

WARNER  FOREVER

*Only he can
help this
runaway bride.*

JULIE ANNE LONG

THE *Runaway
Duke*

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Warner Books

Hachette Book Group, USA

237 Park Avenue

New York, NY 10017

Visit our Web site at www.HachetteBookGroupUSA.com.

ISBN: 978-0-446-51070-7

First eBook Edition: September 2007

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“When you stand in front of the fire, I can see your body through your nightdress.”

“Good,” Rebecca said. “Then look at me. It is what you want to do, is it not?”

“Becca . . . please. Go back to bed. Perhaps we can talk tomorrow.”

Rebecca inhaled deeply.

“I should like it if you made love to me.”

His hand still shading his eyes, Connor gave a short laugh.

“And how on earth would you know that, wee Becca?”

She struggled to keep her voice even. “Perhaps it makes you feel less afraid to treat me as a child but I know for certain you do not see me as one.”

Afraid. He looked at her then, helplessly. The firelight illuminated her through her nightdress, the heart-stopping curve of her breasts and hips, the long shadows of her legs. Something caught in his throat.

“You do not know who I am . . .” he faltered.

“Connor, I know you are something more than you claim to be. You are Irish one moment and as English as Wellington the next . . . but it matters little. I think I know the man you are, perhaps better than anyone.”

She moved away from the hearth and stood next to him. His arms, as if of their own accord, reached up for her . . .

Please turn to the back of this book for a preview of Julie Anne Long’s next novel, *To Love a Thief*, available April 2005.

To Daveed, dear friend, witty malcontent, fellow survivor of the corporate trenches—you cheered me on from the very beginning, and look what happened!

Acknowledgements

Throughout this process I benefited from the astounding generosity and support of so many people . . . my undying gratitude goes to Elizabeth Pomada, agent extraordinaire, who believed in me and found such a wonderful home for my novel; to Beth de Guzman and Melanie Murray at Warner, for their heady enthusiasm for *The Runaway Duke*—and Melanie, I can't thank you enough for your patience, guidance, and humor. I'm so glad you're my editor! And a special thank you to Diane Luger and Min Bark at Warner, too, for my beautiful cover. I feel blessed to be a Warner author.

And then there are the folks who kept me sane throughout:

Thanks to Lisa Martin, best bud, sister (at heart) and master craftswoman—what on *earth* would I do without you, Lis? To David George, for loving the story from the very beginning, which pretty much guaranteed I'd finish writing it; to Ken Mierow, for graciously allowing his brain to be ruthlessly picked and for always, *always* knowing the right thing to say; to Doreen DeSalvo, for her humor and stellar feedback and friendship—I'm so glad *The Runaway Duke* brought you into my life, Doreen! To Steve Czerniak, for his ever-cheerful blunt appraisal, support and laughter—you're a true pal, Esteban! To my sis Karen Crist and to Melisa Phillips, for endless encouragement and endless listening. And to Chris . . . just because.

And to everyone else out there who ever said something kind or positive or supportive: I'm living proof that your words made a difference. I hope you know who you are, and my deep appreciation goes to all of you, too.

Prologue

June 1815

He was dreaming, or he was awake; he couldn't be certain anymore. Smoke and gunpowder scorched his lungs. His musket, slippery with sweat where his fist clutched it, was hotter than his lungs, and nearly slipped his grip as he fumbled to reload. His legs and arms had gone numb from exhaustion, and the sounds raging around him—screams of horses and men, the clash of metal, the thud of boots, the boom of cannons—pulsed, collided, fused into one sound. From somewhere within that one sound an echo of hideous pain howled, distinct, relentless.

“Son? Can you hear me, son?”

Someone grabbed him by his hair, grown long during the endless weeks of marching, and yanked his head back; he looked into the cold glinting eyes of his father, who threw him to the ground and kicked him in the ribs. And when he curled his arms around his knees to protect himself, his father kicked him again, and again, and then pulled him to his feet, because it infuriated his father when he could not see in his son's eyes the pain he was inflicting. And then his father let him go, and when he looked up again, still fumbling to load his gun, he saw Roddy Campbell take a musket ball in the gut; saw the blood fountaining from him, saw Roddy flying backward to lie like so many others on the field, no longer a laughing Irishman who occasionally cheated at cards and always missed his mother, but a pile of rags and bones and meat.

“Tell us your name, lad,” came the voice again, a sound disconnected from the wall of raging noise, soft but excruciating and unwelcome, because it wanted to drag him closer to the surface, where the pain was.

“I don't think he can hear you, Doctor. I was able to give him some of the bark water, but the fever seems to have him now.”

“Roddy,” he gasped. “Roddy.” It seemed important to tell the voice about Roddy. Someone should know, someone should acknowledge his fall.

“What did he say just then?”

“I believe we have our answer. He said ‘Roddy.’”

The doctor dropped his head to his chest with a deep sigh, then quickly lifted it again. Gestures of resignation and loss were indulgences here. He could afford them only sparingly.

“If this is Roddy Campbell, then the lad with his chest blown in must be young Blackburn. First name Roarke, according to Pierce, then a half-dozen other names, like any proper nobleman. Dunbrooke's heir. We've lost the future Duke of Dunbrooke here tonight.”

“Oh,” said the woman, a sigh. They turned to look at the body of the young man whose face they had just covered. ~~Awe of the aristocracy had been bred into the English bone for centuries, and even now, surrounded by the blood and misery of Waterloo, they mourned more than perhaps they ought to for the dead young man, simply because he was the eldest son of a very wealthy duke.~~

“Word has it that he enraged the duke by serving at all, let alone in the infantry,” the doctor said. “Bloody rash young fool. Send a messenger to Colonel Pierce—he personally saw these two lads loaded onto the hospital cart. He was fond of Dunbrooke. The rest of their regiment is dead on the field.”

“Does the duke have any other sons?”

“One other. Word is the younger son’s a bit of a rakehell.”

