

A
Bride
AT LAST

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To my husband, children, mother, and mother-in-law, who helped me carve out enough time to write this story, since a newborn and novel writing don't go together like peanut butter and jelly.



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Chapter 1

MISSOURI

SEPTEMBER 1885

At the sound of running footsteps, Kate Dawson glanced up from dumping mop water in the alleyway outside the school building.

Anthony Riverton skidded to a halt in front of her, his little chest heaving as he drew in gulps of air.

“Why weren’t you in school today?” She frowned at his tattered clothing. She needed to find him a decent coat before winter.

“Mother’s dying.” Dread strangled his words. “Tonight. I just know it.”

A lump pushed against Kate’s high collar. “She seemed better yesterday.” Lucinda didn’t have many days left, but Kate wasn’t ready for her to leave yet—wasn’t ready to assume responsibility for this boy all on her own. She hadn’t saved enough money, hadn’t figured out where they would live . . .

“She coughed so much last night I couldn’t sleep, and this morning she begged me not to leave.” The nine-year-old

swallowed hard, but his eyes were dry. “Said she’d be the one going. I thought she meant back to the laundry.” His ragged voice barely registered. “And she’s mumbling things about Pa.”

Kate’s breath stopped. “Your pa?”

The boy’s arms hung limp at his sides. “Said he’s coming.” She shook her head vehemently. “No.”

“Said she wrote him.”

“Wrote him? Whatever for?” She’d helped the two of them escape Anthony’s father years ago—or at least the man Anthony had known as *Pa*. Had Lucy contacted him?

“Let’s go.” Kate leaned the mop against the schoolhouse door. She’d yet to clean Miss Jennings’s classroom or the Widow Larson’s, but a boy needed somebody with him when his mother took her last draught of air.

She sprinted after Anthony, her long-legged stride easily keeping pace with his. They darted down the convoluted streets of Breton, one of the many towns surrounding Independence, Missouri—a sprawling city they could get lost in, and where Richard Fitzgerald could never find them.

Surely Anthony had heard wrong. Lucinda had to have written someone else. She’d told Kate that Richard wasn’t Anthony’s real father months ago, but she hadn’t thought to pry any further. The only other man she knew of in Lucinda’s past was the husband who’d kicked Lucinda out penniless—who’d driven her to Richard. Was he Anthony’s father or was there a third man?

Winding their way between factories and dilapidated apartments only impoverished factory workers would bother to live in, they ran for the boardinghouse where Kate paid for the Rivertons to lodge. The giant structure leaned, and its walls contained more bugs than the building had bricks, but Mrs. Grindall’s was the only affordable place available. Lucinda’s sickness had stolen her ability to work, and the landlord of

the miserable shack they'd once lived in had not been gifted with compassion.

If only Kate could find them someplace better. But as long as she taught in the rundown section of Breton, that would never happen. Not only was the schoolhouse and surrounding neighborhood lacking, but so was the pay.

Lately, Lucinda had bemoaned the baubles and luxurious life she'd left behind so much that Kate had to keep reminding her of how her lover had treated her to snap her out of whining.

As a teacher, Kate wouldn't be able to provide Anthony with much, but he'd have enough. And most importantly, he'd be loved—which was better than anything Richard could give him.

But what if Richard was on his way to Breton right now? What if he was already here?

The wintery air, like a cold, sharp knife, sliced in and out of her lungs as she breathed deeply with each stride. She sped up to tighten the distance between her and Anthony. Dodging a pile of litter, she darted around the sharp corner into—

“Oof.”

Her shoulder slammed hard into a man in the boardinghouse's alleyway. She stumbled, arms flailing to save her balance.

“Are you all right, miss?” He reached for her, but she righted herself without his help and shook her head. Good thing she wore sensible boots. Heels would have sent her sprawling.

“I'm fine.” She waved dismissively at him, then ran the last few strides to the steps by the back door. She grabbed the balustrade's rounded newel, increasing her pivoting speed to gain the steps faster.

Anthony turned the knob and barged through the boardinghouse's sticky side door, which released a puff of hot air. At least Mrs. Grindall kept the place warm—overly warm, but better than the alternative.

A spooked mouse skittered across the stair landing, and Kate shuddered in the dim light despite the heat. The tiny rodent disappeared into a crevice in the wall.

