

THE SCOUNDREL'S DEADLY DEED - SAMPLE

GRAVESYDE VILLAGE MYSTERIES
BOOK TWO



PATRICIA RICE



MONDAY



ONE



DAMIEN

NOVEMBER 1815

"NO ROOM AT THE INN?" DAMIEN SUTTER ASKED IN AMUSEMENT, gazing around at the nearly empty, half-timbered lobby. A gray wolfhound sprawled in front of a coal grate, undisturbed by childish voices emanating from an area that ought to be a pub. Other than those limited signs of life, the deteriorating medieval inn echoed hollow—evidently inhabited by no more than ghosts.

The tall, carrot-haired man behind the battered counter shrugged his powerful shoulders. Behind him, Damien's valet whistled softly in admiration. Jacques would be exceedingly displeased if they didn't obtain rooms.

"Like everything around here, this place has been abandoned for half a century," the innkeeper said apologetically. "We're working on rebuilding and furnishing, but it probably won't be usable until spring."

"I see. What is considered *usable*?" Damien kicked himself for

listening to Evans. After losing everything with the war's end, the former factory owner was desperate.

Damien had an alternative place to lay his head. He simply wasn't prepared to face real ghosts without a good night's sleep.

Before the innkeeper could explain, a dark-haired, raw-boned man of about thirty, wiping greasy hands on a rag, emerged from the corridor behind the desk. *Soldiers*, Damien began to understand, just back from the Continent.

At Damien's request to define *usable*, the newcomer smirked. "As in, we have no one to carry your water and slops or make your food. This is a luxury campground for us."

"Army?" Damien guessed. "I lost my brother at Waterloo, cavalry. I'm Damien Sutter. I grew up around here. I've come to look at the shoemaker's shop he left." He turned to Jacques. His valet was a slight man but reasonably strong. "Can you manage the water and slops?"

"And prepare light meals," Jacques said fervently, eyeing both muscled soldiers. "If you do not need me to clean and mend three sets of attire a day."

The red-haired innkeeper sketched a vague bow. "I am Rafe Russell. This is former Sergeant Major Fletcher Ferguson, but we call him Fletch. The manor will be happy to hear some of the original landowners are returning. Any other time, we'd have found a room for you up there."

The dark-haired Fletch didn't offer his grimy paw but gestured in the direction of the hill behind the inn. "The manor is full to overflowing. The curate is getting leg-shackled and all his bride's friends and family have descended for the occasion."

"And their retinues," Rafe added dryly. "Dukes travel with a blamed lot of people. But he's paying to stable their mounts and keeping Fletch busy, so we can't complain."

At hint of a need for cash, Damien removed his purse and set a sovereign on the counter. "We'll pay to stable ours as well. I have a friend arriving this evening, Edward Evans, so if you have three

empty beds, we'll take whatever is available. I had no idea duke's daughters resided in the area these days. Which duke?"

He already knew which one, and that His Grace had no daughter, but he had reason to remain unremarked for as long as he could.

"Castlefield. It's not his daughter," Fletch explained. "Daughter of Colonel Peniston, the duke's steward. His Grace simply wants an excuse to raid the manor's library. The captain can hardly refuse him. The duke's book buying is paying to restore the old keep."

Rafe chuckled. "Our *curate* nearly refused His Grace when he offered to purchase a special license so the wedding could be held at the manor. He said he could feed the village for a year or build an addition to the chapel with the cost of the license."

"But dukes can't attend services in tiny public chapels," Damien surmised. "I remember Gravesyde's being as drafty as sitting outside this time of year."

"Once the inn is open, we hope to expand and improve the chapel next. Upton understands that the manor's great hall is more suitable for a duke. Our good parson simply dislikes the waste of all the fol-de-rol. He gave in when he realized a duke was the only way to entice his wealthy vicar into a day-long carriage ride to tie the knot, since he can't do it himself. But it took some fancy negotiation," Rafe said in amusement. "The duke's paying dearly to plunder the library. The bride is curating what she'll allow him to buy and demands high prices."

Educated soldiers, Damien concluded. But they hadn't reacted to his name, so they probably hadn't known the brother Damien hadn't seen since adolescence. He'd always thought there'd be more time. He should have learned that lesson by now.

