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series."*

JULIA QUINN



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PRICE!

Julie Anne Long
A
Notorious
Countess
Confesses

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Julie Anne Long



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Chapter 1

She was confident no one would ever expect to find her in a church. After all, it was too late to save her soul. It was as black, they said, as the widow's weeds she'd shed with the same unseemly haste she'd hoisted her skirts for the Earl of Wareham. Whom she'd then *killed* with unseemly haste. But then, what did one expect from someone of her . . . origins?

This was, of course, all nonsense. Evie had worn black for precisely as long as her etiquette book (her name had been engraved in gold inside the cover—how the earl had loved his extravagances) proscribed. She'd in fact pored over every word in that book as if they were spells that would roll away the stone blocking the door of societal acceptance.

And . . . well, if anything could be said to have *killed* the earl, it was . . . enthusiasm.

She'd been naïve (a word she'd first learned from an exiled French prince, who had been quite *naïve* to think that *she'd* ever been naïve). This still galled. Before she'd married the earl, she'd been certain her epitaph would read: *Here lies Evie Duggan. No one ever got the better of her.* After she married him, she'd indulged in a bit of laurel-resting and even a daydream or two: "*Here lies Evie Duggan . . . devoted wife and mother, a more beloved woman never lived . . .*"

Ah, and that . . . *that* had been her mistake. If not for that, she might have been able to anticipate what happened next. Reveries made one soft. She never should have forgotten that the world was on the side of the planners, not the dreamers.

At the moment, she was too weary to be terribly concerned about the color of her soul. She was unaccustomed to weariness; it sat on her like a heavy, itchy blanket.

She kept her hands piously in her lap, steepling her elegantly gloved fingers in an unconscious imitation of the ancient, squat, little church. She'd always learned by imitation. Henny, her maid, shifted uncomfortably next to her. The pews had been built centuries ago, when all men and women were smaller, which Evie supposed had made it easier to scurry into the trees and shrubbery like so many squirrels when marauders descended. Such a violent past, England had, or so she'd learned from one of the earnest bloods who'd appeared backstage at the Green Apple Theater, where her career, such as it was, had begun. He'd brought offerings of wildflower bouquets and his passion for history. This, of course, meant he hadn't a prayer of earning more than a crumb of her attention—she was a practical girl above all else—but Evie was a great respecter of passion of any kind, and a listener, and both qualities had served her well.

The ton had turned the infamous Evie Duggan into a squirrel when the world had once been her oyster. She wasn't here by choice, but she was certain Pennyroyal Green, Sussex, would cloak her to some degree. After all, it was home to the Everseas, one of whom had once disappeared from the gallows in an explosion and smoke before a crowd of thousands. Surely she was dull compared to that?

It was just a bloody pity the nickname the ton had foisted upon her was so irresistibly vivid.

~~Her life had just been yanked out from beneath her, leaving her wobbling and directionless as a spun top for the first time ever, which was perhaps what had made her susceptible to the ringing church bells as her carriage rolled through Pennyroyal Green just after the sun rose. The bells seemed to beckon, and so she'd followed. Perhaps in this new life, she'd be the sort of person who went to church, rather than the sort of person who caused other riders to topple from their horses in an attempt to get a look at her when she rode in The Row with an admirer. Perhaps the women here would be her friends since she'd recently discovered she had none, when she'd once thought she'd had dozens.~~

“*Must* you wriggle so, Henny?” she hissed.

“Beggin’ yer pardon, m’lady, but these pews are hard as a hangman’s heart and narrow as a rat bunghole. Me petticoat has crawled *right* up me ar—”

Two women in front of them swiveled to stare at them, jaws swinging wide in outrage.

They stared at Evie. In swift succession, impressions ticked over their faces, settled in, moved on. They took in the fur-lined pelisse, the hat that cupped her face like a lover, elegantly highlighting her cheekbones and green, green eyes. Astonishment, suspicion, envy, confusion joined the parade; at last bald curiosity settled in.

But not, thankfully, recognition.

Evie gave them a small, serene smile.

Henny leaned over and said *sotto voce* to Evie, “Why, the townspeople hereabouts are so kind, m’lady, to leave their mouths open to catch any flies afore they can trouble the likes of their *bettors*.”

Their heads whipped back around to face the front of the church. One of the silk flowers atop one of the bonnets continued to shiver, as if cowed. Henny had that effect upon nearly everything.

There immediately followed a sougning sound, like wind bending meadow grass. A moment later Evie realized it was the sound of dozens of heads turning toward the altar, of wool-covered buns shifting on polished wood.

She turned her own head.

Her first thought was: *Well. He’s certainly tall for a vicar*. But then Evie couldn’t recall ever before seeing a vicar in captivity—perhaps intimidating height was a requirement of the job. She was struck by the width of his shoulders, a great shelf tapering elegantly into a lean frame. In his hands rustled sheets of foolscap upon which he’d no doubt written the words meant to improve their collective souls. Bent over his notes as he was now, he looked as if he were supporting the weight of invisible wings.

She could have sworn that every pair of feminine shoulders rose and fell in a sigh when the vicar looked up, a smile, faint but warm, inclusive but impersonal, ready on his face, before he dropped his gaze again to his notes. The perfect vicar smile. She’d spent enough time in a theater to admire stagecraft. She’d spent enough time with men to be cynical about all of them.

She had no use for *any* of them anymore. *That*, of a certainty, was part of her new life.

Henny by no means shared this conviction.

“*Cor!*” she whispered, gripping Evie’s arm. And then slowly, “Would ye *look* at that bloke! ’e can warm me bed anytime ’e wants—”

Evie elbowed her hard.

“Good morning. Thank you for coming.”

Oh. His voice surprised her: a baritone with the depth of a bell and deliciously frayed at the edges. It was like stumbling into a patch of sunlight on a relentlessly gray day. Her eyes closed; the temptation was to bask in it.

Her sense of self-preservation propped her eyes open again. She'd once heard that an Eversea had fallen asleep in church, tipped forward, and cracked his chin on the pew in front of him before toppling to the floor.

She couldn't wait to hear him say more things.

"Goats," is what the vicar said next.

The congregation stirred—or some of it stirred—uneasily. She heard a cough that might just as easily have been a laugh.

Evie stirred, too, worried now, but still hopeful. Surely . . . surely she wasn't about to be subjected to a homily about *goats*? Perhaps he'd said . . . ghosts? . . . instead, which would have been infinitely more interesting?

"Many of us keep the horned beasts, so we know they usually butt heads for two reasons: to please . . . or to assert dominance."

