

A Notorious Ruin
By
Carolyn Jewel

CHAPTER 1

The Cooperage. Bartley Green, England, 1820

Lucy sat in the bow window of the second parlor and gazed at the scene unfolding below. Their new groom, looking smart in the suit she'd bought him from last week's winnings, continued to struggle with the step to the carriage in the driveway. Oh, dear. She had hoped for a better debut from him than this. "Well, Roger, old boy." The elderly hound at her feet rose and placed his head on her lap. She rubbed his head. "This does not bode well."

The dog, an Irish Wolfhound, if one squinted just so, did not reply.

The mechanism of the step defeated the groom still. She hoped and expected he would improve rapidly. At last, he managed the trick, but then he struggled with the carriage door. High atop the carriage, the driver watched with disdain.

Outside, her father arrived to greet their guests. He stood a few feet from the carriage, hatless, arms held wide in greeting. Yesterday's excellent weather had given way to clouds and enough of a breeze to ruffle his iron-gray hair. She'd locked the door to the wine cellar three hours ago and was hopeful he was not drunk. He'd have found his way to the port and sherry, though. The groom held the carriage door.

A gentleman exited the carriage; Captain Niall. She did not want them here, her father's guests. Papa entertained like a man with ten or twenty thousand a year when, in fact, his income was far less and his debts far greater.

Captain Niall buttoned his greatcoat against the wind. He was a man of immense charm and refinement whom others had hinted would be a good match for her. As if such a thing were conceivable or in comportment with her desires.

This would not be, no matter anyone's wishes.

The second occupant of the carriage emerged.

The Marquess of Thrale swung his arms and glanced at the sky a moment before he shook out his coat and wrapped his scarf around his throat. Despite his being unmarried and in possession of a title, he had not been a dashing figure in Town last season. Thrale, however, had made a friend of her sister Anne, and that was enough to recommend him to anyone. Though she appreciated his height and brawn, she did not find him interesting.

Captain Niall put his hands on his hips and arched his back. Thrale said something in that somber way of his, and Captain Niall laughed. They seemed unlikely

friends those two, yet they had traveled together from London all the way to Bartley Green. A month or more at The Cooperage and then another at Rosefeld when her brother-in-law and the others arrived.

She did like Captain Niall's quick smile. Who did not like a handsome, amiable man? She resented his being here. Lord Thrale, too.

The groom now held the head of Thrale's lead horse. Here, he displayed the expertise that had made her hire him over an older man. He had his mouth by the horse's ear and gave every appearance of whispering secrets while he stroked the animal's neck.

Roger settled his head onto her lap as she absently rubbed his ears. Outside, her father and Lord Thrale shook hands. The same exchange occurred with Captain Niall. The men continued to converse, and then Papa went to the lead coach horse and ran a hand down its front leg. They were fine horses. Not ostentatious, but one saw the quality. One of the hunting dogs wandered from the stable, and her father gave its shoulders a pat. Lord Thrale did the same. Conversation turned to the carriage, for Lord Thrale thumped the side of the vehicle. The marquess's carriage, since that was his coat of arms on the door. *Talbot passant*, and his coronet of rank.

Captain Niall, Lord Thrale, and her father remained in the driveway chatting. The groom rode postilion while the coachman drove the rig to the stable block. She continued with her excellent view of Thrale. He was a man of restraint and reserve who rarely extended his friendship to others. One must earn his regard. Her sister Anne, now the Duchess of Cynssyr, had done so. As if anything else were possible.

Papa gestured, describing, most likely, the general bounds of the property. He then pointed in the direction of Rosefeld, the home of her brother-in-law, Baron Aldreth. Not, at present, in residence, though he soon would be.

The two men were here to ride and to hunt and fish, and do all the sorts of things gentlemen did in the country. Lord Thrale's presence was due, she suspected, to the fact that Bartley Green was a fertile location for a Sporting man to spend his time. Exhibitions and battles between talented and renowned prizefighters were frequent here owing chiefly to the presence of Johnson's Academy of Pugilistic Arts in town. The Academy was one of England's finest places to train and improve one's skills in the art and science of pugilism.

