

HEARTS  on the HEATH 

Winning THE Gentleman



KRISTI ANN HUNTER

RITA AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

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THE
Gentleman

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*To the Provider of New Dreams
1 Peter 1:3-4*

*And to Jacob,
for helping me see that where
I came from doesn't
dictate where I'll go.*

Author's Note

You won't find Sophia Fitzroy if you look up the first female jockey in history, because she is fictional. If you look hard enough, though, you'll find Alicia Thornton.

Mrs. Thornton ran two races in 1804, one as a personal challenge and one against a professional jockey. Both of them caused quite an uproar. Though her story inspired mine, that is where the similarities end. The rest of Sophia's experiences and skills are pieced together from the lives of other remarkable equestrian women of the early nineteenth century.

Today's female jockeys don't owe a great debt to Mrs. Thornton, since it would be well over a hundred years before the sport acknowledged another woman in any official capacity, but the question isn't always *did* it happen but *could* it have happened. And that is what makes history so very interesting.

One

SEPTEMBER 1817

After twenty-two years, Aaron Whitworth should have been aware of his closest friend's idiocy. Yet it had never crossed his mind Oliver could do something so utterly foolish.

One could argue the man had saved Aaron's sanity, if not his life, during their school days, but sometime in the years since boyhood, the heir to the Earl of Trenting had lost his mind. Befriending Aaron hadn't been the wisest decision, though, so it was possible Oliver's penchant for making poor choices, or at least rash ones, had always been present.

Aaron clamped his teeth together to avoid saying anything he might later regret. Yanking memories of better times to the front of his mind, he forced his voice to remain even. "You did what?"

"Accepted a challenge. That *is* what men of the turf do." Oliver lifted his chin as his gaze slid from Aaron's and dropped to the horse patiently awaiting its rider.

Aaron frowned at the reins in his hand. He'd been moments away from mounting, ready to make the ride to the Stourbridge Fair in Cambridge and approve an order of saddles one of the sellers planned to deliver after the fair.

Dawn was stabbing its first streaks of light into a clear sky.

Oliver's cook had prepared him a breakfast of cold meat, cheese, and bread to eat as he rode. Aaron's horse, Shadow, had been energetic on the short ride from his cottage to Oliver's stable, assuring an enjoyable journey to the next town.

The promise of the morning paled in the aftermath of his friend's blunder.

Aaron sighed and draped Shadow's reins over a hook on the wall of the stable. Ever since Oliver had gotten betrothed to the daughter of one of Newmarket's prominent horse breeders, he'd been determined to participate in the interests he would one day inherit.

Starting with the racing stable.

Unfortunately, though Oliver was a solid, loyal friend, his knowledge of property and business was little more than conceptual. He seemed to know he'd made a mistake this time, even if he didn't realize the enormity of it.

Aaron spoke slowly, weighing every word before allowing it to cross his lips. "Yes, men of the turf—and please don't use that term again—arrange and accept challenges." He paused. "It is customary, however, to only enter a challenge when one has a jockey to ride his horse."

Oliver shifted his weight and cleared his throat, slowly sliding his gaze back to Aaron's. "We don't have a jockey?"

"Not since I fired him four days ago, no." It should have been done weeks, if not months, before, but Aaron had put it off because finding a good jockey who was willing to work for him was difficult. He had high demands on the skill of the rider, the care of the horses, and the character of the man.

Because Aaron's reputation was less than ideal, he often had to settle for two out of three. Since he wasn't about to let the animals pay the price, he'd been forced to give way on character. Hughes had been a lout, but he rode well and never hurt the horses.

At least, he didn't when he was sober.

"Why did we fire him?" Oliver asked.

And that unwavering loyalty was why Aaron would always put up with Oliver's naïveté.

"He was enjoying his gin so much he thought the horses should have a nip as well and poured two bottles into the water trough." Risking his own health and reputation was bad enough, but endangering the horses was unacceptable.

"Don't we employ more than one jockey?" Oliver asked.

"Your other two took horses to a race in Yorkshire and have been delayed returning," Aaron said. "Right now, I'm just hoping they're here in time for the first of the October Meetings."

"What about Hudson's jockeys?"

Hudson, Viscount of Stildon, owned the other stable Aaron managed, though Hudson had been absent from the area until a month ago. They'd moved from employer and employee to friends faster than Aaron would have thought possible, and he wasn't sure he fully trusted the relationship or the way it had changed his life.

Still, if the situation were dire enough, Aaron could probably stomach asking a favor of him.

Maybe.

Fortunately, that wasn't an option. "One went to visit his ailing mother and isn't due back for at least another week. The other stepped wrong dismounting yesterday and turned his ankle."

Oliver ran a hand through his hair, making the light brown strands stick up at odd angles. "Equinox has no jockey."

