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HIGH SIERRA SWEETHEARTS
BOOK THREE
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The
UNEXPECTED
CHAMPION

MARY
CONNELLY



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The Unexpected Champion
is dedicated to my unborn grandbaby.
I haven't met her yet,
but I already know she is beautiful
and smart and dearly loved.



CHAPTER

1



JUNE 1868

Dismal, Nevada—never had a town been named so right.

The sheriff's office and barbershop were in the same building because the sheriff and the barber were the same man. Penny Scott suspected the man made more money at his barbering.

"Trace has been in there a long time." Penny looked through a window, a small one built with an eye toward saving money on glass. She watched Trace Riley tell their story to the sheriff while the sheriff lathered up a man's face.

Trace was her brother's wife's sister's husband, but honestly they all lived fairly close. Going strictly by geography, she was claiming Trace as a brother.

"I don't know who's getting a shave." John McCall watched through the dirty window and ran his hand over his face as if wondering about going next in the barber's chair. He was a tidy man, a city slicker in a black suit and a flat-topped black Stetson. Dark blond hair and blue eyes.

“But it isn’t right for the sheriff to question a witness in front of someone.”

“You know the law?” Penny thought of all she didn’t know about this man. It was high time he answered some questions.

She’d met him over Raddo’s dead body.

Penny hadn’t shot the outlaw, but she’d been running toward Raddo Landauer with her gun drawn, and she’d witnessed the whole thing. She felt the weight of being willing to kill a man.

Raddo had shot Cam and Penny’s brother. Now he had three bullet holes in him.

Her brother Cam had pulled one trigger. Cam’s wife, Gwen, had also shot him. Raddo was threatening to kill her and the two children.

And John McCall had supplied the third gunshot when he’d seen Raddo ready to shoot Gwen. The first time Penny had laid eyes on McCall, he’d been standing there with a smoking gun.

Trace had come along after the gun smoke had cleared, and he’d ridden to town with them because he knew the sheriff. He was the only one of the three of them who’d come to Dismal since the sheriff had arrived. And Trace believed Raddo had killed his pa years ago. Trace had brought in two men last fall to Carson City, one dead and both partners of Raddo. If Raddo had been alive, Trace would’ve taken him there, because Dismal’s sheriff might not be up to housing prisoners. Unless there was a jail cell tucked in the back room of the barbershop. But with Raddo dead, none of them saw any reason to ride one mile farther than necessary.

John McCall, who’d told them he was a Pinkerton agent, had come as one of the shooters. Penny had come as a witness.

Gwen and Cam had stayed home because Gwen couldn't stop shaking, Cam was frantic to hold on to her, and the children were beside themselves.

Trace Riley was anxious to get back to his wife, Deb, who was Gwen's sister. He talked to the sheriff to vouch for the attacks on all of them all through the winter. Well, no attacks on John, as he'd shown up just today.

Trace came out of the barbershop and part-time sheriff's office. "Sheriff Walters has a lot of questions about what happened today. I told him you two could answer them." Trace hadn't really seen anything. He'd come galloping in like mad at the sound of gunfire.

Penny took a step toward the building, but then John caught her arm. "Let's wait until after the haircut."

"He's done with you, then?" Penny asked Trace.

"Yep, I'm heading back to your place." Bringing along a man the sheriff knew and trusted was a mighty good idea when a group rides into town with a man draped over a saddle, a man with three gunshot wounds and a whole passel of teeth marks from a wolf. "Sheriff Walters doesn't seem to be planning to lock any of us up, and he told me I could go if you'd stay."

"Be glad to," McCall said, not sounding all that glad. He probably didn't like shooting a man much. Penny sure hoped he didn't like it.

"I'll ride the body over to the undertaker. Then I'm heading out."

Trace went off with the body.

Penny looked at John McCall. "Let's go find a quiet place to talk."

McCall arched a brow but came along, as if the empty

dirt street of Dismal wasn't quiet enough right where they were standing.

