

ARIZONA *Brides*

Three New Loves Blossom in the Old West

CAROL COX



BARBOUR
PUBLISHING

Land of Promise © 2004 by Carol Cox
Refining Fire © 2004 by Carol Cox
Road to Forgiveness © 2005 by Carol Cox

ISBN 978-1-59789-841-6

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission of the publisher.

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

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any similarity to actual people, organizations, and/or events is purely coincidental.

Cover image © Tony Gervis/Getty Images

Published by Barbour Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 719, Uhrichsville, Ohio 44683,
www.barbourbooks.com

Our mission is to publish and distribute inspirational products offering exceptional value and biblical encouragement to the masses.



Printed in the United States of America.

Chapter 1

March 1867

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Elizabeth Simmons closed her bedroom door behind her and moved to the head of the curving staircase, casting a scornful glance at the glittering scene below. Brilliant ball gowns glowed like jewels on a black cloth against the men's dark evening dress, and the murmur of refined voices rose to Elizabeth's ears. The cream of Philadelphia society was present tonight, a coup that would further enhance her mother's already high social standing.

Mama must be delighted, she thought sourly. Elizabeth surveyed the spectacle from her vantage point, wanting to delay her descent as long as possible. *Empty words, empty minds, empty people. What a waste of an evening!*

A slender figure in emerald velvet hurried to the foot of the stairs. "Elizabeth, come quickly!" Her sister Carrie's urgent voice floated upward. Light from the chandeliers caught the reddish glints in the young girl's hair, turning them to threads of burnished copper. "Mama's been asking and asking where you are, and she's beginning to get very cross."

Elizabeth watched her sister swirl back into the eddy of activity and gave a sigh of resignation. Like it or not, her presence was demanded. She moved down the staircase, the rustle of her sapphire satin gown barely audible over the swell of voices and the strains of music drifting from the ballroom.

Elizabeth braced herself for the ordeal of taking part in the mindless chatter that was a standard feature of her mother's social affairs. Seeing one of her mother's closest friends hovering at the foot of the stairs, she forced a smile. "Good evening, Mrs. Stephens. How nice to see you here."

"How nice of *you* to make time to come down and join us," the older woman returned with a glacial stare. "Really, Elizabeth, it's too bad of you. You know how much tonight means to your mother. After all the preparations the poor woman has made to ensure the success of this evening, you might at least make an effort not to embarrass her by your tardiness. Come along," she ordered, gripping Elizabeth's elbow with a proprietary air and propelling her forward. "You must let her know at once that you've decided to grace the festivities. The poor woman is quite distraught."

"Oh, you've found her." Both women turned at the sound of the rich baritone voice, and Elizabeth brightened at the sight of her neighbor, James Reilly.

"I've come to make sure Elizabeth is mingling with the guests. Would you be kind enough to let Mrs. Simmons know she has come down while I escort her to her duties?" James bent over Mrs. Stephens's blue-veined hand in a courtly gesture. "And may I say just how stunning you look tonight?"

Elizabeth's lips twitched in amusement at the sight of her unwelcome chaperone simpering with delight at James's attention. The older woman sailed off to carry the message to her friend, and James steered Elizabeth through the crowd.

"However did you manage to appear on the scene at just the right moment?" she asked, weaving her way through the sea of frock coats and voluminous skirts. "I wouldn't have been able to hold my tongue one second longer."

James threw back his head and laughed, drawing an admiring glance from more than one of the young ladies they passed. "You've never held your tongue concerning any issue you felt strongly about in all your life." He tucked her hand more firmly into the crook of his arm and gave it a squeeze. "It's one of the things I value most about you."

"I suppose you expect me to be grateful for that insufferably condescending remark?" Elizabeth sniffed, attempting a show of indignation belied by the curve of her lips. "Never mind. You do deserve some gratitude for rescuing me."

"Rescuing Muriel Stephens, you mean," James countered with a chuckle. "She'll never know what a narrow escape she had. Besides, if you'll recall, you once promised to marry me. That gives me a vested interest in your welfare."

Elizabeth snorted. "If *you'll* recall, that promise was made when I was all of four years old, and you were six. You're hardly likely to hold me to it now. Besides, you know very well I'm much too strong-minded for you." She turned left, toward the ballroom, then frowned when James guided her in the opposite direction. "Where are we going?"

