

Easter Lilies

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KINGSTON

Waiting for Lily Bloom

AN UNPRECEDENTED STORM...
A FERVENT PRAYER...
A STARTLING ANSWER.



WAITING FOR
LILY BLOOM

Jericha Kingston

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Dedication

In loving memory of James and Catherine Hall, and
Michael Knox.

Love never dies.

Praise

“Jericha Kingston weaves a beautiful romance into a dark time in American history. With strong characters and smooth dialogue, she creates a love story amid disaster that reminds us of God’s grace, and how even during trials, He’s working things to our greater good.” ~ Candice Sue Patterson, author

1

James Bloom walked behind his plodding team, gloved hands welded to the plow handles. He spoke to his horses, Myrtle and Fitz, as they drove on, their heavy steps kicking up mounds of dust. The pair's lathered flanks glistened in the sun.

He looked at the sky. Five-thirty, easy. His drenched shirt clung to his back and chest.

What a contrast to the ground beneath his feet. With each row the team furrowed, the parched ground cracked open like a melon too long in the sun.

He squeezed his eyes shut to blink out the dirt. He must've sweated all the liquid out of his body. He couldn't produce tears anymore. Dust coated the inside of his nose and mouth, and he longed for a drink of water.

Water. How desperately the crops needed it. The town. The whole state.

One more row and he'd head home. He hoped his work wouldn't be in vain this time. The past two years had brought nothing but toil and heartache, but at least his team and cows had survived. So far.

He raised his chin. He knew his work. Farming was in his blood. If only the rain would come. He tripped, the reins around his shoulders tugging, then slacking.

Myrtle and Fitz had stopped.

"You wish." He made a clicking sound, and then

added "Yah."

Myrtle's tail swished.

"Almost done. Last row."

Fitz stepped forward first, Myrtle followed.

James completed the row and unhitched the team, leaving the plow behind him embedded in the dirt. Dirt? More like dust. With each step, an orange puff of powder trailed behind him on the wind.

He grabbed the reins and pulled the team behind him. His shoulders slumped. He should be happy. He had his strength, a good team, a home, and food—not much, but he'd make it. He should be thanking the Good Lord. But when evening came...he hated this time of day. Hated what waited for him. More to the point, what didn't wait for him.

Myrtle nudged him in the back, and he pitched forward, tripping over his boots. He sucked in a dusty breath and picked up the pace. He could shoot that ornery horse sometimes. "Almost there."

The team sped up as the corral came into view. He opened the gate and let them in. With a heavy hand, he massaged their flesh. If only he had someone who could return the favor.

After the horses cooled, a wooden trough awaited, filled with the water James had transferred from the creek that morning. They lumbered to the tub and drank a little. Then he led them away so they wouldn't founder.

"Good work." James must've patted Fitz's rump harder than he thought, 'cause the blasted horse's tail swished right into his face, stinging his cheek.

He fed the cows and chickens, and then walked to the creek. After a quick survey of the area, he toed the ground with his boot. Displaced sand floated toward

the water. The corners of his mouth turned down. What used to be a churning brook was now a shallow pool. The stream dwindled more each day. He couldn't think about what would happen if it dried up.

His body flinched as his knees lowered to the dry ground. Thirty-three shouldn't feel this old. He drowned his threadbare shirt in the water and used it to wash his head, face, and neck. He drenched the shirt again, squeezed it out, and scrubbed his chest, back, and arms. A sigh escaped his parched lips. He wished the water was cold, but at least it was wet. As he rinsed the grime away, the wind blew, and a new film clung to him. His eyes squeezed tight. Why bother?

Dirty shirt in hand, he walked to the front porch and kicked off his boots. As if that mattered. Dust coated everything. But his Ma had never let his Pa or him come inside the house with boots on, and the habit had stayed with him all these years.

He opened the door and walked inside. With a sigh, he shook his head, went to the sink, dropped his shirt, pumped a cup of water, and drank. A cast iron skillet held stale cornbread on the stove. He cut a piece and sat at the table.

"Father, thank You for this food. Thank You for health. Thank You for life." He breathed deeply. "And I'm askin' You again for a wife. I need somebody. I can't stand the quiet. Amen." He kept his head bowed. He'd been asking for a wife for five years, and the Lord didn't seem to take note of his prayer. How wonderful it would be to have someone to talk with. Someone who would share her day with him, and he with her. Someone who could settle him when he worried about the wheat. He took a bite of his humble meal and choked. Someone who knew how to make cornbread.

