

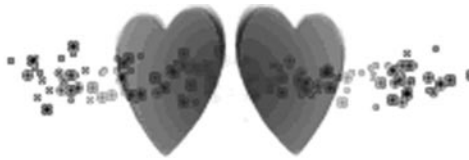
Tempered Hearts



Pamela S. Thibodeaux

“I will give you a new heart & put a new Spirit within you, I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.” Ezek. 36:

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TEMPERED HEARTS

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Dedication and Acknowledgements

First and foremost, thanks belong to God without whose gift and direction this story would not have come to life for me or for you. Special thanks to my friends and family for their encouragement, and especially to my husband and children for their infinite patience while I worked for hours, days, weeks and even months on end. And, last but not least, for Mark.

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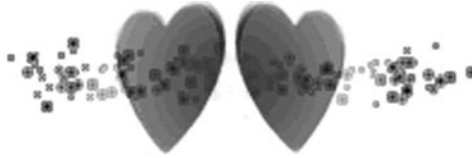
And a very special "***Thank You***" goes to Lauron Sonnier (McCulloch) Stewart, President of Sonnier Marketing <http://www.sonniermarketing.com> for the original artwork for *Tempered Hearts* and *Tempered Dreams*. You helped make my vision a reality...for this I'll forever be grateful. God Bless you Lauron!

**“Who are you?” Anthony demanded.
“What business is it of yours if I beat the
girl for lying?”**

Craig uncoiled his long frame, moving slowly, like a panther stalking his prey. His gaze assessed the situation: Tamera cowed in fright, an angry hand-print marking her beautiful skin, the torn dress at the man’s feet, her words ringing in his ears. Blood pounded in his veins. Revenge screamed through his soul. He stopped toe-to-toe with his adversary. Clenching his fists in a deliberate effort not to put his hands around the man’s throat, he glared down at him.

“Just call me Prince Charming,” he answered, his voice deceptively soft. “I told you to let her go and get out. I’m not going to repeat myself. And if I ever hear of you coming around here again, I’ll personally hunt you down and kill you.”

Chapter One



Craig Harris pushed his half-empty plate away and signaled the waitress for a cup of coffee. Scrubbing a hand over his face, he rubbed his tired, gritty eyes and looked out the window, hoping to avoid idle chit-chat with the woman as she sidled up to him, coffee pot in hand, seductive sway to her hips, a hint of suggestion in her smile.

“Wonder when I’ll have the opportunity to leave you looking so haggard,” she remarked. His gaze cut to her in a quick, scathing look that stopped further conversation.

A flash of movement and color caught the corner of his eye. Craig glanced out the window to see a red Corvette toting a horse trailer pull into service station across the street. Impossible, he thought, shaking his head. He rubbed his eyes again, positive he was hallucinating. Sure enough, it was there, plain as day. Seen it all now, he thought, watching as a petite blonde disembarked from the vehicle, spoke to the attendant then unloaded her horse; admiring the care she lavished on the huge animal. Admiration turned to awe then anger when she loaded the horse back in the trailer and headed in the direction of the diner where he sat. He lay in wait until she was seated comfortably at the counter before approaching her.

“Gonna leave that horse out there long while you sit in here where it’s nice and cool?” he asked. As a rancher, Craig detested the misuse of any animal, especially horses.

Tamera Collins turned and looked into the angriest - and prettiest - steel-gray eyes she’d ever seen. “Are you talking to me?”

“No,” he snarled. “I’m talking to Harry. Who else would I be talking to? You’re the only idiot I’ve seen put her horse in a trailer in one hundred-degree heat!”

Tamera knew the stranger had no way of knowing that her horse trailer was equipped with oscillating fans to keep its occupant cool and it was on the tip of her tongue to tell him, but the sheer audacity of him attacking her stayed her words. She stiffened and desperately held on to her rising temper. "Look, Mister, I don't know where you get off being so rude, but I'll have you know that my horse is well taken care of."

With a low growl he grabbed her by the arm, nearly unseating her. "It's hotter than blazes outside, and even hotter in that trailer! I want to know how long you're going to leave him in there before you get moving?"

Tamera's already strained temper shot up another degree. "Don't manhandle me Mister," she warned, jerking free from his grasp. "My daddy never manhandled me, and you can bet some half-cocked stranger's not going to either!"