Even though Anthony's quick thumping on the staircase probably woke anyone who might have been napping, she didn't want to annoy any residents, so she slowed. Although, considering the thin, grayish walls, the boarders likely dealt with all kinds of unwanted noises.

Once Anthony's pounding steps ceased, the boardinghouse seemed eerily quiet. A dog barked outside, a baby cried somewhere down the corridor, pots and pans banged downstairs, and a lady sneezed across the hall, but what she didn't hear was coughing. . . . Lucinda's ceaseless lung-emptying hacking.

Anthony stood in front of his room's closed door, his eyes open with alarm and his lips pressed tight, his nostrils flaring with each frantic inhale.

Kate took a gulp of the hot, stale air and put a hand on his shoulder. "Let's go in quietly. We don't want to disturb her sleep." At least she prayed the lack of coughing meant sleep.

She opened the door. "Lucinda?"

No answer.

The stillness was palpable.

Kate approached the bed. "Are you awake?" *Please, Lord . . .*

The woman's matted blond curls lay limp against her pillow, the purple beneath her eyes darker than Kate remembered.

Lucinda's eyelids were relaxed despite being half open. Her mouth slack, her body restful. An unusual peacefulness pervaded her face.

With a trembling hand against her mouth, Kate focused on the threadbare, disintegrating quilt covering Lucinda's chest.

Not even a flutter.

Anthony crept up alongside Kate and pressed against her heavy wool skirt and thick petticoats.

She put her arm around him, and they both watched Lucinda. The clock ticked unmercifully slow.

“She never said it.” His scratchy voice warbled with tears.

“Said what, honey?” His tense muscles tightened as she slowly rubbed his arm from elbow to shoulder.

“That she loved me.” He swallowed audibly. “Do you think she wanted to tell me that while I was gone?”

Warmth flooded Kate’s eyes and throat so quickly she barely kept from crying. She tightened her grip on Anthony’s shoulder. To lie or not? “I don’t know.”

She kissed the top of his head and walked him to the hard chair beside the single drafty window. She sat and tugged him into an embrace, but his body refused to soften. He stared out the window, and she held her tears.

Her heart fractured into painful shards as the quiet seconds ticked by. If only he’d allow himself to cry. . . .



Silas Jonesey rubbed his eyes as he stared up at the front door of the boardinghouse on Morning Glory Street for the seventh time. It wasn’t as if the two-story structure had the stability of the walls of Jericho. He could probably push the building over without circling it once, but his feet had refused to cooperate when he first arrived. So he’d marched around . . . and around. However, his heavy traveling bag wearied his left arm and his boots had started rubbing his heels after several circuitous trips.

It was time to go inside.

Would she forgive him? He set his bag on the sidewalk and rotated his shoulder as he stared at the cracked windows. She’d only written him to ask for money, and no wonder—this boardinghouse was likely the worst building he’d ever seen that hadn’t already collapsed in upon itself. The towns surrounding

Independence had grown a lot since he'd last been in the area. Surely there were a hundred better places for his wife to lodge.

Had she known he grew up near here, only a day's ride away? Surely not. Independence was one of the largest cities in Missouri, so she'd likely come to this area looking for a job—just a coincidence.

He rubbed his chest pocket, the letter inside his shirt crinkling. She'd asked him to send her money, but he had to apologize in person and plead for a second chance. But if she declined to return to Kansas with him, was he obligated to keep her housed in Missouri? He wasn't wealthy. This autumn's rain deficit and summer's myriad insect infestations had bit into his savings—and that was before he'd bought the train ticket to Independence.

He rolled his shoulders. No sense getting ahead of himself. He'd come to confess his sins and ask for forgiveness—that's all he really wanted. If she forgave him, then he'd worry about what to do next.

He swallowed, grabbed his bags, and forced his feet up one stair at a time.

The grimy window beside the front door obscured his view inside, so after two knocks and no answer, he tried the door-knob. Open. Stepping inside, a shiver stole over him, despite the relief the cloying heat gave his body. He crossed to the desk in the back of the room but couldn't find a bell, and nobody lurked in the dimly lit interior.

Overhead, a baby cried and footsteps squeaked on warped boards, both sounds muffled by kitchen clanging noises coming from somewhere down the hallway.

"Hello?" Should he pound on something or search for the proprietor? He set down his bag and pulled off his scarf. He raised his voice. "Is anyone available to help me?"

