

QUEEN OF THE WEST

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CHAPTER 1

March 1855

Annie stood studying the large paddlewheel churning the Ohio River, propelling her toward her new life. She had escaped from her mother and siblings in their stateroom to the lower deck of the steamship *Buckeye State*. She watched the engineer as he shoveled coal into the boilers and efficiently responded to the bell that clanged incessantly, directing him to slow or speed the paddlewheels. The sweat-drenched man shouted across to the engineer working the opposite paddlewheel's mechanics. The sounds of the steam engine's hissing and paddlewheel's splashing filled the cramped, dim space.

The boat's whistle blared, and Annie jumped back. The crewman had told her that they blew the whistle to alert passengers of hazards in the river and a possible impact. She saw no signs of a crash but noticed a handsome young man looking at her. He stood almost six feet, with blonde hair, sharp facial features and a dimpled chin.

"What are you looking at?" Annie said.

"I'm sorry. I was watching you," Max said, smiling and speaking loudly over the noise. "You're interested in how it works?"

"Yes, it's fascinating machinery. I'd like to understand how the steam moves the paddlewheels, but I can't see much from here."

Max moved closer to her and pointed. "The coal heats the water in the boilers and creates the steam. The steam pushes a piston inside that metal housing, which moves the arm connected to the paddlewheel's crank."

She turned from where he pointed, toward him. “Is that cotton sticking out of your ears?” she asked.

“What? Oh, yes, it’s to dampen the noise. It’s so loud. It never stops.” He removed the wads of cotton from his ears.

“You’re a delicate one, then? Do you have a parasol for the sun, too?” A grin spread across her face.

His cheeks reddened. “No, it’s just, I’ve spent so much time on these steamships up and down the Ohio and beyond. I like to read, and it’s hard to concentrate with all the noise,” he held up a book.

“I’m teasing you, but you look like an invalid with it sticking out of your ears,” she said.

“Enough about my appearance. You should talk.”

“What do you mean?”

She stood about five and a half feet, a smattering of freckles across her cheeks and soft curls of red hair pulled back in a bun.

“Your attire,” he said.

“What about the way I’m dressed? Are you insulting me?”

His face flushed red again. “No, I’m sorry, I’ve never seen anything quite like your trousers on a lady. Let’s move up here so we can talk without shouting,” he said, guiding her to the front of the deck, away from the boat’s machinery.

“They’re bloomers,” she said.

“You resemble a jester in them.”

“Well, it seems you are intent on insulting me,” she said.

“Now I’m teasing you. Please don’t take offense.” He smiled.

“They’re very comfortable and practical for riding on boats in the wilderness with all the stairs and planks and the rough landings. You try wearing a corset and long dress traveling to the western frontier.”

“You’re going to the frontier? What is your destination?” he asked.

“Cincinnati.”

He laughed. “That’s hardly the frontier.”

“Look around you, man,” she said, raising her voice and pointing to the shoreline. “All I’ve seen since we passed Wheeling are trees and fields of grass.”

“I can’t argue with that; however, the frontier is well beyond Cincinnati. It’s a city with plenty of civilized comforts. It’s called the Queen City of the West.”

“Yes, I’ve heard it called that, but I grew up in New York City. I’ve heard vast unsettled lands, and even Indians still surround Cincinnati.”

“I’ve never met any Indians. You’d have to go farther west to worry about savages.”

“Annie!” A young man called as he descended the staircase from the upper deck.

Annie groaned and turned away from him.

“Is he bothering you?” asked Max.

“No, he’s my brother.”

“Annie, Mother says you shouldn’t be down here; it’s no place for a lady. She wants you to come back to the room.” Her brother bounded down the stairs and over to Annie. “Who is this?” he said, looking at Max.

“Just a clever young man that I’m passing the time with. I’m perfectly safe. Mother need not worry.”

“Annie, come on,” her brother said as he pulled on her arm.

“I’m Max Mueller,” said Max reaching out to shake her brother’s hand.

“I’m Anthony; pleased to meet you.” He shook Max’s hand.

Annie said, “Good afternoon, Max Mueller. I hope to see you again before our journey ends.” As she walked to the steps, she stopped, shook Max’s hand, and smiled at him. “Good day, sir.”

