

Someone to Care: Viola's Story (The Westcott Series)

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****Instant New York Times Bestseller****

Once the Countess of Riverdale, Viola Kingsley throws all caution to the wind when adventure calls in the form of a handsome aristocrat. . . .

Two years after the death of the Earl of Riverdale, his family has overcome the shame of being stripped of their titles and fortune--except for his onetime countess, Viola. With her children grown and herself no longer part of the social whirl of the ton, she is uncertain where to look for happiness--until quite by accident her path crosses once again with that of the Marquess of Dorchester, Marcel Lamarr.

Marcel Lamarr has been a notorious womanizer since the death of his wife nearly twenty years earlier. Viola caught his eye when she herself was a young mother, but she evaded his seduction at the time. A prize that eluded him before, she is all the more irresistible to him now although he is surprised to discover that she is as eager now for the excitement he offers as he is himself.

When the two defy convention and run away together, they discover that the ties of respectability are not so easily severed, and pleasure can ensnare you when you least expect it. . . .

Mary Balogh grew up in Wales and now lives with her husband, Robert, in Saskatchewan, Canada. She has written more than one hundred historical novels and novellas, more than thirty of which have been New York Times bestsellers. They include the Bedwyn saga, the Simply quartet, the Huxtable quintet, the seven-part Survivors' Club series, and, most recently, the Westcott series, including *Someone to Wed*, *Someone to Hold*, and *Someone to Love*. The hired carriage in which Viola Kingsley had been traveling just a short while before the Marquess of Dorchester spoke to her at the country inn not only had been uncomfortable with its hard seats and surely nonexistent springs and its drafty windows and door and its innumerable squeaks and groans and pervading smell of oldness and staleness. It had also developed a severe limp and was proceeding at less than half its former speed and was listing somewhat to one side. Try as she would to sit upright, she had kept finding her left shoulder pressed up against the hard wood panel beside the seat. At any moment she had expected that the carriage would stop altogether and she would be stranded in the middle of nowhere.

And it was all her fault. She would have no one to blame but herself.

Two years before, something truly catastrophic had happened to Viola. She had been Viola Westcott, Countess of Riverdale, at the time and had recently suffered the loss of the earl, her husband of twenty-three years. Her son, Harry, had succeeded to the title. He had been only twenty years old at the time and had therefore been placed under the guardianship of Avery Archer, Duke of Netherby, and of Viola herself. Her elder daughter, Camille, had already made her debut into society and was respectably betrothed to Viscount Uxbury. Her younger daughter, Abigail, was looking forward to her own come-out Season the following spring. Viola had been satisfied with her life despite the necessity of wearing deep mourning. She had not been fond of her husband and felt no great grief at

his passing.

There had been just one loose end to be tied up, and she had made an attempt to tie it. There was a girl, a young woman by then, whom her husband had kept and secretly supported—he had thought it was a secret, anyway—at an orphanage in Bath for as long as Viola had known him. She had made the understandable assumption that the female was his natural daughter by a mistress, and had done what she had considered the right thing after his death by sending her solicitor to Bath to find the woman, inform her of her father's death, and make a final settlement upon her.

That was when the catastrophe had hit.

For it had been discovered that the young woman concerned, Anna Snow, then twenty-five years old and a teacher at the orphanage, was in fact the late earl's legitimate daughter by a previous wife. By his only wife as it happened. He had married Viola a few months before Anna Snow's mother died of consumption. Viola's marriage had been a bigamous one. Worse, her son and her daughters were illegitimate. Harry was stripped of his title and fortune—the title had passed to his second cousin, Alexander Westcott, and the fortune to Anna. All of it. The earl had made only one will, and that had been drawn up while he was still with his first wife. Everything that was not entailed went to his daughter by that marriage. Camille and Abigail lost their titles and their portions. Camille was cast off by Lord Uxbury. Abigail would have no come-out Season or any prospect of making the sort of marriage she had been brought up to expect. They had been left destitute, though Anna had tried to insist that her fortune be divided equally among her half siblings and herself. But at the time, she was a stranger to them. In their pride and hurt and bewilderment they had all refused. Viola had resumed her maiden name.

