



KAREN WITEMEYER



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To my dad.

I knew you for only sixteen years before Jesus called you home, but in that time, you taught me to laugh, to sing, and to give my best in every endeavor. Because of you, it is easy to believe in a heavenly Father who loves his children with unconditional fervor and whose forgiveness knows no bounds.

I love you, Daddy.

*Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins.*

PROVERBS 10:12

# Chapter One



SPENCER, TEXAS  
FEBRUARY 1887

After two years, they'd finally cut him loose. Gave him a new suit of clothes and everything. Funny, though. The shame of the convict stripes still clung to him, as if tattooed horizontally across his skin. Levi Grant rolled his shoulders under the slightly-too-tight coat he'd been issued and wondered how long it would take to get reaccustomed to ordinary clothes.

Or to get the smell of turnips out of them.

A farmer had let him ride in his wagon bed for the last ten miles or so of his journey from Huntsville. Levi's feet had welcomed the respite, but now, standing outside the parson's small box-shaped house, second thoughts needled him.

His future hinged on making a good impression. The Bible and recommendation letter in his knapsack fueled his hope, but his past dragged behind him like the lead ball that used to be shackled to his leg. The Father might have forgiven his prodigal ways, but the world was full

of parabolic older brothers who would either resent the second chance he'd been given or condemn him outright. Not that he would blame them. Christian charity could only be expected to stretch so far.

A gust of cool February wind jarred him from his thoughts and pushed him forward. The Lord had led him to the preacher's threshold—the least Levi could do was knock on the door.

He climbed the steps onto the porch, ducking under a barren rose trellis. Winter had temporarily robbed the latticework of its color, but the promise of spring lingered in the twining stems. Levi rapped a knuckle against the door and waited.

Seconds ticked by. He shifted from one foot to the other. An urge to run burgeoned inside his chest until his lungs found it difficult to expand. He blew out what little air was left in them and paced to the rail. Had he been wrong to come? Forcing himself to breathe evenly, he began to count the number of pickets in the fence across the yard. He'd barely made it to seven when the door clicked open behind him. Levi spun around. Seeing a woman, he yanked his hat from his head.

"Can I help you?" The tiny lady finished wiping her hands on her apron and looked up at him, her eyes widening only slightly as she took in his size.

"Levi Grant, ma'am. I'm here to"—*See? No*—"talk to David Cranford." The pause hadn't been long, but she'd blinked, a sure indication that she'd noticed. Years of avoiding *S* sounds in his speech had made him adept at finding substitutes, but it still took his brain time to recognize and reject the *S* words that came to mind automatically.

"Mr. Grant, of course. We've been expecting you. Please, come in." A warm smile blossomed across her face as she pulled the door wide.

Levi swiveled sideways to edge through the opening without grazing his hostess. His size came in handy when pounding iron, but it was a hindrance around delicate ladies in delicate houses.

She led him to a parlor full of treacherous knickknacks and spindly chairs and left him there with the impossible task of making himself comfortable while she fetched her husband.

Choosing the most substantial piece of furniture in the room, Levi cautiously lowered himself onto the green tapestry sofa, wincing with each creak of the thin oak legs. He slung his knapsack off his shoulder and into his lap, then reached inside for the letter from his chaplain and mentor, Jonathan Willis.

Soft footfalls sounded in the hall. Levi shoved the sack aside and lurched to his feet, still clutching the letter.

“Mr. Grant. Welcome to Spencer.” A thin man with dark hair graying at the temples strode across the parlor carpet, his hand outstretched. “Jonathan wired that you were coming.”

Levi handed over the letter and gripped the man’s hand, careful not to squeeze too hard. The preacher was a good head shorter and probably a decade older than Levi’s thirty years, but his eyes exuded kindness and a blunt honesty that communicated his knowledge of Levi’s past without casting judgment.

“Please, sit.”

Levi bent slowly to retake his seat on the sofa while David Cranford settled into an armchair. He opened the letter Levi had given him but barely scanned the contents before folding it back up and slipping it into his coat pocket.

“You’ll be glad to know that everything is in place,” Cranford said. “Mr. Spencer accepted my recommendation and forwarded the lease papers to our bank. You should be in business by the end of the week.”

Levi swallowed what moisture he could summon from his arid mouth. “No interview?”

