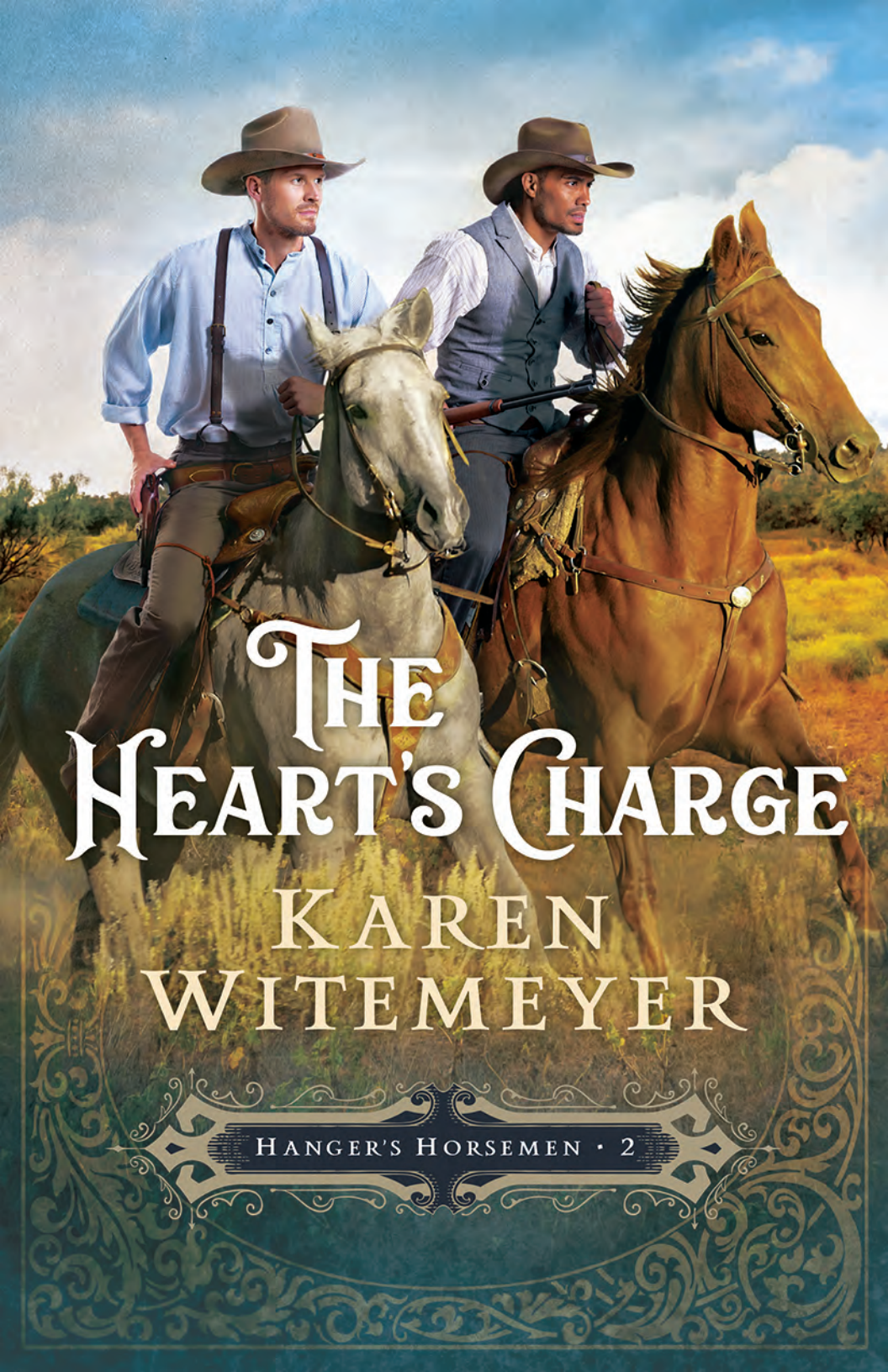




THE HEART'S CHARGE

KAREN
WITEMEYER

HANGER'S HORSEMEN • 2



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BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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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

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Witemeyer, Karen, author.

Title: The heart's charge / Karen Witemeyer.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2021] | Series: Hanger's horsemen; 2

Identifiers: LCCN 2020052792 | ISBN 9780764232084 (trade paper) | ISBN 9780764239168 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493431588 (ebook)

Classification: LCC PS3623.I864 H434 2021 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020052792>

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

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Cover design by Dan Thornberg, Design Source Creative Services

Author is represented by the Books & Such Literary Agency.

