



Chapter Two

While Eugenia and her mother sat in the ornate parlor of Mama's dear friend, Mrs. Martha Browning, Eugenia swallowed a sigh along with her tea. She would rather fall into an icy pond on the frostiest day in January than be here gazing down at the rose-patterned carpet while Mama and Mrs. Browning visited with each other.

But she must appease Mama. Her mother had been so aghast at Eugenia's unkempt appearance when she'd returned from her ride yesterday that she hadn't noticed the scratches on her daughter's cheek. Eugenia had conveniently lost her balance walking in the rose garden soon thereafter and now had a perfect excuse for the scratches and some stiffness.

If only she'd been too sore to come calling. She hid her frown by looking down to stir her tea while Mama and Mrs. Browning exchanged pleasantries. With any luck, the two older women would soon be chatting away as if she weren't in the room.

A welcome breeze scented the parlor with the tangy-sweet smell of magnolia blooms. The Brownings' tree-shaded front

yard beckoned to her as she gazed through the window edged by blue velvet drapes. Mid May in Tennessee should be enjoyed out of doors.

“I’m delighted you’ve come calling with your mother, Eugenia.”

Mrs. Browning’s words yanked Eugenia’s attention from the gorgeous view outside. “As Mama said, we had to see how you’re faring.”

“I’m doing quite well now.”

Eugenia almost choked on her tea. These couldn’t be the words of the lady who feared contracting every latest illness. “I’m glad you’re feeling so sound.”

“I’ve felt wonderful since Jonah came back from college saying he plans to stay close by.”

The cup in Eugenia’s hand halted in midair. *Jonah? Oh, no.* She wanted to see Jonah Browning as much as she wished to run into a porcupine with extended quills. If given the choice, she’d face the porcupine. Unlike Jonah, the porcupine would offer her some sort of adventure and excitement. She offered a fake smile before sipping her now tasteless beverage.

“I thought I recognized your voice, Eugenia.” Jonah stepped into the parlor as if he’d been summoned.

A black cloud of doom descended on her. She loosened her grip on the handle of her cup, lest she damage the delicate china. As often as Mama visited with her friend, she probably knew when Jonah was coming home. No wonder her mother had been so thrilled when Eugenia offered to come calling with her.

“Could I interest you in a walk outside on such a nice day? That is if you don’t mind, Mrs. Hampton.”

Jonah’s smug smile made her feel as if she were a mouse cornered by a cat.

“Of course not.” Mama’s round face glowed.

Eugenia rose and walked out of the room with him. Before allowing Jonah to escort her outside, she took her time tying on her bonnet, then fluffed the lavender bow just right. What a dreadful way to waste such a beautiful afternoon.

“The weather has been delightful the last few days.” How she wished she could ignore the man assisting her down the front porch steps. “Yesterday was perfect for a vigorous ride.”

His brow furrowed. “I suppose it was.”

Peering into his much-too-serious face, she stifled a laugh. Jonah hadn’t approved of her galloping Belle through the woods when she’d told him about it the last time he was home.

Perhaps she could irritate him enough to make this a shorter walk than he intended. She suspected her dowry was what really attracted such a business-oriented man to her, especially since his older brother appeared to be the preferred son to someday take over their family plantation.

“Has Mother told you of my plans to move to Nashville, now that I’ve finished my studies?”

“No.” She watched a squirrel scamper up a nearby oak tree and wished she could join the creature. How easy to picture herself perched on a branch pelting Jonah with acorns until he ran away.

He spent the next few minutes talking of his plans, not appearing to notice she did nothing but nod or smile as they walked among the shade trees. How boring to be so predictable. Like a horse with blinders unable to see anything else around him, he’d mapped out his entire life and intended to follow that path only. Not one syllable uttered about the warm sunshine or the heavenly perfume of roses blooming nearby.

“Once I have a secure position, I’ll build my own home and

settle down with the right lady.” His thin lips almost turned up into a smile as he glanced at her.

I’ll not be that right lady. Not if she could manage it. And manage she would. She couldn’t imagine enduring a lifetime with a man who didn’t understand or accept her any better than Mama did. Living with her mother was hard enough.

“Oh! Ouch!” Grimacing, she halted and stared down at her foot. “I think I have a pebble in my slipper.”

“May I be of assistance?” He reached over as if he’d take her arm.

“If you’d be so kind as to turn around, I’ll remove my slipper and shake out the rock.”

He did as she asked. Eugenia leaned against an oak tree and removed her right slipper. Just in case he tried to steal a glance her direction, she shook out the pretend stone before putting her shoe back on. “You may turn around now.”

When he looked into her eyes, she placed her weight on her foot and winced. “For such a tiny rock, my foot feels quite bruised. I’m afraid I need to return to the house.”

“I’m sorry you’re in distress.” He offered her his arm.

