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MARY CONNEALY

*Marshaling
Her
Heart*

WYOMING SUNRISE
BOOK 3

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From Bethany House Publishers

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Her Secret Song



Marshaling Her Heart

MARY CONNEALY



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To my mom, Dorothy Dunn Frew Moore

She lived for 94 years,
and to me each one of them was,
once I got to join her life,
an honor.

1

AUGUST 1871
PINE VALLEY, WYOMING
NEAR THE WIND RIVER MOUNTAINS

A soft tap on the window snapped Becky Pruitt awake. She was on her feet, gun in hand, her back pressed to the wall beside the window before even being fully awake just by pure reflex.

“Who’s there?”

“Becky, it’s me. Nate.” Nate Paxton, her foreman. New at the job, he’d been with her just two years, but he was a man she’d come to trust.

It was strange, however, for him to come here in the night, so she remained cautious.

“What do you want at this hour?” She glanced at the lovely old clock she’d inherited from her grandmother and saw it was past midnight.

“I have something to tell you and I never got a chance today. No one else can know about this, only you. And it can’t wait.”

It was true they'd had a hectic day. Cattle to round up and get fattened up on grass she'd saved back before they took the long drive to Denver. She'd gone there the last two years and had gotten top dollar. She planned on it again. She'd talked to Nate plenty and they'd worked side by side, but all the other hands had been close by most of the day.

Becky swung the shutter open that covered her glass windows. She was mighty proud of that glass.

She shoved the window up.

"Come close. I can't yell this or the Grables will hear me, and not even they can know what's going on."

"Let me turn up the lantern," she said.

Nate reached through the window and caught her arm. "No light. It might draw attention."

She could just barely hear him, so she dropped to her knees and folded her arms on the windowsill. Her dark braid hung down long enough, it was pinned behind her arms. Nate had no business even coming to her window while she was in her nightgown. It was outrageous behavior. But she saw the intensity in his expression. He wasn't here for any improper reason. He had something to tell her in secret.

"What is it?"

Nate moved closer. Before he spoke, a black blur came diving through the window.

Brutus was here to save the day. He came to her side and nuzzled her hand, which she smoothed over his head.

Then there were paws at the window, and Lobo's muzzle appeared at Nate's side. She was Becky's other dog. Along with Brutus, the pair were parents for most of the

puppies in the county. Including the puppy Becky had given the Nolte family a couple of weeks ago. A puppy that had saved the Nolte family's life by warning them of approaching danger.

Lobo stood on her hind legs, put both paws on the windowsill, and poked her nose inside. She didn't dive in like Brutus. Lobo had a firm position on staying outside unless it was really important.

Since Lobo knew Nate well, she seemed content to rest her head on his arm. Nate ran a hand over her wolfish gray head. In appearance Lobo was more wolf than dog, but when she wasn't snarling at strangers, she had a gentle temperament that made Becky sure there was some dog in there somewhere.

Lobo licked Nate's hand. "Becky, I know I've got no business coming to your window, so I'll make this fast. I'm a former U.S. Marshal. I've been asked to go back to work."

Becky's arms dropped, and she sank back on her heels and forgot to whisper. "You snuck over here at night to quit?"

"Shhh! We can't wake the Grables." Jan and Roscoe Grable lived in the house. Jan cooked for Becky and Roscoe, Becky's ranch foreman before he'd busted up his knee, who cooked for the hands. They were on the far end of the house from Becky, but they weren't deaf.

Becky narrowed her eyes at her foreman. She quit reacting to every word he said. It was time to let him talk without interruptions.

"Go on."

"There's been another stagecoach robbery."

Becky gasped, then clamped her mouth shut. Waiting.

“The U.S. Marshals have decided the outriders aren’t enough. Somehow this band of outlaws is getting inside information about stages that are carrying shipments of payrolls. Some to the area forts. Some to the mines around South Pass City and other places.”

He paused. She didn’t respond. He blinked a couple of times before continuing on.

“This last holdup was planned carefully. The gang knew just where to waylay the stage. They picked a narrow trail with good hideouts and rained bullets down on those with the stage. They killed four outriders, the driver, and the man riding shotgun, plus there were two passengers.” Nate’s mouth went tight with anger. He shoved both hands deep into his dark brown hair, and his brown eyes flashed. Then he drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly, looking as grim as the news he was imparting.

“I met my brother in Pine Valley yesterday.”

“You said he was coming to visit, but you didn’t bring him out.” Becky felt like a few words wouldn’t derail the story.

“He’s a U.S. Marshal from Colorado, and he wasn’t here for a family get-together. He came here to stop the Deadeye Gang. He’ll bring in ten men—including himself. He asked if I’d work as a Marshal until we capture this gang, and I’ve agreed. They aren’t going to tell anyone they’re here. We’ve got a plan, and secrecy is imperative.”

“What plan?”

Nate stared hard into Becky’s eyes as if he were trying to read her mind. “I can’t tell you all of it, but your cooperation is needed. If you’re not interested, say so now and we’ll try to set this up somewhere else.”

“You can’t tell me?”

Nate waited. Clearly expecting her to either agree or disagree and go on about her life while their secret plan unfolded around her and she remained ignorant.

