

THE WAR IS OVER...
FOR EVERYONE BUT HIM



THE
RETURN
OF THE KING'S
RANGER

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the King's
Ranger

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The Return of the King's Ranger
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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2019

Paperback Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0234-6

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0224-7

Published in the United States of America

What People are Saying

I felt as though I was in this small family, in this big war. I truly have a loss for words to describe how this book read for me. All I can say is that anyone can pick this book up, and they will fall in love with the book. They will want more. I want more. ~ Bibliophile Reviews for *The Scarlet Coat*

The Scarlet Coat...is captivating in the dilemmas it presents, in the characters it introduces, and in the romance it embraces. The history of the era becomes personal and dimensional, and there are moments so wrought with tension that it takes your breath away. ~ Reading is my Superpower Reviews

1

Mohawk Valley, July 1785

Up and down, up and down, Nora Reid plunged the dash in the butter churn, trying hard to not think about how the motion followed the pattern of her life. The monotony of it. She looked at the book propped open on her lap. *Robinson Crusoe*. Twenty-eight years on a small island and his life read much more interesting than hers ever would.

With a sigh, she tapped the book closed and set it on the edge of the table.

It wasn't as though she expected much out of her life—and she'd rather not be stranded on a tropical island. She loved her family, community, and everything about this valley, but she still dreamed of something more.

Voices mumbled at the back of the cabin. One distinctly masculine...but not Papa or even Daniel. Nora slowed the dash, curiosity overcoming the desire to finish churning the butter so she could visit her nieces today. The voices continued, but though she strained, she still couldn't make out what was said.

Nora released the long pole of the dash and slipped out the door into the embrace of a warm summer afternoon. Circling around the cabin, she ran her fingertips over the weathered logs forming the walls. She shouldn't be sneaking up on whoever was speaking, but most likely their conversation was casual and not one she'd be excluded from. All the same, her pulse sped as she neared the voices and the words became clearer. She usually didn't spy on her sister, but that was definitely Rose's voice. And what sounded like a suitor.

"Why will you not allow me to speak with your father?" His low tones were crisp with frustration.

"Because Levi already spoke with him not two weeks ago. That's what I have been trying to tell you."

"Levi Acker? Your pa gave him permission, didn't he? And what about you? Did you say yes?"

"He's not asked me yet, though I suspect he shall. Soon." Rose released a long sigh. "I...did not expect this."

Boots shuffled against the ground, but not in any particular direction. "It's not been easy to find opportunity. How was I to know you would even consider me—that I would not appear a fool?"

"Sam, I could never think you a fool."

Sam? Nora pulled back from the corner of the cabin. Of course, that's who the voice belonged to. Samuel Cunningham had always silently admired her little sister. She could think of no one she would prefer for Rose, but Levi Acker would not take rejection very kindly after she'd led him this far.

Not that it was any of Nora's concern. She really needed to get back to making butter.

She only made it one step.

"So where does that leave us?" Samuel asked.

"I need time," came Rose's sad reply. "I must be fair to Levi. If I shifted my affections so abruptly, they would think me fickle and childish. I have always been the baby, with four older siblings to put me in my place. I cannot rush this."

"Can you give me any hope that this will resolve in my favor?"

"How about this?" Rose's voice smiled and then elapsed into silence. Long drawn-out silence.

Nora stole a peek around the corner to see Rose's arms draped around Samuel's neck, her eyes closed as her lips moved slowly against his. Nora wanted to smile, but the corners of her mouth seemed paralyzed. Instead, a familiar ache grew within, a longing for something she'd never experienced, never enjoyed, in all her twenty and four years.

A quick withdrawal took her back to the butter churn, but it was hard to put any strength behind the plunge and turn of her movements with the dash. *Poor Rose*. Her pity roiled with a sprinkle of resentment. Two good men bidding for her love and her hand. Was it wrong to be a little jealous? Or even frightened at the prospects of soon being left in her parents' home, becoming an old maid, never experiencing romance or motherhood?

"My own fault." If she hadn't been so choosy. As the fighting had ceased across New England and the rest of the colonies, men had come to the valley, or passed through. Several tried for her heart, but she'd not been practical back then. She'd wanted something special, something with a little fire in it. Something like her brother Daniel enjoyed with his wife. Or Joseph Garnet and Hannah Cunningham, their nearest

neighbors. Even their pastor, an ex-British officer, and Rachel Garnet shared a sweeping romantic tale.

But waiting for romance was a fool's game.

The door swung wide, and Nora brushed a hand over her moist cheeks before she glanced at Rose—almost six years her junior. Susannah, the sister between them, was married and enjoyed being the mother of a robust baby boy. Daniel had two beautiful girls.

"Are you feeling well?"

