



Wildfire In His Arms

By Johanna Lindsey

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#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Johanna Lindsey's passionate tale features the mysterious Degan Grant from *One Heart to Win*, a dangerous gunfighter running from his past, who finds his future with a beautiful outlaw at the gallows. Look out for Johanna's newest novel, *Make Me Love You*, available July 2016 from Gallery Books!

When a US Marshal calls in a favor, all Degan Grant has to do is apprehend three outlaws. Easy enough, he figures, for a man no one wants to tangle with.

But then a bold young woman crosses his path. Pretty Maxine attracted so much unwanted attention in her Texas hometown that events spiraled out of control. Now she will try anything to stop the handsome, enigmatic gunfighter from turning her over to a corrupt sheriff.

Saddled with a sassy, spirited outlaw who insists she is innocent, Degan must hunt down a vicious killer and keep an old enemy at bay. But soon his desire for his beguiling prisoner sparks into a wildfire of passion, and he can no longer deny they must risk confronting their pasts for a chance at a future in each other's arms forever.

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Editorial Review

Review

"If readers need to remember why they are Lindsey fans, she delivers every reason in this spinoff of *One Heart to Win*. She incorporates her signature captive/captor plotline with sassy dialogue, plenty of verbal sparring, lots of heat and a bit of humor, all in perfect proportions." (*RT Book Reviews*)

About the Author

Johanna Lindsey is world-renowned for her "mastery of historical romance" (*Entertainment Weekly*), with more than sixty million copies of her novels sold. She is the author of fifty-two previous national bestselling novels, many of which reached the #1 spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Lindsey lives in New Hampshire with her family.

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Wildfire in his Arms

Chapter One



"THOUGHT YOU'D LEFT THE territory, Mr. Grant."

Degan looked down at Sheriff Ross, smiling up at him. He leaned forward to soothe his horse before it reared up. The palomino didn't like strangers standing so close to it. Gunshots it didn't mind, strangers it did.

"I'm leaving today. Just making sure no shots get fired in the church."

"Don't need to worry 'bout that. The feud ended last week, soon as the happy couple agreed to get hitched. So you're coming to the wedding?"

Degan looked at the church at the end of the street. The two families getting joined today, the Callahans and the Warrens, were already inside it. People from town were still heading toward it to witness the happy event—and steering clear of Degan, who was sitting on his horse in the middle of the street. As much as he might like to do something as normal as attend a wedding, he knew what his presence would do. And he'd already said his good-byes.

So he shook his head at the sheriff. "No need for anyone to be nervous on a day like this."

Ross chuckled. "I think folks here in Nashart know you well enough by now—"

"That's the trouble. They know me."

Ross got a little red in the face. It was odd for a sheriff to treat Degan so affably. Usually as soon as a sheriff learned who he was, the sheriff asked him to get out of his town. Ross hadn't done that, likely out of respect for Zachary Callahan, who had hired Degan to keep the peace until Zachary's son's wedding. Of course the wedding wasn't guaranteed to happen when the Warren bride had been raised in the lap of luxury

and was to marry Hunter Callahan, a cowboy born and bred here in Nashart, Montana, whom she'd never met. And Tiffany Warren had definitely tried to get out of the arranged marriage. At the Callahan ranch she'd even pretended to be a housekeeper so she could find a way to end the feud between the two families without sacrificing herself on the altar.

Degan had liked Tiffany from the start because she reminded him of home, a home he was never going back to. But he'd guessed she wasn't really a housekeeper. She'd tried so hard not to be prim and proper, but she just couldn't help it. The elegant and sophisticated real Tiffany constantly slipped out, although she'd made him question his intuition when she'd befriended a baby pig and made him her pet. That had really thrown him off. It had tickled the hell out of Hunter, too. No wonder Hunter had fallen in love with his future wife before he knew who she really was.

Degan had been hired to be a deterrent to bloodshed between the two feuding families. It had worked, his job was done. It was time to move on. But the sheriff was getting that same look on his face he'd had a few days ago when he'd gotten up the nerve to ask Degan to temporarily take over his job while he went back East to find a wife. Weddings in town seemed to have that effect on single men, made men who had been looking for a wife want one even more. And unattached young women were hard to come by in the West.

Degan had declined the sheriff's offer, and now he stopped Ross from making it again, remarking, "If I ever became a sheriff, it would have to be where no one knows me."

"But it's your name that will keep trouble away," Ross insisted.

