

THE KINCAID *Brides* BOOK 3



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In many ways I mark my writing life by my youngest daughter, Katy. I started writing my first book when she went to kindergarten. I held my first published book in my hands the year she graduated from high school. When I look at how she's grown up I take pride in her at the same time I know it's mostly coming from inside her and I have no right to pride. All that talent and charm and intelligence are her own, gifts given to her by God that she uses so well. I love you, Katy.

I also dedicate this book to Luke Hinrichs, my editor at Bethany House. He's worked so hard and contributed so much to my books. Luke and Charlene Patterson have this great eye for weaknesses in the plot and how to make the book stronger. It's a privilege to work with both of them and all the people at Bethany House.

CHAPTER 1



OCTOBER 30, 1866

A bullet slammed through the door of the stagecoach, threading a needle to miss all four passengers.

“It’s a holdup!” Callie grabbed her rifle. “Get down!”

The stage driver yelled and cracked his whip. More flying lead hit, higher on the stagecoach. The man riding shotgun got his rifle into action.

“Get on the floor!” The woman sitting across from Callie was frozen with fear. That endangered Connor and it made Callie furious.

The bullets came fast. The stage was moving slow on a long uphill slope. With the driver’s shout they picked up speed. From the roof, she heard a steady volley of deafening return fire.

Reaching across, Callie grabbed the woman by the ruffled front of her pink gingham dress and dragged her off the seat. The woman shrieked but didn't put up a fight, which was smart of her. Callie would've won that fight.

Somewhat more gently, Callie picked Connor up from the seat beside her and set him on the woman's lap. Eight-month-old Connor yelped, more a shout of anger than a cry. But crying would come soon enough. Her little wild man didn't do anything quietly.

"Can you shoot?" she shouted at the young man, hoping he'd snap out of whatever panic had seized him. He shook his head frantically. "Get on the floor, then."

Callie used her whiplash voice and hoped it got the man moving. She threw herself across to the woman's seat to face backward. With her Colt in her left hand and her Winchester in her right, she shoved the curtain aside. The flare of the orange and yellow aspen lining the road blocked any sign of the gunmen.

Callie didn't bother to push the man to the floor. Let the idiot figure that out himself. She got a glimpse of the robbers riding around a curve. Bullets hailed on the coach. Callie held back, waiting for a clear shot.

Connor's yelling turned to a cry. Callie was enraged that her son was in such terrible danger when he should have been safe on her father's ranch in Texas.

The noise overhead said the driver'd slid off his high seat to use the stage as cover. She heard the man riding shotgun land flat on his belly on the roof. The driver's shouting and the gunfire slashed like a sharp knife through the cool October morning.

“Try and calm Connor down.” Not much chance of that. Connor had been a whirlwind since birth. And the two caring for him were more upset than he was.

She counted four outlaws. The varmints had picked this uphill slope a few miles outside of Colorado City because the stage had slowed to a crawl.

Callie had plenty of bullets, but she was a conservative woman, and she didn't intend to fire blind and waste lead. She was mighty low on money and she needed ammunition for when she finally tracked down that worthless Seth Kincaid.

The stagecoach yawed past a curve and it put them out of the line of fire until the outlaws could round it.

The young woman was hugging Connor. The man had wedged himself onto the floor, putting his body between Connor, his wife, and the gunfire. Maybe he wasn't completely worthless.

A bullet cut through the stage door. Splinters exploded and slashed Callie's left hand. She flinched and got her hand right back on the trigger of her Colt.

Callie braced her rifle against her shoulder and took careful aim; the whole world slowed down, the noise fading into the background. She felt pulled away, out of the action. Her mind was working clearly, her nerves steady. The bleeding hand didn't hurt. As she looked at the trail behind, the colors were so vivid and her vision so sharp it was almost painful.

The pulsing hooves gave away the attackers' exact location. And the slow-moving coach gave her a chance at a steady shot.

A glance over her shoulder told her the trail would twist just ahead. Their pursuers would be swallowed up by the heavy

forest lining the road. They appeared and disappeared in the thick plumes of dust.

Callie saw shining silver on the band of a flat-topped black hat. The man was a fool to wear silver if he wanted to make his living sneaking around.

Callie inhaled slowly, then exhaled halfway to relax her chest, waited for the glint of silver, and fired.

A bright splash of red marked the desperado's shirt as he fell backward and was gone. Another outlaw took his place at the front of the pack.

