

Cinderella's Lawman
The Strasburg Chronicles – Book Three

By

Pippa Greathouse

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Table of Contents

Prologue	5
Chapter One	7
Chapter Two.....	12
Chapter Three.....	18
Chapter Four	25
Chapter Five.....	30
Chapter Six.....	36
Chapter Seven	44
Chapter Eight	51
Chapter Nine	60
Chapter Ten.....	71
Chapter Eleven.....	75
Chapter Twelve.....	81
About the Author	90
EBook Offer.....	91
Blushing Books Newsletter.....	92
Blushing Books.....	93

Prologue

Sunday, October 28, 1849

Cinderella Barton hurried out the door of Mrs. Baxter's boarding house, certain she would be late for Mass. She had been at her new teaching position in the one-room schoolhouse for only a week, and it had been hectic. But this was her first teaching position, and she was determined that she would make it work.

The church bell was sounding at St. Mary's, down the street, and she lifted her skirts slightly and stepped off the walk. Holding tightly to her bag, she ran like a bat out of Hades across the street. The irony of the thought of running from Hades on a Sunday morning toward Mass brought a giggle to her lips.

She hoped she was not too late. She had met Father Michael during the past week; perhaps he would forgive her if she were late just this once. He had seemed to be such a kind man, with his broad smile and twinkling eyes; she was almost sure he would not hold this against her.

The bell was on its eighth strike, when she made it to the center of the street. Suddenly, a team and wagon caught her eye and she froze, unsure whether she had time to make it.

The decision made, she ran.

"Whoa! Whoa!" The shout of the driver at his team caused her to turn and look. Someone else was shouting, too, from behind her, and an arm lifted her off her feet, carrying her on across the street. Cinderella found herself kicking and squirming. Who in the world would dare to pick her up as if she were a three-year-old? She angrily tried to get down, but the mysterious stranger set her on her feet again, when she was on the walk just outside the sheriff's office.

"Your life in Strasburg will be quite short, young lady, if you keep that up! I have no wish to see you do this again."

She gasped, turning to the voice that spoke with fury above her head.

"Let me go! I am late!" She tried hard to loosen his grasp on her waist but was unable, in spite of her determination.

"So you are. What in the world did you think you were doing?"

She looked over her shoulder, glaring. "And what do you think you are doing, detaining me?" Once stable on her feet, she put her hands on her hips and stared, surprised at just how far above her his face was. When she caught sight of the badge on his jacket, she stopped abruptly.

He met her eyes fiercely. "Deputy Sheriff Henson Andrews, missy. And you are?"

"Cinderella..." She looked toward St. Mary's and sighed. "And I am dreadfully late."

"Yes. You are. Quite. I shall escort you."

"That is not necessary."

"Be calm, Miss Barton. This way, I shall keep you from being trampled."

"I have absolutely no wish to be calm, Deputy Andrews." After she spoke, however, she regretted it; his dark brown eyes had narrowed and she felt as if he could chew her up and spit her out.

Once again, he began to drag her toward St. Mary's, his hand retaining a firm grasp on her arm.

"You may unhand me, sir. I do not need your help." She looked up irritably.

Ignoring her protests, he continued to lead her up the steps and into the church, his hand firm. As he took her inside, his right hand held on to her arm and he placed his left at the small of her back.

"Let go of me!" she grumbled, looking up.

"I shall, Miss Barton, when I have assured myself you shall be inside for an hour and safe—despite your own efforts."

"Oh, Hell's bells," she muttered under her breath. But the comment only resulted in her being sat down on the pew, so hard it hurt. She gasped.

"Fair warning, young lady" His voice, spoken into her ear, was a deep growl. "I believe you would benefit greatly from a trip across my knee for a lesson in ladylike language."

She gasped and lowered her eyes, trying to ignore him. Moving forward toward the edge of the seat, she made an effort to scoot as far away from him as possible.

She sat there a long time, fuming. How dare he!

