

# THE BARTERED BRIDE

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BRIDES OF THE WEST

THE KENNABRAE BRIDES

ERICA VETSCH



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Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, Kings James Version.

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“**T**he idea’s preposterous, and I’ll have nothing to do with it.” Jonathan Kennebrae bolted from his chair and stalked across the office. “You won’t manipulate me like this. And I doubt Noah or Eli will go along with the scheme either.”

His grandfather, Abraham Kennebrae, sat ramrod straight behind the walnut desk. For a man confined to an invalid chair these past eight years, his voice still rang with authority and vigor. “I’ve spent a lifetime building up this family’s fortune and power, and I want to die knowing it will continue. If not through you, then through your brothers. The best way to ensure this is to marry you boys off well. You act as if contracted marriage was something new. It’s been going on for centuries.”

Jonathan clasped his hands behind his back under his coat-tails and stared out the window of Grandfather’s library. Two acres of emerald grass stretched below to the shoreline. Lake Superior spread before him, cobalt blue under an azure sky. The *Lady Genevieve*, the family yacht named for his grandmother, bobbed gently along the dock beside the boathouse. Her white hull gleamed, her mast pointed to the cloudless

heavens. He wished he stood at her wheel, skimming over the waves, away from this incredible conversation.

“It’s all arranged, Jonathan. Three weddings, three sound marriages, and the consolidation of four of the wealthiest families in Duluth. And not only that, but it brings together under one name all you need to control every aspect of this harbor: shipping, grain, ore, and lumber.”

Jonathan turned and leaned against the windowsill. The morning sun fell through the stained glass of the upper windows, shattering rainbows on the Persian rug. He crossed his ankles, trying to appear casual. “All arranged? You and your cronies have everything mapped out? And Noah, Eli, and I have no say? Have you decided who is to marry whom, or were you just going to have us draw straws?”

His jaw ached and the pain between his eyebrows increased. An image of Grandfather and his bewhiskered, cigar-smoking circle of friends bending over charts and arguing the relative merits of their offspring wavered before his eyes. “I have no intention of marrying an empty-headed show piece chosen by you. Are your grandsons no more than pawns to be shuffled about at your command? Whose idea was this?” His throat ached with the desire to yell, but years of training and deference to the man before him kept his voice controlled.

“Now, lad”—Grandfather made a dismissing motion—“you make it sound worse than it is.”

“I don’t see how that’s possible. I feel like a horse at auction. Did you sell us to the highest bidders?” Sarcasm dripped out, laced with exasperation.

Grandfather wagged a gnarled finger. “Don’t take that tone with me. I’m still the head of this household. I made a sound business decision for this family. You’ll accede to my wishes in this. You’re nearly thirty. It’s past time you were married and setting up your household. As a member of the aristocracy of this city and this state, you have an obligation to marry well.”

“Shades of the Four Hundred.” Jonathan jammed his hands into his pockets. “This is 1905, and your ideas are outdated. This isn’t New York City. It’s Duluth. I’m not marrying someone so I can be invited to better parties and promenade through Newport every afternoon during ‘The Season.’ And I’m certainly not interested in any female who wishes to marry for those reasons either.”

“You couldn’t be further from the truth. You aren’t marrying into the salons of Fifth Avenue. You’re marrying to gain control of the harbor.” He waved his hand in a sweeping motion toward the lake. “Control that harbor and you control millions of dollars. Control millions and you control the politicians in St. Paul and Washington. Control St. Paul and Washington and you control the power to make more millions. Don’t you see it?”

“What if I don’t want to control the harbor? What if I’m content with what I have: a solid business with an excellent reputation and a sound financial base?”

“Then you’re a fool. You’ll have wasted everything I’ve spent my life building up. Now is the time to strike. Of the four richest families in Duluth, I’m the only one with male heirs. Lawrence Brooke, Phillip Michaels, and Radcliffe Zahn have only daughters. And don’t forget, a marriage to Lawrence Brooke’s daughter brings not just the grain docks in the harbor but the railroad that hauls the grain from the Dakotas, too.”

Jonathan ran his hand over his hair. “You still haven’t convinced me. I don’t even know these women. Why would I want to marry any of them?”

Grandfather thumped the blotter. “Stop being obtuse. I’ll make it as plain as possible. You will court and marry the daughter of Lawrence Brooke, you will gain control of the grain docks in Duluth harbor, and you will do so before Christmas.”

“Before Christmas? That’s impossible. Christmas is less than three months away. Isn’t that a bit quick?”

“Poppycock. I see no reason to wait. Waiting only increases

the chances that something will go wrong. We must act now. You, as the eldest, will set an example for your brothers. The twins will fall in line. And it isn't as if the young women won't receive the benefits of a sound match. Wealth, status, security, influence. What more could a woman want?"

Jonathan snorted. "I'm no expert on the female mind. I have no idea what they want. But what happens if I don't do as you say? Or what if the woman won't have me?"

