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celebrating  
15  
YEARS

KAREN KIRST

*The Bridal Swap*

SMOKY  
MOUNTAIN  
MATCHES

*A change of plans...*

# **Karen Kirst**

## **The Bridal Swap**

### **Аннотация**

HERE COMES THE...BRIDE? The heiress Josh O'Malley has courted by mail is on her way to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, to become his wife. His dreams are coming true, and together, they'll create the family he's always wanted. But when the stagecoach arrives, it's not his intended who exits, but her sister, Kate! She came to end her sister's engagement, but with her duty completed, Kate Morgan is in no hurry to leave. She can't help but like the beautiful mountain town...and her sister's would-be groom. If only Josh would realize that his dream can still come true—and love can be found where least expected. Smoky Mountain Matches: Dreams of home and family come true in the Smoky Mountains

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*Josh's letters had revealed a charming, thoughtful man who dearly loved his family and home.*

“Thanks to your detailed descriptions, I feel as though I’ve been here before,” Kate said without thinking.

He stopped. His expression hardening as he faced her, his blue eyes cooled to arctic ice. “You read my letters?”

“I ... we ...” she sputtered. “Well, y-yes, my sister read them aloud.” Mortified at her slip, Kate lowered her gaze to the ground.

“Those were my private thoughts, intended for Francesca and no one else.”

“I am truly sorry,” she murmured, “for everything. Perhaps it would be best if I left.”

“Forget it.”

Her gaze flew up and locked with his. “But I’ve hurt you. I deeply regret—”

“You’ve done nothing to injure me. After all, I met you all of twenty minutes ago. It’s becoming quite clear your sister did not hold me in the same regard as I did her.”

*The Bridal Swap*

Karen Kirst



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I have swept away your offenses like a cloud,  
your sins like the morning mist. Return to me,  
for I have redeemed you.

—*Isaiah* 44:22

For Jacob.

Your dad and I are so proud of the thoughtful,  
caring young man you've become.

Just remember to keep God first in your life.

I love you!

# *Chapter One*

*Gatlinburg, Tennessee September 1880*

Josh O'Malley's life was about to change. Standing on the boardwalk in front of Clawson's Mercantile, a bouquet of wildflowers in his hand, he watched intently as the carriage rolled to a stop. The team of midnight-black horses snuffed and tossed their heads, their massive chests quivering with exertion. The driver, dripping sweat and wearing an inch-thick coating of dust, remained seated while a second, well-dressed man climbed down with haste and swept open the door as if royalty waited inside.

Time stood still. The sounds of the town—snatches of conversations, the bell above the mercantile's entrance, wagons lumbering past—all faded as he waited for a glimpse of his fiancée, Francesca Morgan. Six long months had passed since he'd last seen her.

Anticipation swelled within him like the Little Pigeon River after a heavy downpour. His fingers tightened on the stems. Would she like it here? Not for the first time, doubts flickered in his mind. How would this oil heiress from New York City adjust to his small town, tucked deep in the Smoky Mountains?

He shoved such thoughts aside. Together they would deal with any hurdles.

Then she was there, in the doorway, placing her gloved hand in the man's and floating down the steps in a cloud of seafoam

green. All he could see was the top of her fancy hat. This was the first day of their lives together.

“Hello, Francesca.”

Her head whipped up, and he found himself staring into a stranger’s face.

“Pardon me, Miss.” Josh retreated a step. He glanced around her to find the carriage interior empty. Confused, he looked at her once more. “Excuse me, I was under the impression this was the Morgan carriage.”

The young lady’s eyes flared wide as if she recognized him. But that was impossible.

With a slight incline of her head, she dismissed the man at her side. “Thank you, Mr. Crandall.” Her eyes held a mix of compassion and apprehension.

“Mr. Joshua O’Malley?”

His gut clenched. She couldn’t know his name unless ... “Yes, that’s me.”

“My name is Katerina Morgan. I’m Francesca’s younger sister.”

*Sister?* Surely not. This lady and his fiancée looked nothing alike.

Francesca was tall, lithe and graceful, her peaches-and-cream complexion the perfect foil for her corn-silk hair and baby-blue eyes. The young lady standing before him was altogether different. Petite and fine-boned, yet in possession of captivating curves, the top of her head barely grazed his chin.

Katerina was a delicate lady ... like a doll come to life. Her face was a perfect oval, with rounded cheekbones and dainty chin. Her almond-shaped eyes shone the same hue as her pale green dress, and her pouty, pink lips could've been sculpted by an artist. Her hair was the color of decadent chocolate and arranged in elaborate twists and curls.

“Where is Francesca? Has something happened?”

“Please—is there somewhere we can speak in private?”

Curious townsfolk had stopped to watch their exchange. Gatlinburg was a small town, and most knew his fiancée was arriving today.

“Over here.”

They would be out of sight behind the mercantile. Taking gentle hold of her arm, he helped her across the grass and caught a whiff of her perfume, a subtle scent with notes of citrus. Like her elegant outfit, it was most likely the latest fashion from Paris. And worth more money than he'd see in a lifetime.

“What lush beauty.” Her steps faltered. “Why, I doubt I've ever seen its equal. You are fortunate, Mr. O'Malley, to wake up to this day after day.”

He followed her uplifted gaze to the rounded mountain peaks on all sides, the clear blue sky a perfect backdrop against the autumn foliage visible even at the higher elevations. He understood her reaction. Most newcomers agreed this part of East Tennessee was a tiny slice of paradise.

“I can't imagine living anywhere else,” he murmured.

The hushed hum of rushing water met his ears as they neared the bank's edge. Releasing her arm, he warned, "Mind your step. There's a steep drop-off." About ten feet below, the water's surface reflected the trees' changing colors—dusky green with patches of red and orange.

"It's lovely," she breathed.

Enough small talk. "Why isn't Francesca here?" *Instead of you?*

She faced him, shoulders squared and hands clasped at her slim waist. "I'm afraid I have unsettling news." She paused, clearly uneasy. "Francesca has married another man."

*Married?* "That's impossible." Josh struggled to make sense of her words. "She promised to marry me." The date was set. Saturday next, they were to stand before Pastor Monroe and exchange vows. Friends and family had already been invited.

Her lips compressed in lines of regret. "I am truly sorry."

"I don't understand."

What about all those letters? Had she only pretended to be excited about starting a new life with him?

"Who is he?" he ground out.

"Someone she knew before she met you," she said gently. "They had a falling-out a few days before she left for her visit with the Meades."

He'd met the lovely heiress at the Meades' home in Sevierville, had gone to deliver a pair of rocking chairs and nearly run her over in the doorway of the grand mansion. Nothing in her

behavior had hinted of another attachment. Surely he would've seen the signs!

"I realize this is difficult news—"

"How long ago did she go back to him?" he demanded. "And why did she send you to do her dirty work?"

She blanched. "They were married two weeks ago. And she did not send me. Despite my insistence that you should be told in person, she refused to come."

Whirling away from her, Josh battled conflicting emotions. Anger. Outrage. Disbelief. If the marriage had taken place two weeks ago, then they'd reconciled some time before.

He'd been duped.

His head pounding by this time, he strode to the edge of the embankment and hurled the bouquet, the kaleidoscope of colors cascading to the water's surface and swirling downstream. He needed to be alone, needed to think through this upheaval in his plans.

"I appreciate your coming here, Miss Morgan. Now I must go." He gave her a half bow. "Good day."

Kate's gaze lingered on the tender petals being crushed by the current before skittering to his retreating back. Collecting her skirts, she hurried after him. "Mr. O'Malley?"

When he stopped and glanced back, the tortured look in his eyes nearly took her breath away. "Yes?"

Kate stared at the man Francesca was to have married, unable to utter a word.

She'd looked at his picture when no one else was around, memorizing each feature. Intelligent brows, patrician nose, square jaw. His was a photogenic face.

On paper, he was merely a handsome stranger. The flesh-and-bone man was another matter entirely. In a word, he was intoxicating.

His dusky-gray, pin-striped suit, with its simple lines and understated elegance, molded to his broad shoulders and lean torso. His tan skin glowed with health and vibrancy, and his honey-brown hair was short, the ends bleached blond by the sun.

The neatly trimmed mustache and goatee covering his chin were new. Not usually taken by facial hair, Kate found his fascinating. He looked ... mysterious. A bit untamed.

“Did you need something?” he prompted.

He dwarfed her by at least a foot. That wasn't unusual. Most men did. “Can you direct me to Charlotte Matthews's house?”

A muscle in his jaw jumped. “You know Mrs. Matthews and her son?”

“She was my governess for many years. I haven't met Tyler, but she mentions him quite often in her letters.”

“I see.” His eyes were an intriguing color, the shimmering, metallic blue of a blue morpho butterfly's wings, pale around the pupil with a deeper ring of blue around the edges. So beautiful it made her wish for color photographs.

“Their farm is a mile or so outside of town. What time is your driver planning to leave?”

“As soon as I get settled at Charlotte’s.”

“You’re staying here tonight?”

“Actually, I’m planning to be here for at least a month, perhaps longer.”

His brows slashed down. “That long? May I ask why?”

“I’m here to take photographs of the mountains. I’m considering publishing a book about this area.”

“A book,” he repeated, clearly displeased. “You’re a photographer?”

Was he one of those men who disapproved of female professionals? “I am.”

His brilliant blue gaze assessed her. No doubt he was comparing her to her sister. She inwardly winced. She’d learned long ago that she didn’t measure up, would forever be in Fran’s shadow.

Men adored Fran. Women wanted to *be* her. Even their parents favored her—their mother especially.

Patrick and Georgia Morgan had wanted only one child. Francesca—the epitome of grace and loveliness—fulfilled their every dream of what a proper daughter should be. So when dark-haired, demanding Katerina arrived unexpectedly, Georgia had been less than thrilled.

A lengthy bout of colic made matters worse. For months, Georgia refused to visit the nursery, leaving Kate in the care of nannies. Perhaps that rough beginning had cast a pall over their relationship. Whatever the case, the distance between them

seemed to grow wider with time.

Kate had given up trying to earn her mother's love.

"If you'd rather not help me," she said after a lengthy silence, "I'm sure I can find someone else."

He blew out a breath. "It's too far to walk. Mind if we take your rig?"

"Not at all." They fell into step, as he matched his stride to hers. "I appreciate this."

