

SECRETS OF WYCLIFFE  
MANOR - SAMPLE

GRAVESIDE PRIORY MYSTERY, #1



PATRICIA RICE





# ONE



CAIRO, 1809

"TWO PIASTERS, MISS, ONLY ONE ENGLISH SHILLING!" THE EGYPTIAN MERCHANT shoved an armful of beaded bracelets into nineteen-year-old Clarissa Knightley's face, forcing her to halt in the narrow, crowded alley.

Colorful fabrics and birds in cages hung overhead. The heady scent of spices mixed with the stench of smoke and dung. Baubles and trinkets and shawls distracted the eye. . .

"Stop looking, birdwit," Beatrice snapped, forcing past the merchant to yank Clare away and proceeding through the cacophonous bazaar like Napoleon through. . . well, Egypt.

A ship through the current? Not original enough. Her sister was a force of nature. A hurricane through an island?

"Two piasters, miss!" Another young man cried, waving a shawl in her face. "I have wife, children, only two piasters!"

"Look, we could take one to mama. They're so pretty and cheap, Bea. . ." Clare tried to glimpse the offerings as her sister dragged her past aromatic spice barrels and tables of glittering jewelry.

"Like pretty faces, pretty trinkets are cheap, but once they drag you in, they won't let go until they empty your pockets."

*Pretty faces empty pockets.* . . . Did that mean people with pretty faces were poor or made other people poor?

Pondering the grammar, Clare shook her hand free to defiantly examine a shawl. Bea sailed on without her.

The explosion shattered Clare's complacency. In an instant, a screaming maelstrom of running soldiers, musket fire, and blood engulfed the colorful bazaar. She froze in shock at the splatters on her white gown. Their body-guard abruptly flung her backward, into the arms of a stranger in smelly robes. "Run, missy, run!"

More soldiers firing weapons shoved past, propelling her backward into the escaping mob.

Surrounded by a barrage of noise, shoved heedlessly from one malodorous stranger to another, spectacles lost in the melee, Clare lost consciousness—and Bea.



LONDON, FEBRUARY 1815

ADDING MARMALADE TO HER TOAST, CLARE THOUGHT OF HER LATE SISTER'S warning as she contemplated the fiasco of last night's entertainment. *Pretty faces empty pockets.* Perhaps if she had a pretty face or a plumper pocket, she might learn what that meant.

After paying to have her first novel published, her pocket was considerably leaner.

She handed the toast under the tablecloth for small fingers to grab.

"How did you fare at the soiree last night?" Meera Abrams, companion, best friend, and trusted apothecary, sorted through the morning's post.

"Not well." Clare sighed at the embarrassing memory. "A gentleman asked if I liked Wellingtons, and I told him the general was a brilliant man, but I was glad the war was over. When everyone giggled and the conversation returned to discussing boots, I realized they were talking fashion, not politics. I fear I had been watching a maid tuck a crummet into her apron and imagining a scene of a girl starving in the attic who must serve in this opulence."

Meera laughed. "It is all fodder for your novel, so good came of it. And there will always be another chance."

Clare shrugged. "Unlikely. I cannot go without a companion, and my

aunt is only here for the week. Since you will not accompany me, and I cannot afford a new gown for every event, my matchmaking opportunities are limited to bookstores."

"Where you have your head in a book, when you are not keeping track of Oliver and how many pennies you have left. You don't even notice men."

"I think I am meant to be an old maid. Being a wallflower is amusing." Inured to her lack of social skills, Clare poured a second cup of tea. "Last night I heard that all society believes Oliver is heir to a fortune but lacking in the upper story."

That was a lie, but she saw no reason to correct idiocy. Another wit had whispered that Bea had been a termagant who had followed her soldier husband to Egypt, where they'd got themselves killed, which apparently made the entire family odd.

That *on dit* was painful, but closer to the truth, although malaria and dysentery had killed her brother-in-law, not the bomb. But admittedly, her family, although descended from a respectable line of noble, if eccentric, earls, had never been normal. Clare and Oliver were perfect examples.

"Your father's sister means well," Meera said sympathetically. "She is trying to see you receive the attention your mother's illness and death denied."

"She is trying to steer me to a better set of acquaintances," Clare said dryly, donning her spectacles to study the morning newssheet. "She does not approve of you or our bluestocking friends."

Aunt Martha had terrified her into attending the soiree by warning that her father's family was considering removing Oliver from her care. They thought he needed a man in his life. Horribly, Clare feared they might be right.

She and her nephew had already lost all they loved. She couldn't let relative strangers take him away. Only, marriage simply didn't seem to be in her cards.

So, she'd settled on finding a male tutor to be the man Oliver needed, if she could find one she could afford. She feared she'd been foolish in risking the household budget to have a book published in hopes of earning a little bit more.

Should her family learn about her scandalous occupation. . . Her male pseudonym prevented that. She simply must wait to see if her risk provided a future.

It had been a year since her mother's death. Her family was right that she needed to enter society again. Well, not exactly again. Between her father's

death, her sister's marriage, and her mother's illness, she never really had been presented. These days, she'd rather not be. After Egypt, she preferred to keep her distance from men and crowds. Even the masculine scent of sandalwood induced a need to flee.

