

THE DILEMMA OF A DEAD SCHOLAR - SAMPLE

GRAVESYDE PRIORY MYSTERY, #6



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ONE



ARNAUD: MONDAY MORNING

JULY 3, 1815

"YOU KNOW THEY ABANDONED US ON PURPOSE."

Out of habit, Arnaud Lavigne ignored the inane mutterings of the dainty, fairy-blond heiress crouched at his feet, studying the ancient oil paintings he had taken down to clean.

Dorothea Talbot was as mad as the rest of her Reid family. Generally, she was *quietly* mad and hid with the elderly aunts. Today, for reasons unknown, she had chosen to work in this medieval, two-story foyer already crowded with two restless boys, their tutor, and Lavender, a seventeen-year-old Circe in the making.

Under the tutelage of their teacher, the boys measured the painting frames, matching them to squares of oak molding on the paneling in some ridiculous belief that they'd find hidden treasure. Unfortunately, the two-story walls held a sizable collection of ancient portraits and incredibly bad landscapes. Measuring would take time.

The small space also held Arnaud's ladder and his not-so-dainty self as he attempted to cover a hole in the arched transom above the massive, carved oak doors.

Perhaps Dotty Dottie lingered to chaperone Lavender and not just to annoy him. The heiress never smiled, but then, neither did he.

Although he couldn't help noticing that everyone except Miss Talbot was

covered in cobwebs and centuries of filth from the ancient frames. Meticulously groomed, a single curl dangling on either side of her heart-shaped face, the lady hadn't allowed a speck of dust to besmirch her beribboned muslin. Heiresses apparently lived in protective bubbles.

Having spent the war years living in prison cells and poverty, Arnaud gave no consideration to keeping the remains of his wardrobe rags clean. He simply wore a painter's smock over his shabby linen and waistcoat. He never wore a coat under it. He needed room to move—and his old coats no longer fit properly.

Also an eccentric Reid, this one from the wrong side of the blanket, adolescent Lavender shrugged at the heiress's declaration of abandonment. "Cousin Clare is tired of being the responsible one. She thinks we all need to learn to be adults."

Arnaud was fairly certain that was not why both sets of newlyweds had run off to the city or wherever they'd taken themselves. Privacy was in hard supply at Wycliffe Manor—as the gathering in the vestibule proved.

Lavender and the tutor seemed to be taking advantage of the removed paintings to teach the boys how to graph the measurements onto paper. Arnaud had no idea why and refused to ask.

He had learned the painfully hard way to keep his lips shut and his opinions to himself. It wasn't as if his audience listened to him. As the descendants of the last earl of Wycliffe, the Reids blithely went their own way, seemingly without care to consequences. Frenchmen who sponged off their largesse deserved to be ignored.

"We *are* adults," the tutor said placidly. Barely out of university, Mr. Bird-whistle endured the oddities of his two young students with a great deal of patience for a young man in the presence of two rather extraordinarily lovely women.

And therein lay Arnaud's current difficulty. . . His mistress of the past year had decided to marry and move to the city. Deprivation apparently led to depravity, and he couldn't avoid awareness of feminine scents and soft curves. He was a painter. He observed.

In prison, he'd been deprived of food and women. After escaping to his great-aunt's abandoned manor, he'd survived in a state of insensibility, painting madly so he need not feel the loss of everything he once knew. But over these past months since the manor had filled with life, laughter—and food—he'd gradually emerged from his former state of semi-consciousness. Regrettably, returning to life meant suffering the pain of knowing he had decades ahead of him and no foreseeable means of carving out a future.

He'd just signed away his last claim to his estate and title—for good purpose,

admittedly. Only now, without his home, his Parisian art world, or any goal, he felt like a dog trapped in a hole he'd dug.

Despite a manor filled with feminine resplendence, bedding the mad descendants of an earl was not an option. He'd learned the hard way that pragmatism was necessary for survival. So he puttered, mending what should have been left to crumble because he shared the manor with an aristocratic family who had as little purpose as he.

The ladder he stood on was precarious at best. If he fell, he'd crush women and children. Cautiously, he fit the arched oilcloth into the window frame. He could nail this end. The one in the middle of the window. . . He grimaced. He was large, but even his arms didn't extend that far.

"That won't work," Miss Talbot informed him. "You should ask the curate if he has a ladder. It will take two people to hold it in place."

He knew he wasn't a handyman, but he had wanted to be useful. Asking for help only created more work for others.

