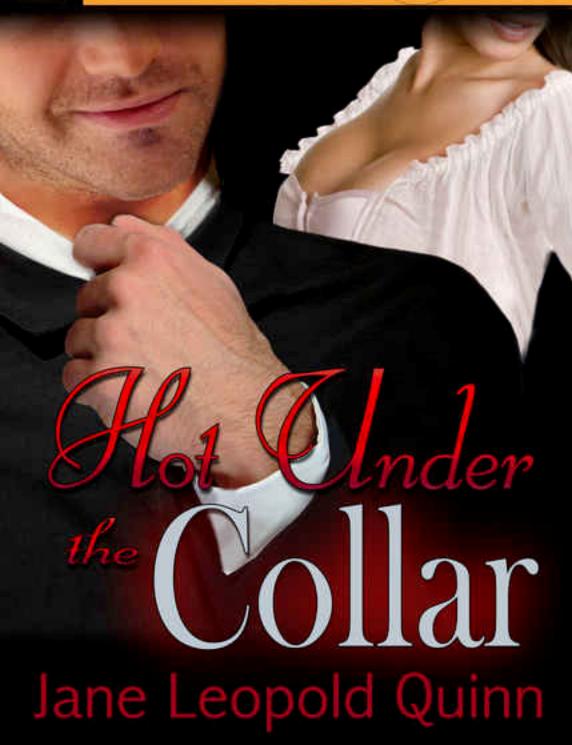


# The Legends of Loving, Texas Series

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#### **CONTENTS**

**Dedication:** 

Hot Under The Collar

**Chapter One** 

**Chapter Two** 

**Chapter Three** 

**Chapter Four** 

**Chapter Five** 

**Chapter Six** 

**Chapter Seven** 

**Chapter Eight** 

**Chapter Nine** 

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#### Hot Under the Collar

Series: Legends of Loving, Texas

Ву

Jane Leopold Quinn

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#### **Dedication:**

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To the rest of the ladies of the Legends—Kaitey Benoit, Jenette DuPris, Mallory Hall, Tambra Kendall, and Renee Michaels. Thanks to Laurel Bradley for suggesting the title. And thank you to Marie Roy of Erotic Romance Workshop.

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[Back to Table of Contents]

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Hot Under the Collar by Jane Leopold Quinn

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[Back to Table of Contents]

#### **Hot Under The Collar**

#### Prologue

The Legends of Loving, Texas are stories not about politics or wars or worldly events. The Legends are about people. About the cowboys and former soldiers living hard scrabble, lonely lives in the West in the years after the Civil War. About the women who trek west to find new lives, new futures worthy of their strength of character and spirit for survival. They are stories about love in all its glorious combinations. The bottom line is that The Legends of Loving, Texas cover all the bases. There's something for every taste, every genre—menage, time travel, vampire, shape shifter, and one man/one woman.

Loving, Texas is the link: the link to the romance, the sex, the excitement of building a new life in a new place, and to happily ever after endings. So, settle in, feel the loving, and plan to read the next installment of The Legends of Loving, Texas.

Loving, Texas—1877

[Back to Table of Contents]

#### **Chapter One**

Good God, she feels good. Fiercely, Pres held her and ate at her mouth. Her enthusiasm staggered him as did his desire for her sweet, womanly body. He ate at her lips. His tongue speared and explored, delving into her mouth, thrusting with abandon. Too long, it had been too long since he'd had a woman. It was shocking that he let himself use her like this. He should stop.

He should. But he didn't. Soft curves yielded under his palms. She pressed tightly against him. How was a man supposed to break off the first kisses he'd had in so long? How was he supposed to ignore the sensuality she betrayed with every wiggle and squirm of her lush body and every answering thrust of her surprisingly agile tongue?

He couldn't. He didn't.

Reflexively his fingers curved around the full cushions of her breasts swollen over the top of her corset. Once he filled his hands with them, he was a goner.

She moaned and shivered, thrusting herself greedily into him.

He licked and suckled at her tongue. All he wanted to do was the same to the sweet nipples hardening against his palms. He drew his fingers to the crests and held them between thumb and forefinger.

She gasped, her head tipped back, her mouth open in a silent scream.

He squeezed precisely and purposefully.

She groaned, shuddered, and rotated her hips against his. Except that it was really against his upper thighs since she was such a little thing compared to him. That was okay. He nestled his heavy erection into the enfolding softness of her belly. Trailing his lips down her neck, his teeth drew on soft as silk skin, nipping in controlled passion, not wanting to mark her, stopping just short of doing it.

Miraculously short.

"Oh, no!" She punctuated her exclamation with a shove at his chest. Ineffectual at first, her fists hit at him harder until she pushed with all her might. "My God, stop this."

"Well, Preacher, see any filly you like?"

Prescott MacKay studied the ladies as they alighted from the covered wagons. Unselfishly, he hoped his buddies would find suitable brides, and quickly. Selfishly, the thing he wanted most on this earth was a woman of his own, but as the preacher, he had to make sure the other guys found their wives first.

"Not really," he responded, not quite truthfully, to Mayor Jim Benson. Many of the ladies were pretty, a couple could be called plain, one looked a little long in the tooth. Tall, short, thin, plump—the women came in all sizes and shapes. Someone for every fella's taste. He wondered if one of them was to his taste. He might be a preacher, but he was still a man. A great, hungry, lonely, horny man.

"That one." Benson pointed to a severely-dressed, severely-visaged lady. "Doesn't look like she's happy to be here."

The woman stood to the side, away from the other chattering mail order brides, her lips pursed, gimlet-eyed gaze sweeping the town. The way her brows drew together said she didn't find much favor in Loving, Texas. Frown notwithstanding, she was still pretty. Round cheeks, a determined pointed chin, fair skin, dark eyes, rich brown hair barely covered by a ridiculously small hat, there was something about her that called to Pres. Her gaze rolled over him, on to Jim, past them, assessing everything. Assessed and found wanting?

He was curious. If she traveled all this way to find a husband, why would she scowl like that? Wouldn't she want to put on her best *face*? Her gaze came back to him. Or was it aimed at his friend? Even from across the busy, dusty street, he could see her lips part slightly and her eyes widen. The sudden heated tightening of his belly shocked him. She didn't look like the kind of woman to inspire lustful thoughts, and as a preacher he tried to keep a lid on them. Didn't feel it was right to respond to all his manly urges, at least not in public.

In his life before becoming a preacher, his bounty hunting days, he wouldn't have bothered with a *proper* looking woman. He'd needed the easy, no commitments, no responsibility, no morning after type of woman back then. It was all different for him now. Now he wanted the morning after woman, the family, the promise of forever.

They traded gazes for a long moment, sights and sounds melting hazily into the background. His heart thudded heavily, almost painfully. What the hell, uh heck. At the same time, her breasts rose and fell in a deep breath. And a nicely

rounded bosom it was. It didn't escape his notice she was a bit on the plump side all the way around, but it didn't keep him from salivating at the promise of all that softness under his work-roughened hands. His lips quirked up, and he brushed his forefinger across his lower lip, anticipating the pleasures he'd share with the woman.

He snapped out of his unseemly sensual daze. Good God, he was a preacher. Yes, he was a rancher, but he did double duty as a servant of God and couldn't allow the other cowboys to think of him as just another skirt chasing skunk. No matter how much skirt chasing he wanted to do again down deeply in the recesses of his heart. Those days had ended three years ago when he gave up gun slinging. Shooting an innocent boy had just about destroyed him.



\* \* \* \*

Isis Garrett saw very little that she liked. In the mid-day heat, the air stifled her lungs, making it hard to breathe, and the sun burned down from a faded blue sky. The town was more desolate looking than she'd been led to believe. Trees clustered around the church and cemetery. They looked cool and refreshing compared to the barrenness of the area in and amongst the storefronts on the main street. And those storefronts needed scraping and painting, except for what

looked like a saloon. Naturally, it was the most well-kept building in this frontier town.

The streets seemed muted compared to the cacophony of Cairo. She'd become accustomed to the braying of donkeys, the bleating of camels, shrill shouts of the vendors hawking every kind of local food and merchandise. Heat and dust, the scents of fresh breads and grilled meats, the memories all came back in a rush and she was homesick. What had she done? She'd left the home she was familiar with for the strangeness of this equally hot and dusty but hushed place. Not so strange. Outside the town, it was as silent and empty as the Egyptian desert. She already knew that from the long trek across the country in the covered wagons.

As usual, she felt on the outside of things. The other brides chirped and giggled, swished their skirts flirtatiously, and simpered at the cowboys surrounding them. She held herself aloof, watchful, assessing, doubtful she would like it here and doubting she would stay.

Unlike the other women, she hadn't traveled all this way to find a husband. That was the last thing she wanted. She'd been with a man, had thoroughly enjoyed making love with him, but had been shocked and betrayed when she found out he was married. So she'd taken her broken heart and run back to the United States. Consequently, she mistrusted the male race and vowed her future would depend on her own devices. She intended to devote her life to improving the culture and intelligence of the people in whatever town she deemed worthy of her.

Besides her clothing, she'd brought two trunks full of books—novels and schoolbooks, two precious copies of the new Merriam-Webster dictionary, and a medical text. And from the looks of things, the six Bibles she carried would be very valuable. Mortified she'd given herself to a man with no conscience, she intended to spend the rest of her life making up for that mistake.

One man stared at her from across the street. She had to squint through the haze of dust motes to see that far. His clothes looked rough—dark pants, dark shirt that buttoned partly down his chest. A sand colored Stetson rose tall and wide over his head, which only seemed to add to his considerable height. His features were well shaded by his hat, but his commanding stance intimidated her. The gun and holster worn slung low on his hips did a lot to intimidate her too.

Well, it didn't matter. She'd probably have nothing to do with a man like that. She was here to start a library, and that was all. No husband hunting, no men friends. A little stab of anguish speared through her belly as she realized she'd never have children and a family, never feel the warmth and security of a man's arms around her. She'd never be lost again in the carnality of a hard male body pressing down on her, pressing his engorged penis inside her. Her lips opened on a sudden sigh that she immediately squelched as she fidgeted and slapped at the dust clinging to her skirts. In her limited experience, men were rotters and liars.

A boy of about twelve years bustled up to her. "Ma'am, do you need help with them trunks a' yours?"

Ripping her mind out of her past and into present day Loving, Texas, she responded, "Yes, young man, thank you. But they're too heavy for you to lift by yourself. They're full of books."

"Books?" He sounded wary. "You a schoolteacher?"

She smiled. He really was adorable with his big shock of fair hair sticking out and freckles dotting his nose and cheeks. "No, I'm going to open a library."

"What's 'at?"

"It's a place with a lot of books for you to borrow, then return them for other people to read. Do you know how to read?"

"Not much," he replied, rocking back and forth from one foot to the other.

"Would you like to practice on some of my books?"

"Maybe." He sounded like he didn't want to commit himself.

That was okay. She wouldn't push anyone. The people who wanted to read would come, and others would follow in time.

"Where are you gonna put your books?"

"I don't know yet. For now, they can go to the hotel until I find a place."

"Maybe Preacher MacKay can help find a place. He knows how to read."

"Probably so," she responded. This Preacher MacKay would be a decent sort of man, not at all like the man still staring at her from across the street. She'd sneaked glances his way, a bit disconcerted he was still looking at her. He certainly wasn't racing over here to help her though. "Where is he?

Maybe he can help us now. We still need to get these trunks stowed away somewhere."

The boy turned around, issued an ear-piercing whistle, and waved his hat in the air. Oh, good Lord, the staring cowboy waved back. He couldn't possibly be... The cowboy said something to the well-dressed man next to him, hitched up his gun belt, and jumped off the boardwalk to smoothly stride across the street right toward her. The closer he got, the larger he seemed. His easy leap up to stand before her put him too close. And too tall.

She gulped, then was furious with herself for reacting to him. But who wouldn't? This close, she could now see him clearly. Tanned face, skin leanly stretched over high cheekbones, knife blade nose, firm chin all combined to set her heart to skittering alarmingly. A sudden rage almost overwhelmed her at the heat radiating across her skin and the heavily thudding pulse low in her belly. She didn't want to react to his immense height and breadth of shoulders combined with that utterly masculine face and the beguiling thick mop of russet hair spilling from under his Stetson. But when he swept the hat off, her senses went into a tailspin. She tamped down on her envy of his rich hair color compared to her ordinary brown. Damn him, she thought ungenerously.

"Prescott MacKay, ma'am." His lips quirked politely enough, blue eyes sparkling like sunshine on ocean waves.

"Mac—?" She glanced at the boy. "He's the preacher?" she asked, dismayed at this turn of events.

"Yes'm. Preacher MacKay," the boy confirmed.

"Do you need help with your trunks, ma'am?"

"She's a li—br—." The boy obviously couldn't say the word. "They're full of books, she said."

The man frowned a minute, then he smiled and said, "A librarian? That's great. Just what this town needs is some book learning. Welcome, Miss—." He paused, an eyebrow quirked inquisitively, his hat poised in front of his chest.

"Miss Garrett," she responded primly, although she didn't feel prim at all. His smile was stunning with its even, white teeth. The temptation to throw herself into his big, strong, manly arms terrified her. Good Lord, a man who looked like him and who was enthusiastic about books was extremely dangerous.

"I have just the place for you to set up your library, Miss Garrett."

"You didn't know I was coming. How do you have a place ready?"

"We have a very nice church building in Loving." He indicated the edge of town with a wave of his hand. "And there's a spot inside the doors that has plenty of room to set up some shelves and a table as a desk."

Gratified at the easy solution to her location problem, her expression brightened. "That's wonderful! It's a perfect place until I can find a permanent spot." In her pleasure, she had to remind herself to be wary of this man. He might be a rough and good looking cowboy, but he was apparently intelligent and a preacher to boot. A formidable combination.

\* \* \* \*

#### **Chapter Two**

Standing right up close to her, Pres was even more fascinated by the lady than he'd been from a distance. His gaze focused on her delectable rosebud mouth, which was pursed disapprovingly. Sharp brown eyes glared at him. Then her whole face transformed with his offer of the church for her library space. But under her sweet, pink cheeked looks, she was as prickly as a cactus. She obviously took great pleasure in her books and lending library, but he wasn't too sure if she'd take pleasure in him. Well, having her in the back of his church for long spells would tell the tale, wouldn't it?



In a few short days, Isis had arranged the books in alphabetical order by author on bookshelves provided by the pastor. Her Bibles, dictionaries, and research books were placed on another two shelves. Prescott MacKay hadn't been around which suited her just fine. She figured she'd just have to deal with him on Saturday when he came to town to prepare for Sunday services. Hopefully, he wouldn't be any bother then.

Well, hadn't she been wrong!

"Mr. MacKay," she greeted him as he sauntered through the front doors of the church. She'd seen his approach through the window, so forewarned, she could attempt an indifferent greeting. His crooked smirk told her he'd wanted to surprise her, but it widened into a full grin when she turned the tables on him.

