



AIMING
for LOVE

BRIDES of HOPE MOUNTAIN ❄️ 1

MARY CONNEALY

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Aiming for Love is dedicated to Sabre Sage Burns,
a young woman I met when I traveled
to the area where *Aiming for Love* is set.

She has struggles in her life, but she has faced them
and remains a woman of beautiful faith,
generous smiles, and a loving heart.

You inspired me, Sage.
It was wonderful to meet you.



October 1873

Hope Mountain

Near Bucksnot, Colorado, Near Grizzly Peak, Colorado

Josephine Nordegren floated through the woodland silent as a ghost.

She smiled inside, but kept the emotion tucked away. Strong feelings almost had a sound. Maybe animals had hearing sharp enough to pick up a pounding heart.

She inched closer to the doe nursing her fawn. But *inched* wasn't the right word. Playing games in her head, she tried to do better. Not *inched*. *Floated* maybe.

Drifted was good. *Glided*.

She entertained herself with her thoughts as she glided closer, her goal was another little game she played. One she'd gotten almighty good at. Not as good as her little sister, Ilsa, but good.

She'd sneak up on the doe, slap her on the rump, and watch her run.

But not until the baby had its belly full. No sense interrupting the meal.

Settling in, only a few feet from the unaware wild critters, Jo waited in utter silence.

The doe's head jerked up. Her white tail flew high. She whirled, graceful as the wind, and charged straight at Jo . . . then ran right past her, close enough Jo could've gotten in her slap. The fawn stumbled, then, almost as fleet, dashed after its mama into the woods only inches from Jo.

She let herself smile then. Right out in the open. Because on the breeze came the scent of woodsmoke.

Very faint.

And a lot more interesting than a deer.

She moved toward it. The smell got stronger. She had a moment of envy for the deer that smelled it before she could. Ah, to be that good. Maybe the doe heard it, too. Jo had ambitions to beat every woodland creature at noticing the world around her.

She'd have known it was a campfire even if she wasn't expecting one—and she was expecting one. A campfire smelled different than if the forest in her Colorado Rockies home was on fire.

But after only a few days, she believed these men knew to take care of the woods. They seemed wise and cautious in their actions.

Knowing.

They wouldn't want the forest to burn any more than she did. Their care helped lure her. Even knowing her big sister, Ursula, would want her to stay well clear.

Instead, Jo floated through the fall woods. Leaves drifted

down from overhead, driven by a cool breeze that could turn mean and bring heavy snow at any time.

When she got close, she pushed the smile back inside.

Sitting only a few feet back in the lush forest, she was invisible. She'd chosen her clothes carefully. She'd made them just for this purpose. The different shades of dull earth tones sewn out of fabric scraps on her leather jerkin and trousers. She touched the spot on her chest where the strap of her quiver crisscrossed with the string of her bow. The clothing itself was made from deer hide, shot, tanned, and sewn by her own hand, though Ursula was the best at it.

The trousers were tight enough to not catch on bushes and mark her path with noise. But not too tight—she didn't want the fabric she'd so painstakingly patched with forest colors of gold, green, and brown to reveal the shape of a leg or arm.

The men worked diligently setting up the camp. They'd come for the first time only four days ago.

Jo hadn't seen a man since Grandpa died many years ago.

Now she couldn't look away.

She carefully took her bow off her shoulder and set it aside, along with the quiver, so they didn't rustle any branches. But she kept them within grabbing distance.

She inched closer so she could listen to the men speak. They were interesting, and she watched greedily. How they handled their horses. How they treated those pretty spotted cows with horns as long as tree branches.

The men were skilled with the fire, quick to put on coffee. She'd never tasted it, but Grandma had talked about how much Grandpa loved his coffee, and Grandpa had brought some home from time to time. Then, after Grandma died,

Grandpa made coffee on his own and talked of campfires . . . probably just like this one.

But Jo was too little then to have a taste, and heaven knew there was no such thing as coffee available for her and her sisters now.

She cast off the memories the coffee woke up and watched the men. It was almost impossible to keep from going out in the open and speaking to them.

The lure of it was matched by terror. It must have been men like this who killed her parents. Grandma and Grandpa had said it often enough.

The outside world had killed their son and his wife. Mama and Papa. Dead so long now that Jo could only catch glimpses of a memory of them.

And here now was the outside world, come nearly to her doorstep.

Had her parents been fascinated like she was? Was that why they were dead? The men seemed quiet and calm, but men must kill.

She should slip away. But she didn't.

Because she was waiting for the tall man. And then she saw him.

She sat up and leaned forward.

Then she caught herself. That kind of movement drew the eye of a deer. Since she hadn't seen a man since Grandpa died, she couldn't know if a man was as alert as a wild animal. But she had to be careful, just in case they were.

She forced her body to relax, but still her mind rabbited around.

The men were all sizes. Mostly lean as a strip of pemmican.