Arnaud rolled up the cloth. "I just wanted to see if it would fit. Perhaps when you're done playing in here, there will be room for two ladders."

"He speaks!" The heiress raised her golden arched eyebrows. "We are not playing. I am convinced each of these paintings fits a specific panel but they've been scrambled. There is no other reason for the irregularity of molding sizes. Oliver, show Mr. Lavigne your calculations."

The youngest boy silently held out a sheet of numbers.

Arnaud climbed down to study it. He was an artist, not a mathematician. But a seven-year-old's calculations were basic enough. "Each panel is a different size?"

He glanced up at the elaborate case moldings adorning the two-story oak paneled wall dividing the foyer from the main manor. The molding formed irregular blocks on the walls that, admittedly, resembled frames. "Are you measuring the portrait frames or the canvas inside the frames?"

Davy—Miss Talbot's eight-year-old brother—picked up one of the smaller oils and set it into one of the lower panels. It appeared to be an exact fit.

Enlightenment. One of the mad earl's letters had mentioned a lady's portrait in the vestibule as key to finding. . . whatever in hell he'd hidden. That had been the reason for removing the hideous paintings in the first place. No key had been found.

"You are hoping to prove that you are adults by finding *jewels*?" Arnaud couldn't conceal his incredulity.

He might not have been so skeptical if he hadn't been hungry. Since the manor's cook, Lady Elsa, the new Mrs. de Sackville, had departed on her

delayed honeymoon, their meals had deteriorated, not improving Arnaud's mood.

"It's a theory," adolescent Lavender said proudly. "Thea says not all the paintings we took down belong in here. We are looking for the ones that fit."

"Tay-uh?" He'd worked it out before Lavender explained.

"Doro-tay-uh." Lavender glared a warning at him. "No one wishes to be called Dotty Dottie."

The delicate lady snorted. . . delicately.

He was French. She was English. He didn't think either language encompassed that pronunciation with that spelling, but what did he know? He was only an uneducated ex-comte and ex-artist. He regarded her warily. "You prefer Tay-uh? Not Thee-uh?"

"Not Dotty," she said curtly.

Fine then. Informality and eccentricity reigned in Wycliffe Manor.

He returned to studying the ancient oak paneling. As far as he was concerned, the vestibule had been an arcade of appalling English work that had only been improved by removing the paintings. He'd mostly ignored the pieces in here in favor of the more professional family portraits in the ballroom and loft, the ones concealing codes, presumably to hidden treasure. But after they'd discovered one of the mad earl's letters claiming a vestibule portrait held a clue, along with a cryptic message of diamonds in squares, Arnaud had been examining every painting in the manor. Given the centuries of bad art on the immense walls, that might take a lifetime.

So far, no more clues had been uncovered. He'd learned that one piece had been painted over, but removing the poor concealment had only revealed an equally bad original. He assumed some ancestor had taken up art and couldn't afford new canvas.

"You believe that wishful thinking is useful and proof that you are an adult?" Arnaud felt horribly old next to these naifs. He was just on the fair side of thirty, but he'd seen more in his lifetime than people who lived to be a hundred.

That didn't mean he knew much. It wasn't as if war and revolution and prison taught more than how to survive.

Dotty—*Thea*—dusted her slender fingers on a lacy handkerchief and regarded him as if he'd just grown antlers. "You have a better suggestion? If we found the jewels, we could hire an adequate household staff and someone to actually glaze that glass you're covering."

"That is centuries-old leaded glass. Replacing it would require a master craftsman. The oilcloth will keep out bats until we find a buyer for the medieval

manuscripts. We do not need jewels." He took down his ladder but couldn't easily maneuver it around the crowd.

They'd paid the manor's annual mortgage with the sale of rare books from the library, with money to spare. They might be living in decrepitude, but they were no longer desperate to keep the roof over their heads.

Fair-haired Oliver intelligently scrambled up on the backward-facing lion statue to get out of the ladder's way.

Arnaud thought the statue was probably a priceless Chinese antique and ought to be one of a pair, but the boy had no eye for art. Oliver was now studying the transom from his loftier position.

Leaning against the base of the lion, Davy pulled a sweet from his pocket and popped it into his mouth. He didn't speak any more than Oliver did, but the tutor apparently understood them. Mr. Birdwhistle didn't admonish them for neglecting the problem he'd set them but continued his measuring.

