

KAREN
WITEMEYER

Taming Lady

TEMPERANCE

THE SECRET SOCIETY OF SPINSTERS | BOOK 1

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To Hilda.

*You shared your son with me,
but more than that, you shared yourself.
You believed in my writing dream before I did,
and even in your last days,
you were quick to shoo me back
to my office with the instruction
“Go write me another book.”
We shared a love of romance,
a love of family, and a love of Jesus.
Thank you for nurturing my creativity
and being my second mom.*



But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.

Matthew 5:44-45



Chapter

1

ALBANY, TEXAS

APRIL 1894

Casting a surreptitious glance over her shoulder, Noreen O'Sullivan tiptoed past the unoccupied Methodist church, then darted across Walnut Street toward the schoolhouse. Heart palpitations brought on by self-imposed skulking shallowed her breathing. She paused to brace her back against a pecan tree and steady herself before approaching the school.

Noreen had acquired many skills in the course of her twenty-seven years, but her arsenal had never included a talent for sneaking about in a clandestine manner. Yet the invitation someone slid beneath the door of her boardinghouse room two days ago had urged secrecy, so in a rare act of compliance on her part, she'd determined to make her attendance as covert as possible.

Giving in to the whims of others was not exactly a hallmark of her character. Noreen possessed little patience for people wielding power over others just because they could. She'd rather blaze her own trail than follow someone she didn't trust. It drove her mother to distraction. She begged Noreen to curb her defiant ways and practice biblical submissiveness. No man wanted to wed a woman

who questioned him at every turn. Fine by her. She had no intention of becoming a husband's chattel. She'd submit to God and to the laws of the land as the Good Book urged, but she'd not kowtow to men simply because society considered them the only citizens worthy of a vote.

If something needed to be questioned, she'd question. If something needed to be opposed, she'd rail against it until things changed. Her brash attitude might make her unpopular, but she'd rather bear the stigma of being unliked than ignore the passion for reform burning in her chest. Noreen had seen firsthand what blind submissiveness had done to her mother, first with Noreen's father and now with her mother's second husband. She was a shell of a woman, timid, with no identity of her own. Noreen had no desire to follow in those footsteps. She might never have financial security, social standing, or children, but she'd have self-respect and her mission. It would be enough.

Reaching into her skirt pocket, Noreen fingered the edge of the invitation. Thick, high-quality paper. Finer than what one would find in the general store. Probably special-ordered from a stationer in Dallas or even a shop back east. Usually, she despised what she considered the putting on of airs by the wealthy when they flaunted their privilege in subtle displays, but she'd set aside her cynicism when she'd seen the sender's signature—Miss Hortense Lockwood, a woman Noreen had long admired.

Well into her sixties, Miss Lockwood had never married and never apologized for her single state. As sister to the local banker, she wanted for nothing financially, but instead of using her wealth as an excuse not to involve herself in the plight of those beneath her standing, she was the first to volunteer to help the needy. She'd nursed sick children through the night to allow mothers to get some much-needed sleep, she hosted a widows' tea every week in her home to encourage the elderly ladies in town, and she chaired a church committee that organized meals whenever a family in the area suffered a loss. Miss Lockwood might not be as outspoken as

Noreen, but she was a reformer at heart, one who cared “for the least of these” as Jesus had taught. A lady the entire town esteemed.

And she’d personally invited Noreen to join a new society of ladies. “Ladies uniquely positioned to aid in the betterment of their community” had been the precise wording. Her Noreen O’Sullivan, bane of the Albany Town Council’s existence, had been invited to join Miss Lockwood’s organization. She’d worked hard to build up an immunity to social ostracism, so the warmth that flowed through her upon receiving the invitation had caught her off guard. It felt good to be included. Especially when this new society might very well be an answer to her prayers. If she could convince Miss Lockwood and her ladies to take on the cause of temperance, she might finally make headway toward closing down the Salt Fork Saloon, a feat she’d been unable to accomplish on her own, despite numerous attempts of increasing zealotry.

Pushing away from the tree in the schoolyard, Noreen stole a quick glance back toward the street to ensure no evening strollers were about, then scurried the rest of the way up Schoolhouse Hill and eased open the door of the two-story frame building that served as the Albany public school. She hated arriving late, but it couldn’t be helped. When one of the kitchen staff went home ill, Mrs. Winslow had needed Noreen to stay and prepare the dessert service. Hopefully, she hadn’t missed anything of vital importance.

Noreen moved through the foyer as quietly as possible, not wanting to disrupt the goings on in the classroom ahead. Ignoring the staircase that led to the secondary room on the upper floor, she entered the room where her good friend Martha Evans taught and looked around for an unobtrusive place to sit among the ladies who had answered Miss Lockwood’s call. Spotting a friendly face at the back of the room, Noreen aimed herself in that direction, relieved she’d not have to suffer the awkwardness of sitting beside someone less tolerant of her outspoken nature. Jane Cowan might crave invisibility for herself, but she supported her friends and their dreams without equivocation.

