

THE PROBLEM WITH DADDY

STAGECOACH DADDIES - BOOK THREE



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Published by Blushing Books
An Imprint of
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.
A Virginia Corporation
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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eBook ISBN: 978-1-64563-986-2

Print ISBN: 978-1-64563-987-9

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Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

CHAPTER 1



The rough-hewn boardwalk edging Willow Street's dirt road held virtually no shade nor places of concealment. Gwen tried to hide herself behind a juvenile pine tree, but she knew it wouldn't pass scrutiny. She shifted her green, floral carpetbag from hand to hand nervously. It held all her worldly possessions – oh how the mighty had fallen. But she kept telling herself it was worth it.

Being passed off to yet another good 'Rise of the Prophets Church elder' again, and this one with two wives already, just didn't sit well with her. Maybe she was just not meant for the Church. Her looks set her apart right off the top. It was hard to be plain when your looks were so dramatic. No one but her mother had platinum blonde hair and translucent ice blue eyes. They were aberrations among the less showy conclave in Jackson Grove. Her mother Laura had taken to hiding and allowed herself to be bullied without any protection from her husband, Joseph Vacker, Gwen's father. It had been easy for Laura to blend into the background with the two other pretty but normal wives playing social butterfly while she played wallflower and hid herself away as much as possible.

Gwen didn't want that for herself, and when she'd been pressed into marriage with Gus, it soon became clear being a conformist was not Gwen's way of behaving. When Gus died and Papa had chosen Maxwell Kempt to be her next husband, Gwen rebelled. Maxwell already had two wives and Gwen did not want to be the youngest, least powerful of the flock.

So here she was, lurking about on a corner on the blazing, shimmery, dusty street, waiting for Mr. David Locke to return from the mercantile with his newspaper and whatever small goods he needed. Would her job as a housekeeper entail these sorts of errands? At least she knew where the mercantile was. It was, in fact, the place where she'd overheard Mr. Jones mention a housekeeping position during a conversation with the stranger, Mr. Locke. She watched him do his business with Mr. Jones and he seemed like a pleasant enough fellow. He dressed in clean, if plain, clothes and what she could hear of their conversation suggested he spoke well enough.

He'd do. Now all she had to do was wait and then pounce. The waiting was nerve-wracking. It was hot here in the sun, relentless despite the little pine tree. But she waited. It was going to take a lot of courage to follow through on her plan. But she'd been all over Stagecoach looking for a job and one look at her sent housewives scurrying away and single gentlemen, while more interested in hiring her, found out she had no experience doing anything but choosing her wardrobe and fixing her hair, and turned her away. Mr. Locke's housekeeping job was her last resort. She was down to her last dollar – only enough for one more night in the poorest accommodations in the hotel.

Finally, he sauntered down the block and up the sidewalk into his home, a slight limp giving him a mild hitch in his step. She counted to three, took three deep breaths, firmed up her jaw, straightened her shoulders and fairly marched over to Mr. Locke's house. Three raps on the door brought a casual response from within. He opened the door. "Hello, can I help you, Miss?"

Now was when Gwen was most likely to fail. Her plan was bold, too bold considering her lack of experience with prevaricating, but desperate times led to desperate measures.

She held out the hand not encumbered by her carpetbag. "You most certainly can, Mr. Locke." She gently pushed by him and into the foyer as he quickly took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. He opened the door further to keep her from pressing by familiarly but stood there with his hand on the open portal. "I am your new housekeeper. My name is Mrs. Mary Pickle." The false name rolled badly off her tongue and she thought she might choke on it, but she didn't. It was going to be hard to be called a name not her own, but she didn't want her family to find her and this seemed like her best option.

He was tall. Taller than he looked on the street. And far more handsome, despite the long, straight, pale scar on the under-curve of his left cheekbone. With a thick mane of dark red hair, and darker red eyebrows over emerald green eyes, his coloring was striking. Unlike many redheads, he did not have a face full of freckles, or super-pale skin. Instead, he had a faint tan and chiseled features with red muttonchop whiskers on each side of his jaw. His expression was one of surprise as Gwen withdrew her gloved hand.

"Mrs... ur... Pickle," he began. "I don't recall us ever meeting before, let alone my hiring you to run my household."