He washed down the grit with water. Was there not a woman to be found in Pauls Valley, Oklahoma? Oh, he could think of a few, but they weren't suitable. He wouldn't settle for just anyone. He wanted a woman of faith.

She would need to be a farmer's daughter. She'd know what a farm meant to a man, the heritage passed down from a father to a son.

He stood and went to the window. Hardly a cloud in sight. Another prayer that seemed to be going unanswered. He'd seen a few tough years, but rain would come soon. It had to. The grain was sparse. The cows were thin. Another year like this...no, he couldn't lose his father's farm. It was his legacy.

Stop it. Think about your wife.

His eyes closed. His wife. Who was she? Would she be pretty? He tossed that thought out of his mind. The Word was clear. Beauty was vain. As long as she'd talk with him and fill the evening hours, encourage him, and have some spunk. Some fire. She'd have to be strong.

And he'd provide. He'd work from dawn to sunset. That was what a farmer's wife wanted—a man who worked hard. And kids. She'd want kids.

Surely after waiting five years, the Lord would answer his prayer soon.

But what if His answer was "no"?

"I hope you slept well, Lily. That bed isn't the comfiest." Aunt Charity stuffed a damp rag along the length of the kitchen window sill as Lily Driggers admired the older woman's efficient movement.

After a turbulent night's rest on a lumpy bed, Lily had awakened to strange surroundings. Then she remembered...the train ride from Georgia to Oklahoma...Uncle Ned and Aunt Charity greeting her at the station...the dusty ride to the farm.

"Would you like some eggs?" Aunt Charity asked.

Lily nodded.

"All right, we have to gather them first."

Lily froze.

"Don't worry, I'll show you how. We have to be quick. Service starts in an hour." Aunt Charity tied her apron tighter on her gangly frame. She reached up to make sure her graying hair was secure in its kerchief. Her cheeks were flushed, and she flitted from the stove to the sink to the table, turning plates upside down before dust could settle on them.

Lily surveyed the room. A pitcher of milk graced the table, its buttery cream rising to the top. The smell of baking biscuits made Lily's stomach grumble. In the corner, a wooden pail rested against the wall with a filthy rag inside. Dust particles sparkled in the morning sunlight that streamed through the solitary window. Just how long had her aunt been awake?

"Grab that basket there. Mind your eyes." Aunt Charity grabbed the doorknob.

Lily took the basket off of the mantel and hurried after her aunt. She squinted as she walked outside, her eyes more offended by dust than sunlight. Gusts of wind tossed her braid, so she tucked it against her spine inside her dress. She'd never experienced such wind back home. The smell of earth permeated her nostrils.

Her aunt's steps were long and sure. Lily quickened her pace and looked around, shielding her

eyes. It was hard to see through the haze. Where was Uncle Ned?

Orange-brown dirt stretched for miles and collided with the horizon. Swirls of dust rose on the wind like smoke.

Aunt Charity stopped and stared into the distance. "Grasshoppers got the corn. Rabbits got the rest." Her voice wavered. Then her chin rose. "But it's clearer today than it's been in a while. Maybe the worst is over." She continued to the pen and opened the gate. Chickens squawked, flapping their wings.

Lily stepped past the narrow opening, careful to hold her skirt tightly in her hands.

The coop looked rusty. Or was that orange color a layer of dust?

"See here? There's nothing to it." Aunt Charity dug out a scoop of feed and scattered it in a fluid motion. "When they're hungry, they leave their nests. If they don't, just leave 'em be, and I'll check back later. OK?"

Lily swallowed and nodded. The woman must be twice her age, but she moved so fast. Even her speech was quick.

"You try."

Lily took the feed and tossed it. The wind blew it back at her. Burgundy-colored chickens swarmed, fluttered, and pecked at her feet. She jumped back, and they startled—for a moment, at least.

"Toss away from you. You want 'em to follow the feed so you can get to the boxes."

Oh dear. She'd have to toss harder. And faster.

"Don't worry. You're doing fine. It'll come." Aunt Charity smiled and patted her shoulder. "I'll make a farm girl out of you yet, you wait and see. You'll have

so many stories to tell your friends back home—”

Lily looked at Aunt Charity with raised brows.

Aunt Charity’s smile faded. She grabbed the neckline of her dress and fidgeted. “I’m sorry, Lily-dear. That was thoughtless of me.”

Lily forced a smile. She placed the scoop in the feed sack, reached up to touch Aunt Charity’s cheek, and placed her other hand over her heart.

