

“With poignant moments, touches of mystery, and stirring faith, *Dusk’s Darkest Shores* by Carolyn Miller reunites a long-presumed-spinster and an injured war hero. I thoroughly enjoyed their unfolding romance and their humorous, teasing banter as the two gradually progress from acquaintanceship to friendship to true love.”

JULIE KLASSEN, author of *A Castaway in Cornwall*

“*Dusk’s Darkest Shores* brings Regency England to life with a charming and inspiring romance that is sure to warm readers’ hearts. They will fall in love with the strong but wounded hero, Adam Edgerton, and the kind and caring heroine, Mary Bloomfield. This wonderful story will keep you turning pages until you reach the very romantic and satisfying ending. Well-written and highly recommended!”

CARRIE TURANSKY, best-selling author of *No Ocean Too Wide*  
and *No Journey Too Far*

“From the first page, I was caught up in the journey of a wounded war hero facing a new battle as his once-certain future crumbles around him, and a woman both gentle and capable who has built a purposeful life and relegated love to a girlish dream. Carolyn Miller’s authentic portrayal of real-life struggles, raw pain, and faith in the midst of difficult circumstances will resonate with readers. A heartfelt and satisfying novel sure to captivate fans of inspirational Regency romance.”

AMANDA BARRATT, author of *The White Rose Resists*

“*Dusk’s Darkest Shores* is all about coming into the light, a joyful journey of restoration amid the lush beauty of England’s Lake District. Mary and Adam will seem like not only book characters but beloved friends. The Regency Wallflowers series has a beautiful beginning!”

LAURA FRANTZ, Christy Award–winning author of *Tidewater Bride*

“Carolyn Miller has penned another absolutely beautiful novel. With profound messages of hope and faith, along with charming wit and a sweet romance, *Dusk’s Darkest Shores* will captivate Regency readers. An excellent start to what will surely be a series to remember.”

JOANNA BARKER, author of *Otherwise Engaged*

“Carolyn Miller’s main character, Mary, is delightfully unique and fascinating for the era. I was pulled in immediately by her personality, and then by the well-crafted setting and beautiful language. The intrigue and conflict led me quickly along, and although I loved the beginning, I was blown away by the end.”

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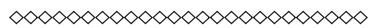
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REGENCY WALLFLOWERS



*Dusk's*  
Darkest Shores

CAROLYN MILLER



*Dusk's Darkest Shores*

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## Chapter 1

AMBERLEY  
LAKE DISTRICT, ENGLAND  
MARCH 1811

Music and laughter swirled through the assembly room, a shiny, animated scene within a life-sized bauble. Smile stiffening, Mary Bloomfield surveyed the event, which bulged with all the notables of the district. Couples twirled under the candles of enormous iron chandeliers, candlelight flickering across the features of the polished and assured. Excitement suffused the faces of the young, the old, the newly married, the long married, the hoping-to-soon-be-married, all those complacent in their bubble of ease. Mary relaxed as Emily Hardy drew near, her pretty face aglow.

“Oh, Mary,” she gasped, clutching Mary’s arm as she laughed, the soft sheen of cream satin gloves a marked contrast to Mary’s brown kerseymere sleeve. “Isn’t this all so delightful? I am sure I have not sat down for a single dance!”

“You have been much sought after.”

Emily’s blue eyes softened, as if in pity.

Before Emily could speak her sympathy, Mary hurried on. “These musicians are rather good, aren’t they? I do not think I have ever heard Mr. Pendle play the flute so well.”

“I am certain I have never heard anything quite so pretty. We must have this trio play at our wedding soon. Do you think Adam will agree?”

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"I'm sure Adam will agree to anything you suggest, and his parents will likely also. They are quite as besotted as their son, it appears." Mary glanced at Mr. and Mrs. Edgerton. Their plump features shone with delight, as much with pride in their prospective daughter-in-law as with the pride naturally expected of parents of a war hero.

The Edgertons' beaming faces turned. Their smiles widened yet further in elated approval as they regarded Emily. But really, what was there not to approve? Emily was the very picture of perfection. From the top of her carefully coiffed golden curls to the tips of her beribboned slippers, she was everything charming and pleasing to the eye.

Mary curtsied as they drew near. "Good evening."

"Oh, good evening, Miss Bloomfield." Mr. Edgerton nodded. "Such a lovely dance, is it not?" Before she could answer, he continued. "But I have not yet seen you dancing."

A corner of her mouth tipped up. Nor was he likely to. There were few unattached gentlemen here in Amberley, the legacy of the town's enthusiastic response of sending its sons to the war against France. Such a patriotic demonstration, disproportionate to Amberley's population, meant the higher number of women would forever advantage gentlemen seeking partners with whom to dance. Or with whom to partner in life. A fact, at the ripe old age of nine-and-twenty, she had long grown reconciled to.

"Perhaps you might offer Miss Bloomfield your arm," his wife suggested kindly.

Mary demurred. "I'm sure he would much prefer to dance with his daughter-to-be."

His eyes brightened, and he turned to Emily, whose countenance quickly approximated his. He asked the question, and, after an apologetic glance at Mary, she accepted prettily, and they both moved to join the dancing.

"And how is your son?" Mary asked Mrs. Edgerton.

"Oh, did Emily not tell you? Adam will soon be returning home! We received a letter just the other day."

"How wonderful for you all."

"Yes. It will be marvelous to see him, especially as he and Emily have

spent so little time in each other's company these past years. We can now start planning for their wedding."

"Forgive me, but I did not realize that the situation in the peninsula allowed visits home just yet. Robert has certainly never mentioned any such thing."

A crease appeared between Mrs. Edgerton's brows. "I don't believe they were serving in the same regiment."

"That must be it," Mary agreed easily.

Mrs. Edgerton shifted to answer a neighbor's query on the other side, leaving Mary to watch the dancing once more. The music picked up pace and volume, as if celebrating the inclusion of Emily and Adam's father, as if recognizing them with extra favor due to their connection of loving and being loved by one of the district's favorite sons.

Adam Edgerton. Where was he now? Basking in the triumph of the latest victory in Spain? Lapping up the adulation of London? Sometimes it was difficult to reconcile her brother's playmate with the formidable soldier he had become, the man whose rise from the ranks to commissioned officer had accompanied several bouts of heroic exploits, including a daring rescue under enemy fire of another of Amberley's own sons. Her brother had never achieved such heights, but Robert's need for spectacles had meant his inclusion in the armed forces had been more a surprise than a certainty, even if he were only allowed to work in the medical corps. Of course, Father, a practitioner of medicine himself, had been cautiously gratified to see his son included in such ranks, to know the legacy of his occupation continued.

