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JEN TURANO



MEETING
HER
MATCH

THE MATCHMAKERS | BOOK 3

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In Memory of Susan Gibson Snodgrass

An avid reader who was with me from my very first published book and who became not simply a woman who went out of her way to support my work but a dear friend.

You are truly missed.

Godspeed, my friend.

Love,

Jen

This book is also dedicated to my Ohio Valley friends who didn't hesitate to step up and share their memories of the Valley with me, as well as give me quite the lesson regarding things like . . . ramps. I had no idea. Your suggestions, as well as your willingness to help me with the local vernacular, definitely allowed me to take this story to a different level, and for that, you have my heartfelt thanks. It was fabulous getting the opportunity to reconnect with so many of you, and to remember why, to this day, the Ohio Valley still feels like home.

Love you!

Jen

One



HUDSON RIVER VALLEY
SPRING 1889

Being chased by highwaymen was certainly cause for concern, as was the idea she was in imminent danger of losing her seat because riding sidesaddle, and while dressed in the most fashionable of riding habits, was not exactly conducive to escaping from a most dire situation.

Leaning over the neck of her horse, Fiona, an unpredictable mare at the best of times, and this certainly wasn't the best of times, Miss Camilla Pierpont cemented her grip on the saddle pommel, wondering how she was going to escape her pursuers with her life intact and how she'd even landed in such a predicament in the first place.

She was not a lady prone to unfortunate predicaments, having acquired the reputation of being one of the most consummate ladies to ever grace the Four Hundred some eight years before when she'd made her debut.

Consummate ladies did not find themselves fearing for their lives often, if ever, but that certainly seemed to be what she was facing now.

Why the men had singled her out was bewildering to say the least because, being not quite nine in the morning, it wasn't as if she were sporting any Pierpont jewels. She also didn't have a single coin on her because she didn't have a reason to carry funds during her morning jaunts. The objective of her early gallops was to gather her thoughts for the day before she was obligated to attend the many society functions that were expected of a lady who held such a renowned societal position.

Gathering any thoughts at all at this particular moment was next to impossible, and the few thoughts that were whizzing through her mind were random at best, such as why she'd had the brilliant idea to secure a single-shot derringer she'd recently learned to operate to her leg by means of a garter, something that had seemed quite risqué when she'd slipped on the derringer that morning, but now seemed downright ridiculous. It wasn't as if she could access the derringer, what with the many layers of undergarments she was wearing, as well as the heavy fabric that made up her oh-so-fashionable but rather cumbersome riding habit.

"This is hardly the moment for such a disclosure, but I've decided I'm a complete ninny, because stowing my pistol in a saddlebag was an utterly ludicrous decision," Lottie McBriar, Camilla's recently hired paid companion, who'd once been in the employ of Frank Fitzsimmons, an underworld criminal boss, suddenly exclaimed, drawing Camilla's attention. "It's not as if I can retrieve the pistol when I'm having a difficult time simply maintaining my seat."

Camilla winced when Serenity, the horse she'd personally chosen for Lottie since she normally gave a smooth and steady ride, took that moment to lurch to the right as she galloped unevenly down the lane, almost unseating poor Lottie in the process.

"You're doing a marvelous job, Lottie, especially when you take into consideration you never rode a horse before you started working for me," Camilla said. "As for the pistol business, stowing one in a saddlebag is definitely a better choice over where I decided to stow mine today."

Lottie's eyes widened. "Please tell me you haven't stashed your derringer in your bodice because . . . one wrong bump and you could be missing one of your, ah, charms."

"Stuffing a pistol down my bodice would be almost as impractical as where I actually stashed it, which is on my leg, but since neither of us seem to have embraced an attitude of practicality this morning, I'm afraid we're both soon going to be dead," Camilla said as they took a turn in the road, Fiona tossing her head when Serenity came a little too close. She chanced a glance over her shoulder and frowned when she realized the men were no longer in sight. "Think they might have given up?"

"It's more likely they've taken a shortcut through the forest in the hopes of intercepting us."

"You think they're intending on an ambush?"

"That would be my best guess, which means we should take this opportunity to change direction and head for the river. It might be a rough ride, but it would give us a better chance of escaping them instead of riding into a trap."

