

*Freedom is within her grasp,
if she truly desires escape...*

HR

— LADIES ALWAYS SHOOT FIRST —
Captured by a Duke

SUMMER HANFORD

Captured by a Duke

Ladies Always Shoot First
Book One

Summer Hanford

HR

A Scarsdale Publishing Half Hour Read

Captured by a Duke Book One Ladies Always Shoot First

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Chapter One

Annabel tugged back the velvet curtain and leaned forward to peer out the carriage window. Trees sped past, but her gaze was drawn to the impenetrable darkness a few scant feet beyond the sun-kissed foliage. The forest looked invitingly cool compared to the heat inside the carriage.

She shifted her gaze to Kitty, seated across from her. "If we tie the curtains back, we can have more air."

Kitty shook her head, brown curls bouncing about her misleadingly cherubic cheeks. "Too much dust will come in. Do you really want to meet your future husband coated in dust?"

"I still don't understand how I'm to meet him without giving away who I am." Annabel let the curtain fall back into place and snapped open her fan. She wasn't certain which would make a worse impression; arriving coated in dust or with her blonde curls plastered against her forehead.

"Leave everything to me." Kitty appeared enviably untouched by the summer heat.

"Why did I let you persuade me to trick the servants into taking us? Meeting the duke a day early will make no difference. I'll still be forced to wed him." Annabel shuddered. What could possibly have possessed her father to promise her to some uncouth backwater lord who couldn't be bothered to visit London to court her?

"Don't worry. I have a plan." Kitty spoke with supreme confidence.

Annabel frowned. How many times had Kitty said those words? By now, Annabel should have learned not to go along with her friend's plans. Somehow, they always ended in trouble, and this current scheme promised the most trouble of all. Sneaking off to meet a man, even her own fiancé, was nearly unforgiveable.

Yet, it had sounded so reasonable when Kitty suggested it. After all, it was only fair Annabel should have a chance to set eyes on Richard Darrius, Duke of Southwood, before she pledged her life to him. Now, though, she couldn't imagine how she could meet him and then gracefully extract herself if she didn't care for him.

"It had better be a good plan," she muttered.

Kitty's smile only added to her angelic guise. "One of my best."

Annabel, less than reassured, decided they should turn back. She opened her mouth to say as much when the carriage skidded to a halt. Annabel flew from her seat. Kitty's screech filled the small space. They collided in a tangle of limbs.

A gunshot roared.

Chapter Two

The horses squealed. Annabel was thrown back against her seat as the carriage lurched forward. Kitty spilled onto the floor.

"Bloody hell," a man shouted.

"What did you do?" another demanded, his words clear, near the carriage door.

Annabel fumbled for Kitty's hand. Finding it, she dragged Kitty up onto the seat, and clutched her close.

The first man said something, his words muted.

"We weren't to harm anyone," the second replied.

He now stood directly outside. Pulling Kitty with her, Annabel slid down the seat, away from him.

". . . only servants. More can be bought," the first man said.

His voice grew louder as he spoke. Annabel realized he'd neared the side of the carriage where they huddled. They were surrounded. Her mind raced. Of all the things she'd worried could go wrong with their plan, highway robbers had never once occurred to her.

The second man said something, his voice garbled. He'd moved away. Annabel's pulse leapt. The forest crowded the road. They had a chance if they could make it to the trees.

She started to pull free from Kitty, but Kitty clung to her. Annabel shot her a glare, then disentangled herself and scooted to the door. She reached for the handle.

"They both look like they'll live, and you best hope they do, John. You took this too far."

Annabel jerked back. He was near the door again.

"Let's grab the women and get on with this," replied John. "As usual, you're taking all the fun out of it."

The door beside Annabel jerked open. A large form blocked the sun. Light spilled in around him. She could make out little more than thick black hair. He leaned inside and she discerned deep blue eyes above a linen scarf that obscured half his face.

The door on the other side wrenched open. Kitty screamed. Annabel yanked her gaze to Kitty, who shrank against her. Another masked man stood outside Kitty's door.