Beyond the dancing figures, Mary's stepmother sat with others of her acquaintance, no doubt good-naturedly gossiping about the prospects of her daughter. Mary's own mother she could scarce remember, her death occurring when Mary had been but two. Her father's second marriage a few years later had resulted in a kindly mother Mary regarded quite as her own and, eventually, a sister ten years Mary's junior. Joanna resembled neither of her elder siblings, possessing the physical qualities of height, ruddy locks, shining eyes, and clear skin that had eluded her brother and sister. Mother hoped a match might be made this year should Mr. Peters finally come up to scratch. Father, it seemed, was not



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quite so determined to see his daughter married off to a legal clerk, even if he were the second son of Amberley's third biggest landowner. But his mild protests fell on deaf ears.

As if summoned by Mary's thoughts, Joanna appeared in the whirlring couples, laughing as the candlelight glinted off her tresses. A clearly smitten Mr. Peters led her to the end of the rows with a gratified expression. Little wonder when the youngest Bloomfield possessed a tendency to flirtatiousness that made some suspect her motives. Perhaps that was what had kept Mr. Peters from proposing, a hesitation until he could be certain that Joanna's heart was truly his.

A disturbance at the door drew most eyes to the figure of an agitated-looking Mr. Croker, who stood hat in hand, clearly not dressed for the assembly. The music changed, and her father hurried towards her. "Mary?"

"It is time?"

He nodded, and together they made their farewells and moved to Mr. Croker, whose air of relief threaded concern within.

"How is Sally?" she asked him, her short legs struggling to keep up with the farmer's long strides as he exited the building.

"She be asking for you, miss." He glanced at her. "And you, too, sir," he added, in an almost apologetic tone.

Father chuckled softly and shook his head. "I know it is my daughter that Sally wants." He retrieved his medical bag from their hired carriage and issued instructions that the servant wait for his wife and daughter. "We shall travel with Croker, here."

"Yessir."

Mary grasped Mr. Croker's outstretched hand, and he hauled her up into his gig. She clutched her shawl around her shoulders. Thankfully, the March evening was unusually mild. "How long between her pains?"

"She said it was time."

After five children, Sally would know. Mary glanced at her father, whose presence tonight served more as precaution than anything else. Mrs. Liddell's role as midwife and Mary's role as nurse during births were generally preferred by all, save the occupants in the house on the hill. Lord and Lady Carstairs preferred the London mode of medical

practitioners, or so Father had said, as Mary never had visited the great metropolis herself. But after a difficult birth last time and a pregnancy that had necessitated bedrest for many weeks, Father had insisted he be nearby when Sally Croker's birthing time arrived.

Mary spent the remainder of the short journey praying for Sally, for the babe, for Mr. Croker and his other children. Within minutes they arrived, and she was helped down. Her brown skirts swished as she moved to the open door, reminding her of the need to exchange her best gown for something more practical. Though judging from the whimpers of pain coming from the bedchamber, there was no time for anything save the white apron which the eldest Croker lass held out to her.

"Mama said you might need this," Betsy whispered, blue eyes large.

"Thank you," Mary murmured, efficiently wrapping the large pinafore-like apron around her, only pausing long enough to stroke the seven-year-old's cheek affectionately. "You will have a new brother or sister soon. Won't that be wonderful?"

"I hope it's a girl. I want a sister," she confided. With four pranksome, noisy brothers, it was hardly a surprise.

"I'm sure God will give your family just what you need." Mary leaned down. "But I'd like for you to have a sister, too."

Betsy's smile held a note of conspiracy as Mary tied the apron's long ribbons around her waist. The apron's size suited Mrs. Croker's girth far better than Mary's thin frame. Still, it would protect her clothes effectively.

With an encouraging smile for the children peeping from their sleeping pallets, she pushed open the bedchamber door.

Mrs. Liddell peered underneath the blankets obscuring Sally's lower body, the village midwife muttering to herself. Father stood holding Mrs. Croker's wrist, an expression Mary recognized as worry wrinkling his brow.

"Hello, Mrs. Croker, Mrs. Liddell." She hurried to the bed and grasped Sally's other hand.

Sally's reddened face eased. "I'm that glad you're here."

"There's nowhere else I'd be."

"Oh, go on with you. Such a lovely, soothing voice you have—oh!"

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Another pain gripped Mrs. Croker, and she squeezed Mary's hand tightly. As the pang passed, the grip eased, and Mary offered a sip of water, which Mrs. Croker swallowed eagerly.

Mary glanced at her father, whose worried expression had smoothed. "Her pulse is not as rapid now."

*Thank You, God. Bring Your peace here. Help this child be born soon.*

"I be thinking it's near time." Mrs. Liddell's dark eyes flicked from Sally to Mary. There were some who said Hannah Liddell reminded them of a witch, with her crooked back and twisted features and her knowledge of birthing and healing and herbs. Of course, there were some who said similar things about Mary, because of the times she had prayed and seen God intervene. Mysterious ways tended to lead the ignorant to superstition.

Mary nodded, then bent to Sally's face, gaze fixed on hers. "You know what to do. Your body will be ready to push soon, so rest as much as you can between contractions."

Sally closed her eyes, as if to summon strength.

Mary placed her hand on Sally's shoulder, praying aloud for God's power to cover the situation.

Sally's body stiffened, sweat beading her brow as another contraction swelled. She clutched Mary's hand, squeezing so tightly Mary had to suppress a gasp.

"I can see the baby's foot." Hannah's voice held a note of concern.

Father hurried to the end of the bed as Mary worked to ease the panic filling Sally's eyes. "You will be well, the babe will be well," she comforted, with a calmness her heart did not feel. But underlying the concern was the certainty that God was here, was intervening, was helping. "You need not fear. God is present with us."

Sally released a shuddery breath, even as the movements at the end of the bed hastened.

Father gestured to Mary, and they moved to the side of the room, out of earshot. "The baby is in the breech position. We shall have to manage things carefully and maneuver it to achieve an effective position. I'm afraid this will be very painful for poor Sally."

"What's happening?" Sally called, fear lacing her voice.

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Mary hastened to her side, offering a smile even as she repossessed Sally's hand and held it firmly. "I'm afraid your baby is being a mite stubborn and must be manipulated into position."

"Will it hurt?"

"Of course," Hannah muttered in her ever-caustic way.

"Yes, I'm afraid it will," Mary said quietly. "But remember, you can do this. God is with us. He cares for us."

Father returned to the room, followed by Mr. Croker, whose fearful expression mirrored his wife's. "What's happening? Is Sally going to be all right?"

"Come, sit." Mary pushed him gently into the wooden chair beside the bed. "Sally will appreciate your support. And your prayers."

He flushed. "But I don't know what to pray."

"Pray for peace. Pray for Sally's strength. Pray for your new child."

He nodded, eyes fixed on his wife's face as she gave another gasp, one that turned into a groan.

"Mama?" Betsy peeked in the partially opened door.

Mary rushed to her. "Betsy, my dear. Come, we must let the adults be. Your mama is a little busy helping your new sibling into the world."

"Sister?"

