REGENCY
Janice Preston
Mary and the Marquis

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Аннотация

Cured with a kiss…When destitute widow Mary Vale aids an injured man on the road, she is shocked to discover that he is the reclusive Lucas Alastair, Marquis of Rothley! She's intrigued by the dark Marquis, but when she offers to nurse him back to health in return for shelter he proves a difficult patient!Lucas hides some deep emotion beneath his brusque manner, and a stolen kiss leaves Mary longing for more… She's able to help mend his physical injuries, but can Mary heal the wounds of his painful past?

Содержание

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Her lips—soft pink, full and tempting—were parted, and, as rotten as he felt, still his loins stirred at the thought of tasting them.

He frowned, a memory floating a fraction beyond his reach.

Her lips. He could feel them, he knew their taste—silky as rose petals, sweet as honey. But how? He licked his own lips, paper-dry and sour. The answer eluded him as he continued his perusal of the woman by his bed.

Her hair. He paused, feeling his forehead pucker. Why had he thought her hair to be guinea-gold? It was not. It was more beautiful by far—the soft golden colour of corn ripening in the August sunshine. Not brassy, not a mass of curls, but soft waves where it escaped from its pins. He wanted to see it loose, flowing down her back.

He frowned again as he watched her sleep, striving to remember, fragments of memories teasing at his mind …

JANICE PRESTON grew up in Wembley with a love of reading, writing stories and animals. After leaving school at eighteen she moved to Devon, and any thoughts of writing became lost in the hectic rush of life as a farmer's wife, with two children and many animals to care for. When her children left

home for university she discovered a love of history, and of the Regency period in particular, and began to write seriously for the first time since her teens.

Janice now lives in the West Midlands with her husband and two cats. Over the years, apart from farming, she has worked as a conveyancer, a call handler for the police and an administrator for a teacher training programme at a local university. She currently works as an exam invigilator and has a part-time job with a weight management counsellor (vainly trying to control her own weight, despite her love of chocolate!).

This is Janice Preston's fantastic debut novel for Mills & Boon® Historical Romance!

Mary and the Marquis
Janice Preston

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Dedication

To Ian, for your unwavering support and encouragement.

And with grateful thanks to the Romantic Novelists' Association, and in particular the organisers and readers of the wonderful New Writers' Scheme.

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Chapter One

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Mary clutched her cloak tighter around her and shivered as she peered through the gathering gloom. She hoped it wasn't going to rain. She felt a tug on her skirt and looked down.

'Mama.' Pinched features set in a face too pale stared up at her. 'Mama, I'm hungry.'

Mary summoned a reassuring tone. 'Hush, Toby; yes, I know, lovey. We shall have something to eat as soon as we find somewhere to shelter.'

Grimly, she quelled her rising panic and reached for Toby's hand as she hefted two-year-old Emily higher on her right hip, where she had fallen asleep, one grubby hand entangled in Mary's hair. They plodded on, following a muddy track that wound through dense woodland, the trees—a mixture of mature specimens and saplings—crowding in on either side, creating a claustrophobic atmosphere that had intensified as the afternoon wore on. No breath of wind stirred the limp foliage, not a bird sang and no woodland creature rustled amongst the undergrowth. The silence was unnerving.

Mary couldn't even be certain they were still heading north. She had become disorientated almost as soon as they had entered the wood. Such had been their weariness that the path, which had appeared to offer a short cut through the wood, had been accepted without thought. Now, however, Mary regretted her

impulse. The track had twisted and turned like a serpent, until she no longer knew in which direction they walked.

For the past half-hour she had been on the lookout for something, anything—a woodsman's hut, perhaps, or even a fallen tree—that might provide shelter for her and the children, but there had been nothing. The afternoon was dipping inexorably towards evening. She knew she must find shelter for the night soon. Her arm ached with the effort of carrying Emily and Toby was tired and dragging his feet. She could hear his breath hitching and knew he was trying his hardest not to cry. She squeezed his hand and he looked up at her.

'It'll be all right, Toby. I promise.'

Suddenly, a deep, rasping groan sounded from amongst the trees to her right. She whirled to face it, pushing Toby behind her and clutching Emily tight to her chest. She saw nothing. She took an uncertain step towards the trees, peering into the shadows.

'Mama?' Toby's panicky whisper sounded deafening in the eerie silence.

'Hush!' Mary hissed. Her eyes darted around, searching for the source of that groan. Nothing moved. She tightened her grip on Toby's hand. 'Come along, lovey, we must go.' She tugged him behind her as she hurried away, her heart hammering with the compulsion to put as much distance as possible between them and that unnatural sound. They reached the edge of a large clearing. It was lighter here, without the tree canopy, and Mary slowed, breathing a touch easier. As they neared the far edge of

the clearing, however, a more familiar sound came to her ears—the jingle of a bit and the soft whicker of a horse.

Spinning round, Mary saw a large pale shape materialise from amongst the trees. The riderless horse walked on to the track, then halted. She looked around. There was nobody to be seen. A horse. Mary glanced down at Toby, read the exhaustion in his stance.

'Come, Toby.'

She led her son to a nearby fallen tree, then shook Emily gently.

'Emily...sweetheart; wake up, darling, there's a good girl.'

Emily opened her eyes a slit. Her face crumpled and she began to cry.

'I know, I know,' Mary soothed.

She lowered Emily to the ground before untying the knot that held the bundle of their worldly possessions on her back. She put the bundle down, then took her cloak off and lay it on the damp ground by the tree. 'There, sit on my cloak, sweeties. I won't be long.' She drew the cloak around the children for warmth.

The horse had reached the clearing and now cropped steadily at the grass. As Mary approached it, the grey stretched its head towards her, blowing softly through flared nostrils.

Mary slowly reached out to allow the animal to take in her scent. 'Hello, old fellow.' She stroked its nose, then took hold of the bridle. 'What are you doing out here all alone?'

The horse—a large, powerful grey gelding—relaxed,

seemingly relieved to find some company in the silent woods. Mary examined him as best she could in the dim light. He was saddled and bridled and appeared unscathed, despite the broken and muddied reins trailing on the ground.

Mary gazed around again. There was nothing—nobody—to be seen.

'Is anyone there?' she called tentatively and listened.

Silence. She chewed at her lip, considering.

The horse had somehow appeared—at the exact time she needed it. Not that she believed in such things, of course. There was doubtless a perfectly reasonable explanation for the horse to be wandering loose in the woods, but she would be a fool if she did not take advantage of the opportunity he offered. He seemed placid enough and looked sufficiently strong to carry both her and the children. It wasn't as if she was stealing, she assured herself. She would leave him in the first village they came to, for his owner to reclaim.

Her one desire at the moment was to leave this dismal wood behind them and find some shelter for the night. Then they could have something to eat.

The last of the bread she had packed when they had left their home three days before was wrapped in a cloth in her cloak pocket. Her stomach rumbled at the thought of food. It would no doubt be dry and unpalatable, she thought with a grimace, but at least it was sustenance. Hunger had its own way of dealing with pernickety eaters. What they would eat on the morrow, she

had no idea. She would face that problem when she must and she thrust the ever-present dread to the back of her mind. There was no sense in meeting trouble halfway. If she must beg for food to feed the children, she would do it. But, first, they must reach habitation and that, to her intense relief, was now possible, with the help of the grey.

'Come on, lad,' she said, urging the horse to follow her.

He dug his hooves in and shook his head with a loud jingle of his bit. Mary tried again, tugging at the rein. He did not move. Mary cursed under her breath. He did not look a flighty sort, but she would not risk her precious children on an animal that could prove dangerous. Decision made, she gathered the reins, hoisted up her skirts and reached for the stirrup, grateful for her misspent childhood riding astride before age and decorum had insisted she use a side-saddle. She had been an accomplished horsewoman once upon a time, although it was several years now since she had ridden.

Once mounted, the grey perked up and moved forward in response to the squeeze of her calves. Mary relaxed. He would be fine.

'Hi! Stop, thief!'

The sudden shout made her jump and the horse shied sideways and lurched into a canter, almost unseating Mary. Heart pounding, both from the shout and from the effort of controlling the horse, Mary pulled up the grey and looked over her shoulder, back across the clearing. Beyond its edge, and barely visible in

the gloom, a man staggered from amongst the trees, halting a few paces shy of the track. He grabbed on to a tree, leaning heavily against it.

'Get back...here with...' His words slurred and faltered. His head drooped.

Heart in mouth, Mary urged the gelding towards the man. She wondered what he would do—if this was his horse, he must be a gentleman and, as Mary well knew, the richer the man the less forgiving he was likely to be towards someone who took what was his, no matter how great their need.

She halted by the man. His head lifted as if with a great effort, his eyes locking with Mary's. Even in the dusky light of late afternoon, she could make out his features, which stood in stark contrast to his ashen skin. His face was all hard planes and angles, with dark, dark eyes under scowling brows and messy, midnight-black hair.

He's very handsome. The thought came unbidden and Mary was shocked she would notice such a thing when she was in such a dire predicament. After all, this man now held the power of life and death in his hands. Were he to choose to turn her over to the authorities, she could be imprisoned, or transported, or even —and she quaked at the thought—hanged as a horse thief. She swallowed hard, controlling her fear. She must be at her most persuasive. She had the children to think of.

He reached out and curled long fingers around the rein.

'What...do...?' His voice tailed away.

His fingers slackened on the rein and he slumped heavily to the woodland floor.

'Sir?'

Leaning down from the saddle, Mary tried to make out further details. His clothing confirmed him as a gentleman, but it was too murky to see much more.

She could, however, smell the alcohol, even from this distance. Her nose wrinkled as she recalled his slurred words. A gentleman, in his cups. Memories of her father and his abusive ways when under the influence of drink awakened. She must get the children away before the gentleman came round.

There was no point in waiting, she persuaded herself. He could sleep off the effects of the alcohol here in the woods and, when he awoke, the walk back to wherever he had come from would do him good.

'Come on, lad, walk on,' she said to the reluctant gelding, as she reined him away from the slumped figure and urged him on.

When they reached the children, Mary slid from the horse and hoisted Toby up to the saddle. It was a struggle. Toby, at five years old, was a sturdy little chap, but he took a pragmatic approach to life and, instead of making a fuss, he made every effort to help and scrambled on to the saddle. Emily began to wail and Mary hastened to pick her up and lift her in front of Toby. She put her cloak back on, retied her bundle, then positioned the gelding alongside the fallen tree and climbed on to it to help her to mount behind Toby.

She glanced back across the clearing, but could see no sign of the man. He was, presumably, still sleeping off the drink. She manoeuvred the grey on to the track leading from the clearing. No further shout sounded and Mary's tension eased a fraction. When they found a farm, or a village, she would release the horse and walk in with the children. No one would ever know she had 'borrowed' him. Like both her father and also her late husband she had no doubt the 'gentleman' would be unable to remember anything that had transpired that afternoon.