Arnaud feared he didn't belong at Wycliffe any longer. He'd had some incentive to stay when they'd desperately sought more codes for the apparently mythical jewels. But now that the library was providing extra funds, he needed to find his own path, not hang around, waiting for life to find him.

He might as well hunt imaginary jewels.

Before he could set down the ladder and open the front door—which none of the addle-pated Reids thought to do—the interior door swung open and his brother, Henri, popped through.

"Hunt and Clare have sent a cart and carriage full of fabrics and furniture," his brother crowed. "Play time, ladies!"

"Fabric?" Lavender stood and dusted herself off. "In the sewing room?"

"Unloading as we speak." Henri stepped aside.

She lifted her hem and dashed past him. Seventeen-year-old Lavender loved fashion, had learned to design her own clothes, and now designed for others. Even a child had more purpose than Arnaud.

"Carriage?" Arnaud asked warily. "Whose?"

"Ours, apparently." Henri beamed. "The auction of ancient tomes has made our newlyweds giddy, and they have acquired a carriage from Lady Spalding. The carriage is not new, by any means. I daresay parsimonious Hunt and the marchioness came to a mutually suitable arrangement. And I imagine Jack bought the horses for his breeding stable. They're fine specimens."

"If only they had sent more experienced maids and a footman or two. . . ." Dotty Thea returned to sorting paintings by size.

Says the heiress who could have hired half the village with her fortune. . . . Arnaud

did not speak his bitter thought aloud. He'd once had estates and servants of his own. Wealth was not always the source of good sense.

"Are we to have a bonfire for the old furniture?" he asked, maneuvering the ladder through the doorway. "Or do we stack the new in the corridor until Clare directs its placement?"

"Don't you dare burn those old pieces!" the heiress cried. "They have stories to tell."

"And there she goes," Arnaud muttered.

His brother laughed at his disgust and took the other end of the ladder. "Do we sit by the fire tonight and listen to the faded sofas speak?"

"Laugh, if you must, but without the spirit of the late Lady Reid, you would not have caught those killers. You simply won't admit it." Dotty—Thea lifted the ruffled hem of her morning gown, revealing dainty slippers, and sailed past them.

The heiress's odd ability to find passages in the former viscountess's journals had allowed the manor inhabitant's to catch a demented killer, saving the book auction—with the help of a lot of other people.

"You read Lady Reid's journals and provided history." Arnaud followed, carrying his ladder toward the gallery. "The sofa does not speak."

"I read her agitation, and that *tower* speaks." Thea pointed at the front corner of the manor. "Has anyone ever found a way in? There could be catacombs or an ossuary in there, given the number of deaths this place attracts. The village is not called Gravesyde Priory for naught."

Arnaud winced. He had pondered the tower mystery for years. As a youth visiting his great-aunt's home, he'd been too busy to look into the one inaccessible, presumably empty, ornamental tower. Since his escape from France, he hadn't wanted to ever encounter another closed, dark prison.

He doubted he'd find jewels in the crumbling structure. But the manor contained many towers. Why had only one been sealed off?

TWO



THEA: MONDAY MORNING

THEA KNEW SHE REALLY SHOULDN'T HAVE MENTIONED THE GHOSTS HAUNTING HER. She hid behind decorum for a reason. Men exploited any sign of weakness.

But honestly, the scruffy Comte Arnaud Lavigne was entirely too toplofty. For a man who resembled a disheveled vagrant, he was in no position to tell anyone else what to do. Just because his stubbly, carved jaw, worldly air, broad chest and shoulders, and. . . sigh. She shouldn't notice his physique—but he never concealed it as a gentleman should.

Men weren't to be trusted for more than muscle power anyway. Dismissing the distracting *former* count and his unjustified superiority, Thea turned her admiration to the graceful curvature of the carved mahogany legs on the sofa and loveseat that Cousin Clare had sent. Surely the bride intended it for the parlor, the most used common room in the manor. Although really, the informal, family withdrawing room would be far more comfortable in the evenings, and more convenient for the staff, if only it weren't buried in cast-offs.

With Lt. de Sackville and Captain Huntley on their wedding trips, however, she'd have to rely on the two Frenchmen for moving furniture about. Adam, their one footman, might help, if he wasn't busy. Their butler was far too dignified, and old, to be pushing about chairs. She despised asking for help.

But clearly, it needed to be done. The manor begged to be refurbished, and she had a talent for decoration. She had already conceived a plan for arranging the public rooms for comfort and elegance. Did she dare be so presumptuous as

to act on it? Her parents never listened but the aunts who had taken refuge in the manor appreciated her suggestions.

