

*A Regency Romance*

**REBECCA WARD**

*Author of Grand Deception*

# *The Wild Rose*

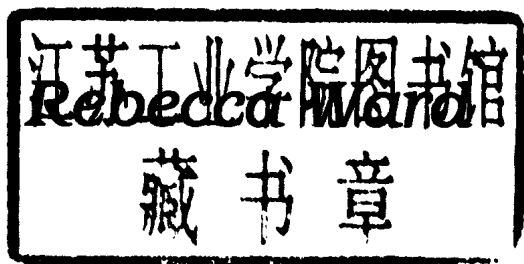


**"Rebecca Ward  
proves her mettle  
as a nonpareil of  
Regency romance."  
—*Romantic Times***

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# ***THE WILD ROSE***



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*“We should be going back.” She had meant to speak firmly, but her words came out in a quiver that ended abruptly as Hawkley gathered her into his arms.*

*Rosamund felt as though this was where she had longed to be all her life. Here there was no sense of lack, or homesickness, or loneliness. Here was security and excitement and the joyous realization that she had come home.*

*And then he kissed her, and all these thoughts shivered away. Rosamund felt herself lifted out of time and place to a universe where no one existed but the two of them.*

*For a moment the magic held. Then one of the grays flung up its head and snorted, and like a thunderclap, reality returned. To his horror Hawkley realized that he was kissing Rosamund. He was kissing her in the open road as if she were some common serving wench.*



*And this was the woman he had promised to safeguard!*

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For Ruth and Ed Booth, on their 50th wedding  
anniversary.

# Chapter One

**W**hile trundling up the stairs en route to his tea, the Viscount Craye nearly collided with the Duchess of Broon and her eight-year-old daughter. With what he considered remarkable aplomb he regained his composure and bowed.

His greeting was met with a poisonous glare. Startled, the viscount blinked, regrouped, and tried again. "Er . . . how is Your Grace this afternoon?" he inquired.

The lady vouchsafed no answer as she sailed past him, but her daughter stuck out her tongue and made a hideous face before following her mother down the stairs.

Much shaken, the viscount proceeded to the first-floor yellow saloon. Here he found his wife prostrate on the orange Chinese daybed while his mother-in-law, Lady Orme, stood by exhorting her dearest Cassandra to remain calm.

"Good Gad, ma'am," the viscount said, gasping. "What's to do here?"

The viscountess was unable to reply, but her mother sighed deeply. "Nothing short of disaster, Craye," she intoned. "Little did I know when Orme quit this vale of tears, compelling me to seek the protection of my son-in-law, that I should be subject to such a terrible scene. To behold a guest—and she the wife of a peer—insulted under the roof of my own daughter is too much."

"Y-y'mean, someone insulted the duchess?" The viscount's small, nearsighted eyes widened at the thought. "Who?"

His viscountess raised her golden head, ornamented with ribbons that exactly matched her becoming primrose-colored muslin day dress, and wailed, "Who *else*?"

"I am afraid Cassandra means me," a clear voice explained.

A tall young woman had walked briskly into the room. "I'm sorry the duchess was angry," she went on, "but I couldn't be a party to an injustice."

The viscountess once more collapsed onto the daybed. Her lord and master goggled nervously at his younger sister. "What injustice?" he demanded. "Explain yourself, Rosa."

Before Miss St. Helm could reply, Lady Orme interposed, "Ask your sister if she did not take it upon herself to reprimand dear little Charlotte."

"I did. She is an unspeakable brat. Bevan, Charlotte found Penelope Weaver playing in the back garden. She shouted at Penelope and tore off the head of her doll. And when the poor child went to defend her property, Charlotte pushed her down and kicked her."

Lady Orme looked down her high-bridged nose. "My dear Rosamund," she said, sniffing, "the child of a gatekeeper cannot be compared to the scion of a ducal house. Moreover,



the guttersnipe actually dared to raise her hand to Charlotte."

"So would you if someone tore off your child's head." An appreciative spark lit Rosamund's dark blue eyes. "Penelope landed a facer on the brat, who bellowed as if she were being scalped. Charlotte accused Penelope of starting the brangling, but fortunately I was walking in the garden and saw what really happened."

