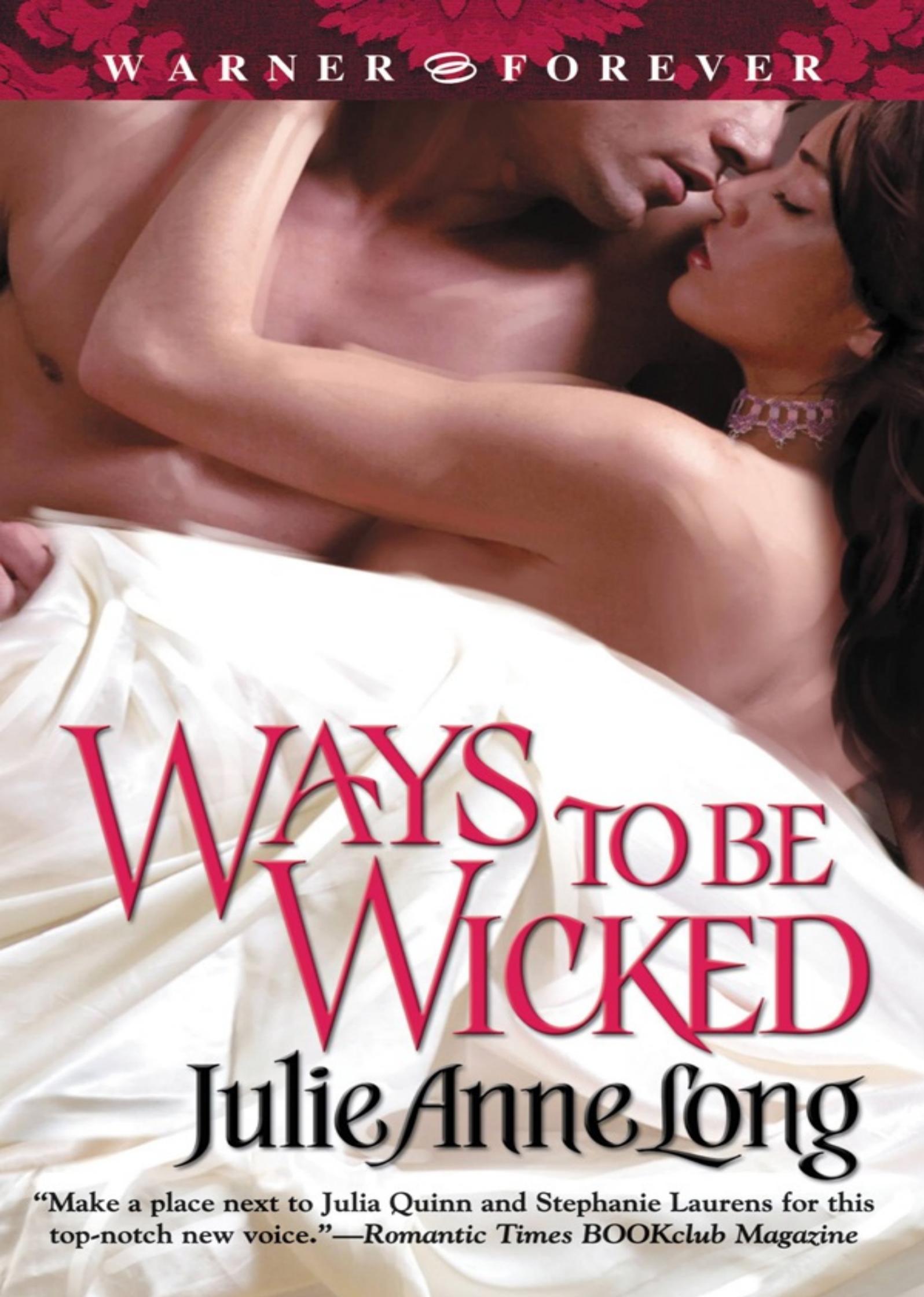


WARNER  FOREVER



WAYS TO BE
WICKED
Julie Anne Long

“Make a place next to Julia Quinn and Stephanie Laurens for this top-notch new voice.”—*Romantic Times BOOKclub Magazine*

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Praise For Julie Anne Long's Previous Novels

BEAUTY AND THE SPY

“Serves up a perfect blend of romance and adventure with thoroughly engaging characters and sparkling dialogue. I highly recommend *Beauty and the Spy* for its fine storytelling, excellent romance, charming wit, and memorable characters.”

