



# Stealing the Preacher

KAREN WITEMEYER



BETHANYHOUSE

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Karen Witemeyer, *Stealing the Preacher*  
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2013. Used by permission.

© 2013 by Karen Witemeyer

Published by Bethany House Publishers  
11400 Hampshire Avenue South  
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438  
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of  
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Witemeyer, Karen.

Stealing the preacher / Karen Witemeyer.

pages cm

Summary: "Forced off a train in 1885 Texas and delivered to an outlaw's daughter for her birthday, is it possible this stolen preacher ended up right where he belongs?"—Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-7642-0966-6 (pbk.)

1. Preachers—Fiction. 2. Kidnapping—Fiction. 3. Texas—  
History—1846–1950—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3623.I864S73 2013

813'.6—dc23

2013002695

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The internet addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers in this book are accurate at the time of publication. They are provided as a resource. Baker Publishing Group does not endorse them or vouch for their content or permanence.

Cover design by Dan Thornberg, Design Source Creative Services

Author represented by WordServe Literary Group

13 14 15 16 17 18 19      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To all the ministers who proclaim God's truth  
with boldness and care for his flock with loving-kindness.

Thank you for answering his call,  
even when the path he directs you to  
is not the one you expected.

*A man's heart deviseth his way:  
but the Lord directeth his steps.*

PROVERBS 16:9



# 1

## BURLESON COUNTY, TEXAS—1885

Crockett Archer stretched his legs into the aisle as the train pulled away from the Caldwell station. Only a brief stop in Somerville remained before his arrival in Brenham—the place where his life’s work would begin. A wide grin spread across his face as he contemplated his future.

Was this how Abraham felt as he’d journeyed to Canaan? Anticipation thrumming through his veins. Certainty of purpose pumping with every heartbeat. That rare sense of satisfaction that came only when one responded to the direct call of the Lord.

“Mama, that man is laughing at your hat.” A young boy peered over the seat in front of Crockett, pointing an accusing finger at him.

His mother huffed and reached up to pat the back of her hat—as if it might have had its feelings hurt. “Some people have no manners,” she muttered, shooting a scathing glance over her shoulder as she grasped her son’s arm and tried to get him to turn around.

“I meant no disrespect to your hat, ma’am.” Crockett leaned

forward to offer an apology, but in truth, as he focused on the millinery atrocity in question, the desire to laugh threatened to choke him. Blue feathers poked out at all angles, as if a family of jays had used it as a perch while molting. Forcing down his amusement, he schooled his features into a serious mien. “My thoughts were elsewhere entirely, I assure you.”

“Then why was you smilin’ so big?” Suspicion laced the boy’s tone.

And no wonder. If the sample before him was any indication of the woman’s usual taste in headwear, the poor lad probably battled for his mother’s millinery honor constantly.

“I was simply thinking of all the exciting things that await me at the end of this trip, and it made me happy.” Crockett winked at the kid. “Are you looking forward to the end of your trip?”

The boy shrugged. “Not really. We’re goin’ to see my great-aunt Ida.” He gave Crockett a beleaguered look. “She smells funny.”

“Andrew Michael Bailey! How could you say such a thing? And to a stranger, no less.” Andrew’s mother yanked him around, and Crockett beat a hasty retreat, leaning back in his seat while the woman lectured her son in strident whispers.

At least she seemed to have forgotten about the hat incident. Crockett decided to count that as a blessing. If dear old Aunt Ida lived in Brenham, it would be best if her niece was more concerned with her son’s slip of the tongue than the new preacher’s opinions on her hat.

*The new preacher.* His heart swelled in his chest.

After three years of apprenticing with the minister in Palestine, Texas, near the ranch where he’d grown up, and guest-speaking at any church in the area that would let him into the pulpit, he finally was being offered the opportunity to preach full time.

Oh, there was another fellow competing for the position, but Crockett knew in his gut that his time had come.

The Lord had been leading him to this day since the summer he'd turned fifteen and his older brother, Travis, suggested he take over the spiritual instruction of the family. At first it had simply been a chore like any other, but it soon developed into a ministry. With their parents deceased and their lives isolated and uncertain, the four Archer brothers had needed a faith that ran deeper than the occasional blessing over supper. They'd needed a faith that penetrated every aspect of their lives. Crockett assumed the responsibility of nurturing his family's souls, but as he and his brothers reached manhood, an ever-increasing pressure to reach beyond his household drove him to stretch his boundaries.