"Get out," the man nearest Annabel ordered.

"You too," the other man said, and Annabel recognized his voice as the one named John.

Annabel hugged Kitty close and snapped her head back around toward the man nearest her. She narrowed her eyes. "What have you done to my carriageman and footman? If you've murdered them, I will see you hang."

"They'll sleep for a time," the man drawled. "I imagine they won't have much love for us when they wake."

"Not with the sore heads they'll have," John said, amused. "Now, come out of there, or I'll come in and get you."

"I think we must do as they ask," Kitty whispered.

Annabel shook her head. "I am not leaving this carriage." They couldn't let themselves be taken. No one knew where they were. Only the carriage man and footman knew they'd left London. They'd persuaded their mothers they were spending the day shopping. They wouldn't be missed for hours.

The black-haired man looked past them at his companion. "Feisty, isn't she?"

"That's your problem. I'm taking this one." John reached for Kitty.

Kitty screamed and buried her face in Annabel's shoulder. Annabel held tight, but John wrenched Kitty from her grasp. The sound of ripping fabric was like ice driven into Annabel's skin.

"My dress," Kitty wailed.

Annabel grabbed Kitty's arm and yanked.

"Get your Miss off mine," John shouted.

Fingers of iron seized Annabel's waist. The black-haired man yanked her free of Kitty, and hauled her from the carriage. Annabel flailed, but she might as well have been assaulting a wall of stone.

"If you don't settle down, I'll throw you over my shoulder," he said in deep, cultured tones.

Annabel thrashed harder. Her hair tumbled down into her eyes as her foot found a shin. He grunted. Her closed fist collided with his ear.

"Hellion," he growled, and tossed her over his shoulder like a sack of grain.

"Monster!" She pounded his back with both fists.

He strode toward the woods without a reply.

Annabel's hair streamed about her, undone and nearly touching the ground. Through her thick locks, she glimpsed her father's men slumped in the carriage seat. Her blood chilled. Her attacker said they would live. She prayed to God he hadn't lied. Anger swept through her. She kicked. Her fists hammered his back. Her abductor didn't slow.

Chapter Three

They reached the shade of the trees. Fear lanced through Annabel anew. She twisted in an effort to break free as he carried her deeper into the murk of the forest. His arm clamped down tighter and tears sprang to her eyes.

If the men lived, they would tell her father what had happened and he would ransom her and Kitty. Annabel's head swam. It wouldn't matter that she and Kitty had fought to remain in the carriage. She squeezed her eyes shut against tears. They were ruined. Completely ruined. She had no idea if she would have come to care for the Duke of Southwood, but she would never find out. No duke would touch her now.

Annabel opened her eyes, determined to seek landmarks for an escape. Between her abductor's legs and the wall of her hair, all she could discern was a narrow footpath winding through the forest shade. She went as still as she could, listening, but heard only faraway birdcalls and her captor's footfalls through her panting. They were quite alone.

She struck him again, but dizziness sapped her strength. Her waist hurt where it rode his shoulder, though his stride was smooth. He held one arm around her waist, pinning her against him. She fought an urge to sob. He was a brute. A beast in man's clothing.

Fine clothing, too, she noticed in an irrational moment. Too fashionable and costly for a common thief. What sort of bandit dressed so well? A gentleman? Could her fiancé have an enemy willing to kidnap her--a hanging offense--in order to thwart him? What sort of man had enemies like that? A terrible one, most likely.

"Settled down, have you?" her abductor asked.

Annabel clamped her teeth together. Her attention caught on the hilt of a pistol sticking up through his belt. She recalled the loud concussion earlier. The weapon looked two barreled. Even if he'd fired the shot, there should be a bullet left. Her three brothers had taught her how to shoot a pistol. Could she reach it before he realized her intention? With a man like this, she would get only one chance. She pressed her lips into a thin line, ignoring the throb in her head.

"Lass?" She almost heard a touch of worry in his voice. "Still with me?" He gave her midsection a squeeze.

