

His Sweet Amber  
*The Red Petticoat Saloon*

By

Sue Lyndon

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Published by Blushing Books®,  
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ABCD Graphics and Design  
977 Seminole Trail #233  
Charlottesville, VA 22901  
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Lyndon, Sue  
His Sweet Amber

eBook ISBN: 978-1-68259-580-0  
Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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## Table of Contents:

Chapter One .....	5
Chapter Two.....	17
Chapter Three.....	28
Chapter Four .....	38
Chapter Five.....	49
Chapter Six.....	58
Chapter Seven .....	68
Chapter Eight .....	78
Chapter Nine .....	84
Chapter Ten.....	92
Chapter Eleven.....	101
Sue Lyndon .....	107
EBook Offer.....	109
Blushing Books Newsletter.....	110
Blushing Books.....	111

# Chapter One

Callie hurried to set the supper table for two. Memories suddenly flooded through her unbidden, and as she poured water into the cups, she felt as if she was preparing for Matthew's return after a long day spent in the mines. At any moment now, he would stroll through the door and greet her with a kiss. But the merry humming drifting out of the kitchen thrust her back into reality as quickly as the fantasy had besieged her, reminding her that Matthew wasn't about to walk through the door and she wasn't at their claim in the mountains. She was in town—Culpepper Cove—and her husband had left this life forever.

Oblivious to Callie's musings, Mrs. Gerrard bustled into the small dining room and placed supper on the table. Ribbons of steam rose up from the large pot. The aroma of the ham and potato soup that had been simmering on the stove for hours made Callie's mouth water.

"I'd expected Thom to have returned already." Mrs. Gerrard wiped her hands on her apron and gave a shrug. "I should have invited the Wilsons over for dinner, for as much ham and potatoes as I've made. Guess we'll be stuffing ourselves tonight."

Callie smiled politely and kept her opinion about Mr. Gerrard to herself. She was glad his trip to visit his claim was taking longer than anticipated. Maybe, if she were lucky, he would be gone for another week. She appreciated the roof over her head, considering she was no relation to the Gerrards, but she didn't care for the leering glances Mr. Gerrard sent her way when his wife wasn't looking.

After Callie fetched the biscuits she'd made earlier, the women sat at the table, said a quick blessing, and tried their best to do justice to the large pot of ham and potatoes. The front and back doors had been propped open to create a cross breeze in the downstairs of the small house, and the voices of passersby and horses clomping down the street came in waves. Occasionally, the sounds of cheerful piano music drifted in with the breeze. The piano music, of course, came from The Red Petticoat Saloon, which was only a short walk away from the Gerrards' house.

Mrs. Gerrard raised her chin with an air of propriety. “When Thom and I arrived here in Culpepper Cove, the first thing we did was ask Mayor Rockwell to close that bawdy establishment. Considered it our Christian duty, we did.”

“You asked the mayor to shut down The Red Petticoat Saloon?”

“Yes, indeed. Then would you believe it—the sheriff went and married himself a soiled dove from that very establishment. And the mayor later did the very same thing!”

Callie didn’t comment further, though not for the first time she found Mrs. Gerrard’s expectations for Culpepper Cove to be strange. If the woman had wanted to remain in polite society, she should have stayed in Philadelphia, rather than follow her husband after he inherited a large and prosperous claim in the Sierras.

The west was untamed, both the land and the people, most of them men, who flocked here in droves with dreams of making a better life for themselves. Callie’s late husband had told her what to expect before they set sail for California, and though some of the things she’d witnessed had surprised her, she didn’t find the presence of an establishment such as The Red Petticoat Saloon out of place or even offensive to her morals.

But, then, Callie had never felt as if she belonged to the family and polite society she’d been born into. She’d always felt like an outsider. Keeping up with all her parents’ expectations had been exhausting. When she thought of her childhood, a jolt of panic often coursed through her. She could never smile enough, speak softly enough, sit up straight enough, needlepoint neatly and elegantly enough, and so on down the line.

