

COLORADO
COWBOYS

5

THE
LAST CHANCE
COWBOY



JODY HEDLUND

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BOOKS BY JODY HEDLUND

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BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
Minneapolis, Minnesota
www.bethanyhouse.com

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

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hedlund, Jody, author.

Title: The last chance cowboy / Jody Hedlund.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, a division of
Baker Publishing Group, [2023] | Series: Colorado cowboys ; 5

Identifiers: LCCN 2022034217 | ISBN 9780764236433 (paperback) | ISBN
9780764241277 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493440573 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3608.E333 L37 2023 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20220721

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022034217>

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

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Cover design by Kirk DouPonce, DogEared Design

The author is represented by Natasha Kern Literary Agency.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

23 24 25 26 27 28 29 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and
wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works;
and that my soul knoweth right well.

Psalm 139:14



A decorative flourish consisting of symmetrical, swirling lines that frame the text.

CHAPTER

1

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

MARCH 1871

“It’s a boy.” Catherine Remington held the squalling infant upside down by his ankles, making sure he didn’t inhale mucus.

The new mother managed a nod, her face pale, her eyes closed, her pretty features etched with pain.

Catherine clamped the baby’s cord in two places and then cut between. Everything about him was absolutely perfect. With each lusty intake of oxygen, his skin was turning pink. His pulse thudded steadily, and he flailed his limbs energetically.

If only the mother were faring as well, but blood continued to saturate the newsprint Catherine had spread over the dirty mattress.

“You did wonderfully, Kit.” Catherine forced cheer into her voice. She started wrapping the baby in a soft cotton

blanket, wiping the remaining blood and mucus from his nose and mouth. “He’s a handsome fellow.”

If only she could transfer even just a smidgen of cheer to the mother . . .

Kit rolled to her side and faced the wall. The outline of her body was visible under the threadbare blanket, and she was thin, almost emaciated, as though she’d been wasting away long before today. She’d spoken little during the long night of labor, and Catherine knew almost nothing about her—only her name, mentioned by one of the other prostitutes.

She shot a glance at the closed door. Where was the other woman? Attired in a fancy gown with rouge on her cheeks and lips, the woman had been in and out all night, checking on the progress but obviously working—if selling one’s body could be called that. Why did she have to disappear now, when Catherine needed assistance to deliver the afterbirth and staunch the hemorrhaging?

The music and bawdy laughter emanating from the saloon next door had been jarring and ongoing for hours. Now, by the light of dawn, a stale silence had fallen over the place, which meant the cavorting had finally come to an end. That also meant everyone was sleeping, and Catherine would have no one to aid her.

“I’d like you to begin nursing.” She finished swaddling the infant, his wails turning to whimpers now that he was snug and warm. She shifted Kit to her back and extended the baby, praying the nursing would contract the uterus and help stop the flow of blood.

But Kit didn’t move, not even to open her eyes.

The lethargy wasn’t a good sign.

Fresh urgency prodded Catherine, and she glanced around

for a place to lay the infant so she could tend to Kit. Other than the bed and a wobbly bedside table, the room had no furniture. A battered carpetbag was shoved underneath the bed, likely containing Kit's belongings.

Catherine slid it out to find a tangle of clothing and an extra pair of shoes inside. Quickly she arranged the garments to make a nest of sorts, then laid the baby there. He gave a few grunts of protest but settled to sleep.

Without wasting another moment, Catherine finished delivering the afterbirth. From what she could see, the membranes were intact without pieces left behind to cause additional problems. Even so, Kit was still hemorrhaging. Badly.

Catherine dug through her leather birth satchel and located a brown bottle with a tincture containing blue cohosh, shepherd's purse, and other herbs that might help.

As she attempted to get Kit to sit up, the new mother resisted with surprising strength.

"Please, Kit. You need to drink this bleeding medicine."

Kit pressed her lips together, then rolled to face the wall again.

Catherine set the bottle aside. If Kit wouldn't cooperate with taking the tincture, then Catherine was left with no choice but to manually compress the uterus.

She ripped a few clean rags and doused them with vinegar to use with the interior pressure. If the vinegar didn't help with clotting, then maybe she could find ice to get the blood vessels to contract. She'd watched her mother attempt the technique once, but it was risky, and ice wasn't readily available.