'Try to sit still, Toby,' she cautioned, as he squirmed in front of her, reaching to touch the horse's neck.

'I'm patting the horse to tell him he's being good, Mama.'

'He is, isn't he?'

'Mama? Look.' Toby held up his hand, showing fingers discoloured with a dark stain.

Mary took his hand and put her finger on the stain. It came away wet and sticky. She brought it closer to her eyes, but couldn't make out the colour. However, it smelled and felt suspiciously like...

'Toby! Are you hurt? Are you bleeding? Where did this come from?'

'Not me, silly Mama. The horse, I think he's hurt.' His voice wobbled.

'But...he can't be. I would have seen if there was blood on his neck.' A knot of dread formed in her stomach. If it wasn't Toby and it wasn't the horse, then it must be...

She reined in. What if he was hurt? Drunk or not, she couldn't leave an injured man lying in the woods all night. Muttering unladylike curses, she turned the grey. Immediately, his ears pricked up and his stride lengthened. To Mary's chagrin, they covered the distance back to the clearing in half the time.

'You old fraud,' she grumbled to the horse as she slid down from the saddle by the same fallen tree.

She tied the horse to a sapling. Injured or not, if the drunkard proved a threat they must be able to get away. Again, she went through the process of untying her bundle and spreading her cloak for the children to sit on. A breeze had sprung up, penetrating her thin woollen dress, and she shivered as she lifted the children down and sat them on the cloak, pulling the edges up around them once again.

'Don't move,' she whispered, 'and stay quiet. It's very important you don't make a sound. Do you understand?'

Both children nodded. Toby wrapped his arms around his little sister, who gazed up at Mary, her eyes huge in her face. Mary closed her eyes as the responsibilities weighing on her threatened to overwhelm her. Her stomach clenched, twisting into sick knots. What would happen to them all? She gritted her teeth and gave herself a mental shake. She forced a smile for the children as she stooped to plant a kiss on each of them.

'I won't be long,' she said.

Cautiously, she approached the track where she had left the man.

‘You...you...came...’ The voice rasped out from the shadows.

Mary gasped. The man had roused from his stupor and now sat facing the track, his back propped against a tree. She shot a quick glance over her shoulder to where she had left the children, but they—and the horse—were safely out of sight. Warily, she picked her way towards the man, who watched her from under dark brows, his glittering eyes visible even in the gloom.

‘Th...thank you. Shot...’ His breaths were harsh and laboured.

‘Shot? Oh, my goodness!’ Mary forgot all caution and hurried to the man’s side. ‘Then it was your blood. Where are you injured?’ She knelt by him.

‘Shoulder...leg...careless...’ He shifted and indicated his left shoulder.

‘What happened? Who shot you? Was it an accident?’ Mary glanced over her shoulder, at the surrounding woods. What if whoever had shot him was still out there?

He shook his head. ‘Not here...safe here...please...take horse...get help...hurry...’ Mary pulled his jacket open. ‘No! Be careful! Aargh...’ His right hand shot out and gripped her wrist with surprising strength, forcing it away from his shoulder. ‘Just...go...get...help!’ he gritted out.

Mary froze, her thoughts scrambling. The children! She couldn’t leave them out here, alone with an injured man. She would have to take them with her, but they would slow her down. How long had he been bleeding?

‘How far is it to find help?’

‘Rothley...two miles...maybe more.’ He seemed more alert, his breathing a touch easier.

Rothley. She knew the village, although not well. She had known it was on her route. She had her own reasons for avoiding it. ‘Two miles? Is there nowhere nearer?’

He snorted. ‘This is Northumberland. Sultan knows the way...won’t take long...you can ride?’

‘Of course I can.’ Mary twisted her wrist, trying to work it free. ‘But, first, I must look at your wounds. How long ago did it happen?’

‘Not sure...lost track...but—’ he squinted up through the branches overhead ‘—possibly...a couple of hours?’

‘Are you still bleeding?’

‘Never mind that...please...go...’

Mary eyed him with exasperation. If he was still losing blood, she must try to staunch the flow before leaving him. It would be an hour or more before help arrived. Three hours of blood loss could prove fatal.

‘Please,’ she said, ‘let me see?’

He scowled, but he lifted his jacket away from his left shoulder. She leant over him, grasped the lapel and opened it wider, reaching inside and placing her hand on the huge patch of blood that stained the front of his white shirt. It was wet. He hissed with pain.

‘Sorry,’ she said as she lowered his jacket back into place. She had seen enough. He had lost a great deal of blood and she knew

she must bandage the wounds before she left.

'You're still bleeding,' she told him. 'I shall have to remove your jacket, no matter how much it hurts, I'm afraid.'

'Any...other time...a pleasure.' His eyes glinted and a brief smile twisted his lips.

She narrowed her eyes at him, steadfastly ignoring the frisson of pleasure that skittered down her spine at his expression. A typical male, she thought. Not even a serious injury could curb his rakish tendencies.

'I'll need to check your back, too,' she said. 'If the bullet went straight through, you will need padding there as well. Have you a knife?'

'A knife? What...? You're not...?'

'No.' Despite the circumstances, she had to laugh. 'I only want it to cut your coat. I shall make no attempt to remove the bullet, if it is still in there. After all, you almost swooned when I barely touched your shoulder just now.'

His dark brows snapped together. 'I do not swoon,' he said. 'Passed out...pain...hardly the same.'

'Well, that's as may be, but removing your jacket will hurt a great deal more, I promise.'

'Hard woman...' he grumbled, but fumbled in his pocket and produced a clasp knife, which Mary took and opened, using it to hack at the edge of his jacket.

'Careful!' he gasped.

'The quicker I do this, the better,' she said as she grasped the

cut edges of the cloth and ripped with a quick, steady motion. She repeated her actions with his blood-soaked shirt. 'Lean forward, if you please.'

He obeyed and she cut again, then eased the clothes away, exposing his left shoulder. His skin was warm to her touch, warm and smooth. She was close enough to register the male, spicy scent of him, overlaid with the coppery smell of fresh blood. She shook her head. What was wrong with her? Concentrate, Mary, she admonished herself.

'Good,' she said calmly, as if her thoughts hadn't been leading her in an entirely inappropriate direction, 'it seems as though the bullet went straight through. I'll...' She paused, thinking.

'You'll...?'

She looked at him and frowned. 'We need bandages.'

'Can use...shirt.'

'No, that won't do. Half of it is already ruined and you must keep warm.' There was no help for it, she knew. She must sacrifice her petticoat, although, heaven knew, she had few enough clothes as it was. Still, in an emergency...

'Stay there a minute,' she said as she got to her feet.

He looked up at her and his mouth quirked into a smile. His lips, she noticed with a flutter, were firm, shapely and very sensual. 'Going...nowhere,' he said. 'What's your name?'

'Mary. Mary Vale.'

She stepped behind the tree and lifted her skirt. She cut a slit in her cotton petticoat, then ripped a length from around the hem.

She then repeated the action twice more, using the knife to cut one strip in half to pad the wound.

'What...you doing...behind my back...Sensible Mary?'

Mary's jaw clenched. Sensible Mary! The exact same phrase her late husband had used, taunting her for her practical outlook on life. Well, she might be practical, but that trait had kept her family together after Michael's drinking had spiralled out of control. Until he died, that is. Much use was practicality when the rent was due and you had no way of paying it. At least, no way she was willing to entertain. Resolutely, she forced her thoughts back to the matter in hand. There was much to do and, despite the sting of that name, she was grateful for her streak of common sense. Acting the lady and, yes, swooning would get them nowhere.

She came back around the tree and knelt again by his side. 'And you are?' she asked, as she folded one of the strips to form a pad.

'Lucas.'

'Mr Lucas?'

He eyed her, then sighed. 'Lucas Alastair. Rothley.'

She froze. 'Rothley? When you said Rothley before I assumed you meant the village.'

She knew of the Alastairs of Rothley. Her father and the Marquis of Rothley had once been friends who, in time, had become bitter enemies.

As she urged Rothley to lean forward so she could pad the exit wound, her mind whirled. The old marquis must have died

and this would therefore be his eldest son. There had been two, as she recalled. The tales of their wild behaviour, recounted in whispers, had even penetrated north of the Border, where Mary had spent her childhood. Wild stories, half-remembered. She pushed her conjectures to the back of her mind. His past was of no immediate import.

'We are near to Rothley Hall, then?'

'Indeed...this...my land...' he gasped.

Mary studied him with concern. His eyes were screwed shut, his fine lips twisted in a grimace. He might be a wild, hedonistic rake—and drunk, to boot—but he was injured and in pain.

'Do you have a family?' she asked, in an effort to distract him as she pressed another strip of her folded petticoat against the hole where the bullet had penetrated his shoulder.

'Family?'

'Yes: a wife? Children?'

'No!'

Rothley's response to her idle question was swift, in a tone tinged with abhorrence, stirring Mary's curiosity. Why so hostile? Mayhap it was as well, she thought, as she continued to dress his wound. Better by far, to her mind, that the rakes of this world remained unwed and saved some poor woman, and their children, a life of misery.

She banished his attitude to the back of her mind and concentrated on the task in hand, listening with increasing anxiety to his shallow breathing. He groaned as she lifted his arm

to pass the bandage beneath, wrapping it around to hold the pads in place.

'Why...do you...ask?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Why ask...about...family?'

She smiled at his suspicious tone, secure in the knowledge he could not see her expression. Did he imagine she wished to discover if he was wed? Did he fear she might set her cap at him on the strength of his title alone?

'I wondered if someone might be out searching for you.'

'Not...' His voice faded.

Alarmed, fearing he was about to pass out, Mary glanced up at Rothley. His eyes were riveted on her chest. She glanced down and felt a blush rise as she realised how much of her décolletage was revealed to his gaze as she leaned forward to bandage him. He glanced up and caught her eye.

'Merely...distracting...myself...S...Sensible Mary.'

Mary felt a tingle deep inside at the heat she glimpsed in those dark eyes. It had been a very long time since a man—rake or not—had viewed her as a woman and not simply as a burdensome wife.

'Let me see your leg,' she said, striving to sound unaffected as she quelled her unwelcome response. Rothley was a rake and a drinker. It was a combination she despised. How could she react to him in such a way? It must be sheer animal attraction; he was, after all, very striking: all brooding, sensual masculinity.

She gently cut the material of his breeches away from the wound, wishing she had some means of cleaning the hole where the bullet had entered the fleshy part of the back of his thigh. There was no exit wound. That was bad. She bit her lip as she bandaged his leg.

Rothley groaned softly and Mary looked up with concern. His eyes were closed and harsh lines bracketed his mouth and furrowed his brow.

'My lord?' He did not respond. She laid her hand on his forehead. Not too much heat there. Not yet, anyway, she thought grimly, but he needs a doctor. The sooner the better.

