



At
LOVE'S COMMAND

KAREN
WITEMEYER

HANGER'S HORSEMEN • 1



AT LOVE'S COMMAND

KAREN
WITEMEYER



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2020 by Karen Witemeyer

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 Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Witemeyer, Karen, author.

Title: At love's command : a novel / Karen Witemeyer.

Description: Bloomington, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, [2020] | Series: Hanger's horsemen ; 1

Identifiers: LCCN 2019055577 | ISBN 9780764232077 (trade paperback) |

ISBN 9780764236273 (cloth) | ISBN 9781493425099 (ebook)

Subjects: GSAFD: Western stories

Classification: LCC PS3623.I864 A8 2020 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019055577>

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 Dan Thornberg, Design Source Creative Services

Author is represented by the Books & Such Literary Agency.

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The LORD also will be a refuge for the oppressed,
a refuge in times of trouble.
And they that know thy name will put their trust
in thee: for thou, LORD, hast not forsaken them
that seek thee.

—Psalm 9:9–10

For my favorite hero.
Horsemen aren't the only champions
who can save the day.

Whether you are rescuing me from
creepy-crawly invaders, malfunctioning
computers, or villainous piles of laundry,
you are always there when I need you.

Thanks, love.

PROLOGUE

**WOUNDED KNEE CREEK, SOUTH DAKOTA
PINE RIDGE INDIAN RESERVATION
DECEMBER 29, 1890**

According to the Good Book, there was a time for war and a time for peace. Captain Matthew Hanger of the 7th Cavalry prayed this was a time for peace even as he fit his finger to the trigger of his Remington Army revolver and took aim at a Lakota Sioux warrior on the other side of the ravine. Matt was sick of war. Sick of training men only to watch them fall on the battlefield. Sick of politicians proclaiming policy without concern for the men sent to enforce it. Sick of right and wrong blurring into a muddy, indecipherable mess until he no longer knew on which side he stood.

He supposed he should be thankful to still be alive after thirteen years of Indian fighting, but he hadn't felt alive since the day he found his parents and baby sister murdered by a Comanche war party. He'd been five, too young to fight back yet old enough to have his soul hollowed out like the family farmhouse, scorched from within until only a husk remained.

"You think they'll surrender their weapons, Cap?" The low voice of Corporal Luke Davenport cut through the cold winter air.

"I pray they do." Matt's gaze never wandered from the warrior in his sights. Three companies of dismounted soldiers had entered the Lakota camp and were in the process of surrounding Chief Big Foot's warriors—a contingent that looked to be about a hundred and twenty men, many wrapped in blankets due to the snowy conditions. Matt's company, still mounted, had been ordered to the ridge south of the camp to guard against any attempt by the Lakota to escape. "These new Ghost Dancing rituals have the men on edge."

The words had barely left his tongue when a medicine man started chanting. As the troopers searched the camp for weapons, the Sioux holy man wove among the younger warriors. Chanting. Dancing. Subtle moves at first, almost imperceptible, but he grew bolder, his motions more defined.

Matt clenched his jaw. Exactly what they didn't need. The Lakota had been docile enough yesterday when Matt's company had rounded them up near Porcupine Butte. Big Foot had been compliant. But this holy man . . . he was stirring up defiance. Matt could feel it as sure as he could feel the winter wind against his neck.

"Steady, boys," Matt murmured to the men closest to him, trusting them to pass the message down the line. They were good men, but many were young. Inexperienced.

And nervous.

"Got a verse for me, Preach?" Matt asked.

Corporal Davenport had been with him for nearly a decade. They'd come up through the ranks together. Luke was deadly in hand-to-hand combat—the best swordsman Matt

had ever seen—yet Matt had come to rely on him for more than having his back. Luke was a walking repository of Scripture. Always had a verse at the ready. And those verses kept Matt grounded.

If ever there was a time for grounding, it was now.

“For thou hast girded me with strength unto the battle,” the corporal murmured, “thou hast subdued under me those that rose up against me.’ Psalm 18:39.”

Matt let the words sink in. He’d heard Luke quote that one before. It was good for putting a military man in a confident frame of mind before charging an enemy, but less than reassuring when one hoped for peaceful compliance. It lent an ominous tension to the knot already twisting in Matt’s gut.

Colonel Forsyth ordered the Lakota to turn over their rifles, his men moving among the warriors and effectively separating them out from the camp where the women and children remained. The older men complied, but the younger braves clung to their blankets as if they had nothing to turn over, their faces stoic masks that brought the hair up on the back of Matt’s neck.

