



# To Love and Cherish

✦ BRIDAL VEIL ISLAND ✦

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BETHANY HOUSE PUBLISHERS

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers  
11400 Hampshire Avenue South  
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438  
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of  
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Peterson, Tracie.

To love and cherish / Tracie Peterson and Judith Miller.

p. cm. — (Bridal veil island)

ISBN 978-0-7642-1010-5 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-7642-0887-4 (pbk.)

I. Miller, Judith, 1944— II. Title.

PS3566.E7717T64 2012

813'.54—dc23

2012000970

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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Cover design by John Hamilton Design

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To  
Lori Baney

With thanks for your friendship  
and encouragement.

—Judy





## CHAPTER 1

### BRIDAL VEIL ISLAND, GEORGIA MAY 1898

Melinda Colson swallowed the lump of frustration lodged in her throat. Her knuckles scratched against the wicker picnic basket as she tucked a cloth napkin around the woven sides. The lid dropped with an unexpected clatter, and she looked up to meet Mrs. Mifflin's surprised gaze.

Her disappointment swelled, and a heavy weight settled in her stomach. "But I understood we weren't departing Bridal Veil Island for another two weeks." Her palms turned damp as she awaited Mrs. Mifflin's response.

"That was our plan, but I've received word that my dear friend, Ida McKinley, will be arriving in Cleveland. We must return home to prepare for her visit." Mrs. Mifflin patted her perspiring upper lip with a lace-edged handkerchief. "There's so much to accomplish before she arrives. I do wish she would have given me a bit more notice."

Melinda's mouth gaped open, and she loosened her grip on the rigid basket handles. "The president's wife is coming to visit you?"

"Indeed she is. Ida has been asked to speak at the commencement exercises at Miss Sanford's school in Cleveland. That's where we first met and became friends. Of course, she was Ida Saxton back then." The older woman pursed her lips and tipped her head slightly. "I'm sure I told you that when you first came to work for me."

Perhaps Mrs. Mifflin had mentioned her connection to Mrs. McKinley, but if so, it hadn't registered at the time. After all, when Melinda first arrived at the Mifflin home, she'd been overwrought with grief. Her thoughts had been focused on her parents' untimely death aboard one of their shipping vessels rather than on Mrs. Mifflin's childhood friends.

"When is she due to arrive in Cleveland? We'll need sufficient time to close the cottage for the season." *Cottage!* A twelve-room two-story Queen Anne home designed by an architectural firm in New York City could hardly be called a cottage, but Mrs. Mifflin enjoyed referring to it as such.

"No need to worry. I've made arrangements with Mr. Zimmerman, the resort superintendent, to have some of the maids from the clubhouse come and take care of closing our lovely Summerset."

"There's no need to go to the expense of hiring maids. I'd be more than happy to remain and close the cottage. Besides, you'll know that everything has been properly attended to if I'm here." Melinda hoped the older woman would heed her suggestion. She didn't want to leave Bridal Veil—not now. And if things went as she hoped, not ever.

Mrs. Mifflin frowned and shook her head. "My dear! How could I possibly get along without you? I need you to fashion my hair and take care of arrangements for the tea. As it is,

we'll be hard-pressed to finish all the details on time. You know there's never before been anyone else I could depend upon as my companion."

Melinda disliked being referred to as Mrs. Mifflin's companion, but that was the title the matron had used when she'd interviewed and hired Melinda after her parents' death. At the time, Melinda hadn't argued against the title. Back then she had been in dire need of the income. But perhaps all of that would change today.

"Besides," Mrs. Mifflin continued, "the dues Mr. Mifflin pays to belong to the Bridal Veil Island consortium cover such needs. That was one of the reasons we agreed to join. The island offers a pleasant diversion from the harsh Cleveland winters while also paying strict attention to the necessary services we require. We've even arranged to have the cottage painted later this summer. Of course, I don't expect you to realize all of the benefits we enjoy as members."