If she was to prove herself useful. . . which she really should, if she didn't want to become a feeble-minded barnacle on the home that had welcomed her. . . she needed to act with a modicum of authority. After all, the manor belonged to her as much as anyone else.

The alternative might be to sit in boredom with the aunts. She might be an heiress, but until she married, she had only her meager allowance and couldn't afford rent. Since she never intended to marry, she needed another means of ensuring her little brother's safety. Her parents were too oblivious to provide it.

Quincy, their massive, balding butler approached her, no expression marring his stiff demeanor. Thea knew the aunts had their own homes and had abdicated any position of authority here. She supposed, without Clare or Lady Elsa present, that left her as the next best thing to mistress of the manor. Having always lived in her parents' homes, she'd never been mistress of anything. Perhaps this was what Clare had meant when she'd said they needed to learn to be adults. Thea tried to look intelligent, knowledgeable, and in charge.

"An applicant for the position of footman has arrived," Quincy intoned. "Mrs. Upton asks if you wish to interview him."

Oh, my. *Interview?* She'd never hired a servant. She had no notion if the manor had a budget for more. But they desperately needed another footman. Young Adam couldn't be everywhere at once.

And if she had an extra pair of hands. . . perhaps her allowance might stretch to cover a servant's pay, if Hunt objected to the expense? Or perhaps Clare and Hunt had sent him? That was a happy thought.

"Might Mrs. Upton bring him up and we can interview him together?" she asked, not sounding as authoritative as she would have liked.

Mrs. Upton was another member of the family, one who preferred the role of housekeeper since she'd been that for her adoptive father and husband all her life. Thea respected the widow's good sense. If she could have chosen her mother, she would have far preferred the plump, unfashionable Mrs. Upton to her own.

Quincy nodded, she hoped, in approval. "In the study?"

"Clare's office, please." It had windows, and chairs suited for ladies.

She stopped by the library to see if Minerva might be present. The latest addition to the manor family was generally buried in books or out visiting the village with the curate. Her cousin glanced up from repairing a book spine when Thea looked in.

"Mrs. Upton is to interview a new footman. Would you care to join us?"

Her dark blond hair pulled up in a nest of straggling pins, Minerva blinked from her work before registering the question. "A footman? As long as he has a strong back and shoulders, what more can we ask? It's not as if I have ever employed a footman."

Minerva had grown up with brothers and following the army and barely knew housekeeping. Thea conceded the point. "I shall measure his shoulders, shall I?"

She didn't think any servant would have shoulders as broad as Arnaud's, even though one could practically see his rib cage through his thin linen. She needed to quit looking.

A trifle anxious at finally being treated as more than an empty-headed doll, she continued down the central corridor to the small study at the rear of the manor, where her cousin Clare had established her own hideaway. Since Clare had been first of the family, besides Hunt, to gather the courage to live on the abandoned estate, she had taken over the sensible running of the household. More experienced in dealing with domestics, the new Mrs. Huntley had every right to establish her own domain.

Thea was fairly certain Clare would not mind sharing her office in the interest of employing servants.

Out of curiosity, she opened the desk drawer where Clare kept a locked box of papers she was always writing on. The box was empty and unlocked. Oh well.

Thea had cleared off the desk, returned books to shelves, and dusted the inkstand by the time Mrs. Upton bustled in, leading a sallow young man of average height—and shoulders. Footmen were normally hired for their looks and height. No wonder this poor man had been reduced to applying for a position in the decrepit, isolated manor.

"Herbert Hanks, Miss Talbot." Mrs. Upton took a chair near the bookcase, folded her hands in her lap, and left the talking to Thea.

Oh, my. Now what? She twisted Clare's pencil and tried not to study the servant's narrow face and bent nose. "Do you live nearby?" was all she knew to ask. Surrounded by empty fields and sheep-inhabited hills, rural Wycliffe Manor was in the middle of nothing, on the road to nowhere. Servants did not generally knock on their door.

Mr. Hanks nodded eagerly, his unattractive, reddish-brown hair falling into his face. "Me old mum's here. I thought to be closer, to help out now and again, y'know? She told me you be needing help."

"Commendable." Thea turned to Mrs. Upton. "Does he have references?"

The housekeeper removed a paper from her apron pocket. "I don't know the family."

Given her mother's sociable propensities, Thea at least knew *of* every family with any claim to society. She couldn't say she knew the Harrisons who signed the letter, but then, she could tell by his speech that Mr. Hanks didn't frequent the better homes. "And why did you choose to leave your last position?"

