

Chapter 1

Summer 1759

Yet again, the day started badly with Uncle Walter turning up while Deborah was arranging the flowers in the little village church. She heard the door slam open and her heart sank even before she turned round. No one made quite as much noise with doors as her uncle, or shouted half as loudly. Closing her eyes she prayed for patience, and needed it, too, for first he didn't like her arrangement for the altar and pulled the flowers out of the vase, scattering them on the floor and telling her to do them again, then he went on to complain that her hair was too wanton and loose. After scowling at her and breathing deeply, he announced his intention of crossing the village green and passing on his complaints to his foolish younger sister, who had so little control over her daughter and should be here chaperoning her.

Deborah had to wonder yet again at the disapproval she always saw in his eyes. Why did he hate her so? She was neither ill-favoured nor pert—nor was she remiss in any of her duties. In the end, she lowered her eyes and risked a lie. “My mother is working on your new Sunday shirt, Uncle. If you disturb her, she'll not be able to sew for the rest of the day. You know how easily upset she is.”

She could see from his expression that he was torn between visiting his sister and doing nothing to slow down the progress of the new shirt, for her mother's exquisite needlework was

much called for by the folk at the big house. It was, her uncle said, only right that his poor relations pay back his generosity in any way they could. Generosity! Anger boiled up inside Deborah at the mere thought. He grudged them every penny of their keep and had housed his only sister in a damp cottage that had brought her low with a wheezing chest both winters they had lived here.

“I shall visit Isabel tomorrow, then,” he decided. “And make sure you keep that hair of yours tied back in a more seemly manner from now on, Deborah. Unlike your father, who was a wastrel and gambler, I have a position to maintain in this county.”

Yes, she thought rebelliously, the position of being the meanest man and the worst master for twenty miles around Newgarth. And she could only suppose he picked on her for her hair because it was truly her crowning glory and showed up her cousin Phoebe’s limp and mousy locks to disadvantage. Or it would have done if Deborah had been allowed to wear it in a more flattering style. But her uncle dictated even that, as he had controlled every facet of their lives in the two years since they had had to throw themselves on his mercy after her father’s death.

When he had gone she let out her breath in a long, slow sigh. If there were any alternative to her uncle’s charity, she’d seize it with both hands, whatever it was. Only there was nowhere else to turn. Her father’s sudden death had had left them penniless—worse than penniless, in debt. Her mother had not been herself since and they could no longer pay their maid the wages she more than earned. Bessie had been with her mother since they were both girls and was more like a member of the family, so refused to leave them, but still, it was not fair that she worked for nothing, as she now did.

Late that afternoon, a man rode into the village. It was a rare enough event for a stranger to visit Newgarth but someone like him—so tall and darkly handsome—was enough to make

heads turn, then turn again for a second look. Two young women nudged one another and giggled, an old woman sighed for the days of her youth and an old man yearned suddenly for the muscles he had once taken for granted.

The stranger went first to the Bird in Hand to ask for directions then followed the ostler's pointing finger across the village green to the small cottage. Here he dismounted, tying the weary horse to the gatepost and walking briskly along the stone-flagged path to rap on the front door.

When it was opened by an elderly maid, he spoke curtly, with no smile of greeting, "I'm looking for one Deborah Jannvier."

"Miss Deborah? Not the mistress?"

He tapped his riding crop impatiently against the side of his leg and repeated, "As I said, *Miss—Deborah—Jannvier*. Is she in or not, woman?"

Bessie sniffed in disapproval of his brusqueness. "I'll inquire whether she can see you, sir."

As she stepped back, he pushed the door open with a growl of annoyance and followed her into the house. "She'll see me."

Bessie backed away from him along the small hallway, feeling suddenly nervous, for he was so tall and determined.

He waved one hand to hurry her. "This is an extremely *urgent* matter, a question of life or death."

She slipped into the kitchen and closed the door, setting her back against it as if to keep out intruders. "Miss Deborah, love! There's someone to see you. He looks like a bailiff's man, but we don't owe anyone money, do we? Not now."