Mrs. Mifflin dabbed her face again and startled as the clock chimed the hour. "Goodness, but I do wish there were more time."

Time!

When Melinda glanced at the clock, her pulse quickened. She needed to hurry. If things went as she hoped, Evan Tarlow, the Bridal Veil Island gamekeeper, might surprise her with a proposal at their picnic this afternoon.

*But not if I don't get there soon.*

The thought was enough to force her to action, and she tightened her hold on the basket handles. This was her afternoon off, and she needed to make good use of these few free hours. "I have a picnic planned for this afternoon, but I'll be certain to have time to pack your trunks this evening."

Mrs. Mifflin's smile faded like a summer bloom in need of rain. "I would think you'd be willing to forgo your afternoon

off, Melinda. A picnic with one of the clubhouse maids is of little importance. Especially when you consider *my* current needs.”

Melinda forced a smile. “You needn’t worry.” She tried her best to understand the older woman’s anxiety. “I promise I will have your needs cared for.” She patted the woman’s arm. “I’ve never failed to have your things ready, no matter the occasion.”

Mrs. Mifflin gave a sniff as though she might begin to weep. “It’s just that this is more important than anything else. I find it rather selfish of you to put your own desires first.”

Early on, Melinda had learned that Mrs. Mifflin believed everything should center on her needs. And although Melinda prayed for the matron each day, she’d not seen much change in her behavior. If Melinda’s father had been able to keep his freighting business solvent and insurance on the ships paid, she wouldn’t have been forced into these circumstances. With no means of support, any thoughts of marriage to a wealthy husband had disappeared when her parents died at sea. The estate attorney had been brief when he’d set Melinda and her brother, Lawrence, adrift in the uncharted seas of financial misfortune.

But perhaps the insolvency had been a blessing in disguise. During the winter months at Bridal Veil Island, a kinship had developed between Melinda and Evan. His romantic interest had been the high point of each season, and she hoped his attention would lead to a proposal of marriage. By society’s standards, Evan didn’t have a great deal to offer, but Melinda didn’t use the monetary standard of the world to assess a suitor. She’d learned a good heart could be trusted more than money. And Evan possessed a truly good heart. Also, it didn’t hurt that he was delightfully handsome.

Melinda hid her smile and lifted the basket from the table. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Mifflin, but I’m unable to change my plans. I know that you would want me to be a woman of my word,

just as the pastor encouraged us last Sunday. Remember, you told me to always be sure to keep my promises.” She turned and rushed toward the back door, giving a wave over her shoulder. “I won’t be long.”

“I find your behavior unacceptable, Melinda.” When she continued down the steps, Mrs. Mifflin called after her. “Don’t be even one minute late or you’ll see a decrease in your wages!”

Melinda hurried down the walk. If Evan proposed, she would no longer need to worry about Mrs. Mifflin or the possibility of having her wages decreased.

Her spirits soared as she neared the secluded grassy spot that provided a perfect view of the Argosy River. Two years ago she and Evan had declared this spot their special piece of Bridal Veil. Not that they could actually claim anything on Bridal Veil, for it all belonged to the investors who had purchased the land, but this place afforded them moments of privacy that Melinda found so vital to her own well-being.

A breeze blew the honey-blond curls surrounding her oval face, and she could feel the heat rise in her cheeks as the sun beat down with more intensity than she’d expected. How she disliked her fair complexion that splotched bright pink with only a bit of sunshine. She should have worn her straw-brimmed hat.

“Over here, Melinda!” Evan appeared from behind one of the low-hanging branches of a live oak and waved her forward, his broad smile enhancing his already good looks.

Her throat caught at the sight of him. His broad shoulders and sturdy appearance caused her heart to quicken, yet it was the kind, gentle spirit beneath Evan’s ruggedness that had won her heart. He loved this island and he’d taught her to love it, as well. Just like Evan, she’d learned to appreciate the beauty in every inch of this place he called home. Now she prayed it would become her home, too.