Apparently, he'd be stretching them all the way to Brenham.

Crockett rested his elbow on the satchel that sat on the seat beside him and mentally ran through the key points of the sermon he'd written and rehearsed for tomorrow's service. His concentration shifted inward, and the scenery chugging past his window blurred. He silently mouthed a verse from 1 Peter, but before he could complete the quotation, the passenger car gave a violent lurch.

His hand caught the seat back in front of him at the last second, narrowly preventing a spill into the aisle when his weight was thrown forward. The locomotive's wheels screeched against the rails. Passengers flew about the car. Women gasped. Children whimpered. The train slowed slightly as the screeching continued.

"What's happening, Mama?" Andrew wailed as his mother curled her body protectively around her son.

"There's probably something on the tracks." Crockett raised his voice above the chaos. "Once the train stops, the crew will

clear it away and we'll resume our trip. No need to be afraid, little man."

Yet even as he spoke the words, a tingle of unease crept between Crockett's shoulder blades. A woman a few rows up let out a shrill scream and pointed at something beyond her window. The man at her side pushed forward for a better look, then shouted the one word guaranteed to strike fear in any traveler's heart.

"Bandits!"

Crockett instinctively reached for his hip only to come up empty. He'd left his guns at the ranch. For more than a decade he'd worked the Archer spread with a rifle within constant reach or a pistol strapped to his thigh. Usually both. Now he was stuck facing a band of train robbers with nothing more than his wits because his mentor assured him that circuit riders were the only preachers who traveled armed.

He should have listened to Travis when his brother advised him to pack a weapon in his bag. Maybe then he wouldn't be sitting here defenseless. But he'd been too intent on making a good impression.

Not one to sit idle, however, Crockett lurched to his feet and fought the forward momentum of the slowing train. Lunging across the aisle, he locked his hands onto a pair of seat backs and hunched over a salesman's sample case to peer out the sooty window.

He counted four men. Guns drawn. Faces covered. Their horses quickly closing the gap between them and the train.

"God help us," Crockett prayed under his breath.

As the train slowed to a near stop, the outlaws drew abreast of the passenger car. One rider fell back, disappearing from Crockett's line of sight. The other three surged ahead.

A thump echoed from the rear of the car. The first man was aboard.



Crockett reclaimed his seat.

Just as the rear door crashed open, two other bandits burst into the coach from the front.

“Ever’body put your hands where I can see ’em!” The lead man pulled a second pistol from his left holster. With a weapon in each hand, he took aim at both sides of the railcar, eyeing the male passengers who seemed most likely to interfere.

As he did so, the train came to a full stop, jerking the passengers a final time. The leader’s stance never wavered. He stood as steady as an old sea dog on a ship’s deck.

Panicked murmurs slithered through the coach, gradually rising in pitch until one lady shot to her feet.

“I have to get out. Let me out!”

The leader’s left gun immediately shifted aim to her chest. “Better control your woman, mister.” His steely eyes narrowed above the black bandana he wore over his mouth and nose. “I ain’t planning to shoot nobody, but plans can change real fast.”

The woman’s companion snatched her from behind and hauled her back down into the seat. She whined but turned her face into the shelter of the man’s arm and made no further comment.

Satisfied, the outlaw turned his attention to the crowd at large. “There’s no reason to get all worked up, folks. As soon as we get what we came for, we’ll be on our way.”

He took a step down the aisle. Then another. The bandit who’d entered with him hung back by the coal stove at the front of the car.

Crockett stole a glance at the man in the rear. He blocked the exit, his gun hand steady. Crockett shifted his attention back to the leader.

Something was off about these outlaws. From accounts he’d read and stories he’d heard, robberies usually featured

hotheaded, cocky kids eager to prove they were fast with their guns. This group seemed too steady. Too self-controlled. Too . . . *old*.

Crockett examined them more closely. The one by the stove turned to glance out the window, and Crockett spotted graying hair at his collar beneath his hat. The middle one had leathery skin—what little was visible above the bandana. Deep creases around his eyes testified to a life lived outdoors, squinting against the sun. And though his glare was intent, the slightly crooked posture of the man at the back reminded Crockett of his sixty-year-old mentor when the man’s joints were paining him after too much work in the garden.