When she said nothing, Nate said, “All you need to do is let me hire three men who come riding in, sometime in the next week or two. Sal will be one of them. They’ll ask for work. It’s time for the fall roundup, then the drive. You ride off with every single cowhand on the place to drive the herd to Denver, just like always. Leave me behind and these three new hands.”

“I hire them and then ride off and let them go about their plan and not ask intrusive questions?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. You run this ranch like a savvy, experienced cattleman. I know you keep your eyes wide open and understand everything going on around you. This goes against all your hard-learned lessons.”

“Three men, not ten?”

“Yes, three men just because you always leave a few behind. Those three and I will be the ones staying while you ride off.”

“I don’t go on the drive. You do. You know I don’t like leaving the ranch for so long. I need to be here to run things.”

“This year it’ll be me. After you go, the other seven men will come in and we’ll run this investigation out of the Idee.”

Becky’s Ranch had ID as its brand. It stood for Independence Day, marking the day she started her own spread and got out from under her father’s thumb. It was known far and wide as the Idee.

“We need a place to lay low. The Deadeye Gang striking again so soon, and hitting so hard, has finally shocked the Marshals into taking action. And it’s high time. We’d hoped the gang would calm down after the Wainwrights died. My brother Sal said they now figure the Wainwrights were the ones urging caution, slowing things down to keep the pressure off.”

Becky covered her mouth with her fist, holding in the words. Peter and Henry Wainwright had owned the general store in Pine Valley. They’d lived respectable lives, but secretly they’d been involved in the area’s murderous stagecoach robberies. They’d finally overplayed their hand when a young woman had seen Henry Wainwright where he wasn’t supposed to be. Her testimony would have implicated Henry in a murder. They’d set out to kill Samantha Nolte, the stepdaughter of Becky’s good friend Nell Nolte—a woman who was now the justice of the peace in Pine Valley.

When they’d attacked Samantha, they needed to go through Nell, her husband, Brand, and Brand’s three daughters. The Wainwrights had lost. Becky and Nate had come on the scene with Brutus about the time it was all over. They and the sheriff had finished the Wainwrights and, they’d hoped, the Deadeye Gang.

It was not to be.

Nate went on giving Becky orders on how to run her ranch. He was doomed to disappointment, but she let him talk.

“With everyone gone from here, the Marshals and I will be free to slip around. No one lives nearby; we can come and go unnoticed. If anyone asks about strange men

in the area, I'll tell them they're new to the ranch. It's a decent plan, and we've got to take action and not delay. I know it goes against your nature to let your ranch be used like this. Let us do it anyway. Think of it as making a compromise to protect your own interests, just like any other hard-eyed businessman."

Becky was sorely afraid she was very hard-eyed right this minute. "You've brought your message. I need time to consider it."

"Three men will ride in together, including my brother. I intend to tell the other hands who he is, and the other two will be his saddle partners. I need to know right now if you're agreeable to hiring them."

Becky studied Nate. She trusted him. But turning her ranch over to his crew of Marshals, without even knowing what exactly was going on, didn't set right.

"I have time to think before your cohorts get here. When they do come, I'll hire them. But I'm not promising you anything now. I need more time. Your brother and his buddies can work here while I think about it."

Nate narrowed his eyes. Annoyance flashed across his features. He wasn't satisfied with her request for time. He glared at her for a few long seconds, as if he thought maybe she'd crumble in the face of his majestically strong will.

Too bad.

Then his gaze dropped to her body as though just now noticing she knelt before him in her nightgown. A mild blush rose on his cheeks, and his eyes quickly shifted to the windowsill. He tugged on the brim of his hat, turned, and scratched Lobo. Brutus licked Becky's fingers and jumped out the window to follow Nate and Lobo.

Becky stood to close the shutters as Nate popped back into view. Grinning just a bit, he said, “That’s a mighty pretty nightgown, Miss Pruitt.”

His head vanished then, and she heard him walk away. It took a bit to realize she was standing there with her jaw slightly dropped. Like a brainless sheep. Like a woman who’d never heard a word of flattery before. Which she had. From her pa’s dreadful cowhands back when she was growing up without a ma at her pa’s nearby ranch.

Those men and their crude flattery were among the reasons she wanted to leave that ranch as fast as she could, and she was always grateful to her ma’s side of the family for the opportunity.

Becky had only met her mother’s parents once when she was six, when her ma took the long journey to Omaha to meet Grandma and Grandpa Steinhauser. They’d been wonderful to her. Two years later, her ma was dead and her grandparents’ contact had been nothing more than letters and birthday and Christmas gifts. Becky had always endured harsh words from her pa whenever something had arrived from Omaha.

And then she received word they’d passed away and she’d inherited money from them. A surprising amount. And it’d been left to her very shrewdly in a way her pa couldn’t get his hands on. It was only after she’d received news of the inheritance and told Pa she was moving out and using the money to start up her own ranch that she’d realized her pa expected the inheritance and had plans for it.

Money from those nice people he’d repeatedly bad-mouthed and never let her visit.

And now Nate had said her nightgown was pretty. He