'My lord?' Mary raised her voice, laying her hand against his cheek. His stubble scratched against her palm. She patted him, gently at first, then firmly.

He groaned again and opened his eyes. She could see the effort he made to rally, jaw clenched and nostrils flaring as he inhaled several times.

'Inside...brandy...' He indicated his jacket.

Mary felt inside what was left of his jacket. The muscles of his chest jerked in reflex as she brushed against them.

'Haven't you had enough of this already?' She retrieved a small flask, recalling the stench of alcohol she had noticed before. No doubt she had already become accustomed to the smell.

He thrust his hand out and, when she handed him the flask, he unscrewed the cap with his teeth and spat it out before taking a long swig. Mary shuddered, the smell again reviving unhappy

memories. She forced herself back to the present, to the situation in hand.

'Which direction is Rothley Hall?' she asked. 'How shall I find it?'

'To right...follow path...turn left on road.' He paused, tensing, then raised dark eyes, racked with pain, to hers.

'Big gates...a mile...on right. P...please...Mary, be quick!'

'Don't fret, I shall go soon,' she replied. Taking his hand between hers she squeezed, her heart going out to him. 'But first, I shall fetch my cloak. It will keep you warm until help arrives.'

Toby and Emily were both awake and the relief on Toby's face when he saw Mary wrenched at her heartstrings.

'Stay quiet, both of you,' she warned as she raised them to their feet. 'I shall only be a minute, then we will take the horse. The man you saw before—he is injured. We must fetch help for him.'

'Are we rescuing him, Mama?' Toby asked in an interested voice.

'Yes, Toby, you'll be a real hero,' she replied as she pinched his cheek.

She hurried back to Rothley. He was drifting in and out of consciousness, much as Michael had done on that fateful night when he had fallen from his horse in a drunken stupor on his way home. Simon Wendover, his drinking companion, had brought him home, leaving him on the doorstep for her to care for as best she could. Mr Wendover, Simon's father and Michael's employer, had sent the doctor the following day to see what could be done,

but it was too late. He had died three days later.

Gently, she laid the cloak over Rothley.

'Angel...' he murmured, but did not fully rouse.

Mary studied his features. He looked younger in repose, his surprisingly long lashes dark against his pale skin, his lips relaxed and slightly parted. He looked nothing like the wild rake she knew him to be. She laid her hand gently on his forehead. The silky texture of his hair slipped through her fingers as she brushed it from his brow. His eyes flickered at her touch and she snatched her hand away, feeling her colour rise. She leant close and put her lips to his ear.

'I'll be as quick as I can,' she promised, sending a quick prayer that rescue would arrive in time, before heading back to Sultan and the children.

* * *

His angel was gone!

Lucas tried to rise, aching to follow her, to continue to bask in the glow of her comforting presence, but he was dimly aware his body would not obey his will. That he did not, in fact, move. He tried to call to her, but only a low moan sounded to his straining ears. The angel was no more, leaving a gaping void, as cold and as black as the loughs on the nearby hills, filled with pain.

He frowned, his thoughts slippery and evasive. Who is she? The wavering image of her face swam into view, reassuring yet tantalising: clear skin with a smattering of freckles, cornflower-blue eyes and soft lips, all framed by wayward wisps of soft gold,

glimpsed as they escaped her bonnet. Why is she here? In the woods? The image of her face sank again, submersed in the inky black depths of his mind.

Julia!

The name surfaced, conjured up from the past, dragging the old feelings of hurt and rejection with it.

He muttered, uncertain of anything any more but the ever-present pain. Was it Julia? How could it be? The face of an angel. The face that belied a heart as black as coal.

He drifted, his mind a jumble of visions from his past: his father, face contorted with rage, roaring, arm raised; his mother, remonstrating, protecting, taking the blows meant for her sons; the gaming houses, the huge losses, drinking to deaden the blow; the opium dens with wild parties and orgies; friends, coming and going; Julia—her beautiful face and the sound of her scornful laughter as she rejected him.

My back! It hurts! With great effort, he forced his thoughts into some semblance of lucidity. The bark of the tree he leant against dug into his back. He shifted to ease the pressure and a white-hot spear of pain penetrated his thigh. As he sank into the void, he fought against it, vaguely aware he must not succumb.

Some time later—an hour, a day, a week?—he roused to the sense of a cool hand on his forehead. Julia. The name gained shape in his mind. He felt his lips move. Did he give voice to the name? He knew not. He tried to prise his eyes open, but the effort was too great. Then he felt hands take hold of him. The pain

spiked through every nerve in his body and he sank—gratefully this time—back into oblivion.

Chapter Two

'Ah, there you are, Mrs Vale. Have the bairns settled?'

'Yes, thank you, Mrs Lindley. Susan did a splendid job with them. They are fast asleep,' Mary replied as she entered the huge kitchen at Rothley Hall. Despite the traumas of the past hours, her tensions melted away and she relaxed for the first time since she had left the cottage. At least, tonight, the children were safe and warm, with food in their bellies, thanks to Susan, the young housemaid, who had taken them under her wing the moment Mary and the exhausted children had arrived at the Hall.

Well, maybe not the exact moment, Mary reflected, recalling the scene with a wry smile. The Hall had looked deserted as she rode up the overgrown drive to the front of the house. She had ridden around to the rear and, spying a flicker of light in what she now knew was the kitchen window, she had pounded on a nearby door.

Mrs Lindley had responded, presenting a most intimidating appearance. She was almost as wide as she was tall, with arms as big as hams folded across her bolster of a bosom as she looked suspiciously from Mary to the children and stoutly declared her master was overseas and expected to remain there for the foreseeable future.

Her conjectures about Mary had been blatant, but Mary had taken no offence, instead silently admiring the woman for her

devotion to Rothley. Upon hearing of her master's injuries, however, Mrs Lindley had swung into action, rallying the rest of the staff and begging Mary to return with the men to show them where Rothley lay.

Toby and Emily had been left in the care of Susan, with whom they had bonded immediately. Later, deemed too young and innocent to remain whilst the doctor ministered to Lord Rothley, Susan had continued in her role as nursemaid and settled the children in bed. Mary had not been as fortunate. It had been clear she was expected to play her part. The sound of Rothley's moans as the doctor removed the bullet from his thigh still echoed in her ears, sending shivers down her spine. He had thrashed around on the bed and, in the end, it had taken five of them to hold him still for the doctor. Mary's arms still ached with the effort.

'She's a good lass and a hard worker. She has to be, living here,' Mrs Lindley continued, as she turned to the kettle singing over the open fire and lifted it. 'I hope she's gone straight to bed, like I told her. It's going to be a long haul, I fear, till the master is up and about again, and we shall all have to pull our weight, even young Susan.

'Sit yourself down, Mrs Vale, do. Doctor'll be down in a minute, then we'll have some coffee and maybe a slice of my cake. I think we've earned it this night.'

Mary sank on to a chair next to the large, well-scrubbed table that dominated the centre of the room.

'May I ask where the rest of the staff are?' Mary asked. 'Surely

a house of this size requires more than the few I have met here tonight?'

The house was huge and rambling, but the staff appeared to consist of a mere four souls, plus two stockmen-cum-grooms. Mrs Lindley had introduced herself as the cook-cum-housekeeper. It seemed to Mary almost everyone served a dual purpose in this house. No wonder it looked uncared for.

Mrs Lindley cackled. 'Bless you, dear. We're all his lordship can afford and he can barely afford us, truth be told. Am I right, Ellen?'

Mary glanced round. The other maid had entered the room, followed by the doctor. Ellen was older than Susan, a cheery woman of around five and forty summers, as slim as Mrs Lindley was wide.

'You are indeed, Mrs Lindley, aye,' she said, then grinned at Mary. 'Worked to the bone, we are, ma'am, and no mistake. But, for all that, I wouldn't never leave 'is lordship and nor would any of us, and that's a fact. Started 'ere when I wasn't much older than Susan, I did. Seen 'is lordship grow up, aye. My, the tales I could...'

'Now, now, Ellen,' said the doctor. 'I am sure our visitor doesn't wish to hear all that old nonsense.'

Ellen coloured, but laughed, 'Right you are, Doctor, I was forgetting myself. I'll pour some coffee and take it to Mr Trant and then I'll take myself off to bed, if there's naught else you need me for, Mrs Lindley?'

At the shake of the housekeeper's head, Ellen bade them all a cheery goodnight and left the kitchen.

The doctor put down his bag and spoke to Mrs Lindley. 'I have asked Trant to stay with his lordship until someone can relieve him. It is imperative someone remains with him at all times in case of fever. It will prove a burden, I make no doubt, as short-staffed as you are, but you do at least have the benefit of... My apologies, ma'am,' he continued, now directing his attention to Mary, 'but I'm afraid, in all the excitement, I failed to catch your name?'

He was a spare man of around thirty years of age, of medium height, with close-cropped fair hair and grey eyes. He had a straightforward manner that Mary found appealing, although she was taken aback by his ready assumption she would help to nurse Lord Rothley. At first, she was inclined to resent such presumption but, upon reflection, it would at least provide her and the children with a welcome haven—a place, and the time, for them to recoup their strength before they must move on.

'I am Mary Vale, Dr...?'

'Preece; Robert Preece, ma'am, at your service.' He bowed, then rounded the table to sit opposite Mary. 'I understand it was you who discovered Lord Rothley in the woods this afternoon?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Did he tell you how he was shot? Or by whom?'

'I'm afraid not, Doctor. I did ask but, well...'

'Quite. You both had other priorities, I make no doubt.' He

contemplated her in silence for a moment, then commented, 'It was most fortunate you were passing.'

Mary was thankful he dropped the subject; she was altogether too weary to field questions about why she had been in the woods. Her eyes drifted closed, exhaustion near overwhelming her, as her mind travelled back over this most difficult of days.

'How has he been, Mrs Lindley? In himself?'

The quiet question penetrated Mary's reverie. She feigned sleep, shamelessly eavesdropping on the conversation. Her interest in the marquis was, she assured herself, transient.

'Oh, you know, Doctor. Much the same,' Mrs Lindley replied, her voice at the same low pitch as the doctor's. 'He drives himself relentlessly. Won't listen to no one: not his mama, not none of us. He's been a sight worse since she's been away.'

'When is she due home?'

'We're none of us sure. If his lordship knows, he's keeping it tight to his chest, that's for sure.'

'We have seen very little of him in the village in the past couple of years—he has become something of a recluse since his return. He would appear to have gone from one extreme to the other, if the tales of his time in London are to be believed. What I cannot understand, though, is his reluctance to socialise with his old friends.' There was a note of bitterness in the doctor's voice.

'No more can any of us, Doctor. When I think how much you two shared as lads...but he's changed, sir. You'd hardly recognise him. It's as if he cannot trust another soul. 'Tis a pity: he was

always such a bonny, carefree lad, despite that father of his.'

