

KAREN
BARNETT

SNEAK
PEEK



SAMPLE
ONLY

UNCORRECTED
PROOF

Where the
FIRE FALLS

A VINTAGE
NATIONAL PARKS NOVEL



Where the
FIRE FALLS

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

BOOKS BY KAREN BARNETT

Mistaken

The Golden Gate Chronicles

Out of the Ruins

Beyond the Ashes

Through the Shadows

Vintage National Parks Novels

The Road to Paradise

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Where the
FIRE FALLS

A VINTAGE
NATIONAL PARKS NOVEL

KAREN
BARNETT



WATERBROOK

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

WHERE THE FIRE FALLS

All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version.

This is a work of fiction. Apart from well-known people, events, and locales that figure into the narrative, all names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Trade Paperback ISBN 978-0-7352-8956-7

eBook ISBN 978-0-7352-8957-4

Copyright © 2018 by Karen Barnett

Cover design by Mark D. Ford

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published in the United States by WaterBrook, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

WATERBROOK® and its deer colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Barnett, Karen, 1969– author.

Title: Where the fire falls : a vintage national parks novel / Karen Barnett.

Description: First edition. | Colorado Springs, CO : WaterBrook, 2018.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017050265 | ISBN 9780735289567 (softcover) | ISBN 9780735289574 (electronic)

Subjects: LCSH: Women artistsFiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Christian / Historical. | FICTION / Christian / Romance. | FICTION / Christian / Suspense. | GSAFD: Christian fiction. | Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3602.A77584 W48 2018 | DDC 813/.6–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017050265>

Printed in the United States of America

2018 First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

*To my brothers: Mark, Chris, and Scott.
Thank you for giving a little girl the first
glimpse of what a hero should be.
I will always look up to you.*

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

It was like lying in a great solemn cathedral,
far vaster and more beautiful than any built
by the hand of man.

Theodore Roosevelt, 1904

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY



July 2, 1929

Sacramento, California

Olivia Rutherford applied lip rouge the same way she painted—with bold, broad strokes. Anything to distract from the truth. She leaned toward the mirror in the gallery’s tiny powder room, admiring the cosmetic’s resemblance to the cadmium red she’d chosen for her latest painting. *Girl with Scarlet Poppies* was sure to be a success at tonight’s showing. She, on the other hand? Olivia placed a hand against her chest, her heartbeat obvious to the touch. The shingled bob, the expensive beaded dress, the black hair dyeshe’d become her own canvas, and it demanded every penny she had. If tonight’s shindig flopped, she’d be hoofing it home on an empty stomach. Again.

Her art dealer, Frank Robinson, always insisted she attend. “Buyers like to meet the talent behind the artwork. Just act the part. We want them to think you’re modern and sophisticated, not some starving bohemian.”

She adjusted the feathered headband, the final piece of her carefree charade—such a contrast from her backwoods roots. When she’d changed her name, she’d left everything behind. Olivia Rudd died the moment she signed

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

the paperwork at the county courthouse. If she played her cards right, Olivia *Rutherford* would provide her sisters with the life she'd missed out on. It would also ensure she never needed to step outside a city again.

Frank knocked and ducked his head inside, a grin lighting his lined face. "You ready, Liv? I've got a line of hot prospects for you tonight." He brushed a lock of gray hair from his forehead.

Liv. Only Frank called her that anymore. Olivia glanced in the mirror to check the finished product. From behind those kohl-lined eyes, the truth peered back. "Ready as ever."

"You look like a million bucks. They're going to fall all over you, as always." Frank squeezed her shoulder. "If I were thirty years younger, I'd marry you."

"I need this to go well."

"You've mastered the routine, sweetheart. Keep it up and these *nouveau riches* will be tripping over themselves to acquire your work. Everyone in this room is as fake as a schoolchild's clay creation masquerading as a Rodin sculpture."

Olivia tugged at the fringed hem of the short dress. If only the facade could soak in, permanently blending with her own colors like paint on a page. Her popularity might be growing, but the paybacks remained meager. Hardly enough to mail one check a month to her aunt. She needed to find a way to scrape up more because Aunt Phyllis had already given more than her fair share to her twin sisters. She'd agreed to take them in for a year, and how many had it been now? Six.