Goats it was! Christ! If ever there was proof she wasn't in London anymore, surely this was it. Somehow she'd failed to anticipate she might be tortured to death by boredom. She had a horror of boredom. She was positively *gifted* at avoiding it. Likely some instinct for self-preservation had kept her from churches until now.

She threw a desperate glance at the entrance. She could hardly bolt down the aisle, and she doubted she could get the big ancient door of the church open without throwing her body at it like a battering ram, although Henny might be able to.

But Henny appeared enraptured.

Eve swiveled back toward the altar and discovered that the sun was now high enough to shed a beam on the vicar. She was arrested: Nice bit of celestial theater, that. In his face, curves and angles seemed united for the purpose of breaking hearts: a jaw clean-edged as a blade, cheekbones that rose like battlements, between them the sort of hollows sported by poets, all deepened and defined by a strategic shadow and light. It somehow contrived to be both sensitive and implacable.

Her heart could not be broken, of course, for the simple reason that it was beyond the reach of any man. But it hardly seemed necessary for a country vicar to look like that, or to have such *presence*, that air of calm command, that comfort in his skin. And because she knew men, she knew it was this more than his looks, that kept all of the eyes in the room on him.

She could feel herself tensing. She suddenly felt trapped. But she was in a church, not a *cell*. And there was no hope for escape, she would stoically endure by watching him the way one might watch scenery unfurling outside a carriage window, and listening to his voice the way one might listen to, or birdsong or the sea. And for a time it worked. But Henny's enormous thigh was flush up against her, which was a bit like being pressed up against a hot bombazine pillow, and the same sunlight illuminating the vicar shafted through one of the austere, stained-glass windows and threw a perfect rectangle of heat on her. And she was weary, so weary. Her thoughts drifted, became diffuse.

Evie's last thought before she fell asleep was: *If he were an angel, surely he'd be the fallen sort.*

She suspected he was a man with secrets, and she ought to know.

When Mr. Eldred's goat attacked Mr. Brownwell and sent him flying five feet across his garden, it had been nothing short of an answered prayer. Adam had been in a foul mood that morning, brutally gnawing his quill, slashing out flaccid, uninspired sentence after flaccid, uninspired sentence and hurling crushed wads of foolscap across the room until they stacked like snowballs against the wall. He'd thrust his hands up through his hair (it was useful to keep it a little too long for precisely the

reason) and rued again his choice of the church over the military, for being shot at seemed preferable to being stared at by dozens of eyes when he had nothing, absolutely nothing to say to them on Sunday.

A typical Saturday, in other words.

But then Mr. Brownwell had stopped in at the vicarage, vibrating with outrage and gesturing at a gaping hole in the seat of his trousers. The incident (a boundary dispute, as it so happened) lit the touch paper to inspiration, and at the eleventh hour (it was *always* the eleventh hour) the Goat Affair evolved into a sermon about loving one's neighbor. Granted, a few of his parishioners already did that rather too literally and quite surreptitiously. This he knew because after a year in Pennyroyal Green many of them had begun confiding in him with something approaching abandon.

"He has a way about him," they told each other. "Such a good man. So calming, so *certain*. One *wants* to tell him things, and he always knows just what to say."

He didn't always know what to say. He sometimes had no *idea* what to say until a parishioner laid trouble at his feet and looked up at him with hope—or challenge—in their eyes. In the year since he arrived to take up the modest living in Pennyroyal Green at the behest of his wealthy uncle, Jacob Eversea, he'd learned that his job was like carrying a torch through a long tunnel where he could only see a few feet in front of him at a time, and occasionally bats flew at him, or he stumbled across alcoves full of treasure, or just missed stepping in something foul. He felt his way through.

Fortunately, he liked surprises. Even unpleasant ones held a certain appeal, for he was secretly conqueror by nature and the youngest of six competitive children and could in fact, on occasion, be positively bloody-minded. All of which meant he would in fact be damned if anything defeated him, whether it was his exams at Oxford or the things that mattered most to his impossible father, like shooting, or a sermon that refused to write itself, or how to make sure the impoverished O'Flaherty family who lived on the edge of town didn't starve. Since he was a boy, he'd driven himself with a quietly cheerful mercilessness to excel. His Eversea cousins had recently discovered this quality when he had calmly, without fanfare, surprised the devil out of everyone by shooting the heart out of every target in the yearly Sussex Marksmanship Contest. He took home a big silver cup and the respect of the men of Pennyroyal Green, who instantly decided they didn't care what a vicar looked like as long as he knew his way around guns, horses, and dogs. He most certainly did.

For his arrival in Pennyroyal Green to take up the living at the vicarage *had* been greeted with a certain amount of skepticism. He was related to the Everseas, after all (on their mother's side), and certainly looked like it, what with the height and the steal-your-breath looks. Both of which filled the church with parishioners on Sundays and the hearts of women with yearning, though he knew some of his parishioners half dreaded (or half hoped) he'd bound impulsively into the congregation midsermon and begin ravishing women. Not *all* of the Everseas had been rogues. Still, those were the ones the people tended to remember.

He knew he'd need to be faultless beneath their scrutiny. So he was. He'd charmed them; he liked people, so he did this effortlessly, in the way of all Eversea men. He sent not so much as a wayward twinkle or lingering glance toward any of the town's young ladies (and there were dozens of come-ones); each of them received an equal measure of regard. He'd decided to be the best bloody vicar creation. Which was comical, he saw now in retrospect. For unlike target shooting, this turned out to be *quite* out of his control, formidable though his control was. He hadn't anticipated that his duties—immersion in the joys, griefs, deaths, births, weddings, secrets, poverty, and petty concerns of his parishioners—would tumble him like a gem, knock the corners from him, humble him, distill him to his very essence. Thus uncluttered with expectation, somehow he could now see even more clearly

into the heart of their concerns. He worked ceaselessly. He scarcely had time to even *daydream* about ravishing anyone. Somewhere along the way he'd stopped wanting to be the *best* vicar and simply prayed to do as much good as possible. He'd begun to feel equal to the job, but privately, he didn't know if he would ever truly feel worthy of it. He just knew he would never stop trying to be.

And at least he now dreamed less often of standing stark naked at the altar before his congregation. His female parishioners continued to have this dream with regularity, however.

And now he stood in the sunlight outside the church while his parishioners filed by to thank him and shake his hand. Mrs. Sneath, that worthy woman, now stood beaming before him. She'd raised five sons who'd gone on to be spectacularly successful both in marriage and in trade, as they would dare be anything else under her watch. She now headed a battalion of women known as the Society for the Protection of the Sussex Poor, dedicated to good works and reformation of lost souls, whenever she was able to get her hands on one. Her fondest wish, she'd told Adam, was to witness a miracle, a true miracle, one day. She'd privately pronounced his character "exemplary," which was all that was needed to remove any lingering doubt about his *tendencies* in the minds of the remaining skeptics.