—*Romance Reviews Today*

“TOP PICK! Four-and-a-half stars! There’s enough action, romance, passion, wit, and historical details in Long’s latest...to have readers sighing with delight. This topnotch new voice gets better with each book!”

—*Romantic Times BOOKclub Magazine*

“Four stars! Wonderful tale! Loved it! Long’s best story yet and I can’t wait to read the rest of the series.”

—*RomanceReviewsMag.com*

“A lovely romance. . . filled with surprising compatibility and an extraordinary amount of luck. . . Long has created an excellent blend of mystery and romance that’s perfect reading...It isn’t your typical romance.”

—*FreshFiction.com*

“A delightful historical tale.”

—*Baryon Magazine*

TO LOVE A THIEF

“A wonderful story.”

—*Midwest Book Review*

“A delightful read. The characters and their repartee sparkle with humor and charm.”

—*Rendezvous*

“What an amazing book! I love a good romance story, but I love a book even more when it is well written. *To Love a Thief* may be one of the most wonderful Pygmalion

stories yet to come out of the romance genre.”

—Rakehell.com

“A perfect blend of romance and humor...magical and engaging, a treat for anyone who believes that fairy tales can come true.”

—TheMysticCastle.com

“Compelling and highly entertaining. . . *To Love a Thief* is extremely well written, fast-paced, and entirely enjoyable.”

—RoadtoRomance.com

“Lily is a wonderful heroine, and *To Love a Thief* is a fun read.”

—Bookloons.com

“An excellent historical novel. . . the relationship between Lily and Gideon is the very substance of every young woman’s romantic dreams.”

—RomanceJunkies.com

THE RUNAWAY DUKE

“Wonderful and charming...at the top of my list for best romance of the year...It is a delight in every way.”

—LikesBooks.com

“Julie Anne Long is an author who shines with a promising and noteworthy talent.”

—RomanceReaderatHeart.com

“Thoroughly enjoyable...A charming love story brimming with intrigue, witty dialogue, and warmth.”

—Rendezvous

“Hilarious, heartrending, and tender. . . ample suspense...A guaranteed winner.”

—CurledUp.com

“A must-read. . . Combining the ideal amount of romance, suspense, and mystery, Long gives us a marvelous and dazzling debut that overflows with intelligence, wit, and warmth.”

—Romantic Times BOOKclub Magazine

“Two fantastic lead protagonists...Fans will want to run away with this delightful pair.”

—Midwest Book Review

ALSO BY JULIE ANNE LONG

Beauty and the Spy

To Love a Thief

The Runaway Duke

This one's for you, Melis.

Acknowledgments

My gratitude to the Fog City Divas for perspective, support and laughter, to Melanie Murray for patience and insightful editing, and to Steve Axelrod, for being the fount from which all wisdom and sanity springs these days—and for cheerfully grouching about bad coffee by a hotel elevator in Reno.

Chapter One

IRONIC, SYLVIE THOUGHT, that the pitching and rolling of that wretched wooden ship should set up a corresponding pitching and rolling in her stomach, given that motion was more native to her than stillness. She in fact leaped, stretched, and pirouetted every day, achieving semiflight with no ill effects apart from sore muscles and the perversely gratifying jealousy of all of the other dancers in Monsieur Favre's corps de ballet. Sylvie Lamoreux was, in fact, the darling of the Paris Opera, object of desire and envy, the personification of beauty and grace— not accustomed, in other words, to losing the contents of her stomach over the side of a ship.

She supposed it had a little something to do with control. When she danced, *she* commanded her body. Well, and Monsieur Favre had a bit of a say in it, too: “I said, like a *butterfly*, Sylvie, not a cow. Look at you! I want to moo!” Or “Your arms, Sylvie, they are like timber. Lift them like so—ah yes, that is it, *mon ange*, you are like a dream. I suspected you could dance.” Monsieur Favre was a trifle prone to exaggeration, but if she was his best dancer, he had helped make her so, and confidence was marvelous armor against sarcasm.

She'd rather be at Monsieur Favre's mercy any day than that of a bloody wooden ship, heaving this way and that over the choppy waters of the Channel.

He would not be pleased to find her gone.

