



*TOGETHER
FOREVER*

JODY HEDLUND



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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

2 Corinthians 12:9

CHAPTER 1



NEW YORK CITY
JUNE 1858

Marianne Neumann's fingers were shaking so hard she could barely pry open the first record book. There were half a dozen more in the drawer. How could she possibly search through all of them?

At a scuffling in the hallway, she glanced at the closed office door and froze. She held her breath and prayed the footsteps would pass by. After only two weeks on the job, she couldn't afford to be caught snooping in the director's desk.

For an eternal moment she remained motionless, listening to the steps as they faded down the hall. Releasing a breath, she returned her attention to the record book bound with a plain brown leather cover.

She opened it gingerly to the front page. The date at the top read *April 1855*. With trembling fingers, she paged through the ledger, noting that the entries were varied in length. The handwriting changed frequently. Several pages were wrinkled and the ink unreadable where perhaps coffee or some other liquid had spilled on the page. The final entry was dated late in 1855, nearly three years ago.

She snapped the book shut and stuffed it back into the drawer where she'd found it.

Her hand slid over the spines. She had to find the records from last autumn. But which ledger contained the information she needed? She attempted to pull out another volume, but it stuck to the others on either side. The June evening had begun to cool, though not enough to lessen the humidity and heat that permeated the second story of the Children's Aid Society building.

"Come on, come on," she whispered. This would likely be her one and only chance to investigate. Which meant she had no choice but to find the information she needed about her lost sister.

Even as her shaking fingers pried another record book loose, she tried to grasp at the last vestiges of hope. Tomorrow she was leaving on her first placing-out trip and would be gone for weeks. She had to have some clue, some small hint to guide her search while she was traveling. She couldn't go without anything.

She flipped open the book to the back entry. *March 1856*. She was getting closer. She returned it and reached for the next one. Would it have records from the autumn of 1857 when Sophie disappeared? Surely the book was here somewhere.

She hadn't resorted to sneaking into the director's office just to come away empty-handed. Not only was she displeasing God once again with her sinful scheming, but she was putting her job in jeopardy. If the Children's Aid Society didn't fire her, at the very least they wouldn't allow her to accompany the children on the trip west.

At another hollow echo of footsteps in the hallway, Marianne paused. When the slapping halted outside the office door, her pulse sputtered faster. She pressed the drawer to close it.

When the doorknob rattled, panic overtook her and she dropped to her knees behind the desk. She hardly had time to duck her head before the door squeaked open. She held

her breath and tried to make herself invisible. Thankfully the desk was massive.

If she'd had a moment's more notice, she might have been able to move the chair out of the way and wedge herself farther under. As it was, she'd have to pray whoever had opened the door would only peek into the office and not come inside.

The click of the door closing, however, sent a tremor through her. As someone began to cross the room, she pinched her eyes closed and shrank lower. *Go away!* Her mind shouted the silent command.

But the steps drew nearer.

Don't come around the desk. Please . . .

When the footsteps stopped at the front of the desk, she didn't dare breathe. Her heart was racing so fast it tripped and thudded against her rib cage.

The person fidgeted with something on the cluttered desktop, scattering papers and shifting books around. The whole workspace was rather messy, shelves overflowing with books and papers, crates filled with letters and stacks of newspapers. Even though it was the largest office in the building, it was still cramped and had only one window, which was half open.

Finally, all rustling on the desktop ceased. Marianne opened her eyes and glanced at the shoes showing underneath the desk. A black pair of leather oxfords that had been polished to a shine.

Oh no. She squeezed her eyes shut again, yet knowing it would do no good. Blocking out the surrounding images wouldn't make her disappear from this predicament, even though she desperately wished it would. And closing her eyes wouldn't make the man on the other side of the desk vanish either.

What if Reverend Brace had returned? He'd left the building over an hour ago. She thought she'd waited long enough before sneaking into his office, but had she been wrong about his schedule?

The man on the other side of the desk cleared his throat. She cringed.

Silence settled over the room, which magnified the chatter of the children downstairs, along with the busy evening noises arising from nearby Broadway Street—the clomp and clatter of horses and carriages and the calls of vendors closing up their shops.