Regardless of motivation for their visit, they would be here long enough to stretch household resources farther than was comfortable. Recent outlays made her thin in the pocket as far as meeting the expense of house guests. After paying the grocer, the butcher, and a few bills she could not in good conscience allow to remain unpaid, she'd laid in supplies to meet the appetites of two hale and healthy male guests. Taking on the necessary staff had put yet another strain on the budget. From her own funds, she'd

hired the groom and his sister—as another downstairs maid—and engaged a cook for the duration.

At last, all three men turned to the house. Papa was grinning. No one could say Mr. Thomas Sinclair, Esquire, was not a congenial host. Because he never bothered to square expenses with income, there never was a guest who went away complaining of his experiences at The Cooperage. The best food, the best wine and spirits, cigars of rare and exotic tobaccos. Constant entertainments.

Roger lifted his head when the front door closed. Voices he did not know meant new people to admire and pet him. She leaned over and stroked his head. Five minutes more of freedom. Five minutes in which she could be herself. So much grey around his muzzle. “We shall meet them presently, and you will be your noble self, yes?”

Most everyone believed the Sinclair fortunes were beyond reproach. After all, there were now two noble sons-in-law, one of them a duke, and long outstanding debts had been settled within days of Anne’s marriage.

In reality, he’d had a year to run up new debts and had done so with disheartening rapidity. Lucy kept the books now that Anne was married and was now intimate with the hopelessness of their finances. Papa had only to say; *My second daughter’s husband is Baron Aldreth, and my eldest just married Cynssyr. Yes. The duke.* And credit was extended for more foolishness and waste.

She stood and ran light fingers over her hair, securing an errant pin or two, then adjusted her shawl and smoothed her bodice and skirts. If all one had was one’s looks, then appearing at one’s best was vital. Time and again she’d been told beauty did not matter, that what mattered was one’s mind and heart. The evidence for that, in her experience, was not persuasive. The exception proved the rule; her sister Anne’s marriage to the duke.

With Roger at her heels, she walked down the corridor to the stairs to meet her father and their guests, fully armored, to paraphrase the great Boswell, with perfection.

“Lucy.” Her father extended a hand and kissed her cheek when she met them. Captain Niall and Lord Thrale stood just behind and to one side of her father, expectant. Smiling. Well. One of them was smiling. “Look here, it’s Lord Thrale and Captain Niall come to visit.”

She despised the need for meaningless conversation. She did not wish to be cheerful or amusing or, worse, interesting. She had made an art of never being the latter. What ladies were expected to find interesting seldom interested her. Sometimes, oftentimes, too often, she missed the bluntness of her old life. “Sit, Roger.”

Roger sat like the magnificent dog he was. *He* had no trouble meeting people. She remembered to curtsy to Lord Thrale first. She’d been away from London only a few months, and already she’d fallen out of the habit of genteel manners. Disaster

awaited if she forgot herself. "My lord. Welcome to Bartley Green."

Few men could stand silent and be so terribly present as the marquess. How had she forgotten that about him? His silence made her worry she'd already misstepped. He was taller than Captain Niall by three or four inches at least, much broader across his shoulders and torso, too.

In her time away from London, she'd not had to pretend she was a delicate and fragile woman. From the corner of her eye, she saw her father frown. He took it as a point of pride that men found her desirable, as if she were a performing dog who mattered only when it performed the requested trick.

Everyone falls in love with Lucy's beauty.

Sometimes she wondered if her father kept a running list of the men he felt had fallen in love with her face or figure, and whether his satisfaction with her depended upon an ever-increasing list.

If she had managed to offend Lord Thrale so soon, well, there was nothing for it. He would have to live with his disappointment in her and she with his disapproval. Quite manageable in her opinion.