Deborah stopped stirring the large pan hanging over the fire and sighed. Her face was flushed, for they were making strawberry jam that afternoon, though it had been a mediocre

crop this year and they would not have enough of the preserve to last the coming winter. “No, Bessie, we owe nothing, so he can’t be a bailiff’s man. What does he want?”

“He didn’t say and, to tell the truth miss, I didn’t like to insist on knowing. Stern sort of face, he has. Not a gentleman by his manner, yet acts with authority.” She lowered her voice and gestured behind her. “He walked straight into the hall without I even invited him in and is waiting there now.”

They stared at one another in dismay, then Deborah swung the jack to move the jam pan off the flames and rinsed her sticky hands in the bucket. Pulling off her apron and working mobcap she pinned up the tumbled, shining mass of hair under a prettier, lace-trimmed cap and examined her skirt hastily for splashes of jam.

The maid didn’t move from the doorway. “Miss Deborah?”

“Mmm?”

“You shouldn’t see him on your own.” For there was something very masculine and forward about him. A good-looking man, the sort to set women dreaming, this, and no one but Bessie to guard Miss Deborah from his like, for her poor mistress never noticed things like that nowadays—or maybe Mrs Isabel just didn’t allow herself to notice things any more.

“Very well. Come with me.”

Bessie followed her young mistress back to the hallway, her face rigid with determination.

The man had been leaning against the wall near the front door, but straightened up and stared at the younger woman without making any apology for his rudeness in pushing into their home. “Deborah Jannvier?”

“Yes. Won’t you come through into the parlour, Mr—er . . . ?”

“Pascoe. Matthew Pascoe.” He followed her into the tiny front room, but before she could invite him to take a seat, he asked sharply, “Might I ask your father’s full name?”

He was so tall, looming over her, that she took an involuntary step backwards, looking up at him in puzzlement. Other men did not seem to take up as much space in a room as this one, and his broad shoulders spoke of great physical strength.

His voice became sharper. “Your father’s full name, if you please?”

“Paul Edward Jannvier.”

“Born?”

“In Lancashire, near Rochdale, in 1709—and died nearly two years ago.” Was it only two years? she wondered. It seemed much longer.

He fumbled in the pocket of his coat. “Then you’re definitely the one I’m seeking.”

She exchanged puzzled glances with Bessie before indicating a chair. To her relief he took it, but he was no less disturbing sitting than standing. Well, she wasn’t going to let him intimidate her, so she put up her chin and gave him back look for look as she waited for him to explain why he was here.

“I’ve brought a letter for you, Miss Jannvier, from your great-uncle—Ralph Jannvier of Marymoor House.” He passed her a crumpled missive and got up to stand by the fireplace while she read it, impatience visible in every twitch of his long, lean body.

Bessie, stationed near the door, saw Deborah gasp in shock and stare blankly into space for a moment before re-reading the letter carefully. Trouble, then. Always more trouble. That poor girl had had more than her fair share of it lately. She cast a suspicious glance at the stranger. If he’d come here hoping to get anything from Deborah’s Uncle Walter in payment of her late master’s debts, he was bound for disappointment, for Mr Walter and that long-nosed wife of his were a pair of mean toads, and you’d not convince Bessie otherwise, not if you talked all night!

But when Miss Deborah looked up and studied the messenger, who was now standing by the window silhouetted against the sunlight, she did not look anxious only thoughtful, so Bessie breathed more easily. Not bad news, then. Or at least, not very bad.

“Do you know what this letter contains, sir?”

“Yes. I wrote it for your great-uncle, for he was too weak to do so himself.” His voice betrayed nothing of his feelings, nor did he volunteer any more information.

Blinking her eyes against the patterns left in them by dazzling sunlight, Deborah looked down again, frowning. “And if I agree to this offer?”

“We can set off at once, ride cross-country and be at Marymoor House before morning. Your uncle’s not got long to live and he’s urgent to see you. Pray God we arrive in time.”

“I must think. Give me a few minutes to consider the matter, at least.”

