

THE VILLAIN'S FATAL PLOT

GRAVESYDE VILLAGE MYSTERIES

BOOK ONE



PATRICIA RICE



ONE



LONDON, SEPTEMBER 1815

"YOU'VE MOST LIKELY FRACTURED A BONE OR TWO, MISS PALMER. You don't keep off that foot, you could be crippled up for life." The apothecary wiped his hands after tying off the bandage. "Best to rest and keep it raised."

The bruising and swelling had made it almost impossible to remove her once-overlarge boot. Putting it back on. . . Faith winced as she attempted to ease on her footwear, leaving the laces untied. "Then I shall have to sit by the fire and knit, shan't I?"

Complaining got her nowhere, so she refrained from saying she was crippled for life already, in more ways than were visible. Mr. Thomas looked at her with too much pity as it was. She refused to be pathetic.

"If you have a cane you'll sell me, I'll stay off it all the way home," she vowed. She hated spending one of her few coins, but stalwart as she had learned to be, even she knew she'd never make it home otherwise.

She would have to buy a larger shoe to accommodate the

bandage, which seemed a dreadful waste, but a lovely excuse for a stronger boot.

Or maybe she could steal one of the boots her uncle used for his clubfoot, she thought meanly. Pain apparently brought out her bad side.

"Aye, a stick will help." The old apothecary brightened momentarily, then shook his head. "Don't know how you'll manage your satchel. That looks heavy. Where's your footman? Don't know what your uncle is about, sending you out at all hours on these streets with those papers."

The satchel didn't contain just papers, which made her lazy footman's defection all the more irritating. When she'd explained she needed to stop at the chemist, Luther had decided he'd worked enough for a day and taken himself off to his pub. He knew she wasn't that far from home. People looked after her here, so she didn't fear the dark streets, even this close to the wharf. But the satchel was heavy and her foot *hurt*.

The apothecary rummaged through a stand of walking sticks, settling on a smaller one. "See if this don't fit."

Not answering his question about her footman, she tested the stick, and smiled in gratitude. "This works well, thank you, sir. I shall look very elegant swinging a walking stick."

She removed the necessary coins from her meager purse, knowing she'd replace them with ones from her uncle's satchel later. She'd paid for her mother's physicians that way for years. She'd felt guilty at first, but Uncle Warren never lowered himself to touching filthy lucre. If his bookkeepers noticed a shortage, he blamed it on his incompetent clerks or the bank. He had wealth enough not to miss a few shillings—or even sovereigns. And he owed her far more than spare change.

She had come to consider theft a form of spreading the wealth to those who needed it. Just call her Robin Hood.

Mr. Thomas looked dubious at her claim of elegance but he'd known her family long enough not to comment.

Faith was perfectly aware that she was anything but elegant.

Stout, possibly. Dowdy, certainly, and as plain of face as her mother had been. But as *the Mrs. Milton Palmer*, her mother had been wealthy and money could buy elegance. Faith couldn't. And what would she do with it anyway? Having no wardrobe to store them in, her mother's silk gowns hung uselessly over a line strung across a storage room. Faith loved trying them on, but they were too ostentatious for these back alleys her mother had never set foot in.

In the early September evening, fog had already closed in. She pulled her cloak hood over her recently refurbished bonnet. Having lived in sight of the wharves for her entire twenty-five years, she navigated the treacherous shoals of dark alleys without fear, even though her father had died on these streets where he'd built his home. He had loved watching his ships come in.

Only tonight, she was much later than usual. Hobbling, with the stick slipping and sliding on the cobblestones, she knew the counting house had closed. Her father had taught her how to open the vault. She didn't need anyone's supervision, but her uncle loved seeing his money as much as his brother had his ships.

After the house closed, though, her peevish uncle worked himself into a drunken state that easily erupted in rage. She hoped he had gone home. Her foot ached like the very devil, had ever since the carriage horse stamped on it earlier. She'd still made it to the bank before it closed. That wouldn't appease Uncle Warren.

She'd love to blame his nasty carriage driver for her lateness, but Uncle Warren would simply say she was clumsy. She supposed she was. Only, she wasn't the one who'd deliberately driven the horse over her foot because she hadn't moved fast enough.

Ah, the alley—a shorter distance and unpaved. Balancing the strap of the heavy satchel over one shoulder and leaning on the stick was wearisome—especially for clumsy her, she added with wry amusement. Elegance wasn't for Faith Palmer.

