

Runaway Hearts:
The Fire Between Us
A Historical Romance
By **Olivia Blair**

Chapter One

October 4, 1850

Belhaven Estate

Her back throbbed from staying straighter than it ever had before. They'd been at this for hours and she wasn't sure how much more she could withstand before she snapped. The more he spoke, the more resentment burned in her chest.

"You will marry him in a month, whether you want to or not." Her father barked at her. "You will not disgrace our family by having a child with Lord knows who and not marrying the one man willing to take you anyways."

The child—her child—who had led to her being restricted to the house for the last year. Even the slave quarters were further from the house than she was allowed to go.

"I'm grieving *my* child." Carolyn wrapped her arms around her torso, pain stabbing at her heart as she remembered how it felt to hold her son. "The child *he* forced onto me. I hardly recovered from birth when I lost Rowan."

"And you will not drag your feet on this anymore." Her father stood close to her, his finger in her face as he towered over her. "And you will not tell lies and besmirch the name of the only man willing to take a ruined woman." His voice shook with a barely contained rage.

"It's been a month, Carolyn, I've given you more than enough time to grieve the death of a child you never should have made." His eyes showed her a warning that he wouldn't dare speak aloud as he stepped back, fixing his collar. "Go make yourself presentable. Mr. Brigham will be here soon, and you will receive him properly."

His name sent a chill down her spine as a weight set heavily in her stomach.

"Yes, father." Carolyn nodded solemnly before making her way to her bedroom.

“There you are, Miss Carolyn.” Her ‘personal maid’, Charlotte, rushed to her side as she pushed the door open. “I was told to get you ready.”

Carolyn nodded, exhaling shakily. “Then, I suppose we should do as we’re told.”

Charlotte motioned to the dress she laid out. “Been getting things ready.” She smoothed the garment out on the bed. “Readied a bath too, if you’d like that first.”

“Thank you, Charlotte.” Carolyn offered a tense smile, moving towards the tub in the room. “He really seems to want me to make a good impression on Mr. Brigham today.”

Charlotte’s movements faltered when Carolyn spoke his name.

She moved to carefully help Carolyn undress. “Don’t sound like you want that, Miss.”

“I think we both know I don’t.” Carolyn pressed her lips into a thin line. “If I had my way, things would be very different.”

“I’m sure it would be wonderful, Miss.” Charlotte’s smile faltered as she helped Carolyn settle into the tub and began working the water through her hair.

“I understand why you call me that when there are other people around,” Carolyn tilted her head back to look at Charlotte, “but why do you call me that when we’re alone, Charlotte? I do still consider you my friend.”

Charlotte paused a moment. “I think you know why, Miss.” Her eyes darted to the door, holding their position just long enough for Carolyn to notice.

“He heard you, didn’t he?” Carolyn whispered, gently sitting her hand on Charlotte’s arm as she washed her. “Did he lay a hand on you?”

“Ain’t nothin’, Miss.” Charlotte’s eyes fell to the floor. “I should know my place by now.”

“Did he threaten you?” Carolyn leaned to look at her friend.

Charlotte shook her head, swallowing softly as she lowered her voice. “Miss...this is dangerous talk.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to overstep, Charlotte.” Carolyn sank into the water. “I just worry about you.”

The pair finished Carolyn’s bath in silence before Charlotte guided Carolyn out and helped to her dry off. Carolyn let out a soft hiss as a pain shot through her abdomen when she shifted. The pain still felt as fresh as it had right after she had Rowan.

“Miss, are you okay?” Charlotte moved the towel away.

“I’m alright. Seems I’m still tender.” Carolyn pressed her hand against her side gently.

Charlotte quickly helped Carolyn get dressed. An ache pulled at Carolyn’s abdomen as Charlotte tightened the corset against her back. Carolyn let out a shaky breath as her hand moved to feel her stomach through the corset.

A knock disturbed the pair; both turned to look at the door as it cracked open.

“Miss Carolyn, your father sent me to bring you down.”

“Very well then.” Carolyn nodded before following the older woman down to the entryway, where her father was waiting with Mr. Brigham.

Her heart sank lower with every step.

“Miss Carolyn, how wonderful it is for you to join us.” Mr. Brigham kissed her hand when she reached the men. “My boys cannot wait to meet their new mother.”

His words made the blood run cold in her veins. The widower—over twenty years her senior—had been trying to get her to marry him for the last few years.

“Mr. Brigham.” Carolyn pulled her hand away cautiously. “I hope your sons are doing well.”

