

—
HIGH SIERRA SWEETHEARTS
BOOK ONE
—

The
ACCIDENTAL
GUARDIAN

MARY
CONNELY



BETHANYHOUSE
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2018 by Mary Connealy

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017961163

ISBN 978-0-7642-1929-0 (trade paper)
ISBN 978-0-7642-3144-5 (cloth)

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Studio Gearbox
Cover photography by Steve Gardner, PixelWorks Studios, Inc.

Author is represented by Natasha Kern Literary Agency.

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To My Cowboy. My husband.
My very own romantic cowboy hero.



CHAPTER

1



SOUTHWEST OF LAKE TAHOE, NEVADA
OCTOBER 1867

Deborah Harkness came awake with a snap, her hand already steady on the six-gun under her pillow.

Just as fast, she eased off the tension and the trigger. She knew that sound.

“Deb, I’ve got to go.” Three-year-old Maddie Sue needed to make a predawn run into the tall grass.

It was almost encouraging that, after months of being awakened many mornings in just this way, Deb could still get nervous. A woman needed to be alert on a wagon train heading through the wilderness.

“Shhh, honey. I’ll take you. Shhh.” The little girl did her best to wait quietly—three-year-olds weren’t famous for that—while Deb slipped on the heavy coat she used for a blanket. Not waking up Maddie Sue’s exhausted parents was always Deb’s first goal. After that—not waking up Deb’s sister Gwen and Maddie Sue’s toddler cousin Ronnie ranked very high.

Everyone needed their sleep.

Deb had learned early on during this wagon-train journey to sleep fully dressed, so it took just seconds to put Maddie Sue's little coat on her—it was sharply cold in the peaks of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in October. Deb grabbed her knapsack and shoved her pistol inside. She never, ever left the safety of the wagon train without the bag and the gun. Mr. Scott had stressed this small precaution until it was a reflex. She urged Maddie Sue toward the back of the covered wagon.

A whimper stopped her.

Ronnie. If she left the little boy, he'd be bawling his head off before Deb got back, and it wouldn't just be Mr. and Mrs. Scott who'd be awake—it'd be the whole wagon train. Ronnie could howl something terrible.

"I've got him, Deb." Gwen was awake now, too. "I'll walk out with you."

In the pitch-dark of the wagon, Deb could more hear than see her eighteen-year-old sister donning her own coat.

Deb was tempted to growl with frustration. At this rate, she and Maddie Sue would be leading a parade into the privacy of the grass.

Instead she just whispered, "Thank you."

She and Gwen had teamed up to keep the Scott children tended in return for a ride across the country.

They'd earned every penny of the trip.

Now they walked silently away from the small wagon train. There was not a stir from behind them, so Deb thought they'd left the Scotts still sleeping.

She sincerely hoped so.

The Scotts worked so hard and were so kind to Deb and Gwen. Deb's life hadn't had a whole lot of kindness in it for a long time.

They didn't go far into the grass. Taller than her head, the grass could be disorienting, and in the moonless, starless hours before dawn, fear gnawed at her. If she wasn't careful, she could easily get turned around in her directions and not find her way back to the wagons.

"Hurry up, honey." The chilly air kept everyone moving fast. Gwen had Ronnie quiet, and Deb heard the eighteen-month-old boy sucking at a bottle. Gwen must've had the bottle ready from the night before and thought to grab it as they left the wagon.

"Good thinking on the bottle," Deb whispered. The boy was probably too old for the bottle, but in the hectic world of the wagon train they hadn't thought to spend time weaning him, and right now Deb was very glad for that.

Gwen's quiet chuckle was followed by a soft croon as she kept the boy eating. "I'm on to him by now."

They finished their little trip and turned to head back to the wagon when a gunshot cut through the night. Deb grabbed Maddie Sue's arm and dove for the ground. Gwen landed right beside her, then stuck the bottle back in Ronnie's mouth before he could start crying.

A scream ripped through the air.

The gunfire came again and again. More guns, many guns. The shouts, the cries of fear and pain and, to her horror, cries she recognized as people dying.

"Take the children and run." Deb, her heart pounding, her stomach twisting until she feared she'd be sick, drew her gun from the pack and took one step toward the wagon train.

A hard hand slapped her wrist and hung on like a vise. "You're not going back there."

"I have to."

"No, Deb, wait. Listen . . . it's already over." Sure enough,

the hail of bullets had tapered off, followed by a few single but deliberate shots. Another cry of agony. Then the shooting ended as suddenly as it had begun. No more cries of any kind, only harsh laughter and a few last gunshots, aimed into the air maybe, joined by whoops of celebration.

“Let’s strip these wagons!” a man shouted in a high-pitched voice. It stopped Deb from trying to pull free from Gwen. Her sister was right. It was too late. There was no one left to save.

The horror shocked her to the marrow.

“We have to go, Deb,” Gwen whispered. “In case the children cry out. We have to get out of earshot.”

Maddie Sue whimpered.

Though Gwen was right, they didn’t *both* have to go. Deb knew full well one adult woman could carry both children.

“You go. I have to at least get a look at them.” She turned.