"Miss Garrett," he responded, his voice so deep it rumbled. "It looks like you're getting settled. Is the space to your satisfaction? Is it large enough?" He leaned his backside against the side of the last pew, legs stretched out before him, boots crossed at the ankles. He looked relaxed enough to spend hours jawboning with her.

"I'm very happy with this space. Please don't pay any attention to me. Go on about your business." She tried dismissing him.

"Oh, I have nothing pressing at the moment." He crossed his arms over his chest.

"Don't you have a sermon to prepare? Or Bible readings?" she asked repressively.

"I have time."

She frowned. He didn't appear to be moving on any time soon, so she sat behind her desk and straightened up already straightened up papers and books. He continued to lean and look, watching her every movement, making her very selfconscious. A heated flush rose from her chest, up her neck, and over her cheeks. She pursed her lips together hoping she looked busy, too busy to chitchat.

Every cell in her body prickled in response to him. Darn it, she had *not* been thinking about him all week. She was *not* 

interested in him as a man. She'd put that behind her. Hadn't she?

"What's your first name?" he asked suddenly.

She looked up at him so fast that her neck snapped.

Rubbing at the pain, she responded, "Isis."

"An unusual name."

"She was the Egyptian goddess of beginnings. My parents are Egyptologists," she said defensively.

"Well, it's a beautiful name. Did you live there?" He seemed to be settling in for a long conversation.

"Yes, all my life. I was born there." It was strange talking to him. She hadn't expected a man who looked so dangerously primal to be intelligent too. She said as much without mentioning the dangerously primal part.

"I've done some reading myself, Miss Isis Garrett. I *have* read the Bible since I *am* a preacher," he said, with a bit of playful pride in his voice.

"Oh, yes, yes, that's right. You would know about Egypt then." Well, that was embarrassing.

"Did you like living in Egypt?" He pushed off from the wooden pew, strolled toward her desk, and picked up a book.

He towered over her, which put him much too close. Heat emanated from his body, evoking the tang of horse and leather and freshly laundered clothes. "It was interesting," she answered the question without looking up at him. "It was all I knew."

"Why did you come out here?"

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, held it for a moment before replying, "That's really none of your concern."

How could she get the message across that she did not want to become any more acquainted with him?

"No, I guess not. I was just wondering what brought you all the way from Egypt to Loving."

"Well, it wasn't to look for a husband, that's for sure."

Making her exclamation intentionally forceful, she rose to her feet. She had to regain control at least over her nerves.

"No? But you came out on the bride wagons."

"It was transportation. I have no intention of ever getting married. I just wanted to start my library." She finally slanted a peek at him and scowled. Why was he looking at her with those exquisite blue eyes? He couldn't possibly be interested. She'd been told she was too plump and her hair a too ordinary brown to attract a man. Even the man who'd taken her virginity had turned spiteful toward her at the end, admitting he'd used her because he was estranged from his wife. He said he had no intention of actually leaving his marriage for someone like her.

Since she hadn't even known he had a wife, she'd responded to the shock and hurt of the rejection by deciding she would devote her life to her books. They were safe. Men were not.

"Would you have dinner with me tonight?"

His invitation came so out of the blue that her jaw dropped open. "Oh...oh, no, I couldn't." She shrugged dismissively, prowling over to the shelves to neaten already neatened spines. What in the world did he mean? She closed her eyes. A vision of Prescott MacKay perched above her, his chest crushing her breasts, the heat of his body searing her skin,

the bright blue of his eyes gleaming lustfully down on her filled her mind, and she had to open her eyes to look around the ordinary church building to dispel the images. Shamefully, she shivered in avid want.

She felt the heat of him close behind her. He drew a forefinger under her chin, turning and lifting it so she would meet his gaze. He gently rubbed his thumb at the underside of her mouth. Surely, the downward tug on her lip was accidental. She tried to break his touch and escape, but an imperceptible bond held her in place.





\* \* \* \*

Pres pulled in a sharp breath. He shouldn't have touched her. Captivated by soft skin, wide melting brown eyes, rosy cheeks, a rapidly beating pulse at the base of her throat, he'd known he was horny, but now he was starving for her. "Do you have other plans?" His question came out in the soft puffs of air his shallow breathing would only allow him. He wondered if she was aware how her whole body turned toward him and how her breasts pressed lightly into his shirt front. And that he could see her nipples popping out through the material of her gown. His cock twitched, wept in anticipation of thrusting into her sweet, luscious body. The thought of brushing the sensitive skin on the tip of his

erection over the hard jut of those nipples nearly did him in. His throat closed on a choked gasp.

She lowered her lashes and raised them again. On another woman, it would look like flirtation but not with her. There was worry, panic in her expression.

"No," barely came out, her lips forming the O. Kiss her

No, you can't. She's a lady. He'd never been so sorry he'd made the vow not to have sex again before he was married. Those days were over. He had to keep his promise to God, no matter how much it pained him emotionally and physically. "I haven't been around here the last few days, and I'd like to welcome you to town." His voice grated harshly in his ears.

She bit her lower lip as if considering his invitation.

"Dinner?" he asked again. "Just as friends?" His hands clenched tensely at his sides. She swiped the bottom of her two front teeth with a moist pink tongue. Jesus, help him, it was sexy. *Not on purpose, not on purpose,* he kept reminding himself. Just wait...

"Will your wife be joining us?"

"Wife." He let his surprise show. "I don't have a wife. Why would you ask that?"

She didn't answer, but her gaze became very serious.

He wanted to soothe away the little frown between her eyes. God help him, sometimes being a preacher was too hard. He'd spent so many years in his other deadly life, but now the stakes were higher. "Isis, I'm not married," he repeated. "Will you have dinner with me?"

She hesitated, then her shoulders suddenly slumped. "All right," she said, her breath whooshing past her lips.

He felt the victory, but wasn't sure what the battle was all about. Maybe over dinner she'd learn not to be quite so wary of him. But then again, maybe she had reason to be.





\* \* \* \*

The wooden bench nestled in a grove of cottonwoods outside the church was Isis's favorite place to sit when she took breaks from her work. The cemetery, which stretched off to the north, was also shaded and surprisingly well-kept. She supposed that was Preacher MacKay's doing. He seemed like a very thorough man.

Oh, Lord, the heat in his eyes had flamed a rare and beautiful blue. How was she supposed to keep her pledge to devote her life only to books? He was a man of God, but the sexual fire in his expression brought back memories she thought banished. Memories of the damn man who took her virginity. She was no longer innocent, but she was no longer a fool either.

Well, dinner in a public place couldn't be too risky.

Isis wanted to leave her past behind. She'd come west, here to Loving, Texas, to start a new life. Her first impressions of the town hadn't been too positive, but it was growing on her.

After his flirtation, which she was sure she hadn't responded to, and his dinner invitation, he'd left her, saying he had a sermon to prepare. What an interesting conundrum he was. A wild and wooly cowboy with all the trappings of Stetson, spurs, and a gun combined with a well-spoken, educated minister. Surely, she'd be safe with him. He wouldn't try to get into her drawers. With the Egyptian, rice paper fan she'd bought in London on her way back to America, she absently fanned her hot cheeks. A novel lay forgotten, open, face down on her lap. Sitting on the wooden bench in the shade didn't keep her face from blazing hot with illicit thoughts of the cowboy-preacher.

Recollections insisted on invading her mind through the strict boundaries she'd built around her past. Even in the heat of a Texas afternoon, the Egypt of her memories seemed hotter. Lying on a bed canopied with miles and miles of tissue thin netting to keep insects out. Her body coated with perspiration. The man's heavy frame above her, also slippery with sweat. A thick thigh between hers, pressing upward against her core. The combination of wet lips, sharp teeth on her nipple and his bristly mustache brushing over her skin, tickling, inciting.

The first time he'd taken her had been painful. He'd been hurried, had apologized, but left her to clean up the blood by herself. The pain had dulled, and she'd wanted him again, wanted the rapturous sensations again.

In the present, she grimaced, squeezing her eyes closed in remembered disgust. Never again would she allow another man to take advantage of her.

"Miss?"

Head bowed, she fought the tears and damned to hell the man from her past.

A hesitant voice, a timid voice, wended its way through her consciousness. She raised her head to see a woman standing in front of her.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Miss, but you're the lady with the books, aren't you?" The young woman bent toward her, an anxious yet dogged expression on her face.

Isis, jolted out of her reveries, automatically smiled, thankful for the interruption. "Yes, I am."

"Would you mind very much if I borrowed one?"

She tried not to stare at the woman, obviously one of the town's *angels of the night*. Eccentrically dressed but in current eastern fashion, her gown, ruched and draped at the back of the skirt, was a tight, midnight blue satin with a very low neckline. She wore a very pretty hat designed like a man's Stetson but with a smaller brim ringed with feather and ribbon trim.

"I love your hat!" Isis exclaimed.

The woman's mouth opened in surprise at the compliment, then her eyes widened in happiness. Her smile made her seem younger than she'd first appeared through her heavy makeup. "Thank you, ma'am!" She patted the hat, feathers ruffling in the breeze. "I made it myself."

"It's beautiful. So unique. Do you make them for a living?" Her heart seized at the look of devastation on the woman's face. She lifted a hand to touch the other's arm and, indicating the bench, quickly said, "Please sit down. My name

is Isis Garrett." She added, "You could open a millinery shop if you make any more hats like that one."

"Mine's Opal Jonas. And thank you. I've made quite a few, almost more than I can wear," she said laughingly.

Each in her own thoughts, they sat without speaking for a moment. Finally, Isis asked, "You'd like to borrow a book?"

"Yes, if you'll lend to me."

"Of course, I will. The books are for anyone to read. What kind of stories do you like?"

Opal laughed outright. "Believe it or not, I like to read romance stories. You wouldn't think I would, but they're pleasant enough to pass the daytime with."

Isis smiled and held up the book in her lap. "Have you ever read anything by Fanny Burney?"

"No, I've never heard of her."

"She was a British author from the last century and wrote about English society at that time."

"I like reading about the past. It kind of takes me away from my present life." She gave a little self-deprecating chuckle and blushed under the face paint.

"Here then, take this." Isis offered the book to Opal.

"But you're reading it. I don't want to take it from you."

"Please. I've read it before. Tell me later if you liked it. I have more by the same author."

"How will I return it to you?"

"Just come into the library any time you'd like. I'll be there."

"Someone might see me."

"And what's wrong with that?"

Opal scowled. "Some people might think me unfit."

Isis pressed her lips together. "Well, I don't, and it's my library. So there!"

Opal chuckled and said, "You're sweet. I hope you don't get any nasty remarks."

"I can handle it, don't worry. Books are for everyone to enjoy. You'll come back and talk to me, won't you? We'll talk about the story." Isis smiled encouragingly.

Opal clutched the book as if it were precious and beamed back. "I will, and I'll take very good care of this."

Isis enjoyed the company of the other woman. Sensing a sensitive soul under the satin and greasepaint, she wondered why Opal had become a prostitute. And it was refreshing to talk to someone who wasn't planning a wedding or who hadn't just been married. The brides were so single minded and didn't seem to have another thought in their heads. At least this woman read books.

"So what do you think of Pres MacKay?" Opal cocked her head to one side.

Isis raised an eyebrow. "He's nice," she responded carefully. "Do you know him?"

Opal giggled. "Not *that* way, no. He just seems perfect. He's handsome and smart and rich."

"Rich! He's just a cowboy. He can't earn too much money as a preacher."

"He's not just a cowboy. He owns the Bar Eight ranch."

"Really? I thought he just worked there."

Opal shook her head. "Uh uh."

"Didn't he send for a bride?"

"Don't know about that. Maybe he's interested in you."

Isis blushed, ducked her head hoping to hide it. "Oh, I doubt it. I'm not the kind of woman a man like that pursues."

"Why do you say that? You're beautiful."

"Well..." Isis had no response. No one had ever said that to her before. Not even her parents.

"I don't mean to embarrass you. You just seem like a sweet, lovely, intelligent woman any man would be proud to be with, especially a man like Pres."

"Um..." Isis's head spun, tears formed in her eyes at the compliment.

"Are you all right?" Opal bent her head sympathetically and took hold of Isis's hand.

It would be wonderful to talk to another woman, someone like Opal who wouldn't judge her. Isis nodded slightly, but she knew she wasn't going to tell the other woman her story. It had to stay hidden.

Opal continued talking as if nothing had happened. "I've known Pres MacKay for many years. I've never known him to treat a woman badly. Not a man either. He's the good kind of preacher. Doesn't preach on Sundays and raise hell on Saturday night like some I've met."

Isis nodded and pressed her lips together processing this information. No matter how wonderful Opal thought he was, Isis doubted that Preacher MacKay would approve of her lost virginity.

"I've seen him watch you."

"Oh, you haven't!" Isis shifted on the bench and turned toward the other woman.

Opal laughed aloud. "I know that look, believe you me."

"No one looks at me with interest. I'm too...large," she said shyly. "And too plain."

"Don't be silly. You're perfect. Most men like a soft woman, and your face is so pretty and innocent looking. I bet you're sweet on the outside and passionate on the inside."

"Oh, Opal," she exclaimed, laughing now. "Don't tease me."

Opal's expression sobered. "I'm not. I'll bet my last hat pin that Pres admires you. I know when a man's got that look in his eye."

"Well, he invited me to dinner tonight."

"And you've been keeping that information secret? What did I tell you?"

"It's just as a friend."

"Sure. Well, we'll see how that goes," Opal responded succinctly.

"It's just that he's so different from any man I've ever met. He acts like a gentleman but wears a gun and has this aura of danger somehow. It's hard to pinpoint. A dangerous man of God. Frightening and intriguing at the same time." She turned to the other woman, giving her a perplexed look. "Do you know what I mean?"

"Well, I don't like to gossip, because Lord knows I'm not one to talk, but this is true. The preacher used to be a gunslinger and bounty hunter."

"Bounty hunter?"

"He hired out to round up men wanted by the law."

"You mean he was a police officer?"

"Oh, no, it's not the same thing. He did it for the money.

That's how he got his first stake and could buy the Bar Eight."

"What's a gunslinger?"

"Where are you from, girl? Haven't you read about this in any of your novels or the newspapers?"

"I was raised in Egypt and just came back to this country a few months ago."

"Oh, my, I had no idea. Egypt, huh?" Opal's eyes lit with interest. "I'd love to hear about that."

"I'll tell you all about it," Isis promised. "But what's a gunslinger?"

Opal chuckled. "Right, I got distracted. A gunslinger's a fast draw. Whoever pulls his gun out of his holster the fastest, shoots, and wins."

"He shoots people? Kills them?" Isis felt a little sick. What kind of man was she going to have dinner with?

"Only if he couldn't get them to jail any other way. The men he hunted were violent robbers and murderers. And he always gave them a fair fight. That's the way with gunslingers. Whoever draws first wins," Opal said triumphantly.

