but before she could think of a suitable reply a sudden tropical downpour spilled from the skies as if someone up above them had turned on a tap. The rain hit the ground hissing and spitting as it evaporated into steam and in seconds they were all soaked to the skin, but at least it put a stop to the interrogation and saved her the necessity of making excuses. She dared not tell Papa about the near catastrophe at the temple. If he knew the extent of her foolhardy escapade he would be justifiably

angry and she would be punished. Granted a temporary reprieve by the rainstorm, Lucetta suffered an uncomfortable ride back to the consulate following in the wake of her father and Agung.

The downpour ceased as suddenly as it had begun and their clothes were almost dry by the time they rode through the gates of the consulate compound and into the stables. Henry dismounted and tossed the reins to a groom but he left it to an underling to help his daughter from the saddle as if to underline his displeasure. 'Go to your room, Lucetta. I'll deal with you later.'

'Yes, Papa. I'm very sorry. I didn't stop to think . . .'

'No, that's your trouble, Lucetta. You do things without giving a thought to the consequences.'

'It won't happen again, Papa. I promise you.'

'That won't wash this time, Lucetta.' Henry glared at her, his dark eyebrows drawn together in a frown. 'You have been foolish in the extreme. There are dangerous men on the loose and anything could have befallen you. If I can't trust you to behave like a grown-up then I must treat you like the child that you undoubtedly are. You may be seventeen but you have behaved as irresponsibly as a six-year-old. You will remain in your room until I have decided on the most suitable punishment for you. Do you understand me, miss?'

## Chapter Three

It was evening before Lucetta was allowed to leave her room. The tropical night had come down suddenly like a black velvet curtain. Paper lanterns cast a soft glow over the gardens and formed lazily shifting shadows on the veranda. The air was filled with the croaking of frogs and the noisy chorus of cicadas. In the drawing room, Eveline Froy reclined on silk cushions, fanning herself vigorously. Her pale oval face glistened with beads of perspiration and her voice was raised in querulous complaint. 'How could you be so silly, Lucetta? Why did you go riding without a hat? You've got freckles all over your face and you've ruined your complexion.'

'Calamine lotion will help with the sunburn,' Lady Boothby said briskly. 'And lemon juice will make the freckles fade, but it was both foolish and dangerous to ride out unattended, young lady. Heaven knows what might have happened if the men from the *Caroline* had not been out hunting for the escaped convicts.' She glared at Lucetta over the rim of her coffee cup. 'You could have caused a serious political incident by such irresponsible behaviour.'

'I realise that now, ma'am,' Lucetta said humbly. 'It won't happen again.'

‘Quite right. It won’t happen again.’ Lady Boothby slammed her cup and saucer down on the sofa table. ‘Sir John has given orders to the grooms that you are not to be allowed out on your own again under any circumstances. You will not leave the consulate without a chaperone. Is that understood?’

Lucetta nodded her head mutely. She knew that she had done wrong, but she was weary with apologising. And was she sorry? If she were to be quite honest, no, she was not. Now that the danger was past, she realised that she had had a great adventure and she had received her first kiss from an impossibly attractive young man. She might have been outraged at the time, but in retrospect she could still feel the soft touch of his lips on hers and the memory sent her heart fluttering wildly in her breast.

‘Is that understood, Lucetta?’ Lady Boothby repeated forcefully. Her impressive bosom rose and fell as she took deep breaths, causing the strands of pearls that hung round her neck to clatter together as if her rather large, prominent teeth were chattering with cold – a virtual impossibility in this steamy heat.

Lucetta came back to earth with a start. ‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘I’m so sorry, Pamela,’ Eveline murmured, clasping her hand to her forehead. ‘You’ve been so generous in your hospitality, and I’m ashamed that my daughter has seen fit to abuse your trust.’

‘Now, now, Eveline, don’t upset yourself. You’ll only bring on one of your megrims again.’