At Rose's question, Nora forced a smile and a nod. "Of course." She had no real reason to be unhappy. She'd made her choices, chosen her path, put romance before security and a family of her own. She'd gambled and lost.

"You are sure you're not becoming ill?"

"I merely..." But she had no excuse, only the need to escape the confines of this cabin and its walls that seemed to close in around her more every day. "Could you finish the butter? It's churned most of the way. I told Lydia I'd bring her more of Mama's yeast start." And return her book.

Rose's eyes widened. "She's ruined hers again?"

Nora shrugged and hurried to the yeast crock. She should not have said anything. "Lydia is very busy with the girls."

"I know, but sometimes I wonder what she was thinking to follow Daniel out here."

Nora never wondered that. "She loves Daniel." Enough to leave comforts, family, and a pampered life behind in South Carolina for a New York wilderness. Real love. Nora frowned at her little sister who, moments earlier, had been in a man's embrace. How did she not understand love? Or was that the reason

for Rose's hesitation? Maybe she didn't love Samuel or Levi.

"If I am late returning home, will you help Mama with supper?" Nora needed time to clear her head.

"If you take my evening milking."

"Very well." Nora preferred milking to cooking anyway. She collected *Robinson Crusoe* from the table and started to the door.

The sun greeted Nora along with a soft breeze. A beautiful day. Yet she didn't feel it. She couldn't push aside the melancholy that had dragged her steps for months. She'd hoped it was the long, cold winter, but spring had come and gone...and she felt worse.

Nora filled her lungs and quickened her pace. She'd go directly to her brother's farm and then take her time with the return, maybe follow the river back. Oh, how she loved the Mohawk River, the rush of its current that almost had the strength to steal her disappointments away. Some days, she was tempted to follow the river far away from this valley where life never changed.

~*~

Ash. Everything was gone. The barn. The cabin. Charred remains overgrown with grass and weeds. Myles Cunningham tugged the leather patch from his right eye so he could see properly. It was not like anyone would come upon him here, and even if they did, they'd know him by association to his childhood home if nothing else. The question was what they would do to him if recognized. The Continental Army

had ordered his death, but the war was over. The British had gone home.

If only he could.

But nothing remained. Not Pa—he'd been killed in battle against the rebels residing in this valley. From what he'd been told, Mama was dead, too, along with little Miriam. Who could say that hadn't also been Hannah's and Samuel's fate?

Myles kicked what remained of the fireplace, sending stones toppling...just like the war had done to his life. Except he wasn't a stone. He didn't know how to roll away, or how to remain solid and unmarred after being hurled. Instead, he was left raw and bleeding inside.

Myles backed away from the heaps of charcoal. He should never have returned to the Mohawk Valley. This place had rejected his family and sealed their fates.

"Let's go." He tugged on the reins of the old, half-blind gelding he'd traded the last of his wages for. Ugliest thing on four legs with one blue eye and a white blaze covering over half its head, but the nag had spared him a long walk. Maybe he'd go north again. There was plenty of territory along the Great Lakes he hadn't yet searched.

Unless his siblings were not to be found.

Myles trudged through the brush toward the river. The taste of ash clung to his throat, and his canteen hung empty from his saddle. He drank more now that he'd eaten the last of his meager supplies. Perhaps he'd pause his journey long enough to hunt. Or poach. He'd not risk himself or his pride by asking anyone in the valley for help, but taking a few eggs or some meat from a smokehouse could hardly be considered a sin.

These people had taken everything from his family.

Not that he gave much thought to sin...or God.

The woods gave way to the rocky bank of the Mohawk River, the rushing water beyond. And a woman. Myles froze in the shadows and tugged his eye patch back into place. The woman appeared young, shoes in hand, hem of her gown pulled almost to her knees. The river lapped at her pale calves. One of the Reid girls. Her long chestnut waves hung loose over her shoulders. A vision...and a kick in the gut.

The Reids were a fine New England family and as true to the rebel cause as any. Probably only one of the reasons they had kept their distance from him in the past. Of course, Fannie, the eldest, had eyes only for Joseph Garnet, a mutual neighbor. She had never once looked his way.

Myles gritted his teeth, but it was harder than it should've been to turn away.

Buckethead, the ornery beast, yanked on the reins, dropping his head and giving a low nicker.

Myles hurried to step back as two dark brown eyes leveled at him.

The woman gasped and dropped her hem. Then snatched it back up again out of the water. "Who are you?"

Myles touched the front corner of his old cocked hat. "Apologies, ma'am." He turned back into the woods.

"I did not expect anyone out here."

He glanced back—couldn't help himself. "Nor did I."

She studied him for a long moment before looking down at her soaked hem hovering just above the surface of the water. "I should..." She took a step

toward the shore.

