

Chapter Three

Angelique ensured she was on time for breakfast the next morning. Another almost-late appearance like yesterday's supper would not be good. Aunt Evelyn valued punctuality as much as a clean home. She walked into the dining room not long after her aunt and uncle. Nathanael was the last one to arrive, but still before the appointed seven o'clock.

Again, she ended up seated next to Nathanael. Something she'd remedy once Luke and Clarisse were not sitting across the table from them. Despite the way everyone accepted him, she'd rather be more cautious about him.

She strolled out of the dining room with Clarisse after breakfast. "Would you like to go for a ride?"

"I'd like that. I don't get to ride much in Murfreesboro." Clarisse's bright smile emphasized her quick assent.

Angelique wondered if her friend would be so enthusiastic about accompanying her today if she told her where she wanted to ride. Not wanted but rather needed to go to face the bad memories she didn't want to wrestle alone. She'd voice her thoughts later when no one else was around.

The men soon left to check the fields and allow Uncle Douglas to show his prized land and crops to Nathanael. Her uncle would have a grand morning doing what he loved. With Luke along, she and Aunt Evelyn wouldn't worry about him staying out too long or doing anything that might overtax him. Nathanael had best learn to watch over his uncle for however long his stay might be. The least he could do for someone kind enough to shelter him from the calamity he'd left behind.

Not long after ten, Angelique and Clarisse changed into their riding habits. They soon guided their mounts down the driveway as they had done since they'd met last year. "I'm so glad your aunt doesn't mind if I borrow her saddle and mare when Luke and I come here."

"So am I." Angelique sucked in a deep breath before saying more. "I couldn't muster the courage to take the trail to your family's house until a month or so ago. Would you ride with me to the meadow we so enjoyed last spring? I intended to suggest we go there that awful day when Mr. Parker attacked us. I haven't managed to go back yet."

As if deciding how to reply, Clarisse stared off toward the brick pillars at the end of the driveway. Perhaps remembering how disastrous that October day had been for Luke, Angelique, and her. But today, no maniacal man bent on having his imagined revenge on Luke would be assailing them. Luke had been forced to shoot their foe in self-defense. Angelique shuddered at the horrendous memories that had kept her from riding at all until recently.

"Are you sure you're ready for that?" Clarisse peered straight into Angelique's eyes.

"Only if you are. I've been praying about it and mentioned going there to Aunt Evelyn this morning. She says replacing the bad remembrances with pleasant ones would be good for both of us. Do you think so?"

Clarisse's shoulders tensed as she tightened her grip on her reins. "Yes." She exhaled a slow breath. "Mother was wise. A beautiful day like this is perfect for turning sad recollections into happy ones."

"I was sure you would understand." This wouldn't be the first time Clarisse had worked to face painful memories since she'd witnessed her former fiancé's fatal riding accident about three years ago. This dear friend's past courage would help Angelique be strong enough to ride to the meadow once more.

They said little as they took the trail. As if by mutual agreement, they reined in their horses at the first sight of their destination.

"I needed this. I had not returned here either." Clarisse scanned the lush meadow.

Pink, yellow, and white flowers abounded as they had last spring. Butterflies and bees flitted in and out of the blooms. The nearby babbling creek flowed as it had the first time they'd come.

Angelique lifted her face to the morning sun, soaking in the serenity. She'd not allow the memories of her rides here with the duplicitous Mr. Parker to ruin this special place, despite him being the one to show it to her the first time. "The flowers still dance in the breeze."

"They do. Should we see if the trees arching over the creek are still inviting us to ride along there?"

Angelique grinned as Clarisse repeated the words she'd spoken the first time Angelique had seen this spot. "Yes. Let's do." She urged her horse on again.

Clarisse did the same. She pointed out two chattering gray squirrels running up the tree ahead of them. "Not everyone wants us here. But it's still as pretty as it's always been."

"It is." And truly was. Angelique glanced over at her friend.

“Beautiful, since we’re reclaiming this place as the blissful one it should be.”

“Yes, we are. We should come here with Luke one day.” Clarisse’s brown eyes shone as they usually did whenever she mentioned her husband.

“I’m sure he’d like that.” Her cousin deserved better memories of this place too.

“He would. And Nathanael. He should see more of our beautiful Tennessee than cotton fields or Murfreesboro while he’s here.”

The trail narrowed. Angelique took the lead, concentrating on ducking a low-hanging branch threatening to dislodge her top hat. Clarisse came alongside her as they rode into a wider spot. Angelique focused her attention on the turtles sunning themselves on a log in the creek.

