

Chapter Two

“June is readying Nathanael’s room.” Aunt Evelyn beamed as she delivered the words Angelique dreaded to hear while they walked through the flower garden. “I hope Luke and Clarisse bring him here soon.”

Angelique shivered despite the warm early May afternoon. How she hoped Nathanael’s delayed arrival meant he’d stay in Charleston instead of running from the scandal he’d caused. Perhaps he’d determined he should go somewhere farther away than Tennessee. Either possibility would be fine with her.

Oblivious to Angelique’s silence, her aunt paused to check Angelique’s favorite yellow rose bush. “This one withstood our unusually hard winter better than some of my other flowers.”

“It did.” Angelique stooped to smell the fragrant blooms. “I picked the first bouquet for my room from this bush.” A much more pleasant topic to discuss than the man she hoped never arrived.

“I remember. Hard to believe you will have been here a year at the end of this month.” She patted Angelique’s shoulder. “Our special blessing from God.”

“Thank you. I can’t tell you how much it means to be loved and wanted. To have a real home.”

“You’re more than welcome, dear. We should have a party. Perhaps a ball. We could celebrate the anniversary of your arrival. Nathanael’s coming as well.”

“That would be lovely.” The reply her aunt expected. Festivities of any kind were the furthest thing from her mind as long as Nathanael Williams might still make his appearance.

“That’s it, once Nathanael is settled in, we’ll have a ball to celebrate both of you. We could introduce him to everyone that way.”

“We could.” *Not.* Her beloved aunt and uncle shouldn’t be harboring a spineless rogue avoiding a duel over a woman’s honor, particularly with Uncle Douglas’s frail health. She focused on the flowers lest Aunt Evelyn guess her contrary thoughts.

“You can present your cousin to the young people as Luke did for you.”

Angelique nearly pricked her finger on a thorn as she jerked up. “I shan’t introduce him as my cousin.” With tremendous effort, she converted her glare to a smile as she struggled to keep her tone civil and light. “That would confuse everyone.” Nathanael was her uncle’s nephew and no relation to her, the daughter of Aunt Evelyn’s late younger sister. No one would call him or think of him as her cousin, save her precious aunt and uncle. She wouldn’t have it.

“As you wish.” Aunt Evelyn’s blue eyes twinkled as they walked into the gazebo. “The two of you should be fast friends by your birthday. If I remember correctly, he’s about four years older than your nearly-nineteen years.”

Angelique put on another pretend smile as she seated herself on the white iron bench next to her aunt. Only her real cousin Luke and his dear wife Clarisse knew her true opinion

concerning the disgraced man whom the entire family had agreed to harbor until time away from Charleston could repair his besmirched reputation. The more everyone had tried to defend the man as unjustly accused, the more he sounded like her late philandering father or the local rogue who had deceived her and broken her heart a few months ago.

Until the others understood the risk they were taking with a man they'd never seen, she'd be the one to watch over her aunt and uncle just as Luke and Clarisse had done for her.

"I do hope this pleasant spring weather lasts." Aunt Evelyn interrupted Angelique's dreary musings.

"A mild summer would be most welcome too." Excessive heat would be hard on Uncle Douglas's weak heart, but saying the obvious truth out loud would distress her aunt.

"Also much better for celebrating your birthday the end of next month. We—"

"Missus, Amos says Master Luke's carriage is comin' down the drive and's almost to the house." A young servant girl bounded into the gazebo, halting in front of the bench.

"Wonderful." Aunt Evelyn got to her feet. "I do hope Nathanael is with him."

Angelique matched her steps to her aunt's slower pace as they walked toward the back door. She was in no hurry to see if their guest had arrived. By the time they entered, voices drifted from the parlor at the front of the house. Aunt Evelyn paused to tell a servant to bring refreshments to the parlor.

A male voice Angelique didn't recognize sent prickles up and down her spine. Nathanael must have come despite all her prayers to the contrary. She steeled herself as she followed her aunt into the parlor.

"And here are my other ladies." Uncle Douglas rose from his spot on the tapestry couch. "He's finally here, dear wife."

The man who must be Nathanael stepped up to Aunt

Evelyn, made a slight bow, then took her hand and kissed it. “I appreciate your hospitality more than I can say.” His rich baritone voice filled the room.

“You’re more than welcome.”

Angelique tucked both hands into the folds of her skirt. She’d rather touch a slimy fish straight from a New Orleans wharf than have this man’s lips brush one of her fingers. His dashing good looks would not sway her. Other women could swoon over his intense brown eyes and near-perfect features framed by wavy, collar-length brown hair.