'He was a harsh man, for sure, but that doesn't explain why Lucas has shut himself away.'

'It's my belief his lordship had no notion of how much debt his father was in. He came home, wanting to learn about the estate—a good five years ago, now—but his father were having none of it: sent his lordship off with a flea in his ear. Called him a no-account wastrel, he did. Eee, the look on his lordship's face when he walked out the door—I shall never forget it, as long as I live. And his poor mama, she near to broke her heart. He never saw his father alive again.'

'I wonder why his father rejected Lucas's help?' Dr Preece mused. 'One would have thought he would welcome it. Pride, maybe? Oh well, I dare say we shall never know the truth of it. And I,' he added in a brisker tone, 'should be shot for gossiping about your master in such a fashion, Mrs Lindley. Lucas would be quite within his rights to bar me from his threshold, were he to hear us. But I shall acquit myself, for I am genuinely concerned for him and it is a fact he will not confide in me.'

Mary had heard enough. She stirred ostentatiously and the quiet conversation ceased.

'Well, now, I must bid you goodnight, ladies,' the doctor said, rising to his feet. 'Don't forget: someone must sit with Lucas...his lordship...at all times. If he does develop a fever—and I shall consider it a miracle if he does not—I shall expect to be informed of it immediately.'

‘Doctor...?’ Mrs Lindley looked troubled. ‘I’m sorry, Doctor, but your bill...?’

Dr Preece finished donning his greatcoat, then crossed to Mrs Lindley and placed his hands on her shoulders, peering into her face. ‘Mrs Lindley, I forbid you to worry about my fee.’

As she opened her mouth, he continued, ‘Leave me to thrash it out with Rothley. We will come to some arrangement. You are to send for me if I am needed, do you hear?’

Relief on her face, the cook nodded.

‘Good. And as for you, ma’am,’ he said, turning his attention to Mary, ‘you have proved yourself already to be an oasis of calm in a crisis. I charge you with ensuring there is no silly hesitation in sending for me should Lord Rothley’s condition deteriorate.

‘Goodnight, ladies.’ He bowed and left the room.

* * *

Mary sat alone by the side of Rothley’s bed and studied the form lying in the huge four-poster, his complexion as white as the pillow upon which his head rested. His features were relaxed, the harsh lines that had bracketed his mouth and creased his brow had smoothed until they had almost disappeared, but, even in repose, he exuded danger. His dark, brooding features drew Mary’s gaze like a lodestone. She conjured up the image of his body—large, muscular, inherently masculine—and felt her stomach perform a slow somersault as she allowed herself the indulgence of imagining his body covering hers, the weight of him on her, his hands and his mouth...

Pushing such thoughts aside, she rose from the chair and crossed to the fire to place a log on the flames.

What on earth is wrong with me, thinking of such things at such a time, when he is critically injured? But the feeling of him lying on her was so evocative, so familiar, she... Of course! With a surge of relief, she recalled the journey back to Hall on the flat bed of the cart that transported him home. She felt again his body, lying between her splayed legs, the weight of his head on her belly.

She was tired and her mind was playing tricks on her. She was not, after all, an immoral wanton, lusting after a man lying wounded in his bed—a man she was supposed to be caring for. She sat down in the chair again and studied her patient. He had suffered a great deal, but he was strong and would no doubt recuperate quickly. Then she could be on her way and these confusing sensations would be left behind, where they belonged. The thought of the journey still ahead of her and her likely reception raised old familiar doubts that pecked at her. Had she made the right decision? But what was the alternative? She could think of none.

It had been a grim few hours and Mary was exhausted. She leaned her head against the high back of the wing chair. Her eyelids drooped. Aware she was on the brink of sleep, she pushed herself back to her feet. She went to the window. Twitching the curtain aside, she peered out, but could see only the raindrops that spattered intermittently against the glass. Shivering, she let

the curtain fall back into place, then crossed to the fireplace and placed another log on the fire. She glanced at the clock on the mantelshelf—nine of the clock. No wonder she was tired, for they had left the cottage before dawn, but she must remain alert. She must watch the patient. There was no sign of fever yet, but the doctor had said the next few days would be critical.

There was a faint sound and the massive form of Mrs Lindley appeared in the doorway. Mary went to her and stepped out into the hallway, that they might not disturb Rothley.

'I've come to apologise, Mrs Vale. I fear I mightn't have given you a very proper welcome at first.' Her eyes twinkled. 'I also must thank you again for all your help.'

'No thanks are necessary, Mrs Lindley. With hindsight, it is fortunate I was in the woods this afternoon. I fear, otherwise, his lordship would still be out there.'

Mrs Lindley's expression became sombre. 'It don't bear thinking about, ma'am. We must thank the Lord He saw fit to send you through the woods today. Now, are you sure you don't mind watching over his lordship a while longer? You look exhausted. I'm worried we've taken your help for granted. I could stay—'

'I'm happy to help,' Mary interrupted, touching the other woman's arm. 'I am happy to take the first watch and then I shall enjoy some uninterrupted sleep so, please, do not tease yourself. I am grateful, to tell the truth, that we have a roof over our heads, if only for a short while.'

Mrs Lindley directed a long look of speculation at Mary. ‘Well, if that’s the case, I’ll say goodnight. Ellen will relieve you at midnight and I’ll take over at four of the clock. It’ll be a hard task, keeping up with the nursing, I’m afraid, on top of everything else, but it’ll be a boon having you here, ma’am, I don’t mind telling you. And the bairns will be a tonic. Although it might be best...’ her eyes slid past Mary, towards Rothley’s door, before returning to Mary’s face, ‘...it might be wise if they are kept away from this part of the house.’

‘I shall ensure they do not disturb his lordship,’ Mary said. ‘I am sure the house is big enough for them to be kept well away. And I dare say we shall be long gone before he is up and about.’

‘Thank you, ma’am. I can’t say why he’s set against having bairns around, but it is so. He’s like to be a difficult enough patient as it is—’ She stopped abruptly, her lips pursed. ‘He’s been under a strain, these last few years. I hope you’ve got a thick skin, but just remember his bark is much worse than his bite.’ She grinned, then waddled away without another word.

Mary watched her retreat, thinking over her words. She shook her head as she opened the bedchamber door and went back into the room. Why would any adult feel such aversion towards innocent children?

‘I thought I dreamed you.’

The whispered words made her jump and her eyes flew to the figure in the bed.

Chapter Three

Rothley was awake, his dark eyes open and riveted on Mary. She swallowed nervously.

'You're awake,' she said and then bit her lip. Goodness, what a ridiculous thing to say.

One corner of his mouth lifted. 'So it would seem,' he said.

'How are you feeling?'

'Sore,' he replied. 'Tired.'

Mary fussed about, a tremor in her hands as she straightened the covers on the bed, aware he watched her every move. He looked sinfully attractive, his black hair tousled and his dark eyes, under their heavy lids, appraising her. He had pushed the covers down almost to his waist and she pulled them higher. The top of his nightshirt lay unbuttoned, a sprinkling of dark hair just visible. She had seen him naked, whilst helping the doctor, and her blood quickened as she visualised his muscled chest, sprinkled with dark hair, glistening with sweat.

For goodness' sake! He's been shot and you're here to nurse him. What sort of a strumpet are you? She was ashamed of her physical reaction even as, contrarily, she relished the slow build of anticipation deep inside. What he doesn't know, won't hurt, she told herself.

'Why are you here? Not that I have any objection to a beautiful woman in my bedchamber, you understand, but...where is everyone else?'

'In bed, asleep, my lord. The doctor was here; he removed the bullet from your leg...'

‘Hmmph, I remember.’ He grimaced, stifling a moan, as he stirred under the bedcovers. ‘What a butcher...never felt such pain. But that doesn’t explain...’

‘The doctor said we are to sit with you, my lord, in case you develop signs of fever. Ellen will take over at midnight and then Mrs Lindley will relieve her later on. I am taking the first shift.’

‘With no chaperon? You are brave, my dear. Many a lady’s reputation has been ruined for less.’

‘I am a widow, my lord. My presence here is no different to Ellen, or to Mrs Lindley for that matter. And, might I point out, you are in no fit state to ravish anyone?’

‘But I wouldn’t be imagining ravishing Ellen or Mrs Lindley, now, would I? But a comely young widow—well, this is an unexpected turn of the cards.’

In the flickering light of the candle, Mary recognised the glint of admiration in Rothley’s dark eyes as he looked her up and down. Resentment slid through her veins. It seemed as soon as a man learned she was a widow, his interest quickened. And he’s not mistaken, is he? She felt the heat build in her cheeks as she recalled her earlier thoughts. She stiffened, stepping away from the bed.

A low chuckle sounded. ‘There is no need to retreat. As you acutely observed, I am in no state to take advantage of anyone. At least, not at present,’ he added, with a grin. ‘It is possibly a touch late for formality, but I should introduce myself. Rothley, at your service.’

His attempt at a bow was no more than a bob of his chin as he lay in the bed and Mary bit back a smile at the absurdity. She relaxed. He was right. Despite his provocative words, he was no danger to her. Yet. And she would be long gone before he could make any serious attempt at seduction. She feared a Lord Rothley, in full health and vigour, might very well prove irresistible, despite her antipathy towards rakes in general.

'I know who you are, my lord. You introduced yourself when we met in the woods.'

He frowned. 'The woods, you say? What...?' His brow cleared. 'Yes. I remember now...vaguely. I owe you my gratitude for your help today.'

His lids drifted shut and he was silent. Mary approached the bed again and was about to sit in the chair by its side when he shifted in the bed. A moan, soon cut short, alerted Mary. She leaned closer and put her hand to his forehead. Still cool, but a touch clammy.

Rothley opened his eyes and regarded her ruefully.

'Never mind your reputation, this won't do mine any good at all,' he said, with a lopsided grin. 'Here am I, in my bedchamber with a beautiful woman for company, and the only moans to be heard are my own.'

Mary laughed at his disgruntled tone. 'You must console yourself, my lord, with the knowledge there is nobody within hearing distance, even were you to entertain a bevy of beauties within these four walls.'

‘Indeed,’ he murmured, capturing her gaze, his fine lips curving. ‘My expertise would be for the sole appreciation of the recipient, would it not?’

One dark brow lifted. He’s testing me, she realised, a slow blush heating her skin, unable—or unwilling? her inner voice teased—to tear her eyes from his. As she froze, his gaze focused and intensified. His eyes gleamed and his sensuous lips curved as Mary, still bent over him, remained transfixed, her pulse racing as his masculine scent assailed her senses and pervaded her very being. She felt as she imagined a mouse must when confronted by a crouching cat, fearful of twitching the tiniest muscle lest it prove the wrong move: the move that would trigger the pounce. Every nerve of her being quivered, every sense was on heightened alert. The stillness of the house weighed heavily, the only sounds the soft crackle of the fire and the ticking of the clock.

