

MILLIE AND FLO INVESTIGATE

A country house mystery with a twist

By Genni Trickett

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CAST:

Camilla Holland (late forties, early fifties)

Florence Evans (late forties, early fifties)

Joan (late fifties to late sixties)

Stephen Elliot (early thirties to mid-forties)

Jamie (mid to late twenties)

Ben (mid sixties to late seventies)

PROPS

Handbag, Carpet bag, Suitcase. Doctor's bag

Brandy bottle

Wine and brandy glasses, teacups

Old teddy bear

Steamy romance novel

Fruit loaf

Pack of cigarettes

Note book and pen

Tea towel

Basket (trug) of lettuce

Plasters and cloth

Pruning shears

Artificial bush to suggest garden

SCENES

Act 1

Scene 1 – The Opera House

Scene 2 – The Train Station

Scene 3 – Drawing Room, Battling Hall

Scene 4 – Drawing Room, Battling Hall

Scene 5 – Drawing Room, Battling Hall

Act 2

Scene 1 – Caro Biddlecombe’s Garden

Scene 2 - Drawing Room, Battling Hall

Scene 3 - Drawing Room, Battling Hall

Scene 4 - Drawing Room, Battling Hall

Scene 5 - Drawing Room, Battling Hall

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

Evening. Opera House.

Two chairs, facing the audience. Millie and Flo are sat in them, clutching programmes. Opera is playing. Flo is leaning forward, all attention.

MILLIE: *(In a loud stage whisper)* She really is awfully good, isn't she?

FLO: Shhh.

MILLIE: Sorry. *(A pause)* I mean to say, she's just... you know. Her voice – it just transports one, don't you think? I really...

FLO: *SHHHHH!*

MILLIE: Oh! Yes, Sorry Flo. *(A pause while she looks round vaguely and fidgets)* Do you remember when we saw it at the Coliseum with ... thingummy singing it? And she was

awful. Oh, what was her name? Fat woman. Maria somebody. Begins with a P.
Pil...Pilla..Peelycatty!

FLO: (*Losing patience*) PELAGATTI! (*A resounding chorus of SHHHHHH from all around them.*) Oh for God's sake! I don't know what you're all getting your knickers in a twist about, not one of them seems to be capable of projecting beyond the apron anyway. Don't try to tell me you can hear a damn thing they're going on about. Mumble mumble, it's as bad as the BBC. (*Leaning forward, cupping her mouth*) ENUNCIATE!!! (*Another round of appalled shushing*)

MILLIE: (*horrified delight*) Flo!!!

FLO: Don't you start. (*Music crescendos and stops*) Praise the Lord, it's the interval. (*Both applaud, Millie with great enthusiasm, Flo barely bringing her hands together*) I don't know if I can take another two hours of this. Come on, let's get a drink.

(*They go to the bar. This can all be done off stage if necessary.*)

FLO: Two glasses of house red, please.

MILLIE: I'll get this.

FLO: Two glasses of Chateau Margaux, please.

(*As they are being served Millie tries to find her purse, managing to spill most of the contents of the handbag onto the floor as she does so. Flo tuts.*)

WAITRESS: £18.60 please.

FLO: That's outrageous. Daylight robbery. You are cynically taking advantage of the fact that nobody could sit through a whole evening of this ear-splitting torment without a lot of drink inside them.

MILLIE: (*Handing over a twenty and waving away the change*) There you are. Thank you.

WAITRESS: Thank you Madam.

(*Millie puts her purse away, once again tipping things on the floor. Flo helps her to pick everything up. Finally they manage to sort themselves out, and wander away, clutching their glasses.*)

FLO: Desperate for a bloody cigarette, but there is absolutely no way I'll be able to get down three flights of stairs and back up again in time. God, I miss the days when you could light up indoors and nobody batted an eyelid. Civilised. And I'm not queueing for half an hour to relieve myself in a pestilent box you can barely turn around in. I'll just have to cross my legs. Do you need to go, Millie? I'll hold your drink.

MILLIE: (*Absently*) What? No, I don't smoke. You know I don't smoke.

FLO: Millie, is there something wrong? I don't mean to pry, but you seem even more addle-brained than usual this evening.

MILLIE: Oh Flo, you are horrid! I don't know why I put up with you!

FLO: Because I'm just so loveable. Seriously, Mills, what's up? Is it next door's cat again?

MILLIE: No. Well, yes, he has been at it again in the azaleas. But I wrote a very stern note and put it through the Balfour's door, and I'm sure they'll stop him doing it very soon.

FLO: You've never been stern with anybody in your life, and I know Zennie Balfour. She'll take one look at your polite begging letter and throw it in the bin, and her mangy, oversexed Tom will continue to befoul your azaleas and rut in your rhododendrons with impunity. Like owner like cat.

MILLIE: Oh no, surely not, Zennie's awfully sweet! Although last week I *did* hear...

FLO: You should just shoot the little bugger and have done with it. I'll lend you my air rifle. Anyway, if it's not that, what is it? Something's clearly wrong. Come on, fess up to Auntie Flo.

MILLIE: Well...It's awfully boring really, and I'm sure I'm just being silly, but...it's Mummy.

FLO: Cynthia? Not...

MILLIE: Oh no, nothing like that! She *has* been having a bit of trouble since her hip replacement, but you know Mummy, she's as strong as an ox, she'll outlive us all. But I am worried about her.

FLO: Why, what has she been up to now? Surely that unpleasant business with the vicar's wife at the jamboree has all been sorted out?

MILLIE: Oh yes, the vicar's wife apologised and brought her a madeira sponge. Mummy still won't have her in the house though. Says she smells of do-gooding and mothballs. Anyway, I'm sure it's absolutely fine and I'm making a big fuss over nothing, but...

FLO: But what? Out with it!

MILLIE: Well, it's just that when I went down, she wasn't there. And she definitely was when I went at Christmas – was there, I mean. I remember Alice fussing because the triplets nearly broke her during hide-and-seek. But when I went down last month, she wasn't – just a gap on the Blue Room mantelpiece.

FLO: Who wasn't there? Your mother?

MILLIE: No, not Mummy! Mummy doesn't live on the mantelpiece. I mean Rosie.

FLO: Who's Rosie?

MILLIE: The Sevres shepherdess. And that's not the only thing – I noticed the Regency sewing box and the little Watteau in the study were gone at Christmas! So it can't be a burglary, if they're vanishing at different times. But then I thought – what if it's all in my imagination? Maybe they were never there in the first place, and I only dreamed them, but I am so *sure*...

FLO: Millie, for the love of Pete would you please stop burbling and explain!

MILLIE: But I am explaining! I'm telling you - things have been going missing.

FLO: Going missing?

MILLIE: Yes. From the house.

FLO: From Battling Hall? Not from your house?

MILLIE: Yes. I mean no...yes, from Mummy's house. Little things, you'd barely even notice, but *I* know they were there. They were part of my childhood. The shepherdess had the sweetest little face and such kind eyes, I used to pretend that *she* was my sister instead of Alice...

FLO: Well, have you asked your mother about them?

MILLIE: Yes, of course. She said the picture was at the restorers, which is all right I suppose, but really there was nothing wrong with it, and she said the sewing box was falling apart and had to be binned, but it *wasn't*, so why would she do that, and she said the shepherdess was never there at all, that she never existed! Which is why I thought I must be going mad, but I *know* she existed, I named her Rosie and I remember everything about her, so then I started to think what if...oh Flo, what if *Mummy* is the one who is going mad?

FLO: Never. Your mother is the sanest person I know.

MILLIE: I know! That's what makes it all so awful. I don't know what I'd do without Mummy, and what on earth would we do with her anyway? We couldn't put her into a home, she'd hate it. Alice is so busy with Digby and the triplets, so I'd have to go down and live with her, and Flo, you know I love Mummy, but...

FLO: Slow down! Before you mentally banish yourself to the wilds of Somerset, let's think about this. Even if your mother were losing her marbles, which I seriously doubt, how does that explain the missing antiques? Is she eating them? Is she using them to build a kind of loony fort in her bedroom? No. There's something fishy behind all this. For a start, why is it only the valuable stuff which is going missing?

MILLIE: Well, you know, most of the things in the house are...

FLO: No, Millie. I know your family is ridiculously wealthy, but even you have a few Habitat lamps and some rugs that did *not* belong to Queen Victoria. So why not take them? A true basket case would surely not make the distinction between the good stuff and the dross.

MILLIE: I hadn't thought of that! You're so clever.

FLO: I am logical. And a china shepherdess could easily be broken, but not a painting. No, it sounds to me as though your mother is being taken advantage of somehow. Whether that is because she is becoming a little absent minded in her old age or because somebody has a hold over her remains to be seen.

MILLIE: Poor Mummy! But *how* will we see, Flo? Should we call the police?

FLO: No, no need for that. I doubt they'd be any help – anyhow, your mother would eat them alive. No, what is needed here is tact and discretion. In other words, me. We shall pack our bags and take the train for Battling Hall first thing tomorrow.

MILLIE: We will?

FLO: Certainly. Never let it be said that I deserted my friends in their hour of need.

MILLIE: First thing?

FLO: God. I forgot you don't do mornings. First thing in the afternoon then.

MILLIE: But what about Mr Benson?

FLO: I shall tell him that I need a holiday. He is perfectly capable of ignoring his own phone calls and tearing up his own correspondence for a week. What about you, Mills? Do you have any plans you need to cancel?

MILLIE: Well, I *am* supposed to be going to the Lyndon-Spratt's garden party tomorrow, it's usually the most splendid bash, *buckets* of champagne and Cloisters do all the catering, so... (*frosty glare from Flo*) but of course I'll tell them I can't go. (*Wistful*) After all, this is so much more important.

FLO: Good. Then that's settled. (*A bell rings*) Oh God, I can't face any more of that dreary caterwauling. Come on, let's sneak out and then we can go home and pack.

MILLIE: Thank you Flo. You're always there for me.

FLO: Someone has to be. It's called care in the community. You're on their list. Now come along!!

(*They exit, hurriedly.*)

SCENE 2

Afternoon. Paddington Station.

(*The station can all be suggested using sound*)

(*Millie and Flo standing on the platform, waiting for their train. Flo has her handbag and a small carpet bag at her feet. Millie has a large, expensive-looking wheelee suitcase and a leather holdall as well as her capacious handbag.*)

(*Millie and Flo enter. Flo has her handbag and a small carpet bag. Millie has a large, expensive-looking wheelee suitcase and a leather holdall as well as her capacious handbag.*)

MILLIE: Here we are, platform nine. See, I told you we didn't have to rush, the train isn't even here yet.

FLO: I detest this kind of last minute panic. It brings me out in hives. If we'd missed this train, all because you had a bad case of sticky pillow, I would not have forgiven you.

MILLIE: You shouldn't worry so much, Flo! We've got ages. Look, we're even the first here. Let's try to get a window seat, then we can look at the view. There are some lovely bits on the way down.

FLO: I remember. God, it's been ages since I've been to Battling hall, though. Six years? Seven?

MILLIE: Seven, at least. It'll be so exciting, having you staying there again. Just like old times.

FLO: Well, almost. Not quite. A bit older, a bit creakier, a bit more decrepit...

MILLIE: Us, or the house?

FLO: Both. We are all over the hill and picking up speed on the way down. Can I ask you something Millie?

MILLIE: Of course.

FLO: It's driving me distracted.

MILLIE: What do you mean?

FLO: I have been trying to guess why on earth you would possibly require such enormous bags for a few days in the country, but my imagination has failed me. Please put me out of my misery.

MILLIE: I haven't brought very much, really! Clothes, of course. Evening shoes. Wellies. Soapy what-nots. Hairdryer. Hats.

FLO: Hats? Plural?

MILLIE: My sketchpad and charcoals.

FLO: We're going to investigate a series of possible thefts, Millie! I don't think you'll have time for drawing!

MILLIE: Well I just thought, you know, it might come in handy if I had to sort of ...um...*sketch* a suspect? As evidence? You know, to show the police?

FLO: I've seen your drawings. A kind person would describe them as abstract. If I remember rightly, the last one consisted of two murky smears and a blob which vaguely resembled a camel wearing a top hat. I'm not sure how the police would go about identifying someone from *that*.

MILLIE: It was a still life of a fruit basket. And I'm getting better, Flo, I really am. Last week Mr Vale said I was making barely perceptible progress. So there.

FLO: Jonathan Yeo must be shaking in his trainers. What else have you brought?

MILLIE: A novel. (*holds up a lurid Mills and Boon novel*)

FLO: That is not a novel, Millie. That is soft porn, for women of a certain age.

MILLIE: It's not porn! It is a romance novel!

FLO: It is tripe.

MILLIE: Actually, it's very well written.

FLO: Really? Give me that. (*takes the book and opens it at random*) "As he lifted her tenderly in his arms, she gazed up into his melting brown eyes. His rugged yet sensual features were perfectly set off, she thought, by his crisp linen suit in a becoming shade of camel. She felt herself utterly surrender to his manly charms, as he effortlessly carried her from the garden into the dark, imposing manor house as though she weighed no more than a feather." (*snaps the book closed*) Dear God.

MILLIE: You see? It's really romantic.

FLO: It is nauseating. (*reading the front*) Fenella Rivers should be imprisoned for crimes against literature and abuse of infinitives. (*putting the book back in Millie's holdall*) What else have you got in there?

MILLIE: Mr Parker.

FLO: Oh Mills, you *haven't*! Why on earth...

MILLIE: I know it's silly of me, but I *can't* leave him behind! I can just imagine his poor, woeful little face, with no-one to love him and cuddle him and talk to him. He'd be so *lonely* without me. And you never know, he might help us to catch the thief! He'll be like Timmy in Famous Five! And he'll be able to sit on the train with us and look out of the window – he'll love that.

