



## The Reluctant Outlaw (Smoky Mountain Matches Book 1)

By Karen Kirst

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*A Kidnapper—and a Gentleman?*

The ruthless criminal who took Juliana O'Malley hostage was a thief and an outlaw—or so she thinks. But on a perilous journey through the Smoky Mountains, he becomes her unlikely protector. And when he pledges to return her home safely, she somehow finds herself believing him.

Evan Harrison has risked everything to find the men who killed his brother. Saving spirited, strong-willed Juliana could blow his cover with a deadly gang. Yet her courage and unwavering faith make him dream of the home and family he thought he could never have. And suddenly, that future is incomplete—without Juliana in it.

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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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*Gatlinburg, Tennessee June 1880*

Blocking the entrance to Clawson's Mercantile, Evan Harrison tried to blend in with the overhang's shadows. He'd dressed in head-to-toe black, his hat pulled low to shade his eyes. Leaning against the glass-paned door, arms crossed and one ankle slung carelessly over the other, he could've been waiting for someone or simply watching the morning rush of people. What passersby couldn't see was his heart's sharp tattoo against his rib cage and the sweat sliding between his shoulder blades to trickle down his spine.

His narrowed gaze flicked to and fro, his muscles bunched and ready to spring should anyone head his way. *Hurry up, Fitz.* He wondered how Art was doing in the back alley.

This wasn't his first holdup, so why the unease? He scanned the crowd again, and the burning in his gut grew worse. He was worried about Fitz. The outlaw inside the mercantile was a wild card. Lenny Fitzgerald had proven time and again that he wasn't afraid to spill innocent blood. And he wasn't particular about his victims.

Evan had done his best to prevent the violence, but he could only do so much without arousing suspicion. He couldn't take a chance of blowing his cover. He'd worked too hard and waited too long to have that happen now.

He closed his eyes, wishing he could put off the inevitable. Then he remembered the reason he was there and his resolve hardened. He was on a quest for justice, and he *would* get it. No matter what.

He snapped his eyes open at the sound of someone approaching. Shifting his head to the right, he caught sight of a young woman striding down the boardwalk in his direction, her boots clipping the weathered planks with determination. She was on a mission, it seemed.

*Please let her be headed anywhere else but here,* he thought.

As she neared, he couldn't help but notice her bold beauty. Sleek red hair peeked out from beneath a navy-and-cream floral-print bonnet framing an oval-shaped face. He admired her ivory complexion, so rare in redheads, and the pert nose, regal cheekbones and generous mouth. Her sturdy navy dress outlined a pleasing female form, tall yet graceful.

She must've noticed him staring, for she quirked a cinnamon eyebrow, her lips firming in disapproval. Her

eyes raked him before meeting his gaze head-on. One jerk of her chin hinted of a stubborn streak.

"Excuse me." She speared him with her gaze. "You're blocking the entrance."

Her eyes were green, not the expected blue. Deep green, the color of spruce trees streaked with sunset gold.

Straightening, Evan plucked the hay from his mouth and tossed it to the ground.

"You can't go in there."

A line of confusion formed between her fine eyebrows. "Why not?"

"Mr. Clawson had to step out for a few minutes. He asked me to tell any customers who happened by that he'd be right back."

Annoyance flickered in those gorgeous eyes. "That's impossible. Mr. Clawson is dead. His son-in-law, Larry Moore, is the owner now."

Swallowing his frustration, he struggled to maintain an air of indifference. Could she see the vein throbbing at his temple? "My mistake. Guess I mixed up the names."

A loud shout, followed by a heavy thump, sounded through the door. Evan cringed, resisting the urge to turn and look. She craned her neck to peer beyond his shoulder, and he sidestepped to block her line of sight.

"Someone is in there," she snapped, her eyes narrowing. "What kind of game are you playing?"

"Trust me, I'm not playing—"

"Is there a problem, Miss O'Malley?" a male voice interrupted from the street.

This situation was going from bad to worse. Evan turned to see a well-dressed man observing them, his curious gaze shifting from the young woman to settle on him. As a stranger in town, Evan would naturally be regarded with a certain amount of suspicion. He had to fix this. Fast.

"Good morning, Lane," the young lady greeted the man with a slight smile. "This *gentleman* and I were just discussing—"

"How rude I was for not opening the door for her," Evan finished. Grabbing the door handle, he made a slight bow. Surprise flashed across her face. "I do apologize for the oversight, ma'am." Evan pulled the door open and with a light hand on her elbow ushered her inside, calling over his shoulder, "I apologize for the misunderstanding. Good day, sir."

