

THE MYSTERY OF THE  
MISSING HEIRESS - SAMPLE

GRAVESYDE PRIORY MYSTERY, #2



PATRICIA RICE





## ONE



*APRIL 25, 1815, TUESDAY*

JOHN CECIL DE SACKVILLE LOCATED THE BUTTONS OF HIS trousers and stumbled back up the muddy hill strewn with blue flowers. He wasn't much on botanicals and couldn't name them. Ale now—the tavern last night had a damned fine ale. His aching head was proof. Jack de Sack had an excellent head for alcohol, but he'd been felled by last night's barrel.

He probably shouldn't have celebrated so heartily on St. George's Day, but if he were to die with Wellington, he wanted to say farewell properly. Except, then he'd needed a hair of the dog that bit him the next day after he realized he'd have to make a substantial detour to rural outposts with an aching head. Now it was Tuesday, and he was lost. Civilian life took some adjustment, but he'd be a soldier again once he finished a few errands.

Having watered the hedgerow with this morning's partaking, Jack contemplated his very rural surroundings. If the recipients of the package he carried had oddly retired to the

country when they should be in London, it was his responsibility to track them down. After all these years, he should at least have the courtesy to deliver it personally and explain the delay.

According to his directions, there ought to be a village nearby, although Gravesyde Priory seemed an ominous destination. Still, manors did not exist without villages, although he couldn't discern even a puff of smoke on the horizon.

A brook babbled between the dirt lane he traversed and abandoned fields. After the neat spring crops and paved roadways he'd passed on his way from the city, he wondered if he'd taken a wrong turn into an uninhabited farm.

He ran his hand over his cropped brown hair, swung a proper curly-brimmed beaver on top of it, and hoped his great coat protected his new civilian attire. He didn't want to ruin a lady's warm memory because the bearer was a wastrel.

Before untying his horse from the shrubbery, he checked his Hessians for mud—and spied a polished boot poking from blooming nettles beneath the hedgerow.

Jack's head wasn't so muddled as to not recognize Hoby's expensive new design. Those boots cost enough to feed a family of four—lousy for long horse rides but designed to impress ladies. *What the devil?*

In no particular hurry and always ready for a challenge, Jack unsheathed his sword from the saddle and hacked away at the brambles.

His gorge rose as the branches fell aside, and he discerned the owner of the boots. He'd seen dead bodies in his career. One did not fight Napoleon and spend years in India without viewing corpses. Sometimes, they were even men he knew. But they were usually soldiers who tempted death—not foppish nobles who sauntered city streets in fancy boots.

"Bastard." Jack stopped hacking and planted his sword in the muddy ground as he studied a face he hadn't seen since his frivolous youth. A dozen years ago, he'd considered him a

friend. Ten years ago he would have cut off the fellow's head, if he had not been on the wrong side of the Channel at the time.

A dozen years and a bloody great hole in his head hadn't improved Culpepper's once handsome phiz.

Jack rolled his eyes skyward, but the Man above seldom provided answers.

He could leave the bastard here for the beasts of the field to gnaw on, save everyone a lot of trouble. Ten years ago, he probably would have.

He'd learned a little more respect for the law since his rakehell youth, not much, but some.

Why was an impoverished dandy on this road to nowhere? Even if Culpepper had changed his colors and finally left London to apologize to the lady whose happiness he'd destroyed, he'd missed the main highway. As far as Jack was aware, Elspeth still resided in Newchurch, well north of here. Besides, apologizing to everyone Culpepper had offended would probably take until Doomsday.

It seemed unlikely that the bastard would be on any such mission. Even so, Jack couldn't leave his corpse for the buzzards.

In disgust, he sheathed his sword. Malaria had weakened him, but he'd spent these past months rebuilding his strength. He tested it now, dragging the fop's body from the mud and tossing him over the saddle with more difficulty than he liked.

Good old Beans didn't do more than flinch at the stench of death. Jack petted the gelding, and in resignation, proceeded down the lane on foot. Fine gift he brought for poor Miss Knightley, a lady he'd last seen in the worst of circumstances. She'd think him cursed.

The guardian of his late friend's infant had been a bookish creature. Jack wasn't in the least surprised to learn she remained unmarried. He was rather surprised, however, to

discover she'd leased her wealthy family's townhome and absconded to rural nonentity. He'd hoped to be on his way to Wellington by now, not traipsing about the Midlands.

Miss Knightley's lawyers had given him directions to this outpost of bloody rural Worcestershire. He hoped they hadn't misled him.