Olivia was no closer to being able to care for Frances and Louise than she'd ever been. The thought tightened around her throat like her imitation pearl choker. She ran a quick finger between the necklace and her skin. To make matters worse, her aunt had sent several complaint-filled letters in recent months. But really, how much trouble could two fourteen-year-old girls be?

Well, tonight she would pretend to be bold and affluent, if only for their sake.

Following Frank into the gallery, she glanced around at her paintings—as though her heart was on display for everyone to see. No matter how she dressed or acted, at the end of the day, only her talent mattered. For years, watercolor artistry had been ruled by masters whose highly detailed pieces mimicked reality. She painted what was in her mind’s eye, her emotions leading the brush. The results had surprised the local art community, and her reputation was spreading. Or Olivia Rutherford’s was, at least.

The idea of an exclusive showing this early in her career sent a giddy thrill through her. At one time Frank had a wide array of clients, and he’d served as a distinguished matchmaker between artists and collectors. But in recent years, he’d grown far more demanding and melancholy—an exacting taskmaster for those artists who remained in his circle. Many had drifted away.

The changes only made Olivia more determined to please him. Art lovers were often known for being moody and unpredictable. Why should dealers be any different? He paid her well—in compliments and promises. The lure of wealth still dangled just out of reach, but that would come in time.

She made the rounds, offering practiced smiles and sparkling conversation. A portly older woman sporting an exquisite diamond necklace waved Olivia over. “Miss Rutherford, join us, please.”

“Mrs. Dixon. You look divine.” Olivia dropped an air kiss just short of the lady’s powdered cheek.

“You’re too kind, my dear. I’m anxious to introduce you to some of my friends from the club.” Mrs. Harold Dixon clamped onto Olivia’s arm and addressed the women with her. “Ladies, this is the creator of all these lovely paintings you’ve been admiring—Miss Olivia Rutherford. Isn’t she a rare beauty?” She introduced each woman in turn.

“I’m enchanted to meet you.” Olivia nodded to each, the names slipping through her mind like paint rinsed from a brush. “I hope you’re enjoying the showing.”

The youngest of the group tipped her head, her glistening Marcel waves putting Olivia in mind of Goldilocks from the story of the three bears. “Your artwork is quite avant-garde. Where did you train? Paris?”

A tightness spread through Olivia’s chest. Why must that always be the first question? “Oh, here and there.”

An older woman wrinkled her penciled brows. “No wonder I don’t see the mark of a master on your style. I’m surprised Mr. Robinson didn’t insist on additional schooling, particularly for one of your tender years. How old are you, anyway? Twenty? Twenty-one?”

“I prefer to plow my own path, you could say.” Olivia chose to ignore the question of her age. What did it matter?

“I see.” The socialite tucked a clutch studded with iridescent beads under her elbow. “But raw talent should be guided by a firm hand, don’t you think?”

Guided? More like crushed. Art school had taken the last of her mother’s money, and Olivia hadn’t even lasted a term. The teachers treated her like a lump of clay to be reshaped into the form of artists who had gone before.

The blonde sighed. “Must you always find fault, Gladys? Miss Rutherford’s paintings are the cat’s meow. These are so much better than the stodgy old canvases my husband collects.” She ran a gloved finger along her jawline as she studied Olivia. “Do you do portraits, by chance?”

The idea twisted in Olivia’s gut. The woman possessed nice lines, but creating commissioned pieces was worse than art school. Last time she’d attempted one, she’d invested a fortune in supplies and spent weeks perfecting the final product. In the end, the insipid woman refused to pay. “No. I’m sorry.”

“Of course she doesn’t.” Mrs. Dixon clicked her tongue. “Miss Ruther-

ford is far too successful an artist to lower herself to working commercially. Not like one of those pitiful, starving artists we see on street corners.”

“I wouldn’t have paintings done by such trash in my home.” The other woman sniffed. “Imagine the filth.”

“One can’t be too careful.” Olivia watched the silver tray of delicate appetizers slip by her, balanced on the hand of a passing waiter. Chasing the server down for a morsel of food would probably place her in that dreaded class. Hopefully there would be some tidbits left over when the gallery closed.

A tall gentleman in a pinstriped suit took a canapé from the selection before glancing her way and tipping a fine Panama hat.