Dismal had two strips of businesses that faced each other like a couple of gunfighters at high noon. The dirt main street was just wide enough for two buckboards to pass by going opposite directions. Probably fifteen buildings in all, one ramshackle store after another, bare wood, hand-painted signs if the owner was ambitious . . . and plenty weren't. Half of them stood empty. Some had space between them, while most shared a wall.

There were a few houses scattered here and there in the wide plain, set slap in the middle of mountains, woods, rocks, and a long stretch of wilderness.

There was wealth to be had a day's ride from here. In cattle, in timber cut from the dense forests, even in tourism because of the beauty of nearby Lake Tahoe. Add in the heavily traveled California Trail that ran along the north side of the lake and there was plenty of money to be made. There was also the Comstock Lode that'd turned hardworking miners into millionaires.

Yep, there was wealth to be had, but somehow Dismal managed to avoid it. Apparently, ambitious folks rode a day away and didn't come back.

Penny tapped her foot impatiently. She needed to get somewhere so she could yell in private. It would be easy to find a quiet spot. The whole town was a quiet spot. Of course, it wouldn't be quiet once she got there.

"I want to know exactly who you are, mister." Penny walked away fast from the sheriff's office. Just as well she put some space between her and the law. In case this came to fists. She didn't want the sheriff mad at her in the event she

was within a few minutes of committing a crime. McCall struck her as the type not to go and punch a woman, so who knew how tough she might be able to get?

He kept up with no trouble. He was a long-legged galoot. Good enough looking, but she spent most of her life surrounded by men, so few of them impressed her much—especially when it came to looks. She'd learned long ago a pretty face didn't make up for a foul character. And how could this child-stealing varmint be anything but?

"Where'd you get the blamed fool notion you've got any right to my nephew?" Penny had to admit they'd been busy, yet why had no one demanded some answers?

She heard thundering hooves and turned to see Trace gallop off at top speed on his fleet-footed black stallion. He'd gotten shut of their prisoner, or what was left of him after he'd been chewed on by a wolf, then shot to death three times.

That left her alone with this low-down coyote.

Penny decided they'd come far enough. Past all but two empty storefronts at the far edge of town. She stopped between the last buildings and turned to face him, arms crossed.

"We're going to clear this up right now. You will never take my nephew."

"Your nephew is the grandson of the people who hired me to find him and bring him home. They have a solid claim on the boy."

"I know the Chiltons. I lived with Abe and Delia for two years, since before Ronnie was born. The Chiltons—"

A gun cocked with an ugly metallic click in the darkened alley between the stores. A second gun jacked a bullet into the barrel. A third. Penny whirled to face three masked gunmen.

The one in the center said, “Not a word out of either of you.”

Penny gasped and stumbled back a step right into McCall. He slid an arm around her and pulled her back, getting one shoulder in front of her.

“Freeze.” The middle outlaw extended his gun. “I only need one of you alive.”

McCall stopped. Penny felt him tense with frustration that he hadn’t put himself fully between her and those guns.

“We don’t have much money,” McCall said. “Take it all, we won’t—”

“Shut up!” The gunman cut McCall off. The man was wearing a heavy coat, thin leather gloves. His face was covered with a red bandanna, with a hat pulled low over eyes that glowed black.

“I have questions, and if I get the answers I want, no harm will come to you. Don’t fight me. I’ll shoot one of you dead and wound the other. One is all I need to get my answers, and you’ll talk better if you’re bleedin’.”

They stood frozen, waiting. Penny hoped for an opening to run or draw her gun and attack. She always carried her pistol in the bag she wore slung over her head and under her arm, dangling below her right hand. But it was her left side that McCall shielded. No possible chance to get her gun drawn in time to shoot three cold-eyed men.

“Ask your questions. We’ll tell you whatever you want to know, just don’t harm the woman.” McCall the hero. He was lucky she was too cautious to move, or she’d’ve swatted him.