"Where are you taking me?" she demanded.

He patted her legs. "Never thought I'd miss being beat on."

Enraged by his amusement, Annabel snarled and thrashed with renewed fury. He clasped her buttocks with his free arm up. Shock reverberated through her. How dare he? With an inarticulate sound of rage, she kicked and pounded as hard as she could. He clamped down tighter on her waist. She sucked in air, hardly able to breathe, but flailed until her limbs drained of strength. She went limp, gasping.

His grip eased. "I'm taking you to a cabin," he said.

She started at the sound of his voice. A cabin? Why would he take her to a cabin? To lock her away? "Where is my friend?"

"John's caring for her, I'm sure."

Annabel bit her lip. The glimpse she'd gotten of John revealed hard hazel eyes above his mask.

Her abductor's stride lengthened. Evenly spaced flagstones, dappled by sunlight, entered her swaying view. Annabel blinked, trying to clear spots from her vision. He ascended three steps. A door creaked. A threshold sped by, replaced by roughhewn floorboards. She watched his foot kick shut the door.

The smell of wood smoke permeated the air. She wasn't sure if the flickering at the corner of her vision was firelight or a symptom of her inverted state. Her world tilted as he set her on her feet. Everything spun. She staggered, listing to the side. He grasped her shoulders, steadying her.

"Easy now," he said.

Her vision righted. They stood in a large room, rustic but richly appointed, like her father's hunting lodge. Annabel fixed her gaze on the dark blue eyes that stared at her above her abductor's mask, and startled at the warmth in them. Heat kindled in his gaze. Her heart pounded. Did he intend to— He leaned toward her. Realizing he thought he'd won, Annabel seized her opening.

She slumped forward, as if overcome. He caught her. Annabel flushed at the unexpected solidity of his arms around her. Her heart pounded hard enough she worried that he would notice and guess her intention. Before he could tighten his embrace, she grabbed the pistol and pushed away with all her might. She stumbled back, breaking free.

He stared, eyes wide in surprise.

She retreated two more paces, pistol held ready before her. "Lower your mask, sir. I would know who I'm about to shoot."

He tugged down the scarf, revealing a square jaw, and smiled with impressively even teeth. "You're quite the hellion, aren't you?"

"What I am or am not is nothing to you," she snapped. "On your knees. I'm leaving, and you are not following me."

His smile widened. "Do you even know how to use that?"

Annabel pulled back one of the hammers with a click. She could see from how clean the pistol was he wasn't the one who shot earlier. "I know I have the dangerous end pointed at you."

"That you do," he agreed. "Why don't you hand that pistol here?"

"I told you to get down on your knees." She inched backward, toward the door.

"You won't shoot," he drawled. "I'll only come after you. How much of a head start will you have?" His gaze raked her slender frame, then lifted again to her face. "You're a slip of a thing. I'd be no man at all if I couldn't outrun a lass in skirts. Where will you go?"

"Back up the path." She retreated another step. "It must lead somewhere." He made a good point about following her, though. Her gown and slippers would hamper her. She pressed her lips into a thin line, bracing herself. "I'm sorry for this."

His eyes flew wide as she aimed the pistol at his leg—then squeezed the trigger. The pistol jerked in her hand, the sound deafening. He howled in pain and staggered backward. Annabel whirled and raced for the door.

Chapter Four

Annabel wrenched open the door, ran down the steps and fled along the trail. Her abductor didn't cry out again. She didn't dare look back. She hoped she'd hurt him enough to hinder his pursuit, but not enough to have inflicted a fatal wound. Not that he didn't deserve being shot. He'd ruined her. She clenched the pistol in one hand. She would worry about her future later. Now, she had to rescue Kitty.

Annabel tripped. She threw her hands out and caught herself against a tree, breathing hard. She cast a quick glance behind her. There was no sign of the man who'd abducted her.

Pushing off the rough bark, she set out at a hurried walk, focused on the path. All would be over if she turned an ankle. She had no idea how she would find Kitty.

