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HIGH SIERRA SWEETHEARTS
BOOK TWO
—

The
RELUCTANT
WARRIOR

MARY
CONNELY



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I'm dedicating *The Reluctant Warrior* to my husband.
He's my very own romantic cowboy hero.

It's hard to know how someone will act in high-pressure situations. Now I know. You really came through for me when I needed you most. Thank you!



CHAPTER

1



SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS

APRIL 1868

It was the silence that woke him.

Cameron Scott took in his surroundings before moving, before opening his eyes. He'd been a warrior for too much of his life, and some rules a man didn't forget. One of them was to find out all you could before they knew you were awake. The silence pounded in his ears. Then came the smell.

He snapped his eyes open. He was in his room in the bunkhouse at the Riley ranch south of Lake Tahoe. He'd been here, nearly a prisoner thanks to the weather, for the entire winter.

He awoke in this same room every morning. And never, morning or night, had the darkness or the silence felt so profound as right now.

Nothing moved. No subdued moonlight slipping in through the tight shuttered window in his room. No wind. No blizzard. That was what he'd fallen asleep to. The blizzards hit

now and then, but the wind was a ceaseless moaning that made him long to move to another climate.

But it wasn't the silence or the darkness that'd made him react as a warrior. It was the smell.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. A wave of sickness struck that threatened to empty the contents of his belly.

His thoughts were sluggish. Danger was nothing new, yet he always trusted his lightning-fast reactions honed by war.

Right now, he felt like a doddering old man who couldn't clear his thoughts. Then he remembered he wasn't alone.

"Utah! Adam, get up. On your feet, men." Cam stood, and his knees buckled, taking him low to the ground. He knew instantly that the unfamiliar weakness had saved his life.

He shouted again, louder this time, and realized how accustomed he was to being obeyed, only now all he got was silence. He roared, "The bunkhouse is full of smoke!"

The darkness he couldn't explain, but the fire oughta shove it back. He crawled out of his room, looking all around. A few glowing embers in the fireplace were the only light.

"Utah, get up! Get out here!" Utah Smith was in the small room right next to Cam's in the newly built bunkhouse. And Utah reacted to everything fast. His room, door open, remained silent. They all slept with their doors open to let the heat in from the fireplace, the only warmth in the house.

If the smoke had overcome both cowpokes, Cam had his work cut out saving them. Wake up the men? Clear the smoke—if he could figure out how? Get the extra hands to work—unless they were unconscious and he wasted precious seconds?

Cam was a major in the cavalry and made life-and-death decisions in a snap.

The smoke first. He rushed to the tightly shuttered window between the fireplace and Utah's room. He flung the shutters open, swinging them inward.

Nothing.

No outdoors. Confused, addled by the smoke and the pitch-black, Cam reached his hand toward this solid wall where a window should be and touched cold. He crunched his hand into the cold and realized it was snow. A solid wall of snow higher than the window. He punched into the snow hoping it wasn't deep and he could break through.

He only drove his fist deeper into snow.

It all clicked into place in his foggy brain. The cabin was buried. Probably the smokestack of the chimney, too. The smoke from the dying fireplace was filling the cabin. Looking around, it was no trouble finding the snow shovels. Scooping snow seemed to be the main job they did these days. Still crawling, Cam grabbed the shovel, reached the fireplace, and scooped up a glowing log. He didn't know how he was going to dig out, but these hot logs oughta be able to handle the snow.

He stood, rushed to the wall of snow, and tossed the log right at it. It sunk out of sight. That opened a hole straight down to the ground around the bunkhouse. He stabbed the snow shovel deep, and it didn't reach air.

How deeply were they buried?

He carried a scoop of snow to the hearth and tossed it on the logs. They hissed and spat. Cam didn't wait for them to go out. He dropped low to breathe and found the steam coming off the fire was fresher than the air in the room. He sucked the air in, got plenty of smoke too, then grabbed more kindling, rushed to the open shutter and tossed the logs out. They melted their way out of sight.

Another scoop of snow dumped on the fireplace. Another scoop of kindling out the window.

He inhaled deeply. His head cleared as he rushed back and forth, snow in, logs out, back and forth.

“Utah! Adam!” He hoped the air was clearing some and they might wake up.

Neither of the men responded.

With the logs gone, Cam still had no tunnel out to fresh air, and with no more fire to melt snow or cast its red glow, he realized how smoky the room still was. He looked around, thinking, and saw a broom. He snagged it, rushed to the fireplace, and stepped inside. The rock floor of the chimney was cooled by the snow. He crouched to avoid the mantel and could nearly stand up straight in the narrowing chimney.

He poked the broom handle up and hit something solid. No snow fell. He didn’t feel the chimney draw. Bracing his feet on either side of the fireplace, he climbed up as high as he could get before the chimney narrowed. He poked again and again, each jab harder, each more frantic. His thoughts became cloudy. His chest burned.

