

CHAPTER I

May, 1794

Sovay rode out early while the dew was still wet on the grass. The grooms had not risen when she stole from the stables, and thin layers of mist wound themselves round her horse's legs like skeins of discarded muslin as she crossed the bridge over the lake. Once she was away from the house, she spurred her horse to a gallop, crouched close to his neck as she took the old green road through the forest and up on to the common. There, she took up station at the crossroads, positioning herself in a grove of young birch, ready for the London coach, certain that he would be on it. Then she would expose him for the lecherous, double-dealing, false-hearted, despicable, craven little villain that she now knew him to be.

They were engaged and he had betrayed her with a chambermaid. Even the thought of him filled her with shaking fury.

'Not the first he's ruined, neither,' her maid, Lydia, had told her, giving her a look. With no mother, and only an invalid aunt to advise her, Lydia had taken some aspects of Sovay's moral guidance upon herself. Well, she needn't worry on that score. Sovay had not been that much of a fool. Not quite.

Her anger was mixed with a restless impatience. Where was the coach? She wanted this over. Her horse

sensed something of her agitation and stamped and pawed, his shoes ringing on the stony ground. She patted his neck and whispered in his ear to quieten him. The air was full of the sweet musky scent of broom and gorse. *When gorse is out of bloom, love is out of favour.* She remembered her mother telling her that. It must have been a long time ago. She plucked a sprig of yellow broom and fixed it to the brim of her brother's hat, her mind going back to the revenge she would have. She would make him beg, she would make him crawl and plead for his life. If he failed the test she was about to set for him, she would shoot him dead.

The crack of a driver's whip, his shouts and curses, the crunch of wheels and the labouring snort of horses broke into her thoughts. She spied through a veil of shifting leaves. There was no other traffic in any direction. She pulled down the black mask that she'd worn at last winter's masked ball and pulled up a green silk kerchief to hide the lower half of her face. The coach creaked almost to a halt at the crest of the rise, the horses sweating after the steep hill. As the driver drew back his whip to urge them onward, Sovay drew her pistols and walked her horse forward.

'Stand and deliver!'

Her words were whipped away by the wind, swallowed by the great open space of the common. She repeated her demand, making her voice deeper, more commanding, and the guard raised his hands into the air while the driver reined the horses in and lowered his whip. Her heart beat harder when she saw that they obeyed her. She kept one pistol upon them and used the other to rap on the door of the carriage.

‘Out. All of you out!’

Two passengers alighted: James, looking pale and frightened, and another young man. He was well-set, with a fresh, ruddy complexion, a little above her brother’s age, about four and twenty. He was in no hurry to get down from the coach and seemed neither worried nor discomfited by this interruption to his journey, and his self-assurance unnerved her. Sovay trained her pistol on him as she ordered the two to part with their valuables and place them in the saddlebag that she threw down to them.

While James sprang to follow her instructions, the other one showed more reluctance, but soon she had divested both of their watches and their gold.

‘Still I want one thing more,’ she said, addressing James. ‘That diamond ring that I see you wear. Hand it over and your life I will spare.’

She could feel her hand shaking when before it had been steady. This was the test she had set for him. The ring had been given as an expression of true love in an exchange of tokens. He had sworn to die rather than part with it. If he gave it to her, then all the doubts she harboured, all the stories that she had heard about him, were true. James did not hesitate; he was struggling to free the ring from his finger, spitting on his hand to work the band loose. She changed her aim and her hand shook no more. She didn’t need to make James beg and crawl. He was doing that of his own accord. He had fallen to his knees, squeezing tears from eyes shut tight in prayer, his clasped hands shaking in supplication.

‘Hold your fire, highwayman,’ the fair young man said as she pulled back the hammer.

He took the ring from James and brought the bag over to her, slinging it in front of her saddle. She holstered one of her pistols and he dropped the ring into her outstretched hand. The stone flashed in the sun.

‘He has given you everything.’ The young man looked up at her. ‘What more could you want from him? Small hands for a highwayman,’ he added and smiled as if he knew her secret.

