

SUSAN
KARSTEN

A
MATCH
FOR
MELISSA

HONORS
POINT
BOOK 1

A Match for
Melissa

Susan Karsten

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A Match for Melissa

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Dedication

To my husband, John, who is truly my gift from God.
He has provided the security and support that
allows me to spread my creative wings.

Coming Soon in the Honor's Point series

A Refuge for Rosanna
An Escape for Ellie

1

Stomping her feet on the hard-packed road didn't relieve her frustration. Aggravation fueled her pace, destroying the usual peace found on her morning walks down country roads. Melissa clenched her hand around the letter ordering her return to London. Father and his plans took precedence over her wishes.

She stopped, unfurled the letter, and read the offending passage one more time.

You shall cut short your visit to the country. I have plans for you, plans that will be of much interest to you.

So like Papa to assume she'd fall in line with his schemes. She crumpled the letter and strode on, staring straight ahead. Visiting the vicarage to which her former governess, Miss Cleaver retired, helped restore Melissa's equanimity. The hovering cloud of melancholy brought on by her mother's death lessened each day. Returning to her home in the city did not sit well, as she disliked London with its smoke and the lonely life she lived there. But Papa's command and mention of his plans brought further dread.

Regret about ending her visit lowered her mood, but Melissa took deep breaths and resisted thoughts of departure by concentrating on the cool, fresh, moist air entering her lungs. Spring mud invaded southern England, but the road was good, and Melissa loved her morning walks too much to let a little mire stop her.

She took in her surroundings again, glancing from

the light green forest views on either side of the road and the lane ahead. Avoiding mud became a game of distraction—until an indistinct brown lump came in sight on the edge of the road. Puddles forgotten, she hurried forward to discover a monogrammed leather saddlebag. Ignoring the dirt-spattered bag's condition, she lifted it and peered inside. Empty. She dropped it to the ground.

Scattered nearby, she spied a London *Times* half in a puddle, and an ivory comb in a muddy rut. Chills ran up her arms and tingled down her spine at the evidence of a traveler's misfortune. Surveying the scene, she cast a glance down the banked slope. Her breath caught even as her heart raced.

About twenty feet away in the lowest part of the ditch, she spied a man prone, half-hidden by brush, only inches from a trickle of dirty water from the last of the spring thaw.

Melissa shoved aside the momentary numbness brought on by the dreadful sight. She took a deep breath, hitched her skirts, and clambered down into the ditch. Disregarding the mud, she knelt and stretched out her hand. Her fingers found a pulse on the cool skin of the man's wrist.

She peered at his chest with her face only inches from his body. She detected a slight rise and fall. Thank the Lord the water level had receded. The stranger could have drowned.

The young man's eyes fluttered open. "Where am I?" He groaned, his voice barely a whisper. He passed a hand over his face before letting his arm fall to the ground.

She reared back and staggered to her feet. A shiver of pity ran through her—helplessness did not fit this

strapping male. Fear compressed her heart upon viewing the evidence of violence.

"You are in a ditch, outside Russelton. By the look of the grass, someone dragged you here." She pointed to some lines in the wet grass.

"Beautiful," he gasped.

"I beg your pardon?"

A slight smile graced his bruised face. "You. Beautiful."

"Sir, it appears you've been beaten, robbed, and left for dead." She squared her shoulders in wounded propriety. "This is not the time for Spanish coin."

Her heart skipped a beat. Even muddy and injured, he exuded raw masculinity. Lack of a proper introduction didn't stop the immediate attraction that drew her to him.

She was about to say more, but his eyes closed, and he groaned and fell unconscious. What to do? It was impossible to carry the man, but he required medical attention. A flutter of fear roosted in her chest, but she fought it down.

Her long habit of self-control came to the fore, and her chin rose in resolve. Melissa gathered the skirt of her brown walking dress, clutched it in one hand, and bunched it well above the ankles and the top of her half boots. Unmaidenly, yes, but with no one present to cause a scandal it mattered not. With the other arm extended for balance, she scrambled up the steep bank and ran to the vicarage for aid.

Nearing the village outskirts, she summoned up energy from her reserves and sprinted the remaining distance.

"Mr. Cleaver!" She gasped as she threw open the front door of the vicarage. "There's been an accident!