Something caught on the end of the broomstick. He yanked down, and a black clump of something came down with it. And the smoke rushed past him—heat rising had found a way out. He coughed as he dropped to the floor and crawled out of the chimney. The smoke thinned enough that he thought it would clear out completely now. They were still buried, but not smothering anymore.

He ran to Utah’s room. Utah slept like the dead.

And that wasn’t a word Cam liked. He checked for a pulse in Utah’s neck. It was there, but light and too slow.

Cam rushed to the window which, despite the melted

spots, was still completely blocked, grabbed a handful of snow, took it, and rubbed it on Utah's face.

He yelped.

Cam dragged him by the leg off the bed to get him lower, to cleaner air. Utah growled as he hit the floor. Even with the smoke hopefully thinning, Utah needed every advantage he could get.

The cranky growl gave Cam hope.

"Wake up! The bunkhouse is full of smoke." Figuring Utah would make it, he ran for Adam's room, stopping to grab more snow.

"Get up, Adam, move!" he shouted. "We're trapped. The room's full of smoke, and the bunkhouse is buried in snow. We need to get out of here. On your feet!"

Adam rolled out of bed as Cam entered his room. By the time Cam was sure he was going to wake up, Utah came out crawling.

Utah's brain must've kicked in. "Dig in the window on the far side of the fireplace, the side near Adam's room. Last night, the snowdrifts were lowest on that side. Let's scoop out that way."

Cam grabbed his shovel. "The front door wasn't blocked last night. Why not go that way?"

"The wind was blowing in from that direction, and we'd scooped out a mighty thin path. It probably filled in deep."

Utah was still crawling. Adam moved faster, so he and Cam set to digging, throwing snow into the bunkhouse with no care for the cold they brought in.

"Cam, good thing you woke up, it saved us," Utah said as he grabbed another shovel and staggered to his feet.

"I got mighty lucky. It hit me about as hard as it hit you." He and Adam timed their digging to stay out of each other's

way. And Utah got himself timed so he was scooping as fast as they were.

They all worked as hard as their aching chests and blurred vision would allow. The room began to clear some.

“The chimney was clogged—that’s what made the room fill with smoke.” Cam kept digging.

They dug on for long minutes, then Utah said, “The chimney on the cabin ain’t any taller than the one we have.”

The cabin . . .

Panic hit like a bolt of lightning. “My daughter and nephew are in that cabin!”

They all knew it. Cam’s sister, Penny, was in there, too. And their boss, Trace; his wife, Deb; and her sister, Gwen.

Trace wasn’t Cam’s boss. Cam was here to get his daughter and nephew and take them home. That’d been his plan before he got trapped here in the first really big snowfall.

And before he’d found out his daughter and nephew hated him.

The hurt from that was like a wolf gnawing at his guts. And he was sure that pretty Gwen Harkness was doing things to the children so they’d keep hating him. Because she wanted those children for herself. The little kidnapper.

His digging went from hasty to frantic, and now it was salted with anger. Then the fear swept back over him. It didn’t matter what he felt so long as it made him dig faster.

“They should be out there digging toward us if they’re all right.” Adam pushed his shovel deep into the wall of snow.

“Maybe not. We don’t have one single idea what time it is.”

Adam went out into the hole they’d dug and slashed at the huge drift. Suddenly he shouted, “I’m through!”

He dove forward and vanished through a hole in the snow. Light came in. It was past sunup, and the folks in the cabin should all be awake. If they were and could get out, they'd have seen the bunkhouse buried and come to help.

Cam's shovel went flying out next. Then he dove.

Adam was moving fast, and Cam figured Utah was only seconds behind him. He grabbed the shovel and got out of the way. Adam was wading through waist-deep snow. It was all powder-dry up here, blast it, and a man couldn't stay on top of it. But thanks to Utah, they'd found a spot the wind hadn't filled in quite so deep.

Cam rushed toward the cabin, only to see a massive drift that covered it over. From this angle he could just make out the tip of the chimney. It seemed clear and it should've been okay, but there was no smoke coming out.

Utah charged past him and attacked the snow in a spot he must've picked out deliberately.

Cam followed and waded right in. "Why this spot?"

"That chimney should be belching smoke. No reason it's not. I think it's plugged. I'm digging to the corner. I can scamper up those crisscrossed logs to the roof and open the chimney."

"There was something in ours, and it wasn't snow. A bird died in there or something. I opened it up to clear smoke before I went to work getting you out of bed."

"Two birds?" Utah looked at Cam with fire in his eyes. "Two dead birds in two different chimneys on the same night?"

Cam scowled. "Not likely."

All three men worked on the corner. Utah hit it first.

"I don't need anyone else up on the roof." Utah was gone upward while Cam and Adam went for the back door.

“Let’s get this door uncovered and opened!” Cam shouted the order, but Adam was already at it. Bad habit, being an officer.

A shout from overhead froze them worse than the bitter cold. A shout of fear and pain.