FLO: I am *not* sharing a seat with Mr Parker.

MILLIE: Well, of course not. He'll sit with me. (*opening her holdall and bringing out a large, disreputable-looking teddy bear*) Won't you, Mr Parker? You're looking forward to your holiday in the country, aren't you?

FLO: For God's sake, put him away before the men in white coats come for you.

MILLIE: (*putting him carefully back in the bag*) There you go, Mr Parker. Have a little sleep, and I'll see you very soon. Oh, and then there's the food, of course.

FLO: Food? What food?

MILLIE: For the train.

FLO: For heaven's sake, the journey is less than two hours. What food did you bring?

MILLIE: Just a few snacks. Brie, stilton, oatcakes, hummus, tara, carrot and cucumber sticks, salami, tomatoes, olives...

FLO: Dear God...

MILLIE: ...grapes, a couple of apples, some chocolate...

FLO: I don't believe this.

MILLIE: (*Triumphantly*) And a bottle of wine.

FLO: Ah, now you're talking. Just the one?

MILLIE: What did you bring?

FLO: A thermos full of strong coffee. I refuse to drink that watery sludge they serve on the train.

MILLIE: Is that all? Don't worry, Flo, you can have some of my food. (*Laughing*) Do you remember at school, when the girls used to have midnight feasts, I always took a little bit extra just in case I got hungry again before breakfast? And you used to get so *cross* with us for sneaking food, saying that we would all get into trouble, but then that time we nearly *did* get caught by Mrs Fitch, you saved us by making us hide in the cupboard and telling her the noise she heard was just you sleepwalking?

FLO: Fitch the Witch. I'd forgotten her.

MILLIE: And she believed you, because you were always so sensible and well-behaved. That's why you were such a good head girl, I think. You were strict, and you followed the rules, but you always looked after us.

FLO: You needed looking after. More chicken-brained, hysterical girls I have never met in my life.

MILLIE: You were netball captain, too. And lacrosse captain. And you were so clever - you never needed to write the exam answers down your arm, like the rest of us.

FLO: Fat lot of good it did me.

MILLIE: Oh don't say that! You've done so well – you've got a job and everything!

FLO: I am a drudge. A skivvy. A slave to the nine-to-five.

MILLIE: But Benson's is such a good company! I mean, I don't know personally, of course, but apparently their pet food really is the best. Charlotte Dalrymple was saying, only the other day...

FLO: Underpaid, undervalued, undermined...

MILLIE: Oh, Flo. Is it really that bad?

FLO: Worse. But hey-ho. It pays the rent.

MILLIE: Poor Flo. If only...

FLO: (*dangerously*) Don't say it.

MILLIE: Say what?

FLO: You were going to say, if only I had married Basil instead of John, I wouldn't be in this mess now.

MILLIE: I wasn't, I...

FLO: Don't try to deny it. It's what everybody thinks, even if they don't say it. Poor Flo, a penniless widow, when she could have had it all if only she hadn't been so stubborn.

MILLIE: But I promise I wasn't...

FLO: (*fiercely*) I loved John. Loved him more than anything. And no matter how things have turned out now, I will *never* regret the choice that I made. I was happier in my little Battersea flat with John than I ever would have been in that damn great mausoleum with Boring Basil. And I wouldn't swap the fourteen years I had with him for a lifetime of riches. And if you think that I would, then you are no better than my bloody father.

MILLIE: No, that wasn't...

FLO: John was a *good* man. He may not have had much, but he was good. And he was fun. And he was kind. And he loved me.

MILLIE: I know he did, Flo.

FLO: (*blowing her nose*) Well then. Shut up.

MILLIE: (*meekly*) I was just going to say, Flo, if only your father would give you a bit of help. He's got ever so much money. John has been – gone – for what is it now... nearly fifteen years? Surely your pa must have forgiven you by now?

FLO: You don't know my father. He loves his grudges almost as much as he loves his money. Anyway, I don't want his help.

MILLIE: But what if...

FLO: Millie, listen to me very carefully. I am doing very well just as I am, and I do not need that miserable, cantankerous old sod meddling in my life.

MILLIE: But couldn't you just...

FLO: Drop it.

MILLIE: I'm sure that if you...

FLO: I said drop it.

MILLIE: Maybe I could...

FLO: (*grabbing Mr Parker from the bag*) CAMILLA DIANA HOLLAND, IF YOU DON'T STOP TALKING RIGHT THIS MINUTE THE BEAR GETS IT!

MILLIE: No, Flo, please don't hurt him!

FLO: I MEAN IT! ONE MORE WORD AND I'LL RIP HIS HEAD OFF! (*Millie opens her mouth, and Flo puts Mr Parker's neck in serious danger. Millie subsides. Are you quite finished? Once she is sure Millie is really done, Flo relinquishes the bear and Millie hugs it protectively to her.*) Right. Good. Now, what's the plan? Is Jamie meeting us at Taunton?

MILLIE: Oh, I forgot to tell you. No, he's not. We'll have to take a taxi.

FLO: A taxi? All the way to Battling Hall? Why can't they come and get us?

MILLIE: Well I don't know about Jamie, but poor Ben can't drive because of his cataracts and Joan doesn't like to drive without Harold. And Mummy hasn't driven since her hip operation.

FLO: To the great relief of the local constabulary. They'll probably have a party the day she hangs up her driving gloves for good. Can't we take a bus?

MILLIE: They only run once a day, and even then they stop a mile from the gates. Don't worry Flo, the taxi will be my treat.

FLO: In that case, I graciously accept. Anyhow, where's this bloody train? Surely it should be here by now?

MILLIE: (*looking at her watch*) Gosh, yes – it's due to leave in four minutes but it's not here yet. That's funny. Maybe it's been delayed.

FLO: Delayed? This is where it starts from. This is the terminus.

MILLIE: Oh yes. That is strange.

FLO: Yes. It is. Millie, forgive me for asking, but you are sure it said platform nine, aren't you?

MILLIE: Oh yes, I'm quite certain.

FLO: It's just that...there's still nobody but us waiting on this platform.

MILLIE: (*blithely*) No, there isn't is there?

FLO: And that doesn't strike you as odd, at all?

MILLIE: Maybe nobody else wants to go to Taunton. I mean, well, you know, it's not very...

FLO: Sshh! (*Train Announcement: **The thirteen oh five train to Taunton, departing from platform 6, is now ready to depart.***) Platform six! PLATFORM SIX, NOT PLATFORM NINE, MILLIE, YOU CRETIN!

MILLIE: (*hastily gathering her bags*) I'm so sorry Flo! I could have sworn...

FLO: Were you hanging upside down like a bat when you read the board? No, no...don't answer that! RUN!

(*Exit, clutching a bear.*)

SCENE 3***Afternoon. The drawing room of Battling Manor.***

A doorbell rings offstage. Joan, a maid no longer in the first flush, crosses the stage to open the door.

JOAN: *(offstage)* Miss Camilla! And Mrs Evans. Please come in. Mrs Holland is resting at the moment. Do you have any more bags to be fetched in from the car?

MILLIE: *(offstage)* No thank you Joan, that's everything. And it's Millie, Joan! You don't need to watch your Ps and Qs in front of Flo - she isn't anybody important.

FLO: *(marching in)* Thanks very much.

MILLIE: *(following her in)* You know what I mean! You're practically family, isn't she Joan?

JOAN: *(taking their coats)* She is that. I remember the two of you when you were just a pair of giddy kippers, running round the walled garden with Marmaduke.

FLO: I was never a giddy kipper. I have always been a model of self-restraint and good manners. Excuse me, desperate for a pee. *Exits*

MILLIE: *(Collapsing onto the sofa)* I loved Marmaduke. Since Pa would never let me have a dog of my own, he was the next best thing. Is Ben ever going to get another dog?

JOAN: Not now, dear. What with his cataracts, and his knees, he's in no state to be chasing round after a puppy.

MILLIE: No, I suppose not. Poor Ben. Is he going to get his cataracts seen to? He promised me he would, last time I was here.

JOAN: Don't get me started. If I've told him once, I've told him a thousand times. But there – he doesn't listen to me. He's scared of the doctor, that's what it is. Maybe you could have a word with him again? He's that fond of you, you might be able to talk some sense into his head.

MILLIE: I'll try. It is a shame, though. About Marmaduke, I mean. It doesn't seem right, a house like this without a dog. Maybe Jamie could get one. Where is Jamie, anyway? Why couldn't he come and fetch us from the station?

JOAN: Why, didn't your mother tell you? Jamie's gone.

MILLIE: Gone? What do you mean, gone?

JOAN: Your mother sent him away, week before last. One minute he was here, pruning the clematis, then your mother called him in and next thing we knew he was off, roaring off down the drive in that little green rust-bucket of his like a bat out of hell, gravel everywhere,

all over the lawn. Ben was in an awful state afterwards, and not just because of the gravel. He was very fond of Jamie. We all were.

MILLIE: But why would Mummy do that?

JOAN: Your guess is as good as mine, dear. Anyway, he's working for Caroline Biddlecombe now, over at Ketchings.

MILLIE: Oh no, not Caro! Poor Jamie.

JOAN: (*grimly*) My thoughts exactly. She'll eat him alive, same as she did the last three. Scott Spraggons hasn't been the same since, his mother's ever so worried about him. But a job's a job.

MILLIE: But Ben can't cope on his own with this big garden, can he? Is Mummy looking for anybody else?

JOAN: I really couldn't say, dear. Oh, and that's another thing - Holly's gone too.

MILLIE: Holly? The girl Mummy took on last year to help you with the house?

JOAN: That's her. Daft as a brush, and she was only here three afternoons a week, but I was glad of the help. Anyway, she went last month, just after you were last here. Apparently she's off to University up north, but what that ninny can possibly be studying I don't know.

MILLIE: But how are you managing, Joan? It's too much work for you on your own, surely?

JOAN: At my age, do you mean?

MILLIE: Well no, of course I didn't mean that, not exactly – but Joan, you mustn't do too much! I know what you're like, you never stop. Let me see your hands.

JOAN: No dear, really...

MILLIE: Come here. (*takes her hands*) Just as I suspected – they're all rough and chapped again. You haven't been using those gloves I bought you for Christmas at all, have you?

JOAN: I just can't get on with them; they make me all fingers and thumbs!

MILLIE: When I get back to London I'll send you down some of the lotion I use. It does wonders for your skin, and it smells divine. Sort of lemony/orangy/custardy sort of thing. Delish.

JOAN: Now, dear, you mustn't go wasting your money on me.

MILLIE: Nonsense. Money's for spending.

JOAN: Speaking of which, is this a new coat?

MILLIE: It is. I picked it up from Harvey Nicks. I can't tell you how much it cost – I'm too ashamed. Mummy's going to be *livid* – I've gone over my allowance again, and I'm going to have to ask her for a top up. But I just couldn't resist it – look at those cuffs! Aren't they too adorable?

JOAN: You are naughty.

MILLIE: I know I am. I have no self-control, you know I don't. I just love pretty things!

JOAN: What was nothing wrong with that nice coat you had before? The green one?

MILLIE: Nothing at all! It was a fabulous coat, it went with everything. But I was out to dinner with Livvy Lloyd last week, and she admired it so much I gave it to her.

JOAN: You gave her your coat?

MILLIE: She really, really liked it. And, you know, it actually suited her much better than me. Green looks so good with red hair.

JOAN: That's all very well, but you can't just go giving away your clothes willy-nilly! You're far too generous. Speaking of which, Harold says thank you for the book.

MILLIE: Oh, did he like it?

JOAN: Like it? I thought he was going to burst when it arrived in the post. It meant ever so much to him, to have a first edition – it's got pride of place in the bookcase! But really dear, you shouldn't have. You need to be more careful with your money – it doesn't grow on trees you know!

MILLIE: No. You're quite right, Joan. I promise I'll try my best to stay within my allowance in future.

JOAN: Good girl. (*Flo enters*) Anyway, here I am gas-bagging and I haven't even got your tea yet. I'll go and get it ready. I made a fruit loaf this morning – shall I bring that in too?

MILLIE/FLO: Ooh, yes please Joan/No thank you Joan.

FLO: Millie, how can you? After all that pigging you did on the train? I swear, you have hollow legs. It's not good for you, you know. You're getting awfully fat.

MILLIE: I'm not getting fat, am I Joan?

JOAN: You look blooming as always, dear. It's nice to see a girl with a big appetite.

FLO: Hardly a girl.

MILLIE: (*crestfallen*) Oh well. I suppose Flo's right. Just the tea then, please.

JOAN: (*with a huge, unsubtle wink at her*) Right you are. *Exits.*

FLO: (*walking to the window*) It is good to be back here again. Some of my happiest memories are of this place. The garden's looking splendid. Shall we go for a stroll around after tea?

MILLIE: It is *now*. It may not be for much longer.

FLO: Why, what do you mean? Why are you looking like an ominous owl?

MILLIE: (*hissing*) Mummy sacked Jamie!

FLO: And now you sound like a goose. Why did she do that?

MILLIE: Nobody knows! It's all very mysterious. And Holly the House Help has gone too. Oh Flo, do you think this could be a clue?

FLO: I did wonder what was going on with the housekeeping. I wasn't going to mention it, but the bathroom was a *trifle* insalubrious, and just look at the dust in here. So, who's here now? Just your mother, Joan and Ben?

MILLIE: I suppose so. But Joan lives in the village with Harold of course, so really it's just Mummy, and Ben over the stables.

FLO: And your mother never mentioned this to you when you called?

MILLIE: Mummy never really tells me anything. She's not very *easy* to talk to on the phone, do you know what I mean? Lots of long silences. I usually end up gibbering like a chimp out of nerves and then she sort of sighs, and I think both of us are quite relieved when we finally put the phone down.

FLO: I can imagine.