Voices ahead caused her to halt and freeze like a deer catching wind of hunters. Who were the newcomers? Fear made her heart thunder. On shaky feet, she slipped from the path. She stopped at the first large tree. Back against the trunk, she slid down into a crouch. Slowly, she cocked the other barrel of the pistol.

As her heartbeat slowed, she recognized Kitty's voice, drawing near. Annabel frowned. Her friend didn't sound the least bit distressed. The other voice, to her surprise, was John the highwayman's. Could Kitty have convinced the man not to harm her?

" . . . what they're up to," Kitty's voice floated toward her. "Even though they're to marry, we can't leave them alone too long." As she spoke, Kitty's words became closer and more distinct.

"My brother is too noble to be up to anything, even with your lovely friend." John's smooth voice raised the hair on the back of Annabel's neck.

"Look here, you aren't to notice how lovely Annabel is," Kitty said. "You promised yourself to me."

"I did, and never have I been happier."

Annabel's mouth fell open. Kitty was engaged to John the highwayman? They couldn't have been alone for more than half an hour.

"You'd better mean that," Kitty teased.

"Of course I mean it, sweetheart."

John's voice reminded Annabel of a gentleman who once tried to compromise Kitty in her father's garden. Kitty had fancied herself in love with the man, a complete cad. Luckily, Annabel knew a cad from a gentleman. She'd followed them with her dog, Caesar, a giant Italian Mastiff one of her brothers had brought back from the continent. One look at a growling Caesar and the so-called gentleman had fled.

"Annabel is going to murder me when she learns I was in on this scheme," Kitty said. "You really shouldn't have hurt the servants. She's very soft hearted. She's probably haranguing your brother about it even now. I fear she'll never forgive me."

In on this scheme? Annabel pressed her back firmly against the tree. What was going on? Who was John's brother? Wait, had Kitty said someone was to marry, aside, apparently, from her and John?

"Who can say?" John's tone was touched with impatience.

They came abreast of Annabel's hiding place, so close she could have reached around the tree and caught Kitty's hem. She almost did, thinking how much it would scare her friend, who Annabel suddenly felt certain quite deserved a scare. Annabel couldn't get herself to move, though. She didn't fully understand what was transpiring, and something about John still gave her pause.

"That's not the right answer, silly," Kitty mock-scolded. "You're supposed to assure me Annabel will forgive me for luring her out to be abducted by her fiancé."

Annabel stifled a gasp. Her fiancé? Oh no, she was the one who was to marry. Her and Richard Darrius, Duke of Southwood. The man she'd shot. She slumped against the rough bark.

"I can't lie," John said. "I'm not sure she will forgive you, especially when she learns the truth."

"Oh John, you're such a joker." Kitty giggled. It was the same giggle she'd used in the garden with that long-ago cad. "All will be well. Annabel will find the whole thing amusing and, of course, romantic. The duke wished to meet her before they were wed, just as she longed to meet him. They're perfect for one another."

"We'll see about that." The amusement in his tone carried an odd edge.

"When you wrote me about your plan, I must admit, I had my doubts," Kitty said. "But it was spectacular. For a moment, I thought you were really going to hurt me. You missed your calling in the theater by being born the son of a duke. Annabel will have to appreciate the lengths we all went to, orchestrating this meeting for them. What woman wouldn't want to be so swept off her feet?"

"Born the son of a duke, yes," he said in an odd voice. "But only his second son."

Kitty giggled again, but Annabel hardly cared. They were drawing away, Kitty's next words unintelligible as they continued toward the cabin, more likely a hunting lodge. The duke's hunting lodge. She groaned. Leave it to her to shoot her own fiancé.

She uncocked the pistol and stood. Yes, she'd shot her fiancé, and she didn't even know the severity of his wound. What if she'd maimed him? Worse, what if she'd murdered him? Annabel leaned against the tree. The forest spun again. She'd made a terrible mistake.

She drew in a deep breath. This was not her fault. It was Kitty's and John's—and the duke's. What had they expected, she would meekly permit herself to be kidnapped? Ridiculous.

