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TEAVILLE  
MORAL SOCIETY

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A HEART  
MOST CERTAIN

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16 17 18 19 20 21 22      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Karen Riekeman,  
*who saved Nicholas from being named Friedrich, listened  
to me babble about this story for hours, read a draft of  
this despite difficult circumstances, and is one of the main  
reasons I'll miss living in the middle of nowhere.*



# 1

SOUTHEAST KANSAS  
OCTOBER 1905

Lydia King took a tentative step into Mr. Lowe’s hazy office, feeling like Bob Cratchit approaching Scrooge. Had Cratchit’s heart pitter-pattered as fast as hers? Except his heartbeat wouldn’t have had anything to do with Scrooge’s looks—thin blue lips, pointed nose, and red eyes, per Dickens.

Scrooge wasn’t a fraction as handsome as Mr. Lowe. His dark sideswept hair, strong jaw shadowed with stubble, and piercing hazel eyes made him one of the best-looking men in Teaville.

“Are you coming in any farther?” Mr. Lowe raised his right eyebrow and tipped his head toward an ornate green leather chair, giving her a tilted smile. “Have a seat.”

She squared her shoulders and glided over to the fancy chair—a strange piece of furniture to be positioned in the middle of a lumber office otherwise bare of anything but plain wood walls, a massive desk, and a man as good-looking as the sawdust in the office was thick. A layer of powdery dust covered every nook and cranny—despite the fact Mr. Lowe likely did no manual labor at

the sawmill—and flighty bits danced to the sawmill’s whine in the sunlight streaming through the unadorned windows.

Above Mr. Lowe’s amused brow, a few feathery wood flakes rested on his wavy dark hair. He couldn’t be as terrible as the ladies from the moral society insisted. Not with that smile.

She grinned back and took a deep breath. “You may not know my name, Mr. Lowe, but perhaps you recognize me from church. I’m Lydia King.” She trailed her slender fingers through the silty dust covering the brass tacks on the end of the chair’s arm. “On behalf of the Teaville Ladies Moral Society, I’ve been tasked to present you with the opportunity to support our—”

“No.”

She blinked. “I haven’t finished asking yet.”

He tucked his pencil behind his ear and crossed his arms. “The answer will still be no.”

“But you don’t even know what worthy cause we’ve decided to undertake this year.” She squeezed the armrests. Dickens had gotten Scrooge all wrong—he definitely did not have red eyes or thin blue lips. They were hazel and a manly pink, respectively.

“Perhaps it’s like last year’s?” The show of white teeth against dark stubble made him decidedly handsomer, even if his smile was more of a sneer. He looked toward the ceiling. “I believe you ladies decided our church needed a new bell.”

“The old system was dangerous. Why, with each pull, the bell could have crashed down on any one of the children.”

“Then forgo ringing the bell.”

Well, didn’t he have all the answers. But the cold glint in his eye wouldn’t silence her. Throwing back her shoulders, she locked onto his stare. Money was needed if they were to increase production and help more families this winter. And not only would his money do more good for the poor outside of his pockets than in them, but Mrs. Little seemed to believe that her getting a donation from Mr. Lowe would prove whether or not Lydia was worthy of marrying her son. “I’m sure this year’s project will meet your approval, if you’d let me share.”

He shrugged. “I was trying to save you breath.”

“I haven’t a shortage of breath.”

His lips twitched as he leaned back in his chair. He pulled the pencil from behind his ear and rolled it between his fingers. “Then do share, Miss King.”

“We ladies quilt at our weekly meetings, but cutting out the blocks by hand takes a lot of time. With machines, we could do more. We’d like to—”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, sir.” Mr. Lowe’s secretary poked his head through the door, his bulbous nose out of place on his rail-thin body. “There’s been an accident. Nothing terrible, but it needs your immediate attention.”

Mr. Lowe crossed the room and glanced out the window. “I should’ve noticed it’d gone quiet.” He pulled a frock coat off a hook and shrugged into it.

