



*Madeline's  
Protector*

VANESSA RILEY

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Vanessa Riley

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### **Madeline's Protector**

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## Dedication

I dedicate this book to my First Copy Editor, my mother Louise, my loving hubby Frank, and daughter Ellen. Their patience and support have meant the world to me.

I also dedicate this labor of love to critique partners extraordinaire: June, Mildred, Lori, Connie, Gail, Ada, Sarah, Angela, and Faye.

My mentors, Laurie Alice, Debra R. & Linda W. for answering all my endless questions

My editor, Lisa, for seeing the vision.

And my team of encouragers: Sandra, Michela, Deb, Sharon, Panya, Kelly, and Ellecia

God, I thank You this day for birthing these characters and Your arms of refuge. Psalms 71



Praise for *Madeline's Protector*

These characters, this story, and Riley's skillful prose captured my attention from the first line and held me captive to the end. ~ Award-winning author, Laurie Alice Eakes

Ms. Riley's novel is a sweet treat with stolen kisses and a sense of intrigue where her gallant characters discover God has the answers for their lives. ~ Author, June Foster

Throughout the entire book, I was kept on the edge of my seat as the author led me through an exciting journey filled with gentleness and love born of distrust and uncertainty. This is a touching look into the past that will grip your heart as it takes you on a well described, exciting, and fulfilling ride that leaves you satisfied when you reach the end. I highly recommend *Madeline's Protector*. ~ Author, Mildred Colvin





# 1

*Shropshire, England, Iron Country, August 5, 1821*

“Stop, thief!” Madeline St. James grabbed the coarse sleeve of the man who stole her guineas, but he shook free and dashed away.

“Give those back, this instant.” Mouth open, pulse racing, she stopped her pursuit. A scream bubbled in the pit of her stomach, but she pursed her lips. A St. James never made a public scene or conceded defeat.

The thief reached the other side of the vacant courtyard, well ahead of a wagon rumbling up the cobblestone lane. He shot her a toothless grin and traipsed to the main building of Tilford Coaching Inn.

The dray and its lumbering horse team swerved closer, but if she waited one more second, the thief would escape her view. Another man would’ve taken advantage of her. Not again.

Picking up her weighty skirts, she sprinted onto the slick rocks of the road. The silver hem of her long carriage dress slapped at the mud. Better to be dirty than a victim. Cupping her palm to her eyes, she scanned for the thief.

The man bounded up the stone entree. He’d vanish like her driver, amongst the sea of gaming travellers.

She lengthened her stride to intercept him.

One high step too many, her boot heel caught in

the sagging silk, tripping her. The air pushed from her lungs as she fell flat. The soggy earth saturated her layers to the shift and petticoat. Her injured elbow stung anew.

Wheels squealed. Hooves clomped the cobbles. Soon the horses would be on top of her, stomping and kicking.

A couple of tugs and yanks couldn't fish her boot free. No escape this time. *Abba Father, forgive.* She turned her head and braced for the onslaught.

A band of iron gripped her stomach and hauled her from the muck. She went limp, sprawled against the hard chest of a rescuer. He pulled her off the lane and under one of the overhanging galleries of the inn.

Wind slapped her cheek as the horses swept past. No one held the reins. The wagon swung wide, crashed into the inn's main building, and flipped to the ground. Ejected barrels hit the whitewashed wall and sprayed foamy liquid.

Madeline's breath came in heaves, and she clutched the titan arm sheltering her. *No fainting. No need to lose more dignity.*

One of the draught horses loosed from its tether and galloped to the emerald pines scalloping the surrounding hills. The other roan remained with the wreck, lifting its crooked leg. Poor lame creature.

An old man rushed out of the inn and cut at the horse's strap. "Bring my gun. This one needs to be put down."

With an awkward hold on her middle, her rescuer spun her, perhaps to keep her from seeing the cruelty. He needn't be concerned.