The volume of the piano music rose, and Callie fought to restrain a smile after watching Mrs. Gerrard grow pale and clench her jaw in an overly angry expression.

In truth, the gems fascinated Callie. She’d seen a few of them up close in the mercantile and imagined they all had grand stories of traveling out west to make it on their own. Though Callie couldn’t fathom selling her body for money, she didn’t think badly of the women who worked at the saloon, and she supposed it was due to her mammy’s influence that Callie wasn’t as quick to judge others as Mrs. Gerrard.

Growing up, outside of the criticism her parents leveled on her when she wasn’t *enough*, Callie’s parents hadn’t paid her much attention. They were always too busy frolicking from ball to ball and visiting with their friends at other manors and plantations in Virginia and farther south. When they happened to notice her, it was only to berate her for some lacking that made

her not ladylike enough. At the time, she had longed for their love and acceptance, but now that she'd discovered their true colors she appreciated all the lessons in kindness Mammy had taught her.

An ache pulsed in her chest. She missed her mammy, but drew comfort from the knowledge that the elderly woman was placed safely with a new family. Callie had seen to that before she left Virginia as an eloping bride suddenly estranged from her family.

“Callie. Callie. Callie!” Mrs. Gerrard tapped a hand on the table. “Have you been listening to a word I’ve said?”

“Apologies, Mrs. Gerrard. I must have drifted off for a second.” She forced a smile. “What were you saying?”

“I’m saying that Culpepper Cove needs to get a preacher in that church right quick. It’s a shame the church, and the fine parsonage beside it, too, are sitting there empty without a preacher and without Sunday services being held every week. I guarantee religion and the fear of God is exactly what this town needs to be turned around.”

“Is that so?” Callie took a long drink of water in hopes of settling the sickness that had twisted in her stomach. This wasn’t the first time her dinner companion had reminded her of her mother. Her father too. *Sit up straight. Fix your hair. Act like a lady, would you?*

Mrs. Gerrard nodded and kept going. “I tell you what, if the mayor had any sense in him, he’d go into the Sierras and drag Lawrence Black down by his neck and order him to start saving souls.”

Callie set her cup down. “Who is Lawrence Black?”

The woman leaned forward, her eyes lit with excitement, as they often were when she was about to impart a bit of gossip—a practice she claimed to abhor yet participated in frequently.

“Pastor Lawrence Black. They say he’s from South Carolina, used to have his own church there. But then one day he up and traveled out west. They say he was so grief stricken after his wife died that he abandoned everything he’d ever known. Struck it rich during his first week mining his new claim, and had a large cabin built up in the mountains. Some say it’s a mansion. He comes to town now and then, but it’s said he refuses to go near the church, let alone take up preaching again.”

“Well, it sounds as though he was so grieved after his wife’s death that he felt the need to run. The need to be alone. It’s a perfectly good reason for his actions.”

Wide eyes stared back at Callie. “Child, there is never a good reason to turn your back on God. Never.”

*Not even if your parents disown you?*

*Not even if your husband dies mere months after you get married?*

*Not even if you find yourself stranded in a mining town with only a few dollars left to your name?*

Callie bit the inside of her cheek to keep from uttering a response she would likely regret. She was a guest in Mrs. Gerrard’s house. Whatever the old woman had to say about soiled doves, absent preachers, or anything else, Callie had best keep her differing opinions to herself. If not for the Gerrards’ kindness in taking her in after Matthew’s untimely death, she didn’t know what fate would have befallen her.

As they cleared the table and cleaned the kitchen, Mrs. Gerrard gently suggested they take a stroll after breakfast tomorrow.

“The drunkards will still be asleep, but the decent God-fearing men will be awake, perhaps on their way to claim a prosperous mine,” the old woman reasoned. “The best thing you can do is get married sooner rather than later, child. While you’re still young. Be sure to wear a pretty dress too. Your Sunday best.”

