

Hearts ENTWINED

— A —
Historical Romance
NOVELLA COLLECTION

The Love Knot • KAREN WITEMEYER

The Tangled Ties That Bind • MARY CONNEALY

Bound and Determined • REGINA JENNINGS

Tied and True • MELISSA JAGEARS



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Karen Witemeyer, Mary Connealy, Regina Jennings and Melissa Jagears, Hearts Entwined
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A LADIES OF HARPER'S STATION NOVELLA

THE
Love
KNOT

KAREN WITEMEYER

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To all my readers in the Netherlands.
You welcomed me so warmly into your country
and inspired me to bring home a piece of Holland
to incorporate into my stories.
This hero is for you.



*Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not,
and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall
be forgiven.*

—Luke 6:37

Chapter

1

MAY 1895

HARPER'S STATION, TEXAS

Claire Nevin frowned at the cheerful white clouds frolicking across the blue sky and tried to close her ears against the melodies the birds insisted on singing in response to the deceptively fine morning. Ignorant creatures. Could they not sense that this day held no cause for celebration? Cause for *trepidation*, aye. The letter in her reticule felt like a stone weighing on her wrist, demanding sacrificial action with no more than veiled hints for explanation. Yet family was family. Claire would do her duty. She wouldn't abandon them in their time of need.

And if she secretly grumbled about her flighty sister jumping into trouble *again* without once considering the consequences, leaving her older sister to clean up her mess from half a continent away? Well, no one need be privy to that wee detail.

Claire set her chin and straightened her spine against the hard bench outside Harper's Station's general store and smoothed the fabric of her myrtle green traveling dress over her knees. She wouldn't feel guilty for her uncharitable thoughts. Polly was

sixteen, no longer in short skirts and pigtails. It was high time she learned a thing or two about responsibility. Claire had been working in Miss Fester's embroidery shop for two years by the time she turned sixteen. She'd left school—though not her books, heaven forbid—to work in a dark little room at the back of the shop, pricking her fingers constantly as she dressed up handkerchiefs and hemlines with tiny flowers and French knots for a trifling wage. Her earnings might have been piddling, but she'd managed to put food on the table when her da drank away all his wages at the pub.

She still sent money home every month. With seven Nevin daughters still filling the nooks and crannies of their New York tenement apartment, and her da with no intention of denying his insatiable thirst, her mam needed all the help she could get. Claire was glad to do it. Glad to help in any way necessary—unless it required her to travel to Seymour. In that case, *glad* was the precise opposite of what she felt.

Where was Benjamin Porter? Claire tapped her toe on the wooden floorboards beneath her feet, then cast a glance over her shoulder toward the store entrance. The freighter had always been the punctual sort, until he married. Lately he seemed to prefer lingering over breakfast with his wife to running his routes.

Claire's shoulders sagged. When had she become such a shrew? Ben and Tori had been married barely a fortnight, and here she sat casting silent aspersions on their character. Mr. Porter *should* linger over his breakfast. Kiss Tori on the cheek and ruffle little Lewis's hair. He was a family man now, and family came before business. Always. In truth, she dreaded this excursion to Seymour so much that she'd forced herself to arrive far ahead of the appointed time in order to sidestep the temptation of not arriving at all. Mr. Porter probably didn't even realize she was waiting for him.

At the quiet click of a door handle unlatching, Claire pasted on a bright smile, determined to be a pleasant traveling companion for the man who had been kind enough to offer her a ride to Seymour before making his usual deliveries. Only it wasn't Mr. Porter who glided through the doorway, but Mrs. Porter.

“Claire? Why didn’t you knock? You would have been welcome to join us for a plate of biscuits and gravy.” Tori extended a china teacup with a moss rose design toward Claire. “With Ben in the house now, I make enough to feed an army. I swear he can put away more food than those giant horses of his do. And Lewis is determined to follow his new pa’s example, though I think he shares half of his plate with Hercules.”