The quiet statement cut through Aaron's control, and a groan escaped as he dropped his head back to look at the lightening sky. "Why would you agree to a challenge without asking me? Especially since we've several races on the books already with the upcoming October Meetings."

"Davens was rather adamant."

Aaron's head jerked hard enough to strain the muscles in his shoulder. The challenge was with Lord Davens? Aaron's relationship with the Newmarket horse owners was tenuous but decent.

Except with Davers. The other man had never liked that Aaron was allowed to sully his presence simply because he had an excellent touch with horses and a few decent connections.

Oliver knew that. Why would he have anything to do with—
“And Brimsbane was there,” Oliver admitted with a sigh, once again shifting his gaze to avoid looking Aaron in the eye.

For as long as Aaron had known Oliver, the man had gotten on well with everyone. Now, for a reason even Oliver probably didn't know, he had formed a one-sided rivalry with his future brother-in-law.

With a sigh, Aaron reached out and buried his hand in Shadow's mane, drawing comfort from the warmth of the horse's neck. “You have the girl's affection, her father's agreement, and a wedding date set in a month. What does it matter if her brother thinks you a cod's head?”

Oliver snapped his attention back to Aaron and frowned. “Brimsbane thinks me a cod's head?”

No, but Aaron was on the verge of it. “To my knowledge, Brimsbane doesn't think of you at all beyond your ability to make Lady Rebecca happy. You've known the chap for years.”

“I know.” Oliver began to pace, the dressing gown he'd been wearing when he rushed from the house to catch Aaron flapping about his knees. Pacing was a sure sign his grip on practical reality was sliding into panic based on some illogical conclusion only he could understand. “Did you see him at the training yards last week?”

“Brimsbane?” Why were they still talking about him? The challenge with Davers was far more pressing. They had one day to find a solution.

Aaron took a deep breath and counted to three. Oliver wouldn't move back to the original conversation until this new one was completed. “Yes, I saw him. When he's in town, he checks his horses' training at least twice a week.”

“Exactly.” Oliver swung his arms wide as he continued to pace.

Aaron waited, but nothing more came. “Exactly what?”

“Brimsbane knows his horses.” Oliver stopped and pointed at Aaron. “Did you know he asked me why my horses ran without blankets, and I didn’t even know what he was talking about?”

“I don’t care for sweating the horses.” Aaron lifted one shoulder and let it drop. “Wearing a winter traveling coat doesn’t make a man faster. Why would a horse be any different?”

Many of the methods he used on the horses in his charge were different from the normal ones, and both the stables he managed—including Oliver’s father’s—had shown increased success because of it. The care of horses and advancements in their training had long been a passion of Aaron’s.

Despite his closeness with Aaron, Oliver attended very few races and never expressed interest in his father’s racing stable. Before he’d fallen in love with the daughter of an avid horseman, Oliver had cared only that his horse looked good and was fit enough to carry him wherever he wanted to go.

Perhaps it was love that had finally sent Oliver over the edge of reasonableness. It had certainly wreaked havoc in Aaron’s life, and he wasn’t even the one experiencing it, thank goodness.

Aaron didn’t have anything to offer a woman. At best he dallied on the fringes of polite society. At worst he was an outcast. Far better for Aaron to keep his circle of friends small and tight so his situation affected as few people as possible.

If only those few people would stop falling in love and expanding the circle. Each and every one of them had gone through a period of acting a complete fool because of their love-addled brains.

None had recovered from the malady with sanity intact.

“Forget about Brimsbane, at least for the moment.” *Hopefully forever.* “Let’s discuss the agreement with Davers.”

Oliver winced and blew out a long breath before relaying to Aaron the details of the challenge. “Might he agree to a postponement?”

“Oh, most assuredly,” Aaron said dryly, “but not before ensuring that everyone in Cambridgeshire, Suffolk, and Essex knew you’d reneged.”

It was possible that had been Davers’s plan all along. The man had a history of trying to tap a weakness in Aaron’s employers in order to mar Aaron’s reputation. If Oliver canceled the challenge, everyone would assume it was because Aaron didn’t think he could win. He’d tried to fire Hughes quietly, but if Davers somehow knew Aaron had no jockey . . .

Regardless of the method or motivation, Aaron’s carefully and strategically cultivated reputation was in danger. The small foundation he’d managed to build himself would crack. One crack would lead to another, and in little time at all, he’d become exactly what his father had told him he would be: nothing.

Aaron couldn’t—wouldn’t—tell Oliver that. He never admitted his fears aloud to anyone. Ever.

Besides, guilt would wrack the man if he knew Aaron’s concerns, and he might try to correct the disaster with an even more foolish decision. Oliver and Graham, the viscount who made up the third member of their boyhood trio, had sacrificed enough for Aaron as it was. Their friendship had inspired him to hope. He wouldn’t repay them by inspiring worry—or worse, pity.

