

## CHAPTER 1



WILLOW OAK, WISCONSIN. AUGUST OF 1880.

"*M*arry me, Penelope."

Penelope Harris looked up at the hopeful eyes of Geoffrey Orwell and her brown eyes flickered as she studied his face. Unruly, curly blond hair, bright blue eyes, a slightly large nose which didn't derail how handsome he was. Geoffrey had arrived in the town of Willow Oak on a hot day in June two months ago, and it had taken precisely one and a half days for half of the marriageable aged women in town to fall in love with his boyish good looks. But he only had eyes for Miss Penelope Harris.

Penelope was not surprised at the marriage proposal however simple it might have been. This was her sixth proposal, and she was only twenty years old. Many girls Penelope's age were jealous of the fact she had managed to obtain so many marriage proposals in such a short time. However, the only thing Penelope felt was irritation.

She wasn't sure if she even wanted to be married, but yet it felt like she was proposed to every two months. She had rejected Mr. Cornwall and Mr. Kent because they were practically her father's

age. She had said no to the lazy Mr. Plec and wouldn't entertain the thought of a marriage with Mr. Johansson or Mr. Andrews because both of them struggled to participate in intelligent conversation on topics other than horses and farming. Besides, she knew why those men were sniffing around even though polite conversation deemed it inappropriate to bring up the topic.

Penelope was an only child and therefore, when her parents passed away, she would be the sole heiress of Harris' General Store. The Harris family wasn't rich by any means, but both her parents were smart with money and living in such a small town made sure there was no competition. They were very comfortable compared to families who struggled with so many mouths to feed or who were desperate for their crops to grow. Penelope would be receiving quite a generous amount of money from her father when she married, which was more than likely the reason why men were constantly sniffing around her skirts. Penelope was quite pretty, with a rosy-cheeked complexion, thick black hair, and brown almond-shaped eyes. But she wasn't much of a talker, and she preferred doing a quiet activity by herself, rather than attending any social gathering.

If she had many men interested in her, it was definitely about her money and the potential of one day being the owner of Harris' General Store. But Geoffrey was different than the men who tried to court her. He had actually tried getting to know her when he saw her walking by herself in town. He didn't see her as the Harris' General Store's daughter, he only saw her as Penelope. He never asked about finances, a flower was always waiting for her after church services on Sunday, and she could always count on him to make her laugh.

Penelope knew her parents didn't approve of him. He worked at the feed store in town, which she thought was an honest profession, but whenever she would bring it up, her mother would just sigh as if asking the universe why they had given her such a brainless dolt for a daughter.

"He's a gambler, Penny," Mrs. Harris would tell her only daughter. "He spends his money at card tables and betting on horses. A man who fiddles with his money in such a poor manner will not make a good husband. Trust me on this, if we let you marry him, the money we have stored for you will be gone in the blink of an eye. Now why don't you court that nice Douglas boy? He's always asking for you."

But Penelope didn't want to court the Douglas boy nor go to the barn dance with the Wilkens' son. Penelope wanted Geoffrey, but while her parents had grudgingly allowed him to court her, they would never give their permission for marriage.

"Penny?" Geoffrey asked her gently. "You haven't given me an answer."

Penny pursed her lips. "We cannot marry. You know that."

Geoffrey started stroking her neck. "Why not?" He petted her cheek, reminding Penelope of the first time they had made love over a month ago. She had left early from choir practice faking a stomachache and he had been waiting for her behind the church. They had giggled like two young children as he led her to a nearby pond. She had become a woman underneath the stars. Her first time had been quick and painful with very little blood. Penelope had expected this; her mother had explained in passing that the art of lovemaking was a painful ordeal married women had to endure. Her mother tended to be negative and Penelope had hoped her mother was wrong, but much to her dismay she was quite right. It hadn't been as wonderful as she had wished and now only hoped she had to do it as little as possible.

Her courses had come at the beginning of the month, meaning there was no child. Penelope couldn't be as reckless next time. To bear a bastard child, would be the source of great shame. Marrying would be the ideal. If it were to be found that Penelope had given her maidenhood to Geoffrey before marriage, she would be labeled a fallen woman, as equal to a whore. Her parents would shun her, perhaps even disinherit her. Every door in Willow Oak, perhaps in

all of Wisconsin, would be shut in her face, and no respectable man would want to wed her no matter how much money her family had. She would be an outcast.

"You *know* why." Penelope's voice was tight with irritation. "My parents will not approve the marriage. They do not like the fact you're a gambler and make nightly appearances at the saloon and at betting tables."

