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HAROLD ROBBINS

AND JUNIUS PODRUG



BLOOD ROYAL

“Harold Robbins is a master!” *Playboy*

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A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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BLOOD ROYAL

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A Forge Book

Published by Tom Doherty Associates, LLC

175 Fifth Avenue

New York, NY 10010

www.tor.com

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ISBN-13: 978-0-765-34722-0

ISBN-10: 0-765-34722-9

First edition: September 2005

First mass market edition: October 2006

Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

1

*Once upon a time, in a kingdom far away . . .
I was nineteen years old when I was asked to become the
next queen.*

*I rode through the streets in a glass coach to the cheers
of thousands on my wedding day.*

*And it's true that I have two older sisters, a wretched
stepmother, and that I was scrubbing the floor in the
kitchen when the call came from the prince.*

*People called it a fairy tale when a teenage girl with a
poor education, whose only work experience had been
babysitting, became the Princess of Wales and would
someday become, by the Grace of God, Queen of the
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
and of her other realms and territories, Head of the Com-
monwealth, and Defender of the Faith.*

*Six months after that ride in the glass coach and a wed-
ding televised to the entire planet, I threw myself down a
stairway soon after I became pregnant with the future king.*

*I had fallen through that thin line between dreams and
nightmares.*

Now as I stared at myself in the dressing mirror, a ma-

ture woman with pale features drawn by tension, my knees shook as I took a gun and put it in the small bag that hung from my wrist.

I didn't hear the maid enter as I was fumbling the gun into the little bag.

"Your Royal Highness, I beg your pardon—"

"What?" I said, startled. I held the gun close to me, concealing it with my dress.

"The—the cream you sent me for—" she stammered.

"Put it on the counter and leave."

The woman put the jar of makeup on the dressing table. Her face was flushed.

I stopped her before she went out the door. "Please remember what I told you. My husband is not to be told I've arrived. Nor is anyone else. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She flew out the door. I knew what she was thinking, that the princess was acting erratic again. "Hot and Cold," I once overheard a staff member call me while talking to another employee, because of those mood shifts the tabloids all say I have. That's where I find out about myself, not from family and friends, but from what's been reported in the tabloids.

I wondered if the snotty little bitch of a maid lied about not telling the prince that I was here. I'd always known that the staff has worked against me. I made many mistakes and one of them was trying to be friendly to the help. The servants respected His Royal Highness and the toadies who hung around him and treated them like footstools—but they were appalled at me for popping into the kitchen to grab a sandwich and chat with them. It had never happened before. Familiarity does breed contempt.

After the door swung shut, I ran for the bathroom, dropping the gun on the floor. I didn't make the loo but threw up in the sink. It wasn't the bulimia this time, I hardly had anything in my stomach. It was my raw nerves. My skin was clammy. As I leaned over the sink I got a rush of cold chills, then a hot sensation crawled up my legs and back. I

held on to the sink for support as the burning nausea spread from my toes to my brain and I teetered on the edge of passing out. I slowly slid down to the floor and sat with my back against the wall. The tears came, as they always do when these attacks come. In the haze, I thought about the gun lying on the floor of the other room.

Good work, they find you passed out with a gun nearby and they really will lock you up.

As I talked to myself, my thoughts went to my two boys. Tears came that I couldn't stop. What would they think? What would people tell them about their mother? They needed to understand that I wasn't crazy, that it was the situation that was insane, that things were so confusing for me, sometimes my thoughts spun like a merry-go-round.

How could I explain that there are horrors that are far worse than murder?

I had to go on. I got to my feet. My knees were still wobbly, but I stood up straight and leaned on the counter for support. I took deep breaths until the room stopped moving and stared at the face in the mirror, pale, drawn from worry, eyes puffy from crying. "The fairy-tale princess isn't doing too well," I told the reflection.

I blew my nose and rinsed my face with water, but there was no way I would be able to get rid of the redness around my eyes. I got my feet moving and went back into the dressing room. I knelt to pick up the gun, not daring to bend over for fear the nausea would hit again.

As I went back to the mirror to put the finishing touches on my face and my costume, I heard my husband's hunting dogs baying outside. I knew it was just the pack giving out their last volley before they were placed in the kennels for the night, but the sound reminded me of stories I'd heard about dogs howling over the body of their dead master. People say animals can sense things beyond human experience. I shuddered.

