

"I LOVED THIS BOOK!" Maggie Osborne, A Stranger's Wife

MAUREEN MCKADE

Author of
A Dime Novel Hero

UNTAMED HEART



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MCKADE**

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HEART**

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Two-tooth was put on the map. Our town will finally gain the respectability it deserves. And if civilization means losing a few saloons"—he slanted a glance at Miss Wade—"or gambling halls, so be it. I'll be glad to see them go."

Scattered applause greeted his short speech.

Gabby strode up the aisle toward him, her heels clicking on the floor like an army drummer's cadence. Although the top of her head didn't even reach his shoulder, she glared up at him and jabbed a forefinger into his chest.

"Just because you live an utterly boring life doesn't mean the other residents don't like to have a drink or engage in a friendly game of poker." Her eyes narrowed to topaz slits. "You, Mr. Ashburn, need to learn there is more to life than tallying your profits."

A few men clapped in support, while some of the women gasped at her audacity.

Ty's face burned. His first official act as mayor, he decided, would be to have the outspoken woman gagged. "If it were up to me, Miss Wade, I'd see you on the next stagecoach out of town!"



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*For the M7 Posse, who reminded me
of the power of faith and perseverance.
Let 'em ride!*



Chapter 1



Wyoming, 1887

“**I** object!”

As the defiant voice echoed through the hall, Tyler Ashburn swiveled in his pew at the front of the Sawtooth Baptist Church and searched for the lone dissenter at the town meeting. He spotted the firebrand standing by the church doors, but almost didn't recognize her with her long hair hidden beneath a faded purple bonnet sporting drooping feathers and two equally bedraggled stuffed sparrows. What on earth was *she* doing here, pretending to be a respectable member of the community?

A jerk on his coat sleeve demanded his attention and he turned to the woman sitting on his left.

“It's that *woman*,” Eleanor Gatewood whispered hoarsely, holding a kid-gloved palm in front of her mouth. “That's Miss Gabby Wade. She owns the—”

“I know who she is,” he interrupted.

“How do *you* know her, Tyler?” Eleanor demanded, her indignant shock replaced by suspicion.

“I haul her merchandise in from Rawlins.”

“Merchandise? You mean her”—Eleanor low-

ered her voice even further—"spirits?"

"That and other supplies," Ty replied.

"You actually conduct *business* with *her*?"

He stifled his growing annoyance, reminding himself that Eleanor had been sheltered all her life from the likes of Miss Gabby Wade. Patting the back of his fiancée's dainty hand, he reassured her, "It's strictly business, Eleanor."

Her plump lips settled into a childish pout, and she smoothed an imaginary wrinkle from her fashionable claret silk cape. "Who does she think she is, attending a meeting of decent folks—and wearing such an abominable hat?"

Eleanor had a point: it *was* the ugliest hat he'd ever laid eyes on. Ty looked at his fiancée's delicate features. She'd had a privileged childhood and been pampered like a china doll. As her future husband, Ty had the responsibility to shield her from the seamier side of life, and from the forces that would seek to corrupt her ladylike sensibilities. Miss Wade represented both. Giving Eleanor's slender fingers a reassuring squeeze, he turned back to listen to the Wyoming territorial politician at the front of the packed room.

"Miss Wade," Tom Bailey said patiently, "this is not a court of law. You cannot object. You can, however, make a motion for the floor to recognize you."

Her indignant expression faltered, and she brushed at the dowdy bonnet with a nervous hand. "Well, I think most of you recognize me, but for those of you who don't, my name is Miss Gabby Wade and I'm a *legitimate* business owner here in Sawtooth."

Muffled coughs and snorts, along with a few outright guffaws, met her statement.

Sparks rekindled in her eyes, and small fists pressed into the skirt folds at her hips. The look in her eyes reminded Ty of a thundercloud readying to unleash its fury, and he braced for the storm.

"It's my right as a citizen to object if my rights are being violated. And what you're proposing, sir, violates my right to earn a living," Miss Wade said in a clear, strong voice that belied her petite stature.