He merely nodded, his mouth set in grim lines. Once he'd given directions to her driver and tethered his horse to the rear of the carriage, he settled his tall frame in the seat across from her. Holding his hat in his hands, he took in the sumptuous mahogany fabric that covered every square inch of the carriage interior. What was he thinking?

His letters, which Fran had read aloud in the drawing room during afternoon tea, had been filled with descriptions of his family's home and the town of Gatlinburg. Fran had laughed, calling him provincial. Kate disagreed. Josh's letters had revealed a charming, thoughtful man who dearly loved his family and hometown.

Glancing out the window, she caught sight of Clawson's Mercantile, the post office and a quaint white church framed by the mountains.

"Everything looks just as I'd imagined it," she said without thinking. "Your description of Main Street makes me feel as though I've been here before."

His voice dripped icicles. “You read my letters?”

“I ... We ...” she sputtered. “Well, y-yes. Fran read them aloud.” Mortified at her slip, Kate pretended an exaggerated interest in the tips of her tan leather ankle boots.

“Those were my private thoughts, intended for no one but Francesca.”

Silence settled heavy and oppressive between them.

“I am truly sorry,” she murmured. “I’ve hurt you—”

“No. Your sister did that all on her own.” He turned his head to glare out the window. “It’s becoming quite clear she did not hold me in the same regard as I did her.”

What could she say? That Fran was interested only in social standing and wealth? Why she’d ever accepted Josh O’Malley’s proposal was beyond Kate. Perhaps to make Percy jealous, so he’d come crawling back to her? If that was the case, the ploy had worked.

The man across from her looked lost. Adrift in a vast ocean with no rescue in sight. Fran had done this to him, but Kate had delivered the news. Did he despise her for listening to his letters? Did he consider her the enemy—guilty by association?

The carriage soon slowed and turned onto a rutted lane. The vegetation was thick on either side, and tree branches scraped along the sides of their rig, slapping against the half-open glass. Pine needles littered the bench seats and carpeted floor. Mr. Crandall, her fastidious footman, would be none too pleased.

Anticipation curled through her at the prospect of seeing

her former governess again. For a time, kindhearted Charlotte Matthews had been the one bright spot in her otherwise lonely existence. They'd reconnected through correspondence, and the older lady had made it plain that Kate was welcome to visit anytime.

They rolled to a stop before a squat, haphazard dwelling nearly engulfed with ivy. Only the window and the door had not succumbed to the ivy's onslaught. She frowned. Would there be room for her here?

The door swung open, and Mr. Crandall stood ready to assist her. Joshua O'Malley descended the steps after her, his expression an inscrutable mask.

Hands clasped at her waist, she turned to thank him, but he was already headed for his horse. It appeared he'd had all of her company he could stand. With a mental shrug, she approached the cabin and knocked twice.

A chair scraped against the floor and the vibrations of heavy footsteps could be felt on the porch. That didn't sound like a lady. Instead, a disheveled, dark-haired man about her age appeared in the doorway. "What do ya want?"

"Hello, I'm looking for Charlotte Matthews—"

She wasn't prepared for the hand that shot out and gripped her wrist in a painful hold. The stranger yanked her forward, and her free hand flew up to stop her fall, only to encounter an unyielding wall of muscle. Gasping in fright, she stared into his shocked brown eyes.

“Lily?” he ground out.

“N-no, it’s Kate.”

He tugged her against his long length. “I can’t believe you’ve come back to me.” His stale breath, reeking of whiskey and tobacco, washed over her.

She recoiled. “You’re mistaken! I don’t know you.”

His dark brows lowered, and anger flashed in his eyes. “Don’t play me for a fool, Lily.”

His fingers dug into her flesh, and she flinched. “Please,” she whimpered, “let me go.”

Somewhere behind her, she heard the click of a gun hammer. “I’d advise you to get your hands off the lady.”

She couldn’t see Mr. O’Malley, but his voice rang with deadly promise.

Uncertainty flickered in the glazed eyes. “My wife is my business.”

“The booze has scrambled your senses, Matthews.” He came closer. “Kate Morgan just arrived today. Look at her fancy clothes. She’s from New York City. A Yankee.”

*This* man was Tyler Matthews? Charlotte’s son was a dangerous drunk?

“I don’t understand.” His grip loosened, but he didn’t release her. His bloodshot gaze roamed her features. “You aren’t Lily?”

Her mouth suddenly dry, she croaked out a response.

“No.”

His hands dropped abruptly to his sides. Immediately, Mr.

O'Malley took her elbow and eased her to his side so as not to draw the other man's attention. Her knees felt like gelatin. Unsteady, she held on to his arm as if it were a lifeline.

He appeared calm, but Kate sensed the tension humming through his body. His jaw was set in rigid lines. "Why don't you go back inside and sleep it off?"

Head bent, Matthews rubbed the back of his neck. "I, uh, haven't been sleepin' too good lately."

"Then maybe you should lay off the drink."

Mr. O'Malley obviously knew this man and his history. What had happened to his wife? And why had he mistaken Kate for her?

"Yeah." Turning, he went inside without another word.

Her rescuer angled his face down toward hers. "Are you all right?"

His low, easy drawl flowed over her like decadent, sugary caramel.

Kate gulped. She avoided all sweets, in particular caramel. One taste was never enough.

Suddenly conscious of her viselike grip on his arm, she let go and took a quick step back.

"I'm fine," she said, tugging her snug-fitting jacket down. Her arms smarted from where Matthews had held her prisoner, but she wouldn't mention that to him. "Thank you for intervening."

Mr. Crandall rushed forward. "I second that sentiment, Mr. O'Malley. Are you quite certain you're unharmed, Miss

Morgan?”

“Yes.”

The brim of his black hat shading his eyes, Mr. O’Malley slid his weapon back in its holster and nodded to the carriage. “Let’s go before he has a change of heart.”

“Go where?” It suddenly dawned on Kate that she had no place to stay.

“My house.”

## *Chapter Two*

This was not the day he'd had planned.

He should've been acquainting his intended with her new home. Instead, he was saddled with her sister. Troubled and pale after her ordeal, Kate stared out the carriage window, seemingly a million miles away.

"Where do you suppose Charlotte is?" Her gaze settled on him, seeking answers.

He hitched a shoulder. "I don't know."

"I thought everyone knew everyone else's business in small towns."

"That's true to a point. However, I personally don't keep track of everyone's comings and goings." He shifted on the swaying seat. When a worried crease appeared between her brows, he added, "We'll ask my mother. She's friendly with Mrs. Matthews, so there's a good chance she'll have an idea where she's gone, if anywhere. For all we know, she could've been visiting a friend or picking up necessities."

Her expression brightened, then dimmed an instant later. "Even if she is nearby, I can't possibly stay there. Not with her son." The fingers plucking at the lace edging her sleeves stilled. "Where is Lily Matthews?"

"Dead."

Her lips parted. "I don't understand. Then why—"

“You resemble her.” He shoved a hand through his hair. “Matthews used to be a productive member of this town, but he hasn’t been the same since the accident.” He’d heard of the man’s tendency to drink, but he hadn’t realized the severity of the problem. If he had, he wouldn’t have taken Kate out there.

“Does Gatlinburg have a hotel? Or a boardinghouse?”

“No hotel. No boardinghouse. The Copelands occasionally have rooms to let, but their son and his family are visiting from out of town.”

Again, she got that worried look.

“My parents may know of somewhere you can stay,” he tacked on. “Or you could go back to New York.”

She stiffened. “That’s not an option.”

“Why not?”

“I came here to do a job.” At his puzzled expression, she sighed. “The book, remember?”

“Ah, yes. I remember. You’re a photographer.” While he had no issue with working women, he couldn’t picture this elegant, delicate young lady as anything other than a privileged socialite. “Your coming here proved to be very convenient for Francesca, didn’t it? Why not let you deal with the unnecessary groom?”

“Mr. O’Malley, I’m sorry—”

He held up a staying hand as the driver halted the team outside of the livery. “It’s not your place to apologize. Forget I said anything.”

Kate didn’t speak as they exited the carriage. Replacing his

hat on his head, he gave instructions to the driver and footman.

“We’ll leave your trunks here until we figure out where you’ll be staying.”

She glanced up and down the busy street. “I thought we were going to your house.”

“We are. It’s not far. I thought you might like to stretch your legs after being cooped up much of the day.”

Surprised that he cared one whit for her comfort, she fell into step beside him.

Passing the last business on the right, Leighton Barbershop, he led her across a quaint, wooden bridge overlooking the river.

The shaded lane enveloped them in a vibrant cocoon, leaves hanging mere inches from their heads. To the right and left stood an endless parade of stately trees reaching for the Heavens, the thick, dark trunks anchored in a sea of gold created by the shorter tulip trees’ golden leaves.

What beauty! *How many are your works, O Lord! In wisdom You made them all; the earth is full of Your creatures.*

She wished suddenly for a cushioned chair, a steaming cup of Earl Grey and a copy of *Scientific American*. She’d stay here in this lane for hours if he’d allow it.

Around the bend, the trees opened up to an expansive clearing, the green grass a lush carpet leading to a two-story cabin with a long, narrow front porch and beyond, a weathered barn and several outbuildings. It was just as he’d described, but of course the reality far surpassed her imaginings.

Pigs squealed in the distance. The sizable garden was bursting with jewel-toned vegetables—plump orange pumpkins, glossy eggplant, striped squash of different sizes and shapes, and green peppers.

Temporarily forgetting her dilemma, Kate grinned, ecstatic to see a real farm up close for the first time.

Pointing to impressive rows of trees, she asked, “Are those apple trees?”

He nodded. “McIntosh apples. They’ll be ripe in about a week.”

“That’s a lot of apples.”

“We won’t eat them all fresh. They’ll be used to make cider, vinegar, applesauce and apple butter, not to mention pies and other desserts.”

“You have a beautiful home,” she breathed, a note of wistfulness in her voice.

He glanced over at her. “The good Lord has blessed us.”

As they drew nearer to the house, Kate’s nerves assailed her. How would his parents react to her presence once they learned her awful news? Mouth dry and palms damp inside her buff-colored lace gloves, she slowed her steps.

The front door opened. A man and woman emerged, their faces alight with anticipation. “It’s about time, Joshua!” the woman exclaimed. “We were beginning to think something had happened.” Advancing down the steps, she crossed to meet them, her husband not far behind.

