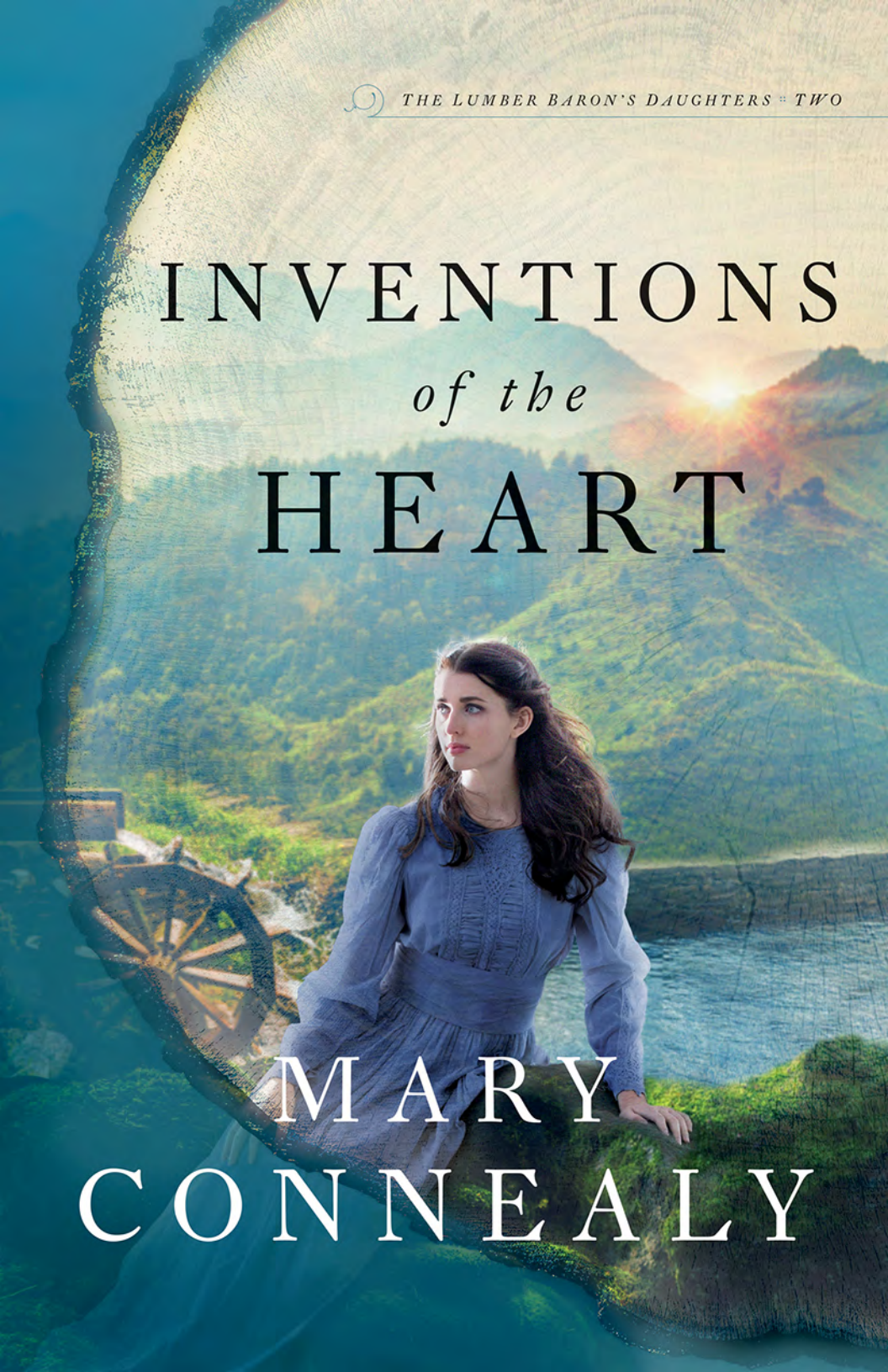




THE LUMBER BARON'S DAUGHTERS :: TWO

INVENTIONS *of the* HEART

The background of the book cover is a composite image. It features a woman with long, dark, wavy hair, wearing a light blue, long-sleeved dress with a lace bodice and a wide belt. She is looking off to the side with a thoughtful expression. The background behind her is a lush, green, hilly landscape with a body of water in the distance. A large, rustic wooden water wheel is visible on the left side of the image. The overall color palette is dominated by blues, greens, and earthy tones, with a soft, hazy light suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

MARY
CONNEALY



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BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2022 by Mary Connealy

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Minneapolis, 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: Connealy, Mary, author.

