

# A TROUBLING SUGGESTION

Troubles of the Heart - Book Two

BETTY WOODS



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*To my wonderful husband, Craig, who happily eats so many  
convenience meals and overlooks all the dust bunnies so I can write  
and live my dream.*

*To my daughter, Cherish, who always supports me and never gives  
up on me.*





## Chapter One

1833

*Outside Murfreesboro, Tennessee*

Clarisse Matthews squirmed in her spot on the tapestry couch. She checked the clock on the marble fireplace mantel. Again. The Williams' butler had ushered her and her brother into the parlor ten minutes ago. Why was Luke taking so long to greet them? She'd soon have the pattern of the dark blue and gold carpet memorized. If Luke were as angry as she'd heard, would he even see her or Titus this afternoon?

"Can't you sit still? You're worse than a child." Titus whispered as he shifted to look at her from his place beside her.

"I'm sorry." She released her grip on the note she'd come to deliver.

She should have never agreed to bring Eugenia's letter of apology to Luke. But she'd already put off fulfilling this promise for over a month. Eugenia probably hadn't intended for Clarisse to wait until mid-April. She glanced down and

smoothed the folds of her skirt for the fourth or fifth time, maybe the sixth. Wearing her favorite dress with the embroidered red roses around the neckline, sleeves, and hem should have given her confidence, but it didn't.

Clarisse had been the one to suggest her friend write the letter explaining why she'd chosen the wheelwright Paul Stuart over Luke, the son of a well-to-do planter. Clarisse hoped and prayed she wouldn't regret the entire idea.

"Good afternoon." Luke gave her a terse nod as he strode into the parlor.

Clarisse started and stared up at him. "Good afternoon to you." His sky-blue eyes were as cold as frost on barren trees in January. Perhaps it would have been better if he'd been out checking the fields with his overseer. *Lord, help me.*

Titus rose and extended his hand to Luke. "We've come as a favor to Eugenia."

Luke jerked back as if her brother had slapped him. His disdainful expression hardened at the mere mention of her dear friend's name. "I owe no favors to Eugenia Hampton, and I'll accept none on her behalf."

"Stuart," Clarisse blurted out the word without thinking. "She's Eugenia Stuart now."

Pain washed over Luke's features before he covered it with another scowl. How she wished she'd kept quiet. Luke, of all people, wouldn't want to be reminded of Eugenia's recent marriage.

Luke spun on his heel, looking ready to bolt from the room.

"Please, Luke." Clarisse jumped up and placed her fingers on his sleeve. Heat rushed to her face. She yanked her hand back.

His frown intensified. "The woman played me for a fool."

"She felt terrible about hurting you." Clarisse thrust the

note at him. "Please. Her words have to be much better than any explanation I could make."

"Yes, I'm sure they are, considering the woman's talent for embellishment." His lip curled as his gaze landed on the letter still in Clarisse's hand.

She squared her shoulders. "How dare you insinuate my best friend is a liar?"

"What else do you call a woman who accepts two gentleman callers while secretly meeting with a third man who is nothing more than a common laborer?"

His glare sent shivers through her. She might as well be looking at a stranger instead of the gentle friend she'd known since childhood. "Did Eugenia ever so much as hint she loved you?"

His face paled. He averted his eyes.

"She told me she tried repeatedly to tell you your hope for her love was in vain." Clarisse worked to keep her tone as kind as possible. This poor man had to be hurting more than he wanted anyone to guess, and she hated to be so blunt with him.

"You have every right to be furious with Eugenia." Titus rose and placed his hand on Luke's shoulder. "But we'd appreciate it if you'd do us the favor of allowing our friend to explain for herself. Please."

Luke stared at the two of them for a few moments before reaching for the letter. His hand trembled as he turned the note over and broke the seal. "Please be seated. I'll read this in your presence so you'll know I saw it, then burn it tonight."

Clarisse and Titus returned to the blue tapestry couch. Luke perched in a cushioned chair across from them, his body as rigid as a statue. She wondered if the letter would already be reduced to ashes if the day wasn't too warm to light a fire.

A welcome breeze teased the lace panels at the open

window. Birds chirping outside mingled with the incessant ticking of the clock. Still, Luke sat staring at the letter. How could a one-page note take so long to read?

“No!” Luke leaped to his feet.

Clarisse jumped.

His eyes burning with rage, Luke waved the paper in the air with one hand and pointed a shaking finger straight at her. “How dare you?”

“What?” She pressed against her brother’s shoulder.

“Don’t tell me you have no idea what that woman wrote.” He spoke through gritted teeth.

“Only her intention to apologize. I never read what she penned.” Clarisse gripped Titus’s arm.

Luke shook his head. His eyes narrowed as he continued to study her. “I find such a denial coming from Eugenia’s coconspirator hard to believe.”

Titus shot to his feet. “Eugenia sealed the letter with her personal seal. *You* broke that seal.”

“Your sister has known her friend’s secrets since childhood. I find it preposterous she doesn’t know every word in this letter.” Luke clenched his jaw so tightly that Clarisse wondered if he wouldn’t soon be in pain.

“My sister is not a liar. A true gentleman never doubts a lady’s word.” Titus pulled her to her feet. “We’ll see ourselves out.”

Her brother wasted no time assisting Clarisse out the door and then to their enclosed carriage parked in the circular driveway. She settled onto the cushioned upholstered seat and clasped her trembling hands in her lap. What would she have done if she’d had to face Luke alone? She smiled at her brother sitting across from her. “Thank you for defending me.”

“I could do no less.”



She sighed. "Perhaps this was one promise I shouldn't have kept."

