

A MOST
Peculiar
CIRCUMSTANCE



JEN TURANO



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Jen Turano, *A Most Peculiar Circumstance*
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2013. Used by permission.

© 2013 by Jennifer L. Turano

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Turano, Jen.

A most peculiar circumstance / Jen Turano.

pages cm

Summary: "Private Investigator Theodore Wilder is on a mission to find Arabella Beckett. But this feisty suffragette may be more trouble than he bargained for!"—Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-7642-1019-8 (pbk.)

I. Title.

PS3620.U7455M67 2013

813'.6—dc23

2013002249

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Cover design by John Hamilton Design

Author is represented by The Seymour Agency

13 14 15 16 17 18 19 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In Memory of
W. Calvin Turner

*This certainly would have given you something
to chat about with the gents at the mall, Dad,
instead of old football stats. Wish you were still
around to share this adventure with me.*

Miss you more than I can say.

All my love,

Jennifer

1

NOVEMBER 1880
GILMAN, ILLINOIS

Miss Arabella Beckett had always been proud of the fact she'd never ended up in jail.

She could no longer make that claim.

Her gaze traveled over the roughhewn walls of the cell and then dropped to the floor, lingering on rusty stains that appeared to be splatters of blood. She frowned as she noticed a trail of muddy water flowing toward and then over the stains. She looked down and realized the mud was coming from the soaking and filthy hem of her gown.

Hitching up her skirt, she stepped over the water and hobbled over to a stone bench. She plopped down and released a huff when a glob of something undoubtedly vile dribbled down her back. She ignored the dribble as irritation began to simmer.

Once again, her propensity for involving herself in matters that were none of her concern had managed to land her in a slight bit of trouble.

She should have stuck to her original plan of traveling

directly from Chicago to her home in New York instead of agreeing to help one Mrs. James—a woman she had just happened upon at the train station—track down her errant daughter.

She shot a glance to the young lady sleeping soundly on the only cot the cell offered and blew out a breath. There was no sense dwelling on what might have been. The reality was she *had* gotten off the train in Gilman, and she was simply going to have to live with that decision. At least she could take solace in the knowledge that Miss James was now somewhat safe rather than enduring what would have certainly been a fate worse than death.

She leaned her head back against the cold wall, ignored the sodden fabric of the skirt that was now sticking to her legs, and forced her weary mind to think.

She was being charged with four counts of assault, which was completely ludicrous considering she hadn't assaulted anyone, let alone four officers of the law.

If those officers would have given her the courtesy of an explanation before trying to apprehend her, she would not have felt compelled to make a run for it. She also wouldn't have chosen an escape route that led through a remarkably foul pigpen.

There was no possible way she could have known a deranged pig lurked on the other side of that completely innocent-looking fence. She'd only taken a few steps after she'd bolted over the top before the beast had charged directly toward her. That disturbing circumstance had caused her to spin around as best she could through the muck and make a beeline for the fence, pushing past the dumbfounded officers who'd followed her. In hindsight, it might have been prudent to have given them fair warning as to what was coming their way, but she'd been distracted by a troublesome piece of splintered fence that had snagged her hair.

As she'd struggled to get free, the pig had set its attention on the officers.

It had not been a pretty sight.

Bodies had scrambled around in a blur, squeals were emitted—and not just from the pig—and the foul substance that littered the pen had drenched everyone.

That unfortunate result had not endeared Arabella to the officers in the least, especially Sheriff Dawson, who'd made short shrift of getting her released from the fence with one deliberate slice of a wicked-looking knife.

She lifted her hand and patted the left side of her head, encountering a mess of ragged, blond curls that had been a good eight inches longer when she'd started the day but now appeared to be no longer than the bottom of her chin. She gave her hair one last pat, dropped her hand to her lap, and noticed the grime clinging to her fingers. She rubbed them against the fabric of her gown and, realizing she was only making them muddier, decided that contemplating her current lack of hygiene and missing hair would have to wait. There were more important matters to ponder.

She turned her head and studied Miss James, wondering what had possessed the young lady to attempt to procure a husband through the mail. Had the young lady resorted to such drastic measures because of pressure from family members, or had the advertisement Miss James answered been written in such an enticing fashion that the lady simply couldn't help herself?

