

KATIE'S MAVERICK

STRASBURG, THE NEW GENERATION - BOOK TWO



PIPPA GREATHOUSE

BLUSHING BOOKS

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MID-NOVEMBER, 1876



AN INVITATION FROM POLLY

*K*atie Adams stood in front of the window looking out at the dreary November day, wishing she was home. The opened envelope still in her hand, she wandered over to her bed and sat down, her face saddened. She read the letter inside and glanced up at Lizzie, her roommate, frowning.

"Katie? What is it? You look like you've received bad news." Lizzie sat down on the bed next to her, tossing her red curls back behind her.

Katie was re-reading it, and the expression on her face saddened even more. "It's a note from Polly, wanting to know if we'll be home from college in time for the wedding."

"We'll make it in time. My big brother wouldn't dare get married without me there. I'd never forgive him." She tilted her head to one side. "But that's not what has you upset. What else did she say?"

Katie turned, meeting her gaze. "She said that Nick is engaged to a girl named Phebe Watson. Isn't she the girl who comes every

year to spend a month or two with the Andrews? Apparently, now, she's broken it off." Katie realized her voice sounded disparaging, but she couldn't help it. "Lizzie, why didn't you tell me about this? You know how I feel about Nick."

Lizzie's face grew rueful. "I'm sorry, Katie. I should have. I just didn't know how. I only got my mother's letter last week, and I couldn't bring myself to tell you, simply because I *do* know how you feel about him."

Katie blinked and shook her head but didn't take her eyes from Lizzie's. "Poor Nick."

"*Poor Nick* will be just fine, Katie. Mother said that everyone in the household was relieved that the wedding was off. She even said Nick was, as well."

Katie continued staring. "You still could have told me."

"I'm sorry. But it's off, Katie. Don't you understand? I think it had to be the shortest engagement in the history of Strasburg. And it's probably the talk of the town."

"So says Polly." Katie stood to her feet and threw the invitation onto the bed, pacing.

Lizzie watched her, quiet for a while. Finally, she said softly, "You know, if you'd given him the least indication that you cared—"

"Oh, stop." Katie's eyes were flashing. "If he'd given me the least indication that *he* cared, I would have. I refuse to go chasing after him like a schoolgirl."

"A schoolgirl?" Lizzie's eyes widened. "You're twenty-two."

"And so are you. We're in college, Lizzie. We're not children any longer. We don't go having flings and batting our eyes and—" She shook her head and turned away, facing the vanity. Dark auburn hair and bright blue eyes stormed back at her. She realized how angry she appeared. Lizzie's reflection stared back at her in the mirror, hurt.

A small sigh escaped. "I'm sorry, Lizzie. I didn't mean to be snippy."

"It's all right. I understand. And you're right; I should have told you before now. At least now you know."

A nod from Katie followed. "What I started to say was twenty-two-year-olds should be able to figure out what lasting love is. I've had Nick in my heart for so many years now..." She moved, trying to keep Lizzie from seeing the tear that trickled down her cheek.

"If it's any consolation to you, Katie, he's had you in his, too."

"Right. So much so that he's managed to avoid me for the last year and asked someone else to marry him." She straightened her shoulders and shook her head. "I'm sorry. Is he going to be in Polly's wedding? We missed Cicely's. I hate that."

"The answer? I don't know. Nick and Geoff are trying to talk each other into overseeing Pembroke so Father and Mother can go abroad. But Geoff won't agree, and neither will Nick. I suppose I could do it, but I won't."

"Why don't you? You'll finish college next spring. You'd manage it well."

"Because I have no desire to. Besides, Geoff is the eldest son. It falls to him by right. I love my family, and I love Pembroke. But I've no wish whatsoever to run it. And I really don't know for sure that I want to return to Strasburg."

Katie gasped. "You never told me that!"

"Well, I don't. And you don't, either, if you'll be honest with yourself."

Katie's glare was intense. She finally averted her gaze and walked toward the window.

"Perhaps I do," she said softly. "Perhaps I *don't*. I've always thought I might, if Nick was going to be there. But now..."

"Now is as good a time as any to see him, Katie, and you know it."

A shake of her head answered, and she sighed. "I don't know." She raised her head at the sound of the supper bell and started toward the door.

"Anyway," Lizzie's voice caught her at the door. "Father and

Mother are home right now, and they're sending a carriage for us next weekend. And another semester will be over."

"Are...either of them coming?"

"I doubt it. If anyone comes with it, it'll be Nick. Geoff is up to his ears in wedding plans, and he doesn't want to tear himself away from Polly."

Katie frowned. "I won't go if Nick comes. I'll spend Christmas here."

Lizzie's brow rose. "And miss spending Christmas with your family? I'll pay money to hear you tell that to Nick. He'll haul you out to the carriage before you get the words out of your mouth."

"Then get your money ready, Lizzie, because I will."

Lizzie laughed. "Sure you will."

"I've no desire to spend four days in a carriage with him."

Lizzie only grinned and rose, passing Katie on the way to the door. "Ready for supper?"

Katie rolled her eyes. She couldn't stay angry with Lizzie for long. Grinning back, she nodded. "Let's go."