Callie blinked hard to dispel her tears as she dried the dishes. Her throat burned.

She only wanted one man. Matthew. But he was gone. Buried near the shack they’d briefly called home, on a claim that hadn’t produced even a gram of gold.

Though the claim was currently for sale, no one had shown any interest in it yet. She supposed whatever money she made off the eventual sale wouldn’t be enough to survive on for long, let alone pay for her passage back to Virginia.

It pained her that finding a husband was her only option of moving forward. Callie occasionally entertained the idea of sending a telegram to her parents with the news of Matthew’s death, requesting the money to travel home and reconcile with her family. But each time the thought entered her mind, all the cruel things her parents had said to her came rushing back.

*“You’re no daughter of mine.”* Her father’s words.

*“Get out of my sight, Callie. I never wish to see you again. Thank God your older sisters have more sense than you. At least they have made us proud. But you—you are nothing.”* Her mother’s words.

All because she’d married without their blessing. To make matters worse, Matthew’s family were staunch abolitionists and had spoken out against families who owned slaves, including Callie’s family. Both Callie and Matthew had thought their families would put aside their differences and support them after the announcement of their marriage, but Matthew’s family had treated him just as coldly as Callie’s.

Fate stepped in when Matthew’s older brother offered to pay their passage to San Francisco. He also gave Matthew enough money to buy a claim. Not long after, they set sail on the *General Williamson*, foolishly believing all would be well and they would strike it rich somewhere in California. But Matthew’s claim proved worthless, and after he died an agonizing death from a rattler bite, Callie couldn’t very well live in a shack in the Sierra Mountains all by herself. She might be stubborn and proud, but she didn’t have a death wish.

After the kitchen was set to rights, Callie feigned a headache and went to her bedroom. Normally, she stayed up with Mrs. Gerrard and helped her quilt in the sitting room, but tonight she longed for solitude.

Callie prepared for bed and then stood at her window that faced the street. Darkness had fallen. She peered up at the stars and crescent-shaped moon. Was Matthew up in heaven, looking down on her at this very moment? She liked to think he was. And she liked to think he would understand when she married again, only months after his passing.

Yes, Callie decided she would allow Mrs. Gerrard to introduce her to as many eligible gentlemen in town as she wished. With the small ratio of women compared to men in Culpepper Cove, she would probably have all manner of marriage proposals to contend with in the near future.

As much as she wanted the chance to get to know a man well before they wed, any courtship would need to be short. This wasn’t polite society in Virginia. There would be no fancy balls or chaperoned carriage rides. No stolen kisses on the large front porch of her family’s home while the locusts screeched around them on a sultry summer night.

She went to her bedside, fell to her knees, and folded her hands in prayer.

After a whispered prayer for Matthew's soul, she sat in silence as the piano music floated in her open window. She was certain this was the third time this evening that she'd heard *Oh! Susannah* playing, but she didn't mind. The music brought her comfort and was one of the reasons she often kept her window open, even when the night air grew so chilled that she had to bundle up under her quilts.

She took a deep breath and folded her hands tighter.

*Please God, lead me down the right path, whether it's to a husband or back to Virginia.  
Please God, show me a sign.*

\* \* \*

Lawrence put down his tattered copy of *Gulliver's Travels* and stared at the flame flickering in the lantern beside his bed.

Mary had been afraid of the dark, and she had insisted he keep a lantern burning all night, though he'd always wait until she fell asleep and extinguish it. Then he would draw her body close to his and fall asleep with the woman he loved folded in his arms.

His throat burned and he swallowed hard.

*Mary.*

She was gone. So was their son.

*Why?*

He ground his teeth together until his jaw ached. He'd asked himself this question—*why?*—thousands of times, and he'd yet to come up with a good answer. *Why did Mary and their son have to die in childbirth?*

Lawrence looked up at the smooth wooden beams of the high ceiling. His whole body tensed and rage pumped through his veins, as if he were about to go to battle.