"I promised you'd be mingling dutifully with the guests. But I didn't say which guests, did I?" James smiled, opening the library door and ushering Elizabeth inside.

"Here she is," he announced. A fire crackled in the hearth, silhouetting the two men who rose to bow in greeting. "Elizabeth, may I introduce Thomas Brady and Elliot Carpenter? Gentlemen, this is Miss Simmons."

"So this is the woman who has more on her mind than her next visit to the dressmaker?" Thomas Brady took the hand Elizabeth offered and quirked an eyebrow in James's direction. "You neglected to tell us she is also a delight to the eye, James."

Elizabeth snatched her hand away. "Don't praise my mind in one sentence, then insult my intelligence in the next, Mr. Brady. I'm quite aware of my physical shortcomings. My eyes and hair are a dreary brown, and I'm far too short of stature to be considered attractive, let alone beautiful. Fortunately, my value as a woman and as a child of God rests in my character and not my physical attributes."

LAND OF PROMISE

Thomas Brady stood speechless, and James hooted with laughter at his friend's discomfiture. "I did mention that she was outspoken, didn't I?"

"And as always, you are a man of your word," Thomas agreed when he found his voice again. "Miss Simmons, please accept my apology for what must have seemed gratuitous flattery. I would take issue with your assessment of yourself if I didn't fear offending you again, but I must say I am thoroughly intrigued, and I look forward to hearing the views of a woman of your perspicacity. And that," he said, raising his hand solemnly, "is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

Elizabeth searched his face, wondering if she were being made the butt of a masculine joke, but found no sign of duplicity. She smiled and extended her hand to his companion. "And you, Mr. Carpenter? Are you willing to exchange views with a mere woman?"

"I believe we shall meet on equal footing," he responded with a laugh. "Or if we do not meet as equals, it will be because your intelligence surpasses ours. I can see that I shall need to have all my wits about me so I am not totally outclassed."

"Shall we all sit down?" James asked as easily as if he were the master of the house. "Thomas, Elliot, and I have been discussing the issue of women's suffrage. I thought you could give us an articulate woman's view of the subject."

Elizabeth's pulse quickened. Maybe this evening wouldn't be a bore, after all. With a sense of anticipation, she settled herself in her father's favorite leather chair, prepared to hold forth on a cherished topic. The men drew up chairs in a semicircle facing hers, the two visitors placing theirs at a cautious distance. Elizabeth clasped her hands in her lap, back erect, and looked at her audience like a professor inspecting a new class of pupils.

"Giving women their due is hardly a new idea," she began. "Nearly thirty years ago, two American women went to the World Anti-slavery Convention in London. They were bona fide delegates, but because they were women, they were not allowed to participate. Imagine traveling all that way for such a worthy cause, only to be told you had to sit in a curtained-off area away from those taking an active part, merely because the people in charge didn't approve of your gender!"

She scrutinized each face, seeking their reactions. James nodded encouragingly, having heard this discourse before. Elliot Carpenter sat with his chair turned slightly away from her, propping his chin on one hand. His expression was carefully neutral, but Elizabeth thought she detected an amused glint in his eyes. Thomas Brady leaned forward, elbows on his knees, apparently weighing her words carefully. She focused her attention on him.

"I'm sure you've heard their names before, gentlemen. Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton will long be remembered for the part they held." Elizabeth tried to stem her excitement at the thought of her heroines. "Eight long years passed before they convened the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls. Even then, their success was measured more in the sense of accomplishment

for taking this momentous step than in realizing any tangible gains.

"Explain to me, if you can, why so many northern men could recognize the iniquity of slavery but continue to hold their sisters, wives, and daughters in what is tantamount to a benevolent captivity?"

"Oh, I say! Don't you think that's a bit harsh?" Thomas expostulated. "Look at the ladies here tonight. I don't believe one of them would think of themselves as deprived. When do you think was the last time any of them were denied anything?"

"Exactly my point, Mr. Brady. They've been spoiled and cosseted, treated more like pampered pets than thinking human beings. That in itself denies them the ability to think for themselves. And women *are* thinking creatures." Out of the corner of her eye, she noted Elliot Carpenter straightening in his chair and suppressed a satisfied smile. He was listening now, really listening. And she had barely gotten started.

