

KEYS
—OF—
PROMISE
2



HONOR REDEEMED



A NOVEL

Christine Johnson



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To my Keys friends, whose support and encouragement
carry me through the tough writing days.





1



Nantucket Island **April 20, 1852**

“What will you do now?” The gentle nudge came from Mrs. Franklin hours after Prosperity Anne Jones laid her mother to rest in the church graveyard.

They sat on sturdy wooden chairs in the only home Prosperity could recall, while neighbors bustled about preparing a meal for those who condoled with her. She had attempted to help, but they had shooed her away from the kitchen. Stripped of the ability to do something useful, she battled a barrage of conflicting thoughts and feelings that ultimately came back to Mrs. Franklin’s question.

What would she do?

That question had never been broached until now. Prosperity always knew what she must do. As a child she had tended house for her oft-ailing mother. The year that fire had swept through town and the sea claimed her father’s life, she added nursing and managing their meager funds to her duties.

Nearly six years later, Ma breathed her last, ushering in

overpowering loneliness. Prosperity's entire family was gone. No more could she turn to Pa for counsel or weep on Ma's shoulder. She had been set adrift on a vast ocean.

What would she do?

At some point she must have donned the black cotton mourning gown. Somehow burial had been arranged and the funeral carried out. Even now, mere hours afterward, disjointed memories ricocheted through her mind: the deep grave carved into the cold earth, hymns so familiar they flowed by without notice, mourners weeping uncontrollably while she could not muster a tear. Well-meaning statements about God's will drifted past like dandelion fluff on a breeze.

After tossing a handful of dirt on the plain pine coffin, she would have preferred to climb the dunes and gaze across the sea at the endless horizon, as she had for months after her father's whaling ship disappeared. Instead she had returned home with the neighbors who now buzzed about like a hive of bees. Only Mrs. Franklin's inquiry had managed to break through the fog.

What *would* she do?

Before Ma's passing, Prosperity had whiled away countless hours dreaming of her future.

David.

She touched the locket at her throat. He had given it to her after she agreed to marry him. It would one day contain tiny portraits of the children they hoped to have. Now it held a lock of his sandy blond hair. That's all she had to remember him by, for more than two years ago the army had sent him to faraway Key West, and he would not return for six more years. What would she do until then?

"Are you all right, dear?" Mrs. Franklin asked.

Prosperity knit her fingers together and nodded.

She was spared further questions by Mrs. Newton, who chased two boys from the kitchen with a scolding that they must wait until dinner was served.

Mrs. Franklin chuckled. “I think he nabbed a biscuit off the tray. That was my Donnie back in the day.”

Her voice blended into the drone of the half dozen women gathered in the tiny parlor. Outside on the porch, the men clustered together, supposedly to keep the children in the yard. Their guffaws punctuated the knowing whispers and pitying glances of the women sitting on the chairs loaned by generous neighbors. Aunt Florence held court in the opposite corner, informing all who would listen that she’d known her sister would die and was amazed she’d hung on so long in this dreadful, drafty shack.

True, the rough slab-wood walls held no charm and retained little of the stove’s heat. A scarred table occupied the center of the room, topped with a vase of daffodils, shadbush, and white violets brought by one of the ladies. Little else graced the room, for Prosperity had been forced to sell every item of value in the years following her father’s death. Nothing frivolous or beautiful remained. Even the cold gray of late April refused a ray of sunlight.

“There is nothing left here,” she breathed.

Mrs. Franklin, a kindly soul, clasped her hands with the warmth of a dear friend. “You must find the strength to go on. Your mother would have wanted it.”

“I know.”

Yet it was easier to say than to do. Once the condolers left, she would be alone with nothing but memories, a few personal items, and David’s letters. Those had brought comfort in the most difficult days. He had pledged a life together. David Latham never broke a promise.

“He will return,” Mrs. Franklin stated with a knowing nod. “How did you know I was thinking of Mr. Latham?”

Mrs. Franklin sighed, her gaze far off. “A woman gets a certain look when she recalls the man she loves.” She patted Prosperity’s hand. “Never fear. You need only write, and your lieutenant will come back from that wilderness.”