It truly was unfortunate, whatever the lady's reasoning, that Miss James apparently felt one was not complete unless one had the attention of a gentleman, even if said gentleman was one she'd never met.

Deciding her time would be better spent figuring a way out of jail instead of contemplating the workings of a young lady's mind, Arabella closed her eyes and turned to God.

Dear Lord, thank you for lending me your guidance and support in the matter of rescuing Miss James. Please continue to keep her safe, and if you could, would it be possible to send me some assistance?

She opened her eyes and nodded. That should do the trick. God would show her a way out, but until that time, she needed to keep a clear head and mull through her options.

She had rights. Granted, they were slim to none since she was a woman, but she could not be held indefinitely, could she?

Knowing far too well that the rights of women were cast aside on the whims of gentlemen on a daily basis, Arabella felt her jaw clench. The reality was that, yes, she might be held behind bars for a very long time.

She should have been more diligent in her attempts at getting the laws changed.

It certainly lent a different perspective to the inequalities facing women when she was the one behind bars, yet now was hardly the time to think about that.

As she smoothed down the wrinkled mess of her skirt, her attention settled on the good six inches of mud attached to her hem, and she suddenly remembered the money she'd stashed in that hem. She could offer the sheriff the money and secure her release.

No, that would never do. She blew out a breath. The sheriff would surely look at that as a bribe, and then she would never escape the confines of the small cell.

The sound of footsteps caused her to blink out of her thoughts and lean forward on the bench, her attention focused on the narrow hallway in the dank and dreary basement jail that led to her cell.

The footsteps stopped and a gentleman came into view. It was rather odd, but she got the distinct impression he was annoyed, probably because he was glaring at her through the bars.

She swallowed a sigh. As a woman who was known for having strong opinions, dealing with annoyed gentlemen seemed to be a common occurrence in her life. She leaned farther forward on the bench, intent on addressing the gentleman, but suddenly found she was at a complete loss for words when she got a good look at his face.

The gentleman was possessed of features that could have been sculpted by a master.

Sharp cheekbones complemented a straight blade of a nose, and his eyes were as dark as his brows, which were currently drawn together as if the man were contemplating a weighty matter. Her gaze drifted to his hair, which was liberally streaked with gold and looked quite untidy at the moment, as though the gentleman had been running his hands through it out of sheer aggravation.

She had the sneaking suspicion she might be the cause of that aggravation.

Her gaze drifted downward, lingering on shoulders encased in an overcoat of exceptionally fine wool.

An attorney would wear such a coat.

Perhaps God was already answering her prayer regarding assistance, and perhaps the man was only annoyed with her because he'd been roused from his house in the middle of the night to bail her out of jail.

Feeling a bit more charitable toward the gentleman, she allowed herself a moment to finish her perusal. He was very brawny, but no, that wasn't quite right. She tilted her head. He was tall, certainly, well over six feet from what she could tell, but his overcoat was tailored at the waist, lending the impression of trimness, while his shoulders . . . a frisson of something unexpected raced down her spine.

That was peculiar. She'd never felt a frisson of anything quite like that before, but maybe it had only been another one of those pesky globs of mud that was still attached to her

person. She nodded in relief over that particular reasoning, and regarded his shoulders once again, unable to help being somewhat impressed. They were so broad, and they gave testimony to the fact that here was a gentleman who could handle himself well in disturbing situations.

Her eyes widened as she realized he was a gentleman who commanded attention, and he was also one who would have no trouble getting her and Miss James released from jail.

She shifted her gaze back to his face, frowning when she realized the gentleman's mouth was moving.

Funny, in her consideration of the man, she'd neglected to realize he was speaking to her.

She'd apparently been struck deaf as well as mute.

"I beg your pardon, sir," she began, finally finding her voice. "Were you speaking to me?"

The gentleman's mouth stopped moving as he sent her a look of what could only be described as disbelief before he nodded.

"Would you be so kind as to repeat what you said?"

"I was inquiring whether or not you are Miss Arabella Beckett."

His voice was deep and slightly raspy, and it held a distinct note of exasperation. She summoned up a smile even as she ignored the irritation that had begun to hum through her. "I readily admit that I am, indeed, Miss Beckett. May I dare hope you've come to secure my release?"

