



AN INSPECTOR IAN RUTLEDGE MYSTERY

# WINGS OF FIRE

CHARLES TODD



# WINGS *of* FIRE

*Charles Todd*



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WINGS  
*of*  
FIRE

Also by Charles Todd

*A Test of Wills*

For D

You know why.



The bodies were discovered by Mrs. Trepol, widow, occupation housekeeper and cook to the deceased.

It was not a morning of swirling sea mists and gray drifting sheets of rain, although afterward Mrs. Trepol remembered it that way.

In fact, the clouds had lifted in the night. The sea was gleaming in patchy May sunlight down below the headland, the house cast long shadows across the wet grass, and an unseasonable warmth already touched the light breeze as she came out of the wood at the side of the big kitchen garden. Her eyes jealously studied the cabbages in their neat rows, measuring them against the size of her own, deciding that hers still had an edge. Well, of course they should! She'd always had the finest garden in the village, and hadn't she proved it with ribbons won at every Harvest Festival? The onions were taller—surely they hadn't been that high on Saturday? But anyone could grow onions. Her peas were already straggling up the sticks she'd set beside them, and growing peas was an art. No sticks stood beside these sad little stalks! She'd be cooking hers before these saw their first blossoms. Old Wilkins, who had kept the Hall's gardens and stables since the lads had all gone off to the war, knew more about horses than vegetables.

Not that he didn't crow over his work.

"Your carrots look a mite *small*, Mrs. Trepol," he'd say, hanging over the rock wall by her front walk. "Compared to mine, that is." Or, "Them beans is spindly. Put 'em in late, did ye?"

Nosy old fool!

Her complacency restored, she went up the three steps to the kitchen door and let herself in with her key as she always did. Not that this was her day to clean. Mondays normally were her day off. But tomorrow she wanted to visit her sister—Naomi's husband had offered to take them both to market in the morning—and Miss Livia never minded if occasionally she shifted her time.

The long stone passage was cool and quiet. At the end of it, she took off her coat, hung it on the peg as she always did, pulled her apron over her head, then stepped into the heart of her domain. And noticed at once that the breakfast dishes, usually neatly stacked on the drain board, hadn't been brought down. She looked around the kitchen, saw that it was much as she'd left it on Saturday evening, not even a crumb marring her scrubbed floor, saw too that no one had opened the curtains.

Oh, my dear! she thought, pityingly, Miss Livia must've had another bad night, and she's still asleep!

Going up to the back parlor, she found that those curtains were also closed. And for the first time she felt a tremor of alarm.

Mr. Nicholas always opened them at first light, to watch the sea. He'd said once that it made him feel alive to see the dawn come and touch the water . . .

Miss Livia must have had a *terrible* night, then, if he'd missed the dawn on her account! Mrs. Trepol had never known that to happen in all the years she'd worked in the house. Mr. Nicholas was always up at first light . . . always . . .

She went out into the hall and looked up the curving stairs.

"Mr. Nicholas?" she called softly. "I've come. Is there anything I can do? Would you care for a cup of tea?"

The silence around her echoed her words and she felt very uneasy now. Surely if he was sitting by Miss Livia's bed, he'd have heard her and come out to speak to her?

Unless something was wrong with *him*—



She hurried up the stairs and went down the passage to Mr. Nicholas' room, tapping lightly on the panel. No one answered. After a moment's uncertainty, she turned the knob and opened the door.

The bed was made. From the look of it, it had not been slept in. Mr. Nicholas could always make it neatly, but never as smoothly as she did. This was her work. *Saturday's* work . . .

She went back down the passage and knocked lightly at Miss Livia's door. Again there was no answer. She opened it gently, so as not to disturb Miss Livia, or Mr. Nicholas, if he'd fallen asleep in the chair by his sister's bed, and peered around the edge.

That bed too was untouched. The coverlet was as smooth as glass. Like Mr. Nicholas'. And there was no one in the chairs.