At last, the marquess bowed. "Mrs. Wilcott."

The next several weeks stretched before her, a desert of emptiness that must be crossed no matter how desiccated she became. With a smile, she turned to the captain. Ah, yes. This was the trick, wasn't it? A smile that meant nothing at all.

In contrast to Thrale, the captain was *a la mode*; everything a man of taste and fashion could hope to be and more. "Good afternoon, sir. I hope we find you well."

"Yes, thank you. Is Miss Sinclair at home?" Captain Niall had been one of her sister Emily's most ardent admirers last season.

"She is visiting a dear friend, but never fear. She will be home presently." Roger bumped against her thighs, and she came near to losing her balance. Lord Thrale was close enough to steady her. "Thank you, my lord." There was unexpected strength in his grip. "Before tea I expect."

Roger left his sit to sniff Captain Niall's boots and then his knees. He gave the dog a gentle push away with one leg. Thwarted in his quest for admiration, Roger turned to Lord Thrale.

"Now, Lucy, m'dear." Papa's frown deepened. "No one wants a dog coming up so bold as that."

"My apologies." She moved to pull Roger away, but Lord Thrale had already bent to give Roger's shoulder a rub.

"This is your dog, ma'am?"

"Yes."

Captain Niall's mouth twitched. "I don't know that I've ever seen a dog of such

uncertain antecedents. Are you certain he's yours, Mrs. Wilcott? I thought ladies kept dogs they can hold in their arms. This one is a monster."

"I'm sure some do." A thread of panic pulled tight. Such ironic words were not expected from her, for she did not miss Lord Thrale's cocked eyebrow. She pasted on another smile. She would defend Roger to anyone; the King, the Prince Regent, anyone at all, including charming, happy, Captain Niall. "Nevertheless, he is mine."

Lord Thrale found the spot behind Roger's ear that the dog loved best, and Roger groaned in ecstasy, dignity abandoned.

"I hope you had a pleasant journey here, Captain Niall. My lord."

Papa spoke over her. "Now, Lucy, that mongrel of yours —"

Lord Thrale gave Roger one last pat and straightened. "Yes, ma'am. We did."

Her father clapped Thrale on the shoulder. Roger, meanwhile, plastered himself against the marquess's legs, tail wagging. "I'm going to show you the billiards room, what do you think of that?"

"Papa." Careful negotiations were required with her father now that he had the stimulation of guests and spirits. "Lord Thrale and Captain Niall might first like to change from their travel clothes."

"Are you saying our guests do not look presentable?"

"Not at all." Anne knew how to deal with him when he'd been at the Sherry. Anne knew the words to say and how to say them, and Lucy failed at that. She always had. Even before Lucy left Bartley Green, Anne had managed everything.

Thrale and her father both were watching her. Captain Niall, too, and her panic blossomed. She was to be unnoticed for anything but her appearance. She had not made an auspicious start.

She took a step back and her elbow bumped a marble bust of Aristotle on the table behind her. A recent purchase of Papa's that she had not be able to prevent. He'd had the statuary sent all the way from Athens. She doubted it was genuine. For several seconds, she lost the feeling in her arm. *Damn*. She resisted the impulse to cradle her elbow. "If I'd been traveling all day, I know I should want a moment to put myself to rights."

Her father guffawed. "If there's a light breeze, you want to put yourself to rights, ain't that so?" He shook his head and shared his merriment. "I never saw a girl so worried she might have a hair out of place. From the day she was born, I own."

"I'm sure," she said, "quite sure Lord Thrale will enjoy the billiards room." And there was Captain Niall, standing here, so handsome and charming. "Captain Niall, too."

"A moment to neaten myself would be welcome." Whether Thrale said this because she was floundering so horribly, she had no idea, but she was grateful he had.

"Thank you, Mrs. Wilcott. Sinclair, shall we find you afterward?"

"Yes, yes, of course," he said. "I'll show you your rooms, then, my lord. Captain. We'll have a friendly game afterward."

