



# TOWARD THE DAWN

A WESTERN LIGHT • 2



MARY CONNEALY



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THE  
DAWN



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I dedicate this book to  
my very own romantic cowboy hero.  
Forty-seven years together and counting.  
Whatever I know about cowboys,  
I learned from you  
(well, maybe John Wayne and  
Louis L'Amour helped a little).

# 1



**MAY 1870**

I'm going to tear this canyon entrance open with my bare hands." Sebastian Jones had endured. He'd lasted the whole winter trapped in here. He hadn't known just how much he'd hate it—a hate that had started strong and kept building—until he found out there was no escape.

"Seb, will you stop? The canyon will melt open when it melts opens."

Seb whirled to face the little woman who had probably saved his life last spring when she and her friends had found him, shot, in an alley in Independence, Missouri.

"Kat, just go away. I'm busy losing my mind." Seb tried to unclench . . . his jaw, his fists, his gut. He'd been doing it for months, deliberately forcing himself to breathe, remain calm, endure.

"When is this ever going to melt?" Arriving at the bitter, dead end of his endurance, he threw his arms wide and exploded at Kat, who had done nothing to deserve this.

She marched straight at him, her own fists clenched, and

he braced himself to take a blow to the chin. Or maybe duck.

Then she marched right past him and plowed a fist into the stupid snowdrift that had blocked this canyon closed since January. “I hate it, too.”

That pulled Seb up short, distracted him from the sense of being trapped. A little. “You hate it, too?”

She yanked her fist out of the snow, stared at her knuckles for a long, cold second, then slugged the snowdrift again with her other hand. Her fists left tidy dents. Then she whirled to face him. Fists red and raw and still clenched.

Again, he braced himself.

“Yes!” She threw her arms wide.

“Why didn’t you say something?” He jabbed a pointy finger right at her shoulder. “You’ve been listening to me rant and complain all winter.” He poked her again, hard enough that she backed up a step. “Let me behave like some ungrateful, irrational madman.” Poke, poke, poke. A poke for each insult he dealt himself. “And while I whined and moaned, you watched me with that tidy little complacent smile on your face.” Another poke, but this time she swatted his hand aside. “You did that while you *agreed with me*?” He jabbed her again. “That’s just pure mean of you. You could at least have spoken up, divided their attention.”

“By ‘their,’ you mean the people that took us both in? Fed and clothed us? Saved us, transported us across the country, gave us a home and heat and friendship?”

Seb fell silent, watching her. The wind buffeted them. The beautiful canyon stretched out for miles. But the narrow-necked entrance to the hidden canyon stood clogged

with snow up to at least twenty feet over their heads. Probably higher, as he couldn't see the top.

She stood glaring. Blond, blue-eyed, delicate, with doctoring skills that had probably saved his life. A hardworking woman who, he just now realized, he knew very little about. She was quiet. She never talked about herself. It hit him that she was almost as secretive about her past as he was about his. Only he was a man who needed to be secretive. An inventor who wanted to earn a living with his work had to get his patents and not share anything until the patent was firmly in his hands. Did she hold something as secretive? What was she hiding? She was with Beth and Eugenia Rutledge when he'd met them. He'd just assumed—

“Us?” She plunked her hands on her hips. “How'd they save you? You were with them from the beginning. You, along with Beth and Ginny, saved me.”

More silence. He saw something in her, something bubbling, like a pot with its lid too tight. Pressure building.

“What's the matter? What are you thinking? You're standing there trying not to just flat-out tell me I'm furiously mad.”

She swung a fist.

He ducked. Glad he'd been ready for it.

“Hey, why'd you do that?” Maybe for all the poking, but it could be for anything. “Now *you're* acting like a lunatic.”

“I did it . . .” She threw her arms wide as she shouted at the top of her lungs. “I did it because . . .” Tears almost spurted from her eyes.

Seb hated it when women cried. No, not hated. Feared.

He always felt helpless and stupid, like a reckless and clumsy bull turned loose in a glass factory.

And still she yelled. Crying, yelling, arms moving like pistons on a speeding locomotive.