"We don't know yet." Mary pulled the door shut behind her and wrapped an arm around Betsy's thin shoulders as she smiled at the other children dressed in faded, much-patched nightgowns, wearing identical expressions of fear. "Your mama and father need you to be very good, as Mrs. Liddell and my father help your mother's new baby arrive safely."

"Your da's the doctor," Tommy said wisely.

"Yes."

"And Mrs. Liddell is a witch." He nodded.

"Indeed, she is not," Mary said. "She is a very kind lady, helping others as she does."

"She looks like a witch."

"She cannot help her looks any more than I can help having brown hair, or you can help having blue eyes." Mary tapped him tenderly under the chin. "We should be kind to others and speak kindly of them."

"That's what Mama says," Betsy said, solemnity in her wide eyes.

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"Your mother is very wise. Now, if we want to be kind to others, perhaps you can help your father by everyone hopping into your beds and closing your eyes. Then when he returns, he might be so pleased that there might be currant buns for you tomorrow."

"Really?"

"Really." Well, only if she remembered to include currant buns in her delivery of baked goods to the Croker house tomorrow. *Lord, help me not to forget.* "But only if you snuggle into bed now."

"Will you tuck us in?" Tommy asked. "Mama always does."

"Of course."

Mary tucked and prayed and kissed the tiny brows, the pleasure of such a task tugging at an unexpected knot deep in her heart that she might never do so for children she called her own. Still, she would be a good aunt, a good friend to those who needed her. "Good night, dear ones," she murmured, twisting the oil lamp's wick to low. "I'm sure we shall be out shortly."

"And we'll pretend to be asleep," Betsy reassured.

"Your father will be pleased to know he has such obedient children." She waited a moment longer, then reentered the bedchamber.

Sally panted, grunting with exertion, the veins on her neck bulging with the effort.

"Good, come here." Father signaled Mary near. "She is losing blood, and her pulse is getting weaker. Hannah and I are at a loss."

Mary glanced at Sally writhing on the bed. *Lord, what do we do?* She stilled, listening for the small voice within.

*Over.*

Over? She frowned. Very well. "Perhaps . . . turning her over, on all fours, would help the baby release."

"Yes." Her father looked surprised. "Hannah? What do you think?"

"Aye." She jerked a nod at the bed. "We should get Sally upright, but Fred can barely think."

Mary turned her attention to where Mr. Croker sat, slack-jawed, watching the proceedings with glassy eyes.

"Croker," Father snapped.

The farmer jerked and seemed to come to himself.

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“Mr. Croker, please help me assist Sally. She needs to shift onto her hands and knees, so she can push this baby out.” Mary wrapped an arm around Sally’s thick shoulders and lifted but was barely able to move her. “Mr. Croker.” Her voice sharpened. “Now.”

He blinked, rose, and wrapped a meaty hand around his wife’s shoulders, then obeyed Mary’s instructions to help Sally to the bed’s side and turn her so she could be supported by the bedframe.

Hannah Liddell scurried near, examined Sally again, and barked instructions.

“Sally.” Mary crouched, waiting until the exhausted woman’s eyes met hers. “We need you to focus. It’s time. Let’s meet your precious baby. Ready?”

The poor woman looked drained, her features sagging, her gaze dull. She nodded limply.

“Now push.”

Sally’s eyes closed as she concentrated. She released a thin screech of exertion.

“Help hold her, Croker,” Father commanded.

One push.

*Please, God.*

A second push.

“I can see its legs.”

Sally was weeping, puffing, her face red and tight. “I can’t do this. I can’t—”

“You can.” Mary gripped Sally’s hand. “And you will. Now take a breath and try again.”

Sally obeyed, then squeezed shut her eyes and concentrated, straining away.

“Good, good,” Father said. “We have the legs out. Congratulations, Sally, it’s a little girl.”

“Hear that, love?” Mr. Croker said. “A little girl.”

“Betsy will be pleased,” Sally gasped.

“So help her meet her sister. One big final push. Ready?”

Sally nodded, new determination filling her eyes. She gritted her teeth, crying out in a groan of pain as Mrs. Liddell helped tug the babe

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free, and Father scooped the infant into his arms and commenced his ministrations.

"Oh, congratulations, Sally." Mary rubbed her shoulder soothingly. "You've done very well. Your babe will be as bonny a lass as Betsy."

"Can I see my baby?"

The swift look from her father shot a spike of fear inside Mary. The baby needed to cry, needed to breathe. *Lord, please touch her now.* "In just a moment," Mary said, her encouragement meant to distract the new mother for a moment. "Let's first get you comfortable in bed."

"Wait." Mrs. Liddell held a damp cloth.

As Hannah performed the needed ablutions, Mary hurried to where her father rubbed the infant's limbs with a dry towel.

"She must start breathing." He slapped the tiny girl on the bottom, eliciting a weak cry.

"Thank You, God," Mary murmured.

"Amen." Her father's glance held a wealth of understanding.

"My baby?"

"She's being wrapped now," Mary called, as her father efficiently swaddled the infant in the muslin wrap that had seen use by the Crokers' other children.

Delight suffused the parents' exhausted features as their new child was placed in Sally's arms. Mary smiled. "She's beautiful."

"Of course she is." Fred gazed at his wife, adoration shining in his eyes. "Just like her ma."

Tears pricked, and Mary turned away. "I will go make some tea." She escaped the room, nearly bumping into Betsy's nightgowned form near the door.

"Is Mama all better?"

"Yes." Mary smoothed her tousled curls. "And I think you will be very happy."

"I have a sister?"

"You might need to go and see." She opened the door. Surely Sally would be thrilled for Betsy to see her longed-for sister.

Betsy slipped into the bedchamber as the other children remained fast asleep, Tommy's thumb stuck in his mouth.

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Mary's heart twisted again and, after kindling the fire to resume boiling water, she slumped into the wooden chair beside the table, allowing the rush and tension to slowly ebb away. It was foolish to hope, to dream that motherhood would one day be hers. Best to stifle such feelings. God was enough for her. He had blessed her in so many ways. To want more was selfish, was greedy, was wrong.

She should be content.

"I *am* content," she whispered fiercely in the gloomy shadows.

So why did something within persist in wanting more?



## *Chapter 2*

On a mild spring day such as today, one could hardly indulge in the discontent induced by private darkness. Indeed—Mary eyed the shining lake, nestled as a pearl between green velvet hills—there could be few finer vistas in all of England.

With reluctance she withdrew her gaze and carefully snipped rosemary flowers from the garden that lined the road, placing them in her basket. The benefit of this garden was twofold. It provided a lovely view for those of Father's patients whose needs necessitated a longer stay in the rooms of their home used for such purposes, as they overlooked the garden and the peaceful hills and vales beyond. The garden also contained a wealth of flowers and herbs, nearly all of which were used to provide traditional compositions in accompaniment with the oft-expensive medicines and powders that had to be transported from London, or sometimes down from Glasgow.

