

*Too Many
Secrets*

by Molly Noble Bull

Dedication

*To Bret, Burt, Bren, Bethanny, Hailey, Dillard, Bryson, Grant,
Grace, Jana, Linda, Angela, Carmen, and Noe.*

But to God give the glory. I can do nothing without Him.

But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

PHILIPPIANS 4:19

Chapter 1

Frio Corners, Texas
November 1882

Looks like the stage from San Antonio pulled in across the street.” Luke followed the hotel employee’s gaze and peered through the front window. “Yep, it’s here all right.” He glanced at his pocket watch. “Twelve noon. Right on time, too.” Then he looked back at the man behind the main desk. “Doc Carter asked me to pick up a package for Mr. Franklin and drop it by the Franklin farm on my way home. It’s medicine. Is it ready, sir?”

“Mr. Ambrose Franklin.” The desk clerk paused. “Yes, here it is.” One eyebrow lifted. “I’m new in town, and you look familiar. But I can’t recall your name.”

“I’m Luke Conquest. Mr. Franklin’s neighbor.”

“Oh.” He handed Luke a small wooden box. “I understand Mr. Franklin’s been sick off and on for a long time now.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, tell him I send my regards.”

“I’ll do that, Mr.—”

“Pearson.”

Luke glanced around the dark, expensive-looking hotel lobby with its crystal chandeliers and polished floors. The word *Frio* meant “cold” in Spanish, and the Frio Corners Hotel was named for the Frio River. The hotel was new, and this was the first time Luke had come inside since it opened. The furniture gleamed like store-bought polish. Slick and smooth. And it smelled like beeswax. It could be a long while before he stopped by the hotel again, and he wanted to take it all in before moving on.

He opened his mouth to tell Mr. Pearson how much he liked the hotel when the entry door opened. The most beautiful girl Luke had ever seen stepped inside. His heart pounded so hard that he did a double take. She looked tall, too.

Why, she was near as tall as he was.

Young women that fine didn’t arrive in the Texas hill country every day. He wanted to savor every moment of that experience.

Her gold-colored hair reminded him of mountain honey and wheat while still in the field, and it looked as soft as a feather pillow in fresh-smelling ticking. It was wrong. But he couldn’t stop staring. Her blue eyes sparkled with excitement like she had a zest for life. He couldn’t look away.

Like a swan on a quiet lake, she floated toward the center of the room. Four young children followed after her.

A warning light went off inside his brain.

The young woman was married and probably somebody's mama. As a church elder, Luke should walk out of here right now and never look back. He hesitated. Maybe he was wrong. As if he'd been hog-tied by an invisible rope, he stayed put. Besides, she looked too young to be the mother of that bunch.

Slim and straight, she glided across the polished floor with confidence and grace. He'd never seen royalty, but he pictured them looking like her. She walked up to the main desk and rang the bell. *Ping*. Her shiny yellow hair looked as alive as she did, brushing her shoulders below her brown homemade-looking bonnet, and she held her head high as she stood in front of the counter, waiting to talk to a hotel employee.

Mr. Pearson continued sorting papers. Apparently he hadn't noticed her yet.

She coughed, and when he turned around, she smiled as if she talked to strangers behind desks every day. But even in the darkened lobby, Luke noticed that her brown skirt and white blouse looked old and shabby. So did the children's clothes. What a contradiction. A princess dressed in rags.

"I'm Miss Abigail Willoughby from Atlanta, Georgia." She had a heavy southern accent. "And these here are my brothers and sisters."

Brothers and sisters. Luke breathed a sigh of relief. *She isn't married.*

The young woman rested her hand on the shoulder of the taller of the two boys. "This is Tommy. Next comes Margaret. Then Louise, and finally Albert."

Luke moved a little closer to the girl and the children.

"I'm lookin' for Pastor and Mrs. Andrew Johnson," she went on. "They asked me to meet them here."

"I haven't seen them. Are they expecting to meet you here today, ma'am?"

"Well, yes and no." She shrugged. "They didn't exactly know when I'd arrive. And I don't rightly know where they live—this being my first visit to Texas and all. Would you mind lookin' to see if they left me a note or something?"