"Women have proven their worth over and over again. Elizabeth Blackwell won her medical degree in 1849. Was that a feat some 'frivolous woman' could have accomplished? And only a few years ago during the war, Elizabeth Cady Stanton helped organize the Women's Loyal National League. Those women managed to gather over three hundred thousand signatures on a petition demanding that the Senate abolish slavery by a constitutional amendment. Three hundred thousand! That was not the work of a group of tea-sipping females who had nothing but cotton wool between their ears.

"God gave us minds, gentlemen. I believe He did not equip us with intelligence and plenty of drive if He did not intend for us to use them."

"But you've just proven women do use their minds and in very profitable ways." Elliot Carpenter scooted his chair closer to Elizabeth's and faced her squarely. "Having the right to mark a ballot won't change any of these God-given attributes."

Elizabeth's temper flared at the sight of his self-satisfied smile. Making a deliberate effort to keep her indignation in check, she held his gaze with hers, measuring her words with care. "Less than a century ago, our forefathers were able to use their gifts and abilities, but they felt strongly about being allowed to govern themselves. I see no difference, Mr. Carpenter."

"I see a great difference!" Elliot sputtered, shaken from his easy calm. "That was about taxation and commerce and—"

"And self-respect," Elizabeth put in. "As thinking men, they wanted the opportunity to have a say in matters that concerned them. Thinking women want no less."

The debate continued in earnest, with Thomas and Elliot voicing their long-held beliefs as though talking to another man and Elizabeth fielding their questions and objections with ease.

The library door swung open abruptly. "I thought I heard voices," said a shrill

LAND OF PROMISE

female voice. "Who is in here?"

The four occupants of the room jumped as if caught in some misdeed. Elizabeth blinked, realizing for the first time how low the fire burned in the hearth. "It's just James and me, Mother," she called. "And two of his friends. We've been talking."

Cora Simmons stepped through the doorway, lips parted in disbelief. "Do you mean to tell me that this is where you've been all night? I was given to understand that you were fulfilling your responsibilities in attending to my guests. Have you been shut up in here the whole time? With three men?" Her piercing voice rose to a higher pitch with every syllable.

James and his visitors took their cue, rising with alacrity to bid their hostess good night. While James and Elliot Carpenter were thus occupied, Thomas Brady took advantage of the opportunity to bow over Elizabeth's hand.

"Thank you for a most informative evening," he said. "You have given me much to think about. And since I'm about to leave," he added, one corner of his mouth twitching upward, "I will repeat my former statement. Despite your own opinion, Miss Simmons, you are a lovely lady. Perhaps when you look in the mirror, you have never noticed the way your hair glistens with a chestnut sheen or watched your eyes flash green fire when your emotions are aroused. But I have, and I am utterly captivated." He gave a quick nod and turned away before Elizabeth could think of a suitable retort.

Thomas joined his companions in thanking Mrs. Simmons for an enjoyable evening. Elizabeth heard her mother acknowledge their speeches politely but noted her decidedly cool response. In the dim glow from the fireplace, with the only other light filtering in from the hall, the light gray streaks were no longer visible in hair that had once been a vibrant red. Nor could anyone see the lines of discontent etched on her face. Cora's slender build looked almost girlish, and in the waning light, Elizabeth could glimpse traces of her mother's former beauty.

"I'll see you gentlemen to the door," Cora said. "The other guests have already taken their leave." She herded the three subdued men through the open doorway, then turned to face her daughter. "Elizabeth, you will remain here until I return. . .with your father. This unseemly behavior of yours has gone too far."

Elizabeth watched the door close, knowing a storm was about to break. How many times had they played out a similar scene in the past? This time, though, the play would have an entirely different ending. She moved to the fireplace and checked behind the mantel clock, reassuring herself the papers were where she had left them that afternoon. Her original intention had been to show them to her family tomorrow, but it appeared her plan would have to be revised.

Even so, she would make sure tonight's confrontation would be as much to her advantage as possible. Elizabeth stirred the fire back to life with the poker and lit two lamps, placing them on low tables and arranging the seating to best suit her strategy. By the time she heard voices in the hallway outside, she stood

ready, determined to take control of the confrontation to come.

