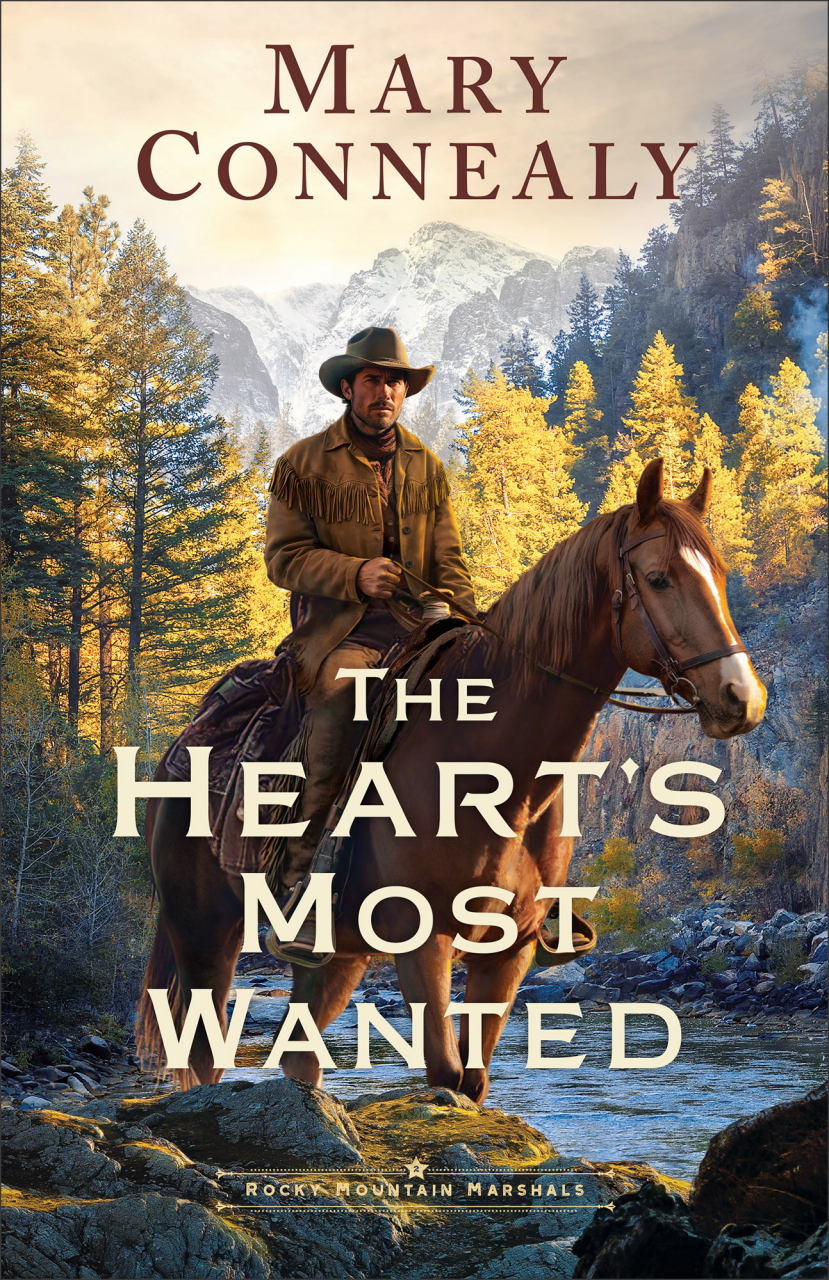


A man with a beard, wearing a brown cowboy hat and a fringed jacket, is riding a brown horse. They are in a rocky river with a forest of tall evergreen trees in the background. In the distance, there are snow-capped mountains. The scene is lit with warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

MARY
CONNEALY

THE
HEART'S
MOST
WANTED

ROCKY MOUNTAIN MARSHALS

THE HEART'S MOST WANTED

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CONNEALY



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To my grandchildren:
Elle, Isaac, Luke, Katherine, Lauren, Adrian,
Quinn, and Harrison

It's an almost freakish coincidence that they ended up
being the brightest, most beautiful human beings ever.

1

SEPTEMBER 1872

THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS OF COLORADO

If he could've done it, he'd've left them all behind.

Well, maybe not Owen. But everyone else was slowing him down.

Not as far as speed went. Rosalind Beck, his old childhood friend he'd found living alone in the wilderness with her son, was keeping up all right. Roz, the little pill, could ride her horse like an Indian warrior. Her little son, Jesse, stuck on his horse like a bur. But *little* was the key word there—for both of them. Roz was a pint-sized blonde. The kid was ten. Not really the trained, sharpshooting, ice-in-their-veins lawmen U.S. Marshal Morgan Sawyer wanted at his side.