For many of the poorer laborers, opportunity to rest and be fed healthy meals and elixirs at Father's cottage infirmary was healing enough. For those of greater income, Father's reputation as an Edinburgh-trained apothecary-surgeon meant his advice was not only sought out but embraced, even if some with greater social aspirations than sense considered him rather less than gentlemanly, due to his practical administrations of medical treatments rather than the prescribing nature of London physicians.

She moved to collect some stalks of lavender. When the flowers were

boiled with cider and water, a most versatile and soothing solution was produced and used for everything from sleep troubles to toothache to hair tonics. She lifted a cut sprig and inhaled its spicy-sweet scent.

Beyond the low hedge a gig rumbled by.

She straightened in time to catch Emily wave a hand, a beaming smile filling her features.

Of course. She must be heading up to the Edgerton farm. No doubt the family wanted her there for the special homecoming, or at least to discuss further details of such things. For the return of the war hero was all any of the village wanted to talk about.

Following her morning visit to the Crokers to check on Sally and the new baby, and to give the children the promised currant buns, she had fulfilled her mother's request and visited the milliner's in the village and been informed by no fewer than three persons about the arrival of Adam Edgerton on the morrow.

"Oh, Miss Bloomfield, is this not exciting? Can you believe we are so fortunate in our little village to have one of England's heroes return to us?"

"I'm sure none would be so filled with anticipation as Mr. and Mrs. Edgerton."

"Oh, and brave Albert Jamieson. He owes Lieutenant Edgerton his life, after all. I'm sure that will be quite an occasion."

"As will be the reunion with Miss Emily Hardy. She and Adam Edgerton will make such a handsome couple, don't you agree?"

"Indeed, they will."

All sorts of festivities were rumored to be planned, from a turtle dinner for the notables of the district to a special picnic for the village's younger members.

Mary's age and station meant an invitation to either event was unlikely. Not that it mattered. She might have once trailed her brother and his friend as they walked the various hills overlooking Windermere, but that was long ago, and her interest in Adam had long been only as her brother's friend. Emily, eight years Mary's junior, was closer to Joanna's age, but seemed to possess a maturity yet to be seen in her sister.

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Poor Joanna. When they had finally returned from the Crokers' last night, it was to discover Joanna had faced some challenges of her own.

"Finally, you are back!" Joanna's petulant expression never boded well.

A glance at their weary mother held no further clues, as she quickly excused herself.

"I cannot believe that man!"

Had Mr. Peters overstepped? Mary removed her gloves and stretched her neck.

"You missed it, having left shortly before it happened. Joseph Beecham asked me to dance and, well, I had no choice but to refuse him. Dance with a butcher's son? I'd sooner die!"

Mary's eyes widened. "Oh, but Joanna—"

"Don't look at me like that, Mary. I know you think I should have accepted him, but ugh, I simply cannot stand the sight of him, let alone the smell. Can you think where those hands have been?"

"Joseph Beecham does an honest job—"

"Don't try to defend him, Mary. You don't know what he did next."

Mary willed her expression to appear penitent, and awaited her sister's next cause for outrage.

"When I refused, along came Mr. Jamieson, and I was never more grateful to accept his hand. Well, you should have seen the look Joseph Beecham gave me. I declare if Mr. Benjamin Jamieson had not been supporting me, I might well have fainted!"

"But surely you know it is impolite to refuse one gentleman's offer to dance, then accept the next."

"Hmph. Such rules are ridiculous in the extreme. So many men seem to think young ladies have no mind of their own. *I* certainly don't think a young lady should be obliged to dance with a man just because he has a nerve to ask her. And Joseph Beecham seemed to have some nerve!"

"You must be aware such an attitude appears very rude. And what about Mr. Peters? I thought he was your choice."

"Oh, he is pleasant enough, I suppose. But I must say he does not seem to have a lot to say for himself at times. I found Mr. Jamieson a far more interesting conversationalist. After all, with a brother who has

gone to war and had such exciting experiences, one can hardly expect otherwise.”

Mary blinked. “But you have encouraged poor Mr. Peters to think you’ll accept his suit. Do you want to be labelled as a flirt?”

“I don’t mind saying, Mary, that it seems rather petty of you to make such observations. But then I suppose it is inevitable, especially when I was fortunate enough to receive invitations for every dance, when others, well . . .” She eyed Mary with a sly look from under her eyelids.

That expression always caused a slight hardening of Mary’s heart towards her foolish, headstrong sister. Yes, Joanna was young and impetuous; yes, Mary was supposed to love her sister, but sometimes Joanna seemed to possess a very selfish core. Had she been overindulged, much fussed over as the child born ten years after Mary? Or was it simply her looks and pretty ways that had blinded others to her less attractive qualities?

“I did not dance last night, that is true,” Mary finally replied, thankful for the calmness in her voice that had a tendency to dampen her sister’s taunts.

“I suppose next you will say you had no desire to.” Her sister sniffed and turned her head.

“If I had been asked, I would have accepted, regardless of who asked me.”

“I suppose that is your way of saying you are better than I!”

Mary stifled a sigh, regret kneading her heart at her o’er hasty words. “I’m sorry you think that of me. I am certainly well aware of my faults.”

“Like the fact you never care about your clothes.” Her sister eyed the brown gown critically. “Don’t tell me you wore that to the birth.”

“Very well, I won’t.”

Joanna gave an unexpected snort of laughter, her humor restored by Mary’s dry response. “If only you would follow my advice and wear something that flatters your complexion, surely you would have suitors galore.”

“Once again I must thank you for your interest, but I assure you I am resigned to being the most delightful of aunts for your children.”

“Really?” Joanna’s voice possessed an element of doubt.

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“Really,” Mary said firmly. “That is, if you ever decide which suitor you wish to marry. Tell me more about Mr. Peters. Has he proposed? Do you think him likely to soon?”

Her sister’s brightened expression led to yet further conversation, amid Mary’s smothered yawns. Mary had been extremely glad to finally achieve her own bedchamber and, after a quick wash and exchange of garments, had tumbled into bed and slumber.

Sleep had proved elusive, as the events of the night chased the emotions her sister’s words provoked. Would meek Mr. Peters be strong enough to curb her sister’s headstrong tendencies? Somehow, she doubted so. They would certainly be a mismatched pair.

Mary drew in a deep breath, willing the fresh morning air to refocus her thoughts to return to the present and the tasks of the day. The sun sparkled on the lake a half mile away, shining jewellike, holding a promise of boating adventures in a few months’ time. In the distance Emily’s gig slowly trundled past the Oakley smallholding, then began to ascend the great hill to the Edgerton farm, the windswept location that overlooked the valley and commanded one of the district’s best views of Windermere.

By all reports Emily and Adam were well suited, their respective backgrounds and their fathers’ status as friends meaning this alliance had not been wholly unexpected. But whether Emily’s tender years and country innocence would knit well with Adam’s seasoned experience with war remained to be seen. Mary could only hope—and pray—that their union would be a happy one.

