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Opening extract from

Anyone but Ivy Pocket

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Published by

Bloomsbury Publishing PLC

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Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Bloomsbury Publishing, London, New Delhi, New York and Sydney

First published in Great Britain in April 2015 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP

www.bloomsbury.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4088 5863 9



Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2



Chapter 1

I found the note upon my lady's bed.

It read as follows:

Dear Miss Pocket,

As you can see, I have gone. Do not follow me. I repeat, DO NOT *follow me!*

I am sailing for South America for no other reason than it is far enough away from Paris to ensure that I never see you again. The hotel bill has been paid. As for your wages, after taking into account my pain and suffering, I have left you the sum of one pound. Which is generous, given your conduct. You are now on your own.

Good riddance,

Countess Carbunkle

I was stunned. Shocked. Appalled. Hadn't I been a loyal and kind maid to the Countess? H*adn't* I? I thought long and hard about my conduct and I could find nothing wanting in it. If I

needed further proof that Countess Carbunkle was unhinged, I now had it. The woman was bonkers.

Things had begun so promisingly. Countess Carbunkle had lured me away from a wonderful family in London. The Midwinters were delightfully eccentric and I had been very happy with them – until the Countess came to stay at Midwinter Hall. She spent a month at the mansion and saw me performing my duties, bringing order and cheer wherever I went. On the eve of her return to Paris she practically *begged* me to come and work for her.

In truth, I was reluctant to leave Lady Prudence and her six children. I admit they were an ugly bunch (Master Tobias had a head like a piglet and Miss Lucy was surely part bullfrog), but Midwinter Hall was the first real home I'd ever known.

Despite that, the chance to travel and see the world was impossible to resist.

Paris. We were in Paris. It was glorious and I was glorious in it. I was taller in Paris. Prettier too. And as I was a twelve-year-old lady's maid of the highest quality, Countess Carbunkle came to depend on me in all matters. I was always by her side, day and night, ready to be of service.

At times she was very difficult to find. One morning I found her crouching behind a chest of drawers with a sheet over her head. Another time she saw me coming and pretended to be a

lamp. I put this odd behaviour down to the fact that Countess Carbunkle was an aristocrat and therefore barking mad.

Just how unhinged she was didn't become clear until the great disaster.

It was at the end of our first week in that magical city. Countess Carbunkle had been invited to a grand dinner party at our hotel. The cream of French society was to be in attendance. At first, Countess Carbunkle had been reluctant to let me attend.

'I don't want you at this dinner, do you hear?' she barked, trying to push me out of the lift. 'Good lord, how did I ever let Lady Prudence talk me into taking you? She knew I needed a new maid and like a devil, she saw her chance to be rid of you. Anyone, that's what I told her, *anyone* but Ivy Pocket. But she swore you weren't nearly as insufferable as you look. What a fool I am!'

'Well, of course you are,' I said, weaving around her and slipping back into the lift. 'But you must think clearly, Countess. This dinner party is a very great affair and you are as blind as a bat. Face it, dear – you *need* me.'

Countess Carbunkle huffed, but I could see the fight had gone out of her. 'Do not embarrass me or I will have your head.'

The dining room was aglow with silver candelabras and hundreds of fresh orchids. Dinner began in earnest. Countess

Carbunkle was seated between the president of France (fat, utterly bald) and a princess from Romania (short, hairy chin). But I was troubled. It was on account of the turtle soup. The Countess did not handle soup at all well. She tended to dribble.

I stepped forward as my lady took her first spoonful. She slurped like a blowhole, and a trail of soup tracked its way down her chin. With heartbreaking discretion, I hurried to Countess Carbunkle's side, gently tilted back her head, and used the hem of my apron to wipe her chin.

'Are you all right, Countess?' asked the president, with a mocking grin. 'You seem to be having some trouble with your servant.'

'All is well, Mr President,' cried the Countess, smiling madly. Then she turned to me, slapping my hands away. 'Go!' she whispered. 'Leave this instant!'

'Calm yourself, dear,' I said. 'Dribbling is no crime. I'm sure your mother was a dribbler and your father too.'

While Countess Carbunkle's watery green eyes glistened with rage, I could see the anguish behind them. My lady was in desperate need of help.

'Attention, please,' I said, placing a supportive arm around my mistress. 'Like many true aristocrats, the Countess has a drooping bottom lip and no real chin to speak of. This makes eating soup both difficult to achieve and unpleasant to behold.'

The Countess gasped. Her teeth clenched. Her nostrils flared like a charging bull. Then she started to growl at me. Surely not a good sign. 'I have had a great many maids in my long life, Ivy Pocket, but until now I have never wanted to stuff one in a cannon, point it towards the ocean and light the fuse! In short, I loathe you!'

