

# Miss Carter, Schoolteacher

By

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# Chapter One

“Why are you crying, honey?” Miss Carter asked the little girl sitting on the steps of the schoolhouse.

“I’m scared!” the child cried out. “Billy said the new teacher is very mean, and she hates little girls the most!”

“That is not true. The new schoolteacher loves little girls; why, she was a little girl not so long ago.”

“Are you sure?” The blue eyes looked at her hopefully.

“Positive. Will you help me ring the bell to start school?” Miss Carter asked, hoping the little girl would realize that she was with the teacher and safe.

“Yes, if the new teacher won’t be angry,” she answered, frightened.

“I promise she won’t be angry.” Miss Carter fetched the bell from just inside the door, and she handed it to the little girl. The girl rang it tentatively, and Miss Carter whispered, “Harder, my dear. Make sure the children who are lollygagging will hear that it is time for school and they should hurry.” The child smiled, and rang the bell with determination. The children came running, and formed a line. “Good morning, everyone. I am your new teacher, Miss Carter. Let’s all go inside and learn about each other.”

The children filed by her, some smiling, some frowning, some looking positively bored, and there were others who simply wondered how long this teacher would last. She would last as long as it took. “Please take your seats. Those of you who are new, please sit up front for now. We will take permanent seats after I know you all much better.”

“Are you gonna spank Billy Adams for lying?” the blonde child asked innocently.

Miss Carter smiled. “I am sure that Billy Adams was playing a joke, or perhaps someone else told him that and he believed them? The important thing is that you know better now, correct?”

“Yes, teacher.”

“You may start by telling me your name.”

“I’m Sally Skinner. I’m in first grade now.”

“Welcome, Sally. Do you have any siblings here?” When Sally looked at her blankly, she amended, “Siblings are brothers and sisters; do you have brothers and sisters in school?”

“No, ma’am. My brothers are babies.”

Miss Carter went around the room, learning the names of each child, smiling when she was sure she was right, and there was no doubt in her mind. “We are going to start with spelling. Please look at the board. There are twenty words there. The students in grades six through twelve will be expected to know all of them for the test on Friday. The students in grades three through five will learn the first ten. The students in grades one and two will meet with me in our spelling corner. Your words will be smaller, but very important. These are your first steps in learning to read.” Miss Carter moved with confidence, her attention on the younger children she was teaching.

She suddenly saw two boys slip in the back door and into the classroom when they were certain she was not paying attention. “You children study those first three words while I talk to someone.” She marched over to where the two boys were slumped at their desk. “School started some time ago; where were you and why are you late?”

“That’s none of your business, teacher,” the oldest boy said belligerently.

“My pa said your pa needs to give you a licking,” Sally Skinner offered her opinion.

“Sally, you are supposed to be studying your spelling words. I will handle this situation.”

“They’re mean boys, teacher.”

“Yeah, Teach; we’re really mean.”

“You just think you’re mean. I guarantee I am meaner. Please be on time tomorrow, or I will have an unpleasant word with your father.”

“He’ll give you more than unpleasant words, Teach. He don’t much cotton to learned women; he thinks it makes them uppity.”

Miss Carter laughed, and then said, “Copy your spelling words, and be on time tomorrow. Don’t make the mistake of challenging me, boys. You’ll lose.”

She turned back to the little ones, and while they were studying and writing their words, she did arithmetic with the next group. She had the oldest students working long division problems, and then they broke for noon lunch and recess.

Miss Carter was tired, and the lull of the warm breeze nearly put her to sleep when she was brought back to the moment by screams of, “Snake! Snake!”

“Everyone stand still. Do not move!” she ordered, and slowly made her way to where the lone child was standing and crying. She immediately realized it was a rattlesnake; without hesitation, she pulled her gun from her lined pocket, took aim, and shot the head clean off the snake just as it was about to strike. The little boy was sobbing, and she picked him up and held him, trying to calm him down. As expected, people came running at the sound of gunfire in the schoolyard.

“What happened here, Teacher?” the blacksmith asked, breathing heavily, and holding his hammer like a weapon.

“There was a snake, Mr. Apple. Miss Carter shot the head clean off!”

“What? You have a gun, Teacher?”

“Of course, I do. It is my duty to protect these children. If I didn’t have my weapon, this child would be dying right now. I assure you I am a competent shot.”

“I told you to comb this schoolyard for snakes, Harold,” one woman spoke sharply to her husband, the mayor.

“There were no snakes here when I checked, my dear. Miss Carter, you did an excellent job. Thank you very much for saving our grandson. I think you’d best take the children inside, and I will walk this yard again.”

“Yes, Mayor,” Miss Carter answered.

