



JULIA
LONDON

The Cabot Sisters

THE SCOUNDREL
AND THE DEBUTANTE

Julia London

The Scoundrel and the Debutante

Аннотация

Indulge with this sensual new tale in New York Times bestselling author Julia London's acclaimed Cabot Sisters series! The dust of the Cabot sisters' shocking plans to rescue their family from certain ruin may have settled, but Prudence Cabot is left standing in the rubble of scandal. Now regarded as an unsuitable bride, she's tainted among the ton. Yet this unwilling wallflower is ripe for her own adventure. And when an irresistibly sexy American stranger on a desperate mission enlists her help, she simply can't deny the temptation. The fate of Roan Matheson's family depends on how quickly he can find his runaway sister and persuade her to return to her betrothed. Scouring the rustic English countryside with the sensually wicked Prudence at his side—and in his bed—he's out of his element. But once Roan has a taste of the sizzling passion that can lead to forever, he must choose between his heart's obligations and its forbidden desires.

“Julia London strikes gold again. Warm, witty and decidedly wicked—great entertainment.” —New York Times bestselling author Stephanie Laurens on *The Devil Takes a Bride*

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[Praise for New York Times bestselling author Julia London](#)

“Julia London strikes gold again. Warm, witty and decidedly wicked—great entertainment.”

—#1 New York Times bestselling author Stephanie Laurens on *The Devil Takes a Bride*

“London’s writing bubbles with high emotion as she describes sexual enthusiasm, personal grief and familial warmth. Her blend of playful humor and sincerity imbues her heroines with incredible appeal, and readers will delight as their unconventional

tactics create rambling paths to happiness.”

—Publishers Weekly on *The Devil Takes a Bride* (starred review)

“This tale of scandal and passion is perfect for readers who like to see bad girls win, but still love the feeling of a society romance, and London nicely sets up future books starring Honor’s sisters.”

—Publishers Weekly on *The Trouble with Honor*

“A delectably sexy hero, an unconventionally savvy heroine, and a completely improper business proposal add up to another winner for ever-versatile London.”

—Booklist on *The Trouble with Honor*

“This series starter brims with delightful humor and charm.”

—RT Book Reviews on *The Trouble with Honor*

“Julia London writes vibrant, emotional stories and sexy, richly-drawn characters.”

—New York Times bestselling author Madeline Hunter

The Scoundrel and the Debutante

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This book is about Prudence, the third Cabot Sister. I am also a third sister and I sort of want to dedicate the book to me, because, like Prudence, I have been heavily influenced, unfairly put upon, greatly appreciated and dearly loved by my older sisters, one gone too soon, one still here and my best friend. So I think I will dedicate this book to them instead. To my two much adored sisters, Karen and Nancy.

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

Blackwood Hall, 1816

IT WAS AN unspoken truth that when a woman reached her twenty-second year without a single gentleman even pondering the *possibility* of marriage to her, she was destined for spinsterhood. Spinsterhood, in turn, essentially sentenced her to the tedium of acting as companion to doddering dowagers as they dawdled about the countryside.

A woman without prospects in her twenty-second year was viewed suspiciously by the *haut ton*. There must be something quite off about her. It was impossible to think otherwise, for why would a woman, properly presented at court and to society, with means of dowry, with acceptably acknowledged connections, have failed to attract a suitor? There were only three possible

explanations.

She was unforgivably plain.

She was horribly diseased.

Or, her older sisters' scandalous antics four years past had ruined her. Utterly, completely, *ruined* her.

The third hypothesis was presented by Miss Prudence Cabot days after her twenty-second birthday. Her hypothesis was roundly rejected by her scandalous older sisters, Mrs. Honor Easton and Grace, Lady Merryton. In fact, when her older sisters were not rolling their eyes or refusing to engage at all, they argued quite vociferously against her theory, their duet of voices rising up so sharply that Mercy, the youngest of the four Cabot sisters, whistled at them as if they were the rowdy puppies that fought over Lord Merryton's boot.

Her sisters' protests to the contrary notwithstanding, Prudence was convinced she was right. Since her stepfather had died four years ago, her sisters had engaged in wretched behavior. Honor had *publicly* proposed marriage to a known rake and bastard son of a duke *in a gaming hell*. While Prudence adored George, it did not alter the scandal that had followed or the taint it had put on the Cabots.

Not to be outdone, Grace had endeavored to entrap a rich man into marriage in order to save them all from ruin, and somehow managed to trap the *wrong man*. It was the talk in London for months, and while Grace's husband, Lord Merryton, was not as aloof as Prudence had always heard, his entry into the family had

not improved Prudence's prospects in the least.

Nor did it help in any way that her younger sister, Mercy, had a countenance so feisty and irreverent that serious thought had been given to packing her off to a young ladies' school to tame the beast in her.

That left Prudence in the middle, sandwiched tightly between scandals and improper behavior. She was squarely in the tedious, underappreciated, put-upon, practically invisible middle where she'd lived all her life.

This, Prudence told herself, was what good manners had gotten her. She had endeavored to be the practical one in an impractical gaggle of sisters. The responsible one who had taken her music lessons just as faithfully as she'd taken care of her mother and stepfather while her sisters cavorted through society. She'd done all the things debutantes were to do, she'd caused not a *whit* of trouble, and her thanks for that was now to be considered the unweddable one!

Well, Mercy likely was unweddable, too, but Mercy didn't seem to care very much.

"*Unweddable* is not even a proper word," Mercy pointed out, adjusting her spectacles so that she might peer critically at Prudence.

"It's also utter nonsense," Grace said tetchily. "Why on earth would you say such a thing, Pru? Are you truly so unhappy here at Blackwood Hall? Did you not enjoy the festival we hosted for the tenants?"

A festival! As if her wretched state of being could be appeased with a festival! Prudence responded with a dramatic bang of the keys of the pianoforte that caused the three-legged dog Grace had rescued to jump with fright and topple onto his side. Prudence launched into a piece that she played very loudly and very skillfully, so that everything Grace or Mercy said was drowned out by the music.

There was nothing any of them could say to change her opinion.

Later that week, Prudence's oldest sister, Honor, had come down from London to Blackwood Hall with her three children in tow as well as her dapper husband, George. When Honor heard of the contretemps between sisters, she'd tried to convince Prudence that a lack of a viable offer of marriage did not mean all was lost. Honor had insisted, with vigor and enthusiasm, that her sisters' behavior had *no* influence on Prudence's lack of an offer. Honor now reminded her that Mercy, against all odds, had been accepted into the prestigious Lisson Grove School of Art to study the masters.

"Well, naturally I was. I am *quite* talented," Mercy unabashedly observed.

"Lord Merryton had to pay a pretty sum to sway them, didn't he?" Prudence sniffed.

"Yes," Grace agreed. "But if she were as plagued with scandal as you suggest, they would have refused her yet."

"Refused Merryton's purse?" Prudence laughed. "It's not as if

they had to *marry* her, for God's sake."

"I beg your pardon! What of my talent?" Mercy demanded.

"*Hush*," Grace and Prudence said in unison. That spurred Mercy to push her spectacles up her nose and march from the room in her paint-stained smock.

Grace and Honor paid her no mind.

The debate continued on for days, much to Prudence's dismay. "You must trust that an offer will come, dearest, and then you will be astonished that you put so much stock into such impossible feelings," Honor said a bit condescendingly as the sisters dined at breakfast one morning.

"Honor?" Prudence said politely. "I kindly request—no, pardon—I *implore* you to cease talking."

Honor gasped. And then she stood abruptly and flounced past Prudence with such haste that her hand connected a little roughly with Prudence's shoulder.

"Ouch," Prudence said.

"Honor means only to help, Pru," Grace chastised her. "Honor means only to help."

"I mean more than *that*," Honor said sternly, charging back around again, as she really was not the sort to flee in tears when there was a good fight to be had. "I insist that you snap out of your doldrums, Pru! It's unbecoming and bothersome!"

"I'm not in doldrums," Prudence said.

"You are! You're *forever* cross," said Mercy.

"And moody," Grace hastened to agree.

“I will tell you only what a loving sister will tell you truly, darling.” Honor leaned over the dining table so that she was eye level with Prudence. “You’re a bloody chore.” But she smiled when she said it and quickly straightened. “Mrs. Bulworth has written and asked you to come and see her new baby. Do go and see her. She will be beside herself with joy, and I think that the country air will do you good.”

Prudence snorted at that ridiculous notion. “How can I possibly be improved by country air when I am already in the country?”

“Northern country air is vastly different,” Honor amended. Grace and Mercy nodded adamantly that Honor was right.

Prudence would like nothing better than to explain to them all that calling on their friend Cassandra Bulworth, who had just been delivered of her first child, was the *last* thing she wanted to do. To see her friend so deliriously happy made Prudence feel that much more wretched about her own circumstance. “Send Mercy!”

“Me?” Mercy cried. “I couldn’t possibly! I’ve very little time to prepare for school. I must complete my still life painting, you know. Every student must have a complete portfolio and I haven’t finished my still life.”

“What about Mamma?” Prudence demanded, ignoring Mercy. They could not deny their mother’s madness necessitated constant supervision from them.

“We have her maid Hannah, and Mrs. Pettigrew from the

village,” Grace said. “And we have Mercy, as well.”

“*Me!*” Mercy cried. “I *just* said—”

“Yes, yes, we are all intimately acquainted with all you must do for school, Mercy. On my word, one would think you were the only person to have ever been accepted into a school. But you aren’t leaving us for another month, so why should you not have the least responsibility?” Grace asked. Then she turned to Prudence and smiled sweetly. “Pru, we’re only thinking of you. You see that, don’t you?”

“I don’t believe you,” Prudence said. “But it so happens that I find *you* all quite tedious.”

Honor gasped with delight and clasped her hands to her breast. “Does that mean you’ll go?”

“Perhaps I shall,” Prudence sniffed. “I’ll be as mad as Mamma if I stay any longer at Blackwood Hall.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful news,” Grace said happily.

“Well, you needn’t rejoice in it,” Prudence said missishly.

“But we’re so happy!” Honor squealed. “I mean, happy for you,” she quickly corrected, and hurried around the table to hug Prudence tightly to her. “I think your mien will be *vastly* improved if you just step out into the world, dearest.”

Prudence scarcely thought so. *Out into the world* was where she lost all heart. Happy people, happy friends, all of them embarking on a life that Prudence had always hoped would be hers, made her terribly unhappy. Prudence was filled with envy, and she could not beat it down, no matter how much she would

have liked, no matter how much she had tried. Even mortifyingly worse, Prudence's envy of the happiness surrounding her was apparent. Lately, it felt as if even sunshine was a cruel reminder of her situation.

But as Mercy launched into her complaints that so much attention was being paid to Prudence when *she* needed it, Prudence decided she would go. Anything to be free of the happy chatter she was forced to endure day in and day out.

* * *

GRACE ARRANGED IT ALL, announcing grandly one afternoon that Prudence would accompany Dr. Linford and his wife north, as they would be traveling that way to visit Mr. Linford's mother. The Linfords would deposit Prudence in the village of Himple where Mr. Bulworth would send his man to come and fetch her and bring her to their newly completed mansion. Cassandra, who had come out with Prudence and had received several offers of marriage in her debut Season compared to Prudence's astounding lack of them, would be waiting with her baby.

"But the Linford coach is quite small," Mercy said, frowning so that it caused her spectacles to slide down her nose. She was seated at her new easel, drawing a bowl of fruit for her painting. That's what the masters did, she'd informed them earlier. They sketched first, then painted. "Prudence will be forced to carry on a conversation for *hours*," she added absently as she studied her sketch.

“What’s wrong with conversation?” Honor demanded as she braided the hair of her daughter, Edith.

“Nothing at all if you care so much for the weather. Dr. Linford speaks of nothing else. *It’s a fine day*, and what not. Pru doesn’t care so much for weather, do you, Pru?”

Prudence shrugged. She didn’t care much for anything.

On the day of her departure, Prudence’s trunk and valise were carried downstairs to a waiting carriage that would ferry her to Ashton Down, where Prudence was to meet the Linfords at one o’clock. In her valise, she included her necessities—some ribbons for her hair, a silk chemise Honor had brought for her from the new London modiste she raved about, some lovely slippers, and a change of clothing. She said goodbye to her overly cheerful sisters and started off at a quarter to twelve.

The ever-efficient Blackwood Hall coach reached Ashton Down at ten past twelve.

“You needn’t wait with me, James,” Prudence said, already weary. “The Linfords will be along shortly.”

James, the driver, seemed uncertain. “Lord Merryton does not like the ladies to wait unattended, miss.”

For some reason, that rankled Prudence. “You may tell him that I insisted,” she said. “If you will deposit my things just there,” she said, waving absently at the sidewalk along High Street. She smiled at James, adjusted her bonnet, and took herself up the street to the dry goods and sundries shop, where she purchased some sweetmeats for the journey. When she made

her purchase, she walked outside. She saw her things on the sidewalk as she'd asked, and the Blackwood Hall carriage was gone. *Finally.*

Prudence lifted her face to the late-summer sun. It was a warm, glorious day, and she decided to wait on the village green just across from her luggage. She arranged herself on a bench, folded her gloved hands over her package of sweetmeats and idly examined some flowers in a planter beside her. The blooms were fading...just like her.