He was quick. He read her intention in an instant. His eyes still on her, he threw up her arm as she squeezed the trigger. James screamed but the shot missed. The horses reared and shied in their traces so the driver had to struggle to stop them from breaking away and the coach from overturning. Sovay used the confusion to make her escape. She had business back at the house.



Sovay suppressed a sigh of impatience as the painter bent to his painstaking work. She tried not to move, as she had been instructed on numerous occasions, although she was afire with anticipation. She and James had an assignation at their usual trysting place in the garden. He would arrive; he might even be waiting for her now, with no idea that she was the highwayman who had stopped him on the road. Perhaps he would not even refer to it, preferring to keep his recent humiliation to himself. Perhaps she would let him pretend for a time, certainly she might do so, before she made a play of noticing the absence of the ring. The very thought of that made her tremble and Jonathan Trenton gave a moue of impatience.

‘How many *times* do I have to ask you?’ he said without looking up from the tiny brush strokes he was making.

Sovay murmured an apology and stared out at the garden behind him. She had never wanted to sit for this likeness. It was entirely Papa’s idea. He had also chosen the artist. A coming young man who had studied under the late Sir Joshua Reynolds. Papa liked to encourage artists early on in their careers. Sovay disliked Trenton. His voice was high-pitched and whining, his manner fussy and overbearing. She sensed that the antipathy was mutual, although he said little to her, except to scold.

The portrait was almost finished and he was glad of it. This was a good commission and he’d been paid in advance, but he had to travel up from town to take her likeness and these were dangerous times. Highwaymen prowled the roads, preying on all comers, even poor painters, and there was unrest in town and countryside alike, sparked by the terrible events in France. He was not of a cowardly nature and would happily have braved the danger, if he had enjoyed the work, but the young woman standing before him had not proved to be the easiest of subjects. The girl possessed a definite dark beauty, a quality he would like to capture, but her face had a sullen cast, her expression a mask that gave nothing away.

Except for today. There was a flush to her cheeks, a heightening of colour. He applied an extra touch of rose madder. Something had happened to change her gaze from stony indifference to restless animation. He exchanged brushes to add tiny sparks of white and ultramarine to her slate grey eyes. She either stood

with such stillness that he was hard put not to paint her like a statue, or she would not keep still. This morning she was inclined to fidget. She had something in her hand. She kept fiddling with it, turning it through her fingers. Something gold and round.

‘What is that you are holding?’ He would refrain from scolding, but she knew not to introduce variations in habit or accoutrements to their sessions.

‘It’s a watch.’ She turned the face to him.

He grunted, dismissing it. A watch would hardly fit in with the way he had chosen to portray her. Something else caught his interest. She was wearing a ring on the middle finger of her left hand. What on earth had possessed her to do that?

Her hand moved and the diamond flashed in fragments of refracted light as a shaft of early afternoon sun struck through the window that opened from the garden. Her head turned slightly, her eyes moved as if to see past him and through the billowing curtain. There was someone out there waiting for her. A lover, he guessed. The source of her agitation? A further wash of madder across her cheeks seemed to signal the answer.

‘You may go,’ he said.

She stepped out of her pose and came towards him.

‘Have you finished?’

‘A little more to do,’ he shrugged. ‘But the real answer is yes.’ She made to pass him, her mind already in the garden beyond the window. ‘Do you not want to see yourself?’

She stopped and looked directly at him. A frank gaze, challenging and insolent, as direct and unwavering as if she was a young man.

‘The real answer is no. I do not like to look at myself.’

The painter laughed. ‘All women like to look at themselves, young or old.’

‘Believe me, Mr Trenton, when I say that I do not. I did not want this likeness. I only sat for you to please Papa.’

‘Even so . . .’ To his annoyance he found himself wheedling, almost pleading. It was suddenly important that she should approve his work.