The slow movement of his hand broke the enchantment for a brief moment, before he enmeshed her further in his spell. His finger touched lightly at her temple, trailed a path down the side of her face and followed the line of her jaw to her chin. It then lifted to caress her mouth, tracing the width of her trembling lower lip. Mary’s lids fluttered closed as his hand cupped her chin and urged her closer, ever closer. His breath whispered across her sensitised lips as he feathered a kiss across her mouth. Desire snaked through her as his hand slid round to cradle her head. The moist heat of his lips as they moved against hers was an impossible temptation. Without volition, Mary’s hand lifted

to his cheek and she leaned into the kiss, lost in the moment, her whole body awakening and responding, every nerve tingling, anticipation flowing from a tiny pinpoint deep inside until it flooded every vein in her body. She trembled, the craving for more near overwhelming her, until the distant sound of a door banging roused her from her trance and, with a gasp of horror, she wrenched her lips from his. She scrambled away, her face aflame, her hands flying to her cheeks in a vain attempt to cover her shame.

'My lord...' she gasped.

The heat in those ebony eyes was undeniable. He smiled at her: a slow, seductive smile that set her quivering with desire. Her heart was pounding and she could feel the pulse jump in her neck. How had he captivated her so very quickly? How had one kiss resurrected those feelings she had thought dead and buried long since?

She stiffened, angry and ashamed that she had become so mesmerised by the touch of this stranger's lips that she had responded in a way no decent woman should. And she was furious she was now unable to conceal her embarrassment. Why should she make such a fuss over a stolen kiss that was no doubt a mere passing fancy to a rake such as he? She dragged in a deep breath to steady her nerves. It would test her ingenuity to its limit, but she must disabuse him of any notion she might be available for any sort of dalliance. Taking a moment, she smoothed her hands down her skirts. She then looked him in the eye, raising her

brows in a way she hoped would make her appear unconcerned.

'Well,' she said, willing her voice to remain light and unconcerned, 'I cannot pretend you did not catch me off guard, or I would not have allowed that to happen. However, although your kiss was pleasant enough, my lord, I shall be obliged if you will restrain your...more basic urges in the future. I have no wish to be constantly on my guard if I am to assist in nursing you over the next week or so. As a gentleman, I am sure you will accede to my wishes.'

'Ah...but can you be certain I am a gentleman?'

Mary raised her chin. 'I make no doubt you were raised as such,' she said, 'and, no matter what direction your life has taken since then, I would urge you to remember that. I am here to nurse you, Lord Rothley, and that is all.'

Rothley's lips tightened a fraction, then a sudden gleam lit his eyes. Mary eyed him with suspicion.

'I'm so hot,' he murmured. 'My forehead is burning. I feel feverish.' His lids flickered shut.

'Hmmph!'

Mary's huff of disbelief was barely audible, but she caught the twitch of Rothley's lips, so it had been loud enough. Without approaching any nearer, she reached across and placed her hand on his forehead.

'Aaahh, so soothing, so comforting,' he murmured as his eyes opened and he captured her gaze again.

He grinned as she snatched her hand away, her insides

melting anew. His masculine aura tugged at her senses, her body responding with a readiness she had never before experienced, even in the early days of her marriage.

He is a rake, she reminded herself. Attracted merely because I am female and, seemingly, willing and available.

'It feels quite normal to me, my lord,' she said, as she crossed the room to the washstand, which held a bowl and a pitcher of water, 'but I will bathe it for you, nevertheless. If—' she glanced over her shoulder at Rothley as she wrung out a cloth in the water '—you promise to keep yourself covered up.'

His lips twitched as she approached the bed. 'Does the sight of my manly chest bother you so?'

Mary tensed. She was a grown woman, not some silly innocent to be beguiled and misled by a silver-tongued rake, no matter how attractive. If she didn't take care, nursing the marquis would prove impossible. She must—for her own sanity—maintain her distance for, if she was honest, his flirtatious ways were proving hard to resist.

'It bothers me not one iota,' she said brusquely. 'I am simply concerned you do not catch a fever, for that would mean I am honour bound to remain here that much longer. The sooner you are recovered, the sooner I may leave.'

The amusement drained from his face. 'You are under no obligation to me, madam. You are not bound to remain here against your inclination.'

Mary felt a momentary qualm. Had she overreacted?

‘My obligation is to my own conscience, my lord. I have experience of nursing and your staff, as far as I can ascertain, have very little. Besides, they are hardly under-employed in this household. An extra pair of hands will not come amiss, I am sure.’

‘Indeed. My household, as you rightly point out, is staffed at a totally inadequate level. No doubt you are used to better.’

His voice was tight, his brows lowered, but Mary felt certain it was not anger that generated his response. Rather, she thought, it was worry creasing his forehead. She recalled Mrs Lindley’s comments about the debts facing the estate.

‘Once upon a time, maybe,’ she said, as she applied the cool, damp cloth to his brow, ‘but not in the past few years, I can assure you.’

His eyes sparked with interest. ‘How so?’

‘My childhood was carefree for the most part, but adulthood brings its own challenges,’ she said. ‘Hard work is not unknown to me.’

She sought to divert him. ‘Do you remember what happened, my lord?’

His eyes glinted wickedly as he grinned up at her.

‘I remember a beautiful angel coming to my rescue. I remember her ripping open my shirt—’

‘I meant, what happened before,’ Mary interrupted. The teasing, flirtatious Lord Rothley was back. Her diversion had worked only too well. ‘Have you remembered how...why...you

were shot?'

'Killjoy,' he murmured. 'I had much rather discuss the softness of your lap.'

Mary's face flamed. She had hoped he wouldn't remember the laborious journey home from the woods in the back of a cart—his head, heavy in her lap and her legs extended either side of his body in an effort to cushion him from the worst of the jolts. His eyes locked with hers and she felt again the slow, nervous trickle of anticipation deep inside. Her breath seized, her nerves all on edge, her legs suddenly weak.

'Your lack of denial leads me to assume my memories are not a wishful fantasy after all,' he said, with a lift of his brows.

Mary stepped back and sat in the chair by the bed, staring towards the fire.

'The doctor said you were very lucky,' she said, seeking to cover her confusion.

He snorted, but weakly. 'How so? I do not feel lucky right now.'

'The bullet went straight through your shoulder without hitting anything vital. He believes you will make a full recovery, in time.' Mary risked a glance at him. 'It could have been a great deal worse, my lord.'

'Time is what I don't have,' he muttered, as if to himself.

'I beg your pardon?'

His expression grew sombre. 'You asked me a question,' he said. 'The answer is yes. I remember every detail.

Thieves...reivers...'

Mary's gaze flew to his face. Reivers was the old name for raiders along the border between England and Scotland. His use of the term revived memories of the dispute between their fathers.

'Surely,' she said, 'that practice died out long ago?'

'It's an old term, certainly,' he said. 'But where there is money to be made, some men will always take what is not theirs. Speaking of which...' He frowned, his eyes distant. Mary wondered what memory had nudged at him. Did he remember her taking his horse? Had he seen—or heard—the children?

'How did these reivers come to shoot you?' she asked, keen to distract him.

'I was checking my sheep, grazing up on the hills, when I came upon three men driving them away to the north. I tried to stop them. They objected. I was hit in the shoulder and lost control of my horse...' His gaze settled again on Mary, his eyes widening. Mary felt sure he now recalled her riding away on Sultan. He made no mention of it, however, continuing, 'Perhaps, with hindsight, it was fortunate. If we hadn't been moving when they fired the second shot, I fear I might not be here at all.

'And that reminds me,' he said, pushing himself up in the bed before collapsing back against the pillows with a moan, sweat breaking on his brow. Mary jumped to her feet and leant over him, fingers curving around the solid muscle of his uninjured shoulder.

‘Please, my lord. You must remain still. Your wounds...’

‘I must speak to Shorey—or Hooper. Immediately!’

Shorey and Hooper were the grooms who had driven the cart into the woods with Mary to rescue Lord Rothley.

‘Can you not give me a message for them? It is late and I am certain they will be abed at this hour. I promise to relay any message to them in the morning.’

‘I suppose there is nothing they can do tonight.’

He groped until he found her wrist. His touch set her skin aflame but he appeared oblivious to the effect he had on her.

‘Tell Shorey and Hooper to go to the top pastures and bring the sheep nearer to home. They must go at first light.’

‘The top pastures?’ she queried. ‘Not the hills? But what about the sheep the men were taking? Did they succeed? Are they all gone?’

‘The men panicked and fled after they shot me. I managed to drive the sheep down...’

‘After you were shot? What were you thinking? You should have ridden straight away for help.’

His expression was grave. ‘Those animals will mean all the difference to the Hall this year. But they’re not safe, all the way up there. You must tell the men. Promise me.’

‘I promise. Please don’t worry.’

Rothley released Mary’s wrist, heaving a sigh as his lids closed. Mary rose and crossed the room to put the washcloth back in the basin.

‘Who are you?’ The soft query returned her attention to the man in the bed. His dark eyes glittered in the candlelight.

‘Mary Vale, my lord.’

‘Ah, yes, of course. I do remember. Sensible Mary.’

Mary turned away. How did that name still have the power to hurt? ‘Sensible Mary.’ What they really meant was Dull Mary. The name felt like an insult. Once upon a time she had been young and carefree, full of laughter. But now...

Rothley’s eyes had closed once more and he appeared to be drifting off to sleep, to her relief. She settled back into her chair, raking through the happenings of the day. How did he elicit such a ready response from her, despite him being everything she feared and despised in a man? Was it lust over an arresting face and a tantalising body? She pictured his strong arms and shoulders, the hard, muscled planes of his chest, the long, lean legs and the taut buttocks, glimpsed as the doctor extracted the bullet from his thigh. He was a man any woman might desire, but she could not risk yielding to temptation again.

Experience had taught her the physical act of love was a mere fleeting pleasure if there was no emotional connection—no love—between a man and a woman. The marital act had left her feeling hollow and empty and used, and Michael had become increasingly disillusioned: resentful and angry at both her and the children. Mary had vowed never again to put herself in the position of being viewed as a burden, or to allow Toby and Emily to be resented as encumbrances. She had only to recall Rothley’s

strange antipathy towards children to know nothing could come of their apparent mutual attraction.

When she looked up, Rothley had roused—if he had indeed been asleep—and now watched her with that amused glint back in his eyes, as if he knew exactly what she had been thinking.

'Where did you come from, Sensible Mary?' he asked, when he saw he had her attention. 'And what were you doing in my woods?' He held her gaze for what seemed an eternity and then added, in a soft voice, 'And why were you stealing my horse?'

She felt herself grow pink. 'I thought it was a short cut,' she said, ignoring his other questions.