Title: *Inventions of the heart* / Mary Connealy.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, [2022] |

Series: The lumber baron's daughters ; 2

Identifiers: LCCN 2021053579 | ISBN 9780764239595 (paperback) | ISBN
9780764240164 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493437337 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3603.O544 I58 2022 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20211105

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021053579>

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

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Cover design by LOOK Design Studio

Cover photography by Aimee Christenson

Author is represented by the Natasha Kern Literary Agency.

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

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 7 6 5 4 3 2 1





To my grandchildren:
Elle, Isaac, Luke, Katherine, Lauren, and Adrian.
The absolute lights of my life.
It's almost the weirdest kind of pure luck that the
six smartest, sweetest, most beautiful children in the
world ended up all being my grandchildren.
What are the odds?





CHAPTER ONE

JULY 1872
TWO HARTS RANCH
DORADA RIO, CALIFORNIA

AT LEAST YOU KNOW YOU CAN TRUST ME.” Michelle Stiles slashed a hand about an inch from Zane Hart’s face.

They sat in his kitchen. His roof over her head. His food in her stomach. And safety thanks to him. Still, the man was so stubborn. She wanted to help, and besides, she was bored, and she knew she could do this job better than anyone else.

Zane slammed both fists down on the table, and his dark blue eyes flashed like summer lightning. “This subject is closed. Don’t you have a husband to find?”

Michelle never should’ve told him about the terms of Papa’s will. He’d been goading her about it ever since. And anyway, he shouldn’t be able to torment her so smugly about her finding a husband after he’d kissed her.

She shoved her dark curls out of her eyes and tried to

overpower him with the force of her will. “I don’t need to find a husband right away. Things are better now.”

Zane glared at her, looking remarkably un-overpowered.

She thought of what a terrible job her stepfather, Edgar Beaumont, was doing running Stiles Lumber, the vast company her father had founded and raised her and her sisters to take over.

When Mama married Edgar, their lives had turned ugly. They discovered Edgar’s plot to marry his stepdaughters off to loathsome friends of his and had no choice but to run.

And because he had them virtually held prisoner in the mansion her parents had built on top of a remote mountain, the fastest way to escape had been to ride down a flume in half barrels. They’d survived the reckless escape and found a place to hide on the edge of Zane’s ranch.

And Zane was right about marriage. Each sister inherited her one-third of the company when she turned twenty-five or when she married. Now with Laura married, all Michelle needed to do was round up a husband, and she and Laura could combine their shares of the company and take controlling interest in Stiles Lumber. Jilly could be next to get married, of course, but she seemed overly resistant to the idea, and Michelle couldn’t guess why.

Their company was still in danger from Edgar. But Zane didn’t need to keep bringing it up. The fact that he was right only made it more irritating.

“At least Mama isn’t in danger anymore. And Laura is all safely married and back there with Caleb and Nick to protect her and Mama.” Michelle trembled to think of Edgar’s violent anger toward Mama when he’d found the girls gone.

They’d tried to bring Mama along, but she’d fallen and

sprained her ankle, and they had no choice but to abandon her.

Michelle had hated it.

But then they met Zane and his cowhand Nick Ryder, who knew of the Stiles Lumber dynasty and had worked for them last summer.

When Nick heard Mama was in danger, he jumped on his horse and rode off to the rescue.

After that, they found gold near Purgatory, a rough settlement on Zane's property.

"Let me run the mining operation." There was no mining operation yet, because when Laura had found the gold and told Zane, all of them had known gold caused trouble.