Claire’s smile softened into something much more genuine as she pictured the towheaded boy slipping his dog treats beneath the table. Her second-youngest sister, Brigid, would be about Lewis’s age now. She used to sneak crumbs from her own meager supper to a skin-and-bones tabby that wandered the alley behind their building. Did she still? A twinge of homesickness pricked Claire’s heart with unexpected sharpness. Leaving Mam and the girls last summer was the hardest thing she’d ever done. Yet it had been the best thing, as well.

“I don’t want to be intrudin’,” she said, her Irish brogue thicker than usual on her tongue, no doubt exaggerated by thoughts of home. She accepted the tea Tori offered and scooted over to make room for her friend on the bench. “I had a bite with Maybelle afore I left the clinic.”

Tori sipped her own tea and gazed into the blue sky, affording Claire companionship yet privacy at the same time. “Ben and Lewis are out back, loading the supplies for today’s deliveries. He’ll bring the wagon around shortly.”

“’Tis kind of yer man to see me to town.”

“He’s glad to do it. Though I admit I was surprised when he told me about your request.” Tori kept her attention on the sky, but Claire felt the gentle prodding rub against her already tender soul. “I haven’t known you to leave Harper’s Station even once since the day you arrived.” Tori lifted her teacup to her mouth. “Not beyond a short jaunt to one of the area farms to tend an illness, anyway.”

Unasked questions hung in the air between them. Tori wouldn’t press for answers, yet the urge to share swelled in Claire like an overfilled hot-water bottle threatening to burst.

She set her teacup on the wooden bench seat and reached into her reticule to extract the letter. Her fingers trembled just enough to rustle the paper as she handed it to her friend. “I’d not be visitin’ Seymour if I had any say in the matter, but me sister’s in some kind o’ trouble.”

Tori met Claire’s gaze, her brows lifted in a mix of concern and curiosity. “What kind of trouble?”

Claire shrugged. “I don’t know. She doesn’t spell it out, just begs me to meet the mornin’ train on this particular date. Read it for yerself. See if ye can make any sense of it.”

Tori set aside her tea and reached for the letter. Claire reclaimed her cup and took a long, slow sip. Perhaps the warm liquid would soothe her frazzled nerves. As the tea slid down her throat, she closed her eyes. Polly’s looping penmanship rolled before her. She’d read the letter so many times since it arrived four days ago that she had it memorized.

Dearest Claire,

You are the only one I can trust. Mam has done what she can, but you know how stubborn Da can be when he sets his mind to something. And he’s set it to cutting me off. Home is lost to me.

I know you’re probably shaking your head and clicking your tongue about whatever folly I’ve gotten myself into this time, and you’d be right to do so. As usual, I failed to think through the consequences before I ran headlong into trouble. But I’m praying that as much as you are shaking your head, you’re also opening your arms to embrace me as you’ve done so many times before. You’ve always been my anchor, Claire, and I need you now more than ever.

I’m not asking for money. I’ll find some way to get by. I’m hoping to convince Miss Fester to take me on. My embroidery is not as fine as yours, but I’ve a deft hand when it comes to beading and piecework. Perhaps I can earn a place crafting handbags for her shop. But without enough coin for

respectable lodging, I'll have no place safe enough to store my treasure. Mam cannot keep it for me any longer. That's why I'm sending it to you.

You've made such a life for yourself, Claire, just as I always knew you would. A healer! Could you have imagined such a thing even a year ago? Mam is so proud of you. And the women you live with sound so strong and supportive and forward-thinking. I know that, for once, I'm doing the right thing.

It's a lot to ask, considering how you came to be in Texas, but I'm begging you to meet the train in Seymour at ten o'clock on the second Tuesday of May. I've entrusted my trousseau to a family friend you will recognize. Take it home with you. Make it your own.

Thank you, Claire. I love you. You'll never know how much.

Polly

The paper crinkled as Tori carefully folded the letter into thirds and handed it to Claire. "I see why you're going, though I find it odd that your sister is going to such lengths to protect her trousseau. Would your father really forbid her from keeping it at home?"