MILLIE: Also, you know how proud Mummy is. She'll never admit when she's got a problem. Although I suppose Alice might know something about it. She visits here quite often with the children, since they're only over in Bristol, and she and Mummy get along rather well.

FLO: Might be worth giving her a ring. You'll have to do it though. Your sister is a perfectly nice woman but I have absolutely no interest in the three sticky, destructive Visigoths she has spawned, and since she seems incapable of talking about anything else I find conversation with her singularly difficult and unrewarding.

MILLIE: They *are* a handful. I was over there last month helping her to look after them while Digby was away on a corporate golfing weekend, and they had me run ragged! She probably doesn't have time to think about anything else. She used to dance - do you remember? Flamingo.

FLO: Flamenco.

MILLIE: That's the chap. And she had her book club, and she used to love going to the theatre. She was even in a show once. Just a local affair in the village hall, and she was second villager or something, but I thought she was terribly good, the way she handled the goat and managed to sing her song at the same time. But now she doesn't do any of that.

FLO: Yes. IVF has a lot to answer for. It is interesting though, don't you think?

MILLIE: Oh, very! Yes, awfully! Gripping. Um...what in particular do you find interesting, Flo?

FLO: The fact that your mother has just now decided to rid herself of everybody except the people she has known for ever; the people she really trusts. That suggests to me that you

might actually be on to something, Mills. She's clearly suspicious. (*takes out a pack of cigarettes*) We're going to have to have a good chat with her, once she's up.

MILLIE: Oh, Flo, please don't smoke in here. You know mummy hates it.

FLO: She's not here.

MILLIE: No, but she will be, any minute now. And then she'll shout at us.

FLO: She'll shout at us anyway, she always does. Fine, fine. Cowardy custard. (*Joan enters with the tea and a large slice of fruit loaf for Millie*) Joan, do you know if Mrs Holland is up and about yet?

JOAN: No dear, I'm afraid she isn't.

FLO: It's not like her to nap during the day, is it? Did she go overboard on the sherry last night?

MILLIE: Flo, really! Mummy's going to be eighty-five in September, she's bound to get a bit tired. She couldn't go on running around the place like a teenager for ever.

JOAN: (*pouring the tea and not looking at them*) Well actually, Millie dear, your mother hasn't got out of her bed at all today.

MILLIE: Not at all? Oh Joan, what's wrong with her?

JOAN: Now, nothing for you to worry yourself about. It's just her poor new hip, you know. It's not taking as quickly as it should. It's all swollen up, the doctor says, and he thinks she might have a bit of an allergy to the metal. He's given her some pills for the swelling, which she doesn't like but I make her take them, and some stuff to help her sleep. It does make her drowsy, but then I suppose that's the point.

MILLIE: But when does he say she'll get better?

JOAN: It's not as simple as that, dear. They have to give her tests, regular, and generally keep an eye on her. He's in here most days, Dr Elliot, and he's got the measure of her good and proper. He doesn't take no notice when she swears at him - he just laughs.

MILLIE: Dr Elliot? What happened to lovely old Dr Forsyth?

JOAN: He retired, dear. Like you say, he was old. And between you and me he'd started making a few mistakes - should have retired long before he did. I'll miss him, though - he was always such a gentleman. Dr Elliot's a nice man too, for all he looks too young to be a proper doctor. But there you are, nowadays I think everybody looks too young to be doing what they're doing.

MILLIE: But Mummy will be all right, won't she Joan?

JOAN: Of course she will. She has good days and bad days, and today's a bad day, but she'll be back on her feet in no time, just you wait and see. And I'm here to look after her, aren't I? And besides, have you ever known anything stop your mother from doing exactly what she wanted to do?

FLO: *(sitting on the sofa next to Millie)* Joan's right. I remember your father telling us stories about what your mother did during the war. From what I could gather she pretty much put a stop to Hitler single handed, and she wasn't even in her teens then!

MILLIE: *(a little sniffly)* Yes, I remember. How she organised a home guard full of school girls armed with bread knives and catapults, and tried to run away to join the army, dressed as a boy. And the time she wrote to Churchill to tell him their local postman was a German spy, and it turned out he really was! Such tall tales – you'd never have believed them about anyone else. But, you know, I believed them of Mummy.

FLO: Well then. If Joan and the infant doctor aren't worried, neither should we be.

MILLIE: I want to see her.

JOAN: Well, she is sleeping just now, dear. I checked on her while the tea was stewing.

MILLIE: I know, but I just want to *see* her. I'll be ever so quiet.

JOAN: She doesn't take kindly to anyone waking her, as you know. Especially now, when she's in a bit of pain.

MILLIE: *(lower lip beginning to stick out)* But I *won't* wake her. I'll just gently open the door and take a peek.

JOAN: I wouldn't, dear, I really wouldn't. Why don't you just drink your tea like a good girl, and wait until she wakes up? I'm sure it won't be long.

MILLIE: No.

FLO: You know Joan's right, Millie. We've only been in the house five minutes; we don't want to enrage your mother just yet. We usually wait at least a couple of hours. Where are your manners?

JOAN: There's a sensible girl. Now, drink your...

MILLIE: NO! She is *my* mother, and if I want to go and see then that is exactly what I will do. *(softening)*. Don't worry! She won't even know I'm there. I'll be like a ... like a little mouse. Like a ghost. A mouse-ghost. *(she runs out of the room and up the stairs. Flo picks up her tea. Joan sighs, sits on the sofa and starts drinking Millie's untouched tea. They both stare straight ahead)*

FLO: *(slowly)* Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two...

*(A roar from above, as of an enraged lion, followed by a bellow of **GET OUT OF HERE YOU NINCOMPOOP!** Joan nods at Flo in respectful acknowledgement, and makes a start on the fruit loaf.)*

SCENE 4

Late morning. The drawing room of Battling Manor.

Flo is sitting on the sofa, busily scribbling in a note book. Millie enters.

MILLIE: Good morning!

FLO: Is it still morning? (*checking her watch*) Just about, I suppose. Have you been in bed all this time, lazy bones?

MILLIE: Oh no, I got up about an hour ago. I've been having breakfast.

FLO: Breakfast? It's nearly lunch time.

MILLIE: Yes, but there were *kippers*. You know I can never resist kippers, Flo! And they were ever so fresh; the fishmonger delivered them yesterday, apparently. I suppose Mummy will have to get all her shopping delivered now that Jamie isn't here to drive to the supermarket.

FLO: I suppose so.

MILLIE: Thank goodness for Ocado. I must say I don't know how I ever coped without it. Daisy Fitzwilliam was just saying to me just the other day that she simply *lives* for the knock at the door, and I know exactly what she means! All those delicious goodies to rummage through.

FLO: Mmm.

MILLIE: At first I was worried that I wouldn't be able to get my head round it – you know what I'm like with computers, it's all in one eye and out the other, but she showed me how to get around their web thingy and it really is very simple. The problem is, one tends to get carried away and click on absolutely everything! I went on there to buy some salmon the other day and ended up buying a saddle of venison and a set of Le Creuset risotto bowls!

FLO: Mmm.

MILLIE: Flo?

FLO: Yes?

MILLIE: What are you doing?

FLO: I'm glad you asked. For your information, while you have been busily sleeping, I have been coming up with a plan of attack.

MILLIE: Attack? Oh, but...

FLO: It's an expression, Millie. We are not actually going to assault anybody. Unless, of course, it proves to be necessary. Now, have you seen your mother this morning? Is she planning to get up today?

MILLIE: I popped in before breakfast. She's in a much better mood than yesterday, but she's not getting out of bed. Joan's going to take her lunch up. I think her hip really must be bad – I've never known her to stay in bed before, not even when she had pneumonia. And when she

broke her wrist jumping one of Lady Mortimer's stallions over Tinker's Beck she just got back on the horse and carried on, *and* she won a prize for her Dashing White Sergeant at the hunt ball afterwards.

FLO: It's certainly a bit worrying; however, for the purposes of our investigation it couldn't possibly be better. Keeps her out of the way while we poke about. Right, now you've finally emerged from your pit we can make a start. (*consulting her notebook*) First things first, have you noticed anything else missing since you were last here?

MILLIE: Not a thing.

FLO: Have you looked?

MILLIE: Well, no, not really.

FLO: Well would you mind awfully going to have a look now? Do a quick sweep of the rooms, see if anything isn't in its rightful place.

MILLIE: I don't know if I'd remember what was where, though. We have so much stuff...

FLO: Don't worry about that. I'm sure you'll notice if something is missing, even if you don't know what was there in the first place, if you see what I mean.

MILLIE: All right. What are you going to do?

FLO: I'm going to have a quick word with Joan. If anyone knows what's up it's her; she's the eyes and ears of this place.

MILLIE: Oh! Can't I stay and help? That sounds much more fascinating than my job!

FLO: No, you can't. You'd be more hindrance than help.

MILLIE: Oh, but Flo...

FLO: What I mean is, Millie, Joan loves you very much, and she wants to protect you and keep you from worrying about anything. If something unpleasant *is* going on here, she's much more likely to be honest with me if you're not around.

MILLIE: I suppose you're right. All right then, can I borrow a piece of paper and a pen?

FLO: Why?

MILLIE: So that if things *are* missing, I can make a list. I'll never remember, otherwise.

FLO: Honestly. There you go. Now, why don't you pop into the kitchen first and ask Joan to come and see me? That'll give you the chance to have a good rummage round in there while she's busy in here with me.

MILLIE: That's a wonderful idea! You're so clever. It's all rather exciting, isn't it? I feel *just* like a spy!

FLO: (*laughing*) The name's Holland. Camilla Holland.

MILLIE: What?

FLO: Never mind. Run along. (*Millie exits*) Heaven help the British government if that's the best they've got. Shaken, and extremely stirred.

(*Joan enters, clutching a tea-towel.*)

JOAN: You wanted something, dear?

FLO: Yes, Joan. I would like to talk to you.

JOAN: Well it'll have to be quick, I've got the potatoes on.

FLO: Don't worry, it won't take a minute. (*picks up her notebook and pen*)

JOAN: Ooh. Now. What's all this?

FLO: How long have you known Mrs Holland, Joan?

JOAN: Well now, let me see. I came here just after I married Harold, in 1977, so that would make it what, thirty years?

FLO: Forty.

JOAN: No! That can't be right, it can't be that long. (*counting on her fingers*) Oh my Gawd it is. *Forty years!* I can't believe it. No wonder I'm feeling my bones. Where does the time go?

FLO: I'd say time flies when you're having fun, but knowing Mrs Holland, it can't always have been fun working for her I'd imagine?

JOAN: (*laughing*) Well no, we've had our moments, but on the whole we rub along happily enough. She's a lady who knows her own mind and isn't afraid to speak it, but I've learned to take no notice of her ranting and roaring. It's usually a storm in a teacup, and it all settles down soon enough if you pay no attention.

FLO: You're a wise woman, Joan, Now, what I want to know is have you noticed any change in Mrs Holland recently? I mean, is she behaving any differently?

JOAN: Well she's not herself at the moment, that's for sure.

FLO: Really? How so?

JOAN: Well, with her hip you know.

FLO: Oh I see. No, I rather meant in her character, you know.

JOAN: Well she's a bit down, that's all. Normally she's always buzzing around the place, sticking her nose in anything and everything that doesn't concern her, but lately of course she can't get about and it must be awful for her just lying there with nothing to set her mind to but a pile of silly magazines. I tell you, dear, I was that glad when I heard her yelling at Miss Millie yesterday – not that it was nice for the poor girl, you understand, but it was a proper flash of the old Mrs Holland all right!

FLO: Do you get the impression that she is worried about something?

JOAN: Oh no, dear. She doesn't get worried, she gets angry and when she does the whole world knows about it!

FLO: Thank you, Joan. Just one more question...

JOAN: I really have to get back to those potatoes...

FLO: Very quickly. Have you noticed anything going missing from the house?

JOAN: That's a strange question. What do you mean, missing?

FLO: Things vanishing without explanation. Like a little Watteau, for instance?

JOAN: What ho?

FLO: The little painting in the study.

JOAN: You mean the one of the fat woman in the altogether?

FLO: Maybe.

JOAN: Oh no, that's not missing! It's at the restorers. It got the light on it, or some-such. Mrs Holland's very particular about that sort of thing.

FLO: But the study faces north. And surely it hasn't been at the restorers since before Christmas? What are they doing – repainting it from scratch?

JOAN: Well I don't know about these things, but there was something wrong with it anyway. I have to say I won't be sorry if it never comes back. It's not right, her running about in the woods like that with no clothes on. It gives me goose-pimples just to look at her.

FLO: What about a china shepherdess?

JOAN: Is that the thing Miss Millie was going on about last time she was here? I'll tell you like I told her - in all my time here I've never seen nor heard of such a thing. Is that what all this is about?

FLO: Millie and I are worried about Mrs Holland. About her state of mind.

JOAN: Oh lord love you, there's no need for you to worry about *her*. She may be confined to her bed but she's still as sharp as a tack. Now Miss Millie is another story...

FLO: What do you mean?

JOAN: Well. She's a lovely girl, don't get me wrong, but she's always been a bit dreamy, ever since she was a little thing. Always off in a world of her own. The stories she used to come out with – not lies, you know, but just things she'd imagined up. She'd never knowingly tell an untruth, Miss Millie, she's honest as the day is long, but sometimes she gets things a little bit confused in her head and she forgets what's real and what isn't.

FLO: I see.

JOAN: You must have noticed it yourself, dear.

FLO: I admit she's not always the brightest pixie in the forest. But...

JOAN: Well, there you are, then. Best to take anything she says with a large pinch of salt, is my advice.

FLO: Yes...

JOAN: The world can be a difficult place for people like Miss Millie; she needs looking after. We're so glad that she's got you to keep an eye on her, keep her safe.

FLO: Well, I don't really...