Outraged mutterings and rustlings erupted in the wake of her clipped words.

Bailey sighed in exasperation. "I would think incorporating Sawtooth into a real town would be good for your saloon."

"Gambling hall," she corrected curtly. "And if Sawtooth elects a mayor and a town council is appointed, they will impose taxes on my place of business. And that, Mr. Bailey, will raise the price of that fancy French cognac you like so well."

She tipped her bonneted head to one side, the shabby feathers dipping to her shoulder. The gesture seemed oddly youthful and almost innocent for a woman in her profession.

"And," she continued, "I would be willing to bet it will also force you to hand over a percentage of your poker winnings to the town's coffers. *That* is the price of incorporating."

Bailey tugged at his stiff white collar as his apple-red cheeks deepened to scarlet. "That, of course, is true, Miss Wade. But you will also be getting a bridge that will cut twenty miles off the trip to Rawlins. People will come and settle in Sawtooth, giving you more business. I would think that would more than compensate for the taxes that

have to be paid—if, as you say, taxes are imposed by the town government." He paused. "I can assure you, though, that without incorporation, the territory will build the bridge someplace else."

Miss Wade folded her arms below her abundant bosom and tapped her boot-clad foot. "I've seen gambling halls disappear overnight because of mandates other town councils have put into effect. Mandates such as restrictions on the amount of liquor we can serve and earlier closing times."

Ty wasn't much for talking in front of an audience, but the madam's defense of saloons aroused his ire. If it were up to him, Miss Gabby Wade and her "business" would be shut down for good. He uncoiled his lanky frame and stood to face the crowd, clenching his hands behind his back. He deliberately allowed his gaze to settle on fellow businessmen and customers of his freighting company. "I say it's high time Sawtooth was put on the map. Our town will finally gain the respectability it deserves. And if civilization means losing a few saloons"—he slanted a glance at the pugnacious woman—"or gambling halls, so be it. I, for one, will not be sorry to see them go."

Scattered applause greeted his short speech.

Miss Wade strode up the aisle toward him, her heels clicking on the wood floor like an army drummer's cadence. Although the top of her head didn't even reach his shoulder, she glared up at him, jabbed a forefinger into his chest, and fired the first volley. "Just because you live an utterly boring life doesn't mean the other residents don't like to have a drink or engage in a friendly game of poker." She paused, her eyes narrowing to topaz slits. "You, Mr. Ashburn, need to learn there is

more to life than tallying your profits."

A few men clapped in support, while some of the women gasped at Miss Wade's audacity.

Ty's face burned under her scathing assault. If a man had dared criticize him in public, he would have had a taste of Ty's knuckles. "This town can do without you taking men's hard-earned money—money that should've been used to buy food for their families," he said through clenched teeth. "If it were up to me, Miss Wade, I would ensure that every single saloon and gambling hall in Sawtooth was boarded up—and I'd see you on the next stage out of town."

The women applauded enthusiastically.

"Then it's a good thing it's not up to you!"

Her upturned face blazed with rosy-cheeked defiance. He met the challenge in her eyes and opened his mouth to respond. Then the clean scent of soap and rose water wafted around him, a gentle assault of unexpected innocence, and he was unable to remember what he'd meant to say.

"Mr. Bailey, may I be recognized?"

Ty glanced over at his future father-in-law. With thick, leonine white hair and dressed in an elegant black pinstriped suit, Vernon Gatewood appeared every inch the successful businessman.

Bailey sighed in relief, then said deferentially, "Yes, Mr. Gatewood?"

"I realize this isn't a platform for political purposes, but I wish to say something that I believe would be relevant to the cause of gaining incorporation." Gatewood gripped his lapels and stepped up to the lectern. "I am in complete agreement with Tyler, and feel it's high time our community moves past the lawless frontier to rightly

take its place in the civilized world. And to help do that, as a representative of the Republican Party, I nominate Tyler Ashburn for mayor."

