

A Refuge for
Rosanna

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Dedication

To Amy and Larry: Details from your lovely, romance inspired a portion of this story.

Available now in the Honor's Point series

A Match for Melissa

A Refuge for Rosanna

An Escape for Ellie (*coming soon*)

1

Rural England, 1816

Carriage wheels thundered, breaking the blessed solitude of the rustic road.

Peter's shoulders tensed. So far, his hard-won, hermitlike existence provided the escape he craved. If he kept to himself, no one would ever find out his past sins. Fists clenched, he wavered and thought to hide from view, but a shred of pride and tattered honor rooted him to the ground. The right to live, and to breathe, regardless of what he'd done, still existed. This well-deserved misery would lift someday.

He decided no he wouldn't hide in a ditch, although he might belong in one. His reputation already tattered, nobody's opinion mattered. He didn't matter, either. When the traveling carriage lumbered into view, he planted his feet shoulder width apart, hands clasped behind his back. The vehicle rolled to a stop, the door directly in front of him.

A burly, whiskered coachman leaned around, peered down, and lifted his hat. He scratched his head, clearly lost. "Can ye direct us to, um...ah?"

The door opened, and a young lady peered out. Shiny dark curls escaped her bonnet and framed large, sensitive brown eyes set in a face complete with dimples and bedecked with an enticing curve of a smile. Pretty though she was, something else called to his spirit—was it her sincerity? Yes, she glowed with it.

“Can you tell us the way to Honor’s Point?” A dainty shoe peeked out from under the ruffled hem of her skirt. “It appears we took the wrong road.” The young lady’s foot shifted, stepping into air. The next instant, she fumbled in the doorway, a squawk of alarm escaping her lips.

Peter leaped forward and tightened his arms around her as she landed against him. She weighed no more than a feather. Her closeness and hints of lilac perfume raised a surge of attraction in his veins.

“Thank you. I might have been injured,” she whispered. She then bent in a failed attempt to loosen the hem of her dress from her heel.

The plume on her bonnet tickled his nose, and he sneezed. She glanced up, her luscious lips, so close, beckoned.

A faint surge of recognition pulsed. *What was her name? Rebecca, Rosanne, Rose? Something with an R.* He’d seen her in London, surrounded by pinks of the *ton*. She’d attended the Banting ball in London little more than a month ago—the last ball he’d ever go to. Even in her rumpled and dusty state, she appeared as delightful as across the candlelit ballroom.

Please don’t let her recognize me, he prayed. As much as I’d like to meet her, it’s impossible now. Discovery terrified him.

She pointed to her foot. “Would you be so kind? My hem is caught.”

Keeping silent, he braced her weight against his thigh, and extricated the snagged hem as requested. Setting the woman down with tender care, he checked her stability before retracting his light hold on her waist.

She tugged at her short spencer jacket, and passed

gloved hands over a lavender gown, smoothing away the wrinkles. She tilted her head. "We are searching for Honor's Point. Perhaps we took a wrong turn, or missed a turn, or...are we off course? The coachman was sure he knew the way." She gazed at him, her brown, doe eyes waiting in innocent expectancy.

He swallowed. "No, ye be on the right path, Miss. Yer almost there." Peter mimicked the local villagers' accent, as he dragged his gaze from hers and fixed it on the ground. He winced at the bad impression he'd made. She'd think him a rustic nobody—and she'd be correct. He tugged his forelock, slumped his shoulders, and gestured forward. "Take a right at the next drive, and it's nigh on a quarter mile to the house."

To avoid further conversation, he affected a limp and hastened to the path skirting the field. He whistled a tavern tune to suit his general aura of shabbiness. As a gentleman, he'd have helped the young woman back into the coach. But he dared not risk detection. As a common villager, he wouldn't be expected to do the pretty.

He desired no encounters like this, no matter how intriguing. On a scrap of land that was once part of the Honor's Point estate sat the cottage where he lived in rural solitude. The only shred of the property left to him now.

A fair distance from the road, he chanced a look back. No longer in sight, the distant, faint rumble of carriage wheels indicated the vehicle continued on its way. Alone again, he ceased the uncomfortable limp, straightened his shoulders, and headed home.

He looked down at his coat. Limp from too many pressings, and frayed spots at the cuffs, it reminded him of his reduced circumstances. At least his self-

imposed exile involved no tailor fittings, no dancing to society's tune, no invitations, no debt-collectors—and no shame. Neither did it allow him to pursue the attractive young lady who'd fallen into his arms.

~*~

Belatedly, Rosanna called to his retreating back, "thank you." She clambered back into the carriage Uncle George provided for the trip. With its well-padded squabs, it gave superior comfort compared to a rented coach, and since he wanted to do this, she'd not quibble. Guilt and gratitude warred for prominence when she thought of her uncle. He'd taken good care of her affairs in the aftermath of the sudden loss of both parents to an epidemic.