I hurried with my costume, wishing I could have the maid help me, but I could not take the risk. I was not expected to attend the prince's annual costume ball after the

fox hunt at Cragthorpe. Everyone knew—at least everyone who read the tabloids, and that was just about everyone—that I hated fox hunts. What does a poor little fox feel when the dogs get to it, when they rip its guts and throat—*what does a man feel when a bullet rips through his heart—*

Terrible upheaval in my stomach rose again and I rushed back to the sink and dry-heaved. I had been alternating between dry-heaving and vomiting all day, eating only a little food in order to have something to throw up because it hurt so bad when it seemed like only my insides were going to be wretched out.

When I came out I sat down on the vanity stool and thought about what I had to do. What would people think? How would the world judge me? Would they understand that the fairy tale became a nightmare, that love turned to hate, that everyone has a breaking point?

Thinking about my husband brought a poem from Byron to mind.

When we two parted,
In silence and tears,
Half broken-hearted
To sever for years,
Pale grew thy cheek and cold,
Colder thy kiss . . .

Colder thy kiss.

Isn't that the truth. I used to joke that my sleeping companion on trips with my husband was a vibrator. That's how it went, the other woman, all over my husband like a bad rash while I held a vibrator.

Frankly, I was tired of being the discarded wife who had to look on while her husband told another woman he wished he were a tampon so he could always be inside her. Imagine my horror when I found out that my fairy-tale prince was recorded saying that over the phone to a married woman.

I was not Mother Teresa. I am a *woman*, with the same

needs, desires, and even lusts as other women. Men may need to just get it off, but women need cuddling and romance. Living in a palace and being married to a prince didn't mean I don't sometimes need my ego stroked and my clit caressed. It didn't mean that I don't need to let my hair down and let the slut come out of me once in a while. You could not put me on a shelf in a room full of medieval armor and Ming vases and expect that I will curtsy to queen and country every time you take me off the shelf and wind me up.

People have wondered about my romantic frustrations, but you know, royalty has a protocol for everything, even making love. A word of caution for women out there who fantasize about marrying a prince—never marry a man you have to call “sir” until your wedding day, and thereafter having to walk down the hallway to his room on those nights scheduled for coitus, pretending to the spying servants that you're not horny, but just have a need to talk about matters of state.

And never engage in “coitus”—it just isn't as satisfying as good, old-fashioned lovemaking.

Do you know what separate bedrooms do to romance? They said I'm a silly girl who read romantic drivel, those Barbara Cartland stories of women and men who come together in passionate embrace. Maybe I did read romances rather than philosophical tomes, but none of the lovers in those books have separate bedrooms—and *they live happily ever after*. Maybe if—

No, it was too late for all that, there were no more “ifs.” I was so tired of wishing and wanting, of hoping things would change. And tired of protocol, sick to my marrow of being a fixture in the institution of royalty. . . . I wished I could have puked out that part of my life and flushed it down the loo, too.

All I ever asked was to be treated like a woman, not a piece of palace furniture.

Now there was only one way out.

I completed my outfit, a pirate's costume, Blackbeard,

or Bluebeard, or whoever the old-time buccaneer was. I selected the pirate's garb because the antique pistol I took from my husband's collection went nicely with it.

It was a pretty little gun, small and clever like a toy, but what made it real was the weight and grip. It wasn't really an antique; it fired a regular bullet rather than black powder and a ball. But it was an historic piece—the mistress of the Duke of Orleans had shot the duke with it when she learned the duke had taken another mistress. I had chosen the weapon carefully, certain that the tabloid press would easily find an analogy to the situation that I faced with the other woman crowding my marriage.

I'd fired a gun before. All of the royals were given training by the Royal Protection Service, firing the same sleek and modern weapons that police and terrorists use. The idea is to be able to pick up a gun that's fallen on the ground during a terrorist attack and use it. All I really got out of the lessons was which way to point the gun and where the trigger was, but that was all you really needed because they taught me not to aim but simply to point and pull the trigger.

That was all I had to do tonight, I told myself, just point and pull the trigger—the weapon would do whatever else was necessary.

