



From Boss to Bridegroom (Smoky Mountain Matches Book 6)

By Karen Kirst

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Falling for the Boss

Being tied up and delivered to the sheriff was not how Nicole O'Malley expected to meet her new boss. Quinn Darling had the audacity to mistake *her* for a burglar! Now she's counting the days until she can leave small-town life behind to open her own boutique. But as long as she's helping two runaways escape their vindictive stepdad, she can't leave town.

Quinn's determined to triumph in his first business venture without the support of his wealthy family. He can't succeed without assistant Nicole, a beauty as prickly as she is captivating. As Quinn adjusts to the tight-knit community, he's soon set on another goal: breaking through Nicole's reserve to capture the love hidden in her heart.

Smoky Mountain Matches: Dreams of home and family come true in the Smoky Mountains

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From Boss to Bridegroom (Smoky Mountain Matches Book 6) By Karen Kirst Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #106877 in eBooks
- Published on: 2015-04-01
- Released on: 2015-04-01
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

About the Author

An East Tennessee native, Karen Kirst attended the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, where she received a B.A. in Speech Communication. She divides her time between being a wife, homeschooling mom, and romance writer. She and her husband, along with their three sons, recently said goodbye to military life and are thrilled to be back home in Tennessee. Her favorite pastimes are reading, visiting tearooms, and watching romantic comedies.

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June 1882

Gatlinburg, Tennessee

There was an intruder in the mercantile.

In her haste, Nicole O'Malley had forgotten to lock the rear entrance, and now she was alone.

While not common in this area, robberies weren't unheard of. In fact, this very store had been targeted two years ago, and her oldest sister, Juliana, kidnapped by outlaws.

A shudder ripped through her as stealthy, faltering steps echoed down the long hallway that led past the private quarters, storeroom and office to where she'd been dusting shelves in the front area of the store. Whoever had dared enter after hours was up to no good.

Alarm pooling in her belly, Nicole seized a large enamel pot from the nearest shelf and wedged herself into the narrow space between the high shelving unit and door frame. She lifted it high over her head.

Her sister had been fortunate. She'd escaped unharmed.

Would Nicole face a worse fate?

What if he had a gun? What if he shot her on sight?

That's why I have to be faster than him. Seize the element of surprise.

The footsteps neared. Paused somewhere in the vicinity of the office immediately on the other side of the doorway. Her hands curved around the pot handles until they bit into her palms. Heartbeat roaring in her ears, her arms began to tremble from the strain. The safe containing the money was in the office. If he went in there, she could try and sneak out the front entrance.

But he didn't enter the office. Instead, he stalked through the doorway. Halted inches away, hands on lean hips as he surveyed the interior. By now things like his scent—peppermint of all things—and impressive height were registering.

The intruder seemed to be cataloging the goods. What was his plan? Steal the valuables and sell them for profit?

He started to pivot in her direction, and she caught a glimpse of sleek jawline above a starched white collar. Nicole's throat closed up. She would *not* be taken hostage like Juliana. If he had time to draw his weapon, she was done for. *It's now or never.*

She swung with all her might. The impact of the heavy cookware against his head knocked him forward. He grunted, hands going up as if to defend himself from another blow.

Go. Now. The pot hit the just-swept floorboards with a dull thud. She dashed into the shadowed hallway, desperation powering her rubbery legs. A low growl cracked the air. He scrambled into the hallway after her. Without warning, strong arms stole around her waist, halting her forward movement and digging into her stomach. She was shoved face-first against the wall. His large body followed, heaving chest pinning her.

"Who? Why?" he panted against her ear, hot breath fogging her neck.

"Let me go, you ill-bred ruffian!" Raising her foot, she slammed her heel down, grinding it into his boot.

He gasped, jerked, and Nicole slipped sideways out of his grasp.

"Oh, no, you don't."