"You sound impressed."

Opal nodded enthusiastically. "He's pretty well known, in Texas anyway. Something happened, I think he wounded a kid, and he quit the business. I wouldn't have minded him being a customer of mine." She stopped abruptly with an abashed expression. "I guess that makes it pretty clear what line of work I'm in. I'm sorry."

Isis placed her hand on Opal's. "It doesn't matter to me what you do, but you were never...uh...with him?" She felt more jealousy than she wanted to. Pres MacKay didn't mean anything to her, and she doubted he had any sexual interest in her. Men didn't look at her that way.

"No, honey. Somehow, somewhere he found God. Women have tried to get his attention, but he's been a good boy. So far," Opal replied.

"I don't think he's going to change his ways because of me," Isis said repressively.

"I don't know. He offered you the church for your library, and now he's invited you to dinner."

"Opal, don't get any ideas."

"Oh, I have plenty of ideas, most of them bad." Opal threw her head back and let go with a bawdy laugh. "I like Pres, and I like you. It might be time for both of you to be happy."

Isis uncomfortably joined the laughter. "Opal, you might be wishing for too much. I'm just not the kind of woman men are interested in."

"I think you're wrong."

[Back to Table of Contents]

#### **Chapter Three**

Isis knew she wasn't wrong. Men weren't interested in her sexually.

Pres MacKay called for her promptly at the hotel. The ladies' dining room at Cartwright's Hotel and Saloon had been a pleasant surprise with its white tablecloths and flower patterned dishes. Pretty landscapes were displayed on whitewashed wood walls, and red and black striped curtains bordered the windows. Thick candles in bowls centered each table.

The preacher wore a brown suit with a white shirt buttoned all the way up. It wasn't as formal as if he'd worn a tie, but he still looked nice. His shiny russet hair had been wetted and combed straight back. She could still see the creases where his hat had been, then her gaze was caught by the sight of his long, thick fingers threading through the strands to erase them. Both arms up, elbows out, shoulders bunching with muscle, he didn't look particularly preacherly. More like all intensely formidable man.

And handsome, a strong jaw, prominent nose, freckles dotting that nose. Boyish and dangerous, devilish and angelic all at the same time. How would a man like this preach? She actually looked forward to going to Sunday service. As he draped the napkin across his lap, her gaze dropped to his pants stretched tightly over thick thigh muscles, and her heart fluttered.

"The roast beef is real good here, Miss Garrett," he explained. "No matter how they slice it, it's still the best. Texas beef."

Thank God he hadn't noticed where her gaze had gone. She ordered the roast beef.

"I saw you talking to Opal Jonas this afternoon."

"She wanted to borrow a book. Will there be a problem with her coming into the library?" she challenged.

"Of course not. Why would it?"

He looked huge perched on the delicate dining room chair. The back of it came to below his shoulder blades. On her, it was almost high enough for her to rest her neck. But he put their faces even when he hunched forward, his elbows on the table, and leaned into her. Naturally, she sat primly, shoulders back, chin up. He was too close.

Before she could respond, a high-pitched, strident voice interrupted them. "Miss Garrett."

"Hello, Marjorie." Isis glanced at the intruder, Marjorie Hightower, the town busybody.

Pres pushed to his feet at the arrival of the other lady.

"Miss—" That was all he got out before the woman exploded.

"Isis Garrett, why were you fraternizing with that woman this afternoon? Do you know what she is?"

"Well, for heaven's sake." Isis was stunned at the vehemence in Marjorie's voice. "Why do you care who I talk to, Marjorie?"

"Because she's a...a...lady of easy virtue," the other woman finished in an overwrought whisper.

"Really?" Isis played dumb.

"Yes. You shouldn't be associating with a woman like that." "Why not?"

"Well," Marjorie sputtered. "She's not the right sort. Isn't that so, Preacher MacKay?" Marjorie turned her ire toward Pres for confirmation.

Isis didn't hide her cold disdain, responding, "Marjorie Hightower, if a person wants to read a book, she has every right in the world." Isis glanced at Pres to see his lips thin into an angry line. She supposed he agreed with Marjorie, being a preacher and all. Isis fully expected him to berate her too and was surprised when he spoke up.

"Miss Hightower, I believe that if Miss Jonas would like to read a book, she has every right to."

"Well! It isn't proper. She's not decent."

"She seemed very nice to me," added Isis innocently, like an extra poke in the eye.

"Here you are having dinner with the preacher after spending the afternoon with a...prostitute. Have you no shame?" Marjorie's face flamed red, and her fists clenched in her skirts.

Pres placed his napkin neatly at the side of his plate and spoke very quietly, "Miss Hightower, I don't think this is the time for this discussion, but Miss Garrett's library is open to anyone who would like to borrow books."

"But it's in a church."

"And the church is open to everyone too," he added emphatically.

Isis ducked her head and smiled. She'd rarely met a man of the cloth who felt this way, who accepted people as they were.

"I never heard a preacher defend a prostitute," Marjorie sputtered.

"Well, you heard one now, Miss Hightower. Miss Garrett and I are having dinner. If you have nothing else to say, please leave us."

"Maybe I won't be in church tomorrow," Marjorie snapped.

"I hope you are, but that's your choice," he replied, smoothly but sternly.

Isis glanced from Pres to Marjorie and back again, amazed that he was so open-minded. Amazed and impressed.

In a flurry of petticoats, Marjorie whirled around and huffed off back to her own table. Pres lowered himself into the chair again just as their food was delivered to the table. "At least she didn't ruin our dinner," he muttered.

"You weren't going to criticize me too for talking to Opal?"
"Of course not." He grinned conspiratorially, his lips tilting up on one side.

"Do you know her?" She was snared in his clear, lake-blue gaze.

"Yes."

"Professionally?" She supposed she was testing him. Opal had already said no.

"No."

"No?" She held her breath.

"No."

"But you know her?" She didn't know why she pressed this. It was really none of her business.

"Isis, this is a small town. Everyone knows everyone." He tilted his head and narrowed his gaze.

Uncomfortable that she'd impugned his honesty, she decided to change the subject. "How did you come to be a preacher? Isn't that odd for a cowboy?" She sliced into her roast beef, rare, just the way she liked it, and more tender than she'd expected.

"Probably, but it was something important to me. When you're out on the range for any length of time, you can't help but be aware of God's handiwork."

He didn't mention being a bounty hunter, and she didn't either. "Did you attend a seminary?"

"Nothing that formal. You know how a student can be trained by a lawyer? Well, I apprenticed with a preacher."

"Did you always live here in Loving?"

"No, when I bought the Bar Eight, the town needed a preacher, and I felt called to do it."

"You sound so matter of fact about such an important thing."

"It wasn't matter of fact at all, Isis. The need was there, and I filled it. Do you believe in God?"

"I was raised to," she hedged.

"Okay."

"Just okay? You're very strange for a preacher."

"You'll get used to me." He chuckled.

"Maybe." She pursed her lips and shook her head slightly.

"You will," he drawled confidently.

"Just eat your famous Texas beef," Isis instructed with a small smile.

Pres's laugh boomed out over the dining room. People looked their way, smiled, then went back to their own eating.





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Pres grinned at Isis's orders to eat. At least they agreed on one thing: people should be treated equally. Pretty, but peppery. He liked that about her. "You said your parents were Egyptologists?"

"They still are," she said, tucking into the mashed potatoes.

"Where are they now?"

"In Egypt."

"You came back to America alone?"

"Um hm."

"Why?" He brushed at his lips with his napkin, interested in getting some insight into her life.

"Because I wanted to make my own way."

"Why did you pick Loving?"

"I saw an advertisement for the brides and bought passage."

"But you don't want a husband?" He leaned an elbow on the table and turned a gimlet expression on her.

"Absolutely not," she replied emphatically.

"What's wrong with husbands?" he wondered.

She stilled, her fork halfway to her lips. Her eyes flashed, angry and wounded.

"That's none of your business." Her lips pursed so tightly that they turned white.

"Mm," he responded noncommittally. A pretty, young woman, intelligent, principled, but who didn't want a husband? She intrigued him.

"My mission is to start a library," she continued, with an edge to her voice. "I hope to have my own building so that I don't have to interfere with your church."

"I don't mind your being in the church, especially since it would be empty all week otherwise."

"You don't mind if women like Opal come in?" She gazed at him from under her lashes.

It wasn't flirtatious in any way, but arousal stabbed at him. Hard. He shifted in the chair and lowered his voice to keep it steady. "Of course not. I meant it when I told Marjorie Hightower that. God loves every creature, not just the ones Miss Hightower approves of."

"You're not like other ministers I've known."

"No?" He smiled at her. The sky had darkened outside the windows, and her complexion glowed like pure cream in the candlelight. "What am I like?"

"I don't know," she replied thoughtfully, little ridges scrunching up between her eyebrows.

Their gazes met, held. Heat radiated between them. He was in no doubt she was as attracted to him as he was to her. She couldn't hide the changing expressions on her face; he

just didn't know what they meant. When he'd touched her before, on her lip, even when he'd first seen her across the street, he'd felt an unmistakable sexual urge. Ever since he'd become a preacher, he hadn't slept with a woman, but he sure remembered what it was like.

His fingers ached to caress the soft curves of her figure. They made him think of warm and welcoming comfort. Of a woman of his own. Home and family. Sinful, glorious sex. Not letting her drop her gaze, he smiled, acknowledging to himself that stretching her out beneath him in a bed of fresh linens would be the nicest thing in the world. Then he'd want to explore. Explore her body. Every sweet, luscious, plump inch of it. He smiled at that thought.

She watched him with eyes full of troubled suspicions. Hell, he was troubled too. Why, after three years as a preacher, was he tempted by this woman?

That first day, watching her from across the street, watching her obvious disapproval of the town, if Bobby Schmitt hadn't whistled for help, he would have gone over to her anyway. It would have been the neighborly thing to do, but she'd interested him as well as aroused him, even then.

Now, she was ensconced with her library in the corner of the church, and he liked the businesslike way she went about setting up. He liked coming in the door, seeing her arranging books. She really cared about them. And cared about making sure other people had a chance to read.

"Pie?"

"Huh?" he said, jerking his attention from the delectable Miss Garrett.

"Preacher MacKay, would you like pie or apple cobbler?" The waitress hovered at his elbow.

Isis was the first to glance away from him and at the server.

"Isis, would you like some dessert?"

"No, thank you."

He glanced at the waitress. "I guess not. I'll take the check, please."

When they were alone again, Isis said, "Have some dessert, if you'd like." She accented *you*. "The young lady seems to be flirting with you."

"Really? I hadn't noticed."

"I imagine many young ladies flirt with you."

"But you don't?"

She again pursed her lips tightly, her eyes flashed angry sparks.

He wanted to jolt a reaction out of her.

"I don't flirt," she remarked flatly.

"A pretty girl like you?"

"Don't try to flatter me, Mr. MacKay. I'm not the flirting kind."

"Every woman is the flirting kind, Miss Garrett." He grinned at her agitation.

"I'm not."

"But why not?"

"It should be obvious," she snapped.

She's touchy. Was she hurt by a man?

"Women like me do not flirt with men like you."

"Well, that sounds definite. So you're not interested in a man like me?"

Her lips opened and rounded to an O. "Don't tease me, sir. I don't care for it."

She looked hurt and angry. And defensive, her breasts rising and falling quickly. Something had happened to her, and he wanted to know what it was. But this wasn't how he wanted this evening to go.

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[Back to Table of Contents]

#### **Chapter Four**

Outside, she felt enveloped by the hot, still air. By the inky, unrelieved blackness surrounding them. Her heels tapping briskly, Isis marched along the boardwalk, a silent Pres MacKay at her side. He offered her his arm, but she wouldn't take it. He did occasionally bump against her shoulder, and she doubted it was by accident. They reached the end of the wooden sidewalk. Pres stepped down, turned, and placed both hands around her waist to lift her down.

She hated that. Her waist wasn't as narrow as she'd like, and she hated having a man touch her there. His hands, large and warm, lingered after her feet touched the ground. She automatically clutched the sleeves of his jacket at the elbows, couldn't catch her breath, her heart suddenly beat rapidly. He took a step too closely until her breasts brushed his chest. What is he *doing*? She stared into his shirtfront. Time stretched out endlessly.

His hands slowly fanned up over her back, over her shoulder blades, and he crushed her against his hard body.

She closed her eyes and suppressed a whimper. Her throat tight, the heat of him, the scents of soap and starch inundated her senses. His large hand cupped her nape, thumb brushing around her ear. She waited, feeling helpless. Vulnerable. Aroused.

"Isis," his voice barely above a whisper. "Look at me."

She shook her head. Couldn't succumb. She'd been caught like this before. By another man who used her.

"Please." His voice deepened into a sensual murmur. He ducked his head, nuzzled her chin up, and captured her mouth lightly. At first. Then he tightened his arm around her back, and his lips heated and softened on hers, the kiss turning more intense.

Oh. Instinctively her fingers clenched. He tasted yeasty, of the beer he'd had at dinner. Her senses swirled with primitive, sexual needs. Lost in the magic of his lips, her hands slid up to his shoulders.

He made a harsh little sound in his throat, and his tongue, thick and insistent, conquered her mouth.

She remembered kisses like this. Arousing. Too arousing. Nevertheless, she threaded her fingers through the long hair at the nape of his neck and clung, suckling his tongue.

He cupped her head, controlling her, securing her. He played, nibbling and sipping, tugging her upper lip between his teeth, then the lower lip, all the while issuing little growling sounds from his throat.

God help her, she nibbled back, caught a moan in her throat, let it out in little puffs of air.

He nudged her into a narrow space between the buildings and pushed her against the rough wood.

There was nowhere to go and nothing to do but push back. Not for him to stop though. She wanted it, the power of his large, muscular body dominating and devouring. Her response, as vehement as his, she ground her hips against his, felt on her belly the hard, explicit evidence that he was as aroused as she was.



Good God, she feels good. Fiercely, Pres held her and ate at her mouth. Her enthusiasm staggered him, as did his desire for her sweet, womanly body. He ate at her lips. His tongue speared and explored, delving into her mouth, thrusting with abandon. Too long, it had been too long since he'd had a woman. It was shocking that he let himself use her like this. He should stop.

He should. But he didn't. Soft curves yielded under his palms. She pressed tightly against him. How was a man supposed to break off the first kisses he'd had in so long? How was he supposed to ignore the sensuality she betrayed with every wiggle and squirm of her lush body and every answering thrust of her surprisingly frisky tongue?

He couldn't. He didn't.

Reflexively his fingers curved around the full cushions of her breasts swollen over the top of her corset. Once he filled his hands with them, he was a goner.

She moaned and shivered, thrusting herself greedily into him.

He licked and suckled at her tongue. All he wanted to do was the same to the sweet nipples hardening against his palms. He drew his fingers to the crests and held them between thumb and forefinger.