“I brought a blanket for us to sit on.” He pointed toward the ground beneath the tree.

She smiled as their eyes locked, and Evan’s look embraced her with warmth that pulsed through her body. She wanted to blurt out the fact that she was expected to depart in the morning, but she decided to wait for the right moment to tell him. There would be no perfect time to deliver such news, but she didn’t want to greet him with Mrs. Mifflin’s edict.

“I hope you’re hungry.” After the two of them sat down on the blanket, she lifted the napkin from atop the basket. “I have your favorite—fried chicken.”

He rubbed his palm on his stomach and immediately helped himself to a drumstick. “Umm, this is delicious. I hope you’re not too hungry. I think I could eat every piece myself.”

Melinda moved the basket closer to him. “You’re in luck. My stomach couldn’t hold a thing at the moment.”

“I hope it’s not because you’re ill. Harland said we could take a couple of the horses riding this afternoon.” His brows furrowed and he hesitated a moment. “If you feel up to it.”

Evan’s boss, Harland Fields, was charged with supervising the group of men employed as gamekeepers, groundskeepers, and landscapers. In addition, the older man was expected to oversee all of the grounds improvement projects on Bridal Veil.

“I’d love to go riding on the beach.” Although they both loved the river view from the clubhouse side of the island, Melinda particularly took pleasure in riding along the ocean on the east side. Frequently she and Evan would walk the two miles to the other side to look for shells and listen to the water lap against the shoreline. Other times, when the horses weren’t being used by guests, Harland would let them take the animals out for exercise. At least that’s what he called it when nosy guests inquired about the hired help enjoying a ride along the shore.

Evan wrapped up the remaining two pieces of chicken and tucked them back into the basket before grabbing an apple and shining it on the front of his shirt. “I saw a couple of loggerhead turtle nests near the end of the island. Would you like to ride down there and have a look?”

“Yes, that would be wonderful.” She tried to sound excited, but her response fell flat.

The apple crunched as Evan bit into it, and a dribble of juice trickled down his chin. Using a corner of her napkin, Melinda wiped the moisture from his face. Her heart fluttered as he covered her hand with his and held it close to his chest. “Something’s wrong, Melinda. I can tell. Either you’re sick or I’ve done something to make you unhappy. Which is it?”

No longer able to continue the masquerade, Melinda wilted. “Just before I left the cottage, Mrs. Mifflin announced that we’re departing for Cleveland in the morning.”

A frown creased Evan’s forehead. “But you’re not due to leave for two more weeks.”

“I know.” Melinda detailed what little she’d learned about Mrs. McKinley’s approaching visit. “I asked to remain behind and help close the cottage, but Mrs. Mifflin wouldn’t hear of it. She says I’m the only one who can properly style her hair and make arrangements for the visit.” Melinda sighed. “From the way she talks, you’d think she’s expecting me to remain in her employ for the rest of my life.” She hoped her last comment would nudge Evan to act. Otherwise, come tomorrow morning, she’d be crossing the Argosy River to the mainland and catching a train back to Cleveland.

“Mr. Mifflin hasn’t said anything about canceling the hunt he’s planned for tomorrow. Maybe she’s confused.” While Evan folded the blanket, Melinda arranged the remaining items in the basket. He grabbed the handle and tucked the blanket beneath

one arm. She could see he was doing his best to sort fact from possible fiction. “I’m guessing that Mrs. Mifflin has spoken out of turn. I don’t think there’s any reason for concern.”

“Believe me, Evan, there is every reason for concern. I know Dorothea Mifflin, and you can be sure I will be on a train back to Cleveland tomorrow. Unless something or someone stops me.”