Matthew shrugged agreement and continued to watch her as she sat there, head bent, staring at the piece of paper. Wisps of hair were falling out of the cap, drawing attention to the slender white neck. She was pretty and to his relief seemed respectable. Moreover, when he had mentioned her at the inn, people had spoken kindly of her. But even if she hadn’t been respectable—which had been a distinct possibility with Edward Jannvier’s daughter—Matthew would not have let that stop him from dealing with her. She was, quite simply, the path to his dearest ambition, so he would take that path whatever the cost, because it offered him hope of a better future than he had ever dreamed of in the hard years of his growing up.

She stayed where she was for a moment or two longer, head bowed, then looked up and asked, “Do you know exactly what my uncle wants me to do?”

“Yes. Though he forbade me to speak of the details.”

“Will you tell me this, then? Is it anything unlawful or—or harmful to others?”

He shook his head. “No. Ralph Jannvier wouldn’t ask such a thing of anyone. He’s stern, harsh in his judgements sometimes, but honest and direct in all his dealings.” And Matthew

owed him a great deal, even affection, though that was not something either of them ever spoke about.

He watched her nod and guessed her answer before she even spoke. “Very well, then. I’ll come with you, Mr Pascoe, but you’ll have to provide a horse for me. I don’t have a mount of my own, or even the means to hire one.”

He nodded. He had not really expected her to refuse, given the circumstances, but he felt relieved nonetheless not to have to waste time on persuasion—or even force. “I’ll go and get the horses while you change your clothes. Wear something warm, for we’ll be riding through the night.”

He left the room without another word, not waiting for the elderly maid to show him out. He was thoughtful as he walked slowly back across the village green. Ralph’s great-niece was pretty enough to turn heads, something he had not expected. Matthew would have stopped to watch her walk past, that was sure. Her eyes were the most striking part of her, being a vivid blue with a very direct look to them, and her hair, what little he could see of it under the cap, was pretty too, curly and of a light brown colour burnished with red-gold glints. She didn’t look like a Jannvier, well, not like Ralph, who had had the dark Jannvier looks until age faded them, nor like the paintings of Ralph’s ancestors hanging on the walls at Marymoor. Perhaps she favoured her mother’s side?

His frown deepened as he continued to think about her. Her face seemed full of contradictions, somehow, and that in itself was intriguing: the nose straight and determined, the lips tender and full, the eyes full of intelligence and the cheeks as rosy as a child’s. It didn’t give an easy clue to her nature, that face didn’t. But she was pleasing and wholesome in appearance and would not be unwelcome in his bed.

As soon as she had heard Mr Pascoe leave the house, Bessie went into the hall and banged the front door shut behind him, then whisked back into the little parlour. “You *can't* go off on your own with a strange man, Miss Deborah! Who knows what'll happen to you? And how do you know he really does come from your great-uncle? Have you ever seen Ralph Jannvier's handwriting before?”

“Mr Pascoe seems an honest enough man and this—Oh, Bessie, it's a chance of something better for us all—perhaps our only chance of getting away from here. If there are risks involved, so be it.”

“Well, at least ask your Uncle Walter for a groom to go with you.”

“I can't do that. My uncle would either prevent me from going or he'd come with me and interfere. Thank heavens he went out shooting this afternoon and won't hear about this till it's too late to stop me. Come with me to find Mother, Bessie. I don't have time to explain the letter twice.” She hurried out to the back garden, the maid close on her heels, still protesting.

Mrs Jannvier glanced up, smiling. “Look! Aren't the beans coming along well now?”

“Mother, stop working and listen carefully!”

Something in her daughter's voice made Isabel Jannvier set down her trowel and stand up. “Is something wrong?” Her voice was wobbly with nervousness, her muddy hands were clasped tightly at her breast, and fear showed in her gentle, faded blue eyes.

Deborah laid one hand on her arm. “Not wrong, no. A messenger has just brought a letter from my Great-uncle Ralph Jannvier, the one who lives at Marymoor House.”

“Dear me! I thought he'd have died years ago!”

“It seems he's dying now and wishes to see me.” Deborah took a deep breath and added in a tone of wonder, “Mother, he promises to make me his heir if I will do as he asks, whatever it be.” That phrase had worried her, but she had decided the rewards were too great to quibble.

“The messenger assures me it is nothing unlawful and—and I believe him. So I shall go to my father’s uncle and accept the offer, only I must set off at once .”