"I look forward to it," Thrale said.

Captain Niall's gaze lingered on her, and she gave him what she called her *drawing room* smile. "Will we see your sister later, Mrs. Wilcott?"

"Yes, certainly." There were two of her. The woman she presented and the woman inside who wished these men gone. How was she going to survive the coming weeks?

CHAPTER 2

"This is a pleasant town," Thrale said to his valet, Flint. They were on the cobbled main street of Bartley Green, ostensibly in search of the florist. Per the directions he'd been given, they ought to have turned off the main street already, but Johnson's Academy was located on the far side of the Crown and Pig, and that excellent establishment was in sight. The florist wasn't going anywhere.

"Tis, milord."

The Crown and Pig stood as the transition between the older, Tudor-era section of the town and more recent structures, which, it happened, included Johnson's Academy. With luck, he would soon be seated in the tavern with a warm beer in hand, the fire at his back and a firm engagement with Johnson himself.

Johnson was a former pugilist who, since his retirement from the ring, had trained more than a dozen prizefighters of some repute. He organized regular exhibitions and provided a respectable place for gentlemen to learn or hone their skills in the art. He was eager to see the place first hand, note who was in training, and meet the proprietor himself.

They passed the Crown and Pig without a word spoken between them. Not five minutes later they stood before a nondescript building with the words *Johnson's Academy* painted above the door in bright yellow letters. Thrale gazed through the windows at the display of ropes and unframed prints of fighters hanging on the walls. Anticipation snaked through him. "Well," Thrale said. "Here we are."

"I should think, my lord, that you ought to ask after Mr. Johnson." Flint opened the door and made a *come in* gesture.

"I ought to leave a card at the very least."

"Right you are."

They returned to The Cooperage three hours past when he'd thought to be back. Flint was barely visible behind a mass of pale pink roses. At one point while they were climbing the stairs to the front door, the wag pretended to stagger under the weight.

His servants, all of them hired in the last year—it having been necessary to let go the majority of his London staff, had come to him recommended by the duke of Cynssyr. Flint had been the first to be sent with the duke's personal character, and the first Thrale had hired.

From behind him, Flint said, "Not too late to save yourself, milord."

He didn't regret the decision in the least. Flint was an excellent valet, but the man had a sense of the absurd Thrale could do nothing to eradicate. He ignored the theatrics. The door, he noted, was a cheerful blue. This was one of the delights of a woman's touch on one's home. A brightly painted door and window boxes of blossoms.

"Abandon the roses and decamp before the ladies of the house see you, milord."

He stared at the snarling lion knocker then opened the front door since Flint had his arms full. "No."

"I could pitch them into the hedge."

Thrale turned. "Captain Niall brought them a box of pralines. Each."

"And?"

"While I do not wish to appear extravagant, neither do I wish to be a thoughtless guest."

"Roses, milord. Roses." He adjusted the flowers. "And young ladies in the house. Beautiful young ladies."

"Roses are an appropriate token of my esteem. They delight the senses. Brighten a room." He touched one of just-opening buds. "They are impermanent. Like pralines, they pronounce a man's regard for a lady, and yet, some days later, there is nothing left but fond memories of the delight taken."

"Unless the lady dries them or presses them, or one of those things ladies do to amuse themselves."

"Such as saving the box the pralines came in?"

"Aye, sir." Flint had been in the recent hostilities with the French. Infantry, and his personal habits reflected the discipline of his time in that rough trade. "Their father will be wanting another noble son-in-law, one deep in the pockets, if you take my meaning. I advise you to retreat. Now. No shame in that."

He stepped into the entryway. "Roses are not an offer of marriage. Or do you believe Sinclair will think I'm offering for both his daughters?"

"He'll wonder which of them you'll take."

He turned again. "It's not as though there's any disgrace in marrying one of the man's daughters. He's a gentleman. They are ladies. Their sisters are Lady Aldreth and the Duchess of Cynssyr. If I were to marry, not that I intend to do any such thing, I could do worse than one of them."