Prudence sighed loudly.

The sound of an approaching coach brought her to her feet. She stood up, dusted off her lap, tucked her package in the crook of her arm and looked up the road, expecting to see the Linford coach roll down the street.

But it wasn't the Linford coach—it was one of two private stagecoaches that came through Ashton Down every day, one midday, one later in the afternoon.

Prudence sat down heavily on the bench once more.

The coach pulled to a halt on the road before her. Two men jumped off the back runner; one of them opened the door. A young couple stepped out, the woman carrying an infant. Behind them emerged a man so broad in the shoulder he had to turn to fit through the opening. He fairly leaped out of the coach, landing sure-footedly, and adjusted the hat on his head. He looked as if he'd just returned from an architectural dig, dressed in buckskins, a lawn shirt and a dark coat that reached his knees.

His hat looked as if it was quality, although it showed signs of wear. And his boots looked as if they'd not been shined in an age. He had a dusty shadow of a beard on his square jaw.

The man turned a slow circle in the middle of the street, oblivious to the young men who rushed to change the horses and deposit luggage onto the curb. Whatever the passenger saw caused him to suddenly stride to the front of the coach and begin to argue vociferously with the driver.

Prudence blinked with surprise. How *interesting*. She straightened her back and looked around, wondering what the gentleman had seen to anger him so. But observing nothing out of the ordinary on the village green or on the high street, she stood up, and as casually and inconspicuously as she might, she moved closer, pretending to examine some rose blooms so that she might hear his complaint.

“As I said, sir, Wesleigh is just up the road there. A half-hour walk, no more.”

“But you don't seem to understand my point, my good man,” the gentleman said in an accent that was quite flat. “Wesleigh is a *house*. Not a *settlement*. I understood I'd be delivered to an estate. An estate! A very large house with outbuildings and various people roaming about to do God knows what it is you do in England,” he exclaimed, his hands busily sketching the estate in the air.

The driver shrugged. “I drive where I'm paid to drive, and I ain't paid to drive to Wesleigh. Ain't a grand house there by no

means.”

“This is preposterous!” the man bellowed. “I’ve paid good money to be delivered to the proper place!”

The driver ignored him.

The gentleman swept his hat off a head full of thick brown hair and threw it with great force to the ground. It scudded along and landed very close to Prudence. He looked about for his hat and, spotting Prudence at the edge of the green, he suddenly strode forward, the paper held out before him.

Prudence panicked. She looked about for a place to escape, but he guessed her intention. “No, no, stay right there, I beg you,” he said sternly. “I must have someone speak to that man and explain to him that I am to be delivered to Wesleigh!”

“Wesleigh?” Prudence asked. “Or Wesley?”

That drew the man up, midstride. He stared at her with eyes the rich color of golden topaz, which slowly began to narrow on her, as if he thought she meant to trick him. He hesitantly moved forward, the paper still held out before him. “If you would be so kind?” he asked through clenched teeth, practically shoving the paper at her.

Prudence took it between forefinger and thumb and gingerly extracted it from his grip. Someone had written—scrawled, really, in long bold strokes—“West Lee, Penfors.”

“*Hmm*,” she said, squinting at the scrawl. “I suppose you mean Viscount Penfors.” She peeked up at the stranger, who was staring darkly at her. She could feel the potency of his gaze

trickling into her veins. “Lord Penfors resides at Howston Hall, just outside of Wesley.”

“Yes, exactly as I wrote,” he said, pointing to the paper.

“But this says ‘West Lee.’”

“Just as you said.”

“No, sir, I said ‘Wesley.’ I’ve never heard of West Lee,” she said, trying to enunciate the subtle difference in the sound of the names. “And unfortunately, it appears you’ve mistakenly arrived in Wesley.”

The stranger’s face darkened, and Prudence had an image of him exploding, little bits of him raining down on the street. “I beg your pardon, miss, but you are not making any sense,” he said tightly. He reached for the edge of the paper with his forefinger and thumb as she’d done and yanked it free. “You have said West Lee three times now, and I don’t know if you mean to tease me or if there is something else at work here.”

“I am not *teasing* you,” she objected, horrified by the suggestion.

“Then it must be something else!”

“Something else?” What could he possibly mean? Prudence couldn’t help but smile. “I assure you, I am not privy to any scheme or conspiracy to keep you from Wesley, sir.”

His frown deepened. “I am happy to amuse you, miss. But if you would kindly point me in the direction of at least *one* of these West Lees, and preferably the one where I may find this Penfors fellow, I would be most grateful.”

“Oh.” She winced lightly.

“Oh?” he repeated, leaning forward. “What does ‘oh’ mean? Why are you looking at me as if you’ve lost my dog?”

“You’ve gone the wrong direction.”

“So I gathered,” he drawled.

“*Wesleigh* is just down the road here, a small village with perhaps five cottages. *Weslay* is north.” She pointed in the direction the stage had just come.

He looked in the direction she pointed. His face began to mottle. “How far?” he managed, his voice dangerously low.

“I can’t be entirely certain, but I’d say...two days?”

The gentleman stranger clenched his jaw. He was big and powerful, and Prudence imagined his fury shaking the ground beneath his feet. “But that is indeed where you will find this Penfors fellow,” she hastened to add, and once again tried not to smile. It was absurd to refer to a viscount as a fellow!

“*North?*” he bellowed, throwing his arms wide.

Prudence took one cautious step backward and nodded.

The man put his hands on his waist, staring at her. And then he turned slowly from her. She thought he meant to walk away, but he kept turning, until he’d gone full circle, and when he faced her again, his jaw was clenched even more tightly. “If I may,” he asked, his voice strained, “have you a suggestion for how I might *reach* this West Lee that is two days away?”

“It’s not West—” She shook her head. “You might take the northbound stagecoach. It comes through Ashton Down twice a

day. The first one should be along at any moment.”

“I see,” he said, but it was quite apparent he didn’t see at all.

“You might also buy passage on the Royal Post coach, but it’s a bit more costly than the passenger stages. And it comes through only once a day.”

He eyed her distrustfully. “Two days either way?”

She nodded. She smiled sympathetically. She would not like to be sausaged into a stagecoach for two days. “I fear it is so.”

He shoved his fingers roughly through his dark brown hair and muttered something under his breath that she couldn’t quite make out but sounded as if she ought not to hear.

“Where might I purchase passage?” he asked briskly.

She looked around him—that is, she leaned to her right to see around his broad chest—to the stagecoach inn. “I’ll show you if you like.”

“*That*,” he said firmly, “would be most helpful.” He bent down, scooped up his hat, dusted it off by knocking it against his knee, then put it back on his head. His gaze traversed the length of her before he stepped back and swept his arm before him, indicating she should lead him.

Prudence walked across the street, pausing as the gentleman instructed the coachman to leave his trunk and bag on the sidewalk with the other luggage pieces to be loaded on the northbound coach. He stared wistfully at the coach as it pulled away, headed south, before turning back to Prudence and following her into the inn’s courtyard. She walked through a pair

of doors that went past the public room and into a small office. It was close, and she had to dip her head to step inside. The ceiling was uncomfortably low, and the smell of horse manure permeated the air, as the office was situated between the stables and the public rooms.

The gentleman passenger was well over six feet and had to stoop to enter. Once inside, his head brushed the rafters. He batted at a cobweb and grunted his displeasure.

“Aye, sir?” said a clerk, appearing behind the low counter.

The gentleman stepped forward. “I should like to buy passage to West Lee,” he said.

“*Weslay*,” Prudence murmured.

The gentleman sighed loudly. “What she said.”

“Three quid,” the clerk said.

The gentleman removed his purse from his pocket and opened it. He fussed through the coins there, examining each one as he withdrew them. Prudence stepped forward, leaned around him, and pointed at three of the coins.

“Ah,” he said, and handed them to the clerk, who in turn handed the gentleman a ticket.

“The driver requires a crown, and the guard a half,” the clerk said.

“What?” the gentleman said. “But I just gave you three pounds.”

The clerk tucked the coins into a pocket on his apron. “That’s for the passage. The driver and the guard, they get their pay from

the passengers.”

“Seems like a dodge.”

The clerk shrugged. “If you want passage to Wesley—”

“All right, all right,” the gentleman said. He peered at his ticket and sighed again. He gestured for Prudence to go out ahead of him, then fit himself through the door into the inn’s main hall and followed her into the courtyard.

They paused there. He smiled for the first time since Prudence had seen him, and she felt a little twinkle of desire when he did. He looked remarkably less perturbed, and in all honesty, he looked astoundingly pleasing to the eye when he smiled. It was a rugged, well-earned smile. There was nothing thin about it. It was an honest, glowing sort of smile—

“I am grateful for your assistance, Miss...?”

“Cabot,” she said. “Miss Prudence Cabot.”

“Miss Cabot,” he said, and bowed his head slightly. “Mr. Roan Matheson,” he added, and stuck his hand out.

Prudence glanced uncertainly at his hand.

So did he. “What is it? Is my glove soiled? So it is. I beg your pardon, but I’ve come a very long way without benefit of anyone to do the washing.”

“No, it’s not that,” she said with a shake of her head, although her thoughts were spinning with the how and why and from where he’d come such a long way.

“Oh. I see.” He removed his glove and extended his hand once more. She noticed how big it was, how strong. How long and

thick his fingers were and the slight nicks on his knuckles. A hand that was not afraid of work. "My hand is clean," he said impatiently.

"Pardon? Oh! No, it's just that it's rather unusual."

"My hand?" he asked curiously, holding it up to have a look.

"No, no." She was being rude. She looked up at his startling topaz eyes. And at his hair, too, dark brown with streaks of lighter brown, and longer than the current fashion, which he had carelessly brushed back behind his ears. It was charmingly foreign. *He* was charmingly foreign and...*virile*. Yes, that was it. He looked as if he could move mountains about for his amusement if he liked. Her pulse, Prudence realized, was doing a tiny bit of fluttering. "It's unusual that you are offering your hand to be—" she paused uncertainly "—shaken?"

"Of course I offered it to be shaken," he said, as if it were ridiculous she would ask. "Why else would one offer a hand, Miss Cabot? To shake. To acknowledge a kindness or a greeting—"

She abruptly put her hand in his, noting how small it seemed in his palm.

He cocked his head. "Are you afraid of me?"

"What? No!" she said, flustered. Maybe she was a tiny bit afraid of him. Or rather, the little shocks of light that seemed to flash through her when he looked at her like that. She curled her fingers around his. He curled tighter. "*Oh*," she said.

"Too firm?" he asked.

"*No*, not at all," she said quickly. She liked the feel of his

grip on her hand and had the fleeting thought of his grip somewhere else on her altogether. “I beg your pardon, but I am unaccustomed to this. Here, men offer their hands to other men. Not to ladies.”

“Oh.” He hesitantly withdrew his hand. But he looked at her with confusion. “Then...what am I to do when I meet a woman?”

“You bow,” she said, demonstrating for him. “And a lady curtsies.” She curtsied, as well.

He groaned as he pulled his glove back on. “May I be brutally honest, Miss Cabot?”

“Please,” she said.

“I have come to England from America on a matter of some urgency—I must fetch my sister who is enjoying the fine hospitality and see her home. But I find this country confounding. I sincerely—” He suddenly turned his head, distracted by the sound of a coach rumbling into town. It was the northbound stage, and it pulled to a halt on the street just outside the courtyard. Two men sitting atop the coach jumped down; two young men climbed down from the outboard. Another man was waiting on the sidewalk to catch the bags that one of the coachmen began to toss to him.

The coach looked rather full, and Prudence felt a moment of pity for Mr. Matheson. She couldn’t possibly imagine how he would maneuver his large body into that crowded interior.

“Well, then, there we are,” he said, and began to stride toward the coach. He paused after a few steps and glanced over his

shoulder at Prudence. “Aren’t you coming?”

Prudence was momentarily startled. She suddenly realized he believed she was waiting for the coach, too. She opened her mouth to correct him, to inform him she’d be traveling by private coach, but before the words could fall from her tongue, something warm and shivery sluiced through her. Something silky and dark and dangerous and exciting and *compelling*...so very compelling.

She wouldn’t.

But why wouldn’t she? She thought of riding in a coach with the Linfords, and the talk of weather. She thought of riding on a stagecoach—something she had never done—and riding with Mr. Matheson. There was something about that idea that thrilled her in a way nothing had in a very long time. He was so masculine, and her pulse fluttered at the idea of passing a few hours with him. “Ah...” She glanced back at the inn, debating. She’d be mad to do such a thing, to put herself on that stagecoach with him! But wasn’t this *far* more interesting than traveling with the Linfords? She had money, she had her things. She knew how to reach Cassandra Bulworth. What was stopping her? Propriety, for heaven’s sake? The same propriety that had been her constant companion all these years and had doomed her to spinsterhood?