“I’ll pray for young Roarke Blackburn’s soul, then, may he rest in peace. Do you think Campbell will live?”

“If he survives this fever, yes, he will live, or at least it won’t be his leg that kills him. Give him some more of the Peruvian bark water when he’ll take it. The ball missed the bone, so he’ll likely keep his leg. Lucky chap, unlike his friend.”

His fever broke the next day and the searing pain in his leg became all too real evidence that he was alive. He opened his eyes to the shy, kind smile of the woman kneeling next to him—was this her house? It was a farmhouse, and bodies of soldiers—dead, dying, struggling to live—lined the floors, and the stench of suffering thickened the air. The woman offered him some water and called him “Roddy.” And as he had decided somewhere in his fitful sleep that his life thus far had been nothing but battles and that if he lived he would never do battle again, he saw this as a sign from God. He thanked God for the innate resourcefulness that allowed him to recognize an opportunity when it reared before him. He silently thanked his father for the cool control he had at his command, a control that had been forged from violence and manipulation. He thanked Wellington, who cared little what his men wore on their backs as long as they fought well and bravely, for no one would be able to identify him from his uniform. And he thanked Roddy Campbell for the temporary loan of his name, and was certain that Campbell would have been thoroughly amused.

In the chaos of Waterloo’s aftermath, it was easy to become someone else. When he was able to limp out of the makeshift battlefield hospital and away from the horrors wrought by Napoleon and his own countrymen, Roarke Blackburn, now known as Roddy Campbell, boarded a ship for England and disappeared into the English countryside, to a life empty of everything but the freedom to choose who came next. At the first pub he encountered, he offered a final silent prayer of gratitude and a toast to his unlucky friend, then retired Roddy Campbell’s name. He had decided to use two of his own names since he had so many to choose from, it seemed the right thing to do.

Roarke Blackburn is dead, he thought with a smile, and toasted himself. Long live Connor Riordan.

June 1816

“Jenkins—I mean, Riordan—may I beg a favor of you, m’boy?”

Connor stifled a smile and looked up from the saddle he was polishing. Imagine Sir Henry Tremaine “begging a favor” of his head groom. But Sir Henry was like that: kind and respectful, if absentminded—occasionally Sir Henry called him Jenkins, who was the gardener, and he called the gardener Riordan. Connor merely considered the extra layer of anonymity afforded by Sir Henry’s

forgetfulness an added benefit of his employment. They'd met in a country pub a week or so before—Sir Henry had mistaken Connor for an Irish laborer, which was precisely what Connor intended to be mistaken for—and they had begun talking about horses, a comfortable, manly topic. At last, filled with bonhomie and ale, impressed with Connor's extensive equine knowledge, Sir Henry had impulsively offered him a job. *Why not?* Connor had thought. He knew horses; he had been wandering aimlessly for nearly a year. Some structure to his day, a kind employer, a small but sufficient wage. It had seemed like the perfect way to bide his time until he knew what he intended to do for the rest of his life.

"A favor, sir? But of course. How can I be of assistance to ye?"

"Well, 'tis my daughter, you see . . ."

"Your daughter, sir?"

"My youngest. Rebecca. She's in a tree. Something to do with a hound."

It seemed that Daisy, a big old brown hound Connor had met just a day ago, had died in her sleep during the night. Shredded with grief, Rebecca had taken to the largest apple tree in the orchard shortly after breakfast. Supper time was growing nigh, and she showed no signs of desiring to set foot on the ground ever again, regardless of the shouted coaxing that her mama and papa had done from below.

"I'm not as spry as I once was, Riordan, and I wondered if you'd mind going up after her? She's a stubborn little thing, and a bit of a hoyden at times, but very dear in her way."

Connor had a soft spot for stubborn hoydens. "I'll have a go at it, sir."

He followed Sir Henry to the tree, an impressive tree to be sure; it sprang up out of the ground like an immense gnarled hand. He scaled it and found a pale, redheaded twig of a girl, all long limbs, fierce expression, and tear-streaked cheeks, huddled on a thick branch.

"Who are *you*?" she demanded imperiously, sniffing, when his dark head came into view.

"I'm Connor Riordan, m'lady. I work with your da's horses in the stables. I understand you are Rebecca. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Oh! Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Riordan." Connor smiled; her startled imperiousness had given way to politeness, as though she was loath to make anyone feel unwelcome. "You're not English, are you?"

"No, m'lady. Irish as St. Patrick."

Rebecca nodded, studying him curiously now.

"'Tis a sad thing about Daisy, eh, lass? She was a fine hound. I liked her very much."

"You met her?" Rebecca asked, half hopeful, half suspicious. Her eyes began to tear again.

"Oh, yes, I had the pleasure of making her acquaintance yesterday. She had very kind eyes, a lot of gray around her muzzle, and a particularly nice smile for a dog. She looked a bit tired, but happy to meet me."

Rebecca began blinking rapidly, because the tears were coming again, but she laughed a little, too. "Her back legs hurt her, and she couldn't see very well anymore, and she had more gray fur than brown on her face. I think you are right—she *was* very tired. But she was my best friend, and I will miss her very much."

"Oh, you are a lucky lass then, if you were her best friend. Daisy was very lucky, too, to have you for a friend. And she's lucky to have folks who miss her. I wish I could have known her better."

Rebecca nodded somberly, reflecting on this philosophy.

"What do you think Daisy is doing now?" she asked in a near whisper, as if fearing the answer.

"Oh, she's most definitely in heaven, Rebecca, chasing her tail, and maybe some rabbits, too, and

every now and then she catches one. But they have an agreement, she and the rabbits—it's just a game of tag, no eating allowed. She has the hind legs of a pup. She'll have scraps from God's dinner table every night."

Rebecca laughed again, then swiped the back of her hand across her eyes. She looked a little relieved at his answer.

"The vicar isn't certain whether animals go to heaven," Rebecca mused. "But I thought that Daisy might."

