

Chapter One

"He's so tall and handsome," said Sissy Dearmont, followed by a sigh.

"And a widower. Poor man," pointed out Ethel, her sister.

Rebecca Tam added, "And he's not old. I figured the new preacher would be an older man."

"But he's been on a church mission already," Faith noted, her voice pitched low enough Charity had to listen hard to hear.

"He has? Where to?" Ethel asked.

"I'm not sure," Faith answered. "But I'm sure it was the most dangerous place you could imagine."

"Ooo," all the other girls vocalized at once.

"Did you see his eyes? Oh, Lord, what amazing eyes. They're such a beautiful blue," said Sissy.

Faith disagreed. "No, they're gray."

"I thought they were gray, too," Rebecca said.

"Hmph. It doesn't matter," Sissy said. "They're beautiful. So gentle for a man."

"I heard he's looking for a wife to help him with the ministry," Faith told the gaggle of girls, all of whom should have known better than to gossip.

"Where did you hear that?" Ethel asked.

"Mrs. Dobson's cousin, Mattie," Faith said, whispering. "She said she'd been talking to Martha Aimes. Martha knows because..." Faith's confidence petered out as Charity turned around and speared her with her eyes.

Her younger sister, Faith, was a notorious gossip, but it wasn't to be encouraged. The town of Virtue, Arizona Territory, had enough fuss and bother without adding to the drama. Charity put down the tin of canned peaches she'd been looking at, and walked over to where the girls had congregated in front of the main counter of the mercantile. Before she got there, she adjusted the lace adjoining the pintucks on her favorite white shirtwaist. It wouldn't do to be messy when confronting critical young women; it would distract from her mild reprimand.

She'd already greeted them when she and Faith entered the broad shop, now she simply made eye contact with each and nodded. "Ladies. I think it's time Faith and I were leaving. We've gotten all we're going to get here. I overheard your conversation. The new preacher would probably not appreciate being talked about as if he were an object."

"Oh, but, Charity—" Faith began.

"No, Faith. Gossiping about him is beneath you." She gave each of the others a stern look—or at least the sternest she had, which she knew wasn't particularly intimidating. "It's beneath all of you."

"I suppose Mother would be miffed," Sissy said to her sister. "Let's go." She and Ethel both straightened their skirts, and paraded out the door, the little bell above it jingling as they left.

Rebecca sighed. "That's a lovely boater," she said to Charity, referring to the straw hat she wore.

"Thank you, Becky," Charity told her. "Faith and I must be going. Good day to you." For the latter, Charity smiled. There was no malice in any of the girls, but they all knew better than to

gossip. Faith knew better than anyone, but she persisted. If you wanted to know anything about anyone in town, you went to Faith.

In this case, while it had been good to learn a few new facts about the new preacher, Charity didn't like the way the information was conveyed, and she felt a little guilty about standing there eavesdropping.

Charity was aware of Mr. Dobson witnessing the entire conversation from behind the counter, so she smiled at him and waved. "Thank you for your help, Mr. Dobson. We look forward to receiving the order. Especially the new marmalade. I can hardly wait."

"It's as sweet as you are, Miss Charity," Mr. Dobson said, a twinkle in his eye.

What a kind thing to say! "Thank you. My best to Dotty," she said as she escorted Faith out the door.

"Good bye, Mr. Dobson," Faith called as the door closed upon them.

Charity was hunting for the lace-trimmed hanky in her reticule, when she ran smack into a wall. Thinking she'd taken a mis-turn and was now, somehow, facing the rough, outer wall of the mercantile, she stepped back. A hand reached out to steady her. A man's hand. Attached to an arm, which was attached to some of the broadest shoulders she'd ever encountered. Looking a little higher, she realized who she'd run into. She'd recognize that face anywhere.

"Are you all right, Miss Bucknell?"

"Oh, yes. I'm so sorry to have barreled into you, Pastor Cambridge. It was clumsy of me."