However, she objected to Uncle George's philosophy that all young ladies should be married—the sooner the better—to men chosen by the relatives of the young females. Even ones like her who wanted nothing to do with marriage, especially loveless, arranged ones. His kindnesses, however, outweighed the mischief done by his numerous efforts to arrange a match for her.

Settling in, she straightened her skirts, clucking over the torn hem. Where was that workbasket? She'd pin up the hem quickly. It wouldn't do to arrive at one's new property with a torn dress. While she worked on pinning the awkward tear, memories of the indignity of falling into a man's strong arms soon gave way to recalling her battle to arrive at the estate called Honor's Point.

She'd won the right to leave London, and set up

her own establishment in the country, away from society. The death of her first love, Clarence, permanently broke her heart. Why must guilt spoil and adulterate her accomplishment of achieving freedom from the pressures of the marriage mart?

No man ever raised a flicker of interest within her. Not after Clarence. If a man to love and respect would have ever crossed her path, a decent interval after Clarence's untimely death, she wouldn't have needed to flee convention.

Once she had experienced love, it had been impossible to accept anything less. She didn't hate the *idea* of marriage, just being forced into one for money, property, or bloodlines.

After months of negotiating, she'd finally convinced dear old Uncle George to agree to her plan to purchase a secluded estate using her own inheritance she'd received when she'd turned one and twenty. She planned to help other less fortunate young ladies attain refuge from forced matrimony. She was one of the blessed few to successfully refuse to be leg-shackled into a marriage of convenience. Convenient for the man, she was sure.

Hem pinned, thoughts turned to what Barton would say if she'd been awake when Rosanna toppled right into the arms of that strange man. The strength of his hold lingered in her memory. He must be a local farm laborer, perhaps a tenant—except he exuded an appealing dignity.

Rosanna stowed the basket, grabbed her parasol, and thumped the roof of the coach, signaling the coachman to proceed.

At the lurch, fiftyish Barton cracked open one eye and let out a yawn. "Did we stop?"

“Yes, we got directions from a local. Barton, we’re almost to our safe haven. It’ll be wonderful.” Rosanna allowed her enthusiasm free rein. She wanted everyone to be happy.

Taciturn, Barton reached up to tidy her smooth black hair, put on her bonnet, and tied the ribbons under her chin. “Indeed.”

Preoccupied so long with the acquisition of the estate, and the move from London to Honor’s Point, relief cascaded over Rosanna as the arduous journey neared its end. She mulled over her motives, and hoped she’d thought of everything. Buying this property outside the small village of Woodvale caused her relatives and advisors to question her wisdom.

She’d always struggled to be taken seriously, so what did it matter if they thought her a fool? Why did people think all pretty women were stupid? Standing up to them required all the determination she could muster.

A seed of doubt rested within her heart—doubt she admitted only to herself. Since the plan met her needs and fulfilled her dream she forged on, trusting all to work out. She’d been through an ordeal in gaining Honor’s Point, the sanctuary she longed for. Perhaps her last niggle of uneasiness would leave when she at last gazed upon the reputed natural beauty of the estate.

2

Once through the gates, Rosanna craned her neck, eager to view the house. "We're here, Barton!"

The driveway's gradual elevation increased the property's exalted quality. Thick woods gave way to massive overarching elms on either side. When the chaise first emerged from the heavily-wooded section, the dusty carriage windows revealed a ring of surrounding hilltops.

Through the breaks in vegetation, a hilltop manor house came into view as Rosanna's carriage rounded the last bend. The land leveled off, and the vehicle stopped where the gravel drive looped in front of the large house. Elegant exterior stairways arched left and right, then curved back toward the massive door. The impressive entrance gave balance to the facade, and favorable proportions lent majesty to the mellow stone manor house.

Dozens of servants stood assembled on the steps, waiting to greet the new mistress. "It appears they received the note we sent ahead indicating my arrival time."

Barton sniffed. "That's an understatement."

Relieved to emerge from the coach and stand on solid ground again, Rosanna turned in a slow circle. She reined in her excitement and folded her hands in prim fashion. It wouldn't do to give an impression of

giddiness. This moment held importance and she must begin as she meant to go on. Her success depended on it. After a few deep breaths of the wonderful, fresh country air, she accepted the butler's escort to the foot of the steps. He bowed before joining the ranks of waiting staff members.

"Thank you for this fine welcome. I am Miss Cabot, the new owner of Honor's Point." She paused and indicated the woman behind her. "And this is Miss Barton, my lady's maid."