JOAN: Oh yes you do. You always have, ever since she was at school. And I can't tell you how grateful we are. It's good to know she's got a friend like you. *(Pause)* Anyway! I must be getting back to my spuds or they'll be burned to a crisp. Lunch in half an hour! *(Joan exits. Flo sits, deep in thought. Millie enters, holding her list and a picture frame.)*

MILLIE: Well, Flo? Did Joan say anything interesting?

FLO: Yes, she did rather.

MILLIE: How exciting! What did she say? Does she know who did it? Is she *protecting* somebody? Did you sit her down and shine a light into her eyes, like they do in films?

FLO: No. Millie...

MILLIE: Did you say "We have ways of making you talk"?

FLO: No. Millie, you are sure about this, aren't you?

MILLIE: About what?

FLO: About all this. Things going missing.

MILLIE: Of course I am. Why do you ask?

FLO: Because it suddenly occurs to me that this is all rather far-fetched. I mean, here we are, a couple of silly middle-aged women, investigating a crime that may never actually have taken place.

MILLIE: But it has taken place!

FLO: Has it? Three little things have gone from a simply enormous house, and you're convinced that something sinister is going on? What if your mother is telling the complete truth, and there's no mystery at all?

MILLIE: But you said...

FLO: I know I did. But I'm starting to think I was mistaken. After all, it's not the first time you've got the wrong end of the stick, is it?

MILLIE: What are you talking about?

FLO: Remember when you were convinced that Mr Cobb was a planning to kill his wife, after you overheard him talking in the gymnasium? And it turned out he was auditioning for Othello?

MILLIE: Oh, but that was at school! That was ever such a long time ago.

FLO: And last year, when you told everybody that Kezzie English was going mad, because she was walking down the street talking to herself about feathers?

MILLIE: Oh, but...

FLO: When actually she had a blue-tooth headset on, and she was talking to her upholsterer!

MILLIE: But Flo, this is different! I'm really, really sure this time! There's something wrong here, I can feel it in the pit of my stomach!

FLO: That's probably the kippers.

MILLIE: Anyway, it's not just three things that have vanished anymore. Look! (*brandishing a list*)

FLO: What is this? (*taking it from her*) Are these all missing? French marble clock, Tiffany lamp, Royal Albert tea set, Victorian Decanter Stand...

MILLIE: And you should see the library, Flo. Gaps everywhere. I have no idea what's gone but I know Daddy had a nice collection of first editions in there – he was very proud of them. I bet they're not there anymore.

FLO: Does that say Indian Statue? Do you mean the one that used to be in the hall?

MILLIE: Yes, he's gone too.

FLO: I remember him. He used to scare me to death.

MILLIE: And there's something else! (*brandishing the photograph*) Look at this!

FLO: Good God. What *are* you wearing?

MILLIE: An owl costume. Anyway...

FLO: And is that Alice? What is she holding?

MILLIE: A stuffed cat in a wedding dress. But that's not important.

FLO: How can you say that's not important? I'm fascinated. I need to know what is happening here.

MILLIE: Flo, please listen! Look at where the picture was taken.

FLO: It looks like Battling Hall.

MILLIE: Yes! In the Blue Room.

FLO: And? I'm sorry, am I missing something?

MILLIE: No! That's just the point!

FLO: You've lost me.

MILLIE: Look at the mantelpiece behind us. There, just behind my wing.

FLO: I can't... oh. Yes, I see.

MILLIE: It's Rosie, the shepherdess!

FLO: Yes. Yes, it is.

MILLIE: So, you see, I wasn't making her up! She *was* there!

FLO: Yes, she certainly was. I'm sorry, Millie. It looks as though you were right after all – it can't be a coincidence, all of these things vanishing like that. Something is most definitely up.

MILLIE: So we can go on investigating? You're not giving up?

FLO: Not a chance. Things are just getting interesting.

MILLIE: Hurrah! What's our next move?

FLO: I would like you to go and talk to your mother. Find out if she's worried about anything. Don't barge in and ask her straight out what's going on; you'll need to be subtle. Just have a nice mother/daughter gossip and see if you can wheedle any information out of her.

MILLIE: Oh but ...

FLO: Come along, Millie – you said yourself that she was in a better mood today. Chin up, be brave. And while you're doing that, I'll have a chat with Ben. Do you know where he is?

MILLIE: (*pointing out of the window*) Yes, he's just out there by the dovecote, staking the lobelia.

FLO: So he is. Ben! BEN! Would you mind coming in here a moment? Go on Millie, work your magic on your mother. Between us we'll have the case cracked by lunchtime. (*Millie exits, reluctantly. Ben enters, hovering on the threshold.*) Come in Ben!

BEN: I've got my wellies on, Miss.

FLO: Well, take them off. Actually, don't bother, looking at the state of this carpet it won't make a bit of difference. Please sit down.

BEN: I won't, Miss, if you don't mind.

FLO: As you please. It's nice to see you again, Ben. How have you been?

BEN: Fine, thank you Miss.

FLO: I hear you've lost Jamie.

BEN: Lost him?

FLO: Well, he's gone, hasn't he?

BEN: Yes.

FLO: I hear that Mrs Holland sacked him.

BEN: Did she, Miss?

FLO: Yes. Didn't you know?

BEN: Can't say, Miss.

FLO: Can you think why she would have done that?

BEN: No, Miss.

FLO: Had he done anything to upset her?

BEN: I don't know, Miss.

FLO: Did she not like him?

BEN: Can't say, Miss.

FLO: Did *you* like him?

BEN: Oh yes, Miss.

FLO: You never thought that he might be untrustworthy?

BEN: Oh no, Miss.

FLO: What *did* you think of him?

BEN: Think of him, Miss?

FLO: Yes. What was he like?

BEN: He was young.

FLO: Yes?

BEN: He was a good worker.

FLO: Anything else?

BEN: -

FLO: Ben?

BEN: -

FLO: Ben, is that it? Is that really all you can think of to say about him?

BEN: He didn't like geraniums.

FLO: Really?

BEN: Hated 'em.

FLO: That's very useful, thank you. Anything else?

BEN: He took a size nine welly.

(From upstairs, a roar "CAMILLA DIANA, I SWEAR YOU WILL BE THE DEATH OF ME! BUGGER OFF AND PESTER SOMEBODY ELSE!")

FLO: *(hastily)* Thank you Ben, that will be all for now.

BEN: *(Thankfully)* Thank you, Miss. *(exits)*

(Millie enters, looking shaken. She and Flo stare at each other.)

FLO: Well, that went splendidly.

MILLIE: Lunch?

FLO: Lunch.

(They exit)

SCENE 5

Afternoon. The drawing room of Battling Manor.

(Flo is marching up and down impatiently. Millie enters with a basket full of lettuce.)

MILLIE: *(shouting over her shoulder)* I'll give you some peppermint tea for her! It works wonders!

FLO: Well it's about time! What *have* you been doing?

MILLIE: Sorry, Flo! I rang Alice, like you said, but she doesn't know anything. She couldn't really talk though, because one of the triplets, I think it was Oscar, had his head stuck in the bannisters and she was about to go at him with the fairy liquid. Then after that I just popped into the garden to take the crumbs to the birds, and I ran into Ben. We've been having a lovely chat.

FLO: What on earth do you mean?

MILLIE: Well I think it was his ears that were the problem. He takes after his father, poor little mite. Like a taxi with the doors open.

FLO: I'm not talking about Oscar! A chat? With Ben? You can't have. Ben doesn't chat.

MILLIE: Of course he does. He tells the most wonderful stories.

FLO: Are we talking about the same Ben? *BEN* Ben?

MILLIE: Yes, Ben Ben! I was talking to him about his cataracts. He's promised me faithfully that's he's going to get them done. And he was explaining all about his plans for the rockery, and he gave me some lettuce for Joan. He's off to powder a wasps nest in the apple tree now. Why would he do that? Do wasps like powder?

FLO: I'm speechless. Unlike Ben, it seems.

MILLIE: And his sister Connie is suffering terribly from migraines at the moment, poor thing – she has to stay in the house all day with the curtains drawn! I'm going to give him some peppermint tea for her. If we have time before we go, I'd like to pop down to the village to see her. Maybe it would cheer her up a bit to have some company.

FLO: I'm sure it would.

MILLIE: Oh, and Ben told me something really interesting, Flo. I think it may be another clue!

FLO: Well? Don't keep me in suspense.

MILLIE: Apparently, two days ago, he was up a ladder cleaning the upstairs windows...

FLO: Up a ladder? At his age?

MILLIE: Oh, he's still quite spry, despite his poor knees. Anyway, Dr Elliot was in with Mummy and he says they were having the most awful row. Really going at it hammer and tongs. Then Dr Elliot stormed out and slammed the door so hard the whole house rocked. Poor Ben nearly fell off his ladder.

FLO: That's quite interesting. Only, you know, your mother does tend to row with everybody.

MILLIE: Well yes, she does, but Ben says this was different. Spitting feathers, he said. And the doctor is a very calm sort of chap apparently, so it gave Ben a bit of a shock to hear him screaming like that.

FLO: Ben really told you all this?

MILLIE: Oh, yes.

FLO: Well I never. You clearly have a knack, Millie.

MILLIE: What do you mean?

FLO: Nothing, never mind. I think we need to have a word with the doctor. Do you know when he's next due to visit your mother?

MILLIE: Joan said he's coming this afternoon, but she doesn't know what time. It's so exciting, he's a proper suspect, isn't he?

FLO: Let's keep an open mind on that for now. Doctors are usually quite well paid; it's hard to see why he'd risk his reputation and his profession by stealing your mother's valuables.

Still, I'm looking forward to meeting him. I *was* planning to pay a call on Jamie this afternoon, and maybe track down that Holly girl, but that will just have to wait.

MILLIE: (*going to the window*) I wonder if he looks like a real villain. I hope he has a moustache. Ooh I do wish he would hurry up and get here! I'm like a cat on hot tin bricks!

FLO: Like a cat on hot bricks.

MILLIE: That's what I said.

FLO: No, you said like a cat on hot tin bricks. You're confusing the expression with the play.

MILLIE: I thought they were the same.

FLO: No, the play is *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*.

MILLIE: Isn't that what I said?

FLO: No, you said...

MILLIE: Flo, look! Look there, isn't that Jamie?

FLO: (*hurrying to the window*) Where?

MILLIE: Look, there, he's just going behind the shrubbery.

FLO: I don't see anyone... Oh yes I do. But he's got a hood on, I can't see his face.

MILLIE: I know, but he was looking this way just now and I'm sure it was Jamie. What on earth could he be doing here?

FLO: He's heading for the gate.

MILLIE: (*setting down her basket and heading for the door*) I'm going to go and ask him!

FLO: Millie, you'll never catch him!

MILLIE: Yes I will! I'll chase him down like a bloodhound! (*exits, at a run*)

FLO: Millie, don't run! You'll fall! (*goes to the window to watch.*) And...(*wincing*) there she goes, arse over tip. JOAN! Can you please go and ask Ben to go and scoop Miss Millie off the drive?

(*Joan enters*)

JOAN: Why, whatever's happened?

FLO: The silly ass has taken a spill. (*going back to window*) Actually, Joan, never mind – there's a car pulling up. A man's got out, and he seems to be dusting her off. Oho. I take it that's the good doctor? He doesn't look all that young.

JOAN: Well, like I say, everyone seems young to me nowadays. And I was used to old doctor Forsyth of course, and he was ninety if he was a day when he retired. Yes, that's Dr Elliot. Miss Millie will be safe with him. Look, there's Ben huffing up, too. He'll help him bring her in.

(Dr Elliot and Ben enter, supporting a hobbling Millie)

DR ELLIOT: Hello Joan! As you can see, yet another charming lady has thrown herself under my wheels. That makes three this month. Something is going to have to be done about it; people are beginning to talk.

JOAN: *(with mock severity)* Dr Elliot, that charming lady happens to be Miss Camilla Holland, younger daughter to the lady of the Hall.

DR ELLIOT: *(looking at Millie with interest, still with his arm round her)* Is that right? I am delighted to meet you, Miss Camilla. Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Dr Elliot.

(Millie says nothing, but stares into his eyes)

JOAN: Yes, that *is* right. And I'd be much obliged if you'd put her down. Now, please. Ben help the doctor to put Miss Millie on the settee. *(Dr Elliot deposits a still speechless Millie on the sofa)* Thank you. Now, let's have a look at you, dear. Ooh, yes, that's a nasty graze. I'll go and fetch some TCP and plasters. *(exits)*

DR ELLIOT. Well, my day is turning out to be much more exciting than I expected. *(to Florence)* How do you do? I don't think we've been introduced.

FLO: *(shaking his hand)* Florence Evans. Thank you for picking Millie up off the drive.

DR ELLIOT: Not at all, it was my great pleasure. Forgive me for asking, but what were you doing lying on the drive in the first place?

MILLIE: I was chasing...

FLO: A pigeon! She...was chasing...a pigeon.

DR ELLIOT: A pigeon?

FLO: Yes.

DR ELLIOT: I see. No, actually, I don't see. Why were you chasing a pigeon?

MILLIE: Because he was...

FLO: Sweet peas! The pigeons have been after the sweet peas. Millie was just trying to scare them away.

BEN: *(in disgust)* Sweet Peas?

DR ELLIOT: May I say that is admirably proactive of you, Miss Camilla. Those birds are nothing but a pest. I wish I had someone to protect my sweet peas.

MILLIE: Millie.

DR ELLIOT: Sorry?

MILLIE: My name's Millie.

DR ELLIOT: Millie. And my name is Stephen.

MILLIE: Stephen.

DR ELLIOT: Nevertheless, I must urge you to take more care of yourself in future. Sweet peas are all very well, but they are not worth risking your neck for, I'm sure you will agree. Please don't go running after pigeons again.