The medicine man kept chanting. Kept weaving among the young warriors. Taunting. Inciting.

Matt sat higher in the saddle. His knees tightened around Phineas. His blood bay gelding’s ears pricked, and his head lowered in readiness. Matt scanned the entire party of Lakota. No visible weapons among them. Yet the troopers searching the camp had only turned up a handful of rifles.

Something was off.

Movement below sharpened Matt’s focus. A Lakota dropped his blanket. Sun glinted off metal. A shot cracked.

Purgatory erupted.

“Charge!”

Matt voiced the shout, then signaled Mark Wallace, his trumpeter, to sound the advance. The bugle called. Horses surged forward. Guns blazed.

More than a dozen troopers in the camp already lay fallen. Twice as many Lakota sprawled unmoving in the snow beside them.

The cavalry's sentinels and scouts sprinted for the protection of the mounted line. Matt urged Phineas forward, his only thought to protect their men. He laid down cover fire, taking down an armed brave running for the ravine and another who had stopped to take aim at a retreating trooper.

Behind him, the Hotchkiss artillery boomed. The force of the blasts from the four light mountain guns reverberated through Matt's torso. He leaned low in the saddle, decreasing his target size so as not to fall victim to the crossfire.

Catching a glimpse of a familiar face, Matt steered Phineas to intercept a retreating trooper. Jonah Brooks, a buffalo soldier with the 10th Cavalry, had served with Matt on numerous reconnaissance missions when stealth had been required. He had a talent for making himself invisible and could hit a dime dead-center from five hundred yards. Too valuable an asset to lose in this mess. Plus, he was a friend.

Matt holstered his Remington and yanked his left boot from the stirrup. Slowing Phineas just enough to make a clean snatch, he leaned sideways and offered his arm. "Jonah! Grab hold!"

The black man didn't hesitate. He locked onto Matt's wrist and swung his body upward as Matt leaned away to counterbalance his weight. Jonah got a toe in the stirrup and fought his way onto Phineas's back behind the saddle.

A hand thumped Matt's shoulder. "I'm good, Cap!"

Matt turned Phineas and headed for the edge of the ravine.

The Hotchkiss guns had started a panic among the Lakota. Women and children bolted out of the camp, seeking escape through the ravine alongside their men. But mixing with the warriors only made them targets.

“Protect our retreat!” Matt yelled to his men. Preach turned in his saddle at his call and met his gaze. “But watch your fire! We have innocents in the field.” Matt pointed to a woman with a toddler in her arms racing toward the ravine.

Preach nodded and started shouting to the troops under his command. Making war on a trained enemy was one thing, but cutting down women and children . . . neither of them wanted any part of that.

“Preach!” Matt called. “Once the men are clear, block the Lakota’s escape.”

His corporal tapped his cap brim with the barrel of his revolver, showing he’d heard. Matt trusted him to see to the duty while he got Jonah to safety. Phineas couldn’t carry two for long, so Matt headed for a rise to the west of the ravine and called out to the other dismounted troops to rally behind the hill. The Hotchkiss guns were firing too close to the line. The troops were in as much danger from their own artillery as they were from the Lakota. In fact, most of the Lakota were fleeing now, no longer an active threat.

Yet bullets continued to fly. Mortar shells continued to explode. Indians continued to die.

Protect your men. Complete your objective. Ignore the rest.

Matt clenched his jaw and hardened his heart. *Focus on what’s within your control.* He couldn’t control the artillery. Couldn’t stop the panicked flight of innocents into the line of fire. But he could get his men to a protected position and reorganize the troops to halt the enemy’s flight.

Once atop the rise, Matt reined Phineas in, and Jonah

slid to the ground. "Take my rifle," Matt ordered as he slid his Springfield from its scabbard and shoved it toward Jonah, who'd been left with only his side arm. "You can do more good watching our backs from a distance with this than following us to the ravine with only your Peacemaker."

Jonah said nothing, just gave a sharp nod and grabbed the rifle.

Matt felt better for his men already. Jonah with a single-load Springfield could take down more enemy combatants than half the troopers bouncing around on horseback combined. And his bullets would find the right targets, not fly haphazardly toward anything that moved.

Spotting the gray horse of his trumpeter, Matt signaled to Wallace and instructed him to organize the dismounted men and have them cover the ravine while Matt joined Preach on the west end to contain those trying to flee.