THE TRIP HOME

Since the arrival of Polly's invitation, Katie had been extremely quiet. All she could think of was the letter from Polly, telling her that Nick had proposed to another woman. Was he terribly upset because she had changed her mind? Her heart was saddened for him. At the same time, she was angry as hell that he'd asked someone else. Had she, Katie, been so unimportant to Nick that he never thought of her at all?

A myriad of things bounced about in her head. She was relieved he was free again. She was upset that it had happened. She wanted to throttle him because he'd gotten engaged without telling her. All of it had caused unrest, and she'd slept extremely poorly.

"I wish I knew when they'd get here," Lizzie murmured, staring out the window.

"I wish I knew who was coming," Katie said in a worried voice behind her.

"Well, keep pacing." Lizzie chuckled. "I'm sure it'll make him arrive faster, no matter who it is."

Katie made a face at her and Lizzie added, "The bath calls. I'll be back."

She'd only been absent a moment, however, when there was a knock on the door.

"Come in, please." Katie turned. The trunks were set next to the door, and she slid one of them over to make room to get it all the way open. "Oh! Hello, Miss Ophelia."

The young woman in charge of the women's hall came in. Her arms went instantly around Katie's neck. "A gentleman is waiting in the lounge to pick you up, Katie. And Lizzie, too." She glanced around the room "Where is she?"

"In the bath. She'll be right back."

"May I help you get your cases down to the lounge?"

Katie's mouth was suddenly dry. "Did he...say what his name was?"

Ophelia smiled. "No. But he has wavy dark hair and brown eyes that look like they have silver in them. I assured him you'd hurry."

The description could have meant either Geoffrey Francis or Nick. Katie muttered under her breath. "Right."

"He does seem impatient."

Katie scowled. It had to be Nick. "Let him wait."

"Katie?" An expression of uncertainty in the young woman's face caused her to turn. "Are you all right?"

"No." She shook her head. "Yes. I'm all right. But I can be as impatient as he can."

For a moment, she sat down on her trunk but, after a bit, thought better of it. She began to slowly drag one trunk down the

hall, just as Lizzie caught up with them and helped Ophelia with the second.

Suddenly, a large hand descended on top of Katie's as she neared the other end of the hall. She glanced up and gasped. She was staring straight up into the silver brown eyes of Nicholas George Wellington.

"Hello, young lady." His eyes were crinkling with amusement at the corners.

Katie jerked her hand out from under his and straightened, her shoulders stiff. "Hello."

Nicholas raised an eyebrow at her and spoke in a deep voice that held a hint of warning. "Katie?"

But Lizzie broke the tension by jumping into her brother's arms and nearly knocking him over.

"Nick! We've missed you!"

"Whoa, Lizzie. Good to see you, too."

"I'm so glad it's you who came for us. I want to hear everything about what's happening at home. Geoff wouldn't tell me if he'd come."

He grinned and glanced down at Katie once again, curiously. "There will be plenty of time on the way home. Relax." Lifting Katie's trunk easily in one hand, he reached for the other. "Allow me, miss."

Ophelia stood back, her face turning a shade of pink as he disappeared down the hall and out the door with their cases.

Lizzie glanced down toward Katie and shook her head. "I swear, Katie. You can be as stubborn as you want, but it'll be at your own risk. He doesn't even let me get away with acting like that."

Katie ignored her and turned toward Ophelia, hugging her. "Please have a perfect Christmas, Miss Ophelia. We'll be back in February."

"It will be awfully quiet here over the holidays. We'll miss you both."

Lizzie hugged her and bounced down the hall in search of her brother.

Katie grinned and said, "I wish you could come with us."

"Perhaps someday. You're lucky. Not all the girls get to go home over the holidays. Enjoy it."

Katie left Ophelia at the door and approached the carriage. Lizzie was outside, affectionately hugging her brother, and kissed his cheek right before he lifted her into the carriage.

But when he turned to lift Katie in, she moved away from him. "I can do it myself, thank you."

"I'd like to see it," he drawled good-naturedly, adding, "Short stuff."

It was a name he'd used for her as a child, and not one she particularly liked. She raised her foot as high as she could to try to step into the carriage, but it was too high. She tried again. When she glanced up at Nick, he was laughing.

She scowled up into his face. "Where's the step?"

"Under it, and it's stuck. Get it out if you can. I can't."

Nick reached for her waist. When she jerked away from him again, his expression faded into a frown. He reached out and took her by the shoulders, turning her to face him. "Kaitlynne." His voice was low and threatening. "What's gotten into you?"

Her full name on his lips gave her pause. He'd never called her that except when she was in trouble with him. "Nothing." She attempted to free herself from his grasp, and he turned her slightly away from him and planted a hard swat on her bottom.

Katie's gasp was louder than she intended. From the corner of her eye, she saw Ophelia's hand fly to her mouth.

But Nick stopped only after delivering three more swats. Then he held her still, as he leaned down close to her ear. "You should know I won't tolerate that kind of behavior from you. I'll ride topside for a while. But when we stop, I'll expect an explanation for your state of pique. *And* I'll expect you to make it with a tone of respect."

Katie found herself lifted into the carriage and heard the door close behind her. In a second, he was gone. She sat down in the seat across from Lizzie and lowered her head.

"I told you," Lizzie murmured. "Nick won't put up with that."

Katie nodded sadly, her eyes misting. "Of all people, I should know."