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MARY CONNEALY



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BOOK 1

Forged in Love

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Woman of Sunlight

Her Secret Song



Forged in Love

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This book is dedicated to Quinn,
my new granddaughter.
Beautiful and sweet and so welcome. True,
she's only one month old while I'm typing this,
but I sense that she is brilliant and
talented in many ways.

Welcome to the family, precious little girl.

1

AUGUST 1870
PINE VALLEY, WYOMING
NEAR THE WIND RIVER MOUNTAINS

A bullet slammed into the side of the stagecoach carrying Mariah Stover, her pa, and her older brother.

“Robbers!” The driver’s voice roared in the hot Wyoming summer as the crack of a whip lashed, driving the horses faster. “Everyone, fight or die!”

Mariah heard the man riding shotgun on top of the stage land on his belly and open fire from the roof.

Bullets peppered the coach.

Mariah sat between Pa and Theo, facing the horses. Pa, a Civil War veteran, snapped his Spencer repeating rifle into his hand and fired out the window in a steady, rolling blast.

Theo threw himself to the opposite seat, occupied by two men who looked terrified. He aimed, fired, and fired again with his Colt pistol. Pa’s rifle echoed the pistol in a steady volley of gunfire.

Mariah dug for the pistol in her satchel and checked the load. She looked out the window to her right. No one there.

Her pa and brother were tough men used to Western ways, who knew that civilization was often left behind at the town's edge. You just had to hope the uncivilized wouldn't follow you right into town.

You protected yourself, or you died. The stagecoach driver had it right.

Pa fired out his window while Theo used the window beside the two others. Both men looked more city than country, and if either of them had a weapon, he didn't produce it. Instead, they just slid aside for Theo.

Mariah gripped a six-shooter. When Pa paused from firing his Spencer, the one he'd gotten in the war when he'd been a sharpshooter, Mariah shouted, "Lean forward while you reload."

Pa did so without looking or speaking, focusing completely on his rifle and trusting her to be tough, competent, and ready.

Mariah watched out the window and saw four men riding ever closer, blasting away. One of them went down, likely from the gunfire of the man on the roof.

She aimed and fired, aimed and fired, and kept going, trying to get the most out of her flying lead.

They were miles from town. No way to get help before these gunmen finished their fight, died trying, or were driven off.

"Get back!" Pa hollered.

Mariah needed to reload anyway, so she gave way to Pa's superior marksmanship.

A cry from overhead ended the gunfire from the shotgun rider. Mariah saw him plummet from the top of the stage. As the three remaining outlaws rode past him, two of them fired into his body.

Pa growled in disgust at the vicious killers. He opened fire again. Mariah had her gun ready to go when she saw someone coming up beside the window on her side. She whipped her head around in time to see the rider empty his pistol into the city boys until they were riddled with bullets.

Her hair came loose from its knot on the back of her head and blinded her for just a moment as she cried out in horror. Then she glared at the skinny blond man. An ugly scar cut across his left cheek and through both his upper and lower lips. She pressed her body against the door and leveled her gun just as she heard a snap from under the belly of the stagecoach—an axle giving way.

She opened fire on the gunman as the stage skidded sideways. Crimson bloomed on his left arm. He brought his gun up with a wicked smile that revealed one of his front teeth was missing right in line with the scar. Their eyes met. He aimed.

The stagecoach tilted wickedly toward Mariah's side and slammed into a boulder alongside the road. The gunman fell back to avoid the boulder. The stage hit so hard the door flung open, and Mariah fell out. She felt the weight of the stage smother her.

More guns fired. Pa's Spencer fell silent, then Theo's Colt stopped blasting.

A bullet hit her in the side. White fire blazed in her belly as the stagecoach settled hard on her.

The world went dark.



Mariah's eyes flickered open from where she was caged by . . . by something. Voices sounded from outside. She tried to cry out for help, but the weight on her chest was so heavy she couldn't draw a breath to manage it.

"They're all dead—just like always."

"What about the woman?" Whoever said that sounded on edge. "First woman we've ever killed. I don't like it. And the Stovers. What were they doing on this stage?"

"Like it or not, she's dead. Crushed under the stage, and I got a bullet in her just to be sure."