“Deb, stop!” Gwen hissed. “It’s too dangerous.”

“I know it’s too late to save anyone, and I promise you I won’t let them see me. But maybe I can see *them*. I can be a witness to this crime and help hunt down a pack of killers.”

A crackle sounded, and Deb whirled around toward the noise. Then came the smell of smoke. The outlaws were burning the evidence of their crime.

Gwen was barely visible as a dark shape in the shadows of the tall grass. But Deb sensed her tension. Gwen wanted to tackle her and drag her to safety. Deb’s blood almost hummed with energy fueled by fear and anger. If Gwen felt the same, maybe Gwen could carry both children and haul Deb along.

Maddie Sue whimpered again, louder this time. Gwen made a low sound of distress, then caught Maddie Sue’s hand. “Let’s go, honey. And Deb, I need you.”

That was the plain, bald truth, and it affected Deb more than concern for her own safety.

“Be careful. We all need you. I’ll be praying every second you’re gone.”

“Thank you. I’ll be praying for all of us.” Deb moved away from her sister, feeling as if she were ripping the very fabric of her skin. She glanced back to see Gwen stepping deeper into the grass.

Could they get separated in here forever? Might she be seeing her sister and those two sweet children for the last time? Even though Deb was heading for a group of vicious murderers, she found herself worrying about Gwen as her little sister vanished into a land she knew nothing about. A land where it took strength to survive, and so far in her life, Deb hadn’t known a man stronger than Abe Scott, so sometimes even strength wouldn’t save you.

Maddie Sue whimpered again, and then there was only silence.

She crept toward the wagon train, the noise of the men a perfect guide. The talking and raucous laughter from the camp grew louder. She saw the flicker of flames and knew the swath of tall grass was thinning.

She breathed as silently as she could, knowing that if she could hear the men, they could likely hear her.

That’s when she realized she saw more than the fire. The eastern sky was lightening. In the first blush of dawn, men looted the wagons. She counted three who appeared against the backdrop of flames and tried to judge their height and build.

She edged closer to the trail, praying she wasn’t visible.

As she stood straighter, looking for details so she could describe the men’s appearance for others, a face appeared in flickering firelight. The face of a killer. She craned her neck for a better look at all three of them. She smelled smoke

again . . . and something else. Something she'd never smelled before.



Burning flesh.

Something Trace Riley had smelled before and had hoped and prayed to never smell again.

Wolf snarled and crouched low to the ground, his ears laid back, his teeth bared. Black, Trace's mustang stallion, tossed his head until the bit jingled.

"Easy, boys."

He was worried about Wolf. "Stay with me." He didn't put it past the dog—who looked more wolf than dog, and probably was—to go charging up the trail on the attack. He liked to rip throats out first and think later.

But as was his way, Wolf minded and stayed at his master's side, inching along with Trace, his low growl mingling with the gusting wind and swaying trees, which nearly provided a roof for the high-country trail. Black's muscles bunched, and his ears went back to match Wolf's. Trace wasn't sure if the two critters knew what it was they were smelling or if they just sensed Trace's tension.

Wolf and Black weren't alone in readying themselves for trouble.

Trace's hands got rock-steady, and his eyes sharpened until every blade of grass, waving in the breeze, became clear. Every puff of wind, and each scent born on it, tested and considered. His rifle filled his hand without a conscious decision to reach for it.

Every one of his senses came alive. He was wide awake to an unseen horror.

He judged every tree and rock along the heavily wooded

trail that straddled the spine of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, where California met Nevada right down the middle of Lake Tahoe. Every one of those rocks and trees made a fine hiding place.

Kicking the mustang into a gallop, Wolf loping along at his side, Trace reached the top of the trail, looked down into a hollow that opened to a wide grassy clearing in the forested land, and saw the smoke—a low smudge along the ground. When the smoke rose, the brisk cold wind instantly dispersed it, which was why he hadn't seen it before he could smell it.

And then he recognized what was burning. A wagon train, or what was left of one, in a circle. Except for the flames, the scene was as silent and still as death itself. He wanted to turn away, run. But he could no more run from this massacre than he could run from his own past.

Trace reined in his stallion and waited in a silence broken only by the buffeting wind and Wolf's threatening rumble. Whoever had done this was long gone. The fire was nearly burned down to nothing. But Trace had lived a long time in a hard land and survived against odds so long he'd be the envy of every riverboat gambler in the world.

He studied the trail. He'd been on it awhile now and there'd been no tracks, nor had he met anyone. No sign of anyone traveling his way, not even hours ago. But there were recent tracks headed east; he could see that even from here.

Reluctantly, he kicked his horse down the trail into the hollow. He had to know what happened and see if there was anyone left alive and, failing that, find out who these folks were and then let their families know what had happened.

A chill colder than Lake Tahoe took root in his backbone. Men lay dead, and the fire in his belly for vengeance roared to life. He'd get justice for these poor folks.

He'd done it before.