"I will tell you a secret, Miss Tremaine: vicars do not always know the answers to the big questions. But do not tell the vicar that I told you that."

Rebecca nodded. "I believe you are right. Our vicar doesn't seem to like it when I ask questions, but I cannot help it. There's so much that wants questioning."

"I'll wager you ask *excellent* questions," Connor said with a grin.

Rebecca nodded somberly, as if this went without saying.

"Did you know your da bought a new horse today? A young Arabian colt, name of Maharajah. A big gray fellow. I think we all need to make him feel welcome. Would you like to meet him?"

After a moment of reflection, Rebecca nodded, and Connor held out his arms, an eyebrow cocked.

"I can get down on my own," she said with an indignant snuffle.

"I know, lass, but you're tired, aye? Everyone will think I'm a hero if they see me helping you down, and I'd like to impress your da, seeing as how I'm new here. What do you say? Will you help me out?"

Rebecca smiled, mulling this over. And at last, she gave in and trustingly hooked her hands around Connor's neck.

And so Connor shinnied down the tree with one arm wrapped protectively around the gangly little girl. She seemed to weigh barely anything at all.

Chapter One

May 1820

A word, Rebecca.”

Lady Tremaine stood on the stairs with a lit candle in hand, a sleeping cap pulled down over her graying curls. She was a short woman who had gone very round in her middle years, and her night robe was flamboyantly ruffled. The overall effect was usually endearing; tonight, however, it was simply terrifying. Above all those ruffles Lady Tremaine’s mouth was a grim line, and her eyes were shining with unspilled tears.

“To bed with you, Lorelei. Come with me, Rebecca.”

Rebecca, in her incriminating black clothing, followed her mother to the sitting room, her heart a frozen fist in her chest.

Her mother did not sit down, or invite Rebecca to sit. She merely turned to speak.

“Clearly I have failed you, Rebecca.”

“Mama—” Rebecca began, pleading, but her mother raised her hand abruptly.

“No, it is quite clear that I have failed you. I think it can be fairly said that you are perhaps a special case, but it remains a mother’s duty to give her daughter the skills she needs to fulfill her obligation in life. And I have tried—”

Here Lady Tremaine’s voice broke, and one tear slipped from her eye. Rebecca watched, transfixed in dread, as the candlelight lit its path down her mother’s cheek. She had seen exasperation on her mother’s face before—many times before, truth be told—and frustration and anger, too, all a result of something she had done or failed to do. But she had never before made her mother cry.

“I have tried,” Lady Tremaine continued, her composure regained, “to teach you modesty. And honesty. And gentleness. I have tried to demonstrate by my own actions the proper way to behave. I have tried to ensure that you could lay claim to at least a few ladylike refinements, such as the pianoforte or embroidery. And I have not undertaken this in order to punish you, Rebecca, though I am quite sure you have thought otherwise, but to protect you: a woman is nothing without a husband. For the sake of your future happiness and security, for the sake of your place in society, for the sake of your honor, I have attempted to teach you these things, so that when the time came you would be a suitable wife deserving of a suitable husband.”

“Mama—” Rebecca tried again, a hoarse whisper. Lady Tremaine shook her head in warning. The tears were falling swiftly and silently now, and her voice had gone thick.

“And though you have a good heart, Rebecca, you have willfully resisted all of my teachings,

which has caused me no end of distress. I am convinced that it is only through an accident of fate that you have not brought great shame down upon us. At this very moment, you can be certain that your father is securing your engagement to Lord Edelston. Your honor and the honor of your family will thus be protected, and Lorelei's prospects will not be threatened. You may count yourself fortunate that instead of becoming a social pariah and a burden on your family, you will become the wife of a baron. You may go to your room now. We will talk further in the morning."

An hour earlier . . .

It had been almost disappointingly easy to leave her bedroom just before midnight, creep down the stairs, tiptoe out through the kitchen, and dash across the back garden lawn to crouch behind the tall hedge near the fountain. Obviously, it had never occurred to her parents that one of their daughters might ever be tempted to do such a thing; they had retired hours earlier, and were no doubt already sleeping the sleep of the blissfully unaware. All the servants were safely in their beds and snoring, to her own maid Letty, as usual, slept as though she'd been clubbed in the head. The entire estate seemed to be dreaming, dogs and horses included. Rebecca was satisfied that no one had witnessed her furtive excursion.

Her exultation at having successfully arrived at the fountain ebbed a bit, however, when she discovered that it was colder than she had anticipated. Although she had, quite cleverly, she thought, donned a pair of black gloves and a dark wool cloak and tucked her treacherously bright hair into a dark furry hat before she left the house, the chill was beginning to penetrate every last bit of her protective covering.

To distract herself, she exhaled extravagantly and admired the white cloud her breath made. There had been a very interesting article on vapor and condensation in one of her father's scientific journals, and Rebecca had been happily engrossed in it this afternoon in the library until her mother herded her into the solarium, where she was forced to poke at the pianoforte for the rest of the afternoon.

The midnight trap she had planned for her sister had promised to more than make up for the torture of pianoforte practice, but the midnight chill, as much as she hated to admit it, was proving daunting. She hoped her sister Lorelei would hurry up and appear and fall into the arms of Anthony, Lord Edelston, who, no doubt, was creeping across the lawn to the fountain at this very moment. Rebecca planned to leap out from behind the hedge with a hearty "ah-HA!" and thus buy freedom from future extortion by her sister.

It was quite by accident that Rebecca had overheard the exchange between the tall, golden-haired Lord Edelston and her fair sister, Lorelei, who, by the age of eighteen, had done her duty to her relieved parents by growing into precisely the sort of pristine beauty the ambitious name "Lorelei" implied. Lorelei was very nearly unnerving, with her silver-blond hair, pale blossom of a mouth, and enormous crystalline blue eyes fringed with the most unfair dark lashes. Rebecca's own lashes were a sort of pale chestnut, which she supposed matched her hair well enough and did nothing to detract from her own handsome gray-green eyes, but they simply lacked the drama of Lorelei's. Rebecca sometimes feared her entire face lacked drama, which seemed to her a gross—or perhaps merciful—misrepresentation of what actually went on in her mind and heart.

