

*A Bride's
Choice in Central
City*

DIANA LESIRE BRANDMEYER

DKD BOOKS

Copyright © 2022 by Diana Lesire Brandmeyer

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Contents

1. Chapter One

1

Chapter One

1872 ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

Breakfast was the same as every day—bacon, eggs, and fruit, with a serving of silence directed at Annabelle Singleton from her aunt. Except for today. Aunt Viola wore a sparkling bracelet that she kept moving around her wrist and sighing over.

“Look how it catches the light.” Aunt Viola held her wrist in the ray of sunshine that graced the table. “I’m so glad the jeweler showed it to me before anyone else. I need something delightful in my life.”

Annabelle let herself believe for a minute that it might be a birthday gift for her.

“It’s lovely, Aunt Viola.”

“Yes, it is. And you should be done with breakfast by now. Eating too much bacon will only continue to increase your size.”

Annabelle refused to let her aunt’s meanness sour her birthday. Not this year.

Aunt Viola’s pride and joy, Pippins, a gray Skye terrier, whined and gave a small yap. “Pippins desires a walk.”

“I’ll walk him if you like.” Annabelle knew her offer would be refused. Aunt didn’t allow Anabelle to walk about free for fear something dreadful would happen to her. According to her aunt, danger waited to prey on unmarried women everywhere.

Her aunt sighed and placed her napkin on the table. “I think you should take him out. It would do you some good to move around a little more than you do.”

She didn’t care for her aunt’s insinuation that she was heavier than she should be. She nodded, wishing to disagree about her size. Instead, she chose to rejoice at the seldom offered freedom. Maybe this was her birthday gift, as it was most certainly not the bracelet. “I’ll take him.”

“You may keep him out for an hour. He needs the fresh air.”

Annabelle rose from her seat. “Yes, Aunt Viola.”

She wasted no time in getting the dog leashed and the two of them out the door. An entire hour to do as she wished, as long as she and Pippins were tethered together. Would Aunt Viola consider letting her do this every morning? Oh, the bliss of being out with people.

Pippins yanked against the leash, pulling Annabelle off balance. As she tried to pull back on the leather, the leash broke. The dog ran into the street. “Pippins!”

As she stepped onto the street to give chase, someone clenched her shoulder. She covered her mouth to keep from screaming.

“Stay back. I’ll get the dog.” The man looked her in the eyes and for a moment she forgot all about Pippins.

“Pippins!” The man ran after her. A carriage raced past, then another. She lost sight of them.

Should she stay as told? If she left and the man returned, he wouldn’t know how to find her. Going back to Aunt Viola’s without her beloved Pippins would be a disaster. Then she caught sight of the

man and her breath caught. He was as handsome as every prince she'd read about, and he'd rescued her.

"I got him! I'll bring him to you." The man called from the other side of the street. Pippins wiggled in his arms, terrified of the large wagons thundering past.

"Please don't spook, Pippins. Stay in the man's arms." She must appear foolish yelling to the dog as if he understood.

There was a break in the early morning traffic. The man rushed across the street. "Here you go."

As he transferred Pippins to her, his arms slid over hers, causing them to tingle. She stifled a gasp of delight. She'd been sixteen the last time she'd experienced a moment like this. That was the first time William touched her hand when he gave her a glass of punch. "Thank you." She couldn't help but notice the clean scent he wore, or was that the way he always smelled?

"I'll get the leash back on this runaway pup."

"But it's broken." Pippins licked Annabelle's face. Aunt Viola would have a fit if she saw that or how close this man stood to her niece.

"The leather is thin. I think I can tie it tight enough for you to return home. You'll need to get another one before you walk your dog again."

"Pippins belongs to my aunt. I'll let her know. And thank you for rescuing us. I am certain my aunt will want to reward you. Please tell me where to send it. Or you could return with me and—"

"No need." He tugged the leather strip tight. "There, that should hold. I need to get back to my family."

"Thank you for helping." *Family.* She finally met a man who appealed to her, and he was married. And family implied children. Aunt Viola was right. Annabelle would forever be alone. She was past the marrying age, just like her aunt.

Thaddeus Kincaid quickened his step. Chasing the dog had made him late for his appointment. He glanced at his jacket. A small dust print marred the pocket. He brushed it away.

“Get your *Globe-Democrat* here! Mann and Libby opens new dry goods store!” A skinny boy on the corner hawked. His stack of newspapers still stood tall for this late in the morning.