His voice was as smooth as water over a stone, too. Calm and cool. Like he’d had so many guns aimed at him that he didn’t take much notice anymore.

The cool was fake, though. She felt his coiled muscles, knew he was looking for an opening. And, like her, he was well aware that these men weren't about to give them one.

"Walk toward the alley. Side by side, slow, and get outta the street."

No ideas sprang to her mind to save her and McCall, so when he stepped forward, she stayed with him.

The alley swallowed them up. The men, much closer now, wore different colored bandannas, different hats and coats, yet they were three of a kind.

When they were out of the line of sight of anyone on the street, one man said, "Turn around and put your hands behind your backs."

McCall turned first, and his eyes met hers, his jaw rigid. He glanced at the boardwalk just a step away from the alley entrance. He wanted her to make a run for it. He'd block her, and there could be no doubt these outlaws would shoot.

McCall was offering to die for her.

The big gallant idiot.

She stepped aside and took another pace forward out of blocking distance. She wasn't about to save herself at the cost of his life.

McCall glared, but there was more to it. His brow furrowed. Worry, maybe even grief. He didn't expect this to end well. And judging by the steady hands on those guns, and the short, clear demands, she knew they were dealing with a salty bunch.

Penny suspected he had the right of it, but even if she'd dove away and run, in this mostly deserted town with no witnesses at hand, these men would've grabbed her and dragged her back. Done their worst.

She wasn't going to let McCall die for her, but it'd be even worse if he died for nothing.

Turning, she put her hands behind her as they'd ordered. A man stepped up. Her hands were wrenched hard. The outlaw enjoyed causing pain. Her stomach twisted with fear from what might come next.

Penny was a woman who'd followed her brother into frontier forts. She'd seen every way evil could show itself in the Wild West. She knew just how ugly this could be.

A rope wound tight around her wrists, cutting into her flesh. A sideways glance showed another man doing the same to McCall.

Her brown eyes met McCall's. His were light blue, but right now they darkened, and she saw him thinking, planning, still coiled.

She stayed ready should a chance come to run or fight back.

Hard hands grabbed her shoulders and spun her around. A dull thud beside her drew her eyes over her shoulder. Before she could look for the source of that sound, she was hoisted over a man's shoulder, and the man strode toward the back of the alley.

Lifting her head as high as she could, she saw McCall collapsing to the ground. One of the outlaws holstered his gun, which he must've used as a club. As he grabbed McCall's feet, the other picked him up by the shoulders. They weren't men who were brave enough, or stupid enough, to trust mere ropes to hold a man as strong as McCall.

She was whipped around and tossed on her back in a wagon. The outlaw was quick to gag her, flip her onto her stomach, and tie her bound hands to the side of the wagon. The ropes were already cutting into her wrists, and now

with her arms wrenched to the side, every moment made the pain worse.

John landed hard right beside her. Even though he was unconscious, he was gagged and secured by his bound hands just as she was.

Facedown in the wagon box, she couldn't see much. But then something big was thrown over her, blocking out the sun. A tarp or a large blanket. The wagon lurched forward. Hoofbeats fell in beside the wagon. Already at the edge of town, they were leaving it behind fast.

Their horses were hitched in front of the sheriff's office. How long before Sheriff Walters noticed? How long before someone even suspected that Penny and McCall had been very smoothly kidnapped? Trace had gone back to her brother Cam's house and would tell everyone that Penny would be a while coming. They might not even start to worry until dark, and by then these men could get themselves well hidden.

Three men, deadly aim, a few seconds' time. It worked so well that she knew they'd done it all before. She was now in the clutches of three very skilled kidnapers with no way to escape and not much hope they'd make a mistake that gave her a chance.

Except they'd made one. They'd left her bag draped over her neck. Her hands were tied so tightly that she didn't think she could reach her gun, not now. She'd try, but there was no room to even wiggle. Still, she'd be ready, watching and waiting.

And she'd be listening, too. Maybe she could figure out what in the world was going on.