Suddenly very frightened, she listened to the house around her. Surely if Miss Livia had been taken down to the doctor's surgery in the night, there'd be a message left in the kitchen! But this wasn't her day; Mr. Nicholas wouldn't have known she was coming in. Well, then, someone would have mentioned it at services on Sunday morning. Eager to gossip—

Going to the long study at the end of the gallery, which Mr. Nicholas and Miss Livia shared, Mrs. Trepol knocked and waited, then reached for the knob as she had twice before.

And then fright turned suddenly to terror. She quickly drew her hand back, bringing it to her flat chest almost protectively, her heart thudding uncomfortably beneath her fingertips.

She stood there for several seconds, staring at the shut door, her voice refusing to call Mr. Nicholas' name, her hand refusing to reach again for the brass knob.

Whatever was behind that door, it was something she couldn't face, not alone, not with her heart hammering like it was going to jump out of her chest and run away.

She turned and fled down the stairs, stumbling on the old, worn treads, nearly falling headfirst in her haste, thinking only of the safety of the kitchen but not stopping there, rushing down the passage, on into the early sunlight and back the way she'd come, toward the village and Dr. Hawkins. Only then did she remember her coat, but nothing would have taken her back into that house. Shivering, on the verge of tears, driven by uncertainty, she ran heav-

ily and awkwardly through the gardens, heedless of the cabbages, and towards the copse of trees where the path to the village began.

What was left of the family gathered in the drawing room for a drink when everyone else had finally gone home, but conversation was stilted, uneasy, as if they were strangers meeting for the first time and had yet to find common ground. The truth was, they *felt* like strangers. In the circumstances. Unsettled, uncomfortable. Isolated by their thoughts.

Then Stephen said abruptly, "Why do you suppose they did it?"

There was an odd silence. No one, thank God, had asked that all the long day! Not through the services nor the burials nor the reception at the Hall afterward, where friends and villagers had mingled, talking in subdued voices. Remembering Olivia and Nicholas, recalling some small incident or ordinary encounter, a conversation—all safely in the past. Avoiding the how and why of death, as if by tacit agreement. Avid curiosity dwelt in their eyes, but they were sensitive to the delicacy of the situation. *Suicides*.

No one had spoken of the poems, either.

Susannah said quickly, "What business is it of ours? They're dead. Let that be the end of it."

"Good God, Nicholas and Olivia were your brother and sister—"

"Half brother and sister!" she retorted, as if that might distance her from real pain.

"All right, then, *half* brother and sister! Haven't you even wondered about it? Don't you feel anything?"

"I feel grateful that they could be buried with Mother in the family vault," Susannah answered. "Thanks to the rector's kindness! In the old days, it wouldn't have been allowed, you know that. *Suicides* weren't buried in the *churchyard*, much less in the crypt! And we'd have been ostracized along with them. It's still bad enough, God knows. London will be an ordeal, facing all my friends, knowing pity's behind their sympathy—" She stopped, unwilling to lay her emotions out, raw and painful, for the others to paw over. "I don't want to talk about it! What we've got to face now is, what's to become of the house?"

Daniel said, "I'd always understood it was left to the survivors to sell." He glanced around the room. Susannah. Rachel. Stephen. Himself. He was Susannah's husband, but he'd always been treated as one of the family. That had been a source of great pride to him. With feelings running so high over the Troubles in Ireland, he might have been seen as less, well, *acceptable* socially, without the Trevelyan connection behind him. Not that the Trevelyans were so high and mighty, but they were *old* blood, respected. His eyes moved on. Cormac. Olivia and Nicholas'd left Cormac out of their wills. Daniel had found himself wondering, sometimes, who Cormac's Irish mother had been—if it had made a difference. Cormac was a FitzHugh, but not a Trevelyan. Not Rosamund's child. Nor wed to one of Rosamund's children. Nor, like Rachel, a cousin on the Marlowe side.

Rachel said, "Yes, that's what I'd been told. Unless they changed their minds. At the end." As they'd changed their minds about living . . . She took a deep breath and refused to think about it. And instead found herself listening again. To the sounds of the house. Since she'd walked through the door two days ago, she'd felt it. Swallowing her, drawing the very breath from her body. Frightening her with a stillness that wasn't stillness . . .