She shifted the blanket over Kit's legs. "You'll need to hold still while I insert the linen and put pressure on your uterus."

"Leave me be."

Catherine tugged at the woman's leg. "If I don't do this, you'll bleed to death."

"I'll die no matter what you do." Bitterness filled the new mothers's voice.

For several heartbeats, Catherine didn't know how to respond. She didn't want to admit Kit was right, but with the amount of blood she'd already lost and was continuing to lose, her blood pressure was dropping, and her body would soon go into shock.

At twenty-two years of age, Catherine was young for a midwife, but after assisting her grandmother and mother for so many years, she was more experienced than some midwives twice her age. She'd seen her fair share of childbed deaths, especially with hemorrhaging. In fact, very few survived the problem, although she'd heard of some doctors who had transfused blood and gotten good results. But she didn't have the equipment—or the extra blood—to attempt such a feat. She had to utilize the methods she'd already learned.

She hefted the woman onto her back again. Kit was light and easy to move, too weak to resist. "Your baby needs you, so we'll do everything we possibly can to make sure you're alive for the little fellow."

Kit shook her head frantically. "I can't give him the life he needs. Not here."

Catherine paused. She'd helped enough prostitutes deliver babies over the past few years, and she agreed that a brothel was no place for a child. "Do you have family who can help?"

"No, my papa disowned me when he discovered I was with child. He told me he never wanted to see me again."

"What about siblings?"

“My older sister helps me when she can, but she’s afraid of Papa firing her from his store if he catches her doing anything for me.”

Catherine heard what the woman left unsaid—that she didn’t want her sister to end up at the brothel like her. “What about the baby’s father? Maybe he can help.” Most of the prostitutes took precautions not to get pregnant. But no method was foolproof. And Catherine had witnessed the births of far too many unwanted babies with no way to prove who the father was.

Kit stared up at the ceiling, her expression turning despondent. “He abandoned me.”

“Then you know who he is?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m positive.” Her voice dropped to a near whisper. “He proposed to me. I thought I’d be safe. That even if I did get pregnant, we were getting married, so it wouldn’t matter.”

Irritation quickly pricked at Catherine, as it did whenever she thought of the immense suffering she’d witnessed from unmarried women having to shoulder the responsibility of an unexpected pregnancy. It wasn’t fair. Where were the men? Why weren’t they being held accountable for their immorality? Especially when the vice from such men only seemed to be getting worse every day.

She agreed with her father’s position as alderman of the Thirty-Third Precinct, that Chicago’s red-light districts needed to be shut down permanently. But instead of politicians making changes for the better, more and more corrupt aldermen were gaining office. The good men, like her father, were finding themselves in the minority.

“If you’re certain of the baby’s paternity”—Catherine tried again to move the young mother’s legs so that she could begin the manual compression, but Kit clamped them tightly together—“I suggest you contact the father, ask for his assistance, and hold him accountable for his actions.”

“I can’t. He’s no longer living in Chicago. He returned to Colorado Territory.”

“Write to him and request his help, at least monetarily. Many men are willing to give some assistance in order to keep the matter quiet.” It was unfortunate but true. Some men could be coerced into doing their duty.

“I’ve written to him already, but he hasn’t responded.”

Catherine bit back a retort, wishing the man was present and that she could give him the lecture he deserved, but at the moment, she was wasting precious time discussing him. Dark crimson was still pooling against the newsprint, and it was becoming all too clear she needed an extra pair of hands to hold Kit in place if she had any hope of succeeding in the manual compression.

The prostitute who’d sent the errand boy to fetch her roomed across the hallway. Catherine had no choice now but to seek her out and wake her up.

“I’ll be right back.” Catherine crossed to the door and exited before Kit could object. As she stepped into the dank hallway, the light from the window at the far end spilled inside and illuminated a scene that made her blood run cold.

A well-dressed, bald-headed man with a paunch held a gun to another man’s chest, a half-naked man who looked as though he’d just been dragged from the bed in the room behind him.

She didn’t have to see the bald-headed man’s face to know

who he was. She'd been at enough political events and parties to recognize him. Rocky Rogers Kenna, alderman of the Nineteenth Precinct in the First Ward.