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the
afflicted and needy.

Deliver the poor and needy: rid them out of the
hand of the wicked.

—Psalm 82:3–4

To the four people I could not have
written this book without.

Toni and Jamie—Two incredibly talented
women. Your generous spirits proved so
wise and patient as you lent a perspective
to this project that I lacked. Your guidance
was insightful, personal, and such a
gift. Any lack in the finished version
of this manuscript is my fault alone.

John and Randy—Your knowledge of local
Llano County history and your willingness
to share your resources with me allowed
this setting to come alive. John—the
bridge scene never would have happened
without your historical research enticing
my imagination. Thank you both!

◆ CHAPTER ◆

ONE

LLANO COUNTY, TEXAS
SPRING 1894

When Mark Wallace left Gringolet two days ago to deliver a prize gelding to a wealthy rancher west of Llano, he never dreamed he'd be called upon to deliver a baby too. Or that the mother of said baby would be waving a pistol back and forth between him and Jonah as if trying to decide which fellow to shoot first.

"Get outta here! I don't want your help." Her face contorted, and a muffled groan escaped as she wrapped her left arm around her swollen belly.

She might not want their help, but she sure as shootin' needed it. She looked as wrung out as yesterday's washrag.

Mark, palms out in front of him, took a step forward. "Easy, now, ma'am. I'm not going to hurt y—"

The pistol exploded. Mark flinched. He took note of the barrel pointing toward the sky but tossed a look over his shoulder anyway, to make sure his friend wasn't sporting any new holes. Jonah gave him a nod, his hand curling around

the handle of his own revolver, ready to defend them if necessary.

Mark prayed it wouldn't be necessary. The lady in front of him might be a few cards short of a full deck at the moment, but she was still a woman. And a gentleman never abandoned a woman in need. Even if she shot at him.

The sound of the gunshot seemed to startle her as much as it had him. Her eyes widened, and her gun arm quivered. Seizing the opportunity, Mark rushed forward, grabbed her wrist, and knocked the pistol from her hand. She shouted, kicked, and pounded his chest and chin with her fists, but Mark ignored the pummeling. Well, until she nearly gouged his left eye from its socket. He couldn't ignore that. A man needed to be able to see, after all. Especially when dealing with a woman in a delicate condition who seemed to have taken leave of her senses.

Doing his best not to hurt her, he trapped her arms behind her back and gently but firmly pushed her inside the rickety cabin.

"No! I don't want you here. Only the angels are allowed." She struggled against him.

Angels? Mark believed such heavenly beings existed, but the way this woman referred to them sounded far from sane.

Then again, nothing about this woman had seemed sane since she emerged through the old cabin's doorway in her nightdress, hair falling down around her ears, gun in hand. They'd heard her pain-filled cries from the nearby creek where they'd stopped to water their horses and had approached the cabin to investigate, calling out to whomever might be inside.

Thankfully, the gelding they'd been tasked with delivering was no longer under their care. The buyer had taken

possession of the horse an hour ago back in Llano, so they didn't have to worry about keeping track of an animal worth more than half a year's wages while wrestling a pregnant woman.

And wrestling was precisely what Mark was doing. The tiny, dark-haired woman was drenched in sweat and bent nearly in half, yet she continued to resist him.

"Sorry for the rough treatment, ma'am," Mark apologized as he inched her over the threshold. She nearly tripped trying to stomp his boot with her bare heel and would've fallen had Mark not supported her weight and kept her steady. "But you need to be in bed."

That was where a woman in labor ought to be, right? In bed? He remembered his mother closeting herself away in her room when his little sister was born. Not that he had an inkling of what actually occurred in the room besides a great deal of groaning, whimpering, and the occasional scream.

He heard Jonah scramble onto the porch behind him and secure the fallen weapon.

"I wish Dr. Jo was here," Mark murmured under his breath, thinking how much easier things would be if Matthew Hanger's wife, Josephine, were on hand. Not only was she a woman, but she was the best doctor in Texas, as far as he was concerned. She'd saved his life and most likely his arm after a rustler's bullet nearly took him out of commission.

The captain had married her last year, right after taking on a partnership with her father at Gringolet Farms, the US Cavalry's preferred horse breeder. Captain Hanger's new position gave the rest of the Horsemen a sense of permanence they'd lacked during the years following Wounded Knee,

when they'd wandered from job to job, hiring themselves out to good people the law couldn't or wouldn't help. Mark didn't mind the ranch work—he loved horses, after all—but the permanence was a different story. He'd been itching for a while now. Itching to move on. To explore new territory.