“It’s *Edward*, my dear, I’ve told you that before.” He smiled but his eyes narrowed at her movement. “The boys are doing well.”

The trio moved to the sitting room, where her father and Mr. Brigham discussed her dowry and wedding preparations. Carolyn sat silently, staring at the wall with her hands folded in her lap. A smirk made its way onto Mr. Brigham’s face as he watched her.

After what felt like hours of conversing, the three moved to the dining room for dinner.

“I need more water.” Mr. Brigham said dryly. “How incapable are your slaves if they can’t keep my cup full, Charles?”

“They know better than that.” Her father rang a bell and the woman who had been serving them rushed over with a pitcher of water, refilling Mr. Brigham’s glass.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Brigham, sir.” She whispered, staring at the floor after refilling his cup.

“Sorry for your incompetence?” He snapped.

“She refilled your glass,” Carolyn glanced at his cup, refusing to raise her eyes to meet the gaze of either man. Her voice shook as she spoke. “There’s no harm done.”

“No harm done, huh?” Mr. Brigham chuckled. “If she can’t do her job, she needs to be taught a lesson. Isn’t that right, Charles?”

Her father nodded once.

Mr. Brigham stood and the sound of a sharp crack split the air, followed by the sound of water spilling filling the room.

The woman dropped to her knees, wiping the liquid up with her apron frantically.

Carolyn shut her eyes tight, flinching at the noise.

Her back tensed as the smell of tobacco and expensive cologne grew stronger.

Edward leaned to whisper in Carolyn's ear. "And if you think she doesn't need to learn, I will be teaching you many lessons throughout our marriage, *dear*."

Carolyn jerked her head to look at him, her nostrils flaring.

"I think it's time for me to go. I will be back in a week to check on my bride to be."

He straightened his back before turning away.

"Of course, Carolyn will see you out." Charles motioned towards Carolyn.

She rose at his words, following Mr. Brigham to the front door.

"Mind yourself when I return." He leaned close to Carolyn as he lowered his voice. "Don't make me remind you why I'm the only man who will accept you."

A shudder ran down her spine at his words. "Until then, Mr. Brigham."

She allowed him to take her hand, enduring the kiss he planted on the back of it with a grimace.

October 7, 1850

Rosemount Hall

The screams chilled his blood. It had been nearly a full day since his mother went into labor. Josiah had heard women give birth before but this felt different.

He waited anxiously near the door to the isolated shack.

Miriam, the closest thing they were allowed to a midwife, had been trying to keep her quiet throughout the day, but her screams still made it where the nearest farmhands could hear.

He rested his head against the wall, by the door his mother went silent and the wails of a newborn tore through the air.

Miriam opened the door to the shack. "Siah, you don't have long. The baby's healthy enough, but your ma's bad off...too far gone, I think."

She stepped to the side as Josiah rushed into the room, taking his mother's hand as he crouched by her side.

"Mama?" He whispered, brushing his fingers through her hair gently.

"Josiah, honey...take care of your brother." She gulped sharply, offering him a gentle smile. "Make sure he knows...nobody owns him."

Miriam carefully placed a baby, bundled in a worn old quilt into his arms. The child was just about the smallest thing Josiah had ever seen. The baby looked up at him with wide eyes.

His mother let out a strangled cough – falling still as Miriam rushed to her side.

Josiah felt his heart sink. "Is she..?" He didn't dare to finish the sentence.

"I'm sorry, Siah." Her voice was barely above a whisper.

The baby's cries filled the room, and Josiah rocked the squirming child in his arms.

He paced around the room slowly as he fought to keep the tears from spilling out.

Miriam stepped beside him, smoothing the quilt. "She named him Isaiah."

Josiah nodded slowly, his eyes slowly drifting to the bundle in his arms.

He took deep, slow breaths.

Isaiah squirmed in his arms, like he was trying to reach for Josiah.

He let out a soft noise before whispering to the baby. "Don't worry. I'll protect you with my life, Isaiah."

"You know what's coming, don't you?" Miriam frowned as she looked at him.

"Next?" His breath caught.

"I heard the overseer talking earlier." Miriam shifted nervously, wringing her hands in front of her. "When I was tending to her...overseer said it plain as day as he walked past. Said as soon as she passed, baby was as good as coin."

His blood ran cold. The walls felt like they were closing in around him.

Josiah looked down at Isaiah, his jaw working slowly. He knew what he had to do, but it could kill them. He had to run—*they* had to run.