"Marvelous sermon, Vicar. Loving thy neighbor is *always* wonderful advice, and often such a challenge. I hope you plan to come round to supper this week so we can discuss plans for the auction and the rest of the Winter Festival?"

A series of events to raise funds for the local poor were planned—an auction, a small assembly, a larger ball—and she and her committee were coordinating them, but his approval and opinion were solicited. The ladies were indispensable, really, given the endless nature of parish duties.

Indispensable *and* maddening. A piquant combination.

"I wouldn't miss it for anything, Mrs. Sneath," he assured her.

"My niece will be visiting from Cornwall and joining us for supper." She added this slyly.

Ah, but of course, she would. "How lovely it will be to meet another member of your family."

"Her needlework is *unparalleled*."

"You must be very . . . proud."

Because that was when he saw her: the petite woman flanked by another woman roughly the size of a bear. She was blinking in the sun, like a creature emerging from a cave. And well she might. An accusing shaft of celestial light had illuminated her during the sermon, and that's how he'd noticed she'd been fast asleep, slightly slumped against the bear of a woman. Not only that, but *snoring* a bit, too, if the fluttering of the net on her hat was any indication.

Not *once* before had anyone slept through one of his sermons. He'd directed nearly the entirety of it to her, out of incredulity and indignant pride.

Fragments of their low and heated discussion floated to him as Mrs. Sneath spoke.

"Funny how you're suddenly an etiquette expert, Henny, when the vicar looks like . . ."

" . . . 'aven't the faintest idea what a 'donnis' might be, but fancy words aside, I've been starved for *scenery* since we've arrived, if ye take me meaning, me *lady*, so if ye'd be so kind as to . . ."

" . . . don't want to make myself conspicuous, Henny, and you *know* . . ."

"Did you enjoy the honey, Vicar?" Mrs. Cranborn had slipped past Mrs. Sneath and was now aiming a radiant smile at him.

"The hon—oh, yes, thank you so much again for the kind gift."

He was forever being given jars of things, honey and jam and apples and ointments, which he supposed was a way of reminding him how much more pleasant his life would be should he ever decide to give a woman the run of it. He remained "dangerously unmarried," or at least this was how his aunt Isolde Eversea put it. But then she would, given the nerve-taxing his cousins Colin and Isaac

had given her. *Mercifully* unmarried was often how Adam viewed it. The dreams of standing naked at the altar had been supplanted by dreams of swimming through the vicarage up to his neck in blackberry preserves, only to find the door neatly embroidered shut by the word “Bless Our Home.”

To his surprise, the small woman and the bear approached.

Mrs. Cranborn glanced up at the large woman in dark bombazine, recoiled in rank astonishment and reflexively stumbled a few steps back.

And so Adam took his first look at the woman he'd clearly bored. She seemed comprised entirely of vivid contrasts: black curls at her temples and alabaster cheeks and eyes like the proverbial jewel so green, they seemed, even through that scrap of net that fluttered from her hat. Her pelisse hung around her swung and clung flawlessly, a fit only the most exclusive of seamstresses could accomplish—though much he knew about women's clothing. She seemed unreal, like something out of a storybook. He supposed she was beautiful. But he was moved by women who seemed touchable, unwrappable, like Lady Fennimore's daughter Jenny, whose soft hair was forever coming out of its pins. This one seemed entirely contained, as sealed and gleaming as a jar of preserves.

“I hope you don't think it inappropriate, Reverend, since we haven't been properly introduced. But I wanted to thank you for the sermon.” The glance she slid over to her bear-sized companion said *Satisfied?* as clearly as if she'd spoken it aloud. “I am the Countess of Wareham. This is my maid, Henrietta La Fontaine.”

The Countess of Wareham . . . the name echoed in the recesses of his mind. He was certain he'd been told *something* about her. Given her appearance, he was unsurprised by both the title and her accent—he secretly thought of those etched consonants and indolently elongated vowels as the London Ironic Dialect. It was as though nothing, *nothing* in the world could ever possibly divert her again, so she indulged the world by viewing it with detached indulgence.

He *was*, however, surprised a countess would introduce her maid. There had in fact been the slightest hesitation before the word “maid,” as though the countess wasn't entirely certain *what* to call her.

He bowed graciously. “A pleasure to meet you, Lady Wareham. I'm the Reverend Adam Sylvain. How kind of you to attend the service.”

Henrietta dipped a graceful curtsy. “Yer sermon was a balm to me soul, Reverend.”

She had a very fierce gaze, did Henrietta. Eyes like bright little currants pressed into dough.

“As soothing as a lullaby, some might say,” Adam said pleasantly.

Lady Wareham stiffened. Her eyes narrowed so swiftly one might almost have missed it.

He didn't.

But then a distant little smile drifted onto her face, the sort a queen might offer a peasant child who held a daisy out to her.

“Thank you, again, Reverend, and good day. Come along, Henny.”

“Good day to you,” he said politely, and bowed elegantly.

He bit back a wry smile. He suspected she'd exhausted the novelty value of church, and he wouldn't be seeing her there again.

Henrietta winked at him as she walked away.

Chapter 2

In the carriage, Evie gloomily entertained the possibility that her soul really was impermeable to moral repair or renewal. Clearly it was resistant to sermons. An inauspicious start to her exile—there was, *new life*—in Sussex.

Cheeky vicar. The nerve. Lullaby, indeed.

“You were *snoring*,” Henny said.

“Surely not,” Evie said idly.

“*Quiet-like*,” Henny conceded. “But you were.”

And then Evie listened with half an ear as Henny planned aloud about supper “—cold roast, I think there is, and didn’t you ask Mrs. Wilberforce to get in some cheese?” She’d hired a housekeeper by the name of Mrs. Wilberforce, but Henny was in charge of her staff, as her capabilities were far-ranging, her roles and titles as diverse and subject to change as Evie’s had been: maid, housekeeper, abigail, advisor, scolder, dresser at the Green Apple Theater (which was where Evie had met her frightener of unpleasant suitors, visitor of apothecaries in the dead of night. She viewed Pennyroyal Green as penance, of a sort. For Eve had all but saved Henny’s life many years ago by employing her as her dresser when Henny was penniless. She would follow Eve to the ends of the earth, but she reserved the right to complain.

