

THE TEACHER AND THE
PREACHER

LONESTAR LOVE BOOK THREE



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

CHAPTER 1



CAROLINE

“*P*lease, Micah, hold still,” Caroline begged the baby squirming in her arms.

Micah turned his deep blue eyes to his mother’s face and beamed a two-tooth grin before latching his pudgy fingers onto her collar and pulling it toward his drooling mouth. She wanted to look her best for the tea party. She was, after all, the guest of honor. At this rate, her entire bosom would be saliva soaked before she arrived.

She set the baby on his feet and took his small hands in her own. Leaning forward slightly, she let the boy toddle. Micah stepped out, leading with his chest, lifting each foot high in the air. He would walk on his own soon, and she both loved and feared the idea. At one-year, he weighed thirty-three pounds. She sighed. Would she be able to keep up with him, lift him, in another six months?

The sound of buggy wheels rolling on packed dirt pulled her attention from her son’s baby steps to the street. The conveyance drew to a stop, and a tall, muscular man stepped out.

“Mrs. Connors?” he inquired.

“Yes, that’s me,” she answered although her stomach tightened at the lie. She was no one’s missus.

The big cowboy removed his hat and held it by his side. “I’m John Wayne, Marcie’s husband. I came to pick you up for the party. Marcie was busy getting ready. She sends her apologies for not coming in person.”

“Thank you, Mr. Wayne.” The baby squealed in displeasure at their suspended motion. He pulled on her hands and scowled.

“Call me John.” He looked at the straining child. “That’s a mighty fine looking boy you got there, Mrs. Connors.”

His eyes strayed from Micah, to her, and back. The baby was white blond, big, tall for his age. She was tiny, elfish, faery-like. Her cheek bones were high, her nose tilted and her mouth a lush pink bow. Midnight black hair was brushed away from her face revealing a widow’s peak. That dramatic peak at the baby’s forehead and his deep blue eyes marked him as hers. Her genetic contribution ended there.

“Micah gets his coloring and his size from his father,” she answered the unspoken question. “Please, call me Caroline.” She lifted the boy into her arms and moved toward the stairs.

John Wayne was by her side, cupping her elbow with his large hand, guiding her down the steps. He helped her into the buggy and waited while she arranged her skirts and set the child on her lap.

He turned the buggy and headed back up the street. “Are you getting settled?”

“Mrs. Thornton met me yesterday and took me to the rooms. There was already food in the cupboard and the bed and crib made up. It was so nice. Micah and I were both worn out from the trip.” The hot, dry Texas landscape rolled by. She’d lived her whole life in Minnesota, a land of sparkling lakes and snow. Well, she’d get used to this place, and she wanted to be, needed to be, far away from anyone who might recognize her.

"Mrs. Thornton, Amanda, is my sister-in-law. She's Marcie's younger sister," John explained.

He gave the reins a shake and the horses picked up their pace. The air flowing past, hot as it was, offered some relief from the stifling heat. "Marcie lived in your rooms when she first came to San Miguel. I installed the lock on the door and the one at the bottom of the stairs. The town is not as rowdy as it once was. We have a church and our school is set to open." He tipped his head in her direction and smiled. There are more women here now, but men still outnumber them. I hope you'll keep both locks set when home." Caroline felt his sharp gaze as he awaited her answer.

"I will," she agreed. "Marcie has been wonderful. I applied to schools all over the country, but no one would hire a woman with a child. Marcie was accepting, enthusiastic, even, to have both of us. She said she would set up babysitting. I'd never encountered that word before. Micah will be staying at your home during the day and the babysitter," she rolled the word around on her tongue, "will watch both Micah and your daughter, Katie." John nodded his understanding. "Marcie wrote that there was no reason a woman with children couldn't hold a job outside the home. I can tell you, no one else shares that opinion. She said she is the midwife and sometimes doctor here. Your wife is very unusual."

John choked or laughed. She couldn't determine which. "Yes, she is certainly that."

The buggy entered a large yard in front of a white, two-story house. A porch wrapped around the building. Two women rose from a swing and met the buggy in the yard.