She stepped past him to look at her portrait. He half smiled, waiting for her to be caught by the spell of her own beauty, cast by the skill of his portraiture. He had seen it many times before. The dress that she wore for the sittings glowed against her skin. The fine white muslin had been difficult to paint but he thought that he had caught the right gauzy lightness. The girl was seventeen, but the style of dress chosen by her father was flowing and loose fitting, more suitable for a younger child. The scarlet sash, that Sovay had chosen to wind round her waist, went some way to lessen the impression of innocence. Trenton stood back examining his work. The white and the red showed off her dark beauty to perfection. He had caught her on the cusp, at the moment of transition from girl to woman. Even with that sullen smoulder, she might never be lovelier . . .

‘You are a great admirer of your own work, I see.’

The irony of her tone brought the blood to his own face.

‘An artist is only as good as his subject,’ he replied with a bow.

‘Smoothly said,’ she smiled, and her whole face changed. He wished they had time to start over again.

‘What do you think?’ Suddenly, it was important for him to know.

‘It is fine work. You are a good painter. But . . .’

‘But what?’

‘I do not like to look at myself, as I said. Now, you really must excuse me.’

With that she left him for her assignation in the garden, running as fast as the goddess, Diana, the classical persona he had chosen for her. He went to the window, peering through the curtains, hoping to gain a glimpse of this young man who had so captured her attention, but she soon disappeared past the great cedar tree and into a tunnel of trees that sheltered the Terrace Walk. The young leaves were at their most beautiful: the deep bronze of copper beech blended with delicate golds and the palest of greens to show like a scatter of coin against the dark gloss of the evergreens. He turned back into the room and packed the colours away in his head as he began to assemble his things. He would finish the portrait in his Covent Garden studio. He would put her in a pastoral setting, something a little wild: woodland in early summer, with a lake perhaps and mountains in the background. He liked to add a touch of the allegorical. His favourite for young women was Flora, goddess of flowers, youth, spring and fertility, but that would hardly do here. She had to be Diana, the huntress. He would give her a bow and a canine companion, perhaps a stag caught in a thicket. He grunted with satisfaction. That would do well and it could all be done in the safety of London.



Sovay ran along the Great Terrace, propelled by fury. She was late, but that did not matter, let him wait. She had turned the diamond round so it bit into her palm. She held the watch curled tight in her fist. He was lucky she did not have pistols with her, or she would finish what she should have done earlier.

When she reached the Oval Pavilion, their preferred place of meeting, James wasn't even there. She refused to sit on the stone bench inside the semicircular stone shelter. If she did so, she could not fail to notice the entwined initials carved on the round table, circled by a heart. Even looking at that wretched seat made her want to vomit. Sometimes when they met, in pursuit of greater privacy, they would mount the curving stairway that led to the little 'prospect' room. Sovay fought to control shuddering waves of fury and humiliation. They would not be going there any more.

She paced up and down, her gown brushing the grass, ready to show the watch and the ring, ready to confront him, but first she would taunt him, pay him out for his betrayal. She slipped the watch and the ring into her pocket. She would enjoy watching him squirm.

He arrived full of apologies, with tales of having been set upon on the road by a band of rogues. He had been ready to put up a fight, but the craven nature of his travelling companion meant that they'd had everything taken from them.

'Even the ring I gave you?'

'Even that.' He held his hand out, fingers spread. 'As you can see. I pleaded with the ruffians, but they

would have killed me.'

'But it was a token of my love for you.' She looked at him, her large eyes full of hurt and accusation. 'You said you would rather die than part with it.'

'I was set upon, I told you!' He stepped forward, as if to kiss her. 'Come, love, let us not quarrel.'

Sovay turned from him. 'Even so . . .'

She stepped away. He made to follow, his face full of persuading. He was pretty rather than handsome, she realised now, with the kind of sweetness of face that might cause a young girl to lose her heart; but his pale blue eyes were set rather too close together and there was weakness in the chin, petulance in the set of the mouth. How could she ever have found him in the least bit attractive? He did not look his nineteen years. The skin on his cheeks was petal smooth and looked as if it hardly saw a razor; his powdered curls were as soft as a child's.