I slipped the gun into the waistband and surveyed myself in the mirror. I didn't look like a very terrifying pirate, but like a tall, slender blonde, a young thirty-something, mother of two, features drawn, emotions ready to burst, a woman undergoing physical and mental distress. And I saw something else, a look in my eyes, I thought, a bit of the feminine feral, that wild, preternatural glint a woman gets when she can't take any more.

Thoughts started crowding my head again about my two boys, the oldest a young teen. What would they think? How would they handle it?

Tears welled in my eyes and I took deep breaths. *One step at a time*, I told myself. *Just take one step at a time and you can conquer the world.* I kept that silly thought in my

mind as I left the dressing area and went into the bedroom.

I hated rooms like this, twenty-foot-high ceilings, gilt molding, elaborate murals, furniture made before King George was fighting the American colonies. It wasn't *like* living in a museum, it *was* living in a museum. Modern heating was hidden in the walls, but it was still a cold place. It would be cold to me even in the middle of a heat wave because the coldness came from the institutional nature of the place. Royalty was an institution. Royal marriages were an institution. There was nothing personal and passionate about institutions. I wasn't attached to anything in the room—nor to the furniture in any of “my rooms” at any of “my homes.” That's why the prince carried his childhood teddy bear with him—even when he traveled or seasonally changed homes. He had never known anything but the institutional life of royalty, and that little stuffed toy represented a tiny speck of normalcy.

Cragthorpe was a duke's country estate, one of those extensive properties that came with the title Prince of Wales. When we were in residence, this was *my* bedroom. Not *our* bedroom. I know, this bedroom thing was really caught in my craw. None of those toady courtiers who hung around my husband had bothered to tell me before we were married that we would have *separate* bedrooms. And nothing I had imagined prepared me for it—certainly nothing in my “literary” education based upon romance novels. As a teenager, and then as a young woman barely more than a girl as I rode in a glittering carriage to St. Paul's Cathedral, I had fantasized about love, about having my own “Prince Charming.” In those daydreams my nights were warm and intimate as I lay in the arms of my lover, naked unto each other, soul mates, his heat firing mine, our love becoming volcanic . . . nowhere in those magic moments did I ever imagine *separate* bedrooms. I often wondered if the servants kept track of the number of nights my husband traipsed down the hall to my bedroom—and vice versa. Did they have betting pools about how many times a month we did it?

I pushed myself to the bedroom door one step at a time,

and opened it. The air in the hallway felt cold against my feverish skin. I heard sounds from the party below where eight hundred guests were gathered for an old-fashioned "hunt" dinner while cameras beamed the event to millions. Even without the gun tucked in my waistband, I would be tense. Few people realized how frightened I was of the public appearances I had to make, how strange and terrifying it still was when I appeared in public with thousands shouting my name, to have a hundred hands reaching for me, dozens of camera flashes hitting me. I was really not sure what sparked the public outburst of enthusiasm wherever I went, but I suspected that it was because people believed I was living a life that they'd only dreamed of. Of course, those people had little understanding of my life, they didn't know how utterly boring and stifling life was as an exhibit piece in a museum.

This time it was going to be even more frightening to face an audience. This time I had a gun.

The grand stairway that no manor house would be without was at the end of the corridor, a sweeping path with a gnarled oak banister down to the Great Hall. I loved hardwood banisters, so warm and strong, so enduring. Walking down the stairs, my hand running along the banister, feeling its strength, was one of the small pleasures I found in living in museums. I was once accused of sliding down a banister in Buckingham Palace. It was the same stairway I used the first time I hurt myself when I was crying out for understanding.

I went along the corridor in a daze. A servant was posted at the top of the stairs to make sure that guests did not make their way up to the royal rooms, but I didn't notice him until he greeted me. I was sick, terribly ill, with an almost overwhelming desire to run back to the loo and vomit.

I had to stop and hang on to the banister for a moment when my mind took flight and my knees turned to jelly. Thoughts of my boys kept popping into my head and I had to fight them back because I knew I would collapse if I let

my emotions escape the tight rein I had on them. The boys were at school. And they would be well cared for. The queen would take them into seclusion. Their grandmother was the wealthiest and most powerful woman on earth. The boys would want for nothing. *Except love.*

“May I announce Your Royal Highness?”

I stared blurry-eyed at the servant posted at the bottom of the stairway. It took a moment for him to come into focus. “No, no, I want to surprise my husband.”