Morgan wasn't that thrilled to have Owen's wife, Delaney, along either. Yet the Rileys appeared to come as a package. He had accepted a few days into this search that there was no shedding them, so he didn't even try. He did try not to think about the newlyweds, though. He had a trail to find, after all.

Together, they were setting off into the Colorado Rockies,

a wilderness that was the most rugged on the entire face of the earth. They'd be combing through the mountains in search of U.S. Marshal Tex Mitchel, who'd been missing for two weeks now, maybe three. Morgan was losing track of time. And yet, as impossible as that task sounded, he had little doubt that he'd be able, somehow, to find his friend.

First, he needed to figure out a way to skirt the north side of the steep-sided river Tex had fallen into. When they'd tracked Tex to the cliff he and the runaway outlaw Stella Duncan had gone over, he couldn't see a break in the canyon walls on the south side. His hope was that there was one to be found on the north. And finding a way to ride along that north side wouldn't be easy. Of course, if it had been easy, Tex could have just walked right out of the wilderness . . . and he hadn't.

Finally, after hair-raising trial and error, close to a week after they'd set out, Morgan found what he'd been hoping for. Not Tex, but a chance that his friend had indeed survived.

"This has to be where Tex came out of the river." Morgan saw no tracks and for certain no sign of his friend, yet it was the only place that looked likely. That was assuming Tex got out there rather than drowned, in which case he'd've surely floated all the way south to Mexico.

Owen Riley, his boss—even if Morgan wasn't that good at taking orders, while Owen seemed mighty good at giving them—rode up beside him and looked down.

He didn't ask what Morgan's reasoning was, but Morgan told him anyway—more for the crowd that was hanging around them. "This is the first place where there's a bank on this rattlesnake of a river."

They'd been walking along the river for days now, up and down treacherous trails and narrow passages.

Owen eased back and looked around. Neither of them spoke. Owen's wife, Delaney, wasn't a big talker. But both of them were skilled trackers. Not as good as Morgan, but mighty good.

Owen saw it first. "That's Tex."

Morgan saw Owen pointing and followed the direction with his eyes. Tex had left an arrow made of rocks in a way that was his alone, with a T shaped out of smaller rocks, as well as an S. They all had tricks like this to communicate with each other whenever they got separated in the wild for some reason.

"He's alive." A smile broke out on Morgan's face. That didn't happen often.

"Stella made it out, too." Delaney's comment reminded Morgan that he'd focused on finding Tex, not the runaway outlaw who'd led him on a dangerous chase that ended abruptly at a cliff.

"Will Tex keep leaving signs, do you think?" Roz asked.

Morgan had to admire her for how she'd bought into their quest to find their friend without making a pest of herself or slowing them down. Just weeks ago, the woman had no idea she'd be a part of any of this.

"Absolutely. He'll expect us to come after him, and at the same time, he'll be trying to find his own way out of this endless, rugged country."

"And to get out, he'd have to head east. The arrow confirms it." Roz reined her dapple-gray mustang toward the east and started out. They'd come from the east themselves but by way of a different trail than the one Tex's arrow pointed

to. And that was mighty generous to call them trails, since there wasn't much indication of any such thing.

Tex hadn't gotten back to Fort D. A. Russell, the destination Tex knew they were headed for, or they'd've met him on their ride back from the fort near Cheyenne, Wyoming, where they'd recently traveled to deliver a prisoner, Clive Duncan, to the authorities. Ultimately, Clive ended up being innocent of all but his being broken out of jail by his family, of which Stella was a part.

After a quick wedding for Owen and Delaney, who'd fallen in love on the way to Cheyenne, here they were out in the wild again. Fortunately, Morgan had no great objections to a long ride in the mountains. He planned to search for as long as it took. They'd brought along two packhorses loaded with supplies, and if needed, Morgan and Owen knew how to live off the land indefinitely. A Marshal needed to be prepared for anything, including bringing a kid along on this latest mission.

Morgan glanced at little Jesse, who seemed to enjoy company. With his dad having passed years ago, the kid had probably never seen another human being besides his mother since his earliest memory. So the boy often rode at Morgan's side.