Whereas Lorelei had inherited her mother's smooth refined oval of a face, Rebecca had inherited her bones from some more rugged ancestor: her cheekbones soared, her mouth was wide and plush,

her nose was straight and strong and resolute, and her firm little chin had a dimple in it, for heaven's sake, exactly the size of the tip of her forefinger. When one considered them side by side, one could see that Lorelei and Rebecca were sisters, but Lorelei's hair seemed like something spun from silk and moonlight, while Rebecca's hair was merely numerous shades of red and rambunctiously curly to boot.

"Titian," her mother described it, optimistically; "That unfortunate red" is what Lorelei called it when they were sniping at each other, which was rather frequently.

Rebecca did not dislike her older sister, and Lorelei did not dislike Rebecca. They were, in fact, very fond of each other. But Rebecca was widely loved by the servants and the neighbors, partially because she was everything Lorelei was not: she laughed loudly and easily, she was curious, she read far more than a decently bred girl ought to read, she galloped her horse hard (astride, no less) and came home happily sweaty. She was affectionate and kind and immensely opinionated about things she should really know nothing about, but then Sir Henry Tremain was a trifle careless about where he left his scientific journals.

She was, naturally, the bane of her mother's existence and affectionately tolerated by her father, who had taught her to shoot on a whim and then basically left her to her own devices, as she could never *really* be the boy he had always wanted. Both of her parents secretly despaired of finding a husband for Rebecca, let alone one with a title.

Lorelei, on the other hand, was typically regarded with the sort of nervous reverence her kind of beauty always inspired, and although she secretly reveled in the awe, she found herself increasingly unable to step out of her regal reserve. She had begun to regard her own beauty as something sacred that had been entrusted unto her safekeeping, and thus she felt obliged to treat herself with somber respect at all times. Lorelei was fully expected to make a spectacular titled marriage, and her mother never tired of pointing this out.

Consequently the Tremain sisters were jealous of each other, which manifested in an ongoing exchange of blackmail threats that rarely reached their parents' ears, although the possibility was always tantalizingly present. Yesterday afternoon Lorelei had threatened to tell Sir Henry, their father, that Rebecca had been poring over the anatomy book he purposely kept on a very high shelf in the library. This was a serious threat, indeed, as the book had been forbidden to Rebecca, and punishment would no doubt be severe—she might even be deprived of her horse for a fortnight. And doubtless the book would then be spirited away forever, safe from Rebecca's voracious hunger for knowledge, and Rebecca would never learn the complete story of how blood circulates through the veins (it was *much* too late to protect her from the story of how babies were made).

In a sense, it was all her father's fault. Upon retirement, Sir Henry had indulged his long-denied interest in science and medicine by subscribing to any journal that could be had on the subjects. Rebecca had happened upon the journals one day in the library and waded into them cautiously, keeping a wary eye out for her mother.

She had never been more enthralled by anything in her life.

Shockingly matter-of-fact debates regarding whether musket balls should be left in wounds if they could not be retrieved easily, the best methods of amputation, the uses of mercury, words like "laudable pus" and "trepanning"—the journals were both appallingly, titillatingly gory and strangely reassuring. Human beings were subject to a staggering array of illnesses and disasters, but the fact that learned men could discuss such things in dispassionate detail made human frailty seem less mystical and frightening and more a matter of course, of philosophy, essential to the pattern of life itself. Whenever Rebecca encountered a word or the name of a body part with which she was

unfamiliar, she referred to her father's anatomy book, and thus inadvertently gave herself a very unorthodox education.

As a consequence, Rebecca nursed a secret desire—or rather a semisecret desire—to be a doctor. She had broached the subject once at the breakfast table, and in light of the spasm of pain that had crossed her mother's face and the condescending bark of laughter it had surprised from her father, she had thought it best not to bring it up again. However, the desire remained, and had only increased in poignancy, as is the habit of all secret desires. Thus, this newest threat of Lorelei's required momentous ammunition by way of counteraction, and she had prayed hard for the appropriate solution.

Rebecca's prayers had been answered in an almost comically swift fashion. Anthony, Baron Edelston, who was staying with the nearby family of Squire Denslowe, had effortlessly and instantly fascinated all the young women in the area simply by behaving toward them the way every young rake in London behaved: politely resigned to boredom, ever-so-slightly tragic and languid, a slight hint of danger glinting in his eyes as he lingered a little too long over the hand of some lucky maiden. Rebecca thought he was handsome but somewhat repulsive. Why on earth anyone found his air of boredom and tragedy captivating was beyond her ken.

However, Lorelei was poised on the brink of her first London season and had yet to meet a man like Edelston. Her careful reserve soon proved no match for Edelston's cultivated indifference. Edelston, indeed, behaved as though Lorelei's sort was as common as the dandelions that sprinkled the garden lawn, and Lorelei found herself actually exerting herself in an attempt to charm.

As exertion was unfamiliar territory for Lorelei, she was in over her head rather rapidly. One moment Edelston was coolly surveying the room full of overly cheerful provincials over the top of Lorelei's moonlight-colored head; in the next moment, he had dropped his voice to a fierce murmur, suggesting a tryst in the back garden at midnight the following night. Rebecca, surreptitiously moving through the room, heard her sister murmur a shocking acquiescence.

Because it would be ever so much more satisfying—and much more potent an arrow in her blackmail quiver—to actually catch her sister in the outrageous act of meeting a young man at midnight, Rebecca had decided to precede the pair to the garden. If the two of them didn't appear soon, however, Rebecca decided she would return the way she came, as catching a chill was becoming a real threat. She clapped her mittened hands together to warm them and gazed up at the stars sprinkling the sky, picking out constellations to pass the time.

