

A young woman with blonde hair in a braid, wearing a dark dress with a white blouse and a grey shawl, sits on a rock. She is holding a wooden staff. The background is a snowy mountain landscape with evergreen trees and a large mountain peak in the distance.

HER SECRET SONG

BRIDES of HOPE MOUNTAIN *3*

MARY CONNEALY

BRIDES of HOPE MOUNTAIN • 3

HER SECRET SONG

MARY CONNEALY



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2020 by Mary Connealy

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.

ISBN 978-0-7642-3260-2 (trade paper)
ISBN 978-0-7642-3778-2 (casebound)

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 Natasha Kern Literary Agency.

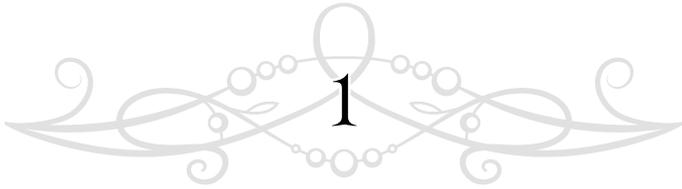
20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Her Secret Song is dedicated
to my new granddaughter, Adrian Isabelle.
A wonderful, joyful addition to our lives
in a year where the world
has had so much hardship and sickness.

I love you, Adrian, welcome to the family.
Born in 2020, may you always have 2020 vision.





March 1874

Hope Mountain

Near Bucksnot, Colorado, Near Grizzly Peak, Colorado

Wax Mosby was living a life that was going to kill him. Probably shot in the back by one of the men he worked with.

If he wanted to live, he had to get away from here, and his time was running out.

But before he could leave, he had to go up.

His honor demanded he face the Wardens. And his gut told him they were at the top of the mountain.

He'd put off the treacherous climb all winter. You could hardly tell it by the remaining snowdrifts, and he'd lost track of what day it was, but the hours of daylight and dark were nearly even. It had to be almost spring.

If he put off his climb any longer, riders would finally get through the snow-packed trail from Bludgeon Pike's ranch. Wax didn't want to be around when they got here.

He had to find Quill Warden—hopefully alive—and learn the truth about Pike’s land grab.

He hiked toward the base of the mountain, the snow getting deeper and the trail getting steeper with each step. Looking up, he knew he’d only just begun.

Foolish idea climbing up there. What in the world was he doing?

Finding the Wardens, that was what. And he’d do it, and today was as good a day as he’d get unless he waited until warm weather fully arrived. Wax planned to be long gone by then.

Come fully warm weather, the Wardens, a tough family with some salty cowhands, would pour down off that mountaintop, guns blazing.

And Pike’s hands would come pouring onto this ranch, guns blazing.

And here would stand Wax Mosby, who intended to never draw his gun again. He’d be right smack in the middle of a gun battle, with no plans to kill honest folks like the Wardens, no desire to kill evil men like Pike’s, and no wish to die.

When the path grew too steep, he had to use tree trunks to grip and drag himself upward. The way got harder. The trees grew straight up, right alongside the mountain slope. Finally, breathing hard, and nearly halfway up the mountain, he realized he was getting close to the ledge where he’d seen the avenging angel.

Last fall, after the Wardens had been run off, Wax had been *with* the man who’d shot a fleeing Quill Warden. Wax had diverted his saddle partner long enough for Quill to get away. But Wax had no way of knowing how badly

hurt Quill was. He stuck to his horse, so Wax hoped the man had survived the ugly bullet shot at him from behind by that coward gunman hired by Pike, Smiling Bob.

A few days after the shooting, Wax, along with Smiling Bob and Canada Phelps, had come to look around the cabin. Wax, being an uncommonly watchful man, spotted a man sitting on the ledge Wax was right now climbing for.

To Wax's mind, God had perched an angel up there. Even now, a chill ran up and down Wax's spine that had nothing to do with the cold wind.

That angel had looked down on Wax and judged him for an unrepentant sinner. And that had set Wax on a path to redemption. When Pike had sent Wax over here to live for the winter, he'd spent his time figuring out he had to change his life. No more hiring out his gun. He'd be a different man when he got out of here in the spring.

But first, the Wardens had to be found. Wax felt as if it were a charge straight from God. He had to talk to them before the shooting started. But the mountain still waited between them.