The stillness in the office stretched on. She would have almost believed the man had left, except when she peeked, his shoes hadn't budged from the spot in front of the desk.

“So . . .” came a hesitant voice.

She jumped. She shouldn't have been startled to hear him speak, but she was. She'd sincerely hoped to avoid detection. But apparently her hiding spot hadn't been secretive enough. She wished the floor would swallow her up whole and she could disappear without a trace. But since that wasn't about to happen, she scrambled to find some excuse—anything—to explain her presence on the floor behind the desk.

“Can I be of any assistance?” The voice was younger than that of Reverend Brace and was unfamiliar.

Perhaps she should remain frozen and pretend she hadn't heard him. Maybe he'd get the hint she didn't wish to be discovered and would leave. However, as much as she wanted to pretend the entire situation wasn't happening, she also knew she had to salvage what she could of her reputation and job. This man might not be Charles Loring Brace, the founder of the Children's Aid Society, but he very well could tell Reverend Brace she'd been in his office.

Marianne attempted to school her face into a mask of pure innocence while she patted the floor around her. “I was just searching for my pen.” She quietly whispered a prayer of apology for her further deception. She felt awful enough for sneaking into the office. Now she was making matters worse with her lie.

“Any luck?” the man asked.

“None.” She started to push herself off the floor, but before she could grab on to the desk to hoist herself up, the man was at her side, taking her arm and assisting her.

Part of her was afraid his grip would tighten like a chain and that he’d drag her from the room, march her downstairs, and expose her misdeed to the other workers who were still present. So she was surprised, when she was finally standing, that he gently steadied and then released her.

“Thank you,” she managed past her constricted airways.

“You’re welcome.” His voice had a slow Southern drawl to it.

Even though she wanted to duck her head and slink from the room, she couldn’t keep from glancing at him. And when she did, her attention jerked back and stayed on his face—his incredibly handsome face. His features were chiseled with equal measures of strength and suaveness. A dimple in his chin added an aura of irresistibility to his appeal.

His tanned skin made his sandy hair appear lighter—not blond, but much lighter than her own dark brown waves. The layer of whiskers on his jaw and chin was a shade darker than his hair. His brows rose, revealing wide eyes that weren’t green, but neither were they blue. Although not distinct in color, they were filled with humor.

Humor was better than anger, wasn’t it? She attempted a small smile, which felt more like a grimace. “I’m Miss Neumann.”

His smile broke free with the abandon of summer sunshine coming out from behind the clouds. He flashed perfect teeth in a devastating smile that had the power to knock a girl off her feet—if she was the kind of girl who was easily turned by a handsome smile, which she wasn’t. “I’m Andrew Brady.”

“Mr. Brady—”

“Drew.”

“Ah. Well. Pleased to meet you.” She wasn’t really pleased to meet him. She was actually chagrined to be caught in Reverend

Brace's office by someone like him. What must he think of finding her hiding on the floor? And then crawling around feigning looking for an imaginary pen?

She inwardly sighed but outwardly attempted to keep herself composed. She smoothed a hand down her skirt, relieved she was wearing one of her new cotton print dresses for summer. It had repeating yellow-and-white vertical stripes with purple and red flowers dotted throughout. The full bell-shaped skirt had so much material it could have been cut apart and made into dresses for an entire tenement of young girls. Well, perhaps not quite. But it was a much fancier dress than any she'd owned while growing up.

In fact, all of her clothes in recent months had been beautiful and dreamy. Her older sister, Elise, had insisted on giving her the clothes. Marianne hadn't protested too heartily, if at all. She could admit she'd appreciated shedding her filthy threadbare rags for the luxurious garments.

"Miss Neumann." Mr. Brady spoke her name as though trying a foreign word.

"Yes, Miss Neu-mann." She enunciated it carefully. It was a typical German name. She supposed she still spoke it with a trace of her German accent, which, try as she might, she couldn't completely shed, even after almost eight years of living in America. "I've been working at the Children's Aid Society for two weeks, and I leave tomorrow for my first trip taking children west."

"And I suppose you're sneaking around Mr. Brace's office attempting to get information on a long-lost child you hope to find while on the trip?"

"Exactly."

His smile widened, and his eyes turned a shade lighter, almost blue.