Jane had yet to notice Noreen’s approach. Her chin was tucked

toward her chest as if she were trying to hide. Poor thing. She'd likely be as grateful for Noreen's company as Noreen would be for hers. Noreen lengthened her stride. However, three steps into the room, it dawned on her that Jane wasn't ducking her head out of shyness.

“. . . ask you, O Lord, to bless our endeavors . . .”

Good gravy. They were *praying*. Noreen halted at once and bowed her head where she stood.

“May we be vessels in your hand, prepared for good works, and eager to serve those around us in a manner that brings you honor and glory. In the name of Jesus we pray, amen.”

Standing behind the lectern at the front of the classroom, Miss Lockwood lifted her face at the conclusion of her prayer. Her gaze immediately landed on Noreen. One brow raised slightly from behind her spectacles, but she quickly softened the censure with a smile. A rather thin smile, but the expression was more welcoming than the scowls Noreen usually collected from displeased townsfolk.

Thankfully, the woman didn't call her out for her tardiness, just turned to address the group of roughly a dozen ladies who'd gathered in the schoolhouse that night. Her smile brightened as she did so.

“Take a look around the room, ladies.”

Noreen dove into the small desk next to Jane, hoping no one had seen her before she claimed a seat. Martha spied her, of course, since she was at the front of the room next to Miss Lockwood, but her friend just smiled, her eyes alight with good-natured teasing. Jane's eyes, on the other hand, widened like those of a frightened fawn. When she realized Noreen was the one bursting into her quiet corner and not a stranger, however, she relaxed.

“I'm glad you're here,” Jane whispered, a sweet smile adding a radiance to her face that her shyness usually hid. “Miss Lockwood doesn't seem quite so intimidating now.”

Jane's temperament was as opposite from Noreen's as one could get. Quiet, bookish, and wanting nothing more than to go unnoticed. Many mistook her bashfulness for blandness. Nothing could be further from the truth. Jane was the kindest, most selfless person Noreen had ever met. Not to mention wise. She could see things

from multiple perspectives instead of just her own and had saved Noreen from making regrettable decisions in the heat of the moment on more than one occasion.

“The women in this room are your sisters,” Miss Lockwood was saying, her voice carrying with all the authority of a minister preaching a sermon. “We are different ages and come from different backgrounds, but we share something in common, something beyond mere womanhood. We are all spinsters.”

Noreen bristled as Jane squirmed in the next seat over, her face reddening in shame.

“I see your discomfort with that term, and I share it. *Spinster*. *Old maid*. *Maiden aunt*. I’ve been called them all, even to my face. The terms are used to denote our difference from other women. To declare us strange or inferior because we lack husbands. Over the years, I’ve learned to let go of the hurt those terms inflict and to seek value not in the opinions of others but in the eyes of God. But in recent months, a desire has stirred within my breast to reclaim the term *spinster* and transform it into a badge of honor. Single men are not looked down upon in society, so why should single women be ashamed of their unmarried state?”

Noreen’s heart swelled to hear such a prominent woman espouse the beliefs she herself held. “Amen!”

Heads swiveled to stare at her. Noreen held hers high, unapologetic. Miss Lockwood nodded, approval in her eyes. Approval. From a leading member of Albany society. Mother would’ve swooned had she been present.

“Is this a suffrage meeting?” one middle-aged lady called out from a seat near the front. “I don’t hold with militant women marching in the streets and causing a ruckus. It’s unseemly, and I won’t be a part of such an organization.”

Several heads nodded in agreement, causing Noreen to frown. Did these women not care that they had no voice in selecting the people and laws that governed them? All citizens deserved to be heard regardless of gender, skin color, or financial status. Miss Lockwood would set her straight.

“No, Bertha. This is not a suffrage society.”

What? Noreen’s frown deepened.

“I’m not proposing we form a group to support any particular political or social agenda. What I hope to create is a sisterhood that supports each other and our community. Some of us live as spinsters by choice, others ended up on this path due to the twists and turns of an unpredictable life. No matter your story, every woman in this room can relate to the unique hardships you face. The pinch of loneliness that strikes in the dark of night, the ostracism that comes from living on the periphery of other people’s families, the frustration of not being taken seriously because we have no husband to defend our ideas, and the shame that comes from the careless words or disdainful glances from others that imply we are unnatural or broken in some way.”

The words punctured Noreen’s chest and deflated her rigidity, leaving her slumped in her seat. Had Miss Lockwood peered directly into her heart? How else could she have described with such accuracy the secret insecurities and heartaches that Noreen battled in the darkness of her private thoughts? Surely, *she* didn’t suffer from such emotional distress?

“You are not the only one to feel such things.” Miss Lockwood’s gaze landed on Noreen for a heartbeat as it swept the audience, and Noreen felt as if salve were being rubbed into the raw places that had just been exposed. “We have all experienced the pinch of those particular pangs. However, I have not brought us together tonight to commiserate and complain. No, my sisters. I wish to encourage and empower you. For you are of special worth in God’s sight, and he has work for you that no one else can accomplish.”