"Siah, if you're planning what I think you're planning, you're not." Miriam's voice grew firm as she glanced out the door. "If you do," her voice dropped. "If you make it to Belhaven, rumor has it the mistress won't turn you out. May not help, but they say she won't make things worse."

Josiah nodded slowly. "Thank you...for everything." He took a deep breath to calm his shaking hands.

He swallowed hard as his eyes landed on the trees through the door.

October 8, 1850

Rosemount Hall to Belhaven Estate

The cool autumn air nipped at his skin as he cradled the bundled blanket to his chest. Isaiah began to stir, soft cries escaping him as Josiah ducked between trees.

“Please, Isaiah.” He gently shushed the baby, bouncing the bundle in his arm.

Josiah peeked his head around a tree, trying to ensure nobody had seen him. He took a deep breath to steady his shaking hands before slipping deeper into the forest behind the shack.

“We will be free.” His feet carried the pair carefully through the woods, his eyes searching the darkness rapidly.

Josiah heard rustling leaves and growls growing in the distance behind him.

“This way!” A man called into the night. “Saw him run!”

A twig snapped beneath his feet as he looked at his surroundings. He spotted smoke rising above the trees nearby.

A bark sounded behind him, forcing Josiah to push through the trees.

It wasn't long before his eyes landed on a familiar clearing. A field of cotton rolled out before him.

The smoke he saw billowed from the smokehouse on the other side of the property. He held Isaiah close as the sounds pursuing them drew closer.

Josiah snuck around the perimeter of the property, making his way into the small smokehouse between the big house and the slaves' quarters. He slipped behind the hanging meat, holding his brother close.

The warmth of the lingering smoke wrapped around them as Josiah took a deep breath, leaning his head back against the wall.

His eyes locked onto the door as it creaked open.

“Oh.” A chirp escaped the woman’s lips as she spotted the man in the smokehouse.

His eyes widened as she closed the door behind her carefully.

“I’m sorry, I thought I would be alone.” Carolyn glanced at the meat hanging around the room before looking back at the man.

Her hands shook as they brushed against her apron.

Josiah hid Isaiah against his side as he looked her over.

He took in her appearance carefully, his eyes narrowing at her fine shoes—too fine for the rest of her clothing.

“You’re the mistress of the house.” Josiah didn’t ask, his jaw tensed as he spoke.

Carolyn cleared her throat. “Well, no...but I’m as close as we have.”

For a very tense moment, the two locked eyes, only looking away when Isaiah whimpered in Josiah’s arms.

Her eyes softened as she spotted the tiny bundle cradled against him.

“He sounds hungry.” Carolyn leaned closer in an attempt to look at the child.

“I know he is.” Josiah looked at his brother, a knot twisted in his gut.

“Do you have a way to feed him?” She began pulling some of the dried meat from hooks, placing it carefully in her satchel.

Her chest knotted as the baby rooted in Josiah’s arms.

Her voice lowered. “I could help, if you’d like.”

His eyes narrowed as they met hers. “How?”

She cleared her throat, her weight shifting between her feet. “I...could nurse him. I’ve done it before—recently actually.” Her eyes fell to the floor before meeting his again. “I’d be happy to help—if you’re okay with it, that is.”

“How do I know you won’t try to take him, miss?” Josiah guarded Isaiah with his arm carefully. He looked over her before he glanced at the door.

Her heart sank at his words. “Call me Carolyn.” She looked around. “If you want, you can stay between us and the door the entire time.”

She stepped closer, her hands in the air as she slid past him. “Please. He needs to eat.” Her eyes fell on the bundle as the baby’s cries softened.

Josiah paused, looking at Isaiah pressing against him. His shoulders tensed as he looked between her and the goat’s milk at his side.

His shoulders slumped forward as he sighed.

“Alright.” Josiah carefully placed the baby into her arms.

He swallowed the lump forming in his throat as he watched Carolyn.

Her hands shook as she fumbled to unbutton part of her dress, pulling the top of her corset to the side before she brought the baby close so he could latch.

Carolyn hissed softly as he did.

After a moment, the room filled with suckling noises. Josiah sighed as he crouched down to place a hand on his brother’s side.

“Thank you.” His voice came out softer than either of them had anticipated.

“You’ve run away, haven’t you?” Her voice was barely above a whisper. “Not that it matters.” She added quickly. Carolyn glanced past him to the door as her voice lowered. “I’m attempting the same.”

“They were going to sell him down the river.” Josiah shifted as his eyes drifted to the floor. “Couldn’t let it happen.”