“Evan!” Harland approached them sitting astride a trotting chestnut mare. With a deft hand, he pulled back on the reins and the horse fell in step alongside them. “Mr. Mifflin canceled the hunt he had scheduled for tomorrow.” He tipped his hat to Melinda. “I’m surprised Mrs. Mifflin let you have your afternoon off.” The older man smiled down at her before turning his attention back toward Evan. “You need not reschedule Mr. Mifflin’s hunt. He tells me they’ll be leaving the island tomorrow. ’Course, I’m thinking Melinda already gave you that piece of news.” He settled back in the saddle. “You two still planning to go riding?”

“Sure are,” Evan said. “I’m going to leave this picnic basket and blanket inside the stable while we’re gone.”

Harland nodded and leaned around the horse’s head. He gave the mare a pat on the neck. “One of you can take Anna Belle. The old girl’s ready for a good run.” He removed his foot from the stirrup and swung down from the horse. “You two make the most of your time together. It’s going to be a long time afore you see each other again.”

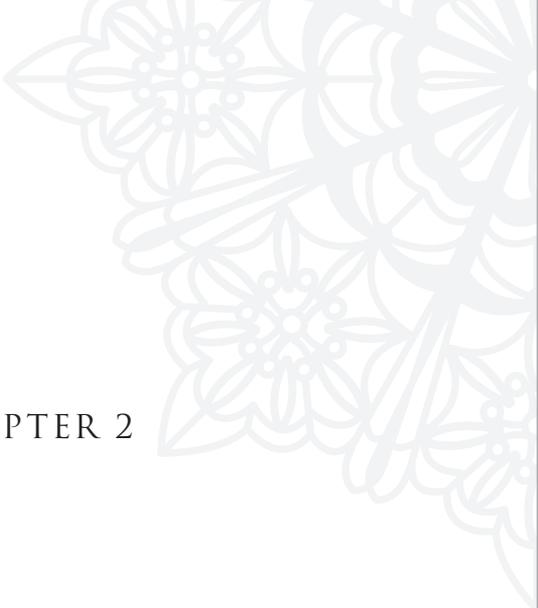
Melinda’s skirt caught between her legs as she whirled around to face Evan. “Maybe not. We haven’t had a chance to fully discuss what we might do.”

The older man arched his bushy eyebrows. “I’m not seeing there are many choices for the two of you. Once the Mifflins have made a decision, I don’t think they’ll be changing their minds.”

Biting back her thought that there was at least one option available, she permitted Harland to help her astride Anna Belle

while Evan went into the stable for his horse. Not until they were alone would she broach the topic of remaining at Bridal Veil. She would need to be delicate in her comments. Although Evan had spoken of his love for her, he'd made no mention of marriage. But marriage followed a declaration of love, didn't it? Surely he had already considered a future with her and would see this as the proper time to propose. After all, she could hardly propose to him.





## CHAPTER 2

The wind tugged at Melinda's hair as their horses galloped down the beach toward the south end of the island. Bridal Veil Island was similar to other resorts designed to entice wealthy investors. Life on the island was intended to be relaxing yet luxurious, and the scenery played an important role. Melinda had always loved their time here—more because of Evan than the beauty of the island, but she found that quite appealing, as well. On any other day, she would have been eager to see the loggerhead nests, but today the sea turtles were of little importance to her. Evan pointed toward a spot not far away, and they slowed the horses to a trot.

“Let's ride over to where there's plenty of wild grass, and the horses can graze.”

Melinda followed his lead but remained astride Anna Belle until Evan dismounted his own horse and circled around to help her down. She loved the safety and warmth of his broad hands as they held her waist and lowered her to the ground. She tipped her head back to meet his eyes. “Thank you, Evan.”

“My pleasure. Our time together is the best part of my day.” A golden glint twinkled in his brown eyes, and she wished the moment would go on forever. He grasped her hand. “Over here.

So far there are only two nests, but in a few weeks there will be many more.” His voice brimmed with undeniable excitement.

Melinda’s desire to remain with him on Bridal Veil washed over her like a tidal wave, and she forced back the threat of tears. How she longed to share in his pleasure today, as she so often had, but unless they developed a plan for their future together, she would experience little joy this day.