Rafe spun the gold coin in his fingers, considering. "You'd be our first paying guests. I hope to set this up as a fancy establishment for business travelers. I don't want to develop a bad reputation before we even open."

"I can assure you, I will have nothing but praise for your hospitality. I am interested in setting up a business here, also, so it's in my interest to encourage visitors." Which was only half a lie. *Evans* wanted to set up a shoe manufactory. Damien never wished to live in this hellhole again.

Before they could accept his offer, a squeal followed by a howl rose over the piping voices in the room off the lobby. A marmalade kitten dashed out and attempted to scamper up the innkeeper's leather breeches. He scooped up the creature, placed it on his shoulder, and waited in expectation rather than rush to the rescue.

The shrill voices hushed as some miscreant shouted, "I didn't do nuttin!"

"We've told you to leave the girls alone."

Damien couldn't resist the urge to peer into the next chamber. As he'd expected, it appeared to be a pub, with huge mullioned windows—only the blackened bar was loaded with books and the trestle tables were filled with children.

"I just pulled her ribbon!" a lad of about ten protested, while dangling by his collar.

The woman hauling him from his feet stood a head above the bemused teacher at the front of the room. All athletic muscle and grace, the Amazon swung her victim off the floor and lugged him to the door. Ignoring their stares, she deposited the boy in the lobby. "Go home and tell your mother why you're not in class or I will."

She watched the boy scamper out the door. Then, unfazed by male stares, she brushed off her hands and marched back to the schoolroom.

In that brief moment when she had practically looked him straight in the eye, Damien's breath caught in his throat. *Surely not*. . . But the wild bush of auburn hair, the proud chin and haughty cheekbones. . .

As if his shock had hit her, she swung back around, wide-eyed. "*Damien?*"

"Brydie?" He hadn't seen her in fifteen years, but how could anyone forget a Celtic warrior goddess? She'd been all skinny awkwardness back then, but she'd filled out nicely. He'd thought her married and well gone from here by now.

"You bloody bastard." She reached him in a single step and smacked his jaw hard enough to spin his head.

TWO



BRYDIE

BRYDIE WAS STILL STEAMING HOURS LATER. SHE'D MADE HER EXCUSES and slipped out of the schoolroom after making the usual spectacle of herself. But she had to warn Kate.

To keep busy, she laundered the bed linen in the washing shed, where she kept the fire hot so as not to freeze. She had to wear gloves to hang them, though. Awkward, but she didn't want another case of chilblains and end up like her mother, her fingers crippled with arthritis.

Besides, from the washing line, she could see Kate approach down the wooded path from the manor. It had once been called Wycliffe Manor but the Wycliffe title had died with the last earl. Newcomers had taken to calling it the Priory, like the village and monastery that had once stood there. Times changed, but she'd never thought Gravesyde would.

Strolling down the hillside, her sister carried a basket of sewing work. They needed all the coins they could earn, but it was difficult to work and mind families too. While they were in the schoolroom, the children were out of trouble, and Brydie was there, if needed. But classes ended early so all the students might

return home before dark and do their chores. Kate needed to be with hers.

"Don't go in yet," Brydie called, crossing the packed dirt of the inn yard.

Her sister glanced up in alarm. "Is Lynly well? Did she have another spell?"

Kate was a miniature version of Brydie, her auburn hair darker and straight enough to make a sleek chignon. She took after their mother's shorter, sturdier side of the family. Brydie had their father's height and distinctive angular features. On Kate, the angles were more rounded and feminine. Brydie had been called *handsome*, never beautiful, graceful, or delicate. Kate achieved a welcoming prettiness.

"Lyn and Rob are fine," Brydie assured her. "I just wanted to warn you that Damien Sutter is in town. He's staying here at the inn and not out at the farm."

"Damien?" Kate looked surprised, and then she remembered. "Oh, his brother died, didn't he? We read it in the newssheets. He was one of the cavalry officers who led the charge against the French."

Brydie frowned. "What if he sees Arthur? They look enough alike. . ."

Kate caught her breath and glared. "Don't you dare, Bree Calhoun! George is Arthur's father and I'll hear no more said of it." She marched off in a huff.