“And you must be Angelique.” He bowed again but thankfully didn’t reach to touch her. “I’m pleased to meet you after hearing so much about you.”

What did he know? Neither Luke nor Clarisse would disparage her, but a fleeting smirk crossed his face, suggesting he might know something about her she wished he didn’t.

“Pleased to meet you.” She struggled to keep her expression and voice pleasant while looking past him to the empty gold chair by Clarisse. The chair closest to the door, if she could think of a way to leave and spend as little time as possible with the man who shouldn’t be here.

Aunt Evelyn joined her husband on the couch. Angelique availed herself of the chair she’d spied. Luke claimed the other one near his wife, leaving Nathanael to sit on the other side of Aunt Evelyn.

“I assume you and Clarisse are spending the night? June has your room ready.” Aunt Evelyn directed her attention to her son and daughter-in-law.

Luke nodded. “We’re almost completely moved into our house and have time to visit. So we’ll stay here tonight, then go to the Matthews’ tomorrow afternoon.”

“Wonderful.” Aunt Evelyn clasped her hands together like a delighted child.

“It is. We’ll go to church with everyone Sunday, and leave that afternoon for home.” Clarisse’s smile included everyone in the room.

Despite the good news about moving into their newly finished house, Angelique worked to hide her disappointment at having only pieces of tonight and the next three days with her best friend. While rejoicing Luke’s parents now accepted him practicing law in Murfreesboro instead of focusing his entire attention on the family plantation.

“We should have someone get Nathanael’s luggage from our carriage before supper.” Luke turned to his parents. “As well as ours.”

“Of course.” Uncle Douglas rang for a servant.

“I’ll tell Jasmine we have three guests.” Angelique sprang from her chair and made a hasty exit before anyone had a chance to send a servant out to the kitchen.

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NATHANAEL STRUGGLED NOT to shake his head as the brown-eyed beauty rushed from the room. Judging from his aunt’s gasp, Clarisse’s wide eyes, and Luke’s slack jaw, she’d surprised everyone.

Which, from what Luke had told him about Angelique, must happen often. Luke had called her impetuous and headstrong, and warned him she feared he’d be a hindrance instead of a help to Uncle Douglas. Clarisse had tempered her husband’s remarks with an explanation of why her friend was so distrustful, especially of men. According to Clarisse, if he could win Angelique over, he’d find her to be a loyal, caring friend. Whether he succeeded or not didn’t matter. He’d stay here long enough for the scandal Eileen had caused to die down and not a day longer if he could help it.

“Luke and I should show you around Oakridge in the morning.” Uncle Douglas interrupted Nathaniel’s thoughts.

Nathanael twisted to see around his aunt and smile at his uncle. “I’d like that, sir.”

Everyone visited together until the servants deposited his trunk and Luke’s and Clarisse’s bags in the proper rooms. Angelique did not return. Her absence probably emphasized how little she wanted him here.

Aunt Evelyn rose. “I’ll show you to your room. We can all freshen up some before supper.”

Nathanael and the others stood too. “Thank you.” He followed his aunt into the hall. She showed him the dining room before escorting him upstairs.

“I hope you find this to your liking.” She opened the door to a good-sized bedroom. “I had June put on a more masculine quilt.”

“Everything looks very nice. I appreciate you accommodating me.”

“You’re most welcome. We’ll dine at five. I’ll leave you to settle in.”

“I’ll see you at dinner.” He walked around his temporary room to stretch his legs. A small writing desk sat in a corner near the door with a washstand and mirror in the other corner. The windows on either side of the bed afforded a lovely view of the back lawn when he parted the curtain of one window, and an even lovelier view of Angelique making her way toward the back door. Her auburn-red hair made her hard to miss, even from the second story. Her pale orange dress gave her the appearance of a flower gliding across the well-kept lawn.

He didn’t close the curtain until she was out of sight. Not staring at such an attractive woman was almost impossible. Winning her over might prove an interesting diversion if he intended to stay here more than a month or two. Perhaps he’d

settle for redeeming himself. Good practice for what he'd have to do once he returned to Charleston. His old habits with the ladies needed to change. He could begin again here.

Rather than send for a servant, he unpacked his trunk and arranged his clothes in the dresser and armoire. Since his parents only had need of a housekeeper, cook, and driver, he was probably more accustomed to tending to his needs himself than his hosts were.

