

TEAVILLE
MORAL SOCIETY

A LOVE
SO TRUE

Melissa Jagears



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*To Naomi,
for having to deal with a rather difficult-to-please critique
partner, yet valiantly remains friends with her anyway, who
deserves more gratitude than she gets, more encouragement
than she hears, and all the strawberries in the world.*



1

SOUTHEAST KANSAS SEPTEMBER 1908

If David Kingsman had any chance of making his father proud, this next decision could be it. Of course, Father was just as likely to disown him for it, but if David's projections were correct, it would be worth it. Hopefully.

Closing the last ledger, David looked across the room at the factory manager of A. K. Glass. Mr. Burns stood by the window, stroking his gray beard while staring out over the industrial part of town, as he'd done the whole time David had pored over the factory's books.

The fact that the manager had done nothing for several hours was as telling as the numbers in these ledgers.

Mr. Burns should be glad Father wasn't the one here right now. Though he wouldn't like him either once he heard his decision.

"Mr. Burns." David released a breath and pushed himself out of the chair. "After today's examination, I'm afraid I need to let you go."

The man blinked but didn't move.

"I understand you'll need time to gather your things." He gestured toward the man's desk before striding to the door and

entering the front office, where several men handled the glass factory's paperwork. The stacks of papers on their desks were but a draft away from fluttering to the floor already littered with boxes, crinkled papers, and glass jars. He tapped his hand on the empty desk closest to Mr. Burns's door. "Does anyone know where Mr. Carlisle is?"

The three other employees in the office looked up and shook their heads.

"Men," Mr. Burns's voice boomed from behind him, "I'd suggest you find a job elsewhere before it's too late. After only one day's assessment, the owner's son here thinks we aren't doing our best. If he'll fire me, he'll fire you."

David held up his hand. "That's not true. Workers who earn their pay will not be fired." He turned to glare at Mr. Burns. "I suggest you leave peaceably."

Mr. Carlisle's tall, thin frame sneaked in through the outer doorway, his thin mustache twitching. "I heard Liberty Glass is hiring."

"Better to work under someone who cares about the people in this town rather than some outsider." Mr. Burns shuffled through the crowded office, holding his box high above his paunch. "Come, George. I'll put in a good word for you." He gestured with his head for Carlisle to follow, then stomped out the door.

The three men behind their desks glanced between Mr. Carlisle and the outsider who'd dared to fire their boss.

David took his time to look all four men in the eyes. "I can't promise anything, but my intention is not to fire anyone who's competent. If you've been hardworking and—"

"Well, my uncle did the best he could with this place, and if that wasn't enough . . ." Mr. Carlisle shuffled through the mess toward his desk. "I'll pack my things."

His uncle? No, no, no. He needed Mr. Carlisle! "Now wait. I know how difficult it can be to work with family, the pressure to remain loyal no matter what. But I'm willing to raise your salary since I need to make this place ready . . . er, I mean . . . start to . . ." *Argb.* What could he say that wouldn't offend but would convince

him to stay? Especially since he wasn't sure how long Mr. Carlisle could keep the position. "I'd appreciate your help in turning this place into what my father and I have envisioned."

The man dumped the contents of a filing box onto the floor and snatched the lone photograph off his desk. Before packing it, he stopped to give David a smug look. "Good luck doing that without me." He opened a drawer and retrieved a sweater and a tin box.

"Is Liberty really hiring?" The youngest of the three remaining men ruffled his red hair.

David clamped his jaw to keep from begging the man to stay. His father would have immediately handed the kid a box for uttering such a disloyal question.

But why would these men feel loyal to Kingsman & Son? Father had only visited once after he'd received the deed from the former proprietor, who'd signed it over to clear a debt. He'd then left the place to run on its own, expecting the same diligence from his Teaville manager as those who ran his holdings in Kansas City.

As soon as these workers found out Kingsman & Son planned to sell this place, what reason would they have to be loyal?

David refused to let his body posture slump an inch. "You're free to go, of course, but I won't rehire you."

"We'll put in a good word for you." Mr. Carlisle waved a beckoning hand toward the redhead.

The two other men stared down at their desks. The one to David's right pulled an invoice toward him, focusing on it as if fascinated.

The younger man stood and shrugged. "It's closer to home anyway. I resign."

David gave the redhead a curt nod and tried not to fist his hands while he and Carlisle finished clearing their desks of personal items.

How would he fix this place up quickly without the secretary he'd been counting on to know the ins and outs of the company?

Uncle and nephew. How he wished that information had come to light earlier.

After the two men exited, David turned to the remaining two employees. “Continue on, I’ll be asking for your help shortly.”

They both gave him a nod before he returned to Mr. Burns’s office. Shutting the door quietly, he wilted onto one of the office chair’s cushioned arms.

Good thing Father had already banished him to Teaville, for it seemed he’d be here awhile. He stared at the papers and ledgers piled on the desk, then looked at the clock. Three fifteen.

As if his stomach could read time, it rumbled, reminding him how he’d skipped his lunch hour while agonizing over the right decision.