The past two weeks had numbed her to violence. Yet, God kept her as He did again today. "Thank you,

Providence, but please...spare the roan."

"You're welcome, but it's Devonshire, Lord Devonshire." The low voice kissed her ear, heated the pulsing vein along her throat.

How could this man sound calm? They both could've died.

He flung open the door to an onyx carriage and eased her onto the floorboards. "Are you injured, miss?"

"No." She rubbed her arms and gazed at her rescuer. He was very tall, enough to make her feel dainty even at her Amazon height. With broad shoulders and a solid chin, she couldn't have sculpted a more perfect hero. "The horse, sir? Can you help it?"

"Stay put. This mere mortal will see what can be done." He grabbed his top hat from the seat and marched away. His elegant form, straight posture, disappeared into the growing crowd.

It didn't matter she sat on the floor, chilled in her clothes, imposing demands of a stranger. Even against this errant horse, Death shouldn't win. She'd seen its victories too often, with Mama's passing seven years ago and Cousin Thomas dying this past spring.

She squeezed her throbbing elbow. Falling aggravated the sprain.

A quick shake of her foot didn't release her trapped kid boot but tore the lace trim on her gown, Mama's carriage dress. A lump formed in Madeline's throat. She missed Mama so much.

A few choice words shouted from the crowd and a round of loud snickers interrupted her woolgathering.

Lord Devonshire returned and rubbed the scruff of his neck. "It cost three guineas, but your nag will be kept by the innkeeper's daughter."

"I'll repay you, sir. My abigail has my reticule." She swallowed gall. The thief took most of her money, but surely three coins were left.

He waved his hand. "I'd rather not be a paid fool." Leaning along the door, he stared at her with irises bluer than a summer day.

What could Lord Devonshire learn from her disheveled appearance? She didn't mind his gaze. Since travelling to Shropshire, grey ash painted the clouds, no doubt from the ore foundries. No sunny skies like Hampshire.

"Now to be of true assistance." He reached under her hem, gripped above her ankle, and freed her boot from the tangle of silk. The warmth arising from his gloved hands seared her thin stockings. "Not broken." He released her foot to dangle through the entrance.

Shocking and bold. Though dressed as a gentleman in buff buckskins and an azure tailcoat, this definitely wasn't someone with whom to be alone.

Her wits returned, and she bounced out of the carriage. "I'll get your payment."

"Wait." Deep and commanding like Father's voice, his words stopped her. "I saw you trip trailing the miner."

She pivoted and clasped her hands across her ruined pelisse. Mud covered the delicate puce rosettes embroidered on the bodice.

"You were very brave to run after him."

"Bacon-brained would be a more apt description." A raindrop splashed her forehead. Her bonnet must have fallen in the commotion. She wiped her brow. The cold balm of mud smoothed against her skin. Her heart sunk, and she wrenched off her soiled gloves. If her cheeks weren't already scarlet, they should be.

He shortened the distance between them, a smile tugging at his full lips. "In mining country, the strikes have set everyone on edge. Some resort to crime. There's a would-be highwayman on every corner. You must take care around Tilford."

A fortnight ago, his concern might've warmed her, but not now.

"Father of Heav'n!" Mrs. Elsie Wilkins, Madeline's abigail, ran to her.

"Y' weren't to leave the livery." The good woman wrapped her stubby arms about Madeline's hips. "Too much for m' heart."

In vain, Madeline pushed at Mrs. Wilkins's indigo redingote to keep it from soiling, but no force could stop the woman's bear-like embrace.

Madeline's trampled bonnet peeked from the motherly woman's reticule. Dredged in dirt, the hat's ostrich plume lay crooked. Even in haste, her abigail took care of Madeline.

With another clench, Mrs. Wilkins finally let go. "Y' face?" She yanked from her pocket a crimson cloth and scrubbed Madeline's chin.

Madeline clasped her friend's wrist. "Dear, hand me my scarf. I'll do it."