Sir Henry Tremaine had rheumatism in his left knee. It had made itself at home there after a hunting accident a few years ago, and every now and again, particularly on chilly nights, it plagued him mercilessly. It was plaguing him tonight, and he had lain awake long enough. Careful not to disturb his sleeping wife, he slid out of bed, slipped into his robe, and lit a candle to light his way to the library, which was where he kept the brandy. From experience, he knew that a quickly bolted glass would muffle the pain long enough to allow him to sleep.

But halfway down the stairs, Sir Henry caught a glimpse of a pale head of hair and a swirl of dark skirts. Astonishingly, Lorelei appeared to be exiting the house through the kitchen. At *midnight*. In seeming deference to his shock, his throbbing knee went quiet. Sir Henry decided the brandy could wait. He stealthily followed his daughter outside.

Tom Jenkins, the Tremaines' gardener, was arriving home from The White Sow, the best place in the village for a glass of comfort and a relaxing chat with a large-busted barmaid, when he saw a dark figure dart across the back lawn. It was tall enough to be a man, and as he had only consumed two pints this evening—Tom liked his ale well enough, but he liked his job better—Tom was certain his eyes were not playing tricks on him. Thinking quickly, he armed himself with a spade from the toolshed, and cautiously glided across the frost-stiffened lawn toward the fountain, where the shadowy figure had disappeared.

Rebecca was deeply disappointed. It appeared that she had risked a great deal for naught, because no one had yet appeared near the fountain. She sighed and straightened her back, then stepped out from behind the hedge to return to the house.

Right into a pair of masculine arms.

“There you are, my sweet. I feared you had changed your mind,” said Lord Edelston in the same fierce murmur he had used to entice Lorelei here to begin with. Before Rebecca could register this astonishing turn of events, Edelston lowered his mouth to hers, slid his hands down to cup her bottom and flicked his tongue at the corners of her mouth.

Rebecca was paralyzed by a number of conflicting realizations, including the fact that, for all intents and purposes, she was being ravished for the first time in her life and it wasn't entirely unpleasant, even if the loathsome Edelston was doing the ravishing. The curious part of her wanted to see what would happen next. The rational part of her was infuriated and frightened indeed. Her hands hovered in the vicinity of Edelston's shoulders, undecided as to whether they should rest there and settle in for a while or shove him away.

The decision was taken out of her hands by a feminine scream, a masculine roar, and a dull thumping sound.

Rebecca leaped away from Edelston and turned slowly, her eyes squeezed shut. After a moment, because there seemed no other choice, really, she opened them.

There, frozen as if in a tableau, stood Lorelei with her hands clamped over her mouth, and Tom the gardener brandishing a spade. This was quite bad enough. But when Rebecca looked down and saw her father struggling to his feet, having apparently been felled by a spade blow to the thighs, she understood that she was doomed.

All three of them wore identical expressions of horror.

Sir Henry Tremaine gently divested Tom the gardener of his spade and tucked it meaningfully in the crook of his arm, the blade of it riding over his shoulder. It looked at home there; Sir Henry was an old soldier, after all, knighted in the service of His Majesty King George III, and skilled in the art of wreaking damage with musket, bayonet, and undoubtedly all similarly shaped objects.

“Take your sister inside, Lorelei,” Sir Henry said. He watched the girls scurry into the house, and then motioned with his chin for Edelston to walk in front of him. Edelston, wisely, obeyed. They followed the girls into the house and paraded past an aghast Lady Tremaine, resplendent in her ruffled night robe, to the library.

Sir Henry installed Edelston in a chair and then settled himself comfortably behind his desk. For long silent moment, they regarded each other across the glossy expanse of oak.

“Would you like a drink, sir?” Sir Henry asked, finally.

Edelston, pale and stricken, had not yet regained the use of his voice, and so he simply nodded, trying not to appear too grateful.

Shaking his head pityingly, Sir Henry pushed a glass of brandy across the desk to Edelston.

Edelston toyed with the idea of asking for something stronger, but refrained. He curled his hand around the glass of brandy and held on to it for dear life.

“You do know,” Sir Henry began slowly, “that you now have a fiancée.”

Edelston swallowed hard. It was all working out rather too neatly, and as the shock of discovery abated, relief and elated triumph nearly sent him dancing out of his chair. It was all he could do to control his expression. He struggled to arrange his facial features into the blend of humility, rebellion and reluctant honor that he thought appropriate to the situation, and wished he had a mirror so he could review the result.

“Drink your brandy, son,” Sir Henry said. “You look as though you may lose your dinner.”

Edelston dutifully took a large gulp.

As for the fact that he had managed to compromise the wrong girl—well, it was a bit of a disappointment, Edelston thought, but young women did wear long gowns, and they had been known to trip on them at the tops of staircases and tumble to their deaths. And if the cinch of a saddle came loose while a young woman was out riding and she took a deadly spill as a result—well, sadly, these things did happen. Edelston was fairly certain he would not find his rustic wife an encumbrance for long.

The marriage settlements, however, would be welcome indeed. More than welcome. They were desperately, quickly needed. One unusual and rather ingenious source of income was all that stood between him and the devastation of his mounting gaming debts. However, a decent-sized settlement—and Edelston knew that Sir Henry Tremaine had been quite fortunate in his investments, and that the Tremaine girls were endowed quite well—would resolve this issue once and for all. Edelston would obtain a disposable, anonymous, and well-to-do bride, the sort that was rather unavailable in London, he would settle his debts, and he would resume living his life precisely as he liked to live it.

“I will do my duty by your daughter, sir,” Edelston said humbly. “I appeal to your memories of yourself as a young man, when confronted by a girl whose charms surpass—”

“Please spare me the pretty speeches, Edelston,” Sir Henry interrupted politely. “You may hope to win a swift exit from this library through a show of capitulation, but let me remind you that your host, Captain Denslowe, is a crack shot. If you attempt to leave the neighborhood before the wedding, you will undoubtedly suffer an unfortunate accident.”