'To where, may I ask?'

'The north.'

'This is the north.' His eyes narrowed. 'Where did you say you had come from?'

She eyed him warily. Her instinct was to give as little information as possible. 'The south,' she replied, 'and I think it is time you rested. You look exhausted. You should sleep.'

'Mayhap you're right.'

As he settled down into the bed he grimaced.

'Are you in pain?' Mary asked. 'The doctor left some laudanum for you.'

A flash of alarm crossed his face.

'What is it? What is wrong?'

'Nothing's wrong. In answer to your first question: yes, I am in pain, but, no, I don't want laudanum. I found myself in thrall

to the poppy's lure once before, in my youth. I shall never risk losing control in such a way again. Not unless I am desperate, do you hear?'

'I hear.' She pulled the covers up beneath his chin.

His lips twitched even as his eyelids drooped. 'Do not imagine I shall forget, Sensible Mary. My questions will wait until tomorrow, when I am stronger. And then, I shall insist on some satisfactory answers.'

* * *

'Mrs Vale! Mrs Vale!'

'What is it?' Groggy with sleep, Mary pushed herself up on one elbow. 'Susan?'

'Yes'm; Mrs Lindley sent me. It's the master, ma'am. She said can you please come?'

Fully awake now, Mary threw back the covers and jumped from her bed. Susan handed her a shawl.

'It's one her ladyship left behind, ma'am,' she said, in answer to Mary's lifted brow. 'Mrs Lindley said as how you didn't have much in the way of clothes with you. Sorry, ma'am.'

Mary threw her a smile. 'Don't apologise, Susan,' she said. 'I am grateful for the attention. Is his lordship fevered?'

'Oooh, yes'm. Tossin' and turnin' something awful, Mrs Lindley says.'

'Has someone been sent for the doctor?'

'Yes'm, Hooper rode out ten minutes since.'

They arrived at Rothley's bedchamber. Mary entered to see

Mrs Lindley leaning over the marquis, trying to restrain him whilst he thrashed from side to side, muttering. The tangled bedclothes had slipped to the floor.

Mrs Lindley looked up, sweat dripping down her face, as she gasped, 'Thank goodness you've come.'

Chapter Four

Lucas opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. His head hurt, his shoulder ached, his leg throbbed, his mouth tasted foul and his throat was as dry and rough as the bark of a tree. With an effort, he moved his head on the pillow, squeezing his eyes shut against the pain that speared through his temple.

When he opened his eyes again, she was there.

In the chair, by the bed. His bed.

She was familiar, but a stranger. How could that be? Where had she come from?

The south. But how did he know that?

He studied her, allowing her restful presence, her alluring features, to distract him from his aches and pains. She might not be a classic beauty, but she was enchanting. Her skin was smooth and creamy, with a smattering of freckles across her small, tip-tilted nose. The colour of her eyes was hidden, but he knew they were the deep blue of cornflowers. Her long, pale lashes rested on cheeks as lush and inviting as sun-ripened peaches. Her lips —soft pink, full and tempting—were parted and, as rotten as he felt, still his loins stirred at the thought of tasting them. He frowned, a memory floating a fraction beyond his reach.

Her lips. He could feel them, he knew their taste—silky as rose petals, sweet as honey. But how? He licked his own lips, paper-dry and sour. The answer eluded him as he continued his perusal of the woman by his bed.

Her hair. He paused, feeling his forehead pucker. Why had he thought her hair to be guinea-gold? It was not. It was more beautiful by far—the soft golden colour of corn ripening in the August sunshine. Not brassy, not a mass of curls, but soft waves where it escaped from its pins. He wanted to see it loose, flowing down her back.

He frowned again as he watched her sleep, striving to remember, fragments of memories teasing at his mind: the woods, a child's cry, Sultan, with a woman—this woman—astride, leaving him, deserting him. And something else. What else?

A pistol shot! Reivers! Stealing his sheep, his livelihood, his future!

Galvanised, he threw back the covers and made to rise. His torso barely cleared the mattress before he collapsed back in exhaustion, panting with the effort, as the pains racking his body intensified tenfold. He heard himself groan and stifled it, but it was enough to rouse the woman.

'Shh,' she whispered as she rose to her feet and leant over him, a smile on her lips. 'Lie still. You're still very weak.' She placed a cool hand on his brow; it was familiar, comforting. He looked up into her eyes—cornflower-blue, as he had known they would

be—compassion shining from their tranquil depths.

'How...how long...?' His voice was croaky, as though it hadn't been used for a long time.

'It is five days now, since you were shot,' she said, pulling up the bedclothes, smoothing them. 'Do you remember?' He nodded. The faint scent of lavender assailed his senses. 'You have been in a fever. You have been very ill, my lord. You will need to rest, to recoup your strength.' She went to a table set up at the foot of the bed and returned with a glass. 'Here,' she said. 'You must be thirsty. Let me help. Drink this.'

She slipped her hand behind his head and supported him as she placed the glass against his dry lips.

He gulped the cool liquid, but she removed the glass before he had drunk his fill, saying, 'You shouldn't have too much all at once. Give your stomach time to settle. You may have some more in a while.'

He watched her, drinking in every detail of her as she replaced the glass. She wore a blue dress that matched her eyes and showed her figure to perfection, as it clung to the roundness of her breasts and her hips. Her manner and her movements spoke of neatness and restraint, calmness and competence. But her face and her body! He studied her with appreciation: her satiny skin, her eyes, her soft, lush lips, the thrust of her breasts, the sway of her hips. They proclaimed the exact opposite: wild abandon, passion, excitement.

He turned his head on the pillow, squeezing his eyes shut

against the unexpected hurt that surfaced. He had known another such a woman. Her beauty had promised so much, yet it had been an illusion. Julia! How weak he must be, to allow that witch to affect him after all this time.

Had he really been so befuddled by his vice-ridden lifestyle? Had his senses been so dulled by the opium he had once blithely consumed, not to see through her looks to the reality? Not to see her for what she was—a greedy, grasping widow on the prowl, targeting naïve young bucks to fleece? He had fallen in love with an illusion of his own making.

Why think of her now, after so many years? He had thought all memory of her long buried. He conjured up the image of her face: her white skin, guinea-gold hair and large cornflower-blue eyes. Of course! No wonder she had been on his mind—Mary's eyes were the exact same shade of blue as Julia's...

Mary!

Sensible Mary! He remembered. He frowned again. At least, I remember some of it.

He kept his eyes closed, struggling to recall. The quiet sound of her moving around the room brought him back to the present from time to time, even as, bit by bit, pieces of the puzzle fit into place. The sheep! The men and the dogs, driving them up the hill; the wild gallop after them; the shouts; the shots; the searing pain. His gut twisted and the fear that had plagued him for months reasserted itself as he realised the implications of losing those sheep. The estate simply could not afford...

‘Shorey.’ His voice, still weak, sounded no louder than a whisper. ‘I remember...you promised...’

She returned to his side and lifted his hand, murmuring, ‘Hush. Do not worry. I gave him your message and he and Hooper rounded up the sheep. They also brought the cattle closer to the Hall, in case the thieves try again. There are none missing and they are keeping a close watch on them until it’s time to take them to market.’

He relaxed. The fear subsided but it did not disappear. It would not leave him, he knew, until he was free of his father’s legacy of debt. He curled his fingers around Mary’s hand, relishing the touch of her skin. He frowned. The skin on her palm and fingertips was roughened. She acted, and spoke, as a lady. But her hands—they spoke of work. He studied her face as she stood by the side of the bed, gazing down at him, her expression serious.

‘All is well, my lord,’ she said, releasing his hand and smoothing his brow. ‘There is no need to fret. I am sure you will be up and about in no time.’

Her gaze was direct and reassuring. He was comforted by her presence. He closed his eyes, all at once exhausted.

The sound of the door opening caught his attention and he forced his eyes open. Mary was at the door, speaking in hushed tones to someone outside. Lucas strained his ears, but could not make out what was being said.

‘What is it?’

Mary glanced back into the room. ‘It’s nothing, my lord.’

Was it his imagination, or did she sound furtive? He struggled to raise himself on one elbow.

'Go and ask Susan to come and sit with his lordship,' he heard her hiss. 'I shall be there as soon as I can.'

Lucas frowned. Who on earth was she speaking to? He didn't want Susan to care for him. He wanted Mary. He opened his mouth to object, but remained silent as he heard Mary's words. 'I know, lovey. I love you, too. Go on, quickly now.'

Lucas, an unexpected feeling of betrayal in his heart, fell back to his pillow. The words that had sprung to his lips remained unspoken.

It's you I want, Mary.

* * *

'Who is she?'

Lucas watched Trant as the valet finished putting his clothes away in the wardrobe later that day. Mary had not returned to his bedchamber since Susan had come to relieve her that morning and he was curious to discover more about her. He'd had little else to occupy his mind, trapped in his bed as he was.

'Who is who, my lord?'

'Mary Vale, of course. Who is she? Where did she come from?'

'I'm sure I couldn't say, sir.' Trant regarded Lucas with an impassive countenance. 'She has been a great help to the staff, though. She barely left your side whilst you were ill.'

'Come now, Trant. I'm sure you can tell me more than that.'

‘I am not one to listen to the tittle-tattle of others, my lord.’

Lucas eyed Trant with exasperation. Was he being deliberately obtuse? Lucas had received a similar response from Ellen earlier and even young Susan had been no more forthcoming. Why were they all so reticent? Or perhaps it was Mary who was being secretive? All he knew for certain was that she was a widow who had been passing through his woods. And that she tasted divine —he could recall every detail of their kiss and it had awoken within him a hunger he’d been at pains to deny since his return to the Hall.

He’d been weak enough once to allow a woman to get under his skin. Julia’s scornful rejection of him still galled him and the rage that had consumed him when he walked in on her and Henson still filled him with shame. No, Lucas would never again trust a woman. He would never wed, nor would he ever have children. In fact, it was safer not to have any children around him: he would not wish on any child the misery and the fear he had endured in his childhood. His attack on Henson had fuelled his fear that he was, as he had so often been told, just like his father, who had been unpredictable, with rage and violence constantly simmering just beneath the surface.

No, he must resist Mary. He had kissed her at a time when he was not himself, when he was weakened. Although...he recalled her assertion his kiss had been ‘pleasant’. That rankled. Pleasant? Pleasant wasn’t the word he would use to describe it. She was clearly too strait-laced to appreciate the sheer sensuality of such

a kiss. He recalled the soft sweetness of her mouth with a silent groan and he knew he must taste her again.

One more kiss. It won't mean anything. What could be the harm?

After all, Mary Vale was not his type—far too sensible, except in her luscious looks, of course, but he had learned the hard way beauty was skin deep. He would not step into that trap again.

