

THE MADMAN'S DANGEROUS DELUSION

GRAVESYDE VILLAGE MYSTERIES
BOOK FOUR



PATRICIA RICE



WEDNESDAY



APRIL 3, 1816

The year of no summer

ONE



Kate

THE TOLLING OF THE MANOR'S MAD FLOOR CLOCK RESOUNDED THROUGH the open portico doorway, striking noon. Or midnight. Neither of which it was, but Kate Morgan knew she was running inexcusably late. In the drive, she gave her two youngest a last-minute inspection before sending them to the new schoolroom. On days like this, she wished for a magic wand, or three hands, or more practically, for the maid they once had—back in the time when she hadn't realized innocence provided no defense against evil.

"Keep your coat on, Lyn. It's cold in that schoolroom." Kate buttoned her eight-year-old daughter's too-small jacket. Lynly had her late father's weak chest and was often sickly.

"Rob, where's your slate? I can't buy another if you lose it." Her twelve-year old held his overlarge coat closed as if he were freezing. Odd. Rob was never cold. Now that his older brother was in boarding school and unable to tease him into his old clothes, Rob refused to wear castoffs.

"I've got it. I'm not a baby." Rob dodged her attempt to straighten his scarf.

His coat wriggled under the scarf he never wore. It had been a

gloomy spring, but the wind today was brisk, not freezing. With a sigh, Kate yanked open his coat, revealing a squirming bundle of baby bunnies.

"Oh, no, you don't, sir." Kate snatched the bundle from his grip. "Mrs. Russell has enough work without adding rabbits."

"I want to show Davey and Oliver!" he protested. "They've never seen bunnies."

Davey and Oliver were the privileged, eight-year-old great-grandsons of an earl, living in a stately medieval manor. They had seen London and society. Rob had never known anything except his family's farm and Gravesyde's rural poverty.

Kate sympathized with her son's desire to educate—and impress—but not at the risk of disrupting schoolrooms. "Tell your teachers the bunnies will be in the yard, where they belong. Go on with the two of you or you'll be late."

She sent them into the tower stairwell that had once served monks and knights. The eccentric assortment of Priory Manor owners had spent these last months using a—literal—pirate's ransom to restore the keep, turning it into workshops and schoolrooms for the benefit of the village. Kate was more than grateful and willing to do whatever necessary to prevent the manor folk from regretting their generosity.

The children raced into the tower, leaving her with the bundle of baby rabbits. Wild hares would make dog food for the manor's hounds. She didn't have time to find a stable hand to lock them up. She'd have to take them inside or be late for work. Again.

Taking the grand portico entrance, relieved the clock had quit its infernal bonging, Kate shoved the bundle into the hands of the startled footman. "The boys want to see bunnies. I have no notion of what to do with them."

The poor lad juggled the bundle and her cloak without question. He'd probably been handed worse. It wasn't as if Gravesyde invited *normal*. They'd been without civilization for too long.

Carrying an armful of linens, a cheerful bundle of energy bustled down the long side hall toward the service stairs near where Kate stood.

The manor provided plain gowns and caps for everyone working here, so her drab attire resembled Kate's. "'Morning, Mrs. Morgan!" She cast a glance at the squirming bundle and laughed. "Easter bunnies! Don't let Miss Marlowe see them. She'll be dressing them like that doggie of hers."

Ana Marie had only just moved to the village after a lifetime in Worcester. Kate's older cousin, she had the Calhoun auburn hair and plain features, but they barely knew each other except by name.

Reminded of her own cap, Kate pinned the windblown linen back in place. As head seamstress, Kate had to maintain a prim and proper façade. "Rob wanted to show them off."

"That boy of yours is adorable. I'm going up with linens for the nursery. Shall I ask Mr. Birdwhistle what to do about bunnies?"

"That would be perfect, thank you." Leaving the amused maid behind, Kate rushed down the hall to the sewing workshop set up in what had originally been a monk's house of worship and then an earl's ballroom. She hated setting a bad example by being late. Women's voices already arose from the interior.

"The children giving you trouble again?" Miss Jameson called, loud enough for every soul in the echoingly enormous chamber to hear. Heads turned to see who entered, so all and sundry knew Kate was tardy.

Both slender and voluptuous, black-haired Vivien Jameson had made it clear since her arrival a few months ago that *she* should be head seamstress. Miss Jameson was an experienced needlewoman, yes, and she commanded attention as plain, quiet Kate did not. But Kate had been head seamstress long before this upstart had arrived. The newcomer lacked Kate's knowledge of their customers and the other workers. Besides, Miss Jameson's attention-getting was unbelievably annoying.

Kate reminded herself to be charitable. The young woman was struggling to make ends meet, as they all were.

Without responding to the comment, Kate studied the main table where the day's work was laid out.