Which now seemed to have been the wrong one.

He grabbed the jacket he’d left draped over a chair and shrugged it on. Working on an empty stomach was foolhardy, but he really couldn’t blame this fiasco on hunger.

“I’ll return, gentlemen.” He strode through the office and out onto the metal balcony that overlooked the main floor of the factory, where men sorted, boxed, and hauled all the various iterations of A. K. Glass canning jars. Thankfully the furnaces were clear across the building and the heat was only mildly stifling here.

His hard soles clanged as he descended the narrow metal staircase, like the pinging of a hammer pounding nails into the coffin where his business prowess now lay.

Outside, the early-autumn air was almost as muggy as inside the factory, but at least the sun was shining. He closed his eyes against its bright rays.

Lord, I need help. In more ways than one.

Thankfully the same God who made that very sun rise knew his predicament. He could take comfort in that, if nothing else.

The scent of something fried wafted on the slight breeze, so he took a left turn at the end of the building and attempted to follow his nose. He glanced around at the industrial area surrounding his factory—bland brick-walled alleys, rutted roads, and tall buildings. Why hadn’t he asked the men where he could get something good to eat?

As he passed by another massive factory, the sight of a street a

block ahead crowded with buildings better suited for small businesses made him rub his hands together, especially since the fried smell was stronger now. He passed an abandoned building on his way to the shops and squinted to make out the well-painted wooden signs hanging from the storefronts up ahead. Where was the smell of food coming from?

He slowed as he finally reached the sidewalk.

The Dutch Tulip, the California, the Pink Lady, the Charlatan.

The faint sound of a piano playing and subdued laughter somewhere down the street gave him pause. He looked into the nearest two windows. Saloons or inns, maybe, both dark at the moment. He really should've asked the man who'd picked him up from the train to tell him about the area, but David had been so focused on accomplishing Father's request, he'd paid little attention to his surroundings.

He had never stepped foot in the seedy areas back home. Should he just go back to work?

A young man walked out of a nearby building and tipped his cowboy hat. He'd exited from someplace called the Hawk and Eagle Soda Fountain.

The youth looked respectable enough, so David returned the nod and pulled out his pocket watch. What harm would it do to grab a plate of food and take it to the factory? He needed to return in time to ask someone to recommend a few boardinghouses or hotels lest he end up somewhere less than savory tonight.

He crossed the fairly empty brick street and headed toward the soda fountain. Even if the delicious smell was coming from somewhere else, he should at least find something edible here.

As he stepped onto the sidewalk, a tall, dark-headed woman emerged from the alleyway. The pale blue of her simple, high-necked dress was not the vibrant color he'd expect of a woman who frequented the bad areas of town. Perhaps he wasn't where he thought he was after all.

She turned into the Hawk and Eagle before he did. Should be a decent place, then.

Inside, a few men sat at smoky tables surrounding the square counter in the middle of the large room.

The woman was halfway across the floor. She wasn't calling attention to herself with a seductive sashay or suggestive glances, so he headed for the counter.

A flash of brilliant red caught his eye. A female at a back corner table was wearing the exact kind of dress he would have expected in a brothel. The woman's painted lips curved as he met her eyes, and she ran a hand across her bodice, tempting him to look at the skin her dress failed to cover.

This sort of woman made the lady in blue stick out like a sore thumb.

He glanced back at the lady he'd followed in, who was ascending the stairs of a balcony lined with several doors. Why had she come in such a place?

She strode across the balcony without a glance toward the players groaning about losing a hand of poker or the woman in the red silk sitting on a man's lap.

Though average in looks, the woman in blue's uncommon height, if nothing else, should have caught people's attention—yet a quick glance around told him no one seemed to notice the out-of-place woman except him.

She stopped at the second door on the balcony and knocked.

What could she possibly be doing up there? Was he wrong? Would upstanding people rent rooms in a place where this woman in red worked?

When the upstairs door opened, the tall woman said something with a smile and then disappeared into the room.

He rubbed his eyes and glanced around the main floor. Not a single man was looking in her direction with a puzzled expression—or one of baser interest.

Should he do something? What? She certainly didn't appear to be in danger. But could he go about his business not knowing how she fared?

“You wantin' something?”

The man at the counter had finished drying a glass and stood staring at him with an uplifted eyebrow.

David looked around and saw no food. “Um . . . what sodas do you have?”

The man picked up another glass. “Ginger ale and club.”

“That’s it?”

“If you want fancy, try the soda fountain on Main Street. Frilly flavors like cola, cherry, and lemon-lime there.”

David waited for a few seconds, but the man didn’t ask him if he wanted something harder to drink, though maybe he was just being cautious with the newcomer since alcohol was illegal in Kansas.

“Club soda, then.”

In a matter of minutes, the woman in blue backed out of the room and headed downstairs. A young man who’d been busily shucking peanut shells between sips of what appeared to be whiskey seemed to notice her for the first time. The red-freckled youth looked her over with a shy smile and quickly abandoned his seat and headed for the bottom stair. If he meant for the silly tilt of his brows and his puffed-up chest to convey confidence, he failed by combining it with a nervous swagger.