A collective gasp sounded in the cafe, followed by absolute silence as the customers waited to see what happened next. Not one of them would have crossed him in any manner, and everyone wondered what he'd do to the mere slip of a girl who dared to.

Caught between surprise and shock, Craig bit back a curse. *Little spitfire. Got nerve too.* "Looks like your daddy never spanked you, either, Sweetheart," he drawled. "Now answer me and make it soon. I'm not used to waiting when I ask a question, and I'm extremely low on patience right now."

Tamera saw red - bright, hot, furious, red. Low on patience? More like low on manners! How dare he manhandle her, insult her father then calmly demand an answer to an unwarranted attack on her ability to take care of her horse!

"Cool off, Mister. Show some courtesy from now on and next time you just might get your answer." Before he could blink she grabbed her glass of water off the counter and tossed it in his face. She stormed into the bathroom, locked the door and burst into tears. "Arrogant jerk cowboy!" she seethed, the confrontation an overload to her taut emotions.

Craig stared in stunned disbelief, eyes narrowing as he realized she'd succeeded in humiliating him in front of an entire room of his peers. He glared around as customers ducked their heads, sipped their drinks, or hid snickers and smiles behind their hands. With a muttered curse, he started toward the bathroom.

"No more, Craig," Harry interrupted with quiet authority, fully aware that Craig would tear the door down to get to her. God only knew what would happen then. "Leave her alone."

Turning on his heel, Craig stormed out of the cafe. The customers burst into wild laughter the moment he was out the door. Craig Harris

owned one of the largest and most successful ranches in the state. And he never let anyone forget it.

Craig tore out of the drive, the jeep's tires spinning, throwing dust and gravel everywhere. Harry waited until he was gone before he went to the ladies' room. "Come on out, Honey, he's gone," he encouraged the occupant.

Tamera clamped a lid on her whirling emotions, washed her face then opened the door. A flush of embarrassment stained her pale cheeks. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

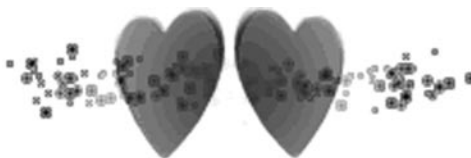
Harry chuckled, leading her back to her seat as the patrons burst into spontaneous applause. "It's okay sweetheart. Craig Harris can be a real jerk sometimes. Most of the time actually. He's a fine man, but he does demand respect."

She gasped in petrified shock. "You don't mean the Craig Harris that owns the Rockin' H Ranch do you?"

"Yep, one and the same."

Tamera hung her head, embarrassment washing over her in angry waves. Of all the strange twists of fate, this certainly topped her list of 'life's little ironies'. "My daddy always warned me to watch my temper," she said in a humiliated whisper. "Now I know why."

"Don't worry, Honey," Harry assured her. "He'll get over it." I doubt it, Tamera thought, knowing she'd find out soon enough.



Craig pulled up to the ranch in the same manner he left the cafe. Dust and gravel turned the damp area on the front of his shirt into a dirty mess. Physically exhausted and emotionally strung out, the last thing he looked forward to was explaining his appearance. Which is exactly what I'll have to do, he realized, spotting his grandfather in his wheelchair, on the porch, talking to the ranch foreman. Slamming out of the jeep, he stomped up on the porch.

"What happened to you?"

Craig faced his grandfather squarely, eyes narrowed, jaw muscle twitching. "Some hot-tempered little witch threw water on me."

Craig Harris Sr. couldn't help but grin at the look on his grandson's face. "A girl?" he asked, not bothering to hide his surprise or amusement. "A girl threw water on you? He chuckled. "Did you hear that Shorty?" he

asked, glancing at the foreman.

Craig eyed Shorty, daring him to comment then returned the glare to his grandfather. "I fail to see the humor in the situation."

His grandfather only laughed. "It's a switch that's for sure. They usually just throw themselves at you."

"Well, that's the price I pay for being known as 'most eligible bachelor'," Craig hissed. "A title I never asked for in the first place."

"Look around you, boy," his grandfather said, gesturing to encompass their surroundings. "You've earned the title, be proud."

"Yeah, well look where pride has gotten me. A face full of water and laughingstock of the town."