Tucking loose locks behind her ears and squaring her shoulders, Annabel stomped up the trail. If the duke wasn't dead, or unconscious from blood loss, she was going to give him a piece of her mind. Throw her over his shoulder, would he? Expect her to quietly go off with a highwayman, did he?

And Kitty. How could her best friend do this to her? John must have charmed her into this a hair-brained scheme. Part of his appeal was obviously the offer of marriage, though Annabel could hardly credit it. His tone said he could barely stand Kitty.

As she hurried toward the lodge, Annabel's thoughts ranged over all she'd heard. Something wasn't right. It didn't make sense. John had thrown away his future to help the duke abduct her. It would take a devoted brother to marry for so little reason, and John

must now marry Kitty. Aside from his promise to her, they'd been unchaperoned for the better part of an hour.

John didn't seem devoted. His tone conveyed quite the opposite. Then again, Kitty's dowry was large. She wasn't from a titled line, but many men cared little for titles when money was involved. Had Kitty foolishly bound herself to a fortune seeking second son in the course of this ridiculous plot?

Annabel increased her pace, biting her lip. And where was the duke? He should have come after her by now. They all should have met on the path, unless he was too injured. She'd aimed to graze him and she was a practiced shot, but she couldn't be sure. It had happened so fast. She'd never shot a man before.

This time as she approached, with sunlight seeping through the canopy to gild the lodge, she could appreciate how fine it was. The duke's hunting lodge was larger than many London homes. Likely, when he used it, he had to bring as many servants as a London home required. It was also situated quite nicely. Ancient, broad limbed trees sheltered it from the hot summertime sun.

Taking a deep breath, she marched up the steps to the door, which stood ajar.

"What are you doing?" Kitty screeched, causing Annabel to jump.

"I'm sorry, pet, but it turns out I don't want to marry you after all." John's voice was cold.

Annabel froze.

"Please turn aside that pistol. I don't understand." Kitty's voice quivered.

"Why does that not surprise me?"

John's sneer spurred Annabel into motion. She inched closer to the crack in the doorway.

"We're to marry," Kitty wailed. "Annabel and I will be sisters, and you—"

"Enough, you stupid chit," John roared.

"John, leave the girl be." Annabel recognized the duke's voice, though he sounded strained.

"You don't get to give orders anymore, Richard."

"It's not an order. The girl means nothing. No one will believe anything she says. Let her leave."

"No." John's voice was smooth again. "I will say how this affair ends. The fates are finally smiling on me. I planned to kill you all and stage it as a tryst turned robbery, but now I may be able to keep the lovely Miss Annabel. It's too rich that she shot you for me. You can't even stand without the support of that wall. Without witnesses, I'll be able to tell any story I wish. I'll marry her, despite her compromised state. I'll be a damn hero."

"Annabel isn't a fool," the duke said.

"Exactly. Only a fool would choose being a dead miss over being a living duchess with me."

Annabel clenched her teeth. She was no fool, and she wouldn't accept either option. Carefully, she cocked the pistol, then eased forward. She wouldn't let John kill Kitty, or the duke. She'd already shot one man today. She could shoot another.

Chapter Five

“You’ll be a murderer.” The hoarseness in the duke’s voice frightened Annabel. “How much blood had he lost? ‘I’m your brother, John,’” he went on. “Think on what you’re doing.”

“Oh, I have. I’ve thought of it, dreamed of it, for years. You can keep our parents’ favoritism, Richard. Take it with you. Enjoy it in the grave.”

Holding her breath, Annabel poked her head through the gap in the doorway. John’s back faced her. He pointed a pistol at the duke, who had one hand braced against the far wall. His eyes flicked almost imperceptibly toward her, then returned to his brother, his expression unchanged. Her stomach churned. The scarf he’d worn over his face, now tied around his left leg, was dark with blood.