After hours of walking a corpse along the designated farm road, accompanied by swooping raptors and ravens, and meeting no one, Jack was ready to stop at the first tavern he found.

He owed Henry Owen a lot, but if the man hadn't been dead these six years or more, he'd have started counting the debt in reverse in recompense for this miserable jaunt. Maybe this suffering was the cost of not carrying out his duty sooner. He understood debts and finance in terms of money, not in personal obligation.

By the time he came across what appeared to be a newly repaired drive with a faded, overgrown sign indicating it belonged to his destination of Wycliffe Manor, he was in no humor for riding up with his ghoulish burden and setting off a household of shrieking females. Besides, the drive led up a bloody great hill with no manor in sight, and his boots had worn through. The village would be closer to the road. A village should have a physician or vicar or someone to handle this situation.

He told himself this lie until the first dilapidated chimneys came into sight.



KEEPING HER HEAD DOWN, AS A GOOD SERVANT SHOULD, LADY Elspeth Villiers carried her employer's market basket and stayed one foot behind the unsuspecting Miss Knightley. She desperately wished to keep the position of cook for Wycliffe Manor, but the kitchen staff recognized she wasn't one of

them. She feared the disruption she caused by the basic breach of upstairs/downstairs rules would soon reach her employer's ears. It had been easy enough the first few weeks after the deaths of the manor's caretakers when all had been confusion. But now, settling into routine. . .

She really should confide in Miss Knightley. Her employer—and distant cousin—was a few years younger than herself but seemed knowledgeable and understanding. Living with the motley household of barely related family, she had to be. Surely her cousin wouldn't mind discovering one more of her family hidden in the kitchen—but then, she most likely would not allow Elsa to continue cooking.

As she was debating, a dusty gentleman in an expensive greatcoat and top hat, leading a magnificent gelding, walked down the lane. *Beans?* Was that Jack's Beanstalk?

*Was that Jack?* The hat concealed much of his face but the chestnut lock falling on his brow. . .

Oh, dear Lord in Heaven, what have I done to offend thee?

Elsa ducked her head and hid behind her employer. Miss Knightley was slender and Elsa most certainly was not, but her cousin's broad-brimmed bonnet could hide an elephant, and no one noticed servants.

The stench reached them first as the gentleman approached. Elsa held her nose, gagging. That's when she noticed the buzzards lazily looping overhead. She'd grown up in rural Staffordshire. She knew buzzards.

The gentleman halted a good distance away. "I'm sorry, my ladies. I will not come closer. Is there someone in authority with whom I might speak?"

*Jack*, that was definitely John Cecil de Sackville. He was *alive*? She could scarcely breathe for the rush of confusing emotion. He was alive and leading a *corpse*?

Undeterred by the horrid sight—and smell—Miss Knightley gestured toward the blacksmith's abandoned stable

half-hidden behind what must once have been a tavern. "You'll want to speak with Captain Huntley at the manor, but I do not advise going further with your burden. The stable is empty and has a door. Do you know how to find Wycliffe Manor?"

"I was heading that way when I encountered. . ." Even from a distance, his grimace was visible. "I apologize again and will not offend you with my company."

Studying him from beneath her lashes, Elsa decided the boy she'd once known had grown into a strikingly handsome man, although his cheekbones cut a little more sharply than they ought. Had he been ill? Injured? Unlike Captain Huntley, he seemed to have all his parts.

"We'll see you at the manor and exchange introductions then. I'll tell the captain to expect you." With the quiet dignity she'd employed to turn around a derelict household, Miss Knightley aimed for the manor footpath.

In the dilapidated cottages of Gravesyde, curtains dropped back. The village had very few inhabitants, most of them elderly. The gossip wouldn't fly far.

Elsa's tongue had turned to stone. She couldn't let Jack see her. She'd finally found a haven and didn't wish to leave. She simply could not go home, but if he told anyone he'd seen her. . . No, she did not dare speak to him, no matter how much she longed to.

But she whispered a quiet prayer of gratitude that her childhood friend had survived the war, even if he hadn't bothered to write, the ingrate.

The Honorable John de Sackville had always been a wild card, but he'd still, in his own way, been honorable. And an honorable man couldn't be trusted to conceal her whereabouts.

Had he killed a man? It had to have been in self-defense. Which meant. . . Elsa refused to consider what that might mean. Only, Gravesyde Priory was well off the highway from



London to Birmingham. Generally, travelers on this lane were headed for Wycliffe Manor. Jack had no reason to do so, did he?

