

SUSAN
KARSTEN

HONORS
POINT
BOOK 3

AN ESCAPE
FOR
ELLIE

An Escape for Ellie

Susan Karsten

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

An Escape for Ellie: Honors Point Book 3
COPYRIGHT 2020 by Susan Karsten

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with.

Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated are taken from the King James translation, public domain.

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

Prism is a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

The Triangle Prism logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History
Prism Edition, 2020

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-9886-8

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my children, Fred, Mary and Annie, who have shown me so much love and honor.

And to Sandy, whose encouragement carried me along during the long wait for publication.

1

Southern England, 1815

Ellie Moore rubbed the bridge of her nose, careful not to smear ink on her face, before putting pen to paper and letting the words flow. Easier to catch lightning in a bottle, but completing a publishable book might obtain her independence, so on she scrawled. Besides, she loved it. Her friend Rosanna's quiet rural estate provided the perfect writing retreat—away from the world and an escape from her parents' schemes of an arranged marriage.

Wheels crunched on the driveway. *Quite odd.* Carriages didn't normally arrive in the evening, right before dinner. She set down her pen on the blotter and scurried to the window of the bedroom. She shoved aside the lavish pale lilac draperies, thankful again her rooms overlooked the approach to Honor's Point. Now accustomed to safety here, she still liked to spy on all arrivals.

An oddly ominous black carriage lumbered

around the circular driveway and came to a lurching stop at the front door of the manor. Alarm jolted her core. A frisson of caution became full-blown fear. Once reaching the refuge of Honor's Point, a lulling security becalmed her over the last few months. Sick recognition of having let down her guard swept over her.

This arrival was nothing to do with her. *Calm down*. Nobody knew she was here. She'd just watch. It would likely be the vicar, or a neighbor, or Rosanna's beau. But a detail of the man's silhouette through the carriage window raised gooseflesh on her arms. They had few male friends, and none wore a *bicorné*, clearly visible within the black equipage.

Ellie smoothed clammy hands over the front of her dinner gown. She clutched the sill, tense as the coach door opened. Her throat tightened. *Calm down, whoever it is, I'll soon know*.

It can't be. Cousin Ferdinand?

How did he find her? The very man she dreaded most had arrived on Rosanna's doorstep. She whirled away from the window. The floor shifted under her before the past merged with the present, and her mind clarified to one thought—escape. She reached under her bed and withdrew a needlepoint valise. Next, she scooped up the pile of foolscap from the desk and nestled it in the bottom of the bag. Her heart sank, the loss of her refuge already stinging.

She fumbled for the comb and brush on the boudoir table. Her elbow jostled a perfume bottle and she gasped as she righted it before it spilled. But what did it matter?

Focus.

The bureau drawer opened with a swift yank. She

couldn't leave her prized paisley shawl behind. Her reticule gave a satisfying clink as she hefted it. Money. Good.

Ellie wrenched her nightdress off its hook and threw it over her arm. Her ornate dress encumbered her, but urgency allowed no time to change. She stubbed her toe on a chair leg but ignored the pain. At her wardrobe she plucked out a serviceable gown and a pair of half boots and crammed everything in, jamming the clasp. Heart pounding, her feet propelled her on a wave of fear.

She careened down the hall toward the back stairs. The creak of the servant's access door sounded like a gunshot, and she winced. Even if someone heard the sound, she had no other choice but to risk escape. Rosanna provided hospitality and refuge, but to suppose she should defend Ellie's freedom exceeded any normal expectations of friendship.

She ran down the dark staircase in silence to the main floor hall outside the kitchen door. Off-key whistling indicated the presence of the potboy, whose attempts at a tune grated on her nerves. If not bent on departure, she'd remind him he'd been banned from the activity on the premises. The nerve-shattering sounds got louder.

She grasped the nearest door handle and slipped into a closet. She took a step back and sideways to get into the darkest shadow but lost her footing and tumbled backwards. Her derriere met a merciful, yet soft landing. She squelched a gasp. The indignity of her small stature had taken many forms, but her seat ensconced in a rag basket hit a new low.

She set down her bag and with both hands, pushed against the rim of the basket, and staggered to

her feet again. The painful whistling faded away leaving only silence. She took a deep breath and emerged into the dimly lit corridor.

She advanced with nonchalance into the kitchen and spotted the cook's back across the room. Ellie tiptoed toward the rear exit.

Halfway to her goal, a voice hailed her. "Lovely evenin'."