“Key West.” It might as well be Tahiti, for both lay beyond reach. Ship passage, even in third class, cost far more than she could save.

“Wherever it is, your young man will set sail for home the moment he receives your letter. Mark my words, he will not hesitate.”

Prosperity wasn’t as certain. David had stressed that his tour of duty would last eight years. Even now she could recall how worry had pinched his brow that day. Eager to brush it away, she had promised to wait. A rare smile had flickered across his lips, and she had been pleased. Alas, she had not accounted for this day.

“I doubt the army will grant leave,” Prosperity murmured.

“Nonsense. You must write. He will find a way to return to you. Then you can decide together what to do.”

That was the fanciful talk of a woman seeking to comfort. The army would not grant David leave because his fiancée’s mother had passed away. No, she must find her own way. She couldn’t stay in this house. That much was unavoidable. She could not afford to pay the overdue rent, least of all continue the lease of an entire house on her own. Mother’s rainy day jar had been emptied long ago. There were no secret bank accounts, no accounts at all. John and Olivia Jones had left this world as poor as they’d come into it.

Mrs. Franklin, short and portly and pink-cheeked beneath

her white lace cap, must have been chattering for some time, but just one statement caught Prosperity's attention. "You can stay with us, of course, if your relations can't take you in. Mr. Franklin would dearly enjoy your delicious currant cakes each morning."

Prosperity mustered a smile, though she could not manage the emotion to go with it. Her parents were gone, and life on Nantucket Island was slipping away.

"You are very generous," she said, though living with the Franklins was out of the question. No Jones accepted charity.

"Only until your young man returns for you, of course."

Prosperity nodded, unable to speak over the knot in her throat. Two years had passed since David offered for her. Each morning and night she recalled his handsome visage. The cornflower-blue eyes and curly hair the color of sand brought a smile to her lips. How stiff he'd seemed when she first met him. She had laughed at his formal bow, and he had acted affronted, but in time she'd grown to appreciate his careful ways. Nothing was out of place. No possibility had gone unconsidered.

He was a product of his demanding father and austere upbringing, so serious of temperament that she'd made silly faces at him to induce a laugh. Oh, how he resisted. First, the corner of his mouth would tick up a fraction. Then he would force a frown. Will would battle emotion until, in the end, a deep guffaw would burst out. Only then would the corners of his eyes crinkle and pleasure fill his gaze.

If only she could see that again. If only she could hear his voice and feel how the very air shimmered when he walked into a room. Then she would know all was well. She could endure any hardship. Alas, her David was beyond reach, and she had only memories to lean upon.

Over time his features had grown dim. Was that tiny mole above the right corner of his mouth or the left? Did his brows sweep high in an arc or duck low? Did the spectacles he used for reading leave the same red marks on the bridge of his nose? Had he succeeded in taming the tuft of frizz at the peak of his brow?

She closed her eyes and tried to recall.

The shifting shapes of memory faded like a dream in morning's light.

"He will return. You must believe it." Mrs. Franklin's voice dragged Prosperity back to the painful present.

Until he returned . . . Her breath caught at the daunting prospect. Alone. Impoverished. Without a home.

"He will." Mrs. Franklin patted her hand for emphasis. "He is a gentleman."

A man of honor. Yes, David was that. He never failed to write each Sunday. The letters might arrive late or all in one batch, as was the case right now. She had not received a letter in nearly a month, but tomorrow might be the day. Until then she treasured each written word, reading the letters over and over until his sentences wove into the fabric of her days. He was saving all he could. He would marry once he had saved enough. If that came sooner rather than later, he might send for her. No woman on Nantucket or Key West could compare to her in beauty and intellect. He kept her portrait on the desk in his quarters.

He was an ever-true, unshakable mark. To this she could cling.

At her side, Mrs. Franklin rose, pulling Prosperity from her thoughts.

Aunt Florence approached with a swish of her flounced skirts. "I'd like to speak to my niece."

Mrs. Franklin offered her condolences to Aunt Florence and trundled to the kitchen.

Prosperity rose, aware that her future might depend on good relations with her closest remaining blood relative, who had made the voyage to Nantucket Island from Boston with her husband. “Please have a seat.”