He moved fast, clinging to narrow hand and toe holds, intent on reaching that ledge. He was still a few feet away when he heard hoofbeats below.

Turning, his hold on the mountain unsure, he studied the trails around the ranch yard and saw five riders. Mean looking. Polished looking. No one Wax had seen before, which meant not Bludge Pike's men.

Probably.

The men spread out in a wide circle around the house. They dismounted at the same moment, with the same

graceful, economical movements, as if they were five bodies controlled by one mind.

They drew their guns and moved slowly, silently, toward the house.

Come for the Wardens, or come for Wax?

He might have more than his share of enemies, but the ranch was where someone would come if they were hunting the Wardens. They hadn't spread it around town about abandoning their ranch for the top of the mountain.

Wax wasn't about to hike down there and have a visit with this tough-looking crew.

The men riding with him the day he'd seen the avenging angel hadn't noticed a man perched up here. People didn't tend to look up.

But one of the five did.

No shout of warning or greeting. No questions asked. The first man pivoted toward the rock wall and opened fire. Then another did, then all five. It was a terrible angle, shooting so far up. And these men had pistols, which were notoriously hard to aim at this distance.

Wax just stayed still and let them waste their lead.

Then one of the men grabbed his rifle out of the scabbard on his saddle; the rest followed suit. The bullets got closer. Rocks shattered and slit Wax's skin. Another shot broke rocks under his hands. Wax lost his grip and started sliding down, picking up speed. A bullet struck—or something sure did—and his slide turned into plummeting as flying lead sang around him.

This was his end. He'd needed to ride off, change his life, change his name, change his soul. But he'd waited too long.

Hurling through the air, he dropped into the trees. He hit a tree branch and a shout of pain escaped him. Then he clamped his mouth shut and dropped out of sight of those killers. He landed hard against the trunk of a tree and was pinned between the tree and the mountain . . . and he heard laughter. Cruel, ugly laughter.

One of the men shouted, "That wasn't even him. I know what Pierce looks like. But a little target practice doesn't hurt."

There was laughter and horses walking. Men walking, talking. It took Wax a while to realize they weren't coming to make sure he was dead. They were uninterested in the man they'd just shot to rags.

Wax lay there, feeling the life draining out of him, bleeding and broken. But he stubbornly refused to die. He wasn't sure how long he was pinned there. He might've blacked out for a time, but he couldn't see the sun or judge minutes or hours from his position.

Finally, with terrible pain gnawing his legs—especially his left one—and his back, his head, his side, his arms, and just plain everywhere, he moved. He only moved his head enough to see through the treetops that the five men, saddlebags and bedrolls in hand, were heading into the cabin.

Maybe they'd decided to stay and wait for whoever Pierce was, or just hole up in an abandoned cabin now that the man living in it was dead.

He couldn't go down, and for a long time, he couldn't go up.

Then he found the guts to try.

One arm moved well. The other worked, but it was

murderously painful to use it. His left leg might be broken. It felt like a wolf had sunk its fangs in deep. It was hard to tell if he'd been shot or if he'd landed so hard it just felt like a bullet wound.

He fumbled beneath his heavy coat, drew his knife out of a scabbard he wore across his chest, then cut strips from his shirt. With miserable slowness, he found wounds and did his best to staunch the blood. It seemed that the blood had finally quit flowing, or maybe he was just running out of it.

Lying sideways, caught by a tree trunk at the waist, and wedged against the cliff, he righted himself. His stomach twisted and heaved as he raised his head. His vision narrowed, and a throb like the beat of a drum banged behind his eyes. But it was quit and die, or take the pain with him when he moved. It made him mad to think of those men, now in that comfortable house while he lay here.

They'd *laughed*. They knew they'd shot the wrong man, and instead of trying to find him, trying to make right a terrible wrong, they'd laughed and gone in where it was warm.

Wax Mosby was no quitter. And he wasn't going to die without a fight.

He wanted to live just so he could go down there and kill every man jack of them.

That thought, that powerful, ugly thought, stopped him.

Was that a reason to live? Was that the goal a man wanted to set, when his life hung by a thread?

No.

No, by all the saints, no.

A real man would act differently when he faced insurmountable odds and terrible pain.

A real man would pray.

Gathering every ounce of the knowledge of his sinful life in hand, he gave it all to God. He begged forgiveness.

More important, he accepted that forgiveness, and he believed.