Olivia froze. Was that Marcus Vanderbilt? The man had bought more art in the past five years than anyone else in the Bay area and often turned around and donated some of the most valuable pieces to hospitals, libraries, and museums. She forced her hands to her side so as not to flap them like an overexcited child. If her work caught his eye, she’d be on easy street. Maybe she could even afford that ritzy private school the girls wanted to attend.

He started in her direction but walked by without a second glance, stopping only to press a kiss to Goldilocks’s cheek. “Sophie, I was worried you’d be bored, but it looks like you’ve made some friends.”

She turned back to Olivia, her blue eyes shining. “Marcus, for once I met the artist before you. Miss Rutherford, may I present my husband, Mr. Marcus Vanderbilt?”

Olivia’s mouth went dry. Her husband? Had she been introduced as a Vanderbilt? Olivia stuck her hand out like a hayseed salesman. “Pleased—I’m—m-meet...” She slammed her lips shut. *Compose yourself.* “I’m most honored to make your acquaintance, Mr. Vanderbilt.”

A smile lit his aristocratic features as he took her hand. “Miss Rutherford. I must say, I’m impressed with what I’ve seen. You’ve a keen eye and an innovative technique. I especially love your use of the female form.”

She swallowed and tugged her skirt lower to cover her trembling knees. “Thank you. I do prefer to use people in my work. I feel it provides life to a scene.” Her thoughts raced. Had she actually refused to paint Mrs. Vanderbilt?

“I quite agree.” He nodded. “Your model in *Girl with Scarlet Poppies* is particularly lovely.”

She bit her lip rather than admit it was a self-portrait—her former self. Paying a model was out of the question. “I was just thinking how Mrs. Vanderbilt might be ideal for my next watercolor—if she’d be willing to sit for me.”

The young woman grasped her husband’s arm. “Oh, Marcus. Wouldn’t that be a dream? I could be in a painting.”

He ran his fingers along her cheek. “You’re already a piece of art, my dear. I’m not sure I could share you.”

Exactly. Then he’d buy the picture, regardless. Olivia pressed on, despite her quavering voice. “With those exquisite features, an artist couldn’t go wrong. It would be such an honor to have Mrs. Vanderbilt in one of my scenes.”

Mrs. Vanderbilt beamed. “Perhaps by the sea?”

“I recently visited a penthouse balcony adorned with flowering bougainvillea.” Olivia countered. “They’d look lovely with your fair skin.” She’d had her fill of fresh air as a child.

Frank wandered up to join them. “Marcus, so good of you to come. I couldn’t help overhearing. I think it’s a splendid idea. And I’ve got the perfect setting for this masterpiece.”

The art collector raised an eyebrow. “What did you have in mind?”

Olivia stepped back. Her dealer had never told her where to paint.

Frank glanced at her before smiling at the Vanderbilts. “I’ll need to beg you to excuse us for a moment, and I’ll speak to Miss Rutherford. Once all is arranged, I’d be delighted to fill you in on the details.”

Olivia followed him to a quiet corner of the room. “What could be so important you’d pull me away from someone like Marcus Vanderbilt?”

He clasped his hands in front of him. “I just finished speaking with an editor from *Scenic Magazine*. He wants you to do some illustrations for an upcoming travel piece.”

“I thought you didn’t want me taking on commercial jobs.”

“This is different. *Scenic* goes out to thousands of subscribers all over the West. They pride themselves on their artwork. If you do well, you might even land the cover.”

Her spirits rose. Most great artists did work for hire at some point in their career; why should she be any different?

“And—you’ll like this—all expenses are included.” He grinned. “You won’t pay for a single thing. He’s going to set up everything. They’re allowing an entire month for the trip.”

“A month?” Olivia’s heart jumped. With that sort of help, she’d be able to send all of today’s proceeds to Aunt Phyllis. But could she manage the pretense for such a long period? “What sort of trip? France? Italy?” Images of posh hotels, restaurants, and museums flooded her imagination.

Frank scrubbed a palm over his mouth and chin. “Not quite so glamorous, I’m afraid. More of a grand adventure.” He met her eyes, an unspoken plea almost hidden in his gaze.

Something about the way he said “adventure” sent a quiver through her belly. “Where am I to go?”