And that the return of the conquering war hero would be everything that it ought.



The carriage clattered and swayed, the miles near interminable. His head throbbed, his eyes ached, his body was so wearied of travel. But soon he would be there. Soon he would—*please, God*—gaze out over the fields and valleys he remembered. Had it really been four years? It seemed a lifetime ago.

“Adam?”

His head shifted in the direction of the speaker. “Yes, Ted?” His ears, sharpened by the demands of these past days, heard the note of impatience in his own voice, and he sighed. He’d need to sort out this agitation before his return. Thank God for his Yorkshire friend, whose forbearance—and willingness to escort Adam all this way from London—made this journey more tolerable than it could have been. The fact his friend had even been in London and traveling north had proved something of a godsend. But Edward “Teddy” Bracken’s agreeable nature was sometimes easy to take advantage of, and Adam would not have his mother, or, worse, his betrothed, upset because he’d forgotten how a gentleman ought to behave. “What is it?”

“I simply asked how you are feeling, but your response made it quite clear.”

“Forgive me.”

“No forgiveness necessary,” Bracken replied easily, his patience befitting his status as Adam’s friend of longest years.

Though perhaps not longest years. Robert Bloomfield still served that role, even though he hadn’t seen the man in several years, save for a glimpse at a medical tent near Lisbon.

His mind tracked back to the days when the two of them would scale the great hills, or fish, or boat on Windermere’s glassy waves. Such innocent pleasures. Neither of them had ever dreamed war would steal away such simple dreams.

The carriage dipped with sudden force and stopped, slamming his head against the thinly padded headrest.

He winced, as the thudding in his head resumed its loud tattoo. “What is happening?”

“It seems a large pothole has swallowed a wheel,” Bracken said. “I’m afraid we might need to get out and help push. Well, *I* might.” An apologetic note rang in his tone.

Adam nodded, then wished he hadn’t, the action searing fresh pain up his spine to rim his brow. He gritted his teeth, clenched his hands, and waited for the episode to pass, refusing to let the smallest sound escape.

The carriage swayed as Bracken exited, the sensation drawing both

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a new bout of nausea and Adam's now-familiar regret at his inability to help. *God, heal me*, he begged. Then life could resume as he'd previously known it, life could resume as it ought.

There came the sounds of grunts and heaves, sounds that drew awareness that freeing the wheel would be much easier if he weren't still seated inside. Why hadn't anyone said?

Adam slid his hand along the carriage door, reached for the handle, twisted it, and gingerly inched his way outside. One booted foot dangled in thin air—

"Edgerton, what on earth—?" Bracken said. "Get back inside now."

"But I can help."

"You won't be helping anyone if you fall."

Adam's arm was clasped, and he was gently pushed back into his seat. "But I'm too heavy for you to move the carriage."

"You cannot afford to be further . . ." Bracken's voice trailed off, but Adam knew what he'd been about to say.

Truth be told, Adam was tired of fighting him. He waved a hand, aiming for an insouciance he did not feel. "Have it your way, then."

"Finally," his friend muttered.

Adam slumped against the squabs, willing patience to appear, counting the seconds until the carriage jerked upwards and forwards, the door creaked open, and Bracken's voice came again.

"We're getting faster at digging ourselves out, I think."

"I doubt we could get any slower."

Bracken chuckled. "I did not realize the roads would be quite so bad. At least they're not covered in snow."

"Have you seen any snow?"

"Occasional traces on the peaks, that is all."

"Perhaps the winter wasn't as hard here as it was on the Continent."

"Perhaps." An element of doubt tinged Bracken's voice.

Well, perhaps not. It wasn't as if they had not had this discussion before.

"How much longer do you suppose until we arrive?"

"It's hard to say. The coachman thinks we might need to travel a little slower, just as a precaution."

Adam's lips compressed. No good complaining. "It will be what it will be."

"Ever the fatalist," Bracken chided gently. "Don't you hope for more?"

"Hope?" Adam's thin veneer of ease slipped. "What do you think this trip is about, if not hope?"

Bracken was silent, perhaps thinking on what they talked about previously. Of course this trip was built on hope. But it was also built on reality, and the reality was that certain people would struggle to see past the man he was now.

A man who most certainly was not the same kind of man who had proposed to and been accepted by the prettiest girl in Amberley. A man who held grave doubts about his future with the farm. He might hope, but he'd overheard enough doctors' coded whispers to know his hopes should not be raised terribly high. The sickness that had first struck in Walcheren had gradually worsened in the past year, leading to several weeks in a hospital as his fever raged and the doctors worked in vain. He'd heard later that he'd been muttering all sorts of mad things, his memories of Cumbria mingling with scenes from the peninsula, the confusion of his mind the merest echo of that which he had lived.

His regiment had endured abysmal conditions in the Netherlands as part of the Walcheren Campaign, where thousands of men had died due to fever, before withdrawal, when those deemed fit enough were sent to the peninsula. His status of "healthy" had proved optimistic at best, but he'd still been able to man a rifle and engage in the kind of bravado people awarded medals for. If it hadn't been for men nursing him—men like Captain Balfour, Captain Stamford—he most certainly would have died.

One day he hoped to meet his fellow soldiers again to thank them, but he'd been told that both men were still involved in the fighting. His lips twisted. Only the most desperate cases were shipped home to England, those deemed useless to employ in fighting . . . the maimed, the mad, the diseased.

And those men who could no longer see.



## Chapter 3

Mary glanced across the congregants to where Mr. and Mrs. Edgerton sat, eyes fixed to the front as the minister ascended the pulpit. The Sunday service at Amberley possessed a special energy today, the excitement swirling around the promised return of Adam Edgerton akin to the promise of a visitation by angels. Mary shook her head, as if shaking off the uncharitable thought.

It wasn't Adam Edgerton's fault the anticipation surrounding his arrival had only heightened due to an unfortunate delay. Everyone in the village had fully expected to see him in services today, to offer their congratulations, their best wishes, but when Mr. and Mrs. Edgerton had arrived *sans* heroic son this morning, the palpable disappointment humming through the gathered congregants had drawn Mr. Edgerton's apology.

"Unforeseen circumstances necessitated the delay of a day or two."

Or so he said. But there was something else in his eyes, something about the way his half smile did not light his eyes, that made Mary wonder while Mr. Ponsonby lectured from the pulpit.

As Mr. Ponsonby pontificated on—it would be unjust to call his message a sermon, as it seemed to consist more of instructions for personal betterment than any real inspiration from the Scriptures—her heart continued to ponder.

What was the matter? Surely a father should be thrilled to see his son return from war. Father never stopped praying for Robert's safe return,

and made sure to include prayers for him in their morning and evening devotions. Why was Mr. Edgerton not sounding overjoyed?

“Let us pray.”

She bowed her head dutifully, but as the minister began his usual spiel of focusing on their utter wretchedness and sinful state, she focused her attention on the Edgerton family, pleading for God’s mercy to be shown to them, and that whatever worry creased Mr. Edgerton’s brow might be trusted to the care of their loving heavenly Father.

