

The Missing Missives

Chapter One

Chesterfield Street, London

June 1810

A Tuesday morning, at an ungodly hour

“Gghruger-ghurgr-ghruger-ghruger-ghrurrr!”

“What?” Annabel lifted her head from her still-damp pillow, blinking swollen eyes in the early morning light. She had forgotten to draw the curtains last night—or this morning—before she’d dragged herself to bed to finish crying herself to sleep.

“Gghruger-ghruger-ghlugghllady Fellbridgghruger-ghruger-ghrurr?”

Oh, no. She sat up and glared at her windowsill. A large gray pigeon perched there, gazing around her bedchamber with great interest. “I thought Sally had replaced you all with the ghostly footmen?” she said irritably to it.

The pigeon fluttered its wings and flew a few feet further into the room, perching on the back of a chair. “Gghrhurghr. Footmen wouldn’t come. You—ghrughr—look a gh-gr-wreck,” he added, turning his head to peer at her first with one dark, beady eye, then the other.

“Are you here to comment on my appearance or summon me to an emergency Lady Patronesses’ meeting?” Confound it, if she wanted to be thoroughly miserable in the privacy of her own bedchamber, she would. She certainly had all the reason in the world to have cried herself to sleep last night after Quin’s cold—and very public—cut direct yesterday in the middle of King Street.

She winced at the memory. After their kiss in Mrs. Bunwich’s parlour in Epsom, after what he had said to her there—after everything that had passed between them in the last few months—what had made him do it?

And why, as suddenly, had his behavior toward Frances Dalrymple, her fellow Lady Patroness, undergone an equally radical change? Shatter-witted, spinsterish Frances had chased him for years; he’d responded to her flirtations with bored civility or, more usually, thinly veiled contempt—when he’d noticed her at all. But no more; she and Frances might as well have switched places, for Quin had barely acknowledged her existence yesterday, while offering Frances every sign of regard. It had been almost a physical blow when Quin’s eyes had slid over her as if she wasn’t there—

“Ggghrrr!” The pigeon rustled his feathers peevishly. “I’m here—gghruhhr—to summon

you, if you would—gghrur—pay attention.”

“I beg your pardon, but I had an excessively bad day yesterday.” Annabel reached for her wrapper—her old one, not the confection of ribbon and lace Mama had bought for her—at the foot of the bed. “Why couldn’t the footmen come?” She cast a suspicious look at the windowsill and floor beneath the chair where the pigeon perched, but both were unsullied.

“*Wouldn’t—gg—come. Ignorrhed the call.*” The pigeon somehow managed to look somber. “Lady Ghr—Ghersey is most displeased.”

“I’m not surprised.” Sally loathed the garbled speech of the pigeons, which was why she’d hired the ghostly footmen—though this particular pigeon was unusually articulate. What could have made the footmen refuse her summons? Such a thing had never happened before. “I expect you have someone else to call on,” she said before he could accuse her of wool-gathering again. “So if you will be so kind as to tell me what time I am expected—”

He—how did she know the bird was a he?—shook his head. “No one else to tell. Ghr—tryingggg to tell you—*prrrivate* meeting. Not everyone there.”

“Oh.” That was interesting. Annabel knew that some investigations were of such a sensitive nature that only those Lady Patronesses chosen by Sally and Mr. Almack to conduct them knew about them. This was the first time she’d been called to one; a pity, as it was difficult at this time to conjure much interest in anything beyond her own misery.

But that could not be helped: she was a Lady Patroness, and a summons could not be refused in any but the most extreme of circumstances. Not even being dead was an excuse, as Mr. Almack could attest. She rose, pulling her wrapper on over her nightgown. “Very well, then. Thank you. If you will excuse—”

“You’re to be at G-Gh-Khing Street no later than eight. Might want to rring for yourr maid.” The pigeon stood up taller and flapped his wings once or twice. “Should—gghrr—have breaggfast before you gggo,” he added hopefully.

The thought of trying to choke down anything, even toast, was singularly repulsive, but Winters would fuss if she didn’t have something sent up. It was a fortuitous circumstance to have a talking pigeon in her room who, it appeared, would welcome a bite to eat. She went to the bell-pull. “Yes, but hide yourself when the chambermaid comes in, please.”

