

HEARTBREAK CREEK  
By Kaki Warner

PROLOGUE

*Rose Hill Plantation,  
Southeastern Louisiana*

Edwina Ladoux stood at the window in her late father's office and watched a small two-wheeled carriage swing through the front gate.

Or rather, what was left of the front gate. The filigreed ironwork had been torn off years ago—rumor was it now graced the back garden of a bordello up by Bossier City—and the lovely stone pillars had toppled soon after. Quarry stone was hard to come by in bayou country, and so back when there had still been hope of rebuilding, she and Pru had laboriously carried the stones back to the orchard to fill in the gaps in the garden wall. But now that wall had fallen, too.

The carriage rolled briskly down the oyster shell drive beneath the long-armed oaks and their streamers of moss. Only three of the original trees remained. The fourth had burned the night the Yankees came, but had stood until high winds toppled it two years later. Now it sprawled across the lawn like a blackened skeleton, slowly sinking into the overgrowth.

The carriage stopped and the driver stepped down, a tall, thin man Edwina knew well. Bernard Alexander, and his father before him, and his grandfather before that, had been bankers for the Whitneys for almost seventy-five years. He probably dreaded this meeting as much as Edwina did. And he hadn't come alone, she noted, recognizing the other occupant as he came around the back of the carriage. He'd brought Reverend Morton.

Reinforcements? In case the distraught Widow Ladoux needed a 'tut-tut' and a pat on the shoulder to help soften the loss of the home that had been in her family for three-quarters of a century. Bless his heart.

The front door open and closed. Murmured greetings. Without furniture or carpets to muffle sound, voices carried through the empty house. A moment later, footfalls thudded in the hall. Clasp ing her hands at her waist to hide the shaking, Edwina turned as the door opened.

But only her sister, Prudence, stepped inside. "Mr. Alexander is here. Reverend Morton has come with him."

"I saw. Is he expecting a ruckus, do you think?"

"Oh, dear."

Edwina gave a brittle laugh she hoped might cover the fear gripping her throat. "Don't worry, I'll behave."

Pru hated scenes. Edwina—the impulsive, high-spirited sister—thrived on them. As with any well-bred, well-trained Southern lady of quality, drama was her weapon, just as pride was her strength. Like the whalebone corsets and hoops under her dress, they shaped her and supported her, hiding beneath the bows and ruffles and hospitable

smile the core of determination that gave her the strength to endure what she must.

Today would be a test of that. Today she had a task to perform—her last as the sole survivor of the Whitney family and inheritor of Rose Hill. With the flourish of a pen, her own personal drama would be over. She could finally drop the mask of brave, but impoverished Southern widow struggling to cling to her home while the last shreds of a way of life crumbled around her. She was so very weary of the pretense.

It was liberating, in a way. This final act had been so long in coming she was almost glad to have it done. She was ready for a new role.

More or less.

Pru walked toward her, her footfalls echoing hollowly off the stripped walls and empty shelves and bare wood floor. “Do you want me to stay?”

Edwina saw the worry in her sister’s dark eyes, and forced a smile. “What I want is for you to keep Reverend Morton occupied. If I have to suffer through one more pitying glance or murmured platitude, I declare I will throw myself out the window.”

Pru arched a dark brow. “And fall the entire twelve inches onto the veranda? You brave thing.” Reaching out, she gave Edwina’s clasped hands a gentle squeeze. “He’s only trying to help.”

“Like he helps all the lonely widows?” Seeing Pru was about to scold, Edwina waved her away. “Fine. I’ll be nice. But really. Doesn’t the man realize we’re Catholic?”

“He came to stand witness, not preach. And he brought the mail.” Pru reached into her apron pocket and pulled out an envelope. She studied the address. “That’s a dismal name. Heartbreak Creek.”

*Finally.* Snatching the letter from her sister’s grip, Edwina stuffed it into her skirt pocket. “I saw an advertisement for an employment opportunity and inquired about it, that’s all.”

“In Colorado Territory? Over a thousand miles away?”

To forestall further questions, Edwina nodded toward the door. “I think we’ve left the gentlemen waiting long enough. Show them in. I want this over with as soon as possible.”

Pru hesitated. “You’re sure you don’t need me to stay?”