A ruddy-faced woman with a stained apron and gray hair

falling from an untidy bun stepped out of a door near the back of the hallway. “Whaddya want?”

“I’m here to visit Lucinda Jonesey. Do I—”

“There’s no dallying with any of my guests. I don’t run a—”

“No, ma’am.” He cleared his throat. His face flamed hotter than the stifling room. “She’s my wife.”

“Lucinda who?” She lowered one brow, turning her head a bit to give him an unconvinced glare.

“Jonesey.”

“Then you got the wrong place.”

He glanced at the letter in his hand. “Is this 402 Morning Glory? She was here a month ago.”

“All I’ve got is a Lucinda Riverton.”

Riverton? She was using her maiden name? “That’s her.”

“She ain’t got no husband.” The lady took a menacing step forward, brandishing her wooden spoon.

“Not for the last ten years, no—at least we haven’t lived together.” Not as if *he’d* been the reason for that. “I promise if she’s not the right Lucinda, I won’t stay. Even if she is the right one, I’m not sure I’ll be here long.”

“Second floor, last door on the right.” She waved her dough-covered spoon at a dark stairwell. “If I hear screaming, I’ll thrash you.”

He worked hard not to smile at the image of the round, flour-covered lady charging at him with a spoon. “That won’t happen. She asked me to come.”

Now, as for yelling? That might be a different matter. . . .

“Fine.” She turned and charged toward the door she’d left earlier. “Myrtle! If those potatoes aren’t done peeled, I’ll whip you within an inch of your life!”

Did this woman threaten everyone with a beating, or did she actually do it?

No voice responded from the back. Perhaps this Myrtle

person knew the proprietress's threat was idle or she kept quiet to avoid confrontation.

Nothing but the sound of sliding pots and clanging bowls sounded from the back, so he grabbed his bag and headed to the stairs.

Carefully testing his weight on the splintered boards, Silas pushed himself upward, his heart pounding harder with each step closer to his wife.

Nearing the last door, he pulled off his hat and stuffed it deep into the pocket of his heavy coat. He cleared his throat and knocked on the door, which gave way under his fist. Something fluttered inside, but no one bid him enter nor asked his name.

"Hello?" Would he even recognize his wife? Ten years could certainly change anybody's looks, disposition . . . wants. "Lucy?"

He looked behind him to make sure this indeed was the last door. If she wasn't inside, where should he wait? Would his estranged wife view his entering her empty room as an invasion?

He pushed the door, and his eyes lighted upon the bed where his wife lay, her blond curls as long and sensuous as they'd been during the seven months he'd known her.

But the rest of her? Tightness captured his chest, and he took a shuffling step over to lean against the metal pipe footboard. He dropped his carpetbag and reached out to jiggle her foot. "Lucy?"

Her eyes remained closed. Could he have come all this way to miss her? He'd only wanted to ask for forgiveness. She didn't have to actually give it.

He slipped around the corner of the bed and reached for her hand. Limp and pale but not exactly cold. Perhaps her slack jaw was from deep sleep.

He felt her forehead, then placed his hand against her breastbone. No heartbeat, no rise and fall of her chest. He blew out

a breath, and his shoulders slumped as he carefully sat down on the dirty mattress.

Why hadn't he written his apology last month when her letter first arrived? Why hadn't God allowed him to ask for forgiveness? He barely knew the woman he'd spent a few hours with each night for seven months after a long day of homesteading. Six years he'd wasted hating her for leaving him irrevocably alone, and the last four years he'd lived in agony waiting for a chance to—

“She’s not there.”

He startled and shot off the bed. The woman who'd smacked into him in the alley sat in a rickety chair with her arm around the urchin he'd sidestepped in an effort to avoid being run into.

Had they been racing to Lucy's side at the announcement of her death? He glanced around but saw no one else in the room. He swallowed against the stone lodged in his throat and blinked against the warmth hazing his eyes. “How long has she been dead?”

The woman's escaped dark auburn locks were wild about her face, her cheeks pink from either crying or her brisk run. “My guess would be no more than fifteen minutes.”

“Your guess?” He turned to face his wife's motionless, emaciated form. “Was no one with her?”

“No, we found her this way, though death wasn't completely unexpected.” She stood and shoved the boy behind her. “And you are?”

“Her husband.” He cocked his head at her sudden defensive posturing. “And you?”

The woman's eyes narrowed. “Miss Dawson.”