She glanced again at Mr. Matheson. Oh yes, he was *very* appealing in a wild, American sort of way. She’d never met an actual American, either, but she imagined them all precisely like this, always rebelling, strong enough to forge ahead without

regard for society's rules. This man was so different, so fresh, so incurably handsome and so blessedly *lost*! She might even convince herself she was doing him a proper kindness by seeing him on his way.

Mr. Matheson misunderstood her look, however, because he flushed a bit and said, "I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to rush you."

Prudence smiled broadly—he thought she wanted the privy.

Her smile seemed to fluster him more. He cleared his throat and looked to the coach. "I'll...I'll see you on the coach."

"Yes," she said, with far more confidence than she had a right to. "Yes, you will!"

He looked at her strangely, but then gave her a curt nod and began striding for the coach, pausing to dip down and pick up one of the bags with one hand, then toss it up to a boy who was lashing the luggage on the boot.

There was no time to debate it; Prudence whirled about and hurried back to the office, her heart pounding with excitement and fear. A little bell tingled as she walked in.

The clerk turned round and squinted at her. "Miss?"

"A ticket to Himple, please," she said, and opened her reticule.

"To Himple?" he repeated dubiously, and peered curiously at her.

"Please. And if you have some paper? I must dash off a note."

"Two quid," he said, and rummaged around until he found a bit of vellum she might use.

He handed her a pencil, and Prudence dashed off a hasty note to Dr. Linford that she would ask the coach boys to deliver to him. She jotted down the usual salutations, her wishes that the Linfords were well and his mother on the mend. And then she wrote an explanation for her change of plans.

I beg your pardon for any inconvenience, but as it happens, I have taken a seat in a friend's coach. She is likewise bound for Himple and it was no trouble for her to include me in her party. Do please forgive the short notice, but the opportunity has only just come about. Thank you kindly for your offer to see me safely to my friends', but I assure you I am in good hands.

She shivered at the sudden image of the gentleman's hands.

My best wishes for your journey and your mother's health.
P.C.

She folded the note, smiled at the scowling clerk, and picked up her ticket. "Thank you," she said, and fairly skipped out of the office.

Her heart was racing—she couldn't believe she was doing something so daring and bold! So fraught with risk! So very unlike her! But for the first time in months, perhaps even years, Prudence felt as if something astonishing was about to happen to her. Good or bad, it didn't matter—the only thing that mattered was that *something* different this way came, and she was giddy with excitement.

CHAPTER TWO

THE INTERIOR OF the coach was suited for four people, but

as the extra seating on top of the coach was filled, Roan had to fit himself inside, wedging into the corner of an impossibly hard bench, his knees knocking against the bonier ones of the old man who sat across from him and unabashedly studied him. Next to the old gent was a boy who looked thirteen or fourteen years old. He sat with a hat pulled so far down his head that Roan couldn't see anything but his long, angular nose and his small chin. He held a small battered valise on his lap, his arms wrapped securely around it.

Beside him was one of two robust women, whose lace caps looked too small for their heads, and whose thick tight curls hung like mistletoe over their ears. Roan didn't think they were twins, exactly, but he supposed they were sisters. They wore identical gray muslin gowns and so much frilly lace across their expansive bosoms that at first glance, Roan thought they were wearing doilies.

However, the most notable feature of the two women was their astounding capacity to talk. They sat across from each other and they hadn't as much as taken a breath—talking over and under and around each other—since he'd fitted himself inside the coach. Moreover, they spoke so quickly, with an accent so thick, that Roan couldn't begin to make out what they were saying.

He could feel the pitch and pull of the coach as the fresh horses were put into their traces. He managed to withdraw his pocket watch from his waistcoat without elbowing anyone in the eye and checked the time. It was just a little more than half-past twelve.

They'd be departing soon, and there was no sign of the beautiful woman with the shining hazel eyes who had helped him.

She was an angel in an otherwise horrendous day, the one thing that had made his entire ordeal seem less tedious. Miss Cabot was, at least to him, surprisingly beautiful, far comelier than anyone he'd seen before departing New York, and most assuredly the comeliest thing he'd seen since arriving in England. Granted, he'd first set foot in Liverpool, in the shipyards, which was not the most attractive place on God's blessed earth, but still. She had a mouthwatering figure, a wide mouth with pink, full lips, and dark lashes that framed her lovely almond-shaped eyes. They were more green than brown, he thought, more summer than winter. He'd felt the male in him snapping to attention when he'd reached her in the middle of the village.

The older woman next to him settled in, removing herself from the wall of the coach and taking up what was left of the bench. There were only a few precious inches between them, not enough space for even a slender thing. Had Miss Cabot gone on top?

As if to answer his question, in the next moment, the door swung open and Miss Cabot's bonneted head appeared. "Oh dear," she said, peering into the interior. "There doesn't seem to be room, does there?"

"Nonsense, of course there is," said one of the women. "If the gentleman will kindly move aside, we'll make space for you here. It will be a bit tight, but we'll manage."

Roan realized the woman beneath the tiny lace cap was referring to him. He looked at the coach wall against which he was smashed, and at the woman, who had taken up more than her share of the bench. “I beg your pardon, but I am as *moved aside* as I can possibly be.”

“Just a smidge,” the woman said, fluttering her fingers at him and making no effort to add any room to the bench from her end.

“Thank you,” Miss Cabot said, and hesitantly stepped inside, pushing past the knees of Roan and the old man. “Pardon me,” she said as she navigated her way into the middle of the coach, leaving a wisp of her perfumed scent as she did.

She balked when she saw the sliver of bench that was to be allotted to her.

“Isn’t much of a seat, is it?” one of the women asked. “But you’re a small thing. You’ll be quite all right.”

“Umm...” Miss Cabot smiled uncertainly at Roan and by some miracle of physical science, she managed to gracefully turn about in that small space without touching anyone except with the sweep of her hem. She settled delicately on the very edge of the bench, her slender back straight. Her knees, Roan noticed, touched the boy’s knees, and he could see the stain of acute awareness of that touch in the boy’s cheeks. Roan had been just like him at that age—as desperately fearful of females as he was desperate to be near them.

“You cannot remain perched like a bird for any length of time. You’ll exhaust yourself,” Roan said. “Please, do sit back.”

Miss Cabot turned her head slightly, and while all Roan could see beneath the brim of her bonnet was her chin and her wide, expressive mouth, he could sense her skepticism. She wiggled her bottom and slid back an inch or two. The woman shifted slightly. Miss Cabot wiggled her bottom again, and Roan could feel every inch of him tense as she continued to wiggle her bottom into the narrow spot between them. By the time she was done—every delicate bit of her pressed against every hard bit of him—he was, imprudently, thinking of creamy bare bottoms. Hers in particular. He imagined it to be smooth and heart-shaped. He imagined playfully biting the firm flesh—

Stop that. The last thing he needed was to be thinking salacious thoughts about a woman no older than his sister.

Roan clenched his jaw, adjusted his arm, and still he could not escape the heightened sensation of the slender lines of her body against the hard planes of his. He argued with himself that he was imagining her body indelicately next to his, not because he was a scoundrel and a rogue, but because he'd sailed across the Atlantic with a crew of men, had bounced about this part of England in coaches much like this and had not touched a woman in weeks.

Well. Perhaps he was a bit of a scoundrel. But it was true that he'd not had the pleasure of a woman's lusty company since Miss Susannah Pratt had arrived in New York.

"Well!" Miss Cabot said gamely, squirming once more. She folded her hands onto her lap over the small package she carried.

“If we’re plagued with bad roads, I might pop right out, mightn’t I?”

No one answered that; no doubt because they all feared it was true. The boy slid down in his seat, disappearing into his coat. The old man had yet to remove his two black pea eyes from Roan, his study so acute that Roan began to wonder if his private erotic thoughts were somehow apparent in his expression.

“On the whole, it looks to be a good day for travel, does it not?” Miss Cabot said cheerfully.

Roan sincerely hoped she was not the sort to find good fortune at every turn and announce it to one and all. He preferred his traveling companions to be as out of sorts and cross as he was when traveling in this manner.

“Quite nice,” one of the women said, and launched into something so quickly and with such verve that Roan could not begin to follow.

He took the opportunity to surreptitiously look at Miss Cabot. Her clothing was expensive. This, he knew, after having paid the clothing bills for his sister, Aurora; he’d become intimately acquainted with the cost of silk and muslin and brocade and fine wool. Miss Cabot had delicate hands, the sort that he guessed excelled at fine needlework. He could see a strand of hair on her shoulder—it was the color of wheat.

Was it disloyal to think that Miss Cabot was what he’d envisioned Susannah Pratt to be before he’d actually met her? Golden-haired and elegant, her countenance and appearance to

spark the deepest male desires? But Susannah had turned out to be dark, wide and shapeless. Roan liked to think he was not so shallow as to form his opinion of the woman based on looks alone, but it didn't help that Miss Pratt had nothing to *say*. When she'd arrived from Philadelphia and had come to his family's home on the arm of Mr. Pratt, all Roan could think was that he couldn't believe he'd actually agreed with Mr. Pratt and his own father that a marriage of the two families was something that ought to occur.

The coach suddenly lurched forward, and Miss Cabot was tossed against him. She turned her head slightly toward him and smiled apologetically. "I do so beg your pardon," she said. "It's awfully close, isn't it?" She resituated herself, her back perfectly straight once more, her hands on her lap.

But it was hopeless. Every rut in the road, every bounce, pressed her body against his—once, causing her to brace herself with her small hand to his thigh—and Roan was reminded with each passing mile how softly pliant she felt against him, how insubstantial she seemed, and yet strangely sturdy at the same time. He looked out the window and tried not to think of her lying naked on soft white linens, her golden hair spilling around her shoulders, her breasts pert. He managed it by looking at the old man every time his thoughts drifted in that direction.

They'd been gone only one excruciating hour when one of the women took a deep breath in her endless conversation and announced loudly, "I know who you are! You're Lady

Merryton!”

All eyes riveted on Miss Cabot, including Roan’s.

“Not at all!” she exclaimed.

“No?” The woman seemed dubious.

“*No!* I assure you, if I were Lady Merryton, I’d travel by private coach.” Miss Cabot smiled.

“Yes, I suppose,” the woman said, looking disappointed.

What, did the old crow really believe royalty would be carted about the countryside in a public coach? Even Roan knew better than that. He didn’t keep up with the princes and queens and whatnot of England, but he assumed a “lady” was some sort of royalty. When his aunt and uncle had returned from London this summer—without Aurora, whose person had been placed with all due confidence by Roan’s family in their care—they’d talked quite a lot about an earl here, a viscount there. Aurora dined with Lady This, danced with Lord That. Roan had paid little heed, and because he had not, he was at a disadvantage—he had no idea what the significance of any of it was, only that royalty seemed to abound in England.

“But I am acquainted with Lady Merryton,” Miss Cabot added casually.

Roan cocked his head to one side, trying to see her face. She was *acquainted* with Lady Merryton? What was she, a countess or some such thing? Didn’t that make her the daughter of a queen and king? And did that therefore mean that Miss Cabot kept company with kings and queens?

“Just as well you’re not her, I think, what with all the folderol around *that* marriage, eh?” The larger woman snorted and shook her head.

“Simply shocking,” the smaller agreed.

Roan could see the blush creep into Miss Cabot’s neck. He didn’t know what *folderol* meant, but as both sisters were practically congratulating each other on their opinions, it made him very curious.

The women looked as if they were poised to ask more questions, but the coach began to slow. Roan leaned forward a bit, could see a row of whitewashed cottages with red and purple flowers spilling out of the window boxes. They’d arrived in a village he’d seen earlier today, and if he were not mistaken, there was nothing here but a change of horses. Yet he, for one, could not wait to be disgorged from this coach.

They rolled into the village, and the coach swayed to one side as the coachman hopped down from the seats atop to open the door and release the step. Roan was always a gentleman, but today, he could not help himself from launching out of the interior of the crowded coach and taking several steps away to drag some much needed air into his lungs, and hopefully, erase the feel of Miss Cabot against him from his flesh. By the time he turned about, the coachman had helped all the passengers from the interior, and the boy was assisting the old man onto a bench. The two ladies, likewise regurgitated from the coach, stood in identical fashion, their hands on the small of their backs, bending

backward...and still talking.

Miss Cabot was standing apart from the others, holding a small wrapped package. She looked remarkably fresh, cheerful as a bluebell in her blue traveling gown.

The driver strolled into their midst with the posture of a mayor in spite of his dirty breeches, worn shoes and a waistcoat that seemed two sizes too small. “Beggin’ yer pardon, ladies and gents!” he announced grandly. “The coach will depart at a quarter past two.”