The final hymn was sung, and they joined the other congregants in the aisle, waiting their turn to be greeted by the minister at the door.

Mr. Ponsonby’s round halo of white hair seemed at odds with his piercing dark eyes, and he seemed to hold her hand rather more tightly than usual. “Ah, Miss Bloomfield. I was most gratified to see your fervent interest in the sermon today.”

She tugged back her hand and offered a polite smile that encouraged nothing more. She would not lie and flatter him about his message. “I believe the best part was concerning the saving power of Jesus Christ. In fact, I would dearly love to hear more sermons spent exploring such things. Imagine if people believed that what is spoken of in Acts amongst the believers could actually happen today. Just think how remarkable it would be if God would choose to use us to heal the sick and see the lame walk. Don’t you think that would be wonderful?”

He coughed, his face turning an interesting shade of puce.

Before he started questioning her theology, she quickly moved on. Rumor had it the recent widower wished to see someone take up the position of Mrs. Ponsonby soon. Likely the woman would act more as an unpaid housekeeper than any real helpmeet, and she had no desire to take on either role.

She smiled to herself. Such pronouncements as today’s would likely disqualify her from further interest.

Outside, the congregation milled in the cold air, and again a clutch of interested villagers surrounded the Edgertons. Again, that knot centered Mr. Edgerton’s brow. She moved past the crowd to speak with Mr. Croker, who was busily accepting congratulations from his own little crowd of well-wishers.

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After speaking of Sally's health, he extolled the good behavior of his children. He fielded a question with a nod and an "Aye, Hannah attended her. And the doctor. And Miss Bloomfield, of course."

Several villagers echoed, "Of course," prompting Mary to hurry away before more could be made of her endeavors. She had no use for such praise, not when she merely followed God's prompting.

She moved to stand quietly beside her father, placing a hand on his arm as they waited for Mother and Joanna to finish their conversations.

He patted her hand. "Old Ponsonby didn't seem to know what to say to your comments before."

"No."

Father chuckled. "I rather think he wouldn't ever dare believe God might want to move in today's world, let alone do anything so unscripted as to perform a miracle."

"Not everyone believes as we do."

"That is for certain." He turned to her, eyes narrowing. "You are well? You seem a bit tired. I hope the activities the other night were not too strenuous for you."

"I had strength enough for the Crokers. Perhaps because I did not dance earlier," she added dryly.

"Yes, I heard your sister mention it." His brow creased. "She is a little tactless sometimes."

"Joanna is young."

"Hmm, yet older every day. Well, I cannot but be thankful that you accompanied me. Mrs. Croker has not ceased to sing your praises. Even if it has wearied you more than you admit."

Her smile of assurance grew wry. "I have not the happy talent to make my features appear other than what they are."

"No." He eyed her thoughtfully, as Joanna and Mama approached. "Ah, we are here. Shall we depart?"

"Oh, please, Father." Joanna clasped her hands. "Emily requested I share luncheon with her today. Please say I may go. I would dearly love the opportunity to chat with Emily before she soon makes the county's most advantageous match."

Well, not quite the county's *most* advantageous match, as just then

Mr. Josias Payne and his pompous son Charles strode by, the magistrate's aquiline features strongly marked in his heir's raised nose, as if he considered those around beneath his dignity. Charles might have an exaggerated opinion of his personal importance but, with the promise of a moneyed estate, he was generally held by all and sundry to be the catch of the county. At least he had, until Adam Edgerton's war exploits had reached Amberley's ears and the young ladies accounted a handsome war hero—who had a medal from King George himself!—as worthy of more attention.

Mary caught the twinkle in her father's eyes and swallowed her amusement. "But whatever will your suitor say?"

"My suitor?"

"Mr. Peters. Was he not invited to dine with us today?"

"Oh." Her face looked so crestfallen Mary had to bite back another smile. "I forgot about him."

"My dear Joanna," Mama said. "How can you say such things? Have you not encouraged his attentions these past weeks? No, it is simply out of the question. Mr. Peters has been invited, and it is to see you, my dear, so there is to be no more talk of abandoning our luncheon plans simply because of a foolish whim. Do you want him to cry off?"

Joanna sighed. "No."

"Then let me hear no more. Ah, Mr. Peters." Mama smiled warmly as that gentleman drew near. "Here you are now."

As he exchanged greetings with Mary's parents, Joanna murmured to Mary, "I don't suppose you can entertain him sufficiently for me, should I endeavor to leave soon after luncheon?"

"I don't know if he would deem my entertainment as sufficient, but I could try my best," Mary said meekly.

Joanna tilted her head. "When you use that tone, I sometimes think you are roasting me, but right now I am too glad to care. Thank you. I will make it up to you."

"How exactly? By drawing attention away from one of my unwanted suitors?"

"Obviously not that." Joanna chuckled.

No, obviously.

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"Joanna, my dear," Mama protested in a hushed aside, as Father talked with Mr. Peters. "I do think you should be more circumspect with your words. Truly, you can seem unkind at times."

"Mary knows I do not mean it."

Mary raised her brows.

"Well, I don't! Anyway, I see Emily and the others are waiting for me. I shall tell her it must be later this afternoon."

Mary exchanged looks with her mother as Joanna huffed off. She pressed her lips together as Mr. Peter's countenance fell at Joanna's departure, then brightened as she drew near again.

"Mr. Peters," Joanna murmured, slipping her arm through his, "how glad I am that you are coming today."

"I'm so pleased for the invitation." His cheeks flushed to the color of Mary's shawl.

"You must forgive me. I needed to tell poor Emily that I must forgo her very kind invitation, as I had plans already. Plans with you," she added brightly.

"Oh, but I do not want to intrude on your pleasure—"

"Truly? Oh, I knew you'd understand! See Mama, Mr. Peters does not mind if I spend time with Emily today. Oh, you are *such* a kind person." She squeezed his arm in an appearance of affection, which caused the young man to appear flustered.

Mama protested. "My dear—"

"I'll just hurry now and tell her I can come after all." And without waiting a moment longer—no doubt to escape the censure in Mama's tight jaw and eyes—she hurried back to where the Hardy family awaited.

"Enjoy yourself, Miss Joanna," Mr. Peters called.

Joanna turned with a mischievous smile and a flutter of her hand. "I always do."

"That girl," Mama said in a low voice, her expression mingling frustration and resignation.

Yet there would be no scenes forthcoming, Mama's reluctance to harness her youngest's headstrong tendencies stemming from a lifetime of averseness to confrontation, Papa's ongoing busyness meaning he had even less time or energy to care.

A slight frown appeared on Mr. Peters's face, as though he'd suddenly grown aware of the consequences of his burst of charitable generosity.

Mary stepped forward. "Mr. Peters, I wonder if you would mind telling us about your recent visit to York."