"Pish tosh, a minor detail, I assure you. Mr. Jones at the mercantile said you needed me, so here I am." Actually, Mr. Jones had said he thought David Locke might be looking for a housekeeper since his retired, but he wasn't sure. Good enough for a little white lie.

"We can talk about it."

"Let me take a look at your lovely home," she pushed. "I'll need to assess just how messy it's become while you were living here as a bachelor with no help. It will allow us to come to an agreement for payment." She took his hand – it was warm, his

fingers firm and callused. "Come along, let's not dawdle. The day is wasting."

He tugged at his hand gently, but Gwen wouldn't let go. She had to succeed with this ploy or she'd be begging on the street, or worse, she'd have to apply at a saloon. The entire idea of going back to Jackson Grove was off the table. She'd do anything to avoid it, even if it meant doing something unsavory; so long as she retained her freedom, the price was not beneath her.

Although she was unfamiliar with the house and had no idea where she was going, she led them down the long hallway toward the back where the kitchen was located. She looked around, hemmed and hawed a bit as though she knew what it was supposed to look like but was unimpressed, then she led him to the dining room and ran a finger over the sideboard, looking for dust that wasn't there. Darn it, it looked like Mr. Locke was perfectly capable of looking after himself. Why did he need a housekeeper? She pointed out the back kitchen window. "A guest house? I'll look at it later, but I expect it will need significant cleaning."

He finally wrested his hand away, making an obvious effort not to hurt her. "Yes. But, Mrs. Pickle, I'm really not prepared to—"

"I presume the bedrooms are this way," she interrupted. Leading the reluctant Mr. Locke along, they proceeded down the hall perpendicular to the main hall and she peered in at each of the three rooms. Each was neat as a pin. Two were bedrooms and another was a masculine space with a large desk, two comfortable leather chairs, some bookshelves scattered around, a globe in one corner, and the scent of lemon oil-polished wood.

She stalked into the parlor at the front of the house and took a seat on the blue and white brocade settee. The parlor was also a pleasant and tidy room with white lacquered, faux Louis XIV furniture with blue brocade cushions. There was a white lacquered spinet piano against one wall, and a few occasional

tables throughout, plus a white drum table in front of a large picture window. "It's a very agreeable house," she told him as he stood nearby. "Please sit." Maybe it was over the top treating him like a guest in his own house, but she was on a roll now and his lack of pushback gave her courage. "I definitely think this is something I can work with. What are you offering in compensation?" She held up her hand to halt him as he opened his mouth. A frown was growing on his forehead. "I can certainly live in the guest house, so I'll accept room and board as part of the package. But in terms of salary, what is your offer?"

This was the riskiest part, asking him to respond. She fully expected the frown on his face to turn into a storm. She'd been pushy in the extreme, but she was so desperate, and she would do her very best to be a good housekeeper – whatever that meant. Her best smile had melted many a man's heart, so she tried it now.

Mr. Locke remained standing. Not a good sign. "Mrs. Pickle, you have been overwhelming in your manner. I hardly know what to say. I would hope you might be as aggressive when fighting dirt."

"Oh, definitely. Dirt is my number one enemy." Another winsome smile and his frown relaxed a bit – but only a little bit.

"What references can you offer?"

A surge of terror flowed and stiffened her limbs. She had no references. "My abilities speak for themselves, Mr. Locke. Have no fear." Of course, her abilities were strongly in question, even in her own mind, but she had to see this through.

"Hm." He stared at her gloved hands. "Let me see your hands."

"I'm not sure I heard you correctly, sir."

"Take off your gloves and let me see your hands. If they're working hands, I'll know you are telling me the truth about being good at your job."

But her hands were pristine and white, the nails manicured. Think fast! "I have a secret, Mr. Locke."

“Oh?” He crossed his arms over his broad chest and she noticed how tight the biceps of his jacket became. This was a powerful man and one she shouldn’t be testing this way.

“I wear gloves for everything. I have some waxed leather gloves I use for laundry, for example, and they keep the soap and hot water from ruining my skin. And to top it off, every night before bed, I use my grandma’s special formula lotion to keep them smooth and reduce chapping. My hands, you will find, are pristine.” What a whopper of a lie! She was so ashamed, but kept her bravado going. Anxiety nearly had her in tears, but she shoved her fears aside and hoped this interview would soon be over. Even if he rejected her, it would be over, though the consequences would be dire.

“Show me,” he pressed.