When she turned to look toward him a little later, she was surprised.

Henson Andrews was gone.

Chapter One

Six months later, Friday, April 26, 1850

Cinderella watched the last of her students climb into the wagon that would take them toward home and waved at them, grinning.

"You need a ride, Miss Barton?" The burley, dark-headed man at the front looked back at her.

"I shall walk, Gleason. But thank you!" she called out.

He did not look pleased but nodded and whistled for the horses, which began to trot toward town, pulling the wagon full of chattering children.

Cinderella sat down on the schoolhouse steps to relax before walking the two-mile trip back into town, with her books and her basket. The warm spring wind blew gently on her face. It was April now, and she loved the way the late afternoon sun played through the trees, flickering amidst the leaves overhead.

She looked up at the twinkling light and closed her eyes. The snood in the back of her head had become loose, after a day of teaching, and she reached back and pulled it away, releasing her chestnut hair to flow freely down her back. For a moment, she felt like she was sixteen again, instead of twenty.

* * *

She had finished her schooling last fall and came to the outskirts of Strasburg on October twenty-second of 1849, to begin her first teaching post. There had been a rocky start. Her meeting with Francis Adams had gone well. She could tell that he had the children's best interests at heart. He had been willing to pay her well and had given her enough to be able to afford room and board. But Mrs. Baxter had charged so much for her rooms at the boarding house, that Cinderella was barely able to afford it. In addition, there were several men rooming there, and Mrs. Baxter had insisted that she do the cooking for the evening meals. With the two-mile walk to the schoolhouse, it had been impossible to do it. She felt as if the woman had taken advantage of her totally.

She had moved, shortly after that, to the hotel and had taken a small room, but she had soon found that she was unable to afford lodgings there. She sighed, remembering it. Finally, she had found a tiny room at Mr. and Mrs. Simpson's place. She was the only boarder, and Mrs. Simpson did expect her to help often with the cooking. At least it was affordable. And improvement, however small, was still an improvement.

Then there had been Mr. Moreton, the former schoolteacher at her school. Even now, her cheeks flamed as she thought about her first day at school, when Sir Francis and Lady Merrie had come into the schoolhouse to hear Mr. Moreton threatening to cane her in front of the students. Standing up to him for her own sake, and for the sake of the students, had been the hardest thing she had ever done. She had been tempted to go back home and give up teaching for good.

Things, however, had finally smoothed out. Except for Deputy Henson Andrews, who had continually reminded her that he would take her in hand if she continued to ignore her own safety, things had grown better. She hoped Gleason would not tell Henson that she had walked again today. He had lectured her several times, since that day at St. Mary's, about walking back and forth through the woods to school. It had served only to leave her fuming inside, and she had continued to do it anyway. And Henson, darn his arrogant hide, had become even more determined that she obey him. He had threatened her with a trip across his knee the last time.

She glanced up, once again; it was time to go. The sun was getting lower, and it was a long walk back to town.

Now, however, she put the thought from her mind; she was just thankful that spring was here. Winter days required building a fire in the woodstove to warm the classroom; now, however, the fire was not needed. The mornings were cool, but when the sun began coming through the windows, it warmed the schoolroom up nicely.

She smiled, picking up her books and her basket, and started toward town. The breeze, blowing her hair back, felt wonderful this afternoon, and she found herself singing

Cinderella was almost halfway there when she heard it, a crackling sound in the woods, off to her right. She looked over her shoulder, her heart beginning to race a little. But she kept walking.

It was nothing, surely. She shook her head and quickened her pace.

A moment later, she heard it again. A shiver ran through her at the sound. What was it? She knew there were wild animals in these woods; several people had spotted a black boar recently at the school closest to the Pembroke Estate. When she heard it again, her heart and her breathing quickened even faster.