Stephen said, moving his cane along the pattern of the Persian carpet's intertwined medallions. "Well, I for one know what I think we *should* do. We should turn this place into a memorial. A museum in Livia's memory."

Susannah stared at him in surprise.

Cormac said, "Don't be ridiculous! It's the last thing she'd have wanted! Olivia spent her entire life hiding from people. Do you think she'd be pleased to have strangers wandering about in here *now*?" He moved gracefully around the room, tall and oddly beautiful in a very masculine way.

"It isn't up to you," Stephen retorted. He tried not to watch. He tried not to resent that grace. And couldn't help it. The war had left him with half a foot. And this damned cane. Trenchfoot and gangrene, for God's sake, not honorable wounds! No more long walks over the Downs, no more tennis, no more dancing, no more

riding to hounds. He could still bowl at cricket, but awkwardly, terrified he'd lose his balance and fall flat on his face.

"All the same, Cormac's right," Rachel said. "I can't imagine this place a museum. Livia would feel it was a betrayal."

"Think of the cost," Daniel added. "You'd need money for upkeep, repairs, staff. A trust of some sort. Olivia may have been famous, but she wasn't *that* rich! In her own right, I mean."

"We could afford it," Stephen persisted. "Or perhaps the National Trust would be interested."

"Not without a handsome endowment," Cormac replied, stopping by the windows, his back to them. "It would take more than three quarters of your inheritance."

"What are you saying? That we divide up the furniture—the sideboard for me, the piano for you, and who's going to take the grandfather's clock?—then sell the house and grounds? Pretend Olivia and Nicholas never existed, that the family—what's left of it—doesn't *care*?" Stephen was steadily losing his temper.

"You want a museum to your own memory, not hers," Susannah said suddenly. "It's *your* immortality you're thinking about, don't pretend it isn't!"

"Mine?"

"Yes, yours! The war's changed you, Stephen—and not for the better. Oh, I've heard you at dinners since she was found out, simpering when someone asks who the love poems were written about. You think it's you, her darling, her favorite!" There was heavy sarcasm in her quiet voice. He'd been Mother's favorite too. He was Susannah's twin—and always so much more than her equal.

"Well, what if they were written about me? I've as much right as any of you to think what I please. You're greedy, that's what it is, wanting the money, wanting every penny you can squeeze. And that's why she left her literary estate to me. A pity she didn't include the house as well!"

"Who died last?" Rachel put in diffidently, not sure she wanted to know. "If it was Nicholas, then it's his will we're haggling over, not hers."

"They were the same. Everything to each other, and if that failed, the poems to Stephen, and the house to the four survivors, jointly,"

Cormac told her over his shoulder. There was no resentment in the level voice that he hadn't been included.

"I'd hate to see day-trippers wandering through here," Susannah said, "staring like spectators at a hanging, then eating their pasties and cider out on the lawns overlooking the sea." She shuddered. "It's horrid."

"More horrid if this place is lost," Stephen declared. "She's a major English poet, for God's sake!"

"When was the last time you were in Stratford? Or Wordsworth's home in Grasmere?" Rachel asked. "Empty, musty, travesties of houses. Like mummified bodies, on view because of vulgar curiosity. I don't want to see this place kept like a waxwork long beyond its usefulness, genteelly crumbling at the edges. I want—to be finished with it."

"Or is it yourself you're thinking about?" Stephen demanded. "Is it your own secrets they might find, browsing around in here?"

Rachel looked at him coldly. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"That all of us have private lives, and one day biographers will be delving into them, laying them bare in the name of scholarship. To learn more about Olivia, how she lived, who her family was—that's the lot of us—how she came to be a poet in the first place."

"That's a dreadful thought!" Daniel exclaimed. There were skeletons in *his* family closet that he wouldn't care to see rattled. Name him an Irishman who didn't have them!