Morgan thought back to the day they'd found Roz in the spectacular mountain meadow where she'd lived with her parents, then her husband, Herman Beck. A modest but beautiful ranch not far from where Morgan had grown up. Not far, that is, if you didn't count the death-defying mountains and valleys, with trails so perilous that Morgan was astounded his horse could handle them. Somehow those trails had seemed less perilous back when he used to go to

Roz's house as a youngster. They'd known each other since they were children. Then he'd gone off to war when he was absolutely too young. He'd started as a drummer and ended up a sharpshooter. He hadn't been in the war for very long before his rifle skills had shown themselves.

And he'd never gone back home. He hadn't seen the need.

His father had left him a note in Elk Point, Colorado, the closest town to where the Sawyers had lived, though it wasn't close at all. His brother Gavin had died fighting for the South, while Morgan had fought for the North. In his father's mixed-up head, he blamed Morgan for Gavin's death. Morgan hadn't been welcome to visit the place he'd once called home.

Truth was, Morgan wouldn't have returned to his old stomping grounds this last trip if it weren't for the charge to transport Clive Duncan on horseback from Denver to Fort Russell after the only train track had been washed out on account of the rains. Morgan, Owen, Tex, and two other U.S. Marshals had barely begun their journey when a group kin to their prisoner had arrived to bust him free, driving the Marshals and others deep into the Front Range of the Rockies.

With no other good options, Morgan had led his group to his former home, and there'd been no sign of Pa. While being pursued by the Duncan clan, who'd been unsuccessful in rescuing Clive, Morgan had led the way to Roz's house, where they found her and Jesse there all alone. She'd been quick to decide to come along with them to deliver their prisoner to Fort Russell. Before long, they'd rounded up the whole Duncan family and had them all in custody.

Then the Duncans had made a break for it. The rest of

them had all ridden off after their prisoners. It was then that Tex, chasing after Stella, had likely fallen over the cliff into the river. Now the two of them were out here somewhere and no doubt in great trouble. They were probably without guns, horses, food, and other necessary supplies.

Morgan had to fetch Tex home as soon as possible. If only dozens of people hadn't come along, slowing him down. All right. Four people besides himself, but still . . . it was far too many.

Morgan caught up to Jesse, who followed after Roz, then took the lead. She smiled at him as he passed her with a glare. "Why'd you take off?" he demanded. "You don't know where we're going."

"Sure I do. You saw that arrow spelled out in rocks. From here east should lead us back down to the lowlands along the Front Range. Honestly, the whole world is downhill from what feels like must be the top of the world."

That got a tiny smile out of Morgan. "Every step of this journey, when I've thought I was at the top of the world, I find out I can go higher."

She chuckled as she rode up alongside him. "Since we've got all this time in front of us, why don't you tell me what you've been doing for the last ten or so years. The war's long over."

"Sometimes it doesn't feel that long," Morgan said. "When it ended, I came close to home, but Pa left me a letter in Elk Point saying I wasn't welcome there anymore."

"Hate to mention it, but your pa was an aggravating old goat."

He nodded. "Pa was that for a fact. As you can see, I ended up becoming a U.S. Marshal. I started south of Denver

around Colorado City. It's not a very interesting job if all you do is deliver papers and transfer prisoners from place to place."

"This last job seemed mighty interesting, though."

"Yeah, you have me there. Mostly I stood guard in court for federal cases in Colorado City. But later I teamed up with Owen, and he got assigned jobs that included traveling, some investigating, searching for runaway prisoners, men who rob stagecoaches and such. Stealing the mail is a federal crime. I get a lot of good out of my tracking skills, and it doesn't hurt none to be a crack shot."

"Morgan is the best we ever had," Owen said from behind them. It figured Owen would be listening in on their conversation.

"Best tracker?" Roz asked.

"Yep, never knew one better. He can move like wind across the tall grass, only quieter. He slips through the forest like fog."

Roz was close enough that she reached over and whacked Morgan in the arm. "Sounds like you've remembered everything I taught you."

Morgan laughed. "I did at that."

The group then picked up their pace as they set off toward the east.

2

Roz looked over her shoulder to see where Jesse had gone.

Her son had dropped back and was riding alongside Owen and Delaney through a wide stretch of forest.

She pushed forward a bit to catch up with Morgan. “It’s so strange to be around people other than Jesse.”

Morgan looked away from the trail briefly.

“It’s been just the two of us for so long,” added Roz.

“I can’t imagine,” he replied.

She gave a sigh. “You know, Herman died when Jesse wasn’t yet two. He has no memory of the man, and I’ve had no interest in fostering a love for him that might bring grief to the boy. Herman was a useless, itchy-footed wastrel of a pa. Talk about an aggravating old goat.” Roz didn’t talk about her husband much. But what she did say sure wasn’t complimentary.

