

THE COMPLETE MCKENZIE
SERIES

ALL THREE ORIGINAL BOOKS



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

SECOND CHANCES: AIDAN'S
BRIDE



THE MCKENZIES - BOOK ONE

*For all those who have had their hearts broken and still have the courage
to take a second chance on love.*

LC

CHAPTER 1



WILLAMETTE VALLEY, OREGON, LATE AUGUST 1852

Naomi Tisdale drew her horse to a stop and patted his neck absentmindedly as she surveyed her new home. She had wondered how much of a house and farm her thousand dollars would buy, sight unseen. She smiled ruefully as she scanned her new home. Apparently not much, she thought dismally.

Her horse, Shadow, gave a snort and waggled his head from side to side as if he were disgusted. She stroked behind his ears fondly.

"I know," Naomi said with a grin, "it certainly doesn't look like what I pictured. Still, we will make it work for us."

The house was really not much more than a rustic, very small cabin. Still, it looked solid and sturdy, and she didn't really need much space. It was just herself, after all. The kind of space she needed was from pitying glances and disapproving frowns. She needed space to make her own decisions and to be an independent woman. She thought, perhaps, this place would provide what she needed. She desperately hoped so.

The cabin sat nestled beneath several majestic oak trees that

would shelter it from storms and shade it from the summer heat. A covered porch ran the length of the front of the cabin, and there was a sturdy looking rocking chair angled to take in the view of the meadow. There was a river burbling nearby. A stone well, complete with a bucket and rope, stood in the front yard. At least it didn't look like she would have to worry about having fresh water handy.

What was once a large vegetable garden stretched out from the side of the cabin, and she could tell the soil was black and fertile even though the patch had mostly gone to weeds. On the other side of the cabin, was a barn that looked like it was large enough to house a few horses and maybe a few cows. It had fallen into disrepair. One of the double doors was hanging askew, and several boards were missing from the sides. There was also a much smaller building nearby and what looked like a smokehouse.

A crude fence had been erected around the side of the barn, forming a corral. Naomi dismounted and led her horse into the enclosure.

"Let's get you more comfortable, Shadow," she murmured as she removed the horse's bridle and scratched him behind his ears.

The horse nudged her, burying his nose under her arm as he begged for more of her attention. Naomi laughed and obliged him by stroking his velvety nose and hugging his neck.

"Yes, you are a good boy," she cooed with an indulgent smile. "Let me get these bags off you, and then we can settle you into your new home."

Naomi untied two small suitcases and several saddlebags and set them beside the gate. Then, she unsaddled Shadow and placed the saddle, blanket, and bridle inside the barn. She located a bucket and carried it down to the nearby river.

She filled the bucket for him and carried it back into the enclosure, careful to latch the gate. The horse sank his face into the bucket and drank deeply. While he satisfied his thirst, she located another bucket for feed and filled it with oats. The oats were almost gone, and she would soon need to replenish her supplies.

There was supposed to be a town a few miles farther down the road. She would have to visit there within the next few days.

Shadow ambled over to her and began happily munching on the oats. He was obviously content with his new abode. With one last pat to his neck, she retrieved her belongings and turned toward the cabin. It was time to see what her new home could provide in terms of comfort and shelter.

Naomi opened the front door and stood in the doorway, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the gloom. The thought that there might be other creatures inhabiting the cabin made her shudder. As long as there weren't any rats, she could handle just about any other kind of critter. The wood floor seemed sound enough, and she was relieved not to hear any scurrying sounds as she walked to the center of the room. The boards beneath her feet seemed sturdy, even if they were a bit squeaky.

A small table with four rickety chairs stood in the kitchen area. There were a few cupboards built along the wall, and a cast iron cook stove took up one corner. A low bed with a lumpy cotton mattress occupied the opposite wall, making up the last of the furniture. A large wardrobe stood at the foot of the bed. It looked well built, with just a few scuffs and a broken piece of trim at the top edge. A rock fireplace was centered along the back wall of the cabin, and a small stack of firewood was piled nearby. Every surface was covered with dust, grime and cobwebs, and a sour, stale smell hung heavy in the air.

There were four small windows, one on each wall of the cabin. They all had wooden shutters that were closed over them from the inside. Naomi opened the shutters and pulled open the windows. She was pleased that light streamed in, and a fresh breeze blew through the cabin, bringing clean, fresh air.