“Threats, sir, are hardly necessary,” Edelston protested. “Your daughter . . . er . . .”

“Rebecca,” Sir Henry supplied wryly.

“Yes, Rebecca . . . your daughter Rebecca is a lovely girl, and I shall be honored to take her to wife.”

“Indeed.” Again wryly. “Return Wednesday noon, Edelston. We will discuss the marriage settlements. Rebecca is heiress to a nice home in Collingwell, and I am not displeased that she will be the wife of a baron. You are dismissed, sir.”

Sir Henry, satisfied that he had protected his daughter’s honor and the honor of his family, watched as the handsome Lord Edelston squared his shoulders and took leave of the library.

Chapter Two

Connor Riordan, Sir Henry Tremaine's head groom, was brushing Maharajah's pewter coat with long strokes while Rebecca observed him morosely from atop the door of an empty stall. Her heels thumped the sides of the door in an agitated fashion while she viciously gnawed a straw.

"They are going to make me *marry* him, Connor! Apparently, I am 'ruined.' I am to consider myself fortunate to be accepted by Edelston, they say."

Connor's hands stilled on the horse's neck for the briefest of moments as he registered this stunning bit of information, then he resumed combing. Maharajah's neck would soon be shining like a mirror.

"Well, Becca, the lad did have his hands firmly planted on your bum, did he not? Many a lass would happily consider that a proposal of marriage." He hid his grin behind the convenient arc of the Arabian's neck.

"Oh, please do not tease me! This is serious!"

Connor of course knew the sordid details of her midnight jaunt. Tom Jenkins had shared it with all of the Tremaines' servants, enjoying a brief celebrity. As a result, all the servants and gentry within five miles had more than likely heard the tale by now, which no doubt had evolved and acquired a few more juicy details in the retelling.

"You believe me, don't you, Connor? Because I cannot make anyone else believe me. I only mean to catch Lorelei with him. Truly. Edelston is so . . . oh, he is awful. Pompous, dull—"

"I believe you, Becca, if only because I know your taste in adventure runs more toward target shooting than to grappling at midnight with randy young lords."

Rebecca frowned as though Connor's assessment of her range of inclinations displeased her.

"It wasn't altogether unpleasant, you know," she said crossly, in a lowered voice. "And what kind of word is 'grappling' for a groom, anyway?"

It was a childish attempt to startle him, but Connor merely cocked an eyebrow and quirked one corner of his mouth, and Rebecca looked properly abashed.

"Promise me you will no' be sharin' your impression of the event with anyone else but me, eh, wee Becca? You may cause your da to spit out his brandy, and with you for a daughter, he needs ever a drop."

Rebecca laughed. "Perhaps I should take to the big apple tree until everyone abandons this . . . *preposterous* idea of a wedding."

"The branch would likely crack under your weight now, great girl that you are. Why would you want to ruin a perfectly good tree as well as your reputation?"

Rebecca laughed again. Connor loved to watch her face when she laughed. Her eyes went bright then nearly vanished with mirth, and she always tossed her head back, showing her smooth white

throat and most of her teeth. There was nothing dainty at all about her laugh.

In truth, Connor enjoyed watching Rebecca's face in repose, too. It seemed a magical thing, the way the strong lines and soft curves and hollows of her face had evolved from the face of the child she had been just a few years before. Her hair had darkened, too, and the pale reds and golds of her baby curls were now entwined with deeper russets and coppers and chestnuts. Connor thought Rebecca's hair was marvelous.

"The puzzling thing, Connor, is why Edelston is so very willing to marry me."

Connor carefully considered his response. He knew, as did all the servants for miles and probably half the *ton* knew, why the handsome Anthony, Baron Edelston, was so willing to marry the daughter of a country squire.

"Well, perhaps Lord Edelston has a sense of honor after all, and simply desires to do his duty by you since he was . . . overcome by your charms."

Rebecca snorted. But her face did brighten somewhat at the suggestion. "Perhaps then I can admire him just a little. Honor and duty are at least admirable traits, and he seems to have so few others to choose from."

"Do you consider honor and duty very important traits in a man, then?" For some reason, it suddenly seemed vital to know Rebecca's thoughts on the matter.

"But of course. Do you think otherwise?"

Connor paused. "Duty is not my area of expertise, wee Becca."

Rebecca frowned. "But—"

"There may be another reason Lord Edelston is happy to marry you." Possibly it would be more cruel than helpful to further illuminate Edelston's character for her, seeing as how she must wed the man regardless. But perhaps in the spirit of truth . . . surely he had no other motive than that for telling her . . . surely not a *selfish* one . . .

"What would that be, Connor?"

"'Tis expensive to be a baron."

"Ah." She looked deflated. "He has need of the money I will bring to the marriage, you mean, to maintain his properties."

"And for seasons in London, and fine clothes, and horses and servants and carriages." *And gambling debts*, Connor thought. *And mistresses*.

Rebecca was quiet for a moment, pensive. "Still, in a way, marrying me will help him fulfill his duty to his title, is that not so?" she suggested weakly.

Connor gazed at her wonderingly. In typical Rebecca fashion, she was trying to find the good in a situation that could at best be described as hellish.

"Perhaps," he said softly.

Rebecca sighed.

"May I help you brush Rajah?"

"You'll smell of horse, and lunch just an hour away." Connor handed her a currycomb, knowing it wouldn't matter.

"Horse is the best smell in the world," Rebecca said dreamily.

She stepped to the other side of Maharajah's neck and began combing him, her technique nearly as accomplished as Connor's. They worked together in companionable silence for a moment, and then Connor paused to push a hand through his hair, which had fallen over one eye. Connor routinely grew his great mop of wavy dark hair to his collar before enlisting the help of Mrs. Hackette, the housekeeper, in shearing it away nearly to his scalp. Unvanquished, it always returned to full bloom

rather quickly, and more often than not, a forelock of black hair curved jauntily down over one of his brows.