Connor shrieked at the loud sound of shooting so close. Callie separated herself from her mother's need to comfort, because the real comfort came from a ma who would protect him. She'd dry his tears later.

With the cool ruthlessness of a mama wolf defending her young—a mama wolf with a fire iron—Callie drew a bead and fired. Her target kept coming. Bullets shattered the door just above her head. They'd aimed at the roof mostly, but now they knew someone inside the stage was in the fight.

Hating that she'd drawn their guns and further endangered Connor, she kept on firing. From overhead she heard the same. A steady man guarded the stage. The driver kept shouting, cracking his whip. Another steady man was at the reins.

A second outlaw went down. A third pressed forward. She'd counted four, so they were close to finishing this nonsense.

They crested the hill. A few more yards and they'd pick up speed. Colorado City was at the base of this rattlesnake of a trail.

Hold them off. A few more seconds.

Callie fired. A bullet whizzed so close she felt the heat.

A sudden snap under the stagecoach lurched them to the side. They tipped, lifting Callie's side of the bench seat up, up, up. She saw the woman wrap her body around Connor and the man wrap his arms around both of them. Her son surrounded by a flesh-and-blood shield. A sickening crunch told her the stage had hit the rocky outcropping on the side of the trail. A chunk of wood bounced into the dust behind them. Part of one wheel.

The brake came on hard as the driver tried to stop them from rolling out of control. Another thud shook Callie so hard she was thrown backward on the bench seat and smacked her shoulder into the side of the stage. The stage, slow anyway because of the climb, slued sideways, tipped so Callie was nearly lying on her back, then shuddered to a halt.

Callie heard the coach's team of four horses go pounding away, broken free from their burden.

The guard overhead shouted, "Stay inside!" He fired and now the driver's gun came into action. Callie spun on the seat now tipped upward at a steep angle. She lay on her side, shoved her feet against the downhill side of the stage, and got back up to the window.

A bullet whistled past her face.

There were two left. They'd taken cover and were trying to pick the men off the roof. Callie focused her eagle-sharp eyes on the pair attacking them. The tip of one gun was visible. In the motionless stage she could now aim with real precision. She fired. A cry of pain sounded as the muzzle vanished.

Return fire hailed on them from one remaining outlaw.

A sudden shout from overhead told her one of the stagecoach men was hit. She watched for the last remaining gun and

saw it just as another shot came from farther up the trail. The bullet hit the window frame. Shards of wood slashed her face.

A second bullet was just as close, and she dived low to give them less of a target.

“You’re hit!”

She looked down at the young man, who was using his body as a shield to protect her son. “Just wood. The bullet missed.”

“Give me the gun.”

“Can you shoot? Can you hit what you aim at?”

The man’s jaw went rigid, then stiffly he shook his head no.

“Then stay down there, city boy. Let us handle this.”

Bullets came now from three guns. She knew three of the four men were hit but apparently not bad enough to stop them from shooting.

Another cry of pain came from overhead and the gunfire from the stage stopped. Callie swiped at the blood flowing, blocking the vision in one eye, which wrecked her aim and put her at a distinct disadvantage in a gunfight.

“Throw out your guns or we’ll shoot until every man aboard is dead.” The voice was chilling, ugly. Callie heard fury in it. And pain. The man wanted vengeance. The people on the stage had drawn blood, and the man yelling didn’t sound like the type to let them go on their way.

“I hear a child on that stage.” The voice sent a chill through her veins. “You want him to live, throw out your guns.”

Connor’s wailing made it hard for her to think.

Protect him, save him. God, please save my son.

Callie gripped her pistol. Soon they’d be in close-quarters fighting. It was going to come to that and when that happened

it was hard to tell the winners from the losers because everyone got bloody.

No matter how young.

“Just surrender. Let them take what we have,” the young man whispered.

Callie looked at him. These men might let a woman go on her way with a child, but they’d blame this city man for the shooting from inside the stage, no matter how fast he talked. He was very close to death and it was her fault, at least to the extent that it was anyone’s fault but these outlaws.

“Stay down. They won’t let you walk away from this.” Connor’s cries kept building. His blue eyes were drenched with tears.

“I’m a man of God. Many bandits won’t shoot a parson.”

She refused to pull her attention away from the outlaws to try and persuade the parson of the long chance he’d be taking. Instead, with her pistol in her left hand and her rifle in her right, she waited, watched, prayed. Careful not to let the muzzle of her rifle protrude from the window, she hoped to get a shot at the unwounded man. It might be enough to break off the attack.