"Mrs. Connors, I'm Marcie Wayne and you met my sister, Amanda, yesterday." The two women beamed smiles of welcome. Caroline suppressed a laugh. They were alike as two peas in a pod with their masses of curly hair. "This must be Micah. What a handsome boy." Marcie held her hands out to the baby and, to Caroline's surprise, he launched himself into her arms.

Two children approached the little group. "These are my older

children.” Amanda put an arm around each child. “Tommy is twelve, and Jeanette is ten. We’ve engaged the services of some of the older children to watch the babies while we have our tea.”

“Tommy, this is Micah. Can you take him to play with the other children?” Marcie handed the baby to the older boy. Micah grinned at her as he was borne away. Caroline gave him a little wave and sighed. He’d been so clingy on the trip, but these people had won him over at first glance. She would trust his judgment. John circled the buggy and helped her to the ground.

The frenzied barking of two dogs split the air. The dogs ran, tongues hanging, twisted in the air, and fought for the prize – a large, dirty stick. One dog was big and brown, a mutt. The other had the thick silver and gray coat of a Husky. *Poor thing*, she thought, *he must suffer in the Texas heat*. In Minnesota, a Husky was a familiar sight. They were excellent guard dogs and could pull a sled through the worst storm, but they were also loyal and loving. He was a long way from the snow, and so was she. Her stomach clenched at the memory of those cold, clear nights. The dogs pulling their sled through the falling snow while she sat wrapped in fur – warm, secure, home. Caroline blinked away a tear and straightened her shoulders.

John pointed at the brown dog. “That’s Duke. He’s our dog. The other one belongs to the preacher.” The dogs each held one end of the stick in their mouth and were engaged in canine tug-of-war. Deep, snarling growls reverberated in the still afternoon air. “Don’t worry about them. They won’t really fight each other,” he reassured. With a dismissive wave, John turned toward the house.

Marcie linked her arm with his. “Come in. Everyone is eager to meet you. San Miguel is a good town, and we hope you’ll like it here.”

The steady hum of chatter disappeared when they entered, and all heads swiveled in her direction. A lump of self-consciousness mixed with a healthy dose of fear took up uncomfortable residence

in her throat. She needed this job. She needed these people to like her, but, more important, to approve of her.

Marcie led her to the front of the room. "I have the great pleasure of introducing our new teacher, Caroline Connors. As you know, the first day of school will be two weeks from today. All children between the ages of six and fifteen are welcome. Please help yourself to tea or punch and cookies."

Marcie laced her arm though Caroline's and led her to the table. She poured two cups of tea, handed one to her, and kept up a running dialogue of introductions. Caroline's hand had been squeezed until it ached, and her lips hurt from the smile frozen on her face.

A single knock on the door drew her attention. A shiver raced through her body, and she pushed it aside. She was safe. No one knew her here. Her shoulders lowered. Her fists unclenched.

"Afternoon, Preacher," John Wayne greeted the newcomer.

"Hope I'm not too late, John. I had a bit of an emergency. Granny Wilkins is poorly, I'm sorry to say." Her shoulders resumed their height. She knew that voice, but it couldn't be. Not here. Not now. Not so far from home.

"That's the preacher. Every available woman for miles around arrives at service in her best dress and stares at him like they've been forty days in the desert, and he's a glass of water." Marcie squeezed Caroline's arm. "Wait until you see him, and you'll understand."

Caroline fixed her eyes on the door. The two men entered, and blood rushed from her face to the bottom of her feet to return in scalding heat. It couldn't be, it simply could not be, but there he stood – Sven Nielson.

John motioned in her direction. "Come meet our new teacher, Sven." He stood in front of her, holding out his hand. "Mrs. Connors, this is our preacher, Sven Nielson." His giant hand engulfed her tiny one. It had always been this way. His giant to her elf, like so many of the Norwegian fairy tales they were raised on.

His hand was clammy. His eyes scorched her face. "It's a pleasure, Mrs. Connors."

"Thank you, Mr. Nielson, I..."