She gasped, her head tipped back, her mouth open in a silent scream.

He squeezed precisely and purposefully.

She groaned, shuddered, and rotated her hips against his. Except that it was really against his upper thighs since she was such a little thing compared to him. That was okay. He nestled his heavy erection into the enfolding softness of her belly. Trailing his lips down her neck, his teeth drew on soft as silk skin, nipping in controlled passion, not wanting to mark her, stopping just short.

Miraculously short.

"Oh, no!" She punctuated her exclamation with a shove at his chest. Ineffectual at first, her fists hit at him harder until she pushed with all her might. "My God, stop this."

He bit back a curse, God forgive him. Rocking back on his heels, he inhaled what he hoped was a cleansing breath.

Her body jerked as if she were going to run.

He steadied her with hands on her shoulders. Good Lord, he felt vile and glorious at the same time. Height differences aside, they fit together. Her breasts filled his hands perfectly. Her head would easily rest on his shoulder.

His vision cleared from its sexual haze enough to focus on her face. Horror, guilt, unmistakable hunger. He recognized all her expressions because he felt the same way. "Isis." His voice ground out in a harsh croak. "I'm so sorry."

"Let. Me. Go," she demanded in a very much similar throaty wheeze.

"Isis, please forgive me. I don't know what I was thinking."

"You're a minister." She said it like she was accusing him of something evil.

"Yes, yes."

"How could you do that to me?"

What? "Wait just a minute, woman. You kissed me back." "But you're a minister," she repeated.

Now she made him mad. "I'm a man first, and you can't deny you kissed me back."

"You...you touched me the way you did, and you're trying to excuse your conduct?"

Oh, boy, he'd really done it. "Isis, I didn't mean to insult you." He had to protect her. What if someone had seen them? Her reputation would have been destroyed, and it would have been because he'd been too long without a woman. This being a preacher was sometimes trying. His heart thudded heavily with guilt. "I'll walk you to your room."

She glared at him.

"I won't touch you, just walk you there."

She stalked out of the alley. He followed, making sure that she got home safely. Thank God no one had seen them. Not for his sake, but for hers.

Son of a...buck. On his way back to his own bed in the room attached to the church, he cursed himself. He'd done everything wrong. Isis was a woman to marry. No matter how aroused he was, and he'd been aroused many times in the last three years since he became a preacher, he'd vowed not to sleep with a woman outside of marriage. But she sure had responded to him, no doubt about that. And he wanted more.



After a night of tossing and turning, Isis rolled to her stomach and hugged her pillow. The absolute last thing she wanted to do was get up, but Marjorie Hightower was already knocking on bedroom doors to remind the brides about services. Apparently, Marjorie had forgotten her threat to stay away from church and Preacher MacKay.

"Miss Garret, you *are* going to church, aren't you?" The strident voice grated in her ears.

"Umphf."

Knock, knock. "Isis, wake up."

She raised her head far enough from the pillow to respond clearly, "Yes, Marjorie. I'm coming." Strident footsteps clacked down the hall to the next room. "Damn busybody," Isis muttered.



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Acceptance. That was Preacher MacKay's sermon this morning. Isis, still shocked and embarrassed by her actions last night, appreciated the message. She just hoped that Marjorie did. She wished Opal was here. Isis determined then

and there she would lend books to any and all of the ladies of the evening whether Marjorie liked it or not.

Every time she sneaked a peek at Pres, he seemed to be looking back. Her cheeks burned with the remembered passion of the night before. She'd acted like a wanton woman, had shown him just how wicked she was. But the minute he'd kissed her, the loneliness and hunger for the physical connection overwhelmed her. Could he tell she wasn't a virgin? Any experienced man would probably know, and he kissed like a very experienced man. She was positive he hadn't always been celibate, not a man who'd made a living with his guns. But an unmarried woman must be innocent. No man wanted a woman who wasn't chaste.

At the end of the service, she'd have to greet him at the door, shake his hand. Maybe she could veer into her library to avoid him. Yes, that's exactly what she'd do. Make it clear she didn't want anything more to do with him.

The church quieted, the voices had died out at the door. "Hello, Isis."

He'd found her. She grimaced. It looked as if she would have to put him in his place. "Mr. MacKay, I'm very busy here, so if you'll excuse me..."

"Isis, about last night..."

"We can just say it never happened." She turned to look at him. Her heart felt like it was plugging her throat.

He drew closer to her. "Is that how you want it to be?" he asked, his voice lowered intimately.

She stood her ground, ashamed by her actions the night before but defiant. "I have no interest in men or marriage."

He flinched, cocking his head to one side. "All I know is that I liked kissing you, and unless I miss my guess, you liked it too.

Her mouth opened. "I did not!" she said mutinously.

"Don't deny it. Not in the church." His lips quirked, his eyes scrunched up in amusement as he lifted both hands to indicate the building.

Her mouth closed on a click of teeth.

"I'd like us to spend more time together." He became earnest again.

"I don't think it's a good idea." Her stomach roiled, and she made a show of neatening up a stack of books on her desk so she wouldn't have to look at him.

"Why not?" he pressed.

"Because..." Damned if she could think of a reason.

"Because I'm busy." She knew it was an unconvincing excuse, but it was the best she could come up with on short notice.

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The next day, Isis started a search for another home for the library. Several weddings took place in the church, even during the week, so on many days Pres turned up in town, always looking mighty fine, to officiate. Sometimes, in a pinch, he asked her to act as witness or maiden of honor.

Listening to his rich drawl as he pronounced the vows gave her more of a thrill than hearing the bridal couple repeat them. His sincerity was obvious. He believed in the union of marriage. An honorable man. Her heart ached. It was too late for her. She'd dishonored herself.

When did everything become so muddled? Her past wouldn't disappear, but was she doomed forever to be alone and childless? Even her parents, as eccentric as they were, loved each other still after all these years.

Today the wedding proceeded without her. Enough witnesses were present. She perched at her desk, papers arrayed before her as if she were reading them, fingers drumming in fits and starts, letting the drone of the familiar words soothe her. She didn't realize anyone had come in until she heard a quiet throat clearing.

"Miss Garrett." Opal was stationed in front of Isis's desk, her hands behind her back, her body shifting nervously from one foot to the other. The fashionable, deep mauve gown set off her coal black hair and leaf green eyes.

"Good afternoon, Opal. You look very nice today."

The other woman smiled, clearly glowing over the praise. "Thank you, Miss Garrett."

"I wish you'd call me Isis. We're friends," Isis pointed out.

"I'd love to. You're the only woman in town, besides the other...well, you know, the other girls, who'll talk to me," Opal said gratefully.

Isis smiled. "Have you given any more thought to opening a millinery shop?"

"I think about it all the time," she said earnestly.

"I've been thinking about it too. We could lease a building together. Hats and books. People could browse one or the other, or both."

"But would any of the nice ladies in town buy from me?" Uncertainty was clear in Opal's voice.

"If your hats are pretty enough, and yours are, they'd line up outside the doors," Isis stated confidently. "What are you hiding?" She nodded toward Opal's hands hidden behind her back.

"Oh, how could I forget?" The other woman brought out a new hat and proudly held it up.

Isis came out from behind her desk. "Opal, it's beautiful. Women will be fighting to buy your designs."

"It's for you."

"Of course, I'll buy it," Isis exclaimed.

"No, I want to give it to you. You've done so much for me."

"But you'll never make any money if you give your hard work away."

"I probably won't be able to make a living anyway," Opal murmured.

"Opal, come sit down," Isis instructed, as she led Opal to a chair and sat across from her. "Why do you say that? You have a real talent."

"No one will buy from a prostitute," she responded cheerlessly.

"You can start over. New people are coming to town. They won't know your past. You'll just be known as the lady who creates such lovely hats."

"Do you really think that could happen?"

Isis grasped Opal's hands. "Everyone deserves a second chance."

Opal's mouth opened.

"Even a third and fourth chance," Isis said, anticipating Opal's argument.

"Maybe..."

"No maybe about it. We'll look for a space this very afternoon. I've got the money. You gather up all your supplies, and we'll be in business by next week."

"But..."

Isis held up her hand to stop Opal. "Have courage. We'll do this together."

A tear slipped down Opal's cheek. "Bless you, Isis." "It'll be all right. You'll see."

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[Back to Table of Contents]

#### **Chapter Five**

Pres entered the church through the back way and heard voices in the library. Isis had been looking for another space but hadn't found anything yet. Thank God. High-pitched giggles punctuated the sweet cadence of her voice. Isis read,

"Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.

"It's so dreadful to be poor!" sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.

He popped his head around the corner. She sat on a low stool with five kids arrayed in front of her on the floor. Four sat cross legged, elbows on knees, one, Bobby Schmitt himself, stretched out full length on his stomach, chin balanced in his palms, all gazing raptly up at her. No one noticed him until he said, "Hi, kids. What're you reading, Miss Garrett?"

Her head snapped up, and her cheeks turned a becoming shade of pink. He felt his face heat too. Usually around him, she was severe and business-like, unless she was kissing him back. Sitting low to the ground, her skirts draped around her, she leaned toward the children while she read to them, and looked...submissive.

Whoa. Where did that come from?

"Hi, Pastor MacKay," one of the little girls greeted him.

"Miss Garrett's reading to us," she said happily.

"I see that. Do you like the story?"

"We just started," said Bobby.

"What book is it, Miss Garrett?" He lowered his gaze, quirked his lips in a smile, and wondered if she had any idea where his mind had gone.

"It's Little Women by Louisa May Alcott," she said.

"Are the women short?" he asked, winking at the kids.

"No, silly," one of the little girls answered for Isis. "It's about a mother and her daughters during the War Between the States. Did you fight in that war, Pastor MacKay?"

"I did not, honey."

"I forgot. You was huntin' bad guys out here."

Isis's gaze rested on him. As far as he knew, she didn't know about his past. Someone could have told her. Maybe that's why she didn't seem to want to get involved with him.

"Yup. Now I'm just rounding up you kids to come to church on Sundays," he said with a smile.

"I come to church," a cute little redhead stated.

"I know, honey." He reached down to wind a corkscrew curl around his finger.

"Oh, yeah, you got red hair like me."

"Yup. Sure do. Miss Garrett, could I have a word with you?" He gave her a significant look.

"I'm reading to the children, Mr. MacKay."

"It'll only take a minute, then you can be right back." He held out a hand to help her up from the stool.





"Would you come out to my ranch with me on Sunday after church?"

Isis couldn't have been more shocked if he'd asked her to undress. She met his gaze, the anxiety in his tugged at her heart. He was a dangerous man, in every way. A parson wearing a gun. A bounty hunter that was. A man who'd killed. An enigma. She couldn't categorize him into a neat little slot. Her mind flooded with the memory of the imprint of his body with its broad shoulders and thick, muscular chest. His strong arms and sculpted jaw contradicted the boyish freckles sprinkled across his nose.

But he was more dangerous to her heart than he ever could be with a weapon. "I came out here to start a library." She'd keep trying to scare him off.

"I understand that," he responded patiently, never taking his eyes off hers.

"I don't mean that I'm presuming you have any other interest in..." *Lord, this is embarrassing*. Of course, he didn't mean to marry her. She didn't want that either.

"If we don't get along, that'll be the end of it. I promise."

She searched his eyes. She could handle him. At the very least, he wouldn't *attack* her. So, even though she was probably jumping into trouble, she nodded her agreement.

"Good. I'll have Maggie at The Cartwright make up a basket, so I won't have to ruin lunch with my bad cooking." He wheeled around and was out the door before she could say another word.

A thrill rolled through her veins as a breath shot out of her lungs. You're absolutely crazy to go with him. Well, you'll just have to keep the conversation about general topics. Don't let him get near enough to kiss you again. She could do this. It would be broad daylight.



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For Sunday services and the picnic with Pres, Isis donned a simple day dress of cotton printed with red rosebuds and faded green leaves. The softly pleated skirt sported a bustle, and the over tunic buttoned down the front. In acknowledgement of the heat of Egypt and Texas, she'd cut down the sleeves and hemmed them just below her elbows. The hat Opal had given her the other day was similar to the one her friend had been wearing the day they met. A wide, red satin ribbon hatband ending in a big bow in the back spruced up a short-crowned white Stetson with a broad brim to shade her face and neck from the sun. She adored it for both its beauty and its practicality.

The minute she climbed into the carriage with him, her mood turned lighthearted. The day was lovely, with an azure sky and streaky, high white clouds. It was her day off, and she was going on a picnic with a handsome man. She acknowledged the conflict in her no-involvement policy and the fact that she was going out alone with him, but she was

confident in her ability to keep him at a physical distance. Unfortunately, in the carriage they had to sit too closely for comfort.

He grinned, said, "Ready?" And snapped the reins.

She nodded, and they took off at a fast clip. Flattening a hand on the crown of her hat so it didn't fly off, she laughed at the sheer enjoyment of the cool breeze on her cheeks.

With a tap on the backs of the horses, he prodded them to go faster, and they soon left the dusty roadway to race over a faint track in an endless plain of verdant buffalo grass.

"We're going to your house?" she shouted above the wind and creaking of carriage wheels.

"Yes, I want to show it to you. It's a work in progress though. I'm building a second story for more bedrooms."

Her only response was to nod. She hoped she'd made the right decision to trust him. Changing the subject seemed like a good idea. Pres knew about her parents. She knew nothing about his childhood or his gun slinging days. "Were you born and raised in Loving?"

"Nope. My family lives up in the Panhandle. My dad's a preacher."

"Is that why you are?"

"Uh uh. I rebelled in every way I could as a kid."

"Is that why you became a bounty hunter?"

"Oh, so you know about that," he replied, slanting a glance at her.

"Opal told me. Don't be mad at her."

"I'm not. Pretty much everyone knows it. I'm surprised Marjorie Hightower didn't blab it first."

Getting him back on track, she continued, "How did you get started?"

"I left home at seventeen and met up with a fellow I found out later was a bounty hunter. He taught me the ropes."

"Did he teach you to sling your gun fast?"

He laughed. "You mean be a gunslinger?" Then he quickly sobered. "It's not really funny. It was a dangerous life, and every day I repent taking lives." He turned his face away from her to gaze across the prairie.

Before he turned, she caught a glimpse of regret in his eyes. "That's why you became a preacher?" She prompted gently, wondering if he'd tell her about the child. Her heart hurt for him. He fought his demons too, the same as she. It added another dimension to him. Made him more...human.

He seemed to be lost in his thoughts. She studied his profile, the strong jaw, lean cheeks, his lips pressed tightly together. Something happened in her breast. A softening of her heart. As fast as that, it terrified her. She couldn't care for him. That would be disaster. It wasn't in her plans.

After long moments of silence, his attention elsewhere, he jerked as if awakened suddenly and turned back to her with an intent expression, as if he were looking into her soul.

It was an even more intimate feeling than when they'd kissed.