Crockett was still chewing on his observations when a man in a business suit held out a fancy gold watch, the chain dangling from his fist.

“Here. Take it and leave.”

The leader scowled down at the watch as if it offended him. “Put your valuables away,” he grouched. “That’s not what we came for.”

Why would they take over the passenger car if they didn’t intend to rob the passengers? Were they simply keeping the crowd in check while the fourth man rummaged through the baggage car?

Crockett leaned forward, just enough to see out the opposite window. The fourth man had gathered the horses on the west side of the tracks and was pointing a rifle in the direction of the engine.

“Then what *did* you come for?” the man with the watch demanded. “Tell us so we can hand it over and be done with you and your gang.”

The creases around the outlaw’s eyes deepened as he scanned the coach for what he sought. When his gaze touched on

Crockett, it hovered a moment before moving on. Crockett's mouth went dry.

The man's brows formed a V of displeasure as he concluded his search. A growl rumbled in his throat seconds before his intention exploded across the coach.

"I came for the preacher!"



## 2

Crockett stiffened. *He came for the . . . what?* Surely his mind was playing tricks on him. The man couldn't have said what he thought he'd heard.

The outlaw glared at the passengers and waved his guns from side to side. "Which one of you is the parson? Don't think you can trick me by not wearin' one of them white collars. I know he's on this train, and I ain't leaving 'til I find him."

Crockett's hand nearly lifted to the string tie at his neck, but he halted the movement before giving himself away. He'd never worn a clerical collar. Brother Ralston insisted that a man's character, not his clothing, should identify his calling. Following in his mentor's footsteps might have saved his life.

"You!" the outlaw barked at the salesman across the aisle. "You look like a preacher with your fancy duds and soft hands."

"N-n-no, sir." The man who had raised his hands in surrender the minute the bandits boarded the train now turned his palms inward, worry creasing his brow as he inspected his

smooth palms. “I’m j-j-just a drummer. See?” Slowly he opened his traveling case. “Patent medicines.”

“Bah!” The outlaw turned away in disgust and swung around to face Crockett.

Pale, steel-blue eyes took his measure. Accustomed to staring down unwanted strangers after years of protecting his ranch from interlopers, Crockett held the man’s gaze, although the task had been much easier when he’d been the one holding the gun. The outlaw’s eyes narrowed to slits, then turned their attention to Crockett’s suit. One brow lifted to the brim of the man’s dark hat as he took in the formal attire, but after a glance at Crockett’s work-roughened hands, the bandit grunted and strode past.

Never had Crockett been more thankful for calluses and scars.

As the outlaw continued his progress through the car, Crockett made his own assessment of the passengers. Which one was the preacher the bandits were looking for? The man at the front who had offered his watch? The one two rows up dressed like a farmer but whose head was bowed like a man in prayer?

The coincidence of the robbers invading this particular train in search of a preacher didn’t sit easily on Crockett’s shoulders. Yet he was sure they couldn’t be searching for him. He’d never been in this area before. Shoot. Until a couple years ago, he’d never been *anywhere*. No one knew he was on this train except his family, Brother Ralston, and the elders at Brenham.

“I’m losin’ patience, folks.” The leader growled his warning as he stomped back up the aisle. “If the preacher man don’t fess up, I’m liable to get a might upset. And my trigger finger tends to get twitchy when I’m upset.”

“Mama, is that man gonna shoot us?” Andrew’s tiny voice cut through Crockett’s heart.

“Hush, Andy,” his mother hissed as she tucked him more firmly under her arm.

Crockett set his jaw. *This isn't right.* Tormenting women and children. Something had to be done. "How do you know that the man you seek is even on this train?" Crockett slowly pushed to his feet, careful to keep his hands raised.

Steel Eyes met his challenge without flinching. "Read him the handbill." He barked the order over his shoulder with a jerk of his chin.

The man by the stove reached into his jacket and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. Holding it by one edge, he shook it open. "Meet the . . ." He paused, cleared his throat once, and then stretched the handbill farther away from his face and squinted. "Meet the preachers. Welcome our two cand-i-dates at Brenham Station on Saturday afternoon. They will arrive on the noon train from Houston and the two fifteen from Milano. Cookies and lemonade will be served."