Roan glanced around him. There was a small public inn and a smithy, but very little else. He would very much like to drown the morning with a pint or two, but instead began striding down the road, needing to stretch his legs and shake off the exquisitely torturous feeling of having a lovely young woman pressed practically into his lap for the past hour and a half. It wouldn’t hurt him to find the last tattered remnants of his patience, either. He paused, searching for it. It was not available.

Roan was not generally an impatient man. On the contrary—he thought most would say he could be depended upon to be the center of calm in the midst of a storm. But he was devilishly out of sorts—he’d been in England for all of two days and could still feel the sea swells beneath his legs after a month at sea. He’d been turned completely around by the fellows in Liverpool, who, he’d realized after some minutes of trying to understand them, were actually speaking English to him. Those lads had sent him on this fool’s errand, sent him south when he should have gone north.

Moreover, Roan was a man accustomed to fine carriages and better steeds. Not stagecoaches on rutted roads, squashed in between a dirty squab and a woman with skin that felt as smooth as butter.

He came to a full stop in the road and breathed deeply of the warm air. The short walk had not improved his mood as much as he would have liked. He turned his face up to a bright blue sky and roared his frustration with his missteps, with his sister, with everything in general.

Now he felt better.

Roan pivoted about and strode back to the little hamlet.

He spied Miss Cabot perched on top of a fence post. She had opened the package she'd held protectively in her lap and appeared to be eating something. Next to the fence, the sisters were seated side by side on a trunk, each with a pail in their lap. They, too, appeared to be eating.

Roan strolled to Miss Cabot's side. He tried not to ogle what was in her lap, but he couldn't resist it, particularly as a quick review of the past twenty-four hours reminded him that he'd not eaten.

Miss Cabot glanced up, turning her head so that he could see her hazel eyes from beneath the deep brim of her bonnet. "Oh. Mr. Matheson."

"Miss Cabot."

She held up the brown cheesecloth so that a variety of small bites were displayed just below his nose. "May I offer you a

sweetmeat?”

He peered more closely at the contents. They looked like the fried cakes that Nella, his family’s longtime cook, often made. “No, thank you.” He wasn’t so out of sorts as to take her food.

“No?” She took one and popped it into her mouth. “*Mmm,*” she said, and closed her eyes a moment. “Delicious.”

Much to his consternation, Roan’s stomach grumbled.

Miss Cabot smiled and held up the cheesecloth a little closer to him. “You must at least try *one*.”

“You don’t mind?” he asked, but he was already reaching for one.

She watched him closely as he put the morsel in his mouth. Good God, she was right—it was delicious.

“Have another. Have as many as you like.”

“Perhaps one more,” Roan said gratefully, reaching. When he opened his palm, he found three instead of the one he’d intended.

Miss Cabot laughed, the sound of it crystal and light. “One might think you’ve not eaten today, Mr. Matheson.”

“I’ve not eaten since yesterday morning.”

“What! Why ever not?”

He shrugged. “I’ve been traveling and it’s not always convenient. Frankly, I thought I would have reached my destination by now.”

Miss Cabot hopped down from the fence and squatted down beside a small bag by her feet, which she opened and rummaged in before removing another cheesecloth. She handed that one to

him.

Roan unwrapped it. It was bread.

“I’ve cheese, too.”

“No, I—”

“I must insist, Mr. Matheson! My youngest sister put it in my bag.” She smiled up at him, her eyes sparkling like diamonds in the sunlight. “She wanted me to be properly provisioned. She has high hopes that we will be set upon by highwaymen and forced to live in the woods.”

“She has *hope* of that?”

“She has a keen sense of drama. Please, help yourself. There is more.”

“I’m grateful,” he said, and went down on one haunch and tore off a chunk of the bread. He ate it much more savagely than he intended as Miss Cabot climbed back onto the fence railing. He helped himself to the cheese, too, surprised by how ravenous he suddenly realized he was.

“Yoo-hoo!”

The two sisters wiggled their fingers at Miss Cabot, even though they sat only a few feet away. “We’ve solved the mystery!” one of them trilled loudly.

“We have indeed! It was *quite* a puzzle—”

“Quite,” said the more robust of the two.

“What mystery?” Miss Cabot asked.

“Well, *you*, my dear. But we have deduced it. You are Lady Altringham!” she said proudly.

“Oh dear me, no,” Miss Cabot said laughingly. “She’s twenty years my senior.”

“Oh,” said the woman, clearly disappointed once more.

“But I am acquainted with her,” Miss Cabot said. “Her daughter and I were presented together.”

“*Ooh*,” said the smaller one, her eyes lighting with delight.

“Presented?” Roan said uncertainly.

“To the *king*, sir!” one of the women said crossly, as if he should have known it.

Roan looked up at Miss Cabot curiously. “Why? Did you do something of note?”

Miss Cabot burst into a delightful laughter. “Not at all! It was all I could manage to curtsy properly.”

“I should like to know from where *you* hail, sir, for you seem *quite* ignorant,” said one of the women.

“Doesn’t he, though?” agreed the other. “Everyone knows that presentation in court is the rite of passage for a young lady of pedigree,” said the other in a bit of a huff.

Roan didn’t understand. “For what purpose?”

“The purpose!” the woman scoffed, clearly annoyed. “Wouldn’t you like to be presented to the king?”

Roan had to think about that. If it prolonged his time in England, he would say no.

“Where are you from?” the woman demanded.

“America,” Roan said. “New York, to be precise.”

“And why have you come all this way?”

He didn't think it was any business of hers, but he said, "To collect my sister who has been visiting your fair country for several months. Does that meet with your approval?"

The woman didn't answer. She had turned her attention to Miss Cabot again, eyeing her suspiciously. "And if you're not Lady Altringham, then who *are* you? What young lady travels without escort, I ask you?"

Roan wondered that, too, and his curiosity was the only thing that kept him from stuffing the woman's cloth from her pail into her mouth. He glanced at Miss Cabot. Her cheeks had flushed in a way that made her look a bit guilty. Good God, she wasn't another Aurora, was she?

"Oh, ah...please, allow me to introduce myself. I am Miss Prudence Cabot. And who might I have the pleasure of addressing?"

"Mrs. Tricklebank," said the smaller. "And my sister, Mrs. Scales."

Miss Cabot peeked up at Roan. "May I introduce you to Mr. Matheson?"

Before Roan could say a word, he was spared by the driver's announcement that the coach would depart in fifteen minutes.

"Oh!" Mrs. Tricklebank cried. "Come, come, Ruth! We don't want to miss the coach," she said frantically, as if they were miles from the coach instead of the few feet that they were. Both women gathered their things and hurried back to the coach, clutching one another's arms, their pails bumping against their

hips.

Roan wrapped what was left of the bread and cheese once more, a bit embarrassed by how much of it he'd eaten. "Thank you for your kindness, Miss Cabot. I'll see to it your supplies are replenished."

Her smile was so sunny, Roan felt it slip right through him. "Please, don't trouble yourself. I shall reach my destination by the end of the day."

"Are you certain? Those two might convince the driver to stop and hold an inquisition."

She laughed. "They're harmless, really. I think they are much in love with the sound of their own voices." She gave him a saucy smile and hopped off the fence railing. She stooped to pick up her valise. Roan unthinkingly took it from her hand and politely offered his arm to her.

She kept that pert little smile as she laid her hand on his arm so carefully that he could scarcely feel it. He looked at her. He didn't want to see a young woman of obvious privilege with the same misguided sensibilities as his sister. "Pardon, but how is it that you are traveling without escort?" he asked. "Not a maid? Not a groom?"

Miss Cabot smiled as if his was a trifling question and averted her gaze. "Don't you think it is interesting how people are so keen to fret over such small details?"

Small detail, indeed. That was precisely the sort of answer his incorrigible sister would give—an answer that answered nothing

at all. "I'm not fretting," he said. "Merely curious."

"Thank you, Mr. Matheson, for not fretting." She flashed another smile at him, but this one was a bit more cautious.

Yes, there was definitely something amiss with this beauty, he would stake his fortune on it. But he had enough trouble brewing in England to delve too deeply.

When they reboarded, Roan noticed the boy had moved to the seats on top of the coach, still holding tight to the battered valise. Roan helped Miss Cabot into the coach, his fingers closing around the small bones of her elbow, his hand on the small of her back to guide her. He waited until she was seated, then put himself on the step, and looked inside, determining how he would fit himself onto the bench beside her and directly across from the old man once more.

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable there?" Mrs. Scales asked him, pointing to the tiny bit of bench between her sister and the old man. "There's more room, isn't there?" And to Miss Cabot, she said, "The gentleman takes up *quite* a lot of space."

He couldn't believe this woman would impugn his size again. She was fortunate that he had been raised properly and did not voice aloud his opinion of *her* girth.

"Oh, I think one spot is as good as the other," Miss Cabot said smoothly. She scooted over. Roan eyed the bench warily. Miss Cabot scooted more. He glanced at her, silently pleading for more space. With a slight roll of her eyes, Miss Cabot scooted all the way into the doughy side of Mrs. Scales.

He stepped inside—hunched over in that confined space—and somehow managed to settle himself on the bench beside her. Miss Cabot shifted to free her arm from behind him, but when she settled once more, her elbow settled firmly in his ribs and would no doubt poke him with every bounce the coach made.

As the coach began to move, Mrs. Scales fixed a slightly suspicious gaze on Miss Cabot. “May I inquire, to where are you traveling today, Miss Cabot?”

Roan could feel Miss Cabot shift about, uncomfortable with the busybody’s scrutiny of her. “Actually, I am on my way to see a dear friend. She’s just been delivered of her first child.”

“Oh, a *baby!*” Mrs. Tricklebank said.

“Yes, a baby!” Miss Cabot agreed enthusiastically. “Poor thing sent a messenger and begged me to come straightaway. It’s her first child and she’s feeling a bit at sixes and sevens.”

“She didn’t send someone for you?” Mrs. Scales asked. “One would think you might have had *some* escort,” she added curiously.

Miss Cabot’s elegant neck began to turn pink. “There was no time. My friend hasn’t any help with the baby, and I think she can’t do without her husband.”

“*Hmm,*” Mrs. Scales said gravely.

She rankled Roan. Who was she to pass judgment on Miss Cabot? He didn’t believe her, either, and thought she was up to mischief because he was well versed in the way young women dissembled. But he wouldn’t prosecute her for it as Mrs. Scales

seemed determined to do. “An interesting custom,” he said, fixing a cold gaze on Mrs. Scales. “Is it common to interrogate fellow passengers on every stagecoach, or just this one?”

Mrs. Scales blinked. She drew her mouth into a bitter pucker. Miss Cabot graciously looked away from the old crone and pretended to gaze out the window. But he could see her smile.

The coach swayed down the road at a fine clip, and the eyelids of the coach inhabitants eventually began to grow heavy. Before long, Miss Cabot began to sag. Roan tried to ease her toward Mrs. Scales for the sake of propriety, but Mrs. Scales had also nodded off and Roan couldn't manage it. Miss Cabot's head—or more accurately, her bonnet—settled adamantly onto his shoulder, and the ghastly feather that protruded from the crown bounced in his eye. Roan tried to turn his head to avoid it, but it was impossible, especially given his desire not to jostle and wake her. Or more important, his desire not to wake Mrs. Roly or Mrs. Poly.

He himself felt his lids sliding shut when a sudden bump in the road startled Miss Cabot, and her elbow protruded so deeply into his side that he feared she might have punctured his liver. But the coach was quickly swaying again, and the passengers settled once more. Save the old man, whose gaze was still fixed on Roan.

But then the coach suddenly dipped sharply to the right, tossing them all about, and over an expletive loudly shouted from the driver, it shuddered to a definite halt.

CHAPTER THREE

PRUDENCE'S CHIN BOUNCED off something very hard, and her hand sank into something soft. Her first groggy thought was that it was a lumpy pillow. But when her eyes flew open, she saw that her chin had connected with Mr. Matheson's shoulder...and her hand with his *lap*.

He stared wryly at her as awareness dawned on her. She gasped; he very deliberately reached up to remove the tip of her bonnet's feather that was poking him in the eye.

Prudence could feel the heat flood her cheeks and quickly sat up. She straightened her bonnet, which had somehow been pushed to one side. "What has happened?" she exclaimed, shuffling out from the wedge between Mrs. Scales and Mr. Matheson to the edge of the bench, desperate that no part of her was touching any part of that *very* virile man. But her hip was still pressed so tightly against his thigh that she could feel the slightest shift of muscle beneath his buckskins.

It was alarmingly provocative. Prudence didn't move an inch for several seconds, allowing that feeling to imprint itself in her skin.

"I assume we've broken a wheel," Mr. Matheson said. The coach dipped to the right and swayed unsteadily. The driver cursed again, loudly enough that the round cheeks of the two sisters turned flolid.

Mr. Matheson reached for the door and launched himself from the interior like a phoenix, startling them all. Prudence leaned forward and looked through the open door. The coach was

leaning precariously to that side. She looked back at her fellow travelers and had the thought that if the two ladies tried to exit the coach at the same time, it might topple over. She fairly leaped from the coach, too, landing awkwardly against a coachman who had just appeared to help them down.