"I don't see that I have any other option."

Temper began to bubble up inside of her, but before she could formulate a suitable retort to his surly response, he ran a hand through his untidy hair and took a step forward, shaking his finger at her through the bars.

She felt as if she were suddenly back in primary school, being taken to task for some silly prank.

Her temper boiled hotter.

“You have led me on a merry chase, Miss Beckett,” the gentleman growled. “You were supposed to be in Chicago, and before that, Kansas. Imagine my surprise when I tracked you to Gilman, only to discover you’d somehow managed to get arrested.”

She slowly rose from the bench. “You’ve been searching for me?”

The gentleman stopped wagging his finger, withdrew it from between the bars, and then gave a short jerk of his head. “For well over a month. Your family sent me after you when they became aware of the fact you’d gone missing.”

Arabella plucked the wet material of her dress away from her legs and took a step forward, pausing when she realized she seemed to be missing a shoe. She lifted her skirt, glanced down, and felt a grin tug her lips as bare toes peeking through tattered and torn stockings came into focus.

That certainly explained all the hobbling she’d been doing. With the chaos surrounding her arrest and subsequent transport to jail, she’d neglected to realize she’d lost her shoe somewhere along the way.

A loud clearing of a throat had her lifting her head, even as the grin slid off her face. The gentleman was staring at her with clear annoyance stamped on his all-too-handsome face, and that had her gritting her teeth even as she took a teetering step forward.

“Who are you?” she asked as she reached the front of the cell, grabbing onto the cold bars separating them and wobbling on her one heel.

The gentleman’s lips thinned. “I already told you, I’m Mr. Theodore Wilder. Were you not listening to a word I said?”

Even though she was in desperate need of assistance, she was tempted to demand that the gentleman take his leave. She tightened her grip on the bars, took a deep breath, released it in one huff, and then sucked in another. “You’re the famous private investigator.”

“I see my reputation precedes me.”

“Why would my family go to the bother of hiring you? I assure you, I was not missing. I was perfectly aware of where I was at all times, and, truth be told, I was actually on my way home before I took this detour.”

Mr. Wilder cocked a brow. “You might not have gone ‘missing,’ Miss Beckett, but any fool can see you need assistance. I would think you would find it a fortuitous circumstance that I came after you, unless of course you would prefer I pretend I *didn’t* find you and leave you here to rot.”

Although she knew more than her share of unpleasant gentlemen, given that she was an adamant supporter of the suffrage movement, she was quite certain she’d never met one this unpleasant before. She felt tempted once again to demand he leave, but practicality intervened, so instead she lifted her chin. “If you were to abandon me here to rot, you wouldn’t be able to collect the hefty fee you’re most likely charging my family for your services.”

“I’m not charging them a fee.”

She blinked. “Why not?”

“Your brother Zayne is a good friend of mine. When your family needed someone to find you, I offered my services, never realizing you would be so difficult to run to ground.”

Arabella reached through the bars and grabbed Mr. Wilder’s arm. “What happened?”

The gentleman barely glanced at the mud now staining his sleeve from her filthy hand before his attention shifted to her face. “I do beg your pardon, Miss Beckett. It was inexcusable of me to lend you the impression something horrible has occurred. I was sent after you because your presence was desired at your brother’s wedding.”

Relief surged over her, but was quickly replaced with confusion. “My brother is getting married?”

Mr. Wilder patted her hand, which was still clutching his

arm, watched her as she snatched it back through the bars, and then shook his head. "I'm afraid I must now be the bearer of some distressing news. Unfortunately, given the fact I was not able to locate you in a timely fashion, you missed the wedding."

"My brother got married without me?"

"He did."

Arabella spun on her heel and tried to pace around the room, finally giving up when she realized pacing was not practical when one was missing a shoe. She came to a stop and caught Mr. Wilder's eye. "Zayne's been contemplating marriage for years. I find it difficult to believe he was suddenly overcome with emotion and simply had to marry Helena before I was able to return home."

"Zayne didn't marry Helena."

"Oh, thank goodness." She limped back across the cell and sagged against the bars.

"You don't care for Miss Helena Collins?"

"I'm sure she's a perfectly lovely woman when she's not bemoaning her many ailments," Arabella said. "Tell me, who did Zayne marry?"