Morgan looked away from tracking again. “Seems you had it hard when with a husband, and then you had it hard without one.”

“Lonely at least. But I lived in the mountains well enough; it’s not much different from what I’ve always known. Of

course, Herman was no help.” She hadn’t exactly hated him. That was a feeling with too much heat behind it.

“Ma had long since moved on to heaven when Herman came along. He was a wandering mountain man who took a shine to me and married me. I got to know pretty quick what kind of fool he was, and soon after our getting married, he abandoned me. Pa was still alive then, so I didn’t miss Herman much. Honestly, we did better without him.

“Jesse was on the way, and Pa bore a lot of the weight through the first year of Jesse’s life. Then Pa died, and Herman came back. He stuck around for a while until his itchy feet got to bothering him, and he wandered off again. The last time he came back, he had a leg wound that had suppurated. I ushered him from this life to the next. He was lucky I didn’t give him a boot to hasten him along his way.” Roz shook her head as she thought of that dreadful time.

“You’ve got a mean streak there.”

“Mostly I don’t, but I made an exception for Herman.” Even so, she tried not to speak ill of the deceased man in front of their son.

Nodding, he studied her. Perhaps that was why she saw a chance for some fresh meat before he did.

“I see signs that a herd of elk passed through recently, Morgan. I’ll go fetch us supper.” She rode off the path they were on, glad for an excuse to quit talking about Herman.

But it wasn’t that easy to shake Morgan; she heard him tailing her. She said over her shoulder, “This is the first real trail I’ve seen. I’ll bet Tex took this route.” Yet she didn’t spot any telltale footprints on the ground.

“Let me up there, Roz.” Morgan had to bump into her horse to slip past her on the narrow trail.

Roz couldn’t exactly let him pass as he’d requested. The trail they rode on was just too tight. Still, he somehow managed to squeeze to the front, and she let him go. She doubted he was a better tracker than herself. No doubt he was good enough, though, just slower.

They hadn’t ridden long when Morgan reined in and dismounted, walking several yards away. “Owen,” he called, “looks like they had a meal here.”

Owen carefully squeezed past her to see what Morgan had found.

Morgan pointed at the carcass of a bird and the remains of a fire. “They might be feeding themselves, but that’s only a single grouse.”

Roz knew that a scavenger could have carried away bones and such and left evidence of just the one bird, but chances were they’d’ve taken all the remains.

“They?” Owen said. “You’re certain it’s two people?”

Morgan answered, “I’m sure. Why else would he include an S alongside the T. Besides, I see the footprints of two people here.”

Roz couldn’t see any such footprints, nothing that confirmed this. But if Morgan was sure, then she accepted it as true.

Beside the remains of a campfire lay another arrow made of rocks, much like the one they’d found at the top of the canyon running alongside the river. Next to the arrow were the letters T and S. Tex and Stella had definitely been here.

“You can’t hike for hours across this kind of terrain and

live on one little grouse for two people,” Morgan said grimly. “Tex knows that, so he’ll keep hunting.”

“It’s a wonder there’s any sign of the bird left over.” Roz glanced sideways to see Delaney looking around, assessing the situation for herself.

Roz had been impressed by Delaney’s family when she met them at Fort Russell. Colonel Bridger and his family were a tough bunch. She wouldn’t have minded if a few of them had come along. But Delaney’s pa and ma had stayed back at the fort. And her brother, whose head was still recovering from being grazed by a bullet during the Duncans’ ambush, had waved them on their way without much interest in hunting up the missing Marshal and his missing prisoner.

Morgan and Owen were still on foot, searching for anything they might glean from the meager campsite. Roz wasn’t sure why. Unless maybe they expected to find Tex himself tucked under a scrub pine, but the man had obviously been here and moved on. They needed to move on as well.

To her disappointment, there was no sign of an elk herd either. She wasn’t about to take the time needed to find and bring down an elk, but at least the herd had guided them to the right trail. She was a good shot, but once Herman died, there’d been no means with which to buy more bullets, so she’d been sparing with them.

While living out in the wild, Roz hadn’t gone to town in years, not since before Jesse was born. But she’d traveled to town a few times with her pa when she was younger, and she remembered the way there. The fact that these tougher folks—the Marshals, the Bridgers, even the Duncan clan they’d hauled to Fort Russell—had all followed *her* out of the mountains gave her a deep satisfaction.