The butler stepped forward and gave a pretentious bow. "Miss Cabot, we are all at your service. I'm Perkins. Allow me to present the staff."

Taking time to smile and interact with each servant, from the tall, reedy-voiced butler, who introduced her first to the housekeeper, Mrs. Good, down to the lowliest, scrawny scullery maid, Rosanna fulfilled the expected duties and traditions attendant upon a new mistress arriving at a grand home.

Since she didn't plan to ever marry, she meant to build a rewarding life here at beautiful Honor's Point.

A few servants wore doubtful expressions on their faces, perhaps disliking the idea of a single lady as their new mistress, a bit askance, she guessed. But Rosanna intended to extend grace to win them over. "Thank you all for the splendid greeting. I'm certain I can count on your help learning about this exceptionally special estate." She moved toward the imposing entrance.

A few servants unloaded the bags and trunks.

Mrs. Good reminded the kitchen staff to prepare a hearty tea for the travelers.

Perkins scampered ahead to open the door.

Pleased to put the time-honored ritual of greeting

the household staff behind her, Rosanna and Barton entered the hall before ascending the stairs in the wake of Mrs. Good, the housekeeper, to freshen up after the trip.

A nimble footman followed behind with their travelling cases, which held essentials.

Once alone in the large suite of rooms, Rosanna threw out her arms. "Barton, isn't it lovely? Aren't you thrilled to be here?"

"It's much more clean and peaceful than London, but I hope the staff accepts us."

"Don't borrow trouble, Barton, they're probably very kind."

"Perhaps so."

"Don't be a wet blanket. Our arrival is the fruition of the first phase of my plan. It's hard to believe we're here. I may require you to pinch me."

"You don't need a pinch, but I will help you change out of this travel-stained gown. Turn around, dearie." She commenced unfastening the hooks and tapes that held Rosanna's lavender-sprigged muslin dress together.

Rosanna stretched her arms over her head to facilitate removal of the dress. Clad in only a chemise, she opened her case and fished for a dressing gown, which she donned and wrapped around her waist. "Ahh, freedom. The French Revolution at least brought about our current comfortable fashions. Much better than those cage-like corsets and such."

"I agree. Can't imagine travelling in panniers or a stomacher. There was even something called a rump-pad."

"Sounds nasty."

"I've not eaten for hours and you know my

clockwork appetite. As soon as we've washed and changed shall we hasten to the dining room?" Barton moved toward the door. "I'll be back to help you."

"Take as much time as you need."

Barton moved toward the door. "I hope I can find my room."

"I'm sure a maid will be lurking around to guide you. The staff seems efficient."

In no hurry, Rosanna relished the moments alone. Travelling took its toll. Even so, energy began to return, buoyed by the simple fact of being in her new home. Hugging herself, she moved to the window to admire the view—more of the thick verdant woods and hills she'd passed on the road to the estate. Though thrilled to have arrived, she tamped down her exhilaration by reminding herself that moving to Honors Point consisted of only the first step.

True satisfaction would be found when she started the next phase of her plan.

3

A tour of the spacious house occupied Rosanna the next morning.

At the end of the tour Mrs. Good opened a door off the main hall with a special flourish and stepped back. "Your study, Miss Cabot. I hope it meets with your approval."

Surprised, Rosanna hesitated.

Mrs. Good's eyes held a twinkle of pleasure and she fluttered her hands toward the door. "Go on, go in."

Rosanna entered the room. "A lady's study—how special to have a room of my own." The room's color scheme of hyacinth blue, white, and gold, its tasteful and delicate furnishings, and French windows with a rose garden view, combined into a feminine and useful room. Rosanna stood in the center of the room and took a slow turn around, trying to take in the many delights the space offered.

So many homes held lavish studies for male heads of household but nothing for the ladies besides escritaires in the corners of their boudoirs or against the walls in common rooms.

This was the sort of room for whiling away the hours, making lists, planning, writing letters, and simply living—mistress of her own domain without society's pressure to wed. Pressures she'd had enough

of to last her a lifetime. Why people put up with society's tyrannical marriage arrangements, she'd never understand. She placed a hand over her heart. "It is beautiful, and it shows excellent foresight that such a room was included when the house was planned and built."

"So glad you like it. The staff went over this room with extra care for you, Miss Cabot." Beaming with satisfaction, Mrs. Good clasped her work worn hands in front of her ample bosom. "I purposely saved this room for the last on the tour."

"Having my very own study is so inspiring." She ran her hand across the glossy mahogany desk. One more confirmation this was the place for her. "Thank you for the tour. I'll be in here should anyone need me."

