

# THE RUNAWAY KING

*Flee the throne... to keep the crown.*



A FALSE PRINCE NOVEL FROM  
THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JENNIFER A. NIELSEN

THE  
RUNAWAY  
KING

*Also by*  
JENNIFER A. NIELSEN

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*The False Prince*

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THE ASCENDANCE TRILOGY

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BOOK TWO

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THE  
RUNAWAY  
KING

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THE  
RUNAWAY  
KING

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# • ONE •

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I had arrived early for my own assassination.

It was the evening of my family's funeral, and I should have already been at the chapel. But the thought of mourning alongside the arrogant coxcombs who would also be there sickened me. If I were anyone else, this would have been a private matter.

For a month, I had been the king of Carthya, a role for which I had never been prepared and which most Carthyans believed was entirely unsuitable for me. Even if I wanted to disagree, I had no credibility for such an argument. During these first weeks of my reign, courting favorable public opinion had hardly been my top priority. Instead, I had a much bigger task: convincing my regents to help prepare for a war I felt sure was coming.

The biggest threat came from Avenia, to the west. Its leader, King Vargan, had come to the funeral unexpectedly. Maybe his claims of only wanting to pay his respects sounded sincere, but I was not deceived: He'd grieve more for the loss of his after-supper cake than for my parents and my brother. No, Vargan



had come to learn my weaknesses and assess my strengths. He had come to test me.

Before engaging in any confrontation with Vargan, I had needed time to think, to be sure of myself. So rather than enter the funeral, I had told them to start without me, then escaped here, to the royal gardens.

This had become my favorite place on the frequent occasions when I needed to get away from everyone. The bright springtime flowers were surrounded by tall, dense hedges and lined with plants of every variety. Majestic trees kept the view from above concealed through most seasons of the year, and the grass was soft enough to make bare feet nearly mandatory. In the center of it all was a marble fountain with a statue at the top depicting King Artolius I, a grandfather from generations ago who had won independence for Carthya. My name, Jaron Artolius Eckbert III, partially came from him.

In hindsight, these gardens were the perfect place for a nice and quiet attempted murder.

I didn't even consider something as passive as sitting tonight. Overwhelmed with conflicted feelings surrounding the funeral, and with Vargan's late arrival, my body was tense and my emotions raw. I needed to climb, to work off some energy.

I quickly scaled the first level of the castle, using the unevenly cut rocks as grips for my fingers and feet. The lowest ledge at this part of the wall was broad and swallowed up in ivy, but I rather liked that. I could fold myself into the dense leaves

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and glance out at the gardens with the feeling that I was a part of it all, rather than a simple observer.

After less than a minute, the gardener's door opened below me. That was odd. It was far too late for a caretaker to be out here, and this ground was forbidden to anyone else unless I invited them in. I crept to the edge of the wall and saw a figure dressed in black cautiously making his way forward. This was no servant, who would have announced himself properly, if he even dared enter at all. The figure made a quick survey of the area, then withdrew a long knife and took refuge in some bushes directly beneath me.

I shook my head, more amused than angry. Everyone would have expected me to come here for reflection tonight, but they wouldn't have planned for me until after the funeral.

The assassin thought he'd have surprise on his side. But now the advantage was mine.

Silently, I unlatched my cloak so it wouldn't interfere. Then I withdrew my own knife, gripped it tightly in my left hand as I crouched at the tip of the ledge, and leapt directly onto the man's back.

As I jumped, he moved, so I only clipped his shoulder as we fell in opposite directions. I was up first and took a swipe at his leg with my knife, but it didn't cut nearly as deep as I'd hoped. He kicked me to the ground, then knelt across my forearm and wrenched the knife from my grasp, tossing it far from us.

The man caught me on the jaw with a powerful punch that

knocked my head against the ground. I was slow to get up, but when he reached for me, I kicked him as hard as I could. He stumbled back and crashed into a tall vase, then fell to the ground, not moving.

I rolled to face the castle wall and massaged my jaw. The fact that my hand was already on my face probably saved my life. Because a second attacker came out of nowhere, holding a rope that he wrapped around my neck. He pulled it tight, pinching off my air. But with my hand trapped inside the rope, at least I could give myself some chance to breathe.

I punched an elbow backward, connecting with the chest of this new attacker. He grunted, but it took three hits before he was forced to readjust his position and loosen the rope. When he shifted, I rounded on him and reared back an arm for a swing.

Then I froze. In the instant I locked eyes with the intruder, time stopped.

It was Roden. Once my friend. Then my enemy. Now my assassin.

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## • TWO •

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It had only been a matter of weeks since I'd seen Roden, yet it seemed like months. In our last encounter, he had tried to kill me as a final attempt to get the throne for himself. But I sensed his reasons for being here tonight were even darker.

Together we'd been trained by a nobleman named Bevin Conner, who'd snatched us and two other boys, Tobias and Latamer, from Carthyan orphanages with the intention of passing one of us off as Jaron, the lost prince of Carthya. Jaron's parents had attempted to send him to a boarding school where he might learn some much-needed manners, but after he'd escaped the ship bound for Bymar, pirates had attacked with the intention of bringing about Jaron's demise. Nobody — not Conner, not Roden, not the other boys — knew that I was, in fact, Jaron in disguise. Roden still didn't know this. As far as he knew, I was an orphan named Sage, no more worthy of the throne than he was.

It was a good thing Conner hadn't attempted to pass him off as Prince Jaron, because in this short time he'd changed enough to look even less like me. Roden's brown hair had

lightened and his skin was tanner than before. He looked older and certainly acted that way. When I'd last seen him, he had been upset, but it was nothing compared to his expression now. This went far beyond anger.