Mrs. Wilkins shook her head and kept swatting the mud. She didn't want to come on this adventure, but how could Madeline be without her strongest ally? It must be the Irish blood bubbling in the abigail's veins, making her so loyal.

"First a broken wheel, now this." Mrs. Wilkins added a spit shine to Madeline's cheek then pivoted to Lord Devonshire. "The stable boys said ye saved her. Bless ye."

"I...I saw the lass fall in the path of the wagon. I

am the Earl of Devonshire. Very glad to be of assistance." An unreadable expression set on his countenance as he flicked a rain droplet from his sleeve. "Are there others in your party?"

"There's me—Mrs. Wilkins—and my lady, Miss Madeline St. James." She stretched on tiptoes and picked at Madeline's unraveling chignon, reseating pins and tucking tresses. "And m' lady's driver, but he disappeared, the no good lout."

Great. Mrs. Wilkins just confirmed they were alone. Now he'd be obliged to help. Indebted to a man. Could this day get any worse?

The earl rubbed his jaw. His gaze seemed locked on the colourful scarf.

Another drip from the overcast skies splattered and curled into the sable-brown hair peeking beneath Lord Devonshire's brim. He was too fine looking, too virile to be trusted. Step-mother's nephew, the handsome Mr. Kent, imparted that lesson before Madeline left home.

"Mrs. Wilkins, hand me my coins. I need to repay his lordship."

"No, miss. 'Tis my duty to escort you to your destination."

Madeline shook her head. "'Unnecessary."

"Cheshire. Please take us there." Mrs. Wilkins dabbed at her coat. "Like a divine appointm'nt, the earl being here."

"I can't speak for divinity, but you might say I've been waiting on a sign." He slipped the cloth from Mrs. Wilkins and waved it like a flag. "Someone brave to show me the way."

"I suppose we have no choice." Madeline snatched it from him with trembling fingers. She may be bacon-

brained but not helpless or a plaything.

"There's always a choice. Like should I chase a scoundrel or let you freeze?"

She stilled her shaking palms.

He stepped near, removed his tailcoat, and draped it onto her shoulders. With his thick thumbs, he flipped the collar's revers to cradle her neck. His touch was gentle. "This should stop your shivers. I'll have my Mason get blankets."

Hugging herself beneath the weighty wool, Madeline gaped at Lord Devonshire. "Sir, we haven't agreed."

"The drizzle will get worse." He rotated to Mrs. Wilkins. "The young lady was just in my Berlin. Perhaps the visit was too short to attest to its comfort."

Trimmed in gold, the carriage could overshadow her father's. Either the earl possessed great wealth or liked the appearance of it. In her experience, both conditions made men pompous or cruel. She rubbed her elbow again.

Mrs. Wilkins curtsied. "My lord, we've two trunks in the stables with our brok'n carriage."

The earl nodded, opened the door to his Berlin, and then plodded the long lane toward the livery of the coaching inn. Was it confidence or arrogance squaring his shoulders?

He didn't pivot to check on them, not once. Arrogance.

"Come along, Lady Maddie. Don't get stubborn. Remember *your* plan."

Madeline raised her chin, grasped Mrs. Wilkins's forearm, and lumbered toward Lord Devonshire's carriage. "Another obstacle to peace."

Her friend's cheeks glowed. "The beginning of

peace, child. It's the beginning."

If only Mrs. Wilkins could be right. The unease in Madeline's spirit disagreed.

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The temptation to look back almost overtook Justain Delveaux, the Earl of Devonshire. He strode faster to the livery. The girl had been spooked. If he seemed anxious, she'd run.

A fire of independence burned in her jade eyes. He'd have to placate Miss St. James and win her trust. Then she'd lead him to the killer.

At the entry of the hay-filled livery, his driver brushed Athena, Justain's filly. "Sir, are you ready to give up? The informant isn't going to show."