She lifted an open Bible from the lectern and began to read. “Hear the words of the apostle Paul. ‘The unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit: but she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband.’” She set the Bible down and gripped the edges of the lectern with both hands, her eyes lighting with fervor. “We have a freedom to care for the things of the Lord that

married women do not possess. I propose that we form a society to do precisely that. To careth for the things of the Lord and for each other. A secret society known only to its members. I do not propose secrecy because I am ashamed of my spinster sisters but because anonymity will grant us freedom from public censure. The Lord himself promised that righteous deeds done in secret will be rewarded by the Father.

“Now, I don’t expect anyone to give an answer tonight. I ask you to pray about it and give it careful consideration. Those who choose to join will make a commitment to be a supportive sister to each member and to uphold the standards of the organization as stated in the packet that Miss Evans will now distribute.” Miss Lockwood nodded to Martha, who rose from her seat and began handing out papers as if the ladies in attendance were part of her grammar school class.

“Each of these packets contains a brief biographical sketch of an unmarried woman who made a positive impact on our world,” Martha said as she handed papers down the rows of seats. “Women like Clara Barton, Charlotte Brontë, Susan B. Anthony, Jane Austen, and Nellie Bly. Some were quiet in their influence, others were more outspoken. But each chose to stand for what she believed to be right and was willing to overcome the obstacles the world stacked in her path.”

Martha arrived at the back corner of the room and pulled a set of papers from the bottom of her stack. “I saved these for the two of you.” She handed the first packet to Jane. “I thought you might gain inspiration from Louisa May Alcott. I know how much you enjoyed *Little Women*.”

Jane flushed with pleasure as she accepted the papers. “I might just read the novel again in her honor this week.”

“How many times will that make?” Noreen teased.

Jane ducked her head. “Eight.”

“How can you enjoy a story when you already know everything that is going to happen?” Noreen adored Jane, but she didn’t always understand her. “Doesn’t that make it boring?”

“Not at all. It’s like visiting an old friend. The pleasantest of company.” Jane folded her papers and slipped them inside the cover of a book that had been hiding in the folds of her skirt.

Of course. Jane never went anywhere without a book.

Noreen returned her attention to Martha. “Who did you save for me?”

Her friend offered a smug grin. “Someone I thought you might appreciate.”

Noreen took the papers and flipped to the second sheet, her midsection aflutter. She scanned the top of the page. A name she knew well jumped out to greet her. Swallowing a delighted squeal, she beamed a smile at Martha. “Frances Willard?”

Martha winked. “The president of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union.”

A woman Noreen idolized and strove to emulate.

“This is *perfect*.”

Martha tapped the remaining papers against Noreen’s shoulder. “I know.” Martha made her way back up to the head of the class, and Miss Lockwood regained the audience’s attention as she went over the society standards.

Noreen only listened with half an ear. She was too busy scanning the information Martha had pulled together on Frances Willard.

She’d been president of a college for ladies? Noreen hadn’t known that. Hadn’t known that she’d worked a brief stint as the director of women’s meetings for Dwight L. Moody, either. Ms. Willard’s experience as a renowned lecturer came as no surprise, though. One of Noreen’s greatest dreams was to hear her speak in person. Yet she hadn’t realized the woman had spoken in every state in the Union in 1883. Noreen had only been sixteen at the time, without means or opportunity to travel to wherever the woman had stopped in Texas. But if she ever came to Texas again, Noreen would travel as far as necessary to meet her hero.

Noreen reached up to touch the small bow she wore pinned to her bodice over her heart. A white ribbon to symbolize purity, the badge of membership in the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union.

Her passion. Her calling. A calling she'd renew tonight. For Frances. And all the families, like her own, that had been destroyed by the evils of liquor.

She'd grown lax of late. Hadn't protested in nearly three weeks. Had allowed the patrons of the Salt Fork Saloon to fall back into complacency. Well, no more. Time to set the drunkards of Albany on the path to redemption.

Chapter
2

Deputy James Paxton moseyed down Second Street on his evening rounds. All was quiet around the courthouse square. As usual. Weeknights were pretty tame in Albany. Weekends, too, for that matter. Just the way he liked it. He'd gone nearly two weeks without arresting anyone. Letting Donovan Farley sleep off his drunks on a jail cell cot didn't count. After Farley tripped over a rock last year and busted his arm on his way home from one of his drinking binges, his wife told him not to come home until he could see straight. Farley's vision was questionable on a good day. Add a half-dozen shots of whiskey to the mix, and he'd be lucky to find his own boots. If a jail cell cot kept the man in good graces with his wife, James didn't mind putting him up for the night. As long as he kept the contents of his stomach where they belonged. Sheriff Adair didn't take too kindly to his jailhouse smelling like regurgitated liquor, and James wasn't overly fond of floor scrubbing.