"Mrs. Morgan, welcome! Now we can start." At eighteen, Lavender Marlowe was entirely too young and beautiful to be rele-

gated to running a business. But as the illegitimate granddaughter of Baroness Marlowe, and heir to a portion of the manor under the late earl's eccentric will, the youngster had access to funds and facilities no one else in the village could claim.

And she was a tremendously talented modiste.

Kate had a lot of respect for her young employer, who provided work for impoverished women. She nodded greeting and waited to see what had the irrepressible lady bubbling with excitement.

Blonde, blue-eyed as the rest of the earl's family, Lavender was a vision of wealthy aristocracy in a lace-bedecked, periwinkle blue frock of her own creation. In contrast to her frivolous appearance, she waved a page full of very business-like numbers. "Mr. Walker says we have earned enough creating and refurbishing bonnets and holiday gowns over Christmas that we now have enough to start looking for a shop in town!"

Kate wasn't entirely certain of the wisdom of paying rent when they had the manor's unused ballroom and tower workshop for free. But attracting outsiders had been a long-time goal, and she understood the excitement. "Start small?" she suggested cautiously. "Selling ribbons and lace?"

"And my hats!" Vivien Jameson added in loud delight. She hadn't been the only one refurbishing hats, but she'd recently learned to create simple bonnets from scratch.

Lavender perched on one of the worktables. "I'd love to have that empty shop next to the new hardware, so women coming to market would see our wares. But it's large, and Walker says the bank is asking too much. It's just, we really *need* that shop window."

The estate's American steward was a brilliant businessman. Ignoring his advice was never wise.

"My brother-in-law is moving out of his office at the inn. The space was once a ladies' parlor and has a lovely bay window—although the inn isn't exactly an area where women shop." Kate puckered her nose as she offered her suggestion.

"But the inn pub is open to all now, even ladies!" Lavender bounced in excitement. "We could have signs directing people to look. Although that mud field of a yard. . ."

She frowned and stood. "Let's all think on it. Kate, bring your basket. My grandmother and Lady Spalding have finally consented to refurbishing some of their ancient gowns. They like you and think I'm a featherhead, so come talk sense to them for me."

"I can talk sense," Miss Jameson said, looking insulted. "I have excellent ideas. Mrs. Morgan just sews a fine seam."

Vivien, unfortunately, lacked the patience to sew fine seams. She preferred playing with lace and silk. Kate accepted her own limitations—her needlework was superior, yes, but she wasn't as inventive as the newcomer.

Except Lavender didn't require Vivien's creativity. She already possessed more imagination than the dowagers needed, and she loved showing off for her grandmother. Kate simply accompanied her as the sensible older woman to convince them they would look beautiful in a young girl's designs.

Rather than assert her authority, Kate let Lavender decide.

"Vivien, I need you to take those infant clothes up to Mrs. Lavigne." Lavender pointed at a stack of newly-sewn infant gowns. "She'll want to ask about the fabric. You can reassure her that it's sturdy enough for many washings."

A descendant of the third earl of Wycliffe, Patience Lavigne was the first of the family to give birth in the manor for nearly a century. The entire household hovered.

Picking up her own sewing basket, Lavender gestured for Kate to follow her to the hall. "I'm relying on your sensible head for the new shop," she confided once they were out of hearing.

"I will be delighted to help in whatever way I can," Kate admitted. "Perhaps older workers who can no longer see well and for whom the hill up to the manor is difficult might work there as clerks." She started toward the back service stairs that Ana Marie had taken earlier.

Lavender grasped her elbow and turned her around. "Main stairs. Quit pretending you are a servant. You are a squire's daughter and gentry, which is why you'll be perfect for the shop. It will require showing fashion plates and taking appointments for fittings, and you know the locals better than anyone. Both the manor ladies

and shop women will listen to you. You can sew there as well as here, so I won't be losing your fine needlework."

Kate wondered if highhandedness was an inherited trait and if that was how people became earls. She didn't speak her thoughts, but once they reached the gaslit, imposing, wide marble stairs at the front of the manor, she hesitated, regretting taking the family's route.

The white stone stairs were littered with blackened, filthy cogs. On the landing, at the center of the pigsty, stood Sgt. Major Fletcher Ferguson, his wrinkled neckcloth undone to reveal a strong brown throat. Having discarded his form-fitting coat, his straining shoulders garbed only in waistcoat and worn shirt sleeves, he heaved the heavy floor clock to one side.

He was much too large and hairy to be a pig, but he was covered in grime and grunting at the weight of his burden.

At least the timepiece had stopped its infernal bonging. Apparently, the man had finally killed the family's priceless antique.

TWO



Fletch

FLETCH DID HIS BEST NOT TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE GLORIOUS EXAMPLES OF female pulchritude wafting up the stairs like a summer breeze. They even smelled of summer. The young blond almost resembled a flower in all the lace and finery, but it was the sturdy, fire-haired widow who always caught his attention. Intuition said that plain, prim exterior hid a dormant volcano in danger of erupting at any moment. He had the reprehensible urge to be there when it happened.