It was closer now. Something large, in the woods, seemed to be coming closer! She broke into a full run. Her long hair flying wildly out behind her, she realized her skirts threatened to grab her ankles. She reached down with one hand and tried to gather them up, while holding her basket and books with her other hand. Her feet flew toward town. Afraid to turn back, her wide green eyes watched the ground for rocks that might trip her.

Now, she heard an additional sound—horses' hooves?

"*Stop!*" A fierce voice behind her called out, and she began to pick up her gait, as fast as she could. "*You little brat! I said stop!*"

She gasped as someone picked her up off her feet and threw her, face down, over the saddle of a horse. Her books and basket went flying.

"*Stay down!*" the growl from behind her commanded, as a hand on the small of her back forced her downward.

The deafening report of a rifle sounded just above her, and she screamed. The horse had stopped, and she found herself jerked upright, by the waist, and held there. She thought she could still hear something in the woods, but it seemed to be further away now.

"And just what do you think you are doing, little missy," the growl said, above her. "Walking through these woods alone? I do believe we have had this conversation multiple times, young lady. *Have you no common sense? And have you no respect for authority?*"

Dismayed, Cinderella now knew whom it was, holding her. She turned, trying to see him, and looked up into the angry eyes of Henson Andrews. She gasped again, thinking she had never seen him look quite that angry in the past.

"And just what do you think *you are doing*, frightening me half to death with your shouting and your gun?" she threw back at him. "Just because you wear a badge—" She stopped, abruptly, when she realized just how close his face was.

His eyes narrowed. "Did you not see, young lady, the grizzly that was tracking you from the woods?"

Cinderella's face paled, even to her deep green eyes, and she looked back toward the woods.

"I see you did not," Henson's angry voice growled in her ear. "I was at the Adams' house when Gleason came back and said you had refused the ride home yet again. It was doubtful you had heard about the grizzly, so I came this way."

"So? Why did Gleason not tell me?" she said, a petulant sound to her voice.

"Because, you little brat, *he did not know*. We heard at the sheriff's office, only about noon, that one had been seen on this side of town. Be still, before I put you back down over the saddle and take my wrath out on your bottom."

She stilled, but was sorely tempted to jerk out of his arms and jump to the ground.

As if following her thoughts, however, she was pulled abruptly back against him. "*Now*, little missy. You *will* listen to me this time. You have ignored my advice ever since you arrived here. I believe I have told you repeatedly that you should not be walking in these woods alone. I will tell you once more, young lady—but only once. The next time I find you have disregarded my orders, I will find you—and take you someplace where it is private and give you a taste of my strap."

She gulped. "You would not dare."

A moment's silence passed.

"*Try me.*"

Hands moved to her waist, as if they would lift her.

"*No!*" She knew without a doubt, he would do it. "No, I—I *believe you, sir.*"

There was a silence. A moment later, his voice spoke in her ear, once more, "Do. Not Move."

She turned back and looked up, meeting his dark brown eyes. He was incredibly close. A tense moment hung in the air between them, until she looked away. Henson did not. After staring down at her for a moment, he dismounted.

Cinderella considered, for a moment, riding away and leaving him, but then she saw what he was doing. He had gone to retrieve her basket and her books. Then, she thought of the bear in the woods; no matter how irritated she was with him, she could not ride off and leave him here. Even if he deserved it.

Henson had brought her books and basket, but instead of handing them to her, had tucked the books into the saddlebag. The basket, he had tied onto the side. He had held her tightly in front of him until they reached town and then took her into the hotel.

"What are you doing?" she asked, as he set her down in front and put a strong hand on her arm. "Why are you not taking me home?"

"I am making sure you have supper. The Simpsons will have eaten by now, and you are too small to be skipping meals. No arguments."

She followed, her mouth a straight line. As he took her inside, however, he spied Sheriff Giles Kidd sitting at a table alone and led her over in that direction.

"Miss Barton." Giles nodded politely, looking quizzically up at his deputy. "You arresting her, Henson?" he said, grinning.