He captured her before she could put any sort of distance between them, this time seizing her arms in a painful grip. Ignoring her struggles and seething threats of retribution, the intruder propelled her into the store, snatched a silk tie from the rack on the counter and tied her wrists behind her back. Anger pulsed at her temples. "You won't get away with this," she said.

He spun her to face him, pushed her into the lone chair and, shoving aside her skirts, bound her calves to the chair legs. Insides quivering with indignation, she did everything she could to make things difficult for him. She wiggled. Strained against the ties.

When she delivered another threat, he straightened to his full height, folded his arms and glared down at her, his honey-colored eyes glittering with ill humor. "If you don't want me to gag that pretty little mouth of yours, I suggest you shut it."

A lock of jet-black hair flopped over his left eyebrow, and he shoved it back, wincing when he came into contact with what was probably a good-size knot on his head.

"I don't know what your story is, lady, but you had better hope it's a good one. You'll be telling it to the sheriff here shortly."

Her frazzled mind belatedly homed in on his accent. It wasn't the slow, easy drawl typical of East Tennessee. His words were clipped. Fast. Northern?

Dread clawed upward into her throat, nearly choking her. *Please don't let this be who I think it is.* Nicole did a quick inventory of his appearance—quality brown leather boots peeked from beneath perfectly creased blue trousers. His navy vest and white shirt had been crafted from sturdy material. He didn't dress like a ruffian. Didn't look like one, either, with the clean shave, neat haircut and carved features. Power and

authority cloaked him. "Did you say sheriff?"

"Sure did." He jabbed a finger in the air above her nose and quirked a mocking brow. "Stay put."

Outrage flamed in her cheeks. "Wait. I can explain—"

But he was already undoing the knob lock. "Save it."

The door clicked shut behind him.

Nicole listened helplessly to the retreating footsteps of Clawson's new owner—and her new boss. She hung her head in defeat. She was never, ever going to live this down.

Quinn Darling made his way down the boardwalk, head throbbing with each step. That was a fine welcome to his brand-new life. He'd wanted change, a simpler existence than he'd led among Boston's elite. Nothing simple about being assaulted by a madwoman the second he arrived.

Gatlinburg had the appearance of a peaceful place. Majestic mountains cradled the town, green slopes cast in waning goldenorange sunlight. Businesses lined either side of Main Street, and a white church boasting stained-glass windows sat at the far end, surrounded by rolling fields and scattered tree groves.

Spotting the lone horse outside a building marked Jail, Quinn picked up his pace. His muscles ached from days of travel; his belly was protesting the long hours since lunch and his headache—compliments of *her*—had quadrupled in size. He wanted the female out of his possession so that he could unload his personal belongings and explore the store that belonged to him.

"Excuse me," he addressed the rugged, fair-headed man behind the desk. "Are you the sheriff?"

Eying Quinn, the man stood, hands perching on his gun belt. "Shane Timmons. How can I help you?"

"The name's Quinn Darling. I purchased the mercantile from Emmett Moore."

The caution in the lawman's eyes receded a little. "We've been expecting you, Mr. Darling."

"Yes, well, I've only just arrived. You can imagine my surprise when I discovered a trespasser in my store. I'd appreciate it if you'd come and fetch her."

"Her?" His lips twitched. "What does this trespasser look like?"

"Deadly." His fingers once again prodded the tender knot at the base of his skull. She knew how to put up a fight, all right. When the sheriff, who looked to be in his mid-to-late thirties, appeared to be fighting an expression of amusement, Quinn continued, "Beautiful, but in a fatal, black-widow sort of way."

"Huh." Unhooking his Stetson from the chair back, Timmons nodded to the door. "Let's go take a look."

They crossed the nearly deserted street. The few remaining stragglers openly stared. "Do you have a lot of crime here?"

The lawman shot him an enigmatic look. "Depends."

"On what exactly?"

"On what you'd describe as a lot."