He gestured toward the nests and turned to look at her. “What’s wrong? Sea turtle nests are nothing to cry about.” His words mingled with the high-pitched cawing of the seagulls along the shore, and he stepped closer. He pulled her to his side. “Tell me why you’re so sad.”

The pain in her heart had become so heavy that it seemed to sink to the depths of her stomach. Didn’t he understand that unless something was done, she would leave tomorrow morning? Perhaps she needed to clarify, but she had expected so much more from him. That he would sweep her off her feet in a magnificent embrace and tell her he’d never let her out of his sight again; that he would hold her close and speak of his undying love; that he would propose marriage and her long days as Mrs. Mifflin’s companion would be over.

“I’m sad because I don’t want to leave Bridal Veil. I don’t want to leave you.” She waited for his response and silently prayed, *Please, Lord, let him hear my despair and say the words I long to hear.*

“I know. Every year you say you don’t want to leave, and every year I wipe away your tears and tell you I will write and that it will be time for you to return before we know it.” He smiled and looked at her as though his words should resolve her sadness. “Everything will be fine.”

“No it won’t!” Several startled terns took wing as she shouted her reply.

He watched the birds take flight. “No need to shout. I can hear you.”

“I’m sorry.” Her stomach churned as she turned her back toward him. She immediately felt guilty for her harsh response. “This early departure took me by surprise, and I feel as if my world is falling apart. I don’t want to leave you, Evan. I lost my parents, and now I feel as though I’m losing you, as well.”

He cupped her cheek and wiped away a tear. “My sweet Melinda, I know how hard the loss of your parents has been on you, but the miles separating us aren’t permanent. The time will pass quickly, and soon you’ll be back on the island, and we can be together again.”

“But for how long?”

Melinda noticed the perplexed look in his eyes. It was clear he didn’t understand that she loved him and wanted to make her home on Bridal Veil Island, that she longed to work alongside him and be a true helpmeet. Had he not learned that much about her during the four winters she’d lived on the island?

Perhaps the clubhouse maids were correct. They’d often spoken about a man’s inability to understand a woman and her feelings. But Melinda had always thought Evan was different. The two of them could talk about everything. At least that’s what she had thought.

Each winter they spent all of their free time together, either walking or riding the fifteen-mile length of the island, always eager for new adventure. She’d learned the history of the island, the animals and plants, the birds and sea creatures—and she’d loved each moment.

During her first winter on the island, Evan had described the ebbs and tides of the ocean, never making her feel foolish for her many questions. On other visits, he’d told her stories of the pirates and Civil War soldiers who had rowed into the

narrow inlets under cover of night, using the island to hide their booty or deliver supplies to Confederate soldiers. He was a wondrous storyteller, and she'd listened to him for hours, enjoying each exciting tale. Other days, the two of them had walked barefoot in the sand and laughed when the lapping ocean licked at their feet.

"Wait here." Evan ran toward the water's edge, leaned down, and picked up a shell. He returned and reached for her hand. He placed the shell in her palm. "Your favorite, an angel-wing shell." He grinned at her. "I think it's one of the biggest we've found."

Melinda nodded, unable to push out a thank-you, the shell a reminder of their many explorations. She rubbed her finger across one of the sharply beaded ribs. The simple act flooded her mind with unbidden memories that had provided endless fun and, for her, so many new experiences.

Evan had shown Melinda the beauty of the marshlands as the sun shimmered across the wet grasses, and when he learned she'd never caught a fish, he taught her—and how to bait a hook, as well. With dogged determination, he'd taught her to paddle a canoe. A smile tugged at her lips as she recalled nearly tipping the canoe on more than one occasion. There were times when she believed he knew her thoughts before she spoke them and that she knew his.

But that wasn't true today. Today she didn't think he knew her at all.

Evan grasped her shoulders and turned her until they were face-to-face. His dark eyebrows were almost meeting over his eyes as he stared at her. "I understand you don't want to leave—especially since you were to remain another two weeks. But arguing during the little time we have left makes no sense, does it?"