The old man grinned. "I said be proud, not arrogant. I've always told you that someone would give you a dressing-down someday. Only wish I'd been there to see it. Where did this happen?"

Craig's eyes narrowed at his grandfather's obvious amusement. Were it anyone else, he'd have thrown them off the ranch at the first guffaw. "Harry's."

"Find her, Shorty. I've got to meet this little girl."

The ranch foreman nodded but chose to keep his mouth shut. He struggled not to laugh but couldn't stop the grin tugging at his lips. Holding out his hand, he waited for Craig to toss him the keys to the jeep then headed into town.

"Guess my humiliation and your joy will be complete by bringing her here," Craig muttered, slamming into the house only to turn around at his grandfather's command.

"Wait just a minute, Craig," he said, then continued when his grandson faced him once more. "I've no desire to humiliate you, Son, it's obvious you've done that very well all by yourself. As usual."

"I don't understand you sometimes. Why do you want to bring her here? She's nothing but trouble," Craig insisted.

"Who is she?" his grandfather asked.

"Have no idea. Couldn't care less."

Craig Sr. shook his head and sighed. "You've let that temper get away from you again, with a stranger no less, and forgotten who you are. We Harrises don't go around intimidating strangers. Especially women. What brought this on besides the fact that you've been up for over twenty-four hours?"

"The irresponsible little twit had the nerve to put her horse in a trailer and then park herself on a stool at Harry's. The heat index is pushing the temperature up to a hundred degrees," he insisted at his grandfather's raised eyebrows.

Craig Sr. shook his head with a resigned sigh. "Take a shower Craig. Shorty will be back with her soon, and I expect you present when they get here."

"Ready to apologize no doubt," Craig grumbled. He knew it was a useless waste of energy to face off with his grandfather. Gramps was right, though. After spending the night walking a pregnant, colicky mare, then delivering a premature colt, he'd been up too many hours to consider the consequences.

"You'll do what's expected of you; what's expected of a Harris." His grandfather affirmed.

His voice was as cold as steel and as hard as the glint of anger in the gray eyes that were a part of his legacy to Craig. Without another word, Craig turned on his heel, stomped through the house and stormed up the stairs to do as he was bid.

Tamera swallowed her humiliation and fears long enough to eat her lunch while getting directions to the Rockin' H. She'd barely finished when a man walked into the cafe.

"No need to follow those directions, Missy, just follow him," Harry said, before nodding hello at the little man. "Shorty," he greeted with a smile and handshake.

Tamera watched the greeting with interest. Not much taller than she, he was the embodiment of a cowboy; bowed legs, skin tanned the color of leather and obviously just as tough, dark eyes that twinkled like stars in a velvet sky. His huge smile was charming despite the discoloration of teeth from age, coffee, and tobacco. He smelled of leather and sweat, strong but not offensive.

"Heard there was some trouble here, Harry," he drawled in a tone Tamera was beginning to associate with the term *'Texas twang'*.

"No trouble, Shorty, just a misunderstanding between Craig and Miss Collins."

Shorty looked at the young girl beside him and grinned. *She was no bigger than a fly!* "You? You threw water on him?"

Tamera blushed at the surprise and disbelief in his voice. "Yes, I'm afraid so," she admitted, her voice softened by embarrassment.

Shorty threw back his head and laughed. "Well, I'll be dipped in horse sh -- hot sauce," he stuttered, amending his usual expression as those who knew it well laughed. "Knew someone would take him down some day. Boy's had it comin' for quite some time now. Never dreamed it'd be a little bitty thing like you. Mr. Harris asked me to escort you to the ranch. He'd like to get to know you," he informed her, while reaching for her lunch ticket.

Harry shook his head. "This one's on the house. The little lady deserves it," he added, with a wink at Shorty.

Tamera felt a wave of aggravation that everyone seemed to get such a kick out of the humiliation of another human being, whether he deserved it or not. "I don't want or need any more trouble." She hesitated, afraid of the consequences now that the time had come to face up to her actions.

"No trouble Miss, I promise," Shorty said.

Tamera looked to Harry for confirmation, hoping she could trust him to steer her right.

Harry nodded. "They're good people. Craig's just a little high-handed at times. As a rancher he's respected, admired, even envied. Because of his reputation as a rancher his arrogance is usually tolerated; or overlooked."