Hardly a helpful answer. Emmett Moore had assured him Gatlinburg was an ideal place to set down roots, find a God-fearing wife and pursue a new and different lifestyle—one where friendships weren't based on business connections or social standing or amount of accumulated wealth. He hadn't said a word about crime being an issue.

Too late now. Quinn kept his silence as they approached the entrance.

When they entered the darkened area, his captive jerked her head up, expressive eyes wide and accusing. Sheriff Timmons took one look at her, shook his head and strode to the nearest window, yanking the thick curtain open with a snap. Soft evening light spilled into the space, giving Quinn a much clearer view of the woman in the chair.

He sucked in a breath. If he hadn't just tussled with the little wildcat, he might've been duped into thinking her a complete innocent. Maybe it was the bride-white dress. Or the youthful perfection of her skin, like finest alabaster, in direct contrast to the thick mane of glossy raven curls spilling from their pins and framing her delicate face. Her eyes were an unusual color a man wouldn't soon forget—lavender ringed with deep violet—accentuated by a fringe of thick, inky lashes and topped with sweeping, elegant brows. Her dainty, bow-shaped mouth added to the illusion of innocence.

Timmons somberly bent to unknot the silk ties at her legs. Her lashes swept down and hot color surged in her cheeks. Quinn studiously avoided looking at the layers of snowy-white petticoats. In the heat of the struggle, his focus had been on restraining his assailant, not whether or not his actions were that of a gentleman.

"You might want to interrogate her before you release her. This one's unpredictable." In addition to the knot on his head, his toes would likely sport a nasty bruise, thanks to her.

"No need. This here isn't a petty thief." Shane paused, amusement twinkling in his blue eyes. "Mr. Darling, meet your shop assistant."

Words failed him. Rational thought failed him. Those magnificent violet eyes speared him as the sheriff helped her stand so that he could free her wrists. "Fou are Nicole O'Malley?"

"In the flesh." The perfect lips thinned with displeasure, then winced as she gingerly rubbed the skin where the ties had chafed.

Quinn winced along with her. He pinched the bridge of his nose. *Way to make a great first impression, Darling.* Then he recalled her culpability in the situation.

"Why did you attack me?" he demanded.

"I thought you were an intruder. Why did you sneak in here after hours?"

"I didn't sneak. This is my store. Besides, the door was unlocked."

"I think I'll leave you two to get better acquainted." The sheriff's smile was rueful as he passed Quinn.

"Welcome to Gatlinburg."

Placing the ties atop a wooden counter worn smooth from years of transactions, she attempted to divest the material of the wrinkles with the press of her hands. He attempted to ignore the contrast of jet curls against milky skin.

"You're three days late," she said.

"An unavoidable delay." Irritation sharpened his words. None of his previous employees had dared question him. But after this regrettable first meeting, he supposed he owed her an explanation. "My wagon suffered a broken axle. I assume Emmett and his wife have already left?"

"You assume correctly."

"That is unfortunate. For both our sakes."

She finally gifted him with her attention. "How so?"

"Because that leaves you to give me the grand tour."

Her hands stilled atop the lengths of silk. "I have no say in the matter, do I?"

"You *are* in my employ." He did nothing to mask the challenge in his tone. Had Nicole O'Malley spoken to Emmett Moore this way? Or was it just him and the fact he'd tied her up invoking this attitude?

Her stiff spine stiffened a fraction more. Her glare could've frozen the rain-swollen river out back. "You manhandled me."

Now would be a good time to point out he'd merely been reacting to the threat he'd perceived in her. His mother had reared him to be a gentleman, however, and so he refrained. "I apologize."

She considered him for a long moment, dipping her head as if she were a duchess and he a lowly estate servant. "I suppose I owe you an apology, as well."

Quinn bit the inside of his cheek to keep from retorting. He wasn't at his best right this minute...travel weary, hungry and hurting. Tomorrow would mark a new beginning between them. For now, he merely wanted to see his store.