“Not a formal one, no. We’ve been without a blacksmith for nigh onto four months now. And with spring planting around the corner . . . Well . . . let’s just say the townsfolk have not been shy in vocalizing their dissatisfaction. Mr. Spencer was anxious to find a blacksmith, and I was happy to recommend you to him. As long as his representative finds no glaring faults in you, things should go smoothly.”

*No glaring faults?* Levi nearly laughed aloud. His faults glared brighter than streaks exposed by sunlight on a freshly cleaned window.

His only hope was to hide them from this representative until he'd had a chance to prove himself.

"Did you tell him about . . . ?" Levi cleared his throat but couldn't quite spit out the rest of the question.

The preacher shook his head. "No. And I see no reason to enlighten anyone at this point. It has no direct bearing on your ability to perform your duties."

Levi relaxed into the cushioned sofa just a bit. He had a chance, then.

"The truth will come out eventually, though," the man cautioned, "and it would be better for it to come from you than somewhere else, but I believe a man has the right to demonstrate his character by his actions instead of being weighed solely by his past mistakes.

"I've known Jonathan Willis since our days at seminary," Cranford continued. "He speaks highly of you, Mr. Grant. And that's good enough for me. I'll gladly introduce you to Mr. Spencer's agent and reiterate my recommendation."

"Thank you." Levi had not expected such generosity. Didn't deserve it. Yet he'd not be so foolish as to reject it. He'd spent enough time in foolish pursuits.

" 'There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.' " The preacher patted the leather cover of the Bible sitting on the round parlor stand between the arm of his chair and the sofa, his gaze intent. Almost as if he were trying to bore a hole through Levi's hide to embed the truth of the words into his soul.

Levi turned his head away from the man's scrutiny to stare instead at a porcelain shepherdess guarding a shelf on the front wall. He knew the passage from Romans 8. He even believed it. Yet no matter how hard his brain tried to convince his heart, self-reproach still clung to him like a parasite.

"You're a new man making a new start."

Levi jerked his head around.

"Leave the guilt behind, son."



“Leave the other book on my desk. I’ll shelve it for you later.”

Eden Spencer tried to hurry her last patron out, an elderly woman who moved slower than a bug on flypaper. Normally she didn’t mind chatting with Pearl after closing time, but today she did. Norman Draper had strolled past her window five minutes ago, portfolio in hand—no doubt on his way to get the new blacksmith’s signature on the building lease. Before she’d even had a chance to talk to the man. Eden pressed her lips together to keep her irritation at bay as she helped Pearl with her scarf.

Why was it that no one on the town council took her role as her father’s representative seriously? What if she found the new smith unsuitable? If the banker jumped the gun with the papers, it would make sending the man on his way vastly more difficult. Thank goodness Emma had stopped by earlier to let her know the smith had arrived. Now, if she could just hurry Pearl along a bit, maybe she could dash across the street to the parsonage in time to prevent any rash action on Mr. Draper’s part.

“Here’s your book, Pearl.” Eden placed the small volume of poetry into the older woman’s hands.

“Thank you, dear. My afternoons would be dreadfully dull without something new to read every now and again.”

“I’m glad I could help.” Eden swung her door open, ignoring the chilly breeze that ruffled her skirts. She took Pearl’s elbow and guided her down to the street, taking extra care on the steps. Then she bid the woman a quick farewell and darted back into the house, where she snatched her black cashmere shawl from the hall tree and flung it around her shoulders. Plunking a bonnet on her head, she let the ribbons flap freely as she loped down the front walk. Loped, not ran. Running would be unseemly.

“Whoa there, little lady. What’s the hurry?”

Eden groaned. Sheriff Pratt’s office was around the corner on Main

Street, and he had taken up the habit of watching for her from his rear window. The town matrons found it sweet the way he escorted her around town. Eden found it a nuisance.

“I’m afraid I can’t talk, Sheriff. I’m late for a meeting.” She offered an apologetic wave as she bustled past without slowing her pace. She had just about reached the churchyard when he lunged in front of her, forcing her to choose between halting and colliding with his person. She opted for the halt.

“Is that any way to talk to your betrothed?” His syrupy voice set her skin to itching.

Eden gathered her shawl a bit more tightly about her. “I’m not your betrothed, Sheriff. I refused your proposal three weeks ago.”

“And nearly busted my heart in the process, but I forgive you.”