Just then, he pulled up on a rise. Below was the ranch. The house roosted on the side of a thickly wooded hillside overlooking the yard. Corrals lay off to the right, a red barn and matching storage shed right next to them. Horses milled in the corrals but not a ranch hand was in sight.

They followed a well-graded trail down to the yard, clattered over a wooden bridge crossing a stream, and she got a close up view of the house. It was nothing like what she'd expected. White paint flecks were peeling off, but the covered porch stretching the width of the house made it welcoming. Scaffolding and building materials littered the yard, contrasting with the neatness of the business side and the barn area.

She glanced at him. He watched her face. She looked back at the house.

"I told you it was under construction," he remarked.

"Outside walls have been framed, but there's no roof yet.

What do you think?" he asked anxiously.

She could easily imagine what it would look like when it was finished. "It'll be beautiful," she responded. "I can see it white. You're going to paint it white again, aren't you?" It was her turn to scrutinize him. He'd pushed his hat back off his forehead so the brim stood straight up in the air.

His gaze roamed from one side of the building to the other. Then it came back to her. "Would *you* like to see it white?"

With his hat back like that and the shock of red hair showing, he looked younger than ever, even though he'd had a lot of experience and a varied life apparently. "How old are you?" she asked, searching his face for typical signs of age. He had crow's feet at the sides of his eyes, but that could just be from working out in the sun.

"Thirty-four," he answered. "How old are you?"

She hesitated. She was much older than she looked and wasn't sure she wanted him to know. But then again, since

they weren't courting, what did it matter? "I'm twenty-seven."

"Oh. I thought you were younger," he said matter of factly. Shrugging, she said, "Well, it doesn't matter, but I'm not."

"No, it doesn't matter to me. So, would you like a white house?"

Refusing to fall into his attempts to make this personal, she said, "I think that would be pretty and fresh looking. White house, green shutters, black roof shingles. Plant bushes and flowers along the length of the porch, some rockers, a porch swing. Then you could sit on the porch and watch over the stream and..." She turned on the seat of the carriage to glance back toward the bridge. "I don't know directions out here. Does the porch face the sunrise or the sunset?"

Smiling, he said, "Sunset. And they're quite something. You have it all figured out, huh?"

Embarrassed, she looked away, realizing she'd described her dream house. "I was just making suggestions."

"Good ones, I like them."

"Well, you can do whatever you want. It's your house."

"Um hm. Would you like to look around?"

She was wary of the eagerness in his voice. "Why don't we eat that wonderful packed lunch first?"

He chuckled. "Okay, I know just the spot." He swung her down, grabbed the picnic basket from the back of the carriage, took her hand, and headed off on foot down the stream. "This place will be shady and comfortable even on a hot day like today. And you can dip your bare toes into the

cool water." Grinning, he bumped shoulders with her and winked.

The bump and wink sent a shiver over her skin. Bare toes indeed. She warily watched him for any more movements like that. "It is lovely," she exclaimed. Before she could utter another sound, he hoisted her off her feet and against his side. With the basket in the other hand, took two steps across the stream and deposited them on the other side. It happened so fast, and he didn't even seem winded from lifting her.

"The grassy meadow is on this side." He pointed out the obvious.

In no time at all, he spread a blanket out on the grass, weighting down the corners with rocks and the picnic basket. Cold fried chicken, biscuits, cheese, and apples were teamed with a large jar of sweetened tea and a couple bottles of beer.

"Why don't you take off your hat and stay a while," he prompted, removing his own Stetson.

She laid hers down at the edge of the blanket.

"I like it, by the way. Did you bring it from Egypt?"

"No, Opal designed it. I've suggested she open a business. If the women would buy from her, she could get out of her...um...current profession."

"That's a good idea. Maybe we could help her," he suggested as he offered her a plate.

"You'd help?" she asked in astonishment.

"Of course I would." He glanced at her as he bit into a crispy chicken leg. "I thought we cleared this up the other night. I'm glad you made friends with her."

"She's a nice girl, in spite of her profession, and just wants to design and sell her hats. I'd like to help her. One businesswoman to another. Why aren't you courting any of the brides?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Who said I'm not courting anyone?" He cocked his head.

"Didn't you send for a bride?" She asked another question rather than answer his.

"No, I didn't."

"Don't you want one?" Why in the world was she pursuing this topic with him? It was the worst subject in the world, one she should stay away from. Still she worried it like a dog with a bone.

"I didn't want to interfere with the other men and their choices."

"Goodness, that's very selfless of you. You don't want to be married?"

He scrambled to his feet, held out his hand. "Let's stretch our legs. Take a walk with me?" He pulled her easily up, but didn't let go, tucking her hand proprietarily at his elbow as they strolled down to the stream.

"Watch your step, this goes downhill a little." He slipped his arm around her waist to keep her from falling. Then seating her on a rock ledge, he took a position close beside her.

Her stomach skittered with nerves at how near he was. He radiated heat through his shirtsleeve along the length of his arm. He just couldn't be flirting with her. "This is lovely," she said, gesturing around her. "And it's not far from the house.

It would be nice to either sit on the porch or out here after a hard day's work."

"Is that what you'd like?"

She hadn't known it until she said it aloud. Yes, she'd like it a lot, but it would never happen. The kind of life she'd once wanted was out of bounds for her now. "My mission is the library," she responded automatically.

"Does that mean you can't have a husband and children too?" he wondered.

"What about vou?"

He laughed and shook his head in frustration. "You don't like to answer personal questions, do you?"

"No. Do you?" she snapped.

"I have nothing to hide." He turned to catch her eye.

"I don't have anything to hide either." Maybe he'd believe her if she returned his gaze steadily enough.

"Sometimes it seems you do by the way you slip out of answering any personal questions. What has turned you against men?"

"I have nothing against...them."

"I think you do."

Shocked he had stumbled so close to her problem, she snapped, "Well, I never..." She tried to push herself up from the rock but couldn't get her feet under her.

"Really?" he drawled, slipping his arm around her waist again to keep her there.

She tried to loosen his grip. He wouldn't let her. She tugged again. "This isn't right."

"It feels good to me."

Closing her eyes, she was almost fooled by the warmth in his husky, heated voice. "You can't mean that! I'm too...too plump." She tried to pry his hand off her middle.

"I said, you feel good to me. Just hold still."

Oh, God, this is torture. She had to place her hand on his chest to push if it was the only way to get out of his arms. The minute she did, he covered it with his own. She went motionless. His heart beat in a continuous reverberation, his shirt just one layer between hot skin and her palm curved around his muscles. She almost swooned. Hard male muscles. It brought back memories she'd tried to forget.

Was his chest covered in rust colored hair? Her breath came out in fast shivery pants, but he held her hand possessively against him. His sky blue eyes darkened, his pupils enlarging. Then his hand no longer held hers. It cupped her cheek, long fingers wrapping around her nape and thrusting into her hair.

"Who hurt you, sweet Isis?" he murmured, his lips hovering over hers, his gaze focused on her mouth.

"No one," she whimpered in denial. She didn't know who made the first move, but she was truly afraid she had. Smooth and warm under hers, his lips tasted delicious with the salt of the fried chicken, sticky with the juice of apples, yeasty from beer. She welcomed the flick of his tongue, gave in to his intense, fiery response. Feverish and frantic, their lips melded, her tongue played with his, his with hers. He used his ruthlessly, stroking and massaging the length of hers, suckling, groaning his pleasure. She clung to his shoulders in a death grip and succumbed to his deliciousness.

#### [Back to Table of Contents]

#### **Chapter Six**

\* \* \* \*

Pres lifted her in his arms, pivoted, and they went down together onto the fresh cushion of grass. Her soft body above him, then under him, her lips open, he got lost in the craving of her. He ate at her mouth, controlling her head in one hand and working on the buttons of her tunic with the other.

Getting them open, he splayed a hand over the full lift of her breasts, round and firm, just the way he liked. Womanly and fine, he couldn't get enough of her. He trailed his lips down her neck, nipped and licked, his tongue laving her collarbone. He folded back the edges of her gown to encounter a chemise with pretty little embroidered flowers. The undergarment didn't deter him. Neither did its single button.

Slipping open the delicate cotton, he bared a breast. A truncated moan caught in her throat as her back arched. His eyes feasted on the white, round, satiny smooth skin centered with a perfect, rosy brown nipple. A perfect, rosy brown, tightly furled nipple. Certain evidence that she was equally aroused.

His tongue flicked out, anticipating the sensation of the hard bud on his lips. His teeth ached to tug it. The minute he put his mouth on her, her hands came up, fingers fisting through his hair, clutching the strands in clear permission.

Suckling hard, he swiped his tongue back and forth across the tip of her breast.

"Oh, God!" She gave a high-pitched shriek and almost tore his hair out.

He heard it through his lust-filled, frenzied mind. It pounded in his brain. *God's watching*. Like a starving child, he continued to draw on her, uncovering the other breast, stroking and caressing the soft pillows of flesh. Her body thrashed beneath him, rhythmically pumping, arching upward.

"Pres," she whimpered. "Yes."

He wetted her nipples, then blew a gentle cool breath across them just to see them stiffen even more. He *had* to stop, *meant* to stop. He jerked up, the truth hitting him hard. *Wrong. This is wrong.* 

"Oh, God," she moaned, her eyes tightly closed in ecstasy.
"Isis," his voice barely above a whisper as he lifted his
head. It was all he could manage at the moment. "No."

Her eyes popped open. Wide open. Her mouth also. Her hurt expression ripped at his heart. There was confusion, too. He collapsed onto his butt, gasping for deep breaths. Her chest rose and fell as she lay, not realizing that her breasts, framed by the sides of her chemise, were still temptingly bare.

Then she covered herself with shaky hands crossed over her breasts.

To the end of his days, he would never forget how stricken she looked. His jaw clenched in frustration at how much he wanted her. With all the women in his distant past, he'd never

before felt this potent a desire. She'd been hurt by some bastard, and he wanted to be the man to make her happy again. He believed he could be that man as much as he believed in God.

Because he'd fallen in love with her.





\* \* \* \*

Damn him. Isis had sworn she wouldn't be seduced again, and here she'd fallen right in with another man. Quickly, she buttoned her chemise and tunic and sat up so she could at least *look* respectable again. She brushed a shaky hand over her eyes, fearing that would never be the case. He'd kissed her and caressed her body, and she'd loved it. Had needed it. For a moment, she'd almost felt loved, but just like the man in Egypt, all the heat was because of his own desire, not because of any feelings for her.

"I'm so sorry." He sat back on the ground, drew up his knees, and stared at his hands dangling between them. "I've taken advantage of you."

Her heartbeat began to slow back to normal, then started up thumping erratically in her chest again. His words buzzed in her brain. They sounded genuinely contrite. She hadn't come to Loving to find a man, but this one confused her, intrigued her. There were so many sides to him. She'd bet back in his gun slinging days he wouldn't have felt remorse

for practically having his way with her, but now was a different time in his life.

"I think you'd better take me back to town." She'd have to be careful around him. Feelings she'd long repressed had surfaced again, and there were so many things about him she was attracted to. But even though he was turning out to be an honorable man, he didn't fit in with her plans. It was now more imperative she find another location for her library so they wouldn't be thrown together, even on the two days he came to town to prepare for the service. She was afraid to trust her feelings. There were too many reasons why she wasn't the right woman for him, and he didn't even know that.





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Every day he stepped inside the church, Isis was there. She would barely look at him long enough to say 'good morning.' He'd offended her, but he hadn't mistaken the passion in her kisses. She'd enjoyed them as much as he had.

With every couple he married, he thought of her. God forgive his abstraction, but he thought of her in his arms, how warm and soft she was. How she gave her all to their kisses, how her fingers clutched at his hair, tunneled through it.

God *forgive* him for becoming aroused in a church, but He had put Isis Garrett on this earth for a reason. And that

reason was to tempt Pres MacKay and drive him mad. He needed to find out why she was closed off to love.

Because, he had fallen in love with the one woman in town who didn't want to be a bride.

"Hello, Isis." He'd been watching her from the aisle between the pews. "Opal." He smiled and nodded to the other woman.

"Hello, Pastor MacKay," Opal responded, grinning brightly at him.

"You two ladies planning a business venture?"

"Isis thinks that we can open a shop together for hats and books. What do you think? Does it sound too crazy?"

He leaned on the back of the last pew and crossed his arms over his chest. "No, I don't think it sounds crazy at all. If all your work is as beautiful as the hat you're wearing and that one," he pointed to the one on Isis's desk. "Then you'll do very well."

Opal beamed at the praise. "Thank you, Pastor. I hope so. The day Isis arrived in town was a great day, don't you think so?"

"Opal!" Isis warned repressively.

He laughed aloud. "Yes, I do agree with you."

Isis looked ready to combust. She looked meaningful daggers at the other woman and said, "Let's go now and look for a building."

Opal smirked at him, obviously not intimidated by her friend. "Good idea. I'm ready."

"Can you give me a minute, Opal? I have something to say to Isis."

"Sure, I'll be right outside. Goodbye, Pastor."

When the church door closed, he advanced on Isis. "I wish you'd talk to me."

"There's nothing to talk about," she responded, turning her back on him to straighten some already straight books on the shelf.

"You won't even look at me, let alone talk to me."

"I'm talking to you right now."

"But you don't want to."

Her head drooped. She took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry I offended you, but I think you liked it too."

She shook her head in denial.

"Isis, who hurt you? Someone did. You came to town with the brides but had no intention of becoming a bride yourself. What are you running away from?" All he could do now was wait. It was her decision to talk to him, but that wasn't to say he couldn't give her a little push. "Come here and sit down."

"Uh uh."

"Please?" He strode back to the pew and waited at the end for her.

When she contrarily seated herself across the aisle, he lowered himself onto his pew. "Did something happen in Egypt? Someone take advantage of you?"

"You didn't take advantage of me," she mumbled, unconsciously stressing the 'you.'

"But someone did."

Her head popped up. She finally looked at him. The shame in her eyes was obvious. He had a knack for counseling parishioners, so he waited patiently.

And waited. Isis Garrett was going to be a tough nut to crack.



\* \* \* \*

She had to get away. "I need to meet Opal to look at a storefront together. I'll be out of your hair soon."

"I don't want you to be out of my hair, Isis." He sprang to his feet only to kneel at her side. "I like having you in the back of the church with your books. I like having you as a witness to the weddings."

Her heart pounded at his intensity. "But Opal wants to design and sell hats, and I want to help her. You can't have a millinery in a church."

He brushed long fingers through his hair, smoothing it back from his forehead, scratched his crown, and said, "I know, but I'll miss you."

He draped a hand over hers folded in her lap. Her gaze dropped. His big, tanned hand with its long, thick fingers engulfed her smaller ones. The memory of his hands on her breasts came fast, bringing a flush to her neck and cheeks. She bit her lower lip and struggled to keep her breathing untroubled and even.

"Did you hear me?"