No one had figured out what to do about a gold strike, so it remained a secret. Michelle wasn't just offering to run his mining company. She was offering to create the company, work the mine, and count, ship, and sell the gold. She'd figure out security and how to protect the gold. She had no doubt in her mind she could manage it.

She wanted to do it all.

"You're leaving," Zane said. "I need someone permanent."

"Let me do it until I leave. I promise to train my replacement."

"Michelle, you know you're going to have trouble keeping men honest. I need someone who's not going to hesitate when they need to beat the living daylights out of one of my miners." He glared at her in such a way as to say he doubted she'd manage that.

With some justification.

She couldn't see herself winning a fistfight with a man half-mad with gold fever.

“That’s the other thing I’ve decided, and it’s part of letting me run things.”

Zane didn’t hammer his fists again. Instead, he laid his face straight down on the table with a sigh that sounded like his whole body was deflating. “What now?”

She stared at the crown of his head. The dark swirl of his hair seemed much happier than he was. “I’ve decided that, for now, we shouldn’t hire miners. You should hire a few trusted men as guards and just let me and Jilly mine your gold. We’ll find out soon enough if it’s a rich vein. If it goes deep, then we can’t handle that much mining. But what if that big chunk of quartz is all there is? Jilly and I can quietly mine the gold. We can transport it back here under armed guard, and word won’t get out that you found it until you’ve sold it and used the money to buy half of California. That’s your goal, right?”

“Don’t act like I’m greedy.” He was speaking straight into the tabletop. “Not when you own a whole mountain covered with trees and live in a mansion that’d make a king blush over the excess of it.”

“You’ve never seen it.” Michelle paused, then shrugged. “It’s huge, though, and beautiful. A king would be lucky to have such a nice house.”

“I’m never going to let you run my gold mine. I’m sure you’d be good at it if you didn’t have to handle a bunch of rough men who probably have gold fever and might be willing to kill you.”

Nodding, Michelle said, “Not too many lumberjacks have any dreams about running off with their pockets full of trees.”

One of her brunette curls swung loose from the bun at the

back of her head, and she twisted it in her fingers thoughtfully. “I could handle it, though. I might need a gun. Can I borrow a gun, Zane?”

That lifted his head up at least. She saw him roll his eyes. “You’re admitting it’s a dangerous job. I can’t put you at risk.”

“I’m educated enough to manage. And there’s no way to get the material in here to work on my gas engine.” She gave him a narrow-eyed look. “Is there?”

Zane shook his head. “Forget the engine. We don’t need an engine on a ranch.”

“It’s not for the ranch. It’s for, well, for lots of things. But mainly it can be used in the sawmill my family owns and the trains we’re going to own. And I also have some ideas for improvement on rolling stock.”

“You’re not rolling my cows anywhere.”

Michelle blinked at him. “Um, not stock like livestock. Rolling stock like the rolling cars the train engine pulls. I want to alter them to load logs onto them more easily and make sure they’re strong enough to take the weight. And there are issues with the braking system on a long downhill slope, so I—”

“Stop talking about trains and logs and tell me what you want to manage.”

“Well, your gold mining operation, of course. But honestly, I want to manage everything. The whole world would run better if they put me in charge. Don’t you like the hot water in your back room? In the kitchen? I could turn one of your upstairs rooms into a proper bathing room with a tub, if you’d just get me a—”

“No. The hot water in the house is a wonder, and I thank you kindly for it. But I’m not letting you run my mine.”

“We’re alone for the first time. Let me explain again how my papa raised me to—”

“Zane!” Shad, Zane’s foreman slammed into the kitchen. “Trouble. Come quick.”

Shouting sounded from outside. Screaming.

Zane was on his feet running.

Michelle gritted her teeth. Thwarted again. But as Zane ran for the kitchen door, Michelle got up and ran after. Whoever was shouting really sounded frantic.

Michelle got outside as two horses, galloping as if they were running from wolves, charged into the ranch yard. The first was ridden by a woman with . . . two heads. Michelle squinted. What she was looking at made no sense.