Though he said either would do, if he were to decide it was past time he was

married, which in point of fact it was, only the youngest Sinclair daughter was of interest to him. Her elder sister, the widowed Mrs. Wilcott, was more to his physical preferences, but Miss Sinclair had the intellectual spark that mattered most to him. Alas, Niall had his matrimonial hopes pinned on Miss Emily Sinclair. If anyone could captivate her, it must surely be Niall. The captain, with his perpetual good mood and elegant looks might well succeed where all others had failed.

"He only just paid last quarter's wages."

He stepped further into the entryway. "What the devil do you mean by that?"

"I mean, Mr. Sinclair might well be looking for another son-in-law to pay his debts. And here he's got two pretty daughters in the honey pot."

Thrale frowned. Six weeks in arrears? It was not well done of Sinclair to leave his staff so long unpaid. He was himself punctilious to a fault about paying his servants. His father, God rest his be-damned soul, had let wages go months past due. Thrale, having lived under the consequences of that neglect, had dedicated himself to being as different from his father as possible in that regard and every other. "Sinclair's debts, if he has them, have nothing to do with me giving roses to his daughters."

From behind the flowers his valet made a faint *tick-tock* sound. The closing seconds of his doom, one supposed. As if he could be compelled to marry where he did not wish to.

Footsteps echoed inside the house, coming nearer. He took off his hat and hung it from one of the pegs above the doorway to the pantry. The Sinclair's home, while modest, as befit its name, was a charming place. More charming than Blackfern, his country seat. From the flowers outside to the arrangement of daisies on a sidetable, he felt a woman's gentle influence. Miss Sinclair's most likely. So he fancied.

The Sinclairs did not have a butler so it was the housekeeper who came in, a cap on her iron-colored hair, and with a steely gaze to match. She dropped into a curtsy. Flint made that *tick-tock* sound again.

"Milord." Her gaze flicked to Flint and then back. Thrale dropped his umbrella in the stand by the door then slipped out of his coat.

"Roses," he said to Mrs. Elliot after he'd pressed a coin into her hand. He did not stint on vails. Then, because it was obvious there were, indeed, roses, he added, "Two dozen each for Miss Sinclair and Mrs. Wilcott."

Mrs. Elliot remained solemn. Or was that disapproval? Servants gossiped as much as anyone, after all. "They will be delighted by such thoughtfulness, my lord."

"Are they home?"

"Miss Sinclair is out, my lord."

"Is she?" Now there was a pity. He'd hoped to have the luck to be found arriving with the roses.

His valet eased into the foyer with a sideways slide and just the top of his head visible above the flowers in his arms. This close, the scent of roses was at the very edge of overpowering. Some indefinable signal passed between Flint and Mrs. Elliot, for his valet, arms full, headed toward a back staircase.

"Captain Niall and Mr. Sinclair are out as well." She smoothed her apron and smiled. He liked the woman for that smile. "We expect them back before tea."

"Such are the perils of stepping out to obtain roses."

"Indeed, milord." She was a rail, wrapped tight, precise in her words and movements. Easy to imagine her running the house with ruthless efficiency.

"While you wait for the others, my lord, you might find the second parlor a pleasant place to explore. The duchess, when she lived here, always enjoyed that parlor best. The view there is much admired."

"Thank you." He remembered the room from his previous tour of the house, and she was right. The view was striking.

"Shall I bring refreshment?"

"No, thank you."

Mrs. Elliot retreated, and he proceeded to his quarters. Here, one saw the back of the property; fields sloped away to dense trees to the east, to the west, sunlight glinted off the water in a distant canal. Flint came in when he was washing up. "This is a nice bit of property."

"Aye."

He allowed Flint to retie his neckcloth and brush every possible speck of lint from his jacket.