"I always win, though," he joked as he wrapped a hand around her waist, reminding Penelope how foolish she had been and how lucky she was not with child. "It would be the proper thing for us to marry, Penny. I did deflower you. We could get married in Plentville, it is only a two-hour journey from here, or Redwood, it's even closer only a one-hour journey. Once our marriage has been declared legal, your parents will not have any other choice but to accept it. Please say yes, Penny."

Penelope bit her lip as she looked at her shoes. Beautiful pink slippers with delicate white bows. Her father had had them shipped from back east. Perhaps she would wear them on her wedding day. It made her sad neither of her parents were going to be present. "Yes."

Geoffrey let out a whoop as he spun her around like a rag doll. "Excellent, you won't regret it. Meet me here tomorrow at eight, after breakfast. I'll get the wagon and we'll—"

"No!" Penelope responded sharply. "You will get us tickets for the stagecoach to Plentville. No one can see us, and a stagecoach will give us more privacy than a wagon."

"But stagecoach tickets are so expensive."

Penelope gave him a look of disgust as she reached toward her drawstring purse and pulled out some money. "There, that should be enough. Meet me at eight at the stagecoach station, and do not be late. If we're lucky, no one will be able to see us. Wear your oldest clothes, to avoid drawing attention to ourselves."

Geoffrey nodded as he looked at her money. He kissed her hungrily. "I love you, Penelope!"

Penelope didn't answer him. It seemed odd to her to proclaim her love for someone she had known for three months. "I need to get back to the store. I've been gone for too long."

The good thing about being the only daughter of owners of a general store was that her mother and father were often at the store since before breakfast all the way to dinner time. Penelope was usually kept in charge of the housekeeping and the cooking. Since there were no annoying siblings around, it was her perfect time to make her escape.

By the time she heard her mother and father close the front door, Penelope was dressed in a plain brown dress. It was hardly the dress she had dreamed about getting married in, but the last thing she needed was to stand out at the stagecoach station. So, her plain brown dress and her second oldest straw hat would have to do. She had packed a small suitcase with only two changes of clothes, some jewelry her grandmother had left her that she would be able to sell, and a bit of pin money she had squirreled away. Penelope was good with budgets and wasn't a big spender on unnecessary items.

Her brown eyes flickered as she took one last look at her childhood bedroom. It was possible she might never be back again. She didn't know how her parents would react when she married Geoffrey. They might disown her. The idea caused her stomach to become queasy, but she loved Geoffrey, right? Besides, she had already lost her maidenhood and due to this, her options were extremely limited. It was either get married or be labeled a loose woman.

Penelope arrived at the stagecoach station with plenty of time to spare. She buried her face in an old newspaper in order to avoid being seen. She was counting down the minutes. It was seven-thirty, then eight, and finally eight-thirty. The stagecoach to Plentville had long since gone and Penelope was anxious and annoyed. Where was Geoffrey? The next stagecoach to Plentville or

Redwood wouldn't be leaving for two days. Penelope could not wait that long alone.

She let out a frustrated sigh as she grabbed her suitcase and headed back home, taking the shortcut she had taken since she was a little girl. The last thing she needed was for people to question why she was lugging a suitcase around. She would drop off her suitcase at home and then go to the boarding house where Geoffrey resided. If someone questioned her, she would tell them she went to visit the owner, poor, nearly deaf Mrs. White, for a cup of tea.

*Why didn't he show up?* Her own thoughts were driving her crazy and for a second, she worried he had taken the money for the stagecoach tickets and run off instead. She shook her head, but that was silly. It hadn't been much money. And Geoffrey had seemed quite determined to marry her.

*He must have a good explanation. He has to or I will just slap him silly next time I—*

"Did you hear Mr. Orwell left town before dawn?"

"My goodness, why did he leave? He was so handsome."

Penelope turned her neck toward the girlish voices so quickly, she was surprised she hadn't broken it. The women talking in hushed tones were Katie and Melissa, two of the biggest gossips in Willow Oak. Unfortunately for everyone, their gossip was usually right.

"Did he say where he was going?" Penelope asked stupidly, forgetting to hide her disinterest in Geoffrey.

"Excuse me?"

For a second, Penelope didn't play aloof like she usually pretended to be when someone mentioned his name. If these girls knew something, she had to know as well. "What is it?" There was pure panic in her voice. "Answer Melissa's question, why did he leave?"