Not that he didn't like the life he had at the moment. Good work. Good friends. The occasional job for Hanger's Horsemen to keep his thirst for adventure satiated. But the itch was growing harder to ignore. He had nothing against putting down roots. He just hadn't found the right soil yet. At twenty-eight, he wondered if he ever would.

"Maybe you should have taken stock of your lack of midwifery skills before you stuck your nose in this lady's business," Jonah grouched as he sidled around Mark and the squirming woman trying to elbow him in the belly.

She castigated Mark with the name of every foul creature she could recall, from skunk to toad to snake. Some she even used twice. *Slimy slug sucker* seemed to be a favorite. That one came up at least three times. He had to give her credit—the lady knew how to throw a good insult. Not that her verbal bullets would slow him down any. His mission was to get her to the bed that stood ten feet away, and a cavalryman never allowed anything to stand between him and accomplishing his mission.

"Just because you ride a white horse," Jonah muttered as he straightened the crumpled bed covers, "it don't mean you always got to charge in like some kind of knight-errant. Not all women are innocent damsels, you know. Jezebel. Delilah. Belle Starr."

"Cooper's gray, not white," Mark corrected as he gave up trying to inch the struggling woman across the floor and just picked her up. His right shoulder protested the extra

weight, the site of last year's injury making its presence known with agonizing clarity. He grimaced but managed to ignore the jabbing ache. That wasn't so hard to do when kicking heels and flailing elbows jabbed him in multiple other locations. "And I'm no knight in shining armor." Far from it. Not when he'd failed to rescue the one woman who mattered most. "I'm just a man who feels duty bound to help the weaker sex whenever the opportunity presents itself."

"I am *not* weak!" A small fist collided with the underside of Mark's jaw.

The unexpected impact caused him to bite his tongue. "That, ma'am, is abundantly evident," Mark said, his mouth throbbing. Thankfully, they'd reached the bed, and he was able to unload his ungrateful cargo.

Despite her claims of strength, the fight seeped out of her the moment she came into contact with the mattress. She curled up on herself and started rocking. "It hurts."

He imagined it did. *Ease her pain, Lord, and show me how to help.*

As her left hand splayed across her belly, sunlight from the open doorway glinted off something gold. A wedding band.

"Where's your husband, ma'am?" That fellow should be the one here, not him and Jonah. Maybe they could find him and drag his sorry, irresponsible hide back to take care of the wife who was laboring with his child.

"Wendell?" Her head came up, and something that almost looked like a smile passed across her lips. "Wendell's coming. He's meeting me here. We have it all arranged. I just have to get rid of the baby."

Get rid of the . . . ?

Mark jerked a sharp look toward Jonah. His stoic friend

usually hid his thoughts well, but not even the unflappable sergeant could hide the twinge of shock that knitted his brows together.

Surely she hadn't meant that like it sounded. She'd meant *deliver* the baby. Rid her body of the infant who was ready to enter the world. That had to be it. No mother in her right mind would—

"The angels will watch over our baby," she said even as her mouth turned down and her body stiffened. Another pain must be hitting her. Her breath came in ragged puffs, and her hands fisted in the sheets. "You hear me, God? Time to send them angels you promised." She threw her head back, the tendons in her neck standing out from her throat. "I did my part. Time for you to . . . uphold your end . . . of the bargain . . . 'cause this baby's . . . comin'!"

Jonah's footsteps pounded toward the door. "I'll go fetch a doctor."

And leave Mark alone with a deranged pregnant woman? Not a chance.

"I should go," Mark said, stepping away from the bed and following Jonah. "You grew up on a farm, right? You have at least a rudimentary understanding of what is happening here. I don't know the first thing—"

"You're white," Jonah said bluntly. He nodded toward the woman in the bed. "She's white. You can't leave a black man alone with a white woman. If word got out . . ."

He didn't need to finish that sentence.

"Either we both go, or I go," Jonah said, his voice like steel. "Ain't no third option."

Ashamed for letting fear of his own inadequacies temporarily overshadow his common sense, Mark nodded. "You're right. Sorry. I'll stay."

He glanced back at the woman muttering nonsense as her head tossed back and forth on the mattress.

“I’m coming, Wendell,” she droned over and over. “I’m coming.”

He had no idea how he was going to help her, but he couldn’t leave her alone. Childbirth had been known to steal the lives of healthy, strong-minded women. There was no telling what it would do to this lost soul.

