

SMALL
TOWN
GIRL

A Novel

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To my mother, Olga, and her sisters,
Evelyn, Margaret, and Bill

1



It wasn't a good thing to be in love with the man your sister was going to marry. Kate Merritt had no doubts about that. Especially when you were helping that sister button up her wedding dress and adjust her veil. Still the truth was what it was. The trick was making sure nobody ever guessed it.

"Wow!" Kate stood back and gave Evie a big smile. "You look like you just stepped off a magazine cover."

Evie made a face as if she didn't believe Kate and turned back to peer into the oval mirror attached to their mother's old dresser. A wavy spot in the old mirror bent her reflection out of shape.

Evie stuck out her lower lip and blew air up to lift her red curls off her forehead. Leaning closer to the mirror, she carefully patted them back into place. "The first thing I'm going to buy for our apartment is a new mirror. Not something passed down, but a new one right out of the store."

"Wouldn't you rather have a radio? Something both you and Mike could enjoy." Kate grabbed a folded newspaper off the dresser to fan Evie.

It was extra hot for September. Another reason Evie was cross. Evie had planned everything out to the last detail for a perfect wedding day. She'd picked the last Sunday in Sep-

tember, because it never rained much in September and it wouldn't be too hot inside the Rosey Corner Baptist Church no matter how many people packed the pews to see their young preacher get married. And now the weather on September 28, 1941, the day she'd picked to be perfect, had betrayed her. That morning she'd sat in the middle of the bed and cried for a half hour while thunder rumbled in the sky outside. Finally Kate warned her how people might talk if she showed up at the altar with bloodshot eyes.

Evie leaned closer to the mirror and rubbed her finger across her nose, then touched a flecked spot on the mirror. "Mike has to look in a mirror to comb his hair, doesn't he? And if we had a radio, he'd be listening to war news all the time. President Roosevelt telling us how bad things are. One minute the president is promising to keep us out of the war and the next he's talking about drafting more boys. That's just too depressing."

"But true. You know the Germans have surrounded Leningrad now. They're cutting off the supply lines to starve the Russians out."

Kate didn't like thinking about the war either, but that was all the talk at Merritt's Dry Goods Store these days. Hitler's blitzkrieg. The Nazis occupying France and Poland. The Red Army holding against Hitler's forces. Ships going down. It was always a relief when Graham Lindell came in the store talking about how many hits Joe DiMaggio was up to now, just so they could think about something besides the war news.

Evie didn't care about baseball either. She hadn't thought about anything except having a perfect wedding day and being a perfect bride for weeks.

"For heaven's sake, Kate, don't ruin my day with war talk. We can't do a thing about what's going on in Russia. And don't they have millions of soldiers in that Red Army they're always talking about? All I'm asking for is a nice little wedding." She

raised her arms and lifted her veil to cool her neck. “How can a piece of material with a thousand holes in it be so hot?”

“You don’t have to wear the veil. Your hair looks great. As always.” Kate pulled the veil out away from Evie to fan her neck.

She really was beautiful. She’d always been the pretty sister with her wavy red hair and clear blue eyes. Kate had plain brown hair that didn’t curl unless she pin curled it, and her eyes jumped from green to blue to gray according to what color she was wearing.

And according to her mood, or so Carl Noland was always telling her. Everybody, including Carl, thought they were a couple. Everybody except Kate, that is. She should have told him months ago there was no chance of that ever being true, but it was easier to let him hang around and hope he’d lose interest. He was a nice enough guy, and she’d known him forever. Some of her friends thought she and Evie should have had a double wedding. Carl had a good job with the post office. Kate was already nineteen. So why wait? Except Kate was never going to say yes to Carl Noland. Never.

The only man she’d ever wanted to say yes to was less than an hour away from marrying her sister, just as soon as Evie quit finding things to complain about and headed for the church. Kate had been in love with Mike Champion since the first Sunday he’d come to fill in at the church after Grandfather Reece had a stroke. That was five years ago now.

Way long enough to know the whole idea was hopeless. And she did know it. Had known it since she was sixteen. By then, Mike and Evie had been dating for a year. By then, she’d cornered Mike leaving the church on a Sunday night before he drove back to Louisville and told him straight out that she loved him. He hadn’t exactly laughed, but she had the feeling he wanted to.

