



Chapter Three

The Saturday of the Browning's ball arrived much too soon, but feigning a headache was not an option. After much pleading, Papa had agreed—even insisted—she should have a new gown. Even Mama, who usually objected to unnecessary clothes, had agreed with Papa. Which meant she was stuck sitting in front of her mirror, fighting not to fidget while Lily finished doing her hair for the ball.

If they couldn't see how mismatched she would be with a man like Jonah, her parents' eagerness couldn't bode well for her. The placid life he planned was the opposite of what she wanted. The man had no idea what she thought or felt and didn't care. Visions of dancing with Jonah sent prickly shivers through her body despite the warm early June evening. She couldn't imagine a marriage with someone like him.

"Miss Eugenia, you has to sit still." Lily, her maid, admonished her while trying to finish putting Eugenia's hair up.

She forced herself not to squirm. If only she *did* have a headache. The pale orange silk gown reflected in her

mahogany-framed dresser mirror gave her no joy. Their seamstress had fitted the dress flawlessly. The bright orange sash accented her narrow waist to perfection. Her pearls were just the right highlight for the scooped neckline. How awful to waste such a lovely ensemble on such a horrid occasion.

Lily fluffed the last curl. Eugenia stood and twisted to survey the back of her head in the mirror. "Oh, I want my good beige fan."

As her maid rushed to retrieve the fan, a soft knock on the door prevented Eugenia from thinking of another method of delay.

"The carriage is waiting, dear girl." Her father's voice drifted from the other side of the door.

"I'm coming." She took the fan from Lily and then trudged into the hall.

By the time the Hampton carriage rolled up the drive to the Browning home, the entire lane was lined with parked, empty vehicles. With any luck, some other lady had already captured Jonah's attention. Every mother in the county considered such an ambitious man a fine catch for their daughters.

Jonah stood in the entrance hall with his mother and father when the butler ushered Eugenia and her parents inside. He looked so proper and stiff, she might have mistaken him for a statue if he hadn't moved.

She stifled a sigh when the image of Mr. Stuart popped into her head. What a contrast between her unassuming rescuer, so at ease in his homespun clothes, and the rigid formal Jonah, clothed in a fashionable black coat and trousers. The simple Mr. Stuart intrigued her enough to hope for another chance meeting with him, while Jonah made her wish she could run from the room and never return.

"Good evening, Gerald, Anna, we're pleased you've come."

Mrs. Browning flashed a glowing smile at all three Hamptons despite leaving out Eugenia's name.

"We wouldn't think of missing your ball," Papa replied.

"Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Hampton." Jonah made a slight bow to them. "May I steal your lovely daughter away? She has already promised the first dance to me."

"Yes, indeed." Papa's beaming smile turned up the ends of his white mustache. "You young people enjoy yourselves."

Feeling like a bird trapped in a gilded cage, Eugenia walked with Jonah down the brightly lit hall and into the large parlor serving as the ballroom. The furniture had been removed, leaving the sparkling crystal and gold chandelier as the main feature in the room. The festively dressed people against the background of the polished mahogany-paneled walls would have been a breathtaking sight if she had been with different company.

"You are a vision of loveliness in that dress." Jonah's grating nasal voice interrupted her thoughts.

She hid her frown behind her fan. "Thank you."

"I've missed our lovely Southern ladies while at college. Northern women cannot compare to our local jewels."

"Then you must reacquaint yourself with everyone you've so direly missed." Eugenia hoped to divert his attention from her while they walked across the room.

"I prefer your company." He smiled into her eyes.

Before she could think of a suitable reply, the instruments sounded the notes of the first dance. Jonah took her hand. Discordant prickles radiated up and down her spine.

Dodging her unwanted suitor consumed too much of her evening. She and Clare stepped outside for some fresh air as often as they could manage. When inside, Eugenia accepted dances with any man who asked. Otherwise, Jonah would have cornered her for every dance.

Luke Williams walked up to her after she'd finished a waltz with a man who could double for milk toast. "I've had a difficult time telling you so much as a quick hello tonight."

"I've never lacked for friends." How nice this friend rescued her at just the right moment.

"May I have this dance?"

"I wouldn't think of telling you no." She gave Luke what she hoped was a dazzling smile when Jonah glanced her way.

Luke led her onto the floor as the first chords of another waltz began. "You've danced with Jonah more than anyone else tonight. Have I missed something between the two of you?"

"Oh, no!" Her reply was much too quick to sound polite, but she didn't care. No one would pair her off with Jonah.

"Since you're so popular, I'll ask in advance for the last dance. Would you give me the honor?"

"Of course." She hoped her fake smile appeared more convincing than she felt. The sooner this night ended, the better.

"Thank you. I missed you while I was away at school."

"Oh, really?" She gazed up into his earnest blue eyes. His rapt attention and remarks too closely echoed Jonah's actions.

"Yes, really." As they moved to the music, his beaming smile lit up his entire countenance.

The moment Mr. Browning announced the last dance, Eugenia spied Jonah striding toward her. She delighted at his frown when Luke claimed her before Jonah could finish making his way across the parlor.

"I have relished what little time I've managed with you." Luke glanced toward the advancing Jonah as he led her in the other direction.

"We've enjoyed each other's company since childhood." She managed not to wince as she gave him another well-

rehearsed smile. Her head hurt from feigning happiness for so long. This long night of charades couldn't end soon enough.

“Yes, but I enjoy the woman I'm dancing with now so much more than the little girl I teased when she came to play with my sister.” He squeezed her hand.

Looking into his adoring eyes made her mouth go dry. She would drive such a mellow man to distraction. His unadventurous outlook would frustrate her. Luke needed to pursue someone more like himself. More important, such a fine man deserved someone who loved him—not liked him as she would another brother.

“I don't believe I've ever seen you so quiet.” He gazed into her eyes as they glided past another couple.

“I'm tired from dancing most of the night.”

He nodded. “I suppose you are.”

She forced another smile, glad this man didn't need to talk every minute, which allowed her to keep her true thoughts to herself. Any serious relationship still frightened her after Clarisse's painful loss of her intended.

Add to that her frustrating situation with unwanted beaux, who cared more about her dowry than her, and she had a plethora of reasons for her exhaustion. She was so weary of dealing with men like Jonah, who wouldn't accept her for herself. Even a friend like Luke didn't truly understand her.

The last sincere conversation she'd had with a man had been the day Paul Stuart had assisted her. True, he'd dared to chide her about galloping Belle, but his bold honesty impressed her. Such a confident man would never want a wife as a mere bauble to show off his accomplishments. When she was ready for marriage, she'd thrill at being courted by a man with the qualities Mr. Stuart possessed.

If only he were the son of a prominent landowner instead of the son of her father's overseer.

Jonah stepped up behind Luke and tapped his shoulder, sending Eugenia's pleasant thoughts of Paul Stuart skittering across the room like shattered shards of glass. "May I intrude and finish the dance with this lovely lady?"

Gentle Luke released her hand to the boorish Jonah and walked away, leaving her to seethe in silence. After such a brazen move, the whole county would assume Jonah was courting her.