"It's a mess, Cap." Preach strode forward to give his report as Matt slid from the saddle. "There's a group huddled in a cut bank a few yards in. Women and children, mostly. But it'd be suicide to try to get to them with all the crossfire."

Matt nodded, taking in the chaos of the Lakota camp. His gaze hesitated on the blue coats of fallen soldiers. He scanned the scene as he scoured his brain for a plan that would enable him to accomplish his objective while minimizing casualties.

Indians poured into the ravine, seeking refuge from the barrage of guns and artillery. Some were armed warriors. Others were innocents. Yet with the dirt and blood and constant stirring of bodies, it was nearly impossible to tell them apart.

A handful of warriors had started scaling the ravine. "There!" Matt pointed at the men he'd spotted. "Focus your efforts on keeping those warriors contained. If they crest the

ridge, they'll have a clean shot on our boys. I'll see what I can do about the band at the cut bank."

"Got it." Luke gave a sharp nod as Matt turned to address his self-assigned mission. "Hey, Cap?"

Matt turned back. "Yeah?"

"Some of them females have guns. Saw one covered in blood holding a cavalry revolver. Must've stolen it from a fallen trooper. Keep your guard up."

"Always, Corporal." If a woman took up arms and stood beside her man in a fight, she opened herself up to the consequences. But a man of honor protected the weaker sex to the best of his ability in all circumstances. Even in war.

Especially in war.

Ducking behind Phineas, Matt reloaded his Remington, then hunched low and jogged along the edge of the ravine, away from the most concentrated gunfire. He couldn't allow the women and children to escape, but he could take them into custody and move them to a more sheltered position.

Signaling a handful of his men to fall in behind him, Matt circled around to the shallow end of the ravine and began the march into Hades. The constant barrage of cavalry fire into the ravine had turned the Lakota's escape route into a mass grave. The sides of the ravine had hidden the full extent of the destruction when he'd been above, but now nothing spared Matt from the horror of the scores of dead and dying littering the ravine floor.

Blood and gunpowder filled his nostrils, but he marched on. It was what a commander did. Showed no fear. No revulsion. Only confidence and strength. So his men would follow.

Catching sight of the cut bank, he veered to the left. He ordered his men to guard the mouth of the ravine and only to fire if fired upon. Then he strode forward, gun in hand.

A bullet's high-pitched whine tickled his ear as it raced past to slam into the earth two feet to his right. Another pinged off a rock ledge in front of him.

He could see them now. Five of them. Kids, mostly.

An old woman met his gaze and straightened. Not in fear, but in resignation. Pride straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin, even as she moved to shield the children. Matt pointed the barrel of his Remington toward the sky and held his left hand palm-out in an effort to reassure her that he meant no harm. Then he gestured for her to come to him.

She refused to move, just stared at him, her eyes casting blame on him and his kind.

A sudden motion from behind the woman, however, flared Matt's instincts. A half-grown boy lurched around his protector, a revolver in his hand.

Matt didn't hesitate. He lowered his barrel and fired. The kid fired too, his shot going wide as Matt's bullet lodged in the youth's shoulder. Matt rushed forward, needing to secure the weapon. A second child cried out as the boy crumpled to the ground. Matt lunged for him and wrapped his fingers around the gun still in the kid's hand. With a quick twist, the gun fell free. Matt tucked it into his belt, then yanked a handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it against the boy's wound. The kid would need a doctor to remove the bullet and sew him up, but he'd survive.

If they got out of this ravine.

"Captain! Artillery is on the move," one of his men called. "We gotta retreat."

Matt jerked his attention to the canyon wall behind him. Sure enough, one of the Hotchkiss guns was being wheeled into place near the ravine's edge. No one would survive the cannon fire at this range.

He turned back to the old woman. “Come.” He gestured urgently and pointed at the mountain gun. “We must leave. Now.”

She ignored him. Well, that wasn’t precisely true. She ignored his order, not him. Him, she impaled with a look of hatred as she herded the other children back toward the camp. Into the line of fire. As if she’d rather die with her people than follow a white man to safety.

The boy Matt was tending flailed. He kicked out at Matt and rolled away, leaving Matt’s bloodied handkerchief in the snow behind him.

“Wait!” Matt grabbed for the boy, desperate to save at least one, but the kid scrambled rashly after his kin, only to be hit full in the chest by a bullet. He flew backward from the force of the hit.

“No!” Matt charged after him, but a hand locked on his arm from behind.

“You can’t save him, Matt.” Preach’s voice.