“Ah, Kate. How sweet.” He put his arm around her shoul-

ders. “But trust me, it’s just a crush. Nothing serious. You’ll forget all about me when you get a little older and meet the man the Lord has in mind for you.”

Kate had been glad it was past twilight so Mike couldn’t see how her face was flaming. Or how her heart was breaking. “You won’t tell Evie, will you?” she managed to whisper.

“Tell her what?” He had tightened his arm around her shoulders for a few seconds. “You’re my sister in Christ, Kate. The Bible says it’s good to have brotherly love in your heart.”

Even now after so many years, Kate flushed when she thought about that conversation. She flapped the paper at herself to cool her face. At least the heat trapped in the house from all the baking for the wedding reception would keep Evie from guessing the real reason for Kate’s red cheeks. Evie stepped away from Kate so that the veil settled back in a soft cloud down over her hair and neck. “No, no. A girl has to have a veil to be a real bride.” She swished her skirt back and forth. The whispery sound of silk on silk didn’t bring the smile it usually brought to her face. Instead she looked near tears again as she appealed to Kate. “Do I really look pretty?”

“No, Evie, you don’t look pretty.” Kate threw her hands out wide. “You look gorgeous. Absolutely, completely gorgeous. Mike is going to melt when he sees you coming down the aisle.”

Evie hugged Kate. Carefully, so as not to wrinkle either of their dresses. “Thank you, Kate. I know you wouldn’t tell me that if you didn’t think it was true.” Evie moved back to give Kate the once-over. “You’re looking pretty gorgeous yourself. I’m glad we decided on the aqua-green material. It makes your eyes look very mysterious.”

“That’s me. Mysterious Kate.” Kate smoothed down the chiffon skirt of her dress. She doubted she’d ever find an occasion to wear it again. It was way too fancy even for church. A few years ago there would have been no way she would have ever gotten a dress to wear one time only, but Evie wanted a

wedding like the ones she read about in the magazines. She'd refused to set a date until she got a job and saved enough money to buy a ready-made wedding dress.

At least she'd agreed to let their mother make Kate's dress. Mama had been sewing for months to have new dresses for all of them. The ones for Tori and Lorena were much more practical than Kate's. While they didn't have to worry about every penny the way they had during the Depression years, that didn't mean they had money to throw away on dresses that would never be worn again.

Even Kate's. Her mother had looked at the flowing skirt and poufy sleeves and said maybe Kate could wear it to a dance sometime. Kate had never been to a dance, but to make her mother laugh, she'd grabbed her and waltzed across the room. She thought about doing the same thing with Evie now, but Evie wouldn't laugh.

She was smiling as she raised her eyebrows at Kate. "Mike's buddy, Jay, certainly seemed to think so when he was here last night. Carl better watch out."

"Yeah, yeah," Kate said. "But if anybody's mysterious, it's Jay Tanner."

"He's not much like our Rosey Corner boys. That's for sure," Evie looked back at the mirror to adjust a curl peeking out of her veil. "But you have to admit he's cute."

"Cute?" Kate made a face at Evie in the mirror. "Kittens are cute."

"Okay. Handsome then. In a devil-may-care way. I'll bet he has a girlfriend for every day of the week."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Kate agreed.

Jay Tanner was good-looking with his wavy black hair and deep brown eyes. He'd breezed into the house with Mike the night before as if he'd known them forever instead of just meeting them for the first time. No doubt he was a charmer. In no time flat, he had Tori laughing so hard she was holding

her sides, Lorena singing with him, and Kate's mother talking poetry. He tried flashing his eyes at Kate too, but she didn't see any need borrowing trouble by flashing her eyes back. One thing about Kate. She had always been sensible. Except when it came to being in love with her sister's soon-to-be husband.

Kate dipped a washcloth in the pan of ice water on the dresser and dabbed Evie's arms with it. She lifted up the veil and let the rag rest on the back of Evie's neck for a few seconds. "Maybe that will keep you cool until you say 'I do.' Speaking of which, we'd better be moving on to the church."

"You do think you can start Mike's car, don't you?" Evie gave her a look as she slipped on her white shoes. "Maybe we should have made Daddy stay here with us until we were ready."