A heaviness pressed against Crockett's chest as the bandit's stilted words drove into him like nails into a coffin.

*How . . . ?* How could he be the preacher they sought? Denial raged through him, but he smothered it and straightened his shoulders. The *why* didn't matter. What mattered was getting these bandits off the train.

"I'm your man."

"You ain't no parson." The leader waved his gun at him. "Sit down."

Crockett stood his ground. "Check my bag. You'll find my Bible, and inside the front cover is a folded page of sermon notes."

Steel Eyes cocked the pistol in his right hand and pointed the barrel an inch from Crockett's chest. "Step aside, son."

Crockett obeyed, moving into the aisle.

Keeping his stare locked on Crockett, the outlaw holstered his left gun and reached for the satchel. Crockett gave serious thought to knocking the pistol out of his hand the minute he glanced down to open the bag, but the man never gave him

the chance. Once he had a grip on the satchel, he tossed it to his partner at the rear of the coach, all without taking his eyes from Crockett's face.

"It's here, boss," the third bandit called in confirmation. "The Bible. The notes. He's even got some journals underneath—all with religious-type names."

"Well, folks," Steel Eyes announced. "It looks like we found what we came for." He latched onto Crockett's arm with an iron grip. "Now, Mr. Preacher Man, let's get you off this train so these good people can enjoy the rest of their trip."

Crockett submitted to the forced escort, the pistol barrel jammed into his back keeping him in check. The outlaws might have the upper hand now, but he'd bide his time. Once away from the women and children, Crockett wouldn't have to worry about an innocent getting caught in the crossfire. He'd make his move when the time was right.

He had an appointment to keep and a job to win. No gang of long-in-the-tooth train robbers was going to derail his plans.



An hour of hard riding later, the leader finally called a halt near a stream bed. Crockett had managed to stay in the saddle during the grueling ride despite the fact that his hands were tied behind his back. His shoulders burned from the awkward position, and his thighs ached from working so hard to keep him atop his mount. The pain had kept him alert, however, and his mind sharp.

The man who had stayed with the horses during the abduction was the first to dismount. "We still got it, eh, Silas?" He eyed the gang's leader. "Don't get that kind of excitement herding cattle, do ya?" He tugged his bandana down to his neck and took a long drink from his canteen, apparently unconcerned that Crockett could see his face.

“I’m too old for that kind of excitement.” The man to Crockett’s right released a mighty groan as he stood in the stirrups. “You didn’t have to jump the train, Carl. I swear I ain’t gonna be able to walk right for a month after slammin’ my hip into that railcar.” He rubbed the offending spot and made a great show of hobbling as he led his horse over to the stream.

“Quit your whining, Frank.” Silas kept a firm grip on the reins to Crockett’s horse as he swung down out of the saddle. He’d had them in hand the entire way, not trusting his captive to follow meekly.

Smart fellow.

Crockett had already concluded that they needed him for a particular purpose, and whatever that purpose was, it would probably keep them from lodging a bullet in his back should he make a run for it. But it was unlikely he could keep his seat at a full-out gallop with his hands bound behind him, even if Silas relinquished the reins. So, instead, he’d spent his time plotting what he would do when they stopped.

Now that they had, it was time for action. All he needed was for Steel Eyes to come a little closer.

Silas moved, but only as far as the head of Crockett’s horse. He paused to stroke the animal’s muzzle. Crockett bit back his disappointment.

“Jasper, bring the preacher man your canteen. He looks a little parched.”

The third bandit did as ordered, but as he approached, Crockett caught a glimpse of the censorious look he turned on his leader. “This is crazy, boss.” His low voice barely carried, but with little noise around them, Crockett was just able to hear his quiet words. “You promised Miss Martha to give up your thievin’ ways. I’ve never known you to go back on your word. Especially to your wife. We’ve been livin’ honest for too long to risk it all on some fool stunt like this.”



“I haven’t broken my word,” Silas growled, his face reddening as he clearly fought to control his fury. “Martha was the best thing that ever happened to me, and I’d not dishonor her memory by soiling a vow I made to her. I didn’t steal a single trinket today, and you know it.”

