Enjoy Chapter one of Once Jilted

One

Shauna Joyce stood at the simple altar, her bouquet of yellow foxgloves as wilted as her spirits. Why? Why had Darrell not shown up for his own wedding? Hadn't he loved her just a little? Perhaps he'd taken ill as he often seemed to suffer one malady or another, but wouldn't he have sent word?

She sank onto the wood floor, her borrowed wedding gown billowing around her. Her hand rubbed at her temple, alleviating the pain of an approaching migraine. Darrell had made no real promises for the future. A dreamer, a bigger dream must have caught his fancy, taking him from her on this special day. Her fingers curled around the bouquet, crushing the delicate stems. Should she be angered or hurt, or both?

"You can't stay here forever, girl." Reverend Bright slammed his Bible closed. The sound echoed like a slap to her face.

She tore her gaze from the window and stared at the preacher. He leaned his thin frame against the pulpit. The man bore no likeness to his name. Dark and foreboding, Reverend Bright used firm control when addressing his congregation. The fire-and-brimstone preacher had made her life a living hell in more ways than one. But no more. Today marked the last of Shauna Joyce's failures. Embracing her anger at Darrell's absence, she made a promise to herself. Used to following the advice and desires of others, she'd meekly allowed outside pressures to orchestrate this wedding. From this day forward, she would live her own life and listen to her own heart.

"You're always right, of course." A bite of sarcasm inflected her words.

He frowned, his bushy brows forming a full arch across his nose. “That condescending tone of yours will be your undoing. No one wants a bride who talks down at him.”

She frowned, causing the pounding in her head to worsen. Was it truly her fault that Darrell hadn’t shown? No. She refused to accept blame.

“Best get on your knees and pray for forgiveness. Perhaps if you show a bit more humility, God will guide Darrell back to you.”

Forgiveness? Humility? She bit her tongue against a sharp retort she might regret later. Darrell was the one at fault. Not her. He’d given no excuse for failing to show. He’d offered no apologies. The man was probably long gone. She’d stood at the altar--waiting. The entire population of Nyesville witnessed her humiliation. Whispered conjectures had echoed off the church walls. At least the attendees were all gone now. She’d given them a week’s worth of gossip, so they hadn’t returned home empty-handed.

Turning, her gaze strayed to a painting that hung behind the pulpit, and she lost herself to the beauty of the art. The Madonna held baby Jesus in her arms, and her expression of love soothed Shauna’s troubled heart. She’d often daydreamed of her own mother holding her in just such a manner. In the past, the fantasy had comforted a troubled child, but she’d long outgrown childhood. At twenty-one, the fantasy caused bittersweet resentment.

She wiped at moist eyes, vowing to shed no tears in front of Reverend Bright. It wasn’t like her to give in so readily to a bout of self-pity, but something inside had snapped at Darrell’s betrayal. Her temples pounded, making her more susceptible to emotional outbursts.

On shaky limbs, she stumbled to her feet.

She hadn’t loved Darrell Gaines. Not really. She’d liked him because he made her smile, but she hadn’t known him long enough to profess love. Darrell had advertised for a wife on the bulletin board at the local mercantile. She’d sought him out, thinking he offered a way to

escape the drudgery of her life. He'd asked her to marry him on sight, giving no real reason for his desire to wed except that "he felt the need." She'd accepted his proposal, enamored with the idea of marriage more than the man.

His desertion shouldn't surprise her, but it did. He was, after all, the one who'd initiated the idea.

Matrimony held anticipation, a small ray of promise for the future. Marriage to Darrell would have provided an escape from her foster family. Dreams and fantasies gave her hope for love.

"Go home. No use waiting here." Reverend Bright snuffed out candles, preparing to close up the church.

She stared at the wilted flowers, then closed her eyes and let the bouquet fall to the floor. If only she had the nerve to throw them at the reverend. Her headache worsened. She willed it away, knowing she'd get no relief once the migraine struck with full force. Besides, her foster family, the Clevingers held no sympathy for her pain. They expected her to work regardless of her infirmity.