She only knew men could be fat or lean because she saw these men here and could compare them to Grandpa. He'd been stout, and he'd loved to slap his belly, laugh, and say, "A fat man is a rich man."

But the tall man was different from the rest. He told the other men what to do.

She'd heard him called Dave. She'd heard Warden. She'd heard Boss.

When she saw him she thought Dave Warden Boss.

The cattle herd way up here, closer to Jo and her sisters than anyone had ever come before, must be his. They spread out across the vast, open meadow surrounded by forest. Deer and elk herds, wild boar, mountain goats, and bighorn sheep wandered and grazed here. But no one had used this perfect mountain valley for cattle before.

Jo and her sisters had a few cattle, but they stayed in the narrow-necked canyon that hid Jo's house. And they were almost pets. They gave milk and had babies, but Jo couldn't stand the thought of eating one of them. She hunted instead, and she was very good at it.

The men, even as they sat and drank coffee and talked, were alert. They were comfortable out here with woods and wind, cattle and horses, campfires and wilderness food, but still always listening, testing the air for scent, and looking around.

Jo considered herself to be the same.

Dave Warden Boss had eyes sharper than the others. He spoke quietly, but when he spoke, the men listened. There would be stories told around the campfire as the meal ended and the dark closed in. They'd all laugh, but Dave Warden

Boss wasn't loud about it. He laughed and his eyes flashed with humor that she remembered from Grandpa. But when Grandpa's blue eyes flashed with humor, he joined it with a roaring laugh. Not Dave Warden Boss. He was a quiet man.

She watched them drink from tin cups. She and her two sisters only had two. Through the years the others had rusted through. Ursula had carved out a cup from a knot of wood, and it worked fine, but Jo longed for a tin cup she could take home to her sister. What a treat that would be.

Oh, Ursula would demand answers. She'd be fierce and scared. Jo wouldn't do it anyway—it was stealing. But she could think on it. She knew true temptation, maybe for the first time in her life.

It didn't matter if there was an unexplained cup to upset Ursula anyway. If the men were here to stay, Ursula would have to know about it. A tin cup would be the least of their worries.

Jo watched the comings and goings of the men.

Seven in all. Three rode herd while three slept. Then the first half would return and sleep, while the others rode out among the cattle. The extra man was Dave Warden Boss. He was out riding for part of the first watch and part of the second. He slept an hour at a time, rode out, came back and slept, woke and rode out. A restless man. A watchful man. She couldn't be sure when he'd go, but she'd watched every one of the three nights they'd been here, and she knew he'd stay away awhile.

She bided her time. Her sisters wouldn't worry if she didn't come home. She commonly wandered the woods at night.

Patient as a stalking cougar, she waited for the first three

men to ride out and the second three men to sleep. Then she waited for Dave to ride out. When he left, she floated toward the campfire, silent as a ghost.

No one woke. They didn't even stir.

The first night she'd only studied.

She'd watched them strike a fire with a magical wave of their hand and was in awe. She remembered matches, but their last one had been gone for years.

Grandpa had taught them to get by without a match, but watching that fire leap to life so easily was a near miracle.

She'd slipped in the second night and picked up a small tin full of matches. Studying them, she wanted to take them, but she set them aside. They hadn't noticed her in their camp that night, so the next one she'd hunted around and looked at more of the wonders they carried. She'd found a small tool they used to poke a hole in leather for stitching. They had one, an awl, Grandpa had called it. But to have two, so more work could be done, what a wonder that would be.

Now, tonight, the fourth night, she eased in again. The men slept, one of them making a ragged noise from his throat that had scared her the first night, but now she was used to it and congratulated herself for her courage.

She'd heard Dave Warden Boss say this was the last night up here. The herd had settled. Now they'd just need to come daily and ride through, counting and checking for trouble. She'd heard someone talk of building a cabin, but she wasn't sure when, where, or for whom.

Reaching the campsite, Jo lifted the cup where it sat by a coffeepot. It was the one she'd seen Dave Warden Boss holding. It gave her a thrill to hold something that was definitely

his. Not a spot of rust anywhere. She was so tempted to take a sip of coffee, just to see what it tasted like.

The sound of hoofbeats startled her. Dave Warden Boss usually stayed out longer. Moving faster than usual—silent but swift—she dashed into the forest, turned, and crouched. Waited.

Three men came in, three went out. It wasn't the man she'd expected. She relaxed as she watched the camp settle down again. When the ragged noise started, she knew they were asleep, and she smiled, ready to go home. Then she reached for her bow and quiver only to realize she still held the cup.

She'd taken it in her haste to avoid the approaching men. She had to put it back. But when would Dave Warden Boss be back? Did she dare slip into the camp twice?

A hard hand landed on her shoulder.

"I've got him."

Dave Warden Boss had her.

Jo whirled to dive away, run.

His grip was unbreakable.

Six men swarmed around her as she fought for her freedom.

She couldn't escape. Dave Warden Boss had a grip that seemed like he'd seen it all before.