Tamera sighed. Might as well face the music, she resolved, and see if there's any chance I still have a job.

Considering what happened, not to mention the fact that she was two weeks late in showing up, Tamera seriously doubted it. With a tiny nod of acquiescence, she followed Shorty to the ranch, the beauty of the drive obscured by the doubts and fears plaguing her. Arriving, Shorty escorted her from her car up to the porch where she found Craig, freshly showered, though still looking haggard and angry, standing beside an older man in a wheelchair.

"Craig Harris, ma'am," he greeted, extending a hand toward her. "I hope there are no hard feelings over your run-in with my grandson."

"You're Craig Harris? I thought Harry said he was Craig Harris," she remarked, nodding in Craig's direction.

The old man laughed. "He is. Craig Harris the Third to be exact."

"Well, sir, I'm afraid I lost my temper also," she apologized, taking the proffered hand. The twinkle in his gray eyes, a lighter shade than his offspring's, eased her embarrassment some.

Again he laughed. "Good for you Honey. Someone needed to bring him down a peg. What's your name?" he asked, enclosing her hand in both of his.

A flush warmed her cheeks. She gently disengaged her hand from his grasp. "Tamera Collins."

"That name sounds familiar," he remarked, a frown creasing his brow. "Why's that, I wonder?"

Her flush deepened. "You sent me a letter of acceptance for the summer job," she said, and heard Craig's sharp intake of breath.

"What job?" he demanded.

She dared a look at him. "The veterinarian."

Craig snorted. "You're too young to be a veterinarian."

"That's right," Mr. Harris interjected, giving Craig a warning look. "I remember now. Exceptionally qualified if your résumé was correct."

"It is."

"Job's filled," Craig interrupted. No way on earth would he put up with her all summer!

Tamera dared another glance. One look told her all she needed to know. It would be a long time before he got over their encounter. "I'm sorry to hear that," she whispered, blinking back tears of frustration and exhaustion. She turned back to his grandfather.

"Mr. Harris, if the job is already filled, I'd appreciate if you could suggest a place for me and my horse to stay over the next few weeks. Harry explained about the charity rodeo you put on each year and I'd like to enter it."

"Craig, your mare's hemorrhaging!" The alarm sounded from the barn before Mr. Harris could answer or Craig could object.

Action exploded around her. Tamera hesitated but a moment before joining in. Jumping off the porch, she grabbed her keys, fumbled with them, threw open the trunk of her car and pulled out her veterinarian bag. Fueled by adrenaline she pushed her way through the mob of frantic cowboys. Shoving them aside, she knelt beside the mare and began examining her.

Panic seized the animal. She struggled to stand. Tamera knew she would have one heck of a fight on her hands if the mare succeeded. Her sharp whistle brought quiet to the chaos around her.

"Let's not panic, gentlemen," she cautioned with quiet authority. "Craig, get her head." She didn't wait to see if he would obey, just issued orders. "Shorty, is it?" At his nod, she continued. "Get this foal out of the way. You," she nodded at a young man in the crowd. "I need warm water, lots of warm water. And towels."

Without question they jumped to do her bidding as she continued with her examination. Silence hung in the air: *Thick. Tense. Anxious.* The only sounds penetrating it were the labored breathing of the mare and the senseless, soothing words of the woman beside her.

"She's not hemorrhaging," Tamera muttered, reaching for her bag. "She's in labor."

"What?" Craig exclaimed, shock and surprise evident in his tone. "But that foal's only a few hours old. That's impossible. Veterinarian my ass," he snorted. "You don't know what you're talking about. Get away from my mare!" He ordered through clenched teeth.

Tamera moved, but not to do his bidding. "It happens, Craig," she

informed him, continuing her preparations to deliver the foal despite his order to the contrary. "Twins. Sometimes one develops more rapidly. The other either catches up or doesn't make it through delivery. How old is that colt?"

He shrugged. "Three, maybe four hours."

She sighed, fighting back bitter tears, his attitude grating on her already raw nerves. Now was not the time to lose control. "Chances are this one will be stillborn or deformed. Either way, it's got to be born. You'll lose your mare otherwise," she told him with grave certainty.

Given the alternative, Craig nodded.