She turned, withdrawing her hand from her pocket. His eyes grew wider and the blood rose in his cheeks to see his watch dangling from her fist, his ring on her own finger. She threw his gold on the ground before him. He stepped back, hands up, as if to block out the sight of the glittering coins.

'It was you!' he said, and blushed even further, but all the time his eyes grew colder and it was not long before he rallied.

His father had been keen on the match in the beginning. There was wealth in the family, passed from mother to daughter. 'She'll come in for a pretty penny when she is twenty-one,' his father had told him, his eyes gleaming as if he could already see the gold spread before them, but circumstances had

changed. He would use the news to mask this humiliation. He was lucky to escape her. There had always been stories. Especially about her mother's family, that their wealth was based on pirate gold. It had been expedient to ignore them. Until now. The whole family was tainted. Today's behaviour confirmed it. A girl who would dress as a highwayman and rob a coach in broad daylight, who would want such a one for a wife?

'The watch I would like returning,' he said, 'but you may keep your ring. I have no use for it. That is what I came to tell you.' He looked skyward as if recalling the words he had rehearsed. 'It is all over between us, Sovay. We can no longer be affianced. Your father is little better than a Jacobin spy and will shortly be arrested. My family cannot continue an association with anyone who shows anything less than complete loyalty to His Majesty.'

Sovay stared at him, trying to make sense of the words coming out of his mouth.

'Tis true, Sovay!' James exclaimed, unsettled by her continuing silence. 'I've heard your father speak sedition on very many occasions. Speaking against the King and the Government. You cannot deny it.'

'I certainly do!' Sovay turned on him. 'He has *never* spoken against the King! He's for reform, of course, but that's a very different thing.'

'I heard it with my own ears at his very table! There is no point in defending him. As for your brother!' James shook his head. 'When he was last down from Oxford, I'd never heard such wild talk. It was enough to get a person arrested, if not convicted.' He hooked his thumbs in his waistcoat pocket, no longer the least

bit disconcerted. 'Your family is bound for disgrace. Scandal hangs about you like a bad smell. Well,' he demanded. 'Do you have *nothing* to say?'

Sovay shook her head. Tears of fury were welling up in her eyes and she could not trust her voice. She could hear his father, Sir Royston, behind the words that he had uttered. How could she ever have considered this, this *puppy* worthy of her?

'In that case . . .' He groped for the watch that was no longer in the pocket of his fine waistcoat. Sovay, who loathed sewing above anything, had punctured her fingers to pepper pots embroidering the primrose yellow and dove-grey silk with little pink knots of flowers. A labour of love. One of her few attempts to do the kind of thing other girls did and it had all been for nothing! She turned away, trying to control herself, lest he interpret her tears of rage for something else.

How had she ever felt anything for him? She had been flattered by his attention; that was the truth of it. He was much sought after, considered a great catch, and Sovay had enjoyed feeling superior to every other girl in the neighbourhood. She had persuaded herself that she truly loved him. It was obvious that she had built up an edifice out of nothing and now it was tumbling like a child's pile of bricks. Her brother, Hugh, had always thought him a shallow, cowardly fellow, in thrall to his father; Papa was the one who had persuaded her into it. Although he disliked his pompous neighbour, he had thought that the marriage might be an influence for good. Once they were married, so his reasoning went, Sovay could educate James and Sir Royston into new, more enlightened

ways of thinking. As if they would listen to her!

Sovay loved her papa, and respected him, but sometimes his ideals got the better of him. She had an uncomfortable feeling that she had been part of one of his schemes for improvement. He had treated the young man as if he was already his son-in-law and had spent many hours discussing ideas with him: new methods in farming and land management, as well as science, philosophy and the politics of the day. James had listened with every show of attention, encouraging him, drawing him on to make more and more radical statements. Her father had gone along with it, always so trusting, seeing the good in everyone. Sovay now saw that it had all been for one purpose: to get him to compromise himself. Who was the spy here? She turned back, ready to accuse him, but James was already walking away.