— CHAPTER —

TWO

Jonah Brooks raced his chestnut gelding, Augustus, back toward Llano with a single purpose—retrieve a doctor and return before Mark ended up delivering the crazy lady’s baby. Wallace was smart. Had good reflexes. He should be able to catch the kid, should it pop out on its own. But as much as he respected Mark as a fellow soldier, the younger man had grown up in privilege, protected from the rawer side of nature. He knew guns, horses, and music. Babies were way outside his areas of expertise. If anything went wrong . . . Well, they’d just have to pray that nothing did. At least not before Jonah could retrieve a doctor.

Coming upon several town buildings, Jonah slowed his pace to avoid endangering townsfolk but kept Augustus at a trot. He spied a pair of old-timers bent over a checkerboard set up on a barrel outside the livery.

“Which way to the doctor?” he called as he drew near.

One of the gray-bearded fellows pushed his hat back on his forehead before pointing down the street. “Last building on the left. Across from the Southern Hotel.” He

stroked his beard, then gave it a tug. "There some kind o' emergency?"

"Woman having a baby," Jonah answered as he passed them without slowing his pace. "Thanks." He waved to the helpful fellow and guided Augustus around the wagons and pedestrians on Main Street until he came abreast of the small office across from the hotel.

The shingle read *Michael Hampton, MD*.

Jonah dismounted, tossed his reins over the hitching post, and jogged up the boardwalk steps, leaping over the last one. He yanked open the door and hurried inside. Two faces turned toward him. One belonged to a woman in her mid-thirties with a reddened nose and a handkerchief at the ready. The other was attached to a rotund fellow wearing a dandified gold brocade vest beneath his black suit coat. He didn't look particularly ill, though his disposition did lean toward the sour side, if his scowl was any indication.

"I need to see the doc," Jonah announced, hoping one of them would point the way.

Fancy Vest snorted. "You'll just have to wait. He's in with my wife."

"Can't wait." Jonah bypassed the snooty fellow and strode toward the hallway at the back of the waiting area. He wouldn't venture too far without permission, but he aimed to make sure the doctor heard him when he called.

"Cross that line, boy, and I'll have you brought up on charges."

There was no line. Just pine floorboards. But Jonah halted anyway, keeping his observation to himself despite the fact that being called *boy* when he was a year past thirty gouged his hide like a barbed wire blanket.

He didn't want trouble. Didn't have time for it.

The screech of chair legs against floorboards told Jonah the man had risen. He steeled himself for the confrontation, inhaling through his nostrils as he slowly turned to face his adversary. His father's words played through his mind, calming his soul.

You can't control what people say, what they do, or how they think. All you can control is what you say, do, and think. Control the mind first, son, and the rest will follow. Pain and anger narrow our vision. Take a higher perspective. Even the vilest man is made in the image of God and loved by him.

Jonah released his breath. Fancy Vest was trying to protect his wife's privacy. He was going about it in an unacceptably degrading manner, but that was on him. Jonah wouldn't rise to the bait. After all, he was here to protect a woman too. One who surely needed the doctor's attention more than whoever was down the hall behind closed doors.

Slanting a glance at the fellow who stood a good five inches shorter and at least ten inches rounder, Jonah said nothing—with his voice. His eyes, on the other hand, made it clear that he wouldn't be intimidated by insults and empty threats.

"Dr. Hampton?" Jonah called in a voice that boomed. "I've got an emergency. A baby coming."

Scuffling sounded on the other side of the door.

"Old Maisy is the midwife who delivers Negro babies in these parts," the woman with the red nose offered with a sniff that seemed to have more to do with disapproval than any ailment she was experiencing. "Ask for Tom Granger at the smithy. He'll give you directions. Maisy can assist your wife."

"Ain't my wife having the baby, ma'am," Jonah said, keeping his tone respectful despite the fact that the woman seemed determined to shoo him from the premises. "It's a

white woman my partner and I ran across in an old line shack 'bout twelve miles southeast of here. But I thank you for the information. If Doc Hampton can't see his way to come, I'll fetch the midwife."

A door opened, and Jonah pivoted to see a man juggling a medical bag as he stuffed his arms into a black suit coat and made his way down the hall. As he crossed the threshold into the waiting area, he nodded to Fancy Vest. "Oscar, you can go in to your wife now."

Fancy Vest tossed a glare at Jonah, then hurried past them.

The doctor turned his attention to Jonah. "How long has she been laboring?"