Without a backwards glance, she left.

Blindly, she trudged down the road, unmindful of her skirts trailing through the dirt.

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A week later, Shauna attacked the set of silver like a banshee bent on scaring every guest in the castle. But then, the castle of her fantasies was little more than a two-story wooden frame house in Nyesville, Indiana. She picked up a fork that still had a coating of dry whiting and vinegar between the tines. After an hour soaking near the fire, the tarnish should come right off. The operative word being should. After scrubbing a stubborn spot, she dropped the fork and leaned her weight against the counter. Old enough to be on her own, she still worked like a slave with no future, living in a home that didn't want her.

"Slacking again?"

She turned toward Madison's shrill voice, determined not to let her nemesis nettle her today. "Aren't you supposed to be at the Clayburgs' for morning brunch?"

Madison pulled on white gloves and patted her perfectly coiffured hair. "Well, of course, but Mother had a tirade over her tight gloves. Seems someone broke her glove stretcher. I guess you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

Of course not. In a voice of false importance, she replied, "Do forgive me. I couldn't seem to get the top to my treasure chest open this morning. I needed the glove stretcher to pry the lid. They worked quite well, and I was able to count every gold coin paid for my services over the years."

Madison narrowed her eyes. "I keep telling Mother we need to replace you with someone younger. Your sarcastic humor is unwelcome."

Perhaps she hoped to provoke the Clevingers into dismissing her, forcing her to find a different situation. Truth be told, the thought of being on her own proved intimidating. She'd been saving all her money with the idea of leaving, but she didn't think the amount in her purse would be enough. Not yet. Not while the country suffered economic depression, and jobs were scarce.

At that moment, Mrs. Cora Clevinger rounded the corner and entered the kitchen. "Madison, stop by Kupert's on your way home and buy another glove stretcher." She held up the broken tool. The scissor-like apparatus had one piece dangling from a spring.

"I haven't time. Make Shauna do it."

"Nonsense. You'll already be out and about, and Shauna has other work that needs tending."

Other work? That didn't sound good. Shauna stared at the mound of silver and wondered what other chores Mrs. Clevinger planned to drop in her lap.

"I'm sure Shauna wouldn't mind procrastinating for a chance to go

into town."

Shauna picked up a silver ladle, ignoring their conversation. The last thing she wanted to do was travel to town. Since her disastrous trip down the aisle, she'd avoided people. She'd even skipped church yesterday by offering to make a special dessert for the noon meal.

"Shauna!"

"Ma'am?"

"If you rub any harder, I'll lose the delicate engravings on that spoon."

Shauna dropped the spoon like it had suddenly spouted thorns.

"Perhaps Madison is right." Mrs. Clevinger sighed. "You haven't the temperament for silver this morning. Clean up, then saddle Ole Tom. I need a few other things also, so I'll make you a list."

Shauna's cheeks flamed with the indignity of the request. If she'd been a true member of the family, she'd be allowed the use of the other buggy. Instead, they expected her to ride astride on an animal that should have been put to pasture years ago. No other lady would be seen riding to town in this manner. But Shauna was reminded each day of her status in the household.

Mrs. Clevinger returned shortly with a list of items. Resigned, Shauna whipped off her apron and hung it on a peg behind the kitchen door. Snatching her bonnet, she headed for the barn. Saddling the swayback gray mule took more time than intended. Beside them in the next stall, Madison's sleek, black mare whinnied. She gave the horse a disdainful glare before hiking her skirts and sitting astride Ole Tom.

Fine dust swirled behind them as she and her mount plodded along the two-lane road. She readjusted the brim of her bonnet to shield her eyes from the glaring sun, then smiled. Even perched atop the old mule with her plain gingham dress and serviceable boots, she felt beholden to the Clevingers for providing a home far away from the dingy, foul smelling streets of New York. It was the only thing that kept her from hating her

foster family for their treatment of her.

When she'd first arrived, she'd had such expectations for the future. All of the orphans on that train had anticipated their new homes, some with more fear and worry than others. She often found herself wondering how the rest of them had fared and looked forward to the reunion in four years.