He needed to find a way to overcome his anger. His heart felt like it was poisoned. It scared him, this continued anger he felt toward God. It had been two years since Mary had died. She would be saddened by what had become of him. That thought caused his spirits to sink further.

He'd left his hometown and church in South Carolina, leaving his congregation scrambling to replace him without much notice. Shame filled him with the memory of what he'd done. He'd abandoned people he'd cared about. People who had cared about him.

The Sunday mornings he'd awoken eager to minister to his congregation were over. The days of visiting the sick and helping those in need of spiritual council were over. How could he help anyone when he couldn't seem to help himself? A man so angry with God had no business leading a congregation.

Try as he might, he couldn't shake the dark cloud that hovered over him. Perhaps it was time for another trip to town. Despite his need for solitude and his annoyance that Mayor Rockwell always approached him and asked him to take his place as the preacher of Culpepper Cove, Lawrence supposed a trip to town might help dull his loneliness, anger, and guilt—if only for one day.

Much as he wanted to stay in his cabin high in the Sierras and never leave, he knew it wasn't healthy to hide out here for such long periods of time. Tomorrow at first light, he decided. Tomorrow at first light he would saddle Abraham and ride into town. He extinguished the flame and closed his eyes, letting sleep claim him.

The next morning as the sun splintered through the trees on top the mountain, he rode Abraham away from his claim, but stopped at the next claim over on his way down the mountain. He found Peter Witherspoon sitting in front of a fire, cooking what had once been some kind of forest critter. Behind Peter, the beginnings of a mud cottage stood, and to the right of him rested the tent he currently called home.

Guilt stabbed at Lawrence. He'd been lucky to strike it rich only days after reaching his claim. Most of the other miners, like Peter, were not as lucky.

“Pastor Black! Good morning, sir. Would you like some breakfast?”

Lawrence cringed at the title of his former calling. He'd wanted to keep the fact that he'd been a preacher for ten years a secret. But he'd made the mistake of getting drunk at The Red Petticoat Saloon one night—his first drink since he'd been a curious lad and tried a swig from his father's bottle.

In the saloon, one whiskey too many had left him spilling his secrets to the miner seated next to him at the bar. He'd told the stranger all about his church in South Carolina, and about his wife and child, and Lord only knows what else. The memories from that night were a blur.

He'd passed out at the bar and awoken in the early morning to Madame Jewel insisting he drink a glass of water and then be on his way, lest she charge him rent for taking up a good seat.

By the time he made another trip to town, everyone knew he'd once been a preacher, and the pressure for him to move into the parsonage and start holding Sunday services began.

Lawrence dismounted Abraham and approached Peter. He took his hat off and wiped the sweat from his brow. "Call me Lawrence. I haven't stared down a congregation in two years now."

Peter flipped the meat from his pan onto a dirty tin plate, then blew on the... *squirrel?* before taking a hearty bite. "Right," he said between mouthfuls. "I heard you've been officiating weddings though."

Lawrence stiffened. "Only five weddings. Didn't plan on it either. Each time, the couples caught me when I happened to be ordering supplies in the mercantile. I couldn't very well say no and force them to wait weeks for the circuit judge to pass through."

Peter finished off the rest of his squirrel-like breakfast. "I found this in one of my traps this morning. Helluva lot tastier than grits." He licked his fingers and set the plate aside, then stood up and scratched his stomach. "So what do I owe the pleasure of this visit for, Lawrence? You need help carrying another twenty pounder down the mountain?"

"I haven't found more than a few specks of gold in the river or in the caves lately. I got lucky during my first few weeks here, is all. You'll get lucky one day too. You have a fine claim here, Peter, I can feel it."

"Well, I sure hope you're right, because I plan on putting an ad in for one of those mail order brides by this time next year." He waggled his eyebrows. "It's all part of my plan to strike it rich and start a family out here." Peter's gaze turned distant for a moment. Sad, too. The man had to be fiercely lonesome sleeping by himself in that little tent night after night.