"Why, I'd be glad to. Just a minute. I'll check." Mr. Pearson turned around and looked through a stack of notes and letters. "Miss Abigail Willoughby." He pivoted, handing her a white envelope. "Here, ma'am."

"Thank you kindly, sir."

She paused to read her letter. Tommy, standing behind Miss Willoughby, pushed his younger sister. Margaret whimpered when her head hit the wooden counter. The little girl stuck out her tongue, pointing it at Tommy. The boy pulled a lock of her red hair. Margaret cried louder.

Luke reached out—prepared to pull the two apart if it came to that. He considered a fight between two children in a nice hotel like this unacceptable. Yet the battle had started right there behind their big sister's back, and Miss Abigail Willoughby appeared to be unaware of it. Or didn't care.

In her white blouse with buttons all the way to her chin, Miss Willoughby looked as calm and stress free as a white-tailed dove.

"Stop that, Tommy." Miss Willoughby didn't bother to turn around but just kept reading her letter. "If you want the candy I promised, that is."

"Yes, Abby."

“That’s better.” She returned her gaze to the man behind the counter. “The letter says that Pastor Johnson and his wife went to San Antonio and won’t be back for several days. They said if I arrived while they were away to stay here at the hotel until they returned. They also promised to pay my fee. And would you happen to know where a Mr. Ambrose Franklin lives? I need to talk to him as soon as possible.”

Luke stepped forward. “My name is Luke Conquest, and I know where Ambrose Franklin lives. In fact, I’m on my way there now. And I would be happy to drive you and the children if you would permit it, ma’am.”

The man behind the desk frowned. “Are you kin to Deputy Conquest, the one that got shot dead in a shoot-out?”

“He was my pa.”

“Well, I heard of him, but I don’t know you from Adam. So I can’t let you take this young woman anywhere. Wouldn’t be proper.” He looked back at Abby. “I’d take you myself, ma’am, but I just have too much work to do here at the hotel. Book work and all. You know how it is this time of the year—and with the Christmas season coming up before you know it. I’m sure you understand.”

“I’m an elder over at the church on the hill, sir,” Luke explained. “That should count for something.”

A woman was mopping the floor off to the side. She turned and smiled up at Luke. He recognized her and smiled back.

“Why, Mrs. Eastland. I didn’t know you worked here now.”

“Started last week.” She sent Mr. Pearson a stern look. “I know Luke there, sir, and I can vouch for him. He goes to our church just like he said. I think you should let him take the woman and the children wherever they need to go.”

“Would you like for this man to drive you, ma’am?” Mr. Pearson asked Abby.

“Yes, I would.”

Luke nodded. “Then we better get started. It’s a long drive getting there, and we have to go through the hills.”

“All right.”

Abby’s smile reminded him of a sudden sunburst breaking through a dark sky. He couldn’t resist grinning back at her.

“Oh.” She touched her forehead with the palm of one hand. “I almost forgot. Our trunk and suitcases are still on the stage.” Abby glanced toward the entry door. “Would you mind having someone carry them into the hotel for us so they will be here when we get back?”

Get back? Luke thought.

“I figured you’d be staying at Mr. Franklin’s place until morning, ma’am.”

“Oh, my, no. I never intended to do that.”

“It could be rather late if we drive back here tonight.”

“I don’t mind getting back late.” She sent him a pleading look. “But I don’t have much money left. The little I have has to last me. So I can’t pay you much for the trip.”

She looked desperate.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “There will be no charge.”

“You are very kind.”

He hadn’t planned to drive all the way back to Frio Corners tonight and then drive back to his ranch in the middle of the night. But he would gladly do it just for the privilege of being with Miss Willoughby for a while.

Luke gazed at the entry door again. “Guess I’ll go out and carry in your luggage, ma’am.”

“I’d be much obliged.”

The stagecoach was parked across the street in front of the café and right next to his wagon. Luke hauled the heavy trunk just inside the door of the lobby and went back for the suitcases.

“Put them in room five,” Mr. Pearson said, “and here’s the key.” He put a key on the counter, motioning toward a hallway at the far end of the lobby. “I would help you. But as you can see, I’m entirely too busy.”

Busy doing what? The desk clerk had hardly moved since they came in.

Luke loaded the luggage into room five, locked the door, and handed Miss Willoughby the key. “Here you are. So, I guess we can go now.” He pulled out his pocket watch again and checked the time. “It’s after twelve. Have you and the children eaten?”