“What has happened?” Prudence asked.

“The wheel has broken, miss.”

Mr. Matheson, she noticed, was among the men who had gathered around the offending wheel. He’d squatted to study it, and Prudence wondered if he was acquainted with wheels in general, or merely curious.

There ensued quite a lot of discussion among the men as Mr. Matheson dipped down and reached deep under the coach with one arm, bracing himself against the vehicle with his other hand. Was it natural to be a bit titillated by a man’s immodest address of a mechanical issue? Certainly she had never seen a gentleman involve himself in that way.

When Mr. Matheson rose again, he wiped his hand on his trousers, leaving a smear of axle grease. That did not repulse Prudence. She found it strangely alluring.

“The axle is fine,” he announced.

There was more discussion among the men, their voices louder this time. It seemed to Prudence that they were all disagreeing with each other. At last the driver instructed the women and the old gentleman away from the coach while the men attempted to repair the wheel. Mr. Matheson was included in the group that

was shooed away.

The team was unhitched, and some of the men began to stack whatever they could find beneath the coach to keep it level when the wheel was removed.

“My valise!” Prudence cried, and darted into the men to retrieve it, pulling it away before it could be used as a prop.

Then Mrs. Tricklebank and Mrs. Scales made seats on some rocks beneath the boughs of a tree, taking the old man and the boy under their wings and fussing around them. There was no seat left for Prudence, so she sat on a trunk.

They watched the men prop the carriage up with rocks and luggage and some apparatus from the coach itself, then remove the wheel. Mr. Matheson had returned to the problem and was in the thick of it, lending his considerable strength to the work. Prudence wondered if he had some sort of occupation that required knowledge of wheels. She couldn't see why else he might be involved. It wasn't as if there weren't enough men to do the work. The only other slightly plausible explanation was that he somehow *enjoyed* such things.

The elderly gentleman grunted a bit and moved around in an effort to find some comfort, forcing the sisters to the edges of the rocks.

“He may be an American and a bit crude, but one cannot argue that he cuts a fine figure of a man,” Mrs. Scales said wistfully.

Prudence blinked. She looked at Mrs. Scales and realized that both sisters were admiring Mr. Matheson's figure.

“Mrs. Scales, how vulgar!” Mrs. Tricklebank protested. But she did not look away from Mr. Matheson’s strong back.

The ladies cocked their heads to one side and silently considered his muscular figure. Frankly, his size and bearing made the Englishmen around him look a bit underfed.

He’d removed his coat, and Prudence could see the ripple of his muscles across his back, the outline of his powerful legs and hips straining against his trousers as he dipped down. Prudence could feel a bit of sparkly warmth snaking up her spine and unbuttoned the top two buttons of her spencer. “It’s rather too warm this afternoon, isn’t it?” she asked no one in particular. No one in particular responded.

As they continued to privately admire Mr. Matheson, another heated discussion broke out among the men. This time, a coachman was dispatched under the coach, crawling in so far that only his boots were visible. The other men hovered about, making sure the coach stayed put on its temporary perch. The coachman at last wiggled out from beneath the coach and in a low voice delivered a piece of news that was apparently so calamitous that it caused the men to burst into even louder argument all over again.

The driver ended it all with a shout of “Enough!”

At that point, Mr. Matheson whirled away from the gathered men, his hands on his waist. He took a very deep breath.

“What do you suppose is his occupation?” Mrs. Scales mused, clearly unruffled by the shouting and arguing. “He seems

so...strong.”

“Quite strong,” said Mrs. Tricklebank. “Perhaps a smithy?”

“His clothes are too fine for a blacksmith,” Prudence offered.

Mrs. Tricklebank produced a fan, and with a sharp flick of her wrist, she began to fan herself. “Yes, I think you’re right. I think he comes from means.”

Mr. Matheson suddenly whirled back to face the men and roughly loosened his neckcloth. He began to speak sternly, rolling up his sleeves as he did, revealing forearms as thick as fence posts. He reached for the wheel and picked it up.

The sisters gasped in unison with Prudence; such a display of brawn was unexpected and stirring. She very much would have liked to see what he meant to do with that wheel, but the driver, clearly unhappy with Mr. Matheson’s efforts, wrested the wheel from his grip. Mr. Matheson reluctantly let it go, grabbed up his coat and stalked away from the men as the driver carefully leaned the wheel against the coach.

He kept stalking, striding past the ladies, his expression dark.

“What has happened?” Mrs. Tricklebank cried.

“What has happened?” Mr. Matheson repeated sharply, and whirled around to face the ladies and the old man. “I’ll tell you what has happened. That fool driver,” he said, pointing in the direction of the men, “insists that we wait for another coach instead of repairing the wheel and being on our way.” He jerked his shirtsleeves down as he cast another glare over his shoulder for the driver. “One would think a man who drives a team and

a coach for his living might carry a tool or two with him.” He shoved into his coat, then dragged his hand through his hair. He muttered something under his breath and turned away from the coach, taking several steps toward an overgrown meadow, and then standing with his back to them, his legs braced apart, his arms akimbo.

For a moment, Prudence thought he meant to stomp away. She could imagine him striding across the fields all the way to the seashore, his jaw clenched, boarding the first ship he found and sailing to America.

“Why should that make him so desperately unhappy?” Mrs. Scales asked loudly.

“Because the good Lord knows when another coach might happen along!” he shouted over his shoulder.

The women exchanged a look. They all knew that two stagecoaches traveled this route every day, as did the Royal Post. A conveyance of some sort would be along shortly. But no one dared say it to Mr. Matheson, as he seemed very perturbed as it was. He was so perturbed in fact, muttering something under his breath, that it struck Prudence as oddly amusing. Try as she might to keep the smile from her face, she could not.

Unfortunately, Mr. Matheson chose that moment to turn back to the group. His gaze landed on her and his brow creased into a frown at the sight of her smile. “What is it?” he demanded irritably. “Have I said something to amuse you?”

All heads swiveled toward Prudence, which only made her

amusement more irrepressible. She had to dip her head, cover her mouth with her hand. Her shoulders were shaking with her effort to keep from laughing out loud.

“Splendid,” Mr. Matheson said, nodding as if he was neither surprised nor unsettled by her laugh.

“I beg your pardon,” Prudence said, and stood up, the smile still on her face. “I do sincerely beg your pardon. But you’re very...distraught.”

He looked her up and down as if she puzzled him, as if he couldn’t understand what she was saying. His study of her made Prudence suddenly aware of herself—of her arms and limbs, and her bosom, where his gaze seemed to linger a moment too long. “Of course I’m *distraught*,” he said, in a manner that had her curious if he merely disliked the word, or if he disliked that she was not equally distraught. “I have important business here and the delays I’ve already suffered could make this entire venture disastrous!”

Prudence paused. “Ah. The delay you brought on by going in the wrong direction, of course, and then this one on top of that.”

He glared at her.

“Oh. Pardon,” she said, and glanced at the others. “Was it a secret? But another coach will be along shortly,” she cheerfully added. “You may depend that there are at least *two* more coaches that travel this route each day.”

“That’s wonderful news, Miss Cabot,” he said, moving toward her. “And what are we to do while we wait? Nothing? Should we

not try and solve our problem?" he asked, gesturing to the coach.

"Well, I certainly don't intend to *stand* and wait," Mrs. Scales announced grandly.

As no one seemed inclined to stand and wait, or solve their problem, the waiting commenced.

The men settled on the side of the road on upturned trunks, the ladies and the old man on their rocks. Mr. Matheson made several sounds of impatience as he wandered a tight little circle just beyond them. Occasionally, he would walk up to the road and squint in the direction they'd come, trying to see round the bend in the road and through the stand of oak trees that impeded the view of the road. And then he'd swirl back again, stalking past the men sitting around the broken wheel, and to the meadow, only to repeat his path a few moments later.

Mrs. Scales, Prudence realized, was studying her as Prudence studied Mr. Matheson. "Did you say there was *no one* who might have seen you safely to your friend, my dear?" she asked slyly.

The woman was impossible. But Prudence had grown up with three sisters—she was well versed in the tactics of busybodies and smiled sweetly. "I didn't say that at all, Mrs. Scales. What do you think? Perhaps the time might pass more quickly if we think of something to do," she suggested, hopping up from her seat.

"What might we possibly do?" Mrs. Scales scoffed.

"A contest," Prudence said, her mind whirling.

"God help me," Mr. Matheson muttered.

"Yes, a contest!" Prudence said, stubbornly standing behind

her impetuous idea.

“Such as?” Mrs. Scales inquired. “We’ve no cards, no games.”

“I know! A footrace,” Mrs. Tricklebank suggested brightly, which earned her a look of bafflement from her sister and the old man.

“And who do you suggest engage in a footrace, Nina?”

“Perhaps something a bit less athletic,” Prudence intervened. “Something—”

“Marksmanship.”

This, the first word uttered by the elderly gentleman, was so surprising that they all paused a moment to look at him.

“I had in mind a word game or something a bit tamer, but very well,” Prudence said. “Marksmanship it is.”

“That’s absurd!” Mrs. Scales exclaimed. “Again, who shall participate?”

“Well, the gentlemen, certainly,” Prudence said. “I’ve yet to meet a proper gentleman who wasn’t eager for sport.”

“I’m not sure you want to put firearms in the hands of some of our fellow travelers,” Mr. Matheson said.

Prudence looked at the men lounging about. He had a point. But Mrs. Scales was watching her so intently that Prudence didn’t dare sit back down. “Then *I’ll* participate,” she said, turning about.

Her pronouncement was met with a lot of snorting.

But Mr. Matheson laughed...with great amusement. “That’s preposterous.”

Prudence's mouth dropped open. "How can you say so?" she objected. "I've been taught to shoot!"

"Why ever for?" Mrs. Scales cried. "On my word, Mrs. Tricklebank, the state of society is exactly as I feared—ladies are not ladies at all!"

Now Prudence was doubly offended. "I beg your pardon, I was taught to shoot for sport, obviously!"

"I think there is nothing obvious about it," Mrs. Scales said, and snapped open her fan and began to wave it in time with her sister's.

"I like this idea," Mr. Matheson said, nodding. He folded his arms and studied Prudence intently, a droll smile on his face that transformed him. His eyes were suddenly shining. "I like it very much, in fact. What do you say we limit the contest to just the two of us to begin," he said, gesturing between them. "Anyone here may challenge the victor."

Prudence looked back at the others. She expected some gentleman to stand up and express a desire to shoot. But no one did.

"Well, then, Miss Cabot?" Mr. Matheson said. "Wasn't it your idea to pass the time?"

It was. And in hindsight, it appeared to be a very bad idea. It was very unlike her to speak so boldly and impetuously, and now Prudence knew why her sisters were accustomed to talking out of turn and saying outrageous things. How did they do it? How did they say impetuous things and then *do* impetuous things?

Mr. Matheson was watching her with far too much anticipation. As if he couldn't wait to put a firearm in her hand. His smile had broadened. "Perhaps these good people might like to wager on our contest," he said smoothly, gesturing grandly to the ladies.

"Wager," said the old man, nodding.

"Ooh," said Mrs. Scales. "I certainly have been known to enjoy a wager or two." She tittered as she opened her reticule. Prudence gaped at the woman in surprise. Mrs. Scales glanced at her expectantly. "Well? As the gentleman said, it was *your* idea."

"Yes, all right," Prudence said crossly. What a fool she was! She *had* been taught to shoot. The earl, as they had always referred to her stepfather, had insisted his stepdaughters be properly instructed in riding, shooting, gaming and archery. He said that they should be prepared to meet their match in a man. Unfortunately, Prudence had not met her match in a man in such a long time that she was quite unpracticed at shooting now.

"We will need a target," Matheson said with all the confidence of a man who knew he would win and win handily. That trait, Prudence discovered, was just as maddening whether a gentleman was British or American.

"I've one," said the old man. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a flask. He tipped it up at his lips and drained what was left, then handed it to Mr. Matheson.

"A perfect target. Thank you, sir," Matheson said. He was enjoying this now, winking slyly at Prudence as he passed her,

carrying the flask.

That flask looked awfully small to Prudence. “I don’t have a firearm,” she quickly pointed out, hoping that would be the end of it.

“Then you may use mine,” Mr. Matheson said, and smiled as he reached deep into his coat and withdrew it. “I suggest you remove your gloves, Miss Cabot.”

The sisters fluttered and cooed at that, and then unabashedly admired Mr. Matheson as he strolled away to set the flask on another rock.

There was no escape. Prudence yanked her gloves from her hands, muttering under her breath about fools and angels.

Mr. Matheson walked back to where she stood and, with the heel of his boot, he scraped a line in the dirt. “Give me your hand,” he said.

“My hand?”

He impatiently took her hand, his palm warm and firm beneath hers. He pressed the gun into her palm and wrapped her fingers around the butt of it. He squeezed lightly and smiled down at her, his gold-brown eyes twinkling with what Prudence read as sheer delight. “Ladies first,” he said, and let go of her, stepping back.