“Miss Carter, please come to supper tonight,” the mayor’s wife insisted. “It isn’t much, but I want to show my appreciation. Jacob is very much loved by us and by his mama. Saying thank you just isn’t enough. Will you come?”

“I would love to come, ma’am. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to know you better.”

“We welcome the opportunity as well,” the woman said with a smile. “Jacob, dear, do you feel like staying at school, or do you need to come home and see your mama?” Mrs. Anderson asked the little boy.

“I’ll stay here, Gram. I’m fine now. Thank you, Miss Carter.”

“You’re welcome, Jacob.”

“I don’t know if I like the idea of a teacher carrying a gun to school,” she overheard one woman say loudly.

“If it was your Lucille being threatened by a snake you would be in love with the idea,” another woman insisted.

“What if one of the children gets hold of it?” the woman continued.

“Viviane, your husband has several guns. Your children are taught to leave them alone, just like all of the children.”

She ushered the children inside the classroom, where they all took their seats, some still eating. “Has everyone finished their lunch?” Miss Carter asked. “No? Well, go ahead and finish. We are going to use this time to create a story. I will give you a clue, and you will supply the answer.”

“What if we get the answer wrong, Teacher?” Sally asked.

“No one gets a wrong answer. We write down answers, and then we pick the one we want to use in our story. We may even tell two or three stories at once! We might not get done today, but this is the game we will play if we have recess inside.” She could see she had their interest. “A father and his?” She smiled when the predictable happened. “Son or daughter; why don’t we make it son *and* daughter?” That was met with approval in the form of smiles, nodding, and hand clapping. Miss Carter reminded herself not to come on too fast.

“Did they have a dog, Miss Carter?” a little boy named Neil asked hopefully.

“They can have a dog, Neil,” she quickly agreed, and wrote it on the board. “I think we have a great start. Tomorrow we will talk about how they traveled to get here, so think about your answers tonight.” She got up and took out a thick book. “This book belonged to my father, and he used to read from it so that I would learn history in a fun way. I would like to read to you, and then we’ll discuss the story and how it applies to our lives today. I expect you older students to have some interesting discussion. I expect you middle students to learn facts, and for you little ones, see how much you can remember.” She started reading, and just as she had been as a child, the class was captivated by the historical details written in story form from a child’s perspective.

“Is that true, Teacher?” one of the boys who was late that morning asked. “Did that really happen like that?”

“Yes, it did.”

“He must have been scared.”

“Nah! He was brave, but I can’t believe they killed his pa like they done. That was bad, right, Miss Carter?” the second boy asked.

“It was very bad, but that sort of thing happened every day. That is why the colonists wanted to be free of the King of England.”

The discussion lasted for quite a while, and Miss Carter gave them a chapter to read in their history books. The middle children had arithmetic to do, and all of them had spelling words to focus on. For the first day of school, all went well. The children were learning, precisely what she’d insisted upon when she agreed to do this job.

Miss Carter had a room in a boarding house that accepted women only. She had to walk through town to get there, however. It meant walking past several businesses, and the sheriff’s office and jail. She hadn’t made up her mind about the sheriff yet, although she’d talked to him a couple of times since arriving in town. Just as she was almost to the jail, Sheriff Geoff Thorn stepped outside to smile at her in friendly fashion. Miss Carter felt he was interested in her as a woman, which was a real pity.

“Good afternoon, Miss Carter,” Geoff said, tipping his hat. “How was your first day of school? Did any of the children give you a hard time?”

“Hello, Sheriff. School went very well, except for the rattlesnake, but even that turned out well. Little Jacob is still alive and well.”

“It is fortunate that you were armed. Who taught you to shoot?” Now he was just plain being curious, but she couldn’t blame him.

“My father,” she said with a smile. “It was nice to see you. I have to prepare my lessons for tomorrow before I go to supper tonight. Please excuse me now.”

“May I walk with you?” he asked, falling into step. “I would offer to carry your books for you?”

“They aren’t very heavy, and I don’t want to give anyone the wrong impression. Teachers must be careful of their reputation, you know.”

“You are also a woman, Miss Carter. A very pretty woman, and I don’t even know your first name.”

“I prefer Miss Carter, Sheriff. We’ve arrived. Goodbye now.” She opened the front gate and hurried up the path to the front porch. She opened the front door and went inside before he could find a way to invite her to go for a ride, or to supper, or any one of the other things he kept coming up with to entice her to spend private time with him. He was handsome, and she would be interested – as herself. But not as Miss Carter, schoolteacher.

“I heard about the rattlesnake, my dear!” her landlady said, her hand over her heart dramatically. “However did you manage? I would have been shaking so much that I would have been of no help at all! I heard that Dorothea Anderson is having you to supper tonight. She sets a fair table, but I will save a dessert for you to have later on tonight.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I will go upstairs and work on my lessons for tomorrow.”