So, this will be my refuge, Naomi mused. She had come here seeking solitude, hoping to find some remnants of peace and happiness.

It had been two years since her husband died. For two years, she

had agonized about all the ways she had failed him. She had failed to make him happy. She had failed to save him when the fever had him in its death grip. She had failed to give him the one thing that he had wanted most in the world.

Given her many failings as a wife, she had decided that she would never marry again. It was far better to remain alone than to see her husband's love for her die a slow death. She couldn't bear to ever go through that again.

She had travelled for weeks to get here from San Francisco. She had travelled alone, braving the wild, living rough and doing her best to avoid mankind in general. It wasn't that she didn't like people. However, she knew there were plenty of people, especially men, who would prey on a woman travelling alone. She didn't want to take any unnecessary chances, and she certainly didn't want to attract any undue attention. She just wanted to be left alone.

Naomi had felt it would be prudent to dress as a man, so she could travel mostly unnoticed. She smiled, remembering the San Francisco shopkeeper's raised brows when she had purchased britches, shirts and boots for herself. A loose but lightweight coat and a wide brimmed hat had completed her ensemble. She had been pleased with the result. With her long auburn hair tied into a bun and tucked into her hat, she had passed as a young boy, at least as long as she didn't come too close to others. She had also found it much more comfortable riding a horse in britches.

Once again, thoughts of her husband and his parents came to mind. They would definitely not have approved of her dressing as she was. But then again, his parents hadn't approved of her no matter what she did. They had always viewed her as not good enough for their son. At least, here, she didn't need to worry about what they thought. She had found a small refuge where she could assert her independence, and at the age of twenty-four, she was more than ready to do so.

The only good thing that had come from her husband's death was that it led to her becoming self-reliant and resourceful. She had

learned that if she wanted something, she would have to get it for herself. She could not depend on a husband or family. She couldn't depend on so-called friends. They either disappeared into the woodwork when needed the most or tried to interfere too much. She had only herself. She would make her own way, and then she wouldn't have to answer to anyone.

By all appearances, it was good that she had become so self-reliant and resourceful. Those traits would continue to serve her well as she made this farm livable. Everywhere she looked, there was work to do and the magnitude of the tasks threatened to overwhelm her.

If only her husband hadn't died. If only his family and friends had been more supportive. She would not have had to flee to here if she had not been subjected to such contempt and disapproval.

If only you had been a better wife.

Naomi heaved a heavy sigh as she set her saddlebags and suitcases on a chair and began rolling up her sleeves. This was no time to get lost in morose memories. *First things first*, she thought.

She might as well start cleaning. There was no way she was going to spend even one night in this filth. It was already late afternoon, so if she intended to get to bed before midnight, she had better make the most of the time she had.

It took only a few minutes to get a fire going in the cook stove. She located a large pot and carried it outside to the well. She lowered the bucket into the well, happy to see that all appeared in good working order. It took only a minute before she retrieved the bucket, and she was pleasantly surprised that the water was clear, cold, and smelled clean and fresh. She tentatively took a sip from a dipper hanging on the side of the well. It tasted delicious, and she sighed with pleasure as she drank her fill.

She filled the pot, carried it back inside and placed it on the stove to heat. Then, she located an old broom and thoroughly swept the cabin, moving furniture and sweeping cobwebs out from under the bed and from all the corners. By the time that was done,

the water was warm. Naomi found a brush, some cloths and a large bar of lye soap in the kitchen, and she set about scrubbing every surface. She removed what looked like years' worth of grime and grease. When she was finally satisfied, every surface gleamed.

Naomi turned her attention to the bed and the pile of dusty blankets covering its surface. She sighed. For a few brief moments, she missed her comfortable home back in San Francisco. Her feather mattress, with its clean white sheets, had been a haven. She would have loved to sink into it at that moment. Her back and neck were aching, and she would have liked nothing better than to have a comfortable and clean bed.

She reminded herself that those creature comforts came at a price, namely her freedom and self-respect. All things considered, she could manage to make a reasonably comfortable bed in her new home. But before she could get any rest, she would have to address the old, lumpy mattress and the filthy bedding. With a resigned sigh, she gingerly began to lift the blankets and carry them out to the porch.