“I’ll be fine. This is simply a formality.” Edwina forced a smile. “We knew Rose Hill was lost months ago. I’m just glad it’s going to our banker, rather than that Yankee scalawag tax man.”

Pru nodded and turned away. She took a step, then paused to swing her gaze around the room that was empty of all but their father’s desk and three mismatched chairs—one behind the desk, and two in front. “I shall miss the books.”

Edwina heard the quaver in her sister’s voice and strove for a lighter tone. “I don’t know why. You read every one of them.”

But Pru didn’t seem to hear. “They were like friends. I felt safe among them.”

*Safe.* Something twisted in Edwin’s chest. Guilt, no doubt. She wanted to blurt out that those days of hiding—under beds, behind drapes, inside the pages of book—were over. She had a plan. A desperate, foolish, outrageous plan that was already in motion, and if successful, would allow them a new start far away from this place of destruction and despair.

It wasn’t just the war-torn South Edwina hoped to escape, but their own

desperate childhoods. Years ago Pru had been Edwina's protector—and would bear the scars from that selfless act for the rest of her life. Now it was Edwina's turn to step out from behind her sister's skirts and do what she must to save them both.

Again, that feeling of liberation swept through her. She might be leaping from the fat into the fire, but at least for that brief moment she hung suspended between the two, she would be totally free. Claspings her hands once more at her waist, she stiffened her back and lifted her chin. "I'm ready, Pru. Send them in."

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A scant fifteen minutes later, the papers were signed and witnessed. Rose Hill Plantation was now the property of Bayou Bank & Trust of Sycamore Parrish, to be auctioned off at a later date for back taxes.

Before the ink had dried, Edwina was slipping out the office door and down the veranda steps into the south lawn.

Hardly a lawn any more. Mostly ragweed and dandelions. More weeds choked the azalea and camellia beds. The crepe myrtles had been left untended for so long they hardly bloomed any more, and the arbor where she and Pru had hidden from Mother was now a tangled mass of ropey wisteria vines. With no one left to fight back the undergrowth, Rose Hill, like most of the grand houses throughout southern Louisiana, was slowly falling into neglect, disappearing beneath a mountain of untamed vegetation.

Blood was an excellent fertilizer, Edwina had heard.

Chased by so many memories and emotions she couldn't separate one from the other, she quickened her pace. By the time she reached the resting place on the rise above the bayou, she was almost running.

The gate creaked as she pushed it open. Slowing to catch her breath, she followed the weed-choked path past the raised vaults of all those who had lived and died at Rose Hill. Here, in this quiet place, nothing changed. The same birds nested among the wide, glossy leaves of the magnolias. The same squirrels scurried by with their acorns. The stately oak still stood guard over the dead, its outstretched arms trailing long streamers of moss like gray tattered scarves.

When she came to the newest graves, where the lime-washed concrete was still starkly white, unscarred by war and time, she sank down on a stone bench and dropped her head in her hands.

It was over. Gone. Her home, this resting place, an entire way of life...lost with the signing of her name.

"Daddy, I'm sorry," she wept. "I'm so sorry."

After a while, disgusted with herself for giving way to useless tears, she blotted her cheeks and straightened. She had cried and wrung her hands for years, and it had gotten her nothing. Now she would do what she must to protect herself and Pru, even if that meant going all the way to Colorado Territory.

Gathering what courage she had left, she pulled the letter from her pocket and broke the seal.

A bank draft and several railroad vouchers slipped from a folded piece of paper and into her lap. Edwina carefully studied them. One voucher was for passage on the

Texas and New Orleans Railroad dated five days hence. Another was for a later date on the Missouri Pacific, and the third was for the Colorado and Nevada.

*It's happening*, she thought, her heart starting to pound. *It's really happening.* With trembling fingers, she unfolded the sheet of paper.

*I accept your terms. Enclosed find train vouchers and travel funds. I will meet you in Heartbreak Creek on the eleventh of April, eighteen seventy. Bring proxy papers. Brodie.*

Edwina stifled a sudden urge to break into hysterical laughter. Or maybe wails of despair. It didn't matter which. It was done. Her fate was sealed. Within less than a month, she would serve herself up like a timorous virgin to a man she had never met, in a place she had never been, for a purpose that made her cringe.