Lawrence could more than sympathize. He gulped hard. His desire to reach town soon and be amongst the living for the first time in weeks suddenly became stronger. Maybe he'd stay at the Bentley Inn for a few days, take his time ordering supplies, and visit The Red Petticoat. Except this time, he would order wine.

The prospect of seeing the dancing girls up on stage lightened his mood. He wouldn't go so far as to spend an evening with one of the gems, but that didn't mean he wouldn't enjoy the scenery.

He'd been shocked the first time he'd seen the girls dancing, but after visiting Culpepper a few times, it seemed as natural a sight as the sun rising over the mountains. Though his former

congregation in South Carolina would be shocked if they knew he'd been in an establishment such as The Red Petticoat, he didn't believe those who worked in the saloon were any more of a sinner than he was.

"I'm headed into town, Peter. Might stay for a few days, actually. Could you keep an eye on my claim?"

"It would be my pleasure."

"Thank you." Lawrence fixed his hat back in place. "Can I pick anything up for you at the mercantile?"

"No, but if you visit the saloon, give Opal my best." He smiled, revealing crooked yellow teeth.

"Which one is Opal?"

He sighed and looked to the sky. "She has dark eyes and brown hair, but you'll know her by her personality. Talk to her for a minute and you'll feel as if the sun is rising." He sighed again.

"I'll see what I can do." Lawrence swung up on his horse. "Good day to you, Peter."

"Good day, pastor."

Lawrence bit his tongue and rode away from his neighbor's claim. It was afternoon by the time he reached town. A few of the paths in the foothills had been nearly washed out, and he'd had to take care in guiding Abraham around the dangerous patches of mud and rock.

Once he crossed the bridge over the Culpepper River and reached town, Lawrence left his horse at the stables, trusting Abraham would be well taken care of. Next, he stalked down the street to the mercantile. He ordered cornmeal, salt beef, flour, coffee, and other essential items, as well as some mining tools that would take weeks, if not months, to arrive in Culpepper. Though he had more money than he knew what to do with, Lawrence saw no reason to sit idle in his cabin. As long as his claim yielded even the smallest flake of gold, he would keep at it, panning in the nearby creek and hardrock mining in the caves too.

Once he completed his transaction and said he'd pick up the in-stock items in two or three days, he found himself unsure of how to spend the next few hours. Directly across from the mercantile stood The Red Petticoat. He glanced out the front window. The saloon beckoned him.

He'd wondered if he had completely lost his senses the first time he had visited the establishment, and he told himself he'd only gone inside because it was the only place one could

get a good meal in Culpepper. After a few drinks though, he'd found himself staring at the women, at the beautiful gems, and imagining himself taking one upstairs. He'd passed out drunk before he'd been able to decide.

Perhaps tonight. Or even right now.

Did he dare?

What would his friends and family in South Carolina think? *What would Mary think?*

It didn't matter. He would never see any of them again. He'd come to Culpepper Cove on a lark, not caring if he struck it rich or failed miserably at mining.

A new life. A life far from the pain and guilt from losing Mary in childbirth. That's what he'd wanted.

The ghosts from his past had followed him though, all the way up to his homestead on the mountain. Would the ghosts ever leave? Would he ever find peace?

Still inside the mercantile, he moved down an aisle and idly gazed at a row of canned jams. Walking around the aisle, he came face-to-face with...

Green eyes.

Wavy blonde hair.

Sensuous lips.

His breath stopped short. *Lord, have mercy.* He took a step back and tipped his hat to the beautiful young lady. A pretty blush stained her cheeks as she stared up at him.

"Apologies for almost knocking you over, Miss..."

"*Missus,*" said a severe looking elderly woman who came to stand beside the adorable blonde. "Mrs. Smith, though the poor thing was widowed several months ago. And I am Mrs. Thom Gerrard. I must say, I don't believe I've made your acquaintance yet, sir. You don't look like the typical miner who travels through these parts."