They reached the covered bridge, and Shauna slowed her pace. Plastered on either end was a faded sign, "Cross this bridge at a walk." The boys her age always galloped across, unmindful of the damage they could cause. The echoing gait of the mule's hooves against the wooden slats provided an eerie, yet serene melody. The enclosed structure wrapped around Shauna's soul, providing a haven for her many fantasies. It was built only six years ago, but still the county elected to have another bridge built north of the town. How many times had she stolen away to sit for hours beneath its shaded protection? She'd do so today if she weren't on an errand for the missus. They reached the end, and she swiveled her head for a longing look down the length of the bridge. Resigned to the task, she urged Ole Tom into a faster pace.

They reached the outskirts of town in very little time. Strong odors from the sawmill permeated the air. More than a few cows wandered in front of her, and she stole a glance at the Walkers' residence. They'd left the fence gate open again. She shook her head, hoping those beasts didn't wander into their yard like last time. Cattle could be such a nuisance. Besides the bovine parade, the streets appeared deserted, but Monday mornings often proved slow for merchants. Ahead, Molly Mcgruder swept dry leaves and dirt from her wooden porch, and Caleb Dungee hung a sign that said, "Open for business." A lazy stream of smoke flowed from his chimney. The blacksmith should just leave the sign out all the time as he often worked endless hours.

Grateful for the sparse crowds, she slipped off Ole Tom and tied the reins to a rail in front of Kupert's General Store.

She strolled through the door, and the little bell overhead tinkled.

"Morning, Miss Joyce."

"Morning, Mr. Kupert. Mrs. Clevinger sent me with a list of items," she said, handing Roy Kupert a slightly crumpled piece of paper.

He looked over the list and frowned. "Ain't got no glove stretchers. I'll have to special order those."

Shauna groaned. Mrs. Clevinger would not be happy with the news, and that meant an even rougher time for Shauna. She nodded. Shoulders drooping, she meandered around the store wishing for things she couldn't have while Mr. Kupert filled her order.

"Shauna?"

She turned toward the sound of her best friend's voice. Lora Lee always looked like a fresh beam of sunlight. Today, she'd dressed in a pastel blue that set off her darker, ultramarine eyes. Lora Lee gave Shauna a bright smile and a warm hug. "I've missed you this past week. Are you all right?"

"As right as snow in the desert."

Lora Lee laughed. "Quite right. I should have known you wouldn't mope over your wedding disaster. I'm glad. Mr. Gaines was all wrong for you anyway. It was clear you didn't love him or him you."

"Yes, but he would have taken me far away. And I would have had my own life."

Lora Lee clasped Shauna's hands and squeezed. "Oh, Shauna. You would have had to live his life. You would have traded one bad situation for another. While arranged marriages happen all the time, I want more for you. You deserve love or at least someone who'll treat you well."

"Perhaps, but I'd rather not dwell on it. The past is past and can't be changed." Except in her dreams, where everything attained a fairytale quality.

"That's my girl."

"No, what I need to do is find a paying job so I can leave the

Clevingers forever." She pulled her hands free of Lora Lee's hold.

"There aren't many jobs for women. Maybe you could teach."

Shauna fingered a bright red length of ribbon. "I don't have enough schooling. I've read just about everything I could get my hands on, but Mrs. Clevinger wouldn't let me attend school more than one day a week... not when my time could be better spent tending to chores. I lack the qualifications to be a teacher."

Lora Lee shook her head. "And when you did go to school, you were so woefully behind in your studies that the other students made fun."

"But not you." If not for Lora Lee's friendship, she would never have learned to read.

Lora Lee flashed the dimple she was so well known for. "We do have some fun history. If it hadn't been for you, I would have taken life far too seriously. We did manage to get into a few scrapes, didn't we?"

"Just a few?"

Lora Lee laughed. "Quite right. More than a few." She wandered over to the bulletin board and browsed through the advertisements.

Shauna followed her, though why, she had no idea. The last time she'd read the board, she'd found Darrell's advertisement, and that hadn't turned out so well.