“No, but we don’t need anything.”

“Yes, we do,” the oldest of the two little boys said. “I’m hungry.”

“Me, too,” the others echoed.

“They fix picnic lunches over at the café across the street. Why don’t I buy us all something for lunch? We can stop and eat it along the way.”

Abby blushed. “I hate to put you out like that. And as I said, we have no money to pay you, sir. You’ve done way too much for us already.”

“Please, let me do this. I would consider it an honor.”

Her blue eyes widened. “Helping us is an honor? How?”

“I’m a member of God’s family, ma’am. Christians help one another.”



Abby smiled when Luke put the wooden box under one arm and took her arm with the other, escorting her and the children across the street to his wagon. Mr. Conquest was a thoughtful person, and she would call him Luke—at least in her dreams. He had on the kind of boots that cowboys wore. Abby tried not to notice that he was also handsome.

A pretty young woman with dark hair stood in the shadow of the café, peering at her. Abby considered asking Luke who the woman was but decided against it. He’d done enough for her and the children. It wouldn’t be polite to bother him with more questions and demands.

Chapter 2

Abby held an empty wicker picnic basket on her lap, gazing at Luke in the wagon seat beside her. The children had enjoyed their lunches and especially the candy, and she was glad she bought a few more sticks for later. To be truthful, she wasn't thinking about candy at the moment and couldn't stop looking at Luke Conquest.

He'd looked tall and lean, standing in the lobby of the hotel in his black cowboy boots and tan trousers. A hat covered his dark hair now, but earlier she'd noticed how the honey-colored lights in his chocolate-brown eyes set off the deeper brown of his thick, curly hair. He held the leather reins with confidence, and his hands looked as rough and untamed as the state of Texas.

Hills surrounded them on all sides. Birds chirped overhead.

"Just look at all the birds," she said.

He grinned. "Some of them already flew south for the winter."

Abby kept looking at Luke, but with her eyes lowered so he wouldn't notice. A crisp breeze chilled the air, and it appeared to get cooler the higher in the hills they went. She'd put on her old brown cape and covered the children with an extra blanket. Clearly autumn was here, and winter was banging at the door.

Yellow, gold, rusty-red, and brown leaves clothed trees higher on the hills. Yet the valleys looked green enough to tempt hand-fed cattle and horses, not to mention the wild animals that probably roamed the countryside.

Abby wondered what kind of trees they were seeing—maples, maybe. The woman on the train said that maple trees grew in this part of Texas.

They had left Frio Corners hours ago, and the wagon broke down before they had driven three miles. Luke fixed the loose wheel and got the wagon moving again, and they had been going up and down rock-filled roads ever since.

In fact, Abby had bumped up and down on the wooden bench so many times that she wondered how she kept from falling off and tumbling headfirst to the hard ground. But according to Luke, they had almost reached the Franklin farm.

Anything would be better than her life as a child and young adult in Georgia. But all that was in the past. She had always dreamed of marrying a churchgoin' man. Now that dream was about to come true, and if Ambrose Franklin looked half as good as Luke Conquest, she was going to love living in Texas.

Abby glanced in the back of the wagon to check on her brothers and sisters. All four children slept on a patchwork quilt.

"Are they asleep?" Luke asked.

She released a big sigh. "Yes, thank goodness."

He chuckled. "They are fine-looking youngsters. Lots of energy, too."

"Oh, I reckon they are full of energy, all right."

Luke looked at her for a moment without saying anything. She wondered what he might be thinking.

"You mentioned Pastor and Mrs. Johnson," he said. "Guess this is none of my business. But how do you know them?"

"After the children and I decided to come to Texas, Ambrose suggested in one of his letters that I write to his pastor. So I did. Ambrose said he lived a long way from town, and I should stay with them until he could have someone pick me up."

Luke nodded. "Then are you and the children related to Mr. Franklin?"

"Not yet."

"What does that mean? You're either related to him or you're not."

"Well, Ambrose and I are. . ."

She hated trying to explain why she and Ambrose planned to marry in just a few days. The circumstances might seem strange to an outsider like Luke Conquest.

"I'm Ambrose Franklin's intended," she said softly, half hoping he wouldn't question her further.