In the meantime he must be patient. There was no help for it—he would have to wait for the lady herself to return to his bedchamber before his curiosity could be assuaged.

His hunger, he had to admit, might have to wait a bit longer.

* * *

It was the following day before he saw Mary again. He was mentally alert, although physically still weak, and he chafed at his confinement.

Mary entered, carrying a covered bowl he suspected contained more of that disgusting gruel Mrs Lindley deemed suitable for invalids. He scanned her figure with appreciation as she walked towards him.

'I have decided,' he announced, in his loftiest tone of voice—specifically designed to needle her— 'to take no further action over your attempted theft of my horse.'

Then he lay back to see what sort of reaction he provoked. He was bored and he was frustrated that Mary had been nowhere near him since the day before, when he had awoken. The servants were all too busy to pay him much attention and he was in

desperate need of entertainment. He had decided teasing Mary would prove an enjoyable way to while away the time. He would prod at her self-control and goad her into revealing the real Mary Vale.

Mary's step faltered at his words. Then she straightened her shoulders and smiled.

'How very magnanimous of you, my lord,' she said, her tone one of warm honey, although her eyes flashed.

Lucas bit back his smile and continued to regard her, straight-faced. 'If, that is, you satisfy my curiosity. I have not forgotten you owe me satisfaction on several points.'

Not the least of which will be another kiss.

'Satisfaction, my lord? How so?' She eyed him coolly, chin in the air.

'For a start, I want to know who you are. Yes—' he added as she opened her mouth, '—I know you are Mary Vale, widow—although not of this parish—but knowing your name tells me nothing about you. Where have you come from? Where are you going? Why were you in my woods? Indeed, why were you stealing my horse? I am afraid, Mrs Vale, you owe me answers that are long overdue.'

'Goodness.' She laughed, although her expression was wary. 'So many questions.'

She walked to the table at the foot of the bed to place the tray upon it, before facing him again. 'You will have to sit up, I think, if you are not to make a mess with your food.'

She approached the bed and slid her arm behind his back, helping him to sit. A wave of desire crashed over him as her lavender scent enveloped him and her warm breath caressed his skin. She pulled at his pillows, plumping them behind him. He wanted nothing more this minute than to drag her down beside him and steal the kiss he had promised himself, to feast on those lush, provocative lips until she begged for more.

How could her mere presence provoke such a longing within him when he had sworn to never again fall under any woman's spell? He cursed his weakness—it must have affected his mind as well as his body. He focused on the window opposite the bed, willing his mind and body back under his control, before looking at her again.

'Prevaricating will not prevent me from pursuing answers to my questions, Mary,' he said. His voice sounded strained, even to his ears. 'I shall have my satisfaction sooner or later, you know.'

She coloured, her blue eyes falling before his steady regard, and her pearly teeth bit into her lower lip, sending his pulse rate soaring once more. It had been an unfortunate choice of phrase under the circumstances. All he had to amuse himself at the moment was his imagination and it was sending his thoughts in a very uncomfortable direction. He deliberately flexed his injured shoulder, using the stab of pain to remind himself that women could not be trusted. He was lusting after Mary and yet he knew next to nothing about her.

He thought back to that day in the woods: the bone-jolting

fall from Sultan's back; the damp, peaty scent of the earth in his nostrils as he lay, winded, amongst the trees; drifting...so very tired...until he had been roused by a sudden sound. He had lifted his head to see Sultan being ridden away from him. He had—somehow—gained his feet; had found enough breath to shout. The rest was a blur. But...that sound...

'There was a cry.'

'A cry?'

'That day, in the woods. It sounded like a child.'

'Are you certain?' Mary turned away, walking to the end of the bed.

Lucas hesitated. Was he certain? 'I thought...I seem to recall something...'

'Might it have been a local child, playing in the woods?'

Lucas stiffened. 'No children are permitted on my property,' he growled.

Mary stared at him, her eyes wide. 'Why so vehement?'

He shrugged. It was nobody else's business.

Mary carried the tray to his bedside. 'But what harm...?'

'The matter is not up for debate. It does not concern you.' Lucas was not about to discuss his reasons for banning children with a virtual stranger, particularly one as adept as Mary at keeping her own secrets. 'Where have you been, Mary?'

Mary stilled, her eyes guarded. 'What do you mean—where have I been?'

She placed the tray on Lucas's lap.

‘Aaarrrgh!’ Pain speared his thigh. ‘Mary!’

The crockery clattered as Mary snatched the tray away. ‘Oh, no! I am so sorry! I didn’t think.’

As the pain subsided to a throb, Lucas smiled ruefully. ‘I cannot blame you, Mary, for I didn’t anticipate that either. A lesson for us both, I think?’

‘Yes, indeed. I shall take more care in future.’ Mary placed the tray gently on the bed. ‘There, although I fear it might prove more awkward for you.’

‘I have you to help with what I cannot manage for myself, though, do I not?’ Lucas grinned at the easily construed suspicion in Mary’s eyes. ‘So, I shall ask again, Mary. Where have you been, since yesterday, when I awoke.’

‘Oh, since yesterday. Sleeping, for the most part,’ she said.

‘All day? Until now?’

‘Well, not quite until now. I did eat. Speaking of which—’ she removed the cover from the bowl on the tray ‘—you should eat this before it gets cold.’

Lucas peered at the contents of the bowl and grimaced. ‘You must have been very tired.’ He picked up the spoon with little enthusiasm.

‘I cannot deny it was a relief to sleep in a bed again.’ Mary cast a meaningful look at the chair by the side of his bed.

Remorse nudged Lucas. Hadn’t Trant said that Mary had barely left his side whilst he had been ill? He had been lying here, frustrated by her absence, without a thought as to what she and

the rest of his household had been through.

‘How often did you sit with me, Mary?’

‘Every night, my lord.’

‘For pity’s sake, stop “my lord”-ing me. You are not a servant.’

‘What should I call you then, my l...sir?’

‘I should prefer Lucas, but I have no doubt you will deem it improper, Sensible Mary. And, in that case, sir will do.’

‘Yes...sir,’ she said, her lids lowering, but not before he glimpsed her expression. She clearly didn’t appreciate the nickname as it wasn’t the first time she had shown resentment at his use of it. But he had more pressing issues on his mind.

‘You stayed here for four nights running? All night? With no relief?’ he growled, vexed to think his servants would take such advantage.

‘It was my idea to sit with you during the night,’ she blurted out, with an anxious glance that piqued his curiosity.

Why was she suddenly on edge? Was she worried about his reaction to her answers? He knew she was not timid. What had he said to prompt this change?

As he watched she visibly took control of her emotions, drawing an audible breath before saying in a firm voice: ‘It was the least I could do, with everyone else so busy every day. You are not to blame Mrs Lindley or the others, for I insisted.’

He raised a brow. Come, this is a bit more feisty. Good for you, Mary.

‘And did you not sleep—in a bed—during the day?’

‘I find it impossible to sleep in the daytime.’

Her lids drooped, concealing her thoughts again. Lucas suppressed his frustration. He could not fathom her lightning changes in mood. Why was she so guarded?

He turned his attention to his food. ‘Do I really have to eat this...this...stuff?’ He poked at the gruel with the spoon.

‘The doctor said gruel is all you’re allowed. For now,’ she added quickly as she sent another anxious glance in his direction.

Why did she react as though she expected him to fly into a rage at any moment? What, or who, had caused her to view him with such trepidation? Had the servants warned her that his mood was, at times, on a knife’s edge?

And can I blame them if they have? He was aware his temper had been unpredictable of late, despite his best efforts to conceal his worries.

Lucas forced the scowl from his brow and relaxed his jaw, determined to coax Mary into a more relaxed frame of mind.

He eyed the bowl of gruel again, then looked at Mary, raising a brow as he smiled his best winning smile. Mary returned his look, her suspicion again clear.

‘It is too difficult to feed myself. I haven’t enough strength,’ he said, his voice a weak croak. ‘Please help me, dearest Mary.’

Mary pursed her lips, regarding him with narrowed eyes, then huffed a sigh as she sat on the edge of the bed and took the spoon from his slack grasp. Her wariness had vanished. His strategy had worked.

She dipped the spoon into the gruel and lifted it towards his mouth. Swiftly, he captured her hand, registering the tremor of her slender fingers as he did so.

'Take care, Mary,' he chided. 'You almost spilt some. I will steady your hand.'

He retained his hold as he guided the spoon to his mouth, relishing the sensation. As his lips closed around the bowl of the spoon, he looked at her, pleased with the success of his strategy as he saw the hint of a blush stain her cheeks and a smile hover on those luscious lips, although he still read caution in her beautiful blue eyes: caution and the merest hint of desire that promptly set his pulse soaring. He forced the gruel down, tearing his eyes from hers in an attempt to dampen his wayward urges once more.

Chapter Five

Mary's blood quickened as she fought to control her reaction to Rothley's touch. She felt the colour rise into her cheeks as her eyes met his and she was afraid he would read the desire the mere touch of his fingers had awakened deep within her.

She watched as he swallowed the gruel. The moment he released her hand, she snatched it away and replaced the spoon in the bowl.

'Perhaps if I hold the bowl for you?' she suggested, lifting it and holding it level with his chest.

Her eyes kept straying to the dark curls just visible in the open neck of his nightshirt. Determinedly, she fixed her gaze on his face. He appeared to have temporarily forgotten his questions,

but she was sure he would revisit the subject sooner or later. Her brain scrambled in an effort to invent a convincing story that did not reveal the existence of her children, but it was hard to concentrate on anything other than Rothley.

'This is disgusting,' he said, as he pushed his bowl away. 'Have you tried it, Mary?'

'No, but it is not I who has been ill. You must know it is good for you—it is all your stomach can cope with, after eating nothing for days. And if you do not eat, your strength will take longer to return and you will have to remain confined to your bed. Please, try and eat a wee bit.'

As he ate another spoonful, Mary pondered her physical reaction to him. Why did she still desire him, despite the tales of his past? There was no room for such a man in her life, not even for a short time. She was a mother with responsibilities and she would not expose her children to another man who resented their very existence.

To be fair, although Rothley had been a touch tetchy—and could he be blamed after what had happened?—there had been no angry outbursts such as she had been led to expect. At least, not yet, but then her father had never been as bad when sober. It was only when drunk... Mary suppressed a shudder at the memory. She recalled the stench of alcohol when she had found Rothley. Had he been drunk that day?

She had, out of necessity, become adept at avoiding confrontation, whether with her father or, more recently, with

Michael, whose temper had spiralled in tandem with his drinking. He had become ever more violent and the more Mary had been forced to adopt the role of appeaser, the more she had resented the necessity to repress her own feelings in order to pacify him.