They probably oughta be following her now, but then she remembered how grouchy Herman became if she acted like she knew best, so she'd learned to keep quiet and let him make his own mistakes. After all, he was more of a mountain man than her pa or Morgan's pa. Except her pa was always kind, while Herman had been far from it. There'd been no way of being sure what one word said wrongly might do to that man. It had gotten to be a habit to keep her opinions to herself, even when she thought she knew better.

As she waited for the others to scour the area, she took a few moments to pray for her son, Jesse. He was a fine boy and her shining pride. She asked God to help him grow up to be more like her pa rather than Herman. Since the boy had never known either of them, maybe he'd turn out to be more like her. With his white-blond hair, he certainly resembled her. All she could do was hope and pray that the boy would develop into a truly good man and for her to set a decent example for Jesse to follow.

Finally, Morgan and Owen determined they'd found every possible bit of information available from the camp they'd come upon, slim though it was. It appeared Tex was indeed alive and well enough to hunt, and Stella had survived, too. Tex had done right to mark his trail so that if Owen and Morgan rode by, they'd be able to follow him. In the meantime, he was doing his part to get himself and Stella out of these mountains.

Roz knew how to live off the land, let it care for her. Based on what Morgan and Owen said of their friend Tex, she figured he did as well. Tex and Stella could be wandering out here for a long time, but surely they'd be all right.



A rock that looked as steady as, well, as a rock rolled under Tex's foot, and he pitched forward and careened down one of these blasted mountains. A cry tore loose from his throat so quickly he didn't have time to be embarrassed. He slammed into a scrub pine that snagged the waist of his pants. Jerked to a stop, he dangled like a fat spider. He had only seconds to glimpse just how far he had left to fall, and the sight was sickening. Scrambling to get a solid hold on the pine, his hand clutched its abrasive bark.

Just then he heard Stella scream, "No!"

Before her scream faded, the tree Tex was gripping broke loose of the rock wall where it shouldn't have been able to grow.

The cliff was sheer, not a handhold in sight. With a sickening twist of his stomach, he knew it was likely he wouldn't survive the fall ahead and quick prayed for a miracle from heaven.

And then he smashed into something else that stopped him cold. Was this his miracle? But before he could get too excited, whatever he'd hit crumbled and sent him plunging again to what had to be certain death. Next, he struck a ledge of some kind, which stopped him like a lassoed calf.

Unable to think, at least not clearly, Tex was afraid to move. He fought to breathe as he waited for this new spot to break loose and send him downward yet again.

But he remained there, deathly still, wondering where he was. At first, he'd thought it to be the cliff, yet it was more of a steep slope. The cliff was far higher than this. Did that

mean if he moved even a single inch, he'd fall off whatever he'd landed on? He couldn't decide.

He had a few seconds to think of Stella. She needed him. She could probably survive on her own, but her chances were far better with someone with her, helping her. With his thoughts spinning, Tex stayed right where he was, trying to figure out what to do next as he stared at the rock wall in front of him. He should maybe turn his head to look behind him instead of at the rock, to assess his chances of getting off this slope.

That was when he noticed the rock wall facing him had an odd black frame around it, sort of a circle, and that circle narrowed. Startled, he realized he was looking into a tunnel.

The tunnel closed, and so did his mind. His dazed thoughts went dark.



Stella Duncan dropped to her knees and carefully peered over the edge of a slope off to Tex's right. A moment ago, they'd been planning to hike down what had struck them as a perfectly reasonable monster of a slope. Their whole world had become nothing but monster slopes—hiking up them, then down, then up again, and on and on like that. Then, without warning, she watched Tex tumble downward and skid, hit something hard, stop for a bit before suddenly falling again.

When Tex was about halfway down the killer slope, he hit a ledge so narrow she hadn't noticed it at first. Up until then, he'd been doing a fine job of falling to his death, leaving her alone in the wilderness. Dread warred with terror as

she thought about being out here in the middle of nowhere without him.

She knew it was as selfish a thought as a human being could ever have, and the fact that she was having it only made it worse.

Then he moved his head, and she felt an ounce of relief before a few stones pelted him, stones he'd knocked loose when he hit them during his descent. The ground in front of her, which had looked solid, then crumbled like dry week-old bread.

She flopped down onto her stomach, so that if the fragile piece of rock crumbled again, she wouldn't go right over. She hoped anyway.

Her eyes locked on Tex. He was definitely alive. He moved gingerly, though, his hand grasping a ledge not much wider than himself. He lifted his head to look around, and what he saw made him pull back for some reason. He then rested his head as if it weighed a thousand pounds, and every bit of movement ceased. It looked to her as though he'd passed out.

