

A LIFE
ONCE
DREAMED



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For my babies:

Garret, who teaches me to go for my goals with tenacity.

Spencer, who challenges me to think deeply.

Adele, who shows me what real charity looks like.

Titus, who models pure optimism for me.

Gideon, who offers me an abundance of kindness.

Walter, who reminds me to laugh.

My foster loves, who teach me that every day matters.

I'll love you all forever.

Prologue

BUFFALO, NEW YORK, 1874

Fearful, timid, reserved. Agnes had been described as such since she was old enough to pay attention to the words of the adults around her. She looked again at the advertisement on the wrinkled sheet of newspaper. The Dakota Territory. Schoolteacher. Contract. Her head spun as she considered the venture. Nothing about it naturally called to her, yet she was fairly certain she had no other options.

“Good morning class, I’m your teacher, Miss Pratt,” she said to her reflection. A large mirror hung above her dressing table, giving her a perfect view of herself and her spacious bedroom. Agnes looked hard at her brown eyes with their dark lashes. Could they be described as anything other than reserved? James had always brought out her spirit and eased her worries. Often, he told her that her eyes sparkled, and when she lost her temper with him, he told her they were full of fire. Without him, could she be bold and strong? She leaned in closer, cleared her throat, and said, “I’m Miss

Pratt. Take your seats.” She attempted an authoritative edge. “Hurry up.”

Her shoulders slumped. She had not sounded commanding. Teaching may not come naturally to her, but she had done well for her tutors, excelling. Nodding her head, she embraced the fact that—academically, at least—she was qualified.

She pulled the pins out of her hair and let her auburn curls fall past her shoulders, running her fingers through the strands. James had always loved her curls. When they would stand at the fence ready to bid each other good night, he would often weave his fingers into her hair. Then he’d lean in and—

She groaned. It would do no good to entertain such thoughts. Rather than think of tender kisses and love that would never be again, she picked up the embellished brass hairbrush her father had gifted her two years prior for her sixteenth birthday. With more force than necessary, she brushed the loose curls back and smoothed her hair against her scalp. At the nape of her neck she twisted her hair into a tight bun and glared at her reflection. “I’m Miss Pratt.” She mimicked the voice of the stern Miss Jenks, who’d tutored her in French. “And I’ll never be anything but Miss Pratt. There will be no more dreams of romance. No more longing to be anything but a teacher.”

Despite her melancholy, fears, and broken heart, she laughed. Laughter would have been a good sign, an indication that the future might somehow work out, but this wasn’t her airy, light laugh like the one James had so often evoked. Tonight, she laughed in discouragement and utter remorse for the change in her life plans.

How had this happened? She looked again at her reflection. Days ago she'd been happy and full of promise. The world had been right. It had been more than right—it'd been perfect. But it had all been a lie. Everything had fallen apart. Her whole world had been snatched away.

“Aggie.” A rock clink against her window. “Aggie, come talk to me. Whatever it is, we'll work it out.”

Tears pricked her eyes as she turned her back to the window and stepped farther into the shadows of her bedroom. Soon she'd be gone, and she'd never again hear James's voice. Their years together were over. She'd go to the Dakota Territory. She'd teach. She had no other options. She'd sign the contract and she'd be Miss Agnes Pratt, the schoolteacher, forever.

CHAPTER ONE



PENANCE, DAKOTA TERRITORY, 1880

“Miss Aggie!” Tommy Smith yelled as he came through the schoolhouse door. “Are you a spinster?”

Agnes turned quickly—so quickly that her knee slammed into the side of her desk. She winced. The pain stole her voice.

“My pa says he don’t understand why you ain’t married. He says some folks are destined to be old maids, but he don’t know why you are. Why ain’t you married?” Tommy set his tin pail against the wall and swung his arms by his sides as he went to his seat. “You’re pretty enough to be married. My pa said that too. He said you’re the finest-lookin’ woman in all of Penance, after my ma, of course.”

The normal ruckus of the morning all but vanished. Agnes felt dozens of eyes turn on her. Running her hands over her skirts, she scrambled for the right words. “Tommy, it is impolite to ask after someone’s personal life in a setting such as this.”

Let that be enough, she prayed.