Rebecca giggled.

“And what amuses you, wee Becca?”

“It’s just that . . . well, you’ve always rather reminded me of a horse, Connor. But not Rajah. Sultan.” She gestured to the big, black, silky-eyed Andalusian awaiting his turn under the brush two stalls down.

“Aye? Would that be because of my enormous muscular haunches?”

She giggled again. “You are as lean as a hound, Connor.”

“A *hound*?”

“With rather broader shoulders, perhaps.”

“But I thought I resembled a horse. Am I a menagerie, then?”

“No! But you *do* resemble Sultan. It’s your forelock.”

Connor pushed his hand through his hair again, self-consciously this time, as though expecting to find pointed ears sprouting up through it.

“Yes, your forelock, and your eyes, too, I think,” Rebecca continued. “Except you’ve gold specks in *your* eyes. Like . . . like coins at the bottom of a wishing well. You can see them when you turn into the light.”

The matter-of-fact lyricism of her scrutiny was both flattering and utterly disconcerting. Odd to think that Rebecca was as familiar with the details of his face as he was with hers.

“Coins, wee Becca?” Connor turned to look again at Sultan; the horse gazed back at him with eyes as dark and soft as turned earth. There *was* a resemblance—at least from the eyes up. Thankfully, the rest of Connor’s face—the lean, angular jaw, high-planed cheekbones, and firm full mouth—resembled no one except his brother, and his father, and his father’s father, and so on back to the year 1600 or so.

“Yes. Gold coins. They make you look rather mysterious and wise.”

Connor’s mouth quirked again as he moved his brush over Maharajah’s haunches. His face, absurdly, was growing warm. “What a shame it is, then, that I am neither. Now, who does Maharajah resemble? Your mama? Lorelei?”

Rebecca giggled and stopped brushing to plant a kiss on Maharajah’s soft gray nose.

“What now, are we throwing ourselves at man and beast both, these days, Miss Tremaine? Best be careful, or they’ll have you and Maharajah in front of the vicar before I can say Finn MacCool.”

Rebecca laughed, delighted with the image. “I’d much rather be Mrs. Maharajah than . . . than . . .”

She stopped suddenly, as though she could not bear to finish the sentence, and the laughter left her voice.

“Connor . . . do you think I should practice the pianoforte? Isn’t that what . . . well, *wives . . . are supposed to do? I already know about the . . . the . . . well*, you know. Other marriage things. From Papa’s book.”

Connor went still. She had always been able to do this, had done this to him since she was twelve years old. She’d say something so utterly . . . Rebecca . . . something so simultaneously shocking, insightful, hilarious, and heartbreaking that he never quite knew how to react, and so, in defense, and to buy time for a response, he’d learned to be quiet for a moment and to school his face to stillness. A cocked eyebrow would do in a pinch, on occasion. Not now, though.

Rebecca ceased combing, too, and they stood together in silence. Without banter to shield him, the chill, mundane horror of the fate that awaited the young woman in front of him seeped into his bones.

Connor would not, could not, picture what marriage to a dissolute lordling would do to the remarkable Rebecca Tremaine. He felt the noose of the consequences as surely as if it were being tightened around his own throat.

“No. I do not think you should practice the pianoforte,” he said finally, inadequately. His voice had gone strangely husky.

“I am so sorry, Becca, I am, truly. This folly is all my doing,” Lorelei said, wringing her hands. Her eyes, however, were glued to the mirror. Rebecca had become accustomed to speaking to her lovely sister in this fashion, perched on the bed behind her while Lorelei sat at her vanity, gazing with meditative fascination at her own reflection.

“Bah, Lor, it is not your doing. We are both to blame. But whatever were you thinking? The garden? At midnight? With *Edelston*? Mama and Papa are saving you for a duke, at least.”

“I was *not* thinking. And therein lies the problem. Edelston had quite fogged my brain. Let us blame Edelston, then. He is not a gentleman. He is *loathsome*.”

“*Loathsome*,” Rebecca agreed vigorously.

There was a silence.

“But handsome,” Lorelei added, a trifle reluctantly.

“Very handsome,” Rebecca confirmed, after a moment.

“Becca?”

“Hmmm . . . ?” Rebecca, freshly filled with lunch and feeling a little sleepy from it, was now sprawled on the bed.

“Your shoes. You’ve just come from the stable.”

Rebecca scooted forward obligingly so that her sullied feet could dangle off the edge of Lorelei’s counterpane.

“What . . . what was it like?” Lorelei asked tentatively.

Rebecca thought a moment. “It was very . . . *interesting*,” she said, finally, imbuing the last word with rich layers of nuance and innuendo that it mostly did not deserve. Lorelei gasped and covered her mouth with her hands, and they giggled together wickedly. It was fun to make Lorelei giggle, especially since she had so lately embraced what she considered ladylike reserve.

“Everyone thinks you came out to the garden to rescue me,” Rebecca mused.

“I know. I cannot disabuse them of that notion.”

“Good heavens! Do not try! I am sorry I had to tell Mama and Papa the truth, as it is. I was in a panic, you see.”

“Oh, but, Becca!” Lorelei moaned. “It *is* my fault! If only it were not my responsibility to marry a duke or an earl, I would offer myself up to Edelston in your place.” Lorelei eyed the glorious reflection that had made such a noble sacrifice impossible.

“Oh, nonsense, Lorelei,” Rebecca sighed. “Mama was right. Something scandalous was bound to happen to me sooner or later, and we both know it. I enjoy so many things that Mama does not approve of that I cannot keep track anymore of what is considered right and what is considered not the ‘done thing.’ My reputation was bound to become hopelessly tarnished without my knowing it. I cannot help it, really.”

There was a short silence while the two sisters contemplated the odd, inescapable truth of this statement.