She turned to face the cook and swung the valise behind her skirts. "Pardon me, Hannah?"

"I said, beautiful evenin', Miss Moore." The woman pounded the dough with her fist. "Would you like a scone?" The cook rubbed her hands together and crumbs fell to the floor. She gestured toward a plate of baked goods on a table in front of Ellie, barely looking up.

"That would be lovely—thank you." The valise gripped behind her in one hand, she reached for a scone. She sidled away and slipped out of the house.

The cook's kneading didn't falter a beat. *God be with you, Hannah. And with me.*

The home woods began only twenty feet from the manor, and she crossed the open space in a few interminable seconds at a pace as slow as she could compel herself to walk. Once in the cover of the trees, she'd fly.

She reached the edge of the cool, shadowy woods and entered via a well-marked path. The damp, moist smell reminded her of the dank darkness of her future if Cousin Ferdinand were to catch her. The leafy branches blocked any view from the house, so she yanked up her hem and began to run. *Run. Don't stop.* The stones beneath her delicate shoes bruised the soles of her feet but she managed to avoid roots and vines.

Heart in her throat, she forced her slippered feet to set a steady pace instead of a sprint.

Cousin Ferdinand's ghastly face with its freckles standing out against his pale, translucent skin arose in her mind and she shuddered. His bristle of a mustache and coarse, unkempt head of hair fueled her dash along the darkening path. She switched the valise from hand to hand every few yards. A sob welled and came out as a groan. She prayed, mumbling the strangled words. "Deliverance, Lord, please."

She'd run about two miles and stopped by a downed tree. She placed her valise on the tree trunk and pulled out the serviceable brown gown. She draped the dress over the log, alert for signs of movement in the surrounding woods.

Praise be! It didn't seem he was on her trail.

She fished the half boots from her valise, then leaned against the trunk and yanked them on. Stitches tore as she struggled out of the pink dinner gown. Shivers racked her as, clothed only in her chemise, she tugged the brown dress over her head, grateful for its ingenious, hidden front closure.

The overlapping bodice tied into place, and Ellie sat in a crook of the rough tree trunk to rest. Her heart slowed. She slumped, head in hands. Not used to running, and drained by the shock of Ferdinand's arrival, she fell into a doze.

When a crow cawed, she stood with a jolt, and set off again. The cool air a blessing, but the valise banged her legs. The discomfort served to prod her as she stumbled, befuddled, toward some thinner trees to her right.

The path came out at the side of a road. The distance she'd covered overland put her way ahead of

any pursuer. They may not even realize she'd fled yet if her cousin was busy with social niceties. Or he might have taken another direction to search.

With reluctance she chose the road, walking along at a good pace. She kept glancing over her shoulder, missing the wooded cover. She hated being out in the open and wished to hide but that would only be a temporary solution. The farther away she went, the better.

Full dark approached, and ground fog began to appear. She needed to find shelter. The roadside woods ended, and thick hedgerows close to the road girded the fields on either side as far as she could see.

Ellie rounded a sharp curve and started to jog again, but after only a few yards, she sped up, shaken by a sound. Certain that carriage wheels neared from behind, she ran headlong, her mind reeling, mouth dry, and her heart like a woodpecker trying to escape her chest. Blocked by the hedges, despair threatened.

Former caution forgotten, her toe caught an uneven rut and pitched her flat onto her face in the dirt road. The wind left her with a whoosh. Stunned for a moment, shocked at the pain of the fall, and frightened by the coach, she tried to rise but failed. She sank, losing hope. All her efforts to escape marriage to Ferdinand would come to naught.

2

“Miss. Let me help you up.” A refined male voice spoke from somewhere behind Ellie. She tried to focus, but her brains remained jumbled from her impact on the road.

Ellie rolled over onto her side and glanced down. *Oh, the impropriety!* Hem halfway to her knees, disarray exposed her ankles. She dared lift her gaze, expecting her vicious cousin Ferdinand with triumph on his face. Instead, she saw a glorious stranger whose stunning blond good looks filled her vision—a man a thousand times more handsome than her awful, hounding cousin.

She reached out, and the man pulled her to her feet with gentle strength. “Thank you, sir.” Her trembling hands batted at the dusty brown dress. Thank God the road dirt was dry and not muddy. This was the only sensible dress she now owned.

When she glanced up at the man, none of that mattered in the glow of his appearance.

Angels don't wear top boots, do they?