Justain stroked Athena's thick ebony coat, a shade lighter than Miss St. James's raven locks. "He didn't. *She* did. Look behind me. Are ladies entering my Berlin?"

Mason squinted. "Yes."

"The young one possesses the red cloth signal. She's the informant."

Furrowing his brows, Mason shrugged. "You and your jokes, sir."

"I'm serious. We're taking them to Cheshire, probably a clandestine meeting. Never thought to look for a woman. Well, not for an informant. The lass will lead me to lynch—"

"Must you wax poetic?" Mason chortled. "Genteel women shouldn't be left here, but..."

"Just say it."

"We need to leave, sir. Something's afoot." Mason wiped water from the brim of his tricorn. "The miners

say a blood vengeance rides tonight."

"We'll leave soon, with my new acquaintances." Why was Mason hedging his words? Since Justain was knee-high, the man never held his tongue.

Rain fell in buckets. Justain moved under the stable's roof.

Mason and Athena followed. He searched his blue-black flap coat and retrieved his treasured silver flask and Justain's bottle of tincture. "The filly's cut is sealed."

"Superb, but no more of this." Justain pocketed the tincture. "Put away your spirits and say your peace."

"This chase won't bring Lord Richard back." His driver's voice grated like a rebuke from the old man, Justain's father. "You've other things to contend."

Justain concentrated on the steady rhythm of the shower. It blocked the memory of Richard's last breath and Justain's mounting guilt. He was to blame for Richard dying. Nothing took precedence over avenging his brother.

"Send blankets to my guests. Have the stable grooms load Miss St. James's trunks." He trudged toward the Berlin. This couldn't be a fool's errand. He hated being a fool.

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Madeline forced a smile at Lord Devonshire as he leapt into the Berlin. He sat in the opposing seat, tossed his sodden top hat and gloves onto the floorboards, then pushed wet hair from his face. The rain poured hard minutes after she and Mrs. Wilkins entered his carriage, and it hadn't lessened.

Seeing him soaked eased her slight agitation at

him.

"Thank ye, for savin' m' mistress." Mrs. Wilkins snuggled into the corner of his carriage, her greying red curls rested upon the creamy silk lining the walls. "Ye gen'rous to escort us to Cheshire." She yawned then winked at Madeline. "So noble and so handsome."

Heat crept up Madeline's neck. She didn't need to be reminded of his looks or his bravery. "We are grateful."

"Be at ease. It's not often I play the hero these days." His sable-brown mop shadowed a lean nose and tanned cheeks. "The escapade gave me needed exercise."

At least, he remained humoured. Gratitude should weigh on her spirit, but was his deed happenstance or had he followed her? Miles and miles from Hampshire, and the feeling of being chased refused to quit.

A servant stuck his head inside the carriage. Rain drizzled down his uniform causing the braiding on his mantle to droop. "To Cheshire, my lord?"

Twisting a signet ring, Lord Devonshire glanced toward Madeline and Mrs. Wilkins and then turned to the opening. "Yes, Mason, I haven't changed my mind. My guests have gone to great lengths to find me. I shan't forsake them."

What? Why did the earl think she sought him? What tales men must feed each other.

"Yes, my lord." The frowning servant nodded and shut the heavy door.

Madeline smoothed her bodice, trying to calm the tickle in her stomach. Father told her every kindness held a price. She'd paid enough for trusting Mr. Kent. The pain from his blows to her side persisted.

"Lord Devonshire, we haven't departed. Pray help us hire a post chaise to ferry my abigail and me to my aunt?"

"No. I will see this through." He cleared his throat. "I look forward to our conversation."

Though the earl's countenance appeared pleasant with his lips curling, he fidgeted his wilted cravat. Dried, the neckcloth might've held a little height in a fashionable sense. Was he one of those pompous dandies? Her scarlet handkerchief did hold his interest.