To say that the bottom had fallen out of her world would be severely to understate the case. The enormity of what had happened to her and her children had been too much for her mind to bear. She had lived on. How could she not, short of putting an end to her own existence? And in the two years since then her life had settled into a new order that was really more bearable than she could have expected. Harry was serving as a captain with a rifle regiment in the Peninsula and was forever cheerful in his insistence that it was just the life for him. Camille was married to a much better man than her former betrothed and they had three children—two adopted and one their own. Abigail lived with Viola at Hinsford Manor in Hampshire, where Viola had spent most of her marriage. What had truly been unexpected after the whole mess was that Anna Snow would end up marrying Harry's guardian, Avery, Duke of Netherby. But she had, and was a duchess now herself. She had insisted she would never live at Hinsford Manor herself and had begged Viola not to let it sit empty. She had even written into her will that the house would pass to Harry and his descendants after her time if he would not accept it before then. The large dowry Viola's father had given when she married Humphrey had been returned, with all the interest it would have accrued since then. Anna had insisted upon it and taken care of it even before Viola could think of it for herself.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Westcott family, far from shunning Viola and her children after the truth became known, had made every effort to draw them back into the fold. As one,

they had made it clear to Viola and her children that they were no less loved and valued now than they ever had been, and no less a part of the family. Two of Viola's sisters-in-law, the earl's sisters, were still fond of saying that they dearly wished Humphrey were still alive so that they could have the pleasure of killing him themselves.

All was well, in fact. Or as well as it would ever be after a few necessary adjustments had been made. Viola, who had lived her whole adult life according to the two guiding principles of duty and dignity, appeared to be back to normal, albeit with a different name. She had convinced herself that she was back to normal, anyway.

Until she was not.

Until she snapped-unexpectedly and for no apparent reason. The trauma of what she had experienced had stealthily crept up behind her and then pounced. And she knew that she had not healed at all. She had only suppressed the pain and the hurt. And the anger. She had snapped at the worst possible time, when the family had all gathered in Bath for the christening of Jacob Cunningham, Camille and Joel's newborn son. They had all agreed to stay on afterward for two weeks of family activities. But two days after the event, Viola, the baby's own proud grandmother, had fled.

She had left Bath feeling guilty and out of sorts and sorry for herself and hurt and angry and all sorts of other nasty, negative things that had no rational explanation. She had simply behaved badly, and that was something she rarely did. Through all her forty-two years she had been known for her graciousness of manner and the evenness of her temper. Yet now she had hurt and bewildered those who were dearest to her in the world. And she had done it deliberately, almost spitefully. She had insisted upon returning home to Hinsford against all reason and against the pleadings of her daughters and son-in-law and the protests of her mother and brother and the Westcott family.

She had announced her intention of returning home. Alone. In a hired carriage. She had pointedly insisted upon leaving her own carriage and servants, even her personal maid, for the use of Abigail when she should decide to return home. She had ignored the shocked protestations of Camille and Joel that they would of course see Abby properly conveyed and escorted home when the time came. She had ignored the kindness of the Dowager Countess of Riverdale, her former mother-in-law, who had come all the way to Bath, though she was in her seventies. She had ignored the kind effort Wren, the present countess, Alexander's wife, had made to come to Bath despite the fact that she was herself in expectation of a happy event, as Matilda, the eldest of Viola's former sisters-in-law, liked to describe pregnancy.

Viola had told them all to mind their own business. Yes, she had used those exact words. She had probably never in her life used them before. And she had spoken sharply, without humor or consideration for the feelings she was hurting. She wanted to be left alone. She had told them that too.

Leave me alone, she had said more than once-like a petulant child.

And she had no idea why she had so suddenly snapped.

She had gone to Bath with Abigail just before Jacob's birth, brimful of anxiety and excitement at the imminent arrival of a new grandchild, and she had been happier when it had happened than she had been in a long while. Camille and Joel Cunningham lived in a manor in the hills above Bath with Winifred and Sarah, their adopted daughters, and now with their son too. They used the house for a variety of purposes—for artistic or writing retreats, for workshops in music and dance and painting and other arts, for plays and concerts, and for visits varying from one day long to several days of the children from the orphanage in Bath where both Anna and Joel had grown up and Camille had taught briefly before her marriage. The house and extensive garden were always teeming with life and activity. Even just before and after Jacob's birth it had remained a busy, noisy place.

The amazing thing was that Camille appeared to be thriving. She had not yet lost all the weight she had gained when she was expecting Jacob, and she often looked slightly untidy, some of her hair fallen out of its pins, her sleeves pushed halfway to her elbows, her feet as often as not unshod, even when she stepped outdoors. She always seemed to have Jacob bundled up in her arms while Sarah clung to her skirt and Winifred hovered close—except when Joel was around to share the parenting, as he often was. She never seemed harried.

Sometimes it was hard for Viola to recognize in her elder daughter the severe, straitlaced, always rigidly correct former Lady Camille Westcott, who had never set a foot wrong and had lacked any discernible sense of humor. Now she seemed vividly happy in a life that was as different from the one she had expected as it could possibly be.

Everything had gone well with the birth and the plans for the christening and the event itself. Abigail had been ecstatic, for her dearest friend came too for the occasion—her cousin Jessica Archer, daughter of one of Humphrey's sisters. Viola had been happy. She had developed a close friendship with Alexander's wife, Wren, the year before, and she was delighted to renew it this year. She was happy that her brother and his wife had come from Dorset. Dinners, parties, teas, excursions, walks, concerts—any number of family events had been planned. Viola had been looking forward to them.