Kitty stood wedged between the duke and the wall, her face white as fresh snow. She shook so fiercely, Annabel could see the trembling in her limbs. Annabel withdrew her head before Kitty spotted her. She couldn’t trust Kitty to hide her reaction as the duke had.

“The tricky part is, I only have one bullet,” John said. He sounded amused. “If you could squeeze yourself a bit farther behind Richard, my dear, I may be able to shoot clean through him and into you. If I were you, I’d pray for a good shot. If the bullet doesn’t reach you, I’m afraid I’ll be forced to strangle you.”

Kitty sobbed.

John released a dramatic sigh. “I’m growing bored with your noise, and I have a much prettier heiress than you to hunt down. Goodbye, Miss Kitty. Goodbye, brother.”

Kitty screamed. Annabel flung the door open. A gunshot rang out, even as she fired her pistol.

Richard flung himself more fully in front of Kitty. John’s body jerked. He snarled a curse, and spun toward Annabel. His left arm hung limp, but his right still held his pistol. He cocked it and pulled the trigger. The hammer fell with a loud click.

He threw the pistol at her. Annabel ducked. The duke launched himself at John. They slammed to the floor in a fury of pummeling arms and legs. Fresh blood smeared the floorboards as they rolled, limbs flailing.

Annabel dropped her spent weapon and ran around the men to Kitty. Grabbing her, she yanked Kitty up from the crouch she’d fallen into. Kitty sobbed, flinging her arms about Annabel, hindering her attempts to check for bullet wounds.

Kitty screamed. Annabel jerked around to find the duke and John rolling toward them. She pulled Kitty out of the way an instant before the two men slammed into the wall. The duke came out on top. He landed a powerful blow on the side of John’s head. John went limp. The duke rolled off him, gasping for breath.

Annabel pulled free of Kitty and dropped to her knees beside him. Blood covered his chest, but her probing fingers found only one additional wound, where John’s bullet had clipped his shoulder. It was a short, shallow gash, much to her relief.

Finally, her inspection reached his face. She smoothed his sweat-dampened hair from his forehead and ran fingers over his cheeks and jaw. Large hands clasped hers.

“Miss Annabel.” His voice was a deep whisper.

“Lord Southwood.” She leaned over him. Her hair hung down in a honeyed wall, screening off her view of the unconscious John.

“You have eyes like the summer sky,” he said.

Annabel blinked. She offered a shaky smile. “Yours are the color of the sky too, that deep blue that comes just before nightfall.” Her smile slipped. “But I believe your left is swelling shut.”

He winced. “I apologize.”

She nodded toward John. “I think we should tie up your brother, my lord. Have you any rope?”

He turned his head in John’s direction, grimacing. “He won’t wake anytime soon, but there should be some rope round back. The servants use it for stringing up deer.”

“I’m sure I can locate it,” she said, familiar with her father’s lodge. She tugged her hands free of the duke’s, immediately missing his warmth.

He caught her wrist. “Perhaps Miss Kitty could retrieve it while you assist me to my feet. There’s something I must discuss with you.”

“Are you sure you should stand?” Annabel bit her lip. Fresh blood pooled on the floor under his leg.

“I’d be no man at all if I couldn’t stand because of a sound pummeling and a few bullet holes.” He grinned, but pain tightened the corners of his mouth.

Annabel hesitated, not certain he should be on his feet.

“Besides, I find the company I’m keeping here on the floor rather unsavory.” He nodded toward the limp form of his brother.

“Right,” Annabel agreed. She turned to Kitty, who watched them wide-eyed, her hands clutched to her mouth. Little sobs escaped around them. “Kitty, there’s rope in one of the buildings out back. Can you find it?”

Kitty gave a quaking nod and hurried off. Annabel returned her attention to the duke, who’d pulled himself up onto his elbows. Waving off her help, he came to his knees. She stood and offered her hand. He clasped it, but managed to gain his feet without putting his weight on her. Once standing, noticeably avoiding placing weight on his left leg, he captured her other hand, as well.

“I must admit, Miss Annabel, I was leery of signing the marriage agreement without meeting you, or I wouldn’t have conceded to my brother’s wild, obviously underhanded plan.”