Lynly and Rob had none of the Calhoun traits. They were unmistakably George Morgan's children—at eight and twelve, they were small, dark, and sickly. Arthur, at fourteen, however, was as tall and healthy as Brydie—and had the same golden-brown hair as Damien Sutter.

She'd cuff the dastard again, but she couldn't afford to lose her position at the inn. Rafe was kind and generous, but he was also the town bailiff, and Damien was apparently a guest. Rafe's patience for her temper would only stretch so far.

Slapping linen on the line gave her over-active mind a chance

to seek nefarious ways to make the scoundrel pay. He'd seduced and abandoned her sister that last summer and never returned—not even after his parents vanished. Brydie had always assumed the Sutters had run away to avoid responsibility for their son's behavior, but they'd never returned. Perhaps he knew where they were, but everyone else still gossiped about the mystery.

The village talked about poor Arthur, too, born months after the wedding, but George had given him a name and been a decent husband to Kate. Only, now that the consumption had finally taken him. . .

Arthur needed a proper education. And Kate deserved an easier life. Without George, they couldn't keep running the farm. There were only so many hours in the day. This winter. . . She shuddered to think of how they'd afford coal once the pile ran out. Maybe she'd chop down that forest springing up on the Sutter's abandoned land.

School over for the day, Verity Russell, the innkeeper's bride and the village's new schoolteacher, emerged to help pin the last of the linen. Sturdier even than Kate, but with soft feminine features and wispy brownish curls at her nape, she appeared motherly even if she'd only just married. "We need a drying shed. These are likely to be frosted on overnight."

Verity only expressed a slight curiosity at the odd hour for washing. Given the lack of staff, Brydie knew she wouldn't complain.

"Sorry, the stable is too full for hanging, and I needed to clear my head before I killed your first paying guest." Brydie stabbed a pin over the line, knowing she had to explain herself. She'd spent years doing so. She had a lot of practice.

"Rafe is still laughing. Mr. Sutter explained that you'd been children together and you carried grudges."

If she meant to make Damien pay. . . She needed to know more. "Why is he back?" Fifteen years he'd been gone—Arthur's birthday served as a reminder.

"Rafe says he mentioned a shoemaker's shop and that he

wants to start a business, but you interrupted before he could learn more. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have someone to make shoes right here in the village?"

Damien's father had owned the village shoemaker's business once upon a time. Damien had hated it. Brydie didn't express her doubts. "I'm sure we'll find out why he's here, sooner or later."

"He's very handsome for an older man, isn't he?" Verity hung the smaller linens.

Older? *Hmpf*. He was only five years older than Brydie. And she'd be thirty and well past her prime in a few months. Old, indeed, perhaps to Verity, who'd only just turned twenty-five and emerged from isolation to start living in the real world again.

"I didn't notice," Brydie said stiffly. And she hadn't. He'd always be that laughing, twenty-year-old lad who'd lingered at home one summer, then vanished, like his parents.

Leaving Verity feeding the chickens, Brydie cleaned up after herself, then donned a cloak to walk home. Rather than go through the inn where she might run into their guest, she skirted around the outside. Kate had taken the pony cart with the children, so it was a long hike.

Normally, she planned her evening during her walk, but she couldn't settle her roiling emotions. She hesitated on the main road through town. She was late enough that the mercantile had closed for the day, and The Monk, Henri's tavern, was full enough to be rowdy. Gravesyde had no other shops and many of the cottages were empty, but lights glittered here and there in the homes of older folk who never left. She couldn't see the far end of town, where the physician/apothecary and her estate steward husband were setting up housekeeping and a badly needed infirmary.

There seemed to be a gathering on what passed for the village green, past the mercantile. A man ranted at the top of his lungs, and people had gathered to listen. In her current humor, she'd most likely shout back. The sight was so unusual, she lingered.

Paul Upton, the curate, emerged from the parsonage gate. He

was about Brydie's height, with a sheen of red in his hair, darker than hers. He'd only recently learned about his parentage and that they were distant cousins.

Paul nodded at the gathering. "Zebediah Johnson. His followers call themselves the People, and they seem to appear wherever His Grace goes. Johnson is calling our poor chapel as heathen as the Papists' cathedrals and is raising funds for a *people's* church. I must assume Catholics are not people?"