The viscountess sat bolt upright on the daybed and addressed her sister-in-law in throbbing tones. "Was it *necessary* to lead the child into the house by the ear? The duchess is one of the most well-connected women in society. I have tried for *months* to have Her Grace visit us here in Kent. Now I am persuaded that she will never set foot in this house again."

"You may well be fortunate." Rosamund walked over to the table, which was set for tea, and poured herself a cup. "The duchess reminds me of a Scottish fur trader we knew at Port Arthur, Robbie McKenzie by name. He was pompous, arrogant, and quite vicious when crossed. Papa said he would never turn his back on Robbie, and he was right."

The viscountess lost her temper and shrieked, "How *can* you compare the duchess to a *fur trader*?"

Rosamund felt a twinge of remorse. She knew that since their father's death over a year ago, she had been a sore trial to Bevan and his wife. She was fond of her fussy, stodgy brother and really did not mean to antagonize him or his wife, but unfortunately she seemed to be constantly falling afoul of the endless rules that regulated their lives.

She attempted to explain. "I feel that a person's character is more important than his rank. Let me ask you this: Could you honestly trust the duchess—or Charlotte?"

Recalling his encounter with the child on the stairs, the

viscount felt a rush of fellow feeling for his sister. "Something in that," he conceded. Then, catching Lady Orme's baleful eye, he quailed visibly and subsided.

"That," Lady Orme said waspishly, "is the sort of talk that will not *do* in polite circles." Sinking into a gold damask chair, she unfurled an ivory and lace fan, which she commenced to wave languidly in the air. "You have hardly had a conventional upbringing, my dear Rosamund, but surely you must see that what was suitable in the wilds of Canada is not acceptable here."

"Is it acceptable to bully people who cannot defend themselves?" The afternoon caught the blue lights in Rosamund's black hair as she set down her teacup and turned to face Lady Orme. "If there is no fair play here in England, ma'am, I prefer the 'wilds of Canada.' "

The viscount scowled. All too well could he recognize the influence of their late father.

Jeremy, Lord St. Helm, had not been content to be younger brother to a viscount. He had wanted adventure and "experiences." In true cockle-brained fashion he had decided to leave his comfortable estate and living and travel to Canada with his wife and small daughter so as to acquaint himself firsthand with his investments in the Hudson Bay Company.

Lord Jeremy, Lady Mary, and ten-year-old Rosamund had taken ship at Liverpool and with their entourage traveled to the New World. Once there they had traveled fifty-two miles up the west coast of Hudson Bay and settled there for many years.

A timid youth, Bevan had never wanted to go to Canada. The thought of living in primitive conditions and rubbing elbows with Canadians, fur-trading Scots, wild Indians, an American or two, and other unspeakable folk was enough to bring on the hives. He had been profoundly grateful that his

education had been considered important enough for him to remain in England and reside with his bachelor uncle, the then current Viscount Craye.

Life had gone on like this for nine years. Then Lady Mary had succumbed to diptheria, and that same year the viscount had been killed in a hunting accident. Jeremy St. Helm had perforce returned to England with his motherless daughter and assumed the title.

Bevan cringed at the memory, for his late father had made an execrable viscount. He had no sense of his own consequence and was always shocking people by talking about the dignity of the common man. Then, a year and some months ago, he'd had a severe set-to with the Marchioness Malquith about the social order, succumbed to an apoplexy, and had been gathered to his fathers.

Bevan, who worried about almost everything, took seriously the responsibility of succeeding to the title. He had also hoped to restore some luster to the family name. But how, he asked himself, could he do so with his sister living under his roof? When he recalled Rosamund's confrontation with the duchess, it was all he could do to keep from having apoplexy himself.

"Good Gad, Rosa," he growled, "you can't go on in this way. You ain't attained your majority, and since you're in my care, you must stop acting in that hurly-burly way." Then, encountering his sister's steady gaze, he faltered, cleared his throat, and looked uncertainly at his wife.