Titus shook his head. "Luke's outrageous reaction to a well-intentioned apology isn't your fault. If he'd listened to what Eugenia tried to tell him, he'd have never pinned his hopes for love on her."

"No, but I do hope this is the last angry person we have to deal with over Eugenia and Paul."

Her brother stretched out his long legs and leaned back against the seat. "Today wasn't as bad as Mr. Hampton's visit."

She shuddered. Eugenia's father had charged into their house, waving his daughter's farewell note to him and raging like a madman. He'd demanded they tell him everything about Eugenia eloping with the son of his overseer. She doubted Mr. Hampton nor anyone else in Rutherford County would ever believe she nor her brother were aware of Paul and Eugenia's exact destination. Even Paul wasn't sure where they'd settle in Illinois.

"I don't regret helping Eugenia and Paul get away." She never would.

Titus grinned. "Neither do I. We suspected there would be consequences, but we did the right thing."

"Yes, we did." She grinned.

His brown eyes twinkled. "I suppose I can rule out Luke as a future brother-in-law."

Clarisse gasped. "I wouldn't marry that cad if he were the last eligible man in the entire country."

Rather than continue any discussion of a future wedding, she glanced down and smoothed an imaginary wrinkle in her skirt. She couldn't think of marrying any man after losing her dear fiancé. She'd die a spinster before she'd betray Garland's memory or the secrets he'd entrusted only to her.



LUKE CRUMPLED the offensive page in his hand while staring at Titus and Clarisse's retreating backs. He'd burn the entire thing as soon as he could get a candle. Waiting until he retired to his room for the night was out of the question.

"Are you all right?" Mother rushed into the parlor, almost out of breath. "I heard you shouting from upstairs."

He ducked his head. "I'm sorry."

"Your father is somehow still napping. What has you so upset?"

"Titus and Clarisse just left. I'll be happy to explain myself."

Mother shook her head. "You shrieked like a wild man at our friends and neighbors?"

"Clarisse insisted on delivering an apology from Eugenia." Bile rose in his throat when he uttered the detested name. Until today, he hadn't spoken the name of the woman who wronged him since he'd learned she'd eloped. His fist closed tighter around the crumpled letter.

Mother's silver-flecked eyebrows formed perfect arches. "An apology caused you to raise your voice so?"

"No." He smoothed the page, then shoved it toward his mother. "Read the last paragraph of this preposterous letter, and you'll understand my anger."

Mother seated herself on the couch with her usual easy graceful motion. Luke paced. Sitting still was impossible. She took enough time scanning the note that Luke was sure she was reading the entire thing. She placed the page on her lap and smoothed out a fold line before rereading the letter. "I'm glad to see a reason for Eugenia's peculiar behavior toward you."

"Peculiar behavior?" He fought for self-control lest he yell

at his mother. "She admits deliberately misleading me, and then she has the gall to suggest I should call on Clarisse because we might be well suited for each other. The woman is nothing more than a liar trying to make excuses for her deception."

His mother sighed as she smoothed another crease from the letter. She had yet to look up from the paper in her lap. "Yes, Eugenia lied to you. But I can't help wishing my dear sister had had Eugenia's courage and defied our father over her arranged marriage."

"You mean Aunt Elaine?"

Mother nodded. Her brown eyes misted with tears when she peered back at him. "Jacques was not the man Papa believed him to be. We had no loyal friend to caution us the way you warned Eugenia about Alton Parker's flaws, so Papa allowed Jacques to take Elaine to his native New Orleans."

Luke closed his eyes as he halted in front of his mother. His aunt's brief and unhappy life was a sad tale of betrayal, but Mother's sympathy for a lying woman irked him. As did the way she chose to ignore Clarisse's involvement with the letter she'd delivered. The woman had to know the letter's contents. Shouldn't his mother side with her son's battered emotions? This so-called letter of apology ripped open his unhealed wounds.

"Look at me, dear."

He obeyed.

She patted the spot next to her. "Come, sit with me."

Again, he did as she asked.

Placing her hand on his sleeve, she stared into his eyes. "Let go of your anger. Do as God commands. Forgive your friend for the wrong she did to you. She was desperate."

His friend? He clamped his open mouth shut. How could

his mother defend the woman who had wronged her own son?  
“Does desperation excuse deception?”

“Not completely, but laying the blame solely on Eugenia isn’t fair.” Her grip tightened on his arm.

“Who else should I blame?” Luke struggled to keep his voice calm. What was Mother implying?

“Yourself.” Mother poked him in the chest with her slender finger.

He jerked away from her. “Me? That’s outrageous.”

“How many times did your father and I warn you that Eugenia might hurt you instead of learning to love you as you wanted?” Mother’s voice softened.

Luke swallowed hard. Despite the warm love so evident in his mother’s compassionate eyes, chills radiated down his spine. His parents had cautioned him against hoping the woman would love him someday more times than he cared to remember. He’d assumed they didn’t want her for a daughter-in-law, but his mother’s sympathy for the woman belied that supposition.

“I should check on your father.” Mother rose. Luke stood.

She patted his arm. “I pray you’ll learn from this painful episode.” Her eyes shone with a mischievous glint as she placed the letter in his hand. “Don’t ignore Eugenia’s suggestion about calling on Clarisse. Eugenia could be speaking more truth than she realized.”

Luke stared at his mother’s back as she left the room. The only truth that female had taught him was how women said one thing and did the opposite. He had no intention of forgetting that fact.

The conniving woman who had to have known the entire contents of the note she’d handed him was another perfect example of why he’d never again entangle himself romantically with any female.