“Sorry to worry you, Ma,” Josh said. “This is—”

“Francesca!” To Kate’s surprise, Mrs. O’Malley clasped her hands in hers. “I’m so pleased to meet you!”

Oh, no. This was not good.

“I—”

“This isn’t Francesca.” Josh ran a finger beneath his shirt collar as if to loosen it. “May I present Kate Morgan? My ex-fiancée’s little sister.”

“Ex-fiancée?” his mother repeated, brow wrinkling in disbelief. “What’s happened, Joshua? Isn’t Francesca coming?”

More than once during her long journey to Tennessee, she’d faced Josh in her imagination. Rehearsing what she’d say. Envisioning what he might say. She hadn’t considered his family’s reaction. Standing here with Mr. and Mrs. O’Malley regarding her as if she were a creature from another planet, she regretted the omission. Not a word came to mind.

Josh’s level gaze was on her as he spoke. “Francesca changed her mind about the marriage. Kate thought it best to bring the news in person.”

“I’m sorry, son,” said Mr. O’Malley, as he placed a comforting hand on Josh’s shoulder.

His mother approached, questions lingering in her eyes. Her tremulous smile lessened Kate’s apprehension a notch. “Kate, I’m Mary. And that’s my Samuel. It’s a brave thing you did, coming here in your sister’s place. Thank you.”

Kate released the breath she’d been holding. She wasn’t going

to be berated, after all. “I regret to have to deliver such dreadful news.”

Unlike Georgia Morgan’s cool, aloof beauty, Mary O’Malley’s appearance was one of sweet femininity, her wavy brown hair styled in a casual upsweep and a simple gold chain with a cross to complement her blue calico dress. And tall, lean Samuel O’Malley, with brown hair much like Josh’s, had a pleasant face.

“We appreciate your consideration of Josh’s feelings,” Samuel added.

The tips of Josh’s ears reddened. “I’m sure Kate would appreciate something to drink after her long trip.”

“Where are my manners?” Mary gasped. “Come on in! I’ve a fresh batch of crybabies already cooling on the table.”

Crybabies? What on earth?

Josh’s parents went inside first, and he gestured for her to go ahead of him. She felt the weight of his gaze on her back as they passed through the doorway.

Her first impression of the O’Malley home was that it could’ve fit inside the dining hall of her parents’ estate. Instead of silk damask wall panels, these walls were bare wooden planks. There were no ornate candelabras or wall sconces, only kerosene lamps placed in key areas about the room. Compared to her estate’s marble hallways, plush Oriental rugs and the finest furnishings money can buy, this home was indeed humble.

However, there was no denying it was an inviting space, cozy and cheerful and decorated with care. Blue-and-white

gingham curtains hung at every window, and landscape scenes of mountains and meadows hung on the walls. A serpentine sofa with blue brocade cushions and walnut trim, along with two matching chairs, were situated around a charming stone fireplace.

“Not exactly what you’re used to, is it?” Josh stopped at her side.

“It’s lovely.”

He studied her, weighing her words and expression as if trying to gauge her sincerity.

“Please, make yourself comfortable.” Mary gestured to the sofa. “I’ll get the refreshments. Samuel, can you give me a hand?”

The couple passed through the dining area and rounded the corner into what she assumed was the kitchen. She couldn’t make out the words of their quiet conversation, but no doubt they were discussing her sister’s cowardice and lack of decency.

“Would you like to have a seat?”

Kate swallowed hard. Josh’s steady assessment set her nerves on edge.

“Yes, thank you.”

Moving to the nearest wingback chair, she sank gracefully onto the cushion and arranged her skirts with care. He didn’t join her. Instead he began to pace the length of the couch, hands in his pockets. Every now and then a muscle in his cheek twitched.

She could just imagine his thoughts. Wringing Fran’s neck, perhaps?

His parents returned at last with a tray of glasses filled with ginger water and a plate piled high with cookies, which they placed on the low coffee table in front of her. The sweet aroma of molasses teased her nose. Were these the crybabies, perhaps?

Mary handed her a glass. "Here you are."

"Thank you." The tart liquid washed the dust from her throat.

When they were settled in the sofa across from her, Mary said, "You've traveled a great distance, haven't you, Kate? What are your plans now that you're here?"

"I'm actually here to take photographs. And to visit my former governess, Charlotte Matthews." Her gaze shot to Josh, who was still pacing. "Everything was arranged and she knew to expect me. She wasn't at home, however."

Absently, she rubbed the tender spot on her wrist where Tyler had held her.

"We thought you might know her whereabouts." Josh had stopped pacing. Resting his weight against the sofa, his hands gripped the wooden trim. His gaze caught her movement and narrowed. Kate covered the spot with her hand.

"You know Charlotte? She's a dear lady." Mary frowned. "She's been facing some hard times lately. Tyler isn't coping well with the death of his wife. And now his sister, Carrie, is expecting and has been terribly ill. Charlotte left last week to be with her until the baby comes. I'm afraid she won't be back for quite some time."

Kate lowered her gaze to her lap. This wasn't welcome news.

Charlotte must've been too preoccupied to send her a letter explaining the situation.

"Miss Morgan needs a place to stay," Josh spoke into the silence. "Do you know of anywhere?"

"You can stay here, of course." Mary beamed. "With four males stomping around this house, I get lonesome for female company."

"Mary, I'm not sure ..." Samuel shot a meaningful glance at Josh.

Her smile faltered. "Oh, yes, I didn't think—"

"She can sleep in my cabin," Josh announced bitterly. "I won't be needing it after all."

"Are you sure?" Mary peered up at him, her eyes full of concern.

"Positive. It won't take all that long to move my things back into my old bedroom."

"Wait." Kate hastily replaced her drink and came around the sofa to face him. "The last thing I want to do is push you out of your home."

"A home I built for my future wife." The pain of betrayal flashed hot in his eyes. "But she's not here, is she?" Turning his back, he strode for the door. "You're welcome to it."

His boot had connected with the bottom step when he heard the door open and close and Kate call his name. What now? Couldn't she see he wasn't in the mood for company?

With great reluctance he pivoted back, squinting in the

afternoon sunshine. She edged forward, her face shadowed by the hat's brim. Loosening the ribbons of her reticule, she withdrew a long parchment envelope and held it out to him.

"I have a letter for you. From Francesca."

He stared at the letter, not sure he wanted to read it. "What does it say?"

Her lips parted, and dark lashes swept down to hide her eyes. Pink washed her cheeks. "I don't know. She didn't share the contents with me and, to be honest, I'm glad she didn't."

Tucking the letter in the inside pocket of his suit jacket, Josh nodded in silent farewell and left her standing on the porch. If he didn't get alone soon, he was going to come undone. What he wanted to do was hunt down the man who'd stolen his future and plant a facer on him. Then he'd confront Francesca and force her to confess her perfidy to his face.

But that wasn't an option. Not today, anyway.

With effort, he ruthlessly tamped down the emotions clawing at his insides.

Ignoring the letter burning the lining of his suit, he gathered his clothes and books from his home, not stopping to linger and mourn his loss. To his relief, his mom was showing Kate the kitchen when he went inside the main house, so he was able to put his things away, change clothes and duck back outside without being seen.

During the entire trip to town and back to retrieve her luggage, the letter and what it might say dominated his thoughts. Why

hadn't Francesca had the decency to face him herself? Why put it off on her little sister?

Finally, when the wondering became too great, he pulled the envelope from his pocket and sank onto the top step of his porch.

Heart thumping against his rib cage so hard it hurt, he unfolded the paper and, holding it to his nose, inhaled her flowery scent. He felt achy all over.

Dearest Josh,

I am not sure what to write, for I know nothing I say will change your low opinion of me. Katerina was adamant that I give you some explanation, and I admit she was right. You must know that I care for you, but you and I together for a lifetime never would have worked. Percy can provide the type of life I need to be happy.

Sincerely,

Francesca Morgan

Stunned, Josh flipped the paper over and found the other side blank.

There was no apology. She'd basically admitted to wedding this man for material gain.

Francesca's nonchalant attitude, her utter lack of remorse, stung. Anger boiled up once again, threatening to overwhelm him.

Once again, he was facing a lonely future.

In the shade of the back porch, Kate leaned against the wooden railing and stared out at the idyllic scene. Gently rolling

fields of green, knee-high stalks waving in the breeze, gave way to rounded mountain peaks rising in all directions in a patchwork display of burnished reds, golds and greens. God's magnificent handiwork for all to see and savor.

She was eager to explore, to seek out potential images for her book.

But first she had to find Josh, as Mary requested. Supper awaited.

Above the lowing of cattle, she heard the insistent pounding of an ax.

Following the sound, she strolled across the yard toward the barn, casting a glance inside the shady interior as she passed by the open doors. Dust motes hung suspended in the dim light, the smell of hay and animals reminding her of the stables back home.

Rounding the corner, she came to an abrupt stop.

A flash of sunlight on glistening skin, sculpted muscles straining, stretching, Josh handled the ax with ease, slicing through the wood like butter. He'd exchanged his neat suit for a pair of dark denim trousers and sturdy brown work boots. His sleeveless undershirt gave her a clear view of molded shoulders, thick biceps and corded forearms.

She gulped. Oh, dear.

Glancing away, she saw the high stacks of kindling by the barn wall. Surely they didn't need more. Then it struck her. He wasn't doing this out of necessity. He was venting.

Compassion for his plight brought moisture to her eyes. She

blinked hard. She couldn't let him see her tears. He'd assume she was feeling pity for him, and she had a feeling he wouldn't like that.

When she moved into his line of vision, he wedged the ax into the stump, turned his back and, retrieving his white shirt, shrugged into it. Still working the buttons, he faced her, brows raised in question.

"Sorry to interrupt," she ventured. "Your mother sent me to tell you the meal is ready."

"Just a minute."

She stood by quietly, fingers toying with the lace peeking out of her sleeves as he quickly stacked the wood before joining her. He was a ruffled mess, his short hair mussed and shirt untucked, the sweat-dampened material sticking to his frame. It only added to his appeal.

"Have my parents kept you entertained this afternoon?"

"Your parents have been welcoming and friendly."

Strangers who were more attentive than her own parents.

Walking beside him, she sensed the coiled tension in him. Had he read the letter? She wondered what it had said, feared Fran's words had inflicted further pain. Her sister wasn't known for her tact.