Her aunt bobbed her head. “All right. As long as I’m forgiven. Now, let’s see you do it.”

She picked up the scoop again, this time tossing a good bit of feed away from her. The scrawny chickens flapped their wings and darted after it. Lily turned, reached inside a nesting box, and retrieved a very warm, stained brown egg. She wrinkled her nose and held it up for a laughing Aunt Charity to see.

“That’s the way.”

After they gathered the eggs, they walked back to the house.

Lily squinted, looking at the humble shack Aunt Charity and Uncle Ned called home. What it lacked in beauty it boasted in strength. The wooden frame possessed none of the wrap-around porches or scrollwork that charmed Georgia homes. Its singular adornment was a weathervane, pointing due east, propelled by the wind. And what a wind it was.

There were days when Lily had longed for such a breeze, but she’d had to settle for a front porch under a majestic oak. Why, in Savannah it was so muggy, a woman could hang her clothes on the line in the morning and still find them wet in the afternoon.

Aunt Charity’s clothesline was bare. Was she even able to use it, with the dust blowing so? Times were difficult back home, but especially so here, in this dry

land.

Back inside, Aunt Charity went to the sink, washed the eggs, and set them on a plate to dry. She took the biscuits out of the stove and placed them on the table. The golden-brown discs were perfect.

Lily leaned down to sniff them. They smelled heavenly. She nodded repeatedly at her aunt, pointing to herself.

“They smell good?”

Lily shook her head.

Aunt Charity frowned. “They don’t?”

She raised her hands, palms out, and erased the air.

Aunt Charity stared into Lily’s eyes. “You want one?”

She shook her head again, scratching her forehead.

“Why not?”

Rats. If only she’d remembered her slate. She walked to the sink and lifted the mixing bowl. She took the wooden spoon and stirred a nonexistent batter.

“Oh, you wanna make ‘em next time?”

Finally! She lifted her finger and tapped her nose.

Aunt Charity laughed. “All right. I’ll teach you how in the morning.”

How exciting. When she went home next week, she would bake Papa biscuits.

Aunt Charity heated the cast iron griddle. When it was hot, she dropped a tablespoon of lard into the pan. She fried two brown eggs and placed them on a plate.

“Do you cook at home?”

Lily nodded and pointed to the eggs.

“You cook eggs? Show me.”

Lily tapped the strings tied around Aunt Charity’s neck.

“Oh.” Swift fingers detached the apron and refastened it around Lily’s neck. “Now.”

Lily plopped more lard into the blackened pan, cracked two eggs on the stovetop, and emptied the contents into the grease. The whites solidified, cocooning the golden yolks.

“How old are you now, Lily?”

Lily drew numbers in the air.

“All of twenty-eight? And such a pretty thing.”

Lily bowed her head and curtsied.

Aunt Charity laughed. “And a sense of humor, too.”

She smiled and scooped the egg onto a plate.

The front door opened and Uncle Ned hurried in, bringing half the dirt in Oklahoma with him. “There’s no stoppin’ this dust.” He dropped his boots by the front door, hung his hat on the back of the kitchen chair, and pecked Aunt Charity’s cheek.

“It’s better than it has been.” She set his plate before him and poured his milk. “Let’s eat.”

Lily brought the biscuits and joined the couple, ignoring the dust that coated the table.

“Looks good.”

“Lily cooked the eggs.”

“Is that so? Thank you, Lily.” Uncle Ned winked, his leathery skin crinkling.

Lily smiled and nodded.

“Let’s pray.” After Uncle Ned voiced his thanks, he shoveled his eggs onto his biscuit and ate it. “I gotta help Bloom with his field tomorrow. He helped with mine last week.”

“When you go, carry his mendin’ back.” Aunt Charity pointed to a folded shirt and a pair of pants resting on a bench.

"I'm not goin' by his house."

Aunt Charity shook her head. "I should've taken 'em back yesterday."

Uncle Ned drained his milk glass and stood. "Just bring 'em to church. Give 'em to him after service. You ready?"

Lily gathered their empty plates and set them in the sink.

"Almost. We need to change clothes."

Lily went to her room and pulled the partition sheet. She sighed and reached for her Sunday dress. It was clear Uncle Ned and Aunt Charity needed church. There was no begrudging the fact, the two were so dear. Maybe if her life were as difficult as theirs, she would need that kind of hope as well, though her method of coping would be more sensible. Filling one's Sunday mornings and evenings with poetry, writing, or painting would suffice. One needn't attend church to please God. Papa never went to church, and he was noble and charitable.