"I don't want to argue, either, but this isn't just about staying another two weeks."

Evan stared at her as though she'd spoken to him in a foreign language. "If it isn't about leaving early, then what is it about?"

"It's about remaining here on the island—forever. About never leaving."

He tipped his head back and shrugged. "Well, no one stays on this island forever. You know that. This is a place where the wealthy come to hide away from the world. Problem is . . . you can't hide forever."

Her frustration mounted to new heights. He was being so practical, and while that was a quality of his she loved, right now she wanted to scream. Maybe she needed to speak in short, concise sentences until it became crystal clear.

"Please listen to me, Evan." She looked deep into his eyes. "I do not want to return to Cleveland—not now, not ever. I want to live the remainder of my life here on Bridal Veil Island."

He tipped his head to the side. "Stay here? What would you do?"

*I could be your wife!* Oh, how she wanted to say those words to him. Instead, she did her best to remain calm. "I could get a job. Maybe at the clubhouse. Don't they need someone to—"

He shook his head. "It's closed up once all the guests return home. Any jobs here on the island during the summer months are filled—by men."

"But Emma is here year-round." Emma and Garrison O'Sullivan had been living on the island year-round from the time Garrison had been hired to oversee care of the horses and livestock.

"You're right, but there are days when I know she'd rather be anywhere but on this island, especially during the heat of summer when the air is so heavy you can hardly take a breath and everything feels clammy, even the clothes you put on first thing in the morning. Besides, the only reason Emma is here is because she's Garrison's wife."

Melinda let his final words hang between them like a swinging pendulum. Either he didn't understand that marriage was exactly what she wanted, or his declaration of love had meant nothing to him. She didn't want to believe Evan's profession of love had been lightly given, yet could he be so dense on only this one occasion?

Disappointment swept over her as they walked back to the horses. Evan had promised to return the animals by four o'clock so they could be groomed and fed.

She could think of nothing else to say, no other way to make clear what she had hoped would have been a spontaneous reaction from a man in love.

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Evan leaned forward to help Melinda as she mounted her horse, his mind whirring with confusion. From the day he'd first met Melinda, he'd thought her near perfect. He'd laughed when the other fellows said they didn't understand women. "You should meet my Melinda," he had replied. He and Melinda had always understood each other, their words as clear as the blue skies over Bridal Veil and their thoughts as interlaced as the strong cotton twine of a fisherman's net.

Until now.

Melinda was searching for a remedy he couldn't give her. Surely she realized he couldn't hire her to fill some nonexistent position. He didn't have the authority to hire anyone. And had there been a job available, where would she live? The only acceptable place would be with Garrison and Emma O'Sullivan, and they didn't have a lot of extra room for anyone else in their little cottage. Of course there was Emma's sewing room, but that wasn't the point. Having another person move into your home would change things. Emma might be agreeable to such an arrangement. She might even like having another woman

around to keep her company during the summer months. But Garrison O’Sullivan was another story—he was a man who didn’t like change. Moving into the O’Sullivans’ home would be impossible, and it was the last place where he wanted to see Melinda.

By morning he was sure Melinda would accept the fact that there was no choice but to return. Still, his heart ached at the tears in her eyes. He loved her and didn’t want to see her so unhappy. He’d have to write many letters so that their time apart would pass quickly.



The following morning Evan arrived at Summerset Cottage. Though not the largest cottage on Bridal Veil, no expense had been spared in furnishing the home or landscaping the grounds. Bridal Veil gardeners had been employed to plant and care for the azaleas, hyacinths, ferns, and palms that surrounded the wrap-around porch and glassed sunroom, and Evan thought the men had done an excellent job.