“I’ll take one.” Thaddeus dug in his pocket for a nickel. He didn’t need another. His had been delivered before he left home, but the boy’s rewarding grin made his deed worth the cost.

“Thanks, mister.”

He nodded and then shoved the newspaper under his arm. The morning hadn’t gone as planned. First a dog and now a paper. It wasn’t like him to run in front of traffic for a dog, but the angst in the woman’s voice sent him charging without thought. And that was before he saw her eyes. Those soft green eyes had reached his heart despite having firmly closed it years ago.

Tying that leash onto the dog’s collar while she held Pippins unbridled a torrent of memories of his late wife. He welcomed them. He let them wash over him, cementing his reasons for staying away from women with captivating eyes.

No other woman could replace Catherine.

Afraid the leather would refuse to stay tied and she would lose the dog again, Annabelle carried Pippins all the way back to her aunt’s house. If Pippins escaped once more, she doubted there would be another handsome stranger to rescue him. She set the dog on the entryway floor. The knot was too tight to untie, so she unbuckled the collar. Pippin’s claws scratched against the wood floor as he scampered to the kitchen where cook would have filled his bowl.

When Annabelle stood, she caught the reflection of her hatless head in the mirror. She’d rushed off without one, afraid that Aunt Viola

would change her mind about letting her go out alone. She pushed back her hair and searched her forehead and the bridge of her nose for freckling. She never failed to check. Her mother's warnings to be vigilant about wearing a hat echoed in her heart. She missed her mother. If she could go back in time, she would never have argued with her. As it was, her mother had managed to leave her instructions written into Annabelle's very being before passing away when Annabelle was ten.

The mirror revealed nothing else except fair skin and a few more red curls that needed a quick tuck back into place. Once more for safety, she scrutinized her pale complexion. Seeing no offending marks, she headed upstairs, thankful there wouldn't be a need to apply lemon juice to fade freckles on her nose.

"You can't be serious, Mr. Stockton. My brother didn't know Annabelle wouldn't have married by now. The girl won't know what to do."

At Aunt Viola's mention of her name, Annabelle stopped mid-step, grabbed the handrail, and squeezed. It wasn't that Aunt Viola said her name; it was the venomous tone used. One her aunt used when she didn't get her way. Which wasn't often.

Do about what? Why was Aunt Viola in the parlor talking about her to her father's lawyer? The meeting with him had been arranged for later this morning. Had the time changed and Aunt Viola not told her? Possibly. Sending Annabelle with Pippins was no more than a subterfuge for removing her from the house. It would have worked if Pippins hadn't escaped, causing their early return.

"Well, I don't care. I will figure out how to take control of this—this situation. She's much too young to trust with that enormous sum." Viola's voice grew stronger.

Mr. Stockton's next words came through the parlor door, too muted to understand. She needed to get in there before Aunt Viola found a way to do whatever she wanted.

She flew down the steps and strode into the room.

Mr. Stockton looked up. "Miss Singleton, I'm glad you could make it. I was quite surprised when your aunt said you had gone out. The message I received said that you wanted to meet earlier because of another appointment." He stood and waited for her to sit on the settee next to her aunt.

She kept her polite smile steady and her lips locked against the words that wanted to accuse her aunt of deception. "Thank you for rearranging your trip. Please sit. I'm sorry for my tardiness. Pippins needed a quick walk on this beautiful June morning. We ran into a bit of trouble when Pippins broke his leash. Mr. Stockton, I'm glad you waited."

Viola gasped. "Is Pippins alright?"

"Quite. He was rescued by a man. He refused a reward for his heroic behavior." She wouldn't mention how his eyes drew her in and that she wanted to know more about him.

"That was kind of him." Mr. Stockton settled back onto the chair. "My dear, it's a pleasure to see you on this important day." His Southern accent brought a touch of home to the room and to her memories. She pulled her shawl tighter against the biting chill emanating from her aunt. Even though it was Annabelle's twenty-fourth birthday, Aunt Viola did not consider it important.

Since her father passed, she had looked forward to this day. Today, she would be free of her aunt's whims and demands. She could live the way she wanted and where she wanted, caring for only herself.

She wouldn't be a prisoner of this house with its stuffy furniture and rules any longer. If she wanted a new hat, she could purchase it

without asking. If she wanted to give a few coins to the boy on the corner to buy bread, she could and would. Her aunt could purse her lips and scowl, but she could not forbid it. Not any longer.

