



A Most
Inconvenient
Marriage

REGINA
JENNINGS



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To my parents,
whose particular variety of inconvenience
has stood the test of time.





CHAPTER I



February 1865
Gratiot Street Prison
St. Louis, Missouri

“First, you’re going to write a good-bye letter to my sweetheart, and then you’re going to marry me.” The prisoner’s smile belied the beads of sweat condensing on his forehead.

Abigail Stuart wrung tepid water out of the rag and mopped his brow. “I will not write your Lady Juliet to tell her that I’ve replaced her. Your fever must be causing you to hallucinate. Romeo was no fickle lover.”

A fly landed on his chin. The prisoner lifted what was left of his arm, forgetting he couldn’t reach his mouth with the putrid stump. Abigail shooed the pest away and wished for a blanket to alleviate his chills. Two years of caring for the dying Confederate prisoners had numbed her to the sight of mangled flesh, but she’d never stopped mourning the senseless pain these young men suffered.

“You won’t be happy, Miss Abby. Not without a stable full of horses,” he said. “And I can give you that. You’ve got to be sick and tired of this prison.”

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“My horses are gone. Nursing is all I have left.”

The man wet his lips. “Marry me and you won’t have to stay here another day. The farm, the stock, the nicest horseflesh in the hills—they’ll all be yours. If the last thing I can do with this life . . .”

Dr. Jonson caught Abigail’s eye. She’d already tarried too long with her favorite patient, but she wasn’t sorry. He’d been kind to her, no matter what color his uniform had been before they’d cut him out of it. She sloshed the rag in the basin. The gangrene had poisoned his blood. She didn’t have much time. Neither did he.

“What about your lady? Why not will the farm to her?”

“My sweetheart?” His eyes grew soft beneath the pain. He closed them and inhaled as though filling his lungs with the smell of fresh hay instead of the stench of the medical ward. With his good hand he tapped the thin mat beneath him. “My fiancée can take care of herself. This war won’t slow her down. It’s my . . . my sister that I worry about. Rachel isn’t strong—hasn’t been since she took the fever. You’re a nurse, and you could help her ma with the farm. It’s the perfect solution.”

A faint hope stirred in Abigail’s chest. Could this be the answer she’d been praying for? “But what if I don’t like the Ozarks? What if your family doesn’t welcome a Yankee invading their home?”

“Then walk away. What have you lost?”

She took his hand, surprised again by the dry heat in the freezing room. “You don’t even know your real name, Romeo. Or has that memory finally been restored, too?”

He wiggled his feet against the end of the cot and shuddered as another chill ravaged his body. Quickly he mastered the pain, and the smile returned.

“My name is Jeremiah Calhoun. Captain Jeremiah Calhoun.”

She’d suspected that his memory loss was a convenient oc-

currence, but like her, he had his reasons for hiding his past. “And what will I tell Lady Juliet?”

“The truth.” An ornery grin stretched across his face. “She might be angry, especially when you turn up, tall and fair—everything she’s not—but Rachel will be taken care of. That’s where my duty lies.”

Duty. Abigail knew only too well where misguided duty led. The graves outside the prison were filled with adherents.

“What’s it going to be, Miss Abby? Don’t leave me in suspense. I haven’t got time for a long engagement.”

She set the bowl on the stone floor and dried her hands on her apron. The South couldn’t hold out much longer. The war would end soon. Abigail had fended off proposals from lonely patients since the siege of Vicksburg, but soon those who survived would be reunited with their families and their loved ones. Soon she would be alone in a world where able-bodied men were scarce and opportunities to work even scarcer. She couldn’t go home. She wasn’t welcome there anymore. With all the upheaval caused by the war, perhaps she should consider this offer, no matter the risks. And like he said—if it didn’t work she hadn’t lost anything.

“Captain Calhoun, if you’ll allow me to procure a sheet of stationery, I’ll return and we can send your love to your intended. That’ll give me time to reflect—”

“While you’re gone, you might want to freshen up.” He winked mischievously. “I expect my bride to look her best.”