Faith broke in. "Hello, Pastor. How delightful to meet you again. You remember me from the church receiving line last Sunday? Faith Bucknell? Charity is my sister."

He smiled and Charity's world got a little brighter. She tried to tamp down her enthusiasm, reminding herself that the pastor was a man of God. But hadn't God fashioned him exquisitely? Such a thought was unseemly, and yet it was a hard one to escape.

"Of course I remember you, Miss Bucknell," he said, addressing Faith. "Both of you. How could I not? Two of the prettiest faces of the congregation."

Charity's face heated and Faith full-on blushed, too. Pastor Cambridge's comment would be making the rounds as soon as Faith could find her friends.

"Well," Charity said, stumbling for words. What to say in the face of such a compliment coming from an eligible and respected bachelor? Charity wasn't much of a flirt. "Thank you for saying such a nice thing. Are you sure I didn't step on your toes or anything?"

"Quite sure," he said, his deep voice reverberating like honey in her ears. She nervously adjusted her hat.

"Then we'll move along and not keep you from your business," she told him, looking pointedly at the hand which still held her arm. He removed it immediately, a rather sheepish smile turning up the corners of his mouth.

"Will I see you at the charity soiree this evening, ladies?"

"I cannot go," Faith said, a tiny pout forming. "I have class projects to grade."

"Faith is our local school teacher, Pastor. She's quite dedicated to her students."

"Though," Faith said, smiling, "they are often not particularly dedicated to *me*."

Charity chuckled along with the other two, and answered his question. "I'll be there."

"I understand you are the charity coordinator for Virtue. It's an apt position for a person with your name."

Faith spoke up. "Oh, Charity is the most charitable person you could ever wish to meet. And, I am, of course, the most faithful." Her grin toned down the remark.

"Both excellent traits. I'm looking forward to getting to know all the Bucknell qualities better."

"Really?" Faith asked, eagerness adding a breathy quality to her voice.

"Absolutely," he said. "Our meeting was all too brief at the church receiving line last Sunday. But we have time. I'm sure we shall have plenty of opportunities to get to know each other."

Charity's stomach lurched. "Time for us to go, Faith. So enjoyable to see you, Pastor. I hope the rest of your day is pleasant." She took Faith by the arm and led her away, down the narrow boardwalk, though her sister resisted a bit.

"Goodbye, Pastor!" Faith called as they left.

"Goodbye, ladies."

* * *

The green dress or the yellow? Both were fashionable and appropriate for the event. But she liked the ultra-puffed sleeves of the yellow better. The décolletage was more modest as well. And it looked so pretty with her long white satin gloves. She had just the right silk flower to wear in her hair, too. It was a marvelous contrast to her white-blond tresses. Mrs. Parker would help her with a perfect Gibson Girl hairdo, and the effect should be beautiful. Though, perhaps the green was better as they were coming upon the Christmas season. No, the green should probably be left for closer to the holiday.

She wasn't doing it to impress Pastor Cambridge. Of course not. She was doing it because the donors deserved to find her at her best. Respect for them made her a little more conscious of her attire. The soiree was to introduce them to the new pastor in a more intimate environment.

Charity didn't want to be in an intimate setting with the pastor. The very thought made her want to curl in on herself.

* * *

The church community room was beautifully decorated, full of flowers, the white walls hung with tasteful bunting, and a pair of white-clothed tables set with punch, tea, lemonade and cookies of several varieties. Charity herself looked lovely and, at least to Paul's eyes, quite appealing in a yellow, silky dress, with her thick blonde hair up high.

"All appears prepared for the evening. You've done a marvelous job planning things, Miss Bucknell."

She smiled, but it seemed tentative, as though she didn't know what to say. "Thank you."

"It's going to be a pleasure to work with you. The church is, and I am, most grateful for the care you give your tasks."

"Um...thank you, Pastor."

Paul noted more than a hint of discomfort. Surely a woman of such beauty and compassion was used to hearing compliments. Her demeanor said otherwise, which was puzzling. Perhaps he was being too forward? Any attempt he could make to change the tone of their conversation was lost when the first patrons started to arrive.