Breathing hard, fury and grief tearing through his gut, Trace realized his grip on the reins had tightened, causing Black to dance. He forced himself to relax his hands and remembered a time when he'd spent many of his days watching this same trail from a distance, posting himself as a guardian to those hardy few who broke off from the main wagon train and took the little-used trail south.

Back then he'd put a stop to the raiders who preyed on honest folks. Back then he'd known no one, spoken to no one. He'd done his work and slipped away. He'd even chosen not to follow the trail out, find civilization, because the raging need for vengeance kept him here, kept him on guard.

Finally, the trouble had stopped. And he'd stopped standing sentry to those passing by. He'd settled in to a lonely life in the wilderness.

Then Adam had turned up at Trace's property hunting work. His loneliness struck him. He hadn't realized how terrible the isolation had been, with only his anger as a friend.

Trace learned a lot about the outside world from his new friend. He explored more widely and found a few folks lived around him. From them he learned about the ghost who haunted this trail. "The Guardian," they called him.

To his grim amusement, Trace found he'd become a legend. The identity of this ghostly guardian was never known, and Trace sure as certain never told anyone. He'd killed men. Oh, they'd needed killin' real bad, but it was a weight on his soul that he never could shed.

He'd nearly reached the fire circle when a rustling to the north, in the tall grass, jerked him around, his rifle aimed. Wolf whirled to face the noise.

He heard a strange cry that he couldn't identify. It put

him in mind of childhood stories among superstitious folks in the mountains of Tennessee, of witches and goblins and banshees. The cry sent a chill up his spine and made the hair on the back of his neck stand up straight.

Trace didn't believe in such things as ghosts, but if ever a place might be haunted, the site of all these murdered souls might be it.

He suppressed the eerie notion. Someone or something was coming and, considering the carnage of the wagon train and the pure fact that someone mighty evil was close by, it looked like, for all his thinking that he was a tough man who survived in the West, he'd walked right into a trap.

He leveled his rifle, ready to fight to the end. Wolf's ears came forward, and his growl changed to a bark. A mighty friendly bark. It wasn't a sound Wolf used much. In fact, about never. Trace couldn't remember ever hearing it before.

"Stay, boy."

And then he saw . . . something impossible.

With a quick jerk, he pulled his finger away before a twitch could trigger his gun. And how could a man not twitch when he was staring at an absolutely shocking sight?

Wolf took off running. He was just as obedient as he wanted to be and not a speck more.

His pa used to say, "*Believe your own eyes, son. Most of the time.*" This might be one of those times Pa was thinking of as an exception.

A woman. He was watching a woman running right toward him.

"Help, don't leave us!" The woman waved her arms, shouted, and generally acted like he was the finest sight short of the Lord returning in triumph.

Which meant she didn't have a lick of sense.

She had no idea who he was, but he had a good notion about her. She was from this wagon train and had somehow survived. And she needed help. In fact, she should've been sorely afraid that he was one of those who'd attacked and killed her fellow travelers. Instead, she showed herself bold as could be.

“You have to help us, please!”

“Us?” Trace said to Black. And now she was asking a strange rider for help shortly after she'd witnessed a massacre.

On the other hand, she did need his help. He shoved the rifle into the leather scabbard on his saddle and was about to call out . . . something. What?

Relax, I'm not going anywhere.

I'm not a murdering outlaw, and you're shot full of luck.

Please quit screaming—you're scaring my horse.

And then a strange high-pitched squall drew his attention as a second woman emerged from the grass. He noticed the bundle she carried in her arms. It was . . . Trace shook his head with some violence. It was . . . no, it wasn't. Yep, it sure enough was . . . a baby.

Now that he was getting a few more details into his addled brain—and he'd been so proud of what an alert and noticing kind of man he was just a few minutes ago—he noticed the second woman had an older child in her arms, too.

The littler kid just plain howled, which set off the older one—a girl and still mighty young herself—into a fit of wailing tears. The first woman turned away from him and raced toward the second, took the crying older child, then they came at him running, screaming, waving. His mustang just got plain jittery, and maybe Trace was a bit jittery himself.

Banshees were looking mighty good right now.

While they kept running and hollering, he started figur-

ing. He was twenty miles from home. He had one horse to carry five people. He'd been on the trail a long time and had very little food left, and sure as certain no baby's milk. The blustering wind and overcast sky told him snow and cold were on the way and might strike at any time.

He looked down at his black mustang stallion. He'd caught the critter when it was just a foal, standing on wobbling legs behind its dying mama, circled by wolves. Trace had driven the wolves off. The mare died, and Trace had taken the young mustang home and gentled him. He broke it himself and considered the loyal animal one of his few friends. He glanced at Wolf and remembered well that saving the colt had cost the pup its own mama, a dog running with a wolf pack. Between the wolf and the mustang, it was hard to tell which one was his best friend.

"Don't leave us. We need help!" the woman closest to him shrieked again. Hadn't she noticed he wasn't going anywhere? Both kids were caterwaulin' now, both women shouting and waving.

Wolf seemed to have second thoughts and came running back to Trace with his tail between his legs.

Leaning low so he wouldn't be overheard, he rubbed Black's shoulder and said to his friends, "These four aren't the only ones who need help."