They came in a rush.

Three men erupted from behind bushes and boulders. Callie fired at the one running fastest and he went down and rolled out of sight along the edge of the trail. The men fired back, but she kept up the assault with both rifle and pistol. The outlaws ducked behind boulders. The stage was tipped nearly sideways on the trail. Held up from being flat on its side by a boulder that poked through the door she wasn’t using.

Callie got an idea. When she was praying this hard and

she got an idea, she always thanked the Lord, even if He hadn't carved it with a fiery fingertip into a slab of stone. They'd wheeled around until the trapdoor in the roof was facing downhill. With a quick twist of her body, she kicked the trapdoor on the stagecoach roof open.

"Get out of here." She turned blazing eyes on the parson. "Take your wife and my son and go. The wagon blocks their vision of the downhill side of the trail. They won't see you leaving. Run for Colorado City and get help. We're not more than a mile or two out. All downhill. I can hold them off."

"No, I won't run like a coward and leave a woman to defend me."

She respected that; she really did. She was also tempted to lay a butt stroke across his skull. "You can't shoot. I can. Get away and get help. With my shooting, we all have a chance to survive this. But with your shooting, all of us are going to die."

The parson's jaw went so tight she thought his teeth might crack.

"Go, you're wasting time. I think one of them is down and the other three are wounded, but not seriously."

A bullet slammed into the stage. Callie ducked and faced uphill again. "Go, please. With your help my son has a chance to live." Her tone had changed from issuing orders to begging.

She glanced at the parson and saw him nod.

"Hurry, you're wasting time. Cover Connor's mouth so they won't hear you." The cruelty of that made her sick, yet it was the only way the baby wouldn't bring these men down on all of them.

The parson helped his wife slip through the trapdoor, handed her Connor. Callie tore her eyes away from her son

and it felt as if she tore her own flesh. Connor's cries cut off, and Callie blocked the parson's exit with her rifle. His deadly serious eyes met hers.

"When you get to Colorado City, if . . . if I don't make it, Parson, find Rafe Kincaid. He's got a ranch near Rawhide, a little mining town to the west. He's Connor's uncle and he'll look out for the boy." Callie hoped it was true.

The parson nodded, clawed his way through the trapdoor out into the crisp fall air. Callie saw him slip his arm around his wife, who carried Connor. They ran. Another bullet fired and Callie had to turn away from her child. Just like Seth had turned away from both of them. The urge to cry shocked her. She wasn't a crying kind of woman, but saying goodbye to her son, well, that was worth a few tears.

She wondered if this goodbye would be forever.

Another bullet smashed through the stage wall and made her forget everything but the fight.

Callie returned fire. The outlaws poured lead into the stage. She was forced to duck. Peeking out, she saw three men slip closer and she let loose with her rifle. They vanished again. Closer, closer every time.

She couldn't cover three men, and that meant she couldn't keep them pinned down. But she could make their advances slow. Give the parson every possible second. Make these thieving coyotes pay a high price for every step.

The gunfire stopped. The outlaws were out of sight. Waiting. She could only hope and pray they'd wait long enough. She searched the scrub pines and blazing aspens and boulders along the trail.

The men started shooting again. Callie returned fire.

The sharp smell of sulfur and blood stung her nose. Splinters sprayed her hands and bloodied them, making her grip on the trigger slippery.

The men ducked out of sight and silence reigned.

Were the stage driver and the man riding shotgun dead? If they weren't, if they'd just been wounded, maybe knocked out, maybe they'd come around and get back into the fight. Even one more gun and she'd have a chance.

The men fired, rushed forward, and dropped. Callie reloaded while the men hid. Time inched forward. She could almost hear the parson's running steps. Down toward town. Help would come.

The coach was so shredded it was little protection anymore. She'd like to shout a threat to the men, let them know help might well be on the way; maybe they'd cut and run. But then they'd know she was a woman and that might make them even more brazen.

Callie noticed the seat across from her had been blasted loose from the frame of the stage. She grabbed at it and moved the thick slab of wood into place in front of her like a shield.

All three of them popped up and dashed forward, shooting. The stage splintered. Needles of wood gouged and slit. Her buckskin jacket and leather riding skirt were decent protection, but her face had been clawed by the wood. A chunk of oak slammed into her head and knocked her backward. She fought her way back to the window. Blood flowed into her eyes and she swiped at it with her forearm. Her vision cleared for only a moment before more blood flowed.