‘You may keep the money,’ he said over his shoulder. ‘If what I hear is correct,’ he added, his voice cold with ominous warning, ‘you may have need of it.’

He did not stoop to pick up his gold and she would not touch it. The coin was left where it settled. Someone would have a lucky find.

She watched him go, all the while seeing his arms thrown up, seeing his back arch, imagining him falling, the rich, red blood spreading to stain the oyster silk of his brocade jacket. If she’d had a gun with her, he would already be dead.

CHAPTER 2

Soxay walked back through the gardens towards the house. Some of her anger had dissipated, but not all. She was glad to be rid of him, better to discover now what a spineless coward he was, what a traitor, but she was annoyed at the way he had trounced her. How he had managed to recover so quickly from his initial embarrassment and *still* behave as though he were superior. If she were a man . . . but then if she were, the situation would hardly have arisen.

Her mind drifted back to the morning. How she'd enjoyed the feeling of being in her brother's clothes. They were a little too big for her. She'd had to belt the breeches tightly into her waist and wear two pairs of socks to stop her feet sliding about in his boots, but she had been able to stride free of encumbering skirts and restricting corsets, to ride astride instead of side-saddle. She liked the heaviness of the pistols by her side, the heft of them in her hand. And when the coach stopped, when she saw James' face, when everyone did *exactly* what she said. She had been taken with an excitement, an exhilaration that she had never before experienced. Even the memory made her heart beat harder. She feared to admit how she had felt. Even to herself.

Her anger towards James returned with still greater force, although part of that was fury with herself for being such a gull, for being taken in so easily, but the

insult against her was nothing compared to the things that he had said about her father. Was it malice? Her father and his were hardly the best of friends. They disagreed violently about most things. Sir Royston objected to her father's new ways. He made no secret of his opinion that Sir John Middleton mollicoddled his workers, building them cottages and paying them more than others could afford. Her father would argue that he could do so because his farming methods were successful, but Sir Royston objected that it made it difficult for other landowners who preferred to stick to the old ways. It was true that her father was of a reforming frame of mind, interested in changing other things besides methods of farming, but did that make him a spy? And how did James know? The accusations had to come from his father. Sir Royston was an MP and had the borough in his pocket. He hardly ever attended Parliament but he made it his business to be close to those in power. There could be truth in what James had told her. Papa was from home at the moment. In London on business. Did he know what was being said against him? If not, she must find a way to get word to him. Sovay quickened her step towards the house.

'Miss, Miss!' Lydia came running towards her. 'You're wanted. There's a visitor. What happened?' She asked in an excited whisper as they walked back to the house.

Sovay showed her the ring. Lydia's green eyes widened and she smiled like the cat she much resembled.

'So who's the visitor? Mr Trenton, the painter?'

'No,' Lydia shook her head, 'he's left already. A

stranger. Steward Stanhope sent me to find you.'

In her father's absence, William Stanhope was in charge of the running of the estate, but family duties fell to Sovay. Aunt Harriet, of course, was nominally in charge of the household but she'd be no help. A self-proclaimed invalid, she dosed herself with toddies laced with laudanum, which kept her almost permanently confined to her bed.

'He's waiting in the library.'

'Thank you, Lydia.'

The young man was examining her father's books when she entered the room. He was so absorbed that he failed to register her presence and Sovay stood in the doorway watching him. He was of medium height and solidly built with little affectation as to his dress. His curly fair hair was undressed, carelessly tied back with a black ribbon. His boots were muddy and his broad back strained the dark cloth of his coat. When he stretched up to reach down a volume, the material across his shoulders threatened to split and his hand showed square and tanned against the pale spines of the books. He browsed like a scholar and was dressed like a gentleman, but he reminded her of Gabriel Stanhope, the Steward's son, who was more at home in fields and woods than in a drawing room. She wondered if he had come to see her father on farming business. People often came to consult him about his methods, but in that case why had Steward Stanhope not dealt with him?