It was all she needed. Giving the mare a shot to help with the contractions, Tamera prepared for the delivery. Snapping on gloves that covered her from fingertip to armpit, she was ready when the next spasm hit the mare. Reaching in the birth canal, she grabbed the unborn foal and gently pulled, stopping when the contraction ceased, but maintaining her grip on the foal. She allowed his direction when Craig barked orders for someone to get the calf puller should it prove necessary in delivering the foal, then questioned him as to the overall health of the mare, length of term, and condition of this pregnancy. He answered readily, holding and stroking the mare's head, neither of them fully aware that they were working in tandem and enjoying it. In less than an hour, the tiny foal made it's entrance into the world. Washing it, Tamera examined the newborn filly.

"Breathe," she whispered. "Come on, baby, breathe," she urged, clearing the filly's airway passages and stimulating her heart. The filly uttered a small nicker. "That's it, baby," Tamera soothed. "Come on now, keep breathing."

Completing her examination, Tamera pulled the filly into her arms, stroking the tiny head and slender neck. "She seems to be normal. She's weak and tiny, but other than that..." She choked on a sob, but couldn't stop the tears from streaming down her cheeks when she realized that she held a living, breathing miracle in her arms. "Thank you God," she whispered, knowing she'd prayed more in the last hour than she had in weeks.

"What now?" Craig's voice penetrated her thoughts. The mare struggled to get up. He held her still, waiting for Tamera's consent.

Surprised at the tenderness in his tone, Tamera nodded, raising triumphant sapphire eyes to his. "Let her up. It's the best thing for her. Walk her to keep the blood flowing for a while. Make sure she passes the afterbirth, all of it. But watch her for signs of excessive bleeding or extreme weakness."

“I’ll need a bigger stall; clean, dry, and disinfected, with plenty of fresh hay. And heat lamps. The next few hours, maybe even days will be the most critical for her, for all of them really. They’ll need constant supervision. She may not be able to nurse them, and even if she does, he’ll probably get more than his share. This little one, though, we’ll probably have to bottle-feed. Or you will, if I’m not here to help.”

Unspoken question hung in the air; Craig heard it, now perfectly aware of her competence. He wondered if she knew how beautiful she looked? Covered in things most women would find disgusting, her cheeks were flushed from excitement and exertion and her eyes sparkled with triumph. She sat holding that filly as though it were her own baby. He let the mare up and rolled to his feet, offering Tamera a hand.

“You’re late.” He accused, unable to stop the grin tugging at his mouth.

At a little over six feet tall, Tamera had to tilt her head to look into his eyes. Only temper could have prevented her from being intimidated by the obvious strength in his wide shoulders and broad chest earlier. Admiration shone in the dark gray gaze, though she doubted he’d voice it aloud. She smiled back.

“Looks like I got here just in time.”

Innocence combined with pure, female triumph in that one smile made his gut twist with desire. In a few short hours she’d infuriated, humiliated, and amazed him. Craig wondered how on earth he’d get through the entire summer with her around.



Pamela S. Thibodeaux

A former member of Golden Triangle Writers Guild, Coeur de Louisiane and RWA, she won Coeur's 1999 "Diamond In The Rough" as well as their 2000 "Ruby" Award and received her RWA Pro Pin in 2001.

Multipublished in fiction and non-fiction, her writing has been tagged as "Inspirational with an Edge!" and reviewed as "Steamier and grittier than the the typical Christian without decreasing the message."

Rancher Craig Harris and veterinarian Tamera Collins clash from the moment they meet. Innocence is pitted against arrogance as tempers rise and passions ignite to form a love as pure as gold fresh from the crucible and as strong as steel. Thrown together amid tragedy and unsated passion, Tamera and Craig share a strong attraction that neither accepts as the first stages of love. Torn between desire and dislike, they must make peace with their pasts and God in order to open up to the love blossoming between them. The first book in the Tempered Series is here!
Tempered Hearts

Tempered Hearts is a journey of both personal and spiritual rebirth of faith lost, then found, and a lesson in forgiveness. -- **Sheri L. McGathy, Author of *Elfen Gold***

Tempered Hearts is an outstanding story of true love and the obstacles you have to overcome to realize loves permanence. -- **Tracy Farnsworth, Reviewer Ivy Quill**

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Inspirational romance at it's innovative best! -- **Susan Grant, Author *Once a Pirate and The Star King***



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