Which was unfortunate in that he was halfway down an ugly-looking cliff—thirty feet at least and that much farther to go. Stella wondered if he was unconscious or possibly, though not likely, asleep. Whichever it was, if he made one wrong move, he'd fall again for certain.

Given the situation, she saw no way to reach him from where she was. Then she looked on past him. The cliff appeared a little less steep there. She saw another outcropping of stone and a stand of juniper trees. She had to get herself down the slope they'd planned to walk down, then make her way around to the area below him and see if she could climb up. It would take hours. And if he was unconscious,

well, he'd have to wake up and help her. Even if she could climb up to him, he'd need to cooperate in climbing down.

Her plan only worked if Tex woke up.

Stella lay there for a long stretch of seconds. The wind whistled, rustling the branches of nearby trees. She was utterly alone, not counting the man she had to somehow get to and rescue. It was the most frightening moment of her life. The loneliest moment of a lonely life.

She was hungry and thirsty and devastated to think he might be so badly hurt he could die.

She closed her eyes and begged God for strength. And for faith. "To live is Christ, and to die is gain." Her ma had taught her that this life wasn't the end of each man or woman's story. She thought of her brother Leland, lying on the ground, dead, shot by one of the U.S. Marshals who'd been transporting her other brother Clive to Fort Russell to be hanged.

Leland, the headlong fool, had opened fire in an attempt to free Clive, killing a Marshal. Without hesitation, the other Marshals in the group shot back at him.

And now she looked down at the very man who might have killed her own brother. She'd never asked which of the U.S. Marshals had taken that shot because she didn't want to know.

Tex's life now hung in the balance.

She pushed away from the crumbling edge of the mountain that sloped to her right and to the east, then got to her feet and walked down a much more civilized slope.

Stopping, she thought about the markers Tex had left behind. She'd watched him lay out the stones in the form of letters in those places where they'd changed directions.

So strange to be trying to communicate with people who might not be anywhere around here or who might not come by at all. Even so, she took a moment to arrange some stones on the ground in the shape of an arrow, showing the direction she was going to walk. She then decided to lay out the words *TEX FELL* before adding a second arrow.

There was a whole lot more to tell, but there just weren't enough stones in these mountains for that. And considering the whole world was made of rock around her, that was saying something.

Stella set out down the slope again as quickly as she could safely go, praying with every step that the man who'd possibly killed her brother was still breathing.

She planned to do everything in her power to save Tex.

3

“They’re supposed to be heading east.” Roz stared at the tracks she’d found while climbing the mountainside. The tracks followed a number of rugged bends, so that now they were moving almost straight north after following Tex’s last arrow.

It’d taken them most of a week to locate where Tex had left the river. Since then they’d been following him for three days more. It’d been three weeks at least since the day he was separated from their group.

Roz drew her horse to a stop and looked at Morgan.

He rubbed one brow and closed his eyes, almost as if their mistake was causing him pain. Owen looked disgusted, too.

“The fog can get real thick up this high,” said Morgan. “We had a few overcast days. And not even a tree to check for moss. You know good and well that directions don’t mean much up above the timberline.”

Roz nodded. “If they went all the way to the top and figured out they were facing straight north, would they have turned around and come back down, hoping to go east by another route, or would they have forged ahead?” She knew

plenty about tracking, but she didn't know these folks, their habits and such. So far, following Tex and Stella had taught her the pair were doing well at surviving, so she wasn't overly worried about their starving to death. But she was real sure they were lost out here.

Tex and Stella weren't the only ones.

"Hey! Over here." Delaney waved the others to her side. She pointed at another arrow on the ground, this one pointing down and toward the east.

"He figured it out and is saving us a lot of steps." Morgan gave his head a firm nod, then started following this latest arrow. Apparently, he was leading now.

Roz shrugged it off. She figured she was better than him at tracking but decided not to say so. Instead, she just fell in line.

Jesse rode beside her at times, going ahead and riding with Morgan once in a while, then dropping back to ride with Owen and Delaney some, too. No doubt he was liking all the company. She'd seen Jesse talking with Morgan, with Morgan pointing in one direction or another. He was teaching her son to track just like she'd been doing, which was a good use of their time.

It reminded her of the day she first met Morgan. They were both about eight years old. He'd come trotting onto their land, and when she caught sight of him, it was like being struck by lightning. Until that day, she hadn't hardly met anyone her age.

"You must be Rosalind?" he'd said. "My pa is a Sawyer. He talks of your pa sometimes and mentioned he had a daughter. I came to meet you."