Lydia folded her hands demurely. She’d wait for him to return; she wasn’t about to tell Sebastian’s mother she’d left without a dime. What was simply pocket change to Mr. Lowe could decide her future. She needed to marry Sebastian Little before her father put them into so much debt that Sebastian changed his mind about her suitability.

If she didn’t marry before long, she’d soon be poor enough to need one of the moral-society quilts. However, a warm blanket would do little to ease Mama’s suffering.

Mr. Lowe stopped in front of her as he made quick work of his buttons. “I’m afraid my answer is still no.” He flashed a smile and bobbed his head. “Good day, Miss King.”

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Lydia turned the page and hooked her foot around the leg of Mr. Lowe’s big green chair.

“Goodness, Miss King!”

She jumped at Mr. Lowe’s secretary’s surprised voice and fumbled the book.

The cloth-bound volume slid down her white ruffled skirt and landed pages down on the floor.

“You startled me, miss.” The secretary’s large Adam’s apple descended with his noisy swallow. “I didn’t expect you in here.”

“I apologize.” Lydia leaned over, grabbed the book, and winced. The center pages had folded back upon themselves. Considering its tight binding, Mr. Lowe hadn’t yet read his brand-new copy of Mark Twain’s *Roughing It*. She brushed the clingy sawdust off the page edges. “I was waiting for Mr. Lowe, and I couldn’t resist.” She held out the book limply and then shook her head. “I shouldn’t have taken it off his desk, but it looked . . .” *Neglected*. Sitting under a thin covering of sawdust, the title she’d been eyeing in *Harper’s Bazar* for several weeks had called to her. “Anyway, I thought I’d bide my time until he returned.”

“Mr. Lowe isn’t returning.”

“The accident?” She bit her lip. Before she’d started reading, she’d fumed over Mr. Lowe’s rude departure, but if someone had been hurt, she’d need to repent every bit of that anger.

“A stack of lumber fell and knocked out a fence. Mr. Borrer received a nasty bump to the head, so Mr. Lowe sent him home two hours ago.”

“Two hours?” Lydia turned to the clock at the back of the office and her heart sank. Two hours and fifteen minutes to be exact. She rubbed her hand down her face. “You say he isn’t coming back?” If only he’d returned and donated a few dollars toward the quilting project, the moral society might excuse her for missing half their meeting. She didn’t relish telling Sebastian’s mother that not only had she failed but she’d also lost herself in a book she wasn’t supposed to be reading.

“Yes, ma’am. On Monday afternoons, he goes to his office at the Mining and Gas Company.”

All the way down Maple Street—in the opposite direction of the church.

“I’m afraid we didn’t realize you had other business or he’d have returned.”

Her shoulders slumped. “No other business. I hadn’t finished my proposal.”

“I thought I heard him decline.”

“Without fully knowing what he rejected. He’ll change his mind when he hears the rest of what I have to say.”

The secretary’s mouth twitched, an apparition of a smile on his thread-thin lips. “Mr. Lowe never changes his mind.”

“There’s a first time for everything.” Lydia picked her embroidered reticule off the floor and swatted at the wood curls clinging to its tassels. “I’ll bid you good day. I’m afraid I’m late.” She inclined her head, swept past him, and raced toward Teaville’s Freewill Church as fast as she could without breaking into an unladylike stride.

Thankful for uncrowded sidewalks, she rushed across the alleyways, where the strong north wind whipped through and spiraled up her cloak. She eyed the bicycle shop window as she clipped along, wishing she had enough money for one of those contraptions. But she never would. Unless she married Sebastian, and then she’d have no need of one. She’d have a personal vehicle.

She wiggled her slightly cold toes as she waited for traffic to clear and imagined fur blankets and coal heat in a cozy black buggy for the upcoming winter. She crossed the brick street, then raced past the line of hardware stores. Turning north onto Walnut, she kept her focus on Freewill Church’s stone bell tower while strong gusts sent newly fallen leaves pirouetting about her ankles.

The heavy front doors of the massive sandstone church slammed behind her, and she scurried down to an out-of-the-way room in the dank basement. About a dozen women sat around the room’s large quilting frame. Half of them were the matriarchs of the church, the other half their daughters or young women without children.