"Me old mum, as I told ye. Me dad died, and I 'ad to come 'ome. I'm strong. I can run fast. I'll be an asset to yer establishment." He looked puppy-dog eager.

Thea turned to Mrs. Upton. "Would you like to describe the position? Should we call in Mr. Quincy?"

"We've already discussed what we need," she replied with calm dignity. Formerly an impoverished curate's wife, she'd never hired servants either. "We need a strong young man, someone willing to fetch and carry, upstairs and down. We're too understaffed to consider any chore beneath us."

"I can do that, mum. I did that afore. Even carried the slops when the maids quit." He beamed happily.

Thea exchanged a look with Mrs. Upton, then tried to maintain a solemn air of authority as she turned back to the young man. Well, not so young. He might be slightly older than she. "Adam will show you to your room, Mr. Hanks. Report to Quincy when you've settled in. He'll give you the rules of the house and discuss your wages. Welcome to Wycliffe Manor."

Mrs. Upton winked at her and sailed out, leading their hapless new footman away.

Before Thea could depart to examine the cluttered withdrawing room, Quincy arrived with a packet of letters, delivering them just as if this were her office. She'd never particularly aspired to presiding over an office and desk, but being treated as more than a doll to move about at will was a new experience she could appreciate.

Ignoring the letters from family, she tore open the seal on the one from her solicitor. She was, after all, twenty-two and capable of taking care of her own affairs.

The solicitor's letter differed in opinion.

Scowling, she crumpled it and tossed it into a wastebasket to use for kindling. She ought to do the same with her family's letters, but a lifetime of habit was hard to break.

She read her father's command first. It hadn't changed.

"Davy is *not* a simpleton!" she shouted at the walls, shredding the letter and winging the pieces at the door—just missing the man entering.

The scruffy artist bowed, causing his overlong chestnut hair to fall across his broad brow. "I heard screams? Did you require rescue?"

She refused to cry. At times like this, when she was upset, spirits battered at

her defenses, and she feared she'd succumb to the vapors, as she so often did. This right noble arse would probably let her fall and crack open her head.

Freezing her expression, she waved dismissively. "I apologize. I was indulging in a tantrum. If you'll excuse me, I shall go kick. . . I don't know. What does one kick in a tantrum?"

He wrinkled his brow as if actually considering the absurd question. "I have tried trees. I do not recommend it without sturdy boots."

"Of course." She stood and examined her cloth slippers, steadying her spinning head. "I shall find a cushion to kick. You are quite right."

Awkwardly, he gestured at her letter with his big hands. The left one was missing a pinkie finger. "I am not Hunt, but might the family help in some manner?"

Such an offer had to be difficult for the unsociable artist. She shouldn't be rude.

"Tearing out my father's throat, perhaps?" she suggested in her best airy manner, the one she used in ballrooms to disguise her desire to kill or be killed. "Best not to think that, I presume. Our ghosts might attempt to oblige."

He raised his thick dark eyebrows into points. "If he deserves killing, perhaps more legal means can be found?"

"No court in the world would stop him." The urge to sob caught in her throat. "No, I cannot concern you with our family drama. If you will let me pass, please."

Clutching her remaining letter, she waited for him to do as asked. A gentleman would.

Skeleton-man was no gentleman. He scooped up the fragments she'd flung and smoothed them enough to read her father's letterhead. "I am French, *vous comprenez*? I do not know your society so well as I should. But I did not think the English so rebellious as us. You defy your father's wishes?"

She choked on bile and sobs and had she been a man, she might have punched him. She'd probably fall on her face if she tried. "Let me by, please."

She wasn't a man, but she'd been raised as a proper lady, which was worse. She could not exhibit emotion in public—or to near strangers. She waited for him to move.

"I will just paste these together then." The obnoxious beast stepped inside and began picking up the strips. "Family helps family, do they not?"

"Not in my experience." Caught watching as he easily bent from the waist to scoop up her mess, she wished he'd at least don a coat. "Only a dunderheaded beast with the understanding of a brick would believe my parents ever help anyone."

He grunted and began laying the scraps out on a piece of stationery. "At one time or another, I may have been all that. So perhaps I shall comprehend your father better than you might?"

"He wants to put Davy in an institution for the insane and incompetent, *vous comprenez?*" she asked with a sarcasm he did not deserve.

The Dilemma of a Dead Scholar

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