When had his corporal come into the ravine? Wasn’t he supposed to be guarding the line? No, the line had been overtaken by the Hotchkiss gun.

Matt struggled. He had to get those kids out. Before it was too late.

But Luke only tightened his hold. Dragged him backward.

The boy didn’t move. Blood soaked through his coat as the truth soaked into Matt’s mind. He was dead. Beyond saving. But what about the others?

Matt scanned the ravine for the old woman and her charges as Luke dragged him away. He spotted her right as the cannon boomed.



“Captain? Can you hear me?”

Matt roused slowly. His head throbbed. His ears rang. His cheek stung. Why did his cheek sting?

He eased his eyes open just in time to see Wallace’s open hand swinging in for a slap. His trumpeter’s palm connected sharply with Matt’s jaw. Matt’s head lolled sideways.

Mystery of the stinging cheek solved.

Matt groaned. “I’d like to keep my teeth in my head, if you don’t mind.”

“Thank God.” Wallace slid an arm beneath Matt’s shoulders and helped him sit up. “Apologies, Captain Hanger. You’ve been out for quite a spell. We were getting worried.”

That was when it hit him. The quiet. No gunfire. No cannons.

His senses sharpened. “Luke?”

“Here, Cap.” Preach’s head popped into Matt’s field of vision, followed by Jonah’s. “It’s over.”

Over?

As if they’d read his mind, his men braced his arms and helped him to his feet. Dizziness assailed him at the jarring movement, but it was the sight that met his eyes that made his knees buckle. He’d seen death before, but never on this scale. Never so one-sided.

Scores of Lakota lay dead in the ravine. Maybe hundreds. He swallowed hard as his gaze landed on a face as stoic in death as it had been in life. The old woman. The children scattered around her. Nothing more than lifeless heaps in the snow.

Why? This was supposed to be a simple weapon confiscation. An escort to the reservation. How had it turned into a bloodbath?

Bile burned the back of Matt’s throat. He’d joined the

cavalry to protect settlers, people like his family. His task had been to bring justice and order to the frontier. This wasn't justice.

“God forgive us,” he murmured.

They'd just participated in a massacre.

— CHAPTER —

ONE

PURGATORY SPRINGS, TEXAS
MAY 1893

They've got us pinned down, Captain.”
Matt Hanger braced his back against the wall of the line shack he and Wallace had taken shelter behind and reloaded his Remington. Gunfire peppered the air as the gang of rustlers they'd been hired to eradicate closed in on their position. Matt's former trumpeter returned fire from the opposite side of the ramshackle building while Matt dumped his spent casings and plucked fresh cartridges from his belt.

“Hold the line a little longer, Wallace,” Matt ordered, his voice firm. Mark was a good soldier. A mite reckless from time to time, but a man who could be counted on when a situation deteriorated. Like this one.

Preach and the ranchers who'd hired them needed more time if they were going to drive the stolen cattle back to the Circle D before the rustlers discovered they'd been hornswoggled. It fell to Matt and Wallace to keep the gang distracted.

Sliding a sixth bullet into the cylinder, Matt turned back to the fight, aimed, and shot the hat from a rustler who'd taken advantage of the reloading lull to dash through the trees on Matt's side of the shed in an effort to gain a tactical advantage.

The rustler yelped and scurried back to the oak guarding his compatriot.

After mustering out of the army following the disaster at Wounded Knee, Matt and the others had made a pact against the use of deadly force. They might be mercenaries after a fashion, but they made it clear to the people who hired them that killing was off the table.

Using hats for target practice, however . . . well, that kept a man's skill honed.

"Jonah will be in position soon," Matt said as Wallace retreated behind the shed to reload. "We just gotta hold them off for a few more minutes."

Easier said than done when the enemy outnumbered them six to two.

A shot splintered the wood inches from Matt's face. He jerked back to a covered position and cast a quick glance at Wallace to ensure the kid was all right. His head was down, eyes locked on fingers busy shoving bullets into chambers. A good way to ensure speed, yet he sacrificed awareness of his surroundings.

The sight immediately put Matt on edge. He scanned the trees on his partner's side of the shed. Caught a movement. Fired.

A howl echoed as the rustler fell. Wallace's head came up, as did his weapon. He glanced at the fallen man, then turned to Matt, a smile of thanks on his face. That smile immediately hardened. He lunged forward, gun drawn.

“Get down!” he yelled as he shoved Matt out of the way and fired.