Dropping the rope, Roden got to his feet and drew out a sword. He held it like an extension of his arm, as if he'd been born with that very weapon in his hand. My knife was somewhere behind him, hidden in shadow. The odds weren't exactly in my favor.

"Get up, Sage, and face me."

"That's not my name," I said. And I wasn't going to get up yet.

"I was with you at Farthenwood. You can't lie to me about who you really are."

Which was exactly my point, if he thought about it. Speaking as calmly as I could, I said, "Lower your sword, and I'll explain everything." I had located the place where my knife lay, but it was too far to be retrieved before he could use that sword. So at this point, I much preferred to talk with him.

"I'm not here for your explanations," he growled.

His sword remained ready, but I slowly stood, keeping my hands visible. "You've come to kill me, then?"

"This fraud of yours is over. It's time you learn who is really in command."

I snorted. "You?"

He shook his head. "I'm with powerful people now. And we're coming for you. I'd rather kill you here, but the pirate king has some business with you first."

Although I appreciated the delay in my death, somehow I doubted any meeting with the pirate king was good news. With a smirk, I said, "So you joined up with the pirates? I couldn't imagine anyone but the ladies' knitting club accepting you."

"The pirates gladly accepted me, and one day I'll command them. They killed Jaron, and when it's time, I'll be the one to kill you."

"You mean they *failed* to kill me. You joined up with failures. If I escaped them four years ago, why would you think I can't do it again?"

Now his face hardened. "I have orders for you. And I suggest you accept them."

I'd take orders from the gong scourer before I obeyed him. But I was curious. "What do you want, then?" I asked.

"I'll be at sea for ten days. When we dock, you'll be in Isel to surrender to me. If you do, we'll leave Carthya untouched. But if you refuse, we'll destroy Carthya to get to you."

On their own, the Avenian pirates were destructive, but Carthya would ultimately prevail. So if this was their threat, then they must have allies. My mind immediately went to King Vargan. Maybe he wasn't here to test me after all. It couldn't be a coincidence that this attack was happening so soon after Vargan had walked through my gates.

"I prefer the third option," I said to Roden.

"Which is?"

"The pirates have nine days to surrender to me. But if they do it in eight, I'll be more merciful."

He laughed, as if I'd been joking. "Costumed like a king, but you're still the same foolish orphan. There's one more demand. The pirates want you to release Bevin Conner."

I snorted again. "So he can join them too?"

Roden shook his head. "I only know that someone wants him dead. Surely you couldn't object to that."

Surely I could. Conner was no friend of mine. He was my family's murderer, and the reason pirates had tried to kill me four years earlier. During my short stay at his estate, he had been brutal to me. However, I would not turn him over to Roden any more than I intended to give myself up. "Conner's death will do nothing for the pirates," I said. "It's only revenge they seek, for both our lives."

"So what if it is? Your life is over, Sage. Accept your fate with some dignity and save your country. Or try to fight back and see us destroy everything. We'll burn your farms, raze your towns, and kill everyone who stands between us and you." He stepped closer to me. "And if you try to hide, we'll take the people you love and punish them for your cowardice. I know exactly whose death would hurt you most."

"Maybe that's your death," I said. "Why don't you go ahead and punish yourself right now?"

With that, Roden lunged forward. I tried to grab his sword, but he kept hold of it and swiped down at me. It cut across my arm, and I yelped and released him. Shouts of my vigils echoed behind us. Finally. I wondered if my cries had disturbed their naps. It was about time they realized I was in trouble.

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Somewhere near us was my knife, but Roden kept swinging, forcing me to back away from him. With my next step, I tripped and fell into the fountain. He came to the fountain's edge with the obvious intent to strike, but now my vigils had arrived to help. Without a shred of fear on his face, he began fighting whichever man was closest. I could only sit there, stunned to see how much progress Roden had made in his skills in such a short time. He cut through them as if they were little more threat than snowflakes.

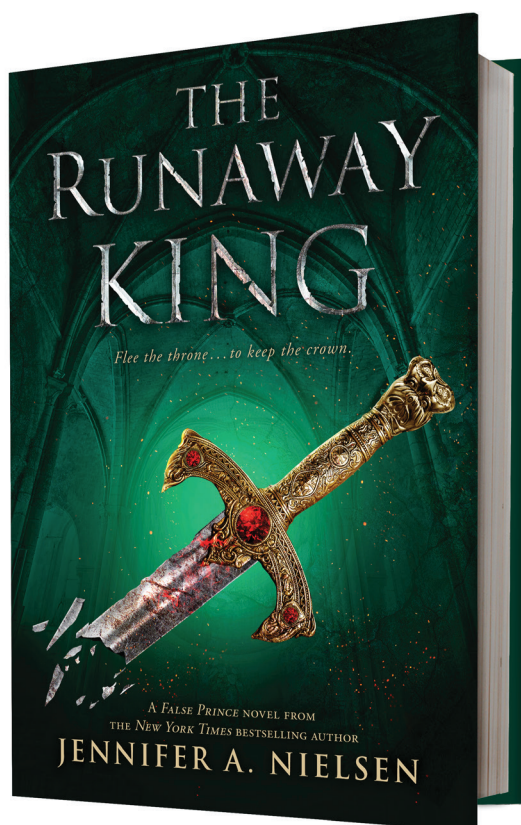
I jumped from the fountain and dove for the sword of one of my fallen vigils. At the same time, Roden wounded another man, who fell backward and tripped over me, knocking me to the ground and landing on my legs.

Roden kicked away the sword I'd wanted. Then, with his blade at my throat, he crouched near me and said, "The decision is yours. Ten days to surrender, or we'll destroy Carthya."

I was only midway through one of my better curses at him when he raised the sword and crashed it down on my head.



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