A couple of decades ago, this part of Shackelford County looked vastly different. Rowdy cowboys working the cattle trails to Dodge City, adventure-seeking soldiers stationed at Fort Griffin, buffalo hunters, gamblers, and outlaws of every sort made the area home. Old-timers even talked about the days when Doc Holliday and Big

Nose Kate lived in The Flat, the locals' name for the town of Fort Griffin that sprouted up below the military garrison. It had been one of the most lawless places in the West. Vigilance committees sprouted up to try to preserve the safety of the ranchers, farmers, and merchants in the area, but lynch mob justice was still murder in James's book. Thankfully, Albany won the county seat away from Fort Griffin and helped establish some stability in the area. And when the railroad bypassed Fort Griffin in favor of Albany, people of The Flat dispersed in search of greener pastures.

Thank God for men like Henry Herron and William Adair—men who'd worn the badge and helped tame this land. James aimed to follow in their footsteps one day and wear the sheriff's star himself.

His steps slowed as he turned his gaze upon the three-story limestone courthouse sitting in the center of town. The impressive edifice never failed to inspire him. Solid. Steady. A symbol of justice and righteousness. His chest expanded. Yep. That's what he wanted to be a part of—a system that valued righteousness, that offered protection and created peace.

God had been training him for this work since the day he was born. The middle of five kids, he'd been negotiating truces and curtailing crises for years before he left his father's ranch outside Breckenridge, Texas, to work as a deputy for Sheriff Herron five years ago. He hadn't had enough experience to run for sheriff when Herron retired in '90, but there'd be another election in a couple of years, and James intended to throw his hat into the ring. Not that he didn't like working for Sheriff Adair. He did, but he didn't want to be an underling forever.

Leaving the courthouse behind, James ambled north on Main. If trouble planned to come callin' tonight, that's where it'd start. Most of the downtown area stood quiet after business hours, but this stretch of two blocks echoed with raucous voices, music, and the occasional impromptu bout of fisticuffs. Billiard hall, saloon, hotel, and railroad depot—all within a few strides. If a man wanted entertainment, games of chance, or a place to wet his whistle, this was where he'd be. Which was why James passed most of his evenings

patrolling these two blocks. His pappy had always said that an ounce of prevention was worth a pound of cure. Sure proved true in law enforcement. All the sheriff required of him during night shifts was to make a couple of rounds of the business district, then be on duty at the jailhouse in case someone required his services. Easy enough since he lived there. Yet over the last two years, James had started putting in regular, after-dark appearances at the Salt Fork Saloon and the billiard hall a few doors down. He never lingered too long—having a lawman on the premises tended to be bad for business in those particular establishments—but a well-timed entrance had a rather remarkable cooling effect on hot heads. The number of assaults on the books in Albany had dropped by twenty-five percent since he'd begun the practice. A fact that could aid a fellow's campaign when election time next rolled around.

What would *not* help his campaign was the thorn in his backside ignoring his warnings and continuing to harass law-abiding citizens. Citizens with influence, and more importantly, votes. James's jaw tightened as he transformed his mosey into a march and lengthened his stride to hurry past the darkened fronts of drug stores, cobblers, and grocers on his way to his target. The irate woman jabbing a pointed finger toward Milton Taggert's chest.

"I will not make myself scarce, Mr. Taggert. I will make myself heard. I have the right of free speech, and I will exercise that right wherever and however I choose. I choose here and now."

The finger jabbed toward the ground to emphasize her point, easing a bit of James's anxiety over the likelihood of said digit being snapped in two by the irate tavern owner. Milton Taggert had moved to Albany from The Flat after the railroad came through and had a roughness around his edges that didn't bode well for single-minded women too blinded by their ideals to identify the danger right in front of them.

"My customers have rights, too," Taggert growled. "Like the right to spend their evenings as they see fit without being insulted by some sour-faced, teetotaling old biddy who wouldn't know a good time if it bit her on the nose."

Miss O’Sullivan’s stubborn chin ticked up a notch. “The demon drink you serve only offers the illusion of fun, but it’s a lie, and we both know it. In truth, it steals a man’s sense and his morals, leading to crime, cruelty, and an immeasurable amount of stupidity.”

James chuckled inwardly at that, ducking into the shadows as he neared. The woman had grit. And a valid point. Not that he expected her zealous sermonizing to sway the burly man glowering at her like a grizzly bear on the boardwalk outside the Salt Fork Saloon.

“If liquor is such an abomination, why did that Jesus fella you’re so keen on turn water into wine for a wedding party?”

Noreen O’Sullivan blinked. Her lips parted but no rejoinder sprang forth.

Taggart’s arms unfolded. “That’s what I thought. Drop this obsession and go home, O’Sullivan. You got no business here.”

Yes, go home, lady. Please. No need to escalate this into something ugly. Even as the plea formed in his mind, Noreen O’Sullivan’s eyes narrowed, and her finger rose back to pointing position.

“Proverbs twenty verse one: ‘Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise.’ Ephesians five verse eighteen: ‘And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.’ Galatians five verse twenty-one . . .”