MILLIE: Yes. I mean, no.

DR ELLIOT: Do you promise?

MILLIE: Yes, Stephen.

(Joan enters with plasters and a cloth.)

JOAN: Right then dear, let's get you cleaned up.

DR ELLIOT: Let me take those, Joan. I'll look after Millie.

JOAN: Indeed you will not! You are here to see Mrs Holland, aren't you? Well off with you and see her then, she's waiting for you. I'm more than capable of mopping a graze.

DR ELLIOT: Very well. I'll leave you in Joan's capable hands. Keep that leg up, and rest it as much as possible. I'll pop in and see you again before I leave.

MILLIE: Yes, Stephen. *(Dr Elliot Exits)* Oh, Flo!

FLO: You ass, Millie. I told you not to run. Does it hurt a lot?

MILLIE: Yes. But never mind that. Oh Flo, Joan, Ben, did you see him?

FLO: Who, Jamie?

JOAN: Jamie? No love, Jamie doesn't work here anymore, remember?

FLO: Well, Millie was quite sure it was him.

BEN: What was who?

FLO: We saw a man in the garden just now, a man with a hood on, and Millie thinks it was Jamie.

JOAN: No, it couldn't have been. She must have been mistaken. Maybe it was the postman?

MILLIE: No, I mean -

FLO: The postman? At this hour?

JOAN: He's a bit late, sometimes. And other times he doesn't come at all. Not very reliable, if I'm honest.

BEN: It was the postman.

FLO: Are you sure, Ben?

BEN: Yes. *(everybody looks at him)* I saw him.

JOAN: Well, there you are, then. Mystery solved.

MILLIE: But I wasn't talking about Jamie, or the stupid postman! I was talking about Stephen! Did you see him?

FLO: The doctor? Of course I saw him. He was just here.

MILLIE: Yes, he was. He carried me. Did you see?

FLO: Well, sort of I suppose. Ben helped.

MILLIE: He picked me up in his strong arms, and he carried me all the way in here. And did you see the way he looked at me?

FLO: No.

MILLIE: He simply gazed at me, like he couldn't tear his eyes away! And I looked deep into his melting brown eyes, and straight away I just knew.

JOAN: Knew what, dear?

MILLIE: That this was it. Here was the real thing, at last. A real hero, like something from a novel. I finally understand, now. Oh Joan, Flo, he is just the most wonderful man I have ever met in my life!

JOAN: Oh dear.

FLO: God help us all.

INTERVAL

ACT TWO

SCENE 1

Afternoon. Caro Biddlecombe's garden.

(Jamie enters, pruning shears in hand, and makes for the topiary. Flo enters behind him.)

FLO: Please, Jamie. I just want a quick word with you.

JAMIE: And I told you, Mrs Evans, I don't have time to talk. Mrs Biddlecombe told me I have to get all the clipping done before five, otherwise she'll give me what for.

FLO: Just five minutes, I promise. Then I'll leave you alone.

JAMIE: All right. What is it?

FLO: Why did Mrs Holland sack you?

JAMIE: You don't beat around the bush, Mrs Evans, I'll give you that.

FLO: No, can't see the point. So, will you tell me why?

JAMIE: For a start, she didn't sack me. She let me go.

FLO: Tomayto, tomato. Why did she let you go?

JAMIE: She didn't say.

FLO: Didn't you ask?

JAMIE: Course. But she didn't tell me.

FLO: Did you get the impression she had been unhappy with your work?

JAMIE: My work? No.

FLO: Or with anything else?

JAMIE: Couldn't say, Mrs Evans.

FLO: Stop it, Jamie. You're as bad as Ben. You know what I'm getting at. Had you been up to anything you shouldn't have been?

JAMIE: Like what?

FLO: Such as...I don't know, removing items from the house without permission?

JAMIE: (*Uneasy*) I'd never do that.

FLO: I went looking for you at your house, before I came here. I spoke to your mother. She told me you'd bought a new car. I assume it's the one parked in the drive, next to Mrs Biddlecombe's tank? The little blue, sporty thing?

JAMIE: Yes, she's mine.

FLO: Must have cost you a bit, a car like that.

JAMIE: She's not new. I got her from a feller.

FLO: I don't know much about cars, but even second hand I'm prepared to bet she wasn't cheap. How did you get the money?

JAMIE: That's my business.

FLO: You couldn't have got her on a gardener's wage. The money must have come from somewhere else. Where did it come from?

JAMIE: I saved up.

FLO: You'd have to save for twenty years to buy a car like that. Come on, tell me the truth.

JAMIE: And... I had a win. On a horse.

FLO: When?

JAMIE: Last week. Derby.

FLO: Of course. Remind me, who won the Derby again?

JAMIE: Can't remember.

FLO: Come on, Jamie! You backed the winning horse! You must remember its name?

JAMIE: Jolly Aunt!

FLO: Wrong. Jolly Aunt doesn't like it soft. Didn't even place. Mellow Mango won by three quarters of a length.

JAMIE: Look, I told you I couldn't remember. But that's where the money came from, all the same.

FLO: I think we both know that's not true. Now you listen to me. How long have we known each other?

JAMIE: Few years now, I reckon.

FLO: Since you were seventeen. You can trust me, Jamie. If you've done something wrong, something bad, we can sort it out, I promise.

JAMIE: Mrs Evans, you're a nice woman. But you're barking up the wrong tree. You'd be better off leaving well alone.

FLO: Is that a threat? Are you threatening me?

JAMIE: Of course it's bloody not! I wouldn't threaten you, who do you think I am? I'm just telling you.

FLO: Listen, if you don't want to tell me what you're up to, I can't make you. But believe me when I say that I will find out, sooner or later.

JAMIE: And I'm telling you, there's nothing to find out.

FLO: If you say so.

JAMIE: Can I get on now, please?

FLO: In a minute Jamie. Just one more question first. What were you doing at the hall earlier?

JAMIE: Which hall?

FLO: Battling Hall, of course.

JAMIE: Wasn't there.

FLO: Oh yes you were. Millie and I saw you. Around a quarter past one. You were looking very furtive.

JAMIE: Are you sure it was me?

FLO: Millie was absolutely sure.

JAMIE: Then maybe Miss Millie should be thinking about getting some glasses. I wasn't there.

FLO: Where were you, then?

JAMIE: Here. Working.

FLO: All right. I assume you won't mind if I check that with Mrs Biddlecombe?

JAMIE: Check away. But she won't be able to help. She was out getting her hair done. Just got back, twenty minutes ago.

FLO: That's very convenient. So nobody saw you here?

JAMIE: No. You'll just have to take my word for it.

FLO: I'd love to do that Jamie, I really would. But I'm afraid I can't.

JAMIE: Look, Mrs Evans, what's all this about?

FLO: Oh no. You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. So far you have told me precisely nothing, so I'm afraid I'm not going to tell you anything either.

JAMIE: Fair dos. Are you staying at the Hall then? With Miss Millie?

FLO: Yes. She would have come with me to see you, but she had a fall after lunch and she's got her leg up.

JAMIE: I'm sorry. Will you tell her I was asking after her?

FLO: I will.

JAMIE: If you don't mind me saying so, you should get her back up to London soon. Not good for her, down here.

FLO: Why do you say that?

JAMIE: She's been very good to me, Miss Millie has. She's very good to everybody. We all want her to be happy.

FLO: What are you saying, Jamie?

JAMIE: Nothing. Excuse me, Mrs Evans, but I really have to get back to it. Mrs Biddlecombe will be coming out soon to check on me, and she likes to see me working hard.

FLO: Leave Caro Biddlecombe to me, Jamie. I'll sort the silly cow out.

JAMIE: You mustn't call her names, Mrs Evans. Mrs Biddlecombe is a very nice woman.

FLO: What?

JAMIE: She's a real lady. Elegant. Classy. And she smells lovely. She can be a bit strict, all right, but you just need to know how to handle her. Look, here she comes now. And she's wearing the green blouse again. Doesn't she look beautiful? (*gives a coy little wave*).

FLO: Oh, dear God. I feel queasy. I'm off. (*Exits*)

SCENE 2

Later afternoon. The drawing room of Battling Manor.

(*Millie and Dr Elliot are nose-to-nose on the sofa, laughing. Mr Parker is sitting next to them. Flo enters.*)

FLO: Hello! You're still here, are you?

MILLIE: Oh, Flo! Stephen was just looking at my leg.

FLO: Yes, so I saw.

DR ELLIOT: It's looking just fine. Perfect, in fact!

MILLIE: Stephen, you're so kind!

FLO: How is Mrs Holland?

DR ELLIOT: Bearing up. She's a brave old stick. (*They both stare at him*) I mean a tough old bird. I mean...a courageous old lady. Courageous lady.

FLO: That's better. How's her hip? Is the swelling going down?

DR ELLIOT: Not as quickly as I'd hoped. Age, of course; an eighty-year-old body can't fight back like it does when you're a teenager. And getting her to rest up is always a battle. Although I do think a little gentle exercise would do her the world of good, I can't let her tackle those stairs. Not yet. Maybe we'll give it a try next week.

MILLIE: Poor Mummy. I can't bear to see her so fragile. It just makes me want to cry.

DR ELLIOT: Now that's quite enough of that. I won't have you worrying and making yourself ill, too. That wouldn't do anybody any good at all. Your mother is a fighter. She'll have this licked before you know it.

FLO: Jolly good. Millie...

MILLIE: You're right of course, Stephen!

DR ELLIOT: Of course I am. That's my job.

MILLIE: Yes! It is! Oh, while I think of it, would you be able to look at Ben's eyes?

DR ELLIOT: Ben's eyes?

MILLIE: Yes.

DR ELLIOT: Well of course, I would be charmed – but is there any particular reason why you would like me to?

MILLIE: Oh, sorry, yes. Cataracts.

DR ELLIOT: Ah. Of course. All becomes clear. Or not, in Ben's case. Yes Millie, I will have a word with him.

FLO: Good. Millie...

MILLIE: Thank you! I know you'll be able to help him. He just needs to feel *safe*, do you know what I mean?

DR ELLIOT: I think I do. Now, is there anyone else in the household you are worrying about? A lethargic hamster? A dyspeptic goldfish?

MILLIE: You're teasing me!

FLO: Millie, where's the paperweight?

MILLIE: What?

FLO: The Baccarat paperweight. With the blue flower. The one that was on the table.

MILLIE: I don't know. Isn't it there?

FLO: No. It isn't. And it was this morning. I know it was, because I was using it. I remember distinctly.

MILLIE: I'm sure it will turn up. Maybe Joan moved it.

FLO: Maybe she did. And maybe she didn't. Well, doctor, if you're all finished here, I'm sure you have plenty of other calls to make. Corns to shave, boils to lance, that sort of thing?

MILLIE: Flo, please...

DR ELLIOT: Don't worry, Millie. Mrs Evans is quite right, I really must be going. Business before pleasure. But I hope I can see you again before you leave?

MILLIE: I hope so too!

DR ELLIOT: I only have morning surgery on a Tuesday. If you're feeling up to it tomorrow afternoon, maybe we could go for a walk? I'd like you to meet Barnabus.

MILLIE: Barnabus?

DR ELLIOT: My dog.

MILLIE: You have a *dog!*

DR ELLIOT: Golden Retriever. Thick as a brick, but he's lots of fun. What do you think?

MILLIE: I'd love to!

DR ELLIOT: Excellent. Right, I'll be off then. Now, you be careful with that leg, you're going to need it tomorrow!

MILLIE: Absolutely! After all, two legs are better than one, as they say!

DR ELLIOT: Er...yes. Quite. Well, see you tomorrow! Mrs Evans.

FLO: Doctor.

(Dr Elliot exits)

MILLIE: Oh, Flo! Isn't he just divine?

FLO: He certainly is.

MILLIE: He's so kind! And clever, and thoughtful, and funny! Oh he makes me laugh like a drain!

FLO: So I heard, from the drive.

MILLIE: Oh heavens! Was I cackling? How *mortifying!* Just like a goose? But he didn't seem to mind, did he?

FLO: No. No, he didn't.

MILLIE: I don't want to get my hopes up, but it does seem, rather, as though he likes me, doesn't it? Do you think he likes me?

FLO: He certainly acts like it, yes.

MILLIE: I mean, obviously it's awfully soon and all that, but I did get the feeling...but what if I'm wrong? I mean, I'm a lot older than him and not half as clever... but oh, what if he *does* like me? Wouldn't that just be *heaven??*

FLO: Yes, I suppose it would.

MILLIE: Of course, it would be rather complicated, what with him living here and me living in London, but I'm sure we could get round that. I could come and stay down here quite often, and he could come up to Mayfair, when he's not working. We could have a town house and a country house! Or he could move his practice to London, I'm sure he'd do terribly well...

FLO: Millie...

MILLIE: And Mummy knows him already, so that's not a problem. I wonder if he has parents? And brothers and sisters? I wonder if they live near here?

FLO: Millie, listen...

MILLIE: Maybe he has children? Maybe an ex-wife? I mean it's not very likely that someone like him has stayed single all these years, is it? I shall just have to be very grown-up about it, and not jealous or worried. But what if he...

FLO: MILLIE! WILL YOU PLEASE SLOW DOWN!

MILLIE: Flo!

FLO: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to shout. But I'd like you to take a minute to stop and think. I mean, what do you really know about this man?

MILLIE: I know he's...

FLO: Yes yes yes, divine perfection, I know. But apart from the fact that he's quite good looking and charming, you don't know anything, do you?

MILLIE: I know he's a doctor.

FLO: A doctor who was overheard having a screaming argument with your mother.

MILLIE: But you said yourself, Mummy argues with everybody. (*Triumphantly*) And he has a Golden Retriever called Barnabus!

FLO: Sadly, the ownership of a dog is no guarantee of character. Look at Daffy Phillips.