“Ah, silence. Do you not want to include Nathanael?” Clarisse’s tone was gentle as she waited for Angelique’s reply.

Angelique stared at the bend ahead of them.

“He insists he was wrongly accused and had no idea the woman he was seeing was engaged to be married.” Clarisse guided her horse around a fallen log. “He deserves the benefit of the doubt.”

“Perhaps. But I’ll have to see his actions match his words.” She reined in her mount, forcing Clarisse to do likewise. “How can you be so sure of someone you don’t know? What if everyone is as wrong about him as I was about Mr. Parker?”

Clarisse rested her hands on her saddle horn. “Nathanael is family. Vouched for by his own father, who my dear father-in-law trusts implicitly. Which means I trust Nathanael’s story and the man himself.”

Angelique shook her head. “I’ve had too much experience with well-practiced liars who could sound as sincere as good

men like Uncle Douglas or Luke. I won't be deceived by another rogue. Never again."

"I understand, with all you've been through. But will you allow him to prove himself to you?"

Angelique sighed. Since her entire family was so enamored with their visitor, she'd have no choice but to give Nathanael too many unwanted opportunities. She wished for his July departure as much as he did.

"I'm so glad all your furniture came in time for you to move into your house." Angelique changed the subject to a more pleasant topic as she snapped the reins to resume their ride.

"We have all we'll need. What's more, Mother wants to give me her piano. She says her stiff fingers don't allow her to play now, and she wishes me to enjoy the instrument." Clarisse beamed. She could not have received a better compliment than the gift of one of Aunt Evelyn's prized possessions.

"She did?"

"Yes. God has given me the very best mother-in-law."

"And He gifted me with the best aunt."

Clarisse nodded. "We are more blessed than either of us could have imagined. Such loving people who've taken us both in as their own."

Angelique halted her horse as she studied the clear water rippling over the rocks in the creek bed, waiting for Clarisse to use her in-laws' approval of her to urge Angelique to accept Nathanael in the same manner. But her sweet friend rode on in silence as they rounded the next bend. "I suppose we should return so you can visit with someone other than me."

"Let's ride a while longer. I have so little time alone with you. If we're a bit late, Mother can be aggravated at us both, for a change, instead of just you." Clarisse tossed a mischievous grin at Angelique.

"And Uncle Douglas will make excuses for us," Angelique

laughed. But her light mood dimmed as two riders strode toward them.

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NATHANAEL COULDN'T MISS Angelique's stiff posture as he and Luke drew near. He would have stayed at the house, but his relatives had insisted he should see Angelique's favorite meadow in all its spring glory.

"Ladies," Luke called to them as he and Nathanael approached.

"Hello." Clarisse glowed as her husband rode up next to her. "I mentioned to Angelique a few minutes ago you should come here soon with us."

"And here I am." His eyes sparkled as he gazed at his wife.

Nathanael had hoped to experience such joy for himself with a special woman one day. He would have, too, had Eileen not used him to make her inattentive fiancé jealous. He was in no hurry to be used by any woman ever again.

"Nathanael, I'm glad you came too." Clarisse interrupted his melancholy thoughts.

"Thank you. I see why it's one of your favorite places to ride."

"We shouldn't linger, or we won't have time to change before lunch." Angelique urged her horse down the trail, leaving Luke and Clarisse to follow with Nathanael to bring up the rear.

Add "brusque" as another way to describe her. Which he didn't mind despite her lack of manners. Luke had remarked the instant they caught sight of the ladies how Clarisse's wine-red riding habit suited her black hair and brown eyes to perfection. Nathanael's attention had been drawn to the red-haired woman in the dark green habit who rivaled the flowers

bobbing in the grass. The one whose bright smile faded as soon as she'd seen him.

Why he so desired to redeem himself with a woman who disdained him for no reason made no sense. Luke had explained the significance of this place as they'd ridden here. Angelique had deep hurts, but her baseless dislike made sympathy for her difficult. Somewhat. After his fiasco with Eileen, he understood why Angelique hesitated to trust him. But he didn't understand why he longed to gain her trust.

"I hope you're enjoying this bit of Tennessee." Clarisse glanced back at him as they rounded a curve in the trail.

"I am. I can see why Luke insisted I accompany him here."

Luke chuckled. "You deserve a better reward than this for being such a good listener while Father told you everything about growing cotton you'll never need to know. Not to mention, why your father should have come with him and our grandfather to Tennessee instead of staying in Charleston."