She slipped onto the bench behind the quilting frame next to Evelyn Wisely, the dark-headed woman closest to her in age. Lydia ignored the pointed stares of the women who’d stopped chatting.



She took the needle Evelyn handed her. “I’m afraid Mr. Lowe kept me waiting.”

“You’ve procured a donation, then?” Rebecca Little narrowed her eyes, turning the wrinkles in her brow into deep rivulets. This woman could very well be her future mother-in-law. Unfortunately, they’d never gotten along, and not at all since her son, Sebastian, had begun courting her.

“No, he didn’t allow me more than a dozen words.”

Mrs. Little harrumphed and returned to her stitching.

Bernadette Wisely, the pastor’s wife and Evelyn’s mother, pulled her thread through a blue-sprigged calico quilt block. “Ah well, we didn’t expect anything.”

“So why bother with him?” Lydia stabbed her needle into her block. “I’ve never once seen the man give an offering.”

“For shame, Lydia,” Evelyn said softly, then dropped her gaze. “We should only answer to the Lord for our giving.”

Criticism from gentle Evelyn bit. Lydia swallowed to wet her dry throat. “But that’s just it. I’ve never seen him give.”

Evelyn pulled a loose thread from a frayed block. “At one time or another, I’m sure all of us have done something that everyone in this room would denounce if we opened ourselves up to criticism.”

If Evelyn had done anything worse than swat a fly, she’d be surprised.

“Like watching who puts what in the bag, perhaps?” Mrs. Little snapped her thread, her dark eyes intense.

Lydia glanced around the room at the handful of ladies who’d found other places to look—all except Charlotte Gray, who went by Charlie. She looked ready to hogtie their group leader, and if not for her mother sitting beside her she likely would have. Dressed as Charlie was, in a man’s Stetson, split skirt, and thick boots, it wouldn’t have been surprising if she had a rope hidden amid the folds of her skirt.

Lydia shook her head slightly so Charlie wouldn’t come to her defense. “I just meant I don’t think it matters who talks to him.”

Lydia dropped her gaze to her stitches. “Why not have me petition someone else? Mr. Johansen, the police officers, perhaps the men at—”

“I gave you one person with whom to prove yourself.” Mrs. Little shook her head. “Do you give up that easily?”

Lydia forced herself not to sink lower in her chair.

“I’ve spent years convincing people to give to my husband’s and son’s campaigns.” Mrs. Little’s face grew sterner. “Raising funds is necessary if we want politicians in power who’ll eradicate the red-light districts blighting Kansas and flouting state law.”

The ladies’ murmuring in assent hummed around the room.

Lydia stared at the swirls in the fabric pattern. If she didn’t succeed in obtaining at least a small amount of money from the wealthiest man in the county, Mrs. Little might convince her son she wasn’t qualified to be his wife. As a state representative, he’d want a wife who’d collect handfuls of votes—like his mother did.

Charlie’s foot stomped. “I could hogtie Lowe till his fingers fell asleep and he couldn’t pinch pennies anymore.”

“Exactly why we’re not sending you, Charlotte Gray.” Mrs. Little glared.

Charlie’s mother elbowed her, and with a huff, her feisty friend surrendered to her mother’s silent plea. Charlie found her needle again, the one she’d been failing to thread since Lydia’s arrival.

Poor Charlie. If she hated anything more than sewing, Lydia had no idea what it could be.

Lydia didn’t particularly enjoy coming to this quilting group either with the way Mrs. Little ran things. But how else could she help others? Being poor, all she had to give was time and sewing skills.

“Dearest . . .” Bernadette gripped Lydia’s shoulder and sneaked a glance at Mrs. Little. “Perhaps you should try again.”

“I have faith in you.” Evelyn flashed her an encouraging smile, but its brightness paled under the encompassing shadow of Mrs. Little’s scowl.

Well, she had about as much faith in herself as Mrs. Little did, so it was time to trust God. Surely He had blessed her with tenacity and Mr. Lowe with a huge bank account so people poorer than herself could get what they needed for the winter.