"I will disinherit you without so much as a blink." Grandfather regarded him with glittering eyes. "I will leave my fortune only to those grandsons who do my bidding. Those who will not, receive nothing. I've already rewritten my will to reflect the changes."

Anger replaced the exasperation and disbelief in Jonathan's chest. "You cannot be serious."

"I've never been more serious in my life." Grandfather narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips, causing his wiry side whiskers to bristle out like a badger. "Do you care to challenge me? The will stands as long as the girl is legally free and morally acceptable for you to wed."

Jonathan's mind raced, and his muscles tensed. How dare that old reprobate? Kennebrae Shipping was his. He'd run the company, chaired the board, and overseen the day-to-day operations for the past eight years. He, not Grandfather, had expanded the fleet, brokered new contracts, enticed investors. The company was his life. He'd be dead before he'd let anyone take it from him.

A knock sounded on the library door. The butler entered, a silver tray in his hand. "This just arrived for you, sir." He extended the salver toward Grandfather.

The old man took an envelope from it and turned it in his hands.

"Will there be a reply, sir? The gentleman who delivered it is waiting."

Grandfather picked up his letter opener. He slit the heavy cream envelope and read, satisfaction spreading over his face. His fingers drummed the desktop.

Jonathan paced between the marble fireplace and the glass-front bookcases. Grandfather's words were no idle threat. He'd disinherit Jonathan without so much as a by-your-leave should Jonathan cross him. He had seen it in the old man's eyes. Galling, that's what it was. To have a bride chosen for him based upon her wealth and connections. And worse, to be chosen as a husband based on his.

Grandfather leaned forward and uncapped the silver inkwell. He dipped his ebony pen in the liquid and scratched a few words on the card. "McKay, give the gentleman this."

"Very good, sir."

The door had barely closed before Jonathan whirled from contemplating the oil painting over the mantel. "Do Noah and Eli know about this?"

"No, of course not. I'll tell Noah when he returns to the harbor, and I'll tell Eli when he returns from Virginia. Though why Eli can't learn shipbuilding right here in Duluth is beyond me."

"He wanted to learn from the best, and the best shipbuilders are on the East coast." Jonathan rubbed his palm against the back of his neck. How could he get out of this? His strides measured the room.

"Will you stop pacing like a caged wolf? You'd think I was asking you to go to the gallows." Grandfather backed his chair and wheeled it around the edge of the desk. A blanket covered his stick-thin legs from hips to ankles.

Jonathan sagged onto the horsehair settee. "From what I can tell, marriage and hanging have a lot in common. The man ends up dangling from the end of a string either way."

Grandfather chuckled then shook his head. "Where'd you

get an idea like that? Your grandmother, God rest her soul, was a fine woman.”

“What about my parents? To hear you talk, they couldn’t be in the same room without bloodshed. How they wound up with three sons is beyond me.”

Sadness lined Grandfather’s face. “Your parents were both high-strung. Always convinced the other was being a fool. But they loved each other, in their own way. I thought they’d settle down eventually. It’s a shame you never got to know them. Your father couldn’t live without her. The carriage accident was a mercy. He was never the same after your mother died. And neither were you, though you were only four at the time.”

“I have no real memories of my parents, only their portraits in the drawing room.”

“Those were your grandmother’s idea. Had them painted from their engagement pictures. Thought it might be nice for you boys to have them.”

Jonathan took note of the nostalgic look in Grandfather’s eye. If he could just keep him talking about old times, about grandmother, perhaps he would forget this nonsense about marriage.

“She was a saint. And what she ever saw in an old boot like you, I’ll never know.”

“Hah! That’s just what her parents said when I came courting. Never thought I’d amount to anything. But I showed them. Built up the biggest shipping line on the Lakes and built Kennebrae House for your grandmother, too. Nothing was too good for her.”

“She deserved every one of the fifty-five rooms for putting up with you.”

“Well, your new wife will, too.”

Jonathan blew out a breath. So much for getting Grandfather off the track. “I haven’t agreed to this madness. Anyway, I

think you're assuming a lot. I haven't even met this Miss Brooke. We might not suit one another at all."

"You're both young and rich. You'll suit one another just fine. How do you feel about music?"

"What?"

"I asked how you felt about music. An evening of music and fine food."

What kind of sidetrack was this? Jonathan put his guard firmly up.

The old man had a gleam in his eye, an unholy sparkle that boded no good.

"You mean one of those parties where the hostess shoves her daughter onstage, and the poor girl scrapes away at some writhing violin concerto or pounds out a tortured nocturne on the piano while the audience tries not to wince or die from boredom? And at dinner they make up compliments over dried-out chicken and pasty potatoes until they can make a graceful escape?"

"I hope it isn't as bad as you describe."

"What are you hatching?"

"The note that came earlier. It was an invitation to Castlebrooke. Mrs. Brooke is having an evening of music and refreshments tonight. I sent the reply that both of us would be delighted to attend. And you'll have ample time to study your bride-to-be. She'll be the one performing the tortured nocturnes."