

Excerpt from *Taming the Wicked Wulfe*
by Tammy Jo Burns

April 1811...

“Theodore Wulfe, I will not do it! I don’t care that you are a bloody duke! Nothing you can say could make me ever want to tie myself to that man. I cannot believe you even have the nerve to ask such a question of me,” Rebekah stormed to the window and looked through it, unseeing.

“Rebekah,” the man behind her said in a gentle tone, much like one would use when attempting to calm a wild horse. “Do you see those children out there?”

“Yes,” she whispered, letting her forehead fall against the glass, welcoming the coolness. She knew what he would say next, and Lord help her, she could not hate him as much as she wanted to.

“They are my life. They are the best of both Sarah and me, as you well know. You have helped care for them since they entered this world. Do you want them sent to an orphanage? Hell, Rebekah, do you want them sent to Sarah’s parents? Do you want them deciding the future of this dukedom?” the Duke of Wulcrest queried.

“No!” Rebekah exclaimed, horrified, looking at him over her shoulder. She turned back to watch the two little ragamuffins that played outside with their matching Wolf Hounds, Piddles and Smelly. Smiling, she remembered how she had tried to coax the children into naming them something else, but they were as stubborn as their mother which explained why their names made vague references to bodily functions beyond a young pup’s control. Sarah’s parents would never allow the children to have pets of any kind, let alone the menagerie they seemed to keep. No, two four-year-olds deserved to be allowed to play and be rambunctious, not locked away in a living tomb.

“Sarah loved you. I love you. We could not ask for a better adoptive mother for our twins,” he broke off into a coughing fit.

Rebekah tried to tune out the coughing, but found she could not. She could no longer deny that he continued to get worse. She also knew that if she turned around, the handkerchief he used would have flecks of red on it. She wanted to rage at Heaven about the unfairness of the situation. These two precious children would be orphans in a matter of months. Teddy and Sarah were wonderful people who did not deserve to be taken so young. Especially when his rotten, good for nothing brother still drew breath. A man who could not be bothered to attend his sister-in-law’s funeral. A man who had not shown his face around Wulcrest Manor in years. A man who if she saw him, there had better not be a loaded gun nearby. A man that Teddy wanted to tie her to for the rest of her life.

“Teddy, I have a wonderful idea,” her face lit up as she turned to look at him. Once more composed, he looked at her expectantly. “Why don’t you and I marry? It would be a marriage of convenience. I could care for you. Why are you shaking your head no?”

“I will be taking myself off to London at the end of this week. I don’t want the children to see me decline. It will not be pretty and if I can spare them, I will. That was one blessing in regards to Sarah’s accident, she did not linger. And besides, if I know my in-laws, they will fight

you for the twins regardless. Knowing that Zachary will rule a dukedom, Hezekiah will want to have him close so that he can attempt to turn him into a pious monster. No, Rebekah, you need Thorn's strength to help you. The two of you will have to provide a united front to fight the Reverend and his wife."

"That is going to be most difficult when I want to kill him myself."

"Rebekah, I have told you on many occasions that he has excellent reasons for everything you accuse him of," Teddy sounded as if he were attempting to patiently talk to a small child.

"So you say. I still reserve the right to despise him. Even now, he needs to be here and where is he? Or should I say whose bed is he in? He is single-handedly destroying your family name, and all you do is make excuses for him. It sickens me." She turned once more to stare out the window. The children were playing tag with the dogs. Squeals, laughter, and barks filtered into the room.

"On this we will just have to agree to disagree."

"Teddy, he runs one of London's most notorious gaming hells! How can you excuse that?"

"I have said all that I will say on the matter."

"Oh," she growled, "Sarah said you could be stubborn when you set your mind to something."

"And I have set my mind to this. Need I remind you what Sarah said when I held her in my arms as she took her last breaths?"

"No," she bit out, tightening her hands into fists, her nails digging into her palms. She refused to give in to any more tears. It had been two years since they buried her sister, and best friend, but some days it felt like only yesterday.

"She wanted you to be happy."

"And marrying your wastrel brother is the solution?" she asked incredulously, spinning around to face him once more.

"Regardless of what you think, family is very important to Thorn. He loved Sarah like a sister for most of his life. He loves his niece and nephew. He tolerates you," he tried to tease.

"I *loathe* him."

"What really happened between you two?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about," she huffed and moved across the room.

"Sarah always suspected there was more between the two of you than you let on, but she said you remained tight-lipped about it."

"It was none of her business and now it is none of yours."

"Fine." He held up his hands knowing he would not get anywhere further on that front. He started to say something but another fit of coughing overcame him. This time it lasted longer than before and had him doubling over until Rebekah could assist him to a chair. Once seated, she quickly got him something to drink. She made to stand up when he grasped her wrist. She could not help but notice that his grip had weakened over the weeks. Kneeling beside him, she looked up at him and saw the desperation in his eyes. "Please, Rebekah."

Those two words were like a death knell sounding over the valley. Suddenly she felt as if someone had put the last nail in her coffin and she could not take in enough air. "Do what you must," she said, rising to her feet.