She nodded slowly but still wouldn't look at him.

"I'll miss you. I'm not your enemy. I want to help Opal too."

That brought her head up. "You do, don't you?"
"I don't like how she earns her living, but I like her."

"You're an extraordinary man, Prescott MacKay."

He smiled. "I hope that means you'll trust me."

Her breath caught at the sight of his vivid blue eyes. She couldn't call him beautiful. His look was a little too rough, not elegant enough to be beautiful. It was all masculine, except for the little boy freckles on his nose showing up even under his tan. But trust was the issue. She'd couldn't put her trust in a man.

"Preacher MacKay!"

They both jumped at the shouting and the sound of the church door banging open, slamming against the wall. A red-faced Bobby Schmitt bent over at the waist, panted out, "Clete Hudson is pushin' Miz Jonas around. He knocked her down."

Isis lurched to her feet, shoving at Pres's chest to get him out of her way.

He held out an arm in front of her. "Let me go check it out."

"No. Where are they, Bobby?" she cried.

"Let me handle it, Isis. Hudson has a nasty streak," Pres muttered as he headed past the boy and out the door.





\* \* \* \*

Pres welcomed the white-hot temper that counteracted the sexual urges Isis caused. Urges not proper in the church, but he wanted her more and more each day.

Right now though, Clete Hudson was his concern. He'd rarely encountered a man as evil and unrepentant as Clete. The man didn't care who he hurt or why.

A shouting crowd had gathered on the boardwalk and in the dusty street in front of Cartwright's Saloon. A flash of red satin could be seen amongst the bodies. Opal was on the ground, Clete kneeling over her, his fists clenched. A couple men tried to pry him away, but he swung his arms wildly and they backed off. Pres didn't blame them. Clete was a tall, thick, hulking bull of a man with a vicious streak and a long memory. He never forgot anyone going against him.

Pres plowed through the crowd, not caring that he shoved people out of his way. His only thought was to get to Opal. Her forearms were raised to shield her face and head. Clete bent over, gripped her shoulders, and shook her. He had her down, and she couldn't get back to her feet. She wasn't shrieking for help, she was just trying to protect herself.

Pres bellowed, "Hudson, get your hands off her!" He grabbed Clete around the waist and shoved him several feet down the boardwalk.

Clete recovered immediately and leaped toward Pres with an outraged expression as if no one should best him. Clete swung a meaty fist. Pres ducked and slammed his own fist into the other man's belly.

"Oomph." Clete doubled over, but not for long. He came right back up swinging, and this time connected with Pres's jaw.

He staggered back, caught himself, and swung again slamming his fist into Clete's nose. Although Pres weighed close to two hundred pounds, he didn't outweigh Clete. He did tower over him, however. Before the man could straighten up, Pres tackled him to the ground, face down, held him with a well-placed knee in his kidneys, wrestled his gun from the holster, and tossed it down the boardwalk. Steve Cartwright, owner of the saloon, joined Pres by pulling Clete's wrists straight up and holding them in a tight grip over his head.

Clete bucked but couldn't throw the two big men off. Pres threw a glance at Opal and was gratified to see her being helped to her feet. Isis steadied the woman with an arm around her waist. Opal's expression was murderous. He didn't repress his smile. Not that he approved of murder, but he did approve of her triumphant look.

The woman actually brushed Isis off and lunged toward Clete with her foot raised to kick him. She connected with his side, and Clete moaned.

"No, Opal!" Pres shouted. "We've got him. He's down."

Isis had hold of her friend again, but she struggled

Isis had hold of her friend again, but she struggled anyway. "I don't belong to the bastard. He has no say over me."

"No, he doesn't, and he'll go to jail for this," Isis assured her.

Pres intended to make that happen. Clete had been causing trouble around town for a long time. His day was over.

Sheriff McCain bustled over, finally, brushing pastry crumbs off his leather vest. "What's going on here? Clete, what have you done now?"

Isis piped up, "Sheriff, he attacked Opal. He should be arrested."

The sheriff eyeballed the two women, his hands resting on his gun belt. "Opal, are you going to press charges this time?" "Opal, you have to," insisted Isis.

"Say the word, or I have to let him go," Sheriff McCain said.

"If you don't, I will," Pres promised.

"Yeah," Opal spat the word. She raised her foot as if to kick him again.

"Hold off," the sheriff warned. "I'll take him in. Steve and Pres, can you two get him over to the jail?"

Pres lifted his knee from Clete's back. He and Steve jerked the man to his feet, each taking an arm, and they hustled him over to the sheriff's office.

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[Back to Table of Contents]

#### **Chapter Seven**

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Now that it was all over, Pres reeled. He felt a too well remembered lethal rage completely at odds with his preacher's training. After delivering Clete to the jail, he bolted back to the church, vaulted aboard his stallion Absalom, and, riding like the very devil was chasing him, sprinted out of town. Barely cognizant of where he was going, he knew he had to get away.

Tearing through the front door of his ranch house, he grabbed up a loaf of bread cooling on the table and some jerky. Adding his bedroll, blanket, matches, and other necessities to his war bag, as well as oats for his horse, he filled two canteens with water from the pump in the kitchen. All this he did by rote, unconsciously packing as if he were heading out to roundup. Back outside in the yard, with one foot in the stirrup, he barked an order to his foreman, Joe Finnegan, to watch over things. He'd be gone a couple of days.

He rode toward the mountains, followed the ridgeline, Absolom's easy canter relaxing the turmoil in his mind. Three years ago, he'd been ordained as a Christian minister. He'd forsaken the violence and evil of his past. Had fought feelings of lust, never before as strong as his feelings now for Isis Garrett. He'd savored the physical reality of punching Clete,

in punishing him for beating Opal. Where was God's forgiveness? Where was his own forgiveness?

God knew that sometimes evil couldn't be changed, but Pres hadn't even tried.

As any good man would, he despised abuse of women. Even now, his first reaction had been harshly primal, but he should have more self-control than to physically assault another person. God expected better from him.

How many times had he counseled cowboys about solving problems without fighting? All of it had been hollow advice he couldn't even keep himself. Climbing down from his horse, he tethered the animal to a tree branch. Propping his back up against a smooth rock, he watched high clouds race across the sky. Ever since he'd first accepted God, he'd been happiest out here on the prairie. The flat land calmed him, the spiky rise of mountain peaks inspired him, brilliant shades of the colors of sunset and sunrise overwhelmed him with glory. Absently, he rubbed his knuckles, still smarting from the blows, but the skin hadn't been broken by Clete's flabby middle.

At least Opal was safe now. She'd been defending herself pretty well, then Isis joined in. He could have done just as well to stay out of it.

Isis. An unwilling smile quirked his mouth. Sweet Isis, but not sweet. She could be sweet if she didn't dislike men so much. He'd bet money that one man hurt her, and she blamed all men. A woman so passionate about her books and about bringing their joys to children was a good woman.

Isis. He closed his eyes and shuddered with the arousing memory of her full breasts in his hands, his palms petting the soft flesh, the stiff spikes of her nipples poking in the center. God forgive him, but he wanted more. He shifted his hand to curl around his cock through the wool of his pants.

Absalom's loud snuffle and stomping of hoofs spooked him. He looked up to see the horse straining at his tether. Leaves twisted on cottonwood branches, and dust devils swirled around the animal. The wind had picked up. A storm was brewing, but he doubted they'd see any rain. The spring and summer had been too dry. He levered himself to his feet and fetched the reins, soothing his huge friend with smooth strokes along his neck and down between his eyes to his nose.

"Sorry, Ab. I know you don't like storms. Don't worry, it's just a little wind." Pres climbed aboard again and nudged the horse toward the west. There may not be any rain coming, but there would be heat lightning, and they needed to find shelter.



\* \* \* \*

"Boss, I thought you were gonna be gone longer," Finnegan said as Pres rode back into the ranch yard.

"Changed my mind," he responded brusquely. "Ab doesn't like storms."

"I'll take him for you." The foreman held out a hand for the reins.

"Thanks, Joe," Pres said as he headed for the meadow down stream from the house. Stripping off his shirt, he knelt alongside the stream and dipped his whole head into the cool water, splashing it over his chest and arms. His mind couldn't stop churning. What about his feelings for Isis? Even inside the church, he'd entertained lustful thoughts about her. Lustful thoughts were one thing. Acting upon them was another.

In the three years he'd been called to preaching, he'd never been tested like this. Violence and lust. What was happening to him? To his orderly, ordinary existence? Until Isis Garrett came to town, he'd been happy with the way things were. Now he felt as if something was missing. No, he *knew* something was missing. He'd wanted the brides to make the other men happy, but he hadn't realized he wanted a bride for himself.

But the bride he wanted didn't want a husband, damn it. Darn it. What held her back? She wouldn't give him any clues except that it must have been a man.

One minute he'd been in the cool, serene church trying to draw the woman out, the next he was embroiled in a fistfight in the middle of the dusty street.

Anger and lust. Two emotions he'd long repressed. He closed his eyes to summon much needed calm, breathing in the fresh, humid air through flared nostrils. Hoof beats startled him out of his rumination. His neck tensed, the prickling sensation spreading down his back. No cowboy liked

someone sneaking up behind him. He turned, his elbows jutted out, clenched fists clamped on hips, anger and remorse emanated from his every pore, and he faced the reason for the lust he'd been fighting for weeks.

"You shouldn't have come," he barked.

"Why did you run away?" she asked, advancing quickly on him.

"Not gonna talk about it. Come here," he ordered, not hiding the edge of roughness in his voice.

Her head jerked back in surprise.

He smiled, felt the cocky quirk of his lips. He'd fought today, and his blood was up. Blood was up, and so was his cock.

For three years, he'd repressed his true nature. "Come here," he crooned it like a snake oil salesman. Or a snake oil preacher. No Godliness but lots of depraved charm. He'd waited long enough for her. The fight, the desire for retribution for Opal. It all had come back to him. All the long years of drifting from town to town, spoiling for a fight.

A snake couldn't change its skin. He'd been a cold blooded gunslinger before and didn't know if the call to God would save him now. He'd tried to become something he probably wasn't meant to be. Grief rolled agonizingly through his frame, and he shuddered with it. He didn't want to betray the tenets he'd sworn to uphold.

The woman was here. She'd come to him. It was what he'd been waiting for, planning for. He wanted her soft plumpness, wanted to curl his fingers around her flesh, to caress and stroke her, watch her pale skin flush with the rosy color of

arousal. She was passionate. He knew it from the way she responded to his kisses and the way she initiated them herself.

He waited, watched her face register his desire. Her eyes roamed his body, his bare chest. Narrowing his gaze, his lips parted at the storm of hunger pooling in his belly, swelling his cock.

She licked her lips. Her gaze seemed to focus on his chest.

He waited. The pleasure would be all the greater for stretching it out. Like toying with an opponent in a duel. Let them stew. Let them think they could beat him to the draw. Let them think that he might back down. Like a fly to a spider web, he drew her to him with a will stronger than hers.

She came to him, her face suffused with intent. Perspiration lightly lay upon pink cheeks. She raised her hands, placed them on his chest. *And pinched his nipples*. Hard. Spikes of pleasure raced to his balls, to the cock swelling beneath his pants. How had she known he liked it rough?

Her mouth followed her fingers. She worked his nipple just as he'd worked hers. Suckling, nipping, pulling at it, teeth sharp with hunger. His head lowered, his arms held stiffly at his sides, he watched her through slit eyelids. Watched the delicate bites, her pink tongue slipping out and around the taut nub.

She switched nipples, repeated the torment.

He smirked his victory. She'd come to him, had done exactly as he'd wanted. The sting of her teeth splintered his self-control, and he clutched her shoulders, his fingers

pressing into them, and growled encouragement. She didn't need orders. She already knew what he wanted.

His head dropped, he rested a cheek against her silky hair and took her tightly in his arms. How could she not feel the same belonging that he felt with her? "Isis," he murmured. She nestled into him, her soft breasts crushed against his middle. Her arms slid around his waist, her hands flattened on his back on each side of his spine. Just the way he wanted.

One hand cupped her neck, urging her face upward so he could gaze into her eyes. "Why did you come?" he asked, this time in a rough whisper.

"You left so fast... I didn't know what the matter was... Are you injured?"

"I'm fine."

"He hit vou."

"He missed. I hit him," he claimed bitterly.

"You had to stop him."

"But not with violence."

"It was the only way."

He let out a breath of assent.

"It's all right, Pres. God understands and forgives you."

"I knew Clete was dangerous. I let it go. As long as he got into fights with other men, I let it go."

"But you couldn't let him hurt a woman. He had to be stopped. You did it as quickly as possible. You're a good man. It was the right thing to do."

"Isis," he began, compelled to finally tell her the truth about himself. "I need to tell you about my past." He stepped back, putting space between them.

She took hold of one of his hand with both of hers. "Yes?" she said softly.

"You know that I was a bounty hunter."

"Um hm. Why did you quit, Pres?"

"It's not a happy life. Days and weeks are spent chasing outlaws and trying to capture them with no one being hurt. When it doesn't happen that way, you're forced to fight or shoot." He swallowed heavily, felt as if tight bands of leather squeezed around his chest.

"You were on the side of the law, Pres. You only shot to capture a bad guy. Surely you know that."

"I know. I knew it then," he muttered. "But I enjoyed it too. Matching wits, following the trail, being smarter, faster. It was a very powerful feeling. A powerful life." He wanted to draw his hand away from hers, but he couldn't really make himself do it. Her grip wasn't just of his hand, she held his heart.

"What happened, Pres. Why did you quit?" she pressed.

He gazed past her into the thick trees surrounding the glade. The scene played out in his mind as if he were still there. "It was night. I'd ridden into town and tied Absalom up at the end of the street. The guy I was trailing was wanted for murdering a whole family."

"Oh, Pres." Her voice held alarm.

"He was bad. I can't even tell you what he did to them." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I had to find him before he did it again." His jaw clenched so hard it ached. He needed the pain to keep him steady enough to finish the story without breaking down. "Unbelievably, he walked right out of

the saloon. I was creeping down the boardwalk across the street staying to the shadows. He walked right out the doors with bright lights all around him. I stepped forward and called his name. John Clark. That was his name. Plain name for one of the most evil men I'd ever hunted. He was drunk, fumbled around for his gun." Pres pulled his hand free. As soon as he told her what happened then, she'd be gone.

She folded her hands across her waist, didn't move, didn't say another word.

"As soon as I saw his hand on the grip, I drew my own gun." Pres couldn't hold back a low sob. "A boy. A boy like Bobby ran out of the saloon. Clark fired. I fired. I..." He couldn't go on.

"It's all right, Pres," she murmured.

She knows. "I hit the boy." His head dropped into his hands, his fingers slid into his hair, and he yanked at the strands to keep from crying. Thankfully, she didn't touch him. Didn't offer platitudes. What was there to say? "I almost killed an innocent boy, but instinct took over, and I shot again and hit Clark."