Suddenly, the coach lurched to a halt, and they were both thrown forward, nearly knocking their heads together.

The coach rocked a bit as the driver clambered down. Eve unlatched the door and peered out just as he was about to peer in.

They both reared back.

“Beggin’ yer pardon, m’lady, but seems summat is awry wi’ one of the horses. Team’s gone balkin’. We beg a moment to have a look to see if we may find the trouble.”

And thus the utter disintegration of my life continues, Eve thought wryly.

“Certainly. If I may just step out for a moment . . . ?”

Because all at once she wanted air. Being transferred from the enclosed little church to the enclosed carriage merely enhanced the sensation of her life shrinking to the size of a cell.

He assisted her down from the carriage, and she landed lightly on the road, bordered by low grass and other greenery not yet killed by frost.

She inhaled and inspected what was now her new view and would be for the foreseeable future: soot-covered hills mounded like a messy blanket; stubby, needled trees, oaks, some of which still sported leaves despite its being the brink of winter. Smoke spiraled from the chimneys of the few cottages scattered in the middle distance. She moved off the road and stretched and peered: The gray line on the far horizon was the sea.

Henny followed her out of the carriage and stretched and inhaled mightily.

And then her driver returned to her and gave a little bow.

“Lady Wareham, I fear we may have a dilemma. One of the horses has lost a shoe, and it would risk laming him if we continue on the journey.”

Of course they had a dilemma. Life had become nothing but dilemmas of late. “How far are we from Damask Manor?”

“A good twenty minutes or so by carriage.”

Which meant at least double the time walking. She wasn’t incapable of it—God only knew she had been a country girl a lifetime ago—but it was unthinkable for a woman of Henny’s age and size to undertake that journey on foot.

Henny took command. “There’s smoke from that chimney.” She pointed. “I’ll see if I can fetch some help, will I? Perhaps a farmer will lend a cart. I’d like to stretch my legs, anyhow, after those torture pews.”

Evie hesitated. “Well, if you insist. I suppose it couldn’t hurt.”

Henny insisted and trudged off, crested a rise, then disappeared over one of those small hills in the little valley, following a narrow beaten path to one of the picturesque little houses with the inviting chimney smoke.

All was silence. Apart from the shifting hooves and murmurs of her driver and footman, they were entirely alone. Evie scanned the trees again and gave a start.

Alone apart from a small blond boy leaning out from behind a tree. He was staring solemn-faced and unabashedly, the way children do.

She crossed her eyes good and proper, taking care to make her expression hideous. Little boys loved that sort of thing, and she wasn’t above reaching for an easy laugh.

He quite gratifyingly giggled. His front teeth were missing, which for some reason charmed her to her core. He must be seven or eight years old, then, she thought. Seamus at that age had been a devil in short pants. Then again, long pants hadn’t done much to reform him.

“Spiders aren’t pretty,” the boy said.

She was accustomed to small boys and non sequiturs. “Well, I don’t know about that. I suspect girl spiders are pretty to boy spiders.”

This the boy found uproarious. His eyes vanished with mirth when he laughed.

She smiled along with him.

“Are girl cows pretty to boy cows?” he wanted to know.

“Undoubtedly.”

“And are girl dogs pretty to boy dogs?”

She pretended to consider this. “In all likelihood, yes. Some girls dogs to some boy dogs, anyhow.”

“All dogs are pretty to me, too,” he confessed.

“And to me,” she agreed solemnly.

The boy went silent, bashful and delighted with their accord.

“Have you a dog?” she asked.

“Oh, yes. A hound. Her name is Wednesday.”

“A fine name for a dog. A fine day of the week as well. Why is she called Wednesday?”

“ ’Twas the day our neighbor brought her to me to keep forever.”

“It must have been a special day.”

“*Pauuuuuuuulie!* Paul! Where the devil *are* you?” A frantic woman’s voice echoed all around them suddenly.

“Ah. And you must be Paul,” Evie guessed.

“~~’Twas a special day,~~” the boy agreed, without even blinking, evidently entirely deaf to his mother’s voice.

The woman huffed up the hill and sighed with relief when she saw him. “Paulie! What have I told you about running off? Your blessed dog is chasing the chickens and Grandmama is expecting us for ___”

She clapped her mouth shut when she saw Evie. She froze midwalk, stiff-legged as a hunting dog pointing out prey.

Then her eyes frosted, and her mouth became a tight, horizontal line.

“See, Mama?” Paulie said cheerfully. “She doesn’t *look* like a spider. She’s pretty. And spiders aren’t.”

Oh God.

Evie’s breath left her in a painful gust.

She stood, cold in the gut, hot in the cheeks, feeling foolish and utterly blank.

That hated, *hateful* nickname. But how would a boy have known unless he’d overheard his mother talking?

Which meant that his mother had learned it from someone else.

Who had learned from someone else.

Which means they must know about her after all.

So much for refuge in Pennyroyal Green. So much for a new life here.

“What did I tell you, Paul, about bothering strangers?” She said this to her son, but the woman stared eyed her unblinkingly.

“But *Mama*, she’s very nice and she likes dogs and she said that boy dogs think girl dogs are pr ___”

The woman latched her fingers about his arm and gave him a tug, dragging him behind her. He protested something on an unintelligible whine.

“Because I’m your mother, and you will do as I say without questioning it, that’s why. She simply isn’t *our* sort, Paul.”

Ah. The staggering self-righteousness of it.

Evie couldn’t move. Her bones had turned to stone.

It was the sort of thing that once would have bounced from her as gaily as guineas flung down on a gaming table. For years, nothing ever dented her; she had shaped the world to suit *her*, as surely as though she were a signet ring and the world sealing wax.

But it was then she realized her hand was flattened protectively, right over the velvet frogs closing her expensive pelisse, one of the earl’s many—one of his last, in fact—gifts to her. Exactly as if a dagger had entered just there.

She dropped it instantly.

“And she’s not *that* pretty, Paulie,” drifted back to Evie.

This, at least was predictable, and made her snort softly.

It was a moment longer before she could toss her head insouciantly. And then for good measure she stuck her tongue out at their retreating figures before whirling on her heels.

And nearly bouncing off the chest of a man cresting the hill behind her.

Chapter 3

She leaped back with a stifled shriek, clapping her hand to her heart.

“Sweet Merciful Mary Mother of God, ye shouldna sneak up like that! Ye creep like a cat ye bloody big . . .”

She stopped.

A very ripe Irish accent, long dormant but apparently healthy and whole and frisky and unleashed by shock, echoed across the countryside. *Bloody big bloody big bloody big . . .*

Ohhhh. The *shame* of it.