Roz knew Mr. Sawyer. He came around and talked and

drank coffee with Pa some. “I didn’t know Mr. Sawyer had a son.”

What else to say? She had no experience talking to a boy her age. In fact, with her pa being a quiet man, and since she lived alone with him, she had precious little experience talking to anyone.

“You want to go riding? Show me your meadow? It’s uncommonly pretty up here. We live in a ragtag kind of place.”

Almost like he wanted to talk to another child . . . just like her. “Let’s walk instead of ride,” she’d suggested. “Our mare just had a foal, a little filly, and she’s the one I usually ride.”

Morgan’s eyes lit up. “Can I see it?”

They’d hiked together, studied tracks, and gone hunting. Later, Morgan had helped break the little filly for riding and had a rare talent for it.

They used to challenge each other to move around silently in the woods.

Roz still remembered that lightning strike when she first met him. It’d felt the same when he’d come galloping into her meadow, running from outlaws while transporting prisoners. That lightning strike had shocked her back to life.

They were hours following the tracks slanting to the east. This was a rugged, rocky, rattlesnake of a mountain range. Roz had never been in this particular stretch of mountains, but she’d lived all her life in the wilderness, so she knew how difficult and dangerous it could be.

Morgan turned at an unexpected angle, and now Roz, despite feeling twisted around by all the trees and rocks and slopes up and down, was sure they were going straight east.

Riding in the wilderness might be hard, but it was also beautiful. She tried to imagine what life would look like

away from her pa's ranch. Her ranch and home. Because it was so terribly lonely at her mountain home, she felt she couldn't go on staying there. Jesse needed more than that. Yet it was all the home she ever knew, and this big wide world beyond her ranch was full of fearful things. Of course, that world had Morgan in it as well, and she wasn't about to let her childhood friend ride away from her again. If he hadn't figured it out already—and she'd told him quite bluntly—she was never going to leave his side, not ever, for the rest of their lives.

How he felt about that didn't matter. It was how it was going to be, and that was that.

She had to wonder if Tex and Stella were as lonely now as she'd been. She suspected it was a shock at first to be so stranded, so lost, and stranded with an enemy to boot. After all, Stella had been taken prisoner, and it was during her escape attempt that they'd gotten lost.

But it looked as though they had stayed together and were surviving. By now they were used to it and had realized these might well be the most precious days of their lives, surrounded by beauty. The soaring mountains, the majestic trees, the sunrises and sunsets. The teeming wildlife and the gushing springs. In such a rich and fertile land, survival should be easy, even comfortable.

They were living off the land, discovering that they could survive through their own wisdom and hard work—that was a fine gift.

Surely, Stella and Tex would one day reflect back on this time with wonder and awe.



Estella Duncan peered back up the slope at Tex's unconscious body and wondered grimly if he was already dead, and if not, if she'd end up killing him in her attempt to get him down from there.

And kill herself while she was at it.

Far as she could tell, it looked as though he'd stopped bleeding. The vivid red that was dripping from the ledge earlier had now ceased. One of his arms dangled, scraped raw and bleeding. The heavier bleeding had come from near his head, which she could no longer see. But the sight of so much blood was enough to spook anyone.

Fighting tears, she studied her route up to Tex. She was terrified she was going to climb up there only to find him dead. Studying the slope, she noted the handholds and footholds she'd use. One wrong move and she'd drag him off that ledge, and he'd flat-out plunge to his death for certain.

After taking a deep breath, then blowing it out slowly, she started up the slope. Thirty feet, she judged it to be. She could walk most of it, or at least sort of walk it. She leaned forward and steadied herself with her hands against the rough cliffside.

Stella saw no way to get him down if he remained unconscious. Not only did she not have the strength to tie a rope around him and lower him down, but she didn't have the rope to begin with. Which meant Tex was going to have to help. She'd just have to sit up there with him until he woke up. If, that is, he woke up.

After what felt like an hour but must have been far less than that, she reached the ledge. He lay there flat on his belly, facing the rock wall.

"Tex, can you hear me? It's me, Stella."

He didn't move. She moved to rest a hand on his back and felt his chest rise and fall. Seconds later, she felt the steady beating of his heart.

He was alive!

Tears spilled over just a bit. She was embarrassed to cry, but since no one in the whole wide world could see her, she decided she wouldn't let it bother her.

She bent over to look at his face; it was scraped and had a nasty gash. That was where most of the blood must've come from. And his arm that dangled, swollen and bruised, it didn't look right. She'd taken the better part of an hour climbing down from above and then climbing back up to him, yet no blow to his arm should have bruised this deeply, this fast. She was afraid his arm might be broken. For sure it'd need a splint put on it. And she'd have to be even more careful now about moving him with that arm so injured.