Camilla reined Fiona to a stop, wincing again when Serenity, evidently taking that as a sign she could discontinue galloping, something she rarely did, preferring to plod instead, stopped moving with no warning, sending Lottie lurching forward and grabbing hold of the horse's mane to keep from flying over Serenity's head.

"Are you alright?" Camilla asked as Lottie pushed herself upright.

"I'll be fine once we get out of harm's way and I can get off this horse, but for now . . ." Lottie nodded to a thick grove of trees. "You go first."

"Absolutely not," Camilla argued. "You're the fledgling equestrian. You go first so I can come to your assistance if you find yourself in trouble."

"Me losing my seat is the least of our worries since you're obviously the target this morning."

"I would think we're both targets of those highwaymen."

“And I beg to differ because I’m acquainted with men who spend their time robbing travelers, and no self-respecting highwayman would waste their time on two women out for a morning ride.” Lottie glanced over her shoulder. “Those men chasing us are kidnapers, if I’m not mistaken, and you, being a grand heiress, are certainly in their sights.”

“Kidnappers?” Camilla repeated. “But that doesn’t make sense because surely they wouldn’t think I’d go along peacefully if they were able to catch us, and I certainly wouldn’t willingly ride along on the back of one of their horses.”

Lottie’s mouth suddenly went slack. “Good heavens, I truly am a ninny because they weren’t trying to *catch* us—they were *herding* us, and . . . we need to get out of here.” With that, Lottie sent Camilla a pointed look, but before Camilla could do more than steer Fiona toward the trees, the sound of carriage wheels reverberating down the road captured her attention.

A second later, a black coach, flanked by five men, sped into view.

Fear left her immobile for the briefest of seconds until a blast that sounded like a cannon rang out, and that was all it took for Fiona to rear into the air right before she turned and bolted down the road the way they’d just come. Camilla held on for dear life as they rounded a turn in the road, right as a second resounding boom split the air.

A mere heartbeat later, Fiona was rearing once again, but this time Camilla was unable to retain her seat and found herself tumbling head over heels through the air as Fiona thundered away.

An “oomph” escaped her when she hit the ground, but knowing she was now a sitting target, she forced herself to her feet, then stilled when the sound of pounding hooves drawing closer left her with the distinct impression that someone was almost upon her, which meant . . . she needed to bring out the derringer.

Hefting up the skirt of her riding habit, she fumbled her way through layers of fabric and wrenched the derringer free from

her garter, but before she could do more than get a firm grip on it with one hand and yank her skirt down with the other, a beast of a stallion came to a stop a few feet away from her right before a hulking brute of a man swung from the saddle.

For a moment, she found herself rooted to the spot because the man now setting his sights on her was the largest man she'd ever seen and radiated a sense of power that was impossible to ignore. With him being well over six feet tall, it was understandable why he was riding such an enormous horse, especially when he wasn't simply tall but also broad, the seams of the ill-fitting jacket he was wearing straining against what she could only assume were impressive muscles—ones probably amassed by doing some manner of physical labor.

Or absconding with people on a regular basis.

That thought had her lifting her gaze from his shoulders, discovering in the process that he was missing his hat and that his hair, an unusual shade of brown mixed with a hint of mahogany, was distinctly windswept, that circumstance a direct result, no doubt, of him having been chasing her only seconds before.

Calling herself every sort of ridiculous for being distracted by a perusal of the man when, clearly, he was a distinct threat to her, Camilla lifted the derringer with an unsteady hand and aimed it his way.

The man's hands were raised above his head a second later. "Whoa there, little lady, let's not be hasty now. What say you stow away that pistol before your feminine sensibilities get the better of you and you end up harming yourself."

For the briefest of seconds, Camilla found herself incapable of mustering up a retort to that nonsense, probably because no one had ever called her "little lady" before in a tone that suggested the man thought she was some witless female, nor had anyone ever had the audacity to suggest she was prone to feminine sensibilities.

She opened her mouth to disabuse him of his absurd notions, but snapped it shut when he began lowering his hands, undoubtedly to

gain access to the monstrosity of a pistol she noticed was sticking out of a holster slung low on his hip.

“Don’t move,” she demanded.

He immediately raised his hands again. “I have no intention of harming you, so tuck that derringer away nice and easy so you don’t unintentionally shoot yourself with it.”

“I won’t be the one I shoot.”