I kept myself going, one step at a time, but the dread was making my feet drag. Music came from the balcony, a Melbourne symphony on tour of the “old country” and roped in for a free royal command performance that they would probably later use in their advertising. Being a Royal was much about promoting the country’s products. No one told me before I married a Royal that Cinderella had to be concerned about where her glass slippers were manufactured.

As I got closer to the balcony doors and the party noise and music got louder, a merry-go-round of thoughts spun in my head—I saw my husband at our wedding in his magnificent uniform, saw him across the table from me at so many dinners when he was reproachful and unsympathetic about my “condition,” saw him surrounded by those cronies who curried royal favor and were always all over him like a bad rash, saw him in the arms of that woman. . . .

Is it right? Am I the crazy one? I fought back my fears and doubts and kept moving forward, forcing my feet along. A blur of people were on the patio, with the orchestra off to my right. I kept my eyes straight ahead.

He was standing next to the balcony railing, looking down at the boars that were being barbecued over a huge bed of coals. His costume was black, from boots to hat, with a black mask over his face. Black Bart, the English highwayman. It was the costume my dresser told me he’d be wearing. Even with the mask, his ears made him recognizable.

One of the toadies next to him was pouring champagne off the balcony and onto the boars roasting. Cheers came

from the guests spread out on the lawn as \$1,000-a-bottle champagne splashed on the cooking meat. When you are rich enough, you don't think about the inappropriateness of showing off with expensive champagne at a charity ball.

Bright light from the television crew momentarily blinded me. I squinted and kept my eyes locked on him. One of his friends nudged him and gestured in my direction and my husband turned, starting at my approach.

I heard my name and realized it was the TV announcer off to my left speaking into his mike, telling the audience that there was a surprise appearance by the Princess of Wales. I didn't need a lip reader or crystal ball to know what thought jumped into the head of the prince's cronies the moment they saw me: *There she is again, being erratic, saying she wasn't attending and then suddenly showing up.*

I stared at my husband. There are moments in life in which it seems like time stands still—the moment I was married, the first time I made love, the birth of my children. I suppose it has something to do with an adrenaline rush that captures your mind, your whole existence, at that moment.

My heart thumped in my chest and my ears filled with a roar as panic and terror shot adrenaline through me. I fumbled getting the gun out of my wrist purse and nearly dropped it.

One of his friends, that toady bastard who had been leading the campaign to discredit me, laughed and said something to him. I heard a little of what he said through the roar in my head, something about "Maybe she's going to kill you," and my husband laughed with his friends.

I was ten feet away when I stuck the gun out, not aiming but pointing it as I'd been taught.

He grinned at the gun and spoke to me.

I don't know exactly what he said, something about how real the gun looked. I pulled the trigger and the world exploded. The bullet knocked him backward, his champagne glass flying out of his hand, his body twisting as he fell to the floor.

As my world spun out of control someone was beside me, grabbing my gun hand, propping me up as my knees collapsed.

Behind me I heard the television announcer's shocked voice.

"The princess has shot the Prince of Wales!"

2

❖

Old Bailey, London

Anthony Trent, Q.C., lead defense barrister in the case of *Regina vs. Princess of Wales*, came out of the courthouse and paused at the top of the steps in the glare of TV and news camera lights. Beside Trent was another member of the defense team, a grizzled elder rock of justice, Lord Douglas Finfall, Lord Chief Justice, retired.

Standing behind the princess's barrister, awaiting his turn to face the worldwide news media coverage of a legal case that would have driven a World War off the front pages, was the Crown Prosecutor. Above all the commotion at street level, on the dome high atop Old Bailey, the home of London's central criminal courts, stood the golden statue of Justice, armed with sword and scales.

Trent, tall, distinguished, in the wig and robe required of the English trial lawyers called barristers, wore an "old school tie" beneath the black robe. Black-haired with a sprinkle of gray showing at the temple, at fifty he was fit, successful, and conveyed just a hint of the smugness that sometimes glowed from members of the British "Establishment."

Nothing in his long career or even his imagination had prepared him for the day he would represent a royal defendant in a murder case that held the attention of the world. But being very reserved in the uniquely British manner, he did not convey to the outside world his elation at having his

image and name broadcast daily to just about everywhere on the planet.

He knew Lord Finfall hated having to be his standby as the media feeding frenzy focused on a mere barrister, and it gave him secret delight to be one up on the gray-haired, rock-jawed justice who had more than once interrogated him in the past when he had appeared before the high court for oral arguments.