“We saw you fall.” Though cool, the man’s blue eyes showed humanity. *We? Was he married?* A wave of thick blond hair fell across his forehead, and he shoved it back. He glanced back to the waiting coach and pulled out his watch, took a look, then snapped it shut. “Are you hurt?”

“I’ll be sore tomorrow, but in one piece. Thank you.” She lowered her eyelids and grasped for demure humility, hoping to disarm any questions. She couldn’t run—nothing but hedgerows edging acres of fields in every direction.

"John?" A woman's voice rose on a note of query. "Bring her here." Impatience and curiosity overlaid the woman's refined tones.

"Coming. You, miss, what's your name?" Abrupt, he tapped timepiece.

"Don't let me detain you, sir." Ellie bobbed a curtsey, ignored his question, and prayed he'd go away. She needed to hide. It wouldn't do for him to ask a lot of questions. She bent over to retrieve the valise she'd dropped.

"Step over to the coach, miss. My aunt wants to meet you." He held out his arm as if certain she'd obey.

Reluctant, she put her free hand on his arm and clung to the valise with her other. She refused his offer to carry it, and hobbled over to the coach, sore from the fall.

A face appeared in the open carriage door. Wisps of graying red hair peeked out from the edges of a fashionable chip straw bonnet, and the woman craned her neck to address the coachman first. "Springs? We'll be a moment or two more, please."

She turned to Ellie and spoke again. "Come close, gel. Let me inspect you."

Ellie complied, discomfort vanishing with one look into the older lady's kind eyes, the same blue as the man's. She moved to the opening, as the steps hadn't been lowered when the man jumped out to her aid.

The woman stared into her face, for a prolonged moment with a thumb on Ellie's chin, as if she were reading her like a book. "You're a good gel. I can tell. Can always tell by the eyes. Yet, ye must be running for a reason."

Ellie remained mute. Of course, she was a "good

girl" but by what measure was this lady evaluating her? And why?

"Quiet one, eh? Did you lose your bonnet?" Not even waiting for an answer, she went on. "I do believe your hair's something like mine once was—scarlet silk." The woman's face took on a dreamy cast. "Stubbins!" she called. A young groom clambered off the box and waited for orders. "Lower the steps."

"Get in. Ye might as well ride a while and keep me company." The lady invited Ellie to enter the coach.

Ellie glanced back at the man and again at the woman. To get into this coach couldn't be much worse than running for one's life in the forest or down a dusty road. Such a dilemma, but when fleeing for one's life, she didn't suppose one could be choosy. They seemed nice enough.

After both Ellie and her rescuer climbed in and took seats in the carriage, the man rapped the ceiling of the coach. It lurched into motion. As a gentleman, he'd insisted on taking the rear-facing seat opposite her. Ellie noticed this smattering of consideration. Perhaps he was kind.

She rummaged through her valise for a handkerchief and came up empty. She clasped the bag closed and peeked up to find that the man held out a clean white cloth. No smile, eyebrows raised.

Ellie took the fine linen and dabbed at her eyes. She needed to think. They were sure to question her at some point. At least a name—She must come up with an alias.

He turned to stare out the window and folded his arms across his chest.

"Who are ye, gel?" The lady rounded on Ellie, fulfilling her assumption that she'd need an identity.

One step ahead of them for the time being, she spoke with sincerity in her voice, false though it was.

"My name is Ellie Moore, ma'am." She sank back against the squabs, wishing she could disappear, crumpling the handkerchief between her clenched hands.

"I'm Mrs. Fairchild. That's my nephew, Lord Dare." She inclined her head toward him, yet her eyes never left Ellie's face.

Ellie suppressed all reaction and put up with the lady's scrutiny. Dusk was falling and the dim light in the coach blurred details, but opulence overlaid the entire conveyance with its plush velvet upholstery and well-padded seats. The occupants, too, gave off that inimitable redolence of wealth with their fashionable attire and good grooming. She had no doubt the man possessed rank—his cool impatience earlier fit the mold.

To ask a question wouldn't be improper. "Where are you, I mean we, headed? What is our destination?" She glanced out the small glass window able to make out only the darkening sky and clouds scudding across the heavens. The wind intensified.

"We've got two hours to go, gel." Mrs. Fairchild reached over and patted her hand. "The Black Crow Inn will be our lodging place for the night."

Ellie kept her eyes down, unsolvable worries about what she'd gotten herself into lanced through her mind as she sat mum.