She wanted to close her eyes and sink deep, deep into the earth.

Instead, she forced herself to look up—*very* up—at who proved to be the Reverend Adam Sylvain, the vicar.

He appeared entirely unruffled. Apart from his eyes, that was. They fair danced like flames with wicked, wicked, downright un-Christian mirth.

One of her horses whickered into what threatened to be a never-ending silence.

Be a gentleman, she silently willed him. *Leave it lie. Pretend you heard nothing at all.*

Up his eyebrows went.

“Biiiiig . . .” he prompted.

She eyed him stonily. *Bastard*, she was tempted to complete. Why not? In for a penny, in for a pound.

He waited. Patient as Job. Wicked as Lucifer. Amused as hell.

“Vicar,” she completed inanely, finally, on a mumble.

His head went back as though this was almost too good to be true, then came down on a nod.

“I suppose I am,” he agreed thoughtfully, though his voice held a suspicious tremble. Stifled laughter. “I suppose I *am* a big . . . *vicar* . . . Though no one has ever before accused me before creeping like a cat. Something to do with being . . . well, *big*, I suppose.”

The vicar was taking the piss out of her, as her brother Seamus would say, and quite effectively, too.

She looked full into his face then. His eyes were such a disarming blue—the color of deep, still water, of Lough Leane in Killarney—they made her strangely restless. It was as if the weather inside him was always clear and temperate. Like his conscience and unblemished soul, no doubt, she thought sardonically. An unprepossessing black wool coat—Weston hadn’t stitched up that one, she knew that for *certain*—whipped behind him in the stiffening wind, which was also doing its best to pluck his carelessly knotted cravat from the confines of a gray, striped waistcoat of no discernible pedigree.

And as though they were a beckoning road, her eyes followed the line of longer, finer, harder thigh than a vicar had any business possessing down to the dusty, creased toes of his boots. Which mo

definitely had not been made by Hoby.

Her eyes stayed safely on the ground. She took advantage of a moment of unexpectedly necessary composure gathering in the wake of the revelation about his thighs.

“I thought vicars were supposed to wear dresses.” She said this almost testily. At least she had gotten control of her accent.

“Oh, a dress is optional.”

Ping! Insults bounced from *him*, it seemed.

“And by ‘dress,’ I suppose you mean ‘cassock’?” he added helpfully. “Difficult to creep like a cat in a cassock, you see, Lady Wareham. It swirls about one’s ankles, flaps noisily in the breeze. One needs *stealth* to stop iniquity in its tracks.”

In . . . iquity?

The word was a slap.

But . . . perhaps he was jesting? Surely he was? Did *he* know about her? Was the whole of this horrid village going to take turns plaguing her in turns? Would they turn out with boiling oil?

“Is that why you’ve suddenly appeared? Did you scent *iniquity* on the wind then, Reverend Sylvaine? Do you roam the Sussex countryside sniffing for it, like a truffle-hunting pig?”

He didn’t reply for so long she finally turned to look at him.

To find he’d gone as rigid as if he’d been driven into the ground.

Something about that stillness made her think that angering him would be very unwise, indeed. Which seemed a peculiar thought to have about a vicar. But despite the fact that he wasn’t blinking, he didn’t *seem* angry. He was studying her the way one might study a lock about to be picked. The only movement was his hair. The breeze lifted it, let it fall, lifted it, let it fall. Hidden in the dark blond were dark gold or copper threads or strands sun-bleached to silvery fairness. In the silence and stillness it was absurdly fascinating.

“I’ve dozens of cousins and a number of siblings, Lady Wareham. If you’ve siblings, you won’t be surprised to learn that my hide is quite callused. It’s nearly impossible to offend me.”

Well.

He said it evenly. As if he hadn’t just seen right through her and neatly incinerated her defenses, as surely as if she were a petulant child.

“Some might interpret that as a challenge, Reverend.”

Which was precisely how she was acting, and she couldn’t seem to stop.

He went quiet again. And then he smiled. Very, very faintly. Just enough, it seemed, for her to notice the elegant shape of his mouth. To tease out one dimple at the corner of it. And when at last he spoke, again she felt his voice more than she heard it, like fingers brushed along the short hairs at her nape. It had gone soft, so soft. But somehow it wasn’t gentle.

“Oh? Did you come to Pennyroyal Green for challenge, then, Lady Wareham?”

She stared at him.

He stared back.

And to her astonishment, heat slowly washed the back of her neck, the backs of her arms, and she was suddenly more difficult to breathe. It occurred to her that she’d never seen a man who was so . . . contained. Yes: That was precisely the right word. As though something in him, some potential *required* control. And whatever it was, whatever *he* was, pulled at her. The way earth pulled water into it. It felt stronger than she was, and her entire life had depended upon her being stronger than anyone.

She turned abruptly away. She inhaled in the hopes of clearing her head, but the traitorous air had turned to wine or some such; her thoughts staggered like foxed heirs at a gaming hell.

He was only a vicar, she reminded herself. The man had caught her in a rare moment of weakness amidst a particularly vulnerable episode in her life. That was all. And she was very weary, of course. After all, the church nap had hardly been the restorative kind.

She tugged her pelisse about her more snugly and stared toward her halted carriage with a little frown. Where the devil was Henny?

“It seems one of our horses threw a shoe,” she said finally. Her voice was fainter than she would have preferred.

She wondered if she’d disappointed him.

He’d been watching her. She half suspected he knew the number of her eyelashes now.

“I see,” he said easily enough, after a moment. “I was on my way to visit a parishioner when I saw your stopped carriage. And as there’s no worry about brigands on this road since One-Eyed William haunted these parts a few decades ago, and as this isn’t precisely one of the more scenic parts of Sussex, I feared something might be amiss.”

One-eyed William? Was he *jesting*?

She said nothing.

“I’ll just have a word with your driver then, shall I?”

When she didn’t reply—for she couldn’t seem to find her voice—he turned. She listened to him take one step, then two steps away, and somehow the sound of his footsteps seemed like the sound of failure.

“Reverend Sylvaine . . .”

He stopped, turned back toward her, his brows raised in a query.

The surest way to regain her power was to deploy what made her powerful.

“I must ask your forgiveness. I fear you startled me from my manners, and . . . I’ve never before met a vicar, you see, and it seems like such an interesting, important role. Pray, how does one become a vicar?”

She, possibly better than any other woman in England, knew the way beneath any man’s rampart—whether he was the Home Secretary or the King of England or a coal monger: It was flattery, served up with flirtation and innuendo.

She was startled when Reverend Sylvaine drew up visibly, instantly almost comically wary.