Mariah stopped trying to call for help.

"I'll get the strongbox."

A bullet blast made her flinch, which hurt everywhere.

A third voice asked, "Is there a good haul?"

"No, only a couple hundred. When we stripped the bodies, we got a couple hundred more."

"I thought this stage had a payroll on it for Fort Bridger?"

"We got bad information, or they pulled a switch, sent the money by another route."

"Maybe they know there's a leak. Maybe he needs to die. I don't like talking outside our group."

"He don't know why I was asking. He don't know nothin'."

"He'll put it together when he hears about this robbery."

"The horses broke the traces and got away, too. We're too close to town. We've gotta clear out. When those horses go storming into town, a rescue party will come a-running."

"You sure everyone's dead?"

“You helped kill them, same as me.”

“The Stovers were good folks. This is a bad business.”

The stage was pressed to Mariah’s face so that she saw the dark wood and nothing else. She couldn’t move her arms or legs, could barely draw a breath. Her head was pinned and aching. The pain was dizzying, and it came from every part of her.

Her belly was the worst, but her chest felt like it’d been smashed out of shape. Her vision blurred as she fought for each shallow breath. Her whole body was crushed.

Finally, she heard horses galloping back the way the stagecoach had come.

As much as those men terrified her, being left alone was almost worst. Tears slid from the corners of her eyes as she thought of Pa and Theo.

Thought how it felt like she was already in a coffin.



Clint Roberts was loitering outside his diner, hoping to catch Mariah’s attention, when he saw the stagecoach team charging into town. The stage he’d been watching for wasn’t behind it. The thundering hooves and wildly out of control speed told of panicked horses. He could think nothing but the worst. “Sheriff, get out here!”

Clint sprinted for his horse, penned up in the corral behind the blacksmith shop. He’d already lost one family. It would kill him to lose another one. The Stovers certainly didn’t count him as family, but he’d begun to count them.

He didn’t ride in from his homestead every day—it was an easy walk. But today he’d hoped Mariah and her family

would be back, and he'd wanted an excuse to stop in, get his horse, and say hello.

The sheriff burst out of the jailhouse, saw the stage horses, and raced for his own mount tied to the hitching post. Willie Minton, the town deputy, was only a pace behind. Other men were coming, too. They all knew the stage was in trouble. And the trouble might be ugly.

Clint was galloping before he reached the edge of town. The stage had been late, so he hoped that meant they'd been close to town.

Mariah. Mariah . . . Please, God, let her be all right.

He'd been waiting until he felt established before he approached her, or, better to admit, before he approached her flinty-eyed father. Maybe even better to admit, he'd been waiting until his heart healed enough to risk sharing it with someone again. As he galloped up the trail, he was sick to think he'd left it too late.

Had he failed Mariah just as he'd failed his family?

2

Mariah wasn't sure if she'd passed out or was just so dazed and under so much pressure from the stage that time meant little to her. She startled when she heard a voice.

"That's John and Theo." A voice she knew well.

"It's got to be the Deadeye Gang." Another familiar voice. Sheriff Joe Mast. A man she trusted. She tried to cry out, but she barely managed a wheeze. No one heard.

"Everyone's dead. Most robbers wear masks when they hold up a stage, take everything of value, and ride off without killing anyone," the sheriff went on, sounding furious and grief-stricken. "John and Theo were tough men. If they couldn't hold off those men with Sculler on the roof fighting, no one can. The stage line should have outriders."

"They did for a while, but no one's struck around here for a year." Mariah recognized Willie Minton's voice. "We thought they'd moved on. Who ever heard of outlaws taking a year between robberies?"

“Where’s Mariah?” That first voice again. Clint Roberts, who owned the only diner in town. But he wouldn’t normally ride with the sheriff. “I know Mariah rode out with her father. They were going to a funeral down in Laramie.”

There were sounds of movement. Men striding all around.

“You don’t think they’d take her, do you?” the sheriff asked.

Mariah wheezed. It was the only noise she could make, and it sounded about like a gust of wind.

“They’ve never done such a thing before,” Deputy Minton said. “But have they ever killed a woman before?”

“Not too many women out here.” The sheriff strode off to Mariah’s left. “I’ve never heard of a woman being on a stage that got robbed by this bunch.”