"My father was already so enamored with my mother by then, he wouldn't leave her. He's never regretted staying in South Carolina."

"As successful as your family's shipping company is, I understand." Luke swatted at a low-hanging spider web.

"Shouldn't we turn back?" Angelique reined in her mare as the trail widened, forcing everyone else to halt.

Luke frowned, then pulled his pocket watch from his waistcoat. "We still have a little time to ride."

Clarisse guided her horse alongside Angelique. "Luke and I should be settled into our house in time to host your birthday supper."

"I'd like that very much." Angelique flashed what appeared to be a genuine smile at her friend.

What would he have to do to receive such a token from her? Nothing. Her clipped words and poor manners shouted

her opinion of him. Allowing her the distance from him she craved was the sensible thing to do. Yet the challenge to change her opinion of him was more irresistible than it should be.

“We’ll only be ready for a simple dinner, no ball or other festivities. But we’d be delighted to have your birthday be our first celebration in our house.” Clarisse tightened the slack reins in her hand as if ready to resume riding.

“That will be wonderful. I’m honored you’d host anything for me so soon.” Angelique’s broad grin included Luke and Clarisse. “Thank you so much.”

If she could be happy with such a small affair for her birthday, the woman could think of someone other than herself. Judging from her conversation with Aunt Evelyn last night about the ball they planned, he’d assumed Angelique expected every occasion to be grand.

Add “grateful” to her description. One positive quality. Why was he keeping track of personality traits for a woman who wouldn’t be unhappy if he left tonight? A woman he should ignore as thoroughly as she did him.

Instead, he should focus on the one good thing about a small dinner. The upcoming ball might be the only lavish social event he’d have to endure before leaving here. A meal with friends wouldn’t afford his aunt an opportunity to introduce him to the local ladies she’d hinted at while talking last night about the upcoming ball.

Angelique and Clarisse supplied most of the conversation for the remainder of their ride. Convenient, since he had little to add to any of the topics they were interested in. Once they walked back into the house, the ladies went upstairs to change clothes.

They lunched at a leisurely pace. Nothing in this place appeared to hurry or rush. So different than the hectic times he

and his father had some days meeting with customers, boat captains, or bankers.

“Before you and Clarisse go to Hopeton, I’d like to go over the ledgers with you.” Uncle Douglas walked out of the dining room with Luke.

“We plan to leave in about an hour, so I have time for that.” Luke followed his father down the hall.

Angelique went upstairs to visit with Clarisse while her friend gathered up her belongings. Aunt Evelyn went to check on a servant who had not felt well lately. With nothing to do, Nathanael went to his temporary room. He’d make use of the small desk and write a brief letter to his parents to send back to Murfreesboro with Luke.

Best to take the opportunity to post a letter when he could. He’d written his family a few days ago to inform them he’d arrived safely. Telling his parents how everyone in Tennessee was faring would give him a good excuse to write again. The more often they heard from him, the more they would be reminded he intended to return to Charleston as soon as possible. If not for honoring his parents’ wishes, he might not have left at all.

Having an entire hour to compose one letter rarely happened. He was more accustomed to jotting off business correspondence in a hurry. Country life would take some getting used to. He folded the finished letter before he heard Clarisse and Angelique go downstairs. He carried the page with him. Luke stepped out of Uncle Douglas’s office as Nathanael reached the hall.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d post this letter to my parents.”

Luke nodded. “Of course.”

Aunt Evelyn also handed a letter to Luke. “I wrote to everyone this morning telling them how delighted we are to

have Nathanael here and that he can stay as long as necessary.”

Nathanael swallowed a groan. The strained look washing over Angelique’s face suggested she did likewise. “I appreciate your hospitality.” He fought to keep his tone pleasant.

“Who knows, we might turn you into a planter.” Uncle Douglas’s eyes sparkled.

How to contradict him without being rude? “I had an enjoyable time learning about growing cotton. I’ll be much more appreciative whenever I see cotton bales sitting on the wharf ready to load on a ship.”

“We’ll see.” His uncle’s expression sobered.

Not a convincing tone, but his uncle didn’t sound upset. A minor success.

After Luke and Clarisse left, Uncle Douglas and Aunt Evelyn went upstairs to rest. Angelique excused herself to talk to the cook and check on supper preparations. Nathanael wandered into the library, not sure how else to spend the remainder of the afternoon.