“You stole the parson.” Jasper tilted his head in Crockett’s direction, though neither of them looked his way. Good thing—since they might have noticed him slipping his boots out of the stirrups or loosening his bonds as he stretched them on the cantele.

“I didn’t steal him,” Silas insisted. “I just borrowed him. We’ll let him go when Joe’s through with him.”

Jasper sighed and shook his head, his long gray mustache doing nothing to hide his frown. “I know you love that kid of yours, Si. We all do. But this ain’t right.”

“I’ll decide what’s right for my family.” Silas snatched the canteen away from Jasper and stalked over to Crockett’s left side.

Carl and Frank were watering their horses several yards away. Jasper had his back turned. There wouldn’t be a better opportunity.

Crockett flung up his knee, planted his left boot against the man’s chest, and shoved with all his might. The canteen clattered to the ground. Silas stumbled back, his bellow sounding an alarm. Crockett leapt from the horse’s back and managed to wrench his right arm free of his bindings. He smashed his fist into Silas’s jaw before the man could regain his balance. The outlaw tumbled backward, the horse’s reins still tangled in his fingers.

The horse whinnied at the rough treatment and thrashed about, trying to gain his freedom. Crockett used the diversion to make a run for the trees. A building of some kind lay to the north. A building meant people. People meant help. He just prayed he’d been right about the bandits not wanting to lodge a bullet in him.

A shot rang out, followed by angry shouts demanding he stop. But no lead slammed into him, so Crockett kept running.

He ducked beneath post oak branches and zigzagged from one tree to another, taking advantage of any cover the terrain afforded.

The building was getting closer. A barn, maybe? He just had to keep his legs under him.

Hooves pounded into the earth behind him. Crockett's heart rate tripled. They were running him down. And he was running out of trees.

Open grassland lay between him and a fenced pasture. Keeping to the trees would only allow him to delay capture, not elude it. His only chance was to scale that fence and hope that Silas and his gang wouldn't risk discovery by pursuing him onto private property.

Lungs on fire, Crockett burst out of the woods and sprinted for the fence. The hoofbeats behind him escalated.

A soft whirring caught his ear a second before a lariat dropped over his head and shoulders. Crockett made a desperate grab for the rope, but before he could get his thumbs hooked, the noose tightened around his chest and yanked him backward. In a flash he was flat on his back, staring at the sky.

He'd just been lassoed like a new calf at branding time. Lying still, head throbbing from where it had collided with the earth, Crockett prayed there'd be no hot iron involved when Silas presented him to his son. Then again, whoever this Joe person was, he was bound to be as off his rocker as everyone else involved in this farce. Who knew what the kid would do? After all, he was the one who'd talked his outlaw father into stealing a preacher in the first place.



# 3

Silas Robbins didn't know what to make of the man at the end of Jasper's rope. All the sermonizers he'd ever come across were soft, bookish men partial to the sound of their own voices. Silas rubbed his bruised jaw with one hand as he shifted in his saddle and glared at the preacher struggling to gain his feet.

This parson was anything but soft.

"I thought you fellers believed in turnin' the other cheek." Silas's saddle creaked as he leaned forward. The preacher man's fine black suit was covered in dust, his hat lay upended a few feet away, and his arms were pinned to his side by a snare that wouldn't give an inch. Yet the man met his stare without a hint of fear.

"King David was a mighty warrior," the parson answered, "and the Bible calls him a man after God's own heart. If he can slay his enemies and stand before the Lord with a clean conscience, I think I can defend myself and do the same."

Silas straightened, a grudging respect poking him like a mosquito prick. In other circumstances, he could imagine himself liking this fellow. But a preacher? He'd run barefoot across a

bed of cactus before he'd give his hand in friendship to one of them holy hypocrites.

"Whatever lets you sleep at night, Parson. Heaven knows the only man better than a lawyer at twisting truth to serve his own purpose is a preacher." Silas crossed his wrists over his saddle horn and waited for the man's reaction.

Would he sputter denials? Call down curses? Staunchly defend his profession?

Nope.

All the fellow did was arch an eyebrow and make a quiet observation. "Seems odd that you would go to so much trouble to collect a clergyman when you hold the occupation in such low esteem."