“I’ve already agreed to the deal, Liv, so don’t get upset. This is the opportunity of a lifetime.”

A wave of heat prickled across her skin. He’d committed her without asking?

“We need this gig, sweetheart. You need it. Your name is hot right now,

but it'll only stay that way if we fight to keep you in the public eye. Most folks would call this place a paradise."

"Where did you tell *Scenic* I'd go?"

He averted his eyes. "Yosemite National Park."

She backed up two steps, her knees weakening. She'd long ago stricken that name from her memory. "I can't, Frank." Her voice shook. "You know that. Anywhere but there."

"Keep it down, Liv; people will notice." Wrinkles formed on his brow.

The memory of trees closing in stole Olivia's breath. She wouldn't return to the mountains. Not for *Scenic*, not for Frank, not for anyone.

"You need the exposure."

Exposure is exactly what she feared. Olivia reached up and tugged off her necklace, unable to draw a decent breath. People were turning to stare. No amount of lipstick and hair dye would save her reputation if she melted into a puddle here in the middle of the gallery.

Hurrying from the hall, she retreated to Frank's office and slid the lock into place. Gulping air, she laid her head against the wooden door and tried to banish the image of giant tree limbs blocking the sky. Her father had fled into those forests a wanted man and never emerged. The mountains had claimed their revenge—a life for a life. What made Frank think she'd ever set foot there? Even the name sent a stream of fire coursing through her soul.

Olivia yanked off the headpiece and let her hair fall loose.

A basket of red poppies sat balanced on the edge of his desk. Another of Frank's rash purchases? Poppies never made good cut flowers, typically wilting less than a day after they were collected. They couldn't maintain their appearance any more than she could. What had made her think she could live this masquerade forever? Her father's choices would always drag at her footsteps, no matter how she chose to present herself to the world.

A rap on the door cut through her unpleasant memories. She willed her breathing to slow. Frank had been her rock for years, transforming her from the girl who survived by selling caricatures outside the gate of the state fair to the sophisticated woman at the center of tonight's posh showing for the area elite. If he thought this was a good idea, she owed it to him to at least hear his arguments. She unlocked the door and swung it open.

Marcus Vanderbilt stood on the other side of the threshold, his pale blue eyes commanding her attention. "Miss Rutherford, we saw you leave, and Mrs. Vanderbilt grew concerned. I do hope nothing is amiss."

Olivia pressed a hand to her throat, struggling to push her practiced persona back into place. "I'm sorry to have worried you. I needed a moment alone. I had some rather shocking news."

He placed a hand on the doorframe, filling the narrow space. "The Yosemite trip? I couldn't help overhearing."

Her throat tightened. How many others had heard?

"I take it you've never been there. It's well worth the visit." He straightened. "I fancy myself quite the outdoorsman, actually."

"I-I'm pretty much a city girl, I'm afraid." *A half truth.* Olivia Rudd might have ties to the mountains, but Olivia *Rutherford* had never left the streets of Sacramento.

Mr. Vanderbilt took a step inside, the fragrance of Brylcreem obvious in his wake. "Perhaps you'd allow Sophie and me to accompany you? I would love to show my bride the beautiful park, and it would give you an opportunity to paint the portrait you were tempting me with."

"Was I so obvious?"

He smiled, tipping his head forward. "It was well played. I respect that. And Sophie is quite charmed by you." He shrugged. "And to be perfectly honest, I'd do anything to make her happy. So if you're willing to paint her portrait at Yosemite, we'd be honored to come along. Should I speak with

your dealer regarding your fee?" His kindness chased a bit of the chill from the room.

A commissioned portrait. A month of all expenses paid. The enticement of a potential magazine cover. She'd be a fool to turn down such mind-boggling offers. Olivia Rutherford may be nothing more than a paper-thin illusion created by her dealer, but she also had bills to pay.

She nodded. "I'm sure he can come up with a fair price."

Mr. Vanderbilt ran a hand down his pinstriped lapel. "As long as my Sophie is happy, I'm not concerned about the expense."

Her life had been nothing but one expense after another for as long as Olivia could remember. Perhaps the Vanderbilts could help her achieve the status she already pretended to enjoy.

And Yosemite? She closed her eyes for a moment. The place held no allure for her. No draw. All it contained was the secret of what her father did, the day her life crumbled.