He smiled at her. “Good day, Miss Annie. I enjoyed meeting the most interesting lady with the most interesting attire on the Buckeye State.”

As they walked up the stairs, Anthony whispered to Annie, “Why were you talking to him? I don’t think Mother would approve. He was eyeing you improperly.”

“He was not. We were just passing the time. Don’t mention Mr. Mueller to Mother. It will only upset her,” said Annie.

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After dinner, Annie returned to the lower deck, feeling claustrophobic as she walked along the tall stacks of cargo under the low ceiling. With the sun setting, the deck was darker and the shadows longer. She passed crates, barrels, bales and baskets. Her piano was down here somewhere. Men dressed in ragged clothes, some with dirty faces and hands, looked up from their groups on the floor as she walked by. One cluster of men and women sat in a circle, laughing and talking loudly. She walked purposefully, watching them out of the corner of her eye. She relaxed when she reached the open-air portion of the deck and found Max sitting on a bench facing the bow. He sat in front of a large crate away from the other deck passengers and boat noise. "Good evening," she said in a quiet voice.

He sat up straight. "Good evening, Miss Annie. This deck is no place for a lady in the evening. Let me accompany you upstairs."

"Thank you, but I'd like to sit in the quiet, too, if it's all the same to you. Unless you're planning to do me harm, I think I'm quite safe."

"All right. Weren't you afraid coming down here by yourself?"

"There are plenty of people on this boat and little privacy. It's similar to parts of New York City that I walk. I'm not easily scared."

"Bad things happen on the lower decks of these riverboats. There are scoundrels all around us. I advise you to stay on the upper deck, but since you're here, would you like to join me on this bench?"

"Thank you, that would be nice. You look much more inviting without the cotton sticking out of your ears," she said.

"And you look much more inviting without the bloomers."

She laughed. "Mother insisted I adhere to decorum for dinner, but this dress is a hazard on this boat. I'm not sure who I was dressing for; we've met an eclectic collection of frontiersmen, immigrants, farmers and merchants."

"It's very becoming on you."

"You made no mention of my attractiveness when I dressed in bloomers earlier today. Why, just because I have a dress on, do you suddenly feel at liberty to comment on my appearance?"

"I didn't mean to offend you. Please forgive me."

She saw a sincerity in his blue eyes that disarmed her. He had an inviting face and a sturdy frame. She had never courted a man but enjoyed bantering and flirting with the men she met at salons and lectures in New York. “What are you doing out here, all alone in the front of the boat?”

“Trying to find some quiet. I’m staying down here with the deckers where there are too many people. My employer doesn’t pay for me to sleep in a stateroom, nor do I require it, but I need some quiet time each day to reflect and pray for my sanity.”

“You sleep down here?” Annie asked.

“Yes.”

“Where?” She scanned the crowded deck.

“I have a blanket. I find space. The cotton balls come in handy at night, too. Sleeping amongst a few dozen men can be noisy.”

“Do you wake up refreshed?”

“Refreshed enough.”

“Where do you eat?” she said.

“There’s a stove for use by the passengers. I cook beans that I brought. I have pork and bread. Sometimes I share with another fellow.”

“It doesn’t sound very appetizing.”

“I’m not eating for the pleasure, but rather nourishment for my body. It’s only a three-day journey. What did they serve in the grand saloon for dinner?”

“It was chicken, beefsteaks, pork, potatoes, some vegetables and pastries for dessert,” she said. “The staff does their best to make it fine dining, but it was nothing like New York restaurants.”

“Well, a lady like you is accustomed to a certain standard of living. I’m sure the captain’s staff does their best. I hear the new steamboats built in Cincinnati are even finer than this one—like floating hotels. You’ll see them under construction in the boatyard just before we reach the landing in Cincinnati,” he said. “Why are you traveling there?”

“I’m moving there. I don’t want to, but I have no choice.”

They sat quietly, the sound of the boilers and the paddlewheel’s splash in the background. It was a warm spring evening, and the breeze from the slow-moving steamboat was refreshing. The sun

was setting, and the hills surrounding the river seemed endless. The large trees cast shadows on the grasses along the riverbank.