They charged again, shooting. She saw where they went, though each time they'd slip around and emerge in some

unexpected place. Then, with their guns in play, her grip shaky and her vision blurred, she couldn't take good aim.

They had about two more of these charges before they overran the stage.

Had it been long enough? There should be men in Colorado City who'd come running, especially to protect a woman, but also to fight for the stage, to fight for right. She knew the West, and yes, there was lawlessness, but there were also plenty of men who used their strength to maintain the peace.

C'mon, Parson. You've had time. A man on a fast horse could be coming soon.

She watched out the window, eyes riveted on the trail. Watching, hoping, praying for anything to aim at. Did God answer such a violent prayer?

A sudden flash of silver drew her attention. That first man she'd seen with his stupid silver hatband. He was close enough to gain the stage. She saw even with just this glimpse of him that his muscles bunched to run. Her last chance. Her son's last chance. At least his last chance to have a mother who was alive to raise him.

She aimed her rifle, swiped the blood away from her eyes, stilled her trembling hands through sheer will, and fired.

A cry from the bushes stopped everything.

The three men didn't appear for another charge. Callie watched for another shot. Time moved as slowly as if her pa's pocket watch ticked in her ear.

There was nothing.

And then the sound of hooves pounding toward her from Colorado City. They gave her such hope that again she was hit by a need to cry.

Waste of time.

She heard more running horses. This time from the out-laws. They'd been driven off.

Time to come out now. Time to go get her son.

Forcing her eyes to move, she saw her hands. There was a lot of blood. Looking down, she saw her jacket soaked in crimson. A stab of pain drew her eyes to her left arm. An ugly stake of wood at least three inches long stabbed through the leather of her fringed jacket. Blood poured from that wound.

How much blood did a woman have to spare anyway?

Her hands were rigid on her rifle and pistol. The stage was riddled with bullet holes.

Her mind told her hands to let go, to ease off the triggers before she accidentally fired again, this time into the chest of some rescuer.

The horse from Colorado City stopped and she saw a man's legs and backside as he swung down from a pretty gray. The edges of her vision darkened until it was like looking through a long, narrow tunnel.

Then the man turned.

It was Seth Kincaid.

Alive and well. He'd have been better off dead.

She could arrange that.

She still had her gun.

CHAPTER 2



Seth saw the stagecoach driver lying halfway in the bushes on the side of the trail. He'd ridden right past him. Seth wheeled around to go help.

A bullet whizzed out the window of the stage and missed him by little more than a foot. Seth drew his six-gun.

"Seth Kincaid, you get back here and let me shoot you, you low-down skunk."

A woman.

A woman who knew his name.

A woman who knew his name and wanted to kill him.

He'd never had much luck with women.

He was pretty sure he'd heard that voice before, but he couldn't place quite where.

The memory conjured up a pleasant feeling in his chest. Which sure didn't match with the threat and the gunfire.

Almost getting shot was thrilling. Grinning, he dropped to his knees and crawled forward. He saw the open trapdoor of the stage. The gunshots had come from the other side, so maybe he could disarm the woman threatening him.

And maybe not.

Maybe he'd get shot.

Finally he was having some fun.

His heart banged and he felt more alive than he had in weeks. As he crawled he tried to figure out why her voice made his spirits rise in a way that had nothing to do with the reckless fun of being in a gunfight.

Just when he was ready to poke his head up so he could get a look through the trap, riders approached from the direction of Colorado City. He ducked into the undergrowth alongside the trail in case the outlaws had circled around and were coming back. He waited until he saw the star on the man who led the way. He holstered his gun. Then stepped out, his hands in plain sight.

"I just heard the gunfire and came running, Sheriff. I'm Seth Kincaid. We've met."

"Howdy, Seth." The sheriff had sharp eyes, and with a quick look around he snapped out orders. "Four of you men stay behind and help the wounded. The rest of you follow me. The parson said the outlaws are wounded. Maybe we can round them up." The sheriff spurred his horse and about half the posse charged on past the stage.

"Kincaid?" A man riding like he'd never before sat a horse brought up the rear of the six armed men. "I'm Parson Frew. She told me to find Rafe Kincaid."

“That’s my brother. We can talk later. There are two wounded men here and there’s a woman in the stage.” Seth raised his voice. “Are you all right, ma’am?”