Could she go, if only to wring from its landscape the money she needed to protect her sisters' future? She opened her eyes and took a deep breath. "I'd be delighted to have you and Mrs. Vanderbilt join me."

Perhaps Yosemite could return everything her father had stolen.



July 8, 1929

Yosemite National Park

Clark Johnson secured the General's reins to the wooden post outside the Ahwahnee Hotel, and then pushed back his hat against the slanting rays of the early morning sun. The breeze carried a chill laced with the lingering fragrance of campfires. Lifting his eyes, he studied the massive granite cliffs framing the boundaries of the Yosemite Valley. The Royal Arches rose

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

sharply in the sky, dwarfing the luxury hotel and perhaps reminding visitors of their minuscule role in this grand place. On a day like this, Clark longed to disappear into the trees, follow the streams to their sources, and not speak to another human soul for days on end.

Unfortunately, another group of tourists probably waited for him. Boorish, overly talkative city folk who spoke of “getting back to nature” and calming their nerves. Didn’t they realize the secret to tranquility resided in quiet?

Talk never solved anything—a plain fact he’d learned the hard way. Words held no power to fix lives. For three years he’d explored Yosemite and the High Sierra, hoping for a word from God about his failed calling. Nothing so far. The thought lay heavy on his chest. How long should a man wait? Maybe silence was His answer on the subject. The church had cast him out—who’s to say the Lord hadn’t as well?

Clark winced. God didn’t work that way. That much he knew. But as for the rest?

He turned his back on the view and followed the walkway to the Ahwahnee.

Chief Ranger John Edwards stood out front, one foot propped up on the short rock wall near the entrance. “Glad to see you made it back. How did your group handle the wild weather last night?”

“Mad as wet hares this morning. You’d think I controlled the climate.”

“Well, you do have a direct line with the big guy.”

“The superintendent?” Clark said wryly.

“That’s not who I’m referring to, and you know it.” The ranger shrugged.

It never failed. Once people discovered he’d been a minister, they had trouble seeing him in any other light. “So, what’ve you got for me today? Tell me it’s not more pencil pushers in search of adventure.”

“I wanted to talk to you about that. You know the transportation department is hiring a professional guide service—”

“Next year.”

“I’m afraid it’s been moved up to next month.”

A lump settled in Clark’s throat. “I’ve been running trips for almost three years now. The pack mules and I are out on our ears?”

“The mules belong to Yosemite; they’ll be fine. It’s you I’m worried about.” John rubbed a hand across his chin. “You sailed through the civil service exam, Clark. I’ve been holding that ranger position for you, but I can’t stall much longer. You need to make a decision.”

“And put on the flat hat?” He glanced up at John’s Stetson, the stiff-brimmed and high-crowned hat marking him as National Park Service even more than the gold badge on his chest.

“I’ve got men clamoring for the honor. I don’t understand why you’re hesitating. We don’t want to lose you. You know this park better than almost anyone.”

A jolt of pain went through Clark’s chest. The staff had become like family, but was he ready to join their ranks? He pushed aside the question. “You haven’t answered me. What’ve you got for me today?” He’d deal with tomorrow, *tomorrow*.

John folded both arms across his chest. “You’ve been booked special for the next month. That’ll take you through the end of your contract. *Scenic Magazine* is sending out some artist—a painter. You’re going to be the escort. After that, the new team takes over.”

Clark ran a hand across his sore shoulder muscles. “A whole month? How many pictures does this person plan on painting?”

John shrugged. “I’m just the messenger. She arrives this afternoon.”

“She?” A familiar squeeze gripped Clark’s heart. “I can’t take a woman into the backcountry alone.”

“I know, you’re not so good with the ladies.”

Or too good. He’d succeeded in barely speaking to a woman outside his

tours for months, and now he'd be saddled with one for four weeks? He'd rather guide a grizzly sow. "Can you spare someone to come along? How about that lady ranger, Miss Michael? This artist might like some female companionship."

"You're afraid of women, so you ask for more?" His friend shook his head. "Enid is busy putting together a wildflower display for the museum. And I'm told the artist is bringing a couple of chaperones—wealthy art connoisseurs. So there's no need to panic."