The boat's whistle blew, and they heard shouting as the vessel slowed. The paddlewheels stopped, and the relative quiet was a relief. They moved around to the port side in time to see a rowboat lowered from the steamship onto the river. Two crewmen, a man and a woman holding a child, sat in the rowboat. Deck hands dropped several bundles and a trunk into it. One of the crewmen rowed them to the Kentucky shore. They saw a farmer walking from a log cabin toward the river. The crewmen helped the man, woman and child step on land, greeting the farmer. The woman stood clutching her child, watching as the men removed their possessions from the boat and placed them on the grass. The men returned to the boat and rowed back to the steamship.

"Why are they abandoning them here? What did they do?" asked Annie.

"They didn't *do* anything," said Max. "I met Mr. Johnson and his wife yesterday. They're from Philadelphia. They're answering an advertisement for land in eastern Kentucky."

"That poor woman," said Annie. "Where will she sleep tonight? How will they survive on their own?"

"They'll make their way. I think they'll find hospitality from their new neighbors. The family in that cabin will likely put them up for the night and direct them on their way. They were very optimistic about their future. He saved his money in Philadelphia for two years to buy land and establish a home here."

The whistle sounded again, the paddlewheels started, and the riverboat resumed its voyage. They stood and watched the couple and child grow smaller in the distance.

"Shall we return to our bench?" said Annie. They walked back to the bow and sat.

"Assure me Cincinnati is nothing like that place where that family got off the boat," said Annie.

"No, it's a city, full of people. You're worried about your move?" said Max. "Why are you moving there?"

"My mother has married a man from Cincinnati, and we're all going to live with him. I wished to stay and live in New York by

myself, but my mother wouldn't entertain it. I'm eighteen, old enough to start my own life, but there are too many branches across the path for a woman. I'm leaving the only home I know and the city I love to go to a wild, uncultured place. And I'm leaving my circle of friends for no one."

"I've never been to New York. What's it like?" said Max.

"It's alive. Performance halls and all kinds of shops and factories. Numerous parks and so many people. Always a lecture or a theater performance to see. It varies from neighborhood to neighborhood. The shops of Broadway are most often talked about, but I loved to spend time near the Bowery. It offers a fine selection without the snobbery. New York has its problems; vagrants, the destitute, and the drunkards, but I wouldn't trade it for any city on earth.

"We lived in a three-story house on Fifth Avenue until Daddy died. He was a banker on Wall Street. The money ran out, and Mother, my sister, three brothers, and I moved into an apartment. Then Mother and Mr. Neltner married, and now we're moving to Cincinnati where he has his law practice."

"I'm sorry about your father. That must have been difficult. How did he die?" Max said.

"He died of cholera during the epidemic six years ago. I miss Daddy so much. He was like me, loved music and adventure. Mother became even more somber after he died."

"I'm sorry. My youngest sister Agnes died of cholera as well."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Listen to me, talking about myself. I'm all right. Tell me about you. What do you do besides ride up and down rivers on steamboats?"

"I am in the employment of Mr. Jonathan Niles and his brother James. I manage the accounting and business dealings for Niles & Company, an ironworks enterprise. I sell to customers, purchase materials from vendors and supervise the installation of iron fixtures. This week, I was in Pittsburgh buying some steel for a special project and am bringing it back to our shop. Someday I hope to be made a partner in the business and build my fortune."

"So, you live there, in Cincinnati. How long have you been there?" she said.

“All my life.”

“Do you have a family there?”

“Yes. I was born in the German neighborhood north of the canal. My mother and father, three brothers and three sisters still live there. I rent a room with a family downtown.”

“How do you find living in Cincinnati?”

“It’s all I know. There are plenty of opportunities if you are willing to work and apply yourself. I am not hesitant to work to better my position. The city grows every year. It is now the country’s fifth-largest city and is the launching place for people and goods heading west. Factories and markets with furniture, building materials, news, sundries and food continue to spring up like flowers in the spring. The landing is crowded with boats daily, loaded with the items to build lives in the west. Meanwhile, the city expands to accommodate the increasing population and commerce.”

“You make it sound like an exciting place. Maybe I’ll find something there for me?”

“Indeed. For any man willing to apply his brain and work hard, there is opportunity.”

“That is the problem everywhere,” she raised her voice and stood up.

“What is the problem?” he said.

“Any man. I’m not a man. For men, there is all this opportunity. I have the intelligence and ambition, but my sex limits me.”