"Oh goodness. Look at this." Lora Lee pointed a finger at a small notice. "Isn't that how you came to live with the Clevingers?"

Shauna strained her eyes to read the small print. Her eyes bulged with each word. "This is not good."

She snatched the slip of paper from the board. Perhaps, if she hid the message, the Clevingers wouldn't find out about the train arriving with a load of orphans needing homes.

Lora Lee touched her hand. "You don't want the train to come?"

"The Clevingers made noise just this morning about getting a younger girl to take my place."

"But another servant would give them reason to force you from

their house. And that's not a bad thing. After all, your indenture to them ended when you turned eighteen."

"And if not for a lack of jobs, I'd have left long ago." Shauna scrunched her face. "But you're right, if I was forced to leave, surely I'd find something to sustain me. I lack the courage to venture out on my own. Even so, think of the child who might replace me." Maybe she couldn't change her own past, but she'd be damned if she let another relive the same bleak existence. "An orphan arrives with hopes and dreams, with the need to become part of a family, only that's not what the Clevingers will be offering."

"Oh."

"Yes, oh." Shauna paced between a narrow aisle of canned goods and assorted jars. "I can't allow another child to suffer as I have."

"Miss Joyce, I've got your order ready." Mr. Kupert's voice boomed across the room.

Shauna frowned at the interruption. "I'll sign for the items in a moment."

"Quit pacing, Shauna." Lora Lee grabbed her arm. "You're making me dizzy."

Shauna whirled to face her friend. "You don't understand. I've got to make plans. The Clevingers will find out about the train, and they'll want another child, another slave."

"Has it been that bad?"

"Worse." She waved the paper at Lora Lee. "I won't let it happen again."

"Well, you can't keep them from finding out, so you might as well pin the advertisement back on the wall."

Shauna smoothed out the crumpled announcement and read over the words again. Two weeks. The train would be here in *two weeks*. Lora Lee took the paper from her trembling fingers and re-pinned it to the wall. Shauna had very little time in which to come up with a plan.

“You can’t stop the Clevingers from taking what they want, Shauna. People like that don’t care whom they hurt along the way.”

“Perhaps. But I can sure slow them down.”

“Shauna. You have that look in your eye.”

Shauna smiled and clutched Lora Lee’s shoulders. “I can’t stop them from knowing about the orphans, but I can stop them from going to the auction. You’ll see. I’ll figure out a way to prevent their attendance when the children are put on display. The Clevingers will *not* get another child to abuse.”

The jingle of the bell and the entrance of five laughing men put a halt to Shauna’s tirade. She glanced at the boisterous bunch with a curious eye. Nyesville didn’t get many strangers. They sobered once they were inside the small store. A square brick of a man separated from the others and tipped his head. “Morning, lassies.”

“Morning to you,” Lora Lee answered, and he turned magnetic green eyes her way.

Shauna just stared. His thick Irish accent tickled her memory. Lora Lee shoved an elbow into her side. Surprised, Shauna whirled toward her friend, catching her funny bone on the corner of the pickle display.

Everything happened at once. Lora Lee’s eyes widened. She reached around Shauna to steady the jars. Shauna, not sure what Lora Lee was doing, leaned back. The pickle display toppled to the ground.

“Shauna Joyce!” Kupert’s surprised cry filled the store.

Horrified, Shauna’s hand flew to her mouth. Ten jars rolled around beneath their feet. Thankfully, only one had broken. Pickles littered the floor, and pickle juice saturated the hem of her dress.

“Oh my.” Lora Lee giggled, clamping a hand to her mouth.

Shauna let her gaze follow the trail of liquid. Two large boots stood in the middle of the mess. Her eyes darted upward and met the amused gaze of the Irishman.

“Oh. I’m so sorry.” The vinegar-dill liquid had splattered on his

pants and coated the tips of his boots. She should offer to wash them, but the idea of touching a strange man's britches seemed too intimate to suggest. Besides, he looked as if he'd just come from a bout of hard work. A little pickle juice couldn't do too much harm to his mud-spattered pants. Could it?