The poor dear had lost her mind. Urgent action was required. With lightning speed – for I have all the natural instincts of a physician – I grabbed the Countess by the back of her neck and plunged her face into the fruit punch. It was the only remedy to relieve her brain fever.

As Countess Carbunkle came up for air, she shrieked like a donkey and started to sob. I took that as a good sign. Not wishing to make a spectacle of the Countess, I threw a napkin over her head and began to dry her face. In response, my lady called me a variety of unpleasant names and begged the princess from Romania to fetch a musket and shoot me.

In no time the entire dining room was ringing with mocking laughter. It was really rather awkward. The moment was saved by Countess Carbunkle, who decided that was the perfect time to run screaming from the room. Which allowed me to make a dignified exit, following swiftly after her.

When I got back to her suite, I found the Countess's door locked. I knocked, of course. Called out. Banged rather loudly.

But nothing. That night I slept out in the corridor. It was perfectly comfortable. So comfortable, in fact, that I did not wake until well after sunrise. Worse still, I awoke to find Countess Carbunkle had fled the hotel in the early hours of the morning. Her suite was empty. All that remained was the note upon the bed.



I collected my carpet bag from the wardrobe and sat down by the window. The situation was rather serious. My options, rather limited. I had one pound to my name. No job. No ticket back to England. No prospects.

I am remarkably good in a crisis – for I have all the natural instincts of a wartime prime minister – so in no time at all I knew what to do. I picked up my carpet bag and headed down to the lobby, replacing my anxiety with the flickering flame of hope. The streets of Paris were sure to lead to adventure and opportunity. No doubt I would stumble upon something utterly thrilling. Or I might end up a beggar, friendless and starving. Which would be terribly inconvenient. But on the bright side – how wonderfully tragic!

The lobby was a hive of activity. People coming and going and rushing about. I stopped for a moment to drink it all in.

Which is when it hit me. The answer to my problem was staring me in the face. A hotel like this was full of Englishmen and women – and who better to wait upon them than a genuine English maid? I would speak to the manager of the Grand and apply for a position.

He was sure to love me.

'We have no vacancies,' said Mr Gateau firmly, scratching at his thin moustache. 'Besides, you are too young.'

'I am twelve,' I declared with considerable pride, 'and you will not find a better maid in all of Paris. My talents are legendary.'

Mr Gateau smiled thinly. 'Yes, I have heard all about your *talents*. Countess Carbunkle had much to say about you before she left the hotel.'

'Well, there you go,' I said, slapping Mr Gateau on the arm to cement our budding friendship. 'When can I start?'

'Out!' he bellowed.

An ill-mannered doorman was escorting me from the hotel when a bellboy raced across the lobby and called me back. The poor chap was rather breathless. 'Are you Ivy Pocket?'

'Of course I am, dear.'

'The maid who was travelling with Countess Carbunkle?'

I was thrilled that he had heard of me. But not surprised. A good maid gets a reputation. 'That's right,' I said.

'She wants to see you,' said the boy gravely.

I gasped. 'Countess Carbunkle? Is she still here?'

The bellboy shook his head. 'The Duchess of Trinity. You've heard of her?'

Well, of *course* I had. My lady had called on the Duchess just the day before – slipping away from me rather sneakily – to pay a visit to her private apartment on the top floor. Countess Carbunkle said her old friend was the richest woman in England, though she had lived abroad for the past sixty years. Not sure why exactly. Something about a broken heart.

'What on earth does she want with me?' I said.

The bellboy looked alarmingly pale. 'She is dying. Please, just come.'

The next thing I knew we were hurrying up the grand staircase.



When I first set eyes on the Duchess of Trinity two things were immediately clear. One, she was gravely ill. Two, she was monumentally fat. A great big slug of a woman – part goddess, part hippopotamus. She was as magnificent as she was terrifying. The poor creature was lying in the centre of a large brass bed, her face a sickly shade of yellow, her enormous body spread out

on every side like an avalanche. The Duchess's eyes were shut, her head sunk deep into a pile of silk cushions. I might have thought her dead if it hadn't been for the wheezing breaths escaping from her grey lips.

I shivered. Which was shameful. Why was I feeling so spooked by a sick old lady? I was no coward. In fact, my bravery was celebrated across the land. Hadn't I saved that blind man from a runaway carriage by pushing him to safety? And wasn't I crushed under the wheels in the process, horrifically injured? Yet when I woke up in hospital my first thought was not about myself but rather the blind man I had saved. And wasn't I awarded a medal for bravery by Queen Victoria herself? Well . . . no. Not exactly. Some of the particulars may be exaggerated. But I had certainly *thought* about doing such things. Which was practically the same thing.

The suite was enormous, filled with plump sofas, fine carpets, a grand piano and assorted antiques. But what did I care for any of that when England's richest – and possibly fattest – woman was lying right in front of me?

