



RUNAWAY

WEDDING



KATHLEEN DENLY

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New York City, 1870

Steven couldn't breathe. He tugged at his cravat and ran a finger beneath the collar of his shirt.

His best man, Gary, gave him a concerned look and whispered, "Smile. Anyone would think this was a funeral rather than your wedding."

Steven grimaced and flapped the sides of his coat. "Wish these windows opened." He gestured to the tall stained-glass windows adorning either side of the large sanctuary. They spilled colored light across the slowly filling pews and over the isle Lucy would soon walk down. *Lucy. His bride?* His heart picked up speed. His paltry breakfast pressed against the base of his throat. This wasn't right. He wiped sweat from his forehead. He couldn't do this. His mother glared at him from the front pew beside his father.

Steven turned to flee, but Gary caught him by the shoulder.

"Easy," Gary murmured in the same tone he'd use to calm a spooked horse.

Steven shook him off, affecting a calm appearance. "I'm fine. I just need ..." Unsure how to finish his sentence, Steven brushed past Gary and out the side door to the alley. There, he spotted a stooped, white-haired woman unloading crates from a wagon and setting them on the steps of a building.

Glancing over his shoulder as the church door closed, he saw Gary intercept his mother. He knew what Gary was telling her: Not to worry. Steven would do the right thing. Steven always did the right thing.

The door clicked shut.

Steven crossed to the old woman. "Let me help you with that." He lifted the heavy crate from her arms and carried it to the step where she had stacked the rest.

She smiled up at him. "Thank you, sir."

He gestured back to the wagon, still half full of goods protected from the morning dew by a rough blanket. "Have you many more to unload?" A bit of hard work might steady him.

"Nah. The rest are fer a store 'cross town. I'd best be goin'." She nodded in farewell. "Have a blessed day."

The woman turned toward the wagon, and he felt a moment of panic. He wasn't ready to return to the church. "Wait!"

She paused.

He glanced at the still-closed door, then hurried to her side and lowered his voice. "Might I deliver them for you?" *What are you doing? Go back inside.* He stuck his hand into his pocket and withdrew a fistful of coins. "I could ..." He gently took her hand and turned it palm up. "I could pay you ... for your inconvenience." The money clinked onto her palm, and he released her.

Her fingers didn't close.

He shifted from one foot to another as the woman eyed him head to toe, clearly taking in his formal wear. She glanced over at the church, then met his gaze pointedly. “Haven’t you somewhere to be?”

He flushed. “I have time yet.” Time. He just needed more time.

She closed her fingers but kept her fist aloft. “You’ll deliver my goods? Gino is a good man. He counts on me.”

“I will.” He held his hands out, palms up. “You have my word.”

She slipped her fist between the folds of her skirt. “You have paper? Something to write?” The coins jingled into a hidden pocket.

Steven reached into his pocket and pulled out the note his ma had left on his bureau that morning. Her words leaped accusingly from the crumpled stationery. *You’re doing the right thing. I’m proud of you, son.* Turning it to the blank side, he handed it to the woman. “I’m afraid I don’t have a pencil.”

She appeared momentarily thoughtful, then turned and knocked on the door behind the step where they’d just set the crates. A moment later, a young boy appeared at the door. They exchanged words in a language Steven didn’t understand. Then the boy disappeared inside. He reappeared a moment later with a pencil. The woman wrote something on the paper, then returned the pencil to the boy, who disappeared inside and closed the door.

She turned back to Steven. “This,”—she held up the paper, displaying the crude map she’d drawn—“take you to Gino.” She started to hand it to him, then hesitated and glanced between him and the church again. “You sure?”

Steven paused. He pictured Lucy's ashen face as her father declared they were to be married. She had opened her mouth but closed it when Steven's eyes had begged her not to protest. Lucy didn't want to marry him. "I'm certain."

The woman shrugged and handed him the paper.

"Thank you." He climbed into the wagon, took the reins, and set her horses in motion. He directed them toward the street behind the church and not toward the front, where Lucy would arrive at any moment. His heart squeezed. She would be humiliated—furious—but with time, her relief would win out, and she would forgive him. Eventually. Her reputation might even recover thanks to her parents' quick thinking.

Steven glanced back as he rounded the corner, but the side door remained closed. He was free.



It took nearly half an hour to reach the store following the directions the woman had drawn for him. This part of the city was neither as affluent nor as well maintained as the parts he was accustomed to frequenting. Piles of trash gathered in every corner. Sewage flowed freely in rivulets down the streets. His tailored formal wear was as out of place here as a pig in the parlor. A group of men stared at him from across the street.