‘Yes, you’re right.’ Eveline closed her eyes and sighed. ‘It’s your fault, Lucetta. I thought a trip abroad might

tame that rebellious spirit of yours, but it seems I was mistaken. I don't know what I'm going to do with you.'

Lady Boothby raised her lorgnette and stared hard at Lucetta. 'Marry the girl off at the first opportunity.'

'But she's only seventeen, Pamela. Lucetta won't be eighteen until Christmas.'

'I was married at seventeen,' Lady Boothby said stiffly. 'My papa arranged the match and I did as I was told. You may be in trade, my dear, but I'm sure that Mr Froy could set the girl up with a handsome dowry. There are plenty of young men from good families who will overlook the lack of breeding.'

Lucetta held her breath, glancing anxiously at her mother to see if she had taken offence at the slur on their background, but to all outward appearances Mama seemed quite calm.

'I expect that's true,' Eveline said meekly. 'But I'm afraid we don't move in those circles at home in London. We live a quiet life in Islington.'

'Then you must think about changing your way of living. If your husband makes as much money from this voyage as he hopes, then why not arrange a London season for the girl? There are plenty of dowagers who will happily undertake the responsibility for a generous remuneration.'

Lucetta was concerned to see her mother's eyes fill with tears and her lips had begun to tremble. 'Please don't say any more, Lady Boothby. Can't you see that you are upsetting my mama?'

'Lucetta,' Eveline cried faintly. 'Remember your manners.'

Lady Boothby drew back her neck and her eyes glittered like a cobra preparing to strike. 'How dare you speak to me like that?'

'I don't mean to be rude, ma'am, but I won't stand by while you insult my parents. They may not be what you consider to be top drawer, but they are good honest people and worthy of respect.'

'Well!' The word exploded from Lady Boothby's lips and her eyes bulged in their sockets. 'I've never been spoken to in that tone in my life, you insolent creature.'

A groan from Eveline was lost in the sound of approaching footsteps and the murmur of male voices interspersed with bursts of laughter. Lucetta glanced from her mother's tear-stained face to Lady Boothby's outraged expression and she realised that she had gone too far. Papa was still angry with her and he would be even more furious when he discovered that she had spoken out against their hostess. A waft of Havana cigars and brandy preceded Sir John and Henry as the double doors were flung open, but Lucetta did not wait to be tried and sentenced – she made her escape through the French windows and fled down the veranda steps into the all-enveloping darkness of the garden.

She ran, stumbling through flower beds and tripping over tree roots, stopping only to catch her breath. She was shaking uncontrollably and her heart was pounding against the whalebone cage of her tightly laced stays. She glanced over her shoulder to make certain that she had not been followed but all was quiet. The single-storey white stucco consulate appeared to float serenely in a pool of light emanating

from the drawing-room windows and the paper lanterns hanging from the roof of the veranda. Lucetta could hear the soft murmur of voices from within, and it was not difficult to imagine the main topic of conversation, but she had no intention of returning to face the inevitable lecture. That could wait until tomorrow when hopefully everyone would have calmed down after a good night's sleep.

Still slightly breathless but intent on reaching the sanctuary of her own room, Lucetta made her way along a path between hedges of tall oleanders, their scented pink and white blossoms standing out palely against the dark night sky. A rustling sound in the undergrowth sent a shiver down her spine. It might be some harmless nocturnal creature or it could be a poisonous snake. She quickened her pace, sighing with relief when the path ended on the carriage sweep at the front of the building. The wide expanse of gravel was illuminated by cressets on either side of the main entrance and Lucetta would have to cross it in order to reach her room. It should have been quite deserted at this time in the evening but a commotion outside the gatehouse made her freeze in her tracks. Holding a lantern above his head, the gatekeeper was arguing fiercely with a person or persons on the road outside.

She paused for a moment, but realising that the gatekeeper was fully occupied she decided to take advantage of the diversion. Bracing her shoulders she forced herself to walk on at a steady pace, as if it were quite normal for her to be out alone after dark. Her feet crunched on the small jagged stones and the hairs

stood up on the back of her neck when she realised that someone was following her. Commonsense deserted her and gripped by panic she broke into a run, but the footsteps were coming closer and she realised that someone was calling her name.