Prudence looked down at the gun. It had a pearled handle and silver barrel, not unlike the pistol her stepbrother, Augustine, liked to show his friends. But Augustine kept his pistol in a case at Beckington House in London. He did not wear it on his person.

Moreover, Mr. Matheson's gun was smaller than the gun she'd been taught to fire.

"You know how to fire it, don't you?" he asked as she studied the gun.

"Yes!" She lifted the gun to have a look. "That is, I assume that the trigger—"

"I suspected as much," Mr. Matheson said. He stepped forward, took her by the wrist and swung her about so that her back was against his chest. "I would feel more comfortable," he said, a bit breathlessly, "if you do not point it at me."

"Oh, I beg your pardon."

He leaned over her shoulder and extended her arm with the gun, helping her to sight the target. He showed her how to cock it. "Would you like a practice round?"

A practice round? No, she wanted this over as quickly as possible. "Not necessary," she said pertly.

One corner of his mouth tipped up. Prudence had to force herself to look away from that mouth. Those lips, full and moist, made her a little unsteady and she needed all her wits about her.

"Let the contest begin," Mr. Matheson said, and stepped back once more to take his place among the few gentlemen passengers who had wandered over to have a look.

As Prudence studied her target, there seemed to be a lot of chatter at her back as well as the sound of coins clinking when they were tossed into the hat the old man had taken off the young man's head as people made their bets. There was laughter, too,

and Prudence wondered if it was directed at her.

“Go on, Miss Cabot. We don’t want night to fall before you’ve had your chance,” Mr. Matheson said, and someone snickered.

Prudence glanced coolly at him over her shoulder. She lifted her arm. The pistol was heavy in her hand as she tried to sight the flask. Mr. Matheson had put it at what seemed like a great distance. Her arm began to quiver—she was mortified by that. She aimed as best she could, closed one eye...and then the other...and fired.

The sound of breaking glass startled her almost as much as the kick from the gun that sent her stumbling backward. She’d not expected to hit the target at all, much less head-on as she seemed to have done in a moment of sheer dumb luck. Prudence gasped with delight and relief and whirled about. “Did you *see*?” she demanded of all of them.

“Of course we saw!” Mrs. Scales said. “We’re sitting right here.”

Prudence squealed with jubilant triumph, as if she’d known all along she could do it. “Your turn, Mr. Matheson,” she said cheerfully as two men hurried by her to examine the flask. “But it appears we’ll need another target.” She curtsied low and held out the gun to him.

The slightest hint of a smile turned up the corner of his mouth. “It certainly does,” he said, and looked at her warily, as if he expected her of some sleight of hand. He took the gun Prudence very gingerly held out to him.

"I've a target!" Mrs. Scales called out. She held up a small handheld mirror.

"Ruth, Mr. Scales gave that to you!"

"Hush, now. He can give me another one, can't he? Make your wager."

A man took the mirror and walked across the meadow to prop it where the flask had been.

"Watch now, Miss Cabot, and I will demonstrate how to shoot a pistol," he said. He stepped to the line he'd drawn in the dirt. He put one hand at his back, held the gun out and fired. He clearly hit something; the mirror toppled off the back of the rock. Two gentlemen moved forward to have a look; Prudence scampered to catch up with them and see for herself. One of them leaned over the rock, picked up the mirror and held it aloft. The mirror was, remarkably, intact for the most part, but a corner piece had either broken off or been shot off.

"I *win!*" Prudence cried with gleeful surprise. "You missed!"

"I most certainly did not miss," Mr. Matheson said gruffly, gesturing to the broken mirror. "Do you not see that a piece is missing?"

"Must have grazed it," one of the men offered. "You hit the rock, here, see? And the bullet—"

"Yes, yes, I see," Mr. Matheson said, waving his hand over the rock. "Nevertheless, the object has been hit. We have a tie."

"Then who is to receive the winnings?" Mrs. Scales complained as the sound of an approaching coach reached them.

Prudence didn't hear the answer to that question—her heart skipped several beats when she saw the coach that appeared on the road. It was not the second stagecoach as they all expected—it was Dr. Linford. Prudence's heart leaped with painful panic. One look at her and Dr. Linford would not only know that she'd lied, but he would also demand she come with him at once. He would tell her brother-in-law Lord Merryton, who would be quite undone by her lack of propriety. That was the one thing Merryton insisted upon, that their reputations and family honor be kept upmost in their minds at all times. As Merryton generously provided for Prudence and Mercy and her mother, and had indeed paid dearly to ensure that the patrons of the Lisson Grove School of Art overlooked Mercy's family and placed her in that school, Prudence couldn't even begin to fathom all the consequences of her being discovered like this. Moreover, she had no time to try—she looked wildly about for a place to hide as the Linford coach rolled to a halt. But the meadow was woefully bare, and there was nothing but Mr. Matheson's large frame to shield her, so she darted behind him, grabbing onto his coat.

“What the devil?”

He tried to turn but she pushed against his shoulder. “*Please,*” she begged him. “Please, sir, not a word!”

“Are you *hiding*?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes, obviously!”

“Good God,” he muttered. His body tensed. “Miss Cabot,” he

said softly, and she thought he'd say he would not help her, that she must step out from behind him. "Your feather is showing."

"Please indulge me in this. I shall pay you—"

"Pay! Damn it, your *feather* is showing!"

The feather in her bonnet! Prudence gasped and quickly yanked the feather from her bonnet and dropped it. She stepped closer to his back, practically melding herself onto him. She could smell the scent of horseflesh, of leather and brawn, and she closed her eyes and pressed her cheek to the warmth of his back. The superfine felt soft against her skin, and she closed her eyes, feeling entirely safe in that sliver of a moment.

"What are you doing?" he demanded softly.

"Hiding," she whispered. "I told you."

"I understand you are hiding, but you're *touching* me."

"Yes, I am," she said with exasperation. Was he unfamiliar with the concept of hiding? "I would crawl under your coat if I could. That's what hiding *is*."

"Good afternoon!" she heard Dr. Linford call out to all. "May we help?"

Prudence was doomed. She would be humiliated before Mr. Matheson and exposed to scandal—all of which seemed far worse than Mr. Matheson's displeasure that she was touching him.

"Turn about," Mr. Matheson said.

"No," Prudence squeaked, her voice sounding desperately close to a whimper. "Please don't—"

“Turn about and walk to the stand of trees just beyond the rocks. No one will see you there, and if they do, you’ll be at too great a distance for anyone to determine who, exactly, you are.”

“I *can’t*—”

“You can’t stand here hiding behind me, Miss Cabot. It’s entirely suspicious. Go, and I’ll walk behind you and block any view.”

Prudence lifted her cheek from the warmth and safety of his back. He was right, of course; she couldn’t hide like a dumb cow in the middle of a meadow. She glanced at the trees Mr. Matheson had suggested.

“Miss Cabot?”

“Yes,” she said quickly, earnestly.

“Let go of my coat and turn about.”

“Oh. Yes.” She reluctantly released his coat and tried to smooth out the wrinkle she’d put in the fabric with her grip.

Mr. Matheson hitched his shoulders as if she’d tugged him backward, and straightened his cuffs. “Have you turned about?”

“Ah...” She turned around. “Yes.”

“Then for God’s sake walk on before the passengers begin to wonder why I stand like a damn tree in this field.”

Prudence did as he instructed her, her hands clasping and unclasping, her step light and very quick, trying not to run. She didn’t dare look back for fear of Dr. Linford seeing her. When she reached the safety of the trees, she whirled about and collided with Mr. Matheson’s chest.

He caught her elbow, his grip firm, and dipped down to see her beneath the brim of her bonnet. His gaze was intent. Piercing. It felt almost as if he could see through her. "I'm going to ask you a question and I need you to be completely honest with me. Are you in trouble?"

"No!" she said, aghast. Not as *yet*, that was. "No, no, nothing like that."

"Do you swear it?"

Good Lord, he acted as if he knew what she'd done. Prudence looked away, but he quickly put his hand on her cheek and forced her head around to look at him. She opened her mouth to respond, then thought the better of it and closed it. She nodded adamantly.

He unabashedly continued to study her face a moment, looking, Prudence presumed, for any sign of dishonesty, which made her feel oddly vulnerable. She looked down from his soft golden-brown eyes and dark lashes, from the shadow of his beard, and his lips. His *lips*. She was certain she'd never seen lips like that on a man and, even now, as terrified as she was of being discovered, they made her feel a little fluttery inside.

"Stay here," he said. He strode away from her, toward the carriage.

When he reached the small crowd, there was a lively discussion, the center at which seemed to be Mrs. Scales. Mr. Matheson gestured toward Linford's carriage. Mrs. Scales bent over and grabbed up her pail and a bag, and hurried toward the

Linford coach. Her sister was quickly behind her, dropping her pail once and quickly retrieving it. But at the coach door, there was another discussion.

There was a shuffling around of the luggage, and then Mrs. Scales, Mrs. Tricklebank and the elderly gentleman all joined Dr. Linford and his wife in their coach. Dr. Linford climbed up to sit beside his driver. After what seemed an eternity, Dr. Linford's coach drove on, sliding around the stagecoach, and then moving briskly down the road.

Prudence sagged with relief. A smile spread her face as she realized she had managed to dodge Dr. Linford completely. How clever she was! Prudence had never thought herself capable of subterfuge, but she appeared to be quite good at it. She felt oddly exhilarated. At last, something exciting was happening in her life! It was only a single day, but she was completely enlivened by the events thus far.

Now that the Linford coach had gone, Prudence noticed Mr. Matheson began striding toward her, his gait long and quick, his tails billowing out behind him.

She couldn't see the harm in this, really. She'd had her lark with a handsome pair of eyes and stirring lips, and no one would be the wiser for it. She would arrive at Cassandra's house as intended, and none would be the wiser of her flirt with adventure, would they?

Prudence might have strained her arm reaching about to give her back a hearty, triumphant pat, but she had a sudden thought

—Mrs. Scales or Mrs. Tricklebank could very well say her name to Mrs. Linford, who would know instantly what she'd done, and worse, that she'd purposely eluded Dr. Linford in this meadow as if she had something very dire to hide.

Prudence went from near euphoria for having arranged an escapade she would long remember to terror at having done something quite awful. *Now* what was she to do?

CHAPTER FOUR

MISS CABOT APPEARED to shrink slightly as Roan strode back to the stand of trees, which he took as another sign that she was hiding something. The woman reminded him very much of Aurora. Roan loved his sister, adored her—but she was the most impetuous female he'd ever known. Without a care, heedless of the consequences of her actions, and therefore at risk of being irrevocably compromised. Of course he grudgingly admired Aurora's independent spirit—he had a bit of that himself—but he wouldn't trust his sister for even a moment.

Looking at Miss Cabot glance around as if planning her escape, he had the same feeling of utter distrust for her.

Miss Cabot apparently thought the better of running and engaging him in a true footrace, but she took a tentative step back.

Roan stopped himself from grabbing her by the arms and giving her a good shake. He put his hands on his waist and stared at her. “All right, then, the sisters have gone. You may safely confess what you've done.”

“Whatever do you mean? I’ve done nothing,” she insisted unconvincingly.

“Thievery?” he asked flatly.

She gasped.

“Murder?”

“Mr. Matheson!”

“Don’t look so aghast, Miss Cabot, for I can’t think of a single reason why you would hide herself from a doctor with a superior coach.”

Miss Cabot paled. She had nothing to say for herself and bit her bottom lip in a manner that Roan believed was a universal sign of guilt on a woman. He honestly didn’t know if he should deliver a lecture of conduct or bite that lip, too, as he desperately wanted to do. He thought of a man with Aurora under similar circumstances—another lip biter—and inwardly shuddered.

“Admit it—you were to be in that coach.”

She lifted her chin, clasped her hands together tightly at her waist. “Yes.”

Any number of scenarios began to race through Roan’s mind, none of them good. “Is he...are you involved in an affair with him?”

“What? *No!*” she exclaimed, her cheeks flooding with color.

“Are you affianced to him?” he asked, wondering if perhaps she was avoiding her engagement. Again, the similarity to Aurora was uncanny and strangely maddening.

“Did you not see his wife? He’s married!”

“Then what is it, Miss Cabot? What has you hiding in these trees like a common criminal?” he demanded, his anger—admittedly, with Aurora—ratcheting.

“I am *not* a criminal,” she said hotly.

“Mmm,” he said dubiously.

“I was...” She swallowed. She rubbed her nape. “It is true,” she said, putting up her hand, “that Dr. Linford was to escort me to Himple, where I am to be met by Mr. Bulworth, who will see me the rest of the way to my friend Cassandra’s side. But this coach will also stop in Himple.”

Roan waited for her to say more. At the very least he expected her to say why she was on the stagecoach at all. But Miss Cabot merely shrugged as if that was sufficient explanation.

It was not.

“Why didn’t you go with him? Why would you put yourself in an overcrowded stagecoach with any number of potential scoundrels instead of in a coach with *springs*?” he asked, incredulous.