Of course she believed in God. Didn't everyone? It was just all that silliness at church she didn't have time for. With her long-sleeved blouse buttoned, she placed a smile on her face and exited her room. She wouldn't argue about going to church. What difference did a couple of hours make? Besides, she was only here for a week. Why be contrary?

After James milked Rosie, he placed the pail and the milking stool outside of her stall. He put a flake of hay in her trough, rubbed her head, and bowed at the waist. "Thank you, ma'am."

Only an hour 'til church. He covered the pail with a folded sheet and carried it to the house and quickly washed up.

It was still windy, but less dusty than it had been the previous week. Maybe the Lord would send rain today.

As he walked to church, he prayed for his neighbors. So many were struggling. Families were going hungry. Fathers were leaving the state, looking for work. Other families abandoned their farms. Surely with so many praying, the Lord would send rain.

But today was Palm Sunday. His focus should be on the Lord, not the weather.

"Lily, I need you to do somethin'." Aunt Charity's forehead wrinkled as she came inside. How *did* she move so quickly? Not a step was wasted as she gathered bottles from her pantry and set them on the table. After service, she'd taken some biscuits and eggs to a friend with seven children. Her friend was currently in labor with the eighth. They could use all the help they could get. "Remember when we prayed for Anya at church? The baby's not comin'."

Oh dear. Lily's chest tightened as she remembered her own mother...

"After I heard about Anya, I forgot all about Bloom's clothes. I need you to take his mendin' back for me."

Lily gasped. Go all alone, in this wasteland, to a stranger's house?

Aunt Charity touched Lily's cheek and frowned. "Now you just take that look off of your face. You'll be

fine. Listen close. Bloom lives right next door. It's only a mile away, and our fields join. You travel straight down the road and his is the first house you come to. We passed it when we brought you from the train depot and I told you to look at the cow, remember?"

She remembered. It wasn't far at all.

"That was Bloom's cow. He won't be there now. He's havin' lunch with the Floyds, like he always does on Sundays."

Good. She didn't like meeting people. After church, she'd tugged on Aunt Charity's sleeve and they'd walked straight back to the Model A. The only person she'd met was Reverend Cox, and after a brief shake of his hand, she pinned a smile on her face and exited.

"You can go right in and set the mendin' on his table. I do it all the time. Just drop it off and come right back. You'll do fine. I've got to help Anya. Poor woman. I don't know why Henry can't..." Aunt Charity trailed off, mumbling something about selfish men and hungry children as she wrapped the clothes in a burlap sack and handed them to Lily. Then she placed her warm hands on Lily's face. "I'm proud of you. Just you mind that." Aunt Charity patted Lily's cheeks, and then took the bottles off of the table. "I have no idea how long I'll be, but if I'm not back by dark, just set out the cornbread and pour your uncle some milk, OK? Wash up his cup when he's done."

Lily nodded.

And then Aunt Charity was gone.

Lily fingered the rough material in her hands. All she had to do was return some clothes. It was a simple task. What could go wrong?

What a barren sight.

Lily held a piece of cloth over her nose and mouth with one hand, and with the other she clutched the sack that held Bloom's clothes. The soil under her feet was more compact than the fields to her right and left. Was this what the desert looked like? Some places were flat and some were raised, but dust was everywhere, blowing and swirling into fascinating little tunnels. Dirt devils, Uncle Ned called them.

Such a strange place. Not sandy soil, but powdery-fine instead, clinging to one's clothes and skin. Broken fence posts and barbed wire littered fields where nothing grew. Uncle Ned toiled in this? Why continue, if this was the result? Was he discouraged?

She would be, if her work produced nothing.

But he seemed calm and had a pleasant enough disposition. Much like Papa's.

Lily saw Bloom's house in the distance. A windmill stood in the front yard, its blades spinning. A corral adjoined the farmhouse. The closer she got, the more it drew her. Heavens, there was a porch. Porches were so welcoming, even dusty ones. The roof was very steep, as if it boasted a loft. Bloom's house had more windows than Uncle Ned's. The paint looked fresh, if somewhat dusty, and all of the porch floorboards were intact.

A rusted automobile languished beside the corral, its windows gone, the driver side door swinging on its hinge. Two large trees sheltered the house, casting it in shadow. A solitary cow watched her approach. It released a mournful bellow that caused Lily to smile.

The unmistakable sound of a tinkling brook