Trent paused, letting his eyes adjust to the lights that glared in the gloom of a gray London late afternoon. Questions would be shouted at him from any number of newspeople, but his public relations person had already posted several reporters up front and those were the ones he would respond to.

"Is it true that the princess is planning to enter an insanity plea to save the nation the trauma of a trial?" was the first question.

"The princess's options are still being assessed," Trent said.

Both the question—and Trent's response—had been arranged. Trent's spiel was that the princess was aware that the case constituted a matter of grave national concern. His reply was intentionally noncommittal, neither answering the question nor shutting the door on the issue.

As Trent gave the response the defense team had worked out, a BBC reporter awaiting her turn to ask a question pressed her earphone closer. "What?" she asked, her question relayed back through the mini-mic clipped to the top of her blouse. Hearing the same information again, she shook her head. "My God!"

The BBC reporter stepped forward, interrupting the planned sequence of questions that Trent's defense team had arranged. "Is it true that the princess has hired an American lawyer to assist in her defense?"

The question had the effect of a pistol shot. A moment of stunned silence. Trent, a practiced trial lawyer who was used to thinking on his feet, was caught completely by surprise. "Nonsense," he said. He couldn't think of anything

to say and the denial simply fell out of his mouth.

The BBC reporter pressed the earphone against her ear again.

"It's coming over the wires," she told Trent. "The princess has hired the Burning Bed lawyer to represent her."

3



A knight in shining armor and panty hose . . .

Marlowe James, Esq. was seated in the first-class section of a London flight, with Greenland looking like a colossal iceberg forty thousand feet below, when she caught the action in the seats across the aisle from her. It was late, the wee hours before dawn, the cabin lights were dimmed, but there was no doubt about it—the man and woman across the way were getting it off.

A thirty-nine-year-old trial attorney with a reputation for winning, Marlowe wasn't shocked by the idea that the two people were enjoying each other on a plane seat. To the contrary, it grabbed her attention. Ordinarily she would have had three words to describe sex play on an airplane: *tacky tacky tacky*. But this time it stirred something in her—a prurient interest. And memories of her own explosions of desire. Her husband and she had enjoyed each other more than once as subtly—and dangerously—as this couple were, but that happened long ago, at a time before their marriage and lives crashed and burned.

She snuggled under her blanket with her earphones on and pretended to sleep while she watched the action out of the corner of her eye. They were being very discreet. *No one but an old pro at dangerous liaisons would recognize it*, she thought.

The couple looked a few years younger than her, maybe in their mid-thirties, she thought. Could be they were

lawyers, too, or doctors? They both had a professional look to them, as opposed to businesspeople or the idle rich. The man had the window seat and the woman the aisle, within a few feet of Marlowe. Like her, both had their airline blankets pulled up to their necks. They were married—the woman had a wedding ring and a not-too-ostentatious diamond engagement ring.

It was both the movements under the blankets and their body language that tipped her off that they were masturbating each other. She had seen his hand sneak across to the woman earlier. While pretending she wasn't looking, Marlowe could see the slight movement in the blanket in the woman's lap area that exposed the fact he had his hand between her legs. Her pumping movement in his lap area was slightly more noticeable.

But it was really their faces that gave it away. His face was rigid as he tried to suppress a grin, hers was flushed, her cheeks warm, eyes closed, her breathing slow and deliberate as she struggled to pretend she wasn't experiencing erotic pleasure.

Marlowe found herself getting aroused. She also shared a seat with a man. She sat in the aisle seat and to her right was a conservatively dressed gentleman with short-cropped salt-and-pepper hair. She had always wondered if a man's pubic hair turned gray when the hair on his head did, but didn't think it would be polite to ask. Instead, she thought about what it might be like to have the man make love to her. He wasn't a Cary Grant type, the unrealistic standard by which she judged older men. And there was no doubt in her mind of how she would have reacted if the king of sophistication had approached her—gray pubic hair or not, she would simply have torn off her clothes and spread herself out for him.

Giving a sideways glance at the man beside her again, she decided he wasn't her type. Not an iota of Cary Grant there. He wasn't a sensuous man, but very much a businessman, his mind and soul into matters of commerce rather than the heart. And if Marlowe was anything, she