Miss Cabot rubbed her nape once more. She sniffed. “It’s rather difficult to explain, really.”

“Difficult? The only difficulty here is your reluctance to admit whatever it is you’ve done. I can’t begin to imagine what you’re doing.” A thought suddenly occurred to Roan, and anger surged in him. He abruptly grabbed her elbow and pulled her forward. “Has he attempted... Has he taken *liberty* with you?” he softly demanded and glanced over his shoulder at the others. He would

get on the back of one of the horses from the coach and catch up with the bastard if that was the case. He'd break his damn neck—

“No! No, not at all! Dr. Linford is a good man, a decent man —”

“Then what in blazes is the matter?”

Miss Cabot drew herself up to her middling height, removed her arm from his grip with a yank. “I beg your pardon, but I owe you no explanation, Mr. Matheson.”

“No, you don't,” he agreed. “And neither do I owe you my help. So I will explain to the driver that you must be met by a responsible party at the very first opportunity—”

“All right! I thought traveling with the Linfords would be tedious. I thought the stagecoach would be more...” She made a whirling motion with her hand, as if he should understand her and reach the conclusion quickly.

But he had no idea what she was talking about. He leaned forward, peering at her. “More what?”

“More—” her gaze flicked over him, top to bottom, and her cheeks bloomed “—exciting,” she murmured.

That made absolutely no sense. This cake-brained young woman thought a stagecoach would be more exciting than the doctor's comfortable coach? That a stagecoach with its close quarters and ripe strangers was more exciting than a padded bench? Roan couldn't help himself—he laughed. Roundly.

Miss Cabot glared at him. “So happy to amuse you.”

“Amused? I'm not amused, I'm astounded by your

foolishness.”

She gave a small cry of indignation and whirled about, looking as if she intended to march into the woods, but Roan caught her arm before she could flee, pulling her back. She fell into his chest, landing like a pillow against him.

“All right, then, unlace your corset a bit,” he said. “But a *stagecoach*? It’s the worst sort of travel, second only to the sea if you ask me. Whatever would make you think it would be exciting? A walk over hot coals would be more pleasurable.”

Miss Cabot shrugged free of him and folded her arms across her body. She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. Her flush had gone deeper. “I’m sorry you found it so reprehensible, Mr. Matheson.”

Roan blinked. Understanding slowly dawned, and frankly, he could not have been more delighted. Or flattered. But delighted, utterly delighted. “I *see*,” he said jovially, aware of the wide grin on his face.

“You don’t.”

“Oh, I think I do. You wanted to travel with me,” he said, and poked her playfully on the arm.

“You flatter yourself,” she said imperiously.

“There is no need for me to flatter myself, because you have flattered me beyond compare,” he said with a theatrical bow. “I’ll admit it, I’m surprised. Granted, I am highly sought after in New York, what with my handsome looks and fat purse...” He was teasing her, but that really wasn’t far from the truth. Just ask Mr.

Pratt if it wasn't true. "But to be admired so by a fair English flower makes my heart pitter-patter."

"God in heaven, I could *die*," Miss Cabot said, and turned her head.

Roan laughed. "Please don't." He put his hand on her shoulder and coaxed her around. "You're far too comely to die, and after all, you've gone to so much trouble now." He squeezed her shoulder. He meant to let it go, but his hand slid down her arm, to her wrist.

She clucked her tongue and turned her head away from him.

"I am teasing you, Miss Cabot. A rooster can't help but crow, can he? I am truly flattered." He moved his hand from her arm to her waist and pulled her closer. "If I'm to be admired, I am very pleased to be admired by someone as beautiful as you."

"Oh Lord," she muttered, blushing furiously. "Don't trifle with me. I'm mortified as it is." And yet she made no move to step out of his loose embrace.

"I am very sincere. Nevertheless, as pleasant as this has been for me, you know very well that you shouldn't be gallivanting across the countryside with strangers. You could very well fall victim to some rogue on the road. At the next stop, I intend to put you in a private conveyance to Hipple myself."

"It's *Himple*," she corrected him, and regrettably, stepped away from him. "And I will see myself there, you need not concern yourself."

Just like Aurora. *It's my life to ruin, Roan. You needn't concern*

yourself with it.

“Seeing yourself there is not inconsequential, Miss Cabot. You don’t want to have your reputation marked by an impetuous moment, do you?”

“No, it’s not inconsequential, Mr. Matheson,” she said pertly. “But the ruin has already been done. I highly doubt that I could make it worse.”

And what did *that* mean? Roan wondered. In what way had she been ruined? Or was she prone to overly dramatic interpretations of the events of her life as was Aurora?

“Ho! The coach!” someone shouted. A cry of relief went up from the other passengers, and there was a sudden flurry of activity, of gathering luggage. As the second stagecoach pulled in behind the first, Roan watched the men over his shoulder a moment, then glanced at Miss Cabot. He looked her over, the purse of her lips, the color in her cheeks. Why were the most alluring women the most trouble? He couldn’t imagine Pratt would never dream of doing what Miss Cabot had done today. Which he supposed was what made her the perfect wife. Didn’t it? At present, Roan would keep telling himself that. He hadn’t actually offered to make Susannah his wife, but it was expected that he would. *He* expected he would, for all the reasons Susannah was not standing here under this tree with him.

Yes, he would keep telling himself that.

Roan looked away from Miss Cabot’s hazel eyes. “I should make myself useful in the repair of the wheel.”

“Yes, of course.” She held his gaze, watching him closely. A smile slowly appeared. “Thank you for not revealing me to Dr. Linford.”

He sighed. “I am unduly swayed by the smile of a beautiful woman. It is my cross to bear.”

Her smile deepened. “I’ll wait on the rocks.” She walked past him—gliding, really, with an elegance that was not learned, he knew from experience. She took a seat where they’d gathered previously, picked up her valise and balanced it on her lap, her hands folded primly on top. She looked straight ahead, as if she were at a garden party.

Roan couldn’t help his smile as he walked past her and touched her shoulder. “I didn’t thank *you*.”

“Thank me?” she asked, looking up at him.

“For your great esteem,” he said, and winked.

Miss Cabot muttered something under her breath that sounded very much like *rooster* and more, then turned her head, fidgeting with a curl at her nape.

Roan joined the men, discarding his coat. The driver of the second coach had the tools necessary to repair the broken wheel. Roan would have had the wheel repaired more quickly had he been allowed to conduct the work himself. He was familiar with broken wheels; he and his family were in the lumber trade, their teams bringing loads into New York City from as far north as Canada. It was arduous work, cutting and hauling lumber, and Roan had been pressed on more than one occasion to lend a hand

to help with the work and the transport. He didn't mind it—he liked the way physical labor made him feel alive and strong. As a result, he had repaired more wheels and axles and that sort of thing than perhaps even these men had seen.

But the driver was adamant that the work be done his way.

The wheel was fixed and attached to the axle, and the men began to load the luggage onto the coach once more. As the team of horses was harnessed, the driver asked the passengers to board.

Roan donned his coat, then collected his smaller bag from the pile of luggage that would be reloaded. He turned and looked back to the rocks, intending to rally Miss Cabot.

She was not sitting on the rocks.

Roan walked into the meadow, scanning the tree line and the road. The woman was nowhere to be seen. Had she boarded the second coach? He looked back to that coach. The passengers were gathering their things and boarding.

Roan strode back to the second coach. “Excuse me,” he said, and stepped through the passengers to look into the interior. Only a woman and a small girl sat inside.

Roan turned back to the others. “Have any of you seen a woman? About yay tall,” he said, holding his hand out to indicate her height. “With a bonnet?” he asked, gesturing to his head.

No one had seen her.

Roan was baffled. Where could she be? He hurried back to the first coach, where the luggage was now secured. One of the

men reached for Roan's bag, but he held tight. "Have you seen Miss Cabot?" he asked the man. "She got on in Ashton Down."

"No, sir," the man said. "Shall I put your bag up top?"

"I'll hold on to it, thank you," Roan said. He stepped around the coachman and peered into the interior of the first coach. Two gentlemen who had ridden on top put themselves inside next to the young man who was scrunched down on the bench, swallowed in his coat, still holding the battered valise.

No Miss Cabot.

A sliver of panic raced up Roan's spine. He turned to the driver, who was overseeing the last adjustments to the team's harnesses. "Have you seen Miss Cabot?"

"The comely one?" the driver asked, squinting up at him.

Roan didn't have time to think why it annoyed him the driver would refer to her in that way and said, "Yes, that one."

The driver shook his head. "Heeding the call of nature, I'd say."

Yes, of course. Roan looked back to the trees across the meadow.

"Come, then, climb up," the driver said. "We're late as it is."

"But we're missing one," Roan said.

The driver glanced back at the trees. "I'm not in the business of chasing strays," he said, and hauled himself up to his seat. "It's been plain enough we're on our way. Are you boarding?"

Roan glared at him. "You would leave a young woman unattended in the middle of the countryside?" he snapped as the

second coach pulled around them and began to move down the road.

“How long do you suggest I wait, Yankee? I’ve a schedule to keep and passengers to deliver. They’ve not had any food. I’ll be lucky to reach Stroud by nightfall.”

Roan whirled around. “Miss Cabot!” he bellowed. “Miss Cabot, come at once!”

There was nothing, no answer. They waited, Roan pacing alongside the coach.

“Come on, then, move on!” shouted one of the men.

“Last chance, Yankee,” the driver said.

“What of the luggage?” he demanded, gesturing at the bags and things strapped to the coach. He had helped load her trunk and there it was, strapped onto the coach beneath all the rest, including his trunk.

“All unclaimed luggage will be left at the next station,” the driver said, and picked up the reins. “Will you board?” he asked once more.

Roan glanced over his shoulder at the empty meadow.

“Ack, I’ll not wait,” the driver said, and slapped the reins against his team. He whistled sharply and the stagecoach lurched away, the wheels creaking, the dust rising to envelop Roan as he stood on the side of the road with his bag.

Where the hell was she? Roan turned a full circle, his gaze scanning the quiet countryside, seeing nothing but a pair of cows grazing across the way.

And why the hell did he care, precisely? Wasn't it enough that he had to leave his thriving business in New York to come after Aurora? It was just his luck—Roan's father was too old to chase after his wayward daughter, and Roan's brother, Beck, was even younger than Aurora. There had been no one but him, no one who could be depended upon to fetch his sister and bring her home to marry Mr. Gunderson as she had promised she would do.

He supposed that perhaps contrary to what Aurora had claimed, she didn't love Mr. Gunderson after all. It had seemed highly improbable to him that she did, really, seeing as how her engagement had been carefully constructed by Roan's father.

Rodin Matheson was a visionary, and he'd devised a way to increase the family's wealth in a manner that would provide generously for generations of Mathesons—aunts, uncles, cousins, grandchildren. All of them. By marrying his daughter to the son of the building empire that was Gunderson Properties, he made certain that Matheson Lumber would be used to build New York City for years to come.

Roan thought it was brilliant, really, and Aurora had easily agreed to it after a few meetings with Sam Gunderson. "I adore Mr. Gunderson," she'd said dreamily.

Perhaps she did...in that moment. That was the problem with Aurora—she flitted from one moment to the next, her mind changing as often as the hands on the clock.

It was Mr. Pratt who had suggested to his friend Rodin

Matheson that perhaps Roan would be a good match for his daughter Susannah. Mr. Pratt was the owner of Pratt Foundries, and Rodin began to see a bigger, more successful triumvirate of construction. He explained to Roan that between Pratt Foundries, Gunderson Properties and Matheson Lumber, their business and income would soar as they became *the* construction industry of a growing city.

It was a heady proposition. Roan had never met Susannah, learning that she summered in Philadelphia. But Mr. Pratt had insisted that his daughter was a delight, a comely, agreeable young woman who would make him a perfect wife. Roan hadn't thought much about the qualities of a perfect wife—he wasn't a sentimental man, and when it came to marriage, he accepted it as something that had to be done. Neither had he given much thought as to who he would marry; that had been the furthest thing from his mind as they'd worked to expand Matheson Lumber. He'd supposed that whoever it was, familiarity would eventually breed affection. Affection was all that was necessary, wasn't it? His parents had found affection somewhere along the way and seemed happy. Roan imagined the same would be true for him. As for siring children, he hardly gave that a thought—he could not imagine any circumstance in which he'd be anything less than willing and eager to do his part.

And then he'd met Susannah Pratt.

She'd come to New York just before Roan's aunt and uncle had returned from England. She was nothing as Mr. Pratt had

described, and worse, Roan could not find anything the least bit attractive about her. It was impossible for him to accept that *she* was the one he was to acquaint himself with and then propose marriage. Privately, he'd chided himself for that—a woman's value was not in her face, for God's sake, it was in her soul. So he'd valiantly tried to see beyond her appearance. Unfortunately, she was not the least bit engaging. He could find no common ground, and even if he had, the woman was painfully shy and afraid to look him in the eye.