He stopped at the pump to clean his hands and douse his face. When he'd wiped off the excess moisture and tucked the cloth into his back pocket, he startled her by taking hold of her hand.

"What are you—"

Carefully, he slid her sleeve back, revealing the purple marks marring her pale skin. His eyes darkened. “Matthews did this?”

The scent of pine clung to him. Kate couldn’t think with him standing so near, his strong, warm hands cradling hers with such tenderness. Back home in Francesca’s room, gazing at his portrait and committing his face to memory, she couldn’t have guessed the impact of his physical presence.

She dragged in a breath. “I’m fine, really.”

“Steer clear of him, Kate. He’s unpredictable.”

It was his first use of her name. She had to admit it sounded good on his lips.

“Kate?” he prompted impatiently.

“You don’t have to worry. I won’t go near the man.”

“Hey, Josh!”

Two men were headed in their direction. Josh’s brothers?

Releasing her, he crossed his arms and waited. Their attention didn’t waver from her as they approached. Feeling like a specimen underneath a microscope, she fought the urge to squirm.

“Kate Morgan, these are my brothers, Nathan and Caleb.”

Nathan shot a startled glance at Josh, but he quickly masked his confusion. His eyes were kind as he welcomed her. “It’s nice to meet you.” Two years younger than Josh, he was twenty-two.

Twenty-year-old Caleb scowled and said nothing. Josh had mentioned in his letters that his youngest brother didn’t like to be around people, something to do with a scar he’d gotten from

a recent accident. She didn't see evidence of one, but she noticed he kept his face turned to one side.

"Where's Francesca?" Nathan asked.

Josh stiffened, his voice flat. "She isn't coming, after all."

"Did something happen?" Nathan asked quietly.

"Yes." Josh's voice held an edge. "She decided to marry someone else." At Caleb's intake of breath, Josh held up a staying hand. "Kate is her sister. She's staying with us for the time being."

He didn't seem pleased with the turn of events. And why should he be? Her sister should've been standing here meeting his family, not her.

Mary pushed open the door. "Supper's ready."

She didn't miss the flash of relief on Josh's face. No doubt he was growing weary of explaining her presence to everyone.

\* \* \*

Sitting at the far end of the table, Josh listened to the ebb and flow of conversation without contributing to it. This was the last place he wanted to be, surrounded by people pretending nothing was wrong. Pretending he hadn't just been cast off.

Supper time in the O'Malley household was typically loud and lively, and tonight was no exception. His father and brothers made sure of that. One glance at Kate Morgan's mystified expression suggested family dinners at the Morgan estate were a much more sedate affair.

Her regal bearing and expensive clothing set her apart from everyone else at the table. She'd removed her hat, gloves and

jacket. Beneath her brocade vest of matching material, she wore a filmy cream-colored blouse with lace at her neck. The color of her eyes matched the peridot earrings dangling from her ears, the vivid green gems flashing with every turn of her head.

Watching her, Josh realized he'd been a fool to think Francesca could ever be satisfied with his way of life. The Morgans lived a life of luxury. Nothing was out of their reach.

He lived simply. He worked hard to carve out a life for himself, yet he had no complaints. He loved these mountains, this land. And he wanted someone to share his life with.

*God, I don't understand Your ways. Nothing is turning out the way I thought, and it's hard. So hard.*

"Time for dessert." His mother placed a warm pecan pie in the middle of the table.

Standing, Josh brought his empty plate to the counter. "I'll pass tonight."

"But it's your favorite," Mary protested, carrying dishes into the kitchen.

He squeezed her shoulder. "Save me a piece for tomorrow?"

Kate approached, her plate still half full. "You are a marvelous cook, Mary. However, I'm afraid I couldn't finish it all." She smothered a yawn.

"Oh, my. You've had a long day, haven't you, dear?" Mary said. "Joshua, will you walk Kate out to the cabin?"

His and Kate's gazes clashed. Then her lashes swept downward, her expression neutral.

What could he say? *No, I don't want to spend even a second alone with her? This woman reminds me of Francesca's treachery and my glaring failure.*

He swept out his arm. "After you."

## *Chapter Three*

With her hat in one hand and her skirts in the other, Kate swept past him onto the narrow porch, her shoulder brushing against his chest and a stray chocolate curl caressing her cheek. The creamy skin of her nape glowed alabaster in the moonlight. Her fresh, citrusy scent, carried on the gentle breeze, filled his nostrils and stirred his blood.

Closing the door behind him, Josh inhaled the cool, pine-scented air in an effort to displace her scent. Kate was a lovely woman, and he was a man craving comfort. Disgusted with himself for even noticing, he gave her a wide berth and started across the lawn.

“Mr. O’Malley?”

She hadn’t moved an inch. From the soft golden glow spilling through the windows, he saw her hesitation and retraced his steps.

“It’s Josh. What’s wrong? Did you forget something inside?”

“No. I, um—It’s pitch-black out there.” Her voice faltered. “Back home, gas streetlamps line the streets and give off quite a bit of light.”

He held the kerosene lamp aloft. “This will light our way.”

An owl hooted. Kate’s gaze darted to the dense woods. “What about wild beasts? I’ve read a few books about this area. There were accounts of black bears attacking people.”

He suppressed a smile. “While it’s true there are bears in these

parts, they normally stay in higher elevations. Bear attacks are rare and most likely the result of someone coming too close to a momma bear and her cubs.”

He approached and held out his arm, but she didn't immediately take it.

“So you've never seen a bear anywhere near here?”

“I didn't say that. But mostly they keep to themselves.”

Her slender hand curled around his biceps, the warmth of her light touch seeping through his shirt. “I'm safe out here then?”

He guided her across the yard. “I can pretty much guarantee a bear isn't going to break into the cabin while you sleep. You should watch out for snakes, though, especially rattlers and copperheads.”

Her nails dug into his skin. “Snakes?”

“And spiders,” he added, disregarding the twinge of his conscience. He was only telling her the truth. “Black widows and brown recluses are the ones to watch out for. Nasty bites. You could lose a limb.”

“Oh, dear.” She shuddered. “My books didn't mention any of that.”

“Just be careful around tall grass. And don't reach into dark corners and crevices where crawling insects like to hide.” He pulled away from her. “Here we are.”

Opening the door for her, his gaze fell on the burst of color in the corner of the room. More wildflowers. He'd borrowed his mother's only crystal vase and placed the arrangement on the

dining table as a small token for his wife-to-be.

He frowned. This night was supposed to have played out much differently. He'd imagined Francesca's reaction to the home he'd built for her, had hoped she'd be pleased.

Instead, a stranger stood beside him.

Moving forward, her skirts whispering in the silence, Kate's gaze assessed the airy, open space that made up the seating area and kitchen.

"You built this yourself?"

He nodded. "With help from my father and brothers."

"You did a great job." The admiration shining in her eyes was a soothing balm to his battered soul.

"Thanks."

In the kitchen, she trailed her fingers along the gleaming walnut tabletop. Her gaze shot to his, a small wrinkle between her brows.

"This is similar to the one at your parents', only smaller."

It was one of his most recent pieces, carved with his own hands. For some reason he couldn't identify, he was reluctant to tell her about his furniture business. Not even Francesca knew.

Slipping his hands into his pockets, he asked casually, "Do you like it?"

She stepped back to study it. "It's sturdy, solid. Simple lines. But here—" she traced a fingertip along the carved edge—"this is truly magnificent. The detail of the leaves and flowers is amazing. Was it done by a local craftsman?"

He hesitated. "Yes."

"Does he live nearby?"

*Closer than you think.* "Yes. Very near."

"You should tell him his furniture would sell extremely well back East." Her praise brought a rush of pleasure, especially considering her family's estate was most likely furnished with the finest money could buy.

"I'll do that."

She smothered another yawn. Time to go. He wasn't sure why he'd lingered anyway.

"Good night, Kate." He paused. "Lock the door. You'll feel safer."

Kate stared at the closed door a full minute before crossing the room to slide the wooden bar in place. His woody scent lingered in the silent room. He'd been stiff, watchful, his blue eyes revealing his misery. *Oh, Fran. How could you?*

Her heart ached for the pain he was enduring.

Turning, she relaxed against the rough wood and stared at the home intended for her sister. Prestige and money were everything to Fran. If she were here, she would scorn this rough-hewn dwelling, no larger than her private bathroom. She would not appreciate its charm, the love and care poured into it. Everywhere she looked, Kate saw little touches meant to cheer.

The bouquet on the table. The floral-print high-backed chair beneath the curtained window. A rainbow-striped rug in front of the stone fireplace. A painting of a waterfall on the wall behind

the sofa.

Josh obviously loved her sister. What would it feel like, she wondered, to be loved like that? Sadness pressed in on her. She couldn't recall hearing the words *I love you* a single time.

Her parents weren't given to displays of affection.

That was for the lower classes, her mother had said when Kate questioned her.

She recalled walking through the park with her nanny, envious of the children holding hands with their mothers, the little boys balanced on their father's shoulders looking happy as could be. The longing for love and affection had only grown with time.

*God loves you*, a small, still voice told Kate. Her eyes smarted with unshed tears. *Help me remember, Father, that You love me even when I'm unlovable.*

The stillness reminded her that she was alone. For the first time in her life, there were no ladies' maids waiting behind the scenes to help her undress or fetch her a soothing cup of tea. The realization was both heady and daunting. What would it be like to be an independent woman?

Exhausted from days of travel, not to mention emotionally drained, Kate decided to deal with unpacking later. Instead, she began the tedious process of undressing. First the skirt, then the underskirt. Bustle. Corset cover. Petticoat.

The ivory satin corset presented a problem. Without assistance, it was next to impossible to undo the tight stays. Huffing and grunting, arms twisting every which way, she was at

last able to free herself from the rigid contraption. She resisted the unladylike urge to toss it across the room.

Tucking the despised article beneath her arm, she went to investigate the bedroom. Covering the wide bed was a handmade quilt similar to the one on the sofa, this one in pale blues and pinks done in the pattern of interlocking rings. She thought of the thick, luxurious silk coverlet on her own bed. Beautiful, yes, and expensive, but not unique. Before she left, she would ask Mary if she'd be willing to sell her one of hers.

Locating her satchel, she changed into her night rail. Next to the bed was a waist-high table where the oil lamp stood. Extinguishing the flame, the room was plunged into inky darkness.