The letter in her reticule said very little. But what it did say had launched her like a cannonball across the Channel to England for the first time in her life. For two weeks, Sylvie had furtively planned her journey, hurt and fury, poignant hope and a great inner flame of curiosity propelling her. She hadn't told a single soul of her plans. This seemed only fitting, given the magnitude of the things that had been kept from her.

Odd to think that a few mere sentences of English could do this. The letter had begun with an apology for bothering Claude yet again. *Yet again*—a little flame of anger licked up every time Sylvie thought of these words. It was not the first such letter sent, in other words. Or even the second, it would appear. And then, in the next sentence, it begged information about a young woman named Sylvie. *For I believe she might be my sister.*

The signature at the bottom said, “Susannah Whitelaw, Lady Grantham.”

My sister. Sylvie had never before thought or said those two words together in her life.

To Sylvie the letter meant a past she'd never known, a future she'd never dreamed, and a store of secrets she'd only half suspected. Her parents were dead, Claude had told her, God rest their souls; Claude had raised Sylvie as her own. And if not for the

fact that Claude had decided to holiday in the South as she did every year at this time, with a kiss on both cheeks for Sylvie and instructions to mind her parrot, Guillaume, Sylvie might never have seen the letter at all.

Sylvie had left Guillaume the parrot in the care of Claude's housekeeper. He would be in danger of nothing but boredom, as he spoke two more languages than the housekeeper, which was two fewer than Etienne.

Etienne. Sylvie's thoughts immediately flew from him as though scorched. And then flew back again, guiltily.

He was generous, Etienne, with ardor and gifts. He flirted as only one descended from centuries of courtiers could flirt; he moved through the world with the confident magnanimity of someone who had never been denied anything. He made heady promises she hardly dared believe, promises that would give her the life she had worked to acquire, that she had dreamed of.

But his temper. . . Sylvie would never understand it. Her own was a starburst—quick, spectacular, gone. His was cold and patient, implacable. It waited; he planned. And his retaliations always came with chilling finality and a sense of righteousness.

She'd last seen Etienne a week ago in the mauve predawn light, an arm flung over his head, his bare back turned to her as he slept. She'd placed the letter on her pillow, telling him only that she was sorry, but that she would see him again soon.

He loved her. But he used the word so easily.

But just as she knew Etienne would have tried to dissuade her from leaving Paris, she knew he would try to find her. And his temper would have been waiting all the while, too.

She did not want to be found until she'd learned what she'd come to learn.

The ship had released the passengers, and at last Sylvie's feet pressed against England. She allowed herself a giddy surge of triumph. She'd made it this far, entirely on her own. But she could still feel the sea inside her stomach, and color and movement and noise came at her in waves: men swarming to unload the ship, the early morning sun ricocheting hard between smooth sea and blue sky, gulls wheeling in arcs of silver and white. No clouds floated above to cut the glare or soften the heat. Sylvie took her first deep breath of truly English air. It was hot and clotted with dock odors, and made matters inside her stomach worse instead of better.

So be it. She would *will* her stomach into obedience. To date, there had been nothing Sylvie could not make her body do if she willed it.

She nodded to the man who shouldered her trunk for her and briskly turned to find the mail coach that would take her to London. She had never before traveled alone, but she had contrived the perfect disguise, her English was passably good, and she was not a child needing coddling or protection from a man. Besides, after Paris, a city as intricate, beautiful, and difficult as the ballet itself, no city could intimidate her. Great cities, at their hearts, were all the same.

She glanced up then and saw just the back of him, through the crowd, the broad shoulders, the way he stood. The sight of Etienne slammed hard, sending a cold wave of shock through her confidence. *It couldn't be. Not yet. Not so soon.*

But it was not a risk she was prepared to take. She swiveled her head, saw the mail coach, and made her decision.

Tom Shaughnessy was alone in the stage coach mulling another failed trip to Kent, when a woman flung herself into his lap, wrapped her arms around his neck, and burrowed in, crushing her face against his.

“*What* in the name of—” he hissed. He lifted his arms to try to pry hers from about his neck.

“Hush,” she whispered urgently. “*Please.*”

A man’s head peered into the coach.

“I beg your pardon.” He jerked his head hurriedly back, and vanished from view.