Facing the slate board, she quickly wrote several equations. The noises of children began again—feet scuffling, books thumping on desks, and voices lowly murmuring. Good, she didn't want to spend the day answering questions that were none of these children's business.

Just as she was about to begin lessons, she heard, "Miss Aggie?"

"Yes, Tommy?" She gritted her teeth and slowly turned to face him. "Did you have a new question? A different one?"

"Well, I thought you said since you was our teacher, we could ask you anything. I 'member you sayin' you would do your best to answer any question we had. I wanna know why you ain't married. That's my question. It don't make no sense to me. My pa's a smart man, and he don't know either."

Clara Belkins, a busybody in the making, decided to join in. "I remember you saying that too." She pursed her lips and waited. The room grew still and quiet. Only the ticking of the windup clock could be heard.

"Clara, Tommy, all of you, listen up." Agnes forced a smile. "Children, as your teacher, I *will* try to answer your questions. You must know that. But there are some questions that are called personal questions. Personal questions are impolite to ask others, especially in a public setting. My choice to remain *independent* is personal."

Tommy shot his hand into the air again. Avoiding his gaze, Agnes straightened a stack of books on her desk. The chubby arm waved more frantically. Despite her best efforts, she could not ignore the boy's flapping arm any more than she'd have been able to ignore a lion's roar.

Agnes resigned herself to her fate. "Yes, Tommy?"

“Is being independent the same as being a spinster?”

Knocking the books she’d been straightening onto the floor, she sucked in a hurried breath of air before bending to pick them up. Standing again, she spoke in a rather firm voice. “That’s enough questions. We need to begin our lessons. I’ve many wonderful things to teach you today. We’ll begin with our math groups. Group five, come to the board. We are going to work these multiplication problems together.”

The normal noises of the classroom replaced the speculative whispers. Soon the day felt like every other. Arithmetic, reading, science, and history. Little hands raised with questions, naughty boys pulled braids, and girls chattered together whenever she turned from them.

When the last student left for the day, Agnes walked through her classroom picking up stray slates, stacking books, and erasing the board. The one-room schoolhouse was simple but warm and welcoming. The stove in the middle provided physical heat, and the colorful drawings and prints on the walls added warmth that sparked the imagination and touched the soul. This was her life. Colorful and simple. Comfortable and predictable. Running her hand along one of the wooden desks, she smiled. Her heart burst with gratitude at the thought of such beautiful children, full of promise. Her hand stopped on Tommy’s desk. The boy was so unpredictable. Always asking questions.

Without meaning to, he had her asking herself if all of this was enough.

The classroom. The children. The town.

Normally she answered in the affirmative. Agnes enjoyed teaching. She’d been afraid at first, but now she found great

joy and purpose in it, and when the school day ended, she didn't mind the quiet of her home. She'd woven herself into the fabric of the town, serving and loving the townsfolk and making a life for herself in Penance. Why did sweet, baby-faced Tommy have to ask her those questions? For six years she'd fought to accept her lot and make peace with her choice to come to the Black Hills of the Dakota Territory. Leaving had been for the best. And her life here was good. So, why wouldn't the familiar ache go away?

Tommy's question plagued her long after she left the school-room. *Spinster. Spinster.* She heard his voice say the word over and over again in her mind. *Spinster.* Someday she'd accept the title. After all, it was merely the natural consequence of her choice. It meant unmarried, did it not?

After arriving home, she sat at her small table and busied herself by making plans for the next day's lessons. First, she decided which sums she'd begin the day with, then she went to work on a reading lesson. As she reviewed the plans, she realized a poem was needed to help break up the monotony, so she found one she hoped would make the children laugh.

Her orange cat, Tiger, rubbed his body against her leg. He purred as he pressed his thick coat against her. Giving in to his demands, she picked him up and held him in her lap. The dear old cat had been her companion even before she'd made the rash but necessary decision to leave her lavish life for a more primitive one in the West.

"That Tommy Smith and his questions! He sure knows how to knock me off my feet." She laughed as she petted the cat's creamy orange hair, and he squirmed and pressed his body closer to her. A low purr earned him a smile. "You like that, don't you? You always have. Even when you were just a kitten."