Kate froze. The blackness closed in on her. Images from her childhood flashed through her mind. Her nanny's contorted, angry face. The dark closet. Musty-smelling coats, piles of boxes and broken, discarded toys distorted by the shadows. Her lungs struggled to draw in air.

How she hated the dark!

This room was small, the ceiling low. And there were no windows to open, as in her spacious, airy bedroom at the estate. No gentle light from the row of streetlamps to ease her fear, or the occasional sound of horses clomping down the lane to comfort her.

*No. I mustn't give in to the memories.*

But they came anyway ... of another time, another place. The

wine cellar. A man she'd adored. The extinguished candle. Her panic. His calm reassurances and mesmerizing touch. She'd felt so loved ...

No! Reining in her thoughts before the shame consumed her, she scrambled beneath the covers and tugged them up to her chin.

*Father God, I need You. I don't want to remember.*

*He will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee.* She repeated the verse until her muscles relaxed and she drifted off to sleep.

Dressed to go visiting Saturday morning, Mary placed fresh-baked loaves of sourdough bread into the basket on the counter. "How are you holding up? I know it must be difficult having Kate around. I could ask Betty if she'd mind her staying over there."

Leaning back in his chair, Josh toyed with the handle of his coffee mug. A dear friend of his mother's, Betty Stanley would welcome Kate into her home. He didn't doubt she'd treat her with kindness. On the downside, she had five sons. All single. And a touch wild. Sending a delicate beauty like Kate over there would be like throwing a rabbit to a pack of hungry wolves. He couldn't do it.

Besides, he wasn't sure he wanted to sleep out in the cabin. All alone. With nothing but his thoughts to keep him company.

"No. I'm fine, Ma." At the questioning arch of her brow, he added, "Honest."

"If you change your mind, let me know. I'm sure Kate would understand."

“I’ll do that.”

“What are your plans for the day?”

“I’m working on Mr. Wilcox’s dining table. He’s anxious to have it before his in-laws arrive next weekend.”

She paused in her preparations. “Could you put it off for a couple of hours? I need someone to keep Kate company while I deliver this.” When he opened his mouth to speak, she tacked on, “I wouldn’t ask, except Nathan has been up all night with Bess. I took his breakfast out to the barn about an hour ago, and the calf still hasn’t made an appearance. And your father and Caleb are milking the cows.”

He didn’t want to play babysitter for Francesca’s little sister, but what choice did he have? His mother went out of her way to make life comfortable for him and his brothers, so whenever she asked a favor, he did his best to comply.

“Fine. I’ll do it.”

“You’re a sweetheart, you know that?”

“Don’t tell anybody.”

Amid her soft laughter, there came a light knock on the front door.

“That’s probably her. Do you mind, dear?”

Swallowing a sigh, he went to greet their guest. At the sight of her, the greeting on his lips fell flat. Her clothing, fancier even than the previous day’s, was utterly out of place here.

Her silk brocade ensemble put him in mind of the eggplant growing in his ma’s garden—deep, luxurious purple. The slim

jacket had sleeves that bloomed out at the shoulders and tightened at the elbow on down to the wrists. A beribboned V emphasized her trim waist, erupting into a six-inch ruffle. The straight skirt below had slits revealing pleated skirts underneath. Corded rosettes adorned both the jacket and skirt, and frothy white fringe peeked out of the wrists.

Her elegant look was spoiled by the mass of chocolate waves tumbling past her shoulders. My goodness, she looked all of sixteen with her hair down. Young and vulnerable. Sweet.

*Nope.* He took a step back. *He refused to be drawn in by her beauty.* If anything, Francesca had taught him outward beauty, no matter how innocent-looking, didn't guarantee a beautiful heart.

“Good morning, Josh.” Her cheeks were a becoming pink. “Might I speak with your mother, please?”

“She's in the kitchen.”

With a stately nod, she walked past him. He remained where he was, unable to pull his gaze from her retreating form. She moved with grace and poise, head high and spine straight as an arrow, like a queen before her royal subjects.

Frowning, he shook his head. How many hours of practice had it taken to perfect such posture? Time better suited to more productive pursuits.

Bits and pieces of their conversation drifted out to the living room.

He heard the self-deprecating humor in Kate's voice as she

asked for help with her hair. “It appears I’m helpless without my staff.”

“Don’t worry, dear. Let’s go up to my room and see what we can do.”

“Since I’ll be on my own for a while, maybe you can give me some pointers.”

Josh stuffed his hands in his pockets, finding it odd that a young lady would need help fixing her hair.

As the pair ascended the stairs, he wondered how Francesca would’ve coped without servants to do her bidding. He hadn’t given it a thought before this moment, all the changes he’d expected her to make. Instead of being waited on hand and foot, she would’ve had to do everything herself. While he’d been blinded by love, she’d obviously been thinking of more practical things.

In less than ten minutes, Kate and his mother were making their way back downstairs. His mother reached the bottom steps first. “Will you make Kate a cup of hot tea? Her breakfast is on the stove.”

To Kate, she said, “I’m sorry to run off, but Laney Hedrick has been ill. The ladies in our sewing circle are taking turns delivering meals, and today happens to be mine. Would you mind spending the morning with Joshua? He’s agreed to show you around.”

Pausing on the last step, Kate’s fingers tightened on the banister. Her gaze shot to his face, then away.

“I’d like that.”

His gaze narrowed. Kate Morgan's perfect manners couldn't conceal her wariness. Was it him? Did he make her uncomfortable? Did she think he'd lash out in anger at her because of what Francesca had done? Or was she simply a timid young lady?

Their temporary guest was a stranger to him. Francesca had spoken at length of her parents but when it came to her sister, she'd been strangely reticent. He wondered why that was. Was theirs a strained relationship?

"I'll be back in time to fix supper, I hope. If not, there's smoked ham and bread for sandwiches."

"Don't rush, Ma. We'll rustle up something if you're late."

The back door clicked shut. Silence hung thick in the air. Kate avoided his gaze, staring with great interest at the white pine floorboards.

Clearing his throat, he headed for the kitchen. "I'll get your breakfast."

While he set the water to boiling and retrieved a teacup and saucer from the cabinet, she stood gazing out the windows overlooking the front yard. He wondered what she was thinking. Why the forlorn expression? Did she miss the big city already?

At the sight of the heaping portion of eggs, bacon and biscuits, her eyes widened and she pressed a hand against her midsection. "I can't possibly eat all that."

Swallowing his irritation, he gripped the top rung of the chair in front of him. "You want me to make something else?" *Your*

## *Royal Highness?*

She looked doubtful. “I normally have a bowl of oatmeal or a slice of toast with marmalade.”

He thought back to the few weeks in March he’d spent with Francesca. “Your sister has quite the appetite.”

Hurt flashed across her face, which she quickly masked. “My sister can eat anything she likes and it doesn’t affect her figure.”

Josh stood mute. What had he said to cause her pain? His heart beat out a warning. He’d known Kate Morgan less than twenty-four hours, and already she was getting under his skin.

“Well, you certainly don’t look as if you need to worry about that,” he said brusquely. “I’ll check if we have oatmeal.”

Her eyes flared with surprise. “Wait. Please don’t go to the trouble.” Lowering herself into the chair, she indicated the plate. “This smells delicious.”

At least she wasn’t sulking. Francesca would have.

He retrieved her tea from the kitchen and set it on the table, along with a crock of honey, then sank into the chair across the table. He watched her eat, thinking he’d never seen such refined manners. She ate carefully, her jaw barely moving as she chewed, dabbing her mouth with her crisp napkin.

“What would you like to do today?”

“I’d like to scout out some possible sites for photographs. Can you suggest any particularly interesting spots?”

“First I need to know what you’re interested in photographing. What kind of book is this going to be?”

“A sort of travel guide. I’d like pictures of the mountains, of course.” Her eyes sparkled as she warmed to her topic. “Churches make interesting photos. Barns. Wagons. Everyday scenes of life on a farm. Would you show me your farm?”

“Sure.”

“I also like to take portraits of people. I noticed the one of your family on the fireplace mantel. Perhaps I can take another one and give your mother a print.”

“She’d like that, I’m sure. That was taken many years ago.” He sipped the stout, black brew. “As to possible sites, I’ll have to give it some thought.”

“Thank you.”

“How long will it take you to gather all the photographs you need?” *In other words, how long before you leave?*

“I’m not certain. But I’m not in any hurry to go back. My parents are touring Europe for the next two months. Francesca is on her honeymoon—” She broke off, her gaze shooting to his. Flustered, she rushed ahead. “Anyway, I didn’t like the idea of rattling around the estate with only staff for company.”

“I’m curious why you didn’t go with your parents. Surely Europe is a more interesting subject than our mountains.”

“Simple. They didn’t ask. My parents prefer to take their vacations alone.”

“I see.” Taken aback by her candid response, he said, “Well, I imagine you’ll soon be bored here.”

“If that happens, then I will know it’s time to go home.”

“Don’t you have fancy parties to attend? Shopping to do? I’m sure you noticed our one and only general store.”

Her eyes dulled. “If my presence here is inconvenient, I will leave immediately.”

Now he felt like a heel. He’d been insensitive. “Forgive me. I didn’t mean to make you feel unwelcome.”

Lashes lowered, she sipped her tea. Her fingers were elegant, nails trim and shiny, skin like satin. One gold filigree ring adorned the fourth finger of her right hand. They were the hands of a privileged lady, unblemished by hard work.

How would he handle the strain of seeing Francesca’s sister every day? Reminding him of all he’d lost. And the gossip her presence would stir up ...

Undoubtedly, he was going to be the subject of a lot of talk. That’s simply the way things worked in small towns. Wasn’t every day a man’s fiancée up and married someone else.

“Are you ready for that tour?” He pushed back his chair.

She hesitated. “If you have something you’d rather do, I can entertain myself. I brought quite a collection of books with me, as well as my harp. I’ll be fine on my own.”

“You brought your harp?” Who traveled with musical instruments? He’d never understand the whims of the wealthy.

“It’s a Celtic harp, small enough to hold on my lap. I’ve played for many years. The music soothes me.”

“I know what you mean,” he said, surprised they had something in common. “About the soothing part. I play the

fiddle.”

“Oh?” Interest stirred in her expression. “I would like to hear you play sometime. Fran didn’t mention that you played an instrument.”