The woman in his lap had gone completely rigid, apart from her rapid breathing. And for a moment neither of them moved. Tom had an impression of rustling dark fabric, a lithe form, and the scent of spice and vanilla and roses and...well, female. This last made his head swim a little.

Startling, granted. But not precisely unpleasant.

Apparently deciding a safe interval had elapsed, she took her arms from about his neck and slid from his lap into the seat a distance away from him.

“And just when I was growing accustomed to you, Madame,” he said wryly. He touched her arm gently. “Allow me to intro—*ow!*”

He jerked his hand back. What the *devil*—?

His eyes followed a glint to her lap.

Poking up from her neatly folded gloved hands was a...was that a *knitting* needle?

It was! She’d jabbed him with a damned *knitting needle*. Not hard enough to wound anything other than his

pride. But certainly hard enough to make her...er. . . point.

“I regret inserting you, sir, but I cannot permit you to touch me again.” Her voice was soft and grave, refined; it trembled just a bit. And, absurdly, she did sound genuinely regretful.

Tom glared at her, baffled. “You regret inser—Oh! You mean ‘stabbing.’ You regret. . . *stabbing* me?”

“Yes!” She said almost gratefully, as though he’d given her a verb she considered useful and fully intended to employ again in the future. “I regret *stabbing* you. I regret sitting upon you, also. But I cannot permit you to touch me again. I am not...” She made a futile gesture with her hand, as if she could snatch the elusive word from the air with it.

She was not...what? Sane?

But he could hear it now—she was French. Which accounted for the way her syllables subtly leaped and dipped in the wrong places, not to mention her unusual vocabulary choices, and perhaps even the knitting needle, because God only knew what a Frenchwomen was capable of. And apart from that tremble in her voice he would have assumed she was preternaturally self-possessed. But she was clearly afraid of something, or someone, and he suspected it was the man who had just peered into the coach.

He looked at her hard, but she kept her head angled slightly away from him. She was wearing mourning; he could see this now that she wasn’t precisely on top of him. Her hat and veil revealed only a hint of delicate jaw and gleaming hair, which seemed to be a red shade, though this might perhaps be wishful thinking on his part. Her neck was long; her spine as elegantly erect as a Doric column. She was slim, but the gown

she wore gave away very little of the shape of the woman inside it. The gown itself was beautifully made, but it fit her ill. Borrowed, he decided. He was accustomed to judging the fit of female clothing, after all, and this dress was not only too large; it had been made for someone else entirely.

Since he had done nothing but gape for nearly a minute, she seemed satisfied he didn't intend to reach for her again and slid the needle back up into her sleeve. For all the world like a woman tucking a basket of mending under a chair.

"Who is pursuing you, Madame?" he asked softly.

Her shoulders stiffened almost imperceptibly. Interesting. A further ripple in that self-possession.

"*Je ne comprende pas, monsieur.*" Delivered with a pretty little French lift of one shoulder.

Balderdash. She understood him perfectly well.

"*Au contraire*, I believe you do *comprendre* my question," he contradicted politely. His own French was actually quite good. All the very best courtesans were French, after all. Many of the dancers who passed through the White Lily were as well, which is why he knew all about the caprices of Frenchwomen.

The veil fluttered; she was breathing a little more quickly now.

"If you tell me, I might be able to help you," he pressed gently. Why he should offer to help someone who'd leaped into his lap, then poked him with a knitting needle eluded him at the moment. Curiosity, he supposed. And that delicate jaw.

The veil fluttered once, twice, as she mulled her next words. "Oh, but you already *have* helped me, monsieur."

And the faint but unmistakable self-deprecating humor and—dare he think it?—*flirtation*—in her words perversely charmed him to his marrow.

He opened his mouth to say something else, but she turned decisively toward the window, and an instant later seemed to have shed her awareness of him as neatly as a shawl or hat.

Damned if he wasn't fascinated.

He wanted desperately to gain her attention again, but if he spoke she would ignore him, he sensed; he suspected that if he so much as brushed the sleeve of her gown his hand would be swiftly "inserted" as neatly as a naturalist's butterfly to the mail coach seat.

He was watching her so intently he was startled when the coach bucked on its springs, taking on the weight of more passengers: a duenna ushering two young ladies, both pretty and diffident; a young couple glowing with contentment, as though the institution of marriage was their own marvelous, private discovery; a young man who looked very much like a curate; a plump prosperous merchant of some sort. Tom made his judgments of them by their clothing and the way they held themselves. At one time, each and every one of them, or someone of their ilk, had passed through his life, or he through theirs.

