

A man in a dark suit and hat stands in a mountainous landscape. The background features snow-capped mountains, evergreen trees, and a blue sky with white clouds. The man is standing on a rocky path in a grassy field.

GOLDEN STATE TREASURE · 1

Whispers of Fortune

MARY CONNEALY

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To my cowboy husband

You're retired now, but you'll always
be a cowboy at heart.



ONE



June 1874

A fist slamming against the door startled Beth Ellen Hart. She shrieked and dropped the china bowl she was washing, which shattered on the floor.

“Get out here! I want answers!” a man’s voice shouted. He sounded furious.

Gretel came running into the room. They exchanged frightened looks.

Ellie grabbed the gun Zane kept on the top shelf of the kitchen cupboard.

The shouting and slamming went on as Ellie marched to the kitchen door, determined to drive off whoever was assaulting her house. That was her favorite bowl!

“Wait!” Gretel rushed to her side, snatched up the Winchester 73 rifle from over the back door and stepped to the side. “Stay out of my line of fire.”

Ellie nodded, then shoved back the latch on the door and jerked it open. The stranger’s fist, which had been aiming at the door, missed hitting her in the nose by inches. She

ducked out of the way so swiftly she fell over backward. Her gun went sailing.

A cracking sound from behind her was Gretel cocking Zane's Winchester.

The man stepped into the kitchen and reached down for Ellie.

"Zuruckbleiben du, schmutzig schurke," she said.

He opened his mouth, probably to shout some more, then clamped his jaw shut. Gretel tended to lapse into German under stress, and that drew his attention—that and the rifle pointed at his chest. He straightened away from Ellie and stared at Gretel.

Ellie scrambled to her feet, ran for the gun she'd dropped, and aimed it again at the man, who stood there looking addled. She was well away from Gretel, so they had him at the point of a triangle.

Ellie had no idea what Gretel had said but could guess and added her own warning. "Get off my land."

The man was not overly tall, five-foot-nine or so, with dark curly hair under an odd, round hat with a narrow brim. He wore a dusty suit of clothes that looked to be many years old. Clean-shaven with blue eyes that shot lightning at her.

He saw the guns and didn't attack if that was his plan.

"Where are my brothers?" He was still mad, snapping at them, face taut and fists clenched. But he stayed put. "I'm not leaving here without them."

That was when Josh stepped up behind the man. "Do I need to send for the sheriff?"

It was a bluff. The sheriff would be unable to get to their ranch for about an hour, and that was if they sent a man for Dorada Rio, the closest town to their northern California ranch, on a galloping horse, found the sheriff immediately

and rode straight back at full speed. And Ellie wasn't about to hold this man at gunpoint for that long.

"Talk, mister," Ellie said. "What do you mean barging into my house like this?"

"He punched Ellie, Josh. Knocked her to the floor." Gretel's hands trembled on the heavy rifle.

Josh shoved the man forward. "Sit down."

He took the gun from Gretel and pointed the barrel toward the floor. "You punched my sister?"

"I don't want to sit down. And no, I did *not* punch your sister. I was knocking on the door. She pulled it open and was in the way. I—"

"You're not going to tell me that my sister hit you right in your fist with her face, are you?" Josh said it as if he were the very voice of doom.

"I did not hit her—I would *never* hit a woman. She ducked and stumbled back and fell." The man's blue eyes shifted to Ellie. "Tell him I didn't hit you."

Ellie enjoyed a very sweet moment letting him sweat as he looked between her and her tall, blond Viking of a brother. She had the same Nordic coloring as him but was built with finer lines, thank heaven. But truth was truth. She didn't need to add reasons to think ill of the man. He was awful enough.

"He was pounding on the door when I opened it." She looked at Josh and caught a spark of humor in his eyes. "His fist came right at me with no intent to punch me. I ducked and fell just like he said. He never touched me."

"Give me my brothers now, and I'll be glad to get off your stinking land. We're leaving California and heading home to New York."

They all turned back to the disheveled, antagonistic man.

Ellie had some notion of what he might mean, yet it galled

her to cooperate. “What are your brothers’ names? And don’t think we’re going to let some stranger come riding in here and leave with our boys.”

“*Our* boys?” The man’s eyes narrowed. “They’re *my* boys. My brothers’ names are Thayne and Lochlan Mac—”

“MacKenzie?” Ellie’s heart sped up. She rested a hand on her heart. “Those boys are your brothers?”

“They’re here then?” His breath whooshed out, and he bent forward as if he might collapse. “I’m Brody MacKenzie. You took my brothers off the streets of San Francisco. I’m here to take them back with me.”

Ellie lowered her gun and stared at Mr. Brody MacKenzie. “I’m Beth Ellen Hart. I go by Ellie. This is my brother, Josh, and the woman who aimed that rifle at you is Gretel Steinmeyer.”

“We have over two dozen children here at our school,” Josh said, setting the rifle back on the pegs over the door. “Every one of them orphans. If those boys are your brothers, then why were they living on the streets?”

“And hungry,” Ellie added, hands propped on her hips. “Wearing nothing but rags.”

“Cold. Soaked through from the winter rain,” Josh went on.

“Uneducated.” Ellie glared at the man.

“Unwanted.” Josh crossed his arms tight over his chest.

“Unloved, even by their brother,” Ellie said. “That is, if you *are* their brother.”

“I am their brother. They ran off—I’ve been searching for them.”

She could see as much. The man wasn’t a spitting image, but similar enough, especially similar to Thayne, even down to the Scottish brogue in the way he talked. “If you weren’t

taking care of them before, how are we to believe you'll begin taking care of them now?"