Bessie gasped in shock.

Isabel Jannvier frowned. “I don’t think Great-Uncle Ralph is very rich, Deborah dear. Your father always used to say it wasn’t worth trying to tap him for a loan because all he had was a rambling old house and some stony moorland acres. Those were your father’s exact words.”

“My father knew nothing of farms and land values. Besides, anything is better than nothing, which is what we have now. I’d deal with the devil himself to get an inheritance that would enable us to leave here. Wouldn’t you?”

Isabel nodded.

“Mother, I can’t—I simply can’t!—let this opportunity pass!”

She heard her mother sigh longingly and knew she had won her point.

Walking round the village green to stretch his legs while the ostler saddled the horse he’d hired for Ralph’s great-niece, Matthew paused as he heard voices from the other side of the wall. Deborah’s voice carried particularly clearly and her words made him scowl. Maybe she was more mercenary than he had thought.

“I can’t—I simply can’t!—let this opportunity pass!” that determined voice declared.

Matthew gave a snort of bitter laughter. This one was little different to other woman, then, it seemed. Most of them would do anything for money. Well, he’d be interested to see if she was still determined to accept the offer when Ralph told her exactly what he wanted. Very interested.

He grimaced. Who was he to judge her? She wasn’t the only one who didn’t intend to let this opportunity pass. But at least his motives included love of Marymoor House and a

fondness for Ralph, as well as a desire to better himself. “So we’re agreed on one thing, at least, Miss Deborah Jannvier,” he muttered. “Let’s hope it’ll be enough.”

In the garden there was silence for a few moments, then Isabel’s vague blue eyes came suddenly into sharp focus. “I do understand,” she said quietly and patted her daughter’s hand, leaving a smear of rich brown soil across the slender wrist. “You must do whatever you think right, dear. When do you leave?”

“In half an hour—less. The man who brought the message will escort me to Marymoor. We’re to ride there. How far away is it?”

“I don’t know exactly. I’ve never been there. About thirty or forty miles, I suppose. A ride of several hours. You will be careful?”

Deborah hugged her again. “Of course!”

Bessie could stay silent no longer. “Mrs Isabel, you’re never going to let her go!”

“Why not?”

“Riding alone—across country—with a strange man! It’s not *decent*.”

“I trust my daughter absolutely.”

Deborah started walking towards the house. “May I borrow your riding habit, Mother?” she called over her shoulder

“Yes, of course, dear. You know I have no need of it.”

Indeed she did know, Deborah thought bitterly. Her Uncle Walter had a stable full of horses, but none was ever offered for the occupants of Stoneybrook Cottage to use. They had to walk everywhere except when he sent the carriage to take them up to the Hall, and this kept them effectively prisoner in Newgarth village.

The maid stayed behind with her mistress to say urgently, “You can’t let her go off like that, Mrs Isabel! It’s too dangerous! We don’t know anything about that fellow. Why, he might even be an imposter? And she has no experience of men like him.”

“What do you mean ‘men like him’? What was he like?”

“Well,” Bessie sniffed in disapproval, “Good-looking, you can’t deny that, the sort of man women run after and make fools of themselves over. But you can never tell what’s behind a face, can you, not on one short meeting? He’s no gentleman, that’s for sure, for all his clothes are of good quality.”

Isabel’s blue eyes became vague again. “I shall trust Deborah’s judgement in this. Besides, when have I ever been able to stop anyone from doing what they want?”

Bessie sighed, gave her lady a quick hug, sighing for the way life had reduced her to a shadow of her old self, then bustled off after Miss Deborah.

When the voices faded from the other side of the wall, Matthew glanced across at the inn and decided that another pot of ale and something to eat would not go amiss before the journey. As he strolled back, he pondered on what he had heard. Was the mother complaining of the daughter’s wilfulness—or of her husband’s feckless nature? Was the daughter as mercenary as she had sounded? He shrugged. Only time would tell—and whatever Deborah Jannvier’s nature, he would so as his dying friend’s wished.

Anthony Elkin was not going to profit from Ralph Jannvier’s death.