With his clothes arranged to his satisfaction and Flint's, he made his way to the second parlor. Like the rest of house, this room was inviting and comfortable. He pondered what made The Cooperage so pleasing to the eye and spirit. He suspected the duchess, the former Miss Anne Sinclair, had had a hand in that. Not until Thrale was well into his majority had he understood his father had abominable taste. What, he wondered, as he studied the parlor, might he do at Blackfern to eradicate the ponderous imprint of his predecessor to his title?

Here, shelves of books lined two walls. No doubt the room served as library and parlor. Along another wall was a long table, and there he found Mrs. Elliot had arranged the roses. They looked exceedingly well here, placed as they were against the backdrop of a lilac wall. There were no lilac rooms at Blackfern. His father had handed over the last round of renovations to a man with an excessive love of gilt and an unending supply of oxblood paint.

He sat by the fire and imagined himself at Blackfern and that the credit for his surroundings belonged to him, or perhaps to a wife of refined taste. He would write to

the duke and ask for the name of his architect. Damn the expense if the recommendation was that he should pull Blackfern down to its foundations. He would, by God, now that he had the money.

Thrale shifted his chair to face the tall windows and picked up a well-thumbed copy of *Paradise Lost* that Sinclair must have left behind. One could imagine him here with the two daughters left at home, entertaining family and select friends, perhaps reading from this very book. Most every volume in the library at Blackfern had uncut pages. Every book but the ones he'd cut himself.

He opened the Milton. Not only had Sinclair read the work, he'd made an Oxford don's study of it. Whole passages were underlined in pencil. He and his host, it seemed, shared a similar opinion of the work. This was more erudition than he'd have credited Sinclair with possessing. Book in hand, he walked to the window and gazed down on the lawns.

The prospect invited the eye. One wanted to walk the grounds and explore what lay over the hill to the right. He ought to have the grounds at Blackfern redone as well. His father had preferred the formal, geometrical lines of the previous century. What was needed was a modern touch, a more natural one.

While he gazed out the window, a woman appeared on the path that emerged from the trees to his left. A maid walked behind her, a paper-wrapped parcel in her arms. The wolfhound mongrel with the improbable name of Roger paced at her side. Mrs. Wilcott, then. A parasol hid most of her face from him, but even if the hound did not announce her, he'd seen that languorous stride too often not to know her. There was a softness to her, a gentleness. A lack of spirit, he thought, that instantly identified her.

And yet. She was physically nothing less than his ideal. A face to make a man weep for her beauty. A figure no less admirable or stirring.

Watching her walk was a sensual delight. Her gown caressed her limbs as she strolled. She moved slowly because the dog was old. Roger, Thrale suspected, was the sort of hound who would keep pace with his owner if it meant he dropped dead of it. It spoke well of her that she was aware.

He stayed at the window until she was out of sight. Notwithstanding his high opinions of the other Sinclair women—the duchess, Lady Aldreth, and Miss Sinclair—Mrs. Wilcott was, in his opinion, the loveliest of them. She'd been married young and widowed early and wasn't much more than twenty-three herself. Left destitute, one heard, or near to it, by a husband of whom no one in the family would speak. One heard vague accounts; very little that was specific.

He did not hear the front door open, but he remained unconcerned by that. If she'd come in a private entrance, the housekeeper would see she was told he was here.

He went to the sidebar and inspected the roses for imperfections. He found none. While he waited, he took out two calling cards. With pen and ink from the writing desk, he wrote *Miss Emily Sinclair* on one and *Mrs. Wilcott* on the other. What had her husband's Christian name been? He did not recall that he'd ever heard. He set a card in each of the bouquets.

Not long after, rapid footsteps descending stairs had him turning from the window. Not Mrs. Wilcott, he thought. No, this was someone spirited. Her younger sister, or one of the maids, perhaps. He adjusted his coat. Perhaps he'd give Niall some competition for Miss Sinclair's affections.

"I left it in the second parlor," a woman said to someone, breathless and not loud enough for him to identify the speaker.