‘Miss Froy. Stop, please.’

Ignoring the plea, she raced towards the shrubbery, but her pursuer caught up with her before she could disappear into the shadowy undergrowth. She spun round to find herself looking up into the face of Sam Cutler.

‘Miss Froy, we seem doomed to meet in unusual circumstances.’

Struggling to regain her composure, Lucetta eyed him coldly. ‘Mr Cutler, I live here. You have no right to scare me like that.’

‘That wasn’t my intention, I can assure you.’ He snatched off his peaked cap and tucked it under his arm, bowing from the waist with a rueful smile. ‘If I did, then I apologise, but I didn’t expect to find you skulking around on your own in the dark. I’m not sure that the consul would approve.’

He was standing with his back to the light and she could not make his features out clearly, but Lucetta heard the laughter in his voice and now she had recovered from her fright the humour of the situation was not entirely lost on her. ‘But I’m not on my own now, am I? You are here, although you haven’t given me a reason for this unexpected visit. Have you come to see my papa?’

He shook his head. ‘No, Miss Froy, I came to beg

your pardon. I didn't want to abandon you this morning and I had to make certain that you got home safely. Unfortunately the fellow at the gate didn't understand my motives for this rather late call.'

Lucetta glanced over his shoulder. The gatekeeper had summoned help from the stables and a group of men were advancing purposefully but warily. She could see that they meant business. 'You're right. I think the gatekeeper is about to have you thrown out.' She slipped her hand through his arm. 'Come with me. They won't dare do anything if I take you into the consulate.'

'I don't want to make things awkward for you.'

'Never mind that. I'm in enough trouble already and a little more won't make a scrap of difference.' Lucetta pulled him purposefully towards the steps which led up to the impressive double doors. They opened as if by magic and a liveried servant stood aside with a respectful bow. Lucetta thanked him with a smile and a nod, hoping that she appeared more nonchalant than she was feeling as they entered the cool white-marble entrance hall with its elegant console tables imported from Europe, gilt-framed wall mirrors and ormolu candle sconces. Three wide corridors led off the reception area; one led to Sir John's official suite of rooms and the other two to the private apartments and servants' quarters. 'Come with me,' Lucetta whispered. 'Hurry.'

'Why are you hiding and who are you hiding from?' Sam demanded as she dragged him towards the consul's private dining room. 'Is it a game of hide and seek?'

'Are you laughing at me?' Lucetta demanded suspiciously. 'I'm not a child, you know.'

His eyes crinkled at the corners and his lips twitched. 'No, I can see that. You are very much a young lady, and a beautiful one too if I might be so bold.'

'Oh, stuff and nonsense. Now I know you're teasing me,' Lucetta said, turning away to hide her blushes. 'Quick, I think someone's coming. We can get out through the dining-room window.'

Without waiting for his response she opened the door to the deserted dining room, where all traces of the recent meal had been cleared away and a clean white damask cloth had been laid ready for breakfast next morning. The floor to ceiling windows had been left open to clear the room of tobacco smoke and Lucetta darted out onto the veranda. She leaned against the balustrade, safe in the knowledge that the velvet darkness on this side of the building would protect them from prying eyes. Her heart was beating a tattoo in her breast, which must, she thought, be due to nervous excitement. But then she realised that she was trembling, and this time it was not fear that was making her pulses race, but the close proximity of a young man who had put himself to a degree of trouble for her sake. She was acutely aware of his presence and overcome by shyness. At a loss for words, she stared down at the ground, unable to look him in the face.

'So tell me what this is all about, Lucetta,' Sam said gently. 'May I call you that?'

She nodded mutely.

'Why were you wandering about in the grounds after dark? Perhaps you had a tryst with a lover?'

This brought her head up with a start. 'Certainly not.'