"The price of fame," Susannah said sourly, her fair, pretty face twisting into a grimace. "And an even more cogent reason for stopping them in their tracks. By selling the house. None of us ever expected to live here anyway. Olivia knew that, she could have arranged for her own museum if that was what she truly wanted. She didn't."

There was another silence. Then Cormac, used to board meetings and finding consensus, used to making choices, said, "Right, I take it you're three to one? For the sale of this property? Stephen can do as he pleases with Olivia's personal papers—manuscripts, letters, contracts, and so on. That ought to satisfy inquisitive scholars. Sad to say, I doubt there's much of a *literary* estate. She was young. And poets aren't . . . prolific."

No, Rachel thought, watching him. You've already gone through her papers, haven't you? You were here first. Did you take any of them, I wonder? Were you afraid for your reputation in the City? Or were you merely curious about your stepsister's secrets?

"Livia seldom wrote to any of us," she said aloud. "Or to anyone else, as far as I know. Perhaps Stephen might want whatever letters we've kept of hers? For the collection?" But not Nicholas' letters, not those.

"Did she keep a diary?" Daniel asked, and as every face swiveled to stare at him, he added, "Well, surprising numbers of people do! Lonely people, especially. Invalids—" He stopped.

"No," Stephen said shortly. "I'm sure she didn't."

"You didn't know her any better than the rest of us did," Susannah retorted. "Not after you were grown. She could have kept *twelve* diaries, and who would have guessed?"

"I came home more often than the rest of you put together!"

"What? Four times a year? At most five? It was uncomfortable here, you know that. She didn't *want* us to come. She'd made herself a recluse, yes, and Nicholas too, he was as set in his way as she was. And they were only in their middle thirties—it's unnatural!"

"I remember the last time I was here," Daniel said. "You could tell she couldn't wait until we were gone."

"We brought in the real world," Susannah agreed. "Life. She lived in that strange half-world of hers. I never understood why she wrote such bleak poetry. Well, not counting *Wings of Fire*, of course. *Scent of Violets* and *Lucifer* gave me the creeps, I can tell you! But then she was a cripple. They're often dreary people anyway, suffering and wretched. I suppose her mind dwelt on such things."

"*She* wasn't dreary," Rachel said suddenly. "And she wasn't truly crippled. I think we bored her."

"Don't be silly," Daniel said. "That's ridiculous. Her family?"

"It's true! For the past six or seven years I've had the feeling she didn't need us. That her life was full, that she had all she wanted right here."

"I don't know how Nicholas put up with it all these years," Susannah said, glaring at Rachel. "I'd have gone mad!"

"Livia told me once that he was paying a debt," Stephen remembered out of nowhere. "Odd thing to say, wasn't it? I asked what sort of debt, and she said a debt of blood." He got up and limped over to the drinks table and poured himself another whiskey.

Cormac said, "Oh, for God's sake!" And sat down again, impatient with the lot of them.

"I don't want to stay the night here," Susannah said, looking up at her husband as she changed the subject. "We'll find rooms at The Three Bells."

"Don't be morbid!" Daniel told her. "Mrs. Trepol has already made up our rooms here."

"I'm not morbid! This *place* is morbid! It's like a hothouse where something unhealthy thrived. And it was never that way while Mother was alive." She glanced up at the elegantly framed portrait over the hearth. Rosamund Beatrice Trevelyan, who'd had three husbands and children by each of them, loving them all with equal devotion, stared back at her with a half smile that captured both serenity and passion. The artist had found more than just beauty in the face he'd painted. "Mother had such *life*! Such warmth. There was always laughter, brightness, here. And that's all disappeared, it—it drained away without our knowing it, after she died. I've come to hate the Hall. I never actually realized that until now. And after dinner we're leaving."

"I'll go with you, if you don't mind. I'd—rather not stay, either," Rachel said, but for reasons of her own. There were ghosts here. She knew it now. She, who'd never believed in ghosts in her life, believed in them here. Not things in sheets that moaned and rattled chains. Those she could handle. These were . . . different.

"You haven't decided—" Cormac began.

"Sell," Susannah said, and Daniel nodded. After a moment, Rachel sighed and with a single movement of her head acknowledged her agreement.