"No, of course not," she said quickly, wanting to pound her palm against her forehead. "What I meant to say is, I was

hoping to find my pen so I wouldn't have to leave on the trip without it."

He cocked his head toward the drawer of ledgers she hadn't been able to close all the way. "Maybe you should check for your pen in the drawer."

She stepped away from the incriminating evidence. "Thank you, Mr. Brady, but I should be going. I still have a good deal of packing yet to do this evening."

"You certainly wouldn't want to leave the *pen* behind, now, would you?" he asked. "Especially not after daring to come into Mr. Brace's private office to find it."

Was he baiting her into telling the truth about why she was in the office? She paused to study him, hoping to read his expression. His grin only inched higher, and the spark in his eyes told her he was enjoying teasing her.

Her ire flamed to life. She didn't appreciate anyone making merry at her expense. "I don't see that my presence here is any of your business. In fact, perhaps you're the one who should explain what you're doing in Reverend Brace's private office, not me." There, she'd switched the focus onto him. After all, he was as guilty as she was for trespassing. "Who are you anyway? And why are you here?"

She hadn't seen him in the offices since she'd started working. She crossed her arms in a show of accusation, but the effect was lost in the drooping material of the wide pagoda sleeves. "Maybe you're an intruder. Maybe I should alert the authorities."

"Don't worry about me, darlin'," he said in a particularly heavy drawl and a wink. "I promise I won't tell anyone you've been in here."

For a brief moment, she was speechless. This man had clearly seen her ruse. Even so, she couldn't let him know he was correct. The best course of action was to leave while she still had a sliver of her dignity remaining.

She started for the door. “Since I have nothing to hide, you can rest assured I won’t worry about you, Mr. Brady.” She tried to infuse confidence in each step and forced herself to exit the room without glancing over her shoulder at him. She only made it a step into the hallway when screams erupted from the first floor. Frightened screams.

What was going on? Was one of the bigger boys bullying a younger child?

She raced toward the stairway. She’d already been hard at work all day helping the orphans to bathe, distributing their two new outfits, and cutting and delousing hair. Nevertheless, she was supposed to be supervising the children this evening and throughout the night.

At this late hour, most of them were eating in the dining room under the watchful eye of the woman employed to cook meals, along with two other agents who were helping prepare for the expedition. Even so, Marianne choked against the guilt that was tightening an invisible hand around her throat and squeezing.

Hadn’t she learned her lesson when she’d resorted to deception last fall when the Seventh Street Mission had closed and she’d found herself jobless and homeless? When her lies had cost her Sophie? Sinning never accomplished anything worthwhile. She’d only end up disappointing God again and earning more censure.

At the heavy tread of footsteps behind her, she suspected Mr. Brady had heard the commotion and was rushing to investigate the situation too. When she reached the bottom that led into the front room, she stopped short at the sight that met her.

In the dining room doorway stood a stoop-shouldered man wielding a pistol. He wore baggy trousers with a stained and tattered coat. His head was hatless, revealing strands of stringy hair. He swung the gun at the long plank table, where at least a dozen children were still seated on trestle benches on either side.

“Tell me where Ned is,” the man yelled in a slurred voice, “or I’ll start blowing off heads!”

The two agents crouched near the table, shielding several of the children who were crying in terror.

The man took a wavering step into the room and pointed the gun unsteadily at the nearest child, a boy who didn’t appear to be a day older than five. The orphan’s eyes widened in his pale face, but he didn’t move or speak. He simply stared up at the man almost resignedly, as though he’d faced such violent overtures before and would accept his fate whatever that might be.

“Tell me where my boy is, you child-robbers,” the man called again, swinging the gun toward the nearest agent, grandmotherly Mrs. Trott. “I ain’t letting you take him away.”

“Who’s your boy?” Mrs. Trott asked in a wobbly voice.

Marianne didn’t consider herself a brave person. But she couldn’t stand by and allow a drunken brute to harm any of these poor, innocent children. Her gaze swept around the front sitting room, taking in the clusters of children already finished eating who were attempting to make themselves invisible behind the sparse scattering of chairs and tables.

Her sights landed upon a poker near the fireplace. Before she could start toward the makeshift weapon, Mr. Brady shouldered past her, brushing her aside in his haste. He barreled toward the intruder, his jaw set with determination.