"No, it's my name that will bring trouble. You know that for a fact, Sheriff. Until gunslingers are a dying breed, there will always be fast guns wanting to prove they're faster than me. Now go on or you'll miss the ceremony. I'm just waiting to see the bride and groom leave the church before I ride out."

"Well, you'll always have a home here if you want it, Degan Grant. And my job if you want that, too!"

Degan almost smiled as the sheriff moved off. He'd never had a hankering to settle in one place until he'd come to Nashart. Of course he wasn't usually in one place this long, either. And he definitely wasn't used to being treated like a member of the family as the Callahans had treated him. They'd even given him a seat at their dining table and a bedroom in their house. Usually his employers wanted him as far away from their families as possible. They certainly never socialized with him. He had considered the sheriff's offer, briefly, because he did like the people around here and was going to be sorry to see the last of them. But what he'd just told the sheriff was the truth. With Nashart's mining problem settled and the two feuding families joined in marriage now, Nashart was going to be peaceful for a spell, maybe indefinitely. It wouldn't remain that way if he stayed.

Many people thought the term peacemaker was a misnomer for a man who could draw a gun faster than anyone else. Yet once drawn, a gun was a powerful motivator. It could keep the peace between warring factions even if it wasn't fired. That's what Degan had been in Nashart—a peacemaker. He hadn't had to kill anyone and had only drawn his gun once to make a point with Roy Warren, before he'd known Roy was one of Tiffany's brothers.

An open-top carriage was making its way down the street accompanied by three men on horseback. Degan had ridden to town with the Callahans and had assumed the Warrens were already inside the church, but apparently not. The bride was riding in the carriage with her parents, her father driving them. Her brothers hung back to keep the dust their horses turned up away from the carriage.

Frank Warren slowed the carriage to a stop, and Tiffany stood and gave Degan a graceful curtsy.

“You’re late for your wedding,” Degan remarked.

Tiffany chuckled. “Brides are allowed to be late, though I swear I’m not trying to make Hunter worry that I got cold feet. I just wanted to look perfect for him today, and that took a little longer than I anticipated.”

“You succeeded. Hunter is a lucky man.”

Degan envied his friend at that moment. Tiffany was a beautiful woman, and she looked exquisite today in her fancy Eastern wedding gown and gossamer-thin lace veil.

“Are you sure you won’t join us?”

He’d ridden over to the Warren ranch yesterday to say his good-byes and had told Tiffany he wouldn’t attend the marriage ceremony. “I’m just waiting to see you two exit the church as man and wife, then I’ll be on my way to California.”

“Hunter said his father tried to hire you again, to look up his son Morgan while you are in Butte, but you’re not going that way?”

“Too many people know me in Butte. I’ll be taking the northern route that passes through Helena instead. But Zachary wanted me to scare his boy home, which is pointless if Morgan still has gold fever.”

“Well, I can’t say I’m not glad your job here is done.” Tiffany grinned. “You made sure no one got killed while Hunter and I were figuring out we were meant for each other, and for that you have my heartfelt thanks.”

“And mine,” Frank Warren agreed.

“Indeed,” his wife, Rose, added. “My boys admitted they were afraid to—”

“Ma!” Roy Warren cut in, abashed.

“Well, restraint on all fronts was no doubt a blessing in disguise,” Rose finished.

Frank cleared his throat. “I don’t think Mr. Grant wants to be likened to a blessing, darling.”

“Nonsense,” Rose huffed. “He knew what I meant.”

“We need to get going.” Frank pointed toward the church.

Degan glanced down the street and saw Zachary Callahan in front of the church looking around anxiously and gesturing to Frank to hurry up.

Tiffany laughed. “I guess I did make Hunter worry, or maybe just my father-in-law! Be safe in your travels, Degan.”

She sat back down. Frank got the carriage moving again and Tiffany’s three brothers nodded at Degan as

they passed. Then Tiffany called back at him, "If you ever find this kind of happiness for yourself, bring your wife by so we can meet her!"

Degan almost laughed. Trust a woman to think only a woman could make a man happy. Degan knew he would never find out if that was true because women feared him. Even Tiffany did. And he didn't know how to change that without ruining his reputation, so he wasn't about to try.

"Hey, mister, can't make up your mind where you're going?"

Degan glanced behind him and saw a stranger walking his horse through the center of town toward him. He was wearing a yellow slicker that was pushed back to reveal the gun on his hip, a rather good indication that he was looking for trouble of some sort. As the stranger approached him, Degan could see he was young and slim and his face so smooth-skinned that he could actually be mistaken for a girl.