Very quietly, she asked, "What happened to the boy, Pres?"

"He...survived. I carried him to the doc myself." Pres lost his battle with tears and felt them roll down his face.

"You made sure he was okay, didn't you?"

He nodded, pinched the bridge of his nose, looked her in the eye. "I gave up the life that night and made sure his mother got the bounty money."

She took his face between her hands and brushed his cheeks with her thumbs wiping off the tears.

"I've tried to live a different life for the last three years. I've kept my anger in check for so long. Seeing Clete beat up on Opal, well...I snapped."

"You did the right thing, Pres, and God knows what's in your heart. I know what's in your heart. You saved Opal—"

Then he remembered. "Is Opal all right?" He wrapped his hand around her nape and pulled her closer.

"She's fine. Would you believe that Marjorie Hightower was comforting her when I left?"

He reared back to look at Isis in astonishment. "Marjorie Hightower? You're joking."

Isis chuckled, her lips curving up prettily. "Would I joke about something like that?"

"You're beautiful when you laugh."

She gazed back at him in dismay.

He released her neck, but cupped her chin instead. Her lips parted invitingly, his eyelids lowered to half-mast, and he kissed her. He closed his mouth over hers and owned her. Lord, she was sweet, and, thank you, Lord, she responded. He lost himself in her. "Isis," he murmured when he took a much needed breath. "I can't believe how deep you've burrowed into my heart. I think about you all the time." He brushed his lips down over her chin to her neck.

She shivered. Her fingers clutched his shoulders.

"I say the vows when I marry couples, and I want to say them to you."

Her body tensed.

He felt her trying to bring her arms together, trying to close him out.

Sweet little hands landed on his chest, delicately at first. Her fingertips brushed over his nipples.

By accident?

Again. Again.

Not by accident. He groaned. It ended on a sigh. Now he shivered. He wanted to wrestle her to the ground and have at her whole body. *Kiss. Get back to her lips. Her mouth.* He nibbled at her, gently bit at her lower lip. Her moan vibrated against his chest, the sexy throb in her throat resonated in his ears.

"Pres."

God, he wanted to do lewd and wanton things to her. Take her hair down, lay it over her breasts, brush the ends of it teasingly over her nipples. Kiss her belly. Surely her skin there was as satiny soft as her breasts. Her dark woman's hair would contrast against her white skin. His hand drifted down her body to press on her mound through the layers of skirt and petticoats.

She jerked, arching against him.

It was the jolt that he felt. Her startled gasp that brought him to his senses. He pushed her away, arms straight out, fingers cupping her shoulders. Her face had every expression he could think of—shock, confusion, sensuality, desire. He had the same feelings in his heart. His cock ached, stretched out to the full length and breadth as it could be and still be confined in his pants. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

#### [Back to Table of Contents]

#### **Chapter Eight**

Isis opened her mouth to speak but all that came out was a huff of breath. Her shoulders slumped. Defeated. Why did she keep doing this? Responding to him. And why did he always back off?

"Isis, I can't seem to keep my hands off you."

"I...I don't understand."

"I want you. You're all I think about. I know you say you don't want a husband. Why not? What happened to you?"

She turned her back on him, so exasperated she could barely talk. What would it take to stop this madness? Would she just have to tell him the truth about herself? He came behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. She stiffened. He released her. If telling him the truth was the only way to get him to end this, that's what she'd have to do.

"Mr. MacKay," she began, turning to face him. "I'll say this one more time. I am not interested in romantic attentions. Not from you or anyone." It was a struggle to keep her face expressionless. She blinked away the urge to give in to tears with thoughts of what she was giving up. A husband and children and a home. So be it.

"Did he hurt you?" he asked gently.

"No," she replied bitterly. "I loved him." She shifted her gaze to the distance.

"He broke your heart."

To say the least. "He didn't love me back."

"I'm sorry."

She met his eyes. He really did look distressed. *Just say it now, and get it over with.* "I'm no longer an...innocent."

He nodded.

"I'll understand if you...um..."

"I still feel the same way about you, Isis."

"How can you? I'm not what a man wants."

"You're what I want."

"But you're a minister."

"I want to help people find peace and love with God, not condemnation. And Lord knows I've made my own mistakes. Isis, you're a sweet, generous woman. You've been so kind to Opal and to the kids." He reached out and brushed a finger down the side of her face, trailed it over her chin, back and forth. Hypnotically.

Yearning for the feel of his hands, she closed her eyes and leaned toward him.

"Whatever that man did to you, I want to show you another way," he whispered into her ear.

His warm breath wafted over her skin, the heat of his body, sent her nerve endings skittering. He stepped closer to her. She daren't open her eyes. If she met his cobalt blue gaze, he'd see the need in her, the desire he'd awakened. She'd tried holding off the memories of dark nights, hot bodies, a man's hands trailing across her skin, the secrets that incited the rapturous frenzy of lovemaking.

His hand slid from brushing her jaw to cupping her nape. "Open your eyes, Isis. See me. Accept me."

She opened her eyes to see the glittering spark of longing in his. Her teeth worked at her lower lip, but she couldn't

fight any longer. Pres MacKay was the finest man she'd ever met. Honest and sincere, he truly believed in the things he preached. He wouldn't pursue her if he was just toying with her feelings. With his arms around her, she finally felt safe.

"I love you, sweetheart."

"But you weren't looking for...a woman."

His lips quirked up in a smile. "Not 'til I saw you glowering so ferociously at the town."

"How in the world did *that* attract your attention?" She laughed at his description. Remembering that first day, it was an apt description of her.

"I liked the way you weren't flirting and simpering with the cowboys. I noticed you right away. Did you notice me?" He enfolded her in his arms, linking his hands at the small of her back. "Hm?"

She leaned back, letting his arms keep her from falling. His eyes became slits, he put on a dreamy smile, and started swaying gently from side to side.

"I noticed you," she responded shyly.

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, didn't you see me scowl at you too?"

"You looked absolutely stricken when Bobby whistled for me."

Suddenly feeling very lighthearted, she laughed.

"What's so funny? Tell me what you thought."

She caressed his bare arms, plucked at the pale covering of hair. Gazing up at him, she said seriously, "I thought you looked fierce. And tall. I was shocked when Bobby said you were the minister."

"Did you expect some skinny little guy in a black suit?"

"Well, I sure didn't expect..." Before she could complete her thought, he covered her mouth with his warm, firm lips pressing, pressing, demanding her response. His hands were still at her waist, but holding her tightly against his chest. She slid her arms around his middle and caressed his back, up and down the valley of his spine, his muscles hot and firm beneath her fingers.

"Isis," he murmured when he raised his lips from hers for a moment. "Push me away."

"Why?" she whimpered, straining toward him, wanting more of his kisses.

"I don't want to take you like this."

"No?" Her voice held a note of disappointment.

"We should be married."

"What!"

"Sweetheart, I want you in my bed. As soon as we can, I want to marry you. Will you have me?"

"I didn't come out here to find a husband."

"But you have now. I love you, Isis. You're what I've been waiting for. I think I knew the minute I saw you that day, and I've felt it more strongly each day."

"But I'm not religious."

"You're kind and giving, generous with your heart."

"Oh, Pres." He loved her. She couldn't believe how giddy that made her. Especially when she felt the same about him. When had that happened?

He placed nipping kisses around her mouth. "You're beautiful. Sweet, sweet cheeks," he whispered, punctuating

his words with little pecks on her cheeks, her nose, her eyelids.

"Chubby cheeks. Oh, Pres."

He rubbed his big palms up her back to her shoulders. "I love every wonderful inch of you. I love you the way you are. Please say you'll marry me."

She pressed her lips on the center of his collarbone, licked up his neck.

He shuddered. "Stop that. God, I need to touch you." His hand slipped around to cup a breast. A heavy breath hissed out of him. "No, I've already gone too far with you. I want you legally mine and in my bed so we don't have to stop."

My God, he truly means it. She hadn't planned on this. In fact, she'd sworn never to be with another man, but Pres MacKay was a wonderful man who could give her what she really wanted in life. A family of her own. Children, a home. A husband. Love.

He slipped down her body. "I'll get on my knees, if that's what you want." And he did just that. He was so tall that even on his knees, they could see directly into each other's eyes. "Miss Isis Garrett, would you do me the honor of accepting my proposal of marriage?" he asked in a most formal voice.

He satirized his solemn vow by first grasping her ankles beneath her skirts and then caressing her calves. Gazing down at him, with the feel of his fingers stroking even under her drawers, she couldn't resist the laughter in his eyes. Shivery sensations fluttered her belly. The contradictions in him astonished her. Obviously, the earthy cowboy warred with the religious man.

The way he looked at her, she didn't think religion was much in his thoughts at the moment. He tickled the crooks of her knees. She gasped when suddenly his palms swept up her thighs and cupped her bottom. "Pres!" she squealed.

"You haven't answered me. What'll it take to get you to say yes?"

"Pres! What're you doing?" She giggled, wriggling but not able to escape. She didn't think she wanted to.

"If I can't get you one way, I'll try another. You better say something before my hands go any farther."

He was actually flexing his fingers on the globes of her bottom and grinning like an idiot. She glanced around. Of course, no one was there, but the embarrassing position made her self- conscious. Oh, good Lord, his fingers traced the crevice between her bottom cheeks. "Pres, what do you think you're doing?" she squeaked.

"Encouraging you, sweetheart."

His sensual laugh shook her body as he pulled her closer so he could delve between her thighs. He'd found the slit in her drawers! "Pres, Pres, no!" Even as she cried out, the tip of his finger made contact with her slick and swollen bud. Consternation and nervousness hadn't kept her from arousal. Turning her face into his shoulder, she bit at her lower lip.

"Oh, Isis, please say yes."

"You're not being fair," her voice came out in a breathless croak.

"I don't want to be fair. I just want you to say you'll marry me." He punctuated this by dipping the tip of his finger into her sheath.

She moaned, her hips undulated against him.

"I love you, Isis."

His huskiness, the note of sincerity in his voice, combusted in her heart. She'd come out west with absolutely no intention of wanting a man, but everything Pres MacKay did and said was a wonderment. His rough looking exterior was just that. It hid a kind, generous, loving man like she'd never seen before, and she'd never see again.

He'd be her husband, the father of her children.

She wanted to say yes. "Oh, Pres, I'm afraid."

"Of what, darling?" He pressed his finger further in.

"What if this is a mistake?" Her knees began to fold at the exquisite sensation of his thick finger entering and exploring her, and she clutched at his shoulders.

"What if it's not?" he responded. "I won't lie. I've been with other women, but I've never felt about them the way I feel about you," he murmured in a rough purr.

His voice seemed so very far away. Her head whirled. All she could think about was what he was doing to her.

"You can be a bit prickly..." His breath spurted in uneven puffs over the skin of her neck.

*Prickly?* She lifted her head lazily in surprise. His tan cheeks flushed red with a hunger that wrung at her heart.

"But you're sweet too."

She met his gaze as his bright eyes darkened, his soul shimmering in them.

"To the kids and to Opal. Oh, God, you feel good. So tight," he groaned the words.

He rotated his finger inside her, each bump and knuckle massaged every smooth, soft inch of her. Her mouth opened and closed uselessly. "Pres, yeah." It was a whispered plea and all she could manage.

"Baby, don't you love me just a little bit?" His voice held a sigh.

She watched his firm lips move with the words, lifted a bit more, and kissed him. He pressed on a button deep inside her, rubbed it, pressed it. She started to shake, couldn't hold the kiss, her head dropped back. Gasping, she tried to reach for the feeling. It was so close. He buried his face at her chest, held her tightly until she let out a loud moan even she could hear over the rushing sounds in her head.

At last, she could take a deep enough breath to open her eyes. She stared into those beautiful blue eyes, eyes the rich color of a clear blue lake. So pretty. Not like her own ordinary brown. At that moment she stopped shaking, stopped wondering. "Yes," she answered honestly. "I do. I love you." She looped her arms around his neck.

"Then, you're saying yes?" His expression showed hope and still a little uncertainty.

"Yes," she answered. "I'll marry you." She gazed dreamily at him, slid her fingers into the brilliant strands of his hair.

"Yes! Tomorrow," he said confidently, gently pulled from her body and rose to his feet to tower over her again.

Oh, she missed him. "Tomorrow! I can't be ready tomorrow. I don't have a nice enough dress. We need flowers. Will we live at your ranch?"

"Of course. The main floor has a roof."

"I don't want to be that far away from my library and Opal."

"It's not that far. You can still go into town every day."

"You won't mind me working?"

"Not until the little ones start coming." He gave her a sensual grin.

Little ones. It was what she wanted. Everything that she wanted. And never thought she'd have.

"Tomorrow?" he asked eagerly.

"I really don't have a nice dress," she said again.

"How long will it take? His teeth were gritted, jaw clenched.

She smiled flirtatiously up into his eyes. Now that she'd made her decision, she couldn't wait either. "Day after tomorrow?"



It ended up being a week before the wedding of Pres and Isis could become a reality. In the waiting time, Opal and Isis found a shop location with a small apartment behind it for Opal. A barn raising was held to complete the second story to Pres's ranch house. The men Pres had married provided free labor, and their new brides provided the food.

Pres's mentor arrived in town to do the honors of performing the marriage ceremony. The day dawned already

hot even at six in the morning. The sheets were soaked under his body, and he was not surprised to find his hand wrapped around his thickly swollen cock even before his eyes opened. A chuckle rumbled through his chest. He'd better take care of it or he wouldn't be able to concentrate on anything else today, and it was the most important day of his life.

He tightened his fist, pressed his head back on the pillow, and closed his eyes in bliss. Glad he hadn't taken Isis yet, he could look forward to joining with her lush body on his wedding night. Their wedding night. She wasn't a virgin. He didn't care. All that mattered was that she was his now, that she loved him. With her by his side, he could fulfill the mission he'd been charged with. He would remake himself from a man who killed to a man redeemed.

Squeezing and stroking his stiff flesh, he let the promise of Isis's hand around him carry him over the brink as hot cum jetted up onto his chest. His last thought before a groan tore out between clenched jaws was of the possibility of her mouth on him. Behind closed eyelids, he could imagine her soft cheeks puffed out because of his thickness and could feel the masses of her rich, coffee shaded hair tickling his belly and thighs. His hips arched, heels dug into the sheets. At a time like this, he surely missed swearing.

Dressed in his black suit and white shirt, he marched through the front door of the church. The wedding was to be at eleven and he was half an hour early. The table and chair that Isis had used as her office were still there, even though everything else had been moved to the new space. And she was sitting there contemplating the bare wall.

It was bad luck to see the bride before the ceremony, but how could anything about this be bad luck? "There's my bride."

Her head jerked up, and her neck and face blushed a perfect rosy shade.

Before she could open her mouth to bawl him out, he said, "You look ravishing, sweetheart."