“Have they ever found such a beautiful woman as Mariah?” Clint thought she was beautiful. Not many did, as she worked alongside her pa and brother in the blacksmith shop and tended toward trousers, bulky leather aprons, and soot.

“Look down here.” Clint’s voice sharpened. “That’s a corner of her skirt.”

Footsteps pounded toward her. She wheezed again. This time, with them close and paying attention, it was enough.

“She’s still alive,” Clint said. “Sheriff, hitch the horses to the stage so we can lift it. I’ll only need a few inches. Just enough to drag her out.”

He crouched low and looked under the stage while there were more sounds of activity. “Mariah, we’ll get this off you and get you to the doctor. Hang on.”

Hang on? She didn't have much else to do.

She wanted to ask about Pa and Theo, but she knew enough and couldn't get a word out anyway.



Clint drew her out, his hands under her arms. Once Mariah was clear of the stage, he shouted to the men riding with him, "I've got her."

The stage dropped back to the ground with a crack.

He knelt beside her, checking for broken bones.

"You're bleeding." He was scared to death of what harm had been done.

"I hurt all over."

"I'm taking you to town." He slid his arms under her and lifted, knowing it hurt. Hating it.

The sheriff was at his side.

"I'll get her to the doctor," Clint said.

"Go on. We'll be along when we're able." The sheriff gave Mariah a worried look and didn't mention bringing in the bodies.

The bodies. Mariah's family. Clint wanted to blame himself for that, too. He knew this trail was dangerous. The stagecoach robberies had seemed to stop, but he could have ridden along. He could have gone out to meet the stage. One more gun. The sound of an incoming rider. It might've been enough to save everyone.

With the sheriff's help, Clint swung up onto his horse and kicked the little black mustang into a gallop. He didn't have the will to go slowly, even if it spared Mariah pain. She would hurt whether he went slow or fast.

He looked down to apologize and realized she had

fainted. Kicking the horse to go faster, he hoped it was only a faint.

Please, God. Please let her be all right.



Doc Preston took one look and went into action. “Get her in the back.”

“Mariah.” The doctor spoke quietly, grief already in his voice as Clint laid her down. “John and Theo were with her.”

“Yes, both dead. Mariah was pinned under the stage and left for dead. Heaven knows what injuries she has from the weight of the stage.”

The doctor focused on the worst bleeding. He got a wicked knife out and slit the front of her dress to reveal an ugly bullet furrow cutting along her belly just below her navel.

The doctor took a pad of bandages and pressed them to Mariah’s stomach. “Hold this down hard while I get a needle and thread.”

As the two of them worked together, Clint told all he knew about the stage. They’d been at it awhile when Nell came charging in, with eyes only for Mariah. “Let me help.”

Sheriff Mast was a few minutes behind. He looked from Mariah to the doctor to Nell and, finally, to Clint. Gravely, he said, “I need to be alone with the doctor for a few minutes. Doc, can you spare these two?”

“Uh, well, yes.”

“I’m not leaving her.” Nell set her jaw as firm as granite.

“Neither am I,” Clint said.

“Um . . . Nell, I guess you can stay. But, Clint, please go

on out. Let us talk in private. It's a matter of the crime. I'm not ready to talk to you about it yet."

Clint glared at the sheriff, and for a minute he wrestled with leaving. He wanted to tell the sheriff he wasn't man enough to make him leave, but something in the sheriff's expression convinced him this wasn't a request made lightly.

Clint jerked his chin down in a nod. "I left things undone at Le Grande. I'll be right across the street."

He stalked out. Leaving her felt like tearing his own skin.



The sheriff stepped into the kitchen of Le Grande as Clint hung up the last of his pots.

Clint had left the back door unlocked, hoping he'd get news about Mariah and wanting to make it easy for anyone to get to him.

What he saw in Sheriff Mast's eyes twisted his gut. "What's wrong?"

The sheriff lifted both his hands as if to stop Clint from speaking. Or to push away the words that had to be spoken.

"I'm sorry, Clint." The sheriff stared at the floor, unable, it seemed, to meet Clint's eyes. "Mariah didn't make it."