Odd? It was downright unnatural. But what a man chose to do for his kin was none of this sermonizer's concern.

"To the house, boys." Silas gave the signal to head out. He trotted his gray gelding to where the preacher's hat lay on the ground. Without slowing, he pulled his rifle from the scabbard, leaned deeply to the right, and plucked the thing off the ground by jabbing the gun's muzzle into the head hole. Guiding his horse with his knees, he unhooked the black felt slouch hat from his rifle barrel and slapped it onto the parson's head.

Gotta have the man looking respectable for Jo.

It gave him a sense of satisfaction to have the upper hand again. The preacher might be a couple decades younger and fleeter of foot, but Silas Robbins still had a few tricks up his sleeve. King David, here, wouldn't be getting the drop on him again.

"You want me to put him up on his horse, boss?" Jasper wrapped the end of the rope around the saddle horn and prepared to dismount, but Silas stopped him with a shake of his head.

"He seemed so all-fired anxious to run across our pasture, I figure we might as well grant him his wish."

The parson's attention snapped to meet Silas's before shifting to the barn and back again. The disbelief lining his face was priceless. The poor fellow thought he'd been running for freedom when all along he'd been heading directly into the den of the thieves he'd meant to escape. If there hadn't been the little problem of him ruining Jo's surprise, Silas might have let him go just to see his expression when they rode into the yard and met him at the barn door. Might've made catching the parson's fist with his jaw worthwhile.

Silas set a leisurely pace as they circled the pasture's perimeter. The man leashed to Jasper's horse masked his fatigue well, but he had to be tuckered out after that mad dash through the trees.

Besides, everyone knew preachers were only good for one thing—talking. It stood to reason that if Jo wanted a preacher, she'd want to talk to the fellow. What kind of gift would the hypocrite make if he was so out of breath when he met her that he couldn't get a word out? If Silas was going to all the trouble of surprising her with this gift, it'd be foolish to break it before she could use it.

But would she like it?

Last-minute doubts nibbled the corners of his confidence. Martha had always been the one who'd selected Jo's birthday gifts in the past. Last year, their grief had been too raw over Martha's passing to celebrate anything. But this year Jo was turning twenty-one. She deserved something large, something meaningful, something she never dreamed she'd actually receive.

*Ah, Martha.* As they gained the road that led to his ranch, Silas turned his eyes heavenward. *I miss you something fierce, love. You should be the one arranging things for our Jo. Not me.*

Jasper was right. Martha never would have approved of his methods, but somehow he thought she'd approve of the gift. She always was partial to preachin' and church-goin'. And Jo followed in her mama's footsteps.

When he'd asked her last week what she wanted for her birthday and she'd told him she wanted a preacher, Silas had seen the truth of her words in her eyes—eyes so like her mother's. She'd laughed afterward and tried to play like she'd just been foolin', but he'd known better. His Jo was hurtin', and for some reason she thought a preacher man would make it better. Silas had no patience for religion, but if Jo wanted a preacher, by George, he'd get her a preacher.

It was only as they pulled up in the yard and the door to the ranch house cracked open that it occurred to Silas that he maybe should have tried to fashion a bow out of some of the rope around the parson's middle to make him look more like a present and less like a prisoner.



Joanna Robbins stepped from the house, her gaze, as always, drawn to her father. The dappled gray he rode stood out among the brown quarter horses, just as he stood out from his men. Mama used to say he was a man born to lead, and Joanna had to agree. He exuded authority, but it was his unwavering dedication to those closest to him that won their loyalty. His men would follow wherever he led. As would she. Yet in the one thing that mattered above all else, she needed him to follow *her*, and that he would not do.

But he was her daddy, and she loved him. So when a smile crinkled his eyes as he swung down from his horse, and his arms stretched wide in invitation, Joanna banished her worries and ran to him.

His strong arms surrounded her with the love and acceptance he'd shown her all her life. She reveled in it as she circled his waist and squeezed her own love back into him, nestling her head against his chest.

“Three days is a long time, Daddy. I missed you.”

“I missed you, too, darlin’.” His grip loosened, and he leaned back. “But I brought you something real special.”

“For my birthday?” Giddy anticipation bubbled up inside her, as if she were a girl turning twelve, not twenty-one. But the men were looking on, so Joanna harnessed her excitement.

