

Red Lily

Nora Roberts

Published by Piatkus

Extract

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PROLOGUE



Memphis

January 1893

SHE WAS DESPERATE, DESTITUTE, AND DEMENTED.

Once she'd been a beautiful woman, a clever woman with one towering ambition. **Luxury.** She'd achieved it, using her body to seduce and her mind to calculate. She became the mistress of one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in Tennessee.

Her house had been a showplace, decorated at her whim—and with Reginald's money. There'd been servants to do her bidding, a wardrobe to rival the most sought-after courtesan in Paris. Jewelry, amusing friends, a carriage of her own.

She'd given gay parties. She'd been envied and desired.

She, the daughter of a biddable housemaid, had all her avaricious heart had desired.

She'd had a son.

It had changed her, that life she hadn't wanted to carry

inside her. It had become the center of her world, the single thing she loved more than herself. She planned for her son, dreamed of him. Sang to him while he lay sleeping in her womb.

She delivered him into the world with pain, such pain, but with joy, too. The joy of knowing when the pain was done, she would hold her precious son in her arms.

They told her she delivered a girl child. They told her the baby was stillborn.

They lied.

She'd known it even then, even when she was wild with grief, even when she sank into the pit of despair. Even when she went mad, she knew it for a lie. Her son lived.

They'd stolen her baby from her. Held him for ransom. How could it be otherwise when she could *feel* his heart beat as truly as she felt her own?

But it hadn't been the midwife and doctor who'd taken her child. Reginald had taken what was hers, using his money to buy the silence of those who served him.

How she remembered the way he'd stood in her parlor, coming to her only after her months of grief and worry. Done with her, she thought as she buttoned the gray dress with trembling fingers. Finished now that he had what he had wanted. A son, an heir. The one thing his cold-blooded wife hadn't been able to provide.

He'd used her, then taken her single treasure, as if he had the *right*. Offering her money and a voyage to England in exchange.

He would pay, he would pay, he would pay, her mind repeated as she groomed herself. But not with money. Oh no. Not with money.

She was all but penniless now, but she would find a way. Of course she would find a way, once she had her darling James back in her arms.

The servants—rats and sinking ships—had stolen some of her jewelry. She *knew* it. She'd had to sell most of the rest, and had been cheated in the price. But what could she expect from the thin-lipped scarecrow of a jeweler? He was a man, after all.

Liars and cheats and thieves. Every one of them.

They would *all* pay before she was finished.

She couldn't find the rubies—the ruby and diamond bracelet, heart-shaped stones, blood and ice, that Reginald had given her as a token when he'd learned she was pregnant.

It was a trinket, really. Too delicate, too *small* for her tastes. But she *wanted* it, and tore through the messy maze of her bedroom and dressing area in search.

Wept like a child when she found a sapphire brooch instead. As the tears dried, as her fingers closed around the pin, she forgot the bracelet and her desperate desire for it. Forgot that she'd been searching for it. Now she smiled at the sparkle of rich blue stones. It would be enough to provide a start for her and James. She would take him away, to the country perhaps. Until she felt well again, strong again.

It was all very simple, really, she decided with a ghastly smile as she studied herself in the glass. The gray dress was quiet, dignified—the proper tone for a mother. If it hung on her, drooping at the bodice, it couldn't be helped. She had no servants now, no dressmakers to fuss with alterations. She would get her figure back once she and James found their pretty country cottage.

She'd dressed her blond hair in top curls and, with considerable regret, eschewed rouge. A quiet look was better, she concluded. A quiet look was soothing to a child.

She would simply go get him now. Go to Harper House and take back what was hers.

The drive out of the city to the grand Harper mansion was long, cold, and costly. She no longer had a carriage of her own, and soon, very soon, Reginald's agents would come back to the house and remove her as they'd threatened already.

But it was worth the price of a private carriage. How else could she bring her James back to Memphis, where she would carry him up the stairs to his nursery, lay him tenderly in his crib, and sing him to sleep?

"Lavender's blue, dilly dilly," she sang softly, twisting her thin fingers together as she stared out at the winter trees that lined the road.