“Seth Kincaid, you get over here where I can get you in my crosshairs.” The woman sounded purely loco.

Seth liked her more all the time.

But since she wanted to shoot him, he didn’t obey her.

“The sheriff’s here now, ma’am. His’ll be the first face you see.” The sheriff was gone, but Seth wasn’t in the mood to go into details. He just wanted the woman to quit shooting long enough to disarm her.

The parson swung off his horse and ran toward the stage.

“Have a care, Parson, she just took a shot at me.” Seth followed after the man, knowing his chances of living through this scrape had just gone way up. After she plugged the parson, she’d feel bad and all the fight would go out of her. Too bad for the parson. Too bad for Seth, because all the fun was gone.

“I’ve brought help.” The parson didn’t even pause as he stuck his head into the nearly shredded door of the stage. “Dear Lord, have mercy!”

The tone brought Seth along fast. He looked in the door to see a woman coated in blood. Her face, her jacket, her hands. She looked dead. Two guns lay at her side, but her hands were lax on the triggers.

“She just spoke to me.” Seth felt the wildness that always haunted him as he shoved the parson aside and ripped off what was left of the door. He reached in to the steeply canted stage, driven by a terror that made no sense—even for someone as prone to jump into danger as himself. Catching her around the waist, he dragged her out of the stage, cradled her in his

arms, mindful of the nasty wooden shard high on her left arm. The bleeding was terrible. He couldn't begin to know what she looked like.

"I've got to get her to the doctor." Seth raced for his horse. In his urgency he only distantly noticed that she fit in his arms in a way that was near perfection. It was all strange. How did she know his name? Why did her voice touch something deep inside him? Why did he feel like he'd held her before?

Why had she tried to shoot him?

Although honesty forced him to admit he had that effect on a lot of people.

He looked down at her as he swung onto his horse. He could make out nothing through the bleeding.

"We're right behind you, Kincaid. These men aren't as torn up as her, but they need looking after, too." A deputy waved him down the trail. "Doctor's office is—"

"I know the way." Juggling the woman and his horse was trouble. Her blood seemed to flow faster with each bump. To cradle her more gently, Seth slapped the reins between his teeth to get both hands free, spurred his horse, and charged downhill. It struck him that he didn't know who she was. But he knew on a soul-deep level that this woman was someone important.

Goading his horse, he charged over a twisting trail at breakneck speed. He felt as if the devil himself were in hot pursuit as he ran for his life.

Except he was running for the woman's life, not his.

He heard hoofbeats from behind and glanced back. The parson was coming after him hard. The man sat on his horse like an easterner. An easterner who'd never been on a horse.

Trying to keep up with Seth would probably be the death of him. And yet the woman didn't have any time to spare. She was bleeding out even as he held her in his arms.

Seth leaned low over his horse's neck until the woman was pressed against his chest. The trail finally straightened and hit a level stretch.

Without slowing, Seth finally had time to look at the woman and saw a fast-moving trail of blood coming from her temple. Trying not to jostle her, he pulled the kerchief off his neck and pinned it to the cut by pressing her face to his shoulder.

There were more wounds, but he couldn't tend them and make good time.

God, protect her, care for her. Don't let her die, please, God.

It was the most fervent prayer Seth had prayed in years. In fact, the only prayer since he was a kid when he spent an afternoon dancing with the devil.

Seth had escaped the pointy-horned varmint that day in the belly of the cavern, but he'd been haunted ever since by the notion that he'd paid for survival with his soul. He'd left it behind, deep in the bowels of the burning belly of the earth.

He'd been looking for his soul ever since. And now this woman had inspired a prayer.

The strange idea fled as Seth galloped into Colorado City. A doctor had his office on the edge of town and Seth raced straight there.

He swung down, the woman still fitting perfectly in his arms, and rushed for the doctor's office.

"I need help." He slammed the door wide, shouting, "Fast. This woman's bad hurt!" A small entry room was empty. Before

Seth could get through the next door, it swung open and a gray-haired man took in the situation with one glance.

“Follow me into the back.” He wheeled around, moving fast for an old man.

Seth still almost ran him down.

The doctor pointed at a table. “Lay her there.”

Seth set her on the high, hard bed as gently as possible. He still had her temple pressed to his chest, holding the kerchief in place.

“Get me some water. There’s hot water on the cookstove behind me.” The doctor issued the rapid-fire order and Seth obeyed. There was no one else there, no patients, no nurse to help the doctor. Seth returned with the basin and set it beside the doctor, then rounded the table.