“That’s because I didn’t tell her.”

One pitfall of relationships conducted at a distance was that important details were often overlooked or left out entirely. In Francesca’s case, details like another suitor. Thoughts of her with another man churned up unpleasant emotions. The betrayal affected him deeply. If and when he ever decided to court another lady, he’d be certain to keep things simple.

And the lady sitting across from him was anything but.

## *Chapter Four*

Strolling about the O'Malley farm, Kate's gaze was drawn repeatedly to her handsome guide. Sunlight filtered through the leaves overhead, showering patches of light on the navy cotton shirt stretched taut across his back and shoulders. Josh's rich drawl made each word sound like a caress. Listening to him explain the names and uses of each structure lulled her into a state of contentment.

He'd spoken hesitantly at first, his expression guarded, as if he expected her to be bored. Her many questions had brought about a change in his tone and manner, however. He was clearly proud of his family's farm. And from what she'd seen, he had reason to be.

She surveyed her surroundings with a practiced eye. People back home would enjoy seeing these rural images. The wealthy would use them as a guide to plan sojourns to the mountains. Those who couldn't afford to visit would at least be able to glimpse the beauty of East Tennessee. She could hardly wait to get started!

Kate found the workings of a farm fascinating. Here people had to be self-sufficient, working with the land and its offerings to provide for their needs.

She would never tell him Francesca would've been less than thrilled with her new home. No doubt, she would've taken one

look and hightailed it back to the city.

Pushing away from the corn crib, he jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “All that’s left to show you is the apple house.”

“Apple house?” Five rows deep, the orchard fanned out in both directions behind him. There wasn’t a building in sight.

“It’s where we store the apples we don’t immediately use.” He extended his arm. “The ground is uneven in places. I wouldn’t want you to stumble and fall.”

She slipped her hand into the crook of his arm, his muscled forearm bunching beneath her fingers. They strolled at an even pace to the orchard. A gentle breeze stirred the trees, carrying with it the fragrant, tangy scent of the fruit hanging from the branches.

“I don’t see a house.”

He pointed to the steep hillside beyond the trees. “Look there. See the door?”

Squinting, she could just make out a low roofline and a child-size door. “It looks like a child’s playhouse.”

He laughed. “Come, I’ll show you.”

As they drew closer, she saw that it had been built into the hillside and only the front facade of stone and timber was visible. When she questioned him, he said it was to maintain the temperature inside at an even level and thus keep the apples from spoiling. Again, she was impressed by the family’s ingenuity.

Using his shoulder, he edged open the door. With a flourish of his hand, he said, “Ladies first.”

She bit her lip. From where she was standing, the interior looked awfully dark and cavelike. But he was waiting patiently, assessing her with those intense blue eyes.

She didn't have to stay inside, she reasoned. What could a quick peek hurt?

Drawing a deep breath, Kate stepped through the doorway, bowing her head to avoid the low crossbeam. Cool, musky air filled her nostrils. Stacks of empty baskets filled the long, narrow space.

It wasn't so bad.

Then Josh came in behind her, his body blocking out the light.

Her heart tripped inside her chest. Nausea threatened, and she felt strangely light-headed.

Memories from the past swept over her, and spinning on her heel, she collided with his solid chest. "Please, I need to get out."

His hands came up to steady her. "What's wrong?"

Without answering, she ducked beneath his arm and shot out the door. Once again in the open field, she sucked in a lungful of air. *Please don't pass out.* Pressing a palm against her clammy forehead, she willed herself to remain calm.

"Hey." He came abreast of her, his hand cupping her upper arm. "You're as white as a sheet. Let's go over here and sit for a spell."

Kate leaned on his strength as he guided her to a fallen log beneath a nearby apple tree. He helped her settle, then sat close beside her. She couldn't dwell on his nearness, only her acute

embarrassment.

What must he think of her?

“I—I’m all right now.”

“What happened back there?” he prompted, his voice thick with concern. “Did I do something to make you uneasy?”

“No, it wasn’t you.” Eyes downcast, she plucked at the ruffles on her sleeve. “I don’t like small, confined spaces. I tend to panic, as you’ve just witnessed.” Her heart rate was slowing to normal, the nausea fading.

“I wouldn’t have insisted on your going inside had I known. I’m sorry.”

She shifted her gaze to his hands, resting on his knees. Tanned and smooth, they were strong, capable hands.

“It wasn’t your fault. I knew better.”

“Have you always felt this way?”

*No, not always. “For a long time, yes.” Please just leave it at that.*

He was quiet. Then, reaching up to the limb suspended above their heads, he plucked two apples and offered her one. “Feel like eating something? The natural sugar might put some color back into your cheeks.”

She met his assessing gaze and got lost in the blue depths. The quirk of his lips in a friendly smile broke the spell.

Accepting the fruit, she balanced it in the palms of her hands, wondering how she’d be able to eat it without making a mess of herself and her outfit. Come to think of it, she hadn’t eaten an

uncut apple since she was a little girl. It was one of those simple acts classified as unladylike. A young lady of her social standing should never appear less than picture-perfect.

Beside her, Josh was already enjoying his.

A tiny seed of rebellion sprouted in her mind. She wasn't in New York. This wasn't the estate. She was on a farm in the Tennessee mountains. Surely the rules of what her mother considered proper conduct could be bent a little.

Sinking her teeth into the firm flesh, Kate relished the sweet-tart explosion on her tongue. Maybe it was the combination of warm sunshine and fresh air or Josh's presence beside her, but she was certain this was the most delicious apple she'd ever tasted.

When the core was all that was left, she glanced over to find him grinning at her.

"What?"

"You, ah, have juice dribbling down your chin."

"I do?"

He caught her wrist. "Wait. Use my handkerchief."

Pulling a clean white square of cloth from his pants pocket, he reached over and wiped her chin. His other hand still held her wrist, the pads of his fingers pressed against her skin so that surely he could detect the spike in her pulse.

He lowered his hand. "There," he murmured with a distracted air, "good as new."

"Thanks," she managed in a weak voice.

Then, as if just noticing he still held her, he dropped her wrist

like a hot coal.

Surging to his feet, he put distance between them, stroking his goatee in a nervous gesture. “Well, that’s all there is to show you. Tour’s over.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Guess we should head back to the house so that I can warm up the soup Ma made for lunch.”

What had just happened? Whatever it was, he’d been affected the same way she had. And he didn’t seem at all pleased.

What was he thinking? Allowing himself to be affected by Kate Morgan. Of all the foolish, irresponsible ... Hadn’t he learned a thing from his tangle with one spoiled heiress?

Annoyed, he was quiet on the walk back and throughout the meal. Kate, perhaps sensing his mood, was quiet as well, seemingly content to listen to his father, brothers and himself discuss farm business.

With the afternoon stretching before them, he’d decided to show her around town. Strolling beside her, he glanced at her profile.

She was soaking in their surroundings as if imprinting the scene upon her memory. Was this city girl a nature lover or was this intense observation a result of her profession?

Her expression brightened. “Look!”

He followed her gaze to a hollowed-out tree trunk where a momma raccoon and four kits lay curled up in their nest, a tangle of gray-and-white fur.

“What an adorable sight!” she whispered, her smile full of

girlish excitement. “How old do you think they are?”

“I’d say four or five months.” He matched his voice to hers so as not to disturb the sleeping family.

“To see them in real life is such a treat!”

“What? You don’t have raccoons in the big city?”

She appeared thoughtful. “Perhaps in Central Park. The deer are plentiful there, I’m told, as are foxes.”

The largest city he’d visited was Knoxville. Amid the noise, crowded streets and hectic pace, he’d quickly discovered he preferred country life.

“You’ve never been there?” he asked, wondering for the first time what she did to pass the time.

“A handful of times. I wasn’t fortunate enough to see any wildlife.”

“Well, there’s plenty of it here.”

Her gaze was drawn once again to the sleeping raccoons. “I’m continually struck by God’s handiwork. His imagination and creativity. Nature reflects His majesty, wouldn’t you agree?”

Josh was surprised to hear her speak about God. He’d tried on several occasions to engage Francesca in a conversation about faith, but she’d skirted the issue, saying only that she was a frequent church attendee. Was this another area of difference between the sisters?

“I agree wholeheartedly.”

Something in his voice must’ve snagged her attention, for she turned and thoughtfully regarded him. They shared smiles of

understanding, an acknowledgment that on this important subject they were in agreement.

Then, before he could get too accustomed to her heart-melting smiles, he resumed walking. She fell into step beside him.

Crossing the bridge into town, the first business they passed was his friend Tom's barbershop. Since it was midafternoon, the shop was empty of customers. Tom stood in back, polishing his tools.

Glancing out the window, he spotted Josh and waved, his brows hiking up when his gaze lit on Kate. He flashed Josh a wolfish grin and a thumbs-up. He must not have heard of Francesca's defection.

The tips of his ears burning, Josh slid his gaze to Kate, who appeared unaware of the exchange. Her stiff black bonnet shielded the sides of her face, so it was unlikely she'd seen anything.

Great. Everyone was going to assume she was his bride-to-be. He'd forever be explaining himself. It'd be easier to call a town meeting and set the record straight once and for all.

They walked in the direction of the mercantile. Out of habit, his gaze homed in on the empty store for sale across the street, the one he'd been saving up to buy. When he saw the owner, Chadwick Fulton, ducking inside, he stopped abruptly.

"I see someone I need to talk to. Would you mind if I met you at the mercantile in about fifteen or twenty minutes?"

"No, not at all." Curiosity marked her expression.

He hesitated, suddenly remembering his and Francesca's outings in Sevierville and her insistence that he stay by her side. "Are you sure? I wouldn't want you to feel ill at ease, you being new in town. I can put it off until another time."

"Don't worry," she surveyed the single road of businesses and smiled, dimples flashing. "I'm fairly certain I won't get lost."

Pleased by her response, Josh smiled back. Apparently, Kate Morgan could take care of herself. "Clawson's is the last business on this side of the street. You can't miss it. I'll catch up with you."

He waited until she'd gone inside to cross the street and study the storefront. He imagined the words *J. D. O'Malley Furniture Company* scrolled in large letters across the plate-glass windows. His dream of opening his own furniture store was so close to reality.

"Good morning, Mr. Fulton," he greeted as he entered, closing the door behind him.