She pretended to be in too much pain to notice his gentlemanly gesture and limped toward the house.

Not long after Eugenia hobbled into the parlor and sank into the nearest chair, Mama ended her visit. If only they’d managed to leave before the Brownings issued a personal invitation to the ball they planned for Saturday next. What a terrible way to start the month of June.

“Of course, we’ll come.” Mama’s brown eyes shone like a child receiving a new toy.

“May I be so bold as to ask if you’d promise the first dance to me?” Jonah smiled at Eugenia from the gold upholstered chair next to hers.

She struggled to swallow the lump in her dry throat. "I'd be delighted."

After a few more remarks about the ball, Jonah and his mother walked with Eugenia and Mama to the door.

"I do hope that bruise doesn't pain you too much." Mrs. Browning fanned herself as vigorously as if she were the one in agony. "I know how dreadful something like that can be."

Leaning against the wall, Eugenia managed to maintain a serious expression. "I'll be fine. Thank you for your concern."

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THE BRUISED FOOT healed well enough for her to call on Clarisse Matthews, her best friend, by the next afternoon. "You mustn't mention to my mother about our walk today." Eugenia soaked in the sunshine as they stepped off the front porch of the spacious Matthews home.

"Oh?" Clarisse's eyes widened as she glanced over at her.

She told her friend everything that happened at the Browning's house yesterday, including the invitation to their upcoming ball. "I had to remember which foot to limp on the rest of the day."

Shading her eyes from the early afternoon sun, Clarisse grinned. "Shall we walk toward the back yard where we'll be out of the heat some?"

Eugenia nodded. Her friend's smile and sparkling blue eyes looked wonderful. Poor Clare had endured so much heartache since the death of her fiancé. Eugenia wasn't ready to risk such pain for herself. Another reason not to rush into any marriage, even if she had a likeable suitor.

"I wish I could have declined Jonah's request for the first dance, but you know how Mama and Papa adore the entire Browning family."

Clarisse nodded. “Especially Jonah since he’s such a fine prospect for a husband.”

“As long as someone doesn’t mind living with a walking business journal.” Eugenia groaned.

“But that business journal is in line for a good inheritance.” Clarisse playfully pointed her finger at her friend.

Eugenia rolled her eyes. If or when she was ready to think about marriage, she’d like someone to offer her his heart rather than his money or status. She saw nothing wrong with wanting someone to accept her for who she was not what she had.

“I’d much rather discuss the interesting man I met Sunday afternoon.”

“Oh?” Clarisse’s dark eyebrows arched up.

She gave Clare a brief description of the mishap on her Sunday afternoon ride plus a glowing report of her intriguing rescuer. “I don’t know what I would have done if Mr. Stuart hadn’t come along. He’s quite nice and helpful.”

“My brother would agree with you.” Clarisse grinned as she fanned herself.

“He would?” Waiting for more information, Eugenia paused next to a magnolia tree.

“Titus had problems with a carriage wheel while he was in Murfreesboro a while back. Paul is a wheelwright, so he repaired it for him. Titus was impressed with the man’s workmanship and the man himself. They’ve become good friends since then.”

If Titus thought so highly of the man then Eugenia’s impressions of him had to be right. How nice. “Then I can be certain Mr. Stuart will keep my secret.”

As they neared Mrs. Matthews’ fragrant flower garden, filled with a rainbow of colorful blossoms, Eugenia took a deep

breath. She'd rather concentrate on the beautiful verbenas and roses than think about her troubles.

Clarisse slowed her pace. "Do be careful with Jonah."

"Oh, I am." Eugenia stooped to smell a beautiful pink rose in full bloom. If only she could enjoy this wonderful spring day and not be concerned about Jonah.

"Good. Jonah and my brother crossed paths a few days ago. Titus was appalled by the man's statements."

Eugenia jerked up so quickly, she almost pricked her finger on a thorn. Judging from Clare's serious expression, she'd better pay more attention to her friend's words. "What did Jonah say?"

"Since everyone thinks a married man is more stable and reliable, he's decided marriage is a good way to further his business plans. He never mentioned affection, much less love."

"Oh, dear. I do have a dilemma, don't I?" Eugenia slumped onto the black wrought iron bench next to the rose bush.

"I fear so. He wants a refined yet spirited lady." Clarisse sat next to her. "He might as well have called you by name."

"If I can manage to stay on good terms with Mama for the next week or so, then I could have a horrific headache the night of the Browning's ball."

"I won't be surprised if I don't see you there." Clarisse's eyes twinkled.

"If that doesn't work, I'll think of something that will." Eugenia laughed in spite of the problem hovering over her. "I've become quite adept at dodging unwanted suitors. And Jonah is definitely of the unwanted variety."

Eugenia enjoyed her best friend's company as long as she dared stay. Such a friendship comforted and cheered her. Only Clare would warn her about Jonah instead of considering him a wonderful beau.