He turned, volume still in hand, as if aware of her scrutiny.

'Oh,' he said. 'Forgive me. I didn't realise I had company . . .'

He faltered, but not from confusion. He recognised her immediately, as she did him. He had been on the coach that very morning and had witnessed her excursion as a highwayman. Sovay momentarily found herself speechless. He rallied more quickly than she did.

‘I was just admiring your father’s library. I envy him this.’ He held up the volume that he had taken down from the shelves: Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, a 1762 first edition. ‘He has a marvellous collection.’

Sovay looked round the room, seeing it with a stranger’s eye. The shelves were stocked from floor to ceiling with books on every possible subject. The walls were studded with chronometers and barometers. Globes and astrolabes stood about on the floor. Cabinets held stuffed birds and animals, samples of rocks, minerals and fossils. Every surface was crowded with bits of machinery, brass-crafted devices for generating this or measuring that.

‘Yes, he is interested in many things,’ she said, just as several clocks chimed the hour in a jangle of sound from the musical to the sonorous while others wheezed and whirred to catch up. ‘Clocks being one of them,’ she added through the din.

He laughed. ‘Excuse me, I have not introduced myself.’ He came towards her, hand extended. ‘My name is Virgil Barrett. You must be Miss Sovay Middleton.’

He took her hand. She expected him to bow and kiss it, as James would have done. Instead he shook it, as if she were a man. His clasp was strong, his skin warm and dry. Sovay returned his grip and took her hand from his.

‘I am delighted to meet you, Mr Barrett. May I enquire as to your business?’

‘I have come to see your father, but I understand that he is from home at the moment.’

‘That is correct. He was called away quite suddenly. You have missed him, unfortunately.’

‘I was afraid of that.’

He began to pace the room, still clutching the book he had taken from the shelves. Could he trust her? The lives and freedom of many, even her own father, could depend on that decision. She was very young, and appeared to be demure, but had he not seen her, masquerading as a man? A highwayman at that? He was sure it had been her. He’d know those eyes anywhere, and there had been murder in them. He’d seen it in the eyes of others. He’d been just a boy, but he had served in the War of Independence. He’d seen it then. The life he led now took him into considerable peril. He had seen it since. Such dangerous behaviour suggested a wild, headstrong nature hiding beneath that modest exterior. She was a long way from ordinary; such an action took nerve and courage. He turned back, having decided. Such qualities fitted these extraordinary times.

‘Are you from the West Country?’ she asked, to fill the silence. She found his manner, his dress, even his accent hard to place.

‘No,’ he laughed again, a rich sound in the ticking room. ‘I’m a citizen of the United States of America.’ He smiled, his teeth white and even, and spoke the words with evident pride.

‘Oh I see. My father calls your nation *a beacon of liberty in a dark world.*’

‘And so it is! We do not have kings and lords ruling over us. We do not bow the knee. We make our own laws and live in freedom.’

‘Not all of you,’ she said. Abolition was one of her father’s many causes.

‘Not all, it is true,’ he replied, divining her meaning, ‘but I did not come here to debate slavery with you.’

‘Why did you come, Mr Barrett? I am curious to know.’

‘Do you know where your father has gone? Do you know what called him from home?’

‘Not exactly, but he has many interests, as I have said, and is in touch with a great many people all over the country. He often travels to visit one group or another. I believe he was going to London to meet with some men who have asked for his help.’

‘Well, I must tell you,’ his brow creased into a frown, ‘the men he was going to meet are subject to orders of arrest, if they haven’t been taken already. That is likely why they contacted him. He is also under suspicion and subject to such an order, as are many others.’ He looked around and spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. ‘I looked to warn him but I was delayed on the road. My horse went lame. I had to take the coach . . .’

She turned away so he could not see her blushing. Her actions seemed even more irresponsible and prankish in light of the trouble which faced her now.

‘I have to warn you of imminent danger. There is someone coming here, a Bow Street runner with a warrant and evidence against him.’

‘But my father is not here!’

‘That does not matter.’