"A lot of good that would have done." Kate rolled her eyes. "Dad knows practically nil about cars. He'd rather walk any day. You know that. But don't worry. Mike has shown me how to start it plenty of times, and if the battery won't turn it over, I'll just give it a crank or two. Easy as pie."

"Some pies aren't all that easy. I don't want to be late for my own wedding." Evie looked at the clock on the dresser. "In less than an hour I'm going to be Mrs. Mike Champion."

"The preacher's wife."

"You don't have to say it like you don't think I'll be good at it. I can be nice to people." Evie stuck her bottom lip out in a little pout. "I *am* nice to people. Every day."

"I didn't say you weren't."

"Yeah, but I heard what you were thinking. You can't hide anything from me. We're sisters, remember? But you're wrong. I'll make a good preacher's wife as long as that preacher is Mike. You're just jealous because you're not getting married."

Kate turned to drop the washrag back in the pan of water so Evie couldn't see her eyes and guess how close she'd come to the truth. Kate kept her voice light. "I'm not in the marrying market."

“Every girl is in the marrying market. And Carl is a nice boy. You could do worse.”

“So everybody tells me.” She picked up the rose bouquet their aunt Gertie had fashioned for Evie by picking every last rose off her bushes and those of several neighbors. “Here. Your turn first. Let’s go get you married.”

Out at the car, Kate helped Evie arrange her skirts before she carefully shut the door. As she hurried around to the driver’s side, a familiar thrill shot through Kate. She loved to drive, to feel the tires turning under her, getting her somewhere. Anywhere.

She hit the starter button and the engine made a weak attempt at turning over. The second attempt was even weaker. “Guess I’d better give it a couple of cranks.” Kate pushed open the door and climbed back out.

“Don’t you dare get grease on your dress,” Evie called as Kate went around to the front of the car.

“I’ll be careful.” Kate turned the crank a couple of times, but the engine still wouldn’t turn over. She dabbed at the sweat on her forehead and got out to try again. This time after she turned the crank, she told Evie to hit the starter and pull the choke. That was a mistake. The engine did start up, but then it sputtered out as the smell of gasoline filled the air.

Kate ran to push in the choke. “You can’t leave the choke pulled out.”

“You didn’t tell me that.” Evie glared at Kate as if she’d caused the car to die.

“I guess I should’ve. Anyway it’s flooded now. We’ll have to let it sit for a few minutes before we try again.”

“We can’t just sit here.” Evie sounded near tears. “I’ve got to get to the church. I knew we should have made someone stay here to help us start the car.”

Kate hated it when Evie was right. Especially about something like this. “We can walk. It’s not that far.”

“Walk?” Evie was getting unhappier by the second. “In my new shoes?”

“Okay. Then we’ll just wait. They can’t start the wedding without the bride. Somebody will come get us.” Kate climbed back into the seat. She didn’t bother shutting the door. “At least the car’s in the shade.”

“Listen to you. Little Miss Sunshine.” Evie went on in a singsong voice. “And the two Merritt sisters had a nice little chat under the big oak tree while everybody else in Rosey Corner sat packed in the church, waving their fans and wondering what was holding up the wedding.”

“I’m glad you’re mad at me.” Kate peeked over at Evie.

“Why would you be glad of that?” Evie frowned.

“First off, if you’re mad, you won’t be crying and messing up your face for the wedding. Second off, it’s natural. Feels just the way it’s supposed to between you and me. One or the other of us has been mad at the other one half our lives.”

Evie twisted her lips, but she couldn’t keep from smiling. She gave up and laughed out loud. “You’re right about that.”

Kate reached over and touched Evie’s hand. “I’m going to miss you so much.”

“I’m not moving to California. I’m just getting married.” Evie turned her hand over and squeezed Kate’s hand.

“I know. But it’ll be different. It’s already been different with you away at school and now working in Frankfort.” Kate swallowed hard. Here she was worried about Evie tearing up and instead she was.

“Don’t you dare cry, Kate Merritt. You have to be happy for me.” Evie shook Kate’s hand a little. “You have to.”

“I am.” Kate managed a smile. She was happy for Evie. Her heart seemed to be divided right down the middle. Happy on one side for her sister. Crying on the other side for what could never be.