“Thank you. You don’t know how this eases my mind.” He took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“I’m going outside with the children,” she said, slipping out of his grasp, and escaping from the room. Once she reached the coolness of the darkened hallway, she came to a stop. “Bloody hell and damnation,” she muttered, nerves and anger jockeying for first place position inside her. “This will never work. I’ll kill him first.” She pushed away from the wall and made her way outside. The spring sunshine felt wonderful on her face, a light breeze blew, lifting the tendrils of hair off her neck.

Two hours later Rebekah sat at the dining table with Teddy, the twins, and the vicar and his wife. They had been allowed to join the adults on what Teddy considered a special occasion. She reached for her glass of wine and paused as the ring on her left finger sparkled in the candlelight. It felt heavy on her hand, reminding her of all that had transpired today. She felt relief that Teddy had had the foresight not to put on her hand the ring that Sarah had worn. If he had done that, she would have been unable to hold back the tears that she currently fought. Instead, her husband’s signet ring encircled her finger. Ignoring it, she took her glass and drank deeply. Her life would never be the same.

“Lady Wulfe, are you all right?” The vicar asked at her elbow.

“Yes, I’m sorry, Vicar. It isn’t every day that a woman finds herself married, is it?”

“No, it isn’t. I just wish your young man could have been here.”

“Yes,” she murmured before taking another deep drink.

“You will be the envy of all the women,” the vicar’s wife, Mrs. Young, said. “Wulfe is such a handsome man, and there is such mystery surrounding him.”

“Mystery,” Rebekah huffed before taking another drink, only to find her glass empty. She caught the eye of a footman who quickly refilled it. She let the conversation flow around her, not contributing overly to it. The wine continued to flow and before she knew it, the vicar and his wife were leaving.

“You are going to have a hell of a headache in the morning, Bekah,” Teddy said as he helped her up the stairs.

“That is Lady Wulfe to you,” she slurred and stumbled up two stairs before standing upright with the help of Wulfecrest and the bannister. “Not even a proper wedding night, but there was that one night.”

“What night? What are you talking about?”

“I don’t kiss and tell, Teddy,” she waggled her finger at him in mock reprimand.

“Perhaps I should break the news of this marriage to my brother in person,” Teddy said.

“He doesn’t know?” Rebekah giggled uncontrollably. “That’s rich!” She continued giggling. “I’m married to a man who doesn’t know he’s married. He’s going to murder us both when he finds out,” she singsonged.

“He will not. How many glasses of wine did you have?” Teddy demanded.

“I lost count. Why is the room spinning?” She asked curiously as they entered her bedchamber.

“Just climb up on your bed,” Teddy instructed.

“Wanted a marriage like you and Sarah. So happy. But now I’m stuck with Thorn. Will

always have a thorn in my side,” she giggled and flopped back on the bed. Soon she slept the sleep of the truly inebriated.

“You, dear sister, are going to have a terrible headache in the morning,” he told the inert form sprawled across the bed. He looked around the room and spied a shawl draped over a chair. He grabbed it and covered her with it rather than fighting with the bedcovers. “Thank you for all you have sacrificed for my children,” he whispered and brushed a kiss across her forehead.

“Thorn, kiss me again,” she mumbled.

“What secrets are you carrying?” he asked the sleeping woman.

June 1811

“Good afternoon, Director,” Thorn Wulfe greeted Mack in the obscure coffee house. He had made sure no one followed him. Very rarely did he get summoned to meet the Director, and he wondered what could cause the man to risk their connection being made public.

“Wulfe, have a seat,” Mack nodded at the waiter, and the man brought over two cups. “I have some news to share with you.”

“Will it help with Glandingham? I swear that man is as slippery as an eel.”

“No, this is of a more personal nature.”

“What is it?” Wulfe asked, noting the solemn tone that had entered the man’s voice.

“There is no easy way to say this. Your brother was in London to see you. We were on our way to the *Lady Luck* and someone took a shot at me. Your brother saved my life.”

“Where is he?”

“He didn’t make it. He told me he was dying and had some things he needed to tell you. He went very quickly.”

“Teddy’s dead?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Where?”

“A few blocks from the Horseguards. I believe it was an assassination attempt on me.”

“I see.”

“Take a drink of your coffee. I had them put something a bit stronger in it.”

Wulfe mechanically took a drink of the coffee, welcoming the whisky he could taste in it. He just as quickly put the cup down. “The twins. I have to get to the twins. Sarah’s parents will be like vultures,” he knew he was rambling, but could not stop.

“The children are being well cared for at the moment by your wife.”

In the process of standing, Wulfe paused, hands braced on the table and looked at McKenzie. “I’m sorry, Director, but I don’t think I heard you correctly. Did you say they were being looked after by my *wife*? And before you answer, please remember that I am very much single and have a beautiful mistress that is very demanding of my attention.”

“The children are being cared for by your wife,” Mack repeated.

“And just who the hell is this wife?”

“Your brother said the name ‘Bekah’.”

“Bloody hell! How in the hell am I married to that waspish woman when I am in London and she is at Wulfecrest Manor?”

“Proxy marriage.”

Wulfe dropped back on the chair. He would have had to sign some sort of papers, wouldn't he? Then he remembered a night several years ago when he had not been thinking clearly. A night that had changed the lives of several people. Barkley, his valet had presented papers for him to sign and passed them off as “estate business”. Bloody hell, he had signed his life over to a fishwife. Never again would he sign something without reading it thoroughly. “Damn, damn, damn,” he muttered before pounding his fist on the table. His head began to pound.