The woman kept firing her Scripture bullets, paying no heed to her increasing peril. Her ammunition bounced off Taggart without making a dent, yet the more she fired, the angrier he became. When the man took a threatening step forward, James stepped out of the shadows.

“Evenin’, Taggart.”

The saloon owner pulled up short and whipped his face toward James, jaw tight and eyes blazing. “You gonna do somethin’ about this, Deputy?” He jerked a thumb in Miss O’Sullivan’s direction. “This Bible thumper’s been out here for the past twenty minutes haranguin’ my customers and disturbin’ the peace.”

Miss O’Sullivan pivoted toward James, her back ramrod straight and her eyes as fiery as Taggart’s. Not a good sign. “I’m on a public

street, exercising my freedom of speech. There's no law against such activities."

Taggart spun to face her, his fists clenched but thankfully not raised. "What about the law of human decency? You're a public nuisance!"

"And you're a threat to public safety, filling men with liquor with no care as to how the drunkards you create will treat their wives and children when they get home." Miss O'Sullivan's voice cracked slightly, and for the first time James suspected that temperance was more than a social issue to this reformer. It was personal.

James wedged himself between the two before they could start taking swings at each other with something more damaging than words.

"All right. That's enough." He kept his voice calm and measured, hoping to defuse some of the tension. "Taggart, I'm sure you have customers to tend. I'll see Miss O'Sullivan home."

"What if I'm not ready to go home?" She took aim at James with a pair of glistening brown eyes that bore a striking resemblance to shotgun barrels.

James held his tongue and forced his gaze away from the compelling woman. He eyed Taggart instead, making it clear he'd not tolerate anything other than retreat. The owner of the Salt Fork exhaled a disgusted breath but complied without arguing. He backed off a few steps, then pivoted and shoved the flat of his hand against the batwing doors, sending them flying inward with a squeak of hinges.

James returned his attention to the woman before him and offered his arm. "Shall we?"

"We shall not," she declared as she stretched her arms behind her back and laced her fingers in protest.

A smile snuck onto his face, though he did his best to keep it on a tight rein, doubting his amusement would go over well. Noreen O'Sullivan was wound as tight as the black curls that had sprung free from their pins to dangle about her face in a defiant yet oddly fetching manner.

"You know, I actually agree with much of what you were saying."

Her eyes widened slightly. “You do?”

Before he could answer, lines of suspicion formed between her brows, erasing the momentary vulnerability. “I won’t be placated, Deputy Paxton. And I won’t succumb to your charms, so aim that smile of yours elsewhere.”

She found his smile charming? The notion made his grin grow, no doubt the opposite of what she’d intended. When her eyes narrowed, he had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from chuckling. The woman sure was contrary. But James found her fascinating as well. Hard not to with all that passion and purpose zinging around beneath her surface.

“I’m not placating you, Miss O’Sullivan. I meant what I said. I’ve seen a lot of senseless damage done by fellas who were too drunk to think straight. Liquored-up cowboys firing off their weapons and endangering townsfolk, petty arguments turning to fistfights, men taking their anger out on their wives and kids.”

A slight tightening around her eyes at that last statement supported his hunch. She’d been hurt by someone who drank too much.

“Then why don’t you do more to stop it?” she demanded, her hands emerging from behind her back to gesticulate in the air between them.

“I do what the law allows me to do. I patrol. I anticipate. I step in when I can.”

“That’s not enough!”

He shrugged. “Maybe not. But let me ask you something. How many men did you keep from entering the saloon tonight?”

Her militant shoulders sagged just a hair. “None. But that doesn’t mean my words aren’t planting seeds that will bring about a harvest of change eventually.”

“Anything’s possible, I suppose.” James weighed his next words with extra care. “But it’s difficult for seeds to take root in folks whose hearts are hardened with anger toward the one doin’ the sowing.”

Her thick, dark brows lifted slightly, giving him a peek of that vulnerability he’d spotted earlier, but like before, a glimpse was all he got before she slammed the door.

“You don’t understand.” Her hands waved him off and her feet followed suit, her dark blue skirt snapping in sharp movements as she strode off in a huff.

James fell in beside her, stretching his long-legged stride to keep pace with her shorter, choppy steps. He didn’t bother saying anything more, figuring she wasn’t up to listening at the moment anyway. Besides, she was leaving the Salt Fork. That’s what mattered. And not just because he’d told Taggart he’d take care of the situation. It was in her best interest, too. The woman had no care for the consequences that could come from riling the wrong fella. She might be a burr under his saddle, but he didn’t want to see her hurt.

She picked up her pace when they reached the courthouse square, as if she thought she could outdistance him. James bit back a smile. She’d definitely worked up a full head of steam, but he matched her gait easily enough. A fact that obviously annoyed her, for she threw on the brakes and spun to face him.

“I am fully capable of seeing myself home, Deputy.”

He nodded. “I don’t doubt it.”

“Good.” She sniffed, then took off at a more normal pace.

He flanked her.

She halted again and glared at him, raising one of those thick eyebrows. “Good *night*, Deputy.”