"Over my dead body." Stephen promised. "In the courts if need be, but I'll fight you. *This house ought to be preserved!*"

"Selling is the soundest move you could make," Cormac said. "Put it off, and you'll find yourselves taking a loss. That's a majority, then? When the wills are read tomorrow, you should instruct

Chambers accordingly. As to the furniture, you might draw up lists of what you each want. And if there should be any conflict—”

“We’re not touching a stick of furniture until this has been settled,” Stephen said stubbornly, his jaw tight and his face flushed.

“Let Chambers work out a compromise. Agreed? What you don’t want personally, you should put up for sale. With the house, I think. It’ll bring far more that way. People with money enough to buy country houses these days don’t have the proper furnishings to put in them.” He looked around thoughtfully. “I’ve been considering a place in the country myself. I wonder . . .” With a shrug he let the thought die, then said, “I suppose it’s nostalgia. I spent a good part of my own life here too.”

“I want Mother’s portrait,” Susannah said immediately. “And there’s the Wedgwood coffee service. I’d like to have that as well. It was Grandmother FitzHugh’s.”

Her husband added, “I’d like to have the trophies for the horse races Rosamund’s stables won. Those ought to stay in the family anyway.”

Cormac said, “I haven’t any right to ask, but I’d like the guns. The ones that came from Ireland with my father. And his collection of walking sticks. They belonged to him before he married Rosamund, so in a sense I have some small claim on them.”

Susannah turned to Rachel. “Is there anything you particularly fancy?” Rosamund had loved Rachel like one of her own. They all had. Nicholas had been deeply fond of her, you could tell that, and they always said Richard—Susannah shivered and refused to think of Richard.

Rachel looked down at her hands, and the glass of sherry they were holding. “I don’t know. Yes, I do!” She lifted her eyes and regarded all of them. “I don’t have any claim on the Cheney side of the family. But, I’d like Nicholas’ collection of ships. The ones he carved. If no one else wishes for them?”

Her glance reached Stephen’s furious face and then she realized how callous it must sound to him, four people coolly coming to terms over the household goods of the newly dead. Her face flushed.



"They haven't been decently buried for more than three hours!" Stephen said. "You're ghouls! It's revolting!"

"Practical, that's all," Daniel answered. "Just as well to have it all straight in our minds. What about you?"

"Nothing of mine is leaving here." He gripped his glass tightly. "And nothing of Olivia's is to be touched. Do you hear me? Nothing!"

"Then that's settled," Susannah said with satisfaction. "And very amicably." She smiled up at Rosamund's image again. "Mother would be proud of us, not quarreling."

"Who's left to quarrel?" Rachel said pensively. Except for you and Stephen, she added to herself. The youngest, the FitzHughs. I barely remember Anne—only that she and Olivia were so much alike that the adults couldn't tell them apart. And I could. Now Olivia is dead as well. The end of the Marlowes. And both of the Cheneys are gone too, Richard . . . and Nicholas. Rachel threw off her deepening depression and pulled herself back to what Stephen was saying.

"Not yet, it isn't settled!" Stephen fumed. "If Chambers won't stop you, I'll find my own lawyers. Bennet will act for me—"

"Don't be an ass, Stephen," Cormac said without rancor. "You'll still lose. And more to the point, so will the family. The courts will agree with the majority—once the family's dirty wash has been thoroughly aired in all the newspapers. Do any of us want that?"

Mrs. Trepol came to the door to say that dinner was waiting. She looked tired and sad.

Stephen put down his drink and made to follow her.

"Will they? Agree with you?" he asked over his shoulder. "She's O. A. Manning, remember? That's bound to count for something. And the fact that none of us is going hungry. You don't destroy a national heritage as easily as you might a mere family estate."

Putting down her glass on the small walnut table beside her chair, Rachel watched them walk out the door of the drawing room and across the hall to the dining room. She'd never seen Stephen so angry. Or so determined. She had a very uneasy feeling that it just might come down to a court matter. And in the end, he'd win. Stephen.