"Or that he's *people* and he's raising funds for himself?" Brydie usually had a more optimistic outlook, but today's unpleasant surprise had left her cynical. "Most *people* barely have funds to feed themselves, much less build a church. A people's church ought to feed them, instead of taking food from their mouths."

"Gravesyde is an unlikely place for fomenting revolution," the curate agreed. "Captain Huntley fears they're here to cause trouble."

"We don't have enough *people* to cause trouble," Brydie scoffed. "Besides, we're all happily looking forward to your wedding. It might ignite all-out warfare if the outsiders try to interfere in our celebrations."

Mr. Upton bowed and grinned in acknowledgment. "My bride would most likely come after any rowdies with an ax should they attempt to intervene."

His bride was the manor's librarian and appeared as meek and mild as a librarian should. But Brydie had heard tales. . . . Mostly descendants of the late earl, the manor inhabitants were eccentric. But remembering Damien commandeering a room at an empty inn, she had to ask, "Where is this Zebediah staying?"

"I fear my grandfather is at fault. He is renting them one of his fallow fields for their tents," he admitted.

Curious. "Your grandfather is Catholic, like mine was. He does not fear they'll burn him out? And I do hope he's charging them a great deal for the trouble."

Smiling, Upton shook his head. "My granddad is frail and can't work his fields, but he still has his money-making skills.

He's charging them a season's income for the sheep he can't graze after they've muddied the field. The sheep he doesn't have, mind you. And since the old heathen has not been to church since leaving the old country, they have no notion that he was born papist. They buy his eggs and pay for his water. He's quite entertained."

"Pity they didn't ask to rent from me and Kate. We have no means of planting the fields come spring either. Earning a bit of rent would have been useful." Brydie tightened the hood on her cloak. She'd take the footpath home. She didn't have any use for troublemakers.

"Whoever made the choice may not have known that your brother-in-law recently died and your fields are available. Makes me wonder who is behind this, but granddad dealt only with Mr. Johnson." He doffed his cap and bowed. "I trust we'll see you at our wedding breakfast then?"

She had been planning on it, until Damien arrived. "We'll have to see how my niece is feeling. Good day to you, sir."

Wondering who knew what fields might be available to rent but not realize theirs were fallow kept Brydie's mind occupied as she traipsed the two miles home. It was full dark, but she had walked these paths since childhood, lived in the same house all her life, and knew no fear.

Kate's husband, George, had been little more than a hired hand until their father died. The Calhoun farm would pass to Arthur when he came of age. Perhaps it was better if Devil Damien didn't know of his son. She really needed to think things through. . . should she ever have the time.

The aroma of roasting chicken filled the kitchen as Brydie hung her cloak in the mudroom. With its brick fireplace and flagstone floor, the spacious kitchen boasted an ancient round oak table with room for ten. Their mother had died before Brydie and Kate had reached adolescence. Having lost both father and Kate's husband in these last years, they now set it for half that number.

Her eight-year-old niece was just placing the last glass when

Brydie stepped into the warmth. Small for her age, her thin dark face almost gaunt, Lynly flashed a smile that lit the already well-lit kitchen.

"Aunt Brydie, I've outgrown my Sunday shoes! Mrs. Russell says I am growing bigger every day!" She coughed after those breathless exclamations.

Brydie knew what that meant. Any other time she would be delighted to measure her niece for new shoes. But if Damien had come to inspect his father's shoe shop. . .

"That is amazingly excellent news, Princess." She hugged her niece and distracted her. "Did you make tonight's pudding?"

Lynly nodded vigorously. "I even cut up some of the apples."

Arthur clunked in as only an adolescent can, followed by Rob, his little shadow. Removing a pot from the grate, Kate cast Brydie a worried frown.

She shouldn't have said anything. Her temper had overtaken common sense. Unlike Brydie, Kate was all that was proper, except for that one unfortunate summer when she must have fallen for pretty green eyes and seductive flattery. Not that Damien had ever used fancy words on a carrot-haired giant like herself, Brydie remembered with rancor. Kate was cute and small, not nearly as big as a man.

"I can't be stealing leather from Sutter's shop while Damien is in town," she whispered to her sister, taking the pot from her hand.

"You could *ask* him if you might use it." Still in a snit, Kate slammed the chicken onto a platter.

Brydie would rather stab him through his pretty green eyes. That summer had ended both their childhoods.

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