But in the darkened coach, she remembered her other peril—Ferdinand. This coach provided a semblance of safety for a time, yet a tremble coursed down her back and waves of fear and unanswered questions cascaded within her. What kind of people

were they? Had she landed in worse trouble? How had her cousin found her at Honor's Point? She worked through the possibilities as silence lengthened but couldn't identify a culprit responsible for informing her relatives of her secret whereabouts.

She tried to think of a suitable explanation for running down the road with a valise. They'll surely ask. Ellie hated to lie, but until she understood this kind lady better, she mustn't tell anyone her real identity. She closed her eyes and sagged against the squabs. Sleep flickered around the edges of her exhausted mind but vanished when she heard Mrs. Fairchild speak.

Mrs. Fairchild tossed her head, which set the curls around her face aquiver. "I want a companion. Someone young. Not too loud, no Friday-faced sourpusses need apply."

"But a random miss plucked from the dirt? Come now, Aunt Leticia, let us reason together. You require someone with a pleasant reading voice, correct?"

The man's words made Ellie squirm. From the dirt—how denigrating. But she could easily hide as a companion. God's providence quite evident, she breathed a silent prayer of thanks.

"Don't quibble, John. You must allow I've had a terrible time finding anyone for such a secluded location."

"We don't even know if she *can* read, much less who she is, or who she's running from." Lord Dare replied.

Her own eyes still shut, Ellie fumed. His implications were an insult to her intelligence.

His negativity did not stop his aunt. "I have an unerring intuition for that sort of thing. She's

intelligent and pure as the driven snow and that's a fact. If I believed in wagering, I'd venture ten guineas."

Never the subject of a wager in her life, this interchange made Ellie uncomfortable. She'd love to stop her charade of sleep and tell them who she was—a young lady of good reputation—but to indulge her desire would not suit her purposes of hiding from Ferdinand. They wouldn't hide her but would send her home. So she continued to feign sleep but was now peeking through her lashes.

Lord Dare crossed his arms and sat in emphatic silence.

Mrs. Fairchild moved to close the controversy. "We'll give her a chance. That's what we'll do." She folded her hands with a ladylike firmness and ceased speaking.

As little as she wanted a position as a companion, Ellie remained in dire need of a hiding place. Had God provided her a way out?

3

Ellie awakened when the coach rocked and slowed to take a sharp turn. Those disruptions, along with the loud 'halloo' shouted by the coachman, also woke Lord Dare and his aunt.

"Goodness. I dozed off." Mrs. Fairchild tugged at her shawl, smoothed her gloves, and retied her bonnet strings.

"I believe we all slept for a time." Ellie spoke in a soft voice only because she needed to respond to the kind lady. What she really wanted was to disappear. Being a bird without a nest didn't sit well with her. Her life had been cut adrift from all its moorings.

The coach came to a stop, and soon the groom opened the door and lowered the steps. Lord Dare emerged first, then raised his hands to help his aunt down. He made sure she was steady on her feet.

This gave Ellie the chance to retrieve her shawl, and place it over her head and shoulders to hide her hair. Lord Dare turned toward the coach again to aid Ellie, but she descended without assistance and took position next to Mrs. Fairchild. Ellie swiftly moved into the role of companion, a female who wouldn't expect any gentlemanly assistance.

He stared down at her. "Since my aunt's determined to take you under her wing, it's good you

aren't a wilting lily." With a flash of his blue eyes, he adjusted his top hat and turned away, striding toward the inn door.

He seemed angry. Did he blame her for something? Was it her fault she'd fallen down on the same road they were travelling, and they chose to aid her in her distress? That must be too much for the irritable Lord Dare to bear.

Ellie followed Mrs. Fairchild up the stairs. Shawl-covered head down, she took the demeanor of an upper servant. With her bright hair covered, it wouldn't be as easy for Cousin Ferdinand to find her. And he'd be asking after a young gentlewoman, not a servant.

The innkeeper's wife opened the door and rattled her voluminous key ring. "Hope it's to yer likin', ma'am. We held the room for ye."

The room had a dormer window and a sloped ceiling on one side. It looked tidy, and a fire was already warming the comfy space. "This room is more than adequate. Thank you, Mrs. Hollander. Please send us a light meal. We've been on the road for hours."

The woman nodded, bobbed, and scurried out, closing the door with a click.

Did it lock? Ellie wanted to lock the world out, circumstances having forced her into this untenable position. She moved toward the window, intending to look out, but realized just in time that anyone watching would be able to see her standing in the lighted room. She decided to warm her hands by the fire.

