

Stately Pursuits

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Extract

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Prologue



Hetty was humming to herself as she drove up the rutted track to Alistair's cottage. It was a house she loved, a true gem. It had genuine casement windows with diamond panes, a little porch guarding the studded front door, and gingerbread woodwork under the eaves. Hetty would have liked to live in it for ever and longed to see it in summer when the roses that tangled up the side of the building would fill the air with their sweet scent. To Alistair it was an excellent investment.

She parked her car carefully behind Alistair's Porsche and got out, pulling a box of groceries from the back seat. She'd brought all his favourite food: cheese, single Gloucester with nettle, from a specialist cheesemonger in Covent Garden, some wild Scottish salmon, which she had queued half an hour for, and some handmade chocolate truffles. In a freezer-bag she had some ice-cream she had made herself. It was the only way she could afford to give him his favourite kind, and she did like to spoil him.

She'd made excellent time. It was still only ten o'clock. They had the whole, wonderful weekend to be alone together, and although it was January, and the weather was bleak, Hetty loved winter walks, followed by hot buttered crumpets in front of the fire as a reward. She'd bought those, and butter, in case Alistair had forgotten.

Using her key as usual when they travelled down separately, she let herself in, put down her box, and called 'Alistair? Are you in?' She knew he was, because his car was there, and he wasn't an early riser at weekends. He might still be asleep, his soft floppy hair tumbled across his cheek, his eyelashes long and curly, giving him a schoolboy innocence which was quite lacking when he was awake. For a moment she wished she hadn't called, but had just tiptoed up so she could wake him with a kiss. But it was too late.

'Come up,' he called, obviously awake, probably surrounded by newspaper. 'I'm in bed.'

Hetty smiled indulgently, wondering whether he'd stayed in bed so he could welcome her there, or was just having a lie-in. She knew he had had to go to a dinner party, unofficially business, which was why he'd been unable to bring her down. If it had gone on late, he would be tired.

She climbed the twisting staircase, lifted the latch of the bedroom door and went in.

There was no heap of half-read Saturday supplements snuggling up to Alistair. Instead, a tall, slim, blonde woman, several years older than Hetty, and several aeons more sophisticated, appeared to be offering him entertainment.

The couple did not spring guiltily apart on Hetty's entrance, as convention demanded. They stayed together, Alistair's arm curled defiantly about the woman's shoulders.

Hetty stared, unable to make sense of the picture before her, which was made more bizarre by the feeling she had that they were waiting for her. Hetty almost expected them to leap out of bed and tell her she'd won

some mysterious prize. But they didn't. They stared back, Alistair looking smug, and the blonde more than a shade uncomfortable.

Hetty's disbelief of the obvious melted, leaving behind the sensation that a bad attack of flu was about to claim her. Her head swum, the floor tried to pull her to it with alarming strength. She realized if she wasn't careful, she would faint.

'I'm sorry to spring this on you, Hetty,' said Alistair. 'But there was never anything serious between us, and all good things come to an end. This seemed the best way to tell you.'

Hetty heard her voice come out of her mouth, apparently without any help from her. 'Oh, really? The telephone too conventional for you, was it? You didn't feel you could just slip it into the conversation while we had lunch yesterday?'

Alistair shook his head, still insouciant. 'I had an important meeting in the afternoon and couldn't handle any extra hassle.'

Hetty didn't feel anger, she became anger, as hot and lethal as the white-hot centre of a volcano. She moved towards the bed without knowing she was doing it. She pulled the duvet on to the floor.

'Hey,' said the woman. 'Look, I'm sorry ... but ... what are you doing?'

Alistair slept under linen sheets, nothing synthetic was allowed near him, except, Hetty observed as though from a long way off, the blonde at his side. One of these sheets, an antique inherited from his mother, covered him and his companion now. Like its fellows it had monograms embroidered on the corners, and had deep hems top and bottom. She had personally spent two

hours ironing it, having somehow omitted to send it to the laundry. From nowhere came the memory that there was a tiny darn near the top.

They should have been warned when she pulled off the duvet, but Alistair and his friend seemed unprepared for any reaction. Hetty twitched the sheet easily from their slackened fingers, causing a horrified scream from the woman and an indignant 'Hey!' from Alistair.

Their modesty was not threatened. Hetty didn't even glance at them as she picked up the sheet and ripped it, her teeth locked on to one half, the other being pulled with her hands in a rolling motion, like a conjuror producing coloured handkerchiefs out of his mouth. The sound as the ancient linen tore was supremely satisfying, drowning Alistair's cries of distress and the blonde's admonishings. Only when the sheet was in two halves at Hetty's feet did she look up.

The woman had picked up the duvet and was cowering under it. Alistair, furious, had got out of bed and was striding towards her.

'You little bitch! That's an antique you've just ruined. You can bloody well pay for it to be mended!'

On a cloud of rage, Hetty felt elated, invincible. But she wished to avoid Alistair's furious onslaught and so left the bedroom and closed the door, shouting through it, 'You're a turd, Alistair. A coward and a turd. You didn't tell me we were finished because you couldn't be bothered to work out how. So you just got your lady friend to help you act it out.'

'There's no need to be rude . . .'

'There may not be any need but there's one hell of a lot of justification!'

She retreated rapidly down the cottage stairs, before

Alistair could find his silk boxer shorts and set off in pursuit. She ran out of the front door, leaving it open, found her keys in her coat pocket and unlocked her car.