MILLIE: Oh but Stephen is nothing like Daffy Phillips! He probably doesn't even own a trampoline.

FLO: I'm not saying he would do anything like that. Let's face it, most people wouldn't. Quite disgusting. All I'm saying is that you can't always take people at face value. Just because somebody pays you a few compliments, it doesn't necessarily mean you should take them seriously.

MILLIE: But...I don't see why he would pretend to like me if he doesn't.

FLO: Maybe he does like you. But let's face it, Millie, you have other attractions than your pretty face and winning personality.

MILLIE: Are you talking about my money?

FLO: Yes. I'm afraid I am. He knows your family, he's spent time in this house; he certainly has an idea of how wealthy you are. And I'm sorry, but that can be extremely tempting for some people. We don't know anything about his financial situation; he could be a gambler, he could have ten children to support for all we know! And don't forget that we still haven't ruled him out as a suspect in the thefts. For all we know, he could have taken that paperweight. It could be in his bag right now, or his pocket.

MILLIE: No, Stephen wouldn't do that! I know he wouldn't.

FLO: You don't know anything of the sort. That's just the problem – you're too trusting, Millie! You see good in everybody.

MILLIE: Well, I think that's a nice thing! Not everybody is a cynic like you, Flo!

FLO: It *is* a nice thing, to a certain extent, but you take it too far! You're naïve. And that's exactly the type of thing a con artist would spot straight away, and they wouldn't hesitate to exploit your good nature for their own ends.

MILLIE: Are you calling Stephen a con artist?

FLO: No, of course not! I'm just begging you to exercise a little caution!

MILLIE: So what you're actually saying is that he couldn't possibly like me for anything except my money.

FLO: No, I'm not saying that...

MILLIE: Yes you are. That's what you think. Poor, stupid, plain Millie, nearly fifty and still single, just waiting for a man to swoop in and take advantage of her for her money.

FLO: That's not it...

MILLIE: Yes, it is! That's exactly it! You've always thought you were better than me, don't pretend you haven't. Clever Flo, what on earth is she doing hanging around with Silly Millie, who always says the wrong thing and can't answer any questions in class and always falls over in Lacrosse? And you feel so charitable, like you're such a good person for putting up with me.

FLO: No, of course I don't!

MILLIE: Yes, you do! And it makes you feel better about yourself, doesn't it? You criticise me, and laugh at me, and tell me to shut up, and it makes you feel better about the fact that your own life is such a mess!

FLO: My life is just fine, thank you very much!

MILLIE: Oh no it isn't! You live in that horrid little poky basement flat in Battersea, you work all day in a job you hate. The fact is, you're secretly jealous of me.

FLO: Jealous? Of what, for God's sake?

MILLIE: Of all the things I've got that you haven't.

FLO: You have nothing that I could possibly want.

MILLIE: Oh yes, I have. My money for one thing.

FLO: I don't want your money.

MILLIE: Yes, you do! You hate having to count the pennies every month. You don't buy any new clothes – just look at you! You can't even afford to shop in Waitrose! The only reason you can go to the theatre and the opera all the time is because *I* pay for it! With *my* money! You're saying I should be careful of Stephen, but *you* use me for my money all the time!

FLO: Well, please don't bother in future! I'd hate to be a burden on your finances!

MILLIE: But it doesn't matter, because I have *lots of money!* Not like you. But I think what you really hate is that I have lots of people around me and you haven't.

FLO: What do you mean?

MILLIE: I have Mummy, and Alice, and Digby, and the triplets, and Joan, and Ben. Pa may be dead now, but I had him for years and years and he loved me very much. And now I've got Stephen too. You haven't got anybody. Your mother left when you were little and you haven't seen her for years, you don't talk to your father, you don't have any brothers or sisters or children. You're all alone.

FLO: I am not alone!

MILLIE: Yes you are. You're all alone and bitter and twisted. You don't have any real friends either, because you're so bossy and grumpy all of the time. All your friends are actually *my* friends. People just put up with you because they feel sorry for you.

FLO: They put up with *me*? *You're* the one they put up with! You're like a toddler that has to be looked after all of the bloody time! We can't take our eyes off you for a minute, otherwise you'd wander off, or fall over, or stick your fingers in a plug socket. You've never grown up, Millie! You're not capable of looking after yourself! Everybody is in a conspiracy to protect you from the big bad world, including me, but sometimes I wonder why I bother! I am sick to the back teeth of having to treat you like a child!

MILLIE: Well stop it then! Stop treating me like a child! I am a grown up and I can make my own decisions!

FLO: Very well then. I'm done. From now on you can look out for yourself, but don't expect me to be there for you when you come a cropper! Because you will!

MILLIE: I won't! I'll be just fine!

FLO: In less than a week you'll have burned the house down, or gone bankrupt, or got yourself arrested. And how I will laugh!

MILLIE: I WILL NOT!!!! I'll show you. I am a grown up and I am quite capable of looking after myself!

FLO: NO YOU ARE NOT! YOU ARE A SILLY, RIDICULOUS CHILD!

MILLIE: I want you out of my house.

FLO: Very well. I'll leave first thing in the morning.

MILLIE: NO! No, I want you out NOW! Pack your things and go.

FLO: But...

MILLIE: GET OUT!

FLO: But where am I to go at this time of night?

MILLIE: The last train to London leaves at nine, you'll have plenty of time. But don't think I'll be paying for a taxi to the station – you can jolly well walk!

FLO: Fine! Unlike you, I am perfectly capable of standing on my own two feet – *and* walking on them!

MILLIE: FINE!

FLO: FINE! (*Flo exits. Millie bursts into tears on the sofa.*)

SCENE 3

Night. The drawing room of Battling Manor.

(*Flo enters, carrying her handbag and carpet bag. She looks around her, and spots Mr Parker, alone on the sofa. She picks him up, sinks onto the sofa and buries her face in her hands. Joan enters.*)

JOAN: Are you all right, dear?

FLO: No. I'm not.

JOAN: I couldn't help overhearing a bit of what went on between the two of you before.

FLO: They probably heard us in Taunton.

JOAN: I just wanted to say, you mustn't feel bad, dear. Some of the things you said weren't very nice, but, well, that's not to say that there wasn't some truth in them.

FLO: But I shouldn't have said them.

JOAN: Maybe not like that, no. But you're right – I do baby Miss Millie. We always have, all of us, ever since she was born. She's always had her Dad, and Alice, and me, and Ben running around after her, making sure she was safe, hiding anything nasty from her. Even her Mum, in her own way. And it's about time that stopped. She may not be clever, like you, but she's a grown woman and she needs to start looking after herself.

FLO: Clever! I'm not clever. I thought I was, but I was wrong. Millie's the clever one. She's right, I have made a mess of my life. And I am jealous of her.

JOAN: Oh, my dear.

FLO: Oh, not of her money! It would be nice not to have to worry about it, but I get by. It's not that. I'm jealous that she has a family, and people who love her, and worry about her, and look after her. *I want that! I want to be looked after, just for once.* I'm jealous as hell, and I think that's why I attacked her the way I did. You see, I'm not a very nice person, Joan. And I'm all alone. (*bursts into tears*)

JOAN: Oh my little love! Come here! (*sits on the sofa and puts her arm around Flo*) Don't think that, don't you ever think that! You're not alone! Haven't we been a family to you, ever since you were a girl?

FLO: Yes, but it's not the same!

JOAN: Of course it is. Miss Millie's not a blood relation of mine, but I care for her just like she was, and it's the same with you. We used to love having you here in the school holidays, and nothing's changed! We all wish you'd come to visit more often. Ben always asks after you, whenever Miss Millie comes down.

FLO: *Ben* does?

JOAN: He certainly does. He's got a lot of time for you, has Ben.

FLO: Good grief.

JOAN: As for Miss Millie – well, she just thinks the world of you.

FLO: Not any more. Not after all the things I said to her.

JOAN: Don't you worry about that. She's not the type to hold a grudge. She's a nice girl, with a good heart.

FLO: Yes. She is.

JOAN: And so are you. She needs you, and I'm prepared to swear that you need her too. You'll make it up, just you wait and see. Good friends like you two don't break up just because of a silly row. You just need to give her a bit of time to calm down.

FLO: I will. I'm going back to London.

JOAN: What, now? How are you getting to the station?

FLO: I'm going to walk.

JOAN: All the way to Taunton? You most certainly are not, you ridiculous child. Just you wait here, and I'll give Jamie a ring to come and pick you up.

FLO: But Jamie doesn't work here anymore.

JOAN: Just between you and me, dear, Jamie still does a lot for this family. He'll be happy to give you a lift, don't you worry. I'll go and give him a ring now.

(Millie enters)

MILLIE: Joan, have you seen... Oh. What are you still doing here?

JOAN: Millie, Mrs Evans has something to say to you.

MILLIE: I don't want to talk to her. I just came down to get Mr Parker.

JOAN: Please dear, just listen.

MILLIE: No. Give me Mr Parker.

JOAN: *(picking up Mr Parker)* You can have him when you've listened.

MILLIE: Joan! Please!

JOAN: No dear. This is for your own good. Mr Parker is coming with me to the kitchen, and he's not coming back out until you've had a nice chat with Mrs Evans.

MILLIE: Joan! Bring him back!

JOAN: (*exiting*) La la la! Mr Parker and I can't hear you!

FLO: Please, Millie. I do have something to say to you.

MILLIE: Fine. Hurry up.

FLO: I wanted to say...that I'm sorry.

MILLIE: What for?

FLO: For saying that you were naïve and stupid.

MILLIE: And?

FLO: And for implying that Dr Elliot only wants you for your money.

MILLIE: And?

FLO: And for saying that everyone just puts up with you. That's not true. Everybody loves you.

MILLIE: So why *did* you say those things, Flo? You really hurt me.

FLO: I know I did. And I'm sorry. I think I said them...*because* everybody loves you. They love you because you're kind, and because you're sweet to everybody. And I'm not. I'm domineering and impatient and grumpy, so people don't like me. You were right. I am jealous of you.

MILLIE: There's no need to be jealous!

FLO: But I am. I want what you have. I don't have a family, not really. Not like yours.

MILLIE: No, but that's because your pa is mean and horrible, and that's not your fault.

FLO: I have aunts. And some cousins. But I've never really made an effort to stay in touch with them. I think, if I'm honest, I rather shut myself off when John died. I was angry with him for leaving me, and I was angry with the world for taking him away. And then, when I stopped being angry I was bitter. And you're right; it's gone on far too long. John would be appalled with me, and the way I've behaved. It's time for this to stop.

MILLIE: My poor Flo. It must have been terrible for you. I can't begin to imagine. But you do have lots of friends. I know I said you didn't but I only said that to upset you because you were being so mean.

FLO: I know lots of people, but they're not close friends. I wouldn't be able to go to them if I had a problem, you know?

MILLIE: Even Mr Benson?

FLO: Especially Mr Benson! He's my boss, he's not my friend. And anyway, he's scared of me. I know too much about him.

MILLIE: Poor Flo.

FLO: I think, when you get right down to it, you're my only real friend, Millie. Isn't that a sad state of affairs? But that being the case, I can't afford to lose you. Will you accept my apologies for being such a cow?

MILLIE: Oh, Flo! Of course I will! You're my best friend too! And I'm sorry for all the nasty things I said, they weren't true at all. When I get angry I don't know what I'm saying! Everything just goes all dark in my head, and the words just come out and I can't stop them. Can you forgive me?

FLO: Do you know, I think that's the first time I've ever seen you get angry!

MILLIE: I won't do it again, I promise.

FLO: No, don't say that. You were a bit scary, but actually it was good to see you all fired up and speaking your mind for once. Promise me that in future, if I ever patronise you or treat you like a child you'll tell me to bugger off?

MILLIE: Flo, really!

FLO: Promise me?

MILLIE: I promise. And if I'm *behaving* like a silly child you must promise to tell me, and I'll try to be more sensible.

FLO. Promise. Friends?

MILLIE: Best friends.

(Joan enters with Mr Parker, a bottle of brandy and two glasses.)

FLO: Oh Joan, you're a wonder, that's just what we need. *(Joan hands her Mr Parker)* No, not that flea-bitten monstrosity, the brandy! Give the bear to Millie.

JOAN: I'm glad to see you've managed to sort things out, the pair of you. Now, what with one thing and another I've not had time to do a proper dinner tonight, but there's cold pie and tomatoes and bread and cheese laid out in the kitchen, so you can help yourselves if you're hungry. I've taken some up for Mrs Holland, too. And I'm off home, so if you need anything else you'd better speak now or forever hold your peace!

MILLIE: We're fine, thank you Joan!

FLO: Yes, thank you Joan. Thank you for everything.

JOAN: You are very welcome. Goodnight, my dears. *(exits)*

FLO: *(pouring the brandy)* Right. A toast, I think. To friendship.

MILLIE: To friendship! *(they drink, Millie spluttering. Flo refills the glasses.)* Gosh, steady on.

FLO: Oh never mind that. We both deserve a drink.

MILLIE: You're right, we do! So, how did you get on with your sleuthing today?

FLO: Rather well, actually. I managed to find where Holly lived, but she isn't there. I talked to her mother, and apparently she really has gone to university.

MILLIE: Really?

FLO: Yes. History of Art.

MILLIE: Oh.

FLO: Exactly. Oh. So that explains that, and rather rules her out. But I have made a lot of progress, nevertheless. So much so, in fact, that I'm pretty sure I know who dunnit. Or rather, who is still doing it.

MILLIE: You mean you've solved the case?

FLO: Yes. I rather think I have!

MILLIE: Then we need another toast. To solving the case!

FLO: To solving the case! *(they drink, Flo refills the glasses)*

MILLIE: So, are you going to tell me who it is?