Marianne wanted to reach out and stop him from doing anything foolhardy. Certainly he wasn’t planning to confront an inebriated man who was waving a gun around. It was much too dangerous.

Yet much to her horror, Mr. Brady reached for the drunk, swung him around, and punched him in the stomach. Even as the man stumbled and started to double over, he let loose a slew of vile curses, raised his gun, and pointed it at Mr. Brady.

Aghast, Marianne watched as the drunk’s finger closed around the trigger. She screamed a warning, but it was too late. The bang

of the gun drowned out her voice. More screams and cries filled the air along with smoke from the discharge. Marianne expected to see Mr. Brady lose his grip on the man, stagger backward, and fall to the floor. Instead, he slammed the man's hand against the doorframe, knocking the gun loose so that it clattered to the floor.

Within moments, Mr. Brady had yanked both of the man's arms behind his back and had subdued him into a sniveling, whimpering mass. A black hole in the ceiling showed that somehow Mr. Brady had managed to knock the barrel of the gun upward, thus saving himself from a nasty gunshot wound. A mixture of surprise and relief weakened Marianne's knees, forcing her to grab on to the stair railing to keep from buckling.

"Wally." Mr. Brady cocked his head in the direction of one of the boys standing near the front door. "Go fetch the police officer on the corner of Broadway. Tell him Drew Brady asked for him."

The thin lad nodded solemnly and then slipped out the door and was gone before Marianne could instruct him to bring back *two* police officers just to be safe.

The drunk started cursing again. Mr. Brady yanked on the man's arm. "None of that now," he said. "This here's a God-fearing place full of women and young children. You better watch your language or you'll force me to make sure you do."

"Give me back my boy," the man spat. "That's all I want."

Mr. Brady made holding the intruder look effortless. But from the way his muscles bulged against his shirtsleeves, he was expending a great deal of strength to keep his grip on his prisoner. "You said your boy's named Ned?"

The man nodded. "Heard tell he's heading west—to Illinois—with a trainload of other kids."

The children were mute, still cowering as they watched the interaction, the remainder of their meals growing cold on the table before them.

Mr. Brady kicked the gun so that it slid across the wood floor,

stopping only inches from Marianne's feet. He didn't need to say anything for her to realize he meant for her to pick it up and make sure the drunk didn't get his hands on it again. She bent and grabbed the weapon, the metal colder and heavier than she'd expected.

"If I asked Ned why he ran off from his home," Mr. Brady asked, "what would he tell me?"

"It ain't any of your business—" The man's curse was cut off as Mr. Brady yanked his arm.

"He's probably got plenty of good reasons for leaving, doesn't he?"

"The law says I got a right to keep whatever he earns."

"He's a human being created in the image of God Almighty. And he has a right to be treated with dignity."

"I can raise my boy however I see fit."

"If you treat him worse than a dog, don't expect him to show you any loyalty."

Marianne didn't know who Ned was or if he was in the building. But she'd certainly never turn him over to this man. Marianne knew exactly what kind of person Ned's father was. It hadn't been all that long ago that she'd been in a situation much too similar to Ned's.

"You can't keep him from me," the man shouted. "And if you won't tell me where he's at, you can be sure I'll find him. I always do."

"You don't want him to end up like you, do you? A violent drunk?"

The man started to speak but couldn't seem to find the words.

"Don't you want him to have a better life?" Mr. Brady persisted.

Marianne willed the man to answer with a resounding yes, but she wasn't surprised when he cursed Mr. Brady and at the same moment lashed out, flailing with his legs and twisting to free himself.

Mr. Brady wrestled with the intruder for several moments before renewing his grip. This time he thrust the man forward toward the building entrance. One of the boys opened the door and held it wide. Only when Mr. Brady was in the doorway did Marianne notice the blood seeping through his sleeve. The bright crimson covered the back of his upper arm so that the sleeve stuck to his skin.

Marianne sucked in a breath. “Mr. Brady?”

He shot her a hard glance over his shoulder, one taut with warning.

She bit back her words. But once the door closed behind him, she sprang into action. “We need to send someone for the doctor. Mr. Brady’s been shot.”