Seated behind the only piece of furniture left behind, a scuffed hunk of wood masquerading as a desk, the old man looked up and grunted. "O'Malley."

"How are you today?"

"What do ya want?"

Fulton's grumpy response wasn't unusual. He was an unhappy, crotchety old man.

"Sir, I came by to let you know that I've almost got the money to buy this place. I'll be paying you a visit as soon as I finish a few more orders."

“The sooner I sell it, the better,” he grouched, then shook a gnarled finger at Josh. “Remember, I ain’t holdin’ this place for you. Cash talks, and so far you ain’t shown me any.”

Josh understood it was the way of business, but he didn’t have to like it. Mr. Fulton wouldn’t agree to accept a deposit. “Yes, sir. I understand.” He tugged on the brim of his hat. “Good day.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He waved him out. “G’day.”

After taking one last look around the space and mentally calculating how many pieces he’d need to fill it, he left. He eyed the mercantile across the street, deciding he had time to stop by the post office and see if he had any letters from his cousin Juliana. He wasn’t consistent in his replies, but so far she’d overlooked that fact and kept the letters coming. They never failed to lift his spirits.

She’d only been gone a month, but it felt like a lifetime. He took comfort in the fact that her new husband was making her happy.

Inside the post office, he was surprised to see a line of people. He had time, though. Kate didn’t seem to be the type to fuss if a man was a few minutes late.

Kate strolled along the boardwalk carrying the small brown sack of hairpins and hand mirror she’d just purchased. Though not a large store, she’d been pleasantly surprised by the variety and quality of goods. The proprietor and his wife had been friendly and helpful without being overbearing. And customers greeted her with either a nod or a smile.

The overall atmosphere of the town was one of easygoing charm. People back home seemed to be more formal, keeping to themselves as they went about their business.

Glancing up and down the street, she searched for Josh. She wondered what could be keeping him. He'd certainly been intent on some task. Perhaps it had taken longer than expected.

She decided to head in the direction of the shop he'd disappeared into. Waiting for a wagon to pass, she lifted her skirts off the dusty ground and hurried to the other side. She didn't notice the two men standing outside the post office until she was almost upon them.

The shorter of the two elbowed his companion in the ribs and muttered words too low for her to hear. That man, whose face had been obscured by his hat's wide brim, lifted his head and stared hard at her. She recognized him at once. Tyler Matthews.

Her feet slowed as his hungry gaze devoured her, looking her up and down as if she were a slice of pie to be savored. Feeling violated, she stopped, unwilling to go any nearer. When he advanced a step toward her, Kate whirled and walked as quickly as she could in the opposite direction while trying not to attract attention.

Glancing back to see if he still followed her, she collided with a muscled chest and her sack slipped out of her hands. It hit the weathered boards with a thunk. Hands came up to steady her.

"Kate?"

*Josh.* "I'm sorry," she panted, "I didn't see you."

“What has you upset?” Holding her steady with a gentle grip, he gazed down at her with concern.

“I saw Tyler. He started to follow me.”

Lips compressing in irritation, he scanned the boardwalk behind her. “I don’t see him. He must’ve ducked in between the buildings. Where did you first spot him?”

“Outside the post office.”

Slowly she became aware of his thumb lazily stroking her arm, an unconscious gesture meant to soothe.

His brows came together. “You okay?”

“Yes, just a bit unnerved. This is something I’ve never experienced before, having someone fixated on me.” She shuddered. His fingers flexed in response.

Josh was near enough for her to feel his body heat, to see the leap of his pulse in the hollow of his neck. The dark shirt complemented his tanned skin and brilliant eyes. Her gaze fell to his mouth, noting that his lips looked warm and generous. What would it be like to be kissed by Josh? she wondered suddenly.

Had he ever kissed Fran? Her sister had been surprisingly coy on the subject, never hinting either way. Jealousy gripped Kate’s heart, startling her. She had no business entertaining such thoughts!

Tearing her gaze up to his, she sucked in a breath at the confused interest in his eyes. With an almost imperceptible shake of his head, as if to clear his thoughts, he swallowed hard.

“I want you to be careful.” He bent and picked up her sack.

“Stay alert to your surroundings, especially when you’re alone.”

“Of course, I—”

“Josh!” a female voice trilled. “Aren’t you gonna introduce us to your fiancée?”

## *Chapter Five*

Two young ladies stood watching them, eyes wide with curiosity.

Kate flushed with embarrassment. No doubt they were drawing their own conclusions to what appeared to be an intimate moment. What would they think when they realized she wasn't Francesca?

"Girls, I'd like you to meet Miss Kate Morgan." Josh put distance between them. "Kate, these are my cousins. Megan and Nicole O'Malley."

Like Kate and Francesca, the O'Malley sisters did not resemble each other in the slightest. With her dusky-blond curls and angelic countenance, Megan radiated a sweetness not present in Nicole, who was a striking beauty with raven hair and china-blue eyes.

Megan's friendly smile put Kate instantly at ease. Nicole stared at her with undisguised awe, her gaze taking in every inch of Kate's attire. Compared to their comparatively simple dresses, she supposed her ensemble was a bit much.

"It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Welcome to Gatlinburg, Kate," Megan said.

"Kate? But I thought—" Nicole began, only to stop when Megan nudged her shoulder. "Uh, it's nice to meet you."

Hating that Josh had been put in the position yet again of

having to explain this horrible situation, she saved him the trouble. “My sister, Francesca, isn’t coming, I’m afraid.”

“We’ll discuss it later,” he said firmly, searching the street for onlookers.

That was one advantage of living in a large city, she thought—a person could blend in with the crowd. No one knew your business, and no one cared.

It was obvious the girls respected Josh, for they dropped the subject like a hot potato.

“We were on our way to Plum’s for tea. Would you like to join us?” Megan asked, her eyes hopeful.

“It’s our town’s very first café,” Nicole gushed. “Mrs. Greene, the proprietress, says one day soon we’ll have loads of people coming through here looking at our mountains and that they’ll all need a place to eat. Ma thinks she’s lost her mind—”

“Nicole, please.” Megan shot her an exasperated glance.

She waited for Josh to reply, who deferred to Kate. “It’s up to you.”

After the near run-in with Tyler and her disturbing awareness of Josh, a cup of hot tea might help her to relax. “That sounds like a splendid idea.”

“Wonderful.” Megan beamed her pleasure.

Kate hadn’t always been the best judge of character, but she got the feeling Megan O’Malley would make a good friend. And she didn’t have many of those. Most of the young socialites of her acquaintance were like Fran, interested only in the latest fashions,

the finest parties and, most importantly, finding a rich, suitable husband.

While she liked nice clothes, she would much rather take photographs than spend hours poring through *Harper's Bazaar* or standing for fittings. Parties among her set were overrated. Same food, same music, same people. Different setting.

As for a husband, she did want one of those. Longed, actually, for someone to love who loved her heart, mind and soul. But after what had happened with Wesley, well, she worried no man would want her—a used woman.

*He* certainly hadn't wanted her. Once had been enough for him.

While she'd been sure he would show up the next day with a ring and a proposal, he'd boarded a ship for England instead.

Shoving the remembered pain and humiliation aside, she crossed the dusty street with Josh, the sisters walking ahead of them. They were chattering and laughing, seeming as close as sisters could be, and Kate experienced a familiar twinge of regret. She and Fran had never shared such a close bond, not even as children. Now that her sister had a new husband and a home of her own, Kate doubted they ever would.

Plum Café was an unexpectedly charming establishment. Mauve tablecloths covered the round tables, and matching curtains edged with gold ribbon adorned the windows overlooking the street, softening the harsh glare of sunlight.

An assortment of tantalizing aromas hung in the air. Voices

and the clatter of dishes could be heard coming from the kitchen in back. Only one of the tables was occupied—an elderly couple who smiled and nodded but otherwise minded their own business.

Josh pulled a chair out for each of them and once they were seated, lowered his tall form into the one beside her. He took off his hat and hooked it on the back of his chair, then ran a hand through his hair. It was impossible to judge his mood by his closed expression. Was he thinking of his canceled wedding?

The proprietress, a meticulously dressed, middle-age lady, appeared and took their orders.

Nicole leaned eagerly forward. “Kate, you must tell us about New York. Have you been to Macy’s? What’s it like?”

Kate smiled. “Macy’s has the most amazing window displays. The staff is attentive and knowledgeable. There is so much to see, you could spend days browsing the aisles.”

“Is there a library in the city?” Megan looked hopeful.

“There are two—the Astor Library, used primarily for research, and the Lenox Library, which has mainly rare, religious books. I don’t visit either one, since our estate houses a grand library with both classics and recent works.”

“What a treat to have all those books at your disposal. Why, I doubt I’d get much else done if I lived there!”

“What type of books do you like to read?” Kate asked. “I brought a crate full with me. You’re welcome to borrow as many as you’d like.”

“Honest?” Megan seemed pleased with the offer.

“All she reads are love stories.” Nicole rolled her eyes.

“Nothing else.”

“That’s not true,” the other girl protested. “I like adventure stories, too.”

“If I have to hear about Mr. Darcy and Miss Bennet one more time,” she exclaimed, “I think I’ll be sick.”

“Nicole!”

Kate dipped her head to hide a smile. Their drinks arrived then, along with a plate of gooey, pecan-sprinkled cinnamon rolls.

Josh held up a hand. “We didn’t order these, Mrs. Greene.”

“Consider it an engagement gift.” The lady’s smile encompassed Kate and Josh. “Congratulations.”

Before they could correct her, she disappeared into the kitchen.

“Oh, dear.” Cheeks burning, Kate lowered her gaze to her lap.

When she felt his touch on her shoulder, she looked up and got lost in his impossibly blue eyes. “Forget about it,” he said quietly. “It’d be a shame to let these go to waste. I’ll clear things up with Mrs. Greene later.”

“Here you are.” Megan set a roll in front of her. “That woman is an amazing cook. You have to try one.”

Nicole was already biting into the pastry, an expression of rapture on her youthful face. “Mmm.”

She supposed she could set aside her self-imposed aversion to

sugar-laden treats just this once. “Fine. But just so you know, I don’t normally do this.”

All eyes were on her as she lifted the first bite into her mouth. The rich, cinnamon pastry melted on her tongue. She stifled a moan of appreciation.