Which meant nothing to him. “A friend of Lucy's?”

“Yes.”

That's all she was going to say?

She stepped forward. “Why are you here?”

He pulled on his collar. *Yes, why am I here, Lord? Why now?* He'd spent over ten years alone when his mother had abandoned him at the orphanage, seven months a semicontent but delusional groom, and ten more years as an estranged husband.

And now he was alone again.

"I suppose the Lord wanted me to know of her passing." Not the greatest comfort, being that he was completely abandoned once again, but it was something. "She'd written for help." And she'd definitely needed it. How long had she suffered? Her haggard face indicated a lengthy illness.

"Why didn't you come for her earlier?"

He returned the woman's glare. If her eyes weren't scrunched with accusation and her lips curled with scorn, she'd be heaps prettier. "I suppose you fault me for the month I took to get here? I live in Salt Flatts, Kansas. I couldn't leave my homestead unattended without ruining everything I've worked for. I got somebody to take care of my property as soon as I could, and yet I still . . . missed her."

He'd been walking outside for half an hour.

Was Miss Dawson right? Had he missed apologizing to his wife by fifteen minutes because he'd dragged his feet attempting to settle his nerves?

And why must this strange lady look at him so? What right had she to be mad at him? "Besides being named Miss Dawson, who are you?"

She took one step back, but her chin tilted higher. "So you're not here for any other reason?"

"Do you find evading questions amusing?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I need to know."

"Why must I inform you?" He set his jaw. He'd told her Lucy was his wife, yet Miss Dawson hadn't bothered to offer condolences, just a biting glare.

Her son leaned over to peer at him from behind her, and

Silas sighed. He couldn't chide the boy's mother in front of him. Nor should they be arguing beside a dead woman's bed. He swallowed his pride, something he'd become good at these last ten years, and shrugged. "I came here for no other reason than my wife asked me to." He held out his open hand indicating the door. "Why don't we talk outside?"

He led the way out, holding the door open for the mother and son to follow.

Turning around in the middle of the hallway, Miss Dawson returned to glaring. "Did she say *why* she wanted you to come?"

"I'm assuming now it's because she was sick." He glanced back into the room, noting the blood-speckled handkerchiefs, the tonics on the washstand, the disheveled cot below the window. Who slept there? "Was she not alone?"

"Someone had to care for her. She was dying of consumption. Penniless. Unloved. Beaten down by the life you tossed her into."

He straightened. "I tossed her into?"

"Do you deny sending her away?"

"I do." Why did this woman he'd just met think so poorly of him? "I don't know what she told you, but I never asked her to leave. I wouldn't have. She's all I have in the world." He swallowed hard. "Or had, anyway."

Miss Dawson relaxed, and he frowned. Why would his becoming a widower calm her? Her countenance hadn't struck him as unkind. In fact, she was rather attractive. Maybe not like Lucy—her looks had enamored him from the moment she'd sent him her photograph—but this Miss Dawson's face was pleasing enough.

Well, more than pleasing if he were honest, with her pert nose and softly colored lips. Less than an hour ago, she'd flown past him in a sea of petticoats, hardly slowed by a jarring hit to the shoulder and a near tumble. She didn't look strong, considering

her soft feminine form, but her straight back, tilted chin, and peppery words would make any man cautious.

“Well, Mr. . . . I’m sorry, I didn’t ask your name.”

“Jonesey. Silas Jonesey.”

“Ah. Jonesey.” She smiled even more. “Mr. Jonesey, I’m sorry if I caused any offense. I wasn’t certain you were—”

“Then you’re not my real father?”

Miss Dawson stiffened, and the boy came out from behind her.

Silas licked his lips, watching the color drain from Miss Dawson. “I thought he was yours?”

“He is.” She glared at the boy and gave him a quick shake of her head. The silencing gesture only made the boy cross his arms.

Silas glanced at Miss Dawson’s fingers. No ring. Not that a lack thereof meant anything if they were as poor as they looked. He took a glance at the two of them again. Besides dark-colored hair, there wasn’t much resemblance—and the boy’s hair had no hint of red. Miss Dawson couldn’t be much more than twenty-five maybe, and the boy had to be . . . around nine.

Nine.

If the boy had blond curls, he’d have looked exactly like Lucy must have at that age.

Silas put a hand to his neck and tightened his abdominal muscles against the slurry in his stomach. “I have a son?”