Mrs. Fairchild lifted her bonnet off her head and patted her curls, sighing. "I hate travel. Never want to inflict it on my maids. But it's times like this I'd dearly love to have a lady's maid with me." She turned from

the washstand, drying her hands. "Please do settle down, dear. You're shuttling back and forth and making me dizzy. Set down that bag. It must be getting heavy. Wash your hands and face. I believe I see a streak of dust on your cheek."

When Ellie reached the mirror above the basin, she glimpsed a face even paler than its normal china doll hue and bloodshot eyes. The flight and the corresponding shocks and fears had taken a toll on her appearance. The water raised her spirits a smidgen.

Fatigued, Ellie could only think of the relief of blessed sleep. "Where am I to sleep, milady?"

"I'll have a cot brought in." A knock sounded at the door. "Oh, there. That'll be the food. Come in!" she trilled.

A serving girl entered, balancing a tray on one hip.

"Right here's fine." Mrs. Fairchild pointed to the table in front of the fire. "Have Mrs. Hollander send up a cot and bedding, straightaway."

"After we've eaten this tidy supper, we'll talk. By then your cot will be here and we can rest. This looks tasty. I believe it's asparagus bisque—one of my favorites." She examined the remainder of the dishes and made humming sounds before glancing up at Ellie. "Shall we pray?"

Without waiting for an answer, Mrs. Fairchild closed her eyes and folded her hands. "Oh Lord, we thank Thee for this day, and for this food. Thank You for bringing us all here safely." After a few more petitions, she closed her prayer with the proper words and opened her eyes. Without any further ado, she began to spoon the creamy pale green soup into the two bowls on the tray.

How kind she was. Gratitude rose up in Ellie's

breast. She couldn't voice it right now, but it was there, resting under her heart. During her flight from the house, through the woods, and then down the road, God delivered her to a place of seeming safety, and she was thankful.

The escape and her fear had superseded all else, but now she remembered the touchstone of her faith in God. *Thank You, Lord.*

Mrs. Fairchild set her spoon down with satisfied finality. "Such a good soup. Just the thing for a late-night repast. Something warm, yet not too heavy." She lifted a napkin from a basket of buttered scones. "What have we here?" Nibbling one, she looked blissful. "Lemon. Butter and lemon. Two of my favorite things." Smiling at Ellie, she passed the basket of flaky treats.

"Thank you, ma'am." Ellie sampled the delicious buttery confection while wondering how much to speak. Acting as a companion was new to her, she wasn't sure of the tone to take. How much of her personality would be allowed? The companions she'd known had been dressed in gray and bordered on invisible.

"I'd like you to consider taking a position as my companion." Mrs. Fairchild brushed her lips and fingertips against her napkin, and continued, holding up a staying hand. "I'd like to clarify something. The situation of companion is not offered out of desperation. It would take a simple letter to an employment agency to produce streams of candidates, even with the estate's location at the back of beyond. But I have taken to you, gel, and not just because you have those tendrils of red hair so like mine when I was young. Finding you the way we did. It had the gravitas

of providence. Won't you consider the position?"

A tickle of laughter threatened, but Ellie suppressed it in time. An heiress on the run couldn't be choosy. Squirreling herself away at some out-of-the-way estate, dressing in gray, and blending into the walls sounded like as good a strategy as any since she had no plan at all. Anything to escape the clutches of Ferdinand and be forced to a marriage altar.

"What would be entailed as your companion?" The question not only bought her time to decide, but prudence told her to ask. So far, Mrs. Fairchild seemed like a fine person, but Ellie wanted to find out her requirements.

"Oh, the usual. Accompany me most everywhere I go—which in Willow Grove amounts to church and occasional visits to the shops in the village. Sit with me during interminable needlework sessions. Read to me. You do read, don't you?"

"Oh my, yes. I love to read." Ellie had no qualms about being qualified in that regard. The rest sounded simple enough. Her own mother's companion had been a poor relation who sat in the same room as her mother, day after day. What was her name? Such a nondescript woman. Oh yes, Janine Crosby. A cousin several removes away, but still close enough to lay claim to family charity.

"Good. I expected as much. Reading is a delight. You'll be paid two pounds every quarter, with room and board provided."

Ellie didn't care about the terms. She just wanted to know whether the location was as extremely remote as she was hoping. "How far out of the nearest town are you situated? Not that I want to go to town, I'm simply curious."