“You were leery?” She’d never stopped to consider his feelings on the betrothal.

He nodded. “I had reports of your beauty, of course, but there is more to life than beauty.”

“You were given more than I, then, my lord. I had only my father’s word, and no reason to believe him when he assured me I’d be content.”

“And are you?” He cocked a dark eyebrow. He evidenced a complete lack of doubt as to her answer.

She looked him up and down. How could she not be pleased? His height, his hair black as night, her intimate evidence of his strength. Schooling her expression into critical appraisal she offered, “In truth, I would prefer a fiancé with fewer holes in him.”

“Then you probably shouldn’t have shot me.”

Her faced warmed. “And?” she prodded, tilting up her chin. He gave her a quizzical look and she added, “Are you satisfied with your bride? You best decide now, for tomorrow we’re slated to marry.”

“Life with you will always be interesting,” he said, but his expression was pleased. “There is one more question, though, that needs to be answered.”

“What is that, my lord?” Annabel was truly perplexed. It seemed as if he liked her somewhat forward temperament. He didn’t even sound angry about his leg.

He released her hands and cupped the back of her neck. “The most important question.” His eyes settled on her lips.

Annabel’s breath caught.

Richard lowered his mouth to hers.

His kiss was as unyielding as his form, and she found she liked that about him. Applying light pressure to the back of her neck, he angled her head and explored her lips. Annabel twined her fingers in his thick hair and drew him closer.

“Ahem,” Kitty said.

Annabel stilled. Heavens, how long had Kitty been standing there? Her lips curled in a luxurious smile as she realized she didn’t care. After all, they’d been answering the most important question, and answering it well.

“I have rope,” Kitty said.

“Well then, let’s tie up my brother, then we can return to your carriage to ensure the wellbeing of your servants,” the duke said, his eyes never leaving Annabel. “May I invite you back to my manor?”

“Of course, my lord.” Annabel couldn’t contain her smile. “That would be most convenient. After all, we have a wedding to attend.”

Epilogue

Annabel brushed her nearly waist-length blonde hair, waiting for her husband to join her in their shared bedchamber. She knew it was a difficult day for him, being the final day of John's trial. Richard had spoken out in defense of his brother, arguing in favor of banishment to Ireland over hanging. He'd gone to court sure he could secure that verdict.

Annabel was certain, too. John hadn't killed anyone. Even the servants he'd knocked unconscious had recovered. Her influence as a duchess was helping restore Kitty's reputation, so John didn't have to answer for ruining her. The worst crime carried out during the affair was shooting Richard in the leg, and Annabel had done that.

Richard entered, his jacket slung over one arm. He looked tired, but he smiled when he saw her. That was all the answer Annabel needed to know he'd been successful in saving his brother from the noose.

"Things went well, then?" She set aside her brush, rose, and crossed to him.

His eyes roamed over her frilly French nightgown. He nodded. "But I find I don't feel like discussing the trial."

"No?" She wound her arms about his neck.

He gave her a slow smile and lowered his lips to hers. Annabel had to agree with him. There was no reason for talk.

###

Other books in the Ladies Always Shoot First series

To Save a Lord
Book Two

One Shot for a Gentleman
Book Three

Anything for a Lord
Book Four

About the Author

Beginning in 2014, Summer Hanford was offered the privilege of partnering with fan fiction author Renata McMann on her well-loved *Pride and Prejudice* variations. To date, they have over twenty popular *Pride & Prejudice Fan Fiction* stories available, four of which are Amazon Best Sellers. In addition to her work with McMann, Summer is branching out into writing Regency works of her own, with a novel and several short story series upcoming from Scarsdale Publishing.

Born on a dairy farm in Upstate New York, Summer attended university for psychology and art, then went on to do two years each of graduate and doctoral work in Behavioral Neurology. She now lives and writes in Michigan, with her wonderful husband and three obligatory, deliberately spoiled, cats. For more about Summer, visit www.summerhanford.com.