"Zayne didn't get married. Your brother Hamilton did."

"Hamilton? He hasn't shown interest in a lady since his wife died."

"He's shown a great deal of interest in Lady Eliza Sumner."

"How did he become acquainted with an aristocrat?"

Mr. Wilder looked at her for a moment and then . . . he rolled his eyes.

He really was an unlikable sort.

"Miss Beckett," Mr. Wilder began before she could tell him exactly what she thought of him, "while I certainly understand your curiosity regarding your brother's new wife, I must point out to you that you are in a somewhat dire predicament. Let us dispense with the gossip and devote ourselves to the pressing matter of getting you out of jail."

While he was quite correct, she did not care for his snippy tone in the least. She plopped her hands on her hips and regarded him with narrowed eyes as an uncomfortable silence settled over them.

A full minute later, Mr. Wilder rolled his eyes again, put *his* hands on *his* hips, and sent her another glare. “Very well, since you seem to be possessed of a stubborn nature—one, by the way, no one in your family made me aware of—I’ll tell you a condensed version of what transpired in New York.”

“You are too kind.”

As Mr. Wilder’s dark eyes turned glacial, he ran a hand once again through his hair and finally opened his mouth, speaking so rapidly she barely caught his words. “Hamilton met Lady Eliza at a dinner party held at the Watsons’. He then bailed her out of jail, and when she was dismissed from her position as the Watsons’ governess, he took her home with him where they promptly fell in love.”

“That’s your condensed version?”

“I thought it fairly sufficient.”

It was just like a gentleman to leave out all the pertinent details. “You told me absolutely nothing of consequence, such as why the lady ended up in jail, and why an aristocrat was working as a governess.”

If anything, his words came out even faster. “She was working as a governess because her fortune was stolen, and she was arrested because she was mistaken for a lady of the night.” He smiled. “I think you and Lady Eliza will get along famously, since both of you seem to have a propensity for attracting trouble.”

“I do not have a propensity for attracting trouble.”

Mr. Wilder’s smile widened as he gestured to the cell.

Arabella forced a smile of her own. “This is the first time I’ve been arrested.”

“Really?”

“I do not make a habit of breaking the law, Mr. Wilder. I may occasionally attract unfavorable attention as I work to secure women the right to vote, but the suffrage movement is a peaceful movement, not one that lands me in jail on a frequent basis.”

“The suffrage movement can hardly be considered peaceful, Miss Beckett,” Theodore countered. “Women are being encouraged to rebel, and that certainly does not lend itself to a peaceful home.”

It was fortunate for him that there were bars separating them.

Arabella began tapping her one shoe against the hard floor, immediately stilling when she teetered from the motion. “I *encourage* women to stand up for their rights, Mr. Wilder. We are held accountable to the same laws as men, and yet we have no say regarding the passage of these laws.”

“You think all women wish for the same rights as men?”

“Not all of them, but that stems from a lack of education, which is a direct result of unequal rights.”

“Most ladies of my acquaintance desire marriage above all else.”

“You must not have a large group of female acquaintances.”

A laugh burst out of his mouth, causing her teeth to clench. “How in the world do you expect me to address that statement? Why, if I contradict you, you’ll think I’m a braggart, and if I agree with you, I’ll be a liar.”

“A braggart would actually be an improvement over the impression I’ve already formed of you.”

Mr. Wilder let out another laugh and then waved a dismissive hand in the air. “While this is certainly a riveting conversation, I do believe it is past time we addressed your reason for being behind bars, instead of our differing opinions regarding my personality and views on the preposterous suffrage movement.”

Arabella opened her mouth, found she once again had no words at her disposal, so instead snapped it shut and simply watched him as he began to stalk back and forth in front of the cell. He stopped and crossed his arms over his chest.

“You’re going to have to afford me some explanations.”

“There really is not much to explain. My arrest was a simple misunderstanding.”

Mr. Wilder let out a grunt. “That’s what all criminals say. Explain the assault and theft charges.”

“I didn’t steal anything.”

“Are you inferring that you *did* assault four officers?”

There was just something about the gentleman’s tone that annoyed her from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. She forced another smile. “Mr. Wilder, forgive me, but are these questions really necessary? Given your reputation, I would assume you are more than capable of securing my release with relative ease.”