The little Frenchwoman widow might as well have been a shadow of one of the other passengers; with her slight build and dark clothing, she all but vanished against the seat. No one would trouble her or engage her in conversation if she appeared not to welcome it; she was a widow, and ostensibly still inside a bubble of grief.

Tom doubted it. He knew a costume when he saw one.

People wedged aboard the coach until it fair burst with heat and a veritable cornucopia of human smells, and the widow finally disappeared completely from Tom's view. When they were full, the coach lurched forward to London.

And as Tom was a busy man, his thoughts inevitably lurched toward London along with the coach: his meeting with investors regarding The Gentleman's Emporium was one line of thought. How he was going to tell Daisy Jones that she would *not* be playing Venus in the White Lily's latest production was another.

Ah, *Venus*. The concept was so inspired, so brilliant, such a delicious challenge for his partner's formidable talents that The General had very nearly entirely forgiven Tom for promising a particular early production involving damsels and castles. . . inside a week. A frenzy of choreography, carpentry and epithets had resulted in a production comprised of a brilliantly constructed little castle, scantily clothed damsels, and an inspired, prurient song regarding lances. It had been a roaring success, and The General had all but refused to speak to Tom for weeks afterward.

Tom had known the damsels would be a success. The inspirations that dropped into his mind suddenly and whole, like a bright coin flipped into a deep well, invariably were. The production had since become one of the staples of the White Lily's nightly offerings. But the reason audiences returned to the theater again and again was because they could count on Tom Shaughnessy to surprise them, to feed their ceaseless appetite for novelty, and Tom knew he would soon need another small surprise to keep his audiences from becoming restless.

But Venus... Venus hadn't been a coin-dropped-in-the-well sort of inspiration. The theater itself had given it to him, just the other night: Tom had swept his eyes across the gods and goddesses who gamboled across the murals covering the theater walls. . . and the image of Botticelli's Venus, rising from her shell, had risen up in his mind. Venus would be a *tour de force*, a masterpiece, and the enormous profits he anticipated, along with the backing of a few key investors, would make his dream of The Gentleman's Emporium a reality.

Now all that remained was the delicate task of informing Daisy Jones that she would not be the one rising from the shell.

Tom smiled at the thought and glanced up; the curate sitting across from him gave him a tentative little smile in return. Very much like a small dog rolling over to show its belly to a larger, more dazzling dog.

"Exceedingly warm for this time of year," the curate ventured.

"Indeed. And if it's this warm near the sea, imagine how warm it will be in London," Tom answered politely.

Ah, weather. A topic that bridged social classes the world over. Whatever would they do without it?

And so the passengers passed a tolerable few hours sweating and smelling each other and exchanging pleasant banalities as the coach wheels ate up the road, and there was seldom a lull in conversation. And for two hours, Tom heard not a single word of French-accented English in the jumble of words around him.

When the curate stopped chatting for a moment, Tom slipped a hand into his pocket and snapped open his watch; in an hour or so, he knew, they would reach a coaching inn on the road to Westerly in time for a bad luncheon; he hoped to be back to London in time for supper, to meet with investors, to supervise the latest show at the

White Lily. And then, perhaps, enjoy late-night entertainments at the Velvet Glove in the company of the most-accommodating Bettina.

And then in the lull a pistol shot cracked and echoed, and the coach bucked to a stop, sending passengers tumbling over each other.

Highwaymen. *Bloody hell.*

Tom gently sat the curate back into his seat and brushed off his coat, then brushed off his own.

Brazen coves, these highwaymen were, to stop the coach in broad daylight. But this stretch of road was all but deserted, and they'd been known to stop the occasional coach run. A full coach was essentially fish-in-a-barrel for highwaymen. Which meant there must be many of them, all armed, if they were bold enough to stop a loaded coach.

Tom swiftly tucked his watch into his boot and retrieved a pistol at the same time; he saw the curate's eyes bulge and watched him rear back a little in alarm. *Good God. No man should be afraid to shoot if necessary,* Tom thought with some impatience. He tugged the sleeve of his coat down to cover his weapon; one glimpse of it might inspire a nervous highwayman to waste a bullet on him.