A disturbance at the kitchen door revealed Tommy with a sobbing Micah in his arms. "I'm sorry to interrupt the party, but Micah got mighty fussy. I tried my best, but I think he needs his ma."

Caroline pulled her hand from the preacher's grip and hurried across the room. "Thank you, Tommy. Come here, baby." She leaned down and scooped the unhappy child into her arms. Rocking back and forth, she patted his back until the sobs became sniffles. The preacher's gaze burned her back and sent her pulse racing. She lifted her eyes to his and strove for a look of defiant begging. *Don't say a word. Not a single word.*

The baby lifted his head from her shoulder and surveyed the room with those dark blue eyes before pushing his fist into his mouth.

"I'm sorry. He's teething. I've enjoyed meeting all of you, but I believe I should get Micah home." Caroline moved toward the door glancing at Sven as she went. His eyes were glued to the baby. She was out the door and moving toward town. A frenzy of conversation exploded at her back.

John hustled to catch her. "Mrs. Connors, Caroline, wait. Let me hitch the buggy."

"Don't worry. I'll enjoy the walk." Caroline called over her shoulder, but her difficulty holding the squirming child paid lie to her claim.

"I'll be happy to walk Mrs. Connors back to town." Sven's long legs ate the distance between them. He put two fingers in his mouth and a shrill whistle pierced the air. "Loki, come," he called.

The Husky stopped mid-game, spotted Sven and trotted to his master's side. "Good boy, Loki." Sven ruffled the big dog's fur.

"Loki. Oh my God. Loki," Caroline gasped. The dog studied her

with his Husky eyes, blue with a ring of black, before trotting to her side and rubbing against her skirt.

"He remembers you," Sven said.

She ran her fingers through his thick fur.

"You can't carry the child all the way to town," Sven muttered. He reached for the sleeping boy. "Let me help."

He plucked Micah from her arms and laid him against his chest. He circled the child with both arms and closed his eyes. His voice trembled. "He's mine."

"Yes, he's yours," she snapped. Anger oozed like thick mud through her words.

She stamped her foot and would have rushed ahead ignoring the blond giant except he held her son, their son, in his brawny arms.

"I don't understand. It was just the one time," he stammered.

"Yes, well, apparently once is enough." Her words, sharp as arrows, zinged through the hot, dry air.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know..." he began.

"No, you didn't know. You left. Left the next morning after we slept... no, not slept, there was no sleeping involved, after we made love by the river. At least, I thought we were making love until you disappeared. And I waited, Sven, I waited. Counting the days until I saw you again, and then counting the days until I knew I was pregnant. Pregnant and alone in a small town. The small town we grew up in. A place full of good people, but people who take rules seriously. It takes two to break one rule in particular, but only the woman gets the blame." She was walking at full speed, arms swinging.

As they neared the door to her rooms, she fumbled in her purse searching for the key.

"John said you were Mrs. Are you married?" Sven asked.

"No, in my application I said I was a widow. Marcie willing to hire a woman with a child was rare enough, but an unwed woman

with a child? Even Marcie's good will can only go so far," she fumed.

"We'll get married," he declared. Sven shifted the baby to one arm and took possession of Caroline's wrist with the other.

She pulled from his grasp. "Was that a proposal, Mr. Nielson? If so, it's too little, too late." Caroline stabbed at the doorknob with her key. "Where the hell were you? Damn it, Sven, where were you?"

"Don't swear, Caroline," Sven frowned.

"Don't you tell me what to do." Caroline pushed the door open and retrieved Micah. She aimed a scorching glare up at him. "My baby is hungry and tired." From the wince on Sven's face he hadn't missed the emphasis on the first word of her sentence.

After delivering the parting shot, she slammed the door in his astonished face. She leaned her back against the door, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Oh, Sven," her voice was a lonely gasp. She had cried for him, hoped he would return, prayed he would claim her and Micah. But now, when she finally had a place for herself and Micah, a place where she had a chance to live life with her chin held high, he arrived to remind her of all she had lost.

"Damn it," she repeated with more than a touch of defiant despair in her voice.

"Damn."