She'd brought the blanket she'd ordered him from Paris, and the sweet little blue cap and booties. In her mind he was a newborn still. In her shattered mind the six months since his birth didn't exist.

The carriage rolled down the long drive, and Harper House, in all its glory, stood commanding the view.

The yellow stone, the white trim were warm and graceful against the harsh gray sky. Its three stories were proud and strong, accented by trees and shrubs, a rolling lawn.

She'd heard that peacocks had once wandered the estate, flashing their jeweled tails. But Reginald hadn't cared for their screaming calls, and had done away with them when he'd become master.

He ruled like a king. And she'd given him his prince. One day, one day, her son would usurp the father. She would rule Harper House with James. Her sweet, sweet James.

Though the windows of the great house were blank and glazed by the sun—secret eyes staring out at her—she imagined living there with her James. Saw herself tending him there, taking him for walks in the gardens, hearing his laughter ring in the halls.

One day, of course, that's how it would be. The house

was his, so in turn, the house was hers. They would live there, happily, only the two of them. As it was meant to be.

She climbed out of the carriage, a pale, thin woman in an ill-fitting gray dress, and walked slowly toward the front entrance.

Her heart thudded at the base of her throat. James was waiting for her.

She knocked, and because her hands refused to be still, folded them tightly at her waist.

The man who answered wore dignified black, and though his gaze swept over her, his face revealed nothing.

"Madam, may I assist you?"

"I've come for James."

His left eyebrow lifted, the barest fraction. "I'm sorry, Madam, there is no James in residence. If you're inquiring about a servant, the entrance is in the rear."

"James is not a servant." How *dare* he? "He is my son. He is your master. I've come for him." She stepped defiantly through the doorway. "Fetch him immediately."

"I believe you have the wrong house, Madam. Perhaps—"

"You won't keep him from me. James! James! Mama is here." She dashed toward the steps, scratched and bit when the butler took her arm.

"Danby, what is the problem here?" A woman, again in servant black, bustled down the wide hall.

"This . . . woman. She's overwrought."

"To say the least. Miss? Please, Miss, I'm Havers, the housekeeper. You must calm yourself, and tell me what is the matter."

"I've come for James." Her hands trembled as she lifted them to smooth her curls. "You must bring him to me this instant. It's time for his nap."

Havers had a kind face, and added a gentle smile. "I see. Perhaps you could sit for a moment and compose yourself."

"Then you'll bring James? You'll give me my son."

"In the parlor? There's a nice fire. It's cold today, isn't it?" The look she gave Danby had him releasing his hold. "Here now, let me show you in."

"It's a trick. Another trick." Amelia bolted for the stairs, screaming for James as she ran. She made it to the second floor before she collapsed on weak legs.

A door opened, and the mistress of Harper House stepped out. She knew it was Reginald's wife. Beatrice. She'd seen her at the theater once, and in the shops.

She was beautiful, sternly so, with eyes like chips of blue ice, a slender blade of a nose, and plump lips that were curled now in disgust. She wore a morning dress of deep rose silk, with a high collar and tightly cinched waist.

"Who is this creature?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am." Havers, swifter of foot than the butler, reached the door of the sitting room first. "She didn't give her name." Instinctively, she knelt to drape an arm around Amelia's shoulders. "She seems to be in some distress and chilled right through."

"James." Amelia reached up, and Beatrice deliberately swept her skirts aside. "I've come for James. My son."

There was a flicker over Beatrice's face before her lips clamped into a tight line. "Bring her in here." She turned, strode back into the sitting room. "And wait."

"Miss." Havers spoke quietly as she helped the trembling woman to her feet. "Don't be afraid now, no one's going to hurt you."

"Please get my baby." Her eyes pleaded as she gripped Havers's hand. "Please bring him to me."

"There now, go on in, talk to Mrs. Harper. Ma'am, shall I serve tea?"

"Certainly not," Beatrice snapped. "Shut the door."

She walked to a pretty granite hearth and turned so the

fire smoldered behind her, and her eyes stayed cold when the door shut quietly.

"You are—were," she corrected with a curl of her lips, "one of my husband's whores."