The viscountess hastened to pick up the cudgels. "Bevan is right, Rosa. You are in England now, and when in Rome, et cetera." She paused to add in a coaxing voice, "I am persuaded that you could be *most* popular if you chose. Lady Selfield was saying, just the other day, that she would be *delighted* if you would call on her and her daughter."

Rosamund, who considered Lady Selfield a mean, hypocritical woman and her daughter the worst gossipmonger she had ever met, remained eloquently mute.

"And then, you ride *so* well," the viscountess continued. "Turn that talent to advantage and accept the invitation to Lady Natherby's outing. There will be a ride in the woods and a picnic luncheon for the ladies while the gentlemen ride to hounds."

"You forget," Lady Orme pointed out acidly, "that Rosa does not care for fox hunting."

"It is because I saw so many wild creatures in the forests around York Factory," Rosamund explained. Her eyes sparkled with enthusiasm as she recalled those cool, dark forests. "Silver foxes, pine martens, and wolves—all of them free and so magnificent and so proud! I wish you could have seen them. Then you would understand why I hate to think of a terrified fox running for his life with a pack of hounds at his heels."

"Oh, rubbish, Rosa," the viscount exclaimed petulantly. "Good Gad, the pater made money from the Hudson Bay Company, which dealt in furs. I tell you plain, I don't understand you."

Neither did she understand Bevan. Unhappily Rosamund looked at her family and saw incomprehension, distaste, and distrust in the three pairs of eyes that were regarding her fixedly. Not for the first time that day, she felt a wave of homesickness tinged with claustrophobia.

"Perhaps a change of scene will help," the viscountess was suggesting. "We were in mourning for your papa last year, but this spring will be different and we hope to reside in London for at least part of the season. Rosa will find the cotillion balls and turtle suppers and musical assemblies *most* diverting."

Visibly wincing at the thought, Rosamund said, "It may be that I won't go to London at all. I've had an invitation to visit a friend."

In the surprised silence that followed this announcement, Lady Orme reflected that any acquaintance of Rosamund's was sure to be socially unacceptable.

Not for the first time, she regretted the fact that her pretty daughter, a diamond of the first water and the toast of her season, had married Craye. Not that the man himself was in any way objectionable—he had a considerable fortune, a time-honored title, and had the added attraction of being pleasantly stupid and easily led—but his sister was quite another story.

A handsome girl, my lady thought, with that wealth of black hair and those almost violet eyes, but handsome was as handsome does, and Rosamund's views were keeping her on the shelf. She had already refused offers from several gentlemen, including the most eligible Marquess of Bradmere. Since she was twenty-four and past her prime marrying years, Bevan might have her on his hands for a long time—perhaps forever.

The thought of having to deal with Miss St. Helm each day of her life made Lady Orme's tones more vinegary than usual. "And from whom did the invitation come, pray?" she asked.

"From Amber House in Sussex. You see—"

She was interrupted by the viscountess clapping her hands. "But how *wonderful*. I did not know you were acquainted with Lady Amber."

"Good family." The viscount approved. "I know Lord Amber slightly m'self because his property abuts that of a schoolfriend of mine, the new Earl of Hawkley." He glanced at his wife and mother-in-law and continued with studied

nonchalance, "Julian Dane was a few years behind me at Eton."

The viscountess smiled reminiscently. "I collect meeting the earl—he had not yet succeeded to the title then—on the occasion of our wedding. A tall gentleman, with broad shoulders and chestnut hair and the *most* speaking dark eyes—" She caught her mother's eye and added hastily, "That is to say, *I* did not remark him, but all the other ladies present cast sheep's eyes at him. Do you remember him, Rosa? But no—You had the grippe the week Bevan and I were married."

"I'd have asked Hawkley to visit us," the viscount said, "but he's been busy since his father died. Got his properties to see to, and hunting and shooting and his horses, naturally. Always was a top sawyer, Julian. I'll call on him when I escort Rosa to Amber's."

"That would not be possible," Rosamund said. "Lord and Lady Amber no longer own the property. Their house was sold to pay Lord Amber's gaming debts. But," Rosamund added helpfully, "I'm sure that Lucy will be glad to have you visit her."