If Gatewood had announced the Second Coming had arrived, Ty doubted he would have been more shocked. Vaguely aware of the explosion of comments that followed, he looked down to find Miss Wade's lips pressed firmly together in a disapproving frown.

Eleanor jumped to her feet, elbowing Miss Wade aside and wrapping her arms around him. "Oh, Tyler, that would be wonderful! Just imagine, me as the mayor's wife."

"Yes, imagine," Miss Wade said, her words oozing sarcasm.

Ty glared at her, then extricated himself from his fiancée's overly enthusiastic embrace. Moving to Gatewood's side at the front of the room, he said in a low voice to the older man, "I have a freight business to run. I don't have time to be mayor."

"Nonsense, Tyler," Gatewood said under his breath. "You have people working for you who can take care of the schedules and books. You have a fine head on your shoulders and that's what Sawtooth needs to bring us into a new era."

"But—"

"But nothing. Think of all the good you could do. It would be within your power to rid the town of licentious dens like Miss Gabby's Gambling Emporium. You can make Sawtooth a place where folks can come and raise their children without being surrounded by the moral depravity of people like her." Gatewood turned away from Ty and raised his hands to quiet the noisy crowd. "Everybody, may I have your attention? Who will second

Tyler Ashburn's candidacy for mayor?"

"I second," the Reverend Tusk said sonorously, as if proclaiming an amen.

"All in favor?" Gatewood called.

The ayes nearly raised the house of worship's roof.

"Those opposed?"

"Me!" Miss Wade's single voice rang out.

As his first official act as mayor, Ty decided he would have the outspoken Miss Wade gagged.

Gatewood threw an arm around Ty's shoulders. "Looks like you're going to be Sawtooth's first mayor."

"Not so fast," Bailey broke in reluctantly. "Mr. Ashburn must be voted into office through the proper procedures."

Gatewood scowled. "And what are the 'proper procedures'?"

Bailey appeared uncomfortable. "Well, you have to hold an official election, and there has to be a grace period of at least one month for any other interested candidate to enter the mayoral race."

"There isn't anybody in town who doesn't respect Mr. Ashburn. I sincerely doubt anyone will challenge him."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that, Mr. Gatewood," Miss Wade called out, then fixed her blistering gaze on Ty. "This isn't over, Mr. Ashburn."

Spinning around, the unstoppable Miss Gabby flounced down the center aisle and out of the church.

Ty's gaze followed her dramatic exit, and a shiver of warning chased down his spine. He shrugged it aside. How much trouble could one pint-sized woman be, anyway?

* * *

Gabby burst into her gambling hall and nodded to a few of the regular customers at the poker and faro tables. Absently, she noted that a couple of lamps needed oil, and the chandelier, lowered and cleaned only a few days ago, already had cobwebs stretched across its prisms. Despite more pressing problems, she'd be sure those items were taken care of after closing. The Emporium was a reflection of herself, and Gabby wanted to cast both in the best light possible.

Rose James, one of her barmaids as well as her best friend, joined her at the polished mahogany bar. "How'd it go?" Her excited smile faded to a grimace. "I hope it wasn't as bad as you look."

"Worse," Gabby replied dourly. She removed her mother's bonnet and laid it on the bar reverently, soothing the sparrows' ruffled feathers. Pulling the pins from her blond hair, Gabby allowed the long tresses to spill down her back. Rid of the respectable trappings, she heaved a sigh.

Rose pointed at the hat. "Didn't that help?"

Gabby shook her head. "Trying to pass myself off as one of them was like a fox trying to get in the coop dressed like a chicken."

"Maybe you should've bought a new hat, one a little more fashionable?" Rose suggested hesitantly.

"There is nothing wrong with this bonnet," Gabby said defensively. Her thoughts returned to the meeting. "Everybody wants Sawtooth on the map, and the territory won't build the bridge unless the town's incorporated, which means a mayor has to be elected. Vernon Gatewood nominated Tyler Ashburn to run for office."

Rose's kohl-shadowed eyes widened. "Tyler

Ashburn of the A-B Freight Company?"

"The same."