He stopped at the front of the small shop out of habit. Then he remembered he drove a delivery wagon and directed the horses around to the back. The smells in this alley were far worse than those in the one beside the church. The remains of a dog rotted to one side, rats scampering away as his wagon drew near. Coming to a stop, he jumped down, and his leather shoes sank ankle-deep in muck. It struck him as fitting. He walked to the back of the wagon, his steps creating a slurping, popping rhythm.

Two blue eyes stared at him from beneath the cargo's gray blanket.

He suppressed a shout of surprise and blinked. He blinked again. The eyes remained. Two very wide, very familiar blue eyes.

With a squeal, the blanket dropped, and the eyes vanished.

“Lucy?” Steven’s heart pounded in his chest. “Lucy?” He stepped forward and lifted the edge of the blanket.

Lucy’s horror-stricken, tear-streaked face stared back at him. “Steven?”

He dropped the blanket. He didn’t mean to. His fingers had simply gone numb. He couldn’t breathe. Again. Questions whirled in his mind. How could this have happened? What was she doing here?

Then it hit him. She, too, had been running from their wedding.

Lucy’s head popped out of the blanket. Her hair, mussed from the ride, stuck out at odd angles.

Steven couldn’t hold his laugh. Both of them were running from each other, and somehow, they’d wound up in the same wagon. He bent over, his sides aching with mirth.

She gawked at him. “What has gotten into you?” Then she scowled and covered her nose and mouth. “What is that smell?” Her gaze landed on the rotting dog, then swung back to him. “Where are we? Why did you bring us here?”

Steven’s mirth died nearly as suddenly as it had arisen. “Bring *us* here?”

“Yes. Clearly, you knew I was here.” She gestured to the blanket that still concealed most of the cargo. “So why put me through that awful, rattling ride? I realize you must be angry with me, but it is not like you to punish me so.”

His astonishment grew to anger with her unjust accusations. Betrayal filled his chest, robbing him of speech.

She looked around her again. "Do you plan to leave me here? Is that it?" Her scowl collapsed as tears filled her eyes. "Do you hate me? I suppose you should, but I ..."

"No!" Her tears erased his anger. He climbed into the wagon and took her by the shoulders. "No, Lucy. I do not hate you. I did not know you were in the wagon. I swear it."

Her tears spilled over. "Then why ... why are we here?"

"I ..." words failed him as he realized any explanation would only bring her more pain.

Her eyes searched his. "Oh!" She gasped and tried to pull away, but he held her tight. "You were ..." She looked frantically around them, then back to his face. "You were leaving me? At the altar?" Her expression hardened. "How could you! I'd be a laughingstock. My reputation would be ruined."

"How could I?" Steven released one shoulder to point behind her. "And just what were you doing beneath that blanket, my dear?"

"Well, I ..." she caught her bottom lip between her teeth and tilted her head down, peering up at him through her lashes. "... umm."

"Exactly." With a sigh, he released her and sank onto his haunches in the wagon. She settled beside him, smoothing her skirts over her legs.

For the first time, he noticed her attire. The dress of white satin and brocade, trimmed with white lace and ribbons, had suffered some soiling from its ride in the wagon but still retained its intended impression of wealth and decadence. It didn't suit Lucy. He much preferred the blue satin

gown she'd worn the night of their unexpected engagement. The color so perfectly matched her eyes that he'd found himself tempted beyond reason when she looked at him.

Upon his arrival at her parents' annual Christmas ball, she had immediately drawn him to the library. Her excitement to share her latest literary acquisition was palpable. Of course, he indulged her insistence on reading to him. Her passion was irresistible.

When she finished and looked to him for a response, he couldn't speak—struck with the realization of his love for her.

Responding heat flared in her crystal blue eyes.

His lips met hers in the most glorious moment of his life. The book fell to the floor as he drew her into his arms.

Her gloved hands moved to his chest.

The library door burst open. Her father stood in the doorway, a colleague at his side—no doubt they'd planned to share a drink from her father's private bar at the back of the library.

Springing away from Lucy, Steven turned to explain, but words failed him. What had he done? He studied her profile, but she wouldn't look at him. Had he misread the look in her eyes? He must have. What a fool he was.

Lucy's father's shocked expression lasted less than a heartbeat before he chuckled and turned to his friend. "Well, I suppose the cat's out of the bag now. I had planned to announce this once everyone had arrived, but young Steven here has asked for Lucy's hand in marriage, and she has accepted him."

Lucy's mouth opened, protest in her eyes.

Steven caught her gaze and gave a minuscule shake of his head.

Her father beamed as his colleague offered congratulations.

There'd been no chance to speak after that. Her father had escorted them from the room and minutes later announced their engagement to the more than one hundred guests at the ball. Lucy and Steven had pasted on smiles and accepted more congratulations.