Claire thought about her father and his unpredictable rages. "Aye. Though I imagine Mam tried to hide it from him as long as possible. If Polly did something that warranted expulsion from the family, Da would not want any of her things left behind to remind him of her."

A picture of the battered steamer trunk she and Polly had used to store their trousseau rose in Claire's mind. A broken clasp that wouldn't lock. A dent in the lid. Rust on the hinges. Yet together they'd placed all their dreams for the future inside. Pillowcases Claire had lovingly embroidered as she imagined her future husband lying beside her. Quilts Polly had pieced out of dress scraps destined for the rag bin. They'd been beautiful. Her sister might

be flighty when it came to most responsibilities, but she was a craftswoman when it came to quilting. Her stitches precise, her appliquéed edges flawless. Miss Fester would be lucky to have her.

“The two of us had such romantic dreams.” A wistful smile curved Claire’s mouth. “Most of it pure foolishness, but it got us through the lean times.”

At least until the day Claire realized that dreams couldn’t be trusted. Practicality was the only way to ensure one’s future.

She’d left most of her trousseau behind when she answered Stanley Fischer’s advertisement for a mail-order bride, not wanting the sentimentality that had inspired their design to follow her into her sensible marriage. Then, of course, she’d *met* Mr. Fischer, and all thoughts of marriage, sensible or otherwise, had run screaming into the abyss.

“I can understand Polly wantin’ me to keep her trousseau, but why insist I meet the train in person? Could not the box simply be shipped to me and brought in by Mr. Porter? There’s something more to this story. Something me sister’s too ashamed to admit, even in a letter. Whoever’s bringin’ the box must be bringin’ explanations, as well. ’Tis the only thing that makes any sense.”

Tori’s hand covered Claire’s and squeezed. “I remember well what it was like to be young and foolish, but no trouble is insurmountable. She’ll survive, Claire.”

“But she must be so frightened.” Claire grasped Tori’s hand with a desperation she’d been denying for days. “No home. No family. She has friends, but they’re all as flighty as she is. They’ll be no help.” She yanked her hand away and pushed to her feet, then paced in front of the bench, her boot heels clicking a sharp staccato rhythm as she moved. “The day I received her letter, I wrote back, urging her to come here to Harper’s Station. I even sent her funds for train fare. Whatever trouble she’s in can’t follow her here. Surely.” Her pace slowed as she lifted her gaze to the east, blinking against the glare of the morning sun, and then she stopped altogether. “She won’t come, though. I know it in me bones. There’s a lad she’s fond of back home. A scoundrel

for certain, but she loves him with all the dramatic devotion of a sixteen-year-old's heart." She shook her head, as much to wish the truth away as to acknowledge it. "No. She'll not be leavin'."

Tori stood beside her and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Then you should go to Seymour and learn all you can from this family friend your sister has entrusted with her secrets. Perhaps then you'll know how best to help her."

Claire nodded. "'Tis all I can do."



An hour later, the outskirts of Seymour rolled into view, and Claire's grip tightened on the arm of the freight wagon's bench.

"Almost there." Ben Porter turned a friendly smile in her direction, but all Claire could manage was a sickly twisting of her lips in response.

Why couldn't the road be longer? No, that wouldn't be sufficient. Getting mired in a bog would be better. Or set upon by masked bandits. Then she'd not be at fault for missing the train. She would have made an effort in good faith, after all. Done her duty. But the Lord had cursed her with sunshine, good roads, and peaceful travel. She eyed the one cloud overhead that contained a touch of gray along its belly.

It's not too late for a lightning strike and runaway horses, Lord. Really. I wouldn't mind. Not that I want any harm to come to Mr. Porter, mind ye. Just turn his massive beasts around and run them back toward home.

Sunlight glistened off the gray-rimmed cloud and bleached it white.

Claire dipped her chin, her spirit chiding her. She was being cowardly. Such wishes belonged to a child, not a woman of eighteen. God had not given her a spirit of fear, but one of power and love and a sound mind. 'Twas high time she put that sound mind to work and focused on her Lord's power and love instead of the spiteful nature of a particular mercantile owner.