"Ah. And here is Mr. Smithers," Charity said, gesturing to a distinguished older man in a new and fashionable tuxedo coat with black tie. He removed his top hat and handed it and his walking stick to a volunteer receptionist. Perhaps Virtue was a fashion-forward place to be, despite its humble position in the world. His own tail coat was older and less stylish, perhaps a bit too formal for this event, but it was all he had that wasn't the average daily frock coat. Lutheran preachers were hardly flush with money. His stipend from the church, small salary from the congregation, and the rectory they provided, would never make him a rich man.

Smithers' face was lined and careworn, a deep V forcing his brows down in the center.

Charity ushered the older man over to Paul and the two shook hands. "Mr. Smithers," she said, "is our town undertaker. He gives freely of his time and resources."

Paul acknowledged the man with a smile and nod. "We are very grateful for your services, Mr. Smithers. Thank you for coming tonight."

"My pleasure, Pastor. Our Charity here is an angel and the townsfolk all rally 'round when she calls upon us."

Paul glanced at Charity, but she was modestly looking down at the floor. "I'm learning that about her," he said.

The conversation went on for a few more moments, and others arrived, each dressed well, some better than others, but all clearly prosperous in his or her own way.

As a heavyset woman with thinning gray hair was introduced, Paul caught a distinct twinkle in her eye as she looked between him and Charity. "Pastor, this is Mrs. Snowden," Charity said. "Her husband, Claude, was a pillar of the community and Mrs. Snowden is no less. He passed away two years ago."

Paul took the widow's gloved hand and bowed over it. "It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am. I'm sorry to hear of your loss."

"Thank you, young man," she said. "I miss him, but I try to stay active and it helps."

"Mrs. Snowden recently gave fifty dollars to the Widows and Orphans Fund, Pastor."

Mrs. Snowden was watching the two of them like a predator sizing up prey. "It was my pleasure. What I have, I'm most willing to share."

"And we appreciate it. I do not remember meeting you at services on Sunday. Is my memory faulty, or did I miss you somehow? I'm sure a distinguished woman like yourself would have made a lasting impression on me."

"You flatter me, Pastor Cambridge," she said. "I wasn't there. My daughter recently had a baby and I needed to be with her, watching the little one for a while on Sunday."

"Perhaps you'll be available to attend tomorrow Mrs. Snowden?"

Her eyes darted between Paul and Charity again. "I wouldn't miss it. Pardon me, but I see my old friend Eunice nearby. I must say hello."

"Of course," Charity said. "Please do not let us keep you. Thank you for coming."

Watching Mrs. Snowden trundle away, Paul asked, "What was that about?"

Charity gave him a puzzled look. "What was what about?"

Hmm. Her innocent mien was compelling, but was it real or feigned? "Oh, nothing. My imagination, I'm sure." He glanced toward the door and saw a family group coming in. "I believe the rest of your family is here, Miss Bucknell."

"Oh!" she said, though her demeanor said she was relieved. "I'm sure they'll want to talk to you right away, Pastor."

"I wish you would call me Paul."

"Oh, but I cannot!"

His brows lowered. "Why not?"

"Because...because...it isn't appropriate. You are our pastor, after all. I should show you all due respect."

"By treating me as a distant and elderly figure? I assure you, I am not so old."

Her cheeks pinkened. "No. I'm sure you are not."

Taking her hand, he gave it a slight squeeze. "Then call me Paul."

Her gaze dropped down to the floor again. "If you say so...Paul."

"Much better. Now let's greet your family."

Over the course of the next half hour, Paul chatted with Charity's grandmother, Patience Sutton, her sisters, Hope, Mercy, and Verity, as well as Verity's husband, Joshua Palmer. A glimmer shone as the fellow moved and his lapel fell open and closed.

"Is that a badge? Are you a man of the law?" Paul asked him.

"I'm Virtue's newly minted sheriff," he answered with a smile.