“Let’s get her jacket off.” The doctor reached for the front of her buckskin coat and stopped. “That’s as good as pinned to her arm.”

The doctor leaned close and pulled at the edges of the jacket to see the wound. “What happened to her?”

“She was in a stagecoach holdup. The sheriff should be right behind me bringing in two more wounded. I don’t know how bad they are.”

“I hate to pull that out. I’m not sure how much more blood she can stand to lose. And I don’t have time to give her much tender care if more are coming.”

The doctor looked at Seth, almost as if he was asking for a second opinion. Seth shrugged. “It’s gotta come out sometime, Doc.”

With a firm jerk of his head, the doctor said, “Let’s get her coat off the other arm before I pull out that peg.”

When only her wounded arm was still in the jacket, the doctor pulled the wooden shard out quickly. The woman moaned. The first sign of consciousness.

“Get her jacket off. We’ll stop the bleeding in that arm first and then see what else we have to deal with.” The doctor cut her dress sleeve away.

Seth and the doctor fought a short brutal fight against the pouring blood. Soon her arm was tightly bound. The doctor was quick with a needle on four slashes on her scalp. He clipped the hair away in all four spots with ruthless disregard for a woman’s vanity.

“No bullet wounds.” The doctor washed the woman’s bloody hands. “Ugly scratches but no stitches needed here.” He turned with his cloth to bathe her face. Reaching for the water, he hesitated. Seth saw how dark red the water was.

“Get me some clean water. How long was she out there bleeding?”

“I heard shooting and came running for the stage. She was still conscious when I got there, but the shooting was over.”

He didn’t count the shot she’d fired at him.

After all, she’d had a hard day. If she’d been just a little further from death, she’d have been thinking more clearly and she might not’ve pulled the trigger.

“The sheriff came along a minute after I got to the stage.”

A commotion in the front of the building turned the doctor’s head. He shouted, “Bring ’em on back!”

The door opened and the parson came in alone.

“I thought there were more wounded.” The doctor looked from the parson to Seth.

“The sheriff isn’t far behind me.”

“Parson, do you know this woman?” Seth remembered what the parson had said. “What did you want with my brother?”

“She stayed behind.” The parson looked overcome with guilt. “I said I’d stay, but she was good with a gun. She said if I stayed to hold off those outlaws, we’d all die. If she stayed and I ran for help, we all had a chance to live. But leaving a woman behind . . .” The parson’s throat worked as if he couldn’t push the words past his shame.

Seth well understood how the man felt. But he’d seen the man ride. This woman, with her buckskin coat and two guns, her voice full of challenge, she’d made the right decision.

The doctor began bathing her face. Seth watched, riveted on the slowly emerging woman. Who was she? How did he know her?

Which reminded him. “What about my brother, Parson? What did she want with him?”

A woman entered the room and drew Seth’s attention. She had a baby in her arms. A fat little dumpling of a boy wearing brown overalls with a brush of dark brown hair. The boy was younger than Ethan and Audra’s baby Lily.

The baby smiled straight at Seth with a devilish glint in his wild blue eyes.

“She said if she didn’t survive the robbery, Rafe Kincaid was her son’s uncle and he’d care for the boy.”

“U-u-uncle?” Seth couldn’t seem to get any more words past his throat. In fact, he barely managed that one.

“Yep, did you say Rafe Kincaid is your brother?”

Seth nodded, words still beyond him.

“Well, then, you’re the boy’s uncle, too.” The parson smiled.

The doctor was cleaning up the woman, and Seth thought maybe, if he turned to look right now, he might recognize her.

“That’s great. You can see to the boy, then.” The parson lifted the baby out of his wife’s arms and stepped toward Seth.

Dear Lord God in heaven, I’d better recognize this woman!

The parson extended the fat toddler toward Seth and the little guy smiled, his eyes flashed, and in the course of a few seconds Seth had a vivid, terrifying parade of memories of all the reckless things he’d done throughout his life to risk his neck. This little one seemed eager to do the same.

The parson thrust the baby into Seth’s arms, and Seth had to hang on to keep from dropping the tyke. The baby giggled and kicked Seth in the belly and slapped him in the face. Except for the giggling, Seth expected much the same reception from the boy’s mother.

Seth sure hoped he did recognize her.

Because it looked like she was the mother of his child.