She’d met Aunt Florence just once before, on her aunt’s brief visit to the island when Prosperity was a child. How different Aunt was from her sister! While sunlight and love had creased Ma’s face into a starburst, Aunt’s face was pinched, her lips pressed into a white line. Thin and bony, Aunt wore a silk mourning gown that rustled as she moved. Its fine black-on-black striping took Prosperity’s breath away. Never would she touch, least of all wear, such a gown.

Aunt Florence looked down her nose at the chair. “Given the option, I prefer to stand. After the grueling journey, I cannot endure another hard bench.”

Prosperity swallowed. “I hope your accommodations were comfortable. Dumfrey Hotel is the finest on the island.”

“It was barely habitable, but better than this,” Aunt sniffed with a caustic glance at Prosperity’s home. “My sister chose unwisely. I trust you have done better. Livvy wrote that you are engaged to marry an army engineer.” She never once looked directly at Prosperity. “It’s certainly better than a whaler, though a true gentleman would have married and brought you with him.”

“He is a true gentleman.”

Aunt didn’t seem to notice that she had spoken. “I fear that your uncle and I must return to Boston at once. Harold can’t be away from the bank for long.” She opened the clasp on her elegant silk bag and pulled out a small ivory envelope that must have cost dearly at a stationer. “We want you to have this.”

With trembling hand, Prosperity took the fat envelope. What on earth could it be? Perhaps it was a note of condolence or one of Ma's letters to her sister.

"Thank you," she whispered, her throat dry.

"Do understand that we can't take you in." Aunt Florence's cold smile revealed perfectly white teeth. "Harry and his family visit often, and of course Amelia is still at home. Between friends and family, there isn't a week that we don't use every bed in the house."

Prosperity averted her gaze. "I understand." Her last close relative was deserting her.

Aunt waved a hand toward the envelope. "Use this to make your way in the world. Livvy wrote that you are quite capable of caring for yourself, but we wanted to give you this assistance until you can secure a position as a governess or housekeeper."

Prosperity stiffened. She was the daughter of a whaler. Her fiancé was an engineer. Her future did not depend on going into service. Mrs. Franklin was right. David would help. And Prosperity would turn the other cheek on the affront.

Swallowing her pride, she managed to speak. "Do thank Uncle Harold for me."

"You can thank him yourself. We must leave now in order to catch the boat to the city. You may escort me to the carriage."

Prosperity could not regret Aunt's early departure. For her mother's sake, she expressed sorrow as she led her aunt to the door. Behind her, the women carried the food to the table. The moment Prosperity escorted her aunt off the porch, the men and children rushed inside, leaving Prosperity alone in front of the house with her aunt and uncle.

He tipped a hand to his beaver. "Miss Jones."

"Uncle Harold."

“I fear we must leave.”

She nodded. “It can’t be helped.”

“Indeed.”

“We will be late for the boat,” Aunt Florence said.

He helped his wife into the hired carriage. Before climbing in himself, he turned back to Prosperity.

“Be a good girl, now.” He too did not meet Prosperity’s gaze. “That little sum should help you make a start of things.” He cleared his throat, muttered something unintelligible, and then entered the carriage. With a final apologetic glance, he closed the door.

After the carriage rolled from view, Prosperity broke the seal on the envelope. A single sheet of paper, unmarked, cradled a number of large bills. She could not count the sum now, in the street, but it appeared enough to settle accounts and pay for room and board until David learned of her circumstances. A letter would take weeks or even a month or more to arrive. Then the same time for his reply to return. By then . . .

Prosperity pressed the envelope to her midsection, overcome by the speed with which the world was closing in upon her.

Help me, Lord. Show me Thy path and the way Thou wouldst have me walk.

The simple prayer calmed her.

“She’s gone, is she?” Mrs. Franklin joined her in the yard. “Good riddance, if you ask me. Livvy deserved better from her sister, but there’s no sense fussing over what can’t be changed. Come, dear, let’s go inside and have a bite to eat.” She took Prosperity’s arm. “There will be plenty of time to consider your future tomorrow.”

Prosperity did not move, for the answer to her prayer struck with perfect clarity. Why wait for letters to wend their way south and then north again?

“I will go to Key West.”