"You sure you don't want me to stay with you?" Mr. Porter's

brow puckered with concern. “I can postpone my deliveries until after you’ve met the train.”

His kindness shamed her. Forcing her fingers to uncurl from around the bench handle, Claire folded her hands in her lap, then slowly raised her gaze and shook her head. “’Tis no need. Ye’ve already gone out o’ yer way for me as it is. Besides, there’s no tellin’ how long I’ll be visitin’ with the friend me sister sent. I haven’t seen a body from home in months. ’Twill be good to swap stories and hear how me family fares.”

Her escort eyed her doubtfully. “You sure?”

Bright red lettering swam into the corner of Claire’s vision as they passed the first few buildings of town. Claire swallowed hard. *Don’t look. Don’t look.* But her glance defied her mind and darted around Mr. Porter’s broad shoulders to dance over the large, imposing sign. *Fischer’s Emporium.* Claire shuddered.

“Miss Nevin?”

She jerked her attention back to the man at her side. “Sorry.” She forced a smile. “Go on and tend to yer business, Mr. Porter. I’ll be fine.”

He frowned but thankfully didn’t argue. “You know where to find my brother’s livery, right? I spoke with him yesterday and reserved a horse cart for you. He’ll have everything ready whenever you decide to head back.”

“I know where to go. Tori wrote out the directions for me.”

The freighter nodded. “Good. If you need anything—” he paused to glare at her—“*anything*, you head to the livery. Bart and Addie will take care of you.”

“Thank ye. I’ll remember that.” Mr. Porter meant well, she knew. But going to Bart Porter’s livery was going to be hard enough without lingering for an extended visit. The stables stood only a block from the emporium.

She’d already plotted a route to get from the depot to the livery via side streets so she could circumvent Fischer’s store. If the horse-flesh Porter’s brother rented her was half as good as he claimed, she’d be able to rush past the emporium in a blur on the way out

of town and neatly avoid any contact with the man she'd jilted nine months ago.

It wasn't cowardly. It was . . . intelligent. No one with half a brain poked a rabid wolf just to prove herself brave. Much wiser to evade the beast's vicinity altogether.

"Here we are." The wagon slowed as Mr. Porter brought his draft horses to a halt.

Claire's stomach swirled, and her head grew light. Avoiding the wolf was all well and good, but there'd be no avoiding whoever stepped off the train that had just pulled into the station. No avoiding the truth about her sister, either. As much as Claire wanted answers, she dreaded them with equal fervor.

Mr. Porter came around to her side of the wagon and helped her down. Once on the ground, she thanked him for his assistance, then turned to face the depot. Hands quaking slightly, she smoothed her bodice and touched her hat to ensure it remained straight. Setting her shoulders, she lifted her chin and strode forward. Polly was counting on her. Whatever trouble stepped off that train, she'd handle it with calm efficiency and sensible practicality. Just as she always had.

Weaving through the drummers and departing passengers who milled about on the platform, Claire made her way to the train. Steam hissed. The conductor shouted instructions. Porters jumped to obey. And amid the chaos, people trickled out of the front railcar.

One stranger after another exited to clutter the platform. Claire inched forward, determined not to miss whomever her sister had sent.

The top of a man's hat protruded from the doorway. A hand reached for the bar alongside the opening to steady his descent. Claire stilled. Her mouth turned to cotton wool, and her heart thumped in her chest. As if time had been mired in molasses, a chin gradually appeared. A strong, square chin. A clean-shaven chin. An impossibly familiar chin. The rest of the man's face remained blocked by the brim of his hat as he ducked.

It couldn't be. Saints preserve her. Polly could never be so cruel.

The Love Knot

Her knees weakened, and Claire staggered, but there was nothing to grip for support. Only her own hand. So she clasped her fingers together and willed her spine and legs to straighten.

The man's foot reached the first step, and finally, his hat lifted.

Instinct might have warned her what was coming, but nothing could stop the burning jolt that seared her soul when Pieter van Duren's honey-brown eyes locked on hers.