Mr. Cleaver!"

"Whatever is it, Melissa?" He emerged from a door down the hall, wrinkles etched in his forehead.

"Come with me right away. I found a man unconscious in a ditch. About a half mile away." She bent over, hands on knees, to catch her breath.

"What? Say that again? Calm down, Melissa."

"There's no time to waste. Hurry." She turned and raced out the door. "Come on."

"I'll get the wagon. Bert and Toby went to town for supplies, but I can manage. Please go to the parlor and summon Priscilla." He put on his hat and dashed past Melissa toward the small stable behind the house.

She pivoted and hurried down the hall. "Miss Cleaver!"

The auburn-haired, kindly woman emerged from the kitchen. "What is the commotion, dear?"

"I found a man unconscious by the road. Your brother's getting a wagon. We must hurry."

The older woman snatched up her shawl and bonnet on her way past the hall tree and emerged to wait on the steps. Mere moments passed before the horse and wagon appeared. It stopped only long enough to allow the women to clamber up next to Mr. Jeremiah Cleaver onto the seat.

Melissa motioned with her hand. "That way."

The wagon jolted violently against the ruts, and the women hung on with two hands. Melissa's bonnet fell back, held on only with the ties. Her hair slipped from its pins and annoying strands blew across her face.

Nothing mattered but getting back to the man.

Melissa directed him to stop. "There," she pointed, "there he is."

The minister jumped from the wagon. He raised his hands to assist Melissa and his sister to the ground. Mr. Cleaver yanked off his black tailed coat, threw it onto the wagon's bench and rolled up his shirtsleeves. With long, leaping steps, he descended into the ditch.

Melissa eased her way down for a second time and stooped to check the man's pulse again.

She got another clear view of him. Blood matted his hair on one side. Though he was muddy, bruised, and bloody, his firm jaw, chiseled nose, and thick eyelashes aroused Melissa's interest. Who could he be?

Miss Cleaver called from the edge of the ditch. "I'll gather his things."

"Nothing appears to be broken. No limbs awry or askew."

Mr. Cleaver breathed heavily as he half-lifted, half-dragged the large, listless burden up the bank. He reached the roadside, gently laying down the still-insensible victim. He removed the side boards from two slots in the wagon bed before issuing the next instructions. "You two ladies, help me lift him on the count of three. He's a big fellow." Mr. Cleaver positioned one hand under each arm. "One, two, three!"

Melissa picked up his feet, ignoring the boots pressing into her midsection. Miss Cleaver lifted at the waist. The ill-treated man did not make a sound during the transfer, nor did he wake.

Melissa climbed into the wagon bed and settled next to him. She covered him with a blanket taken from a trunk under the seat. An unfamiliar knot of responsibility sat in her stomach like a worrisome weight. Her breath caught with worry, and a well of deep sympathy bubbled inside. As she gazed at him,

she made mental notes as to how she would take care of the victim.

“So you’ll ride back there, with him?” Mr. Cleaver’s voice carried concern.

“Yes. I’ll be fine.” Melissa kept a hand on the blanket-covered mound as if to provide a steadying comfort. Cold, shaky, and a bit queasy, she only wanted to get back to the vicarage. The possibility the attackers might still be around traveled across her mind like clouds passing the sun. She constantly scanned the woods along the road. The belated thought of potential danger caused her heartbeat to quicken.

“Jeremiah?” Miss Cleaver’s voice rose above the clip-clop of the horse’s hooves as she spoke to her brother. “What do you think happened? I’m guessing robbers or highwaymen left him for dead. Nothing much to identify him among the items I gathered. Only this monogrammed bag. The letter ‘M’ with a superimposed ‘R’. Who has those initials?”

The deep rumble of Mr. Cleaver’s words came next. “I hate to speculate, sister. Whoever he may be, we must take him in and provide for his needs. Acts of mercy are always to be done whenever opportunities arise. Examine the things in his traveling bag again. Perhaps there’s another clue.”

“Yes, indeed, that’s the thing to do.” Priscilla went through the bag again. “Paltry leavings, with no further information to glean. The monogram on the bag is the sole clue.” Finished perusing the contents, she let it drop to the wagon seat.