FLO: No, I don't think I am. I'm sorry, but there are still a couple of things I need to get straight in my head before I go pointing any fingers. Do you mind awfully?

MILLIE: No, that's all right. But you will tell me before you make the big announcement, won't you? Just so we're both singing from the same tree?

FLO: It's singing from the...never mind. What big announcement?

MILLIE: When you gather all the suspects together and reveal who the murderer is! Will we do it in the library? I think that's the usual place.

FLO: Millie, you seem to be confusing me with Hercule Poirot. And I sincerely hope no-one here is a murderer. But, now that I come to think of it, that's rather a good idea.

MILLIE: Hurrah! To rather good ideas! *(knocks back her drink. Florence laughs and does the same, Millie refills the glasses)*

FLO: I'll invite Jamie, Joan and Ben to have a drink with us tomorrow evening. I'll say we're having leaving drinks, because we're going back to London. Can you ask Dr Elliot to join us too, after your walk?

MILLIE: Yes, of course. But he didn't do it.

FLO: I think we'll have it in here, rather than in the library. Drinks in the library would sound odd. You don't mind me breaking with tradition?

MILLIE: Whatever you think best. Ooh, I'm so excited I can't sit still! Mr Parker's excited too, just look at his face! What shall we drink to now?

FLO: To...Mr Parker!

MILLIE: To Mr Parker!

SCENE 4

Evening. The drawing room of Battling Manor.

(Flo is pacing nervously up and down. Millie enters, with Dr Elliot.)

MILLIE: Hello, Flo!

FLO: Oh good, you're back! Doctor.

DR ELLIOT: Mrs Evans.

FLO: Did you have a nice walk?

MILLIE: Oh it was wonderful! We went all the way round the barrow and back through the copse. And we chattered the whole way round, didn't we Stephen?

DR ELLIOT: I can't remember the last time I was so entertained on a walk.

MILLIE: And Barnabus is just such an angel! He gives the best cuddles!

DR ELLIOT: Yes, he certainly took to you.

FLO: Where is Barnabus, anyway?

DR ELLIOT: He's in the car, flat out and snoring. I couldn't bring him in, he's all over mud. Don't worry – the window's wide open and he's got plenty of water. He'll be fine.

MILLIE: Is everything ready for the You Know What?

FLO: For the *drinks*, you mean? Yes, everything's all set. Everyone should be arriving in about five minutes.

MILLIE: Well? Can you tell me yet?

FLO: *(looking significantly at Dr Elliot)* Well, not *really* Millie.

MILLIE: Oh! Of course. Stephen, would you mind awfully going away for just a minute? Flo and I need to talk.

DR ELLIOT: Am I being banished?

MILLIE: No, not at all! Well, yes, but just for a teeny-tiny minute.

DR ELLIOT: Very well. I can take a hint. I'll go and make myself a drink. (*busies himself at the drinks table*)

MILLIE: Well Flo?

FLO: Come here. (*they put their heads together and whisper for a couple of seconds*)

MILLIE: What? Are you sure? (*more whispers*) No! I can't believe it! It can't be true! (*more whispers*) Oh, Flo!

DR ELLIOT: Everything all right?

FLO: Yes, fine thanks!

MILLIE: Er...yes. Yes, everything's ok. Gosh, look at the time, I must go and change before everyone arrives. Darling Barnabus has left muddy paw prints all over me. Back in a sec. (*exits*)

FLO: So.

DR ELLIOT: So.

FLO: Look, I'm sorry I was a bit off with you yesterday.

DR ELLIOT: That's quite all right. Don't mention it.

FLO: No, I must mention it. It wasn't kind of me. I would like to apologise.

DR ELLIOT: Millie explained that you were just being protective of her. Which is a very good thing. So, I am delighted to accept your apology, but it really isn't necessary.

FLO: Well, thanks. I worry about her, you see?

DR ELLIOT: I do see.

FLO: She is quite...innocent.

DR ELLIOT: And you were suspicious of my intentions.

FLO: A bit, yes. I thought you might be...you know.

DR ELLIOT: A fortune hunter.

FLO: Yes.

DR ELLIOT: Then allow me to put your mind at rest. I am financially comfortable, if not exactly wealthy. I have a thriving medical practice, I own my own house, which has a rather lovely garden.

FLO: Please, you needn't...

DR ELLIOT: I am a widower. My wife died nearly ten years ago. We didn't have any children. I have one sister, who lives in Gloucestershire, and one brother, who lives in London. Both have successful careers of their own.

FLO: This really isn't necessary...

DR ELLIOT: Both of my parents are alive, and they live five miles from here. However, they have independent financial means, and are not a burden on me. Therefore, as you can see, I have no dependants. Apart from Barnabus, who eats me out of house and home.

FLO: Dr Elliot, are you laughing at me?

DR ELLIOT: Maybe.

FLO: Fine. I deserve it.

DR ELLIOT: I just want you to understand that I do not need Millie. But I do like her, very much. I have never met anybody like her before. She has a truly unique view of the world. She is great fun, and charming company, and I would very much like to see more of her in the future. But I am not, and never will be, interested in any money she might possess.

FLO: I'm very glad to hear it. But can you please just answer one question?

DR ELLIOT: Of course.

FLO: What did you argue about with Mrs Holland the other day?

DR ELLIOT: I don't know what you mean. We didn't argue.

FLO: Ben heard you.

DR ELLIOT: He must be mistaken.

FLO: I don't think so. He was quite sure.

DR ELLIOT: Let me see. An argument. What could that have been about? Oh, now I remember. It was nothing really, just that she wasn't taking her pills regularly enough. I suppose I did get a little bit aerated with her.

FLO: Aerated? According to Ben, you nearly took the tiles off the roof.

DR ELLIOT: Well, you know how she can be. I did lose my cool a little. Not my proudest professional moment I'm afraid – I'd be much obliged if you didn't mention it to anyone.

FLO: Very well.

DR ELLIOT: Good. Thank you. Well, I'm glad we got that cleared up. And just in time too, because, if I am not very much mistaken, here come the ravening hordes now.

(Ben comes in the garden door)

BEN: Mrs Evans. Doctor Elliot.

FLO: Hello Ben! Thank you for coming. Are you well?

BEN: 'Malright.

FLO: Good, good! Excellent! Oh, and here comes Jamie too. (*Jamie enters from the front door*) Right, what can I get you all to drink? Dr Elliot, you already have a brandy. Ben, Jamie, we have brandy, gin, red wine or bubbly?

BEN/JAMIE: Brandy/Brandy please.

FLO: Jolly good. Brandies all round then. (*Millie enters*) Oh, Millie. Brandy for you too?

MILLIE: God no. I'm never touching the ghastly stuff again. I was sick twice this morning.

FLO: Lightweight. Is your mother coming down?

MILLIE: No. She sends her apologies, but she just can't face the stairs.

FLO: Right. So, we're all here. No, we're not – where's Joan?

(*Joan enters*)

JOAN: I'm here, I'm here! Sorry, I was just top and tailing the beans for dinner.

FLO: Brandy for you too, Joan?

JOAN: I should say. Thank you dear. Cheers!

ALL: Cheers!

FLO: Now, lovely though it is to see you all and have a drink together, I have to admit that Millie and I had a bit of an ulterior motive in inviting you here this evening.

DR ELLIOT: This sounds intriguing.

FLO: It's not a comfortable thing to talk about, so I'm just going to go for it. Millie and I - well, Millie actually – noticed that things have been going missing from this house. Valuable things. And nobody had a reasonable explanation for their disappearance – no Joan, I'm sorry but it didn't wash. So we came down here to investigate.

JOAN: So that's why you were scribbling away in your notebook the other day!

FLO: Exactly. We've been digging around, sleuthing, you might say, to get the bottom of the disappearances. We've been asking questions, and keeping an eye out for anything odd or suspicious. And, I am both glad and sad to say, we have discovered the culprit.

JAMIE: I told you the other day, you've got it all wrong – there's no culprit!

FLO: I'm very sorry, but there is.

DR ELLIOT: Well? Don't leave us hanging. Who is it?

FLO: All of you.

BEN/JOAN/JAMIE/DR ELLIOT WHAT?

FLO: You're all in on it. It's the only logical explanation.

JAMIE: This is bollocks.

FLO: Jamie, you are the one actually doing the stealing, spiriting things away in your car. I can only imagine that Mrs Holland became suspicious of you, which is why she fired you. But that didn't stop you, did it? You kept on coming back, sneaking into the Hall for more loot. You even dared to come in and pinch the paperweight yesterday, right from under our noses – it *was* you we saw in the garden! And you're doing quite well out of it, aren't you? That's how you paid for your new car. Derby winner my foot.

JAMIE: You don't know what you're talking about.

FLO: Oh, but I do. But you weren't acting alone, were you? I don't know why, but everyone here has been protecting you.

JOAN: No dear, that's not how it was.

FLO: You can't deny it. All of you have done your very best to throw me off the scent. Ben, you did an excellent job of stonewalling me.

BEN: Thank you, Miss.

FLO: No Ben, it's not a compliment. And you fibbed about seeing the postman in the garden, when really it was Jamie.

BEN: I saw the postman.

FLO: No, you didn't. You didn't see anyone. You were in the orchard, killing the wasps – you couldn't possibly have seen all the way over to the drive, not with your poorly eyes.

BEN: Ah.

FLO: Ah. Exactly. Shame on you. And you, Dr Elliot, you lied to my face earlier about why you argued with Mrs Holland.

DR ELLIOT: But I...

FLO: No, don't give me that nonsense about the pills again. You are a rubbish liar.

MILLIE: Stephen? What - ?

FLO: And as for you, Joan – *(Joan collapses to the floor in a seeming faint)*

MILLIE: Joan! Joan, are you all right? *(she crouches by her, holding her hand and patting her cheek. Everybody except Flo crowds round)* No, keep back, give her some air. Jamie, pass me a cushion, we need to raise her legs. Ben, go and fetch me a glass of water, please.

FLO: Wait a second, Ben, I don't think that will be necessary.

MILLIE: But she's ill!

DR ELLIOT: Let me have a look at her, Millie.

MILLIE: Please, help her. Joan? Can you help her?

FLO: Oh, for God's sake. Joan. Joan! Get up this instant.

JOAN: What? Where...where am I?

FLO: Oh, do give it up. You're not fooling anybody. Apart from Millie.

JOAN: I must have had one of my turns.

MILLIE: What turns? Are you alright? Can you sit up? I think we ought to put your head between your legs.

FLO: Turn, my foot. She's perfectly fine. And stop being so nice to her, she doesn't deserve it. She tried to make me think that you were imagining all of the things going missing, or making the whole thing up. She practically told me you weren't right in the head.

MILLIE: Joan! How could you?

JOAN: I'm sorry dear. I meant it for the best, I really did.

MILLIE: You told Flo I was a loony? How could that possibly be for the best?

JOAN: You don't understand, love, neither of you does.

FLO: Damn right, we don't. Why, after so many years, would you all suddenly decide to betray Mrs Holland? And what has Jamie got over you all, that you would shield him like this?

JOAN: There are reasons, things you don't know about.

DR ELLIOT: Wheels within wheels, you might say.

JAMIE: And you've got no call to be jumping to nasty conclusions. Calling me a thief.

JOAN: Now, Jamie, you must see that it would seem that way to an outsider...

MILLIE: An outsider? Is that what I am now, an outsider in my own home?

FLO: Millie, it's all right, let me handle this. What we think...

MILLIE: Flo!

FLO: What? Oh. Sorry. You're quite right. Please go ahead.

MILLIE: I am *not* an outsider. This is my mother's house, and you have all been stealing from her. You've been stealing from an old lady, a sick old lady. And you've all been lying to me. How could you? You Joan – you've known me since I was little. You looked after me when I had mumps, and when I broke my arm falling out of the horse chestnut tree. And Ben - you taught me how to ride a bicycle. And Jamie, you've worked here since you were sixteen. Pa took you on when nobody else would, because of your father being in prison, and how do you repay our family for their kindness? By proving them right, all the people who said you were no good!

JAMIE: Miss Millie, please! You mustn't think...

MILLIE: Stop talking! I can't stand to listen to you. I don't want to look at you. And...and you, Stephen. I liked you, I really did. I thought you were kind, and good. And I thought you

liked me. But it was all a big lie, wasn't it? You do want my money. You're nothing but a con-artist, just like Flo said. Nothing makes sense anymore. I don't know what to believe in. You're all horrible, and I hate you all! (*collapses on the sofa in tears*)

JOAN: Oh now, come here my pet (*goes to comfort her*)

MILLIE: No! Don't talk to me, any of you!

FLO: Good for you! Leave her alone, please, Joan!

DR ELLIOT: I can see why you have come to this conclusion. I completely understand. But please believe me when I tell you that it is not what you think.

FLO: So you *haven't* been colluding with Jamie to remove items from this house and sell them?

DR ELLIOT: Well yes, we have, but...

FLO: Then it's exactly what we think.

DR ELLIOT: No, it's not. Millie, I never lied to you. I do like you, it's not about the money, I promise.

MILLIE: Liar! You're all liars!

DR ELLIOT: Oh hell! Joan?

JOAN: Yes. They need to know the truth, both of them.

FLO: Well, it's about time!

JAMIE: Now hang on...

JOAN: No. We can't keep this secret any longer. Look at the state that poor girl's got herself into.

ELLIOT: I told her this would happen. This whole unpleasantness could have been avoided, if only she'd listened to me!

JOAN: Well. It was her decision to make.

JAMIE: She was doing it for the right reasons. She was doing it for Miss Millie!

JOAN: Yes, she was. But now it's all blown up, and she's just going to have to face facts and come clean.

MILLIE: What are you talking about?

FLO: Yes, I'd like to know that too. What's going on?

JOAN: I'm sorry dears, but we can't tell you.