A piteous mew in the shadows offered her excuse to rest for a minute. "Kitty?" More mewling followed.

She'd tried to keep cats for years, but someone always let them out, and life on the wharves seldom came to a good end. But a hungry kitten. . .

Eyes adjusting to the darker shadows, she sorted a ragged bundle of ginger from the debris behind the ash cans. Remembering a bit of cheese in her pocket, she set down the satchel and rummaged in her cloak.

She inched closer, awkwardly holding cheese and stick. The kitten watched warily, sniffing with suspicion. Marmalade, most likely, under all that filth.

"I bet you'd make a good mouser," she murmured as the tiny bundle of fur lay flat to study her.

Perhaps she could train this one not to leave the kitchen? She'd love a little company to fill the lonely hours. Uncle Warren never entered the cellar. He wouldn't know.

The moment the kitten snatched the cheese, Faith caught the handful of fur and cuddled it inside her cloak. "There's more where that came from, Marmie. And there's a fire where you can dry off."

As if accepting the offer, the kitten snuggled into her warmth, tiny, frightened heart beating against hers—someone to love. It had been so long. . . A light lit her dreary evening.

Only now she had a dilemma. Stick, satchel, and cat. And she was later than late. She was a ninny for taking on any more responsibility, but the kitten made her unreasonably happy.

She slipped her new pet into the satchel and appropriated a few coins while she had it open. Now that her mother was gone, she took the extra coins for her trouble. It wasn't as if her uncle paid her for running his errands. He assumed allowing her to live in her own home was sufficient recompense.

"He's a mean cheat, Marmie," she whispered, retrieving her stick to limp down the mews leading home. "Why hasn't anyone

taken a cudgel to his head? Run his black heart through with a sword. . ."

Before she could imagine any more bloodthirsty fates for her father's brother, an earth-jarring explosion rattled windows and doors, and she stumbled. Shouts of alarm broke out in the distance.

Steadying herself on the stable wall, clinging to the shadows, Faith peered from the mews and watched in shock as the windows of the four-story mansion her father had built glowed from within. Had that been a trick of candles, it would have been a gorgeous sight.

Except the glass exploded, and flames roared from those lit windows. A moment later, fire licked at the roof, and the foggy night sky reflected orange.

Stunned, she froze against the brick, watching the inferno in horror. Shouts, people running. . . She crumpled into the shadows, fingers digging into the rough brick of the stable.

Her home, everything she'd once owned, all her memories of a happier life, everything she'd hoped someday to claim again. . . *gone*? Horror engulfed her as she watched her future and past burn to fiery cinders. Her soul shriveled like the once lovely damask draperies, her mother's silks, and her father's books. Tears coated her cheeks. And then, a stray idea caught her. . .

Like a snail without its shell, *Faith Palmer died with her home.*

She blinked, not certain from what depth of hell that thought arose. Her insides churned. She swiped at the tears streaming down her face. . . Without her home or family, dull, clumsy Faith Palmer was quite effectively *dead*.

Oddly, that notion left her. . . *free*?

"If heaven means dropping the chains that bind us to earth, is this what it feels like to be an angel, Marmie?" Watching her home blaze into a bonfire, she stroked the kitten's head—the kitten that had saved her life. Had she not been late, had she not stopped to rescue a kitten. . .

She would have been in her cellar kitchen, fixing her tea as she

had for nearly a decade. Flaming timbers would now be falling on her head, taking with them the last of all she was, the memories of her mother's laugh, her father's beloved books, the wardrobe of beautiful hats and silks. . .

Everyone would believe her *dead*. How very odd to think no one really knew her except as an inhabitant of that house. She didn't really know herself. She'd had a few dreams, impossible to execute, but now. . . Absorbing the disaster and grasping her new freedom, she squeezed the knob of her walking stick and tried to find a different footing.

In the stable were the dreams she'd lived on these last ten years: the books and coins she'd squirreled away, bits and pieces she'd hidden, cautiously planning for that day she might have sufficient funds to either reclaim her home or escape it. She had letters offering hopes she couldn't redeem. . .

Until now—well before she was prepared.

The kitten yowled a protest from the satchel—a satchel filled with bank notes and coins. Out of the ashes. . . hope flared.

Faith Palmer might be dead, but whatever tiny spark of life remained inside the woman standing there, struggling to stay upright, was not. "I can be anyone, kitty. . ."

Dread and excitement tightened her throat.