March 1865
Hart County, Missouri

The stationmaster had said it was eight miles farther, but he hadn’t mentioned the steepness of the mountain trails. Still, Abigail

enjoyed the exertion in the chilly air, especially after her inactivity on the train. Muscles were meant to be challenged, so Abigail did her best to stretch her limbs in the privacy of the leafy path.

Moisture gathered between the fine riverbank gravel on the road. Water pooled beneath the pressure of her feet and then disappeared as she traveled upward, feeling the exertion in parts of her limbs that ladies didn't mention. The acres of rocky forest contrasted with the smooth pasture and farms—proof of the heroic effort expended to create the few clearings.

She shouldn't be surprised. Her Romeo had persevered like a hero, even if he was wearing the wrong color. He'd accepted the loss of his arm with fortitude, marching the two hundred fifty miles from Westport to St. Louis as a recent amputee, insisting he would soon be well enough to return to his hills and his love. But the infection he'd contracted along the way changed his focus.

By now his fiancée would know of his death. She would have his letter, and his family would have the notice penned by the medical staff. Abigail hadn't allowed them to share news of the marriage, still unsure if she would make use of the gift Jeremiah Calhoun had given her. How hard would it be to hear that your lover had married someone else? Especially if he died before you could give him what for. But Abigail had to consider his sister—the sister whom he had loved enough to jilt his intended, to drop the pretense that he would recover and see to his responsibility. If nothing else, at least she was honoring Jeremiah by checking on his mother and sister. She wouldn't remain if they were well, but where she'd go was still a mystery.

Abigail hadn't truly had a home since Mama remarried. After the wedding, everything from her new colt to her father's oak desk became John Dennison's. And rather than bite her tongue in two, Abigail had expressed her opinion rather forcefully as John sold everything in the stables. But he'd taken his revenge.

Abigail brushed aside the troubling memory. Forget the past. She had no past. She'd only look ahead. A honey locust tree crowded the path, the thorns on its trunk mean enough to please a Roman centurion. Abigail crushed the sides of her jade skirt as she passed, protecting it from damage. Perhaps she should be wearing mourning, but it didn't seem practical to dye her clothing before she decided if she was going to be a widow or not. With no new dresses since she'd left home, she couldn't afford to waste one.

The road leveled and a roughhewn cabin appeared at the back of the next clearing. Smoke curled from the stovepipe, and a dog scrambled from beneath the porch to announce her presence.

She heard raised voices, louder than the dog they were attempting to quiet. A child started crying. Abigail gripped her satchel tighter and sped her steps, eager to leave the chaos behind her.

"Where you going to?"

She skidded to a stop but couldn't find her questioner.

"I'm up here." A grimy face peered down between the naked branches. The boy's words whistled through the gap between his front teeth. "You're new 'bout these parts."

Was his face scratched or just dirty? Abigail couldn't tell. The boy dropped down, not noticing when his bare feet hit the stony path.

"Pa!" he called. "We got company."

"No, I'm not stopping," Abigail said. "My destination is the Calhoun farm."

"The Calhouns'?" A wide-eyed girl with uneven pigtails stepped out of the woods. "Should've known since you're dressed all nice and that."

"Me? Dressed nice?" Abigail looked at her traveling costume,

then at the girl's shift. "Thank you, but I can't stop to visit. I have an important—"

"Going to the Calhouns'?" A man stepped out of the cabin, his beard spread across his chest like a napkin at suppertime. "I reckon we can show you the way."

"But it's right along the road, isn't it? The stationmaster said I couldn't get lost."

"No bother." He stuck his head inside the cabin and called, "Irma, I'll be back. Mind the hominy." Pulling a threadbare felt hat off a nail, he bounded off the porch steps with elbows and knees flying like the wooden limberjack dolls the prisoners made. He skidded to a stop before her. "Is that your only bag?"

A mountain man, yes, but with his children climbing up his back and clinging to his hand, Abigail didn't feel threatened. Even the dog ran circles around him, wagging its tail and barking playfully.

"The rest will be delivered tomorrow."

