



## *Chapter Two*

Women's voices from the parlor greeted Clarisse as soon as Titus opened the front door. He rolled his eyes upward. She'd hoped to slip into the house without Mother noticing they'd been gone. But they would have to walk past the ladies to get to the other part of the house or the stairs.

"We'd be delighted to come to your ball." Mama's voice drifted into the entryway.

Not another ball. Clarisse longed to declare her true feelings about attending parties of any kind. But Mama hadn't understood her at all when she'd tried to explain she'd never forget Garland. She'd never find another man like him.

The giggle following Mama's announcement had to belong to Marissa Parker. "I'm so glad you'll be there."

Titus brushed every speck of dust from his hat before placing it on the hall tree. Clarisse took her time untying her bonnet. If only Mama understood how much her children dreaded attending any function at the Parkers' house now. They all preferred to spend as little time as possible with

people who had so little regard for their dear friends, Eugenia and Paul.

"I hope Clarisse will be home soon. I'd so like to see her."

Marissa's lilting voice assaulted Clarisse's ears. No one in the Parker family would ever set foot in this house again if they had any idea the three younger Matthews had been the ones to help Eugenia escape a forced marriage to Marissa's brother.

"We might as well make our appearance," Titus whispered.

She took one last wishful look at the front door before squaring her shoulders and walking down the hall to the parlor.

"There you are. Jenette said you'd gone for a short drive and should be back soon." The direct look Mama shot their direction said she'd want a good explanation for the carriage ride after their guest departed.

"My dear wife knows me well." Titus gave Jenette an adoring gaze before making a slight bow toward Marissa, who occupied the couch with their mother. "If you'll excuse me, ladies. I need to look at some papers in my office."

*Coward.* If only she could escape so easily. Clarisse seated herself in the chair next to Jenette while deliberately avoiding her mother's stare. "We couldn't resist a drive on such a lovely day."

"The very reason I couldn't resist riding over to see you." Marissa grinned in Clarisse's direction.

Clarisse forced a smile in return. Marissa's words and blue riding habit dredged up bittersweet memories of Eugenia riding over to call on Clarisse. How she missed her dear friend.

Another giggle interrupted Clarisse's thoughts. "The weather has nothing to do with the real reason I wanted to deliver my invitation in person." She leaned toward Clarisse and Jenette's chairs. "Jonah Browning and I are to be married soon. I couldn't wait to tell you my good news."

"How wonderful." Mama beamed at Marissa before turning to give her daughter a wishful glance.

"Thank you." Marissa looked from one woman to the other. "I must ask you not to tell anyone else. Papa will make the announcement at the ball."

"We'll be happy to keep your wonderful secret." Jenette fanned herself. "Thank you for sharing with us first."

Marissa clapped her hands together like a delighted child. "I had to. Jonah and I met at your Christmas party last year."

"I wish you and Jonah every happiness together." Clarisse hoped her words didn't sound as stiff as her pretend smile felt.

She wished them happiness but not for the reasons everyone else in the room might think. How wonderful another eligible man was no longer on Mama's list of marriage prospects for Clarisse. If those remaining bachelors would propose to other women, she would be left in peace with her memories of Garland and the secrets he'd entrusted only to her.

"I'm sure we'll be very happy." Another giggle accompanied Marissa's words.

Their guest droned on for the next hour about Jonah's good fortune in Nashville and the house he'd started building. Clarisse couldn't help but grin at how Eugenia would have rejoiced with her that both Marissa and Jonah would soon be an entire day's drive away from here. Thankfully, Marissa was none the wiser as to why Clarisse smiled as their guest continued jabbering.

The instant the oak door closed behind Marissa, Mama glared at her and Jenette before either could escape the entry hall. "Now, dear daughters, the real reason for the short drive no one told me about. Just before our friend arrived, I sent for the carriage only to have the butler tell me my carriage was in use."

Jenette clasped and unclasped her hands. "Telling you the truth in front of our caller would have distressed her. Shall we return to the parlor?"

"Shall I soon have an explanation?" Mama's tone matched her stern expression. She whirled and marched across the polished wood floor toward the parlor. She claimed the beige upholstered chair across from the couch and watched Clarisse and Jenette as they settled there beside each other.

Clarisse sat up straight, returning her mother's piercing gaze. Being treated like a child needing to confess some misdeed was totally uncalled for. She and Titus had attempted to do the right thing. "You wouldn't have been happy with us if we'd told you what we were doing."

"And why is that?" Mama tapped her fingers on the armrest.

"While I was reading this morning I found a letter Eugenia had somehow slipped inside my Bible. It was an apology she wanted delivered to Luke. I felt I should honor her wish. Titus came with me since I couldn't call on Luke alone." Clarisse hoped her shaded version of the truth would be acceptable. She *had* kept the letter hidden in her Bible until today.

Mama's eyes widened. "I'm glad Eugenia had the decency to apologize. How is Luke?"

"He's still angry—furious, actually. The note wasn't well received." Clarisse gripped the arm of the couch. Thoughts of Luke's fierce countenance and loud voice still disturbed her.

"Can you blame him? I'll never understand why Eugenia eloped with a common wheelwright instead of marrying a good planter like Luke Williams or Alton Parker."

*For love.* Clarisse longed to blurt out the words, but challenging her mother would be useless. She doubted Mama's sympathy for Eugenia's father or Luke and Alton would ever change.

Mama rose and fixed them with a serious almost glare. "In the future, you will inform me about any such foolish errands beforehand. Even adult children shouldn't keep secrets from a parent. Your dear father would be quite displeased."

"Yes, Mama." Clarisse and Jenette answered in unison. Whenever Mama brought their late father into the conversation, she was beyond displeased.

"Good. I need to speak with Jasmine about supper preparations." She spun on her heel and marched out of the parlor.

"I'm sorry," Jenette whispered after Mama disappeared. "I couldn't think of anything to tell her."

Clarisse squeezed her sister-in-law's hand. "She'll be fine."

Jenette's blue-gray eyes held doubt. "I hope you're right. I don't ever want her to suspect Paul and Eugenia were married in our barn with our help while she slept."

"The only other people who can reveal that secret should be settled somewhere in Illinois by now." Clarisse gazed down and smoothed her skirt.

No one in her family had any idea how many secrets she held in her heart. She missed her fiancé as much now as she had when he'd died almost two years ago. The more everyone insisted Clarisse should set aside her love for Garland, the tighter she gripped her memories and their secrets.