"Don't know," Jonah said. "Just ran across her. But she looked like she'd been battling a good while. Sweaty, tired, and waving a pistol at anyone who tried to come close. I witnessed at least two pains come over her in the five minutes it took us to disarm her and get her into a bed."

The woman gasped behind him. "Disarm her? Who is this wild woman?"

Dr. Hampton picked up the black bag he'd set on the seat Oscar had vacated and stepped over to the red-nosed lady. "Jenny, why don't you head on home? I'll check on you later."

"But . . ."

He opened the door for her. "Try a steam treatment and some nice hot soup. That should get you feeling better."

She rose, her eyes darting between the two men, obviously more interested in the wild woman they were discussing than the recommended remedy for her cold. However, she seemed to sense the doctor's unwillingness to continue discussing a patient in front of someone not involved with the case and reluctantly gathered her belongings.

Once she had left, Dr. Hampton turned back to Jonah.

"Did you get a name?" he asked. "I know most of the expectant mothers in the area."

Jonah shook his head. "No, but she did say somethin' about her husband." He searched his mind for details and found precious few. "Can't recall the name. She was talkin' sorta crazy-like, though. Goin' on about angels and insisting her husband was gonna meet her at that old cabin. But there was no one there. No husband, no female relative to ease her time. Just her and that pistol. I didn't even see any baby things. It was as if she'd made no preparations at all."

An odd look came over the doctor's face. "Was the husband named Wendell?"

Jonah's memory cleared in an instant. "Yes! That's it."

"Dear Lord in heaven." The doctor's face paled. "Wendell Dawson died three months ago."

Jonah's gut knotted. Suddenly all the talk of angels made an eerie kind of sense. As did the pistol.

"Fern Dawson nearly took her own life after his death, so steeped was she in grief. She has no relatives here. Not many friends either. She and Wendell ran a small ranch southeast of town until his death. In her condition, she had no choice but to sell off the cattle. I thought she might keep the house, but she sold it off too, a couple of weeks ago. She's been staying in town since, waiting on the baby to come. I thought she was making progress, that she was shifting her focus from her loss to what she was about to gain—a child. Wendell's child. But now . . ."

His words drifted off, and Jonah's mind made short work of filling in the dark possibilities.

All at once, the doctor's expression firmed. "Oscar?" He yelled the name loudly enough to be heard in the next room.

Footfalls echoed in the hallway before Oscar appeared

with a petite woman hovering shyly behind him. “Yeah, Doc? This fellow giving you trouble?”

“It’s Fern Dawson.” The doctor cut straight to the point. “Her baby’s coming, and she’s cloistered herself away in one of Wendell’s old line shacks. This gentleman is going to take me to her, but we’re going to need a wagon and some female reinforcement. Tell Jake at the livery to hitch up a wagon and alert Mrs. Abernathy. If Fern will listen to anyone, it’ll be the parson’s wife. I’ll tie a white handkerchief to a tree or bush at the place we turn off the road so he can find us.”

Oscar remained wary as he jerked his head toward Jonah. “Are you sure we can trust this fella’s—”

“Oh for pity’s sake, man, we don’t have time for this.” Dr. Hampton grabbed Oscar by the shoulders and shoved him toward the door. “Fern is not well. Go fetch Jake before we end up having to deliver another Dawson to the undertaker.”

Oscar’s wife skittered after her husband, eyes wide, face pale. As she passed the doctor, however, she slowed and clasped his hand. “I’ll find Mrs. Abernathy and let her know what has happened. If she’s not available to attend Fern, I’ll go myself.”

Dr. Hampton smiled. “Thank you, Hannah. You’ve put my mind at ease.”

She offered a small smile and released the doctor’s hand, but instead of following her husband out the door, she hesitated in front of Jonah. She met his gaze, the pink spreading across her cheeks evidence of her embarrassment and unease. Yet there was an earnestness glowing in her eyes that could not be denied. “Thank you for going out of your way to help a stranger, Mister . . .”

Jonah tapped the brim of his hat. “Brooks, ma’am. Jonah Brooks.”

“Mr. Brooks.” She dipped her chin. “May God reward you for your kindness this day.”

“A healthy mother and babe will be reward enough.”

She nodded. “Amen to that.” Her gaze darted to the doctor then back to Jonah. “Godspeed to you both. And may his grace abound.”

As Jonah waited impatiently for the doctor to collect his horse from the livery so they could set out, he silently repeated Ms. Hannah’s plea for grace. It was as good a prayer as any, he figured, and Jonah’s gut told him that everyone involved was going to need a larger than average helping of the commodity before this day was through.