“Very well.” She removed her gloves and showed him her perfectly manicured, lily-white hands.

“Lotion,” he said, his deep voice flat.

“It’s a multi-generational recipe.”

“How long have you been a housekeeper, Mrs. Pickle?”

“Oh, several years, mainly taking care of Mr. Pickle’s household.”

“I’ve never heard that name around here. Where did you and Mr. Pickle live?”

She mentally debated whether to mention Jackson Grove. It was a small town, populated solely by Rise of the Prophets members who rarely ventured far away from their Church elders. Chances of him hearing of the town were remote at best. And the more she lied, the more she had to remember if he ever asked again. “Jackson Grove, Utah,” she said. “But it has little to do with my being an adequate housekeeper or not.”

He may have thought her a Mormon because he asked, “So you don’t make coffee?”

She shook her head. “No, sir. I do not know how.” Actually, she couldn’t even light a stove. Making coffee was an entirely

foreign concept. The Rise of the Prophets members did not drink coffee or spirits, so it wasn't a stretch to admit she didn't have that particular skill.

"I suppose I can teach you," he muttered, and his low-voiced comment made Gwen's heart skip a beat. Was he sincerely considering giving her the job? "So, you come without references, experience only within your own household, and you expect me to just hire you on the spot? Where are you staying?"

"At the hotel..." Now would be a good time to admit she was down to her last dollar and really needed a place to stay. At the same time, it would make her appear desperate, and she needed to be strong and commanding, even though she was a teeny, tiny, wilted wildflower inside.

"What happened to Mr. Pickle? Is he at the hotel waiting for you?"

"Alas, Mr. Pickle is deceased. Which is how I find myself in these unfortunate circumstances. I must make my way in the world using the skills I have gleaned over the term of my marriage. Those are perfectly adequate, I assure you." They were perfectly adequate for a woman educated in pouring lemonade and sitting still for her hairdresser, but she wasn't going to say so. An expression of sympathy snuck into his green eyes. And it was quite true Gus Roper was dead. Gwen had shed a few tears for him, but not too many. He was a cold fish at his best moments and her job was to be the brood mare for all the little Guses. Unfortunately, she'd failed at that. They were childless even after almost nine years of marriage. He'd waited to take a second wife until Gwen had been breeding, but the Grim Reaper caught up with him before he could expand his horizons. Gwen had been assumed to be infertile, so her father had had to re-match her with someone who didn't care about having more children. Maxwell Kempt only cared about feeding his own vanity. Having the most beautiful young wife in Jackson Grove was more than enough for him. He didn't care if she was a good

homemaker – he had two other wives for household matters – two snarling, picky, backbiting wives. Gwen couldn't be locked up with them for even a minute. Escape had been her only option.

“No baby Pickles?” There was a hint of humor in his voice. ‘Pickle’ had been such a stupid name to pick as an alias. She should have chosen Smith or Jones, but then she would have sounded like a fake. She sighed. As though she didn't with a name like Pickle.

“No, sir. I'm infertile.” It brought on a blush; she could feel it in her cheeks.

He paced a few steps then turned to face her directly. His focused stare nearly undid all the progress she'd made. It made her want to burst forth with all her secrets, confess and be done with deception. Except if she did, would he give her a sympathetic look again? Or one of derision? He didn't seem like the kind of man who would throw her onto the street to fend for herself, but she didn't know him at all except for what Mr. Jones had told her. Jones was terse at his best moments, so she only knew David Locke was unmarried, lived in a house he'd purchased from his sister who'd moved up northeast somewhere, he made his living as a farrier, and he was an amiable enough man who didn't appear to be vice-ridden. She'd surreptitiously gleaned, from the conversation she'd overheard in the mercantile with Jones, he'd been living here for a few years after being away for quite some time, and he had a daytime housekeeper who recently retired due to ill health.

Gwen couldn't meet his gaze. All the lies and prevarications made her ashamed. But she said nothing, opting for silence and hiding behind her lashes.

“All right,” he said. “You're hired. *Provisionally*. You start tomorrow bright and early. I'll teach you how to make my coffee and you'll make it promptly when I rise, when I come home for dinner, and when I'm home at supper and through the evening. I

do not expect you to drink it. I like scones for breakfast. Mrs. Welsh left her recipe in a little stack in a kitchen drawer. I'll show you where it is. I'm sure we have all the ingredients, including the raisins I like best. Although, when we can't get raisins, I'm happy with chopped apricots.