Upstairs, Deborah hastily donned her mother’s riding habit, a garment which was very old-fashioned, but of good quality dark green velvet and showing little wear. The jacket and waistcoat, which were like men’s garments, fitted her perfectly, but would have hung on her mother’s thin frame nowadays. The full petticoat was a little short, because she was taller than

her mother, but there was no help for that. Under it she put on a pair of the yellowed flannel trousers her mother had always worn when riding to protect her legs. On her head she wore the rather battered three-cornered hat that went with the outfit.

Bessie stopped protesting and started to help pack. Shaking out Deborah's best cloak she folded it carefully, saying, "It may grow cold later." She then packed a change or two of clothing in Mr Jannvier's old saddlebags, muttering, "You'll have to sleep in your shift, there isn't room for much more."

There was a hammering on the front door, then it opened and that deep voice called out, "Are you ready yet, Miss Jannvier? I've got your horse here, waiting."

"The cheek of it!" huffed Bessie. "Opening a lady's door and yelling at her like that! A gentleman would know better."

The listener below scowled as he heard the maid's words echo down the stair well. Who would want to be a fine gentleman if the few he had known were examples of the species?

"Never mind. I'm ready now!" Deborah stole a last glance in the small mirror, not displeased with her appearance.

Bessie's face crumpled and her eyes grew bright with tears, "You will be careful, won't you, dearie? I shan't rest easy till you're safe home again, that I shan't! Let me carry this down for you."

Downstairs, Isabel Jannvier had come out of the parlour and was asking Mr Pascoe about Ralph's exact state of health.

"A seizure," he said, his face betraying sudden sadness. "Very unexpected. He had seemed hale and hearty for a man of his age until two days ago."

"He's enjoyed a long life."

Mr Pascoe's mouth twitched. "Enjoyed isn't exactly the word I'd use for Ralph Jannvier. He's a stern and determined man."

“’Tis a pity he never had a son.”

Silence, then. “Aye. I suppose so. Ah, there you are!” With a nod to Mrs Jannvier, he moved towards the door, holding it open impatiently.

Not until Deborah and Mr Pascoe had galloped off down the lane did Bessie realise that they still did not know exactly where this Great-uncle lived. And all Mrs Isabel would say was, “Marymoor village lies somewhere to the north-east of Rochdale, I believe. On the edge of the moors. I just hope my brother will not pursue her. You know how he likes to have a finger in every pie.”

“He’ll be angry about this.”

“Yes. But then he’s always angry about something.”

“Hadn’t you better do some more work on his shirt?”

“No. I shall enjoy myself while I can.”

As her mistress drifted out to work in the garden again, always her refuge in times of trouble, Bessie tutted to herself and went back to the kitchen to deal with the strawberry conserve with much sighing and rattling of pans and jars. She had one of her feelings about all this. There was trouble brewing. As she worked, phrases like, “murdered in her bed” and “never heard of again” floated through her mind and she prayed that Deborah would be all right.

Neither woman was surprised to receive a visit from Walter Lawrence later that day, demanding to know who the stranger was and where his niece had gone. He flew into a royal rage when he found out the details.

“How dare you let her go without consulting me, Isabel? And with a strange man, too. Who knows what will have happened to her by now? Have you no sense? You told me the old uncle refused to pay your husband’s debts, so you owe him nothing. Nothing at all!”

“He’s dying. Wants to see her. There was no time to be lost, Walter.”

“It’ll be a trick of some sort. You’ll see. Why should he want to see her now?” His eyes narrowed. “Is this to do with his will? Is it?”

Isabel lost herself in a morass of phrases, but by the end of it he had the information he required, or near enough. “The less you have to do with the Jannvier family, Isabel, the better. You were a fool ever to marry into it. And you should have sent for me today before letting Deborah go rampaging across the countryside with a stranger. I *am* the head of the family, after all, and responsible for you now.”

He growled in annoyance as that vacant look settled in his sister’s eyes again. He was beginning to suspect that she was losing her wits. Not that she’d ever been very sensible, running off to marry a feckless fellow like Paul Jannvier, a man with no income but what his wits and the cards brought in. “And don’t come to me for help if your daughter gets herself in trouble and comes back with a swelling belly. I’ll condone no immorality.”