SATURDAY



TWO: RAFE



GRAVESYDE PRIORY VILLAGE, LATE SEPTEMBER 1815

"I HATE SHOWING UP AT JACK'S DOOR AS A BEGGAR." SGT. RUFUS Russell rode through this aging hamlet some miles off the main highway south of Birmingham, searching for anything resembling a wealthy estate.

Not the world's friendliest man, Sgt. Major Fletcher Ferguson, Rafe's former commanding officer, continued through the village to the far end—still with no sign of so much as a manor house.

The village was even further from civilization than Rafe's former home in Norfolk. He'd spent these last years at war because of a highway that had bypassed his home, leaving his family penniless. Since the war's end, he'd traipsed for months looking for another place he might fit in. This rural nowhere did not appear promising.

He curbed his gelding in the non-existent grass of the village green and rubbed Wolfie's wiry gray head. Nearly as tall as a small pony, the wolfhound had followed him home from the wars. They'd both like to try peace for a while—but the repose of a graveyard had little appeal. A chilly wind blew as he studied the

rotting thatch and timber of the village with the ominous sobriquet of Gravesyde Priory. "Did Shakespeare misplace one of his stage settings?"

. Seeing a tavern sign creaking in the breeze, Rafe called a halt and swung down. He and the hound could both use food. He tied the reins to a fence post with no fence.

"We are officers and gentlemen," Fletch contended grumpily, looking around for water for the horses. "Besides, Jack passed the word he needed help. That doesn't make us beggars."

"Non-commissioned officers are not gentlemen." Rafe found a pump, but the handle fell off in his grip while he argued his case. "The right-honorable Jack de Sackville we knew intelligently resigned his commission and made his fortune in India, while ungentrified louts like us all but begged our way through mud and snow on the Continent."

Fletch shrugged. "If Jack can't find enough men to guard his stable or train his horses, then his fortune did not buy him any fancy estate. We have come to offer our services, so we're not beggars."

"He's married an earl's daughter and is no doubt wealthier than Midas," Rafe maintained. "We're *beggars*."

"Beggars are those poor lads they sent home without legs or arms or a ha'penny to their names. We have blunt. We just don't have enough." Fletch studied the sprawling half-timbered structure beyond the non-fence that most likely had once been an inn before the roof fell in.

"A few coins in our pockets and a banknote or two barely count as blunt." Rafe had convinced his equally penniless friend that they needed to set up their own business. Yon fire trap wasn't what he had in mind.

With the expertise of an innkeeper's son, Rafe examined the decrepit inn's yard, the crumbling stable, the . . . lack of potential patronage. Gravesyde seemed to consist of a dozen cottages and an invisible manor. Maybe the people were invisible too.

To disabuse his thinking, an auburn-haired gent wearing a

clerical collar and a shabby frockcoat opened a gate in a nearby hedge. Rafe judged the clergyman to be younger than himself and no doubt even poorer. At least his uniform had been tailored to properly fit his barrel shape. Maybe beggars could survive here.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. May I help you? Gravesyde receives so few visitors that we like to greet each one. I'm Paul Upton, the local curate." He swept off his workman's cap and bowed.

Rafe had already collapsed his frayed bicorné under his arm. He bowed and introduced himself and the major. "We're on our way to Wycliffe Manor and thought to seek accommodations and refreshment first." He'd traveled on an empty belly far more often than he cared to remember. Here, in the midst of a bounteous English harvest, on a late September day, he shouldn't have to starve.

Parson Upton looked chagrined, glancing at the empty inn. "I fear Gravesyde has no accommodation other than the manor. If you're familiar with the owners, I'm sure they'll put you up. Their drive is only a little further down the road, past the chapel."

"What about the tavern?" Fletch asked, nodding at the swinging sign of The Monk. It appeared freshly painted, at least. "We could use a quaff to clear the road dust."

The curate brightened. "You're in luck. Henri is here today, restocking. I was just heading over to see if my sister brought down victuals for a noon meal."

Rafe half listened as the young curate explained his sister had only recently married the tavern owner and lived in the manor. Perhaps Jack and his wife had turned a manor into an inn. Tavern owners did not generally reside in mansions.

Henri Lavigne appeared to be a French émigré about Rafe's age. He would resent a Frenchman living off the fat of England while he starved trying to save the man's home, but he was amiable by nature. He felt even more generous toward the gent when the tavern owner claimed the first round was free and offered to share his bountiful repast.

"There's enough here to feed half a village," Fletch exclaimed as Henri emptied the basket of food and the curate helped himself to a healthy loaf loaded with what appeared to be ham, cheese, and relish.