He nodded, and shared about his time at the symposium for those in the legal profession as Mary and her parents walked with him the short distance to their home on the village outskirts, the dark slate roof gleaming wetly in the sun after the night's rain.

After a cold collation at lunch, and entertaining Mr. Peters to the best of her ability—which surely had fallen sadly short of both Mr. Peters's and Joanna's standards and expectations—Mary retired to her room, thinking over the morning.

Silly, foolish Joanna. While Mary could understand her younger sister's disinclination for Mr. Peters's dry conversation, he did still hold Joanna in high regard. How, when her sister was so cavalier with his attentions, Mary could not comprehend. Perhaps such was the nature of love, that one could be blind to the folly of the chosen object of affection.

Would that someone she admired held her own self in such esteem. But no. She would not feel sorry for herself. It was best to not ponder those things that would never be. Instead, she'd turn her thoughts to what could be.

Did she truly believe what she had said to the reverend this morning? What if God did want people to trust Him to act in miraculous ways today? Was it presumptuous to believe in healing miracles? Or was it faith?

She closed her eyes, opened her hands. "Heavenly Father," she whispered, "I know I am not much, but I do believe You are real, and that You love people, and that You want to make a tangible difference to people's lives today. Use me for Your purposes, I pray."

In the quiet that followed, something subtle shifted in her soul, as if a breath had been released. The next minutes she spent in silence, listening for that small voice that so often guided her steps, a voice that guided her days. Some had called the inner promptings she heard superstitious and questioned why she turned up just as their child had

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fallen from a tree, or when an extra pair of hands was needed to assist. She believed, as did her father, that this voice was the Holy Spirit, and the number of times she had seen situations transformed for good when she had obeyed only reaffirmed crediting these promptings to God.

Mary continued to pray. For her parents. For Joanna. For Robert. For Mr. Peters. For the Crokers. For the Edgertons. Even for scarce-believing Mr. Ponsonby.

That her village and its loved ones might know God, might know His mercy, and might know His power to save and to heal.



A faint scream woke Mary from light slumber.

Mary sat up, pushing her hair from her eyes, blinking against the darkness. Had that sound been real or just imagined? A person or a crow? Deep shadows hid the room, though a slight fluttering came from the curtains shrouding the partially opened window. Was it evening or morning? She had eaten supper, had she not? She thought back to the rest of the evening. Joanna's return had seen tossed-off apologies for abandoning them earlier, and exclamations about Emily's beautiful wedding trousseau, and a plaintive desire for an eligible gentleman to make her a bride. Mary had wryly suggested Mr. Peters stood as an obvious candidate, only to be met with derision and a flounced-off departure from Joanna to bed. How many hours ago had that been?

After what seemed an age, the thumping in her heart eased, only to be replaced a few minutes later by a thumping up the stairs. She tensed. The scream had been real? There came the sound of voices, one higher pitched, one lower. She had heard such sounds before.

A tap came at her door. "Mary?"

"Yes, Father?"

The door was flung open. "Oh, good, you are awake. You must dress quickly. We are needed."

"Of course."

Within two minutes she joined her father in the gig, stepping around

a lantern at their feet. He snapped the reins as she fastened her cloak. "It is the Oakley girl. She has been attacked, so the servant said."

"Oh no, poor Susan! And without a mother to lend her support."

"Hence why I asked you."

Because Mama's softhearted sensibility did not always lend itself to the hard tasks such visits would imply.

*Dear God, be with Susan. The lass could not be older than sixteen. Help her, help Mr. Oakley. Give us wisdom.*

Her prayers sliced through the emerging dawn as they drove the quarter mile to where the Oakley farm subsisted. There were lamps aglow, running figures, the barking of a dozen dogs, a scene of chaos and confusion. Her stomach tensed.

"In here," a man yelled and ran to hold the horses.

Her father jumped down, offering her a quick hand to assist her descent before they hurried inside the cramped stone farmhouse. "Where is she?" he called to the bustling room.

A wide-eyed servant girl pointed to a closed door, which they pushed open. There lay the curled and weeping figure of young Susan Oakley on the bed, being patted awkwardly on the shoulder by her father.

"Thank God you're here," Mr. Oakley said, his features drawn and pale.

"Susan?" Father moved to her. "It's Doctor Bloomfield."

"Get away! Get away!" Susan cried, shuddering.

"Susan, it's only the doctor, come to help you," Mr. Oakley said. "Oh, and Miss Bloomfield, too."

"I can't, I can't—" She curled more tightly upon herself.

At Father's gesture, Mary moved closer to the bed and knelt. "Susan? It's Mary. You are safe now. No one can hurt you."

Whimpering, Susan shook her head, face still turned towards the wall. "I'll never be safe. Never!"

Mary laid a hand on Susan's shoulder, felt her stiffen, then relax. "You are safe now," she assured, silently praying for Susan to experience God's peace and comfort.

After several minutes the girl's weeping quieted, her shudders ceased, and she drew in several raspy breaths.



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"Would you tell me what has happened?" Mary asked gently.

A nod. "But not when they're here. I'm so . . . so ashamed. Oh, Papa." Her voice broke, and she started crying again.

Mary glanced over her shoulder at the clearly distraught Mr. Oakley and her father.

Father met her gaze, nodded, and quietly escorted the farmer from the room, leaving Mary alone with the still sobbing girl.

"I'm sure you have nothing to be ashamed of." Mary softly rubbed her shoulder. "It is only us now."

Susan shook her head. "I . . . I do not . . . I cannot—" She rolled over, her scared brown eyes meeting Mary's in one quick moment. "Oh, Mary!"

Mary bent, and the next moment Susan was sobbing into her shoulder, offering broken whispers about waking to find a man in her room, about how he covered her mouth with his hand, threatened to kill her if she screamed, before doing the most heinous of things and forcing himself on her.

Heart clenching, Mary hugged her harder, as if she could protect her from the memories. "You poor, dear child."

Susan's tears had wetted her gown, her sniffing making Mary long for a handkerchief. "I didn't know! I didn't see—"

"You did not see who did this to you?"

"No. It was dark, he was heavy—oh." She retched, and Mary snatched up the porcelain chamber pot just in time for Susan to release her stomach's contents.

Compassion wrung her heart. When Susan had finished, Mary offered her a cloth to wipe her mouth, and encouraged her to sit on the bed, wrapped in Mary's own shawl.

"Susan." Mary held the girl's hands and squeezed them gently, looking her in the eyes. "I'm afraid my father will need to examine you."

"No. I don't want him to."

"Of course you don't. But the magistrate will need to ask both you and your father questions. I'm so sorry. I'm sure it will be unpleasant, but it must be done."

"But I don't want people to know."

"I understand. And I'm sure people will do all that they can to protect your name from being linked to anything sordid. But in order to catch the man who did this, the authorities will need to find out what they can."

"No, no." Susan shook her head. "I can't—I don't want anyone to know—"

"Susan," Mary said, her voice firming. "You have done nothing wrong."