"Take off your rings and put them in your shoes," he ordered the newlyweds quietly. Hands shaking like sheets pinned to a line, they obeyed him, as no one else was issuing orders in this extraordinary situation.

Tom knew he had only a ghost of a chance of doing something to deter the highwaymen, no matter their numbers. Still, it never occurred to him not to try. It wasn't as though Tom had never taken anything; when he was young and living in the rookeries, he'd taken food, handkerchiefs, anything small he could fence. But he had ultimately chosen to work for everything he owned; he found it satisfied a need for permanence, a need for...legacy. And damned if he was going to allow someone to take anything he'd earned if he could possibly avoid it. Even if it was only a few pounds and a watch.

"Out, everybody," a gravelly voice demanded. "'Ands up, now where I can see 'em, now."

And out of the dark coach stumbled the passengers, blinking and pale in the sunlight, one of whom was nearly swooning, if her buckling knees were any indication, and needed to be fanned by her panicking husband.

The air fair shimmered with heat; only a few wan trees interrupted the vista of parched grass and cracked road. Tom took in the group of highwaymen with a glance: five men, armed with muskets and pistols. Clothing dull with grime, kerchiefs covering their faces, hair long and lank and unevenly sawed, as though trimmed with their own daggers. One of them, the one who appeared to be in charge, gripped a knife between his teeth. Tom almost smiled grimly. *A showman.* Excessive, perhaps, but it certainly lent him a dramatic flair the others lacked.

Tom's innate curiosity about any showman made him peer more closely at the man. There was something about him. . .

"Now see here . . ." the merchant blustered indignantly, and promptly had five pistols and a knife turned on him. He blanched, clapped his mouth shut audibly. Clearly new to being robbed at gunpoint, he didn't know that etiquette required one to be quiet, lest one get shot.

And then Tom knew. Almost a decade ago, during a few difficult but unforgettable months of work in a dockside tavern, Tom had spent time with a man who drank the hardest liquor, told the most ribald jokes, tipped most generously, and advised young Tom which whores to avoid and which to court and imparted other unique forms of wisdom.

“Biggsy?” Tom ventured.

The highwayman swiveled, glowering, and stared at Tom.

Then he reached up and plucked the knife from between teeth brown as aged fenced posts, and his face transformed.

“Tom? Tommy *Shaughnessy*?”

“ ’Tis I, in the flesh, Biggs.”

“Well, Tommy, as I live and breathe!” Biggsy shifted his pistol into his other hand and seized Tom’s hand to pump it with genuine enthusiasm. “ ’Avena seen you since those days at Bloody Joe’s! Still a pretty bugger, ain’t ye?” Biggsy laughed a richly phlegmy laugh and gave Tom a frisky punch on the shoulder. “Ye’ve gone respectable, ’ave ye, Tommy? Looka tha’ fine coat!”

Tom felt the passenger’s eyes slide toward him like so many billiard balls rolling toward a pocket, and then slide back again; he could virtually feel them cringing away from him. He wondered if it was because he was on a Christian-name basis with an armed highwayman, or because he had “*gone respectable*,” implying he had been anything but at one time.

“Respectable might perhaps be overstating it, Biggsy, but yes, you could say I haven’t done too badly.”

“ ’Avena done ’alf bad meself,” Biggsy announced proudly, gesturing at the characters surrounding him as though they were a grand new suite of furniture.

Tom thought it wisest not to disagree or request further clarification. He decided upon nodding sagely.

“ ’Tis proud I be, of ye, Tommy,” Biggsy added sentimentally.

“That means the world to me,” Tom assured him solemnly.

“And Daisy?” Biggsy prodded. “D’yer see ’er since the Green Apple days?”

“Oh, yes. She’s in fine form, fine form.”

“She’s a grand woman,” the highwayman said mistily.

“She is at that.” Grand, and the largest thorn in his side, and no doubt responsible for a good portion of his fortune. Bless the brazen, irritating, glorious Daisy Jones.

Tom gave Biggsy his patented crooked, coaxing grin. “Now, Biggsy, can I persuade you to allow our coach to go on? You’ve my word of honor not a one shall pursue you.”

“Ye’ve a word of honor now, Tommy?” Biggsy reared back in faux astonishment, then laughed again. Tom, not being a fool, laughed, too, and gave his thigh a little slap for good measure.