The viscountess frowned. "Really, Rosa, you are being *most* vexing. Who is Lucy?"

"I am telling this badly," Rosamund admitted. "Let me try again. Lucy is Mrs. Sample, an American lady who lived near us at Port Arthur. She—she nursed Mama when she became so ill."

Rosamund's expressive eyes grew shadowed; her clear voice faltered into silence. After a moment she continued, "I was sick of the putrid throat myself, and Lucy came to stay with us and nurse me after Mama died. She was so kind! Later, she and her husband—he was a very successful fur trapper and trader—decided to come to England with their

daughter, Anemone, and they established a business in Norfolk. We have written to each other many times, but I have not seen the Samples for years.”

Lady Orme dropped her fan. “Rosamund, you cannot be thinking of visiting a—a colonial. We are at war with America. Think what people would say if you were found consorting with the enemy!”

Rosamund stared hard at the cream-colored wall behind my lady’s head. She drew several deep breaths—a calming trick she had learned from Tall Reed, a wise old Mohawk she had known in Canada—and managed to reply quite civilly.

“I can assure you, ma’am, that Lucy is completely loyal to the crown.” Seeing that Lady Orme remained unconvinced, Rosamund added, “She is a widow, now. Mr. Sample passed away last year and left her with a great deal of money. That is how she came to buy Amber House.”

She looked at her brother, saw that he was about to make some further objection, and rose from her chair. “As Cassandra says, I’m certain that I will be the better for a change of scene. I will write to Lucy at once.”

No one spoke as Rosamund left the room. The yellow saloon remained deathly silent until her footsteps had died away. Then the viscountess clenched her small fists and drummed them on the daybed. “No,” she wailed. “No, no, *no!*”

The viscount gave a strangled groan. “My sister’s going to visit an American who smells of the shop. Oh, by Gad, if word of this gets out, we’ll be the laughingstock of our set.”

“Cannot you reason with her?” demanded his mother-in-law. “Calm yourself, Cassandra, I beg . . . Hysterics bring on wrinkles, and that would never do. Craye, I demand you

take action. You are the head of the family and Rosamund is dependent on you."

"No, she ain't. She don't have full control of her fortune yet, but the pater left her with a comfortable allowance. And you know well enough, ma'am," the viscount added dispiritedly, "that my sister does what she likes."

Social disgrace loomed on the horizon. The viscountess winced as if she could already hear the poisonous whispers and rumors flying among her circle. The viscount cringed, envisioning the contempt of his friends. A man who could not control his sister's madcap ways would have little respect from his peers. He began to pace the room.

"She is bound to disgrace herself in Sussex," Lady Orme fumed. "If only Orme were alive! *He* would not allow this wicked girl to ruin our good name."

The viscount paused in his pacing to object to this. "That's doing it too brown, ma'am. Rosa ain't wicked, she's just—"

"She is wild to a fault. No, Craye, I refuse to wrap plain facts in clean linen. Character more important than rank, indeed! What your sister needs is someone to teach her that her ways will not be tolerated in civilized society."

She fixed a freezing look on her son-in-law, but for once he did not quail before it. Instead he exclaimed, "You've got something there. Rosa does need a strong hand. And I've thought of the very man who can get her to cut line. I'll write to Julian."

The ladies stared, and Lady Orme demanded, "The Earl of Hawkley? What, pray, can *he* do?"

"Should think he can do anything. He's a devil of a fellow, Julian. A top sawyer, as I've said, and a bruising rider to hounds. Resourceful, too. Not the sort of fellow to cut his stick at anything."



Lady Orme was regarding her son-in-law with something bordering on respect. “But how can you be sure that the earl will help us?”

“Julian and I were at school together. What’s more, he’s a peer of the realm, now. He’ll realize that if we all started consorting with shopkeepers and fur traders, we’d all be in the basket.”

The viscount drew himself to his full five feet four inches. “Bound to see that he can’t let the side down,” he said earnestly. “And I’ll tell you something else, Mama-in-law. If Hawkley can’t handle Rosa and get her to see what’s what, no one can.”