"Yes, goodbye, Lane."

The door closed with a final whoosh, cutting off her farewell. Through the window, Evan watched the man hesitate a moment before planting his hat back on his head and walking away. One problem taken care of. One to go.

"What was that all about?" she demanded.

Evan scanned the room. Fitzgerald was nowhere to be seen, which meant he was probably in the back, tying up the owner.

He took hold of her arm, speaking in low, urgent tones. "You're in a situation way over your head, lady. I need you to walk back out that door and as far away from this mercantile as you can. Talk to no one. I can't guarantee your safety if you alert anyone to what's happening here."

She stared at him. "What—"

"No questions. There isn't time—"

"What's that girl doing in here?"

Evan stiffened at the sound of Fitzgerald's cold voice behind him. "Keep quiet," he murmured in her ear. Without releasing her, he faced the outlaw whose features were concealed by a red bandanna.

"She was determined to do her shopping," Evan drawled. "Looks like her impatience has earned her a stint in the storeroom with the owner. I'll tie her up."

"You will do no such thing!" she cried, attempting to pry his hand loose.

Fitzgerald shook his head. "Forget it. She'll have to come with us."

"No." Her chances of survival were slim to none if she went with them.

"She's seen your face. We can't leave her here."

"I thought we agreed—no hostages. I don't like this—"

"Then you should've done your job and kept her away," Fitzgerald snapped. "Let's go."

Evan hesitated in order to give Fitzgerald a few second's head start.

"A hostage will only slow you down, you know," she argued, her eyes large in her pale face. "Leave me here. I'll tell the sheriff I didn't get a good look at you. You have my word."

He didn't reply. What could he say at this point? His mind was whirling with too many scenarios—all of them unpleasant—to attempt rational conversation.

"You're making a huge mistake! As soon as people realize what's happened, they'll organize a posse and come looking for you."

He sensed her mounting desperation, but was helpless to do anything about it.

"Isn't the cash enough? Do you really want to add kidnapping to your list of crimes?"

Ignoring her questions, he forcibly led her past the stockroom and the floor-to-ceiling shelves overflowing with goods, past the storekeeper's office and, finally, to the private quarters. At the rear entrance, he warned her to keep quiet.

"Where's Mr. Moore?" she demanded. "Is he okay?"

He slipped the Colt Peacemaker out of his holster, making sure she got a good look at it. He wasn't above intimidation to keep her in line. Her life depended on it. "Whatever you do, stay close to me."

For once, she didn't utter a word. Evan hoped that she wasn't too strong-willed to do as he said. He didn't

know what Fitz would do if she made a scene.

He grabbed the bandanna bunched around his neck and tugged it up to cover his face. Opening the door a crack, he checked the alleyway. Fitz and Art were already saddling up. He hurried her down the wooden stairs to where his horse, Lucky, was hitched, prodding her forward with a hand on her back.

"Get on the horse."

She dug her heels in the rocky dirt. "Uh-uh."

"Do it or I'll toss you up there myself," he growled from his position directly behind her, letting her feel the tip of the gun barrel near her shoulder. Her resistance irritated him—didn't she have the good sense to be scared?

With a huff, she grabbed the saddle horn, placed her foot in the stirrup and hauled herself up. He replaced his firearm and swung up behind her.

Art's eyes bulged when he spotted her. "Who's that?"

Fitz barked, "Never mind. Let's ride."

"Might as well relax," Evan told his hostage, signaling Lucky to head out. "It's gonna be a long ride."

Juliana O'Malley seethed with anger. As the miles between her and Gatlinburg stretched endlessly into the distance, she passed the time dreaming up ways to get even with the man holding her captive—everything from pushing him off a cliff to hog-tying him and leaving him at the mercy of wild animals.

It was either that or succumb to mind-numbing fear. She was familiar with firearms all right, but never in her life had she had one waved in her face.

*Lord Jesus, please help me, she prayed. I'm in a bit of a situation here.*

If only she'd heeded her instincts. The moment she became aware of the man in black's blatant scrutiny, she'd known that he was no gentleman. Her cheeks burned even now as she recalled how his intense gaze had taken in every inch of her. Scandalous!

She squirmed in the saddle. His muscled arms tightened in response, imprisoning her against his rock-hard chest. His warm breath stirred the hair at her nape and prickles of awareness danced along her skin.

Juliana squeezed her eyes tight and tried not to dwell on his disturbing nearness. At least he smelled pleasant enough, she consoled herself. Beneath the smell of horse and sweat, she detected the clean scent of soap.

They would have to...

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

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