Mr. Wilder took a step closer and, for some strange reason, waved a hand toward the floor.

She looked at the floor and then back to him. “Surely you’re not suggesting I take a seat?”

“Miss Beckett, your gown is beyond filthy and the floor will cause it no additional harm. Since you seem to be a difficult sort, and I’m somewhat weary from chasing you around the country, I would like to get comfortable before you begin explaining what happened, and just so we’re clear, explain it you will.”

She opened her mouth, but before she could get a single word out, the annoying gentleman continued. “Even though you are a most unusual lady, you are still a lady, and it’s been my experience that ladies are notoriously wordy when they begin to explain something, so we should take the weight off our feet and sit down.”

Realizing that if she responded to that bit of nonsense,

he would probably take her response as proof about wordy ladies, she kept her lips tightly shut and plopped down on the cold floor. She folded her mud-encrusted hands demurely in her lap and swore she would not speak a single word until Mr. Wilder apologized for his all-too-pompous attitude.

2

The seconds ticked away as Mr. Wilder lowered his large frame to the ground and sent Arabella an expectant look.

Keeping her lips pressed tightly together, she lifted her gaze to the ceiling, where she began contemplating the mold that resided there. A shiver suddenly caught her by surprise, and then another as the cold from the floor seeped through her sodden gown.

Her gaze dropped from the ceiling when Mr. Wilder began to mutter something under his breath, even as he pushed himself to his feet, shrugged out of his overcoat, and thrust it through the bars.

“Put this on.”

She remained perfectly still. She’d never been one who followed orders well and wasn’t about to start now.

He dropped the coat, and it settled to the ground beside her. “Don’t be ridiculous, put it on. It’s apparent you’re freezing. I certainly don’t want to have to explain to your brother why I couldn’t bring you back because you died from exposure.

You've caused me quite enough trouble as it is, and I'm beginning to lose patience with you."

Her eyes narrowed, but another shiver stole over her, causing her to snatch the overcoat as she struggled to her feet. She slipped her arms through the sleeves and stifled the urge to sigh in delight as wonderful warmth stole over her.

The coat was huge and smelled of sandalwood and something that was all male. She snuggled it around her, breathed in deeply, lifted her head, and found Mr. Wilder frowning at her.

"I need that back."

Chivalry, apparently, was definitely dead.

Her vow to remain silent disappeared in a split second. "You can't have it back."

"I don't need it for long. I just need something from the front pocket."

Arabella reached into the pocket and pulled out a gun.

"Be careful with that, Miss Beckett. It's loaded, and I have no wish for you to shoot yourself."

"I wasn't planning on shooting *myself*."

His eyes widened just a touch before they turned hard. "A gun is not a toy. I'll thank you to hand it to me gently through the bars. It will not help my attempt to get you released if the sheriff discovers you're armed."

He might have a point.

She moved forward, held out the gun, and couldn't seem to resist allowing her gaze to wander over him again. Without the overcoat, he really did possess a trim figure and . . . somewhat impressive muscles.

She jumped when his fingers drifted over hers and quickly pulled her hand back through the bars as soon as he took possession of the gun. He shoved it into the waistband of his trousers and then casually stepped away from her, apparently unaware his touch had left her fingers feeling slightly scorched.

She sank back to the floor and arranged the coat around her, hoping he wouldn't notice her cheeks were probably flaming.

What was it about this particular gentleman? He made her uneasy, and it was not a feeling she enjoyed.

Maybe the events of the day really had affected her nerves.

Her cheeks cooled immediately and she lifted her head, finding Mr. Wilder once again on the floor, staring at her with an unreadable expression on his face.

She felt the unusual urge to fidget under his regard.

"May we finally return to why you're behind bars?" he asked.

Her urge to fidget ceased.

"By all means, Mr. Wilder, let us move this conversation forward. What would you care to know?"

"I need you to explain the assault charges. Assaulting officers of the law is a very serious offense, one that usually results in a stiff punishment."

"I didn't assault anyone. A pig did."

"I see," Mr. Wilder said slowly. "Very well, let us move on to the theft. From what I've been told, a Mr. Brown is insisting you made off with his horse without his permission."