"Dinner is served promptly at noon. I'm a farrier so I build up a big appetite through the day. I expect a hearty meal at mid-day. And supper is at five o'clock. It needs to be a lighter meal but should have dessert." He watched her. She must have looked poleaxed. "You getting this, Mrs. Pickle?"

She nodded slowly. No, she wasn't getting it at all. All that cooking! She could butter bread and make lemonade. Everything else someone else had done at home. No one had taught her since she was the 'decorative one'.

"I like my clothes washed every Saturday. They get mighty dirty at the forge and in the mud with the horses. If you want to make a two-meal-sized pot of stew or soup on Saturdays, it will be fine. I don't mind eating the same thing twice in the same day. I know doing the wash will take a lot of your time. We have a good mangler, so you won't have to wring out the water by hand. Just don't get your hand between the rollers. Are you familiar with a wringer?"

Again, she nodded. What in heavens was a mangler or a wringer?

"You'll find everything you need out in the shed in the back yard. Of course, there are the usual housekeeping chores such as dusting, sweeping and mopping. Mrs. Welsh just beat the rugs a few days before she left, so they won't need doing for some time. All the tools you'll need for daily upkeep are in the shed with the bucket, tub and mangler. I think Mrs. Welsh also left several bars of good household soap out there, so you won't have to make or buy soap for a while."

"Thank God," she whispered. She was only one person, how was she supposed to do all of this?

"I will buy the groceries for a week or two, just until we're sure we'll get along together and I can leave you in charge of the household funds. Just make me a list and I'll do the shopping before work every morning."

"Yes, sir."

He watched her, skepticism written all over his face and posture. His frown hadn't gone away even for a moment. "Are you sure you've got this?"

In fact, she was dazed. Being a housekeeper was a lot more work than she'd anticipated. Maybe she should come clean and bow out. The problem was, the next stop was a job at a saloon. She was not quite that frantic yet. Not if she could use her brain and wits and make this work.

"Don't you worry, Mr. Locke. Mary Pickle will see to it." And Mary Pickle had better do it because Gwen Roper was way out of her element.

He pointed to the carpetbag sitting on the floor near her feet. "Is that all your things? No more at the hotel?"

"I have nothing else."

"Left you penniless, did he? Scoundrel. Well, here." He picked up her bag and started walking out of the parlor. "Let's get you into the guest house and settled until tomorrow. I have to get to the forge. It's about a five-minute walk from here, over by the livery stable. I won't expect anything of you today, so scrounge around for whatever you want to eat and I'll do the same." They'd made it through the kitchen and onto the brief path through the garden to the guesthouse. "But tomorrow, bright and early, scones and coffee." He opened the door to the guesthouse and ushered her in. "I'll see you tomorrow, Mrs. Mary Pickle."

"Thank you, Mr. Locke. Good day to you."

She softly closed the door behind her, not seeing the room she was standing in as her mind spun. What had she gotten herself into?



ALTHOUGH THE NEXT morning dawned brightly, or so Gwen assumed, she wasn't awake for it. In fact, she slept right through until shortly after nine o'clock. When she looked at her little watch brooch on the bedside table, her heart sank. She'd utterly failed. He was going to fire her even before she began. She dressed with great speed and practically ran out of the guest-house and through the back door of the main house.

She called out to Mr. Locke, but no one was there. It was then she spied the note on the kitchen table.

Dear Mrs. Pickle,

I presume you slept well enough in the guesthouse. I knocked upon the door there at seven o'clock but there was no response. If you're reading this, then you are well enough to come to the kitchen, although quite tardy in doing so.

I have seen to my morning needs. Please clean up the kitchen and the rest of the house and prepare dinner. I will return at noon and we can discuss the hours during which you should be working.

Please remember, you are a provisional employee. I have no idea how this will work out, but I am disappointed with this start to our relationship.

Until later,

Mr. David Locke

Well, she wasn't fired, not yet. But she couldn't make any more mistakes. Not one. Somehow, she had to find a way to do the chores she was assigned and do them well. A neatly folded, ruffled white apron sat upon the kitchen counter. Her stomach was roiling so breakfast was out of the question. She didn't have time anyway. She put the apron on and looked around the kitchen with an eye toward doing something useful.