“One of the best ways, I’ve learned, to become one is to be related to the family who owns the living,” he said shortly. With just a hint of irony.

And said nothing more.

“Must one be faultless of character? Entirely . . . free of vices?” She folded her hands before her and aimed her gaze up at him through her lashes with the precision of a rifleman.

The vicar glanced down at her demurely folded hands as though she’d unlocked a pistol. And then he slowly looked back up into her face.

He hesitated.

“I suppose it depends on how one interprets the word.”

A masterpiece of circumspection, that sentence.

His eyes were now unreadable as an empty sky, shuttered. Hers, she was fairly certain, thanks to some collusion between her thick black lashes and the color of her eyes and the angle of sunlight and the sheer *intent* to charm, were sparkling.

“Have *you* any vices, Mr. Sylvaine?” Her tone implied that she sincerely hoped he did, that she would be understanding and forgiving, would indeed find them fascinating, and that her own would *nicely* complement his.

The vicar was now as tense as a bunched fist.

And then a faint dent appeared between his eyes.

Alas, by no stretch of the imagination could she interpret this expression as “bewitched.”

“None, I’m certain, that would interest you.” He said it gently, and turned his head just slight

back toward the road, where his duties apparently awaited. As though, of all things . . .

. . . he was *bored*.

She was speechless.

“I should think it’s safe enough to walk alone along this part of the green, Lady Wareham, but perhaps you oughtn’t go far until you know the country better. Perhaps you’d prefer to wait inside your carriage out of the cold?”

She knew when she’d been dismissed. Pride—and astonishment—prevented her from flailing.

“Seeing to the safety of your flock, are you?” she managed almost lightly. Her voice was faint from the jostling her pride had taken.

He smiled politely. “And to my duty as a gentleman.” More of that peculiar, distancing gentleness. “I apologize for startling you. It wasn’t my intention.”

To her horror, heat bloomed in her cheeks again.

“My maid is very nearby,” she said shortly, struggling to hide her embarrassment. “And I don’t mind the cold.”

“I’ll just see if I can be of some assistance to your driver then, shall I?”

When she said nothing, he made a very elegant bow and turned away from her. She stood still as stone, watching as he hailed the driver and her footman, who greeted him cheerily. All those many heads gathered together, the powdered one and her stocky, hatless driver and Mr. Sylvaine’s fair one conferring in low voices. While the driver gently held the horse’s head, the vicar bent and lifted up the glossy animal’s hoof and inspected it. Evie watched in astonishment as he tugged his cravat free of his waistcoat and carefully, almost tenderly, wrapped the horse’s hoof to the evident approval of her staff.

And then he turned and waved a farewell, striding up the road, no doubt toward his original destination. Cravatless.

She watched him go.

At last she heard the huffing of Henny’s breathing before she saw Henny, then Henny crested the hill, skirts lifted in her hands, exposing a few inches of thick, sturdy ankle decorously covered with thick, sagging woolen stockings. “I fear no one answered me knock at the door, m’lady.”

She dropped her skirts and froze in place when she saw her mistress’s face.

Her eyes went wide.

Then she narrowed them shrewdly and swiveled her great head about and raised a hand to shade her eyes when she saw Adam Sylvaine walking away, posture like a soldier’s, stride long and easy.

Silently, they both watched him.

They in fact watched long enough for it to become ridiculous.

He never once looked back.

“Now *that* one is a *man*,” Henny pronounced finally. As though they’d been debating the topic.

Evie snorted. “The country air has curdled your brain.” She tossed her head and strode toward the carriage. Henny followed on her heels, still huffing.

“Now ye listen to me. Ye think ye’re worldly and grand now and that ye’ve known every sort of man there is to know. But if ye’ve too many flowers in your garden, they all start to smell the same, dinna they? Ye canna tell one from another. And I tell you, that one is better.”

“Because he’s a *vicar*? For heaven’s sake, Henny,” she said wearily, “he’s . . . *just* a man.” It was

easier to use the word “just” to describe Adam Sylvaine when he wasn’t standing near enough for her to count the colors in his hair. “Beneath their clothes, under the skin, they’re all the same. It always becomes evident eventually. It matters not whether they look like angels or gargoyles.”

“I didn’t say he was *saintly*, or even good. I said he was better,” Henny maintained obstinately. With the maddening air of superiority she liked to adopt when she couldn’t support an argument.

In her weakened state, the word “better” for some reason cut Evie too close to the bone. She’d never had hope of being *better*, it seemed. Life had seen to that, and it had taken on a momentum of its own long ago. Still, she hadn’t any regrets. Regrets implied she could have made other choices, and she wasn’t certain she could have. Certainly, she’d viewed her life as a triumph of planning until recent events had exploded it like a cue taken to racked billiard balls.

“It might behoove you, Henny, to remember that *age* doesn’t necessarily bequeath wisdom.”

“Ye only use words like ‘behoove’ when you know I’ve the right of it. And mind you, better means he isn’t for the likes of *you*, rag-mannered chit that ye are.”

“A rag-mannered chit who has tolerated *your* cheek for much too long.”

They bickered with comfortable familiarity all the way back to the carriage.

The driver and footman had just finished reharnessing the horses and scrambled upright when the two of them approached.

“Why did the vicar wrap the horse’s hoof?” she asked the footman.

“He said he should hate for us to ruin our livery, m’lady. He insisted upon it.”

“But . . . I’m not certain I understand. Why would anyone need to ruin anything?”

“As a precaution, m’lady, to protect it until he can be shod again, we needed to wrap his hoof. She came off cleanly, like, so no damage done yet, and we’re fortunate he wasn’t lamed. Vicar knows his horses!” he said admiringly. “If we take the drive slow, we should reach home without harming him. Vicar said he’d send the farrier out to us straightaway.”

It was the sort of report one’s servants didn’t usually trouble a countess with. But there was no money of the house, and her budget, settled upon her by Monty’s estate, could scarcely justify keeping the horses and carriage and the footman as it was, and the health of something as valuable as a horse was of paramount concern. And she had no doubt that everyone below stairs knew it.

And livery was costly, too. Likely the vicar knew it. She imagined what the cost of a cravat meant to a vicar, and his kindness threw her own churlishness into stark relief.

“Thank you,” she said gently to the footman. “We shall take the drive home slowly, then, and come to know the lovely scenery of our new home a little better.”

“Very good, my lady.”