Clare didn't explain to her bold friend that she had been relieved that no one had asked her to dance. Men inhabited her worst nightmares. She had spent a week in perspiring anxiety, fearing that the soiree would be a crush. She'd rather become a hermit than spend another evening attempting small talk with large, noisy males.

A smashing, splintering *bang* disrupted her reflections. Clare shrieked and dropped her teacup. Clasp the table so as not to drop under it, she waited for blood-curdling screams.

Meera sensibly checked the street behind the draperies.

"A carriage collided with the night cart. Messy, but no one's hurt." She returned to her seat. As an apothecary, she would have run outside to assist if anyone had been injured.

No blood. No foul-smelling strangers.

Clare gritted her teeth and mentally repeated her mantra. She could do this. Her house was safe. No one bombed the streets of London. Thugs would not enter her gracious parlor.

Meera mopped up Clare's spilled tea. Oliver darted from beneath the table to watch the commotion outside. Clare closed her eyes until the din settled and her heart stopped racing. She was fine. She was more than fine.

Hand shaking, she raised a piece of toast to her lips and focused on the newssheet.

*Napoleon had escaped his prison!*

No, no, she would not borrow trouble. Napoleon would not be sailing the channel with his army. . . No muskets and uniforms in the streets of London.

Her imagination might be the death of her one day. Conflict was easier to control in fiction.

"Does the post bring any replies to your search for a tutor?" Meera asked, attempting to distract her.

As a distraction, it worked well. Her nephew had a brilliant mind, but like the rest of the family. . . he was not normal. Finding not only a *suitable* teacher, but a male one who would work for a female with little money. . . Complicated.

Hoping for a reply to her application to the employment agency, Clare flipped through the rest of the post until she reached an official-looking

missive from *Wycliffe Manor*. What on earth? Had that not been sold eons ago?

She slit the seal, then raised her cup for a sip while skimming the stilted composition. . . and spluttered hot tea across the linen. Coughing, unable to speak, she waved the missive until Meera took the letter and put toast in her hand.

Short, round, and dark compared to Clare's tall, thin, and pale, Meera possessed the logical mind that Clare did not. "Bad news?" she asked worriedly, because Meera's life, like Clare's, had been a string of bad news. They had that much in common. Her friend read the letter at Clare's wave of permission. "Wycliffe Manor? In Gravesyde Priory? How gothic. What is this about?"

Methodically chewing cold toast to cool her burned tongue and gather her thoughts, Clare shook her head, not immediately answering. Surprises were generally bad news. When she'd recovered sufficiently, she took the letter back and read it more carefully.

"My great-grandfather was the Earl of Wycliffe." She frowned at the elegant writing. "The original estate dated back to a priory destroyed in the 1500s. The village still bears the name. The first earl rebuilt and renamed the property Wycliffe Manor. I've never seen it. The last earl sold everything when it became clear the line of succession had died out."

"Is that allowed?" Meera asked in suspicion. The daughter of a Jewish apothecary and an India-born Hindu, she had only incidental knowledge of British nobility.

Clare struggled to find any hint of fraud, but the letter was quite plain, once her boiling brain accepted the impossible. She wasn't quite there yet. "I'm not a solicitor. I don't know the laws. I just know what I was told—the earl sold everything and divided it up between his sisters and daughters. My grandmother invested her share in this house and a trust fund to maintain it." So, the money belonged equally to Clare and Oliver, despite the gossip.

"But the letter says you also own a share of *Wycliffe Manor*. How is that possible?" Meera attacked her boiled egg as if it had personally offended her. Meera had a few anger problems, for excellent reasons.

A niggling possibility blossomed in Clare's wild imagination . . .

"It's *not* conceivable, if the manor had been sold, as I assumed. The earl owned vast estates and wealth. There were coffered jewels inherited over the centuries. My grandmother's sapphire was a gift from that collection. I suppose Wycliffe Manor may have been entailed and couldn't be sold? But

then, I wouldn't inherit a share of it. Women normally don't, which is why the earl sold everything. His only relations were female."

Meera waved her fork. "None of that makes sense. Take it to your solicitor. He will find out."

After years of death and disaster, Clare was afraid to allow even a glimmer of anticipation. But just this once, could she hope something good had fallen on their doorstep? "If this is really true, if I have a second home. . ."

Meera looked at her questioningly. "A second home?"

"It says I own a share of a *manor*. What if we could rent out this townhouse for the Season? The extra income. . ."

A gleam of understanding reached Meera's eyes. "We could go elsewhere these next months? We could escape Jacob?"

After her father's death, Meera had mistakenly believed his assistant's attention meant he would marry her. She'd dreamed of sharing the apothecary shop with a husband who respected her knowledge.

Unfortunately, he had shown his true character when Meera had told him of their impending parenthood. Instead of doing what was right, he had made a deal with her father's landlord and locked her out of the shop.

Clare clutched the paper as if it were diamonds and gold. "If this is true, I can not only earn the money I need for a tutor, but you can lose Jacob and his threats until your child is born."

As her seven-year-old nephew settled at the table to finish his breakfast, she added, "Do you think a tutor might be more agreeable to working for a woman and teaching Oliver if we are living on an estate with servants?"

"Even a derelict castle with a dozen unknown cousins is healthier than a summer in London with Jacob at the door, but let's be cautious," Meera advised.

"For a change?" Clare added, because caution had never been a family trait as far as she was aware.



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