A woman, for sure. Oh, not with two heads, but with a small child in front. Michelle felt better to figure that out despite the madly racing horse.

The woman’s dark hair flew wildly behind her as she screamed for help. The child, with her matching dark hair, wailed like a feral creature.

A man rode just behind her, terrible in his silence.

Michelle stopped feeling better. Too much blood. The woman was bleeding, but the man made the blood on her pale blue dress look like a scratch.

“Annie?” Zane’s shout could’ve shaken a roof down.

The woman, Annie, reined her horse frantically, and it skidded to a stop, almost sat on its haunches to do it, but she brought the horse under control. The man didn’t even react. He leaned down until the saddle horn had to be poking him in the chest. His horse galloped on until it came up on the barn. It whinnied and tossed its head and reared up higher and higher. Michelle thought it’d go over backward.

Zane ran toward Annie. Four men around the place, drawn by the shouting and galloping hooves, rushed for the rearing horse. The man tumbled off the horse as Shad reached the horse's head, leapt high to catch the bridle, and pulled the horse down with his weight. He led it away so it wouldn't trample the fallen man. The other three cowhands hurried to the rider.

Michelle pivoted toward the house. Jilly was better at this than she was. Then she remembered Jilly was gone. Laura was gone. That left Michelle, almost certainly more educated about anatomy and medicine than anyone else around the place. Nothing even resembling any practice at doctoring, though.

She spun back for the injured man and saw Zane rushing toward him carrying a little girl, with Annie clinging to his arm.

"Todd!" the woman screamed. She let go of Zane and ran faster.

Michelle sprinted, trying to get there, see what she could do.

The horses were taken into the barn.

The little girl began crying, "Pa, my papa. Pa." High and wild and terrified, just like her ma. Michelle didn't blame them.

Annie dropped to her knees beside Todd and tore at his shirt.

Zane, with his hands full of shrieking toddler, wasn't much help. He looked around and saw Michelle and made one brief move to hand the little girl off.

Michelle dodged around him and knelt by Todd as his wife got his shirt open. He was utterly still.

"A bullet into his stomach," Michelle noted. The next words to say were *he can't survive this*, but Michelle had

learned a few things about handling people in tough situations, and she kept her prognosis to herself.

“Let’s get him inside.” She snapped out the order with such command that the two cowhands not busy with the horses picked him up and carried him toward the house.

Michelle helped Annie up. The woman wasn’t steady on her feet, and it looked like she was bleeding from at least two wounds. Her arm was bleeding and one leg, but both seemed to be working fine. She’d live.

Todd . . . It would likely be time wasted. But Michelle had plenty of time, and Annie would need to see someone trying to help.

That’s when it hit her.

Annie and Todd. And the toddler was . . . was . . . Michelle dug deep. Her memory for names was excellent. Caroline. Annie Lane was Zane’s sister. Married to a rancher named Todd Lane. This gutshot man was Zane’s brother-in-law. Their picture was up in Zane’s office. Zane had mentioned their names once.

The men went inside and headed straight toward the stairs.

“No, bring him back. I want him on the kitchen table.” Michelle’s voice, again, got action. She turned to Zane. “I need bandages. Needle and thread, any medical supplies.”

She turned to Shad, who’d come in right behind them, the horses dealt with. “Get me a basin of water.” From the handy boiler she’d installed. But she didn’t say that. “And cloths. The rag bag is—”

“I know where it is.” Shad leapt into action.

Zane stood across the table from Michelle, Todd’s unconscious form between them. Caroline shrieked in his arms.

Michelle pressed two fingers against Todd’s neck and

found a steady pulse. Aware of Annie's fear, Michelle spoke of what she'd found. "A very strong pulse. That's a good sign."

Maybe he had a chance, except Michelle only had the most miniscule notion of what to do. She found the bullet wound. The basin of water and a stack of clean rags were there before she could ask again.

Wringing out a wet rag, she wiped the terrible bleeding aside. "Two bullets. He's been shot twice."

She looked at Annie. "Zane, get her a chair. She's been shot twice, too, but I want her to stay close to Todd."