She’d made him smile, and this lightened her mood a little. It was such an *easy* thing for her to do normally, to charm, to ease, to make things better, to take *care* of things, and she felt her failure with Reverend Sylvaine bleakly. She was an *expert* at identifying the thing that made a man feel most proud and the thing that made him feel most inadequate, and she would praise the one and bolster the other. Of course, once captivated, she could tweak his vulnerabilities and strengths the way a skilled driver used ribbons to steer horses, should the need arise.

“Now, Lord Asquith, *he* could by no stretch of the imagination be compared to a flower,” Evie concluded inside the carriage, continuing the argument with Henny, determined to win it.

“Lud, but isn’t that the truth of it,” Henny agreed, sighing and leaning back into the well-sprung seats. “The man stunk like a shop in Seven Dials. ’Twas an ointment ’e bought in the dead of night at McBride’s Apothecary and used for a masculine complaint.”

Evie was fascinated despite herself. She knew McBride’s well, in large part because McBride could

be relied upon to pawn things, something actresses often needed to do. “How would you know a thing like that?”

“I ken a thing or two. I might ’ave been a tart in my day, too,” Henny said smugly. “Given arf chance.”

Evie was too weary to object to the word “tart,” especially when it was said with genuine affection. Henny had known her in every incarnation. And Henny had surprising success with men. “Perhaps you ought to give it a try, Henny. Mayhap you can land an earl, too, and the two of us can retire in style.”

Her maid gave her thigh a delighted slap. “I may do that very thing.”

Evie looked out the window, out upon the soft hills unfolding endlessly, to the smoke spiraling up into the sky from cottage chimneys of houses filled with people who would in all likelihood be gossiping about her within days and would never welcome her, to the flat silver line of the sea in the distance, and knew a moment of disorientation: The view could have been her past or present or future. She felt anchored to nothing.

For some reason she found herself craning her head in the direction Adam Sylvaine had disappeared. As if he, of all things, was the star she could navigate by.

Chapter 4

Adam was surprised to find himself at Lady Fennimore's door. He paused and fished out his pocket watch; he was only ten minutes later than usual. He frowned, surprised, and stuffed it back into his coat. He could scarcely recall the walk at all, and he'd taken it once a week for nearly a year now. Time had suspended as two images overtook all other thought.

Lady Fennimore's daughter greeted him at the door, as usual.

"How is she this morning, Jenny?"

Jenny gave a start. She took an infinitesimal step backward, eyes widened.

It was then he heard himself as she'd heard him: curt, preoccupied, irritated. Very unlike him. The sort of voice that might make anyone take a step back.

He added a smile to apologize for it. Jenny forgave him with a melting smile of her own and entwined a finger in a stray curl that had escaped its pins.

"She's about the same, Reverend, but she's always so much better after she sees you. You can go straight up if you like. I've just put the kettle on, and I can hear it about to boil. I thought you might like some tea after your long walk."

"You're always so thoughtful, Jenny. Tea would be wonderful. And the walk is one of my favorites."

Pleased pink moved into Jenny's cheeks and throat and collarbone, and she touched a hand to her forehead. A wayward tendril of fair hair and floated to the kitchen, buoyed by his smile and kind words and his own daydreams about the vicar, which involved her serving tea and rubbing his wide shoulders and propping one of her own needlework pillows beneath his head when he napped.

She was *certain* the "love thy neighbor" sermon had been directed to her.

He watched her go, her softness and simplicity and eagerness to please balm after his last little encounter. And as she disappeared into the kitchen, and Adam strode through the foyer, past the gilt-edged mirror nailed up over a small table struggling under the weight of roses stuffed into a Chinese urn. Lady Fennimore kept a hothouse, though it sometimes seemed as though the hothouse kept her, so profuse were the blooms and so prevalent the scent of them in her house.

Just as he was about to launch himself up the now-familiar flight of marble stairs, he froze.

Then turned, and as cautiously as if he were about to accost a burglar midcrime, returned to the mirror.

To discover his expression was dark and abstracted; his jaw was tense. His eyes were brilliant, with some fierce emotion, something perilously close to anger but not quite.

No wonder Jenny had taken a step back.

He'd best do away with that expression before the astute Lady Fennimore got a look at it and somehow worked out that a woman had caused it.

A thoroughly baffling, *unpleasant* woman.

~~Who had gone from sleeping in church to shrieking in what sounded very much like gutter Irish~~ (which had perversely amused him) to prickly and difficult, to flinging flirtation at him—she'd quite alarmingly *sparkled* at him—like a soldier hurling boulders with a trebuchet.

Despite all of this, two impressions surfaced through all the others. And these were the ones that dogged him all the way to Lady Fennimore's house.

How he'd first seen her: standing utterly still, two hot pink spots on her cheeks, hand flattened against her rib cage. Then squaring her shoulders, like a pugilist shaking off a blow.

Something Maggie Lanford had said hurt her.

And then there were the freckles.

He'd seen them as they stared each other down—a faint scattering, only slightly darker than dried tears, on each cheek. And something about them, and her green eyes, made him think of bird's eggs and summer days, and from there he'd found himself wondering what that smooth cheek might feel cradled in the palm of his hand. What it might be like to drag his thumb softly over those pale spots which, if he knew women, were the bane of her existence, to soothe away whatever hurt had put that hot pink in her cheeks.

He'd never had a thought like that in his entire life. Let alone about a woman he disliked.

He inhaled deeply, exhaled, and turned his back on the mirror.

Lady Fennimore was propped in bed, engulfed by a night rail and topped by an enormous frilly canopy from which her cobweb-fine gray hair escaped. She was layered over with great heaps of blankets. Her hands lay frail as lace gloves atop the counterpane. The sun had full run of the room and poured emphatically through the enormous windows, and Adam could see every one of the thousands of wrinkles that comprised her now-tissue-fine complexion.

“Ah, there you are at long last, Vicar. I don't know what should keep you. Come and sit by me and savor my last moments on earth. Perhaps you ought to record my thoughts for posterity. I had a few new ones this morning though demmed if I can remember them now. God knows no one else says anything worth remembering these days. Though your predecessor had one or two moments of profundity. I'm awaiting yours.”

A combative glint lit her eyes.

“Doubtless if deathless prose ever occurs to me, I'll owe it *entirely* to your inspiration, Lady Fennimore.”

He and Lady Fennimore rather enjoyed each other.

Now they did, at least. At first she was one of the things that had helped knock the corners from him. One of the proverbial bats that flew out at him from the tunnel.

She smiled. And then she squinted at him. “Young man, you look distracted,” she accused.

“Enthralled by your company, that's all.”

She snorted. “And I do believe you're getting a wrinkle. About your left eye.”

This little observation was an example of why she terrified Mrs. Sneath's battalion of women and why he was the one who visited most often.