She didn’t want to be forgiven. She wanted to be left alone.

Sheriff Pratt clasped the crown of his felt hat and dragged it from his head down to the general vicinity of his heart, or more precisely, the area above his belly paunch.

“I’m just letting you know the offer’s still on the table. In case you decide to reconsider.” He smiled at her and winked, but the gesture seemed void of true affection. The man might want to marry her, but Eden doubted his reasons had anything to do with tender feelings. He probably figured tying himself to a Spencer would be good for his career. He was up for reelection, after all.

“Thank you, Sheriff, but—”

“Conrad, darlin’. Call me Conrad.”

Eden stiffened. “Sheriff Pratt . . .” She emphasized the formal address. “I appreciate your kind consideration, but my answer remains unchanged. Now, if you’ll excuse me?”

His smile tightened, but apparently the gentleman in him won out. He extended his hat in a sweeping motion as he stepped aside. “I’ll wish you a good evening, then, Miss Spencer.”

“Thank you. And a good evening to you.” Eden nodded and moved past. Her conscience pricked a little over having been short

with him, but after the indignity she'd suffered five years ago, she was in no hurry to commit herself to another man. Especially not to one who wore a gun. Violence only begot more violence, and she couldn't imagine aligning herself with a man who had blood on his hands—even if he stood on the right side of the law.

Having reached the parsonage, Eden thrust aside all thoughts of the sheriff and raised her hand to knock. Emma Cranford answered swiftly.

"They haven't signed anything yet, have they?" Eden asked as she breezed past the preacher's wife, focused solely on making her way to the front room, where the men were congregating.

Soft laughter echoed behind her. "Are you planning to storm the castle, Eden?" There was more teasing than chiding in the question. Nevertheless, it succeeded in slowing Eden's step and getting her to turn around and face her neglected hostess.

"I'm sorry, Emma. I didn't even greet you, did I?"

"Never mind," she said as she shooed Eden toward the parlor. "We've been friends too long for me to be offended by such silly details. I know not to get in your way when you're on a mission." She smiled in the forgiving way of hers that relieved Eden's conscience even while it made her silently promise never to repeat the infraction.

"Go on. Get in there before Mr. Draper bullies them into signing without you."

Eden nodded her thanks and spun back toward the parlor.

Male voices grew louder as she approached, Mr. Draper's being the most adamant. ". . . no telling when Miss Spencer will get around to making an appearance. You know how women are. If Calvin Spencer gave his approval, that's all I require."

"I'm sure she'll be along short—"

"Well, *I'm* here now. But I won't be for long. I have a town council meeting to attend. And if Mr. Grant wants to lease the smithy, he'll sign the papers now."

*Storm the castle, indeed.* Bristling, Eden set her shoulders for battle

and swept into the room. “If Mr. Grant wants to lease the smithy, he’ll have to gain my approval or the papers will be meaningless.”

The banker turned hostile eyes on her and opened his mouth, most likely to inform her that his papers were legal with or without her approval, but David Cranford managed to forestall the argument by jumping to his feet and rushing to her side.

“Miss Spencer! So good to see you.” He wisely positioned himself between her and the banker. “May I introduce you to the man who recently applied to be our new blacksmith?”

As David stretched his arm out toward the sofa, a man rose to his feet. Slowly. Well, it wasn’t so much that his movement was slow, but that there was a great deal of him to unfold from where he sat.

At some level, her mind registered the preacher’s voice as he made the formal introduction, but the rest of her attention remained riveted on the giant in Emma’s parlor. If the mythical Hercules had been inspired by an actual person, this man would surely be a descendant. She’d never seen such broad shoulders.

Her gaze moved from his shoulders to his face. Square jaw. Firm lips. Straight nose, barring the bump on the bridge, where it looked like it’d been broken. Everything about him was hard—except his eyes. Vulnerability shone in their gray depths. Or at least she thought it did. He shifted his regard to the floor so fast, she couldn’t be sure.

David cleared his throat, and Eden blinked, realizing she was expected to speak. “Pleasure to meet you, Mr. . . . ah . . . Mr. Grant.”

“Ma’am.” He nodded to her, his gaze barely brushing her chin before falling again to the floor.

Good heavens. How was she supposed to conduct an interview with a man whose size was so startling she could scarcely manage a coherent greeting?