“Whoa, Nellie. Calm yourself.”

“Why should I calm myself? The world is unjust. Am I to just accept it?”

“I hear your plight, but it does little good to work yourself into a frenzy.”

“You don’t understand. You have unfettered opportunity.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” he said. “I have great opportunities with my education, but we all must live within our circumstances. I was born into a family of meager means. Many treat me as a foreigner in my own country because my parents came from Germany. There are doors that the well-to-do keep shut from even the most ambitious.”

Annie said, “I feel the same. I am an American but not given the same opportunities as a man. I have limited education and occupation options, and I am dependent on a man for my life. That is a form of enslavement.”

“You are equating a woman’s life to that of a slave? You, who has the means to sleep in a stateroom and eat in fine restaurants. You have plenty. I think there is a difference. Slavery is immoral.”

“Yes, there is a difference in degree and overtness. Would you say women’s place below men is moral? Men passed the laws of this nation, and I am subject to them with no way to alter them. I have limited property rights. If I marry, I relinquish my property to a husband, become his property, and vow to obey him. I am treated as a subjugate person.”

They both sat silently for a while. The sun had set, the only light cast by the near-full moon and the thousands of stars in the sky. Max looked at Annie and saw tears on her cheeks. She wiped them away.

“I never considered what the world looks like from a woman’s perspective. I’ve never met a woman who had such dreams for herself.”

“Oh, you have, Max. They just don’t share them with you because their confidence to express their dreams has been taken from them since they were little girls. I will not suppress my dreams and accept a life limited by the circumstances of my birth.”

“In that way, you and I are alike; our refusal to accept a place set by others,” said Max. “Why do you feel so strongly?”

“I’ve felt this way as long as I can remember. I never liked anyone telling me what to do. I’m sure I was a handful for my parents. My mother would constantly punish me and curtail my activities. ‘Young ladies don’t do that’ and ‘Don’t be unreasonable’ were two of her most common reprimands.

“When I was five or six, I had a playmate, a boy named Ansel. We were both the oldest in the family, and our mothers had us together all the time. I remember running in the park, racing him, playing games and chasing the ducks near the pond. At some point, my mother started restricting me from doing the things Ansel did. It was my first memory of being told boys were allowed to do one

set of things, but girls were expected to behave differently. One day, she insisted I sit on a bench quietly with a doll and watch Ansel. It didn't make any sense to me, and I resisted her limits. I remember more than once being dragged from the park in a tantrum by my mother. I fought her all the way home, and only my father's rational, soft voice could calm me."

"You were a passionate child," said Max, smiling reassuringly.

"I was always inquisitive and prone to activity rather than docility. As I grew older, I encountered similar arguments about things even more important to me. Then, I was told what to wear, read, study, and even how to sit or laugh. My mother telling me that I couldn't pursue things that made me happy made no more sense to me than telling me I couldn't play with Ansel anymore because I was a girl. Her enforcement of society's expectations of women stamped the joy of life right out of me."

"It sounds as if you have been frustrated from a young age. Was your childhood only unhappiness?" said Max.

"My father was my only solace. He acknowledged the limits I encountered but encouraged me to push against them, to a point. He understood my frustration and accepted that I was a unique individual and not a bad girl because I didn't want to conform. He told me I could do great things with my passion, as great as a man, but I had to learn patience. I don't think I figured that out before he died.

"I've spoken in an unrestrained manner. I'm sorry. I trust I have not offended you," Annie said.

"No offense taken. I've never met a woman who speaks so openly against the ways of the world, but your reality is yours. Mine is mine," he said. "You are an extraordinary woman."

"And you are an unusual man—one with a receptive ear. I have enjoyed our conversation. I hope that your opportunities bring you good fortune." She stood up.

"Let me escort you to your deck. That won't subjugate you too much, will it?"

She laughed. "No, given the lack of light and the scoundrels who haunt the lower deck, it would be prudent."

Max held out his arm, but she refused it. He acknowledged her refusal with a smile. When they reached the stairs, he stopped. “It has been a pleasure, Miss Annie. I wish you success in your new life in Cincinnati.”

“Thank you, Max. Goodbye,” she said and turned and walked up the stairs. He watched her until she was out of sight.