She attempted a stern expression. “Now I’m in trouble. I will have to make a point of avoiding the Plum Café from now on and maybe even this entire side of the street.”

The sisters chuckled. Even Josh managed a smile.

“Want to know what I think?” He set down his coffee mug. The teasing light in his eyes was unexpected, stealing her breath. “Now that you’ve tasted them, you won’t be able to resist.”

“I disagree,” she challenged with a lift of her chin. “When it comes to sweets, I happen to have unwavering willpower.”

His gaze dropped to her mouth. His eyes darkened, all emotion hidden. “You, um, have a spot of cinnamon.” He indicated the corner of her lips.

Self-conscious, Kate used her napkin. “Better?”

“Yes.” Shifting in the chair, he addressed Megan. “I was at the post office just now and picked up a letter from Juliana.”

“Oh?” She exchanged a pointed glance with Nicole. “What did she say?”

Nicole giggled.

“I haven’t read it.” He stared hard at them. “What’s up?”

“Juliana’s expecting!” Nicole blurted.

“You weren’t supposed to tell,” Megan admonished in a

hushed whisper.

Beside her, Josh went very still. “Why keep it a secret?”

Eyes averted, Nicole toyed with her teacup. Megan met his gaze head-on.

“It’s not a secret, of course. It’s just that, well, Juliana wanted to tell you herself. No doubt it’s in your letter.” To Kate, she explained, “Juliana is our eldest sister. She was married last month and now lives with her husband, Evan Harrison, in Cades Cove. She and Josh were best friends.”

Gulping the last of his coffee, Josh set the cup down with a thud. “Are you two going straight home after this?”

“Yes.”

“Would you mind walking Kate home?”

“Not at all.”

Grabbing his hat, he looked at her. “Is that okay with you?”

“Certainly.”

Standing, he slipped Megan a banknote. “This will take care of the bill and tip.”

“Josh—”

He silenced his cousin with a look.

The three sat without speaking as they watched him leave. As her seat was facing the window, she could see him striding purposefully down the street. He was obviously distraught by this sudden news. Her heart went out to him.

“Kate, did your sister call off the wedding?” Megan’s troubled countenance revealed how deeply she cared about her cousin.

“Yes. In fact, she has already married someone else.”

Kate cringed at Nicole’s shocked gasp. Megan’s eyes glistened with unshed tears.

“He must be heartbroken,” she whispered. “He was already sad about Juliana’s leaving.”

“She and Josh were practically joined at the hip.”

“He lost his best friend,” Megan confirmed. “And now his bride ...”

Lounging on a sun-warmed rock, Josh stared unseeing at the water coursing past. The fish weren’t biting today.

He’d been in his workshop since leaving the café, working most of the day to finish Mr. Wilcox’s dining table. His hands ached from the amount of sanding and polishing he’d done, but it was a small inconvenience. The table was finished. The money he’d get from it would bring him one step closer to his dream.

If someone else didn’t beat him to the punch, that is.

A twig snapped. Josh whipped around, his hand going to the pistol in his holster. Spying Kate, he relaxed.

She’d abandoned her stiff jacket and wore only a long-sleeved, ruffled black blouse with her deep purple skirts. Slung over her shoulder were an odd-shaped bag and a leather strap attached to a square box. With the other hand, she carried a tripod stand.

Her porcelain skin was flushed pink. Chocolate curls had escaped confinement to brush against her cheeks. It was obvious she hadn’t seen him. Her gaze scanned the woods, occasionally dropping to the ground as she maneuvered fallen logs and uneven

terrain.

“Kate.”

Her hand went to her throat. “You startled me!”

“Sorry.” Standing, he removed his hat. “Do you need help?”

“I can manage.” Changing direction, she headed his way.

He met her halfway and took the tripod.

With careful movements, she set the box and bag on the leaf-strewn ground.

She held out her hands for the tripod.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” he said. “I shouldn’t have left.”

“I survived,” she huffed. “Although you could’ve warned me about Nicole’s propensity to talk endlessly of fashion.” If it weren’t for the teasing light dancing in her eyes, he would’ve thought she was serious.

Again, her reaction was unexpected. Francesca would’ve pouted over such carelessness on his part, no matter that he was upset, trying to absorb one change after another.

“It’s a topic of great interest to her, I’m afraid.” He sighed, a hint of answering humor in his voice. “She drove you to distraction, I take it?”

“Not at all! I like Megan and Nicole very much. They are nicely mannered young ladies.”

“Glad to hear it. I’m rather fond of them myself.”

“The sisters you never had?”

“Living next door to each other, we were practically raised as one big family. They do like to accuse me of assuming the role

of protective older brother.”

“You were upset earlier. Is everything okay with the one who moved away?”

“Juliana’s fine.” He slipped his hands into his pockets. “Better than fine, actually. Ecstatic. I’m thrilled for her. It’s just that so much has changed the past few weeks.”

Her expression turned pensive. “Yes, I can imagine it’s a lot to take in.”

Certain she was thinking of his canceled wedding and not at all interested in going down that path, he resumed his post and picked up his rod.

Indicating his empty pail, he said, “I was hoping to have trout for supper, but so far the fish aren’t obliging.”

A ghost of a smile gracing her mouth, she surveyed the pebble-strewn stream and dense forest spreading out around them. It was quiet here. Restful. Nothing but the trickle of water and the rustle of leaves overhead.

“There’s something magical about this place,” she said, her voice hushed. “It’s so beautiful it almost defies description.”

With the onset of fall, the leaves were already beginning to thin out. “You should see it in spring and summer. The greenery is so thick you feel like you’re the only creature for miles around, save the birds and squirrels.”

Her gaze settled on his. “I’d like that.”

He hadn’t meant it as an invitation. It wasn’t that he didn’t like her. Kate seemed nice enough. But she didn’t fit in here. And

although the physical similarity wasn't there, in his mind he'd never be able to separate her from Francesca and her heartless betrayal.

He pointed to the box. "What do you have there?"

"My camera."

Crouching down, she flipped open the lid and lifted it out. Made of polished cherrywood with brass fittings, black accordion-like material in between the two ends, it appeared to be an expensive piece of equipment. "Would you mind if I took a photograph of you?"

"What? Now?" He wasn't primed and primed for a portrait. Far from it.

"Yes, now." She stood. "Not every photo has to be staged in a studio."

"But I'm not dressed—"

"You look fine." Her gaze flicked over his shirt and trousers. "Natural. I wouldn't expect you to be fishing in a three-piece suit, and neither would anyone else." She paused in sliding a piece of square coated glass into the camera. "If you'd rather not, I understand. I don't want to make you uneasy."

"No, it's fine."

"Great." Her wide smile elicited one of his own. "I'm going across."

There was a natural bridge to the other side, a mound of earth and rocks she crossed without incident. When she was directly across from him, he said, "I thought photographers had to travel

with portable darkrooms.” The stream wasn’t all that wide, so he didn’t have to raise his voice.

“Not with the invention of the dry plate.” She steadied the stand before placing the camera on top. “The image is fixed and doesn’t have to be processed right away.”

“I haven’t heard anything about it.”

“That’s because they’ve only recently been manufactured for widespread sale. Okay, look directly at me. And sit as still as possible.” Peering into the camera, she removed the cover and waited for a full minute before replacing it. Straightening, she seemed pleased. “That’s going to be a good one, I think.”

Crossing back over, she was replacing the camera in its box when he spoke.

“Tell me about Francesca’s husband.”

Her hands stilled. She looked uncertain.

“I don’t even know her married name,” he persisted.

“His name is Percy Johnson.”

“Francesca Johnson. I think Francesca O’Malley has a nicer ring to it, but that’s just my opinion.”

Her mouth flattened. “I’m sorry.”

“I know he’s not a common laborer, like me. What does he do? Or rather, what does his family do? He probably hasn’t worked a day in his life.” He couldn’t disguise the bitterness in his voice.

*I’m sorry, God. I can’t help envying the guy. He got the girl, and I’m left here to pick up the pieces.*

Indignation flashed in her eyes. “There’s nothing common

about you. My sister chose flash and glamour over depth and substance. She made a foolish decision.”

Her words sparked an odd pang in his chest. He couldn't figure out why she was defending him. She didn't know him. Not really. Except, she *had* listened to his letters and glimpsed into his soul without his consent.

“Don't get me wrong,” she hastened to add, “I love my sister. It's just that we each have our own opinions of what's important in life.”

He found that difficult to believe. They might disagree on specifics, but their outlook couldn't be all that different. They shared the same upbringing, the same advantages.

Proposing marriage to a woman so far above his station had been a colossal mistake. He should've realized from the beginning that their worlds were too far apart.

“I just don't get it,” he wondered aloud. “Why not break off the engagement the moment she decided to patch things up with him?”

She edged closer to the water, stepping on a smooth, slanted rock scattered with orange leaves. “I wish I had an answer for you. Her behavior is as much a mystery to me as it is to you.”

“The two of you aren't close?”

She frowned. “No.”

He wanted to question her further, to ask why her parents hadn't invited her to join them in Europe, but it was none of his business. Soon she'd be gone and he wouldn't have to spare

another thought on the Morgan family.

She pointed to a rounded shell bobbing above the surface. “Do you know what kind of turtle that is?”

“Can’t rightly say, but there are a number of painted box turtles hereabouts.”

“A pity it moves too quickly for my camera.”

His eyes on the turtle, he hadn’t noticed her getting closer to the rock’s edge.

“Be careful,” he warned, holding out a hand. “Those rocks can be slippery—”

“All I want is a closer look.”

One moment she was standing, bent at the hip with hands braced against her knees. An instant later, she was facedown in the stream.

Dropping his pole, Josh strode through the thigh-deep water. Wrapping his arm around her, his hand curled around her waist, he helped her stand. “Are you hurt?”

A bubble of laughter escaped as she wiped the moisture from her eyes. Her mouth a breath away from his ear, the soft, husky sound shot liquid fire through his veins.

“I’m fine.” Taking stock of her sodden clothing, she grimaced. “My pride is a bit bruised, however. You did warn me, didn’t you?”

Josh couldn’t stop his smile. “Did you get that closer look you wanted?”

“No. I guess he didn’t want to stick around for all the

excitement.”

A shiver coursed through her body. Though it was a warm September day, the water was cool. And she was wet from head to toe, the layers of clothing clinging to her petite yet womanly frame. Water dripped from her hair onto his shirt.

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