"I'm not afraid of women." Clark thrust his hands into his trouser pockets. "They're just a highly unpredictable species. One minute they're sweet as honeysuckle; the next you find yourself up to your kneecaps in hellfire."

John laughed. "I suppose there's a grain of truth to what you say. At least about some women. But truly, you don't know what you're missing, my friend."

Easy for John to talk. He'd snared a wife as steady as a mule but pretty as a ray of sunshine. No ranger could ask for a better helpmate than Melba Edwards. No wonder John smiled so often. "I'm safer keeping my distance—at least until I meet someone I can trust."

"So, what'd she do to you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Back when we first met, when you were hiding out over by Mount Starr King, I guessed you were on the lam. I thought putting you to work as a guide might make an honest man of you." He chuckled. "Took some time to figure out you'd been a preacher, not some criminal." John leaned forward, a glint in his eye. "Melba thinks a woman put you over the edge. I told her you wouldn't get close enough to a gal for that to happen."

Clark buttoned his jacket, as if it could protect him from both unwanted questions and memories. "*Natural* history, John. That's what you hired me for. Not personal history."

John grinned—an expression so common it had carved deep lines at the corners of his mouth. “If you won’t throw us any bread crumbs, Melba and I will have to keep guessing.”

With a quick tip of the hat to his friend, Clark hurried back to his horse. If he’d learned anything in his three years at Yosemite, it was never feed the rangers. It only made them more curious.

Is that what God wanted for him? *Ranger Clark Johnson*. It sounded absurd.

He patted the General’s rump before digging into the mare’s saddlebag. “All right, girl. If we’re picking up a lady artist, I guess I’d better at least put on a clean shirt.”



Olivia stepped out of the long Packard Phaeton, untied the silk scarf from around her hair, and smoothed her bob back into place. She blinked hard and took several quick breaths to gather her composure. She couldn’t allow the Vanderbilts to see her undone by a few cliffs, trees, and cloud—seven if the panorama had left her heart a quivering mess. Could she somehow capture that emotion on paper?

Sophie hopped out of the car behind her. “It’s chilly. I should have brought a warmer coat.” She gestured to the valet, still holding the door. “You’ll make sure our bags are brought up straightaway, won’t you?”

The pale man nodded, his cap slipping forward on his head with the motion. “Yes ma’am. Right away.”

Olivia shook off the strange feeling that had captured her the moment they entered the valley. “I’ll take my paint box. I don’t want anyone else to handle it.”

Mr. Vanderbilt trotted around from the other side of the vehicle. “I’d be happy to tote it for you, Miss Rutherford, if you don’t trust the help.”

A flicker traveled across the valet's face, but he turned toward the luggage compartment without a word.

Sophie tittered. "You're wasting your time, Marcus. Olivia already informed me she doesn't let anyone near her case. It must contain holy relics or something."

Olivia strode to the rear of the automobile and grasped the handle of the heavy container. "Thank you, Mr. Vanderbilt, but I barely trust myself with it. My whole life is wrapped up in that box." More than anyone knew. An elegant lady would probably allow a gentleman to carry her belongings, but she couldn't chance anyone finding the old newspaper articles and letters hidden under the paint tray.

"I imagine this place is filled with eligible bachelors. I fully intend to pick a companion for you." Sophie flung a cashmere wrap about her shoulders with an exaggerated shiver, her ploy drawing Marcus like a wave to the sand. The woman had perfected the wide-eyed act, but Olivia surmised she was more perceptive than she let on. "Though I imagine a fellow would have to be pretty colorful to snare your heart. I don't believe you'd marry just any handsome face."

Olivia propped the box on her hip and surveyed the grand hotel entrance. "Every human form is a piece of art, if you look through the right eyes."

Marcus slid an arm around his wife's slim waist. "And you two are prettier than any picture."

Olivia followed the pair down the long promenade and into the hotel. Sophie's lively chatter had already eased a little of the tension from Olivia's shoulders. She'd brought the wealthy couple along primarily to validate her reputation, but was it possible they could actually become friends?

A rough-looking man leaned against the hotel's reception desk, one booted foot kicked out before him. He held a coiled rope over one broad shoulder, arms folded across his chest.