“I did it because I *am* a lunatic. I am *not* a friend of this family, or I wasn’t at the beginning.”

Seb shook his head. “I’d been shot and was on the verge of death when I met you. I don’t know what brought you to this locked jail cell of a canyon. I don’t know anything because you’ve never *said* anything.”

She looked as though she was fighting not to speak. Then she exploded. “I escaped from the same asylum as Ginny!”

Seb froze. He felt his eyes go wide. He clamped his mouth shut so he wouldn’t say another thing. Just in case it led to more yelling, more tears, more agitation.

Her eyes narrowed, and she glared hard enough to burn the flesh from his bones.

“You agree, don’t you? You believe I’m a madwoman just like my wretched uncle did when he locked me away and took all the money I inherited.”

He didn’t have a choice now of keeping his mouth shut. Her accusation called for a response. Silence might seem like he agreed with her wretched uncle. “Really, you escaped from a lunatic asylum?”

She swung again. Open hand this time. But he was ready, and she missed.

“Cut that out.” He braced himself to duck again.

“You should let me hit you.”

“No, I shouldn’t. Why would I do something that stupid?”

“You just seem like a coward is all. Ducking like that.”

Stay in there and take it.” She shrugged, and some of the white-hot fury seemed to ebb. She swiped the sleeve of her blue gingham dress across her eyes, then pulled a handkerchief out of one sleeve, turned aside, blew her nose, mopped her eyes a bit more, and turned back.

He said, “So, tell me about the asylum.”

Kat shook her head and turned back to the snowdrift. A hundred yards long and twenty or thirty feet high. She stepped up to the place she’d punched and studied the holes she’d left. “Do you remember last September when we came in here?”

An annoying question when he’d already asked one and had been ignored. “Of course I remember it. It’s the last time I was in the world outside of this paradise.”

Kat glanced over her shoulder at him, her mouth in a grim line. “Me too. Well, last September when we drove the wagons through here, there was snow on the ground. Not snow like a recent storm, but old, melting ice tucked into the nooks and crannies along the edges of this canyon.”

Seb remembered. “You think it was still melting in September?” He was shouting by the time he finished saying it. Horrified. There was no escape. His next invention had better be wings.

“Mountains have snowcaps that never melt. We’re not on a mountain peak, but we’re high up. Really high up. Yes, I think this will take months yet to melt. If it ever does. You remember this closed up in January?”

“I remember that, too, Kat,” he said impatiently. He didn’t want to talk about that. “About the asylum—”

“It strikes me that Oscar came out here maybe late

summer before we made the trip on the wagon train. He must've gotten in. He did so much work in here, he couldn't have come in September."

Oscar Collins was the man who'd helped Beth plan Ginny's escape from the Horecroft Insane Asylum. He'd discovered Hidden Canyon a hundred miles from nowhere. He'd bought it. He'd driven in a herd of cattle. He'd built the cabin the women lived in. With Jake Holt now married to Beth, Jake lived in the cabin, too. He'd planted a garden of plants that would reseed themselves or come back from their roots. He'd planted trees. He'd had to work for months to get the canyon ready.

The men, meanwhile, lived in a cave near the cabin with a decent entrance built onto it. The men were warmer in the winter and would probably be cooler in the summer. They had a hot spring in the extensive cave that provided most of the heat, and each of the three men, Oscar, his brother Joseph, and Seb had their own rooms. Plus there was a kitchen area and honestly any other rooms they wanted. The cave stretched back a long way. Seb used one room for a laboratory, although Oscar was threatening to build him his own laboratory because his experiments occasionally created fumes, making breathing difficult.

"I don't know when he came. He said he knew about this canyon from years ago—how it had called out 'home' to him from the first moment he saw it. But his life drew him back to Chicago. Then, when Ginny needed a hiding place, he thought of it. Beth gave him enough money to buy it, and enough to outfit three wagons with enough supplies to last forever. They intended to come here and stay for the rest of their lives. Or at least the rest of

Thaddeus Rutledge's life." As long as Thaddeus, Ginny's husband, was alive, he had rights over her that included locking her away in an asylum based only on Thaddeus's opinion that his wife was insane.