A second shot echoed nearly simultaneously. Mark grunted and fell backward.

“Wallace!” Matt scrambled to a better position. He had to protect his man.

Rustlers encroached from both sides. Matt dragged Wallace against the shed wall and crouched down in front of him. He fired at a movement on his right. Then swiveled and fired to his left.

Only two shots left.

God, I could use some help here.

Like a trumpet blast from heaven, a rifle reported from behind the shed. Two shots. One echoed from the left. The other from the right.

“Throw down your weapons,” a deep voice boomed. “We’ve got you surrounded.”

Jonah. Thank God. Jonah had been an answer to Matt’s prayers more than once during their time together, but never had there been more on the line than today. They had a man down. The youngest of the crew.

“How bad, Wallace?” Matt didn’t take his eyes off the trees. He’d put one rustler down with a shot to the leg, but the outlaw could still pose a threat. He was fairly sure Wallace had at least winged his man, but there was too much cover for him to know for sure.

“Shoulder shot, Captain. My gun arm’s useless, but I don’t think I’m headed to the pearly gates just yet.”

The strain in the kid’s voice belied the lightness of his words.

Another shot rang out, this time from the opposite direction. A cry echoed in the trees, followed by a soft thud as something heavy hit the dirt. Hopefully a gun.

“The man told ya to drop yer weapons.” Preach’s voice. He must have circled back after the ranchers got the cattle clear of the box canyon where the rustlers had stashed them. “Better do as he says and come out with yer hands in the air. I ain’t exactly the patient sort.”

One by one, the rustlers emerged, hands raised. One fellow only lifted a single arm, holding the other pressed against his left side where a bullet had creased him. Another two came out as a pair. The one carrying Matt’s bullet in his leg limped and leaned heavily on his partner for support.

Keeping his gaze and his gun trained on the rustlers, Matt stood, shifted left, and backed up until his spine hit the shed wall. Then he slid down the wall into a crouch that brought him even with Wallace. A quick glance confirmed his suspicion. The wound was bad. Mark had propped himself up into a sitting position and shoved a field dressing against his shoulder, but blood had already soaked through it. The kid’s face had lost all color, and the mouth famous for charming ladies with a roguish smile and flattering tongue was pulled down into an agonized grimace that boded ill.

Wallace needed a doctor. Fast. But they were in the middle of nowhere with nothing around but ranches and a ragged handful of buildings pretending to be a town. The closest city of consequence was San Marcos, ten miles away. Chances were good Mark wouldn’t survive the trip there, and waiting for someone to fetch the doc would take at least two hours, if not more.

As soon as Jonah and Preach came into view from opposite directions, herding the rustlers between them, Matt holstered his weapon and focused all his attention on Wallace.

“The kid hit, boss?” Jonah asked as he took charge of the man who seemed to be the gang’s leader, tying his hands behind his back with a strip of rawhide.

“Yep. Right shoulder,” Matt answered as he changed the field dressing with one of his own and wrapped a bandage as tight as he could manage around the underarm and torso. “I’ll patch him up best I can, but he’s gonna need a doctor. Sooner rather than later.”

“I need the doc too,” one of the rustlers whined. Probably the one with a bullet in his leg, not that Matt made the effort to look up and check.

“Dalton,” Preach called out, “where’s the closest doc?”

Matt did look up then. Terrance Dalton, owner of the Circle D, stepped into the small clearing behind the line shack. Apparently Preach wasn’t the only one to circle back. The local ranchers had pooled their funds to hire Matt’s crew, but Dalton owned the largest herd and therefore had the most at stake. It spoke well of him that he cared enough for the lives of the men he’d hired that he’d leave his stock to lend his gun to the fight.

“Dr. Joe can tend ’em,” Dalton said. “Got an office right here in Purgatory Springs. Across from the post office. Less than a mile away.”

Best news Matt had heard all day. “Great. I’ll get Wallace to Purgatory. Preach, you and Jonah take that bunch to the sheriff in San Marcos.”

“What about me?” the whiny rustler complained. “I’m bleedin’ all over the place.”

“Preach?” Matt looked to his second-in-command.

Dalton moved in closer, gun at the ready while Luke bent to examine the criminal’s leg.

“Looks like a through-and-through, Cap. I’ll give him a

few quick stiches and bind it up. He should make it to San Marcos.”

“I don’t want you stitchin’ me!”

Luke straightened and shrugged. “All right. Cauterizin’s easier anyhow.” He unsheathed his overlarge hunting knife and held it up between them. “Just need to light a fire and get this blade red-hot. Shouldn’t take too long.”