What a perfect specimen of Western manhood. Olivia tightened her grip on the box, the image of this fellow posed against the Yosemite cliffs flashing across her mind. But painting could wait. First she needed to find her room and splash some cold water on her wind-burned cheeks. Olivia forced the gentleman's rugged visage from her thoughts and approached the long counter.

The clerk jerked his head upward. "Checking in, miss?"

Frank said the magazine had arranged everything. She'd expected a bit more of a reception. "My name is Miss Olivia Rutherford."

The man she'd been appraising a moment before turned and stared right at her. "The artist?"

A quiver raced through her stomach. "Yes." She wouldn't expect someone of his physique to be an art connoisseur. "Are you familiar with my work?"

A smile lifted his lips, easing the harsh expression from his face. "Clark Johnson. I'm the guide for your pack trip."

"The—the what?"

He hiked an eyebrow. "Your guide. You're the magazine artist, aren't you? They hired me to escort you and your party through the valley." Mr. Johnson glanced back at the Vanderbilts and pushed back his hat. "Sir, ma'am, we can head out whenever you're ready." His eyes traced them from head to foot. "You might want to change first."

Olivia's heart picked up speed. It would take a pretty big change to entice her out onto the trail. She'd agreed to travel to Yosemite, not trek through its woods. "I'm afraid you were misinformed, Mr. Johnson. My art dealer said I could paint from the hotel balcony. We have no intention of setting foot on any dusty trails." She focused on the desk clerk. "Now, about our accommodations."

The clerk studied the registration book. “I’m afraid I don’t have your name here, Miss Rutherford. You say you’re with a magazine?”

A wave of heat crept up Olivia’s neck. She knew this situation would be trouble. Hadn’t she told Frank as much? She leaned across the counter. “Yes, *Scenic Magazine*. We will need two of your best suites. With balconies and private washrooms.”

The man’s Adam’s apple bobbed as his eyes darted between her face and the book. “If you’ll excuse me for a moment, Miss Rutherford, I’ll check with my manager.”

Sophie let her wrap drape down her back. “Oh, dear.” She turned to her husband, running a hand over his lapel. “You’ll fix this, darling, won’t you?”

Mr. Vanderbilt straightened his shoulders. “Of course. They cannot treat us as such.”

The guide propped one elbow on the counter. “You’re not in need of my services, then? The magazine scheduled us for four weeks on the trail. I’ve got my pack mules ready and waiting.”

The room wavered before Olivia’s eyes. Four weeks—in the wilderness? *Stay calm*. “Mr. Johnson, I am here to paint, to dine, and to dance—in that order. Smelly mules are not on my agenda.” Not to mention the bears. And bugs.

He shrugged one shoulder. “The magazine paid for my services, regardless. I suppose my stock could use the rest.” The guide turned to leave.

She studied the curve of his bicep as he hiked the lariat over his shoulder. “Wait a moment. They already paid you?” An idea spread through her mind like colors blending on the page. “So you’re at my disposal?”

Sophie giggled behind her.

He glanced back, a light simmering in his brown eyes. “I’m not at anyone’s *disposal*, miss. But if you want a tour—”

Olivia flicked away his words with a brush of her hand. “No tour. I need a model. And you’re perfect. Rugged, manly.”

“I—what? No.” His jaw dropped.

Sophie placed hands on her hips. “I thought I was your model.”

Olivia turned to her friend. “I’ll need more than one, certainly.”

The guide had pulled the hat from his head revealing a shock of brown hair. “Ma’am, I’m honored, but I couldn’t possibly.”

Was that a blush? *How endearing.* Olivia circled around, eyeing him from various angles. “As you said, you’ve already been paid. It’s much less work than hiking all day, I’m sure.”

The clerk reappeared, a sheen of perspiration showing on his forehead. “Miss Rutherford, I’m terribly sorry. We have only one room available, and it’s not quite what you requested.”

Olivia ran fingers through her bob. What would a proud, affluent woman do in this situation? Probably not dissolve into tears. She tucked the art case under her arm and glanced toward Mr. Vanderbilt. “I’m simply parched. Sophie and I are going to find the dining room and order some lemonade. I trust you’ll take care of this. You and”—she turned to the handsome outdoorsman—“Mr. Johnson here can speak to the manager and work out the details. Sophie and I will wait on the patio. I hear the view is splendid.”