"But I should have woken earlier, I should have screamed—"

"You have done nothing wrong." Mary eyed her firmly. "Nothing wrong."

Some of the panic seemed to leave Susan's eyes, and she gulped. Blinked. A new tear traced the contour of her cheek. "Will—will you stay here with me?"

"Yes. I will not leave you."

"Promise?"

"Of course." Susan gave a tiny nod, and Mary squeezed her hand and opened the door. "Father?"

He looked up from the table where he was speaking with Mr. Oakley. "The magistrate has been sent for."

She nodded, glancing at Mr. Oakley. "She does not want it spread abroad that she was attacked."

"But I cannae let the man who damaged my daughter's virtue go free!"

"Perhaps it need not be spread about that her virtue was affected, but merely that there was an intruder. The magistrate must be told the truth, of course, but perhaps we can persuade Mr. Payne to the benefits of not spreading things further."

Her father looked at her askance.

She shrugged. One could only hope for the best as far as that man was concerned. And hope—indeed, pray—that the Oakley's few servants would have sense enough not to noise abroad the terrible circumstances affecting their master's daughter.

She joined her father in the room, doing all she could to distract Susan as she was carefully examined and the various scratches, bruises, and other signs of injury were noted.

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"You do not remember anything about the man?"

"No," Susan said dully. "He was heavy, that is all."

"You did not recognize his voice?"

"No." Susan glanced at Mary. "Will this be finished soon?"

"Very soon," Mary promised. Daylight seeped past the curtains. "I hear a carriage, which suggests the magistrate has arrived. He will likely ask you questions, and then it will be time for a nice long sleep."

"But not here. I can never sleep in this room again."

Mary glanced at her father, who gave a sharp nod. "If it is all right with your father, then perhaps you might like to stay with us. You'll be safe and protected, and a change of scene might do you good."

Susan nodded, and lowered her skirts, just as a knock came. The door opened and Mr. Oakley looked in. "The magistrate is here to see you—oh, Mr. Payne."

"Thank you, I do not need to be announced." Mr. Josias Payne walked into the room, eyeing Susan and Mary with a narrowed gaze.

He was not known for his compassion, and Mary could only pray he might see fit to use some today.

"Bloomfield."

"Mr. Payne." Father acknowledged him with professional courtesy. Theirs was a strange relationship, where the rich landowner barely tolerated the man who had studied medicine in Edinburgh, but whose successful treatment of his wife and sons had resulted in a measure of grudging respect. Such respect was all the more necessary when Mr. Payne needed him in cases like this.

"How's the girl?"

"Quite shaken," Father said.

Mary stayed silent through the interrogation, holding Susan's hand as promised, not letting go even when Mr. Payne asked what she was doing here.

"Miss Bloomfield is my friend," Susan attested. "I will not speak unless she remains."

"Hmph." He eyed Mary askance but said nothing more until the end of the accounting.

“Seems a hopeless case, if you have nothing with which to describe him,” Mr. Payne said dismissively.

Susan blanched, and Mary squeezed her hand.

“Susan is welcome to shelter at our house, as she does not feel safe here anymore,” Father said.

“Yes.” She glanced around the room and visibly shuddered. “Take me away from here.”

“Oakley? Do you understand?” At the farmer’s nod, Father continued. “Payne, I trust if you have further questions you will address them there. I wish for Susan to be removed before too many villagers are awake and curious.”

“Very well.” Mr. Payne proceeded to examine the room, studying the stained bedclothes, rattling the locked window. “Locked, was it?”

“Aye,” said Mr. Oakley.

“Hmph.” Another glance about the room and he exited, followed by Father and Mr. Oakley.

Mary turned to Susan. “Are you sure that you wish to stay at our house?”

Susan nodded. “I’d rather be anywhere than here.”

“Perhaps you could gather some of your clothes to bring.” Mary’s own gowns were unlikely to fit Susan’s more statuesque form.

Mary exited to find the men seated at the table, Mr. Payne discussing the difficulties of finding the villain.

“Excuse me, sir,” Mary said, “but would it not be possible to learn if there were any eyewitnesses or to question people about their whereabouts in the early hours of the morning?”

He snorted an unpleasant-sounding laugh. “And just who do you expect to be out at such a time? This isn’t London, Miss Bloomfield. We’ve no night watchmen here. Besides, what would you expect anyone out at such an hour to say? They will all say they were in bed, as all good Christians were when this young person claims to have been attacked.”

Mary’s hackles rose. Surely he didn’t suspect Susan of being immoral, of being less than a good Christian? “Please, sir, we request that you do not advertise the entire nature of the attack. If you would be so good as

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to say there was an intruder, rather than it was Susan who was attacked, that might help preserve her reputation.”

“I believe that would be wise.” Father nodded. “There is no need to further ruin the poor girl, is there?”

This last was said with an even look at the magistrate. What *had* previously transpired between them?

“I suppose not,” Mr. Payne said, in an almost regretful tone.

“We shall go, then.” Father rose and put out a hand to Mr. Oakley, who clasped it. “Rest assured Susan will be well cared for.”

“Aye.” The farmer offered his daughter another helpless gesture, patting her shoulder.

Within the half hour Mary had tucked Susan up in the bedchamber adjoining hers, the sleeping draught administered by her father having worked effectively. Mary tiptoed from the room and found her father in the kitchen, his stockinged feet stretched towards the welcome warmth of the fireplace.

“What a start to the day.” Father rubbed the back of his neck. “Poor girl. We can only hope—”

“She is not with child,” Mary finished for him. *Dear God, please no.*

He shook his head. “Sometimes I wish you were not so wise to the world. But if you weren’t, then I suppose you would not be so valuable in moments like these.”

A yawn escaped him—little wonder, he’d been out visiting patients for much of yesterday—so she kneaded his tight shoulders.

“Ah, you’re a good girl. Just a little to the left—ah, thank you.”

The crackle and hiss of the flames and the early morning birdcalls were the only sounds for a lengthy moment.

“Such a tragedy.” He shook his head. “Who would have ever thought our little village would see such a thing? And against little Susan Oakley of all people. That family has had a hard enough time as it is these past years.”

The loss of Susan’s mother to typhoid three years ago had tipped Mr. Oakley’s focus from his only child to his farm and dogs, a self-protective measure, Father surmised, as if Mr. Oakley couldn’t bear to have his heart rent again.

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“At least Mrs. Oakley was spared the knowledge of this happening to her daughter,” Mary murmured.

“Indeed, indeed.” Father sighed heavily. “What is the world coming to, I wonder?”

Mary ceased her massage and leaned down to rest her chin against the top of his head. “We shall pray God will heal her body and soul.”

“Yes.” He patted her hand resting against his shoulder. “I fear poor Susan will not be the only one in need of such mercies.”

But further questions could not be asked as the cockerel crowed and Ellen bustled in to begin the breakfast preparations.