Melissa kept up a stream of inward petitions that he’d live. She studied his pale, handsome face. Her fingers took on a life of their own—stroking to smooth

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a strand of hair off his forehead. With the Lord's help, she'd be a part of his care. When he recovered, she'd like to meet this man.

2

Miss Cleaver bustled into the vicarage with Melissa in her wake, aiming for the kitchen at the back of the house. "Betsy, boil some water, please. There's been an accident."

The rotund cook went about the task. "What be wrong, Miss Cleaver?"

"We found a man who's been beaten. More than that, we don't know." Miss Cleaver strapped on a large apron and opened the linen closet. She stuck her head in, shuffled around a moment, and emerged with a small stack of towels. "Melissa, help me make these linen towels into bandages."

Melissa wanted to sit with the unconscious victim, but he had yet to be carried inside. Lightheaded and a touch dizzy, but determined to help, she sat at the kitchen table and tore a few linens into strips, hands shaking with the effort. She rolled several strips before her head sank to rest on her arms, eyes closed. "Oh my. I'm not well." Hot followed cold, a wave of queasiness rose and fell with the slightest movement of her head.

"Keep your head down, dear." Miss Cleaver patted Melissa's shoulder.

Shuffling footsteps sounded in the hall. Mr. Cleaver had summoned Toby to assist him as the groom had returned from his errand in town.

"Easy, there. I'd not like him jostled or injured further. Careful now. Hold tight." Mr. Cleaver's voice

faded as it climbed, yet Melissa caught a disturbing snippet. "We'll need to keep a sharp eye. Appears like a robbery. His horse will be running loose if it wasn't stolen."

"I'll carry these bandages up. Melissa, stay here and drink some tea, please." Miss Cleaver scooped up the rolled cloth strips. "When your spirits are more nifty-naffy, you'll want to change clothes."

Melissa opened an eye as Miss Cleaver left the room. With effort, she raised her head and lifted the cup, sipping the restorative, fragrant brew. Glancing down, she rued the condition of her dress and gave it an ineffectual swipe of the hand.

She stood when Miss Cleaver returned from delivering the bandages. "Tea did wonders. I am much better. May I help?"

"Let's get you changed into a clean dress, and go to the parlor to wait for the doctor." Melissa appreciated the woman's comforting arm around the waist as Miss Cleaver guided her up the stairs to change clothes.

"I'm fine now. It was only a delayed reaction to the shock." Melissa made her way to an oval wall mirror to tidy herself. Wind-blown tendrils escaped her chignon, and she finger-combed and tucked the wayward tresses into a semblance of order. Staring into the mirror, she tried to read her future, but no prophecy or clue showed there. Melissa turned away from the glass.

Docile, and soon clad in a clean dress, she addressed her fears to Miss Cleaver. "I'm grateful for the assistance, as my fingers are nerveless. Do you think he'll live?"

"Lord only knows, dear. He's beaten fairly bad."

Melissa whispered, "Lord, don't let him die this way." No one should be assaulted and left for dead. For a strong, handsome young man to be struck down was worse, somehow.

"Amen. It is frightening to witness a stalwart male taken down like that." Miss Cleaver cleaned her glasses and perched them on her nose. "I'll bring the linen strips to the parlor. You'll be more comfortable there."

Once settled in the parlor, Melissa rolled a few strips with clumsy hands and sat, rocking idly. Uncertainty as to the extent of the man's injuries left a weight of anxiety, but another cup of hot tea dispelled the remaining results of her delayed shock. "Such terrible violence—I hope he escapes permanent injury."

Mr. Cleaver entered the room after a short time, having changed out of his muddy clothes and neatened his graying auburn hair.

"How fares the patient?" Miss Cleaver leaned forward, folded hands resting on a small pile of bandage rolls.

"Got him settled. After the doctor visits him, we'll learn more." He opened his Bible, laid it on his lap, and sat pensive.

Dr. Swithins and his assistant Mr. Doone arrived within the hour. The doctor's rosy cheeks and plush, white beard didn't obscure his intense demeanor. "Where's the injured man? Any idea what happened?"

Melissa appreciated the doctor's urgency, and Mr. Cleaver's immediate rising from the chair brought even more relief to the tension of waiting. "I'll lead you to the patient."