The first chore had to be the dirty dishes in the small washtub at the sink. There was a rag nearby, so she washed and

dried what she found. It took her a minute or two, but she found out where they went and put them away.

Next, she had to explore the shed outside. There, she found cleaning supplies like a broom, dustpan, mop, bucket, and neatly folded cloths. Also in the shed were a large wooden washtub, washboard and some torture device with a hand crank. She presumed those last items were for the laundry on Saturdays, but it was not Saturday, so she tried to ignore them for now. She'd figure it out – if she still had the job later in the week.

Clumsy though it was, she swept and dusted. Neither produced much in the way of dirt and she wasn't quite sure where to put the refuse, so she took it out to the backyard and dumped it beneath an oleander bush, then got her hands dirty covering it over with pine needles from a nearby tree, leaves and small stones. Another thing she'd have to figure out. She hadn't had her hands dirty from actual dirt since she was about six. It felt odd and quite unpleasant, but she supposed she'd have to just wash more and deal with chapped hands. Maybe she should find someone's grandma's special lotion for hands. Rolling her eyes, she wondered where she came up with such loony lies. She should have been a storyteller.

Now, the mid-day meal. He would be hungry, he'd said. She had a vague idea what a farrier did – made horseshoes, their nails, tools and such for caring for horses. And then he traveled to the places where the horses lived and fixed their feet and put the shoes on them. It had to be hard work. Hard, dirty work. Saturday was going to be a horror of a day, she could see.

The problem was, she had no idea how to cook, what to cook, or where it might be found in the kitchen. She had to explore and get creative. She had one hour to get the job done. If she were a laborer, what would she want to eat for a midday meal?



HE CAME HOME EXACTLY at noon, clearly hot but freshly washed. His clothes were arranged tidily, but they were soot-stained and wet around the cuffs. Gwen couldn't remember seeing a more masculine man in her life. His brawn was clearly defined under his shirt and leather vest. She couldn't help but compare soft-around-the-middle Gus Roper with hard-bodied David Locke. The two were hardly visibly related as male humans.

"Mrs. Pickle," he said, smiling slightly as he came through the back door. "I'm glad to see you are well."

"Thank you, Mr. Locke. Yes, I'm quite well. I apologize for my tardiness this morning. I must have been exhausted for some reason. I assure you it will not happen again." And it wouldn't. After dinner, Gwen was going to march directly to the mercantile and put down her last dollar on an alarm clock.

"That is excellent to hear, because one more episode would be more than I could tolerate, I'm afraid." He sat at the bare table. "Having had only a rudimentary breakfast of bread and butter, I confess I am quite hungry. I can smell you've been cooking. What have you made for me?"

"Well, I had some difficulty finding things and there were some problems with the stove, but I did fix a cold dinner using yesterday's bread, butter, cheese, some meat jerky, and some oats with milk. I hope it is acceptable."

"Cold oats? You're feeding me horse food?"

Her stomach took a dive. It was as she feared, she'd failed again. She'd known she was risking it all by putting such a lame dinner on the menu. "I'm sorry. If you could please show me how to light the stove, I expect a more proper repast will be provided tonight."

"Mrs. Pickle... you don't even know how to light the stove?"

"It's newer than the one I was using in Jackson Grove." It was quite new, in fact, new to her.

He sighed. "Serve dinner, if you please, and then I'll show you

how to light the stove and I'll teach you how to make coffee. There should be some leftover from my breakfast."

"It's cold."

There was an edge to his voice when he responded. "I'll drink it cold. Just bring it, please."

Gwen hurried off to get his meal and brought it to the table. She stood nearby to see if it was even marginally acceptable. He caught her lurking and made a sweeping gesture. "By all means, join me. You should also reap the benefits of this dinner. I don't expect you to go hungry or hold back until I'm done eating before you have your repast. This household is far too small to get stuck on formalities. Sit, sit."

In fact, she was starving. The meal was inadequate, but at least it was food. Mrs. Welsh had left decent products behind which made Gwen's foraging easier. But it would be Gwen's job to stock the shelves with proper food in the future. The entire idea made her stomach churn again and gave her a headache. This entire situation was much harder than she'd anticipated. How arrogant she'd been. But no longer. Mrs. Mary Pickle would manage things capably. If Gwen could just find her inner Mary Pickle and put her to work.