“Do you remember James?” She shook her head, trying to knock the wistful longing from her heart. “I know I shouldn’t complain. But I do wonder sometimes if there could have been a way for things to be different.” Tiger looked at her. His eyes had seen so much. They knew her story, unlike her friends in Penance, who only knew that she’d come seeking a job. “It wouldn’t have been fair to James though. You know it has to be this way, don’t you?” She sighed. “It doesn’t matter anyway. I’m sure he’s married and probably has a dark-haired baby or two. One that looks just like him, with a solid jaw and dark brows. And I’m a teacher. I’ve my students to brighten my days.” She scratched Tiger’s ears. “It’s a good ending for us all.” She scratched harder. “But if Tommy calls me a spinster again, I might have to take a switch to him.”

Upon hearing the word *switch*, Tiger jumped down and ran away.

“I was only playing. You know I could never strike that precocious child. But I’ve been tempted. You can’t blame me for that. You would understand if you had to answer all his questions.”

Tiger’s long tail swayed behind him as he slunk beneath a chair and turned away from her. She thought of going after him but stopped herself. Daylight would be gone soon, and she still needed to hang her wash, iron, and fix a meal. Work, she’d learned, was a blessing most people failed to acknowledge.



Determined to keep the children busy, Agnes overprepared for class the next day. The students moved from one activity to the next like a wheel in perpetual motion, so busy they had

no time for flippant questions. It was Friday, and by Monday everyone would have forgotten Miss Aggie's status as an independent spinster, or so she hoped.

"Are you coming to our house to eat Saturday night?" Ruby Lawrence asked at the end of the day. "I've been looking forward to it all week." Ruby's name fit her perfectly. She had the fairest skin, but her cheeks were always ruby red no matter the weather.

"Of course I'm coming. I hardly ever miss our Saturday reading time." Agnes smiled at the excited eight-year-old. Ruby belonged to her dearest friend, Hannah, and although Agnes would never admit she had a favorite student, she could never deny that Ruby possessed a special place in her heart.

"Will you bring some of your books with you?" Ruby picked up a piece of chalk and returned it to the tray on the blackboard. "The ones with the pictures?"

"Would you like me to?"

"Yes! I can only remember living here in Penance. I know I lived somewhere else before, but I was little. When I look at those pictures, I can imagine other places." Ruby crossed the floor to her lunch tin. During the day the children kept them near the back of the room where they hung their coats. "Do you miss the city? I'd love to see the tall buildings and go to a store that sells nothing but candy. I'd love to wear a fancy dress and go to a dance. It must have been the most exciting place to live."

"I miss things about it. People, mostly. But there are things I don't miss too." Agnes thought a moment before speaking again. "Ruby, it doesn't matter so much where you live as how you live. And even though I do miss things, I love being

a teacher and I'm needed here. You'll understand someday how good it feels to know you're needed. Just the other day, I was able to watch Beth Higley's baby so she could rest, and I help Old McHenry haul water. I am glad I am here to help and to teach all my students."

Ruby looked perplexed. Finally, shaking her head, she said, "I don't like hauling water, but I like babies and I like McHenry's stories. I'm awful glad you decided to come here even if you did have to leave the big city. Clara told me that in her old town, before she moved here, she had a teacher who kept a switch by his desk and found a reason to use it every day. I don't think I'd like school one bit if you were like that."

"I've also heard tales of such teachers. But I'll never use the switch." The very thought sent a shiver down her spine. The children were far too dear to her to ever strike. She cupped her hand by her mouth and whispered, "I've a confession. I'm afraid of the switch myself. All the threats I've ever made were far from earnest. I'm not sure I'd be brave enough to use it."

Ruby giggled. "You're very brave. You came all the way across the country without any family. I'd never be that brave. I still get scared at night sometimes, but I know I'm not alone like you. I think you're the bravest around to live all by yourself." Ruby's eyes grew big when she spoke. "Were your teachers nice when you were little? Did they use a switch?"

"I had tutors who came to my house. My mother would not have tolerated my being swatted or switched, but I do remember a few who rarely smiled." Agnes put a hand on the girl's shoulder. "You better get going. Don't want your mama worrying."

Before stepping through the door, Ruby said, "Tommy is

right. You're real beautiful. I wish I had your auburn curls. My hair is so straight."

"But your cheeks are always rosy, and your eyes are the bluest blue." She nudged Ruby toward the door. "I suppose we're all beautiful in our own way. Hurry home before your mama comes looking for you."