Degan didn't have to answer the snide question. He could just ride off now and miss seeing his happily married friends walk out of church. But he knew boys of this stamp didn't like to be ignored.

"How old are you, kid?"

"Seventeen, not that it's any of your business, so don't call me kid. Name's—"

"Not interested."

The boy looked disgruntled. "Is everyone in this town as ornery as you?"

Ornery? Degan raised a black brow. He'd been called a lot of things, but never that. And the boy had stopped his roan horse a few feet from Degan's. He obviously had more to say, and no one else was around to say it to with the main street deserted now that everyone going to the wedding had reached the church. Only the shopkeepers were still in town, at least half of them standing at their windows. Strangers didn't pass through town without being noticed.

Degan told himself he shouldn't be so suspicious of every stranger who approached him, gunfighter or not. There were a lot of friendly people in the West and dozens of good reasons for a man to carry a weapon. Not everyone was out to make a name for himself by challenging every fast gun he heard of.

So Degan unbent a little and asked, "Do you need help with something?"

"Yeah, I do. Heard from some miners over in Butte that Degan Grant was living here."

"He was just passing through."

"Then I missed him?"

"Depends on what you want him for."

"Huh?"

"If you want a showdown with him, this is your lucky day. If you want to hire him, this might still be your lucky day. Any other reason, it's probably not your lucky day. Which is it?"

“So you know where I can find him?”

“You’ve already found him.”

The boy smiled, quite widely, making Degan wonder for just a moment if his gut instinct was wrong. It wasn’t.

“High noon, tomorrow, right here,” the boy said, still wearing a confident grin.

That didn’t need any clarification. High noon was when most stand-and-face-your-opponent gunfights happened, a time of day when neither combatant would be disadvantaged by blinding sunlight.

Degan glanced up to see where the sun was before saying, “It’s close enough to high noon right now, so if we’re going to do this, let’s do it now. Come hitch up your horse if you don’t want it catching stray bullets.”

Degan rode his palomino to the nearest hitching post before he dismounted and tossed the reins over it. The boy followed him and did the same, so he wasn’t expecting Degan to come around the horses with his gun already drawn.

Now the boy was glaring at Degan as he slowly moved his hand away from his gun. “How’d you get your reputation if you cheat like this?” he spat out.

“By killing men—not boys. And this isn’t cheating, it’s saving your life.” Degan took the boy’s gun and emptied it on the ground between them, then handed it back. “But I guess you don’t get it yet. We’re still doing this. If you win, you can reload and we’ll have another go. If I win, you get to ride off and be glad you’re still breathing. Sound fair?”

“Hell no. How ’bout we just do this normal in front of witnesses?”

“Look around, you’re being watched. And I’m offering you exactly what you came here for, a chance to see if you’re faster than I am, just without spilling blood in the street, and without you pissing your pants in fear thinking you’re about to die. This is actually a much better test of who’s faster, if you think about it. You’ll be relaxed, without fear, without sweaty palms that might cause you to fumble. And you’ll still have your bragging rights if you win.”

Degan removed his jacket and hooked it over the pommel of his saddle. Just because he lived in the West now didn’t mean he had to give up the finer things in life he was accustomed to. Well, he’d had to give up some, but not the way he dressed. His black jacket was finely tailored, the black vest silk, the white shirt made of soft linen. His black boots were highly polished; the spurs weren’t tin but real silver. And his gun holster was custom-made.

He stepped out into the street away from the intersection. He didn’t want his friends witnessing this if they came out of the church early. The boy had followed Degan’s example and left his slicker with his horse before putting some distance between them. He still looked nervous. Degan wondered if he had done this before or if this was his very first gunfight. It was a shame kids like this didn’t learn from their mistakes and just go home. Maybe this one would when they were done.

“You’re not going to empty your gun like you did mine?” the boy asked hesitantly.

“No. There are witnesses, remember? I’m not a murderer, just a fast gun. So prove you know how to do this.”

A few more seconds passed with the boy’s hand hovering just over his weapon. He was still nervous, despite Degan’s assurances. Degan could see the boy’s fingers shaking.

Degan finally sighed. “I’m giving you an edge, to draw first. Anytime now would be good.”

“So you’re gonna let me win?”

“No, I’m not.” Degan drew his gun, then slid it back in his holster just as fast. “See? Now draw.”

The boy tried to, but his gun still didn’t clear his holster before Degan’s was out and pointed at his chest. “Thing is, kid, I don’t miss either. So are we done here?”

“Yes, sir, we are.”

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