"I paid Mrs. Brown five dollars for the use of that nag, which I might add was exorbitant, given the fact I only needed the animal for a brief period of time while I checked on Miss James."

"Who is Miss James?"

Arabella waved toward the cot. "That's Miss James."

Mr. Wilder craned his neck. "May I suggest you wake her so I can get a clear picture of what occurred?"

It would be exactly what the gentleman deserved if she took his advice and woke Miss James, but she would also be affected by the chaos that would take over the cell if the lady awoke. "That would not be wise, Mr. Wilder. From what I've

discovered of Miss James, she's the dramatic sort and prone to hysterics. You'll get no worthy explanations out of her. It's best if we allow her to remain sleeping."

"May I assume she's a friend of yours?"

"I've never seen her before today, and quite frankly I've been rethinking the whole rushing-to-her-rescue business," Arabella muttered.

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

Since it was rapidly becoming clear that Mr. Wilder was not going to negotiate her release until she gave him some type of explanation, Arabella decided she might as well give in and tell him her story. "I was minding my own business at the train station in Chicago when a lady by the name of Mrs. James sat down next to me and burst into tears. She told me that her daughter, Miss Alice James, had run away from home to answer an advertisement for a mail-order bride. Mrs. James was desperate to get some news of her daughter, so I agreed to stop in Gilman, the place the advertisement originated from, and see if I could find the young lady and give her a message from her mother. From what I gathered from Mrs. James, she shares a tumultuous relationship with Alice and was afraid her daughter would refuse to meet with her if she made the trip herself."

"Are you in jail because you tried to intercede between Miss James and this groom?"

"There was no groom to be had. Miss James managed to land herself smack in the middle of what I've come to believe is a prostitution ring."

Mr. Wilder closed his eyes and began muttering under his breath. When the muttering continued for a full thirty seconds, she felt it was time to move the conversation along. "I believe Miss James was lured here for the express purpose of selling her off to the highest bidder."

Mr. Wilder's eyes flashed open. "Why do you believe that?"

Arabella shrugged. “From what little I’ve been able to get out of her, she was met at the station by a gentleman who told her he was escorting her to her future husband. When she arrived at a farmhouse about a mile out of town, instead of encountering an eager groom, she was tied to a chair and left there to await her fate.”

“How do you know she was tied to a chair?”

Arabella felt the unusual urge to scoot to the opposite side of the cell, even though she was separated from Mr. Wilder by bars. “That’s how I found her.”

Mr. Wilder leaned forward, and Arabella couldn’t help but notice that a vein was now throbbing on his forehead.

“You went out to the farmhouse?”

“How else would I have given Miss James that message from her mother? Unfortunately,” she continued as Mr. Wilder began to sputter, “I did not find Miss James in a happy state, and the situation deteriorated rather quickly.”

“Should I ask what happened next?” he asked between gritted teeth.

“Well, not if it’s going to upset you.”

“I do not get *upset*.”

Feeling it would be unproductive to point out the obvious, Arabella curled her legs underneath her. “I’ve come to the conclusion that the gentleman who gave me directions as to where I could find Miss James was most likely in on the dastardly plot. I think he might be the same gentleman who escorted Miss James from the train station, but I can’t swear to that, as I’ve not been able to get much out of Miss James as of yet. I’ve also come to the conclusion that he sent me out to the farmhouse with the same fate in mind for me as was intended for Miss James. I believe it was only due to the fact that God was watching out for me that I was not taken and forced into a life of prostitution.” A shudder caught her by surprise. “I’ve never had a reason to think about such a

degrading life, but now, considering what almost happened to me, I shall definitely have to explore options to help women in such appalling circumstances when I get home.”

“When you get home, you should explore ways to stay out of trouble,” Theodore returned. “But enough about that. Tell me, where did you come into contact with this man who just happened to have the whereabouts of Miss James on hand?”

“He was lurking around the train station.”

“And it never crossed your mind that a man who was ‘lurking’ might not be the best source of information?”

“I didn’t actually think of him as lurking at that particular moment. If you must know, the gentleman was perfectly pleasant and only too willing to assist me. He helped me stow my luggage at the station and told me where I could rent a horse. He then gave me detailed instructions on how to locate the farmhouse and bid me a cheerful farewell.”

“But things went wrong once you reached the farmhouse?”