She pursed her lips as if she was going to argue with him, but she said, "You shouldn't see me before the wedding." She pressed her hands over her skirts as if she could hide them.

"You look perfect. You make me so happy." Delicate lace covering her head was held by a circlet of mid-summer wild flowers woven through with ivy and pearls. The white of the veil contrasted sharply with her dark hair and cascaded around her face and shoulders. He couldn't stop smiling at the frothy confection. "Did Opal design the veil?" He couldn't wait to remove every inch, every piece of her clothing to get to the sweet body underneath.

She rose from the chair. "Are you sure that you don't...mind that I'm not...a—"

"It's all right, sweetheart. All that matters is that we come to each other with love and faithfulness in our hearts."

These words echoed in his mind as they stood at the altar. He couldn't keep his eyes off his bride. A streak of sunlight through the stained glass window behind the cross laid gold and red highlights across her face. If there was any doubt of God's presence in the world, it was dispelled by that sight. He hadn't needed proof, but here it was anyway.

They repeated their vows. Her expression, a very pretty one, was one of amazement and wonder as if she couldn't believe what was happening. He didn't give a damn that she wasn't a virgin. All he wanted was Isis Garrett as she was right now. And as she'd be later on their wedding night. Her lush body naked and open to him.

I give you this ring as a token...

He wasn't paying attention, wickedly distracted in a church, during his own wedding. She slid the ring on his finger.

...of my love and faithfulness.

She was looking up at him all wide-eyed. Gazing into her big brown eyes, he pledged his love right back to her. *Thank you, God. I don't deserve her.* 

I now pronounce you man and..

He reached for his wife, sliding his hands around her waist. Just before sealing their marriage with a kiss, he whispered for her ears alone, "I will love and cherish you all my life."

"Yes, yes," she whispered back. "Now kiss me," she commanded.

He wanted to laugh aloud, but instead he did as she ordered and took her lips, warm and moist, salty from tears. "Don't cry, wife."

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[Back to Table of Contents]

#### **Chapter Nine**

"Isis," Opal began. "Just forget the past. It's over. It doesn't matter now. You are married to a wonderful, handsome man who loves you so much."

Isis's distraction during the party after the wedding had caught Opal's attention, enough for her to give the bride a little lecture. Isis wondered if she'd ever be able to accept that Pres loved her as she was. She didn't get much of a chance to worry, because her new husband's attentiveness kept her happily occupied. They cut the cake. They danced joyously to guitar and fiddle music. He pulled her into dark corners for lascivious kisses, promising heady delights in the night to come. It was the most wonderful day of her life.

Finally alone. He'd driven like a mad man out to the ranch and carried her across the porch, into the house, and down the hall to his bedroom. It was the nicest room, homespun, but pretty. An oval, multi-colored rag rug filled the center of the room. A brass headboard loomed over the bed, tall and overwrought with curlicues and swoops.

"Oh my goodness, look at that," she exclaimed.

"I bought it from Steve Cartwright and hauled it out here yesterday," he said proudly.

Pres gave her no more time than it took to close the door before he pulled her in for a kiss. He groaned as if kissing was new to him, and it was already his favorite thing to do. His hands were everywhere, pressing and squeezing her back and

sides, his fingers compressing rhythmically and lighting every one of her nerve endings into highly charged sizzlers.

She couldn't complain. She was doing the same thing. She cupped the thick muscles in his back, digging her fingers into the deep furrow over his spine. Those muscles, hard under hot skin, even through his shirt, entranced her. So different from her own soft flesh. She doubted there was a muscle anywhere on her body, but it appeared that he didn't mind.

The kiss ended, but he buried his face in the side of her neck. She writhed and giggled the closer he got to her ear. He knew she was ticklish, but then he exerted just the right amount of pressure to take away the tickle and turn it into arousing. His breath, hot and moist, thundered in her ear. Her eyes closed, she smiled joyously, and the giggle became a throaty moan. "Pres," she sighed.

"I've been waiting for this night," he whispered. "As lovely as you look in your gown, it needed to come off an hour ago."

"An hour ago we were still in town," she teased.

"I didn't want to embarrass you, my love." He held his head back slightly to meet her eyes. "No one else is on the ranch tonight, but still..."

Oh, God, he was so handsome. She placed her palms on his face, brushed her thumbs over his cheekbones, down the grooves at the sides of his lips. She caressed his jaw, kissed along its sleek, strong line, nipped and licked. "Pres," she moaned his name. The fear that he wanted a virgin still niggled at her.

"I want to go slow. Savor you. I want our first time to..." He set her back a bit and began to unbutton her dress.

She caught her breath. He didn't just unbutton down the front, he cupped her breasts between working on every button, rubbing them, circling his palms over her nipples. Her head tipped back, she lifted her chin, and enjoyed. She caught a peek at his face, what she could see of it. His head was bowed, and he seemed to be watching his hands fondle and undress her.

The dress opened, exposing her corset and chemise. He kissed the mounds of her breasts, his lips soft and moist, smoothing over her skin, his tongue delving down the center into her cleavage. She gripped his ears, fingers folded around his nape. On sensory overload, she shuddered and moaned. It had come on so fast, and now she wanted him to have access to all of her.

He was already working on the laces of her corset, loosening them and yanking everything off the top half of her body until she was bare. It was outstandingly arousing to be naked from the waist up while he was still clothed. Her lips tipped up in a smirk of delight.

Her nipples tightened under his gaze. They ached. Her breath came faster. She pressed her lips together and arched toward him. "Please," her voice turned into a low breathy sigh. "Take me into your mouth."

He didn't move, just continued to look at her, cupping the undersides of her breasts but making no attempt to touch her nipples.

She whimpered, her head back, her mouth pouting in silent pleading.

His thumbs maddeningly brushed the skin of her plump breasts, but he refused to go near the tips.

"Pres, please do something." She brought her own hands from his face to cover herself.

He gave a choking growl, a tortured laugh, and said, "Holy God, do you realize how you look?"

In the swiftest move ever, he picked her up and laid her across the bed. It was so quick that her hands were still on her breasts.

"Touch yourself," he said. "Look. Watch. Touch your nipples."

Shocked at first at his request, she did it anyway. She ached too much to not touch herself. With thumb and forefinger, she pressed the tightly furled tips.

"Tighter," he begged, his breath uneven, eyes wide, the blue dark and sensual.

She compressed her nipples tightly.

"Twist them." He could barely get the words out.

She twisted, again and again. Her head rolled back and forth on the bed. Her hips shifted. He seemed frozen, unmoving, mesmerized by her fingers.

"Damn, Isis, you're killing me."

"Then do something," she challenged, her voice none too steady.

He pulled her to her feet, and in a rush, he stripped her of her skirt, petticoats, and drawers leaving her in stockings, garters, and tan kid heeled slippers.

"Holy God," he whispered, as if it were a prayer.

At that moment, she lost her fear, lost her insecurity over her less than thin figure. No one could feign a reaction like that. At that moment, she truly believed herself beautiful and desirable. She reached for one of the garters to take it off, but he put out a hand to stop her.

He avidly looked her up and down as if he were young and stricken as any boy seeing his first naked female. "You are every man's lush fantasy," he murmured, a half laugh, half whimpering sound coming out in a huff. "But you're all mine."

In all her newly found confidence, she twirled around, gazed at him over her shoulder, and began to take down her hair. Pins dropped to the carpet. She pulled off the circlet of flowers and pearls. He took it from her hands and draped it rakishly over the spindle at the foot of the bed.





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Pres had just about all he could take. Gone was the unsure woman, the contentious woman who held him off for weeks. In her place was what he thought of as the real Isis Garrett. Sexy, sweet, passionate in her work, and obviously passionate in the bedroom. Playfully, she shook her hair around her shoulders, letting it drape around her like a cloak. Her expression was serious as she watched him, her teeth worrying her lower lip.

"Are you going to get undressed?" She lifted an eyebrow provocatively.

The little she-devil. He'd been hard since they'd entered the room. Well, he'd been hard since way before that. He hung on by his virtual fingertips to keep from grabbing her and thrusting into her sweet body with no play beforehand. Now she teased him. He wanted their first time to be loving and tender and romantic, and the woman was working on his last nerve. Maybe it was a message to him that they'd played long enough.

He shucked his clothing as fast as he could, well aware that she followed every movement. His skin felt hot, his heart thudded, and his reddened and potent cock jutted impatiently from its curly nest.

She reached again for her garters.

He rumbled, "Touch those again, and I'll tan your backside." The look of her, bent forward, rich, dark hair tumbling over her shoulders, rosy nipples playing peek-a-boo with the strands, took his breath. Her expression, shy, teasing, decadent, and wicked made him swell harder, throb painfully. His balls were already drawing up. He closed his eyes with the exquisite sensation.

In a quick move, he pulled the bedspread down, slung an arm around her shoulders and the other under her knees, and tossed her on the bed, coming down hard on top of her. Air whooshed from her lungs, and he eased up immediately. "I think I'll spank your bottom anyway."

"Don't you dare," she cried, pushing him with her hands on his shoulders.

"Hah!" He flipped her over to her stomach. All that soft, white skin. He separated the strands of her hair to clear them off her back so he had the full effect of the sight. She was sensitive about her weight, but she had no idea how really beautiful her curves all the way to her bottom looked. He smoothed his hand down from the middle of her back and cupped a cheek. When he squeezed, she moaned and shifted.

He rose up above her, straddled her legs, and leaned down until his chest met her back. That put his cock cradled between her cheeks. He pressed downward with his hips. Pushing. Easing between.

Later. Another time.

He drifted his lips across her shoulders, over her nape. He pulled her arms above her head and smoothed his hands down their length to the sides of her breasts. He wanted his mouth on them, suckled the curve of her neck where it met her shoulder. Turning her over, he began his erotic, loving assault.

Taking her lips, he joined with her, tangling their tongues like he was searching for her soul. Trailing down her body, he drew a nipple into his mouth.

She arched into him, called out his name in a shocked voice that was more pleasure than offense. Her fingers cupped his ears urging him on with cries and writhing.

Loving her nipples one after another, he massaged them with his lips until they were tight and hard. His own arousal, already high, built stronger. He knew he probably wouldn't last much longer, but he wanted to pleasure her as many

times as possible before he finally united with her, his cock snug and secure inside her body.

He skimmed down over her belly, its quivering softness vibrating against his mouth. It seemed as if she knew where he was headed. Her moans increased, her thighs separated.

"God. Pres. Oh, my God."

He sifted his fingers through the dark curls over her mound, kissed them, parted her tender folds with his thumbs.

She shrieked, her hips arched.

Sliding his hands under her bottom, he lifted it, clamped his lips around her clit, and suckled gently. Her sobs rocked him. Her hips knocked against his face. He clutched them to hold her still. Bringing her to climax was his most important task. He wanted her wet, her tissues swollen open, wanted her ready for his thrust.

He pushed a finger inside her sheath, felt the throbbing contractions of her interior muscles, wanted to feel them around his cock. But he kept pumping into her, continued to suckle her clit to bring her to climax.

Her orgasm came with loud groans and shudders. He could feel the quivering of her thighs on his shoulders. Before her pleasure could ease off, he rose up over her and thrust his hungry, pulsing erection into the heat of her softened sheath. "Oh, God," he whispered as a prayer. Her eyes widened, the deep brown eyes sparkled. Was she crying?

She wrapped her legs around his hips, her arms around his back, and pumped with him, thrust for thrust.

Her body felt exquisite. Hot and tight, she held him, enfolded him. He was finally inside, possessed by her. His

arms closed around her. He kissed her. They rocked together, pleasure incomparable, transcendent. The climax hit him, his cum broiling its way up from deep inside his balls. He filled her, shot thick jets of semen deep into her womb.

Much later, depleted by the intensity of his waiting for her, by the excitement of the wedding day, they lay snuggled, her head on his shoulder, a hand resting on his belly. "Lord, Isis, I guess we are truly married." His chest rumbled with suppressed laughter.



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"What's so funny, my love?" Isis responded, nuzzling her nose in his chest hair.

"You sure didn't want to get married. You told me that plenty of times. And now you seem pretty enthusiastic about it," he gloated.

She playfully swatted his chest but followed it up with a soothing kiss. "Well, I didn't trust men. I made mistakes, and I'm not proud of myself. I tried to drive you off because of it." She brushed her lips across the smooth plane of his side. His body was firm and muscular, so different from hers.

"You didn't succeed though. You realize that, don't you?" "Well, that's obvious." She chuckled at that.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Do vou trust me now?"

She hesitated, not because she didn't trust him, but because this was important, and she wanted to say it right. "You're an unusual man, Pres MacKay. Gentle and patient. You turned your life around. I had to respect that."

"Respect is nice, but aren't you madly in love with me?"

She laughed and sat up to face him. The man lying there was so arousing in his nakedness. "I'm wildly in love. You dug through the walls I'd put up and made me love you."

"However I did it, it worked." He ran a finger across the line of her jaw.

His hair, the russet ruff, was all mussed up, sticking straight out. She'd gripped it to hold him to her breasts, to control him at her clitoris. He looked supremely masculine, and, at the same time, like a young boy. Red hair, freckles, eyes the deep color of the sky at dusk.

"The road to Loving, Texas has been a strange one. I never expected it to come to this conclusion."

"It's not the end, darling. Our children will be born here, and their children. We'll be awash in kids before you know it." He grinned wickedly, brushed his knuckle back and forth over her chin.

"And we'll be sitting on that porch, rocking away in our old age." She grinned back. "We'd better get started on those children."

He enfolded her in both arms, rolled her across his body to land her flat on her back. He reared up over her. "My sentiments exactly, Mrs. MacKay."

"What're you waiting for, Mr. MacKay?"

#### [Back to Table of Contents]

#### www.janeleopoldquinn.com

#### Author Bio:

I've been an avid reader as far back as I can remember and always a romantic dreamer. I grew up loving the cowboys on TV in the 50s and 60s, imagining the life, tight jeans, strapped down guns, beat up Stetsons, cowboy boots. What's not to love? Maybe the history wasn't always accurate, but the basic story of the mysterious, gorgeous, emotionally-wounded loner spoke to me. I guess they were searching for me throughout the Wild West.

That was the start of my sensual fantasies. They stayed locked in my mind for many years until a friend said, "Why don't you write them down?" Why not, indeed? One spiral notebook, a pen, and the unleashing of my imagination later, and here I am. Joining Romance Writers of America and Passionate Ink introduced me to other romance and e-press writers and helped hone the craft of erotic romance that has become my passion and niche in life. I love the creative process and am constantly, madly writing and revising the "next great novel."

My careers have been varied—3rd grade school teacher, bookkeeper, executive secretary, legal secretary—none of which gave me a bit of inspiration. Even though I suffer for my art, I love every part of the process—developing characters, designing the plot, even drawing the layout of physical spaces from my stories. Writing romance is the most wonderful job in the universe.

Please visit my website at www.janeleopoldquinn.com.

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