

A woman with long dark hair and blue eyes, wearing a white blouse and a brown leather vest, is leaning against a tree trunk in a forest. She is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background is a soft, golden light filtering through the trees. The title 'WOMAN of SUNLIGHT' is written in a large, white, serif font across the middle of the image. Below the title, the subtitle 'BRIDES of HOPE MOUNTAIN & 2' is written in a smaller, white, serif font. At the bottom, the author's name 'MARY CONNEALY' is written in a gold, serif font. The entire image is framed by a decorative, gold-colored scrollwork border at the bottom.

WOMAN of  
SUNLIGHT

BRIDES of HOPE MOUNTAIN & 2

MARY CONNEALY

BRIDES *of* HOPE MOUNTAIN • 2

WOMAN *of*  
SUNLIGHT

MARY CONNEALY



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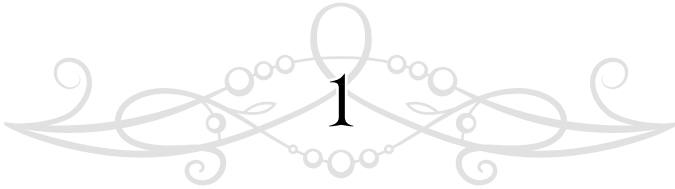
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*Woman of Sunlight*  
is dedicated to Lauren,  
my precious new granddaughter.





*November 1873*

*Hope Mountain*

*Near Bucksnot, Colorado, Near Grizzly Peak, Colorado*

**Y**ou look awful." Mitch Warden poured himself a cup of coffee and studied Ilsa Nordegren's face as she stepped into the kitchen.

Her face was peppered with half-healed blisters left from having chicken pox, but she resisted the urge to slap her hands over her scabby cheeks.

For that matter, she resisted the urge to slap Mitch.

"You're the reason I look so dreadful. You brought this sickness to me." A cranky side of herself that she really hadn't known she had made her shove Mitch back. He didn't even move, but she felt good doing it. "No one ever got sick before you came home."

He'd come down with it first and given it to Ilsa. He'd brought it with him when he came home from back east. He'd found his family's Colorado ranch deserted, but he and his chicken pox had followed his family to the top

of Lost Peak—that’s the name Ilsa’s grandpa had for this place, but the Wardens had always called it Hope Mountain.

She glared at him. “You look awful, too.”

He didn’t really. He wasn’t all the way healed—but he was two weeks ahead of Ilsa. And truth be told, he was a good-looking varmint. Not overly tall, but tall compared to her. Dark blond hair. A nice square chin and brown eyes that made her think of the rich wood of an old oak.

But all that wasn’t a good enough reason not to insult him back.

“Mitch, hush.” Isabelle Warden, Mitch’s mother, who made everyone call her Ma, spoke without turning around, and without stopping her work peeling apples for a pie.

Mitch set his tin coffee cup on the kitchen table and poured a glass of water, then handed it to Ilsa. “Drink this.”

He kept pushing water and broth at her even though her fever had gone down over two weeks ago and all her blistered pockmarks had dried up and scabbed over and she was eating plenty of food and had been for days.

But she really did look awful. And Ma had a mirror, something Ilsa had never seen before, so she couldn’t lie to herself or smash the mirror, which would be wrong and wouldn’t solve the problem anyway.

But she was getting better every day. The red was gone from her face—well, her whole body, but no one saw the rest but her—and her strength had returned.

Still, Mitch treated her like she was in desperate need.

The galoot probably felt guilty and well he should.

“You can quit being a doctor now,” Ilsa said. “I’m back to being the doctor for everyone here.” It was true that Ilsa had

more doctoring skills than anyone else. She'd been taught them by her grandpa before he died, and he'd learned the ways of healing from native folks he'd lived with long ago.

Mitch held the water in front of her face. She snatched it away and gulped it down just to make him stop.

She thrust the now-empty cup back into his hands.

Mitch set it aside, picked up his coffee, and took a long sip as he studied her, most likely for signs of thirstiness.

To get his mind off her awful speckled face, she said, "As soon as Jo and Dave get back from town, I'm going to ride with them to visit Ursula. I'm well enough."

Josephine was her older sister, newly married to Mitch's brother, Dave. Ilsa always called her Jo. Ursula was her even-older sister who had turned into some kind of lunatic hermit.

Ilsa and her sisters had lived up here completely alone after their grandparents died, leaving the three girls on their own at a very young age. And they stayed up here because of their grandma and grandpa's terrible warnings to never leave the mountains because there was deadly danger in the lowlands.

Those had been good days.

Then the Wardens had moved in, and soon after, along came their pest of a son Mitch.

Mitch slammed his cup on the table. "You are not up to riding to see your crazy sister any time soon. You're barely up from your sickbed."

"My sister isn't crazy." Honestly, some days Ursula seemed as crazy as a rabid skunk bear, but Ilsa ignored that and glared at Mitch. "You don't get to tell me how I feel or where I can go."