As he set his Bible on the nightstand beside the bed, doors opened and closed as the various family members left their rooms. He laid his shaving razor and brush on the washstand before heading to the dining room. By the time he walked in, the butler had seated Aunt Evelyn and Clarisse. Luke took the chair next to his wife. Uncle Douglas seated himself at the head of the table, leaving two empty chairs across from Luke and Clarisse.

Not what he'd prefer, assuming Angelique would soon occupy the seat beside him. Unless she changed her mind about him. He'd dealt with more than enough people in Charleston who didn't want to be around him.

"Please take either of the empty chairs." Aunt Evelyn nodded in his direction.

Nathanael chose the chair across from Luke. Allowing Angelique to carry on a conversation with Clarisse more easily should be to his advantage.

Angelique remained noticeably absent as everyone placed their napkins in their laps. She breezed into the room as the clock on the fireplace mantle in the parlor finished chiming five times. Add "near lack of punctuality" to the description Luke had given him of her. If not for Clarisse's sympathetic words, he'd conclude Angelique's beauty did not reach into her heart.

After the butler seated Angelique, Uncle Douglas wasted no time saying grace. He finished his prayer by thanking God

for Nathanael's arrival. Such a shame he was more welcome here than in his own home at the moment. His father feared the possible damage Nathanael's undeserved problem might do to his business as much, if not more, than the harm done to Nathanael himself. He'd been labeled a coward by some for avoiding a duel. Leaving town a few days later had likely sealed the gossips' assumption. Especially since he doubted people would accept Father's explanation of Nathanael going to help an uncle in bad health.

Aunt Evelyn passed a platter heaped with slices of ham to Clarisse. "Angelique and I were discussing a ball at the end of this month to celebrate the anniversary of her arrival as well as your coming, Nathanael."

"No need to go to such trouble for me." His banishment to a country home no one could find was nothing to revel in. But he'd not express his true thoughts to his gracious hosts who had taken him in.

Uncle Douglas chuckled. "Planning any party will be no trouble for Angelique or my wife. They'll have a day set in time for Clarisse to invite her family before she and Luke go to Hopeton tomorrow."

"Then I'll look forward to the upcoming festivities." Nathanael reached for his water goblet to moisten his dry throat.

"Speaking of Hopeton ..." Angelique smiled across the table at Clarisse as she paused from buttering her roll. "Aunt Evelyn and I called on Jenette and your mother last week. Millicent awoke from her nap before we left. Your niece is an adorable baby."

Clarisse beamed. "Yes, she is. She's growing so quickly, she's doing something different every time I see her."

Angelique's quick change of subject signaled—what? Her displeasure at planning a ball to celebrate his coming? He

didn't want to be in Tennessee any more than she wanted him here. Nothing would prevent him from returning to Charleston as soon as possible.

"She's a delightful baby. And we should decide on a day for our ball so you can tell your family about it tomorrow." Aunt Evelyn returned her attention to Angelique. "The last Saturday of this month would give us almost two weeks to plan."

"Yes, it would." Angelique directed her gaze straight at Luke, "You and Clarisse should come and help me introduce Nathanael to our friends and neighbors. Invite Mr. and Mrs. Glynne to come too. Your boss is almost like family now."

Luke shook his head. "Mr. Glynne and I have important work to do between now and then, and Clarisse is still busy setting things aright at our house. I can't promise we can return so soon."

Clarisse paused from cutting up a bite of ham. "But we will do our best to be here."

"We'll plan for you at supper that night. Invite your family to come too." Aunt Evelyn reached for her water goblet as if the matter were settled.

"I'll do that." Clarisse's eyes sparkled. Her husband's did not.

"This will be an excellent time to invite the people who recently bought the Hampton plantation, as well as the new family in the Parkers' house. Angelique and I can call on them soon." Aunt Evelyn's smile didn't dim, despite the serious look in her niece's eyes.

As the meal progressed, Luke and Clarisse provided details of the house they'd recently moved into. Aunt Evelyn talked of the upcoming ball as often as possible, mentioning more people she intended to invite.

His aunt and Angelique would be busy next week making calls unless someone sent a servant around with some of the

invitations she intended to offer. The less he saw of Angelique, the happier he might be since she had such a low opinion of him. Additionally, the more people at the ball he dreaded, the less he'd see of her that night as well.

Never in his twenty-three years had he deliberately planned to ignore any beautiful woman. The gossips in Charleston would be aghast to know his thoughts.