The walking path to the manor cut over a babbling brook, up a hill, and through a forest of pines. The ground was covered in spring blossoms. Normally, she would have lingered to pick a bouquet of bluebells and campion to brighten her rooms in the cellar. Not today.

"I'll take the basket around to the kitchen," she murmured, hiding her agitation as they reached the upper drive.

"We should talk, Mrs. Evans," Miss Knightley said before Elsa could escape. "I hope you know you are safe here."

Elsa bobbed a curtsy. "Yes, miss."



CLARISSA KNIGHTLEY WATCHED HER EDUCATED, ARISTOCRATIC cook rush off to the servant's entrance of the manor in the rear and shook her head. Even had the cook's speech and mannerisms not given her away, the Reid family traits were revealing—blond hair, blue eyes, widow's peak, the odd ear lobes, dimples, and the wayward thumb.

She glanced at her hand, but her glove hid her thumb's backward tilt. She could be describing herself, except, the earl's descendants came in different sizes. She was average height and on the skinny side. Mrs. Evans was about the same height but possessed the bosom and plump curves men appreciated.

She had hoped the woman she knew as Lara Evans would eventually feel comfortable enough to speak up, but Wycliffe Manor. . . Clare sighed and hurried up the steps to the aging, carved front doors. The grim walls of the former priory were all that remained after the first earl had rebuilt it into a manor house. The stone gargoyles and turrets were foreboding even

during the light of day. Add *another dead body*. . . They'd already buried an elderly butler, housekeeper, and a scoundrel who'd attempted murder to steal a valuable pharmacopeia.

They would need a chapel, a vicar, and a larger graveyard if any more corpses turned up. She couldn't blame poor Mrs. Evans for hiding in the kitchen. Wycliffe Manor would never be a luxurious country estate, and who would want to claim a seriously flawed family such as theirs?

At least, she did not think this visitor was family. As far as they were aware, no more males, other than her nephew, hung from the Reid family tree, and no descendant of the Earl of Wycliffe had brown hair. The family traits were distinctive, and the visitor did not possess them.

She detected a hint of soldier in the way the stranger carried himself, which made her want to run and hide.

But she was learning to be brave these days. The months she'd spent in Egypt with her sister and Bea's soldier husband were a distant memory, even if those last fateful days of terror would never fade.

Inside, she handed over her coat and hat to their illustrious new butler, Quincy, a massive door guardian who'd once been a prizefighter. "Where is Captain Huntley? We are about to have a visitor with a most unpleasant problem."

"He's just come out of the cellar to wash for dinner, miss. Shall I send Adam to let him know you wish to speak with him?"

That meant Hunt was bathing. He'd spent these last weeks preparing the crypt beneath the great hall for the new coal gas retort. Engineers simply were not gentlemen, she was learning. That didn't mean her overactive imagination didn't conjure a brief image of the strapping captain naked in a tub. That unsteady her nerves more than the encounter with the stranger and his corpse.

"If you will, please. What about Arnaud or Walker? Are

they about? I do not think I should be the one to interview this visitor." She might *want* to hear the visitor's story, but she wasn't about to decide what to do with a dead body.

Her gothic novels didn't need to be that realistic. Which reminded her of the letter in her hand. Or guilt did. She was hiding from Aunt Martha so she might finish her novel in peace. Why had her aunt tracked her down?

"I'll have Adam send them to the captain's study, miss. Will there be anything else?" The butler hid any evidence of interest behind his smashed nose and stoic demeanor.

"Have Marie prepare a guest room for a gentleman, please." Clutching her unopened letter, she hurried up the marble stairs to the family floor. They needed to hire a housekeeper. She had no interest in running a place this large on her own.

Flinging her outer garments over a chair, she hastily popped the seal on her letter. Aunt Martha was a busybody married to her father's brother. Six years ago, after Clare's sister and her soldier husband, Henry Owen, had perished in Egypt, leaving their infant child behind, their aunt and uncle had declined to take on Oliver, citing age and illness. More like, lack of funds for a nursemaid and a disinclination to deal with children they'd never had. The Owen family had been equally disinclined to take on an infant. Which had left Clare, at the tender age of nineteen, the guardianship of her nephew.