‘And what are the charges?’

‘Probably the lesser charge of sedition. Speaking against the King and the Government. Once the warrant is in the hands of the magistrate, your father will be arrested as soon as he appears.’

And the magistrate was Sir Royston. He would be happy to oblige. His son, James, would supply the evidence. She had heard the very word on his lips not half an hour since!

‘What will happen?’

‘If he is found guilty? Imprisonment. Even transportation.’

Her father did not enjoy the best of health. A death sentence, either one. The guilty verdict was a foregone conclusion. Who would doubt a magistrate’s son?

‘The lesser charge, you said,’ Sovay looked up into his troubled blue-grey eyes. ‘What is the greater one?’

‘It is possible he might be charged with treason . . .’ Virgil lowered his voice, as if he feared that they might be overheard.

‘Treason!’ Sovay hugged herself, suddenly chilled, as if the shadow of great events had fallen across Compton, blotting out all light and warmth from the sunny library. ‘What would happen if he was convicted?’

‘The sentence for treason is to be hanged, drawn and quartered. The punishment has not changed.’ He paused. ‘And . . .’

‘And?’ Sovay shuddered and turned away, wishing to hide her agitation. Was that not bad enough?

‘If your father was convicted of treason, his lands and property would be forfeit.’

She turned back. And who would benefit from that?

Sir Royston, no doubt. All her father's work would come to nothing. His workers and cottagers would end up as miserable as the wretches who worked Sir Royston's land, the Stanhopes turned out in favour of that weasel of a Steward the Gilmores employed. It was not to be borne.

She had been aware of dark clouds forming, but had no idea that the storm was so near. If only she had paid more attention to her father's preoccupation. He had given up his beloved experiments. His day book and his nature journal had lain unopened for months, the surfaces in his workshop and laboratory had gathered dust while he had spent all his time in here, writing tracts and engaged in endless correspondence. He believed so completely in the rightness of his cause: Reason, Liberty, Equality. These truths had been dinned into her since she was a child, so much so that it seemed strange to her, and her brother, that others did not share them. The Revolution in France had been welcomed in their house with rejoicing. Her father had planted a liberty tree on Compton Dasset village green and the anniversary of the Bastille falling had been the occasion, last year, for a celebratory dinner which had been attended by like-minded friends from across the county, members of the Monday Society who met on the first Monday of every month to discuss science and philosophy. They had toasted 'The Patriots of France', 'Tom Paine' and 'The Rights of Man' but they had also toasted 'King and Constitution', she remembered distinctly. Her father believed absolutely but he was not disloyal. He spared little thought, however, for the danger that his ideas brought with them, and even then his concern

would always be for other people, never for himself. All this had been going on in front of her and she had hardly noticed, too preoccupied by that wretch Gilmore. Virgil Barrett must think her very shallow. She would find a way to make up for it now.

‘This man. This Bow Street runner. When will he come?’

‘I would say that I was a few days ahead of him, no more than that.’ He hesitated. ‘I would stay and help you if I could, but I ride north. He carries a sheaf of warrants and evidences with him and there are others I must warn. May I trouble you for a horse? I will not get far on the spavined nag I was offered at the inn. Also . . .’ He hesitated, not knowing how to put this. ‘I find myself without funds and,’ his fingers went to his empty waistcoat pocket, ‘in need of a timepiece.’

Sovay coloured. This was as near as he’d come to mentioning it, but all through their interview she’d been intensely aware of their previous meeting on the road.

‘Of course.’ She went to a drawer in the bureau. ‘Here’s gold for you and a watch and chain.’

He pocketed the money in a jingle of coin and examined the watch carefully.

‘This is very like my own watch,’ he said with a smile. ‘Very like indeed!’ He opened the back and examined the maker’s mark. ‘Made in Philadelphia. What a coincidence! Who would credit it?’

‘Who, indeed!’ Sovay laughed, despite her embarrassment, grateful to him for so deftly defusing the tension between them.