Katie pursed her lips, annoyed at being told what to do. She placed her hands on her round hips. "Well, everyone knows, of course, what a huge gambler he is. Always ready to make some

money only to bet on horses or a game of cards. It is no wonder he finally decided to ditch town, rumor has it he owed quite a bit of money to a man they call Big Buck and Big Buck told him he had to pay him by this morning or, well, you know." She didn't elaborate, but Penelope knew what she was implying. Sometimes she wondered what the point of having a sheriff in town was if men were determined to make justice with their own fists.

Melissa played with her parasol. "Penny, are you all right? You're looking rather faint."

"I'm fine. It's the heat. I have to go."

She forced her legs to move toward home, trying her best not to throw up. She thought she heard Katie utter the word "whore" under her breath, but she wasn't quite sure. Nor did she care.

Penelope wasn't usually a crier. She thought there was no point in crying over things that had already happened, but all she wanted to do was curl into a ball and cry her heart out. How could she have been so unbelievably foolish to believe Geoffrey was a responsible, respectable man who would actually marry her after he took her virginity? The idea of running away to get married no longer seemed romantic, it was delusional at best.

Perhaps what hurt the most was he had left without giving Penelope a second thought. No goodbye kiss. No promises to write. Not even a half-hearted, "I'm sorry." He had simply left with her money and that was that.

She was so lost in her own thoughts she didn't notice her parents standing on the porch of the house. Her mother looked furious. Her father's expression was a mixture of sadness and horror. They looked at Penelope as if she had grown three extra arms. "Who's watching the store?"

Her father didn't answer. Instead, he approached her and gripped her by the collar of her dress. "Did you lie in bed with Geoffrey Orwell, Penelope?"

"What?" Her face turned a pasty white as she shook her head as fast as possible. "No, I would never—"

A sharp slap across her face prevented her from finishing. She stared at her father in shock. He had never struck her, not even as a child. Mr. Harris was looking at her as if Penelope had committed murder and how he was looking at her was worse than Geoffrey abandoning her. "Don't lie to me, to your mother. You have already caused enough shame. It's all over town. Melissa and Katie overheard the conversation you had with Geoffrey yesterday that you were planning on running away." He let out a dry chuckle when he noticed her suitcase. "Apparently, they were right."

Melissa and Katie, of course, they had overheard. They always seemed to be where you least expected them.

"I did lie with him," Penelope murmured, as there was no more point in lying when everyone in town was already gossiping about her and Geoffrey. "He promised to marry me. To do it properly. As I'm sure you know, he left."

Mr. Harris looked crestfallen as he refused to look at Penelope. "You are no longer welcome in this house. You're leaving with the clothes on your back."

Her voice was very small. "But what will I do?"

Her parents couldn't abandon her. Where would she go? She was unmarried and ruined. She had no schooling or special skills. Her only options would be to starve, beg, or join a brothel.

"You should have thought of that before, you stupid girl." Mrs. Harris' eyes were cold, and her thin lips were pulled back tightly.

"Mother." Her voice quivered as she turned to them with wide brown eyes. It was silly to beg, embarrassing really. Especially since Mrs. Harris would have even less sympathy than her husband who had already gone back inside the house. "Please."

"Get out," Mrs. Harris said, her hand on the door ready to slam it in her face. "You're just embarrassing yourself."





A WEEK LATER, in the town of Redwood just one hour away from Willow Oak, thirty-four-year-old Pastor Derek Stevenson exited the Redwood Presbyterian Church holding his Bible. His mind, like always, was occupied by several thoughts, mainly that he had to work on his sermon for Sunday and he still hadn't bought his father a gift. His mother was planning a huge birthday party for his father in a week. He was dreading it because he knew his mother was going to introduce him to several women in the hope he would finally wed.

"You're right on time."

Wilbur Fallon got out of the wagon and removed his hat as he gave a respectful bow. "Of course, Pastor Derek. Once again, thank you for accompanying me to Willow Oak. My mama, well, she's not doing so well. The doctor says she doesn't have much time left and I know how much she likes you. A few kind words might brighten her spirits. Are you sure I can't give you a ride in the wagon, Pastor? It is a one-hour long journey."

"Nonsense," he said with a smile as he grabbed the reins of his horse, Dixie. He had saddled his horse in anticipation for Wilbur's arrival. "I grew up on a cattle farm. An hour on a horse is nothing, though I'll admit I'm a bit out of practice. Besides, I'm sure you want to spend some time with your poor mother. You're a good son."

Wilbur gave a cough. "Thank you for understanding, Pastor."