Annie grabbed her husband's hand and pulled it to her lips. "Todd, Todd, can you hear me?"

"Shad, can you handle the chair?" Zane snapped.

Shad moved a chair behind Annie and as good as knocked her into it. Her knees were wobbly, so it wasn't hard.

"Shad, get Jilly and the Hogan sisters back here. All three of them are fine at doctoring." *Fine* was a little strong, but better than her. None of that mattered. Todd would die regardless of the skill of his doctor. Annie would live, regardless of who treated her. And Michelle, for now, was here to do her best for both of them.

Shad cracked an order to the two men who'd carried Todd in, and they left the room at a run. Jilly was riding herd with the Hogan sisters. The Steinmeyer family had ridden to town with some of Zane's hands. Melinda and her baby had gone along. The first time to town for any of them since they'd come to live with Zane two weeks ago.

Shad hustled out of the room and was right back with a good-sized cloth bag. "Here's what we have to treat injuries."

Michelle had Todd's bullet wounds wiped clean. She dug in the bag and found a long, stiff wire.

"I need to find out if the bullet went through. I didn't see his back well enough to be sure."

Bo, one of the steadiest cowhands, came in. "I didn't see any blood on his back. I'm thinking the bullets are still in there."

Michelle's stomach twisted. She was about to operate on a man who had no chance, or maybe just almost no chance. She had to try to help him. And that began with removing the bullets.

Carefully probing the wounds, Michelle felt the wire scrape against something metal almost immediately. She felt a surge of hope. "Not that far in. The bullets may have been spent when they hit him. Maybe they didn't hit anything vital."

Michelle looked up at Zane, who was bouncing little Caroline with surprising skill. "I could use a hand. Unless you've done this enough to want to take over."

"Nope, you're doing fine. How can I help?"

Michelle wondered what people saw when they looked at her. She must appear to be capable and confident. In truth, the sight of those wounds, the smell of the blood, the ashen face of the unconscious man, it all shook her deeply, and she was fighting to keep her hands from trembling.

Shoving her fear aside as best she could, she dug in the bag and was relieved to see long, narrow tweezers. "I need hot water to sterilize these tweezers."

Zane hurried to the stove and dipped water out of the wells into a basin and brought it to Michelle's side. She dropped the tweezers, and a needle in, then stared, wondering how long to leave them.

Or should she hold them over a fire? She'd read about Joseph Lister's sterile operating methods and knew cleaning her tools made everything safer.

Yes, she'd read about it, but she'd never come close to actually doing any of this kind of medical treatment. All she knew was, find the bullet and get it out. Sew the wound shut. If things were damaged inside, as they almost certainly were, she could do nothing. Her minimal knowledge of medicine, which she'd read and studied as part of her science courses, told her no one could do much.

Michelle prayed as Zane eased Annie closer to Todd's head. He stood across from Michelle. Michelle's eyes shifted to the little girl, then to Zane.

Zane seemed to read her mind. "Shad."

Zane's foreman was there before Zane quit uttering his name. He thrust Caroline into Shad's arms.

Shad, a man to keep a cool head, shifted his grip and said quietly, "Do you want a cookie?" He walked away with the little girl, bouncing her, easing her terrible weeping.

Shad left the room, and there was silence.

Michelle pulled the tweezers out of the water and probed. She listened to the sickening sound of a metal tool digging in flesh. The bullet wasn't deep, and the path it'd torn in Todd's body was straight. The tweezers pinched onto the bullet and slipped off. Breathing in and out to calm herself and steady her hands, Michelle tried again. She got hold of the bullet on the third try and pulled firmly. The bullet came out. Shad, toddler still in hand, was somehow back in the room and standing there with a plate.

Michelle hadn't asked for the plate and hadn't thought of what to do with the bullet. Just getting it out was as far

as she'd planned. She dropped the bullet on the plate with a dull click of metal on glass.

And went back for the second.

Michelle glanced at Zane. "Get a cloth and put pressure on the wound I've finished with."

The second bullet wasn't as easy to find. A surge of sickness almost stopped her from working when the wire went deep before it clicked against the bullet.