"His what?"

"We have never actually met, but we have corresponded. And I am to be his bride."

His mail-order bride, she thought.

"Are you *sure* this is what you want to do, miss?"

"Of course, I'm sure. I've waited all my life to marry a God-fearing man and have a home of my own."

He frowned. "But am I correct in saying that you have never actually seen him?"

"Why would I need to? I reckon I know everything worth knowing. We have exchanged letters, but I will be meeting him face-to-face for the first time today."

"I see. Well, what has he told you about himself, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Not that it is any of your concern, but he said that he worked in mines in California and around here for a while. Now he lives alone on a farm he owns free and clear. Our parents are dead, and he doesn't mind that I'm bringing my sisters and brothers to live with us. Now I would call that a good man, wouldn't you?"

"I never said he wasn't a good man. He is. But there are a few things about Mr. Franklin you might want to know."

"No." She shook her head. "As I said, I know all about Ambrose Franklin that I need to know."

She saw his facial muscles tighten like he was looking down his nose at her. He probably guessed how poor they were and how unworthy she was. Yes, she felt guilty accepting a marriage proposal from a God-fearing man like Ambrose when her own father was. . .

Abby bit her lower lip, and her heart attempted to break out of the prison she'd tried to keep it in. She hated men like her father, and her late stepfather never worked a day in his life. Abby's poor mother supported the family until the day she died.

She glared at Luke. "I don't need a perfect stranger like you to try to turn me against the most decent, most honorable man I ever knew." Abby lifted her chin. "I'll judge Ambrose, if you please."

"Suit yourself." Luke peered down the road ahead.

He's angry with me now.

But why should she care? Luke Conquest meant nothing to her.



Nobody spoke again for a long time. Luke pretended an interest in surroundings he'd seen a million times—the hills—the streams—the trees just putting on their fall clothes.

The path they were taking edged the river. Luke blinked against the water's blinding sparkle, against water that was always cold. As a child, he'd seen muddy rivers and creeks when the family left the hill country and drove east to Grandma's, but the swirling Frio River was always clean and clear. He could see all the way to its rock bottom, and he loved to hear the rush of hasty waves as they twisted and swished on the long journey to the Gulf of Mexico.

Still, he couldn't stop wondering if the lovely Miss Willoughby was nothing more than a gold digger out to marry a rich and ailing man. In any case, she was in for a big surprise.

A small rock cabin stood on a rise just ahead.

"Well, ma'am. We're here."

Abby smiled, gazing at the house.

"The roof needs a little repair," Luke said, "and the brown shutters could use a coat of paint. Otherwise, the house looks pretty good."

Luke pulled the horses to a stop and tied up the reins. Then he jumped down from the wagon. "May I help you down?" he asked.

She hesitated.

Maybe she was still peeved with him for saying what he did. Good thing she didn't know what he'd been thinking.

At last she said, "Yes. Please, help me down from the wagon."

"What about the children?"

"I think I'll just leave 'em here sleeping in the wagon while we go inside. They should be all right, I think. I don't plan to stay long."

"Very well."

He reached out and grabbed her around the waist in order to lift her down. She felt lighter than a newborn calf.

As soon as her feet touched the ground, she wiggled out of his grasp and hurried toward the front steps of the cabin. Luke snatched the wooden box with the medicine in it from the back of the wagon and followed her up the steps to the front porch.

At the door she knocked, waited, and knocked again.

"Don't knock," Luke said. "Just go on in. Mr. Franklin will be resting anyway."

Abby hesitated. Then she went inside.

A big rock fireplace dominated the interior of the main room, and he saw her

looking at it as soon as they went inside. Abby continued to survey the darkened room, and he noticed when she took a special interest in the bed in one corner. Mr. Franklin lay on it, snoring loudly.

“Hello,” she said.

Nobody answered.

“I think he must be sleeping,” Luke said.

Abby nodded and moved closer to the bed. One quick look, and she whirled around, staring at Luke.

“This man can’t be my Ambrose,” she exclaimed. “He looks old enough to be my grandfather. Why, he has a long white beard that hangs over the edge of the quilt like he was Saint Nicholas or something. Who is he anyway?”

“That’s Ambrose Franklin, ma’am, your future husband.”