Except, of course, she was neither timorous nor a virgin, and this time, she knew exactly what was in store for her.

A shadow passed overhead, and Edwina looked up to see a brown pelican wing by, the pouch beneath its beak full. She doubted they had pelicans in Colorado. Or magnolias, or shrimp gumbo, or long sultry days when even the alligators didn't venture far from the slow, murky waters.

But they had mountains. And snow. And since she had never seen either, she at least had that to look forward to.

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"You're *what*?"

Pru's voice had risen to a near shriek. Her eyes were as round as a carp's and her brows had moved halfway up to her tight dark curls as she'd stared at the papers in her hands.

It might have been comical had Edwina been in a laughing mood. Hoping to avoid arguments, she had planned to put off this confrontation until tomorrow, the day before their departure. But her sister had found the proxy papers so Edwina was forced to tell her all.

"A mail order bride." Edwina flopped down on the narrow bed in the room they shared in Mrs. Hebert's boarding house. "It's the perfect solution. And please don't try to talk me out of it, because as you can see by those papers, the deed is already done."

"You're married?"

"This morning. In Judge Aucoin's chambers. His assistant stood as witness. It was all rather humdrum." And somewhat sordid, but she didn't mention that. She'd been through one grand wedding. She certainly didn't need another.

"*Married*?"

"To Declan Brodie. He seems a nice enough man." Seeing that her sister was about to start yelling, Edwina dumped the contents of her reticule on the bed and rifled through the papers and vouchers until she found the tattered newspaper clipping.

"Here," she said, handing it to Pru. "Read for yourself."

Edwina already knew the words by heart:

*Honest, hard-working widower, age thirty-three, seeks sturdy English-speaking woman to help with mountain ranch and four children. Drinkers, whores, and gamblers*

*need not apply.*

Such a romantic.

And one with rather low standards, she thought. Yet she qualified—except for the ‘sturdy’ part. Since she had lost so much worry-weight over the last months, her once “willowy” figure now had all the appeal of a flagpole.

“You actually responded to this?” Pru’s voice was starting to rise again. “An advertisement in a common newspaper?”

“It’s not common,” Edwina defended. “It’s the *Matrimonial News*. And it’s famous. Everybody had heard of it.”

“I haven’t.”

Edwina waved that aside. “And he wrote a very nice letter back.” Digging again through the papers on the bed, she came up with a crumpled envelope, which she handed to her sister. “A rather nice assessment, I think.”

“As well it should be,” Pru snapped when she saw the signature. “Since the man wrote it himself.”

“Not that one. The one from the traveling circuit judge.”

Another terse appraisal that Edwina knew by heart:

*Mr. Brodie is a man of strong-determination, who is well-respected and tall.*

Tall?

“And he also sent this.” She held up a tiny tintype of an unsmiling, clean-shaven, dark-haired man in a dark coat and banded collarless shirt.

Pru studied the tintype, then handed it back along with the letters of recommendation. “I just wish you’d talked to me first,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

Edwina recognized the pose, and braced for a scolding.

“Why would you do such a thing, Edwina? I know it was hard losing Rose Hill, but—”

“It isn’t just Rose Hill, Pru. It’s...” Edwina spread her hands in a helpless gesture. “It’s everything. That man spitting on you, the vile things that Yankee upstart said to me, those horrid men in Crappo Town who are terrorizing everyone. This isn’t home anymore. Everything has changed. And if there’s nothing left for us here, why should we stay?”

“We? You’re dragging me into this?”

“You’re my sister. Did you think I would leave you behind?”

“Well...I...”

“They have mountains, Pru. Huge mountains! And all kinds of things we’ve never seen. And look!” Edwina bent to pull from beneath the bed the book that had arrived only yesterday. Beaming, she held it out. “Knowing what a glutton for information you are, and how curious you would be about our new home, I had this sent all the way from a New Orleans bookstore.” And it had cost her dearly, but seeing the smile on her sister’s face convinced Edwina it was worth every penny.

“Our new home?”

“Our new home. Mr. Brodie has a place for you in his household, too.” Or he would, as soon as Edwina talked him into it.

Pru laughed and rolled her eyes. “He’d better. Since his new bride doesn’t know a thing about cooking or tending children.”