His parents had behaved as though they'd known all along, even explaining the lack of a ring, "Well, of course, it needed to be resized. My grandmother, bless her soul, was not quite so dainty as Steven's Lucy." When asked if a date had been set, Lucy's father had announced a date not three months away. Even that raised no eyebrows. Lucy and Steven had shared an unusually close friendship since childhood. Despite their many protestations that they were only friends, rumors had abounded for years that they would indeed marry.

Since the announcement, their parents had kept them busy with wedding preparations, and all of Fifth Avenue seemed to come to congratulate the two families. They'd not been allowed to spend a moment alone together in the weeks leading up to this day.

Steven considered the empty alley. They were alone now. He glanced at Lucy, who sat silently, wringing her gloves in her lap. A tear dripped from her chin.

"I'm sorry." She whispered.

Surprise washed through him. "You're sorry? Whatever for? Lucy, I am the one who should be apologizing."

"No. It's me. It's my fault. If I hadn't taken you to the library..."

“Lucy...” He placed a gentle hand beneath her chin and lifted her face so that she met his gaze.

“I’m the one who kissed you. I had no right. I should’ve ...”

“I wanted you to,” she whispered, her face flushed.

Steven blinked. “But you were going to push me away.”

She shook her head, dislodging his touch. “No.”

“You put your hands on my chest just before your father came in.”

“I . . .” She chewed her lip, her gaze falling to her fidgeting fingers. “I intended to pull you closer,” she whispered.

Hope filled his chest. “You ...”

She looked at him then.

The emotion in her eyes . . . Was that love? The beat of his heart matched the pounding speed of his father’s racehorses. Then why was she running from their wedding? Confusion filled him. “I don’t understand. Lucy, are you saying ...?” He couldn’t bring himself to ask. Being wrong again would crush him.

“I’m so sorry, Steven. I never meant for this to happen. I thought if I could get you alone... I was working up the courage to tell you that my feelings had changed, but I was so frightened. What if you didn’t feel the same? It would make things so awkward between us. I feared you’d start avoiding me, and I couldn’t bear to lose you.” A small smile tilted her lips. “Then you kissed me, and oh, Steven, it was the most wonderful moment of my life.” The smile melted, pain replacing the joy in her eyes. “Then father came in, and you looked so horrified, and I knew. It wasn’t the same for you. Just a moment of weakness you already regretted.”

“Yes.” He shook his head. “No. I mean, I regretted it, but—”

“Which is why I couldn’t understand, at first, why you wouldn’t let me stop my father,” she continued as though he hadn’t spoken. “But, as we stood there accepting congratulations, I understood. You were sacrificing yourself for me. To save my reputation, you were sacrificing your own happiness.”

“But I—”

“I should have stopped it then but couldn’t bring myself to do it. I knew my reputation would be damaged if I called off the engagement after it had been announced. My mother would be devastated.” Her wide eyes begged for his understanding and forgiveness. “She’s worked so hard to overcome her sister’s mistakes and find acceptance in society. I couldn’t imagine hurting her that way. I convinced myself that I could make you happy. That, with time, you would come to love me the way I love you.” Her face crumpled, and he could see the last three months had been as torturous for her as it had been for him. “But this morning...” Her voice caught.

He could bear no more. With a groan, he took her by the shoulders and pulled her to him. Pressing his lips firmly to hers, he let all the love he’d held back for weeks pour out of him.

After a stunned moment, she kissed him back with such fervor there could be no doubt that her words were true. She loved him!

When the need for air burned his lungs, he pulled back to rest his forehead against hers. “Lucy Elaine Margaret Ashman, I love you with all my heart. Will you marry me?”

She laughed. “Yes!” She kissed him. “Yes. Steven, I’ll marry you. I love you.” Then she looked down at her soiled dress and sighed. The joy in her eyes was tempered slightly by the reality of the mess they’d made. She looked at him with a self-deprecating chuckle. “Oh, Steven, what are we going to do?”

He pressed another kiss to her lips, intending to be brief but getting drawn in until they had to stop for air again. Cupping her face, he asked, “Do you trust me?”

She smiled. “Always.”

“Good.” He took her hand and helped her climb over the back of the wagon into the front seat. “Wait here.”

Minutes later, Steven waved goodbye to Gino, who had agreed to send his son to the church with a note. Then Steven climbed up beside Lucy and started the now empty wagon down the alley.



A little over an hour later, Steven stood once more at the head of the church. This time, he couldn't stop grinning as Lucy walked toward him on her father's arm. A brief stop at Lucy's home and an even shorter one at Steven's home had been all that was needed to rectify the damage caused by their detour to the altar. Now, as Lucy approached in his favorite blue dress, his breath caught at the joy that glowed in her sparkling blue eyes. He'd nearly lost her, but in a few minutes, they'd exchange their vows, and she'd be his forever.

Thank You, Lord, for saving us from our foolishness.