The two medical men followed Mr. Cleaver out to

be led to the sickroom.

“Don’t be shocked by the pronounced unhealthy mien of the assistant, Mr. Doone.” Miss Cleaver patted Melissa’s hand. “He’s been like that his whole life.”

Reassured, Melissa relaxed, hands unclenching. “The man is quite a contrast to the robust physician.”

“Appearances can be deceiving. For example, Melissa, few would guess at the brilliance of your mind, based on your loveliness.”

She gave a dismissive wave. “Don’t flatter me. In London, one has to be so careful of quacks. They’re everywhere with their false remedies and dangerous treatments. What’s our guarantee Swithins is a good doctor?”

Mr. Cleaver returned, catching the tail end of the conversation. “Don’t worry. He studied in Edinburgh and keeps apprised of the many new developments in medicine.” Mr. Cleaver raked a hand through his hair, sat near the women, and reached for his Bible again.

“Does the doctor wash his hands? I recently read that unclean hands are a source of many ills.” Melissa shuddered, revolted at the thought of dirty fingers probing wounds and spreading disease instead of curing it. “Who’d have expected doctors with healing hands to be carriers of illness?”

Mr. Cleaver’s kindly grin reassured her. “I personally observed him cleanse his hands. Don’t fret, Melissa.”

~*~

Before the clock stroked a new hour, the doctor entered the front parlor. “I’ve given him a full examination. Doone is putting him into a nightshirt.

Good thing you moved him as little as possible.”

“What is the diagnosis?” Mr. Cleaver rose to his feet.

The doctor stroked his beard. “Classic case. I’ve treated many like it. Ankle. Yes, a severe sprain to the ankle, bruised ribs, and a large lump on the head.”

A sprained ankle, bruises, and a bump? That didn’t sound so bad. Perhaps her concerns were unfounded. “Has he awakened? Said anything?”

“No, Miss. He remained unconscious for the entire examination.”

“Can you tell what happened to him?”

He smoothed each eyebrow before responding. “If I were to guess, I’d say he charged his assailant, stepped into a pothole, stumbled and was struck from behind by an accomplice, perhaps? Dragged him into the ditch. No honor among thieves.”

Was the man an amateur detective as well as a doctor? Melissa found his scenario too pat. Was he a seer? Not that it mattered. “But how can you be certain?”

“Young lady, merely a guess, as you asked me for a conjecture as to what befell him. I only put together a rough scenario based on the few signs available.”

“Oh, of course, I’m sorry. I’m simply so worried. He’s special, to me, since I found him.” She clamped her lips shut against such babbling, not wanting to reveal her heart any further. She glanced at Mr. Cleaver, eyebrows raised and questioning, pleading for distraction from her foolishness.

Mr. Cleaver passed a hand over his brow. “Thieves in the district represent a concern.”

Dr. Swithins slurped his tea and checked the clasp on his leather medicine satchel. “Either way, with this

type of head injury, combined with his ankle, I prescribe bed rest for two weeks and willow bark for pain."

"What about his wounds?" Deferential, Miss Cleaver held her pencil above a tablet, ready to take notes.

Smiling with approval, the doctor gave instructions. "The wound on his head is superficial, but the blow was heavy. Change the dressing in the morning and keep the room dark and quiet. If he avoids fever, he'll be well. The patient seems quite healthy and strong. I expect him to regain full consciousness soon. I shall return to check on him tomorrow." He peered over his spectacles at Mr. Cleaver. "You've alerted the magistrate?"

"Yes, I've sent Toby to the village. I hope the trail hasn't grown cold. It's essential for thieves to be brought to justice. Praise the Lord we found him, and he wasn't killed, whoever he is."

Mr. Doone stuck his head in the door. "All's set with the patient. I tucked him in and he's sleeping restfully. Shall we go, Doctor? To take care of the squire's servant?"

"Ah, yes. Off to another case. I'll be back tomorrow. Follow my instructions."

"We will." Melissa smiled. She hoped the Cleavers would allow her to help. To do something besides rolling linen strips into bandages.

Strong desire flooded her heart. Desire to care for the man as he recovered. She wanted to tend to him until he was completely healed. Her planned departure couldn't come at a worse time.