“As I was telling your aunt, everything is now settled with your father’s estate. There is nothing left in the trust. Everything is set up in a new company, AMS. Your father suggested we use your initials for the company’s name. The papers are in the Nashville bank safe. The money is in an account. The properties will need to be managed as you would like. You may continue to rent them or sell.” He handed her a packet of papers. “Go through these before September, as that’s when the first decision on a piece of property you now own must be made. I can, of course, advise you on where to place your money if you decide to invest as your father did.” Mr. Stockton raised a teacup to his lips and sipped.

“It isn’t right. After all, she isn’t married.” Aunt Viola’s face looked harsher than ever, if that was even possible. Her hands clutched her skirt hard enough to set in wrinkles.

“It’s what her father wished. I’m sure you can help her discover the right things to invest in and how to spend her money wisely, as you yourself have been doing since your parents died.” His cup clinked against the saucer as he set it on the small table that separated him from the women on the settee. “I believe they trusted you, Viola, to make the right choices, even as an unmarried woman. It is true you were well past an age to marry. That may have swayed your father’s decision.”

Annabelle shuddered. Aunt Viola bristled when someone referred to her unmarried state, even if cloaked behind other words. Mr. Stockton hadn’t bothered to try.

“Times were different then, Mr. Stockton. I wasn’t able to marry the man I loved, so I remained unmarried. I did have a choice.”

If words could bite, Mr. Stockton would be bleeding all over Aunt Viola's chair. If her aunt had married, she might be a softer and kinder person, but it was too late for that now. She would never change.

"Sir, I disagree with you and my brother. Annabelle is not ready to handle her father's estate. My brother was a fool to think she could. That amount of money at her age is obscene. She'll want to give coins to every beggar on the street."

"Nonsense, Aunt. I'll be able to get help when needed, as you did. Mr. Stockton, there are a few things I'd like to do before considering any investments. I'll be making a withdrawal soon." Aunt Viola had no reason to think Annabelle couldn't be as successful as herself. If William hadn't turned out to be a disappointment, they would have married and already had the money. Since arriving in St. Louis, Aunt Viola kept Annabelle away from any eligible men, saying they weren't good enough for a Singleton woman. Considering how she now pressed for control of Annabelle's money, she considered it might have had nothing to do with finding the right husband.

"Whatever could you possibly need, child? All this time, I've provided you a home and clothing." Viola traced the heavy jeweled bracelet circling her wrist.

"Papa gave me an allowance, which you know since you took most of it for room and board. That wasn't his intention when he sent me to live with you."

"He didn't expect you to live here this long, either. You didn't want for anything under my care."

Except for love. Even a modicum of care and concern would have made her feel welcome.

"Ladies, it's been nice to see you both again. I do believe it is time for me to take my leave. Annabelle, if you should have need of me before I return to Nashville, send someone to deliver a message. Viola, thank

you for your hospitality. Your cook does make the best cookies. Please thank her for me.” Mr. Stockton stood and retrieved his hat from the butler, who had shown up the moment Mr. Stockton mentioned leaving.

“Thank you, Mr. Stockton. I will do that.” Annabelle smiled. “I’m sure I’ll have more questions for you. It is quite a shock, the amount of money, that is. I thought perhaps we’d lost it all with the Rebellion.” She’d thought her allowance too small to move into her own apartment, and while Aunt Viola was not the most pleasant person to live with, her home was safe. If Annabelle had tried to move and not been able to support herself, she doubted Aunt Viola would have let her return.

“Enjoy your birthday, Miss Singleton, and get yourself a pretty hat to mark this day. Your father was a smart man. He could see what the outcome of the Rebellion should be, prayed it would, and invested his money outside of the South. He’d considered moving before the Rebellion began, but you were engaged, and he didn’t want to be far from you.”

Engaged. Yes, she had been. To William Kirby. Then one day, a letter had arrived. He’d broken her heart by marrying that Northern woman and bringing her back to Nashville. Not once had he written to tell her of a change in his attentions. If not for him, she would have still been living at home. Father would not have died alone.

It was William’s fault that she ran away to her friend’s home in Friendship, Tennessee. Nothing about that adventure turned out well. A measles outbreak forced her to return home to face her father’s anger. Father never understood her embarrassment over the broken engagement. She wanted her own house filled with children. She had grown weary of being his hostess for his business dinners.

Her aunt stood. "I'll see you out, Mr. Stockton. Annabelle, wait here for me, please. I have something to show you." Her aunt grinned at her like a bird with prey trapped tight in its beak.

Annabelle prepared to fight. There was no way she would give her aunt control over the money. She was sure that's exactly what her aunt had in mind.