Saddle leather groaned, drawing Joanna’s attention to Jasper Mullins, her father’s foreman. He swung a leg over his mount’s back and unwound a rope from the saddle horn. He dragged his hat from his head, exposing a circular crease in his white-gray hair, then leaned forward and kissed her cheek. The tickle of his droopy mustache made her smile, but the rope he placed in her hand brought a furrow to her brow.

“Happy birthday, Miss Jo.”

“Thank you, Jasper.”

Frank Pickens and Carl Hurst called out similar well-wishes before making themselves scarce by following Jasper to the barn. It was only when they’d all led their horses away that she got a clear view of what stood tethered to the end of her rope.

“You brought me a . . . rustler?”

The tall man was dressed better than any rustler she’d ever seen—not that she’d ever really seen any. But she imagined they’d wear something more practical for their thieving. Denim trousers, perhaps. And a cotton work shirt. Not a fancy suit and tie. Although the coat *was* rather rumpled, and the trousers were coated with a thick layer of dust.

“He’s not a rustler, Jo.” Her father’s deep voice penetrated her thoughts.

She questioned him with her eyes.

He struggled to meet her gaze and failed. Blowing out a heavy breath, he plucked the hat from his head and beat it against his thigh. “Dad-burn it, girl. You said you wanted a preacher, so that’s what I brung ya.”

*A preacher?*

Joanna's knees nearly buckled. She dropped the rope as if it had become a snake and pressed her empty hand to her belly. A preacher. How fervently she had prayed for a man of God to cross her path, one who would aid her in fulfilling her calling. This should be a time of great rejoicing and thanksgiving. Instead she felt ill.

"You stole him?" She bit back a moan. "Daddy, how could you?"

"I didn't steal him," he shouted at her back as she rushed to the preacher's side and began loosening the knot. "I just encouraged him to pay you a visit for your birthday. That's all."

Joanna didn't respond. Nor did she meet the parson's eye. She just focused on the knot above his waist.

"I was real careful not to hurt him none—which is more than I can say for him. That preacher man nearly broke my jaw!"

That brought her head up. "You did?" she whispered.

The man shrugged. "Seemed prudent at the time. I was trying to escape a band of ruthless kidnappers."

Lord have mercy, but the man was handsome. His eyes were the exact shade of the Caledonian brown pigment in her paint set, though infused with a light that would be nearly impossible to duplicate on canvas. His jaw was strong and slightly squared. His nose perfectly proportioned to the rest of his face.

The artist in her had begun cataloging the position of his ears and the line of his throat when he wiggled against his bindings and reminded her of more pressing matters.

"I'm so sorry," she said, fumbling once again with the knot. Finally it loosened enough for her to expand the loop and free his hands. He immediately flung the lasso over his head and rolled his shoulders.

She instinctively stepped back, not sure what he would do. The sound of a gun being cocked directly behind her made it clear her father was taking no chances, either.



The parson seemed unruffled by the show of force, however. He simply continued rubbing his arms and wiggling his fingers in an effort to repair his circulation.

Curious. Most men of her acquaintance had difficulty standing up to her father when he was in a stern mood, even without a gun pointed in their direction. But this preacher, if he truly was a man of the cloth—she was beginning to have her doubts—acted as if standing in a yard at gunpoint was an everyday occurrence.

“Who are you?” She hadn’t realized she’d spoken the thought aloud until he turned to her.

He swept his hat from his head, revealing russet hair neatly trimmed. “Crockett Archer, miss.” He dipped his chin politely. She stepped closer. “I’m Joanna Robbins.”

“Well, Miss Robbins. As much as I’ve enjoyed this little side trip, and as delighted as I am to have the honor of wishing you felicitations on your birthday, I really must take my leave. I’m afraid I have a prior engagement that is of the utmost importance. A congregation awaits my arrival in Brenham.”

His gaze held no malice, and his smile seemed genuine enough, but she sensed a layer of iron beneath his words.

“You ain’t going nowhere, preacher man.” Her father moved to her side, his gun less than a foot from Mr. Archer’s chest. “Not until my Jo gets what she wants from you.”

Joanna’s eyes slid closed in mortification. What *his Jo* wanted right now was for the earth to open up and swallow her whole.