Beth had warned Seb of their plans. She'd offered many times to get him to the railroad and give him enough money to go wherever he wanted. But no, he'd come along instead. It had sounded so safe. And he'd been shot by an unknown gunman. Fear had made a hidden canyon sound perfect.

If only he'd known it would end up feeling like a noose around his neck.

"I wonder if Thaddeus survived those stab wounds last fall?"

"How could we ever know when we're trapped in this stupid canyon?" Seb turned to the mountain of snow and punched it right in its snowy face.

Kat came and studied the fist marks, three of them now, side by side. "I think we can get out. We have a shovel in our cabin."

Seb's head snapped around. "Again with 'we,' like 'us'? Admit it, you want out as badly as I do."

"At least as badly."

He moved up close enough that his nose almost touched hers. He wasn't an overly tall man, five-foot-nine . . . and a half with his boots on. Yet she was a little thing and made him feel tall. He did his best to loom over her.

Then his blue eyes met hers and held.

She was a pretty woman, no doubt about it. He'd noticed that before. But only a fool tried to court a woman with no preacher in sight and a group of men who'd shoot him for anything less honorable than a true courtship.

Her eyes held the same as his. Speaking just above a whisper, he said, “You’ve never talked about yourself or your past, Kat. But I’d’ve said I know you because I’ve seen you work. I’ve seen you do what’s necessary to survive out here and do it with wisdom and patience. Right this minute, I’ve learned I don’t know you at all and that’s because you treat life like it started on that wagon train. And I’ve never even noticed. But what I do know is you’re as sensible and sane as any woman—any *person*—alive. Who locked you up? Who’s this uncle that wanted you out of the way so he could take your money? Who is he, and where is he? I’ve a mind to go have a short, hard talk with him.”

“No. You don’t dare.” Her hand snaked out and caught the hand he’d just poked her with.

Well, not *just*. It’d been a few minutes. He’d stopped poking and ranting when he realized what a terrible thing it was for her to be declared anything but the most rational of women.

They stood, locked in combat, her eyes urgent. Her grip was like iron . . . well, very soft, warm iron that he could have freed himself from instantly, except he didn’t want to.

“I’m getting out of here. Come with me.” The words just popped right out of his mouth, as if his brain was in no way connected to them. He paused for a moment and wondered if how he felt right here, right now fit the definition of insanity.

She let go of his arm as if she had to force her hand to open. Then she shook her head, closed her eyes, and turned back to the snow. “How will you do it?”

Seb’s mind went a little wild when he heard something

in her question that she probably didn't mean the way it sounded. How will you do . . . oh, the snow barrier!

"See where you punched your fist in and where I did?" He turned and stared blindly at the snow, anything but look at her, just in case she could read his mind.

"Yes, of course I can see it. It's a foot in front of my face."

"Earlier it was like powder, remember? There was no getting over it. A person would just sink in over his head and flounder." He didn't admit it, but he knew because he'd tried. He'd made it until about March before he tried to climb out the first time. He'd tried again in April. Now it was late May. He hadn't really started wanting out desperately until he'd realized it wasn't possible. "It was impossible to make forward progress, and a horse was out of the question."

He finally started seeing the snow instead of what he'd *seen* when Kat had asked him that question.

He continued, "It's changed. It rained twice in the last few weeks. I think we can climb it now. We can cut a more gradual slope in it, one a horse could walk over."

There was no way to leave, not without a horse. It was just too far a distance for a man to walk. And Seb didn't have a horse. Which was something else he needed to figure out. He had some money. Jake would sell him a horse. He glanced at Kat. Or two horses.

Kat leaned forward, clawed at the snow. "It's crisp and tight and heavy. It's not going to go back to powder. And look." She pointed at the ground right up against the canyon wall. A stream of water flowed like a spring. "It's melting. It'll take a while, but it *will* melt."

Seb didn't think he could wait any longer, not without