Without so much as a how-do-you-do, the lad cut off her path and took hold of her left arm. “I’ve heard there’s nothing in this world like being held in the arms of an angel, and I’d like to find out for myself.”

She backed away, giving him a patronizing glare. “You should go home, young man.”

The boy’s lips curled into a snarl as she tugged against his grip.

David left his soda and hurried forward.

“Let her go,” the man behind the counter hollered. “She ain’t one of my girls.”

The youth glared at the soda jerk, and the woman took the opportunity to pull away. She gave the man behind the counter a nod before heading out.

David stopped, but she didn’t even acknowledge him as she blew past.

The freckled miscreant huffed as if he were ten and his momma had told him he couldn't bring frogs into the house, then slogged off to his seat. The two groups of men at the corner tables hadn't stopped jabbering. The red silk woman had disappeared.

David looked back at the soda jerk or bartender—whatever he truly was—but the man had resumed polishing the rows of empty glasses on his counter.

A woman was almost assaulted and he goes back to cleaning?

David turned to follow the lady out.

“Hey!” the bartender hollered. “You didn't pay for your drink.”

David dug a coin from his pocket and tossed it onto the counter, then rushed outside. To his left, the tall brunette was walking east, seemingly *farther* into what had to be this town's red-light district.

Had she no idea where she was either?

He sped up and then kept pace far enough behind not to draw attention, but close enough to sprint to her if needed.

A sudden flurry of black flew out of the alley. A muddy-haired kid ran straight for her.

David's feet flew just as quickly as the young one's. A pickpocket hadn't been the fate he'd expected to save her from, but he wouldn't let her be mugged if he could stop it.

The boy slammed into her and wrapped his arms around her legs, throwing the woman off balance.

One of her arms twirled for a second to save herself from a fall, and then she laughed.

David pulled up short. Laughed? He couldn't help but wrinkle his brow.

What kind of decent woman came into a red-light district with a smile for a prostitute and a laugh for an urchin?

She leaned over to embrace the boy, dirty clothes and all, then ruffled his matted hair.

After getting a tweak to the nose and a reply of some sort, the boy dashed off so fast the brunette's attempt to pat his back failed.

Perhaps this woman didn't need an escort after all . . . and yet, that made her all the more intriguing.

She shoved one hand into a side pocket and whirled around, her eyes narrowed, her chin tilted in question. “Is there a reason you’re following me, sir?”

Was there anything about this woman that wouldn’t surprise him? He’d expected a big-boned woman like her, who was likely a smidgen taller than he, to have a deep, husky voice, and yet it was as soft as an angel’s, even with challenge coloring her tone.

He glanced at the stiff arm disappearing into her skirt. At least she wasn’t completely unprepared for the bad section of town. Hopefully she had something more substantial than a jackknife in her hand.

“No need to worry about me.” He walked forward slowly, his palms out. “You, on the other hand . . . I mean, it looks as if you’re doing just fine, but the people who frequent areas like this . . . Well, if it’s all right with you, I’d like to make sure you get out of here safely and meet up with someone you know.”

Her hand didn’t leave her pocket. “You do realize I saw you in the saloon.”

“You mean the Hawk and Eagle Soda Fountain?”

She snorted.

All right, so that wasn’t the sound he would have expected from an angel.

“Not a soul believes that’s a soda fountain.” She rolled her eyes, and yet her smile was more amused than anything. “You might think me less than bright for visiting this part of town, but I assure you, I’m not that stupid.”

He pulled at his tie, feeling a little less than bright himself, since it had taken him a while to figure out this was indeed the bad part of town. “I only went in because you did. I was looking for something to eat.”

He threw her the grin that made most women duck their heads and flutter their eyelashes—didn’t work on her, apparently. “Regardless, would you mind terribly if I escort you home? Considering where you are, I doubt many men will stop to ask you who you are before they make assumptions.”

She straightened and threw back her shoulders. “Your escort is not necessary. I’m fine, thank you, and good day.” She turned and strode away.

She was obviously not fine, but she sure was interesting.

He waited until she was farther ahead this time before following.

In just a few blocks, she turned onto a much busier street with plenty of well-dressed ladies strolling among the passersby before she disappeared behind a shiny new streetcar. The green monster of a contraption rumbled down its tracks, heedless of horse or human and the rare automobile.

David’s stomach cramped, but thankfully the woman had led him into a section of town he wouldn’t have to worry about being seen in. At the hotel across the street, a couple—framed by a large picture window—ate what looked to be a gigantic slice of meringue pie.

After one last glance toward where the mystery woman had vanished, he made his way across the street for lunch. Too bad Father’s glass factory would keep him busy until it was sold and he could return to Kansas City. Trying to figure out what the woman in blue was about would have been a great way to entertain himself during his banishment.

But he couldn’t work every hour of the day. Maybe he could find a way to run into her again.