"Nay trouble. I was growing a wee bit tired of the scent of bay rum anyway."

She blinked. He made light of her accident in a way that put her at ease. The Clevingers would have ranted for days over something like this. "I best see to cleaning this disaster."

"And who's going to pay for that broken jar, Miss Joyce?" Kupert brought her a broom and dustpan.

Shauna's stomach twisted in knots. "I haven't the funds." She did, but she didn't want to waste money on pickles when she had more important things in mind for her money.

"Well, I'll just put it on the Clevinger's account, then."

She froze, broom in hand. "No. Oh no, you can't do that."

Lora Lee placed a jar on the stack and turned. "I could buy it, Shauna."

She gripped the broom handle tighter. "No. I broke it. I couldn't take your money."

"But..."

With one hand on the broom, she reached for a container with the other. The Irishman grabbed for the same jar. They both chuckled, and Shauna let him pick up the glass container without protest. He gave her a wink. "Why doon't I pay for the damage? After all, 'tis me greeting that landed you in this pickle in the first place."

Lora Lee laughed at his pun, but flustered, Shauna frowned. She didn't want charity from anyone. "Absolutely not. I'll work out something with Kupert. I broke the jar. I should pay."

His rugged features snagged her attention. He wasn't an overly

handsome man, but his eyes drew her interest. Oh my, but his emerald green eyes held a twinkle that sent her heart racing.

He gave her a wink, before dismissing her. “A wee stubborn lass you be.”

The sound of his voice with the rolling “r’s” and the “oo” vowels tickled her fancy. She gave herself a mental shake. The man was a stranger, a carpenter or common laborer by the look of his clothing. And she’d just been jilted a week ago. She had no business turning her eye to another man so soon after her botched wedding, so she focused her attention to cleaning up the sour juice. With dustpan in hand, she swept up the shards of glass first and dumped it into the trash barrel. When she returned, the man charmed Lora Lee while they picked up pickles.

“Did you know that jar held twenty-two large pickles?” He presented a comical picture, holding a wrinkled vegetable in each hand and reciting the little-known pickle fact.

“I’m usually not in the habit of counting the contents, Mister...?”

He transferred a pickle to his other hand, and after wiping his fingers on his trousers, extended his open palm to Lora Lee. “Kane. Kane McKenna. I usually greet the fine lassies with flowers in hand.”

Behind him, his four friends snickered.

Shauna wrinkled her brow again. He flirted with Lora Lee as if Shauna didn’t exist. Why it caused a sharp pain in her heart, she had no idea. Men always preferred Lora Lee’s soft-spoken voice and pretty face, while they rarely gave Shauna a passing notice. Once, just once, she’d love it to be the other way.

Something about this man made her want to be noticed, though. She coughed, and they both turned her way.

Kane’s eyes widened as if seeing her for the first time. “And who might you be, lass?”

She gave him a gentle smile. “Shauna Joyce.”

“Ach, a fine Irish name to be sure.”

Lora Lee stepped forward, snagging his attention again. “I’m Lora Lee Grimes. So what brings you to Nyesville?”

“We needed a wee bit of distraction from our tedious jobs. And I cannoot think of a better distraction than conversing with such lovely lassies.”

Shauna winced. His gaze had fastened on Lora Lee again. A sharp pain stabbed at her pride. Frustrated with the brief stab of jealousy, Shauna bent to the task of cleaning. Best just to ignore the man, since he was clearly more interested in Lora Lee. What would he think when he discovered Lora Lee already had a beau?

“Kane.” One of the other men called out. “If you’re finished entertaining, there’s a great article in the Sunday newspaper on where to find the best fishing holes.”

“Aye, John. I’ll be right there.”

Shauna turned her back on the man and his friends as she mopped at the mess with a towel, but she try as she might, she couldn’t ignore the lyrical tone of his voice.

Lora Lee’s dress rustled. “Will you be visiting our town again soon?”