She also recognized the half-naked man. His long neck and equally long arms had earned him the nickname Stretch in political circles, as had his penchant for stretching the truth. He led the charge of sullyng the reputations of the aldermen who refused to join in corrupt policies, including her own father's, fabricating lies upon lies. Of course, most God-fearing people disregarded everything Stretch said. But still, he was a dangerous man to oppose.

Before she could make sense of what was going on, a gunshot echoed in the hallway, and Stretch stumbled against the wall. As he slid down, blood smeared a trail, the red a stark contrast to the light floral wallpaper. When he landed on the floor, he collapsed into an unmoving heap.

Rocky kicked Stretch, sending him sprawling into the open doorway, revealing a bullet hole directly at his heart. His body flopped, his arms and legs at odd angles.

He was dead. Rocky had killed Stretch.

Catherine sucked in a sharp breath.

Rocky pivoted and in the next instant was pointing his gun at her.

Too late, she cupped a hand over her mouth, her attention riveted to the barrel aimed at her. For long, tense moments, she cringed and waited for another blast and the pain of a bullet hitting her, perhaps ending her life.

As he lowered his gun, she still didn't allow herself to breathe. She wanted to escape back into the room behind her, but she was too paralyzed to move. She'd just witnessed a murder. Heaven help her. While she'd encountered a great

deal of immorality and wickedness when answering God's call to aid the less fortunate, she'd never observed one man taking another's life.

Surely this didn't bode well for her. . . .

Maybe Rocky wouldn't care that she was there. Maybe he was corrupt enough he'd let her go on her way. Maybe he would assume she was one of the women who lived in the brothel and not bother with her.

One of the women? Catherine almost laughed at the outlandish supposition. Her evening dress wasn't anything like the revealing attire of the prostitutes. Hers was fashionable, with a long basque bodice that combined with her overskirt to create a layered look. She rarely used hoops since they were too cumbersome, and she hadn't yet taken to the large bustles at the back of the waist that were becoming fashionable. Her dark hair wasn't lavishly styled but instead pulled up into a simple knot. She wore no makeup. In fact, she guessed she appeared ruffled and harried, hardly a seductress.

"You're Paul Remington's daughter." Rocky's words echoed in the hallway, more of an accusation than a question.

No, apparently she wouldn't be able to slink away in oblivion. Even as she fought to find an excuse or ruse, she inwardly chastised herself for being a coward and considering running away from the scene of a crime. She couldn't, not when a murder had occurred, and the man who committed it needed to be brought to justice.

She straightened her shoulders. At five foot four, she needed every inch her petite frame could give her. "Yes, I'm Catherine Remington."

“What’s a fine lady like you doing in this establishment at this time of day?” His words were hard and biting, almost as if she’d imposed upon him with her presence.

“As a matter of fact, I’ve been here all night assisting one of the young women during her time of travail.”

He cocked his head, his brows lifting.

“I’m a midwife. I’ve been here delivering a baby.”

“Well, it’s a good thing you stepped into the hallway when you did, isn’t it, boys?” Rocky directed his question toward two men standing just inside the open doorway above the dead body. They stepped over Stretch until they were both positioned behind Rocky, arms crossed and staring at her.

She’d noticed the men with Rocky on occasion. Perhaps they served as his guards or his servants. Either way, she wouldn’t let them intimidate her.

“Young lady,” Rocky said, “I’ll need you to testify to the police and the judge on my behalf, let them know Stretch came after me and that I was left with no choice but to shoot him or lose my life.”

Had Stretch provoked him? She glanced at Stretch’s crumpled body. There wasn’t a weapon in sight. Blood poured out of the open wound in his bare chest, forming a dark puddle on the floor. “I’m sorry, Mr. Kenna, but I can’t testify to that end—”

“Sure you can. You were right here.” He straightened his suit coat as though his business was finished. “You saw everything just the way I said.”

He wanted her to lie for him? So he could get away with murder? Well, if he didn’t already know, he was about to learn that she was a woman with as much integrity as her

father. “No, actually, I didn’t see Stretch do anything to harm you.”

Rocky started down the hallway toward her, and his men followed on his heels. Their footsteps tapped a dangerous rhythm. If he could kill Stretch, what would stop him from killing her?