Brody's shoulders sagged, and he sank into a chair at the kitchen table. He rubbed his hands over his face. "They're alive and well? Were they bad off when you found them?" Then his temper flared. "What are you doing with them, them and all the children you sweep up off the streets as if you think they're trash? Are you forcing them to work on your ranch? If they've signed anything, indentured papers and the like, I'll fight you in court. They're too young to sign—"

"Stop talking before you make a bigger fool of yourself than you already have." Josh stepped to the door and said to Ellie, "Let's take him out to see these boys we're forcing into labor." He jabbed a finger out the door. "But you're not riding off with them until you convince us they'll be safe with you this time. Because they sure as certain weren't safe with you before when they slipped by your notice and managed the journey alone all the way to California from New York. Lead the way, Ellie."

Ellie stepped up to look closer at Brody MacKenzie. She saw it in his eyes, a shine that could've been tears. Relief that he'd found them? He seemed to care about his brothers. At least right now he did. But Josh had the right of it, and she hardened her heart against feeling any sympathy for Brody. He was going to have to convince her before she let those two troublemaking scamps out of her sight.



His brothers. It had to be them. He hoped and prayed and kept the tears from falling through sheer grit.

Brody followed the woman. Ellie Hart. She had on a pretty yellow calico dress that almost matched the yellow of her

hair. He'd hardly looked around when he came riding in wild with fear, which he covered with anger.

"You know, this ranch is notorious in San Francisco for snatching up children and hauling them away, never to be heard from again."

The woman, Ellie, glanced back over her shoulder, then looked on past him. "We're notorious, Josh."

A faint chuckle sounded from behind Brody. "I can't wait to tell Zane he's known as a kidnapper and child-enslaver. That oughta make him mad."

"Michelle will calm him down, I expect."

Both of them laughed.

Brody listened to the back and forth at the same time he rounded the house, a nice-sized ranch house, and gazed past the huge barn to see sheds and more houses and a big whitewashed building two stories high. Every structure was well built. The houses had gardens out front with fences encircling modest yards. A prosperous ranch that almost looked like some of the small towns he'd visited.

Horses grazed in a corral. Chickens pecked at the ground behind a wire fence. He smelled hogs but didn't see them, but they could be behind any one of a dozen outbuildings. And spread out over miles of rolling grassland, he saw red cows with white faces, grazing and fat and contented.

But it was the big building that drew him.

Ellie must have noticed, though she seemed to be walking fast, her attention averted.

He, of course, was focused on the house and not paying the pretty blond woman with the sassy attitude any mind.

"Your brothers are most likely in class. Though they've been known to sneak off and not return until mealtime." This time she looked at him with a single arched brow.

“It’s them all right. Those two are hard to keep ahead of. I shoulda known better than to go off to college. They were too much for Ma, and heaven knows Pa was no help.”

That earned him a sharp look, but she didn’t say why. Probably blamed him for abandoning them. Fair enough. He blamed himself.

Ellie reached the door and swung it open to complete silence.

It was a school. He could smell it. Chalk dust and books and, well, he couldn’t say what else exactly. He just knew a school when he smelled one. They stepped into a wide hall lined with several doors in a row straight across from him and two sets of stairs leading to the left and the right.

“The upper floor has bedrooms. Several children in each room and bunk beds. We call it a dormitory. The boys on the right, the girls on the left. The upstairs are divided so there’s no access between the two sides without coming down here. Most rooms are for three or four, but your brothers stay in a room where it’s just the two of them. That’s because we aren’t full.”

His brothers had always shared a room more fit for a closet, and when Brody was home, he slept in there with them. The two of them in a room big enough for four would be the finest place they’d ever stayed.

Ellie continued, “The children are in special individualized classes this time of day.” She pointed to the door farthest to the right. “Morning is four grades divided up by age, the afternoon targeted to each child’s skills. Thayne has shown an unusual gift for math and science. He focuses on that in his afternoon classes, with a few related subjects like physics and calculus.”

Thayne, his impish sixteen-year-old brother, had a talent

for arithmetic? How had they gotten him to sit still long enough to find that out?

“And Lochlan is fascinated by geography. He’s always studying maps and asking questions about the world at large.”

Now, that sounded like Brody’s fourteen-year-old brother. He was searching for MacKenzie’s Treasure. He probably loved geography because reading a map might lead him to a gold mine, though it never had for their pa.

“We keep the rooms quiet, Brody.” Ellie spoke softly as she reached for the doorknob to the right. “I’ll go get your brothers and bring them out. My older sister, Annie, is their teacher for this session, which this late in the day will be special skills. Be very quiet. Annie believes that teaching the children to direct their own studies, work independently, and most of all control themselves are the main goals of a teacher.”

She opened the door. Though Brody kept quiet, he was standing right there and saw Lochlan in plain view right in front of him.

Lochlan saw him. His eyes went wide. He leapt to his feet, screamed, and jumped a full foot off the floor. “Brody! Thayne, come quick—Brody’s here!” He turned to the room and shouted, “My brother is here!”

Brody took one second to see the severely annoyed face of the teacher and winced, but only for a second because his brothers came charging at him, and he found himself overcome with happiness and relief.

His brothers’ boots thundered across the floor. There was an eruption of talking and excited laughter from the schoolroom. Then they hit Brody so hard he’d’ve fallen if he hadn’t staggered into Josh. Josh kept him from going down under the onslaught.

And then Brody held them. His brothers. Alive and well. “I found you! Thayne, Lochlan . . . thank God, thank God.”

His brothers, now nearly full grown, were all right. And now Brody had another chance to do things right. Be a good big brother. Show these two he loved them and wanted to take care of them.