Mrs. Franklin’s jaw dropped. “You cannot be serious.”

“I am not only serious, I am certain.”

“But my dear, you are letting your emotions speak. You have suffered a great loss and are not thinking clearly. Give yourself time to grieve. By the time your young man returns, you will be in a much better state of mind.”

“I am perfectly sane. In fact, my thoughts have never been clearer.”

“Naturally you want to see your fiancé, but do be practical. Even if you could afford such a voyage, someone must travel with you.”

Prosperity clutched the envelope. “I shall travel alone.”

“Alone? You cannot. Sea travel is neither comfortable nor safe. I speak from experience, dear. Mr. Franklin and I have traveled to Charleston in the past. It’s not a voyage to be undertaken without great care. A woman alone?” She shuddered. “Your reputation and quite likely your person would suffer.”

“It does not matter. David awaits me.”

“You cannot mean that.” Mrs. Franklin’s voice rose with every word, her expression earnest. “I will account your rash decision to grief, but even if you will not guard your reputation, you must consider the uncertainty of the seas. Your father was a seasoned sailor, yet the sea claimed his life. The risk is too great. Better your fiancé return to you.”

“He cannot. He would never leave his post.”

“Then wait. You are welcome at our house.”

Though Mrs. Franklin’s concerns chipped at Prosperity’s confidence, she would not be swayed. When weighed against servitude or destitution, the risk was small, for if she succeeded, her beloved awaited.

Prosperity squared her shoulders. “I am sailing for Key West, and you cannot persuade me otherwise.”



Key West That Night

Lt. David Latham’s hand trembled. A drop of ink splotted onto the white paper.

“Not again.” His muttered frustration echoed off the walls of the small but adequate quarters.

Already the sheet of paper was a tangle of scratched-out beginnings and blotted ink drops. Once he got the wording right, he would begin anew with a fresh sheet of stationery, but two hours of wrangling had produced only the date. In thirty minutes, even that would be incorrect.

Ordinarily he handled any difficulty with calm precision. An engineer in the United States Army Corps must rely on logical analysis to conquer frequent setbacks. This one, however, was both personal and painfully unexpected. It drove a spike into the heart of his carefully drawn future.

It made this letter far from ordinary.

He returned the pen to its holder and flexed his fingers. To his right, the window opened onto a star-filled sky barren of suggestions.

How to begin? Every letter required a salutation, but no combination of words worked. His usual address bespoke an affection that would gladden his beloved’s heart. What cruelty when a paragraph later he must crush that joy. On the other hand, formal address would send her into a panic before he’d cushioned the blow with careful reasoning.

No, this was a delicate affair.

He laughed bitterly.

Affair was too kind a word. *Debacle* fit much better, especially when he could not recall a single moment of the slip into temptation that led to this painful decision. To counter his disbelief, she had brought forth witnesses. The result could not be denied. He was responsible.

Oh, Prosperity, dear Prosperity, what have I done to you?

He ran a finger over the daguerreotype that he had commissioned immediately after she agreed to marry him. The frozen image could not capture the glow of compassion in her gold-flecked hazel eyes. The interminable wait without moving a muscle resulted in too severe an expression. Despite the hardships Prosperity had endured, she brought joy and light to the darkest day. Her plain gown and cap in this picture reflected her present lowly estate. He had planned to one day clothe her in the fine gowns she deserved.

That hope was gone, whisked away in a single night of shameful revelry.

He kneaded his throbbing temples. Why couldn't he remember? He had no recollection of Aileen Carlyle beyond some playful jesting when she brought the rum to the table he and his soldier friends occupied. The first toasts led to more and more until he awoke the next morning in the soldiers' barracks with a splitting headache and no idea how he'd gotten there. After a stern reprimand, the incident seemed over until Miss Carlyle approached him four weeks ago with news that chilled his bones.

Why hadn't he turned away at the grogshop door? Why had he even gone there? He never drank spirits, but the men had insisted, and he had been flattered by their attention. He'd let camaraderie draw him into temptation.

Why such a terrible price?

How many times he had prayed for God to relieve him of this burden. How often he had dropped to his knees pleading for a miracle that would absolve him, but this sin could not be whisked out the door.