"Tempting. I found her walking in the woods, home from school again. And by the time we got back, she had missed supper." He was pulling out a chair for her now.

She stood, refusing to sit—for almost two seconds. But his hands had already reached for her shoulders, and she remembered the day at Mass, when he had put her down in the church pew. She quickly sat, before he put her in the seat.

She looked up at Giles. "In my own defense, sir, no one had told me about the bear."

Giles' brows rose. "You think you need defense, Miss Barton? Then you must have a guilty conscience." The corners of his mouth had turned up in amusement slightly, and Cinderella became flustered.

"No, sir—I just—" She halted, looking from Giles to Henson.

But Giles had turned toward his deputy. "You saw the bear, then?"

"Saw it, yes. And I shot at it, but all I did was scare it away."

"How am I supposed to protect my students if I don't know there is one out there?" She was glaring up at Henson now.

But her green eyes were met with Henson's terrible and threatening dark brown ones, and after a moment, she dropped her gaze to the table in front of her.

Henson, a moment later, leaned down next to her ear and spoke, very quietly, so that no one else would hear, "*Keep it up, little missy.*" His voice was a growl. "*Have you no idea just how close you are to feeling my wrath?*"

Once she had eaten, Henson had walked her back to the Simpson's and knocked on the door, refusing to leave her there alone. When he had knocked for the third time, Mrs. Simpson came to the door.

"You are late, Miss Barton. You know the rules. You have missed supper. We were forced to fix our own."

Ignoring the anger in the woman's eyes, Cinderella turned to say goodbye to Henson and go in, but when she started to go inside, Mrs. Simpson stepped into her path.

"And why is the deputy bringing you home?" she demanded.

Henson spoke up. "I rescued Miss Barton from a grizzly bear, close to the schoolhouse, Mrs. Simpson. I knew you had probably eaten, so I made sure she was fed. I am sure you will be glad to know that."

Mrs. Simpson let out a huff. "She may fade away into nothing, for all I care."

Cinderella could feel Henson stiffen beside her. She stepped in front of him, gazing up into her landlady's hostile face.

"Look here, ma'am—" Henson's voice was full of anger now, but he was interrupted by Cinderella's quiet voice as she faced her landlady, determined to be heard.

"Excuse me, ma'am?"

Mrs. Simpson stepped back. "All right. But this is the last time I shall open the door to you after six o'clock, young woman." She flashed a frown toward Henson as well and attempted to close the door in his face. But he caught it, putting a foot in and moving toward her.

"Am I to understand, Mrs. Simpson, that you do not provide your paying boarders with a key so they can come and go? And that you would refuse them the right to their own quarters, when they have paid you in advance? Shall I make out a report on you?" He stood there, his eyes narrowed.

She took another step back.

Cinderella, still furious, marched toward her room, her head held high. "I believe I pay for twenty-four hours out of each day, Mrs. Simpson." A moment later, she had closed the door behind her with a distinct click.

Henson stood, staring toward the landlady, his eyes furious. "I shall keep this episode in mind, Mrs. Simpson, in the future, when someone is looking for a place to stay."

The woman's eyes widened slightly, but she did not speak, and Henson finally turned and closed the door, firmly.

He stood outside the door for a long time, thinking about what had just happened. He had heard Cinderella's reply to Mrs. Simpson. How did she manage to stay there, when they treated her so badly? Anger boiled to the surface once again.

He had heard how difficult a landlady Mrs. Simpson was to her female renters. No one seemed to stay there long, especially the ones known to be pretty. And Cinderella was definitely that. He stood there, thinking.

Adorable, yes, Cinderella was that. Beautiful, she was certainly that. Stubborn? Yes, definitely. Irritating? Absolutely. He thought of a word that his father had once used—a combination of irritating and endearing.

Endearitating. In a word, that was Cinderella Barton.

It was a full five minutes later, before he made himself turn and go back toward the other direction. He did not even realize that Giles, leaving the hotel, had seen him.