"Ma'am, Lord—"

The parlor door, left ajar, flew open.

The third of the Sinclair sisters swept in, and this was a surprise, to see her burst in so full of life and energy. Roger trotted behind her. She did not see him yet, and he stood, book in hand, bereft of air.

Her air of abstraction was gone and in its place was focus and deliberation. A stranger to him. This creature was another woman entirely. Vivid. Intense. Aware. He stood, dumbfounded, wordless. She scanned the table near the chair where he'd first sat down.

"Where the devil is it?" She headed for the chair by the fire.

Her language took him aback.

She was halfway across the room before she became aware of his presence. Her eyes widened, and a woman he did not know looked straight into his soul, took his measure, and found him lacking.

What a fancy, to think a woman like Mrs. Wilcott had that spark in her.

"Ma'am."

All the life in her vanished, and she was the Mrs. Wilcott he knew too well. His brain filled with thoughts that were no credit to him. Her gown was dark blue, and ribbons in her hair pulled her curls away from her temples and the nape of her neck. He returned to her face, ethereal, angelic, devastating. He drew in air but nothing helped, and over her shoulder he had a disconcerting view of himself in the chimney glass; a man stunned into imbecility by a woman who was so beautiful it hardly mattered that he did not care for her.

"Oh," she said, looking at the roses. She curtsied. So young to be a widow. Roger left her side for him, and without thinking, he rubbed the dog's head. "Lord Thrane. Good afternoon."

"Madam." He decided he was mistaken that she sounded sorry to see him.

"My sister is not here. She'll be back in time for tea, though."

Mrs. Wilcott was no intellect, he was certain of it. He would have discovered it before now if she were. He was not often fooled by the people he admitted into his acquaintance, and that eased his mind enough that he smiled during his bow to her. He was still smiling when he straightened, but she wasn't looking at him. Her focus was on the book he still held. In the instant before she met his gaze, something behind her eyes flickered with awareness, and then it, too, died. Killed? Nothing but vapid beauty remained.

Her sisters were intelligent women. All three of them women of wit and discernment. The possibility that Mrs. Wilcott might be their equal stupefied him. Surely no. No woman played so deep a game. Not her.

She waved with no sign that any thought of substance had ever entered her head. "Captain Niall has gone for a walk with my father. Their destination was the river. Something about fishing." Her eyes flicked again to the book he held. "Your errand in town was successful I gather. It must have been, since you have returned."

Thrale lifted the book. Mrs. Wilcott blinked. "Yes, madam. It was."

She tipped her head to one side, and his impression of her as vital and formidable slipped away like mist. There was nothing in her eyes. No spark of understanding, no sense that she'd seen through him and was disappointed. She smoothed her skirts, an unconscious gesture, and that part of him that remained aroused took in the way her gown settled around her body, the perfection of her bare arms between her sleeves and the tops of her gloves, the curve of her bosom. That disgraceful, lusty part of him whispered he could as easily fuck a stupid woman as an intelligent one.

He swept an arm in the direction of his roses. "For you, Mrs. Wilcott."

She turned her head in that direction. "So many. How generous and thoughtful you've been." She walked to the vases with his two cards propped against the petals in each arrangement. "Thank you, Lord Thrale. They're lovely. Wherever shall I put so many flowers?"

"For your and your sister."

She looked over her shoulder at him with the distracted expression that was so familiar to him. There wasn't a complicated thought in her head. He was certain of it. "Shall I order tea, my lord? A bite to eat?"

What he ought to have said was no. His apology for not obliging her would take him half a minute, and then he could be back in his room with Milton, or walking to the trees and a shady spot in which to read. What came out of his mouth was, "Yes, thank you."

He watched her walk to the door and call for a servant. Instructions for tea were

conveyed to the maid who appeared. When she turned back, an empty smile curved her perfect mouth. A thousand miles away.

"Do sit, my lord." She returned to the fireplace, lowering herself to a chair with exquisite grace.