“N-n-never mind. Stitchin’s fine.”

Matt hid a grin and turned back to Wallace. The pain etched on the kid’s face killed his amusement in a blink.

“Can you stand, soldier?” Matt hunkered down and lifted Wallace’s left arm over his shoulders, then wrapped an arm around his waist.

Mark nodded, grimacing as he strained with the effort of standing.

The kid might be a mere twenty-seven, ten years Matt’s junior, but he was no reedy youth. He had the lean, muscular build of a cavalryman, and it took all of Matt’s grit to get them both upright.

Matt whistled, and half a minute later, Phineas trotted out of the trees. Wallace’s gray trailed behind.

“Come on,” Matt ground out as he moved them both toward the horses. “Let’s get you to Purgatory.”

“If it’s all the same to you . . . Captain”—Wallace groaned as Matt jostled him—“I’d prefer . . . Paradise for my . . . final rest. Better company . . . you know? Gets a little . . . hot . . . in Purgatory.”

Matt scowled at the poor jest and took on more of Wallace’s weight, practically dragging the young man now. “There’ll be no final resting today, soldier.” He lifted Wallace higher, as if making him look like he was strong enough to walk would actually cause it to be true. “That’s an order.”

“Do my best . . . sir.”

“That’s all I ask, son.” Matt clenched his jaw as Preach stepped up to hold the kid while Matt mounted.

Matt glanced heavenward as he swung into the saddle, knowing God would read the plea on his heart to spare Wallace’s life. *All I ask.*



Matt rode to town as fast as he dared with Wallace fading in his arms. By the time he got to Purgatory Springs, the kid slumped against him, unconscious.

“Hang on, son,” he murmured, shoving the panic away and focusing on what he could control—getting Wallace to the doctor.

Purgatory Springs consisted of nothing more than a half-dozen nondescript buildings along a single main road. Matt scanned for the post office sign, spotted it, and immediately steered Phineas to the white clapboard building across the street.

“Dr. Joe!” he yelled as he halted Phineas. “Get out here! Got a man down.”

He pulled his right foot from the stirrup, braced his left leg, and shifted Wallace’s weight against his shoulder. Slowly, he swung his right leg over the back of the horse, concentrating on keeping Mark steady.

“Here. Let me help.” A woman reached up to support Wallace and take a good portion of his weight.

Where was the doc? It didn’t seem right for a woman to be doing the heavy lifting. Though, Matt had to admit, she seemed capable. Strong too. She propped up Wallace’s back as Matt eased to the ground. As soon as he got his foot free

of the stirrup, he relieved her of her portion of the burden and caught Wallace beneath the knees.

The sensible woman didn't stand around gaping but immediately pivoted, scurried back to the office door, and held it open. "Bring him this way."

Matt had already followed on her heels and angled Wallace through the door. The nurse—for that was what she must be, with her bibbed white apron and dark blue dress—seemed to catalog Wallace's condition with her gaze as Matt eased him past her.

"Gunshot?" she asked as she scooted around him in the hall and led the way to an oak-paneled room filled with glass cabinets and a wooden examination table.

"Yep." That was all the answer Matt could manage while lugging around 175 pounds of dead weight.

It seemed to suit the nurse, though, for she asked nothing more. Just skittered around the cabinet and stomped on a pedal of some sort. The inclined table lowered into a horizontal position.

"Lay him here."

Matt did so. She immediately pressed two fingers to Wallace's neck.

"Weak, but regular. That's a good sign."

Matt nodded, the words easing his apprehension enough to allow him to take a full breath. But then the woman started unwrapping the kid's bandages.

Matt slapped his hand over her wrist. Her head jerked up, shocked eyes wide. Shocked, remarkably *green* eyes. The kind of eyes that could make a man forget what he was about. Or would have, if he wasn't in charge of fetching competent medical attention for a man he loved like family.

“The kid’s lost enough blood already. I’d just as soon wait for the doctor to get here before you go unraveling things.”

Those wide eyes narrowed as she tugged her hand free of his grasp. She straightened to her full height, which placed the top of her head even with his chin. “The doctor *is* here,” she said, enunciating each unbelievable word with metronomic precision. “Dr. Josephine Burkett at your service.”

Dr. Joe was a *woman*?

“Now, if you and your antiquated assumptions will get out of my way,” she said as she pushed past him and reached for the bandages again, “I have a patient to tend.”