“I don’t blame you for running, then.” She brushed her fingers against the baby’s cheek. “How are you planning to feed him? He’ll need to eat something.”

Josiah stayed quiet, focusing on his brother’s breathing. “Got some goat’s milk...not nearly enough though.”

“If you want,” she hesitated a moment before continuing, “I could travel with you. Keep him fed while we make our way.”

His eyebrows knit together as he met Carolyn’s gaze. “Why would you do that?”

Carolyn looked at the small child in her arms, the way his big brown eyes met hers and the small tuft of curls taking shape on his head tugged at her heart.

“I can’t just let a child starve. He doesn’t deserve that.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. “If there’s any way I can help him, I want to.”

“...and I need to escape too.” A chill ran down her spine at the thought of what awaited her if she didn’t leave. “Truth be told, I can’t make it on my own and I know that.”

Josiah’s eyes settled on her, his voice lowering. “If anyone saw, they’d assume the worst.”

“I won’t let them see.” She held her breath, watching him carefully.

He nodded slowly, looking between Isaiah and Carolyn. “I suppose you can join us then, but we move fast.”

She nodded as Isaiah drifted off to sleep against her. “I’ll keep up.”

Carolyn tugged at the top of her dress as Isaiah released her. She carefully fixed her dress.

Josiah couldn't help but notice how slow her movements were.

"Ready when you are." She looked up at him.

Josiah grabbed her provisions, holding them out to her. "I'll take him. Get your bag."

"If that's what you want." She whispered, bringing Isaiah over to him. "Do you know how to make a carrier?"

"Maybe." He took the blanket Carolyn offered him.

He folded the blanket the long way, tossing one end over his shoulder.

"Turn around." She whispered.

Josiah turned and she guided the blanket across his back with one hand. He took the end of the blanket from her as she reached his side. He tied the two ends together at his hip.

He shifted the sling on his chest before Carolyn slipped Isaiah into it carefully.

Josiah froze as he heard voices growing outside. He held a hand up to tell Carolyn to stay quiet.

"Check that shed." A man called. "Plenty to hide behind in there."

Josiah pushed past Carolyn, ducking into the shadows in the corner.

The door creaked open.

Her heart raced as she turned towards the hanging meat, looking over her shoulder as the strange man entered the building.

She jumped away from the man, turning to face him. Her skirt covered where Josiah crouched, holding his breath.

"Sorry to startle you, miss." The strange man removed his hat, holding it in front of him. "We're hunting a runaway—a dangerous one. You see anything?"

Carolyn gasped softly, sitting her hand on her chest. “Dangerous, you say? And you think they might’ve come here?”

“Tracked him here. Don’t worry yourself, miss, we’ll catch him before he can steal anything else—or hurt anyone.” The man nodded to her. “Mind if I look around a bit?”

Josiah tensed behind her, squeezing his eyes shut.

“Of course you may.” She motioned, reaching in front of her to move meat into her basket. “I’ll be collecting meat for dinner while you do.”

“Thank you, miss.” The man moved closer, looking behind pieces of meat.

Her heart pounded in her chest as the man moved closer.

“Would you mind if I ask what the runaway stole?” Carolyn glanced towards him as she wrapped things slowly.

The man cleared his throat as he turned to her. “Ain’t exactly a what, miss.” The man hesitated. “He stole a newborn.”

She sat her hand on her stomach. “A child? How awful. I hope you manage to find him soon.”

“I assure you, we will, miss.” He stood straighter.

“Will you gentlemen be staying on the property long?” She reached towards the meat.

“Don’t reckon it’ll take us too long to search the grounds.” He narrowed his eyes at her.

She pulled her hands back from the meat. “Then, I won’t be needing to take extra meat in for dinner.

The man raised an eyebrow as he looked her over.

“A proper lady doesn’t let a guest go hungry.” Carolyn offered him a smile.

He nodded to her once. “Do let us know if you notice anything amiss.”

“Of course, sir.” She offered him a smile.

The man took one more look around the room. “Miss.” He tipped his cap to her as he exited the smokehouse.

Josiah’s shoulders relaxed as he looked up at her.

Carolyn let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding as she turned to face him.

The pair listened as the sounds of men searching nearby slowly faded into silence.

Carolyn stepped out of the smokehouse. She looked around before waving behind her to Josiah.

He poked his head out to check for himself before motioning for Carolyn to follow him.

The grass softened their steps as they moved around the building. They slipped into the woods. Leaves crunched quietly beneath their feet with every step.