Michelle looked up. Zane was staring at the wire, then his gaze came up and met hers. It was all there in his eyes. In the bleak expression on his face. He knew exactly what happened when a man was gutshot.

Turning back to her surgery, she pressed the tweezers in through blood that nearly boiled out of the wound.

It was too long before she got a solid hold on the bullet and got it out.

"Pressure on this one, too, Zane." Michelle retrieved the needle from the bottom of the basin, then found the thread. She'd never done such a thing as sew someone up before. She'd never seen it done. And she knew . . . without really knowing at all . . . that there were things inside Zane's brother-in-law that needed sewing up, too, and she couldn't begin to handle that.

Remembering whom she was working with, a tough cowboy who lived a long way from a doctor, she asked Zane, "Can you set stitches?"

"I have. Shad's better."

Such a deep sigh of relief came over her that she gasped for air and only then realized she'd quit breathing.

Shad was there. He took over. Michelle got handed the baby. She backed away and realized she had blood on her

hands. She went to wash as best she could without dropping little Caroline. Once her hands were clean and with the toddler distracting her from her panic, Michelle turned to Annie.

“Let me have a look at your wounds.”

“They’re nothing. Wipe the blood off and wrap them up. I have to stay near Todd.”

Michelle thought Annie was an admirable woman. To distract her from being so blasted brave, she set Caroline in her lap.

Michelle went and wrung out a cloth, then knelt in front of the valiant woman. Between holding the baby and holding her husband’s limp hand, she barely noticed Michelle pulling a bullet out of her calf.

“Not in the muscle.” At least not much.

Annie nodded as if Michelle was speaking the obvious.

Michelle didn’t tell her it was a long way from a scratch and would need stitches.

Michelle decided to make Shad do that, too. For now, she pressed a pad of cloth to it until the bleeding stopped, then wrapped the pad tight.

She turned to Annie’s arm. Her sleeve was soaked in blood.

“Do you have another dress?”

“Y-yes.” Annie blinked at Michelle as if she feared why Michelle had asked.

“It will be faster and more modest if I rip your sleeve open rather than make you, um, disrobe. Your dress will be ruined. I just hoped you had something else to wear.”

“Rip it up. I have clothes here at Zane’s house.” Annie’s voice was laced with fear, pain, and anger. “I’m never wearing this dress again no matter how careful you are.”

Michelle nodded. Since there was a convenient bullet hole in Annie's upper sleeve, Michelle put both fingers in the hole and ripped. The sleeve split without much of a fight.

"This one isn't bad at all. I'm afraid you'll need some stitches on your leg, but this, well, it bled freely, but the cut isn't long nor deep. It's mostly closed. I can wrap it—"

"Just wrap my leg, too. It'll heal."

No, it wouldn't, but Michelle had things to do now. She'd wait and fight later.

She felt good about the tidy bandage on Annie's arm. Stepping back, she turned to wash her hands again, then came right back to pick Caroline up. Done crying, Caroline, with all the strange commotion around her, eagerly watched all the activity.

"How much longer on those stitches, Shad?" Michelle wasn't as good at handling a baby as Zane or Shad.

"I'm done." Shad straightened from his stitching.

"Let me bandage it." After a few minutes' practice on Annie, she felt like she had a reasonable skill with that.

Michelle settled Caroline gently back on poor Annie's lap. She looked over at Zane. "Wash your hands. You're going to need to hold the baby."

Michelle rounded the table as Shad straightened from his stitches. Under her breath, she told Shad, "Right calf. Stitches."

Shad nodded and went to his next patient with his needle and thread. Michelle didn't say anything, but she was impressed to see Shad stop and wash his hands before going to work.

Annie was so fixated on Todd that she didn't seem to notice Shad coming at her with a needle.

Zane went to take Caroline back just as Shad got a firm

grip on Annie's leg. He pressed one hand solidly on Annie's shoulder. "Brace yourself, sister."

Startled, she looked up at Zane, then down at Shad. "What are you doing?"

The needle poked her, and she hollered. She'd've jumped up, but Zane and Shad were ready for that, and she was held utterly still—not counting her mouth.