The pigeon fluttered up to the canopy rail of her bed and perched there, unmoving, while the chambermaid brought her hot water and promised to send Winters up with toast and strong coffee and to order down to the stables for her carriage to be ready for half past seven. Annabel bent over the gently steaming washbowl; a brisk interview with soap and water would hopefully wash away the ravages of a tear-filled night. But when she sat down at her dressing table and began to comb her hair, her reflection told her otherwise—as did the pigeon, now gazing down at her from the mirror’s frame. “Ghrr—not much better,” he commented.

Annabel's comb hit a tangle. "Ow. I'm beginning to understand why Sally prefers the footmen."

The pigeon shrugged. "Ghr. You'rre unhappy. Hh-hwhy?"

A lump rose in her throat. The beastly bird actually sounded sympathetic. "Someone I know—that is, I thought I knew—was not—does not feel as he led me to—as I thought he did."

"Hhurr." The pigeon dipped his head a few times. "Know hhow—ghr—how that feels."

Annabel stopped combing. "You do?"

"Ghrr. My beautiful one—she of the deepest eye, the plumpest breast, the smoothest feathers—ghhrr." His beak drooped. "She loved me once, but does no longgher."

The poor thing! Evidently even pigeons could be crossed in love. "What happened?"

"Ghr. Don't know. Flew up to see her, in the park where our flock gh-goes in morning, and—hhur—she wouldn't talk to me. Wouldn't look at me."

"Why, that's exactly what happened to me," Annabel said. Who would have guessed that she'd be spending this morning swapping heartache stories with a pigeon? "I wish I could help you. Does she, er, speak to humans?"

The pigeon nodded. "Gghr. Our flock gh-got enchanted many eggh-lives aggho. She used to summon you ladies too, same as others of us. Wouldn't gg-go today, when order came."

"How odd. What do you think—oh, thank you, Winters."

Annabel's maid had just backed into the room, bearing a tray. She set it down on a side table and sketched a curtsy. "Your breakfast, ma'am. What do I think about—good heavens, there's a pigeon on your looking glass!" She hurried toward it, flapping her apron. "How did it get in here? Shoo, you!"

Annabel put out a restraining hand. "No, please don't—he's a friend."

Winters halted, regarding the pigeon suspiciously. "A...friend, madam? That malodorous creature—"

The pigeon flapped his wings back at Winters and muttered a rude word.

Winters' jaw dropped. "Did it—did it just say what I think it did?"

"Very likely," Annabel said. "However, I would appreciate his not doing so again," she added sternly. "He's here to call me to a meeting in King Street."

Winters, to her credit, only blinked once before saying, "Of course, madam. Shall I get out your blue walking dress?"

A memory, unbidden, flashed through her mind: the last time she'd worn that dress had been to the Summer Exhibition at Somerset House with Quin after Angelique Ronderley had put the pictures aright. Her breath caught; was this how her life would be for the next few months? Would things she did, clothes she wore, anything she heard or saw be defined by the last time she'd done or worn or seen or heard them with Quin? It was as if—as if he was dead, only she'd

not felt any such desolation whilst she was in mourning for Freddy. And that was precisely what it was: mourning.

For a moment, she could not answer. Finally, she managed, “Yes, that will do, Winters.”

Her maid glanced at her, then went back to the tray and poured a cup of coffee, added liberal amounts of sugar and cream, and brought it to her. Winters knew something had happened yesterday; she didn’t ask what, for a good servant never would. But she made it clear that she understood something was amiss, and sympathized.

“Ghr—you ggghoing to eat that?” The pigeon had hopped over to the table holding the tray and was examining the toast-rack with interest.

“Yes, she is.” Winters glared at him.

“He can have a piece,” Annabel said quickly.

“With gh-jh-jam!”

“Hmph.” But Winters scraped some jam onto a triangle of toast. The pigeon took it delicately from her, did a complicated sort of movement that was part nod, part bow, and took flight out the window.

Winters went to it and pulled it partly closed. “I—er—I know what you told me when we were at Epsom, my lady, but a talking *pigeon*?”

“Yes, it’s a bit of a shock, the first time.” Annabel put down her cup. “It’s usually ghostly footmen, these days.”

Winters shuddered. “I think I prefer the pigeon. May I help you with your stays?”

Annabel allowed Winters to help her dress and did not object when she tactfully suggested a little pearl powder to reduce the shadows around her eyes. But she was abstracted—and not wholly because of Quin. She could not get the pigeon out of her mind, for obvious reasons...but also, why had the footmen not come when Sally called them?

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