Until she snapped.

And had to get away.

Alone.

She had behaved badly. She knew it. She had left at dawn before the family on both sides could gather to hug her and say their farewells and express their concern and wave her on her way. And she had held steady on her determination to travel by hired carriage, though she had had the offer of half a dozen private carriages and servants to go with them to give her company and protection and respectability.

Leave me alone, she had said to more than one of them.

But then suddenly there was something wrong with the hired carriage. And finally it had been creaking and moaning more than ever and leaning ever harder to one side as it turned into the yard of an inn, though surely not a major posting inn. The carriage had ground to a halt.

"What is amiss?" she had asked the coachman when he opened the door and set down the steps.

The carriage had hovered over them at an alarming angle.

"Axle about to bust, missus," he had said.

"Oh." She had accepted his hand and climbed down to the cobbles of the yard. "Can it be mended quickly?"

"Not likely, missus," he had said. "She's going to need to be replaced, she is."

"How long?" she had asked.

He had lifted his hat to scratch his head as he went down on his haunches to assess the damage. An ostler belonging to the inn had come ambling up to stand at his shoulder and purse his lips and shake his head. "You was lucky," he had said, "not to be tipped on the open road miles from anywhere for highwaymen and wolves to find you. You might have got yourselves killed if you'd been springing 'em. That there axle ain't going to be held together with no piece of string tied around it, I'm here to tell you. It's got to go and a new one put in its place."

"Which is exactly what I can see for myself," the coachman had said testily.

"How long will that take?" Viola had asked again, realizing anew how foolish she had been to go against all advice by venturing on her journey without even a maid to lend her countenance. Oh, she deserved this.

The coachman had shaken his head. "I dunno, missus. All the rest of today, anyway," he had said. "We won't get back on the road till tomorrow morning at the earliest, and a blessed unlucky thing it is for me. I was to go straight back to Bath tonight, I was. I have another customer booked for tomorrow, and a right classy gent he is too, a regular. Always pays a lot more than the fare if I gets him where he's going with time to spare. Now someone else will get to take him and he may never ask for me again."

"Tomorrow?" Viola had said in dismay. "But I need to be home today."

"Well, so do I, missus," the coachman had said. "But neither one of us gets to have our wish, do we? You had better speak to the innkeeper here for a room for yourself before they all

gets taken, though I doubt that happens too often in this place." He had looked up at the inn with some contempt.

A smart traveling carriage had been standing to one side of the inn door. It must not be an entirely decrepit place, then. The thought of entering it unaccompanied, however, had caused Viola to quail inside. Whatever would they think of her lone state? But she had caught herself in the thought. Good heavens, she was thinking like the Countess of Riverdale, for whom all had had to be rigid respectability. What did it matter what anyone thought of plain Viola Kingsley? She had reached into the carriage to pull out the bag she had kept inside with her and made her way toward the inn, leaving her trunk to be fetched later.

Noise had greeted her as she opened the door, as well as the odors of ale and cooking. The double doors into the taproom to her left had been wide open, and she had seen that the room, dark and shabby though it appeared, was filled with people, all of whom had seemed to be in high spirits—perhaps in more ways than one. It was surprising for so early in the day. But all had been clarified when the innkeeper came to tend to her and explained that if she had to be stranded by a near-bust axle, for which he expressed his sincere sympathies, at least she was fortunate that it was here and today that it had happened. The village was about to celebrate the end of the harvest, though they did not do it every year. But the church roof was leaking something bad whenever it rained, and that always seemed to happen on a Sunday morning when people were sitting in their pews trying to listen to the vicar's sermon. Someone had had the idea of organizing an after-the-harvest event to raise money. What better way was there to gather funds than to give people a rollicking good time in exchange for the...

Other Books

The Castleton Massacre. A former United Church minister massacres his family. What led to this act of femicide, and why were his victims forgotten? On May 2, 1963, Robert Killins, a former United Church minister, slaughtered every woman in his family but one. She (and her brother) lived to tell the story of what motivated a talented man who had been widely admired, a scholar and graduate from Queen's University, to stalk and terrorize the women in his family for almost twenty years and then murder them. Through extensive oral histories, Cook and Carson painstakingly trace the causes of a femicide in which four women and two unborn babies were murdered over the course of one bloody evening. While they situate this murderous rampage in the literature on domestic abuse and mass murders, they also explore how the two traumatized child survivors found their way back to health and happiness. Told through vivid first-person accounts, this family memoir explores how a murderer was created.

“ . Pearl Viola declared that she would take them back to Vancouver and place them separately in foster care . . . Pearl Viola now informed them that they would be leaving with the Killinses and settling with someone in that family. But who?”