Biggsy wiped his eyes and stared at Tom for a moment longer, then took his bottom lip between his dark teeth to worry it a bit as he mulled the circumstances. And then he sighed and lowered his pistol; and with a jerk of his chin ordered the rest of the armed and mounted men accompanying him to do the same.

“Fer the sake of old times, then, Tommy. Fer the sake of Daisy, and Bloody Joe, rest ’is soul. But I canna leave everythin’, you ken ’ow it is—we mun eat, ye ken.”

“I ken,” Tom repeated, commiserating.

“I’ll leave the trunks, and jus’ ’ave what blunt the lot of ye be carryin’ in yer pockets.”

“Big of you, Biggsy, big of you,” Tom murmured.

“And then I’ll ’ave a kiss from one of these young ladies, and we’ll be off.”

Clunk. Down went the wobbly new missus, dragging her husband down after her; he hadn’t time to stop her fall completely. Never a pleasant sound, the sound of a body hitting the ground.

Biggsy eyed them for a moment in mild contempt. Then he looked back at Tom and shook his head slowly, as if to say, *what a pair of ninnies.*

“All right then. Who will it be?” Biggsy asked brightly. He scanned the row of lovely young ladies hopefully.

Tom thought he should have known his own formidable charm would get him only so far with a highway-man.

The crowd, which not a moment before had been mentally inching away from him, now swiveled their heads beseechingly toward him. Tom wasn’t particularly savoring the irony of this at the moment. He wasn’t quite sure how to rescue them from this particular request.

“Now, Biggs,” Tom tried for a hail-fellow-well-met cajoling tone, “these are innocent young ladies. If you come to London, I’ll introduce you to ladies who’ll be happy to—”

“I willna leave without a kiss from one of *these* young ladies,” Biggsy insisted stubbornly. “Look a’ me, Tom.

D’yer think I’m kissed verra often? Let alone by a young thing wi’ all of ’er teeth or ’er maidenhe—”

“Biggsy,” Tom interjected hurriedly.

“I want a *kiss.*”

At the tone, the men behind Biggs put their hands back upon on their pistols, sensing a shift in intent.

Tom’s eyes remained locked with Biggsy’s, his expression studiously neutral and pleasant, while his mind did cartwheels. *Bloody, bloody hell. Perhaps I should ask the young ladies to draw straws. Perhaps I should kiss him myself. Perhaps we—*

“I will kiss him.”

Everyone, highwaymen included, pivoted, startled, when the little French widow stepped forward. “You will allow the coach to go on if I do?” she asked.

Ze coach, Tom thought absently, is what it sounded like when she said it. Her voice was bell-clear and strong and she sounded very nearly impatient; but Tom caught the hint of a tremble in it again, which he found oddly reassuring. If there had been no tremble, he might have worried again about her sanity and what she might do with a knitting needle.

“My word of honor,” Biggsy said almost humbly. He seemed almost taken aback.

Tom was torn between wanting to stop her and perverse curiosity to see if she intended to go through with it. She hadn’t the bearing or voice of a doxie. *I am not . . .* she had struggled to tell him. She was not someone who suffered the attention of gentlemen lightly, he was certain she meant to say. Not someone who was generally in the habit of leaping into the laps of strangers unless she had a very good reason to do

so.

He hoped, *hoped* she didn't intend to attempt anything foolish with a knitting needle.

Biggsy recovered himself. "I'll take that, shall I?" He reached out and adroitly took her reticule from her. He heard her intake of breath, the beginning of a protest, but wisely stopped herself. Ah, she'd good judgment, too.

Tom saw her shoulders square, as though she was preparing herself for a launch upward. She drew in a deep breath.

And then she stood on her toes, lifted her veil, and kissed Biggsy Biggens full on the mouth.

And a moment later, Biggsy Biggens looked for all the world as blessed as a bridegroom.

Chapter Two

THE CONFIGURATION INSIDE THE COACH on the way to the coaching inn was this: Tom at one end; the other passengers all but knotted together for protection.

And then the widow.

All was silence. He and the widow might be the hero and heroine of the hour, but no one wanted to acknowledge it, no one wanted to *touch* them, and certainly no one wanted to know either of them.

Once all of the passengers tumbled out of the coach in the inn yard, where they would be served a dreadful lunch before continuing on to London, Tom saw the widow glance furtively about.