Stella became aware all over again that there wasn't much room on the ledge. Mindful of Tex's hurt arm, she pushed him closer to the rock face so she wouldn't have to cling to the cliff like a scared cat as she decided what to do next.

"Tex, if you'd wake up, you could sure help me figure out how to get out of this tangle we're in."

She didn't see him so much as flicker his eyelids, but it made her feel better to talk to him, so she kept at it. They might well be up on this ledge all night long. Tears helped nothing, while the talking braced her spirits. Swiping her arm across her eyes, she said, "I need to bind up your arm, but how? I suppose I could climb back down and gather some sticks to make a splint. I could maybe find some bark or vines to strap it in place." She examined his bruised arm again and prayed for a sprain. That would be easier to deal

with. “And I’ll cut fabric off my petticoat or your shirt to make a sling with.”

She wished there was water available. A cloth soaked in cool water to bathe his face might help Tex to wake up. She might as well wish for plaster to make a decent cast for his hurt arm, the skill to apply it, a staircase to walk down to level ground to rest beside a blazing fire, and an elk haunch to roast for dinner. And while she was at it, why not wish for a horse with wings to fly up here and fetch them both to the nearest town with a doctor.

“Tex, come on and wake up now.” She gently rocked his right shoulder, leery of even touching his left. When he showed no response, she sighed and leaned back, unsure what else to do.

“How about I tell you stories of when I was a youngster, living with my ma and my little sister, Geraldine, who we called Sissy. Aunt Ethel and Uncle Gordy lived next door, and Pa and Gordy always rode off into the mountains most of the spring, summer, and fall. But they’d live at home for the winter—not quite the tough mountain men they liked to believe they were. At the time, Sissy and I were the only females born of the Duncans, and we came along after a passel of brothers and boy cousins.”

It occurred to her that she was wasting her breath, but then breath was about the only thing she had in abundance. Yet if she quit talking about her past, there wasn’t much more to talk about.

“Once Pa and Uncle Gordy decided the boys were old enough, off they’d go out into the wilderness, not to be seen again for months. Honestly, life at home was better with them gone. As each brother rode off, the house would be a

little easier to keep up, the meals easier to prepare. Sissy and I, along with Ma and Aunt Ethel, would hunt our own food. We came upon some beautiful land while out exploring and wondered if any other people had ever set foot on it before.

“So every fall, Pa and Uncle Gordy would come back home, but after a few years, again one by one, the boys started not coming back with them. Pa would announce that another of them had struck out on his own. We’d never see them again.”

Stella stopped talking and seriously considered climbing back down to search for water. “But what if you shift around in your sleep?” She shook her head. Tex looked more like he’d been knocked out cold. Cold as a snowcapped mountain in January. “I can’t have you falling off this ledge. Now that I’m up here, it just doesn’t seem wise to leave you.”

She needed to figure out what to do and quick. “So far the only ideas I have are to sit here with you or climb down to fetch some water. That amounts to doing nothing or doing something stupid. How’s that for a pair of miserable choices?” She leaned back against the rock face again, thinking the Scriptures might give her inspiration.

“‘The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. . . .’” Slowly, Stella recited Psalm 23. Today it held more meaning than she’d ever realized. She had learned to read with the Bible. It had been the only book in their house; it had been Aunt Ethel’s until she died, so really it was the only book in two houses. It was a wonder she didn’t speak in Thees and Thous.

Stella had saved that Bible when the fire broke out in Pa’s cabin. Pa had returned from a trip to find his wife and younger daughter badly harmed from the fire and his older daughter trying to care for them. He’d built a new cabin,

and they'd moved Ma and Sissy into Uncle Gordy's. Then after a terrible month in which Ma and Sissy both died, and after a winter alone with all the menfolk, Pa had taken Stella into the wilderness with the dwindling group of brothers and cousins. She didn't want to go but she didn't want to stay alone in the cabin either. It would have been a terrible choice, so Pa settled it for her, and she'd carried the Bible along with her.

That Bible had been left with her pa when Tex had captured her and taken her prisoner. She wondered what had become of it.

As she spoke the words of Psalm 23, she wondered what other verses she knew by heart. She was sorely afraid she'd have plenty of time to recite them all. The holy words seemed to drift upward as if in prayer, lifting her spirits while also giving her something to do besides fret over doing nothing or doing something stupid.