He made a show of gazing up at the few stars that were making their presence known in the darkening sky. “Yep. A right fine evening.”

He smiled at her then, and her feathers ruffled so violently he half expected to see her feet leave the ground.

“Perhaps I’ve not made myself clear. I do not need, nor do I wish to be forced to endure, your escort.”

“I’m sorry you find my company so tedious.”

“It’s not that.”

Was that a blush crawling across her cheeks?

She blew out a harried breath. “I promise not to return to the saloon tonight, all right? There. Your duty is dispatched. You can

cease trailing me about town as if I were a dangerous criminal. I'm sure you have more important things to do with your time."

James shrugged. "Can't think of any."

"Oh for pity's sake." Noreen O'Sullivan grumbled something under her breath about muleheaded lawmen, then took off like a trotter in a harness race.

James scurried along at her side, allowing several feet of space to separate them so as not to encroach too much on her independence. When she stomped up the steps of her boardinghouse porch, he hung back at street level and watched her grab the knob and yank the door open.

"Good night, Miss Noreen."

As he'd hoped, she tossed a glare over her shoulder at him. He smiled, grabbed the brim of his hat, and dipped his chin.

She made no comment, just disappeared into the house and closed the door with unladylike force.

James shook his head as his grin stretched wide. The man who hitched his wagon to that spitfire would never be bored, that's for sure. 'Course he'd have to tame her first. An unlikely prospect when the filly in question would rather trample a man than sacrifice her freedom.

Good thing he was too busy building his credentials as a future sheriff candidate to bother with unbroke fillies, or he might actually be tempted to try his hand at gentling that one.

Chapter
3

The nerve of that man! Interfering in her business. Restricting her freedom. Smiling at her as if he actually *liked* her. Despicable, deceitful man. He might bamboozle other women with his calm demeanor and dry wit, but she saw through his façade. Deputy James Paxton had cared about one thing tonight—getting her away from the Salt Fork and preserving the peace for Milton Taggart and his saloon full of liquor lovers. And he’d succeeded, dragging her away like some kind of criminal.

Noreen wiped her shoes on the rug inside the boardinghouse entryway as if trying to wear a hole in the weave.

“You better not be in trouble with the law again.”

Noreen swallowed a gasp as her chin lurched upward and her gaze landed on the disapproving frown of her landlady. “Mrs. Barker, you startled me.”

The woman prowled around the lower floors of the house with the stealth of a cat. And with her teacup in hand, and her mention of the law, Noreen had no doubt she’d been sitting by the front parlor window, spying on whomever happened by. Especially her tenants.

“Maybe you’d hear better if you didn’t slam doors and attack my rug like a grater on cheese.”

Noreen swallowed the sarcastic retort that sprang to mind and forced an apology through her tight throat instead. “Sorry, Mrs. Barker.”

She couldn’t afford to lose her room here. It was the only respectable place in town for female boarders and therefore the only alternative to her stepfather’s home. Her mother might have chosen to tie her life to Arthur Clevenger, but Noreen had made no such vow, and the moment she’d found employment, she’d escaped from under his roof and under his thumb.

Mrs. Barker raised a brow as if doubting the sincerity of Noreen’s apology, not an unwarranted reaction. “I only rent to women with good morals, Miss O’Sullivan. You run afoul of the law, and you’re out on your ear.”

Oh for pity’s sake. “I am not a criminal, Mrs. Barker. I’m a reformer endeavoring to make this community a better place. A safer place. All within the bounds of the law, I assure you.”

“If that’s so, then why did Deputy Paxton deliver you to my door? And don’t try to feed me any nonsense about him courtin’ you, ’cause I won’t believe it.”

“Of course he’s not courting me.” Though an inexplicable pang jabbed her chest at her landlady’s assumption of the impossibility of such an occurrence. Was she really so repellent that the idea of a man wanting to woo her was unfathomable? Noreen shoved the depressing notion aside and focused on the issue at hand. “Deputy Paxton happened across me in town.” No need to specify where. “And being the gentlemanly type, he insisted upon walking me home.”

Mrs. Barker sniffed. “That does sound like something the deputy would do. He’s such a nice young man. Always ready with a smile and a willingness to lend a hand.”

Her expression softened into something that almost looked . . . dreamy. Noreen couldn’t recall ever seeing such a wistful look on the middle-aged woman’s face.

“Reminds me of my Percy, God rest his soul. That man had a heart of gold. Needed it to put up with my persnickety ways.” Her

mouth curved at the corners, and a shadow of a dimple appeared in her left cheek.

Noreen nearly lost her balance while standing on flat feet. Mrs. Barker had a *dimple*?

The miraculous dent disappeared in the next heartbeat, however, returning the widow to her normal prudish state.

“Well, get on with you, then.” Mrs. Barker shooed her toward the staircase with the hand not holding her tea. “You’re the last one in, as usual. I need to lock up for the night.”