Caroline started crying.

The toddler crying, the mama shouting, it was loud enough—or maybe Michelle's bandaging hurt bad enough—that Todd's eyes flickered open.

"Annie, Todd's awake." Michelle used her whiplash voice. She'd had plenty of practice bossing people around.

Annie's shouting stopped. Caroline cried on. Zane didn't let his sister go, so Annie leaned forward to grasp Todd's hand.

"Todd, you're going to be all right. Both of us are."

Michelle didn't disabuse her. She was busy with bandaging, so she didn't see if Zane had a grim expression or not.

Shad set the last stitch and started with a rolled bandage. Michelle finished with Todd's wounds. Caroline quit crying.

The Hogan sisters and Jilly came into the kitchen at a run.

"Harriet, Nora, we need to get Todd to a bed down here. I don't want to carry him up the stairs," Michelle said.

"We'll go get it ready for him." Harriet did most of the talking for the two of them.

Nora took a sharp look at the bandages and blood all around. "You get things ready, Harriet. I'll help in here."

Nora came around to slide a supportive arm across Michelle's waist. Quietly, she said, "Sit down before you fall down."

With strong arms and the take-charge nature of a lifelong schoolteacher, she guided Michelle to a chair. Only when Michelle sat and her knees gave out on the way down did she realize how light-headed she was. Dropping the last few inches, she drew in a long breath.

Jilly rushed over with a glass of water and thrust it into Michelle's hands. Then she went around and plucked Caroline out of Zane's arms so deftly he barely realized his niece was being taken away.

Jilly got water for Annie and helped Nora clean the kitchen as best she could one handed. If not for the large man on the kitchen table, the room would be considered restored to order.

Todd and Annie were in their own world, speaking, holding hands. Praying. The world went on without them.

Two cowhands had come back with the Hogans and Jilly. Shad had stopped them at the door. He looked at Zane. "I'll be right outside if you need help, so will a few men. Call us when you need to move him."

Shad's eyes shifted to Todd. Michelle saw the grim truth.

They wouldn't be moving him to the bed. They'd be moving him to a grave.

Michelle's head went dizzy. She caught hold of the edge of the chair, afraid she might topple out. Her hearing went weird. As if a hive of bees were buzzing in her head. Her vision narrowed. At last it eased, and she knew she wasn't going to faint.

She noticed Zane speaking quietly to Shad but was too fuzzy to bother eavesdropping.

When she was sure she wouldn't pass out, she gulped down her water.

Todd and Annie continued to talk softly to each other. Zane joined in once in a while with a solid hand on Todd's shoulder. Then Zane asked Jilly for the little girl and brought her to Annie. Todd looked at the child, who was calm now.

"Hi, baby girl."

"Hi, Papa." She grinned and waved her arms, then tried to climb on the table.

Zane moved to grab her.

"No, let her come, but watch where she lands. Don't let her kick me." Todd smiled weakly. "Let me hold her for just a minute."

That's when Michelle realized Todd knew what his injuries meant. He wanted to say goodbye.

Annie's eyes filled with tears. She carefully held the little girl so she could be tucked in her papa's arms. Annie bore her weight and made sure Caroline didn't bump the bandaged wounds.

Todd pulled the toddler close and spoke gently to her. Spoke of love. Hugged her tight. Then he looked at Annie. Michelle looked away from the raw pain, the loss, the longing that passed between the two of them. It was an intimate moment, and they should have been allowed it without witnesses. But there wasn't time.

He gave a shudder violent enough that Annie lifted Caroline away from him. "She doesn't need to see this, Zane."

Zane took the child. "Jilly, can you take Caroline to the other room?"

Jilly bounced the little girl as she walked out.

Todd's shuddering stopped. He went still. Every bit of tension in his body left him. Michelle couldn't look away,

and she saw the moment his hand went limp, slipped through Annie's grip, and dropped to the table.

Annie began to sob. She hugged her husband, and her weeping rose. Zane let it go on a long time. Finally, when the worst of the storm passed, Zane pulled her into his arms and held her tight.