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*By Emma Orchard*

The Second Lady Silverwood

The Runaway Heiress

*a&b*

**THE  
RUNAWAY  
HEIRESS**

EMMA ORCHARD

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*Dedicating this book to my lovely family,  
Luigi, Jamie and Annie, shouldn't be taken  
as any sort of suggestion that I want them  
to read it or, even worse, talk to me  
about its contents. Ever.*



*We are all fools in love*

*Pride and Prejudice* – Jane Austen





## CHAPTER ONE

A ragged cloud blotted out the sliver of moon. It was suddenly darker in the elegant square of fashionable houses, and Cassandra scurried down the shallow steps in front of her. Once at the bottom, she huddled in the shadows at the far end of the paved semi-basement area, panting. She was trespassing on some gentleman's private property, but that was the least of her concerns in this moment. Her heart was pounding in her chest, and she was dizzy with terror. It was good to stop running for a moment, to try to collect her thoughts. But she dared not relax, for there was no safety here – there was nothing at all to prevent her pursuers from finding her in this makeshift hiding place and dragging her away by force. There was not the least point screaming and hoping that passing strangers

might come to her aid; the men who were chasing her had already demonstrated that they had a ready answer prepared for any passer-by who should question their actions. She had thought that the gentleman she had stumbled into a few hundred yards back might assist her, but her pursuers had caught up with her and told him some plausible tale, and he had shrugged, and gone on his careless way. She had barely escaped them then; only her desperation, her youthful speed and their drunken state allowed her to evade their grasp.

The streets of London in the dead of night were a perilous place for a woman alone, and she was well aware that in running out of her uncle's house at this hour she had forfeited any claim to respectability in the eyes of the world. There was no help to be found, only more danger. She was entirely alone. She must *think*.

There was a faint light inside the mansion, spilling out from a small, barred window and coming, she presumed, from the servants' quarters in the basement. What little she had seen of the house in her headlong flight did not suggest that it was currently occupied by its aristocratic owners, which was why she had made the snap decision to seek refuge here. Cassandra had noticed in a single desperate glance that the doorknocker had been taken down and the tall windows at street level and above were all securely shuttered. She supposed that the noble family who owned such a large and imposing building in the most exclusive part of Town were away. The Season was coming to an end, so it was reasonable

to think that they had joined the rest of the polite world in some fashionable seaside resort, leaving a skeleton staff of servants to ensure the safety of their home. She was in danger from the servants too, of course – perhaps they would not molest her, but if one of them should have occasion to come out here, and saw her lurking where she had absolutely no business to be, they would undoubtedly raise a hue and cry that would attract the attention of her pursuers. And if a commotion should instead alert the patrolling Watch, she would be in no better position. She could surely expect no aid or sympathy from them. They might – she was ignorant of these matters, and hoped to remain so – apprehend her for vagrancy and lock her in some dreadful gaol, and if they should ascertain her identity they would merely return her to the care, for want of a worse word, of her uncle and guardian. And then she would be back where she'd started.

Cassandra stiffened as she heard voices, angry male voices, in the square above her. Her uncle, and . . . him. Clearly they had not given up seeking for her yet. Of course not: too much depended on finding her.

The best thing would be to gain entry to the mansion somehow, and hide there till daylight. The streets would be less dangerous then. It was not much of a plan, but it was all she had. If she could somehow attract the attention of the people in the house, so that they came out, she might perhaps slip inside while their backs were turned – how, though? – and be safe from her

pursuers for a while. She could not think beyond that. She felt hot panic rising inside her, and pushed it down. Losing her head would not help. She must plan, and then she must act.

She crept towards the stairs that led up to the street – she had been huddling like a frightened animal in the darkest corner of the area – and strained to hear her uncle’s voice. It was close, but if there was any chance of her desperate plan working it would need to be much closer.

The wait seemed interminable, but at last she could hear him cursing not far away. She judged that he was probably directly in front of the neighbouring house. She slipped back towards the basement door and picked up a wooden pail that had been left there; she had almost fallen over it a moment before, and that had given her the germ of an idea.

No time to hesitate. She flung the pail with all her strength against the lighted window and shrank back into the shadow of her former hiding place, close to the basement door but – she hoped – invisible. The wooden bucket clattered against the iron bars – a loud, shocking noise in the relative quiet of the deserted square – and she heard a shout of angry surprise from inside and, a moment later, the screeching of bolts as the door was unfastened. Meanwhile, a triumphant cry of ‘Got her!’ came from the pavement above, and heavy, urgent footsteps pounded towards her, then slowed a little as they descended the steps in the darkness. She had been

counting on that: that they would follow the sound, confident that they had run her to earth at last.

The basement door was wrenched open, and a man emerged into the area. He was so close to her that she could have reached out and touched him. A servant, she supposed. He was an African man. Silhouetted against the light inside, he made an impressive figure; he was tall and powerfully built, and his posture was belligerent, his fists raised in front of him in what Cassandra imagined to be a boxer's stance. There was a woman close behind him, almost as tall and broad. A formidable pair, and their attention was not focused on her, but on the men who had just reached the bottom of the steps. 'Oi!' bellowed the manservant, moving nearer to the intruders, his fists still held ready for action. His companion, as bold as he was, followed him. 'What d'you mean by trespassing on a gentleman's property and making this racket?! If you've come to mill the ken, you'll have me to deal with, and you'll soon regret the day, my bully boys!'

'My good fellow . . .' began her uncle in the unctuous tones she so hated.

She did not stay to see how their altercation resolved itself; she edged closer and closer to the open door, still hidden in shadow and blessing her soft slippers for their silence, and then slid inside, entirely unobserved by any of the participants in the scene playing out behind her. It was dangerous – there could be others present in the basement rooms, and if anyone saw her now she was lost – but she was wagering everything on the chance

that, if there had been anyone else there, they too would likely have been drawn outside by the commotion and the impulse to protect their master's property. It was a risk she was prepared to take. She had no choice.

Her gamble paid off: the stone-flagged corridor was deserted, and the room opening off it – a kitchen – appeared to be empty too. She did not stay to make sure, but penetrated deeper into the house, resolved to seek the upstairs quarters where she thought she might be safer from discovery.

The layout of a gentleman's town mansion generally followed a set pattern, and Cassandra had no difficulty finding the servants' staircase. She crept up it to the green baize door that must lead to the ground floor of the house, opening it a crack and poking her head cautiously around it. A grand entrance hall, paved in squares of black and white marble. A little chilly moonlight crept in from the large fanlight above the door, enough to see her surroundings. She thought for one awful moment that she saw a tall, motionless human figure, standing there in the alcove, watching her, and let out an exclamation of surprise that she muffled hastily with one ungloved hand. But she realised in the next second that it was a classical statue: a fine marble copy of the Apollo Belvedere, some part of her brain noted irrelevantly. She felt hysterical laughter bubbling inside her. Apollo could do her no harm, and just at this moment the prospect of being transformed into a tree as the nymph Daphne had been while he chased her was

not at all unattractive. No, it was living, breathing men she had to fear, not ancient gods.

She opened the door fully and slipped through it, closing it with agonising but necessary slowness behind her. She could hear no sounds of pursuit coming from below, and it did not seem to her, from what she had seen of him, that the burly servant who had accosted her uncle so confidently was the kind of man who would meekly allow two complete strangers to enter and search the building that was under his care. But still, it would be the highest degree of folly to stay here. She must find a more secluded place to hide. And do it very, very quietly. She crept forward. She was a criminal now, she supposed. A house-breaker. But she was committed to this course of action, and could not turn back. Which door should she choose . . . ?