Oliver ran his hand through his hair and resumed pacing. “We have to run the race.”

“Yes.” Knowing he couldn’t stop what had already been set in motion, Aaron turned his mind to potential solutions. Newmarket was the heart of English racing. Jockeys abounded in the area.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t think of anyone who met even his two essential criteria and would be willing to ride for him this close to the October Meetings. Jockeys worked closely with their horses, and the decent ones had all been hired long ago. They wouldn’t want to jeopardize those positions by agreeing to run for Aaron. Though superb, his reputation was fragile, and no one wanted to be the jockey at the helm when the ship finally crashed.

Either God thought Aaron needed another lesson in perseverance, or the world wanted him to remember his proper place—or rather his lack of one.

Existential issues notwithstanding, tomorrow morning Aaron would be expected on the Heath with a horse and rider at the starting post.

He sighed. “I suppose we could use a groom.” It would likely mean losing the challenge. Aaron’s stomach burned. He’d lost his share of official races, of course, but he’d never lost a personal challenge.

Mostly because he never accepted one he didn’t know he could win.

And while a loss would undermine his reputation, missing the race altogether would destroy it.

“The grooms are all excellent riders.” Oliver smiled, unsurprisingly unaware that anything aside from the money wagered might be lost during this race.

“You know I wouldn’t hire a man who didn’t ride well or treat a horse correctly,” Aaron grumbled. That didn’t make them good jockeys, though. Stable work tended to require stronger, larger men, which wasn’t the ideal build for a jockey.

Oliver’s smile fell, and he resumed pacing. “A loss won’t look good to Brimsbane or Lord Gliddon.”

Aaron narrowed his eyes at his friend. “I do hope once you’re married you give more concern to how your wife feels about you instead of her brother and father. I didn’t haul your lovesick foolish self from London to court the earl.”

“Rebecca loves me.” Oliver frowned.

“Precisely.” The calmness Aaron held with an iron grip shattered, and he stepped forward to grip his friend by the shoulders and give him a slight shake. “She loves you. Since the betrothal has been announced and you aren’t going to live with Lord and Lady Gliddon after the wedding, what are you worried about?”

“You don’t understand.” Oliver shook his head and looked away.

No, Aaron would never understand. He'd seen caring families and had, at times, craved one of his own, but in his experience, family was nothing but shameful responsibility. His father considered him an example to hold before his real son to show that choices had ramifications.

"Explain it to me, then." Aaron's voice was hard, not because he was frustrated with Oliver but because there were going to be consequences, possibly dire ones, and Aaron intended to take the brunt of them. Graham and Oliver were the only people who had ever chosen to be in Aaron's life despite his less than noble beginnings. The least he could do was protect Oliver in return.

"I love Rebecca," Oliver said softly as he broke away from Aaron and paced again.

"We established that."

"I didn't propose in London."

"As I'm well aware." Aaron had only visited London a few times during the Season, but he'd seen how Lady Rebecca's popularity had paralyzed his friend, despite the indications that she reciprocated his feelings.

"You had to drag me here from London and kick me in the backside to act before I lost her." Oliver shoved his hand through his hair again.

"Again, I am aware."

"Yes, well—" Oliver cleared his throat—"so are they."

Aaron frowned. "Is she—"

"No," Oliver cut in sharply before sighing. "She understands. Lord Gliddon . . . well . . . I don't believe he'd have given his blessing if Rebecca hadn't forced him to. I don't think he likes me."

"Everyone likes you, Oliver."

"That doesn't mean he respects me."

The truth of that statement silenced Aaron. Lady Rebecca saw the man's faults as well as his virtues and loved him anyway, but to someone who didn't take the time to get to know him, Oliver could look something of a cake.

“I thought if I took an interest in the stable, won a few races, that would be something Lord Gliddon could appreciate.”

Aaron clenched his jaw to keep the words in his head from rushing through his mouth. If Oliver had enlisted Aaron’s help, it would have been simple to teach him the right things to say and do to appear a proper horseman. But what was done was done.

“Don’t worry,” Aaron said, swallowing hard to keep the burn in his stomach from crawling up his throat. “I’ll find another rider.” Somewhere.

Oliver’s shoulders lost their tension, and he smiled, obviously content that Aaron would handle everything.

Before Aaron said something to crush his friend’s ease, he mounted Shadow and pointed the horse toward Cambridge. While he wouldn’t be spending the day leisurely strolling through the fair, he still had to make the final arrangements on his order.

Besides, there wasn’t a better place to ponder a problem than on the back of a horse. By the time he returned to Newmarket, he’d have a plan in mind, if not in place.

As the horse walked by the Heath, Aaron looked over the expanse of grass that had been his restoration. Hopefully it wouldn’t soon be the site of his humiliation as well.