She wasted no time in putting the study to use. Seated at the writing desk in the quiet, charming room, she opened the various compartments and drawers, withdrew a pen, ink, and a piece of stationery and got into position to write. But the pen remained still. The ink on the pen, suspended above the paper, dried. Sentences formed in her mind, only to be rejected. The dry ink didn't matter, since glib words and phrases vanished like vapor. She realized an inherent problem. How was she to share her planned harbor from undesired marriages with others?

Palm pressed to forehead, heart sinking, she tussled with the dilemma. A large obstacle loomed. How could she not have foreseen this? How foolish to think the plan would go off without a hitch! All those hours of convincing Uncle George to allow this move, and now this roadblock. Offering aid to other young ladies would be more complicated than simply

penning an advertisement.

According to Rosanna's original plan, when a young lady fleeing a distasteful, forced betrothal or an undesirable arranged marriage learned of Rosanna's services, they would see a discreet advertisement in the *Times*, and arrange sanctuary here at Honor's Point. Notices placed in newspapers, however, would also be seen by the very people from whom the young ladies wanted to flee. This presented a severe dilemma.

Rosanna's head sank until her forehead rested on the desk. She considered the setback from all angles. The crisis appeared to be insurmountable. None of the meager solutions that came to mind solved the flaw. Any announcement of the refuge would reveal its existence and defeat the purpose.

Thanking the Lord she'd not confided the defective plan to anyone save Barton, she suppressed a groan, took a deep breath, and stared out the window while massaging her neck. A walk might clear her mind and perhaps the fresh air would blow a solution into her head.

Rosanna retrieved her bonnet from the table in the front hall.

Perkins let her out the door. He followed her out onto the top step.

The parkland around the large house was landscaped to capitalize on the hilltop setting. Paths diverged from the house in four directions. "Where do the trails lead?"

Deferential, Perkins gave an intriguing answer. "Each one leads to a spectacular view of hills, and woods, or patchwork fields."

She tied her bonnet ribbons, eager to be on her way—to walk off her anxiety and perhaps concoct a

solution. "How lovely, Perkins. Is there any danger on the property, of which I should be aware?"

"No, Miss Cabot. Nary an intruder, incident, or accident of any kind has befallen a lady here. Honor's Point is safe." He handed her a parasol and placed a shawl around her shoulders.

She thanked Perkins and set off, loneliness ratcheting through her heart. "I've no one to consult with. I alone must think of a way out," she murmured as she walked toward the convergence of paths, reveling in the fresh air, even while wracking her brain for an answer to the puzzle.

The warm breeze coming off the hill, and the scent of summer flowers combined to restore her spirits within a short time. A sensation of relaxed freedom washed over her. The blessed solitude without the requirement of a maid at her elbow at all times was a refreshing novelty.

Energy flowing, she selected one of the four paths. Her chosen route meandered down the main hill, and then passed into the woods. Within the cover of the trees the path grew less tame. Before she knew it, the path took her to the edge of a ridge.

To her left rose an outcropping of large white rocks in the distance. This must be one of the boundary markers the estate's steward mentioned. Rosanna planned to walk out on the other paths soon, each one leading to a corner of the property.

From this ridge, through a cluster of trees below the rocks, she could make out the roofline of a structure. It appeared to be a small dwelling—a cottage perhaps? Besides the dower house and gatehouse at the foot of the drive, she was aware of no cottages on the property, other than the tenants' homes, which

were in the opposite direction. She would ask the steward about it the next time they spoke.

She backed away from the precipice and sat on a convenient tree stump near the path. Bowing her head, she thanked God for her safe arrival at her own place of refuge, for peace of mind, and for an answer enabling her to offer sanctuary to other young ladies. Reinvigorated, and with a lighter heart, even without, as yet, any resolution, she rose and walked back to the manor house. Due to her exertions, she anticipated a reviving cup of tea.

Perkins appeared as if by magic to open the door before she'd barely touched the steps.

She shed her bonnet, shawl and parasol. "Thank you, Perkins. I had a lovely walk. The beauty of the property is unrivalled. Please send tea to my study."

She spotted a letter on the silver mail tray. Lifting it, she examined it. The front of the envelope featured a feminine scrawl. In a murmur she read, "To Miss Rosanna Cabot, from E. M." Who was E.M.? None of the few people who knew her direction had those initials. Perplexed, she entered her little study. While waiting for a servant to bring tea, she tore open the letter.

Dear Rosanna ~

Perhaps you recall the last time we met. It was at the Banting ball. You remembered me and our friendship at the academy. Those idyllic years seem so far off, don't they? Even though that ball was over a month ago, our conversation stayed with me. You said you were about to buy a property and move away to the country. The name Honor's Point stuck in my mind and after much difficulty, I was able to find its location through a discreet and helpful reference librarian.