No. If he were, the earl would've let Madeline die than risk wrinkles to his clothes. The parade of fortune hunters Step-mother marched through Avington Manor surely would've made no effort. The shrewish woman probably hoped the flock of peacocks supping at their home could convince Madeline to accept her nephew for a mate, a lesser of evils.

The carriage lurched forward. Lord Devonshire reclined as if he posed for a portrait. His steady gaze set upon her.

Did he want his jacket returned? Did her slipping bonnet offend him? She righted it and smoothed its bent feather. "May I at least reimburse the livery expenses for my carriage?"

"Keep your precious gold coins. 'Tis my honour to serve you, Miss St. James." He grinned. Smooth white teeth peeked. "The opportunity to pull a headstrong beauty from harm's way is something I relish."

"Would you let a thief abscond with your coins?"

His smile dissolved. "No. I protect what is mine, and I'll avenge what is stolen."

Few had the patience for her opinions. She rolled one of the silver buttons of his jacket along her thumb.

"Praise be unto Prov..." Mrs. Wilkins snorted a

harsh noise, her chin bobbling in the throes of sleep. With a fold and a tuck, Madeline secured the dear woman's blanket then tugged a book from the abigail's reticule.

"You two are my first guests in this new coach." The earl's tone was low.

He needn't be concerned about awakening Mrs. Wilkins. After this harrowing day, wild elephants couldn't rouse her.

Slumping near the window, Madeline glanced at the retreating landscape, the evergreens reflecting in the puddles. She'd enjoy nature now, before they crossed the Severn Gorge. Seeing the bottomless chasm would rattle her frayed nerves. The last time, ten years ago, she took this route with her parents and had curled next to Mama and hid within the folds of her shawl. *Abba Father, please allow each of my steps to be surefooted. Tell Mama I miss her.*

Lord Devonshire inched closer. Though the carriage rocked with each clip-clop of the horse team, he didn't sway. His tall frame sat erect like a sleek marble sculpture. "Is there anything I can do to make you comfortable?"

Mrs. Wilkins's bonnet fell onto her lap, her snores bleating to an embarrassing high pitch. The symphony of snoots quieted, but not before one protracted trumpet.

"No, sir." Madeline's cheeks warmed. Explaining her hasty exodus from Avington would lower his opinion of her, not that she needed his good opinion.

Egad. Step-mother was right. Madeline did over think things. She yanked her bookmark, flipped a few pages, and tried to lose herself in the passage.

He rapped the book and lowered it. "You'll ruin

your sight, reading all the way to Cheshire. At our next stop, I'll have a lantern set down, unless I can capture your interest."

Another opportunist. Yes, he'd saved her from being trampled, but he was still a man. Did they do anything but seek their own pleasures? Like Mr. Kent.

Kent's sibilant whispers turned to yells ringing in her ear. He threatened to kill her for refusing his proposal. What type of life would she have if she'd eloped with a man of such vile temperament? She shuddered. Shoving her novel in Kent's eye darkened it and helped her escape.

"Miss St. James? Are you well?"

"Yes." She glanced at her wet hero. "You must be cold. I should return this." She lifted the tailcoat an inch and an ache rippled along her elbow. She clenched her teeth and let the jacket fall back to her shoulders.

"Just damp." He whipped his sleeves, rustling ivory buttons. "You seem to favour your right arm. Did I injure you in our last embrace?"

"No...no, my lord." Her breath hitched, and she sniffed an odour similar to fresh dye. It reeked. She huddled deeper in the tailcoat and swathed her nostrils. The mild fragrance of sandalwood lingered in Lord Devonshire's jacket. Peace reined in every storm, and this one smelled of safety, like her father's robes.

The earl shifted his boots hard onto the floor. "Some say confession is good for the soul. Do tell. Why were you at Tilford—a gaming den, no less?"

Madeline wobbled on the tufted cushion. "My carriage broke down. One usually has no choice where this happens."

"And your driver's missing? Such a fanciful story.