“And to be sure, lass.” He inclined his head. “We’re camped not too far as we’re building the covered bridge across Big Raccoon Creek about seven miles out. A fine spot for a picnic if you’ve a mind.”

Lora Lee giggled. “Perhaps, but I’m afraid my beau might not approve.”

“Ah. A pity for sure.” But he made no move to extend the invitation to Shauna.

As if she’d accept.

She wrung out the wet towel and skirted around the burly Irishman to the front door, opening it. The door squealed, but even so, she slipped outside unnoticed.

At the horse trough, she slapped the soiled towel into the water.

After dunking it several times, she wrung it out, venting her frustration on the scrap of cloth. Why should she care if a complete stranger took notice of her or not? After all, having been jilted at the altar should leave her bitter toward men. So why was she intrigued by this one? And why did his indifference hurt so much?

Finding no answer, she returned to the spill. A thorough scrubbing would see the floor restored to rights and keep her mind from the Irish stranger. Upon entering the store again, her gaze located Kane. He'd moved closer to his friends, and Lora Lee busied herself looking at bolts of material. Shauna bent and applied the wet rag to the floor. She looked up when the tinkling bell indicated the entry of another shopper.

Madison and her best friend, Susan Hart entered the store.

"Shauna, what are you doing on the floor?" Madison looked down her angular nose, looking as though she smelled something foul.

Shauna groaned. "Cleaning up after an accident."

"Did you break something?" Madison stared at the haphazardly stacked glass containers. "Mother won't pay for one of your blunders."

Heat rushed to Shauna's cheeks. "I've already made arrangements to pay for the broken jar."

Boisterous male laughter diverted Madison's attention. The five men perused the local newspaper, their eyes alight with some mischief. Madison seemed to assess the strangers with an appreciative eye. Shauna exchanged a guarded look with Lora Lee. It was quite clear what Madison intended.

Shauna shrugged. Once Madison made her presence known, the men would fall under her ardent spell. Even Lora Lee's beauty couldn't compete with Madison's exquisite looks. But then, Lora Lee had no reason to vie for attention. She was secure in her newfound relationship with Brewster Chauss.

"Miss Clevinger." Mr. Kupert acknowledged her presence with a stiff bow. "What can we get you today?"

Madison smiled. “I have a craving for something sweet.”

Shauna paused, wondering why Madison was in town when she’d told her mother she had no time. Wasn’t she supposed to be elsewhere, anyway? Shauna shrugged. Madison often manipulated her mother to suit her needs. Today was no exception.

Five men looked up from the paper at the sound of her voice. Kane separated himself from the bunch and sauntered closer. “Mr. Kupert, I believe we’ve settled on our selections, if you’d be so kind to tally our purchases.”

“Right away, Mr. McKenna.” The clerk looked at the items stacked before him and tallied the amount. Kane had placed two dime novels, a harmonica, and a spool of white thread and needles on the counter. Once again, the man aroused Shauna’s curiosity. With the exception of the sewing items, the man had purchased personal wants that had little to do with need. Was he affluent? His manner of dress suggested otherwise.

He smiled at Madison. “Ach and this be a fine day to take in the lovely view.”

She smiled back. “Are you and your friends just passing through?”

“Well now, with such lovely ladies in town, I’m thinking we’ll be visiting more regular. Kane McKenna at your service.”

Madison giggled. “Madison Clevinger.”

He gave her a gentle bow.

“That will be a dollar and seventy-three cents.” Kupert broke into their conversation.

Kane turned back to the counter and dug in his pocket. “Would ye be putting the lass’s broken pickle jar on my bill as well?”

Kupert nodded and gave him a new figure. Shauna stood, stunned by the gesture. Hadn’t she made herself clear when she refused his offer previously? Maybe she wasn’t so invisible to the man after all.

He turned back to Madison when he’d finished. “A pleasure

making your acquaintance." He then looked across her shoulder at Lora Lee and Shauna. "Lassies. Ye have a right fine day."

Kane gathered his friends and headed for the door. Shauna's gaze followed him. At the door he turned and winked. Her mouth gaped. He'd winked at her.

Then he was gone.