"I'm Amelia Connor. I've come—"

"I didn't ask your name. It holds no interest for me, nor do you. I had assumed that women of your ilk, those who consider themselves mistresses rather than common trollops, had enough wit and style not to step their foot into the home of what they like to call their protector."

"Reginald. Is Reginald here?" She looked around, dazedly taking in the beautiful room with its painted lamps and velvet cushions. She couldn't quite remember how she came to be here. All the frenzy and fury had drained out of her, leaving her cold and confused.

"He is not at home, and you should consider yourself fortunate. I'm fully aware of your . . . relationship, and fully aware he terminated that relationship, and that you were handsomely recompensed."

"Reginald?" She saw him, in her fractured mind, standing in front of a hearth—not this one, no not this one. Her hearth, her parlor.

Did you think I'd allow someone like you to raise my son?

Son. Her son. James. "James. My son. I've come for James. I have his blanket in the carriage. I'll take him home now."

"If you think I'll give you money to ensure your silence on this unseemly matter, you're very mistaken."

"I . . . I came for James." A smile trembled on her lips as she stepped forward, arms outstretched. "He needs his mama."

"The bastard you bore, and that was forced on me is called Reginald, after his father."

"No, I named him James. They said he was dead, but I

hear him crying." Concern covered her face as she looked around the room. "Do you hear him crying? I need to find him, sing him to sleep."

"You belong in an asylum. I could almost pity you." Beatrice stood, the fire snapping at her back. "You have no more choice in this matter than I. But I, at least, am innocent. I am his *wife*. I have borne his children, children born within the bounds of marriage. I have suffered the loss of children, and my behavior has been above reproach. I have turned a blind eye, a deaf ear on the affairs of my husband, and given him not one cause for complaint. But I gave him no son, and that, *that* is my mortal sin."

Color rushed into her cheeks now, all fury. "Do you think I want your brat foisted on me? The bastard son of a whore who will call me mother? Who will inherit this?" She threw her hands out. "All of this. I wish he had died in your womb, and you with him."

"Give him to me, give him back to me. I have his blanket." She looked down at her empty hands. "I have his blanket. I'll take him away."

"It's done. We're prisoners in the same trap, but at least you deserve the punishment. I've done nothing."

"You can't keep him; you don't want him. You can't have him." She rushed forward, eyes wild, lips peeled. And the blow cracked across her cheek, knocking her back and to the floor.

"You will leave this house." Beatrice spoke quietly, calmly, as though giving a servant some minor duty. "You will never speak of this, or I will see to it that you're put in the madhouse. My reputation will not be smeared by your ravings, I promise you. You will never come back here, never set foot in Harper House or on Harper property. You will never see the child—that will be your punishment, though it can never be enough in my mind."

"James. I will live here with James."

"You are mad," Beatrice said with the faintest hint of amusement. "Go back to your whoring. I'm sure you'll find a man who'll be happy to plant another bastard in your belly."

She strode to the door, flung it open. "Havers!" She waited, ignoring the wailing sobs behind her. "Have Danby remove this thing from the house."

BUT SHE DID COME BACK. THEY CARRIED HER OUT, ordered the driver to take her away. But she came back, in the cold night. Her mind was broken to pieces, but she managed the trip this last time, driving in a stolen wagon, her hair drenched from the rain, her white nightdress clinging to her.

She wanted to kill them. Kill them all. Slash them to ribbons, hack them to pieces. She could carry her James away then, in her bloody hands.

But they would never let her. She would never take her baby into her arms. Never see his sweet face.

Unless, unless.

She left the wagon while shadows and moonlight slid over Harper House, while the black windows gleamed and all inside slept.

The rain had stopped; the sky had cleared. Mists twined over the ground, gray snakes that parted for her bare, frozen feet. The hem of her gown trailed over the wet and mud as she wandered. Humming, singing.

They would pay. They would pay dearly.

She had been to the voodoo woman, and knew what had to be done. Knew what would be done to secure all she wanted, forever. For always.

She walked through the gardens, brittle with winter, and to the carriage house to find what she needed.

She was singing as she carried it with her, as she walked in the damp air toward the grand house with its yellow stones alit with moonlight.

"Lavender's blue," she sang. "Lavender's green."