“I must admit that they did, although at first it didn’t appear to me as if anyone was around. I pounded on the door for a good few minutes, and no one ever opened it.”

“Did it never occur to you to leave when no one answered the door?”

“I was about to leave when I heard the distinct sound of someone crying from inside the house.” She arched a brow at him. “You cannot tell me you would have left under those circumstances.”

“I wouldn’t have, but I’m a man.”

“*Anyway*, I found the door locked, but the crying soon intensified, so I made my way to the back of the house and peered into a window.”

“Why didn’t you peer into a front window?”

“They were boarded up.”

“That didn’t alarm you?”

She’d be lucky to have any teeth left considering she was

quite certain she was grinding them down to mere stubs. “Of course it did, but again, someone was *crying*, and that someone turned out to be Miss James.” She dropped her head and focused on her mud-splattered gown, knowing perfectly well Mr. Wilder would not react favorably to what she was going to say next. “After I broke the glass in the window to gain entrance, I’d just started untying Miss James when that man burst into the room.”

“The man who gave you directions?”

“No, a different man.”

“Miss Beckett, you are not very adept at explaining, are you?”

She felt the strangest urge to throttle Mr. Wilder, which was odd considering she wasn’t normally the violent type. She cleared her throat and opened her mouth to deliver a scathing retort, but before a single word could pass her lips, Mr. Wilder pushed himself to his feet, stalked closer to the bars, and let out a shrill whistle.

“Miss James, wake up,” he called.

Had he not listened to what she’d said regarding Miss James?

She scrambled to her feet and turned just as Miss James shot upright on the cot, her face already screwed up in an expression that seemed, based on the short time Arabella had been acquainted with the young lady, to foreshadow a hysterical episode.

At least Mr. Wilder could not claim she hadn’t warned him.

Miss James let out a ragged sob, but then the lady’s eyes widened as she glanced past Arabella. The sob turned to a sigh, and Miss James smiled and released a giggle. The young lady rose to her feet, shook out her gown, and glided across the room, her goal obviously to get to Mr. Wilder as soon as her dainty feet would allow.

Arabella spun on her one heel, expecting to see Mr. Wilder’s

ever-present scowl, but instead the gentleman was smiling a charming smile and . . . bowing in Miss James's direction.

He'd certainly never bowed to her.

"Miss James, I do beg your pardon for waking you in such an abrupt manner," Mr. Wilder said, "but I fear Miss Beckett's thoughts have been addled by her experience. I'm hopeful you'll be able to give me the answers I so desperately need. I'm Mr. Wilder, at your service."

"My thoughts are not addled," Arabella snapped.

Mr. Wilder ignored her and took the hand Miss James thrust through the bars, bringing it to his lips in a move that was all too practiced. Miss James giggled again and began batting her lashes.

"I will be more than happy to answer any questions you might have, Mr. Wilder," Miss James purred. "I have suffered a truly horrendous day, but I must say that my fears have simply melted away, knowing a big, strong gentleman has come to my rescue."

"How do you know he's here to rescue us?" Arabella couldn't resist asking.

"Why, one only has to look at the gentleman to know he's a knight in shining armor come to life," Miss James simpered.

Miss James was obviously the easily impressed sort.

"You may rest assured that I *am* here to rescue you, Miss James," Mr. Wilder said, "but first, I do need to ask you some questions."

Miss James looked mildly disappointed when Mr. Wilder released her hand and took a step back, but she rallied quickly and sent him an adorable smile as she pressed herself against the iron bars. "What do you need to know?"

"Miss Beckett told me that there was a man who entered the farmhouse while she was attempting to untie you. Have you ever seen that man or seen the man who escorted you there before, and do you happen to know their names?"

Miss James nibbled on her lip. “I’m afraid I’d never seen either man before, Mr. Wilder, and neither one of them bothered to give me their names.” She gave a small sniff. “I first met the larger of the two men at the train station, and he told me he’d been charged with delivering me to my intended. Once we reached the farmhouse, he handed me over to that gentleman you just asked me about, who was short in stature and possessed little hair on his head. That gentleman proceeded to tie me to a chair and told me they would be back shortly. It was my understanding they were off to fetch my groom.” She batted her eyes again. “I still have no idea why they felt the need to tie me up. I can assure you, I was only too willing to get married. I recently turned eighteen and have no desire to obtain the title of spinster.”