More than happy to escape the judgmental glances and unflattering repartee, Noreen bid her proprietress a tepid good-night and hurried up the stairs to the small room with the slanted ceiling next to the bathroom. It was the cheapest space in the boardinghouse, cramped and noisy when water ran through the pipes, but it was home, and the moment Noreen crossed the threshold, a layer of stress fell from her shoulders.

No critical attitudes could find her here. No whispers of pity or condescension could penetrate the walls. No maternal disappointment or paternal bullying would spring at her from behind the dresser, and no angry saloon owners with fisted hands stood ready to silence her with physical force.

Here in the privacy of her room she could drop her bravado and admit that if Deputy Paxton hadn’t been there to intervene, her debate with Milton Taggart could have ended very differently. Noreen sighed as she crossed to her washstand and unfastened the top few buttons on her high-necked blouse.

Growing up with a drunkard father who possessed a mean streak that could slice with cruel words or bludgeon with backhanded blows depending on his mood, she knew the dangers of pushing too hard. Of making herself a target. But coming away from the spinster society meeting, she’d been too full of renewed zeal to exercise caution. She couldn’t imagine Frances Willard backing down. She’d stand for what was right, no matter the personal consequences.

As Noreen poured water from the ewer into the chipped porcelain basin, Deputy Paxton’s voice rang through her memory.

“How many men did you keep from entering the saloon tonight?”

She dipped a washcloth into the lukewarm water, squeezed it out, but failed to lift it to her neck.

In all of her passion-fueled protesting over the last few years, she'd never stopped to consider whether her reformation efforts were actually producing progress. All of her focus had been on proclaiming truth. Not on getting people to *hear* that truth. As much as it galled her to admit, the irritating deputy might have a point.

Noreen ran the damp washcloth over her neck and face, letting routine guide her hands so her mind could wander down new paths. How did Frances Willard fight for temperance? She used her political connections and social standing to bring awareness to those with the power to enact change. Politicians. Newspapermen. Writers. She lectured to women's groups and organized those who shared her beliefs. One woman might be ignored, but hundreds standing together had a voice.

Noreen draped her washcloth over the drying bar and reached for the folded papers in her skirt pocket. She might not have any political connections or social standing to exploit, but thanks to the Lord's perfect timing, she now had a group of women willing to stand together to better their community. All she had to do was convince them that temperance was a worthy battle to wage.



The following afternoon, in the lull between the lunch and dinner crowds at the Albany Hotel, Noreen washed dishes, handing off the freshly scrubbed place settings to the young kitchen maid at her side. Luella accepted the plate and swirled her dish towel over its surface with vigor. The girl was only fifteen, but she worked hard and gave Mrs. Winslow no reason to regret taking her on three months ago.

Luella came from a difficult home life, something Noreen understood far too well. The girl's father, Claude Templeton, was one of the farmers who frequented the Salt Fork, drinking away funds that could be better spent on providing for his wife and daughter. When Martha came to Noreen at the end of the winter term with

concerns about some bruises she'd spotted on Luella's wrists, Noreen had taken the girl on as a personal project—finding a way to keep her out of the house after school while earning her own funds so she and her mother could have a way to escape should the need arise. It had taken some fast talking to convince Mrs. Winslow that the hotel would benefit from having an extra pair of hands in the kitchen, but after the first month, Luella had more than proven her worth.

"Noreen, I'm going to check on the table linens for the dinner service," Mrs. Winslow called, one hand on the swinging door that led from the kitchen to the dining room. "When you are finished with the dishes, start prepping the vegetables for the salads and side dishes. Lu can peel potatoes for the mash."

"Yes, ma'am."

Mrs. Winslow pushed through the door and disappeared from the kitchen. The moment the door swung closed behind her, Luella turned an eager face toward Noreen and practically bounced on the balls of her feet.

"So . . . which spinster profile did you get?"

The plate Noreen had been washing slipped from her fingers to clatter against the metal basin. "How do you know about that? It's supposed to be a secret."

"Oh, it is. But Miss Evans let me help with the research. We met every Saturday for the last month to work on it." Her eyes shone with excitement. "It was so inspiring. Learning about women who make a difference in the world all on their own, without a husband or father telling them what to do. I had no idea there were so many. Miss Evans says there are likely hundreds more. We just don't know about them because their stories aren't flashy enough to end up in newspapers or history books." Luella collected the plate from the dishwasher and smiled. "Women like you and Miss Evans."

The girl's adoration soothed the places inside Noreen's spirit that had been rubbed raw over the years from those who looked down on her with disapproval, dislike, and even scorn. Her heart softened and stretched, letting her sisterly feelings for the girl fill even the forgotten corners. If she could make a difference in Luella's life, assure

her that she was enough all on her own, Noreen would consider her life a success, even if Congress never passed prohibition into law.

“It just goes to show how trustworthy Miss Evans believes you to be that she would let you in on our secret.” Noreen nudged Luella with her shoulder, then retrieved the soaking flatware from the bottom of the sink and dropped it into the basin of rinse water.