Nobody did. Not once since her grandpa died. Her sisters had let her come and go as she chose, and it suited her.

“Well, somebody’s got to tell you when you don’t seem to have a lick of sense.”

“Mitch,” Ma snapped, turning away from her apples, “go out and see if your father and Dave are coming up the trail.”

“Ma, you know there are sentries who’ll let us know if—”

“Go,” Ma snapped, then pointed a very motherly finger toward the door. She’d been throwing Mitch out a lot lately. “And don’t come back until you can be polite to Ilsa.”

Ilsa was always glad to see him go. And considering Ma’s order about being polite, he’d be gone awhile. Maybe forever.

Not that Ilsa really understood what polite was. It must have something to do with him being so cranky.

Mitch picked on her, nagged her, and found every fault in her. The man was just watching her too closely, and she felt much better when he was gone.

Ilsa knew she treated him a lot like he treated her. But he deserved it and she didn’t. Anyone could see that.

He snorted like a caged bull, then stormed out, slamming the door.

“Your son seems easily upset,” Ilsa said. She’d had no practice understanding what people were thinking. She’d gotten the impression others could look at someone in the face and say, “he’s mad . . . he’s worried . . . she’s sad.”

Well, Ilsa knew what a frown was and a smile. But beyond that, she and her sisters had always just said what they thought straight out.



She didn't understand gleaning details from watching someone's face.

"He most certainly does." Ma gave her the oddest smile. And why was it odd? Ilsa couldn't say.

Ilsa helped with the apples. Soon she heard hooves galloping away. Mitch had saddled up and was off.

"I have some eggs and bacon keeping warm in the back of the fireplace. Let me get you some breakfast." Ma made food so deliciously. Ilsa paid rapt attention whenever cooking was involved. She was learning more from Ma every day.

As she ate the wonderful food, Ilsa thought of how much she stayed inside these days. It wasn't normal for her. The woods and treetops, the caves and trails, were as much her home as the inside of a cabin, and she missed being outside until it was a kind of hunger. She'd spent far too much time indoors since she'd gotten sick. She wouldn't have minded going along with Mitch, except she'd've had Mitch for company.

Anyway, Jo and Dave and Quill Warden, Dave and Mitch's pa, weren't coming yet. The sentries would've let them know. Ma just wanted peace. Ilsa would have liked to check for herself, though. She was anxious for Dave to get back because he'd taken Jo with him. And Ilsa wanted to see her sister again and go back to their cabin.

This one had too many grouchy men in it. One too many.

The cabin they were in was built near where the forest started on the northeast edge of a huge, grassy meadow. The trail down the mountain opened after a short ride into the forest on the far side. Ilsa expected the ride to take him

a long time, especially since his mother throwing him out had so obviously been intended to keep him out.

If she couldn't go see Ursula, she could at least get out of the confines of this cabin. A long, cold walk would suit her right now. With that in mind, and without asking Ma, who could be counted on to always have some rule Ilsa didn't understand, she slipped into her coat, grabbed her bonnet and gloves, and was outside and running before Ma could say anything.

She dashed into her beloved forest. The first tree she found to her liking, she scampered up, light and easy as any woodland creature, then perched on a broad branch to watch the cowhands and cattle and Mitch riding wild across the meadow.

She drew out her knife, one she'd carried since before Grandpa died, and studied it. After years of sharpening with her whetstone, the blade was almost needle thin.

Afraid every day the blade would break, but unwilling to let it grow dull, she sharpened it as Grandpa had taught her, then gently replaced it in the little leather pouch she'd sewn into the pocket of the strange dress Ma Warden had made for her.

Then she tugged on one of the many thick vines she'd braided and hung here and there, and swung from where she sat to the next tree. Branches slapped at her, and the wind blew through her hair. Her heart nearly sang from the pleasure of swinging, moving fast far above where anyone would notice.

She followed Mitch.

She didn't have braided vines everywhere. But when she'd reach a tree that lacked one, it was because she'd

come to a clump of trees with branches woven so tightly to each other they were nearly a solid floor far above the ground.

She'd run along up high, then she'd find one of her vines and swing again. She was always joyful when she was swinging.

The treetops were where she went when there was tension at home, as there sometimes was between her tough middle sister, Jo, and her anxious and bossy big sister, Ursula.

Now, having fun for the first time since she'd been sick, she swung through the forest that edged the meadow, almost as fast as Mitch galloped.

The top of the trail, where Jo had gone down—breaking the most forbidden rule her grandparents had ever made—was hidden by a stand of trees that marked the southeast corner of this meadow.

Mitch rode into the woods and vanished from sight for a time. Ilsa swung along until she caught up to him and crouched to watch. She loved to stand back and watch.

Cranky Mitch had slowed his horse to a walk and continued toward the top of the trail. She hoped the long, hard ride had cooled him off.