Her mother entered the room first, eyes blazing. Elizabeth's father followed, an obviously unwilling participant. Before the door closed, Carrie slipped into the room with her usual quick grace, with Virginia, the middle sister, gliding in behind her. Carrie moved at once to a pocket of shadow near the bookcase, while Virginia positioned herself near their mother, her smirk indicating she planned to enjoy the fun.

Elizabeth acted quickly before she could lose her advantage. "Sit here, please, Mother," she said, pointing to the comfortable leather chair she had recently vacated. Cora gaped at the order but sank into the seat indicated. "Carrie, Virginia, you may sit in the wing chairs." Elizabeth smiled inwardly, watching her sisters' predictable placement, with Virginia taking the chair nearest their mother and Carrie scooting slightly closer to Elizabeth.

"Father—"

"I'll stand, thank you." His tone sounded gruff, but he smiled at his eldest daughter with genuine affection, tilting up the corners of his mustache and puffing his rounded cheeks. The smile faded when he turned to face his wife. "What's this all about, Cora? Can't it wait until morning?"

"No, Monroe, it cannot." Cora had recovered from her initial confusion. "We need to discuss the disgraceful behavior of your daughter."

"Which one?" The feigned ignorance in those hazel eyes so like her own made Elizabeth want to burst out laughing. As if he didn't know! Creamy-skinned Virginia, whose only interests in life consisted of social prominence and an ample supply of creature comforts, was very much the product of her mother's upbringing. Cora would never find fault with her. And Carrie, with her gentle spirit, might agree with most of Elizabeth's views but would never openly defy her mother. Tonight's culprit would be the same daughter who had always caused her mother distress, and well Monroe knew that.

Apparently, Cora thought so, too. Her nostrils flared as she drew a deep breath and pressed her lips together. Elizabeth, realizing she might soon lose her opportunity, hurried to seize the moment.

"I'm glad you're all here," she began, ignoring her mother's gasp of surprise and the appreciative twinkle in her father's eyes. "I had planned to discuss something with you tomorrow morning, but I believe this would be a better time." She stepped across to the fireplace and drew two envelopes from behind the mantel clock. "Both of these letters arrived in this afternoon's post. I've only opened the one addressed to me, but I believe I can tell you what you'll find in the other one."

"Whatever are you babbling about?" Cora stretched out her hand in a silent demand for the letters, but Elizabeth moved away from her. "*You* are the topic of discussion here, young lady, and those letters can be of no possible interest to us right now."

LAND OF PROMISE

Monroe rocked back on his heels, eyeing Elizabeth shrewdly. "She's a sharp girl, Cora. Let her have her say." He nodded at Elizabeth. "All right, tell us what's in the letter."

"As I said, I haven't opened this one," she said, handing the envelope to him. "It's addressed to you and Mother, from Mr. and Mrs. Bartlett. I believe when you read it, you'll find an account of how Mrs. Bartlett suffered severe injuries in a fall."

"Letitia?" For once, her mother seemed concerned about someone other than herself. "What happened? Will she recover?"

"According to Mr. Bartlett's letter, she slipped on a patch of ice on the path outside their home and fractured her right arm when she tried to break her fall. She landed up against the porch steps, and the force of the blow cracked a rib and caused some deep bruising." Elizabeth watched her mother's face grow pale and took pity on her. "They are sure she will recover, but it will take time."

"Poor Letitia!" Cora pressed her hand to her heaving bosom. "However will she manage out in that forsaken wilderness? Why Richard insisted on dragging her out to such a horrid wasteland, I will never know."

"He didn't have much choice," Monroe answered drily. "Running a cotton mill during the war was not a money-making proposition. That political appointment came at an opportune time."

"But to take a refined woman like that to a place inhabited only by ruffians and savages!" Cora dabbed at her eyes with a lace handkerchief. "I've said it before and I'll say it again—it was a heartless thing to do."

"And how does this concern you, Elizabeth?" Monroe asked. "You said this had some bearing on your wanting to talk to us."

"It does." Elizabeth drew a deep breath, studying the faces of her family. "You're quite right, Mother. While Mrs. Bartlett is expected to recover, she requires a great deal of help. This letter," she said, holding up the remaining missive, "is a request for me to travel to Arizona Territory to give her the help she needs."