"Oh, sure. Finley's going to fetch them when he brings the post, huh? You wouldn't want to carry your luggage through these hills. Not a fancy lady like you."

And she had worried that her dresses were out of date. She surveyed the ragtag bunch. What if Jeremiah had exaggerated? What if his beautiful horse farm was no more than a cabin and some mules? The butterflies in her stomach turned into crazed birds. She slipped her hand into her pocket and held on to her father's penny. Jeremiah had said his sister needed her. Could Abigail leave her in a battered cabin, just because she was accustomed to a prosperous farm?

"What's your business at the Calhouns'?" With twinkling eyes the man pulled a corncob pipe out of his vest pocket and set it into his mouth.

"I'm coming to visit Mrs. Calhoun. I tended her son when he was a prisoner."

Hostile eyes accosted her from every side.

“Mr. Jeremiah was in prison?”

“You locked him up?”

“Are you a jayhawker?”

At the last word, tension bristled through the youngsters. Even their father eyed her suspiciously.

“I’m not sure what a jayhawker is,” Abigail said. “I’m a nurse. It was my duty to care for the Rebel prisoners, so that’s what I did.”

“There aren’t any jayhawkers around now, son,” the bearded man said. “All those outlaws joined the Federal Army.”

“But she worked for the Yankees, too.” The tree climber spat.

“Josiah!” His father grew stern. “You mind your manners with the lady. She was a nurse to help our soldiers. Don’t meddle in other folks’ doings.” Then forgetting his own advice he asked, “Were you with Jeremiah when he died?”

His gentle tone produced feelings of unexpected kinship in Abigail. It pleased her to meet people who admired Jeremiah as much as she did. “Yes, sir, I was. I held his hand as he passed and was there for the burial, as well. I was privileged to know him, even if it was for only a short time.”

“Jeremiah was a good man. Don’t know what his family will do without him.” The rip in the knee of his trousers flapped with every step.

And he was worried about the Calhouns making ends meet?

“How’s his sister?” Abigail asked. “He was concerned over her health, right until the end.”

He scratched his beard. “Miss Rachel is sickly, so we shouldn’t judge.”

A sure voice piped up, “She don’t like us to come into the house. We’ve got to leave her bundles at the back porch.”

“And we can’t whistle when we come up the drive. It ’fects her nerves.”

The man nodded. “But she’s been dealt a cruel blow. The same rheumatic fever that took her father took her health, and she hasn’t been the same since. Lord have pity on poor Mrs. Calhoun.”

More pity on the mother than on the afflicted sister? Abigail chewed her lip. What had Jeremiah forgotten to tell her?

The path crested the hill and continued downward until it reached a clearing that stretched over several acres. Bare winter saplings popped up through the split-rail fence that zigzagged toward a graceful stone house nestled in the valley.

Abigail rocked to her toes to get a better view of the farm before her, straining to see the barn. While it was a far cry from the elegant stables of her home, the large rock structure looked sturdy. Big enough to hold a decent herd through the winter. Perhaps Jeremiah had done her well, after all.

The children chirped in excitement, the dog adding to the cacophony until Abigail found sympathy for Miss Rachel’s nerves. She stopped where the rail fence gave way to massive stone posts, pieced together like a crazy quilt. “I can hardly miss it from here. Thank you for . . .” but she was too late. The bottoms of grimy feet flashed as her young escorts raced down the drive.

“Them young’uns.” In an amazing feat of dexterity the man passed the pipe to the other side of his mouth without touching it. “They sure run fast.”

“Indeed.”

They followed the children to the two-story house, its white trim defining the door and windows of the rock walls, lending order to the zigzag pattern. The children banged on the front door, and before Abigail could step on the porch, a silver-haired matron emerged.

“Please, children, keep your voices down. You don’t want Miss Rachel to hear you.”