‘My father’s collection includes items great and small,’ she said. ‘Now let us find you a suitable horse.’

‘Thank you.’ He took her hand again and this time he kissed it. ‘I hope that our next meeting will be under happier circumstances.’

‘So do I.’

Sovay smiled. She found that she liked him and hoped that they would meet again. She went with him to see that he got his new mount and that he had all he needed for his onward journey.

Virgil thanked her and rode off, glad to feel a good horse under him. A pretty girl. No, pretty did not do her justice. She was both less than that, and greater. Her good looks verged on beauty. She looked small as she stood on the steps to wave goodbye to him. She was very young to be facing alone the forces that were gathering round her, ready to snuff out the flame of liberty that had burnt so bright in that pleasant house. He checked his horse, half of a mind to go back to help her, but he merely lifted a hand in salute and spurred his horse on. It was his duty to warn others of the danger they faced, before it was too late.



Sovay could settle to nothing and knew that this restlessness would not be dissipated until she had found her father and got word to Hugh in Oxford. She prowled the empty rooms and everything that she saw was suddenly newly precious to her.

It was all in jeopardy, for if the house was seized, everything would be cast on the bonfire, or sold and dispersed. And why? For what reason? She looked up at the portrait that hung above the fireplace. Her father had a kind face, his mouth quirked at the corners as if he could not resist smiling and his dark

eyes shone with intelligence. Plainly dressed, as always, slightly overweight, the buttons on his waistcoat straining a little, he looked very much the gentleman farmer in his buff-coloured coat and breeches, and his neat, light brown wig. It was a proud pose before his beloved Compton, his gun at his side and a dog at his knee. Sovay felt deep affection as she looked up at him. He was a good man, generous, kind to his tenants, always willing to listen, to help those in need. Why should he be punished? Because he had an enquiring mind? Because of what he believed? He believed in reform, certainly. He believed that all men should be able to vote in secrecy and that parliamentary seats should not be in the gift of men like Sir Royston, but was that sedition? Was that treason? Were all who believed such things to be silenced?

Sovay slowly mounted the stairs, surveying the family portraits which looked down at the hall. Her mother as a young woman, dressed in the elaborate spreading skirts of twenty years ago or more. She was wearing a beautiful gown of pale pink satin, ruched and sewn with bows and bunches of lace that looked like overblown roses. She was sitting in a bower, roses of the exact same pale shade growing all around her. Sovay sighed. Her mother died when she was five.

She turned at the top of the stairs and went into her mama's drawing room. Sovay seldom came in here. She found it hard to bear. Although her mother had been dead for twelve years, her father insisted that there were fresh flowers arranged and that her tea things were laid just so. A collection of miniatures were grouped on the wall to the side of the fireplace:

Sovay and Hugh as children. Hugh at about seven or eight had been a pretty child, with his high colour and blond curls, but he could never be mistaken for a girl. His collar and necktie were askew and there was a careless, unruly fall to his hair and the look in his eyes suggested a mischievous, rebellious nature. Sovay had been younger, not more than three or four. She remembered nothing of the sitting or the artist. The dark, solemn-eyed girl, with a bow in her hair, could be a stranger, although she did remember the puppy she was clutching to her. Hugh and Sovay together, a little older, dressed as Harlequin and Columbine. Sovay smiled, remembering how Hugh hated that portrait and was always hiding it. Their mother had commissioned the likenesses as her illness worsened. She kept them by her bedside, as though she could take their images with her.

The last oval frame on the wall did not contain a painting at all, but a coil of her mother's curling dark hair. Even encased here, and after all these years, it had not lost its lustre. Sovay turned away, eyes stinging with fresh tears. She could see that hair, lovingly dressed and combed by Mrs Crombie, spread over the pillow, arranged around her mother's white, white face, whiter than the pillowcase.

Sovay wiped her tears away and returned to the landing. It was up to her now to find a way to secure this household, to keep Compton from harm. Who would not fight for their family's name, for their honour? Who could criticise her for doing so? She descended the stairs having decided upon a course of action.