Yet, I must admit to a tiny pinch of fear – like icy water in my veins – as I stood there by the bed. Just the two of us. Me and the Duchess of Trinity. No witnesses. Nobody to help should the Duchess wake up, roll me in some sugar and have me for lunch.

The Duchess's heavy eyelids suddenly shot open. 'Close your mouth, child, you look like a bucket.'

I gulped. Like a frightened infant on a stormy night. Which was infuriating!

'You're a plain little thing, aren't you?' she said next.

'You poor deluded creature,' I replied, finding my voice. 'Dying has sapped the strength from your eyes. I'm remarkably beautiful and that's a genuine fact.'

The old woman shrugged. 'As you wish.'

A cool breeze blew in from the balcony outside, fluttering the Duchess's halo of white hair. For some reason it made me rather sad. I felt it was the right time to say something kind and reassuring to the invalid. I am skilled in such small talk.

'Your eyes are a fine shade of green,' I said softly. 'The rest of you is a nightmare, but your eyes are lovely.'

She smiled faintly. 'Are you hungry?'

I had helped myself to some crispy bacon from the silver breakfast tray sitting outside the Duchess's apartment door, so I wasn't at all hungry.

'Well then, down to business,' announced the Duchess. 'You've been travelling as Countess Carbunkle's maid?'

'More a companion than a maid,' I said. 'That half blind fossil loves me like a granddaughter. Or at the very least, a second cousin twice removed. In fact –'

'Hush!' The Duchess's green eyes fixed on mine. 'I know you have been abandoned. Left high and dry in this godless city. Did you *really* plunge the Countess's head into the fruit punch?'

'How else was I to relieve her brain fever?' I said crossly.

The Duchess looked rather pleased. 'Countess Carbunkle told me you were abandoned at the Harrington Home for Unwanted Children aged five – is that correct?'

'Highly doubtful,' I said. 'I'm certain I grew up in a violently loving family.'

'Bunkum,' muttered the old woman, though she appeared to grin. 'Before you came to Paris you worked for the Midwinters of London?'

'Oh, yes,' I said, 'I was with them for nearly a year. Delightful family. Monstrously unattractive, but delightful.'

'Then you are familiar with Lady Prudence's cousin – Lady Amelia Butterfield?'

'I met her once or twice,' I said, utterly baffled as to why she was asking me such things.

The Duchess of Trinity lifted her head from the pillow, her double chin swelling like a balloon. 'And her daughter Matilda?'

'Never met the girl,' I said. 'Why?'

'Go to the piano,' instructed the Duchess of Trinity, 'and open the lid.'

I did as she said.

'You know how to play?'

'Very well,' I said. 'Miss Lucy hated having to practise, but her mother insisted – so Miss Lucy would give me a toffee apple if I would go into the music room and pretend to be her. Turns out, I'm a natural.'

'You are familiar with "Row, Row, Row Your Boat"?' asked the Duchess.

I laughed. 'Everyone knows *that* one, dear.'

'Excellent. Play it.'

'Duchess, if you wish to hear a tune, let me play some Beethoven. You will be moved to tears.' I smiled proudly. 'Everyone cries when I play the piano.'

'Do as I ask,' she demanded. ' "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." Just once. From start to finish.'

The old bat was clearly off her rocker. But as I had nowhere else to go, and homelessness awaited me out on the streets of Paris, I sat down and played the tune. It sounded like a symphony. As I hit the last note I could feel the piano begin to vibrate beneath my fingers. Softly at first. Then more urgently. It was as if the ground were shaking. Then I heard a mechanism cranking from deep inside the instrument. *Click. Click. Click.* Without warning, a panel at the front of the keyboard began to move. Sliding back. *Click. Click. Click.* It only took a

few moments, then there it was. A hidden chamber. A small cavity, cast in darkness.

Before I had a chance to ask, the Duchess of Trinity issued her next instruction. 'Reach inside.'

Now, I'm an adventurous sort of girl. Plucky. The courage of a lion. But the thought of sliding my hand into that dark recess – gaping at me like an open mouth – filled me with a small amount of trepidation. Still, I wasn't about to let that stop me. Carefully, I reached into the blackness. My fingers quickly hit upon an object. It felt soft and firm all at the same time.

'Pull it out,' the Duchess said.

It was a box. Roughly the size of a book. Covered in plush black velvet. An intricate silver keyhole carved in the top.

'Bring it to me' was the next instruction.

I placed the box in the Duchess's puffy hands. She held it like it was a sacred offering, her green eyes glistening in wonder as she stared at it. Then she set it down and her plump hand vanished inside the folds of the bed coverings and came out again holding a brass key.

She dropped it on the bed, her gaze never leaving the box. 'The key, child,' she whispered. 'Use it.'