Derek nodded, not wanting to embarrass the man further. If he knew anything about growing up with brothers, it was that men didn't particularly like discussing their feelings. Derek wasn't so sure why the whole situation was taboo, everyone needed to have their voice heard and he'd had many men break down when they asked for spiritual guidance. Yet Derek knew how far he should push. Perhaps that was why he was well-liked.

Derek had been a pastor for almost ten years, since he was twenty-five, and he had never not once regretted his chosen profession. He believed it was his calling to guide men and women

toward the Lord. He was well-liked by his congregation for his kind, patient nature, a stark difference from the other Stevenson brothers. His younger brother Stefan, who had taken over the Stevenson ranch, was stoic and reserved, but ever since he had married his wife, then Imogene Spencer, he had started to smile a bit more. His older brother Peter was the town sheriff, and while he was a jokester most of the time, he could be extremely bossy. Despite their differences, the three brothers were extremely close. They even looked very similar: tall, with coal black hair and bright hazel eyes.

Their mother often said she was glad Derek hadn't inherited the famous Stevenson hot temper. His mother was wrong, however. He did have a temper, but unlike Peter and Stefan, he kept his temper in check most of the time. Then again, there were few people who were willing to upset a pastor.

Wilbur and Derek discussed mundane topics on the way to Willow Oak mostly sticking to the topics of the weather and farming. It was clear Wilbur's mind was on his ill mother. Derek had visited Willow Oak only a handful of times. He didn't have many opportunities to travel since he was busy with his own church. The last time he had come to Willow Oak had been two years ago when he had briefly taken over for a pastor who, at the time, had been sick with a terrible chest cold.

After Derek had visited Wilbur's mother and they had prayed together, he realized his stomach was growling from hunger. He decided to get a bite to eat at a café before he returned to Redwood.

He paused in front of a local café and read the menu hanging on a small chalkboard outside. When he saw he wasn't fond of the food they offered, he turned around, running straight smack into another person. Or to be more accurate, the other person ran into his chest. Derek was a tall man, and he was used to people running into him.

He placed his hands firmly on the person's thin shoulders, steadying them so they didn't fall. It took a minute to realize it was

a young woman who had run into him, her dark head bowed as he asked gently, "Are you all right, miss?"

The young woman raised her head, and Derek could instantly see she had recently been crying. Her complexion was sallow, and she looked exhausted. She was dressed in a blue calico dress that was wet in the chest and frayed at the hems. Her hands were red and dry as if she had been scrubbing too hard. Even with the exhausted look on her face, Derek instantly recognized her. He was good at remembering faces, which was sometimes a blessing and a curse.

"Penny?" he blurted out.

The young woman blinked at him dazedly as if just noticing Derek for the first time. It took her a while to recognize him, but when she did, she almost looked ashamed. "Pastor Stevenson, isn't it?"

"Derek," Derek corrected. "Please call me Pastor Derek."

Penelope nodded as she shifted uncomfortably as if she desperately wanted to run in the opposite direction. He didn't know why. During their last visit, they had been perfectly friendly. He remembered she had a lovely voice and sang in the church choir. He took a look at her poor complexion and unkempt appearance. Apparently, she had suffered some hardships in the past two years. He didn't see a wedding ring on her finger, but her parents owned the general store in town and while they were certainly not wealthy, Penny had always been neatly dressed.

"How are you, Penny?" he asked gently. "It's been too long."

"What are you doing here?" she blurted out, ignoring his question altogether.

"Wilbur Fallon wanted me to visit his mother, she's ill." Penny nodded and Derek noticed a handful of townspeople had stopped what they were doing and were staring at Penelope. Some were whispering, others were sneering. It was clear Penelope had been involved in a scandal of some kind, but he wasn't quite sure what. From what he remembered, Penelope was a sensible girl and didn't

seem like the type to do anything reckless. "Would you like to join me for a cup of tea, Penelope? I'm quite famished, and it would be nice to have some company."

Penelope blushed even deeper as she looked at her dry, cracked hands. "I don't think it would be appropriate for you to sit with me, Pastor Derek. I'm a fallen woman, you see."

Derek gave her a sympathetic smile, while he gave the townspeople a rare glare, silently daring them to continue staring at Penelope with such harshness. "People can be cruel." He cocked his head to the side. "Please join me for tea. One of the good things about being a pastor is we rarely care about the malicious gossip spread by others. I will also not take no for an answer."

Penelope almost gave him a smile, which was enough for him. "I'll join you for tea."