"I'm Lawrence Black, and I'm pleased to make your acquaintance." He took turns shaking each woman's hand, but firmed his grip when he shook Mrs. Smith's palm and found it difficult to let go.

"Well, Mr. Black, that explains why I've never met you before. You've been too busy chasing your fortune in the mountains rather than tending to your flock. Perhaps a certain establishment across the street wouldn't have men pouring in and out at all hours of the day if

proper church services were held weekly and the townsfolk were reprimanded for their sins. Have you seen the church the town built? A right shame it stands empty.”

The old woman’s scolding made the tips of his ears burn. He had half a mind to tell her of his intention to visit that very establishment later that day.

“Mrs. Gerrard, it’s not very Christian of you to judge this man, especially since you don’t know him.” The blonde’s face paled as she spoke to her older companion. Clearly, Mrs. Smith was mortified by Mrs. Gerrard’s little speech.

“Thank you for your kind words, Mrs. Smith.”

“Please, call me Callie. I insist.”

*Callie.* A pretty feminine name for a pretty feminine girl. After a moment, he realized he was staring at her like a fool. Was he drooling? God, he hoped not.

“Well then, Callie, I insist you call me Lawrence,” he finally said.

She blushed again, more deeply this time. After exchanging an awkward goodbye, during which Mrs. Gerrard shot him a scornful look, he started to make his way out of the mercantile.

But his curiosity about the pretty blonde slowed his steps. He turned and peered at her from over an aisle. When she smiled at him, his heart stuttered and all the air left his chest.

What would it be like to hold her hand? To kiss her?

He found himself entertaining the sort of romantic thoughts he hadn’t experienced since he’d met Mary all those years ago.

His feet carried him to the other side of the aisle. Callie held his gaze and gave him a questioning look. His pulse quickened. *Say something.* His throat went dry and he swallowed hard. A glance at the counter showed Mrs. Gerrard was speaking with the owner of the mercantile.

“Did you forget something, Lawrence?” Callie asked.

Lord help him, she had the most beautiful eyes. He couldn’t look away. He could hardly breathe. “Callie, I was hoping you would do me the honor of joining me for a picnic lunch tomorrow.”

Callie’s face lit up. “I would be delighted, Lawrence.”

“Wonderful. I’ll see you at noon, then? How about near the bridge, on the bank overlooking Culpepper River?”

“Yes, I’ll be there.”

They said goodbye again and Lawrence finally walked outside. The sun warmed his face as he strolled down the street. Excitement swirled within him, as well as confusion. Had he really just asked a young woman to spend time with him?

Well, he hadn't been able to help himself. Those eyes of hers... Lord above, he could have stood in the mercantile and stared at her all day.

He reminded himself that he wasn't looking for a wife, and then he felt incredibly guilty for the false hope he might be bringing Callie. What if the pretty blonde was searching for a husband? She was widowed and still quite young. Of course she'd be hoping to land a husband soon. What was he doing, then?

He glanced up and realized he'd walked all the way to the bridge. He stared at the sky and for the briefest instant, thought about praying for guidance. But as quickly as he'd looked up to the heavens, he lowered his eyes to the dirt road, turned, and headed back into town.

He was no more lost than he'd been in the days after Mary's death. He hadn't spoken to God then and he wasn't about to start now.

The church and parsonage loomed to his right as he headed further into town. He gave both buildings a wide berth, but couldn't help looking at them as he passed by. Sturdy buildings, both painted white with red shutters.

When would the townspeople and the mayor stop asking him to take up preaching again? He wished he would wake up one day to find all his anger gone, to find his heart wasn't closed up anymore. But it had been two years since Mary and their son had died. Two years and still he couldn't move on. Would he ever know the peacefulness of prayer again? Or would he keep drifting further from the man he had once been?

Shaking these dark thoughts away, he headed toward the piano music that had just started up. In this moment of confusion, he didn't know where else to go. He hoped The Red Petticoat had decent wine.