If she'd thought to see any family resemblance between the woman and Romeo, Abigail was disappointed. The woman had generous features, wide cheekbones, and an ample mouth, unlike the narrow face of the soldier. But hadn't Jeremiah spoken of the woman as *Rachel's mother*? His stepmother, no doubt. Clad in mourning, she held a pair of scissors upraised like a broken parasol, perhaps keeping them out of the children's way. She definitely didn't demonstrate the carefree attitude that Romeo, er, Jeremiah was known for throughout Gratiot Prison.

She squinted up at Abigail, probably trying to place her.

"Mrs. Calhoun." Abigail dipped a faint curtsy. "I hope my visit isn't an inconvenience. I've traveled far to see you."

The woman tilted her head. "Not at all. I rather enjoy unexpected visitors. Are you an acquaintance of the Huckabees?"

Huckabees? They'd never even introduced themselves.

"No, ma'am," Mr. Huckabee said. "We just saw her on the road and thought we'd show her to the right spot. It's the least we can do for our neighbors. Now, before I get back to Mrs. Huckabee and the babies, I might just check on your stock, if you'd like."

"I would. That cow was stingy with her milk today. I don't know how you manage to get so much out of her."

"Confidence, ma'am." And he made a long pulling gesture to demonstrate his technique.

Mrs. Calhoun's chins waggled in mirth as Mr. Huckabee dragged his children off the porch. Abigail thanked him and followed Mrs. Calhoun into a messy parlor. The scent of lemon wax and the roaring fireplace imposed order on an otherwise chaotic setting.

An overturned basket of wrinkled laundry lay scattered across the settee. Ladies' journals balanced precariously on a small round table in the center of the room. Mrs. Calhoun deposited

the heavy pair of scissors atop a stack of clippings that threatened to flutter away as she bustled past.

“Have a seat,” she said. “I wasn’t expecting a guest today, but I’ll have some coffee hot in a jiffy.”

“That would be delightful.” Abigail needed time to collect her thoughts. She removed her hat and coat and hung them over a chair.

She’d finally arrived. Abigail straightened her green velvet cuffs as Mrs. Calhoun exited. What would she say? How could she broach the subject? Should she move the sharp scissors out of her mother-in-law’s reach before she told her? Her hand slipped into her pocket and found the solitary penny she cherished. She turned to practice her speech on a collection of bells sitting in a dusty curio cabinet.

“When I met Jeremiah, he was a prisoner,” Abigail whispered. “No, that’s not right. How about: Jeremiah asked me to take care of his sister, Rachel. It was his last wish that I would make this journey.” True, but how to mention his proposal? In all her imagining she hadn’t been able to come up with one satisfactory introduction on the topic of her matrimonial state.

“Ma,” a voice called from upstairs, “what brought the Huckabee swarm to our door?”

Abigail froze. There was no answer from the kitchen.

“Ma?”

If this was his sister, she obviously wasn’t used to being ignored.

Soft footsteps could be heard sliding across the upstairs rug, then descending the stairs. Rachel Calhoun entered, stooped like a much older woman. The joints of her fingers flared an angry red. So Mr. Huckabee was correct about the rheumatic fever.

The girl straightened. “I’m sorry.” She flipped her chestnut braid over the shoulder of her house gown, clearly not apologizing for anything. “And who might you be?”

Abigail stepped forward. “Hello, I just arrived—”

“Obviously.” The lines about her mouth had settled deep, as if perpetually troubled.

“Yes. I’m a friend of Captain Calhoun. I promised him I would visit.”

“A friend of my brother?” Rachel crossed her arms. “Your name?”

“Abigail . . .” she halted. When would she tell them the truth? Was it too early?

At Abigail’s hesitation, Rachel sniffed. “Whoever your people are, you must not be proud of them. I might not be high and mighty, but I’m not ashamed of my kin.”

Abigail lifted her clenched jaw at the reproach from the mountain girl. She was proud of the Stuart name, even if her mother no longer shared it and the farm she loved no longer bore it. But that door had closed. Besides, if she worked hard enough, maybe someday she could garner respect with a new name.

She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. She’d found a new name for a new life, and she might as well start using it.

“My name is Calhoun . . . Abigail Calhoun. I’m Jeremiah’s wife.”