And rather than follow the rest of the travelers inside, she made her way surreptitiously, but very purposefully toward the stables. She rounded the corner and disappeared from view; he picked up his pace and stopped when he saw her snug against the side of the building, half in shadow, her shoulders slightly hunched.

A wrench of sympathy and respect for her privacy made him pause. She was attempting to discreetly retch. He'd been within whiffing distance of Biggsy's breath; he could only imagine what it must have been like to taste it.

She whirled suddenly, sensing him there, swiping the back of her hand across her mouth; he took a step back, safely out of knitting-needle range. She stood very still and regarded him through that veil.

Wordlessly, cautiously, he reached into his coat, produced a flask, and held it out to her.

She looked down at the flask, then up at him. Two cool movements of her head. But she made no move to accept it from him.

"Or perhaps you prefer the taste of highwayman in your mouth. . . Mademoiselle."

Her chin jerked up a little at that.

After a moment, with a sense of subtle ceremony, she slowly, slowly lifted her veil with her gloved hands. *Ah, a woman confident of her charms.* This heightened Tom's sense of anticipation, which surprised and amused him. He wasn't precisely jaded, but surprise when it came to a woman was something he felt so rarely anymore. *Veils, he noted to himself silently. Must use more veils at the White Lily Theater. Perhaps a harem act . . .*

Still, nothing could have prepared him for the shock of her face when she finally tilted her head up to look at him.

He felt her beauty physically, a sweet hot burst low in his gut. A jaw both stubborn and elegant in its angularity, lifted now in pride or arrogance or defense; an aching

soft-looking mouth, the bottom lip a full curve, the one above it shorter, both the palest pink. Eyes very bright in her too-white face. They were pale green, her eyes, intelligent and very alive, with flecks of other colors floating in the irises. Two fine, straight chestnut brows slanted over them.

Her eyes met his, and with great satisfaction, he saw that impossible-to-disguise swift flare of her pupil. It was always a good moment, a delicious moment, the recognition of mutual attraction that passed between two beautiful people. Tom smiled at her, acknowledging it, confident and inclusive, inviting her, daring her to share it.

But she turned her head away from him slowly—too casually—as though the pigeons listlessly poking about in the stableyard were of much more interest to her than the man standing before her with a flask outstretched.

When she returned her gaze to his she reached out her hand for the proffered flask, as though the pigeons had cemented her decision. She lifted it fastidiously up to those soft lips and took a sip.

Her eyes widened. He grinned.

“I wonder what you were expecting, Mademoiselle. Whiskey? Do I strike you as the whiskey sort? It’s French—the wine, is. Go ahead and swallow it. It wasn’t cheap.”

She held it in her mouth for an instant; at last, he saw her swallow hard.

He bowed, then, and it was a low, elegant thing, all grace and respect. “Mr. Tom Shaughnessy at your service. And you are Mademoiselle...?”

“Madame,” she corrected curtly.

“Oh, but I think not ...For I have splendid *intuition*.” He used the French pronunciation. The word was spelled just the same in English and in French, and meant precisely the same thing: a very good guess. “And *I* think you are a mademoiselle.”

“You presume a good deal, Mr. Shaughnessy.”

“I’ve always had luck with being presumptuous. One might even say I make my living being presumptuous.”

She scanned him, a swift flick of her green eyes, up and down, drawing conclusions about him from his face and clothes and adding those conclusions, no doubt, to the impressions she’d already gleaned from his acquaintance with the highwayman. He saw those green eyes go guarded and cynical. But oddly. . . not afraid. Yes, this was a mademoiselle, perhaps. But not an innocent one, either, if she could draw a cynical conclusion about the sort of man he was. It implied she knew rather a range of men.

“It was brave, what you did,” he said.

“Yes,” she agreed.

He smiled at that. He could have sworn she almost did, too.

“Do you have any money?” he asked. A blunt question.

Again, that stiff spine. “I do not believe this is business of yours, Mr. Shaughnessy.”

“A knitting needle and widow’s weeds are all very well and good, but money, Mademoiselle, is everything. Have you enough to continue on to your destination? The highwayman took your reticule, did he not?”

“Yes, your *friend*, Mr. Biggsy, took my reticule. I might not have been so brave had I known the price of my bravery.”