FLO: What? But you said...

JOAN: Yes, you do need to know the truth. And you will. But it's not our place to tell you.

MILLIE: Then who...?

DR ELLIOT: Millie, you need to talk to your mother.

MILLIE: Mummy? But why?

DR ELLIOT: She'll explain everything. Please, just go and talk to her. I'm going to take Barnabus home for his dinner but then afterwards, I'll be back here – if you still want to see me, that is.

FLO: I'll come with you to talk to Cynthia. I want to hear what she has to say.

JOAN: No dear. No offence, but this is Miss Millie's business. She needs to talk to her mum alone.

FLO: All right. But if you need me, Mills, I'll be right here.

JOAN: That's right, dear. We'll all be here, if you need us.

SCENE 5

Night. The drawing room of Battling Manor.

(Flo is pacing nervously up and down. Millie enters, slowly.)

FLO: Well? You've been up there for ages. What happened? What did Cynthia say? *(Millie says nothing, but slowly sits on the sofa, staring into space)* Millie? Are you all right? What's wrong?

MILLIE: Oh, Flo.

FLO: What is it? You're scaring me. Do you want a drink? *(Millie shakes her head)* Please tell me, were we right about Jamie?

MILLIE: No. It wasn't Jamie.

FLO: What? But it *must* have been! I was so sure!

MILLIE: Jamie's not the thief.

FLO: Well who is it then?

MILLIE: It's me.

FLO: *What?*

MILLIE: I'm the thief, Flo. It's me.

FLO: I don't understand.

MILLIE: I've been stealing from the family for years.

FLO: You're not making any sense. What do you mean?

MILLIE: I've been taking the money, and it's all gone. Well, nearly all of it.

FLO: But your family has pots of money.

MILLIE: No we don't. I thought we did. But none of it was true.

FLO: I'm lost. Help me, Millie.

MILLIE: We *were* rich, before. But it turns out...it turns out, Pa wasn't very good with money. He tried his best, but he didn't do very well. Mummy explained - I didn't understand it all, but it seems he invested in some things that weren't very reliable. Tech companies. Mummy said something about a bubble, but I don't know what that had to do with it.

FLO: Oh dear.

MILLIE: Anyway, when he died there wasn't very much money left. And this house simply eats money – well, you've seen the state of it. Mummy tried to get some grants, but nobody wanted to help.

FLO: So where has all the money been coming from?

MILLIE: From our savings, and we've been going through them like water. Well, I have...
(*she starts to cry*) Oh, I've been so extravagant, Flo! I just spend and spend. I bought that flat in Mayfair. I go on lovely holidays. I spend such a lot on clothes, far more than I need. And food, so much food... and just...just...*silly things!* Mummy gave me an allowance, and I overspent month after month and I never thought it mattered, all I had to do was ask for more! I've wasted so much money, so much! And poor Mummy's paid for it all.

FLO: Oh, Millie! But you couldn't have known.

MILLIE: No! Nobody told me! Pa always gave me whatever I wanted. He paid for me to come out – I did two seasons. They knew I wouldn't be any good in a job, because I'm so stupid, so he and Mummy hoped and hoped I'd meet a nice, rich man who would take care of me. But of course, I didn't meet anyone. And for years Mummy's been scrimping and saving, while I've been draining the estate dry, and I never knew! Mummy's so proud, she wouldn't tell me – she just kept hoping something would turn up and I'd never have to find out.

FLO: Does Alice know?

MILLIE: Yes, but Mummy told her not to say anything. Alice doesn't need money, Digby's family is well off. I'm the one who's let everybody down.

FLO: Don't say that. Of course you haven't. So...the antiques?

MILLIE: Mummy's been selling them to try to raise some money.

FLO: *Cynthia's* been selling them?

MILLIE: Yes. Little by little. A painting here, a knick-knack there, very gradually so that I wouldn't notice. But I did notice.

FLO: Yes. You did. But how does Jamie come into it?

MILLIE: Well, at first Mummy was selling them herself. She'd pop the thing in the car and drive up to a dealer in London. But after the operation she couldn't drive, of course. So she

needed someone she could trust to sell them for her. She knew she was going to have to let Jamie go, she couldn't afford to keep him on, so, to make it up to him she asked him to sell the things for her and take a share of the profit.

FLO: Does Jamie know anything about antiques?

MILLIE: His father was a fence. That's why he's in prison. He specialised in antiques. Jamie knows a bit about it too, and he still has a few of his father's contacts.

FLO: Gosh. I wish I'd known that at the beginning of this investigation.

MILLIE: I'm sorry. It just never occurred to me.

FLO: Don't worry about it, it doesn't matter. So, everybody knew what was going on?

MILLIE: Once Jamie was involved, Mummy couldn't keep it a secret any longer. Joan and Ben have been trying to stop me finding out. They didn't want to upset me.

FLO: But they must have known you'd find out sooner or later!

MILLIE: I suppose they just wanted it to be later. You were right, Flo. Everybody has always treated me like a child, and I've let them because it was easy, and comfortable. And now this has happened, and it's all my fault!

FLO: Now you listen to me. None of this is your fault. They made the decision not to tell you.

MILLIE: I should have guessed. I should have used my brain! Maybe deep down, I didn't want to know. I've been behaving like a spoiled brat, just taking and taking and taking. And now Stephen is going to hate me for ever.

FLO: Of course he's not, you goose! That's a point – how is he mixed up in this, anyway? What did he argue with your mother about?

MILLIE: Oh Flo! That's the worst thing of all. Mummy has to go into a home.

FLO: What? Oh no, Millie!

MILLIE: She says she should have had the hip replacement years ago, but Dr Forsyth told her she didn't really need it. Anyway, when Stephen took over the practice he made her have the operation straight away, but she's old now, and it's just not taking the way it should. And the other hip's started to go, and she's anaemic, and not eating or looking after herself properly. She tried to pretend it's nothing serious, but she... she just looks so frail!

FLO: But *Cynthia*? In a *home*?

MILLIE: Stephen told her it's the only answer. She needs gentle exercise but she can't do the stairs, and she needs somebody to monitor her diet and her pills. Basically, 24 hour care. He's found a lovely home for her just outside Bridgwater, but it's so expensive! The only way she can afford it is if she sells the house.

FLO: No! Sell Battling Hall?

MILLIE: I know! It doesn't bear thinking about, does it? Anyway, Mummy refused. That's what she and Stephen were arguing about.

FLO: Does she want to go into the home?

MILLIE: No, of course not! She'll hate it. And if she sells the hall, poor Ben will be homeless! But I can't see any way round it. Joan's getting on, she can't give Mummy the care she needs. She has to be properly looked after.

FLO: I suppose she does. And what about you?

MILLIE: What do you mean?

FLO: Well, you can't keep taking your allowance from your mother now that you know all this, can you?

MILLIE: Gosh, I hadn't even thought of that. No, of course not.

FLO: You'll have to get a job.

MILLIE: Oh! But what will I do? I don't know how to do anything.

FLO: No. It's not going to be easy finding something at your age, especially since you don't have any experience.

MILLIE: Oh it's so awful. I keep hoping this is just a ghastly nightmare, and I'm going to wake up any minute and none of it will have been real.

FLO: I am so sorry, Millie. This hasn't turned out at all the way we expected, has it?

MILLIE: No, it hasn't. It was supposed to be fun, we'd snoop around and find the villain and unmask them and everybody would be so happy and pleased with us. But it's all gone horribly wrong.

FLO: I know. It's horrible. However, there may be a solution.

MILLIE: What? What is it? Have you had an idea?

FLO: I believe I have. You asked what you were good at doing. Well, the one thing you do best is caring for people.

MILLIE: I don't understand...

FLO: You care about people. You want them to be comfortable, and happy, and you do everything you can to make that happen. No, listen to me. Remember when Arabella Swanson found out her husband was sleeping with the au pair? She spent a week in your spare bedroom, snivelling all over your best sheets, and you stayed in all that week and looked after her, and listened to her. And when that little boy fell off the slide in Hyde Park, you were the one who soothed him, and mopped him up, and had him laughing by the time his mother came. You're *good* at that. And people love you for it.

MILLIE: Oh Flo, you're very sweet. But how does that help?

FLO: Well, if you can care for people you barely know, why not your mother?

MILLIE: Mummy?

FLO: I know she's a bit of a dragon, but she's your mother. Who better to look after her than you? And it makes so much sense for everybody! If you sell your Mayfair flat and move in here you'll have lots of money to be getting on with. You can probably get some kind of carer funding too. And Cynthia won't have to go into a home, so Battling Hall won't have to be sold, and Ben won't lose his home, and everybody will be happy.

MILLIE: I'm not sure Mummy will be happy. She thinks I'm a dimwit. She said so just now. What if I muddle up her pills, or drop her, or -

FLO: Your mother's never happy. But I'm sure she'll come round to the idea eventually. Especially when she realises she doesn't have to sell the hall. You can move her bed down here, into the back parlour, so you don't have to lug her up and down stairs, and you'll learn everything there is to learn about nursing her. Joan already knows what meds she needs to take – she can help.

MILLIE: No. No, no, no, no no. I can't do it. I can't do it. It's such a huge responsibility. Maybe that sounds selfish, but I can't... I don't... I'm just not ready for it, Flo.

FLO: Well, then. What are you going to do?

MILLIE: I don't know. I just don't know, Flo. Oh, what a mess.

FLO: Listen to me, Millie. I know you think you're not capable, but I know better. I know how strong you can be. I've seen it. Now I'm not saying this going to be easy, and I'm certainly not saying it's going to be fun. But I don't think you have much choice.

MILLIE: Oh, but –

FLO: Your mother needs a carer, and she can't afford one.

MILLIE: Because of me.

FLO: Not just –

MILLIE: No, it's because of me. It's my fault. I spent all the money. Oh, poor Mummy! You're right, Flo. I don't have a choice.

FLO: Cheer up, Millie. I don't mean to sound callous, but it won't be for ever.

MILLIE: S'pose. But Flo, I've made such a mess of everything I've ever tried to do. Do you really think I can do this?

FLO: No. I know you can.

MILLIE: Really?

FLO: Really, really.

MILLIE: Then I will! I'll really do it! I'll look after Mummy brilliantly, and show her I'm not a dimwit! And we'll sell everything we can, all the pictures and silverware...and my

clothes...and my jewellery, and we'll get enough money to keep Joan and Ben and Mummy and me, and I'll learn to live simply and make do and mend, and...

FLO: Attagirl.

MILLIE: But Flo...leaving London.

FLO: I know. It's a big step.

MILLIE: And...leaving you.

FLO: Don't be an idiot. You won't be leaving me. London's not a million miles away – you can come and see me whenever you like. And I'll come down here to stay all the time.

MILLIE: You will?

FLO: Just try and stop me.

MILLIE: Then I'll do it. I'll sell up and move in here with Mummy. Gosh, there's such a lot to be done! And I'll have so much to learn! But after all, I'll have Joan to help me, and Alice too when she comes over. And you're right, Flo. It really is the only answer.

FLO: Of course I'm right. I'm always right.

MILLIE: Will you miss me?

FLO: Yes, Millie, I will. I'll miss you a lot.

MILLIE: I'll miss you too.

FLO: Nonsense. You've got lots of people around you down here, you won't give me a thought. And without you around for company I may have to make an effort to be a bit nicer to people. Make some friends of my own.

MILLIE: You know, talking of Arabella Swanson, after the divorce she bought a flat just round the corner from you. Maybe you could...

FLO: No. I may be turning over a new leaf, but I draw the line at being friends with Arabella Swanson. The woman carries her poodle in a bag.

MILLIE: But...

FLO: And she calls me Flossie.

MILLIE: Yes, but she's very nice really...

FLO: No, Millie. Stop trying to look after me. It's time I took a lesson from you, and learned to stand on my own two feet.

MILLIE: Oh, Flo! What a nice thing to say.

FLO: And you never know, maybe when I retire I'll move down here. Get a cottage, or something.

MILLIE: Might you? That would be wonderful!

FLO: Well. You say that now, but you'll probably be very busy with your own life by then. You'll have lots of new friends. And, I suspect, one friend in particular.

MILLIE: What do you mean?

FLO: A gentleman who will probably be a lot of help when you're learning to nurse your mother?

MILLIE: Who are you talking about?

FLO: A handsome gentleman, who's waiting for you in the garden? (*Millie looks blank*) Stephen, you total melon! Stephen!

MILLIE: Oh! Is he here?

FLO: He certainly is. He's been pacing up and down the rose garden like a man possessed for the past hour. He must have smoked at least three cigars. Why is it that doctors invariably smoke like chimneys? They know how bad it is for them, it doesn't make sense.

MILLIE: He's really here?

FLO: He really is.

MILLIE: And he doesn't hate me?

FLO: No, Millie. He hasn't been waiting outside in the dark for you, chewing his nails to the bone because he hates you. I think he's worried you may hate *him*.

MILLIE: Oh! Never!

FLO: So. Are you going to go out there and put him out of his misery?

MILLIE: Yes, of course. In a minute. But first, I'd like to say something.

FLO: Fire away.

MILLIE: I want to say thank you. Thank you for everything. For coming down here and helping me find out what was happening. For being my friend.

FLO: You mean, you're thanking me for inviting myself down here, shouting at your cook, scaring your gardener, being rude to your future husband, accusing your handyman of theft and setting in motion a chain of events resulting in you having to sell your flat and move in with your mother, thereby totally ruining your life?

MILLIE: Um. Yes. I suppose I am.

FLO: Oh Millie. I do love you.

MILLIE: I love you too, Flo.

(They both collapse in a fit of giggles. A roar from upstairs – “FOR GOD’S SAKE, WOULD YOU IDIOT GIRLS JUST SHUT UP!” They instantly go silent, frantically shushing each other. “THANK YOU.”)

END