That explained the reasoning behind answering the advertisement.

Arabella swung her head and watched as Mr. Wilder’s smile faded.

“Miss James,” he said, “surely you must realize that there was never any groom?”

Miss James giggled. “Of course there was.” She sobered and sent Arabella a scowl. “Miss Beckett must have scared him off when she shot that man.”

“You conveniently forgot to mention anything about shooting a man, Miss Beckett,” Mr. Wilder snapped.

Arabella lifted her chin. “I was about to tell you, but you decided to wake Miss James, and with all the pleasantries being exchanged, I haven’t had a chance to finish my tale.”

“She was quite ferocious when she fired that pistol,” Miss James said. “Why, I’m surprised she didn’t hit me in the process, since the man she shot was rather close to me at the time.”

“He was across the room from you, and his intention was clear. He did not want me to free you,” Arabella muttered.

“He only wanted to keep me safe for my soon-to-be husband,” Miss James argued.

This was what happened when ladies were not given the benefit of a suitable education.

“Where did you get a gun?” Mr. Wilder asked, drawing her attention.

“I always have a pistol at my disposal.”

“Did you kill him?”

“Good heavens, I should think not. I aimed for his shoulder.”

Mr. Wilder cocked a brow.

“I’m an expert markswoman. I don’t fire a pistol unless I’m completely certain of what I’m about to hit.”

Mr. Wilder’s other brow joined the first one.

He didn’t believe her.

He was the most obnoxious, chauvinistic, old-fashioned gentleman she’d ever had the misfortune to meet.

“There was blood everywhere,” Miss James said, “and some of it even got on my favorite dress.” She pointed to a small smudge on her skirt and then gestured to Arabella. “I still do not understand what happened to Miss Beckett. She was not covered in filth when I first met her, but then, after we were thrown into a wagon, she had taken a turn for the worse. I readily admit the scent of her made me quite nauseous.”

“How *did* you come to be in such disrepair?” Mr. Wilder asked.

“Perhaps you should ask Miss James,” Arabella said sweetly. “That is why you woke her.”

“Miss James just stated she doesn’t know.”

Arabella blew out a breath. There was nothing to do but finish her story. She was tired of being in jail, longed to take a bath, and longed to part ways with Mr. Wilder. She plopped back down on the cold floor and looked up. “After I shot the man—he was the balding one, in case you’re wondering—I finished untying Miss James, and then we were just about to

make our escape when the sheriff showed up. Unfortunately, he took one look at the man bleeding on the floor and immediately placed me under arrest.”

“And that’s the entire story?” Mr. Wilder asked.

“You’re forgetting the pig.”

“Miss Beckett started to act all funny when the large man who’d graciously given me a ride out to the farmhouse showed up. For some reason, she didn’t appear to like the fact that the gentleman was known to the sheriff. Before I could stop her, she darted away,” Miss James said. “As I said before, the next time I saw her, she was filthy and missing a large chunk of her hair.”

Mr. Wilder’s gaze sharpened as he peered down at her. “Your odd hairstyle is not intentional?”

“Hardly, nor is this circumstance of only sporting one shoe. The blame for both situations can be laid at Sheriff Dawson’s feet.”

“Can they now?”

Right before her eyes, Mr. Theodore Wilder went from annoying to lethal.

“I’ll be back,” he rasped as he spun on his heel and strode away.

“Where are you going?”

“Sheriff Dawson and I need to have a little chat,” he called over his shoulder before he disappeared down the hallway.

Arabella struggled to her feet and looked through the bars, turning when Miss James let out another giggle.

“Oh, he is divine,” the young lady breathed.

Divine was not the word Arabella would have used to describe Mr. Wilder. Arrogant, annoying, and infuriating fit him better, but . . . something about finding out the sheriff had cut off her hair had changed his attitude toward her, and she knew without a shadow of a doubt they would soon be free.

She limped over to the stone bench, sat down, and couldn't hold back a smile.

Mr. Wilder was certainly not who she'd thought God would send her, but he was what she'd gotten, and she couldn't help but be thankful for the assistance.

She raised her eyes to the ceiling.

Thank you, Lord.