The girl beamed at the compliment. “I wish I could be a spinster, too. I asked Miss Evans if I could join the society, but she said I was too young.” Luella’s face fell. “Miss Lockwood’s rules state a woman has to be twenty-four before she can be considered for membership. That’s so old! I’ll have to wait nearly a decade!”

Noreen stifled a wince at the *old* comment and chose not to take offense. To a fifteen-year-old girl, nine years surely felt like an eternity. It was more than half her life, after all. Noreen dried her hands on her apron and reached for a second dish towel. “I guess we’ll just have to dub you a spinster-in-training.”

Luella’s smile returned in full force. “Do you mean it?”

Noreen chuckled. “Of course. Though we can’t let the other spinsters know. Wouldn’t want them to think we were breaking the rules.”

“I won’t say a word. I swear!”

“I suppose we can let Miss Evans in on the secret since she already told you about the society. And possibly our friend Miss Cowan.” Jane might balk at the rule bending, but she had such a heart for children that Noreen couldn’t imagine her protesting Luella’s inclusion once she understood what a difference their mentorship could make in the young girl’s life.

Luella launched a hug attack, grabbing Noreen around the waist and squeezing tightly. “You’re the best!”

Not quite sure how to handle this unexpected burst of affection, Noreen held her arms wide for a moment before allowing them to curl slightly around Lu’s back. It had been a long time since someone had hugged her, and it caused a strange burning at the backs of her eyes.

Then, in a blink, it was over. Luella pulled away and started bouncing again, as if her joy didn’t know how to sit still. In contrast,

Noreen could barely move, too unaccustomed to affectionate displays to navigate the treacherous territory with any kind of confidence. She cleared her throat and busied herself with drying flatware.

“Which famous spinster did you get?” Luella asked as she shifted her towel around to find a dry spot.

Noreen managed a smile. “Frances Willard. She’s the president of the WCTU.”

“I don’t remember that one.” Luella’s eyebrows arched as she reached for a group of spoons. “What’s WCTU?”

“The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union.” Noreen scrunched the bib of her apron to one side so that Luella could see the small white bow she wore pinned to her bodice. “Members wear a white bow of purity, like this one, and dedicate themselves to promoting the prohibition of intoxicating liquors. Miss Willard founded a state organization in Texas as well and even helped us bring a prohibition referendum to the polls in 1887. Unfortunately, it failed to pass.” A scowl tugged Noreen’s mouth flat. “If women had been allowed to vote, I suspect the outcome would have been much different.”

Not wanting to dwell on unpleasant thoughts when they had such little time to talk openly, Noreen forced a brightness into her tone and turned the conversation around to Luella. “If you were able to pick one of the reports you helped research as *your* spinster inspiration, who would you have chosen?”

“That’s easy. Clara Barton.” Luella’s hands stilled, and her voice grew wistful. “The Angel of the Battlefield. Her whole life is about helping people, especially those who are unable to help themselves.” Luella shook off the dreaminess and shot a grin toward Noreen. “Did you know that she was named head nurse for General Butler’s unit in the War Between the States even though she had no formal medical training? That’s how big of an impact she made by taking care of wounded soldiers. Then she convinced President Hayes to create the American Association of the Red Cross and has been the president of the organization ever since. I want to be a nurse like Miss Barton. Helping folks heal, making their lives better.”

Giving others what she needed so badly for herself.

Noreen placed a hand on the young girl's shoulder. "I have no doubt you'll be the finest nurse in Texas one day." If she ever escaped her father's confining hold. Noreen would need to talk to Martha about putting together some kind of scholarship fund to help Luella continue her studies beyond the secondary classroom.

Luella smiled, but shadows lingered in her eyes, the curse of a child who understood that reality rarely lived up to one's dreams. "Did you know that Clara Barton actually came to our town once? After those three years of drought in the '80s. Mama said Miss Barton set up her headquarters in Albany as she toured the surrounding counties and brought clothing, household goods, and tools to the farmers' families who'd been devastated by lost crops. Mama said only a woman would think to bring things for the families. All the men thought about was the seed they needed to replant. I was only eight and don't remember much about it, but I still have the shoes I got from the Red Cross that year. They're plumb wore out, but Mama told me to keep them so I could remember the woman who brought hope to a land that had none."

A woman who brought hope. That's who Noreen wanted to be as well. A woman who made the world a better place. But even Frances Willard had failed to get her prohibition referendum passed in Texas because men alone held the right to vote. Yes, rallying the spinsters would make it more difficult for the town council to ignore the plight of those negatively impacted by drunkenness. But that might not be enough. She might need another ally. One well-liked and respected around town. One who appreciated the value of sobriety. One capable of growing facial hair.

Jane's father occasionally assisted the cause by preaching a sermon on the dangers of overindulgence, but his concern centered on the spiritual needs of his flock, not on promoting a political agenda many considered divisive. And Noreen didn't want to risk a rift developing between herself and Jane by pestering the parson too often.

That left only one trouser-wearing candidate on Noreen's list of possible advocates—Deputy James Paxton.