Abandoning the ties, Miss O'Malley gestured to the long counter topped with glass display cases. "As you can see, we keep the more expensive items under lock and key. Silver, crystal, jewelry." Pivoting neatly, she gestured to the shelving units running the length of the walls on either side of the hallway door. The bottom half consisted of closed cabinets and drawers, while the top half was all open shelves. "And here we have a vast assortment of goods."

Quinn walked slowly past her, his attention on the haphazard collection of canned foods, boxes of wafers and cookies, tableware and linens. Mantel clocks and kerosene lamps perched on the top ledge. When he reached the end, he opened the nearest drawer and frowned at the mess of paper scraps and writing instruments.

"Why isn't the merchandise more organized?"

"Order and neatness weren't among Emmett's strengths."

Posture proud and regal-like, she folded her hands amongst her lace-scalloped skirts. While she'd spoken without censure and her expression revealed not a hint of disdain, he sensed Miss O'Malley didn't approve of the former owner's management.

"It's been this way for as long as I can remember," she added. "The arrangement may not make sense, but the customers know where to find everything."

Quinn approached, stopping closer than necessary simply to gauge her reaction. She didn't retreat. Her lips tightened in disapproval or dislike, he couldn't tell which.

"Show me more."

Again, the royal-like dip of her head. Adjectives scrolled through his mind and, as was his custom upon meeting new people, he began a mental list of attributes. *Reserved. Prickly. Beautiful.* Too bad that last one didn't appear to extend beyond the surface.

Moving between the two counters, she led him down three side-by-side aisles crammed with a variety of goods—tools, animal traps, ready-made clothing, toys, books and paper products, barrels packed with pickles, flour, sugar and crackers and more. A woodstove occupied the far back corner, surrounded by several chairs and a spittoon. A checker set perched atop an upturned barrel.

"What is this?"

"This is where our male customers gather."

Dark tobacco stains marred the floorboards, indicating not everyone had good aim. The upscale Boston establishments his family had frequented would never have allowed such a thing. "How often?"

"Whenever we're open."

Quinn blinked, searched her face for a sign she was merely jesting. There was none. "Do you mean they gather here every day?"

"Every single one."

"Are we talking an hour or two in the afternoons?"

"No, they pretty much hang around from dawn to dusk."

"Let me get this straight—these men sit here for countless hours, disrupting the flow of foot traffic and taking up valuable space that could be used to house more items? And that was acceptable to the Moores?"

"It's the way things have always been done. Besides, they're harmless."

She refolded a calico shirt on a display table piled with neat stacks of ready-made clothing that likely didn't bear the Darling name. While his family's garment factories currently supplied the Northern states, his father had plans to expand in the future. There was no question of the venture failing. Anything Edward Darling put

his hand to succeeded.

Clawson's Mercantile in the Tennessee mountains was far removed from Boston and the Darling empire, however. His father had nothing to do with it. Whether it failed or flourished was entirely up to Quinn. For the first time in his adult life, he had something entirely his own. This store was his chance to prove to himself that he was capable.

"Not everyone lives close by. Some customers travel an entire day to get here. This is where they catch up on local happenings and reconnect with old friends."

If Quinn had arrived before Emmett's departure, he could've discussed this and much more with him. The delay had cost him. He ran a finger along the cold metal stove that wouldn't be lit for many months.

"Simply because something has gone on for a long time doesn't mean it can't be changed." *Never be afraid of change, son. Be bold but prudent.* Quinn may have earned a business degree from Harvard, but his practical knowledge he'd gleaned from working side by side with his father. He gestured to the chairs. "These are going away."

She looked at him as though he'd suggested they set up a piano in the corner and hire saloon girls to sing for the customers. "Where will the men meet together?"

"I saw a café across the street. Let the owner of that establishment deal with them."

"You can't do this."

"The last I checked, my name was on the deed. I can and I will."

"Have you ever managed a store before?"

Users Review

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