Sheriff Mast turned to face the door connecting the kitchen to the dining room. Clint thought he was leaving, and he leapt forward to grab the man's arm.

But the sheriff wasn't going anywhere. He just stood and stared at the floor.

"She wasn't that bad. What happened?"

"Doc thinks maybe a broken rib punctured her lung or her heart. Maybe a head injury. He isn't sure."

“No.” Clint pushed past the sheriff and ran for the doctor’s office.

“Clint, wait! No, come back here.”

But Clint ran on, sprinting through his dining room and out onto the street.

Mariah, Mariah. Please, God. It can’t be.

As he ran, he saw the undertaker, Jim Burke, outside the mortuary, building a box. He had a big stack of wood for all the coffins he needed to make.

Including Mariah’s. No. No. No.

He was vaguely aware of children playing in the schoolyard and Pete Wainwright, Pine Valley’s mayor, standing outside his general store.

He slammed through the door to the doctor’s office. Doc Preston came out of the back room and firmly clicked the door shut behind him.

“Clint, go on home. You can’t be in here.”

“She wasn’t hurt that bad. Are . . . are you sure?” How could a doctor not be sure? Stupid question, but Clint had to ask. “Let me see her.”

“No, Clint. Nell’s with her, and she doesn’t want any company. Go on.”

“I will not go *on*,” Clint shouted. “What happened?”

The sheriff rushed in.

Clint turned and saw through the open door that Jim Burke had quit building, and Pete Wainwright had taken the wooden steps down to the street.

“Come away, Clint,” the sheriff said.

“I will not leave here without seeing her. I won’t.” His voice rose with every word. “I can’t.” He felt the burn of tears in his eyes. He refused to let them fall. He hadn’t

cried since his family had died, with him nowhere near to help them.

Nell came out of the back room. She shut the door just as firmly as Doc Preston had.

She stood silently. Clint's chest heaved as he watched her. Nell was Mariah's friend. If Nell said he could see her, then he'd be allowed in with no fuss.

"I'm going to see her. I'll knock you out of the way if I have to, Doc. Nell, you can't stop me."

She didn't respond. She looked at the sheriff, who'd come up beside Clint. Clint braced himself to fight.

"We have to tell him," Nell said quietly. "I didn't know you had feelings for her, Clint."

"Don't try and stop me, Nell," he repeated, ignoring her comment about his feelings.

The doctor looked at the sheriff.

"I'll have your word that what we tell you goes no further than this room," Sheriff Mast said with intensity. "Then you'll leave and mourn Mariah fully and publicly."

Clint swiped his wrist across his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Come into the back." Nell opened the door and let Clint in. To see Mariah unconscious but breathing steadily. Not dead.

Grief faded, replaced by elation. And fury. Clint boiled over. "What—"

Soft hands gripped his arm, drawing him back from the mad ramblings of his mind. He looked down into Nell's blue eyes. Kind eyes. Not the eyes of a woman who wanted to hurt someone.

"We're saying she died."

Clint waited for more, but Nell held his gaze as if allowing him to take in her single sentence for an extended time.

And then he knew why. “So the Deadeye Gang won’t come and kill her.”

“She’s marked for death,” Nell said. “We talked it over, and we think she should be declared dead. We’ll bury an empty coffin, then we’ll spirit her out of town and send her far away. I’m afraid that’s her only hope.”

He was going to lose her. But better to lose a living woman than a dead one.

One was a victory and the other terrible defeat. For Mariah, there was no choice. For Clint . . . he ended up with a broken heart either way.

“Thank you for telling me.” Clint touched Nell’s hand. He knew loss wasn’t new to her. Nell was a widow who’d left her old life behind for the frontier.

“I didn’t do it because you were causing a scene and possibly drawing a crowd who’d find out the truth,” Nell said.

“Then why?”

“Because hiding her is going to be hard and dangerous. I offered to hide her in the rooms over my shop until she’s well enough to travel. But if there’s any suspicion that she’s not dead, my place is the next place they’d search after her own house. But they might not think to hunt through the rooms over the diner.”

Clint had lived above the diner for a while, but now he had a cabin on his homestead. He could easily use those rooms to hide Mariah.

And stand guard much more discreetly. As he fully intended to do.