"I'll be on my way."

He started to turn when a yelp was swallowed up in a splash. Myles spun around as the woman failed to right herself and pull her now saturated skirts from the river. Droplets ornamented her face, screwed up with a look of pain.

"What happened?"

"I twisted my ankle on a rock." She managed a faulty hobble toward dry land.

Myles held himself at bay. "What are you even doing out there?" Though now July, the river was still cold from the spring thaw.

"Never mind that. If you will not help me, then you might as well leave."

A groan rumbled deep in his chest as he looped the gelding's reins around the nearest tree branch. He jogged to the river's edge. The Reid girl just younger than Fannie had been a little more intrepid than the others.

"Wouldn't want you to get your boots wet." She winced with her next step, but her dark eyes challenged him.

"Not my fault you were insane enough to go into the river." He waded out to her. "Now what?"

She gripped his arm and looked up directly into his face, searching it as though that had been her intent all along. He'd forgotten she had also been the most curious of the Reid girls.

Myles fought not to look away from her silent interrogation. She wouldn't recognize him. There was no way. He'd been but a lad when they'd taken him away to be a slave for the rebels and their cause. Nine years had done more than add to his height and the

breath of his shoulders.

But what if she did see past all that?

"Come on." Looping his arms around her, he swept her up. No more searching his soul. Myles trudged back to shore before he realized he didn't know what to do with her. He should ride away and let her hobble home, but he couldn't. Besides, she personally had done nothing against him or his family. Only her pa.

"You can set me down here," she suggested.

Myles shook his head, returning to his horse.

"I assure you, I will be fine." A pretty blush rose to her cheeks.

The gelding shifted as Myles boosted her into the saddle. "Where do you live?" Not that he needed directions, unless she was no longer in her father's home. She was not much younger than him and likely married.

"You'll take me home?"

"Unless your ankle has already mended."

"No...no, it's still sore." Her lips curved in an upward direction, but not with a simple smile. This one held a degree of intrigue. "May I know your name?"

Myles cleared his throat from the sudden tightness. He'd already prepared a name from two men he had served with in case anyone should inquire. "Mathew Crawford."

Her smile spread. "Thank you, Mr. Crawford. I'm Nora Reid. And I am very pleased to make your acquaintance."

Of course, she was. She didn't know they'd already been well acquainted.

2

Lord, forgive me. Nora had never been more ashamed of herself. Had never found herself trapped by a lie before. And had never regretted one less.

She pushed her thoughts from her uninjured ankle and her deception to the man leading the ragged old mount. If she'd had any brain in her head, she'd have considered being afraid of him. Shaggy black hair hung to his shoulders, and his face was obscured by a beard and an eye patch. Most men traveling through the valley carried scars from the war, but there was a darkness about this one, a brooding. And yet there was something familiar about him as well. As though she were meant to know him.

"Tell me, Mr. Crawford, are you passing through or seeking land?" She studied the way his long coat swayed with each step. His boots looked ready to fall off his feet for wear. He had a strength to his movements, but also a stiffness. As though he were uncomfortable. She wished to see his face better. Despite the patch and beard, she could discern him to be a handsome man. Handsome and mysterious. What would make for a more perfect romantic tale?

"Don't mean to stay longer than I have to."

His words emptied over her like a pail of ice. Once again there was no romance or tale to be had. She'd been rash and foolish to delay him, and she wouldn't

make that mistake again. Perhaps she should simply confess that her ankle was fine and she hadn't really fallen. Her conscience would thank her though her dignity would not.

Better to let him ride away and worry about repentance later.

"Where are you bound?" She'd satisfy some of her curiosity before he delivered her home and rode away.

"Not sure."

"I suppose a man such as yourself has no attachments or reason to be destined for any specific place?"

No one...like a wife or fiancée?

His only answer was the ever-so-slight slump of his shoulders, but he kept a steady pace.

"I take it you've traveled a far piece already?"

"Is there any other way into this valley?" A growl conveyed his words. He shot her a glance.

"My apologies. I am not usually so inquisitive into the affairs of others."

"Good."

Nora opened her mouth to say something more but stopped herself. Obviously, he had no desire to converse with her. A wonder he'd even assisted her and offered her a ride. And yet, despite his rough exterior, there had been a gentleness about him when he'd swept her into his strong arms. Perhaps his bark was the only way he knew how to protect himself. But from what? A speckling of small scars extended from the edge of his eye-patch to his ear. What wounds marred his soul?

They broke through the brush onto the trail, and he paused to scan the area. Even after tugging the horse forward, he looked to be on high alert, as though

he expected something to pounce upon them from the brush along the trail. Perhaps a nervousness he carried from the war.