The fruit of his error grew, and honor dictated he must set matters to rights. That entailed breaking the unwelcome news to his fiancée. Such a thing ought to be handled in person, but she dwelt nearly fourteen hundred miles north of this tropical island outpost. A letter was his only means of communication. Delivery would take weeks, perhaps a month if weather delayed the ship. By the time she received this . . .

He heaved a sigh.

It would be done.

Irrevocable in the sight of God.

Thus he must write the painful letter, and a letter began with a salutation. He drew a clean sheet of paper from the desk drawer.

As an engineer working on the construction of the new fort, named in honor of the late President Zachary Taylor, he would move to larger quarters sufficient for a family after the wedding.

The event that had once filled him with anticipation now churned up dread. He had always envisioned a proper ceremony back home on Nantucket Island. His parents and brothers, cousins and uncles would witness the joyous uniting of kindred spirits in their family church. He had promised to wed as soon as he finished his tour of duty in Key West. Though this meant years apart, the income he earned here would build a solid financial foundation to start a family. The reasoning had made perfect sense at the time, and she had gazed up at him with complete trust.

Oh that he had tossed reason to the wind and married her at once.

He raked fingers through his tangled locks. Nothing could be done now to alter the plans. Fate—or rather, despicable conduct—dictated his future. He would wed sooner rather than later, and not to the woman he adored.

She gazed at him sweetly from the daguerreotype. Despite the loss and hardship she'd endured, hope shone in her eyes. That hope had been rooted in his promise.

He slammed the image facedown on his desk. How could he look her in the eye?

She trusted him, and he had betrayed that trust. He must break her heart. Dear, gentle Prosperity deserved the best after all she had suffered, not another loss.

Unable to bear not seeing her, he lifted the image once more. He traced the curve of her cheeks to the dimpled chin. If he closed his eyes, he could still hear her resonant voice, surprisingly deep for one so small. He could still feel the softness of her hair, a lock of which was buried in his trunk. He could still smell the freshness of the sea upon her, as if she'd just climbed the dunes to look for her father's lost whaling ship.

"You deserve better," he whispered.

The cricket he'd not managed to evict from his room answered with a shrill taunt.

He ought to destroy the daguerreotype. That part of his life was over. But he could not bear to lose this last link to her, so he tore apart the frame and removed the silvered plate. He tucked the image between the pages of his Bible. Then he closed the volume and slid it into the bottom desk drawer beneath his engineering manuals and the army regulations that ordered his days. Tomorrow morning he would take them all to his office.

The time for regret was over. A man accepted his responsibilities, no matter how distasteful.

He picked up the pen, his hand steadier.

Dearest Prosperity, he scrawled, forging the initial *My*. She was dearest to him still, though he could no longer claim her affection.

I cannot ask your forgiveness, nor do I deserve it. Though I am tempted to soften the blow, your honest, practical nature would not wish me to couch what I must tell you in false cheer. Thus I will be straightforward, trusting that your affections have so sufficiently dimmed over the two years of our separation that this news will not inflict great suffering.

I fear that I must break our engagement.

The trembling began again, so violently that he had to set down the pen. Driven by torment, he sprang to his feet and paced to the darkened window. Yanking off his spectacles, he stared into the night. In the distance, a few lanterns dotted anchored vessels. Nearer, lamps brightened the commander's windows and glowed dimly at one end of the soldiers' barracks. Soon they would be put out, leaving only the moon and the stars to light the garrison.

No light could illuminate David's soul. Such sooty blackness could never be scrubbed clean. She was better off without him, but he was lost without her.

Despair welled again. Once more he pushed it down. Honor dictated but one course. Lives would be wrecked no matter which path he took, but only one protected the innocent.

Once again he sat at his desk and picked up the pen. He

could not profess what was in his heart, that he loved her still, that he would love her until the day he died. That would be cruel. No, this letter must sever their bond in a single stroke, break every connecting sinew, and leave not even a ray of hope. Only then could the wound heal. Only then could his beloved let go of the future they had planned together and turn her gaze toward another.

He dipped the nib in ink and touched it to the paper. The words did not come easily. His unsteady hand bore witness. He scratched it out as best he could.

I will marry tomorrow.