“Lorelei, do you agree that it is my duty to marry Edelston? Mama said it was a question of honor. My honor. And your honor. Our family’s honor.”

“I cannot say, Rebecca.” She sounded as helpless as Rebecca felt. “I suppose it is. Mama and Papa seem to think so.”

Rebecca nodded once, grimly, as though this was what she had expected to hear.

“Mama has invited a modiste to visit this afternoon,” Lorelei ventured. “She wants your dress ready in less than a fortnight so we can have the wedding the day before we leave for my London season.”

Rebecca shot straight up, all the color drained from her cheeks. “A *fortnight*?” she squeaked.

“Only think, Becca!” Lorelei seemed to cheer a little. “I can be your attendant, and we can have the most marvelous enormous cake, and your dress will be of white satin all sewn with beads, although perhaps we don’t have time for beads, but maybe we could use silver tissue instead . . .” She trailed off, noticing the look of incredulous horror on Rebecca’s face.

“Beads?” Rebecca squeaked. “Cake? A *fortnight*? Two *weeks*?”

She threw herself off the bed and knelt near the startled Lorelei’s feet.

“I do not want to marry him, Lorelei. I do not want to be a wife.”

“Ever?” Lorelei asked, astonished.

“I want to be a doctor,” Rebecca said miserably.

The words had never sounded so pathetic and naive to her before. Rebecca was just beginning to realize that the longings of the daughters of English country squires were considered as consequential as a cloud of breath on a cold day. Vapor and condensation, indeed.

“Oh, Becca.” Lorelei turned away from her burdensome reflection to take her sister’s hands in her own. “It seems so terribly wrong, even if it *is* your duty. But what can we do?”

“That’s just it. What *can* we do?” Rebecca tried to keep the words light for Lorelei’s sake, but her voice had gone thin with despair.

And after a moment, because they both knew the answer to the question was *absolutely nothing*, Lorelei carefully knelt down, mindful of not crushing her dress, and pulled her sister into a hug.

As threatened, the modiste arrived that afternoon and unfurled a length of pearly satin in the upstairs parlor, spreading it across a chair so Rebecca could see how it reflected the light from the window. Conscious of the sharp eyes of her mother, Rebecca obediently ran her fingers over it and tried not to flinch in revulsion.

It looks like a shroud, she thought, and the now-familiar sensation of a giant hand closing around her throat returned. Rebecca imagined herself suffocating under the folds of that white satin, and her heart began to hammer. She swayed, and tiny black dots danced before her eyes. For the first time in her life, Rebecca nearly fainted, all thanks to a bloody bolt of satin.

The modiste and Lady Tremaine misinterpreted her pale cheeks and the swaying and were utterly charmed.

“It is fitting for a young bride to be excited, *non*?” said the modiste as the two women lowered Rebecca into the satin-draped chair with motherly clucks. “It will be all right, *ma chérie*. After the wedding night, you will see.” She gave Rebecca a particularly French wink.

Lady Tremaine gave the modiste a brief reproving frown and waved a lavender pomander under Rebecca’s nose.

But when her mother wasn't looking, Rebecca returned the modiste's wink. The modiste looked startled. *Let her wonder*, Rebecca thought.

Stripped to her underclothes, Rebecca submitted to being draped and pinned for the rest of the afternoon. She felt strangely removed from the proceedings, as though she had vacated her body and was watching a group of strangers from a polite distance. *This is not really happening*, she told herself. *It simply cannot be happening*.

But when she saw herself in the mirror swathed in creamy satin, her mother and the modiste standing behind her beaming in pride, Rebecca finally understood, without a doubt, that it was.

Chapter Three

Connor was rubbing away at the scuffs on Sir Henry's favorite saddle when the tack room suddenly darkened.

He glanced up from his work to find Rebecca hovering almost hesitantly in the doorway, blocking the sunlight. He was immediately suspicious; "hesitant" was not a word one typically associated with Rebecca Tremaine. She was wearing the pale pink riding habit he knew she despised—the color had been her mother's choice. Secretly, however, it was one of his favorites; the pink seemed to collaborate with the multitude of reds in her hair to do wonderful rosy things to her complexion.

And then he glanced down and saw that she had a very good reason to be hesitant.

"Wee Becca, where on earth did ye get a musket?"

"It's Papa's. From the war."

"And does he know ye've taken it out?" Silly question. It was hardly as though Sir Henry Tremaine would hand a musket to his youngest daughter with his blessings: *Go shoot something, m'dear*. Though Sir Henry had taught Rebecca to shoot with pistols, he had stopped short of bringing out the larger firearms, perhaps remembering just in time that she was in fact a girl.

"Papa is away in St. Eccles today. And he didn't lock it up or hide it."

"Well, he doesna lock ye into your room at night, either, does he, and just look at the trouble *that* wee bit of oversight has caused." Connor shook his head ruefully. "Your poor, trusting da. Wee Becca a man is entitled to believe his muskets are safe from his daughters."

"Connor, I'd like to shoot a musket at least once in my life before I am married and can no longer do anything at all."

To Rebecca, *anything at all* no doubt meant galloping a horse astride at breakneck speed or firing pistols at apples or laughing too loudly or reading and quoting from controversial books or . . .

Or simply being Rebecca. He felt again that strange sense of strangulation on her behalf; his throat tightened. He massaged his neck absently, then swiveled to resume rubbing vigorously at the saddle, as though he could somehow erase the events of the past few days.

He turned to her again after a moment. "Well, and I suppose ye'd like me to teach ye?"

"Well . . . you were a soldier, were you not?"

"Aye. I was a soldier."

"I've brought a picnic." She lifted her other arm; a basket dangled from it.

"Oh, well, in *that* case." He rolled his eyes.

"Do women in America shoot muskets, Connor?"

He smiled at the shameless appeal to his favorite topic of conversation: America. A place he longed to visit, and one day planned to call home. Rebecca had always been a rapt audience for his musings about America.

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