But then, everyone knew he wasn't right in the head. At war's end, he'd arrived in Gravesyde at his lieutenant's request and stayed as his sergeant's partner in his inn, but he didn't socialize.

The enormous floor clock he'd pulled out at an angle on the landing half hid him. The young aristocrat sailed by as if Fletch were part of the mahogany case. The other lady knew him better. She kicked his worn boot where it protruded onto the stair.

"Good morning, Major. You will let us know if the earl hid his jewels in there?"

"I'm sure diamonds and rubies make it tick, Mrs. Morgan." They'd called each other less proper names when arguing over. . .

just about everything. He hated small talk but apparently he had a penchant for irritating women.

"I am looking forward to it." She sailed up the stairs after the royal blond.

On the whole, Fletch liked women. He just didn't like what they represented—family and responsibility. And the Widow Morgan had piles of both. He missed his late mistress. She'd never expected anything of him but his coin. He offered up a moment of silence in Willa's memory. There'd been a long drought since her untimely demise. Pretty soon, every woman who crossed his path would look good.

Using a rag, he carefully dismantled the enormous pendulums. His father hadn't been much of a parent but he'd been an excellent clockmaker. Fletch had literally learned history at his daddy's knee. He knew this clock wasn't *medieval*, as the family called it. The first pendulum clocks weren't even a gleam in Galileo's eye until after dull Cromwell stuck his spoon in the wall and naughty Charles took the throne. Long case clocks weren't built, if he remembered his history, until bloody Queen Mary's reign.

This particular specimen was far more refined than those early attempts. Completely handmade and carved from the finest mahogany, it had to have cost a few fortunes. But then, the earls of Wycliffe had that and more at one time.

Fletch had taken apart many old clocks. This one wasn't just refined, but peculiar, like the earl's entire family. He needed to diagram what he found.

He abandoned the stairs to find paper and pencil. The American captain, executor for the earl's trust, had told him to take what he needed from his old study, but Hunt had only one eye and didn't spend time writing. Fletch had to venture deeper into the manor's bowels before he found the captain's wife in her study. She offered a selection of paper and writing instruments.

By the time he returned to the stairs, he caught a glimpse of a plain skirt slipping down the side hall to the ballroom.

He must have missed the seamstresses coming down. A shame. He'd thought of a few sallies about jewels to set off Mrs. Morgan

again. The village didn't offer a great deal of entertainment, which was fine with him. He'd seen the Continent, watched the countryside blown up and covered in blood. He didn't need excitement. Mild amusement sufficed.

A shattering scream from above abruptly hurled Fletch into his worst nightmares. He froze, prepared to dive for shelter—although stone stairs weren't the same as a muddy trench.

Fighting paralysis, he concentrated on the scream. *Mrs. Morgan!* Wasn't that her who had just gone around the corner. . . ?

Jarred into action, he dashed up the marble stairs to the family's private floor. The old dowagers stuck their heads from their suite and ducked back in at sight of him. They were probably bolting doors and loading weapons. His disreputable appearance often had that effect.

"Help, someone, anyone! Send for Dr. Walker!"

He'd never heard the sensible lady hysterical.

The huge, old butler lumbered up the stairs after him. Using his officer's voice, Fletch ordered Quincy to send for the physician, then ran through the upper corridor, following the shouts.

Turning down the front guest hall, he caught a glimpse of dark skirts vanishing into the service stairs. As far as he was aware, the manor had no visitors this week. Not so much as a single maid or valet stuck out their head from the row of closed doors. He wished he'd brought a lamp. The sconces in this narrow, windowless hall were next to useless. They needed to rip out the wall, let in all that light from the ballroom downstairs. Of course, that would eliminate the family art gallery on the other side of the wall.

A single sconce illuminated the stairwell. He recognized the fiery hair more than the dark attire all the women wore. She was crouched near. . . more dark skirts, in an unnatural sprawl. Easing down the steps, Fletch noted a second head of fiery hair and swallowed hard.

"What happened?" he whispered. He didn't know why he was whispering.

"She must have fallen." Sobs thickened her voice. "She just returned to Gravesyde. This is awful."

He breathed easier knowing that wasn't Mrs. Morgan lying life-

less at the bottom—just someone who looked an awful lot like her. “Move back. Let me near. Is she unconscious?”

“She’s not moving. I’m terrified—” She let that thought dangle as she eased up the stairs so he could climb down.

Voices chattered at the top of the stairwell. Someone opened the door at the bottom, letting in more light.

An older woman, with gray threading through the auburn beneath her cap, sprawled headfirst across the bottom treads, her neck bent unnaturally. She wasn’t breathing. Fletch checked for a pulse and couldn’t find a beat.

He shook his head, and Mrs. Morgan began to weep.

Damn, the village didn’t need any more dead bodies.

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304 S. Jones Blvd. Suite #2906

Las Vegas NV 89107