He sat, legs crossed, the Milton balanced on his thigh. "I am delighted you are here, Mrs. Wilcott, though I could not help but overhear that you came here not to entertain me but to search for something." He scanned the room and then picked up the book and fanned the pages. No reaction but disinterest and then—his heart sped up because of that flash of something through her eyes again. "Perhaps I might help you find it."

"I think not."

"No?"

"No." She lifted a hand in a dismissive gesture. The back of her knuckles hit the candelabra on the table at her side. "Goodness!" She steadied the candles, but not successfully, for she knocked it over entirely. It was a mercy for the household that no one had lit the candles.

A footman tapped at the door, and Mrs. Wilcott waved him in. "Tea is here. How lovely." She rose, and when Thrale came to his feet, she said, "Please don't stand on my account." He remained on his feet while the footman arranged the tea and set out plates. At the sideboard, she rearranged the roses meant for her.

"A fine day, don't you think?" he asked.

She glanced out the window, then back at the roses. Her fingers moved quickly, touching each of the flowers in turn. "I wonder if it will rain. I do like rain when I am not in it."

She was counting them. For God's sake, why? "There are forty-eight in total, Mrs. Wilcott, across both vases."

She went still, and that quiet had an edge he recognized. It pained him, that understanding, almost as much as his dismay. He did not want to feel anything for her more complicated than his appreciation of her beauty. This pinch of his heart was as unwelcome as his curiosity. Had he not arrived at his opinion of her in London? That despite her beauty, she was a woman of little consequence.

"So many?" she said in a light voice. Having touched every rose, she now rearranged them until they sat in the vase with perfect symmetry. "I'm sure it matters not a bit whether there are twenty-four or thirty-seven. They're very pretty. Emily adores roses." She faced him, and she was as pleasant and empty-headed as ever. "As I'm sure you know. She'll be very pleased you brought them. They are her color."

"I hope you like them just as much."

"Like all roses, they are as beautiful as they are dangerous."

Thrale forced himself to take a mental step back. Had those words come from any of her sisters, he would have appreciated the hidden thorn. But Mrs. Wilcott? Was that even possible? He'd long ago concluded she let her intellect lie fallow. A pity.

And yet. He could not shake his conviction that he knew nothing about the woman behind those so-blue eyes, and that worse, the woman he'd glimpsed was worth knowing. Roger sat near her, eyes on her as if he, too, found her beautiful beyond understanding.

She put her back to the roses. "Tea, my lord? Before the water is cold." She gave him an empty smile. "I don't know about you, but I do not care for tepid tea."

He retook his seat after he saw her to her own. He ought to have been comforted by that smile that spoke of nothing, but he wasn't. While she scooped tea from a box carved with a fanciful chevron, he watched her for any sign she was capable of the deception he suspected. He set the Milton on the table beside him.

She paused with the tongs over the sugar bowl. "One lump did you say?"

"Thank you, a smaller one if you don't mind."

"Not at all." She used the edge of the tongs to search the contents of the sugar bowl. "I find that my day is quite destroyed if my tea is not perfect. This one?"

"Yes."

She held out his tea and a spoon and beamed at him. He knew what he'd seen when she came in. He knew it.

"Thank you, Mrs. Wilcott." He stirred his tea.

"Perfect, I hope."

Deliberately, rudely, even, he held her gaze. "Yes." No reaction to that. None whatever. "Tell me, Mrs. Wilcott, do you read?"

"Oh, yes my lord." She leaned against her chair, her features smooth. "I adore novels. Particularly historical novels. And ghosts. I adore stories with ghosts. Mrs. Sleath's *The Nocturnal Minstrel* is a particular favorite of mine."

Thrale tapped a finger on the Milton. "I am not familiar with that novel. Ghosts, you say. What would you say about a novel with devils?"

"Blasphemy, sir, of course." She spoke without the least sign of irony, and he sighed. Defeated.

He liked her dog. There was that.