The practice of naming homes had begun with Bridal Fair, the original mansion constructed on the island. That home had belonged to the Cunninghams, who had lived there long before the island had been purchased for a resort. As Evan had heard it said, Victor Morley, the developer, had been a good friend of the Cunningham family. When they fell upon hard times, he had proposed the island a perfect location for a resort. After the grand lodge had been built, others had purchased lots to build their own island getaways, and naming those houses had continued with each new cottage. Referring to the expansive structures that dotted Bridal Veil Island as cottages seemed a bit of a misnomer, especially to the workers who had constructed the lavish houses and the servants employed to work in them. They were certainly

the grandest of any Evan had ever known, and he was happy that he could be a part of this stately island.

Wiping the tops of his boots on the back of his pants, Evan rechecked his appearance as best he could before bounding up the steps. His heart picked up a beat in his eagerness to see Melinda before she departed with the Miffins. When she approached the door, she looked no happier than when they'd parted company yesterday. "Good morning," he said in his cheeriest voice.

"Come in, Evan." Melinda pushed open the door. "There's no denying it's morning, but I wouldn't say it's good."

"Anything I can do to help?"

She opened her mouth but quickly mashed her lips together and poured him a cup of coffee. "Bottom of the pot," she said.

He nodded. "Thanks. Sure I can't do anything?" He glanced around the room. The kitchen in Summerset wasn't large, but a large kitchen wasn't needed. Most of the guests joined together in the clubhouse to enjoy their meals, and little cooking was performed in the private residences.

"Indeed you can, Evan." Mrs. Miffin entered the kitchen, her jaw set at a determined angle. "The wagon was supposed to be here a half hour ago to take our belongings down to the boat. At this rate we're going to miss the train."

Evan set his coffee cup on the table. "I'll see if I can locate the wagon." He hiked one shoulder and gave Melinda an apologetic smile before rushing out the door. At the end of the walkway, he spotted the vehicle and waved to the driver—Alfred Toomie. No wonder it was late.

Still waving at Alfred, Evan trotted toward the rumbling wagon and shouted, "Come on, Alfred. The Miffins are going to miss their train if they don't get over to Biscayne!"

Alfred gave the reins a halfhearted slap across the horses' rumps. In spite of the listless direction, the horses picked up their pace.

When the horses finally came to a halt in front of the Miffins' cottage, Evan scolded Alfred for his tardiness. "Now get in there and help carry the trunks out here before Mrs. Mifflin reports you to Mr. O'Sullivan and you lose your job."

Evan doubted the young man cared if he got fired, for his father took the boy's pay each week. Still, Alfred had a responsibility to perform his work as expected. The boy pushed a hank of dirty blond hair off his forehead. He looked as though he hadn't had a bath for some time, and he smelled that way, too.

"If you do a good job, you might even get a tip that you can hide from your father." Evan winked and hoped that bit of news would encourage the young fellow. And if Mrs. Mifflin didn't give him an extra coin, Evan would.

In all the scurrying about to load the wagon and transport the Miffins and Melinda in the carriage, there wasn't time for the two of them to talk until they were at the dock. Evan stood beside Melinda while the trunks were being loaded onto the *Bessie II*, the launch that would deliver them across the river to the Georgia mainland, where they would board a train headed north.

Evan reached for Melinda's hand. "I know you're unhappy to be leaving, but I'm just as unhappy to see you go. I love you, Melinda. Promise me you'll write as soon as possible."

One side of her mouth twisted up into a little smile. "You love me? Really, Evan?"

"Of course, you silly goose. Why don't you believe me? Last week I pledged my love to you and you said you loved me, as well. Why do you question me now?"

"I suppose because it seems you are happily sending me away."

He shook his head and touched her cheek. "I never said I was happy about your leaving, but we both know we have little to say in the matter. We are both dependent upon the direction of others." As if to stress this point, Mrs. Mifflin approached.

“Come along, Melinda. There isn’t time to dillydally.” She grasped Melinda’s arm in a possessive manner.

Melinda leaned close to Evan, straining to whisper in his ear. “We’d have had plenty of say if you had asked me to stay.” That said, she turned and hurried to the boat.