“I wouldn’t be so certain about that,” the man argued. “You’ve just suffered a tumble from your horse, and you were about to be waylaid by a gang of men with malice on their minds. You certainly can’t be expected to be clearheaded right now, and no one should handle a weapon in that state.” He nodded to the derringer. “It might be best if you just set that on the ground.”

“Would you like me to kick it your way, as well?”

“That’s not a bad idea.”

She quirked a brow. “Except that, contrary to what you evidently believe, I’m not a complete and utter simpleton.”

“I don’t recall suggesting you were a simpleton.”

“It was implied, given that you think I’m not only going to set my weapon on the ground but also send it your way.”

“You’re the one who suggested kicking it to me. Nevertheless, my suggestion that you distance yourself from your derringer was simply for your own good, as you’re clearly in a highly agitated state and that’s when most accidents with guns occur.”

“I’m not in a highly agitated state.”

“The fact that your voice just raised an octave suggests otherwise,” he said before he drew in a deep breath, slowly released it, then drew in another.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Hoping you’ll follow my example and begin taking a few deep breaths as well, which will do wonders to calm the state of your nerves.”

She felt the most distinct desire to pull the trigger and had to refuse the inclination to draw in a deep breath, as that would cer-

tainly leave the man believing she was heeding his ridiculous advice. “If you were truly concerned about my nerves,” she settled for saying instead, “the last thing you would tell me is to calm down.”

“I didn’t tell you to calm down,” he countered. “I was merely suggesting a remedy that might have benefited your agitated state, a state you seemed to embrace from the moment I got off my horse.”

“Because you addressed me as ‘little lady.’”

His brows drew together. “You found that aggravation-worthy?”

“It was insulting.”

“Huh,” the man said before he took a step toward her, something that recalled Camilla back to the troubling situation at hand.

“Don’t move,” she demanded again as she tightened her grip on the pistol.

He froze on the spot. “I’m really not going to harm you.”

“You truly must believe I’m witless if you think for a second that I don’t know you’re one of the men who was chasing me.”

“I wasn’t chasing you. I was racing to your rescue.”

“A likely story.”

The man opened his mouth but snapped it shut when Lottie came rushing down the road, on foot no less, and brandishing a tree limb, which suggested she’d finally lost her seat and Serenity had gotten away from her and taken Lottie’s pistol in the process.

In the span of a split second, the man spun around, his concerningly large weapon already drawn from his holster and pointed Lottie’s way.

Convinced Lottie was soon going to find herself a victim of a bullet, Camilla did the only thing that sprang to mind—she aimed the derringer above the man’s head and pulled the trigger.

Thankfully, the moment after she’d discharged her weapon, the man abandoned his interest in Lottie and swung to face her, his blue eyes already narrowed in what could most assuredly be described as a most menacing fashion.

“You missed,” he said.

“I didn’t. I was shooting to distract you from my paid companion.”

The man’s eyes narrowed another fraction. “An interesting decision since you’ve lent me the impression you think I’m a threat to you.”

“You *are* a threat to me.”

He re-holstered his pistol, a surprising move considering the circumstances. “If you’re convinced I’m a danger to you, why, since you’re using a single-shot derringer, would you waste your only bullet on a distraction tactic instead of rendering me incapable of being a continued threat?”

It was beyond irritating when Camilla realized he’d just made an excellent point, but before she could think of a suitable retort, Lottie stole up behind him and slipped the man’s pistol straight out of his holster. She then raised the gun into the air and pulled the trigger.

Camilla’s ears immediately began ringing as a blast echoed around her, her eyes widening when Lottie went flying backward, the result of a recoil that had literally knocked her off her feet.

Her gaze darted to the man, who, unfortunately, was still standing and seemingly unscathed. Interestingly enough, though, instead of looking outraged, a reaction she’d been expecting, he was squinting up into the tree he was standing under.

Her gaze shifted to what he was looking at, which seemed to be leaves that were rustling in a somewhat unusual manner, the peculiarity immediately explained when a large bundle of gray-and-black fur suddenly hurtled through the leaves, landing on the ground a few feet away from her.

It quickly became evident that the raccoon now hissing in a most concerning fashion had not appreciated its abrupt departure from the tree.

Camilla took a hesitant step backward, stilling when an entire nursery of raccoons began scrambling down the trunk, all of which were making noises that had the hair on the nape of her neck standing at attention.