Since Upton's mouth was full, Henri responded for him. "Our curate's mother is the manor's housekeeper. She fears he'll waste away if he must live on his own cooking. And my wife sneaks in extra for me. I'm thinking we could open the place as a pub with the leftovers."

Rafe bit into the fresh bread with a groan of delight. He hadn't half-finished chewing when he had to say, "All you need is a good variety of brown ale and stout, and your pub would exceed the finest of London."

An eager discussion of breweries ensued, much to Rafe's contentment. He'd spent a great deal of time learning brewing processes. Fletch lacked knowledge and merely admired the mural of a blond goddess on the wall.

They were in the midst of an argument over hops when Wolfie barked a warning, just before a raspy voice behind Rafe said, "Look at the ginger with the long ears! Both rabbit and carrot!"

His mood soured from genial to hostile in the time it took to swing around on an older, unshaven gent with a bulbous, red-veined nose. "Your proboscis protrudes too much, old man. Let me flatten it—"

The curate grabbed Rafe's arm before he could swing. For a man half Rafe's size, Upton was surprisingly strong.

"Clement, The Monk isn't properly open yet. Henri is entertaining a few friends." Releasing Rafe, Upton caught the dolt's arm and steered him toward the door. "Is the apple picking done for the day? I thought my sister planned to work until dark—"

The door shut behind the pair.

"Heard that a time or two, have you?" Henri refilled Rafe's mug.

Not since he'd grown broad enough to fill a doorway, but there always had to be one genius in the crowd.

"The good curate likes to keep our rougher customers in control so my wife can continue singing here of an evening." Henri polished a mug.

Rafe processed the relationships—Henri's wife—the curate's sister?—sang at the tavern and picked apples? And lived at the manor.

"You invite a *woman* into the tavern?" Fletch asked, his attention still on the mural.

"Her singing raises funds for the church, while increasing my sales with her mournful voice. Cuts down on fights and broken glass, as well." The Frenchman seemed satisfied with the situation. "The locals are normally a good lot, but the manor has been bringing in apple pickers for the season. A few are a bit rough."

A woman, in a tavern. Rafe began to suspect this isolated area was a trifle more than eccentric. He drained his mug. "Apple picking? Harvest time already?"

Where did harvest workers sleep? A roof over his head would be a pleasant change.

"Such as it is. I was hoping to make good cider, but the orchard has been too neglected to produce much. Patience is trying to restore it. Local farmers and their families used to help, but they're long gone. The manor has been hiring anyone with enough limbs to pick. Clement. . ." The tavern owner lifted his wide shoulders. "Won't last long if he's shirking already."

If they wanted a place to sleep tonight, they should apply for an apple picking position? And beat Clement into tree fertilizer.

At the door, Wolfie yipped, and Rafe caught the jingle of reins and clomp of hooves. His canine companion had a fear of wheels. Rafe had impulsively rescued him after an artillery cart had run over his paw—not considering how he'd feed an animal this size.

"Huh. The village doesn't get many carriages." Henri set down a mug.

The tiny tavern had only one small window, and that was in the rear. Fletch ambled over to peer out the door. "Some portly gent and a widow. Nice rig."

Holding the last of his most excellent ale, Rafe watched over his friend's shoulder. The curricule halted in front of a mercantile. Before the driver could descend to help his passenger, the widow climbed down on her own with the aid of an elegant ebony walking stick bearing a handle that gleamed silver in the sunlight.

Rafe admired her sturdy curves, but the black veil falling from the wide brim of her preposterously elaborate hat prevented seeing more. He couldn't tell her age, but a lonely widow in town. . . might be reason to linger. Women seemed to like him, but available ones were hard to come by in rural England.

"That's the manor's banker, Bosworth." Henri came from behind his counter to look out. "No notion of why he'd drop a lady off here instead of at the manor."

Rafe wasn't in any position to look at *ladies* of any age. And he'd had more than his fill of greedy, cheating money men. If he was to hold onto his hard-earned blunt, he needed to invest in something substantial instead of castles in the sky for a change. .

He slapped his mug down on the bar. "Let's get this over with, Sarge. We can put a tent up for the night, if naught else."

And scavenge apples for dinner. The bread and cheese Henri had offered, no matter how enjoyable, hadn't begun to fill his empty belly.

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Book View Café

304 S. Jones Blvd. Suite #2906

Las Vegas NV 89107