"In that case, I'm sure we'll meet often, as I feel it's incumbent upon the church to minister to the miscreant as well as the lawful of this town."

"I agree. Charity, here, has been quite active in offering a sympathetic ear to our inmates. I'm sure it's given them comfort. Even the recidivists among them calm in her presence."

Charity was indeed the angel Mr. Smithers had declared her to be. She appeared to be everywhere, aiding and comforting those in need. Her young sister spoke up. Hope appeared to be about nineteen, and was matched with her identical twin, Mercy. Mercy, thus far, hadn't said two words together, but she appeared to be paying close attention.

"We learned a few things about you when you were introduced last Sunday, Pastor Cambridge. But there's so much more to you than a simple introduction could have mentioned. I was sorry to hear of the passing of your wife. Was she ill?"

"Hope!" Verity said. "Mind your manners. That is not your business."

Hope stuck out her chin, a little defiance in her tone when she responded. "I'm just making conversation."

Verity, the eldest of the brood, looked about ready to lay into her sister, but Paul tried to defuse the situation. "No, Miss Bucknell, she was not sick. She died in childbirth, along with my stillborn son."

"Oh, dear," Hope said. "I'm so sorry. What a horrible time it must have been for you."

"It was three years ago, Miss, and though it's still painful, I have soldiered on, as we all must do."

Charity spoke up. "Yes. We lost our mother about three years ago, as well. It was sudden—her heart, Papa said."

"My daughter was a good woman. There was nothing we could do," Patience Sutton said, her eyes a little wet. "She was my sweet, sweet girl."

Paul's gaze went from Mrs. Sutton to Dr. Bucknell, the girls' father, and back again. "I'm sorry for your loss." He spoke somberly to the rest of the Bucknells present. "I'm sure it was a hardship."

"We still miss her," Mercy said. Paul had begun thinking she was never going to say a whole sentence.

"Of course, you do," he said

"Thank you for your sympathy," Dr. Bucknell said. "As you said, we soldier onward."

"Perhaps we should change the subject to more pleasant topics," Charity said. "This is a party and we must be joyful. We have a new pastor and a new sheriff, and there is much hope for our future."

"Hear, hear," Dr. Bucknell said.

"Let's talk about flowers," Mrs. Sutton said. The rest of the family stared at her. It was something of an odd thing to say.

Charity patted her grandmother's hand. "Perhaps another time, Granny. I meant the future of the church and the town."

"I know I'm looking forward to our future together, Pastor," Hope said, batting her blonde eyelashes in Paul's direction.

She was a pretty girl, as all the Bucknell women were, but a bit too young for him. At twenty-eight, he would find a woman of Hope's age hard to relate to in terms of world experience.

"Hope..." Verity hissed.

Hope gave her an innocent look. "What?"

Verity sighed. "Oh, never mind."

"More guests are arriving. We must greet them and give them our thanks," Charity said, neatly closing the argument.

"Perhaps you would come to supper sometime, Pastor?" Mrs. Sutton asked.

"Kind of you, ma'am. Thank you."

The matron appeared pleased. "Charity can arrange it, can you not, my dear?"

Charity looked a bit wide-eyed. "Of course, Granny, though I'm sure Pastor Cambridge has quite a lot of engagements."

"Not particularly," Paul told her. Getting to know the church parishioners was not only part of his ministry, but also a pleasure with families such as the Bucknells. And if he could learn more about Charity and discover why she was so skittish around him, so much the better.

"Oh. Um...Are you sure?" she asked, clearly uncomfortable.

He tried to gentle her, but wasn't too sure he was successful. "Yes, I'm sure. Unless it's too much trouble."

She sighed and looked defeated. "I'll set something up."

A puzzling woman, Miss Charity Bucknell. If Paul didn't know better, he'd think she was afraid of him. But that couldn't be true. They'd hardly met. Perhaps she'd be less bashful after they worked together for a time.

They said polite words to the Bucknell family and moved on to greet more of his congregation.