“Your eyesight is remarkably good for a dying woman,” he said dryly.

“A pity, isn't it? I'd rather use up all of my faculties before I meet my Maker, and yet some of them work brilliantly yet. You oughtn't think so much. Do more praying than thinking. You'll wind up with fewer wrinkles. I was a thinker, and look at me now.”

“Perhaps I’ll pray that my Maker forbears giving me any more wrinkles, lest you point them out.”

She laughed again. It devolved into a cough, and she lay back with a sigh and closed her eyes briefly. He waited with her.

She sighed and opened her eyes.

“I’ve been giving things away, you see, in preparation for my next . . . oh, let’s call it my little journey, why don’t we. Reverend Sylvaine, will you be so kind as to open that box on the table there?”

She angled her chin toward a tiny, hinged wooden box on the table next to her bed.

He leaned forward to retrieve it and levered it open.

Inside was a tiny gold cross, a necklace. He lifted it up on one finger; the fine chain pooled in his other palm, cool and smooth.

“It was mine when I was a girl. It was given to me by my uncle, and he told me to wear it for good luck and protection, and I did for years until my neck grew too fat for it. Jenny wanted it, but she’ll inherit a good deal when I go, and I told her I wanted to give it to *you*. And you might be the only person she wouldn’t begrudge such a thing. It’s not valuable, mind you, but I’d like you to have it. I’m a Vicar. I expect you’ll encounter many a soul who might benefit from a little protection. Give it to someone who needs it.”

He went motionless. He didn’t trust himself to look up just yet. He was swamped by the full knowledge that his visits here would soon cease.

His day-to-day life was marked now by moments like these. Without warning, something a parishioner said or did would unaccountably move him. He knew these moments were both expanding and reshaping him, the way the sea shaped a continent. They made him better—better able to help, understand, to see—but not always without a bit of pain.

He cleared his throat and looked up.

“Thank you, Lady Fennimore. I’ll cherish it. I wish I’d known you then.”

“Ah, Reverend. If you think I’m a delight *now* . . . Now, if you’ll close the door, I’ve something to confess. And I shouldn’t like my Jenny or anyone else to hear.”

Ah! So more surprises were in store. He stood and closed the door and returned to the chair.

“You may be surprised, young man, to know that I was a Diamond of the First Water in my day.”

“I don’t doubt it at all. Your eyes are magnificent.”

“Face like yours, flirting with an old woman like me.” She snorted. “Shameless, and you a man of God.”

“I’ll do penance for my moment of weakness, of a certainty.”

She laughed again, and he waited when the laugh became a cough that shook her, and she reached for her handkerchief again. She cleared her throat.

“A pity it is you’ll marry one of these village milksops, and have a dozen dull and pretty children.”

“Now, Lady Fennimore, consider that it’s possible that you do the young ladies of Pennyroyal Green a disservice.”

“That is, unless something goes awry. Like with that Redmond chit,” Lady Fennimore continued.

“She’s married to an earl, now, Miss Violet Redmond is.” There was no use debating which Redmond chit she referred to; everyone knew Violet had once threatened to throw herself down a well over an argument with a suitor and had needed to be pulled back by her elbows. “She’s a countess.”

Were *all* countesses difficult? he wondered.

“He’s not a proper earl, though, is he? He’s part savage or some such. American,” she sniffed.

“The Earl of Ardmay is truly an earl according to the King, Lady Fennimore.”

“The king,” she snorted, as if the King had a questionable birth, too. “But as I was saying

Reverend, it's marriage, and the marriage bed that will open any milksop's eyes and turn her into a woman."

Given the events of the day so far, and of his life in general, he was somehow unsurprised to be discussing the marriage bed with Lady Fennimore.

"Oh, they're all milksops. So tediously easy to frighten. I'd like challenge, now and again! The again, every well-bred young woman ought to be a milksop if her mother does her job right," she said authoritatively. "My own Jenny, she's a milksop."

He thought of Jenny and her softness and seeming pliancy. But another woman had embedded herself in his awareness like a splinter. He thought of that accent with the "r's" rolled tight and round and the "bloody" and knew definitively *she'd* never been a milksop. Though he hadn't the faintest idea who might have raised her. Or what precisely she *was*, if she wasn't a milksop.

"And now I will tell you something, young man, and it has been preying upon me. I'm not long for this world, as you know."

"So you tell me," he said lightly.

Her fingers wandered the counterpane and found his hand. He gripped hers. Her hand felt like a scrap of silk stretched over hard ivory; no flesh remained. But it was still strong.

"Mind you, I've attended church for as long as I was able. I read my Bible and abide by God's word as much as anyone can. I was a good wife and I loved my husband very much. But . . . Jenny's father wasn't Lord Fennimore. I loved another man, too, while I was married."

He hoped she wouldn't feel the sudden tension in his hand.

Because as sins went, it was an impressive one.

Everything he knew and assumed to be true about Lady Fennimore jostled and shifted in a struggle to accommodate it. He yanked back a rearing reflexive sense of judgment ("Good God, Lady Fennimore!") they both knew what she'd done was wrong. He did her the favor of assuming she hadn't done it lightly. All he truly needed to know was what she needed from him now.

And once again, he would need to feel his way through.

Still, it took a moment to recover his equilibrium.

"And you regret this?" he began, carefully.

"Oh dear me, no. I most certainly do not," she said with relish. "And therein lies the trouble."

"But you wish to be absolved of the sin."

She sighed. "I wish I'd the courage to say no, I do not care whether or not I sinned, and take the risk when I get up to Heaven for the final judgment. But I'm about to meet my Maker, and if God should fit to appoint you my heavenly escort, as it were, then I would like to know how to . . . ensure a place. I shouldn't like to debate St. Peter when I arrive or meet with any nasty surprises. I haven't the wardrobe for Hell."

"Were you married to Lord Fennimore when you met Jenny's father?"

"Yes."

So if she was looking for the name of the sin, it was "adultery," but they both knew that.

"You see, Reverend, you may never know this, but love, real love, the kind that you *fall in*, is like Corinthians. The "suffereth long" and "is kind" nonsense. It's like the Song of Solomon. It's jealousy and fire and floods. It's everything that consumes. I defy even *you* to resist it should it visit you in this lifetime, no matter the circumstances, and I don't know whether I would wish it upon you. It's a . . . beautiful suffering. We have our God and our laws and so forth to tell us how to live, but God made us flesh, didn't he? And your handsome flesh, my dear boy, seems rather an amusing test for a vicar. Good luck controlling those urges, I say, should the right temptation present itself."

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