Isabel roused herself from her abstraction to say, “Deborah wouldn’t do anything immoral.”

“She had better not.” He fidgeted for a moment, then said, quite unnecessarily, “I am seriously displeased about this. Seriously.”

With a sigh, she focused on a particularly pretty vase of flowers which she had just finished arranging and prepared to endure a series of homilies and scoldings.

But for once, Walter cut the diatribe short and left her to her own devices. He wanted to ask the people at the inn about the stranger. It should be easy enough to trace him if Marymoor lay near Rochdale. It might even be worth sending Frank after the two of them. His

groom had helped him in many ways over the years, ways other people knew nothing about. He had complete trust in the fellow. If there were any profit in this situation, Frank would find it for his master—and be rewarded for his troubles, as usual.

Well, why should he not profit from any inheritance, if that was why Ralph Jannvier had sent for Deborah? His sister and niece owed him something, for hadn't he paid all their debts—well, the tradesmen's debts, anyway? Gambling debts were no concern of his.

And he'd not only housed them since then, but made them an allowance. Yes, they definitely *owed* him repayment for all that.

Frank should go after them and investigate the situation.

As she cantered along on the sure-footed mare, Deborah threw back her head and breathed deeply of the warm afternoon air. She could not help wondering what her great-uncle wanted her to do and wishing he had offered her a hint. She had to be content with the fact that her companion had promised her it was nothing unlawful. Matthew Pascoe had a way of saying things that made you believe him.

She stole another glance sideways at him. He rode well, looking very much at home in the saddle. He wasn't quite a gentleman, but there was an air of authority to him nonetheless. He was wearing a dark riding coat over a cloth waistcoat, and but there was no pretence to fashion in the garments, no wide cuffs or rich materials. Under the simple three-cornered hat he wore his own hair, rather than a wig, dark hair tied back with a simple leather thong.

She had never met anyone quite like him, but she trusted him instinctively, could not have said why, just did.

One thing was certain in her mind. Whatever was asked of her, she would do it. And if she never set eyes on that dreadful cottage or saw her Uncle Walter again, she would be delighted, for she'd known nothing but unhappiness and humiliation since going to Newgarth.

“How long will it take us to get to Marymoor?” she asked her taciturn companion a little later.

“If we ride steadily, we’ll be there soon after midnight. It’s a good thing there will be a moon tonight, though it’s not full. We’ll take a rest when we change horses.” He eyed her with a dour look that did not bespeak confidence in her equestrian ability and added, “Can you keep going for that long?”

“I haven’t ridden for a year or more,” she admitted. Her Uncle Walter said frankly that he did not intend to waste his money on supplying mounts for indigent relatives who had no reason to go anywhere, anyway. “I think I can manage, though. I used to ride quite a bit before Father died.” When her father was on a winning streak, that was, and could afford to hire the horses. She reached forward to pat the mare’s neck. “She has a nice steady gait.”

His only answer was a grunt, and whether it was of encouragement or disapproval she could not tell.

Later she asked more directly, “What is my Uncle Ralph like?”

“Old. And dying.”

“Could you not tell me more than that?” she exclaimed, disappointed.

“You’ll see him for yourself soon enough.”

Which didn’t help much. “Well, what about Marymoor? Tell me about the house.” She heard his voice soften as he spoke. He must be fond of the place.

“’Tis built of stone, with ten bedrooms and good attics for the servants, though parts of it are in sore need of repair. It comes with some decent land, for those parts, though those who don’t know the district might say differently, and could be made more productive with an owner who was not set in his ways.” He had already made a start on mending matters.

“And you are what—the bailiff?”

“I don’t have a fancy title. I manage everything for your uncle and have done for a year or two.” He shut his mouth firmly, as if he had said more than he intended, and when she next asked a question told her curtly to save her breath for riding.

After another hour they stopped briefly at a tiny wayside inn to rest the horses and take some refreshment, but were off again within the half hour.

“Are we going fast enough, do you think?” she asked a little later.

“Who’s to say? It’s in God’s hands.”

She gave up trying to speak to him, enjoying the ride and above all, the feeling of freedom, praying fervently that she need never return to Newgarth.