Rose gave Gabby a wicked grin. "I would give a month's wages to spend a night with that man."

Gabby stared openmouthed at her. "Tyler Ashburn? He's a sour-faced grouch who wouldn't know how to have fun if his life depended on it. All he cares about is his money and getting in good with Vernon Gatewood." She scowled. "Even going so far as to become engaged to Gatewood's spoiled brat."

"Who cares about that?" Rose said with a negligent wave of her hand. "It's just his body I want."

Gabby recalled the breadth of his shoulders and his firm chest beneath her prodding finger, and a hot wave shimmered through her. Rose had a point: Tyler Ashburn's fine physique could turn any girl's head. But she wasn't an impressionable young girl. She'd grown up around men and learned about their crude behavior with women early on.

Gabby didn't care what a man and a consenting woman did behind closed doors, but she wasn't about to encourage it by allowing her upstairs rooms to be used for such debasing activities. And although Rose and the other barmaids wore brightly colored knee-length dresses typical of saloon girls, they only sold drinks—not their bodies.

"Now, Rose," Gabby began, "I thought you put your past behind you."

"I have—I wouldn't charge him." Rose winked. "I'd *pay* him. Besides, just because I don't do it for money anymore doesn't mean I don't enjoy a romp with a good-lookin' man."

Imagining Tyler Ashburn in her own bed

brought an unexpected rush of heat to Gabby's cheeks, and she took a deep breath, casting aside the unwanted images. Once a man took his pleasure with a woman, he figured he owned her. And Gabby wasn't about to let any man boss her around—not even one whose rugged good looks could coax a spinster out of her proper petticoats.

"Men are more trouble than they're worth," Gabby said. "You mark my words. If Mr. Ashburn becomes mayor, we may as well pack our bags."

She leaned against the bar and gazed about her gambling hall. After she'd bought the place, she'd put in countless hours transforming the common saloon into a bright, airy room with tasteful oil paintings adorning the walls and rich velvet maroon curtains draped from floor to ceiling at the entrance.

She'd put her heart, soul, and sweat into Miss Gabby's Gambling Emporium, and nobody was going to chase her out of her home. She'd spent fifteen of her twenty-three years moving from one place to another, sometimes forced to leave by irate townsfolk, sometimes because her uncle had decided to find a greener pasture to hawk his wares.

"We have to come up with a way to stop Ashburn from becoming the mayor," Gabby stated.

"I have a double-barrel derringer in my room upstairs," Rose offered helpfully.

"That's good, Rose," Gabby said dryly. "You can use your charms to lure him up to your room, then shoot him. I can see the newspapers now." She lifted her arm, pointing to an imaginary headline. "'One of Sawtooth's Upstanding Citizens Killed While Cavorting in Bed with Soiled Dove.' Great idea."

"I promise he'll go a happy man." Rose waggled her eyebrows suggestively.

"Unfortunately, Tyler Ashburn is so upstanding he'd make Abraham Lincoln look like a scoundrel."

"Nobody's that perfect," Rose scoffed.

"Then we'll have to find something in his background to use against him—tarnish his squeaky-clean image so that people will think twice before voting for him." She rubbed her palms together. "But somebody has to run against him. Somebody sympathetic to our cause."

"Why don't *you* run against him?"

Gabby wrinkled her nose. "That's worse than the derringer idea."

"No, listen to me." Rose began to pace excitedly. "It just might work. This is the one territory in the country where women can vote and hold office. Declare yourself a candidate, and beat Ashburn at his own game."

"Come on, Rose, I wouldn't have a chance against him. You should've seen the folks at the meeting when I stood up to him. I thought they were going to have an old-fashioned witch burning."

"I'll bet it was mainly the women who were ready to strike the match. Most of the men in this town have been in here a few times, and I haven't heard any complaints. If you can get them behind you, you *could* win."

"But I don't know anything about being a mayor," Gabby objected. "I'd only make a fool of myself."

"No, you wouldn't. You own your own business, Gabby, and that makes you smarter than most.