Was the pattern set to continue whilst she remained at the Hall? And what about when she and the children arrived at her old home? Her father was unlikely to welcome her with open arms after she had shamed him by running away on the eve of her seventeenth birthday. Yet again she questioned her wisdom in going back, but what other choice did she have? Homelessness and starvation? The workhouse? No choice at all. At least she would be there to protect her children. There had been no one to stand between Mary and her father when he turned to drink after her mother had died.

Were there no men, she wondered, with something akin to despair, who did not believe it their right to intimidate and abuse those who had no choice but to pander to their every whim?

'Mary, Mary...'

The quiet words pierced her reverie and she came back to the present with a gasp.

'Will you tell me what you were thinking about?' he asked, then smiled ruefully. 'No, of course you won't. But you looked so very solemn, Mary, sitting there, your thoughts turned inwards, your face so very sad. Can I not help? What is it that fills your eyes with such dread?'

A lump formed in her throat, but she was determined not to cry. She stretched her lips in a smile.

'It is of no matter, my l...sir,' she answered. She glanced down and saw he had hardly touched his food. 'Please eat,' she said. 'It must be cold by now and that will not improve the taste, I can assure you. The doctor will be pleased if we can report you are eating well when he next visits.'

'The doctor? You mean Robert Preece? How many times has he visited?'

'Every day whilst you were fevered, sir.'

Rothley's jaw tightened as his brow lowered.

Mary tried to quell her trickle of unease. Why should you imagine he's angry with you? For heaven's sake, stop being such a ninny! Her disquiet remained, however.

'His last visit was yesterday morning, a short time before you awoke,' she added.

Rothley said no more, but finished his gruel, his expression growing more and more disgusted. He settled back with a sigh. Mary busied herself with clearing away the tray, her awareness of his dark gaze following her making her slow and clumsy in her task.

'Come, Mary, leave that and sit down—' glancing over, Mary saw Rothley slant a knowing grin at her '—on the chair, if you prefer. I would know more of the mysterious lady who happened to be walking through my woods at the very time I had need of her.'

His expression said it all: he knew precisely the effect he was having upon her. Her resolve steadied as she remained where she stood. Did he believe she would fall at his feet in response to his manly allure and handsome countenance? Mayhap he had reason to so believe, after that kiss, but he would find she was made of sterner stuff, she vowed. She would not allow her treacherous body to dictate her relationship with this man.

'There is naught to tell, sir. I was passing through. There is no mystery.'

'Where is your destination? Is there no one to worry over your non-arrival?'

Mary laughed and, even to her ears, it had a bitter sound. 'There is no one to worry over me. I am in no hurry to leave.'

Rothley indicated the chair by the bedside. 'Please...sit down, Mary.' He waited until she sat before saying, 'You still have not revealed your destination, which leads me to wonder why?'

Mary twisted her hands in her lap. How much could she divulge without letting slip the existence of the children? Mrs Lindley and Ellen had both urged her to conceal their presence from Rothley, but had not said why he was so opposed to the idea of children at the Hall. Nor was she inclined to reveal her family name, given the past acquaintance between their fathers.

'I do not go there by choice,' she said. 'I have no alternative.'

'You claim there is no mystery, yet I find myself more mystified every time we speak. If it gives you no pleasure to go to this place, why go? Why did you not remain in...wherever it

is you have travelled from...and find employment there?'

'I could not remain there, sir.' It was a weak reply, but Mary could think of no other. She could read the scepticism in his eyes.

'If you will not tell me your destination, tell me where you have travelled from, Mary, and why.'

'I am a widow, sir...'

'That much I do know.'

'You asked me a question. Be pleased to permit me to answer.' She was determined not to be cowed by him.

He grinned at her, unabashed. 'My apologies, Sensible Mary. Please, do continue.'

Mary took a deep breath. She had nothing to be ashamed of. Why should she be ashamed of escaping the dreadful fate her father had planned for her?

'I come from a village close to Newcastle where...'

'But that is not where you grew up.'

'Well, no. How did you...?'

His lips quirked. 'I detected a hint of an accent, Mary. I guessed you were Scottish.' His face grew serious, his dark eyes narrowing as he stared at her. 'Have you really walked all the way from Newcastle to here?'

'No, not all the way, w— I encountered many generous souls along the way who offered to share their transport. I have been very fortunate.'

'Your husband failed to leave provision for you? How did you live, before he died?'

‘He was steward to a gentleman and we lived in a cottage on his estate. Michael, my husband, died in a fall and his employer allowed u—me to remain at the cottage. I took in sewing for the household and I also helped with correspondence and other business in return for food and pin money. But then Mr Wen—the gentleman died unexpectedly...’

Mary faltered. They had been dark days, with two young children and losing the one hope she had of remaining independent. ‘His son did not wish to continue his father’s arrangement and I had no other way of earning money to pay rent. I had to leave.’

Rothley’s dark brows drew together in a frown. ‘His father’s arrangement?’

‘Yes. As I said, I did sewing and some letter writing. He entrusted me with both the household and the estate accounts. I have a good head for...’ Mary registered Rothley’s expression and his tone. She was momentarily lost for words. ‘Oh!’ She hauled in an indignant breath. ‘You think...you think...!’

Words failed her. Belatedly, she understood precisely what Rothley implied.

‘I do not condemn you, Mary. The father clearly had excellent taste, but I can understand the son’s reluctance to take on his father’s obligation. I see now the difficulty in obtaining further employment in the area.’

She leapt to her feet, her cheeks burning. Rothley’s hand shot out and grasped her wrist. She twisted and pulled, but could not

break free.

‘Wait, Mary, please. There is no need to be ashamed. You said yourself you are only travelling from necessity and that your intended destination is not from choice. I can offer you an alternative. Stay here, with me. I will take care of you.’

He wants me as his whore. He is no better than Simon. As his grip loosened, Mary snatched her wrist free and backed out of his reach. She whirled to face him.

‘Just because I am a widow you gentlemen seem to believe I exist simply to slake your thirst. Well, I don’t! Do you hear me? I shall never...’

She paused, willing her voice not to wobble. ‘I am a respectable woman and I beg leave to inform you I resent your...your...insinuation...that I might have behaved immorally with Mr Wendo— with my employer. He was a lovely gentleman and extraordinarily kind to me and my...my...Michael. I...’

To her horror, tears blurred her vision. She had never imagined Mr Wendover’s kindness to her could be so badly misconstrued. Her breath juddered, loud in her ears. She must get out of here. She ran to the door.

‘Mary...wait...’

She ignored him, slamming the door behind her.

Chapter Six

Lucas tightened his hands into fists. What had possessed him? Of all the cack-handed fools! He didn’t even want a mistress. The words had spilled out without thought. He had eagerly

anticipated Mary's visit and now he had driven her away with his ill-considered words. Why had he blurted out his suspicions? Would it have hurt him to conceal his thoughts, at least until he could decide if there was any merit in them?

Her reaction had been an honest one, he felt sure, although it would not be the first time he had been taken in by a woman. But...Mary? Was she such a skilled actress, to put on such a convincing performance?

He was roused from his conjectures by the rattle of the doorknob. His heart leapt at the sound, but it was not Mary's expressive countenance that met his eager gaze, but the impassive features of Trant.

'The doctor is here to see you, my lord.' The valet crossed the room to pick up the tray discarded by Mary. 'Shall you require me to remain?'

'No, thank you, Trant, there is no need. Please send Dr Preece up.'

'Very well, my lord.'

'I showed myself up,' a cheerful voice announced from the doorway. 'No need for Trant to be put out, I know my way around well enough by now.'

Lucas experienced an unexpected spurt of pleasure at the familiar voice and features of his old friend, Robert Preece. He felt his heart shift in his chest. The burden that had weighed so heavily on him since his father's death eased a fraction.

'Rob...' he held out his hand '...it is good to see you.'

Why had he been at such pains to deny all his old friends and neighbours since his return to Rothley? Had he really convinced himself no one in this world could be trusted? That every person beyond the boundaries of the Hall was blighted by the same immoral bankruptcy as his erstwhile London intimates? Could he now put the past behind him and rebuild old friendships?

Robert approached the bed, a quizzical smile on his lips, and grasped Lucas's hand.

'It is a pleasure to hear you say that, Lucas. After all, you have not been the most attentive friend and neighbour since your return from the metropolis.'

'Touché, my friend. As direct and to the point as ever, I see.'

'I have determined to make the most of your current weakened state, old chap, for I am persuaded that, once you are on your feet again, you will revert to that evasive fellow I have been trying to pin down these past two years.'

Guilt washed over Lucas at his treatment of his old friend. 'I fear I would have provided very poor company in those years.'

'That would make no difference to a true friend, Lucas. What happened in London to make you shun all company bar that of your mama?'

Despite himself, Lucas laughed. 'Goodness, man, you never hesitate to walk where others fear to tread, do you?'

Robert shrugged. 'You might bite my head off for asking difficult questions, but at least you are incapable of knocking my head from my shoulders at such presumption.'

He stood smiling down at Lucas for a moment, then turned away and placed his bag on the table at the foot of the bed. He removed his coat, then approached the bed, rolling his shirtsleeves to his elbows.

'Whilst you are deciding how little you can reveal in order to satisfy my curiosity, let us dispense with the tedious medical side of this visit,' he suggested. 'Then we can have a proper catch-up of all our respective news. For I, too, have led a full and active life since we were last confidants. You may therefore rest assured that my side of the conversation will not be confined to inane responses to your titbits...' His voice rose an octave, mimicking the tone of a gossiping woman. '"Did you really, Lucas?" "And what did you say then, Lucas?" "Goodness, whoever would have believed it?"'

They both laughed, then Robert sobered.

'No problem becomes easier by keeping it to oneself, Lucas. You would do well to remember that.'

'Who says I have a problem?'

'That is your pride talking, my friend.' Rob eased Lucas forward in the bed, helped him to take off his nightshirt and removed the bandage from his shoulder. 'It is no secret your father did not leave the Hall in the best of financial situations. Sir Gerald has made certain of that, gabble-mongering about his expectations, both in the village and all around the district.'

'Expectations?'

'The terms of his loan to your father are no secret. He is

convinced he will be in possession of that land of yours next to Dunwick by the end of the year.'

Lucas clenched his teeth, both against the stab of pain as Rob manipulated his shoulder and at the mention of Sir Gerald Quartly, a local landowner and mine owner who lived on the far side of the village at Dunwick Manor. The loan had been secured against the Hall's best pasture and arable land, and the next payment was due on the Quarter Day: Michaelmas, the twenty-ninth of September. Barely three weeks away.

Dread snatched at his insides, twisting his stomach into knots. Unless he obtained a good price for his livestock at Hexham market he would default on the loan and the estate would lose its most productive land. Thank goodness he had been in the right place to stop the theft of his sheep.

'That seems fine, all healing very nicely,' Robert said, rupturing the silence that had greeted his comment about Sir Gerald. 'You have a good range of movement in the joint, which is a positive sign. Now, let me examine that thigh.'

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