Just before his aunt and uncle had come home, he had decided he would speak to Susannah about her true desires. Perhaps she found him as odious as he found her. Perhaps she was desperate for escape from this loose arrangement.

But the news his aunt and uncle had brought home trumped everything else. They were all desperate to find Aurora before she was lost to them, and Roan had put aside his own troubles to chase after her. What could he do?

He could curse Aurora for the weeks it had taken him to cross the Atlantic, that's what. The longer Susannah Pratt thought he would be her husband, the harder it would be to disengage from her. Roan was even angrier with Aurora for not being in West Lee, or whatever the hamlet he'd been directed to, but in the other West Lee, north. That alone was enough to concern him. Did he really need to fret about *another* incorrigible, intractable, disobedient young woman?

No. No, he did not. He didn't care that Miss Cabot's eyes were

the color of the vines that grew on his family's house. Or that she had boarded this coach because she'd been attracted to him. Or that he'd teased her and embarrassed her and thereby was probably the cause of her running off.

She was *not* his concern, damn it. And yet, she was.

For the second time that day, Roan swept his hat off his head and threw it down onto the ground in an uncharacteristic fit of frustration. Damn England! Damn women!

He kicked the hat for good measure and watched it scud across the road.

And then, with a sigh of concession, he walked across the road to fetch it. But he discovered he'd kicked his hat into a ditch filled with muddy water. Roan muttered some fiery expletives under his breath. He'd find another hat in the next village. He picked up his bag and hoisted it onto his shoulder and walked on.

Now, to figure out where that foolish little hellion had gone.

CHAPTER FIVE

PRUDENCE HADN'T ACTUALLY intended to flee. She'd been as anxious as anyone to board the coach and be on her way. But as the repair work had dragged on, she began to imagine any number of scenarios awaiting her at the next village. Dr. Linford and his wife, first and foremost, their displeasure and disgust evident. Worse, Dr. Linford and his wife in the company of someone in a position of authority, who would escort Prudence back to Blackwood Hall in shame. She could just see it—made to ride on the back of a wagon like a convicted criminal. As they

moved slowly through villages, children and old women would come out to taunt her and hurl rotten vegetables at her. *Shameless woman!*

That public humiliation would be followed by Lord Merryton's look of abject disappointment. Merryton was a strange man. He was intensely private, which Grace insisted was merely his nature but, nevertheless, everyone in London thought him aloof and unfeeling. Now that Prudence had lived at his house and dined at his table these past two years, she knew him to be extraordinarily kind and even quite fond of her. But he did seem almost unnaturally concerned with propriety and if there was one thing he could not abide, would not tolerate, it was scandal and talk of his family.

As he had been her unwavering benefactor and her friend, Prudence could not bear to disappoint him so. She held him in very high regard and, shamefully, she'd not thought of him in those few moments in Ashton Down when she'd impetuously decided to seek her adventure.

She'd begun to wonder, as she sat on the rock, watching the men repair the wheel, if she ought not to find her own way back to Blackwood Hall and throw herself on Merryton's mercy. To be ferried back to him by Dr. Linford, who would be made to alter his plans to accommodate her foolishness, would only make Merryton that much more cross. She decided it was far better if she arrived on her own, admitted her mistake and begged his forgiveness.

That's why, with one last look and longing sigh at Mr. Matheson's strong back and hips, Prudence had picked up her valise and had begun to walk. She wanted to thank Mr. Matheson for his help, but thought it was probably not a very good idea to draw attention to the fact she was leaving.

She had in mind to find a cottage. She would offer to pay someone to take her back to Ashton Down. And, if she reached the next village before finding a cottage, she could keep herself out of sight until Dr. Linford had gone on. He'd be looking for her coach.

She walked along smartly, trying to be confident in her new plan. All was *not* lost, she told herself. She was at least as clever as Honor and Grace. She *would* see her way out of this debacle.

She hadn't walked very far when she heard the approaching coach, and her confidence swiftly flagged. It was surely the stagecoach, and the driver would stop, insist she board the coach. She hadn't thought of that wrinkle. But Prudence was determined not to be delivered into the hands of Linford. "You will *not* falter," she murmured under her breath. "You have as much right to walk along this road as anyone."

Prudence lifted her chin as the coach rapidly approached. It wasn't until the last possible moment that she understood the coach did not intend to stop and inquire about her at all, and with a cry of alarm, Prudence leaped off the road just as the team thundered by, cloaking her in a cloud of dust.

When the coach had passed, Prudence coughed and picked

herself up with a pounding heart, dusting off her day gown as best she could. "He might at least have slowed to see if I'd been harmed," she muttered, and climbed back on the road, squared her shoulders, and began to walk again.

She had no sooner taken a few steps than she heard the sound of the second coach. Now an old hand at navigating passing coaches, Prudence hopped off the road and stood a few feet back.

But *this* coach slowed. The team was reined down to a walk, then rolled to a stop alongside where she stood.

The driver, *her* driver, peered down at her a moment, then turned his head and spit into the dirt. "Aye, miss, wheel's fixed. Climb aboard."

"Thank you, but I prefer to walk," she said lightly.

"Walk! To where? There's naught a village or a person for miles."

"Miles?" she repeated, trying to sound unimpressed. "How many miles would you say?"

"Five."

"Well! Then it's a good thing that I wore my sturdy shoes," she lied. "A fine day for walking, too. Thank you, but I shall walk, sir." She wondered if Matheson was sitting in the interior of the coach overhearing her, laughing at her foolishness. Was that why he hadn't shown himself? Perhaps he didn't want anyone to think he was in any way familiar with a featherheaded debutante who was walking down the road in slippers more fitting for a dance?

"Suit yourself," the driver said, and lifted the reins, prepared

to send the team on.

“Sir!” Prudence shouted before he could dispatch the team. “Will you see that my trunk is delivered to Himple?” She opened her reticule to retrieve a few coins and began to make her way across the ditch to the road. “Please. If you will leave it at the post station, someone will be along for it.” She climbed onto the road—slipping once and catching herself, then climbing up on the driver’s step. She held up a few shillings to him.

“You’re alone, miss?” one of the gentlemen riding behind the driver called down to her.

She ignored him. Her heart was racing now, not only with fear, but also with anger that was very irrational. She could imagine Mr. Matheson sitting in the coach, rolling his eyes or perhaps even sharing a chuckle with the boy. One could certainly argue that she deserved his derision given what she’d done today, but she didn’t like it one bit.

“You’re certain, are you?” the driver said, taking the coins from her palm and pocketing them.

“Quite. Thank you.” Prudence stepped down.

The driver put the reins to the team. Once again, Prudence was almost knocked from the road. As it was, she stumbled backward into the ditch, catching herself on a tree limb to keep from falling.

She watched the coach move down the road and disappear under the shadows of trees.

Five miles from a village.

She looked around. There was no one, and no sound but

the breeze in the treetops and the fading jangle of the coach. Prudence had never been alone like this. But, as her poor, mad mother used to say before she'd lost the better part of her mind, no one could correct one's missteps but oneself. The sooner one set upon the right course, the sooner one would reach the right destination.

Prudence would argue the point about the right destination, but there was nothing to be done for it now. And for God's sake, she would not shed a single tear. There was nothing she detested more than women who resorted to tears at the first sign of adversity. Yes, walk she would, in shoes that were meant to wander about a manicured garden...just as soon as she gave her aching feet a rest.

Prudence dropped her valise and sat down on top of it, her knees together, her legs splayed at odd angles to keep her balance on the small bag. She folded her arms on top of her knees, pressed her forehead against her arms and squeezed her eyes shut. *How could you be so stupid?*

Reality began to seep into her thoughts.

Whatever made her believe she could be like her sisters? She'd never been like the rest of them, had never taken such daring chances, disregarding all propriety on a whim. What made her believe that she could step out of bounds of propriety *now*? Yes, she'd been at sixes and sevens of late, unsatisfied with her lot in life, but still! She was alone on a road, perfect prey for highwaymen, thieves or other horrible things she couldn't even

bring herself to think of. *Gypsies!* Prudence gasped and her heart fluttered, recalling the frightening tales Mercy had insisted on telling.

“Well.”

The sound of a man’s voice startled her so badly that Prudence tried to leap up and scream at the same time and managed to knock herself off her imperfect perch and onto her bottom.

Mr. Matheson instantly reached for her, and Prudence, in a moment of sheer relief, grabbed him with both hands, hauled herself up with such vigor that she launched herself into his person and threw her arms around his neck.

Perhaps he was as stunned as she—he caught her, but neither of them moved for one long moment. Then Mr. Matheson put his hands firmly on her waist and carefully set her back, staring down at her as if she’d lost her mind.

“I beg your pardon,” she said apologetically. “I was momentarily overcome with relief! What are you doing on foot?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Rescuing you.”

Prudence could feel the color rising in her cheeks, the *thump, thump, thump* of her shame and delight in her chest. “You gave me such a fright,” she said, pressing her hand to breast. “I thought I would perish with it.”

“Well, I think we’ve sufficiently delayed your ultimate demise for at least an hour or so,” he said. “What the devil are you doing here? Why did you leave the coach? Where in hell do you think you’re *walking?*”

“To the next village or cottage,” she said, gesturing lamely in that direction. “I mean to pay someone to return me to Ashton Down.”

He squinted down the road in the direction she gestured. “What a perfectly ridiculous thing to do,” he said gruffly. “*Why* would you? You had a seat on a coach!”

“Because I feared Mrs. Scales would not be able to restrain herself from reporting all that had happened since leaving Ashton Down, and she...might possibly utter my name.”

“I think the odds of that are excellent,” he said, nodding, as if it were a foregone conclusion. “And your solution to this was to, what, run away?”

“No,” she said, as if it were absurd to suggest she’d run, even though she obviously had. “My *solution* was to go at once and find someone who would return me to Blackwood Hall. I should rather my family learn of this...turn of events...from me.”

“Mmm.” He folded his arms and stared down at her with such scrutiny that her skin began to tingle. “So you thought you might march up to anyone with a conveyance and ask that they see you to this hall where you might report your folly?”

When he put it like that, it sounded ridiculous. Prudence sniffed. She scratched her cheek and gazed down the road, then looked at him sidelong. “Well, you needn’t look so smug, Mr. Matheson. You’ve made your point. I’ve been foolish.”

“I haven’t even begun to make *that* point, Miss Cabot, but I’ll happily do so as we trek into the next village and find that

conveyance. At the moment, however, I'd very much like to turn you over my knee like a child, for God knows how childish you've been."

"Yes, so it would seem!" she said, miffed. "You're not my father, Mr. Matheson."

"Your father!" he sputtered. "I'm scarcely thirty years old. And yet I have *twice* as much sense as you."

"If you had *twice* as much sense, you might have made your way to Wesley instead of Wesleigh!"

He was momentarily disabled by the truth in that statement. "I will allow that," he said, holding up a finger, "at least until I see you to some means for a safe return home." He bent down, reaching for her bag.

But Prudence was faster and snatched it up before he could take it. "I will carry my own bag, thank you."

"For the love of— It's a long way to the next village."

"I am aware of how far it is to the next village. It's five miles. And I am perfectly capable of carrying my own bag!"

He muttered under his breath and hoisted his own bag onto his shoulder. "Shall we?"

"Do I have any other choice?" Prudence began to walk, her bag banging uncomfortably against her knee. "Where is your hat?" she demanded, wishing he'd stop looking at her so intently.

He frowned. "Lost," he said curtly. "Why is it that you misses are all alike?" he added irritably, as if he was constantly running into unmarried women in the countryside.

“We *misses*? Have you some vast experience with *misses*, Mr. Matheson?”

“I have enough. Why do you think I am here in this godforsaken—”

Prudence looked at him sharply.

“Pardon. In this foreign land,” he amended.

“I don’t know,” she said insouciantly. “Presumably to instruct all of the young misses in proper behavior.”

“If only I had the time that would require. But no, I am here to instruct one miss. Imagine, it’s not even you! I am in pursuit of my incorrigible, equally headstrong and impulsive sister.”

Prudence tossed her head. “I wouldn’t be the least bit surprised if she was trying to keep her distance from you and your opinions.”

“She won’t escape them,” he said flatly.

“I can’t imagine anyone could,” Prudence retorted pertly.

They walked in silence for a few moments while Prudence wondered what the sister had done, what had caused him to come in “pursuit” of her. “Where is she?” she asked.

“Yes indeed, where *is* Miss Aurora Priscilla Matheson?” he asked. “I very much hope she is at West Lee,” he said, gesturing impatiently with his hand at his failure to grasp the subtle differences between the names of the villages. “Shall I tell you the tale of this young woman? My aunt and uncle brought her to London last spring. It was a wedding gift of sorts, an opportunity to see a bit of the world before she marries Mr. Gunderson.

But Aurora is quite impetuous, and she made many friends in London, some of whom, apparently, convinced her to stay another month or so more than was intended. When it came time to leave, she refused to return home with my aunt and uncle. She wrote my father and said she'd be along in a month or so."

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