"Where did you fight?" Nora couldn't keep the question from slipping out.

"All over."

"My brother fought here in New York for three years, and then for a while in South Carolina."

A low grunt was the only reply.

"Do you not like South Carolina?"

"Never given it much thought."

"The Carolinas are a long ways from here. What regiment did you serve with?" She had no doubt he'd seen battle. The way he carried himself indicated a soldier.

"Do you mean to interrogate me?"

"Of course not. I for—"

He looked up at her with a hint of a smile on his mouth. If only it reached farther. His good eye remained dark, almost black, and carried such sorrow her heart ached for him.

"I'm sorry." Not for her loosened tongue but for the hurt he must have endured. Maybe she wasn't ready to be done with her foolishness yet. Maybe there was some way to convince him to stay a little longer. There had to be quite the story behind this mysterious man.

They walked a while longer in silence, his focus forward, the distance from home falling underfoot. "Down this trail." She indicated the wagon ruts leading to their cabin and land.

He nodded and redirected his horse.

Ahead, feathery smoke rose from the chimney. She had dawdled longer than she should have and supper

was probably already prepared. Hopefully Rose had held true to their agreement so she wouldn't owe Mama an apology.

What if...

Nora twisted enough to see the limp sack hanging beside a bedroll at the back of the saddle. How long had it been since Mathew Crawford enjoyed a hot meal, one with any substance? "I cannot express how grateful I am for your kindness," she started, "I wonder—"

Rose stepped out from the barn, pail in hand full of milk. Nora frowned. Was it truly so late in the day? Apparently, she owed more than one apology.

Her sister shuffled to a stop, eyes wide and frozen on the stranger.

Mathew glanced her way but continued toward the cabin without a word.

Rose veered in their direction. "Are you all right, Nora?"

"I am fine." She would not compound her deception by lying to her family...if she could help it.

Mathew wrapped the reins around the hitching pole and then reached for her.

"You must be new to our valley." Rose's eyes rounded and a smile spread on her face as Mathew looked at her, his motions stalling.

No. Rose already had two men chasing her. She couldn't take Mathew's attentions, too. Not that Nora held any claim to them. Or him. "Mr. Crawford is passing through and was kind enough to see me home."

"I see that. Will you sup with us, Mr. Crawford?"

Nora's heart sank. Now even that invitation had been taken from her. "I was about to ask him as

much." She set her hand on his arm to steal his gaze. "You would be most welcome to stay for supper."

Instead of looking at her, he stared at her hand, resting above his wrist. "I should be on my way."

"Nonsense." Rose shook her head at him. "You can pause long enough for a hearty meal and to tell us about yourself and your travels."

Mathew stiffened under Nora's touch. As much as the man needed a little more meat on his bones, he seemed quite intent on keeping his secrets.

~*~

Any desire Myles had for food was swept under the need to keep his true identity from them. They appeared to have no inkling of recognition—else they would have hardly invited him into their home—but how long before they saw past the years?

Nora's hand slid from his arm, but the sensation remained. Touch. When was the last time someone had touched him? More than just a brief handshake. Nine years of deprivation ached in his chest. He reached to help her down.

Without a word, she complied, placing both her hands on his shoulders as he lowered her to the ground. Thinking better of allowing her to walk on her sore ankle, he swept her up in his arms.

The surprise on her face quickly merged to a subtle smile—not as open and buoyant like her younger sister's, but equally becoming. Her arm stole around the back of his neck igniting the strangest feeling within him—a mixture of warmth and craving.

At the door, he tried to balance her weight so he could reach for the latch.

"Allow me."

He hitched her back into his arms, and she pushed the door open. Her mother stood by the fireplace basting a large slab of meat on a spit. The heady scent hit him like a boulder falling off a cliff, as did her questioning gaze. He ducked his head and plowed forward.

"Nora, what on earth has happened?"

"Nothing, Mama, I'm fine." She squirmed to get down from his arms, but he held tight until he reached a chair.

"And you are?" Mrs. Reid directed her questioning at Myles.

"Just delivering your daughter home, ma'am." He deposited Nora in the chair and twisted back to the door. The quicker he made his escape the better. His stomach felt hollowed out at the assault of mouth-watering aromas.

The younger sister stepped into the cabin with her pail of milk, blocking the exit. "Are you rushing off already, Mr. Crawford? Do stay."

"At least for supper," Nora said from behind. Her voice carried a plea. "Allow me to thank you for your kindness."

"What kindness was that?" Their mother moved around the table to get a better look at Nora. "Why are your skirts soaked? Did you fall in?"

"I...I was wading."

"Child, I wish you would stay away from that river. It's not safe with the banks still swollen."

Nora made no reply. Her eyes lowered, but they burned with a determination difficult not to admire.