An unexpected variety of books greeted him. Shakespeare, Walter Scott, James Fenimore Cooper, and others. Whatever his choice, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d been able to read uninterrupted for so long. He decided on a volume of Shakespeare’s plays. Unaccustomed to so much silence and solitude, he left the sliding door open.

An hour or so later, Angelique walked past, carrying needlework. He’d read as long as he could stand it. Against his better judgment, he walked into the parlor a few minutes later, where Angelique had settled herself on the couch.

“If the lack of activity this afternoon is typical, what does one do with his time here?” Other than attempting not to stare at the woman before him. Judging from yesterday’s pale

orange dress and this bright yellow now, Angelique must like vivid colors. Observations he shouldn't be making.

"Do?" She peered up at him. "I've checked on supper and seen that the other chores are being done the way Aunt Evelyn likes. Now I'm embroidering a sampler of Clarisse's favorite Bible verse to give to her for their new house."

He glanced toward a checkerboard sitting on a table across the room to avert his gaze from her. "Do you play checkers or chess?"

"I prefer checkers." She ducked her head and resumed her stitching as if dismissing him.

"Chess is more stimulating to the mind, don't you think?"

"Perhaps. Board games are for rainy days." Her attention remained solely on her project.

"Then could I interest you in a walk outside in the shade since there is neither a breeze nor a refreshing rain this afternoon?"

She stabbed her needle into the cloth. "My interest lies in the sampler in my hands."

"I find it hard to believe a woman from a bustling town like New Orleans would choose to sit in a stifling parlor staring at a sampler for an entire afternoon over an opportunity for lively conversation."

"I prefer the staid routine at Oakridge to anything in New Orleans." She jerked on her thread hard enough he wondered she didn't damage the fabric.

"People determine if the discussion is robust, not the location. Am I wrong to assume you're a good conversationalist?"

"My cousin has to have told you more than enough about me." Her terse tone signaled she wasn't happy with being the topic of conversation.

"Actually, Aunt Evelyn mentioned at supper last night,

it's been almost a year since you arrived from New Orleans. I'm a businessman. I'm accustomed to paying attention to details."

She blew out her breath as she set her embroidery hoop on the corner table next to the couch. "If I humor you with a short walk, will you allow me to work on Clarisse's gift uninterrupted?"

If he weren't so bored, he'd refuse her begrudging offer despite being the one to initiate it. "I'll repay you with all the solitude you desire after a short stroll. A bargain too good to resist for someone with so much to do."

A smirk spread across her face as she rose. "A bargain as long as you don't mind hauling a bucket of water from the well to the flower garden."

"I'm quite capable of such a feat." He followed her to the hat rack by the door. Why she'd asked him to carry water instead of telling a servant to do it, he'd try to discover. But for now, he welcomed anything to occupy his time.

After she tied on her bonnet, he followed her to the back of the house and out the back door.

"This tin pail sitting by the well should hold all the water I need."

He drew the water for her. "You haven't said what you want the water for."

"I have rose bush cuttings taking root in the flower garden." She turned to walk to the roses as soon as he finished filling the pail.

Not far from the gazebo in the center of the garden, she paused and pointed to green-leafed sprigs. "Aunt Evelyn is helping me grow new roses from the cuttings. I hope to soon have yellow, pink, and red bushes started for Clarisse and Luke's yard."

"I'm sure they'll appreciate that."

She knelt on the gravel walk in front of the cuttings. “They’re growing nicely since I planted them.”

No Charleston woman would be on her knees checking plants of any sort. He closed his open mouth as she rose to her feet, then dusted off her dress. Add “unpredictable” to the growing list of her characteristics he shouldn’t be observing.

“You planted these?”

“I did. As you mentioned, one needs something to do here.”

Her twinkling eyes signaled she might be teasing him or taunting him. Which, he wasn’t sure. “Yes, one does. What sort of activities do you suggest for me?”

“You can start by gently dousing each plant with water all around.”

He did as she directed. “What else do you suggest?”

She gazed directly into his eyes. “Humor Uncle Douglas the way you did this morning. See he doesn’t overtax himself. That will make you quite useful for however long you’re at Oakridge.”

“But judging from today, that won’t fill my afternoons.”

She shrugged. “A man purported to be as clever as you will devise some sort of activity.”

The verbal joust he was and wasn’t enjoying now was the first possibility of something to do that crossed his mind. But finding a way to make it a regular occurrence might be more frustrating than fulfilling.