The first flush of rage was leaving her. It took her a few tries to start the car, and when it did start she put it into first instead of reverse. She shot forward into Alistair's Porsche.

She hadn't meant to do it, and had only hit his bumper and did little damage. But it felt so good that Hetty reversed properly, angled her own car and went faster, so the next bump made more of an impact. The third time actually dented his car, but also caused an unpleasant-sounding crunch in her own. She was reversing for a final onslaught when Alistair appeared in the doorway.

The sheet was bad enough, but she really couldn't afford to pay for the damage to his car. It would be better if he didn't find out what she'd done until she was well out of the way. She put the car into first and escaped.

She had driven down from her London flat early that morning. There was no way she could drive all the way back. Now the corset of rage that had held her together thus far was beginning to disintegrate. She was starting to shake. Any minute now she would burst into tears.

Her parents. Although they lived quite near, and Hetty's mother was always issuing invitations to Sunday lunch when Hetty and Alistair were down for the weekend, they never went. Alistair found parents a trying species, to be avoided unless absolutely essential – possibly for financial reasons. Thus Hetty didn't know the way, but once on the main road she found a signpost to a town she did know. She'd driven ten miles or so when the car started to protest.

'Just get me there,' she implored as steam began billowing from the radiator. 'Please, just get me there.'

It tried, but it was an old car, an ancient Ford Escort, which had taken all her savings and now took most of her spare cash to run. It wasn't accustomed to being used as an offensive weapon and, though loyal far beyond the bounds of duty, it gave out at the end of her parents' avenue.

Hetty just managed to get it to the side of the road, and then got out, hurriedly, in case it exploded. Then she ran down the lane to her parents' bungalow and hammered on the door.

Her mother opened it. 'Hello, darling. This is a surprise. Have you brought Alistair?'

Hetty opened her mouth and started to sob.

Chapter One



'Now, you will be all right, won't you, darling?' said Hetty's mother. It was more of a command than a question.

'Well, if I'm not,' Hetty muttered, stowing her mother's overnight case in the boot of the Clio, 'it'll be your fault.'

'What's that?' Her mother emerged from putting something on the back seat.

'Nothing.' Hetty forced a smile. 'I'll be fine.'

'I know you will.' Mrs Longden spoke as if there had never been any doubt. 'You should be all right for money for a while. Samuel seems to have plenty. But let me know if you run short. And I'll sort out a car for you soon, then you can visit Samuel and not be so isolated.' She glanced at the narrow country lane that ran through what had once been the park belonging to the big house. It was edged with beautiful huge trees, but there wasn't another property in sight. 'Not that you'll be isolated, exactly ...'

They both knew she was lying.

'I said I'll be fine,' repeated Hetty. 'And if you don't go now, you'll get the rush-hour traffic going into Guildford.'

Hetty wasn't particularly happy about being abandoned in a crumbling, possibly haunted, pile in the

middle of nowhere, but as this was to be her fate, she wished her mother would leave her alone to get on with it.

'The village shop sells everything and you can use Samuel's account. He said you were to. And it's only about ten minutes' walk.' As her mother never walked anywhere Hetty knew this estimate might not be accurate. 'And they're such *nice* people.'

By 'nice' Hetty's mother meant well-spoken and middle class. She had ascertained, while buying a pint of milk and a box of cornflakes, that the owners were refugees from the rat race, escaping from the City just before Black Wednesday, and had swapped urban amenities for rural bliss.

'I know. You told me. I'll pop along there when you've gone,' said Hetty. 'I'll need some cat food.'

Her mother frowned. 'Mmm. Samuel should've mentioned the cat. Still, it looked pretty ancient. I don't suppose it'll go on for much longer.' She opened the car door. 'Now, I really must get off.'

After much kissing, finding of keys and slamming of doors, Hetty watched her mother drive away. She sighed deeply and then realized she'd forgotten to remind her mother to get the telephone reconnected. Damn! Fighting a sense of abandonment she made her way back into the house.

The manor had been in the Courtbridge family since the Wars of the Roses, passing down from father to son until the First World War killed off three male heirs and the line was forced to divert to the furthest, spindliest twigs of the family tree. This branch were far less prolific. Hetty's mother's Uncle Samuel, awaiting a serious,

possibly life-threatening, operation, had been only distantly related to the previous incumbent. And his heir was not only distant genealogically, but also geographically, last heard of in some part of the world that used to be the Soviet Union.

Hetty's mother was the only member of the family who knew who had married whom and how many times each cousin was removed. She had a strong sense of duty and when her uncle – ('Not really an *uncle*, darling, more a third cousin, but the generations all went wrong.') – became ill, it was Hetty's mother he contacted. He wanted her to get in touch with his quasi-nephew and ask him to come and look after the house. On no account must it be left empty for more than a few days.

But after many days with her ear glued to phone and fax machine and receiving only ear-splitting shrieks for her pains, even Mrs Longden's determination expired. She put down the phone for the last time and turned to Hetty.

'I don't suppose he'd have come anyway. He never turns up for family occasions or we would have met him. He's probably far too busy making money to do his duty.' It was then her gaze narrowed. 'You're not doing very much at the moment, darling. I don't suppose you'd care to house-sit for a while? It's a beautiful old house, in a lovely part of the world. Do you remember when you were a bridesmaid? The house made a great impression on you.'

'Mother, I was five years old ...'

It was thus that Hetty's misfortune, in the shape of a devastating love affair, became the ill wind that blew somebody some good.