“Oh yes. Educating our young is an important job. I am happy you take it seriously.” With that she bustled back to her kitchen. She still had to feed her other boarders. It was a large house. She had given Miss Carter her choice of three empty bedrooms, never realizing that the schoolteacher had chosen the one that would be the easiest to leave by way of a window if she needed or wanted to.

As Miss Carter opened the door to her room and entered, she was grabbed from behind. She threw herself backwards throwing her attacker off balance; then she whirled around and kicked. Unfortunately, she knew the man who passed out cold on her floor. “You stupid idiot!” She pushed him aside so she could shut and lock the door.

Miss Carter put down her schoolbooks and her purse, then took a small amount of water from the ewer sitting ready in the wash basin and flicked it in his face. When he groaned, she whispered, “Shut up, you damn fool! Men are not allowed in this house without Miss Virginia’s permission, and certainly not upstairs! What were you thinking, grabbing me like that? You’re lucky I didn’t shoot you!”

“What the hell, Charly! Were you trying to kill me?” he demanded, breathing hard. “I may never have kids now!”

“It would serve you right. If you had boys, they would probably be as stupid as their father!”

“Watch your mouth, Charlotte. I could turn you over my knee and give you a lickin’ you wouldn’t soon forget.” He glared at her.

“Am I supposed to cower in fear at the Burnham look, Max?” she asked, and then giggled. “I suppose you must have a reason for being here, so get to it and then get out.”

“Girl, you are pushing my buttons, and I ain’t in the mood. I never should have agreed to work with you.”

“You got that right. We don’t make good partners. You’re too damn bossy.”

“You watch your mouth. Teachers don’t cuss.”

“It’s your fault I took this job, brother, dear. I am not going to forgive you, either.”

“Look, Charly, it’s the only chance we got to find this guy and the money.”

“So you said, so the boss said. I don’t like using children this way.”

“I know, honey, and I don’t, either. Pa would have my hide for using you like this, but all those people in Farrington are suffering because their money was taken. The town is slowly strangling and dying. Milly begged me, and I couldn’t tell her no. You’re the only one who stands a prayer of pulling this off.”

“So you said. I’m doing my part. School started today.”

“No leads yet?” He seemed disappointed.

“Max, it has been one day. You expect too much.”

“No kids dressed better than others?” he asked.

“Not so I noticed. It isn’t unusual for all of the girls to have new dresses to wear on the first day; I always did.”

“And you came home with it all ripped and made Ma angry,” he teased, then grinned. “I guess I was hoping something would be obvious. No kids lording it over others like William Tanner did at our school?”

“None of that going on today. Of course, we had the snake incident, and that cut recess short.”

“Snake? What happened?” His dark eyes anxiously searched her over for any sign of bites.

“It was a rattler. The kids yelled; I shot it just as it readied to strike a child. I hope I didn’t ruin my cover, but I wasn’t about to let a child die, Max.”

“Of course not, honey. Thank God you were there.” He hugged her, and then kissed her cheek. “I love you, sis. Do a good job. I’ll be somewhere close by if you need me.”

Charly nodded. “Never grab me from behind again. Seriously, I could have killed you before I knew it was you, and I couldn’t live with that, Max. I love you too, you know.”

He left by way of the window, and a look at her watch told her she had about thirty minutes left to work on the next day’s lessons. She was a good teacher, and the children would not suffer from the lack of proper teaching. For now, and the foreseeable future, she was Miss Carter, schoolteacher.

She understood Max’s need to solve this crime. He was in love with Milly Knox, and he wanted to impress her. He also wanted to help all those people in Farrington. The robbery of the town’s bank had hurt the whole town and people were finding it hard to buy materials they needed for their ranches and farms. The store owners were finding it hard to get stock because they couldn’t pay for it; purchases were being made on credit and no one in town could pay their bills. It was a terrible cycle, and was a serious situation.

Max had asked Marshal Bill Samson to assign his sister to work with him, suggesting that she could teach school and look for clues among the children. A small toy had been dropped by one of the bank robbers. The toy was sold in Haswell, which is why she was teaching school instead of trailing criminals and bringing them in for trial. Charly didn’t know anyone in Haswell, and even if she did, they wouldn’t recognize her dressed as Miss Carter.

Once she had a general direction for the classes, she took the time to change her dress to go to the mayor’s house. She wanted to make a good impression on that particular family. She had a hunch that she might learn something invaluable, and even if she didn’t learn anything, the



mayor's wife could get her introduced to other families. Seeing how they set their tables could tell her a lot about family finances. She could also learn if any fathers had been out of town lately. Yes, if their papa were alive, he would take her and her brother to the woodshed for a good hiding. Using folks like this was against everything he'd taught them.