Clare scanned the letter, skipping over the scolding for not telling her dearest relation, who only had Clare's best interest in mind, that she was renting her lovely townhouse while absconding to rural nonentity. In the final paragraph, there it was. *I have spoken with the Owens. They are equally concerned that Oliver is not in school. It is time he started making the connections necessary for families of our stature. Please let us know where you have enrolled him and when he will begin. The Owens are considering speaking with their solicitor about your guardianship.*

Clare swallowed hard. There it was, the sword of Damocles that perpetually hung over her. She'd been resentful when both families had insisted that she take responsibility for her sister's infant, but she'd understood. She'd been Oliver's nursemaid since birth, and he was attached to her. But, at nineteen, she'd still stupidly held out hopes of marrying. Her limited funds had not stretched to infant caretakers.

Now, she was glad she'd become Oliver's guardian. Nannies and governesses would not have understood her nephew's brilliance or oddities. Neither would Aunt Martha.

Hearing footsteps in the hall, she shoved the letter into her pocket. A moment later, Meera arrived with an arm full of clothes. They'd been best friends for years, even though Meera's Jewish-Hindu family were apothecaries, and Meera had been trained as one. Clare didn't know what she'd do without her.

Her friend was another reason Aunt Martha disapproved of Clare's eccentric London household. Heaven forfend that her aunt take it in her head to visit Wycliffe Manor!

Meera performed a grand curtsy in her new gown, and Clare studied the effect. "It is lovely! Our little seamstress has outdone herself. Turn about, let me see."

Dark-haired, round, and short, Meera spun about in her spangled India muslin. The high waist and fuller skirt hid the slight swell of the child she carried. The peach-colored cross-over handkerchief bodice emphasized her splendid bosom. "It feels decadent."

"Walker's eyes will fall out of his sockets. I wish I possessed half your beauty." Clare opened her armoire to choose a dinner gown. The long-abandoned manor needed too much work to indulge funds in ladies' maids. She and Meera did for each other.

"You are beautiful in a different way," Meera assured her. "I am earthy. Your golden coloring is celestial. Besides, the

captain is captivated even when you're wearing mobcaps and aprons. What are you frowning about?"

"Mysteries. While I love writing them, I am growing a little weary of dead bodies on the doorstep. If I do not mistake, we will have a guest at dinner tonight." Their visitor was more important than fretting over what she couldn't control.

"Dead bodies?" Having grown up as a physician's assistant, Meera was not in the least squeamish. She helped Clare unfasten her walking gown.

"Very dead, buzzards overhead and all. Unpleasant dinner conversation, so I will have to pry the story from Hunt later. I fear if he has to act as magistrate, he will take the next ship back to the Americas. He likes hammering things, but not gavels, I think."

"Would you go the Americas with him?" Meera asked, troubled.

"No, which is half our problem. His home is there. Mine is here. Or at least, mine is in London and partially here. Oliver needs to grow up in familiar surroundings. He's lost too much as it is."

"If he is destined to go off to school, would it make a difference where you live?" Meera buttoned the back of Clare's ice-blue sarcenet dinner gown. The fashion was several years old, but Clare preferred sleeves to the current strapless fashion. Lavender, her very young but talented seamstress cousin, had trimmed it with tulle so it almost seemed strapless.

The effect was wasted once she flung a shawl over her shoulders. The sixteenth-century manor wasn't exactly warm, even on a lovely April evening.

Clare sighed. "Since I have never been to school, I am no expert. I simply know he does not mix well with people. I fear I coddle him."

"I fear we're too far from civilization to find the tutor you

seek. He will have to attend school sometime." Meera pulled the pins from Clare's fine hair and brushed it out.

"He is doing better with all these men around. It's early days yet. We've only been here a little over a month. He's like a little sponge and has learned a great deal already. But that also means we should limit the people who stay to ones of good character."

"Except your entire family owns a share in this ramshackle abode, as your great-aunt calls it. They can't all be as refined as you." Meera began wrapping Clare's hair into ringlets and pinning them.

Clare laughed. "If I am the scale we measure by, then we could invite the entire village. This is a ridiculous discussion. There is a dead man in the blacksmith's stable. His killer might be coming to dinner. Perhaps we should dine up here."

Meera laughed loud and hearty.

Clare managed a wan smile in acknowledgment of the jest. She was already itching to run downstairs to see what their visitor had to say and resenting that the men would hear the tale first.

**The Mystery of the Missing Heiress**  
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Cover design © 2023 Killion Group

First digital edition Book View Café October 2023

ISBN: ebook 978-1-63632-175-2

print 978-1-63632-176-9

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Published by Rice Enterprises, Dana Point, CA, an affiliate of Book View Café Publishing Cooperative.

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Las Vegas NV 89107

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